

PUBLISHED IN TOWN
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WEDNESDAY MORNING



COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

A CAPTURED CHUM!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



Knox struggled furiously. "I'll skin you!" he raved. "I'll report you to Mr. Ratcliff, and see that he punishes you severely for this outrage! Let me get up, hang you!" (See Chapter 1)

CHAPTER 1. On the Watch.

TOM MERRY burst into his study in the Shell passage at St. Jim's with a wrathful expression upon his usually sunny face. Apparently he was quite upset, and he glared at Manners and Monty Lowther, who were in the study, as though they had done him some personal injury.

"I'm fed up!" Tom exclaimed hotly.

Monty Lowther grinned.

"If that's the case, you won't want any tea, I suppose?" he asked humorously.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" growled Tom Merry. "I'm wild-thundering wild!"

"What's up, old man?" asked Manners curiously. "Come to look at your chivvy closely you do look fed up."

"Who's been disturbing the serene calm of your mental

Next Wednesday:

"FOR THE OLD SCHOOL'S SAKE!" AND "UNDER THE DRAGON!"

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equilibrium, fair youth?" asked Lowther, who couldn't possibly be serious under any circumstances.

"It's Knox!" replied Tom Merry between his teeth. "After which nothing more need have been said. The Shell captain's sympathetic chums understood perfectly. Evidently Knox, the bullying prefect, was on the war-path again. Knox usually had periods when his peculiar characteristics made themselves most apparent. This was undoubtedly one of them."

"Knox again!" exclaimed Manners. "What's the trouble this time?"

Tom Merry rubbed his hands tenderly.

"Oh, the same as usual!" he replied. "He's in a towering temper about something—lost some money on a gee-gee, I expect—and when I just happened to bump into him in the entrance-hall he gave me four swipes with his rotten cane!"

"Disgraceful!" said Monty Lowther. "And you only bumped into him?"

"Well, he happened to be carrying some paper and ink at the time," admitted Tom Merry, "and it naturally got upset. But it wasn't my fault. How the dickens could I help the red ink slopping all over his face and getting into his mouth?"

"You were absolutely blameless!" said Lowther.

"And he gave me four swipes—four rotten swipes—just for bumping into him! What do you think of it?"

"Well, I think Knox ought to be hurried down, and quartered," went on Lowther, with a note of indignation in his voice. "After that it wouldn't be a bad idea to do something really drastic—such as dropping him into a tank of boiling oil!"

"Oh, don't be funny!" growled Tom Merry. "My hands are jolly sore, and I've got to handle a bat this afternoon, too. Jolly good job there's no match to-day!"

Manners opened the door.

"Well, let's buzz down to Little Sile," he said cheerfully. "As a matter of fact, we were just going to look for you when you thundered in. Can't stop to think about Knox this afternoon. We've got to practice hard in readiness for the away match next half."

And the Terrible Three, who were in flames, hurried out of their study, mentally deciding to deal with Knox later on—at least, Tom Merry decided. Manners and Monty Lowther privately held the opinion that Knox had been somewhat justified in giving the four swipes. To have red ink slopped all over one's face was a very pleasant way to put it mildly.

"Bai Jove! The uttah wottah!"

The dulcet tones of Arthur Augustus, who was the Fourth Form, echoed up from the study of the Terrible Three reached the head of the stairs.

"Hallo, Gussy's been catchin' a cold," said Manners. "I wonder who the 'uttah wottah' he was to be expected Knox has been—"

"Giving his aristocratic form some exercise," remarked Monty Lowther. "The dickens are you punching, Manners?"

"Silly idiot!" growled Manners. "I'm as old as Adam! If you can't think of anything better you'd better retire from the business, or else go on the music-halls. The music-hall comedians are always hashing up old jokes that originally came out of the giddy Ark, and springing them on the suffering public as though they were brand, sparkling new!"

"Knox is an uttah beast!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, looking at the Terrible Three as they descended the stairs. "I wepeat, deak boys, that Knox is nothin' bettah than a bullyin' wuffian!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Two hear, hears, in fact," said Lowther. "Your remarks meet with our unanimous approval, Gussy. But have you been splashing red ink over Knoxy, too?"

"Weally, Lowthah, I nevah touch wed ink," said Arthur Augustus. "It is howwid stuff for gettin' on the fingahs. But somehow Knox has managed to smothah himself with the wetched stuff. He was weally a most disgustin' sight! The uttah beast cut me acwoss the legs with his wotten cane! Did you evah heah of such an outwage?"

"Appallin'!" said Monty Lowther solemnly. "I should write to the governors about it, Gussy. In about six

months' time, after holding a dozen meetings, they will send their instructions to the Head, and Knox will be placed under arrest for daring to touch your august person!"

"Pway be sewious, Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus reprovingly. "I admit that Knox had good reason to be in a tempah, but that is no excuse for his caning me. I happened to meet him, you see, and I merely gwinced—"

"Loudly, I suppose?" asked Monty Lowther.

"It is impossible to gwin loudly, Lowthah. I may have burst into a chuckle—as a mattah of fact, I believe I woared with laughah. It was watah unfeelin' of me, but Knox looked extwemely funny. I woared!"

"And Knox, I suppose, didn't see the joke?" asked Manners.

"No. He is uttably lackin' in a sense of humah, deah boy!"

"I think that quality would be rather lacking in me if I'd swallowed a gallon of red ink," chuckled Lowther. "But you say you roared, Gussy. I suppose you mean you roared when Knox tickled your giddy understandings."

"Weally, Lowthah, I wufuse to have my legs wuferrered to as undahstandin's!" said Arthur Augustus stiffly. "Of course, I woared. My legs are smartin' now. I wogard Knox as a howwid bully!"

"Shurrup, Gussy!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I do not compwehend the meanin' of that widiculous expwession. As I was sayin', Knox is a wottah—"

"Shush, you ass!"

Arthur Augustus had his back to the staircase, and did not see that Knox, having cleaned himself, was descending the stairs. The swell of the School House failed to take the hints that were thrust upon him by the Terrible Three.

"Knox is a frightful wottah," said D'Arcy, warning to his subject.

"Not only a bully, but a—Weally, I wonder what you are makin' that howwid gwinced at you, but I trust you are not going to be ill?"

"You're a—ass!" murmured Lowther sulkily.

"So you think I'm a frightful rotter, D'Arcy?" exclaimed Knox, with a grin, and grasping D'Arcy's arm. "You're a—glint in the deat's eye!"

Arthur Augustus. "So you're a—"

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to be looking for trouble this afternoon. And on this occasion the famous Figgins & Co., of the New House, were the unconscious culprits.

Figgins & Co. were hidden among the trees, and were waiting impatiently for Clampe to come along. Clampe was a Shell fellow, and another denizen of the New House.

"We'll teach him a giddy lesson!" said the long-legged Figgins. "I heard him say, quite by accident, that he was going to have a smoke in the wood-shed with Diggs. I've suspected that Clampe went in for that rotten game for a long time, and we'll teach him the error of his ways. His kind uncles are going to shew him the right path!"

"Well, it's past the time now," said Kerr. "Perhaps he isn't coming after all!"

"Of course he ain't!" growled Fatty Wynn. "Let's get back to the study. How am I going to make that giddy toffee if we stop here on a fool's errand?"

"If you call me a fool—" began Figgins warmly. "Well, it was you who suggested it, wasn't it, Figgy?"

"Look here, you ass—"

"Look here, you chump—"

It seemed extremely probable that the inseparable chums of the New House were on the point of quarrelling. Fatty Wynn wanted to make his toffee, but Figgins, as chief of the "Co.," meant to make it thoroughly understood, once and for all, that what he said "went." But before the argument had fairly started Kerr nudged his two comrades.

"Shush, you asses!" he muttered. "He's coming." Figgins & Co. had been on the watch for ten minutes, and they relapsed into instant silence now that Clampe was approaching. As it happened, it wasn't Clampe at all—it was Knox. Figgins & Co. didn't seem to consider the possibility of anyone else coming that way, and as soon as they heard footsteps they took it for granted that Clampe was the approaching one.

Which was rather unfortunate for Figgins & Co.—and for Knox.

"Here he comes," murmured Kerr. "Get ready!"

"We'll teach him to smoke, by gum!"

The footsteps drew nearer, and a figure suddenly appeared.

Without even looking to see who the figure was, Figgins & Co. sprang out. Knox, taken utterly by surprise, was bowled over in a twinkling. He went down with a terrific thud and gasped.

"Got him!" roared Figgins. "Now, Clampe, you rotter—"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Fatty Wynn, in alarm. "It ain't Clampe at all, Figgy! It's Knox of the School House!"

"My—my only hat!" stuttered Figgins.

"Get off my chest, you young hounds!" roared Knox furiously. "By George, I'll make you sit up for this!"

"We—we're awfully sorry, Knox!" gasped Figgins. "We thought you were Clampe, you know. Quite an accident, I assure you. I—I say, if we let you get up, you won't—"

Knox struggled furiously.

"I'll skin you!" he raved. "I'll report you to Mr. Ratcliff, and see that he punishes you severely for this outrage. Let me get up, hang you!"

He struggled harder than ever, and Kerr, who was kneeling upon his chest, rocked about like a ship in a heavy sea. Suddenly there was a dull crash from somewhere in Knox's waistcoat, and Knox howled in fury.

"That's my watch!" he spluttered. "You—you—By Jove, I'll half kill you for this! You've smashed my watch to pieces!"

"Awfully sorry," said Kerr breathlessly. "If you'll only promise not to report us—"

Knox went so red in the face that he seemed on the point of an apoplectic fit. He exerted himself terrifically, and Figgins & Co. were hurled from him. Knox jumped to his feet, breathing hard.

"You young rotters!" he snarled, feeling in his pocket and producing the remnants of his silver watch. "You've smashed it!"

"It was my knee," said Kerr. "If you hadn't struggled, Knox—"

Knox grasped Kerr roughly.

"You've smashed my watch, so I'll wear yours until mine is repaired," he said harshly. And before Figgins and Fatty Wynn could interfere he had wrenched Kerr's watch from his chain.

"You'll have it back when mine's mended, and not before!" he said angrily.

And Knox strode off, leaving Figgins & Co. simply speechless with indignation.

CHAPTER 2.

Kerr Means Business.

"THE—the rotter!"

"The burglar!" gasped Figgins, at last.

"He's collared your watch, Kerr!"

"My—my silver watch!" stuttered Kerr furiously.

"That was a present from my mater, and that rotter will bust it up!"

"I wouldn't stand it!" said Fatty Wynn warmly.

"My hat! It's coming it a bit too thick!"

"Rather!" agreed Figgins.

Kerr hesitated, his face pink with wrath. Then, suddenly making up his mind, he left his chums and raced across the quad towards the School House. Knox had almost reached the entrance when Kerr caught him up.

"I—I say, Knox—"

Knox turned and glared.

"Well?" he asked roughly.

"That—that watch was a present, you know," panted Kerr. "My mater gave it to me, and I've never parted with it for a second. I wouldn't even lend it to Figgy or Wynn!"

Knox grinned unpleasantly.

"Well, you didn't lend it to me," he said. "I took it!"

"Yes, but it ain't fair," protested Kerr heatedly. "I didn't smash your tucker on purpose, Knox! We mistook you for Clampe, and it was quite an accident. And if you hadn't struggled—"

"Run away!" snapped Knox impatiently.

"But I want my watch!" roared Kerr. "I'll pay for the repair of yours, and take it down to the watch-maker's, if you like!"

"I don't like," rapped out Knox. "Clear off!"

"But—but it's burglary!" shouted the Scottish junior. "I've offered to pay the damage, and you haven't got any right to collar my tucker. It ain't fair, Knox—it ain't playing the game!"

Knox chuckled.

"Perhaps it'll teach you to be more careful in future," he sneered. "If you think I'm going about without a watch on me you're jolly well mistaken. And if this turnip doesn't keep right time I shall open the back and stick a pin in the works to make it go properly!"

And with that appalling threat, Knox walked into the School House, leaving Kerr gritting his teeth with helpless fury. He could do nothing—nothing in the way of sneaking, at any rate. If he wanted the watch back he would have to recover it by force, and it was no easy matter to use force against a prefect, especially a prefect of the rival House.

"I uttahly wefuse!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stalked out of the School House in spotless flannels, and he uttered the words in a firm voice.

"I uttahly wefuse!" he repeated. "Knox can go to Jewicho for his wotten lines. I considah that the imposition was uttahly unwawwanted, and I shall theafore appeal to the Housemastah if Knox cuts up wustay. Bai Jove, Kerr, what are you doin' oval this side of the quad, you New House wottah?"

Kerr glared.

"It's Knox!" he exclaimed gruffly. "Of all the howling rotters—"

"Bai Jove, have you been winning foul of Knox, too?" asked Arthur Augustus. "It isn't precisely the thing to wua down a membah of my own House, but, undah the circs., Kerr, I agwee with you entirely. Knox is a disgwace to the School House!"

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"He's a disgrace to any House," growled Kerr. "We wouldn't have him as a gift!"

Arthur Augustus looked thoughtful. "As a matter of fact, dear boy," he said, "I was seriously thinking of using my influence with the Head to have Knox removed across the quad to your quarters. It weally requires a fellow of extreme tact and judgment to bwoach such a delicate subject to the Head, but I am suah that my influence would weigh heavily with Doctah Locke."

Kerr grinned, in spite of himself. He could just imagine D'Arcy's influence causing the reverend Head to shift Knox from the School House to the New House. It was extremely more probable that Arthur Augustus himself would be shifted very promptly from the Head's study.

"Don't be an ass, Gussy."
"I wefuse to be called an ass!"
"Well, whether you refuse or not, you are one!" went on Kerr. "If you go to the Head about Knox you'll be skinned alive."

"I should uttably wefuse to be skinned alive!" said Arthur Augustus stiffly. "The Head is not a Pwussian, dear boy! But you are lookin' wathah watty. Pway confide in me if you are in any twouble."

"Oh, you can't help, Gussy," said Kerr, with a gleam in his eyes. "Knox has collared my ticker just because I happened to kneel on his and smash it. I offered to pay the damage, too! The rotter's actually pinched my watch—a present from the mater!"

"Bai Jove, what uttah cheek!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "Mattsahs are coming to a cwisis. I nevah thought that Knox would descend to pinchin' tickahs."

"I'll get it back!" said Kerr firmly.
And he meant to think of a scheme sooner or later—and, as it happened, the idea for it came sooner than Kerr anticipated, and from a totally unexpected quarter.

CHAPTER 3.

Kerr's Terrific Wheeze!

B UZZZZ-Z-Z-Z!

Kerr paused as he walked down the passage in the New House. He was just outside the prefect's room, and within the apartment the telephone-bell was ringing insistently. Apparently there was nobody there to answer it.

There was a telephone in the prefect's room of both Houses at St. Jim's, and juniors were occasionally allowed to use the instruments. Very often they used it without being allowed, when the prefects happened to be absent.

Buzz-z-z-z-z!
Kerr looked at the door of the prefect's room, and then turned the handle.

"Anybody in here?" he asked, looking in.
But the room was empty. Kerr crossed over to the telephone, and lifted the receiver from its hook.

"Might as well see who it is," he muttered, placing the receiver to his ear. "Hallo!" he added aloud. "Who's that?"

"Hallo! Is that St. James's College?"
"Yes, this is St. Jim's," replied Kerr.
"Good! I want to speak to Knox of the Sixth Form."
"To whom?"

"Knox, the prefect," went on the unknown voice.
"Oh, Knox!" exclaimed Kerr. "Well, you're on the wrong number, old chap. This is the New House. Knox adorns that old barn they call the School House. We wouldn't own him over this side of the quad—wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole, in fact!"

"What?" exclaimed the voice angrily. "How dare you speak like that! Who are you? What is your name?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you!"

"From your voice I gather that you are a boy—a very insolent boy!"

"Go hon!" said Kerr coolly.

"I shall report you!" said the unknown hotly. "What is your name?"

"Oh, rats!"

"Eh? What did you say your name was?"

Kerr grinned. He had no compunction whatever about checking friends of Knox. Anybody who could be on friendly terms with Knox must obviously be a rotter.

"I tell you you've got the wrong number," said Kerr. "Perhaps if you ring up the Green Man, in Rylcombe, to-night, you'll find Knox there—or perhaps you are ringing up from the Green Man yourself?"

"You—you impertinent rascal!"

"Bow-wow!"

"How—how dare you?"

"Oh, I dare all sorts of things over the 'phone," said Kerr coolly. "But who are you, and what do you want? I don't think Knox likes talking to bookmakers over the telephone!"

"Bookmakers!" roared the strange voice. "Good heavens! How dare you imply that I am a bookmaker! My name is John Mason, and I am expected at St. James's this afternoon."

"You're a pal of Knox's?"

"I am a friend of Knox's father," said the stranger.

"I have not seen Knox since he was a child—before I went abroad."

"Well, it's no good telling all this to me," said Kerr. "You'd better ring up the School House. Knox might be there."

"Don't you know for certain?"

"How should I know?" asked Kerr. "He may be out on Big Side, or—"

"Dear me, how awkward!" said the unknown Mr. Mason. "And I have only a few moments to spare."

"Better ring up at tea-time—"

"I shall be in the train by then," said Mr. Mason, over the wires. "Look here, my boy! You are very impertinent, but I presume it is only owing to your extreme youth."

"Go hon!"

"I want you to take a message to Knox for me."

"What's the message?" asked Kerr noncommittally.

"Merely a few words," said the stranger, evidently taking it for granted that Kerr would give the message to Knox. "He is expecting me this afternoon, as I wrote and told him that I was coming."

"Perhaps that's why he's so ratty to-day!" grinned Kerr.

"Eh? I didn't catch what you said."

"It doesn't matter," chuckled Kerr. "Get on with the giddy message, my tulip!"

"Good gracious! I should like to meet you face to face, you young rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Mason. "But I have no time to waste. Merely tell Knox that I am not coming to see him this afternoon, but will defer my visit until next week."

"Simply that?"

"Yes; nothing more."

"You're not coming this afternoon at all?" asked Kerr, suddenly standing erect and quivering a little.

His eyes gleamed with an eager light. An idea had just struck him—a great and gorgeous wheeze, if he could only work it.

"No, I am not coming to-day."

"Not under any circumstances?"

"Haven't I told you?" roared Mr. Mason impatiently.

"You are stupid, boy!"

"Sorry! Then you want me to tell Knox that Mr. Mason isn't coming, and won't be here until next week?"

"That is it, precisely."

"And you haven't seen Knox since he was a kid?"

"That is so. But—"

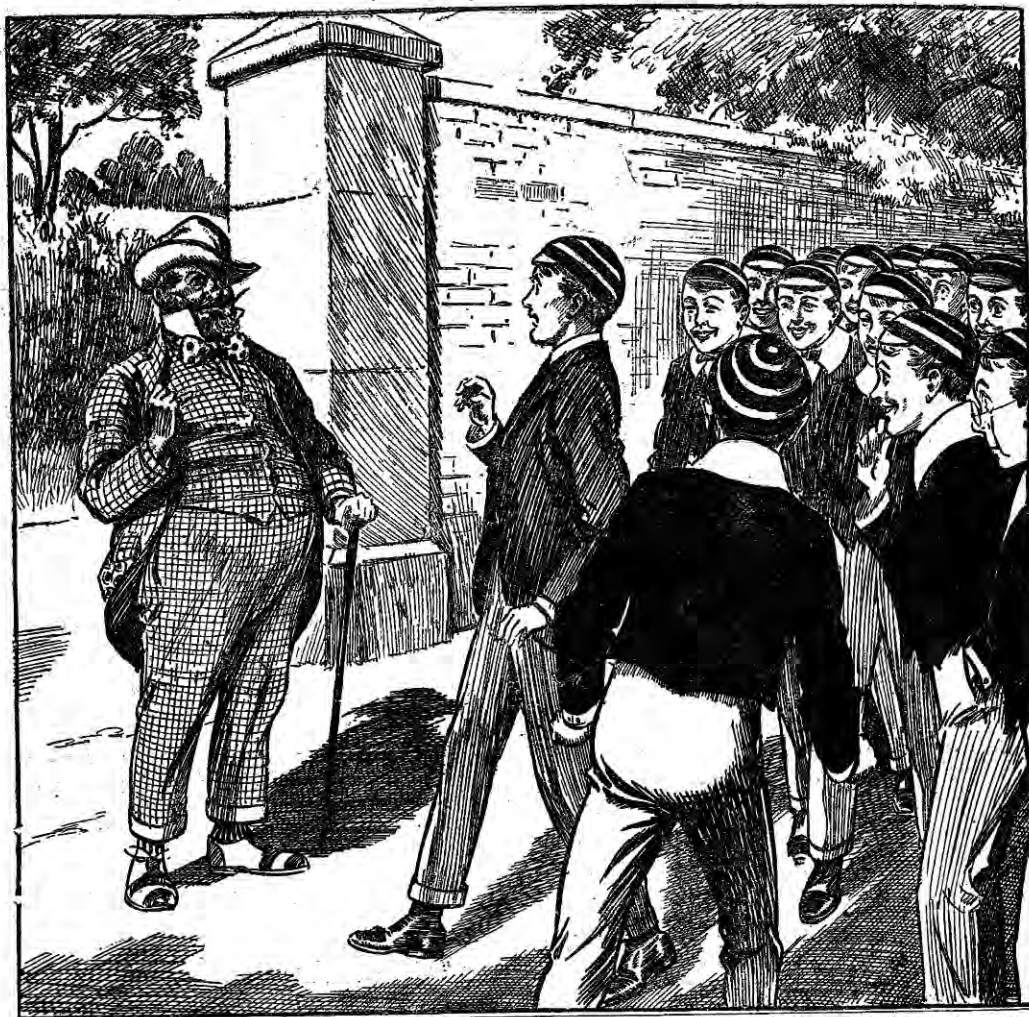
"He wouldn't know you if he saw you!"

"I suppose not. I have only just returned from abroad," said the stranger. "But I fail to see how this affects the question. Knox is expecting me, and I want you to tell him that I am not coming until next week."

"I'll go and see Knox at once," said Kerr. "Don't you worry yourself."

Kerr omitted to mention that, although he would see Knox, he had no intention of telling the prefect what had passed over the telephone. Kerr made no promise whatever.

"Thank you!" came across the wires, and Mr. Mason rang off.



"Nice place—werry nice," said Mr. Mason. "I 'spose you're 'igh up in the school—mebbe in the Seventh Standard?" "S-s-standard?" stammered Knox faintly. "They're called Forms here, sir. This isn't a Board School!" (See Chapter 5.)

Kerr replaced the receiver and slipped out of the prefects' room before Monteith or Baker or Sefton came along. His eyes were gleaming.

"By George," he muttered, "what a wheeze!" He walked down the passage slowly, and emerged into the sunlit quadrangle. An involuntary grin was hovering about his mouth.

"Knox is expecting Mr. Mason, and if I don't give the message—and I didn't promise to—Knox will still be waiting for his visitor," he murmured. "It would be a dirty trick to disappoint Knoxeey, so I'll work it that Mr. Mason comes, after all. At least Knoxeey will think it's Mr. Mason!"

For Kerr's great wheeze was to impersonate the unknown gentleman, and present himself at St. Jim's in his place. As Mr. Mason couldn't turn up there could be no possible hitch in the plan.

"It's all plane-sailing!" muttered Kerr gleefully. "Old Mason is a ripping good sort; he's planned this jape for me absolutely O.K.! He's a stranger to Knox, and can't turn up under any circumstances. So when I announce myself as Mr. Mason, Knox won't have a suspicion, and I can give him the time of his life! And I can get my watch back, too, and Knox will be the

laughing-stock of the whole giddy school. What a jape, by gum!"

It was certainly a gorgeous idea, and if it worked out according to programme Kerr would have his revenge on Knox, and succeed in making the bullying prefect sing extremely small.

Kerr had told the real Mr. Mason that he would go and see Knox, so Kerr felt obliged to keep his promise. As it happened, Knox was standing by the entrance gates, and Kerr strolled up carelessly. Knox was talking to Cutts of the Fifth.

"Yes; the old idiot ought to be here by now," Knox was saying. "He mentioned half-past two in his letter, and it's twenty-to-three already."

As Knox spoke he pulled out his watch—or, rather, Kerr's watch—and chuckled as he saw the New House junior's wrathful expression. It pleased Knox's peculiar nature to gloat over the helplessness of the younger boy.

But Kerr's turn was coming!

"I shouldn't wait about here for the ass," said Cutts. "Let him find his own way when he comes! You're not expecting a tip from him, are you?"

"Well, it's possible," said Knox, "but there's no certainty about it. Mason's not a relation, you know—"

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merely a pal of my pater's who's got a foolish idea into his head that he'd like to see me. I suppose I shall have to slobber over him while he's here, just to keep up appearances, you know?"

And Knox and the Fifth-Former strolled off.

"My hat!" grinned Kerr to himself. "It's all serene! Knox hasn't got a suspicion, and it would be a pity to disappoint him. But I'll bet there won't be much of the slobbering bizney when I get started! Knox is going to have the surprise of his giddy life!"

And Kerr, chuckling hugely, went off to prepare for the great jape.

CHAPTER 4.

Knox's Visitor Arrives.

"NO, I sha'n't tell a giddy soul!"

Thus George Kerr of the New House.

He had been thinking the matter out, and had finally decided to keep mum. He would not even tell Figgins and Fatty Wynn of his intended jape. He made up his mind, in fact, to spoof the whole school.

Kerr had no doubts as to his ability to carry out the wheeze successfully. He was generally acknowledged to be the best actor in the Fourth Form. And, apart from that fact, Kerr was truly a wonder at the art of impersonation. He had proved his skill on many occasions, and he knew that he could disguise himself so that not a single person, even his closest friends, would recognise him.

Ten minutes after Knox and Cutts had left the vicinity of the entrance gates Kerr hurried out, carrying a large handbag. He walked down Rylcombe lane for a little distance, and then suddenly dived into the wood.

From that moment he disappeared completely, but in a comparatively short time a stranger stepped out of the wood and looked cautiously up and down the lane.

"All serene!" he murmured. "Now for the giddy jape!"

The false Mr. John Mason was a curious-looking individual. Rather short and squat, he was, nevertheless, a little stoutish, and was attired in a somewhat loud check suit. His collar was abnormally high, and his necktie aggressive in the extreme. A Panama hat sat upon his head at a rakish angle, and, altogether, Mr. Mason looked somewhat like a prosperous bookmaker on a holiday.

His face was ruddy, and adorned with a reddish-brown beard and moustache. And he looked down the lane from beneath heavy, bushy eyebrows. Mr. Mason did not look at all like a friend of the lordly Knox's, and it was practically certain that Knox would get a terrific shock when he met the stranger.

Which was exactly what Kerr of the New House wanted.

Mr. Mason strolled leisurely up the lane to the gates of St. Jim's, and found Clampe and Diggs of the New House lounging by Taggles's lodge. Nothing could have suited Mr. Mason better, for, if Clampe and Diggs did not recognise him, he would be perfectly safe.

"'Allo, young shavers!"

Clampe and Diggs did not look at the stranger. They were engaged in conversation, and it did not seem to strike them at the time that Mr. Mason was speaking to them. Obviously, he was talking to some village urchins outside.

"I'm speakin' to you, my pippins!"

The two New House juniors condescended to notice Mr. Mason's existence.

The stranger nodded affably.

"How-do?" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Nice afternoon!"

The two juniors stared.

"Low boulder!" muttered Clampe.

"Like his rotten cheek to talk to us!" said Diggs audibly. "What do you want, my good man? This isn't the tradesmen's entrance, you know!"

"That's all right," said the stranger. "I want the School 'Ouse."

Clampe grinned.

"Take it!" he said, with a chuckle. "You're quite welcome to it! We're New House fellows, you see, and that old barn would be better out of the way."

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"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Mason. "Ahem!—I should say—er—the School House looks quite a decent show!" he added hastily. "This is St. Jim's, I s'pose?"

"You s'pose right," said Diggs. "But what do you want here? Strangers ain't allowed in the quad, you know. This is a school for gentlemen!"

Mr. Mason nodded.

"Then you don't belong to St. Jim's?" he asked blandly.

"Don't belong—" Diggs turned red. "Look here, you low rotter—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Clampe. "One for you, Diggy!"

Diggs glared ferociously.

"If you've called for the dust you'd better go to the tradesmen's entrance!" he said, with a sneer. "Or perhaps you're selling bootlaces?"

Mr. Mason laughed heartily.

"You must have your little joke!" he exclaimed. "No; I ain't called for the dust, Piggy—didn't I hear your friend call you Piggy? A most appropriate name, I'm sure!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Clampe.

Diggs turned scarlet.

"Look here, Clampe, I ain't standing this!" he shouted. "I'm blowed if I'm going to be insulted by this—this pub-haunter!"

"Better go easy!" muttered Clampe. "Don't call him names!"

"Well, didn't he call me 'Piggy' just now?" roared Diggs furiously.

"That's your name, ain't it?" asked Mr. Mason. "If you'll tell me your little friend's name, Master Scamp—"

"Scamp!" muttered Clampe. "My—my name's Clampe, you idiot!"

"Sorry!" said the stranger coolly. "Nothin' to get wild about. Your little friend—"

"I'm not his little friend!" howled Diggs. "I'm older than he is, anyhow! If you've come here looking for trouble, you low beast—"

"No; I ain't lookin' for trouble," said Mr. Mason affably. "I'm looking for Knox, the son of my old pal, you know. There, there! Don't get your little rags out, my boys! If you tell me where I can find Knox I'll give you a ha'penny each!"

Clampe and Diggs gasped.

Then, without a word, they turned their backs on the visitor and stalked away. Mr. Mason looked after them and grinned to himself. He walked aimlessly across the quad, and suddenly spotted Crooke of the Shell talking to Mellish.

"Knox ain't about," he murmured. "May as well amuse myself. And it'll put the giddy disguise to the test—not that it needs any more testing, I fancy!"

He approached Crooke and Mellish, and they looked at him curiously.

"'Allo, young 'uns!" he said, fingering his shaggy beard. "I want the School 'Ouse."

"That's the School House, there," said Crooke, nodding.

"Thanks! I'm lookin' for Knox."

Crooke grinned.

"Can I oblige?" he said humorously. "I'll give you some knocks, if you like."

"I reckon you've got plenty of cheek for a kid!" said Mr. Mason. "I mean Knox, the prefect. Where is he?"

Crooke and Mellish looked the stranger up and down and sniffed.

"Find him!" said Crooke shortly.

"That ain't perlit!" said Mr. Mason severely. "I can see you kids ain't been brought up proper! You look pale; you've been smoking!"

Mellish glared. He had just been smoking, as a matter of fact.

"Mind your own business!" he growled. "Who the deuce are you, anyhow? Do you think we're standing here to tell every clodhopper who comes along—"

"I don't want no impudence!" interrupted Mr. Mason.

"What!"

"You 'eard what I said! Strikes me you boys ain't looked after properly at this 'ere school!" said the visitor. "I ain't been 'ere long, but I can tell as you two ain't got the manners of real gentlefolk! I'm a

gentleman, I am, and I can tell the dud articles at the first glance! You two want horsewhippin'!"

"My hat!" gasped Crooke. "This is the giddy limit! The chap must be off his rocker! Look here, Looney, there's the gate——"

"No need to point to it," said the stranger. "I ain't blind. I've come 'ere to see Knox. Strikes me I've been to a lot of council schools where the boys have better manners. 'Owver, I don't s'pose the majority of the boys are like you. Mebbe you're what they call the snobs?"

"You—you——"

"My hat! I'll——"

"Well, what'll you do?" asked Mr. Mason grimly. "I'm at St. Jim's to see Knox, an' I've asked you to show me to 'im. Anything wrong in that? Ain't a visitor entitled to respect?"

"You—you entitled to respect?" sneered Mellish.

"Yes. What's wrong with me—hey?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with you," said Mellish unpleasantly. "You're all right—for Petticoat Lane or Whitechapel. But you'd better clear out of St. Jim's pretty quickly! Loafers ain't allowed here!"

Mr. Mason looked grimmer than ever.

"I kin stand a lot, and I ain't lost me temper yet," he said slowly. "I want to know if you're going to do as I asked. Are you goin' to show me to Knox——"

"Yes," said Crooke suddenly.

Mellish stared.

"Look here, Crooke, you ass——"

"Shut up!" said Crooke quickly, and he winked at Mellish with his off-side eye, a wink, however, which did not escape the notice of Mr. Mason. Mellish subsided, guessing that Crooke had something "on." He was right, for the Shell fellow jerked him aside.

"Buzz off and fix up a booby-trap of books in my study," he whispered quickly. "We'll teach this bounder something!" Then Crooke changed his voice, and added aloud for Mr. Mason's benefit, "Go and see if Knox is in his study."

"Right-ho!" grinned Mellish.

And he hurried off.

"Fixing up a jape," thought Mr. Mason, with an inward chuckle. "They'll find I ain't such a giddy fool as I look, by gum!"

In a few minutes Mellish returned, rather breathless.

"Yes, Knox is in his study," he announced.

"This way, sir," said Crooke, with sudden respect.

Mr. Mason followed the two juniors into the School House. They went up into the Shell passage, and paused before the door of Crooke's study. It stood very slightly ajar, and the visitor suspected a trap at once.

"This is Knox's study, sir," said Mellish. "Walk in, sir."

Mr. Mason hesitated.

"This is rather curious," he exclaimed. "I understood that Knox is a prefect and a Sixth-Former. How is it that his study is in a junior passage?"

The two cads of the School House were rather taken aback.

"This—this isn't a junior passage, sir," stammered Crooke. "This is the Sixth-Form quarters. Walk in—Knox is inside."

Mr. Mason shook his head.

"Do the thing proper," he said. "Show me right in, young'uns."

Crooke gave a sickly smile.

"We—we'd rather not, sir," he exclaimed hastily. "We—we're in a hurry, sir. Come on, Mellish!"

The joke on the visitor hadn't panned out quite successfully, and they thought it wisest to make themselves scarce. But at that moment a crowd of Shell fellows, in flannels, came round the corner and blocked up the passage. Also two strong hands were laid upon the cads' shoulders.

"Hold on!" said Mr. Mason grimly; but his eyes twinkled as he saw the Shell fellows crowding up. There were quite a number—Bernard Glyn, Kangaroo, Dane, Talbot, and several others.

"Let us go, you common bounder!" roared Mellish furiously. "Take your beastly paw off my shoulder!"

"By Jove, what's the matter?" asked Bernard Glyn.

"It's this—this rotter!" panted Crooke. "He's a visitor——"

The Shell fellows frowned.

"A visitor!" repeated Talbot sharply. "And you're insulting him! My hat! We'll deal with you later, Crooke! What's the trouble, sir?"

"Well, these young gents say that this is Knox's study," said Mr. Masph. "They may be right——"

"Why, it's Crooke's own study!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "It ain't!" roared Crooke. "It's Knox's. Walk in, sir!"

The visitor gripped the two cads more firmly.

"If it's Knox's study," he said, smiling, "you can go in and announce me!"

And he pushed them forward into the doorway.

Crooke gave a fiendish yell, but it was too late. He and Mellish sprawled in the doorway.

Crash!

A shower of heavy books thundered down upon the heads of the unfortunate japers. Mellish had done the thing thoroughly, and had chosen the largest books he could lay hands on, and also added, by way of variety, the fireirons and one or two chunks of coal. The cad of the Fourth received the full benefit of his thoughtfulness now, for the poker gave him a frightful crack on the head, and a lump of coal nearly drove his nose into his face. The coal was black—coal usually is—and a great deal of the blackness was transferred to Mellish's face, which scarcely improved his appearance.

"Ow!" howled Mellish. "Yarooooooh!"

"Yow!" roared Crooke. "I'm half killed! Yoooop! Oh, you ass, Mellish! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mr. Mason. "So that's why you wanted me to go in? Well, you must 'ave your jokes, I s'pose? Very amusin', young shavers—as good as a pantomime! P'raps this'll teach you a lesson to treat visitors with respect!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Shell fellows.

"How do you feel, Mellish?"

"I—I—— Oh, my nose!" moaned Mellish.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bernard Glyn & Co. were simply convulsed. They didn't appear at all sympathetic. As a matter of fact, they weren't. They felt that Crooke and Mellish had thoroughly deserved to be hoist with their own petard. The hearts of the Shell fellows warmed towards the unknown Mr. Mason, as it were. He was obviously an ungrammatical bounder, but he had turned the tables upon the cads with great neatness, and that fact made him almost popular at once. He left Crooke and Mellish sitting among the debris, and walked off down the passage. The Shell practice match was evidently at an end, so there were sure to be plenty of fellows in the quad.

There were.

And the news rapidly spread that he had already had an encounter with Crooke and Mellish, and that he had come off triumphant. Bernard Glyn & Co. had followed the visitor down, and he was soon the centre of an amused throng.

As Kangaroo remarked, it was possible to cut Mr. Mason's accent with a knife, but any man who /succeeded in taking Crooke and Mellish down a peg or two must obviously be the right sort!

CHAPTER 5.

Quite an Entertainment.

"BAI Jove, who is the stwangah?"

The chums of Study No. 6—Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—were strolling from Little Side with the Terrible Three. As they entered the quad, Arthur Augustus adjusted his famous eyeglass and looked towards the spot where Mr. Mason was surrounded by many juniors.

"I wondah who he is?" he repeated.

"Better go and ask, Gussy," said Tom Merry.

"That's right; go and shove your nose in!" exclaimed Blake. "You always were inquisitive, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake——"

"He looks a funny merchant," remarked Ma mers. "I don't admire his taste in clobber, anyhow."

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"You are quite wight, Mannahs," said Arthur Augustus. "The stwanga's clobber is feashfully aggressive. Bai Jove, what a necktie! And look at his collar! Gweat Spott!"

"Don't faint, Gussy!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "Weally, Lowthah, I wish you wot nbt make such widic wemarks. I have no intencion of faintin'. I twust I possess more staminah! But, weally," added Arthur Augustus, "it wequires pweetly stwong eyesight to look upon such a get-up without flinchin'!"

"They gathered round the little crowd."

"I want to see Knox," Mr. Mason exclaimed affably.

"You see, I'm on a visit to St. Jim's."

"A visitah, bai Jove!"

"That's it, young shaver. I'm visitin' Knox."

"Young shavah!" murmured Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Weally, that is wathah too much, deah boys! However, I cannot vewy well wemonstwate with a guest."

"No; it would be awfully bad form," said Lowther gravely.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Will somebody find Knox for me?" went on Mr. Mason. "I've been 'ere a decent while, an' I ain't seen 'im yet. P'raps one o' you youngsters will oblige?"

"Pway let me offah my services," said D'Arcy gracefully, stepping forward. "Knox is wathah a wottah, sir, but pewwaps that fact is unknown to you?"

"Well, not exactly," replied the visitor. "But if Knox don't like the looks o' me—I ain't exactly a born dook, you know—I'll soon put him in his place. Give the name of Mr. John Mason—who's always been a great friend of Knox's father. Knox don't know me, since I got these whiskers. If he's ashamed of an old friend, then I'll teach 'im a lesson."

Arthur Augustus went off to search for Knox, leaving the juniors highly amused. They foresaw quite an entertainment in the very near future. The high and mighty Knox would most certainly be startled at the stranger's accent, and would feel ashamed of his visitor—for Knox was a first-class snob.

Arthur Augustus ran the prefect to earth in the pavilion of Big Side, and beckoned to him. Knox came out, frowning.

"Done those lines?" he asked.

"Bai Jove, Knox, I've come on quite anothah mattah," said Arthur Augustus hastily. "Theah is a gentleman waitin' for you in the quad—a Mr. John Mason. You are expectin' him, I gathah."

"Oh, he's come at last, has he?" said Knox, feeling if his tie was straight. "Yes, I am expecting him, D'Arcy. I'll come now."

Arthur Augustus hurried off in advance, fearful lest Knox should again remember the lines. He rejoined the crowd in the quad, and a moment later Knox pushed through them, all smiles, to greet, as he thought, his father's old friend. He had visions of a substantial tip, so he set himself out to be extra polite.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Mason!" he exclaimed genially. "You're quite a stranger to me, you know, but I've heard heaps about you from the pater."

The smile faded from his face as he regarded Mr. Mason's appearance. But there was no getting out of things now; he had acknowledged the visitor as an old friend.

"Well, you ain't wot I thought you'd be, youngster," said Mr. Mason, taking Knox's hand. "I was expectin' to see a hupright, hatheletic fellow. Strikes me you don't go in for enough hexercise. 'Owver, I'll give you a lecture later on."

"T-thank y-you!" stammered Knox.

He looked at Mr. Mason in dismay, and the latter chuckled inwardly with tremendous amusement. Revenge is sweet, and George Kerr, hidden beneath the disguise of Mr. Mason, meant to take full advantage of his opportunity.

"Nice place—werry nice!" Mr. Mason proceeded. "I s'pose you're 'igh up in the school—mebbe in the seventh standard?"

"S-s-standard?" stuttered Knox faintly. "They're called Forms here, sir. This isn't a Board-school!"

Mr. Mason looked round genially.

"Times 'ave changed," he went on. "O' course, you wouldn't remember the times when me an' your dad went to the same Council-school? Them was times, young 'un! Me and the blacksmith's boy used to—"

"I—I say!" gasped Knox. "Wot'n you come up to my study, sir? We can talk a lot better there, and—"

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Mason. "We're all right 'ere! Why, what's it matter about these boys 'earin' what I'm sayin'? You ain't ashamed of your own dad, or your dad's pal, I know!"

Knox looked round helplessly, and gritted his teeth. He was conscious of the fact that his face was absolutely crimson. The juniors were looking on with great and glorious enjoyment, and every face bore a grin.

Knox, the snob, was being shown up. The unpopular prefect felt that he would like the ground to open up and swallow him, Mr. Mason and all. This fearfully low bouncer was absolutely the limit, and he was his father's old friend. Knox was quite staggered.

"Buck up, Knoxy!" grinned Blake. "Don't go away now; we're just getting interested."

"As good as the play!" chuckled Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Knox turned on D'Arcy with a scowling face.

"Go to my study, and wait till I come!" he snarled.

"Weally, Knox—"

"Do as I say!" thundered Knox furiously.

"I uttably decline!"

"Ear, ear!" chimed in Mr. Mason. "Let the young gent alone. Wot he said was quite true—things are gittin' interestin'. If you bully the younger boys in my presence, Gerald, I shall take you in 'and myself. I don't believe in bullyin' in any form. I 'ope you don't bully the kids?"

"Never!" muttered Knox between his teeth. "I always treat them with extreme leniency."

"Weally, Knox, what a wotten whoppah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "You know vewy well that you are the wottenest bullay in the School House. I pwotest against such a whoppin' fib."

"Hear, hear, Gussy!"

"Don't tell fairy tales!"

"Shame!"

Knox clenched his fists.

"Silence!" he roared savagely. "Clear off, all of you!"

"Don't go, boys; stop where you har!" said Mr. Mason.

The juniors stopped; they had no intention of going in any case. Mr. Mason was voted to be an absolute ripper. There was scarcely a boy there who had not felt the sting of Knox's misused power, and to see him humiliated was a sheer joy.

"No sense in gettin' ratty," said the visitor soothingly. "You an' me don't want to fall out, Gerald. What would your dad say when I went back to 'is public-house?"

"Public-house!"

"My only aunt!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, this is the latest!" grinned Monty Lowther, "Farry Knoxy's pater being a giddy publican!"

Knox nearly choked.

"He isn't!" he roared. "What do you mean by sayin' such a thing?" he went on angrily, turning to Mr. Mason. "It's a lie!"

"Easy, boy!" said the visitor smoothly. "Mebbe I made a mistake, but it's only natural. Him an' me always bein' in the pube—leastways, I can say with truth that I never went into a pub without 'im!"

"Won't—won't you come indoors?" asked Knox desperately.

"Not me! I'm astayin' hout 'ere," said Mr. Mason. "Yes, it's a werry nice school. I s'pose your dad would 'ave liked to 'ave gone to a school like this."

"He did!" growled Knox. "He was educated here and at Oxford."

"Hoxford—eh?" said Mr. Mason. "What did 'e go to Hoxford for?"

"To the University, of course!" snarled Knox.

"University?" repeated the visitor. "Wot's that?"

Knox gritted his teeth.

"Look here, Mr. Mason," he said savagely. "I believe you're pulling my leg. You can't be so ignorant—" "Hignorant!" repeated Mr. Mason sharply. "Mind what you're sayin', young man. I'm a well-hedicated mah, I am, an' I pride myself as I can tork with Royalty. Me and your dad hoften 'ave an argument hon manners. I'm always 'avin' to pull 'im hup in conversation. I s'pose you've swanked the boys 'ere that you're the son of a rich man? 'Ow many times 'as your father 'ad to go to the pawnshop—'ow many times, hey?"

"Pawnshop, by gum!"

"Phew!"

"G'weat Scott!"

Knox glared round at the tittering juniors.

"My hat, I'll deal with you juniors later on!" he muttered thickly. "And as for you, Mr. Mason, the sooner you get off these premises the better I shall like it. After what you've been saying the boys will make a laughing-stock of me—"

"Well, it won't do you any 'arm!"

"Look here—"

"Now, then, don't git riled!" said Mr. Mason soothingly. "I'm older than you, yer know, Gerald. If you're ashamed of me—well, I'll clear hout. But don't let's part in hanger. Let's 'ave a cigar together, any'ow!"

"A—A what?" gasped Knox.

"A cigar—a smoke," said Mr. Mason. "You smoke, don't you?"

"Of course not!" snapped Knox. "I never smoke!"

There was a general broadening of the juniors' grins.

"Oh, never!" murmured Lowther.

"Sure, an' it's a howly friar, ye are, Knoxe!" said Reilly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, you'll 'ave a smoke with me, surely?" asked Mr. Mason, producing a couple of black cigars from his waistcoat-pocket. He stuck one in his own mouth, and held out the other to Knox. But the prefect shook his head.

"I don't smoke," he repeated between his teeth.

"Well, you can start now," said Mr. Mason genially.

"You don't mean to say you're a-goin' to funk it? Fancy you, a big, strappin' feller like you, bein' afraid to smoke a mild cigar. Well, you are a kid!"

Knox breathed hard.

"Go it, Knoxe!" chuckled Blake. "Light up like a man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pile in!"

"Don't be a funk!"

"Ear that?" chuckled Mr. Mason. "They're laughin' at you, Gerald! Don't let 'em see as you're afraid of smokin' a cigar. You ain't a little kid, are yer? Wot's the matter—afraid of bein' sick?"

"No, I'm not!" roared Knox desperately. "It's against the rules to smoke at St. Jim's. If—if you'll come for a walk with me I—I'll smoke it!"

"Good!" said Mr. Mason. "Light it hup 'ere, though. Then we'll go for a little walk—mebbe to the station."

Knox brightened up.

"Are you thinking of going?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, I shall 'ave to go afore long, I s'pose," said the visitor. "After I've seen the 'eadmaster, and—"

"You—you can't see the Head!" gasped Knox frantically. "The Head's out, I believe—"

"He isn't," interrupted Lumley-Lumley. "I guess he's in his study."

"Well, he's—he's very busy," snarled Knox, meaning, at all costs, to prevent this impossible "friend" of his from interviewing the reverend Head. "Come on, Mr. Mason; we'll light these cigars and be off!"

Mr. Mason grinned.

"No 'urry!" he exclaimed. "'Owever, we'll light up!"

He produced a box of matches and struck one. Knox lighted his cigar, and the puffs of smoke that came from it nearly choked him.

"Like it?" asked Mr. Mason, making a pretence of lighting his own.

Knox was so occupied that he didn't notice that his visitor failed to light the other cigar.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Kangaroo. "What a niff!"

"Yaas, wathah! Gwooh!"

"It is a bit niffy, Knox!"

Knox thought so too. He gasped and spluttered. He had smoked many cigarettes, and one or two cigars, when he felt extra "doggy," but never in his wildest dreams had he thought a cigar would be so utterly utter as this precious specimen. It was not merely "niffy"; it was positively ghastly.

"Like it?" repeated Mr. Mason amiably.

"It's—it's a bit strong!" gasped Knox. "Let's be going."

"Mind you don't let it go hout."

"I sha'n't let it go hout—I mean out!" spluttered Knox.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Never, in all his life, had Knox felt so murderous. He felt that he would like to throw himself upon Mr. Mason and slaughter him on the spot. He felt—he knew—that he was humiliated and made a laughing-stock. Hemmed in by grinning and tittering juniors, who usually quailed at his glance, he could not even escape. And he was obliged to be civil to this low, common ruffian who called himself his father's friend! Knox thought that it must be some horrible nightmare!

But the cigar, at any rate, wasn't a nightmare—that was real enough! The cloud of smoke that enveloped Knox was simply wicked. It drove the juniors back, gasping and choking; and even Mr. Mason seemed to be in desperate straits to prevent himself going off into a coughing fit.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Knox. "This is too much! Let's—let's be going!"

"I'm ready," said Mr. Mason, waving a puff of smoke away. "Oh, crumbs! What a niff! I—I mean, ain't that cigar got a lovely scent?"

Knox took it from his mouth and held it out at arm's length. A way was clear for him to get through the crowd, and he walked hastily through the juniors, Mr. Mason following. As a matter of fact, the juniors were only too glad to get rid of Knox—and the cigar. And Knox and Mr. Mason were in dire need of fresh air.

But the pair had hardly walked five yards before a thin, begowned figure appeared, and a murmur of consternation arose from the juniors. Knox stood in full view, with the fearful abomination still smoking in his hand.

"Knox!"

The prefect stood frozen to the ground. The single word cut through the air in acid tones, and Knox went pale.

For the begowned figure was that of Mr. Ratcliff, the harsh, ill-tempered Housemaster of the New House!

CHAPTER 6.

Ratty Catches it Hot—and Cold!

MR. RATCLIFF halted.

"Knox," he thundered, "what—what is that thing in your hand?"

Knox looked at the cigar dully and dropped it.

"A—a cigar, sir!" he stammered.

"This is positively outrageous!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff in a terrible voice. "I—I am at a loss for words, Knox! I cannot believe the evidence of my own eyes! How dare you—how dare you, Knox!"

"I—I couldn't help it, sir," said Knox limply.

"Couldn't help it?" roared Mr. Ratcliff. "You have the audacity to say that you couldn't help it! Good gracious! What is the school coming to? You, a prefect, have the utter impertinence to light a cigar in the presence of many junior boys, thereby setting them a shocking example! I—I cannot find words to express myself, Knox! This abominable occurrence shall be reported to your Housemaster—to Dr. Holmes himself! What have you to say, Knox?"

Knox didn't reply. In fact, he didn't feel up to replying. This shock, coming on top of the effects of that awful cigar, was a little too much. Knox felt that matters couldn't get much worse than they were at the present moment.

"Answer me, Knox!" rapped out Mr. Ratcliff. "I demand—"

Mr. Mason stepped forward. He had been feeling

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rather nervous at first, but as his disguise had stood the test of even his own schoolfellows Kerr felt that Mr. Ratcliff could be trusted not to see through it. And the japer, seeing that things had gone a little further than he had first intended, wished to smooth the troubled waters, as it were.

"One moment, sir," he said calmly. "If you will allow me—"

Mr. Ratcliff turned a frozen glare upon Mr. Mason—which quite failed to have the desired effect, however.

"No, sir! I will not allow you!" he thundered. "You will be pleased to be silent while I am administering punishment upon this wretched boy! I will deal with you later, sir, for I suspect that you are responsible for this terrible scene!"

"I think Knox was hardly to blame—"

"Will you be silent?" roared Mr. Ratcliff, too angry to moderate his tones or his language to the stranger. "I don't know who you might be, sir."

"Well; I might be the Kaiser, or Admiral Tirpitz, on a holiday."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh subsided as if by magic as Mr. Ratcliff glared round. He turned to Mr. Mason with a snarl.

"So you are pleased to be flippant!" he exclaimed furiously. "Very well! I shall demand a full explanation from you, sir, later on. At the present moment I strongly advise you to hold your tongue!"

"But, sir," interrupted Knox, "this gentleman is Mr. John Mason, a friend of my father's."

"Silent, Knox! It is my intention to take you to the headmaster. This—this gentleman will be requested to interview me later on."

Mr. Mason's eyes gleamed. He was feeling wrathful already. Mr. Ratcliff was an old enemy—there was hardly a New House junior at St. Jim's who didn't owe Mr. Ratcliff an innumerable amount of grudges. Mr. Ratcliff was, in the juniors' opinion, absolutely the limit in ratters. For ever nagging, for ever fault-finding, for ever administering lines and lickings, Mr. Ratcliff was considered "fair game" for sport when an opportunity presented itself. Such opportunities, however, very rarely, if ever, came. Several juniors had often threatened to come back to St. Jim's when they had grown up, for the sole and exclusive pleasure of giving Ratty a thundering good horsewhipping. In point of fact, such an occurrence had actually taken place on one historic occasion.

Kerr, of the New House, was feeling reckless. Here was an opportunity to "go for" Ratty bald-headed. As a stranger he could talk as he liked, without fear of being silenced, for Mr. Ratcliff had not the slightest authority over him. He could give as good, if not better, than he received. But as a New House junior he had to put up with the Housemaster's harsh tongue without daring to reply. Mr. Mason was not forced to put up with anything of the kind.

And he didn't!

Rather wrathful, and certainly reckless, he went the whole hog, so to speak, and entered into the spirit of the thing. Like a supposed visitor to St. Jim's, had been ordered to hold his tongue. Mr. Ratcliff had certainly forgotten himself.

"I wish to say a few words—"

"Allow me to inform you, sir, that your advice is not asked for, and is not wanted!" snapped the New Housemaster idly. "It may interest you to know that I am Mr. Ratcliff!"

Mr. Mason's eyes glittered.

"Oh!" he ejaculated slowly. "You're Mr. Ratcliff, are you? I've 'eard of you! I've 'eard a 'ole lot about you! So you're Mr. Ratcliff—eh?"

The words were uttered in a tone of deepest contempt, and Mr. Ratcliff's eyes almost goggled from his head. The juniors, listening with all their ears, grinned at one another and drew closer. Matters were evidently going to be interesting. If Mr. Mason succeeded in humiliating the unpopular Housemaster he would be forthwith proclaimed a hero for all time.

"How—how dare you!" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Ow dare I!" repeated the visitor deliberately. "Mebbe, you think I'm one o' your schoolboys who you The GEN LIBRARY.—No. 391.

can bully as you please! Do I look like a schoolboy? I'm goin' to speak to you plain, Mr. Ratcliff, and tell you a few facts that ought to make you feel 'appy! And I ain't goin' to be shut up, neither!"

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"Good gracious, Knox! Remove this—this navy!"

"And I ain't a navy!" went on Mr. Mason. "You're a bully, Ratcliff, and if the boys 'ere 'ad their way I'll bet they'd kick you out of St. Jim's! Instead o' treatin' 'em like a master should, you bully 'em, stick your great ugly nose in where it ain't wanted, and interfere in things that don't concern you!"

"Good—good heavens!"

"Take my advice and make yourself more agreeable—you'll find it pays in the long run, matey! I'm tellin' you all this for your own good, just as if I was one o' your schoolboys, and I give you warnin'. If you don't alter, you'll find yourself reach the limit one o' these 'ere days. The fellows will go for you bald-headed, and boil you in oil! Not that you don't deserve it—cos you do!"

Mr. Ratcliff positively quivered with fury. The crowd of juniors were grinning with unholy joy, and even Knox wore a smile. Mr. Mason's words were sweet music to their ears; to hear old Ratty "told off" was a sheer delight.

"You—you insulting scoundrel!" roared the Housemaster. "How—how dare you! I'll have you thrown off the premises!"

"Yes, you would!" sneered Mr. Mason, more recklessly than ever. "That's just like you, Ratty! You do a lot o' torkin', but it don't amount to much when you threaten the likes o' me! It's only boys, who can't answer back, who you really bully!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

That remark was rather unfortunate, for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was getting excited, did not trouble to lower his voice. And his beautiful accent told Mr. Ratcliff who the speaker was.

"Oh, you burbling chump, Gussy!" murmured Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

Mr. Ratcliffe strode forward to Arthur Augustus. He felt that he was out-matched by the plain-speaking visitor; but he could, at least, vent his wrath upon the aristocratic person of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"D'Arcy!"

Arthur Augustus looked surprised.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "Old Watty must have heard me!"

"Do you hear me, D'Arcy?" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Yaas, sir."

"Cease that muttering, and come here at once!" rapped out Mr. Ratcliff in a chilly voice. "You made a remark just now, upholding the insulting words of this—this ruffian!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Well, boy, what have you to say?"

"Nothin', sir. He spoke the litewal twuth!"

"Oh, you blithering jabberwock!" groaned Blake.

"Very well, D'Arcy," said Mr. Ratcliff, fairly dancing with fury. "I will teach you that it is not your place to pass criticisms upon me. I intend to thrash you soundly, here and now! It should be a lesson to you!"

"Weally, sir, you have not the power," protested Arthur Augustus.

"What! What did you say, D'Arcy?"

"You are not my Housemaster, sir—"

"You have insulted me, boy, and I intend to thrash you!" roared Mr. Ratcliff, gripping his walking-cane in a firmer grasp. "Hold out your hand!"

"Weally, sir—"

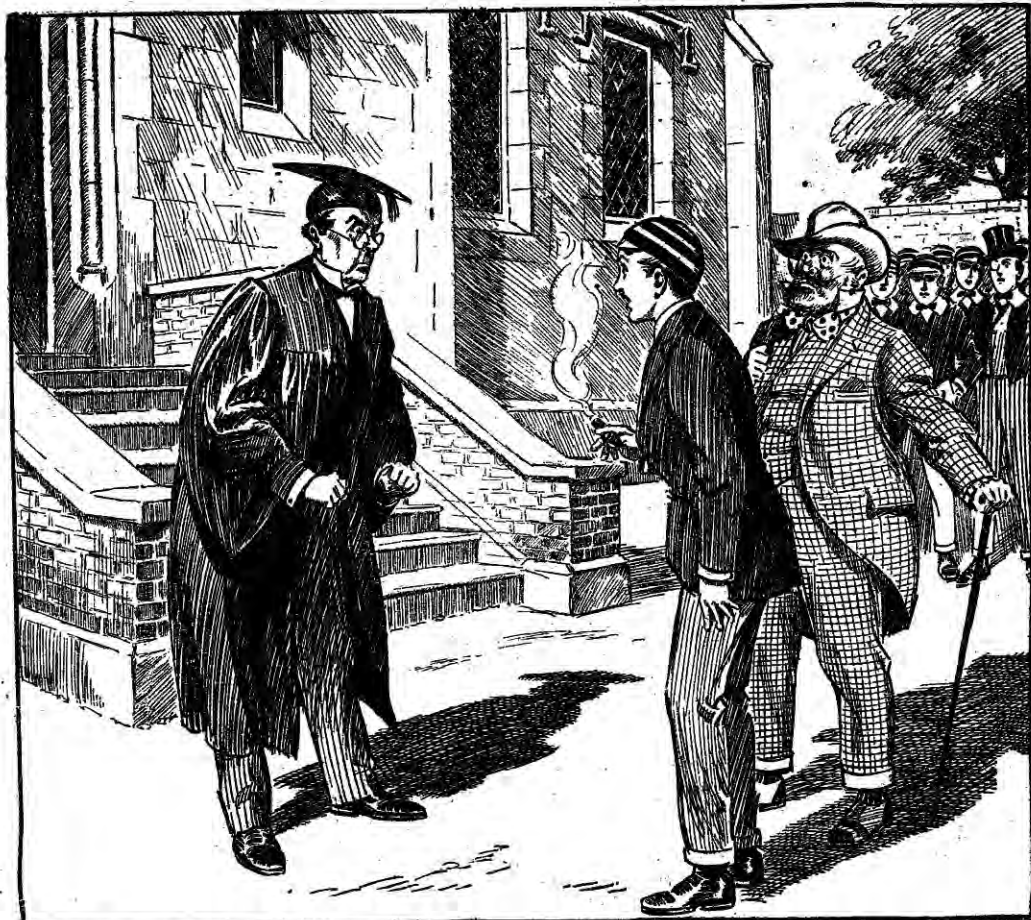
"Hold out your hand!"

"I wefuse, sir!"

"I will give you one more chance before I take drastic action!" snarled the Housemaster, who was now nearly choking. "Again I order you, D'Arcy, to hold out your hand!"

"I uttaly decline to do anythin' of the sort, sir!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I wefuse to be thwashed. I have done nothin' to wawant such tweekment. I—"

But Mr. Ratcliff was not speechless with passion. He was not angry with D'Arcy particularly, but he felt that



"Knox!" The prefect stood frozen to the ground. The single word cut through the air in acid tones, and Knox went pale. For the begowned figure was that of Mr. Ratcliff, the harsh, ill-tempered Housemaster of the New House; (See Chapter 5)

if he did not vent his wrath upon somebody immediately he would certainly burst a blood-vessel. And Arthur Augustus had interposed at the right moment. Mr. Ratcliff was so furious that he could not control himself. He grasped the swell of the School House and lashed viciously at his noble legs.

"Owwwww!" howled Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove, you uttah wottah! Yowwwwwooop!"

Mr. Ratcliff laid it on heavily.

"My hat, this won't do!" murmured the disguised Kerr in dismay. "I shall have to stop this giddy caper! I mustn't let poor old Gussy suffer!"

Mr. Mason, otherwise Kerr, was now extremely wrathful himself. Mr. Ratcliff's unwarrantable attack upon Gussy was the limit.

"Stop that, you brute!" roared Mr. Mason.

Mr. Ratcliff nearly fell down with amazement. He released Arthur Augustus and turned upon the visitor.

"Did—did you address me?" he panted.

"Leave that boy alone!" thundered Mr. Mason. "If you touch him with that cane again I'll snatch it away an' give you a taste of it!"

"We'll see—we'll see!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff, grinning with fury.

And he turned upon Arthur Augustus as the latter was walking away, and brought the cane down with considerable force upon the rear portion of D'Arcy's trousers.

"Yaroo!" howled Arthur Augustus, jumping into the air. "Oh, cwumbs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared. It was rather unfeeling of them, but they didn't feel the pain, and the expression upon D'Arcy's noble countenance was really funny.

"Now, sir," snarled Mr. Ratcliff, almost foaming at the mouth, "perhaps you'll show us what you'll do!"

Mr. Mason hesitated.

"Yes, by gum, I will!" he roared, throwing caution to the winds; and he made a dive forward and snatched the cane from Mr. Ratcliff's hand. It swished through the air with a hiss that made the Housemaster's blood run cold.

"You—you wouldn't dare to touch me with that?" he panted.

"We'll see—we'll see!" hissed Mr. Mason, mimicking Mr. Ratcliff.

He looked truly ferocious, and the unfortunate Ratty turned quite pale. Never for a moment had he suspected that Mr. Mason would be as good as his word. But he had no time to remonstrate. The cane hissed down and lashed his thin legs with stinging force.

"Ow! Help—help!" bellowed Mr. Ratcliff. "Help!"

He jumped nearly a yard into the air, and looked round wildly for assistance. But none was forthcoming. The juniors, New House and School House alike, stood looking on with unadulterated joy. They had all suffered from Mr. Ratcliff's vicious temper, and they were not likely to go to his assistance now. On the contrary, they

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would rather have lost a term's pocket-money than miss this gorgeous scene!

Not a master was in sight, not a prefect, except Knox. Possibly the prefects were conveniently keeping out of the way. Anyhow, they didn't put in an appearance. Even Taggles was not to be seen. Mr. Ratcliff was at the mercy of this murderous ruffian!

There was only one thing to be done—he must make a dash for the New House. No doubt such a proceeding would be undignified in the extreme, but the unfortunate Housemaster was now desperate. He had suffered enough indignity already. To remain there and be thrashed before a crowd of grinning juniors was simply out of the question.

So he ran for it; but, unfortunately, Mr. Mason ran too. And he not only ran, but he administered a playful slash at every yard or so, which had the effect of making Mr. Ratcliff hop up and down like a monkey on hot bricks. It was impossible to look upon the scene seriously. Across the quad they went, and a roar of laughter followed. The juniors were simply doubled up with merriment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Run for it, Ratty!"

"Give him another taste!" roared Figgins. "Don't spare him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's wight, deah boy—thwash the wottah soundly!"

Mr. Ratcliff made desperately for the New House, but his pursuer headed him off, and the wretched Housemaster swerved aside and ran for the fountain, his gown flying in the breeze. Arriving there, he put his back to it and held up his hand.

"You—you scoundrel!" he panted. "Don't dare to touch me again!"

Mr. Mason swished the cane through the air. Unfortunately Mr. Ratcliff thought that the blow was going home, and he involuntarily threw himself back, forgetting at the moment that the fountain was just behind him.

He threw himself back, lost his balance, and failed to recover it!

There was a loud splash and a fiendish yell from Mr. Ratcliff. But the yell was almost drowned by the howl of laughter that went up from the convulsed spectators. Even Mr. Mason himself was taken by surprise.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Now the wottah is cooled off!"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Old Ratty's got it hot and cold all at the same time! He ought to consider himself lucky! It's as good as a giddy Turkish bath!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Ratcliff wallowed out of the fountain like a limp rag. He was too utterly spent to say a word. Mr. Mason realised it, and threw the cane down. As a matter of fact, he was rather alarmed at the enormity of the offence he had committed. He, Kerr of the Fourth, had thrashed Mr. Ratcliff with his own cane! It would mean the sack—nothing less—if the truth ever came out.

But that wasn't likely to happen, for nobody suspected him. But as Mr. Ratcliff's dripping figure staggered into the New House, Mr. Mason made up his mind to clear out and assume his own identity again without any loss of time.

As long as he remained at St. Jim's now he would be in considerable peril!

CHAPTER 7.

A Little Mistake.

TEN minutes later the old quadrangle wore quite a calm appearance.

Little groups of juniors were scattered about, certainly, and they were all grinning, but there was no longer any excitement. The real cause was that Kildare and Darrel had put in an appearance—with canes—to ascertain the cause of the commotion. Whether by accident or design, they had arrived after everything had happened, and, after looking at Mr. Mason rather curiously, they went off.

The visitor to St. Jim's was now the centre of a little group of Fourth Formers, and Knox had gone off to the School House. Knox was feeling rather relieved. The

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adventure with Mr. Ratcliff had detracted the juniors' attention from himself. And, too, the juniors no longer looked upon Mr. Mason as a low bouncer. In their estimation he was a hero.

"But I can't believe it!" muttered Knox, as he entered his study. "It seems impossible that that chap is pater's old friend. There must be some mistake somewhere."

Yet that couldn't be, Knox told himself, for the stranger had given the right name, and had come on the right day.

"Oh, hang!" muttered the prefect. "I'm not going to bother myself about it. Thank goodness old Ratty came along at the moment he did! That cigar would have made me ill for a week if I'd finished it; and I expect old Ratty will be too ashamed of himself to rake the matter up again."

He looked thoughtfully at his table, and his eyes rested upon a little parcel which had apparently come by post. Toby, the page, must have left it there during his absence. Knox picked it up and unfastened it.

"Wonder what the deuce it is?" he muttered.

He soon discovered—and the discovery gave him a considerable amount of pleasure. For the parcel contained a really first-class gold watch. It was not a cheap article, but a solid good English lever.

Knox was delighted.

It was a present from a loving relative which had been long promised. Knox had begun to have doubts about its arrival, but now those doubts were set at rest. And the watch couldn't possibly have come at a more opportune time. His own was smashed, and he was wearing Kerr's, of the New House.

Knox grinned.

"Well, I've got no further use for Kerr's turnip now," he muttered. "I'll slip across the quad and get rid of it at once. Kerr ought to consider himself jolly lucky."

He had no intention of having his old watch repaired, and as he didn't want two watches on him, he decided to get rid of Kerr's before he wore the magnificent new one. He placed it on the side table. It was getting a little dusky now, for the afternoon was well advanced; and as the blind was partially down, to keep out the sun, the study was somewhat dim.

Knox went out into the quad, but as there was no sign of Figgins & Co. he entered the New House, and went up to the Fourth Form passage. Without troubling to knock at the door of Figgins's study he entered.

Figgins and Fatty Wynn were there. Figgins was preparing tea, but Fatty Wynn was busily breaking up some substance which was apparently meant to be toffee. It was black and uninviting, but Fatty Wynn was sucking a chunk with great enjoyment.

They both looked up as Knox entered, and they both frowned.

"Well," said Figgins bluntly, "what do you want?"

"You're a School House rotter!" said Fatty Wynn, not without difficulty, for the lump of toffee in his mouth was of huge dimensions. "You ain't got any authority over us, Knox—clear out!"

"Where's Kerr?" asked Knox.

"Out!"

"But where is he?"

"How the dickens should I know?" asked Figgins. "He went off on his own somewhere, and we haven't seen him for over an hour. What do you want him for, anyhow?"

"I don't want to see Kerr particularly," replied Knox, taking out Kerr's watch, and laying it on the table. "Give him this when he comes in."

"Oh, so you've come to your giddy senses?" asked Figgins.

Knox shook his head.

"No; it's a rotten watch!" he replied. "I wouldn't be seen with such a turnip!"

And Knox departed.

"He's smashed the blessed thing, I expect," growled Fatty Wynn, reaching for the watch.

But Figgins snatched it away first.

"You ass!"

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Wynn. "What am I an ass for?"

"Do you want to get Kerr's watch all mucked up with your rotten toffee?"

"It ain't rotten toffee!" protested Fatty Wynn indignantly.

"Well, it looks pretty ghastly," replied Figgins, with delightful frankness.

"Taste a bit, you chump!"

"Not me!" grinned Figgins. "The sight of it's enough, old man. I believe you've got some chunks of coal or cinders mixed up in that toffee, Fatty!"

"Well, there might be one or two pieces," admitted Fatty Wynn. "But you can easily pick 'em out when you're eating it. I say, when's that ass Kerr coming in?"

But Figgins couldn't answer that question, and he laid the watch—which was in perfect order—aside until Kerr put in an appearance.

Meanwhile Knox left the New House. Just outside he met Mr. Mason, who was apparently waiting for him.

"You haven't gone, then?" said Knox, frowning.

"I'm goin' soon, youngster," said Mr. Mason affably. "Wot's the time?"

Knox's hand went to his waistcoat.

"My watch is in the study," he replied shortly. "But it's time you were going, Mr. Mason, anyhow."

And Knox, seeing Rushton of the Sixth in the distance, left the visitor without ceremony, and crossed the quad. Mr. Mason watched him until he and Rushton entered the gymnasium.

"In his study—eh?" murmured Kerr. "That's a giddy stroke of luck. I'll slip in, get it, and then grease off. My hat! What a shindy there'd be if old Ratty found out who I was!"

But Mr. Ratcliff had made himself extremely scarce, and was not likely to be seen in public again for several hours. It was doubtful if he would show his face even then. So Kerr felt that he was safe.

He walked leisurely across the quad and entered the School House. Fortunately, he met nobody in the hall or passages, and arrived outside Knox's study without mishap. He opened the door cautiously, and slipped in. He left the door ajar behind him, and did not hear a footstep in the passage.

That footstep was caused by Percy Mellish, the Paul-py of the School House. He looked in through the partially-opened door, and saw that the visitor was alone in the study. He was looking round as though in search of something.

Kerr couldn't see his watch at first—he didn't see it at all, in fact. But he saw Knox's new gold ticker on the side table, and in the dimness, and in his hurry, he did not notice that it was a different timepiece. It was a watch—that was enough for Kerr. He took it quite for granted that it was his own.

It was rather an unfortunate mistake to make, and was to lead to truly dire consequences. And Mellish's inquisitiveness did not improve matters. He saw Kerr put the watch in his pocket, and thought it rather strange.

"My hat, a watch!" muttered Mellish. "That's rather queer!"

He didn't expect Mr. Mason to make his exit quite so quickly, and was still in the passage when the visitor emerged. Kerr was rather taken aback.

"I—I didn't know you were there," he said, a little confusedly.

"Ain't Knox in there?" asked Mellish.

"No."

And Mr. Mason went hurriedly down the passage, leaving Mellish staring after him. The cad of the Fourth felt no great affection for the visitor, and he was still sore from the effects of the booby-trap incident.

His eyes gleamed suspiciously.

"The boulder was jolly confused," he muttered. "My hat! I wonder if everything's all right? What was he doing in Knox's study alone? What was he doing with that giddy watch?"

Mellish didn't really think that there was anything amiss; but he loved to make mischief. Making mischief, in fact, was one of his favourite forms of amusement. He decided that it would be rather a good joke to tell the fellows that the stranger had been up to something

fishy in Knox's study. It might result in Mr. Mason being subjected to some inconvenience and trouble, and that would be a slight compensation for the booby-trap fiasco, anyhow.

Mellish walked down the passage, and descended to the entrance-hall. The Terrible Three were chatting against the door—chatting, in fact, about the gorgeous japing of old Ratty. It was tea-time, but the Terrible Three did not seem to be in any hurry.

"I say, you fellows, I've just found something out," began Mellish. "I happened to see something—"

Tom Merry sniffed.

"You generally do happen to see things, you blessed spy!" he exclaimed. "Buzz off! We don't want to hear any rotten tales!"

"But it's about—"

"Oh, vamoose!" growled Manners.

"Absquatulate!" said Monty Lowther. "That's what they tell you to do in America, when they would rather have your room than your company. Absquatulate or leave! You can do which you like, Mellish—only buzz off!"

"You asses!" shouted Mellish. "I've found out something about that low rotter who whacked into Ratcliff!"

"Low rotter or not," said Tom Merry, "he's a decent chap. It was worth quids to see old Ratty buzzing round the quad!"

"My hat, rather!" grinned Lowther. "Worth fivers, in fact!"

"He was in Knox's study just now, alone," went on Mellish quickly. "I happened to be passing, and saw him—"

"Oh, rats!"

"Go and eat coke, you rotter!"

"I saw him shove a watch in his pocket that had been lying on Knox's table," persisted Mellish. "He put it in quickly, and then came out. You should have seen his face when he saw me in the passage!"

"Well, what of his face?" growled Tom Merry.

"It was absolutely ghastly," said Mellish, drawing upon his imagination. "He looked as though he had been caught in the act, sort of thing. It's my firm belief he was up to something fishy!"

"Rot!"

"Piffle!"

"Rubbish!"

Mellish glared. His tale had not created much of an impression, and the Terrible Three stated their opinions with characteristic bluntness.

"I tell you—"

"Will you clear off?" roared Manners.

"Well, if that's all you've got to say—"

"It is!"

"Except that if you don't clear off in exactly ten seconds," added Lowther, "we shall be under the painful necessity—painful from your point of view—of bumping you until you make a dent in the floor. One, two, three—"

"Look here, you burbling asses—"

"Four, five, six. Four seconds left, Mellish!"

"You—you rotter!"

"Seven, eight—"

But Mellish did not wait any longer. He felt that there would have been considerable peril in waiting any longer. He recognised the war-like signs—Manners was already pulling up his sleeves—and "absquatulated."

CHAPTER 8.

In a Tight Fix.

THE Terrible Three chuckled.

"I thought that would do the trick," grinned Lowther, when Mellish had disappeared. "Silly young ass, coming to us with his yarns!"

"Sheer invention, I expect," said Tom Merry, with a sniff. "Mellish has got his knife into Mr. Mason and wants to make mischief."

"That's it," said Manners.

Nevertheless, the Terrible Three were certainly impressed by Mellish's story, although they would not admit it to him or to themselves.

Mr. Mason was certainly a man of the lower order, to

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judge from his grammar. It was not absolutely out of the question to suppose that he had taken a fancy to something in Knox's study. But it was quite probable that everything was all serene. There was only Mellish's word to go upon, and that wasn't usually worth much.

The Terrible Three were silent for a few minutes, and then Manners relieved the door-post of his weight.

"Well, I suppose we'd better have some tea?" he said.

"The kettle's boiling by this time, I expect."

"Impossible!" said Lowther solemnly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Manners. "I put it over the fire twenty minutes ago. I should like to know how it's impossible? I'll bet you anything you like the kettle's boiling!"

"Done!" said Lowther. "I'd like a giddy motor-bicycle. You'd better send the order off to-night, Manners, old man!"

"You—you ass—"

"Of course, the water in the kettle might be boiling," went on Lowther thoughtfully. "I don't say anything about that. But to say the kettle's boiling is potty—"

Manners glared.

"I suppose you call that a joke?" he asked, with biting sarcasm. "Because, if so, I don't! I think you're potty yourself!"

"Good!" said Lowther.

"And I think you're a funny fathead!"

"Go it!"

"Oh, leave him alone, Manners!" said Tom Merry. "He can't help it; it's a family failing, I believe. Let's go and have tea."

And the Terrible Three commenced ascending the stairs. But before they reached the top the thick-set figure of Mr. Mason appeared. He came downstairs quickly, after a moment's hesitation.

"Going, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, my boys," said Mr. Mason shortly. "Good-night!"

"Can't you stop to have tea in our study—"

"Impossible! Thanks all the same."

And Mr. Mason hurried out. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther looked at one another rather in surprise.

"By gum, he's in a giddy hurry!" said Manners. "I wonder—"

"Well?"

"You wonder what?"

"Oh, nothing!" hesitated Manners.

"Well, that's a fat lot to wonder," said Lowther.

"Explain yourself, ass!"

"Well, I was thinking of what Mellish said," replied Manners uneasily. "I—I suppose there couldn't have been any truth in it? Only Mason looked a bit taken aback. Let's go and see where he's making for."

They descended the stairs again and went to the door of the School House.

The quad was getting a little dim now, but there was still plenty of light. Mr. Mason was crossing to the gates. Except for his figure the quad was deserted.

Suddenly he paused, looked towards the New House, and then dodged with really wonderful agility, considering his evident age, to the cover provided by the old elms. He crouched there unseen by the two figures who emerged from the New House. They were those of the School Housemaster and Mr. Linton.

Kerr, in fact, was feeling a little nervous. He had already overstayed his time, and he was anxious to become himself once more. Everything was quite all right, and he was congratulating himself, when he heard Mr. Linton's voice across the quad.

Instinctively Kerr concealed himself. The School Housemaster and Mr. Linton had apparently been visiting Mr. Ratcliff. Therefore, Kerr had no wish to meet the two masters now. They might ask awkward questions, which he would have difficulty in answering.

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So it was much better to hide.

Consequently he crouched behind the elm until the pair had disappeared into the Head's house.

But the Terrible Three looked upon the matter in quite another light. This, under the circumstances, was only natural. The whole thing was suspicious. First, Mellish's tale, then the little incident on the stairs, and finally the strange behaviour in the quad.

"Why has he hidden himself?" murmured Tom Merry uneasily. "I say, you chaps, I'm beginning to have doubts, you know. As Mellish said, things look fishy. Suppose the chap really had boned something out of Knox's study, how would he act?"

"Why, just as he's acting now, I should think," said Manners.

"Exactly. The fellow's a stranger, you know," went on Tom Merry. "I think, perhaps, we'd better go and ask him a few questions."

"We shall look pretty sort of asses if everything's all right," granted Lowther.

"Well, we can take it out of Mellish afterwards," said Tom Merry. "That's one consolation, old man."

They left the School House and hurried across the quad to the gates. Mr. Mason was just about to leave. He heard the footsteps behind him and quickened his pace. Tom Merry looked at his chums.

"Looks suspicious!" he murmured. "Come on!"

"Hi, Mr. Mason!" called Lowther.

Kerr turned hesitatingly, but before he could decide what to do the Terrible Three were surrounding him.

"Just a word, Mr. Mason!" said Tom Merry uncomfortably. "You're a first-class chap for going for old Ratly as you did, but—but some rotter has started a suspicion against you. We want to clear it up before you go."

"It's about a watch," said Manners. "Mellish of the Fourth says he saw you take a watch out of Knox's study."

Mr. Mason smiled. There was no reason why he should not reveal his identity to the Terrible Three; they'd simply roar at the gigantic jape. And, of course, he could easily explain that the watch was really his own.

"You see—" he began.

But at that moment Darrel of the Sixth came up, and Kerr could say no more. It was the height of misfortune that Darrel came upon the scene at that moment.

"Oh, so you're the gentleman who played old Harry with Ratcliff?" he asked affably. "Well, I'm a prefect, and I'm supposed to keep law and order, but I can't say that I exactly disapprove—unofficially, I mean. Ratcliff requires taking down a peg or two at periodical intervals."

"We—we were talking to Mr. Mason about a watch, Darrel," said Tom Merry. "Mellish says that he saw

this gentleman take a watch out of Knox's room. It is all rot, of course, but we want to clear Mr. Mason's name."

"Oh!"

Darrel looked serious, and gave Kerr a keen glance.

Kerr was looking somewhat alarmed—a fact that did not escape the attention of the Terrible Three. And Kerr had good reason to feel alarmed. He had his own watch in his pocket, as he thought, and if he was forced to produce it in front of Darrel, Tom Merry & Co. would recognise it as Kerr's, and the whole truth would come out.

Which would be nothing less than disaster. For Darrel, as a prefect, would be forced to report the matter. And if the truth came to the ears of the Head—if Dr. Holmes learned that Mr. Ratcliff had been chased round the quad by Kerr of the Fourth—well, Kerr would belong to the Fourth no longer. His career at St. Jim's would come to a sudden and abrupt termination.

Kerr looked daggers at Darrel. Why didn't he clear off?

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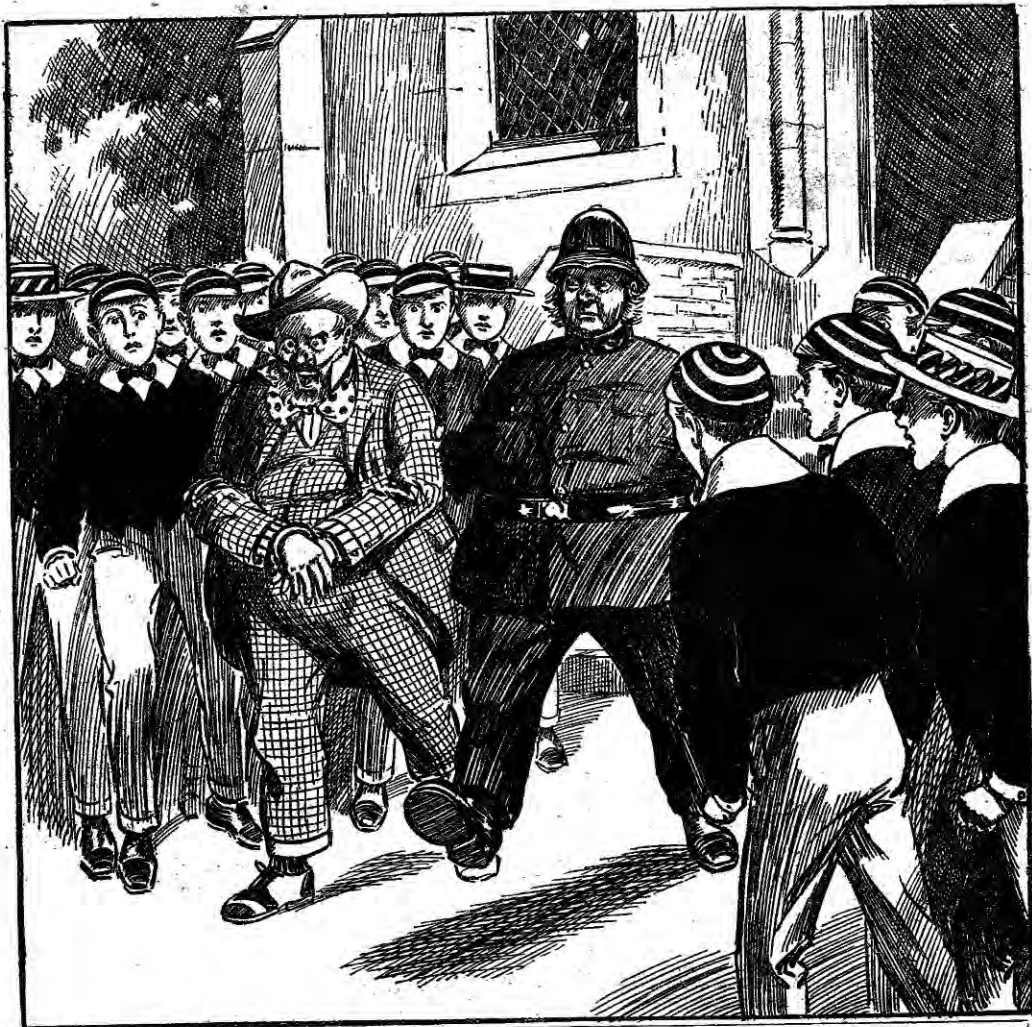
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"Bai Jove, heah he is, deah boys!" cried D'Arcy. "Now then, young gents, let us pass," said Mr. Crump severely. "And don't show no pity for this man. He's a desprit character, that's wot 'e is!" (See Chapter 10.)

"We know you can explain it," said Tom Merry. "Did you take a watch out of Knox's study, Mr. Mason?"

"I don't see as 'ow—"

"That's not an answer," interrupted Darrel suspiciously.

"Well, I did take a watch, then!" grunted Kerr. "But it's my own!"

"Let's see it!" said Manners bluntly.

"I—I'm in a hurry to catch my train. I—I mean I want to go!" exclaimed Kerr confusedly.

"My hat! I wish that ass Darrel would go!" he added under his breath.

Tom Merry looked grim.

"It won't take a moment," he said, really convinced by now that all was not as it should be. "If it's your own watch, where's the harm in showing it to us?"

Kerr made a frantic effort, and winked laboriously at Tom Merry.

Unfortunately Tom Merry took it quite the wrong way.

"It's no good your winking at me," he said roughly.

"That game won't work. One of you chaps had better run and fetch Knoxe," he added.

"No, wait—" began Kerr desperately.

But Manners had rushed off.

"All this is very suspicious!" said Darrel sternly. "The fact of your not wishing to show the watch practically makes you condemn yourself! You're a stranger here, Mr. Mason, and we don't know anything about you. You'd better let us see the watch before we take it by force!"

Kerr groaned. His position was really precarious, but the predicament into which he was to be landed later on was to prove twenty times as serious. At the moment, however, Kerr was happily ignorant of the future.

He fished in his pocket, took out the watch, and handed it to Tom Merry.

"Don't recognise it!" he whispered hurriedly, naturally thinking that the ticker was his own. "For goodness sake, don't give me away!"

Tom Merry frowned as he took the watch, and Monty, Lowther and Darrel grew closer.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom. "This is a brand new ticker!"

"Brand new!" ejaculated Mr. Mason. "Rot!"

"A gold one, too!" said Darrel.

"Gold!"

"Rather!" A solid gold English lever, worth twenty quid, at least!

"Good—good heavens!"

Kerr staggered, and turned pale under his make-up. He had taken the wrong watch! It wasn't his own ticker at all. For a moment he could hardly realise the truth. Unwittingly he was a thief!

CHAPTER 9. No Explanation.

KERR breathed hard. "I—I didn't know it!" he exclaimed frantically. "I didn't mean to take that watch! I—I thought—"

"We'd better wait until Knox comes!" said Darrel sharply. "This watch may be his, although I've never seen it before."

Kerr didn't reply. His mind was in a whirl, but he breathed a little sigh of relief, nevertheless. At the moment he was glad that he had made a mistake, for now there was nothing to prove his true identity. The shadow of the sack, as it were, was momentarily lifted. He was in a very tight fix, but he was still Mr. Mason. There was no likelihood of his identity being discovered unless he revealed it of his own accord.

Tom Merry was looking very grave. Those whispered words of Mr. Mason's, asking him not to give him away, were convincing proof indeed. At least, Tom Merry thought so. It showed quite plainly that the stranger was guilty.

It was absolutely rotten, but if the man was a thief he would have to be punished.

"Here comes Knox!"

Knox and Manners hurried up in the twilight.

"What's up?" inquired Knox. "My hat, then you're still here, Mr. Mason?"

"Yes; we've detained him," replied Darrel. "He was seen taking a watch out of your study, Knox, and was just hurrying out of the gates when these Shell fellows collared him."

Knox started.

"A watch!" he exclaimed quickly. "Let me see it."

Darrel handed it over.

"Great Scott! This is my new ticker!" yelled Knox indignantly. "It only came this afternoon, and I haven't worn it yet! It's solid gold, and worth twenty-five quid! Do you mean to say Mr. Mason collared it?"

"Yes."

"By George!"

Knox pocketed the valuable ticker and stared at the dismayed Mr. Mason as if he were some zoological specimen. This was absolutely the limit. Knox had thought his father's friend a low ruffian, but a thief—

A doubt was beginning to creep into Knox's mind. Was it possible that there was a mistake somewhere? It seemed incredible that the man, with all his common ways, could possibly be the real John Mason.

Knox decided to discuss the matter with Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell. Linton would know what to do.

"You'd better freeze on to this rotter while I go and talk to Linton," he said hurriedly. "Don't let him get away. We shall have to see the Head, I expect."

"I won't escape," growled Kerr.

"That's a fact!" said Lowther grimly. "We'll watch you too closely, my pippin!"

Knox hurried off.

"Don't be long!" called Darrel. "I'll wait here until you come back!"

Kerr groaned inwardly. If Darrel would only go he could explain matters. Then, perhaps, he could have a fake struggle with the Terrible Three and make his escape. Kerr knew that they would be only too willing—only too anxious—to help him out of his predicament once they knew the truth. But, with Darrel present, any idea of revealing his identity was out of the question.

"You'd better go, too," suggested Kerr. "These three chaps can look after me. I ain't strong, and they can all 'old me. You may be wanted, bein' a prefect."

Darrel shook his head.

"You'll be safer with me here," he said shortly.

"Oh, we can look after the chap!" said Manners confidently.

Kerr looked up eagerly, but Darrel shook his head again.

"I'm staying!" he said firmly.

And Kerr gave up hope.

Meanwhile, Knox rushed into the School House, and went up the stairs three at a time. Near the top he almost bowled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy over.

"Out of the way!" he snarled.

"Weally, Knox—"

"I'm in a hurry!"

"Bai Jove! What's the excitement?" asked Arthur Augustus. "You look quite wed in the face, Knox. I twost nothin' is wong? Pway don't wush away while I am speakin'. Well, I nevah! The wottah has gone!"

Knox had no time to waste on Arthur Augustus.

He knocked on the door of Mr. Linton's study and entered. The Shell master was writing, and he looked up in surprise at Knox's flushed face.

"Is anything the matter, Knox?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; something serious," replied Knox. "You may be aware that I had a visitor this afternoon—a Mr. Mason. He had a scene with Mr. Ratcliff in the quad."

"Ahem! I have heard something about it," said Mr. Linton.

Knox rapidly explained what had occurred, and voiced his suspicions regarding the stranger. Mr. Linton listened, with a grave face, and when Knox had done he rose to his feet and frowned.

"This is a very serious occurrence, Knox," he said, tapping his desk with his finger-tips. "Really, I hardly know what to do. The headmaster must know of it, of course. But this doubt about Mr. Mason's genuineness is rather embarrassing. If the man is really your father's friend the position is awkward. Is there no way of ascertaining the truth?"

Knox considered.

"My pater's on the telephone in the City," he said, looking up suddenly. "He never leaves his office before six, and I might catch him. He'd know, perhaps. It'll mean a trunk-call to London, but we should get to know something. The pater would be able to describe his friend. You see, sir, I've never seen Mr. Mason until to-day."

"Very well, Knox; the seriousness of the position warrants a trunk-call to London," said Mr. Linton. "We will telephone at once."

They left the study and went to the prefects' room. It was empty, for most of the seniors were at tea. Knox soon succeeded in getting through to his father's office, for the heavy business of the day was over.

"Hallo—hallo!" he shouted into the mouthpiece. "Is that you, dad?"

A surprised voice came faintly across the wires.

"Good gracious, it is Gerald! What do you want, my boy?"

"There's a man at St. Jim's who calls himself John Mason," said Knox. "He wrote and said he was coming to-day, you know."

"Yes; but he cancelled that arrangement, Gerald."

"What!" roared Knox.

"He hasn't been there?"

"Great Scott!"

"He is going to join me in London to-night," went on Knox senior.

"Then—then this chap here is an impostor?" gasped Knox into the 'phone.

"Presumably so."

"But—but Mr. Mason may have changed his mind," said Knox quickly. "He may have come to St. Jim's after all."

"That is impossible," came the voice across the wires.

"As a matter of fact, Gerald, Mason wired me to say that he was coming; he's on the train now. If there is a man at St. Jim's who calls himself John Mason he is evidently an impostor. What is he like?"

"A—a small, thick-set man," replied Knox. "He's dressed like a bookmaker, and has got whiskers. And he speaks like a navvy, dropping his 'h's' and all the rest of it."

A laugh came across the 'phone.

"You're being spoofed, my boy!" chuckled Knox senior. "My friend Mason is a thin man, exceedingly gentlemanly, and is quite clean-shaven."

"By George!"

Knox stared at the telephone. He had a few more words with his father, and then hung up the receiver. "Our suspicions were right, sir!" he said excitedly, staring at Mr. Linton. "That awful bounder downstairs isn't Mr. Mason at all!"

"So I gathered from your words, Knox," said Mr. Linton.

"He—he must have got to know that Mr. Mason wasn't coming," went on Knox. "He's some awful tramp chap who's come just to take anything he could lay hands on, and he collared my new ticker as the most valuable article! If those Shell kids hadn't captured him he'd have got clean away!"

"It is exceedingly fortunate that the boys discovered the man's real character before it was too late," said Mr. Linton. "We had better take the scoundrel to the headmaster's study without delay."

Knox was excited. He had half suspected that his visitor was an impostor all the time, and now he had undeniable confirmation. It was practically certain that the man had come to St. Jim's for the purpose of robbery.

And certainly all the evidence went to prove that such was the case.

The unfortunate train of circumstances had landed Kerr of the New House into a terrific hole. He had taken the gold watch in the firm belief that it was his own, and this was the result! The disguised junior was to be taken before the Head as a common thief!

And he could not explain. That was the terrible part of it all.

It would be the simplest matter in the world for him to reveal his identity, and explain how Knox had collared his watch, and how he had taken the gold ticker in mistake. The Head, of course, would understand at once, and would know that everything was all right.

But Kerr couldn't explain; he couldn't reveal himself as Kerr of the Fourth. If he did the Head would know that it was he—Kerr—who had publicly humiliated Mr. Ratcliff!

And the result of such knowledge would be drastic. Kerr would be expelled. The Head simply couldn't allow him to remain at St. Jim's after such an act. Kerr had recklessly chased Ratty round the quad under the firm impression that he would be leaving St. Jim's as Mr. Mason for good within an hour.

Knox and Mr. Linton descended to the quadrangle, and found the Terrible Three and Darrel still mounting guard, as it were, over the prisoner. Mr. Linton looked at Kerr sternly, and the junior's heart sank.

"Your trick is discovered, my man," he said coldly. "Denial is useless."

"Trick, sir?" asked Tom Merry inquiringly.

"Yes, trick!" exclaimed Knox wrathfully. "This rotter isn't Mr. Mason at all!"

"Not Mr. Mason!"

"No; he's an impostor. Came to St. Jim's in Mr. Mason's name just to see what he could pinch!"

"I didn't!" broke out Kerr desperately. "I—I'm not Mr. Mason, I know. I never actually said I was, but—"

"That is enough!" snapped Mr. Linton icily. "Knox and Darrel, you can manage him between you. Bring him to Dr. Holmes's study. You Shell boys can go now. I understand that you are responsible for the scoundrel's capture."

"In a way, sir," said Tom Merry. "But it was Mellish who first gave us the tip. Mellish saw the man take Knox's watch, you know, sir."

"Indeed, Mellish's inquisitiveness has come in useful for once," said Mr. Linton drily. "But come, Knox, we will go to the Head."

And the dismayed and now thoroughly alarmed Kerr was marched off.

Not a soul guessed at his real identity, and, indeed, he wished it to remain secret. Oh, if he hadn't let himself go during that scene in the quad. The temptation to "go for" Ratcliff had been irresistible, but he knew that he ought to have resisted. That one incautious act had placed him in an awful predicament.

His mind was in a dizzy whirl as he was taken into the Head's study. He listened to the conversation as though he were in a dream. It all seemed unreal; even

now he thought that there might be some way out. And what would they do to him, anyhow?

The Head was amazed and shocked as he listened to the story. Knox's watch had been recovered. Surely they would let him go, thought Kerr. He became aware that the Head was looking at him with stern eyes.

"Well, sir, what have you to say?" asked Dr. Holmes sternly.

Kerr started.

"N-nothing," he muttered, "except that I didn't mean to take Knox's watch."

"That is absurd!" retorted the Head sharply.

"It sounds absurd, I know," replied Kerr. "But it's the truth. I—I can't explain fully. You—you don't know everything. I can't say any more."

The Head smiled grimly.

"There is no necessity, my man," he replied. "You stand self-condemned. You have no explanation to offer, and we know that you are a scoundrelly impostor."

Kerr breathed hard.

He wanted to blurt out the truth. He wanted to tear his disguise off, and show himself as himself; he wanted to explain the mistake of the watch.

But he dared not!

His very safety, in fact, lie in remaining silent. The thought of being sacked from St. Jim's sickened him. And yet he assuredly would be sacked if he told Dr. Holmes that he was Kerr. For expulsion could be the only punishment for his escapade of the afternoon, at Mr. Ratcliff's expense.

So he remained silent, and was nervous lest his disguise should be penetrated. He was thankful that the Head's study was not lighted up yet.

There must be some way out of his difficulty—some way that he hadn't thought of yet. After this interview was over—

But Knox's voice broke in upon Kerr's thoughts.

"What are you going to do, sir?" asked the prefect.

The Head's eyes were stern, and he rang the bell.

"There is only one thing to do, Knox," he replied.

"This man is obviously a professional scoundrel, and he must therefore be given in charge. I intend to send for the police at once, and have him arrested."

"As you say, sir, the only thing to be done," commented Mr. Linton.

Kerr stared, and then fell back a pace, quivering.

The police!

He was to be arrested for robbery!

It took his breath away, and left him shaking and shivering as though with ague. Until this moment he had not realised the true and real extremity of his position. But there was no misunderstanding the Head's decision.

"Arrested!" murmured Kerr, under his breath. "Oh, my hat, this beats everything!"

CHAPTER 10.

Under Arrest!

"SPOOFED!"

"The fellow's a giddy fraud!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"Yaas, it is a bit surpwisin', deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But are you suah of this, Tom Mewwy? It's howwid to think that the chap is a wobbah!"

The Terrible Three were in the junior common-room, and a crowd of Fourth-Formers and Shell-Formers were gathered round. The news that Mr. Mason was an impostor took everybody by surprise. Yet it was really remarkable, two minutes later, to hear many juniors had guessed at something of the sort all along.

"There's no doubt about it, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "We found Knox's new gold watch on him. He was trying to sneak out when we collared him. And Knox has proved that he ain't the real Mr. Mason at all."

"Oh, he's a proper scoundrel!" said Jack Blake.

"I trust the magistrate will be lenient," said Arthur Augustus. "The fellow is an awful boundah, I admit, and a wotten thief, but I hope he gets off lightly. I am goin' out into the passage, and if I meet a pwefect

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NEXT

WEDNESDAY: "FOR THE OLD SCHOOL'S SAKE!"

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I shall ask him to wequest the Head to let Mr. Mason go free."

"And I can see the Head doing it," grinned Lowther. "Can you weally, Lowthah? Bai Jove, you uttah ass, you are wottin'!"

"Well, I thought you were, too!" explained Lowther blandly. "Were you serious, Gussy?"

"I wefuse to answah, you uttah clump!"

And Arthur Augustus left the common-room. Quite a crowd followed him—his three chums of Study No. 6, the Terrible Three, and others. The hall was deserted, but out in the quad two figures loomed up in the gloom. They were those of Figgins and Fatty Wynn.

"New House rotters!" roared Levison. "Collar 'em!" "Pax!" exclaimed Figgins hastily. "We're looking for Kerr. We've mislaid him!"

"Kerr?"

"Yes," said Figgins. "Have you chaps been up to some fatheaded jape?"

"Weally, Figgay, we haven't seen Kerr for hours," said Arthur Augustus. "I twust nothin' has happened to him. When did you see him last?"

"Some time in the middle of the afternoon."

"He's not here," said Tom Merry. "I expect he's gone out somewhere on his own. He'll be back by locking-up time."

"What's the giddy excitement over here?" asked Fatty Wynn. "Somebody standing a feed?"

Blake grinned.

"That's the way, Fatty—always think of your tummy first!" he chuckled. "No, there's no feed on. But you know that chap Mason—Knox's friend?"

Figgins grinned.

"Rather!" he replied. "He deserves a giddy medal!"

"Well, he's a thief!" said Blake.

And he told the New House juniors what had happened. Figgins and Fatty Wynn were greatly astonished, and, still more, greatly disappointed. All the juniors, in fact, had looked upon the valiant Mr. Mason as a sort of hero.

And now it came out that he was an impostor—a visitor at St. Jim's under false pretences—a thief! The revelation was certainly an unpleasant one.

"Now then, young gentlemen, let me pass!"

A gruff voice sounded in the dusk, and a burly figure appeared before the lighted door of the School House. It was the figure of P.-c. Crump, the Rylcombe policeman. Mr. Crump was looking extremely important, for he knew that he had an arrest to make, and arrests round about Rylcombe were few and far between. Consequently, Mr. Crump felt that this was an occasion on which to show off his importance.

"Old Crump!"

"Phew!"

"The Head ain't lost much time."

"Wotten, deah boys. Mr. Mason is to be awwested!"

"Let me pass, please, young gentlemen!"

Mr. Crump passed majestically. At least, he intended to do so. Unfortunately, however, Monty Lowther's boot somehow stuck out in the way, and the constable tripped on it, plunged forward, and only just managed to keep his balance. He shot forward and ascended the steps into the hall at a staggering run in order to save himself from falling.

"My heye!" he gasped.

"You're in a hurry, Crumpey," said Lowther innocently.

"Young raskils!" muttered Crump, with as much dignity as possible. He walked on, leaving the juniors chuckling. Mr. Crump arrived at the Head's study and entered, holding his helmet gingerly under his arm.

"Ah, you have come, Crump!" said the Head. "I wish to give this man in charge for robbery. He came to the school under false pretences, and was only just prevented from escaping with a valuable gold watch."

Mr. Crump fixed the unfortunate Kerr with a basilisk glare.

"You'll 'ave to come with me," he said, with evident satisfaction.

"I—I won't!" gasped Kerr. "You don't understand."

"We understand quite enough," said Dr. Holmes curtly.

"Take him away, officer. All formalities can be seen to The GEN LIBRARY.—No. 391.

later on. I wish this man to be taken from the school without any loss of time."

"Werry good, sir," said Mr. Crump, jingling something in his hand.

Kerr watched with heaving breast, and then he instinctively shrank back. He was going to be handcuffed!

"Don't—don't put those things on me!" he gasped.

"Now then, none o' that!" exclaimed P.-c. Crump roughly. "Old hout your 'ands!"

Kerr clenched his fists and looked round desperately. All eyes were turned upon him with stern accusation, and he suddenly went limp. He held out his hands. What was the good of resisting? The Head wasn't to blame for calling in Crump; he had only done the right thing.

The wretched New House junior was thankful that he had taken particular care over his make-up. His thoroughness was rewarded now, but nobody guessed the actual truth. And Kerr took care to speak in the same gruff voice as he had used during the afternoon.

Snap!

The manacles were on his wrists.

Kerr looked at them as though in a mist. Then, all in a flash it seemed, his mind became clear and acute, and he almost laughed at the utter absurdity of the whole thing. He, Kerr of the Fourth, arrested and handcuffed! Half a dozen words would be sufficient to gain his freedom again.

But those half-dozen words were never spoken; they would have been Kerr's expulsion order, as it were. He set his teeth, and resigned himself to be taken to the police-station, but he told himself that he would get out of the terrible hole somehow.

He couldn't do anything himself, but there were Figgins and Wynn; there were Tom Merry & Co. of the School House. House rivalry would be forgotten at such a time as this. All would help to extricate him from this predicament.

But they didn't know that Mr. Mason was Kerr! How could he tell them?

"Come hon!" exclaimed Mr. Crump roughly.

And Kerr was led away. As he walked beside the policeman he managed, with some difficulty, to get a stub of pencil from his pocket. Then he scrawled something on to a piece of paper he had had in his hand previous to being handcuffed.

"Come hon, brisk now!" said Mr. Crump. "An' you'd better not play no monkey tricks with me, my man."

Under ordinary circumstances Kerr would have thought it certainly impossible to write a brief note, even in a fearful scrawl, while his hands were manacled. But he was desperate now, and he managed somehow. He was thankful that he had unconsciously been fiddling with a piece of paper while in the Head's study.

He screwed the paper up in his palm, nervous lest Crump should detect it. For if the policeman saw what was written "the fat would be in the fire" indeed. But the stolid guardian of the law and his prisoner reached the School House door without Crump suspecting anything.

"Drat it!" muttered Crump. "Here's them boys again!"

The Terrible Three, Blake & Co., and many other School House and New House juniors were waiting out in the quad to see the policeman and his captive depart. They could not deny that Mr. Mason deserved punishment, seeing that he had stolen Knox's new ticker, but, all the same, they felt a certain amount of compassion for the stranger. He had, at least, given them all an afternoon's unadulterated amusement.

"Bai Jove, heah he is, deah boys!"

"Handcuffed, too, by gum!"

"Hard lines!"

"Now then, young gents, let us pass!" said Mr. Crump severely. "And don't show no pity for this man. He's a desprit character, that's wot 'e is!"

"You ain't going to lock him up, are you, Crumpey?"

"I ham!" declared Crump. "He's a willain!"

Kerr could hardly restrain a grin, in spite of the seriousness of the situation. It was all so utterly ridiculous. Crump would have had about ten fits if he had known that the "desprit character" was none other than Kerr of the Fourth!

"Make way, please!"

The juniors followed Crump and Mr. Mason to the gates in a body, surrounding the pair. Mr. Crump was inclined to be pompous, but as the juniors didn't take any notice of him, it didn't matter much.

"By Jove!" murmured Kerr suddenly.

He found himself almost alongside Figgins. They had reached the gates, and it was absolutely the last chance of letting the juniors know the truth. Kerr stepped aside a little and forced the scrap of paper into Figgins's hand.

"Now then, walk quietly!" growled Mr. Crump threateningly.

Figgins stared at his palm.

"What the—?" he began.

"Read it!" hissed Kerr. "Mum's the word!"

The constable glared round.

"Wot's 'e a-saying?" he asked suspiciously.

"Oh, n-nothing!" stammered Figgins. "I—I mean—"

But Crump and his prisoner passed out of the gates, surveyed with great disfavour by Taggles. Taggles disliked anything out of the usual routine to happen. As a rule it always entailed extra work for him; and Taggles had a great antipathy for work of any kind.

The gates clanged to, and the crowd of juniors listened while the footsteps of the prisoner and his triumphant escort faded away.

"Well, deah boys, he's gone!" said Arthur Augustus. "I suppose we have seen the last of the poor fellow. It is wathah a pity, considewin'."

But D'Arcy was wrong—quite wrong. They hadn't seen the last of Mr. Mason by any means!

CHAPTER 11.

The Rescue Party.

"GREAT jumping cocksnerts!" Figgins made that most extraordinary ejaculation in a tone of breathless amazement. He and Fatty Wynn were separated from the others, and were against the door of the New House. In Figgins's hand was a crumpled scrap of paper.

"Dotty?" asked Fatty Wynn politely.

"Yes, I—I believe so!" gasped Figgins faintly.

"Glad you acknowledge it, old man!"

"Read this!" ejaculated Figgins excitedly. "My only hat, it's unbelievable, Fatty! It was Kerr all the time! Kerr! Oh, it's impossible!"

Fatty Wynn stared at Figgins rather in alarm.

"If you're feeling bad, Figg—"

"You—you ass!" roared Figgins. "Read this! That Mason chap bunged it into my hand as he was being led out—without Crumpey seeing him! Read it, you burler!"

Fatty Wynn held the paper under the light. Upon it were a few words, horribly scrawled, but just decipherable.

"I'm Kerr. Come and rescue me. If not, it means the sack!"

Fatty Wynn looked puzzled.

"Blessed if I can see anything startling," he said. "The chap is evidently dotty. What the dooce does he mean by saying he's Kerr? Must be off his silly rocker!"

Figgins fairly danced with excitement.

"Don't you understand?" he roared. "That chap ain't a man at all; he's Kerr! That's why Kerr ain't here with us. He's been having a jape all on his own, and got into a giddy mess!"

"You—you mean—?" gasped Wynn.

"It's Kerr!" said Figgins excitedly. "Ain't you got any sense, Fatty? Mason is Kerr all the time, disguised! And he's landed himself into a fearful hole somehow. It was Kerr who thrashed old Ratty; it was Kerr who pinched Knox's watch! My hat, there must be some mistake about that!"

"Kerr!" gasped Wynn, staring. "Oh, my hat! But—but we didn't recognise him, Figg!"

"Of course not!" snapped Figgins. "You know what a marvel he is at disguises. Didn't he come to St. Jim's as Dr. Monk, of the Grammar School, once and spoof

everybody? This is another of his blessed make-ups; but we weren't in the know."

Fatty Wynn realised that his long-legged chief was right.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he ejaculated. "And, I say, Figg, I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"Why, can't you see?" explained Wynn keenly. "Didn't Kerr say he was going to have his own back on Knoxy? Well, he disguised himself so as to give Knox a high old time. He was doing it, you remember, when Ratty came up and interfered."

"By George, you're right!"

"Of course I am. And Kerr went to Knox's study afterwards to get his watch back," went on Wynn. "He didn't know that Knox had brought it to us, and he took Knox's by mistake. It was that mistake which landed him in this fix!"

"And he's been arrested!" said Figgins seriously.

"Well, it's a go!"

It was certainly a "go," and Figgins and Fatty Wynn hardly knew what to do. It was evident, however, that Kerr would have to be rescued in some manner. And Figgins instantly realised that Tom Merry & Co. must be informed of the facts, and a meeting held to decide the plan of action.

"Come on!" said Figgins briskly.

"Where to, Figg?"

"Study No. 6, in the School House, of course!"

And they hurried across the quad. The other juniors had dispersed, and had gone their various ways. The two New House heroes entered their rivals' domain, and reached the Shell passage without meeting anybody. They opened the door of Tom Merry's study. The Terrible Three looked up in surprise.

"Come to Study 6," said Figgins hurriedly. "It's vital!"

"What the dickens—?"

"Not a second to waste!" said Figgins urgently.

And he and Fatty Wynn departed to the famous apartment in the Fourth-Form passage. They arrived and walked in without the formality of knocking. Blake & Co. were at home, having just come in.

"Bai Jove, New House wottahs!"

"Pax!" said Fatty Wynn hastily.

"Pax be blowed!"

"It's a question of life or death!" exclaimed Figgins excitedly. "At least, it's jolly serious. Kerr's got himself into a frightful hole!"

"Bai Jove!"

"That's different."

And Blake & Co. dropped their warlike attitudes and sat down again. But before Figgins and Wynn were fairly in the study the Terrible Three put in an appearance. They were all looking somewhat puzzled and astonished.

"Now, what's this vitally urgent matter, Figg?" asked Tom Merry.

Figgins closed the door carefully.

"You're beastly mysterious!" began Blake impatiently.

"Mustn't let anybody overhear," Figgins said. "It's about Kerr. Kerr's been playing the giddy ox, and has landed himself into the deepest hole that ever happened. He went and played a jape without consulting his kind uncles, and this is the result!"

"What's the result?" demanded the curious juniors.

"I'll give you a surprise," went on Figgins. "That chap Mason wasn't Mason at all!"

"We know that, you ass!" roared Blake. "He was a rotten burglar!"

"He wasn't," said Figgins calmly. "He was Kerr—disguised, but Kerr, all the same!"

"Kerr!"

"Oh, draw it mild, Figg!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Go away, and think of some other yarn!" said Blake. "That won't do for us, Figg! We're not such silly asses as all that on this side of the quad!"

Figgins had expected open scorn and incredulity, and he wasn't disappointed. He produced Kerr's scrap of paper, passed it round, and explained the incident when Knox had taken the Scottish junior's watch, and also explained that Kerr had sworn to be revengeful.

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"So, you see, it was old Kerr all the giddy time," he concluded. "He was simply japing your rotten prefect. He took Knox's watch by mistake, thinking it was his own, I expect, and was utterly flabbergasted when he found out the truth. Mellish saw him do it, and put you Shell bounders on the scent. You collared Kerr, made him produce the watch, and things looked jolly black against him. And when Knox found out that he wasn't Mason at all—well, it seemed pretty evident that he must be a deliberate thief!"

For a moment there was a tense silence in Study No. 6. Tom Merry had been looking thoughtful, but a sudden gleam entered his eye, and he looked round the crowded study.

"Suppose a gang of giddy roughs raided the Rylcombe Police Station?" he said slowly. "It's only a cottage, you know, and the room they call the cell wouldn't take much forcing. A whole crowd of ruffians would easily do it, and then Kerr would be rescued."

The juniors stared.

"And do you imagine that a gang of ruffians are conveniently going to break into the police-station-to-night?" asked Blake sarcastically.

"Yes," replied Tom Merry; "I do."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, pway be sewious!"

"I was never more serious in my life," replied Tom. "Now, these ruffians—nine, to be exact—will rescue Kerr by force. It's a desperate plan, but it's the only way I can think of."

"You—your ass!" roared Figgins. "How do you know that nine ruffians are going to break into Crump's cottage?"

"Because, my good chap, the nine ruffians happen to be in this study at this moment," said Tom Merry calmly.

There was a gasp.

"I uttably wefuse to be called a wuffian!"

"Oh, dry up, Gussy!" exclaimed Tom Merry quickly. "There's only one way to get Kerr out of this rotten hole, and that's by using drastic measures. Well, the measures I have suggested are jolly drastic."

"But we ain't ruffians!" roared Blake.

"We can be, can't we?" asked Tom Merry quickly.

"What's wrong with bunging on false beards and long coats, and all the rest of it? We sha'n't be recognised, even if we're seen; and after we've rescued Kerr we'll skin off the disguises and be respectable St. Jim's juniors once more. The police will think that their prisoner has been rescued by a set of awful scoundrels, and will be searching the whole giddy countryside for them, while we're here chuckling. That's my idea, anyhow. I'm blessed if I can see any other way out of the tangle."

There was a moment's breathless silence.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Blake. "What a ripping wheeze! You are a giddy genius, Tom Merry!"

"Yaas, wathah! I weward that plan as bein' distinctly wippin!" said Arthur Augustus excitedly. "Kerr has simply got to be wescued—theah is no doubt what-evah about that—and Tom Mewwy's plan is simplicity itself. We can take hammahs and chisels and things in ordah to break into the wotten cell. Bai Jove, we shall feel like howwid burglahs, deah boys."

"Can't help what we feel like," said Blake briskly. "It's a desperate situation altogether. Kerr's very safety hangs in the balance, so we've got to get a move on. At a time like this, Figgy, we've got to forget that you're New House rotters!"

"Exactly!" agreed Figgins. "But the longer we jaw here the more time we waste. Let's buzz off and get prepared. Prep can go hang for to-night!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Tom Merry & Co. and Figgins and Fatty Wynn proceeded to put their desperate plan into execution without a moment's delay.

CHAPTER 12.

No Luck!

"**A**IN you go!"

P.-C. Crump pushed his prisoner into the little cell at Rylcombe Police Station, and the heavy door clanged to, and the bolts were shot.

The cell was only a small room, in reality, but the door

was thick, and the window was stoutly barred. There was no means of escape for anyone locked within the little apartment.

Stamp! Stamp!

Mr. Crump was coming to the cell again, and Kerr wondered what his object could be. He was soon to learn. The door was unbolted, and a light shone upon Kerr's disguised face.

"Better not take your clothes off!" growled Crump, who was evidently in a bad humour over something. "I've jest 'phoned up to Wayland, an' I've got to take you in a trap to Wayland Police Station. You'd better be ready in five minutes, my man."

The door shut again, and Kerr stared at it dumbly.

He was to be taken to Wayland!

"Oh, crumbs, that's properly put the kybosh on it!" he muttered, in dismay.

Even if his chums did decide to make an attempt to rescue him, it was hopeless now. Once he was in Wayland Police Station nothing could liberate him except his own confession. That would set him free soon enough, but he didn't want to confess.

He wanted to escape so that he could resume his own identity without a soul, excepting his own chums, knowing the actual truth.

Escape!

The word buzzed in his head again. The idea of escape did not seem so remote now. He was to be taken to Wayland by Crump in a trap. Surely an opportunity would present itself for him to make a dash for it?

Kerr set his teeth.

"I'll risk it!" he muttered grimly. "It's the only way. While we're going to Wayland I'll try and give old Crumpy the slip."

The policeman was not long in returning. He was in a bad temper, apparently owing to the fact that he had to make the trip to the neighbouring town. The cell door was unlocked again, and Crump appeared with a lamp. The policeman was ready for his journey.

"Come hon!" he growled. "An' no larks, mind yer, my beauty! But I don't reckon you can do much, seein' as you're 'andcuffed, and seein' what a little whipper-snapper you are compared to me!"

Kerr didn't reply; he simply looked sullen.

As a matter of fact, he wasn't sullen at all, but he wanted to give Crump the impression that he was resigned to his fate. The policeman would then be less vigilant than otherwise might be the case. Kerr couldn't give his word not to attempt escape, for the simple reason that he meant to make an attempt.

The trap was waiting outside, and Kerr was glad to see that only about a couple of local rustics were looking on. He climbed into the vehicle—a small, low-built trap—and was closely followed by his escort.

"Lot o' nonsense!" muttered Crump. "Makin' me take you hove to Wayland this time o' night. Well, perhaps it'll be better to be well rid of yer!"

They started and drove sharply through Rylcombe, and then out on to the lonely road to the town. It was a dark night now, for the sky was a little overcast, and there was no moon. Kerr felt extremely glad, for everything was in his favour. If he could only get out of the trap he could make a dash for it.

And he knew that he could very soon outdistance the burly constable, once it came to a race.

But he could think of no pretext with which to stop the trap. He instinctively felt that Crump would suspect his intention, and would consequently become alert. No, he must take Crump quite by surprise, and be away into the darkness before the constable realised what had happened.

And there was only one way in which that could be accomplished.

"I'll do it!" thought Kerr desperately.

He would jump clean out of the trap as it was being driven along.

At first thought it seemed a mad thing to do, but after all Kerr decided that there would not be much risk; at most he would only sustain a few bruises. The trap was low, and there was a short rise within a few hundred yards, up which the horse would have to walk.

That would be Kerr's opportunity.

They went on, and the trap presently slackened its pace, for the horse was feeling the effects of the rise. Another minute, and it dropped to a walk.

"Git hon!" growled Crump. And he made an extraordinary noise with his mouth, which the horse evidently understood, for it went slightly faster.

And then, all in a flash, something shot out into the roadway. Crump felt the trap shake, and he turned round with a bellow of rage.

His prisoner had jumped clean out!

"Whoa!" roared Crump, pulling up the horse sharply. "My hey, the chap's jumped hout!"

Crump jumped "hout" of the trap himself, and looked hurriedly down the road towards Rylcombe. He blinked in the darkness, and then saw a dim figure moving ten yards away.

Crump rushed towards it.

The figure was that of Kerr, and Kerr was in the act of rising to his feet. His luck was dead out, there was no doubt about that whatever. He had taken the leap out of the trap at the precisely correct moment, but Fate was against him.

As he landed squarely upon his feet, his foot had struck a loose stone. The next moment he crashed on to the roadway, and almost knocked every ounce of wind out of his body. He knew that he had not a second to lose, but for a few moments it was a sheer physical impossibility for him to rise.

When at last he did scramble up, still in agony, it was to find Crump's hand upon his shoulder, and now the policeman grasped him in a painful clutch.

"What luck!" groaned Kerr hopelessly. "What ghastly luck!"

"Thought you'd escape, did yer?" roared Crump wrathfully. "Not while I'm about, my man! You ain't the first who 'as tried to give me the slip, but no one's never succeeded. This'll mean a hextra dose o' quod for you, I reckon!"

Kerr was too utterly disappointed to reply. He had been so certain that he could escape that he looked upon it as if it had actually happened. And now there was no chance for him at all. Crump would certainly not give him a second opportunity.

As soon as they were in the trap again the constable produced a stout piece of rope, and tied it round Kerr's ankles.

"That'll put a stop to your little games!" grunted the constable. "With your feet tied and your wrists 'andeuffed I don't reckon you'll try any more o' your tricks. Gee up, old 'orse!"

And captor and captive proceeded towards Wayland.

All hope had faded from Kerr's breast.

CHAPTER 13.

Many Rescuers.

A VILLAINOUS, bearded face peered round the corner of the hedge close by the little Rylcombe Police Station, on the outskirts of the village. A cloaked and dim figure appeared after the face.

Altogether the fellow looked a desperate character.

"Bai Jove, it's quite all wright, deah boys!" exclaimed the villainous individual in tones which strangely resembled those of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Pway follow me. It is my ideah to go up to Cwump's cottage and wequest to see the pwisonah—"

"Gag him!" hissed a voice. "The silly ass will give us away!"

"Weally, you wottah—"

Many other bearded strangers appeared out of the gloom, and Arthur Augustus was promptly collared.

"Look here!" murmured Blake threateningly. "The best thing you can do, Gussy, is to keep your mouth shut. You've got such a beautiful accent that you'll muck the whole show up, if you ain't careful!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"If you're not quiet, Gussy, we'll bump you!" exclaimed Tom Merry. And Arthur Augustus subsided, realising that there was no time for argument.

"What's the programme now?" whispered Manners, who looked like an anarchist.

"Well, we don't want to all be seen at once," replied

Tom Merry. "You chaps had better wait behind this hedge here while I buzz round and do a bit of scouting. I might be able to have a few words with Kerr through the bars of his giddy cell!"

"It'll be a sell if he ain't there!" murmured Monty Lowther irresistibly.

But nobody was in the humour for puns, especially the Lowther variety, and Tom Merry disappeared into the darkness. Outside the gate of Crump's cottage he suddenly ran into an aged rustic who was standing by, apparently looking at nothing in particular. For a moment Tom Merry was startled.

"Nice goin's hon!" murmured the old fellow. "That's wot they be, mister. Did you see 'un?"

"See what?" asked Tom Merry gruffly.

"Why, ole Crump an' that there willain!" explained the rustic heavily. "They've just gone off in a trap to Waylan'—to the big lock-up, I s'pose. Well, I dessay 'e deserved bein' punished—"

But Tom Merry had vanished, and he scooted back to his chums.

"They've gone!" he panted, in dismay.

"Who?" demanded Blake. "What do you mean?"

"Crump's taken Kerr to Wayland; some old chap just told me."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Might as well go back!" grunted Digby. "We can't rescue Kerr from the Wayland Police Station, can we?"

"You ass!" hissed Figgins desperately. "Do you think we're going back now? Good heavens, if we don't rescue old Kerr he'll have to own up, and then he'll be sacked!"

"But what can we do?" asked Fatty Wynn helplessly.

"Do!" roared Figgins hoarsely. "Didn't we hear a trap start off less than five minutes ago?"

"My hat, so we did!"

"Well, it was Crump and Kerr in that trap for certain. They've only just started for Wayland, and a trap's only a slow thing, anyhow. What can we do?" went on Figgins, clenching his fists. "My only Aunt Jane! I've got it. Look!"

Figgins pointed excitedly. In the distance he could see the village tuckshop, with its windows dimly illuminated. And outside quite a collection of bicycles were propped.

"Are you dottay?" asked Arthur Augustus. "Weally, Figg, I cannot see what you want us to look at."

"Explain yourself, you New House ass!"

"Bikes!" ejaculated Figgins intently. "They belong to Grammar School chaps, I expect. But that doesn't matter tuppence. We'll collar them before Gordon Gay & Co. can interfere. Then we'll race after the trap, and overtake it before it gets to Wayland!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"What a ripping idea!"

"Rather!"

"We can whizz down that little side lane," went on Figgins quickly. "It's not much of a road, I know, but it's a short cut, and if we buzz like lightning we shall be able to get in front of the trap, and then hold it up. Things are being made easier for us by Crump taking Kerr to Wayland."

"Yes—if there's no hitch," said Blake doubtfully.

"There'll be a hitch if we don't start; there's not a second to lose."

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry quickly. "Mustn't make a mess of it by being too hurried. Suppose the Grammar cads spot us taking their bikes? They'll think we're strangers and will set up a hue-and-cry. One of us must take his disguise off and explain the extremity of matters to Gordon Gay & Co. after we have gone."

"Gussy!" exclaimed Lowther. "The very chap!"

"Weally, I uttally wufuse to wemain behind!"

"Yes, you're the very chap, Gussy!" went on Tom Merry briskly. "If you come with us you'd only give the game away by calling Crump a 'feahful wottah,' or something like that."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Besides, there's not one of us who could explain matters so gracefully and delicately to Gordon Gay as you, Gussy," said Monty Lowther diplomatically.

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"If you weally think so—"

"We do, rather!"

"Vewy well, I will wemove my disguise and stay behind," said D'Arcy. "I twust you youngstahs will cawwy the thing through without a hitch, although it is wathah doubtful considering that I shall not be theah to diwect pwoceedings."

"We'll manage somehow, Gussy," said Figgins. "Only, for goodness sake, stop this jawing and let's start!"

The jawing, as a matter of fact, had occupied only a little over a minute, and the eight disguised juniors walked forward in a body, and quickly collared eight bicycles. The rescue party were extremely thankful that the village street was dimly lighted, and was almost deserted. There was not much fear of detection.

Tom Merry, looking back, had a momentary glimpse of Gordon Gay & Co. rushing out of the tuckshop in wild excitement. But they bumped into Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and the Shell captain saw that the swell of St. Jim's was busily explaining matters, or trying to, at least.

"Speed!" panted Figgins. "Pedal for all you're worth, you chaps!"

They needed no bidding. They were putting all their "beef" into it, and the bicycles simply flew.

The party turned down the side lane that Figgins had referred to, and went along at the same reckless speed. Under ordinary circumstances the juniors would not have dreamed of taking such risks as these on a dark road, but the very safety of their chum depended upon their speed.

They threw caution to the winds, and went for all they were worth. They were all good cyclists, and they made the machines fairly hum. But, fast as they went, they knew that it would be touch and go. It would be almost a matter of luck if they reached the high road before the trap had passed.

Fortunately there was no traffic of any description, and so their progress was unimpeded, and there was no accident.

On they flew, the dust billowing in clouds behind them. "Nearly there!" panted Tom Merry. "One more spurt, and we'll get there before the trap yet!"

As the juniors were spurring all the time, Tom Merry's advice was rather superfluous. And a few minutes later, panting, dusty, and breathless, they arrived at the junction with the main road to Wayland. As they leapt from their bicycles they looked hastily towards Rylcombe, and two spots of light flickered in the distance.

"The trap!" gasped Figgins breathlessly. "We're in time!"

"Thank goodness!"

Their strenuous efforts were rewarded, and they breathed with relief. Except for the oncoming trap, the dark road was quite deserted, and it would be a comparatively simple matter to rescue their unfortunate chum. And they would be perfectly safe in doing so, for Crump would never see through their disguises in the darkness. In the daytime the rescue would have been impossible, but it was dark, and that made all the difference. Tom Merry gave his instructions rapidly, and in a few minutes the bicycles were hidden, and there was no sign of a living being.

The trap came jogging on.

It was only a few minutes since Kerr had made his attempt to escape, in fact, and Mr. Crump was in an exceedingly bad temper. He wanted to get to Wayland and be relieved of his charge. He gave the horse a light cut with the whip.

"Git hon, you beast!" he shouted impatiently.

There was a slight murmur from the bushes bordering the road. There was no mistaking that voice. Crump's remark at that moment was exceedingly fortunate, for, in the darkness, the juniors could not see the occupants of the vehicle, and they did not want to make a mistake. The horse didn't take much notice, but seemed to go on at exactly the same rate. Suddenly, however, it swerved aside, and twitched its ears nervously.

A black-cloaked form had appeared in the roadway. He was bearded, and a mask covered his eyes.

"Stop!" he commanded, in a threatening voice.

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CHAPTER 14.

All Serene!

MR. CRUMP started violently. "My heye!" he ejaculated. "Wot—wot does this 'ere mean?"

"It means," said the stranger, "that you've got to deliver up the prisoner!"

Kerr, in the trap, almost let out a whoop of delight. He guessed, instantly, that this was the result of the scrawled note he had thrust into Figgins's hand. His chums had come to his rescue after all. From the depths of despondency Kerr's spirits suddenly leapt to the highest possible pitch.

"The bricks!" he murmured joyfully. "They ain't left me in the lurch after all!"

But there was only one rescuer—possibly Figgins. But what could Figgins do alone?

"Sharp now!" went on the stranger. "Deliver the prisoner to me!"

"You—you—" stuttered Crump. "Would you interfere with the law, you raskil?"

"I am interfering, and I won't wait more than ten seconds longer!"

Mr. Crump had visions of his interview with the superintendent if he allowed his captive to go, and he suddenly became desperate. He whipped up the horse and let out a bellow of defiance. Kerr's heart beat wildly. Was the rescue going to fail after all?

The masked individual sprang forward before the horse had fairly started, and grasped its bridle.

"To the rescue!" he roared. "To the rescue of our comrade!"

And instantly a swarm of similarly masked and bearded figures sprang out from all sides. Mr. Crump turned pale beneath his tan.

"Oh, lor!" he exclaimed. "There's a gang of them! If I don't give in they'll murder me!"

"Death is the reward of those who resist!" said a solemn voice.

"My heye!"

Mr. Crump evidently took the solemn one at his word, for he didn't resist in the slightest degree. He leapt out of the trap, and for a few minutes the rescue party were busy. When they had done the captive was freed, and the handcuffs encircled Crump's own wrists. His feet were securely tied, and to make assurance doubly sure, the rope was also secured to the trap itself. And upon the constable's manly breast a jagged piece of cardboard was pinned, bearing, in printed characters, the words:

"OUR COMRADE HAS BEEN RESCUED FROM THE LAW'S GRASPING CLUTCHES. WE HAVE NO USE FOR THIS BLOCKHEAD. WE DISAPPEAR FOR EVER. THE SOCIETY OF CROOKS."

"Our trade mark is there," said one of the mysterious rescuers. "Drive on, blockhead, and report yourself to your superiors. You will see us no more!"

Mr. Crump was too frightened to say anything, and as Tom Merry gave the horse a light touch at that moment, he had no opportunity in any case. The trap jogged along, Crump just managing to drive with difficulty. He almost felt ill when he imagined himself driving through Wayland, handcuffed, tied to the trap, and minus his prisoner.

The rescuers, in fact, almost felt sorry for Mr. Crump. "It's all right, though," said Tom Merry. "He won't be blamed when he tells how many villains set upon him, and he'll be sure to exaggerate it. I don't think he'll suffer."

"But we've got Kerr!" ejaculated Figgins joyfully. "Kerr, you thundering, thumping ass, what do you mean by it?"

"What do you mean by getting yourself arrested?"

"Think of the trouble you've put us to!"

Kerr grinned sheepishly.

"It was all a rotten accident!" he explained. "You see, I took the wrong ticker, and so got myself into this fearful scrape. I couldn't say a word because—"

"Yes, we guessed it all," chuckled Tom Merry. "My

hat! I'll give you my word, we've worked like niggers to rescue you, Kerr!"

"But we've succeeded!" said Figgins. "Oh, Kerr, you see, I've a good mind to give you a thick ear!"

"Don't do that, Figg!" exclaimed Kerr. "I've been through enough to-day, goodness knows! I grazed my arm in trying to escape from old Crump, and I absolutely gave up hope. I didn't think you'd be prepared to get up such an elaborate wheeze. It's ripping of you. I'm saved!"

"Yes, but you won't be saved if we stop here!" said Monty Lowther. "I vote we buzz back to St. Jim's with all speed."

The juniors, Kerr included, removed their disguises, and then started off for Ryleombe, Kerr riding on Figgins's step. They arrived without mishap, and found Gordon Gay & Co. perfectly satisfied with the explanation which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had given them, especially as the elegant Fourth-Former had been thoughtful enough to stand them all a gorgeous feed in the tuckshop to compensate for the inconvenience.

Having returned the bicycles, Tom Merry & Co. and the New House Trio started briskly for St. Jim's. They did not wish to remain a moment longer than was necessary in Ryleombe. And Gordon Gay and his friends shrewdly refrained from delaying their rivals.

"It's wippin'!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I was wathah uncertain as to wathah you would be able to manage without me, deah boys. Kerr, you wottah, why didn't you tell us you were japin' Knox and Mr. Watchful?"

"Well, you see, Gussy, I wanted it to come as a surprise afterwards."

"Oh, it came as a surprise all right!" said Monty Lowther. "We nearly had fits when Figgins flew in and said that it was you who'd been arrested!"

"Awrested!" said Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove, now that it is all over, I wégard the affah as bein' distinctly funny!"

"It has got its humorous points, I'll admit," said Tom Merry. "But, my hat, you were running it pretty fine, Kerr, old man! Fancy having the utter nerve to go for old Ratty baldheaded as you did!"

"He deserves a medal!" said Figgins stoutly. "I'll tell you what," suggested Fatty Wynn—"we ought to have a feed to celebrate the occasion."

The juniors chuckled. "Good idea!" agreed Figgins heartily. "And, as you School House chaps have come up to the scratch so jolly well, what do you say to a blow-out in my study this evening?"

"It's a wippin' ideah, Figgay, but I'm wondahin' about prep."

"Blow prep!" said Figgins. "You can miss it for once, I suppose? It'll mean lines to-morrow, but I reckon to-morrow can look after itself. To-night we'll celebrate!"

And the cheerful juniors went on until they arrived at the spot where Kerr had dived into the wood and changed his clothes. The clothes were a bit damp, but Kerr didn't mind, and, as the night was mild, he soon slipped into them.

"Thank goodness!" he said. "I'm Kerr again!"

By an extraordinary stroke of luck the whole crowd of juniors managed to reach the quad, via the summit of the wall, and the speed with which they dispersed was really remarkable. Ten minutes later Tom Merry & Co. were strolling innocently about the quad as though nothing had happened. And Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kerr were busily preparing a feed in the New House. Kerr was safe now. There was not even the remotest prospect of his being suspected. There was, in fact, no reason why he should be suspected.

But, in spite of his security, he came very close to detection. And it was Knox of the Sixth who almost found out the truth.

Just before supper-time the gates clanged open, and P.-c. Crump and Inspector Skeat came in, Crump looking crestfallen, and the inspector important. They went straight to the Head's study, and reported the awful occurrence on the Wayland road. The only clue, Skeat declared, was the fact that the escaped prisoner had grazed his wrist.

And Knox, who had been present in the Head's study during the interview, suddenly came across Kerr close to the New House with a slightly bloodstained handkerchief round his wrist. Thinking of the other matter, the coincidence seemed remarkable, to say the least. And it instantly flashed into Knox's mind that Kerr had had a grudge against him.

And the watch! Kerr must have taken his gold watch in mistake for his own! Knox saw it all. The prefect even guessed the identity of the mysterious rescuers.

He frowned darkly, and laid his hand upon Kerr's shoulder.

"Hallo! What's up?" demanded Kerr.

"I'm going to take you to the Head!" said Knox triumphantly. "I've guessed the truth, you young rascal! I haven't forgotten what you did to me in the quad this afternoon. This'll mean the sack for you, as sure as anything!"

"Off your rocker?" asked Kerr.

He had been startled for a moment, but was quite cool now.

"No, I'm not!" growled Knox. "It's no good your denying the truth."

"And suppose you do take me to the Head?" asked the Scottish junior coolly. "Where's your proof, Knoxy? Do you think the Head will believe that yarn?"

Knox released his hold, and looked doubtful.

"Do you think old Skeat will believe that a Fourth-Former was bunged into a prison-cell?" proceeded Kerr, with great calmness. "I'm not committing myself to anything, Knoxy. You've got no proof—this graze is nothing—and even if the Head thought it was true, he couldn't punish me on suspicion. And what do you think he'd say when I told him that you'd appropriated my watch, after I'd offered to pay spot cash for the repair of your broken one?"

Knox scratched his head.

"Perhaps I'll let you off," he said grudgingly.

Kerr grinned.

"Put it how you like," he replied. "It doesn't make any difference. My advice to you, Knox, is to keep suspicions to yourself, and let the whole matter drop."

And Gerald Knox evidently thought so, too, for he turned on his heel and walked away to the School House. Kerr, chuckling hugely, rushed up to the study, where the School House guests were already present in force.

The juniors were all amused at the manner in which Kerr had silenced Knox's mouth, and the feed was a terrific success.

So Kerr managed to get out of his awful predicament just by the skin of his teeth—and the help of his loyal chums.

And the local police were left with a mystery upon their hands which would certainly require a considerable amount of clearing up, bearing in mind that both the prisoner and his rescuers had utterly vanished for all time.

THE END.

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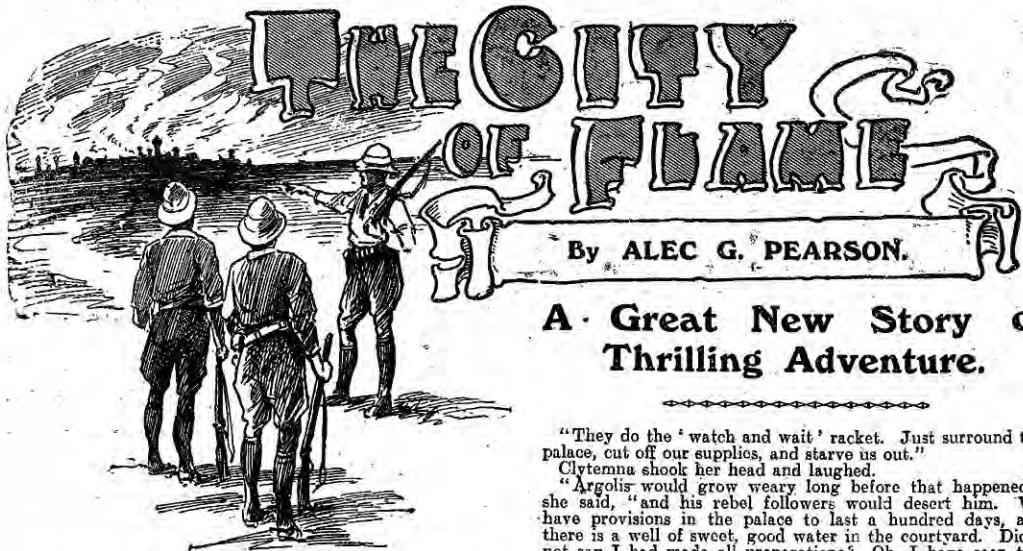
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A Great New Story of Thrilling Adventure.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

Hal Mackenzie, Jim Holdsworth, and Bob Sigsbee, while cruising in a yacht, the Isis, in the Red Sea, discover information relating to a mysterious City of Flame, and form themselves into an expedition for discovering it.

After many exciting adventures, they at last reach the land of Shoa, and, after crossing a great desert, reach the Temple of the Sun. There they meet Patrick O'Hara, a tall, red-headed Irishman, who is being kept prisoner by the natives, and regarded as a saint. The comrades then come into collision with Argolis, the chief priest, who wishes their deaths.

A few days later the temple is visited by Queen Clytemna of Shoa, with an enormous retinue. She takes the three adventurers and the Irishman under her protection, and in due course they return with the queen's retinue to the City of Flame, and are lodged in her palace.

Queen Clytemna informs the comrades of vast treasure-trove, and asserts that the treasure is rightfully hers, but the priests have conspired to keep it from her.

The comrades decide to find the treasure, and, after many thrilling adventures, succeed in their purpose.

On returning to Queen Clytemna's palace, they are informed by the queen that the priests have succeeded in stirring up revolt among her subjects, and the rebels are preparing an attack on the palace.

The comrades then decide to aid the queen and a handful of loyal subjects to defend the palace against the rebels.

(Now read the conclusion of this fine story.)

How Pat O'Hara Held the Gate.

At the stairhead the comrades met Clytemna, and in that hour of stress and peril, when the coming day would decide the fate of all within the palace, and, indeed, the fate of the city itself, she had never looked more queenly.

"You have done well, my brave comrades!" she exclaimed, and her dark eyes flashed. "Ah, but I knew that you would not fail me—and you will not fail me, whatever betide! The gate is down, and you'll remember that is our only way of retreat, though you will also remember that there may be no possibility of retreat. But I have made all preparations."

"We can die fighting, if it comes to the worst," said Hal. "But you, Clytemna—"

"Have no fear for me," interrupted the queen. "I have a weapon"—she drew from her girdle a dagger of rare Damascus steel, with a curiously carved ivory handle—"and my enemies shall never enjoy the triumph of making me a captive. As a last resort, I shall use it."

"How many of the enemy do you reckon there are?" asked Sigsbee.

It was Nestor who answered this question. "To every one of us," he said, "there are twenty-five of the high-priest's followers."

"Long odds," muttered Sigsbee. "But they have to make the attack in the open, while we're inside the palace walls. I allow that evens things up a bit, unless—"

"What?"

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"They do the 'watch and wait' racket. Just surround the palace, cut off our supplies, and starve us out."

Clytemna shook her head and laughed.

"Argolis would grow weary long before that happened," she said, "and his rebel followers would desert him. We have provisions in the palace to last a hundred days, and there is a well of sweet, good water in the courtyard. Did I not say I had made all preparations? Oh, I have seen this coming for long past, yet I had thought to have more true men ranged on my side than there are."

"'Tis a great ginal she'd have made," whispered O'Hara to Jim, "if she'd been born a man."

"Do you think it possible," asked Hal, "that the rebels have any explosives similar to that which we used to destroy the east gate? Argolis is a cunning rascal, and would keep a fact like that secret."

"They have nothing of the kind" replied Clytemna, "nor is there any more in the whole land, perhaps not in the whole world. The palace will be attacked, and soon, for the men of Shoa are fierce and impatient. Spears and swords and battering-rams will be their weapons. Come; we will go round and visit all the defences again. I did so an hour ago, but we must not relax our vigilance. There may be one traitor left in the palace, though many have been weeded out. And even only one traitor may work much mischief."

Hal didn't inquire how the "weeding out" process had been accomplished, but knowing the customs of the country, and the small regard in which human life was held, he had no doubt the work had been done thoroughly.

The palace was as strongly built as a fortress, and although it might soon have been battered down by modern artillery, the walls would have withstood a hammering from battering-rams for days, perhaps for weeks.

For with all the wisdom of their scientists and all their skill in many things of which Western nations had but little knowledge, the Shoon methods of fighting were much the same as they had been in the days of King Solomon and the famous Queen of Sheba.

The battering-rams were immense beams weighing about five tons, shod with metal at the business end, and slung from double shears—that is, shears with four legs, which were fixed on low, massively-built trolleys. This, of course, was so that they could be moved from place to place.

It needed twenty men to work each battering-ram, and they were protected to a certain extent by shields against throwing spears or missiles flung from slings, but the shields were no protection against bullets from "big game" sporting rifles.

As it was with these weapons that Hal, Jim, and Sigsbee were armed, the very best of their kind, they could easily beat off the battering-ram crews so long as they had any cartridges. The drawback was they hadn't a tenth-part of the ammunition they required. A hundred and fifty cartridges divided between three men are soon expended.

All the lower windows and doors were strongly barricaded, and the defenders were stationed at the upper windows and loopholes, from which positions they could hurl spears or other missiles at the attackers, or pour boiling liquid on them if they came close up to the walls.

Nestor was in command of the guards, and the four comrades had a sort of roving commission to go to any part of the palace where they would be of the greatest service.

It was midnight by the time the inspection was over, but the rebels still kept their distance. No doubt it took them some time to muster in their full strength, but they were moving slowly from various points in the city to the great square in front of the palace.

The dark masses of men could be seen in the broad avenues,

and the glint of their spear-heads when the red light of the flames touched them. But the spouting jets of flame had sunk so low now that they did not illuminate the city, as was usual.

The streets were plunged in shadow, an ominous condition of affairs which the rebels didn't understand—for never before had such a thing happened—and didn't like. It seemed to be a premonition of disaster.

Clytemna stood by a window and gazed at the slowly sinking flames with a strange smile on her lips.

"The end will come soon," she murmured, "and those poor fools yonder little dream the foe they will have to contend with at the last."

Hal heard her words, and perhaps understood their meaning, but, being eminently practical, he didn't trouble to dream of things which might happen over which he had no control. It was enough now to concern himself with the present.

"Wouldn't it be as well," he suggested, "if half our men had a spell of sleep while the other half kept watch? There will be no attack for a few hours. Sleep will refresh them, and we shall all want every ounce of our strength and need all our wits about us."

"It is well said," replied Clytemna. And she gave the necessary orders to Nestor. "I, too, will rest, but I shall require no waking when the hour comes."

The four arranged that Jim and O'Hara should have the first watch, and that Hal and Sigbee should relieve them in about two hours' time.

Nothing particular happened during the first watch, and when it was over Jim and the Irishman laid down on the floor and went to sleep instantly.

Jim thought he could not have been asleep more than ten minutes when a hand on his shoulder roused him up. But he had slept for nearly three hours, for day was just breaking. He sprang to his feet, and found Hal standing by his side.

"Get ready!" said Hal. "The rebels are here!" O'Hara was already up and stretching himself. He swung his heavy battleaxe round his head.

"I'm fit!" he declared. "All I want is for him to come within rache av me!"

Outside it was strangely silent—the calm which precedes a storm.

Jim went to a loophole and looked out. The great square was packed with men—two or three thousand of them. They were standing motionless, and uttering no sound. It was curious and startling that such a crowd, gathered together in open rebellion against their ruler, could stand there in such absolute silence.

"Guess if this was one of them South American revolutions," observed Sigbee, "the insurgents'd be yelling themselves hoarse. But they'd have broken into the wine-shops for a start, and most of 'em would be full up with cheap liquor."

"The woine av this country wudn't make them yell," growled O'Hara, "however full they were of ut."

"Seems to have made them unhappy, if they've been drinking any," laughed Jim, who could never be serious for long under any circumstances. "An accumulated pain in all their little Marys—"

"Shut it!" said Hal, who couldn't help laughing himself. "I believe you'd joke if you were going to be buried."

"Depends," replied Jim, "on whether I was dead or not. If I was going to be buried alive—Hallo! They're making a move."

Some of the Royal Guards, who were standing near, stared with surprise at the "white strangers," who could laugh at such a time. Laughter was so seldom heard in that city of gloom, and that men should laugh now, in the face of death, as it were, was to them an amazing thing.

They knew the meaning of that dead silence in the rebel ranks. They were awaiting the signal for the attack.

At this moment it was given—a single blast, loud and shrill, on a blazen trumpet. Then came the rush.

The rebels were no longer silent, but with a confusion of shouts and the clash of weapons they poured in three thick streams through different entrances into the outer courtyard of the palace.

"Let 'em have it now!" cried Hal. "You can't make any misses, but go particularly for the men with the battering-rams whenever you get the chance."

There was only one battering-ram being dragged to the front then, a huge affair, with thirty or forty of the rebels hauling and pushing to get it into position.

Jim and Sigbee opened fire on that lot, and several dropped. The remainder beat a hasty retreat, with cries of fear and rage; but their leaders rallied them, and others took the places of those who had fallen.

Hal, in the meantime, kept up a steady fire on the front rank of the rebels, and the guardsmen aided him by hurling a continuous shower of throwing spears from the upper windows. There was an enormous stock of these weapons in the palace.

The rebels replied by hurling stones from slings, and also with throwing spears, but they did little damage. Yet they pressed so fiercely forward with the attack that although they lost heavily, they at last got close up to the palace walls with the huge battering-ram. And so for hours the fight raged furiously, with little advantage to either side. The battering-ram was at work, but to make a breach in the palace walls would be a long job, and many men would fall before it was accomplished.

Pat O'Hara found himself rather out of it, for he didn't possess a rifle, and he was not skilful at spear-throwing. He yearned for a hand-to-hand fight, and after a time he decided to "have a look round" in the lower corridors of the palace to see if there was any remote prospect of getting to close grips with the enemy.

It was lucky he did so, for suddenly he heard a sound like the creaking of doors swinging open on their hinges, and, knowing no doors should be opened, he rushed to the spot.

For a moment he stood aglath. A side door, with the iron-barred gate in front of it, were both wide open, and a man was standing on top of the flight of marble steps leading down to the courtyard, signalling to some others whom O'Hara did not at once see.

The Irishman recognised this man. He was the officer of the guard who had delayed them at the main gates on their return. He had been under suspicion, and, scenting danger to himself, had suddenly disappeared. It was supposed that he had joined the rebels, but it was evident that he had been concealed in the palace all the time.

"Treason!" roared O'Hara. "Ye thafe av the world, wud ye betray us to the inimy?"

He made a rush at him. The traitor drew his sword, and lunged fiercely at O'Hara, but the Irishman smashed the steel blade short off at the hilt with a terrific blow of his great axe.

Then the axe swung round again, and the traitor paid the penalty of his dastardly act. With a scream of agony he flung up his arms, and then lurched down the steps into the midst of a band of men who were about to ascend them.

They passed over his dead body, scarcely deigning to look at it. He had served their purpose; and even the rebels had no feeling but contempt for a traitor.

"Did ye think to sneak in this way an' surprise us?" shouted the Irishman. "Come on, then, an' thry. I'll show ye how Patrick O'Hara can hould the gate against ye."

The party of rebels numbered about forty, and they were all armed with stabbing spears, for they had hoped to get into the palace unobserved, and admitting others, make short work of the defenders who were scattered about the building. It was fortunate they had brought no throwing-spears with them.

The gateway was narrow, and no more than two men could pass through abreast. This was a slight advantage for O'Hara, but the only one. It was no use for him to shout for assistance, for the din of conflict was so great that his voice would not have been heard by his comrades. Alone he would have to hold the gate.

The party of rebels may have thought they had an easy task in front of them, for they came up the steps with a rush. The leading one, a big fellow, struck at the Irishman with his spear, but O'Hara warded off the blow, and then the mighty battle-axe crashed home. The man pitched backwards never to rise again.

"Where's Argolis, the traitor what calls himself a priest?" cried O'Hara. "Where's your leader? Let him come here to face me, an' I'll send him quick to perdition."

But the high priest was not risking his precious life. He was directing operations from a secure position.

By twos and threes the assailants rushed up the steps to the gateway, but as fast as they came the axe crashed upon them, and they fell dead or dying. Nothing could withstand the blows of that heavy, keen-edged axe, which sheared through helmets and shields as though they had been no more than cardboard.

They thrust and lunged at the Red Irishman with their broad-bladed spears, wounding him in several places, but still he held his post, and his strength seemed undiminished. Never was there such a fight. The pile of dead and wounded blocked the steps, and at last his foes drew back, staring at him in amazement, and crying to each other.

"It is the Red One from the Temple of the Sun, and death cannot touch him!"

Terrible indeed did the Red Irishman look, for he had flung aside his loose cloak, and stood in the tight-fitting black garments which gave him the appearance of an old-time headman. He was the biggest and strongest man of all the fighters.

But, strong as he was, he was glad enough of the brief respite, and as he leaned on his axe, panting from his recent

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exertions, one of his opponents, thinking now to take him at a disadvantage, leaped suddenly upon him, spear upraised to strike.

O'Hara dropped his axe, for he hadn't time to swing it up to deal an effective blow; but he set one foot upon it. Then he gripped his adversary round the body, and with one tremendous heave, lifted him shoulder-high; next, he hurled him straight away from him.

The twisting, kicking rebel served as a new kind of missile, plunging right in amongst the others, who were crowded on the steps, and knocking three of them down.

"Arrah, now!" shouted O'Hara. "Come up, wan at a toime, so I can play skittles wid ye!"

But he snatched up his axe again, for some more of the priests were coming round one angle of the wall at a run. He knew he could never hold this fresh lot back; and he couldn't close the gate, because it had been so tampered with that it wouldn't move. He had done all that mortal man could do, and there was nothing left now but to fight on to the end.

If he could only warn the queen, or his comrades, of this danger! But he saw no possibility of doing that.

On came the rebels in stronger force than ever. He swung his axe, and two went down. But he could no longer stem the rush. Then all at once he heard a cheery voice behind him call out:

"Move a pace to your left, Pat! Good! That'll do!" Then the sharp crack—crack—crack! of Jim Holdsworth's magazine-rifle. Five shots he fired in rapid succession, and five of the enemy dropped. The rush was checked. They surged back against each other to get out of the way of the deadly hail of bullets.

"All serene, Pat!" cried Jim. "Are you badly hurt? Glad we happened along in time. There's half a score of the guards coming up, and we'll give these chaps beans—if they wait. After that we'll block up this gateway!"

Destruction.

The succour arrived in time, and the attack on the side gate, which O'Hara had defended so gallantly, was abandoned. The rebels were driven off from that corner, and the gateway blocked up.

O'Hara's wounds were attended to, and he had perforce

to rest for a while, for he had lost blood. Many of the defenders of the palace had received slight wounds, and a few were seriously hurt, but the devoted band who stood by the queen to the last were by no means disheartened.

They fought on hour after hour through all the long day, snatching some hasty mouthfuls of food whenever they had a chance.

The din of the conflict was terrific: the sharp reports of the rifles, the yells and shouts of the attackers, the crash of splintering wood or falling masonry, and the thunder of the battering rams, two of which had succeeded in getting into position close to the walls, made a babel of sounds that baffles adequate description.

It was just about sunset that Sigsbee, looking wild-eyed, and begrimed with dust, smoke, and blood, came to Hal, and said:

"Cap'n, how many cartridges have you got left?"

"Seven," replied Hal.

"Wal, I've only got five," continued Sigsbee, "and Jim's only got three. That's fifteen between us. I reckon it'd be a good idea to save those till we vamoose out of this palace. We've got to beat a retreat middlin' soon unless we're goin' to bury ourselves here, for those battering-rams'll put a hole through the wall pretty soon now. Has Clytemna got anything up her sleeve—I mean about slipping away?"

"She seems to think it can be managed, though we must wait a little longer."

"For darkness?" Sigsbee glanced through a loophole towards the west, where there was a faint red glow still in the sky.

"No, for more light," replied Hal. "She is in a strange mood, and I didn't quite understand what she was driving at when she last spoke to me. Ah! Here she comes, and Jim with her, looking as chirpy as usual. Nothing squashes his cheerfulness!"

Clytemna joined them. She was smiling—not a smile of merriment, but one rather of fierce triumph.

"The end is very close now," she said—"so close that there is no further need for you to waste your strength in fighting."

"How so?" asked Sigsbee.

"It is getting dark," replied Clytemna. "Look out! Where are the flames of the fire vapour, which gave this city its name? Can you see even one?"

She pointed, with a wave of her hand, from a window. A throwing-spear came hurtling through, missing her by a hand's-breadth. She laughed scornfully.

"You must not show yourself, Clytemna," said Hal.

"I don't fear those rebels," she replied, "nor their puny weapons. Look, I say. Where are the flames?"

There was not one solitary flame visible; not the smallest flicker.

"There are none," said Hal.

"Listen!" exclaimed Clytemna.

Was it thunder? A dull rumble smote upon their ears, and it dominated all other sounds. The palace shook. It could not be thunder, for it was beneath the earth.

"What is it? What does it mean?"

"The mighty forces of Nature at work," replied Clytemna. "There is a legend that when the great flames, which have lighted the city for a century, die away and vanish into the earth, it is a warning of destruction. The city is doomed! Listen once more."

Again they heard that deep, rumbling sound, like subterranean thunder, but now much louder than before. It was followed by the crash of a falling building.

The din of the fighting ceased abruptly. The rebels had paused in their furious attacks, and for a few minutes there was a silence which was far more startling than the noise had been.

They waited, that group by the window, and watched; scarcely breathing, their nerves strung up to the highest tension. A hoarse muttering of fear rose up from the ranks of the rebels, and they could be seen moving away in all directions.

Darkness fell—a darkness so intense that the crowds, and even the buildings, were blotted from sight. The mutterings of the crowds were hushed, but it was the hush of an increasing fear. An unaccountable darkness is always terrifying, for men and women feel so helpless when they have to grope their way blindly from place to place.

Then all at once the darkness was split asunder by a vivid sheet of flame, which burst out of the ground in the heart of the city, and with a roar as of hundreds of engines letting off steam, rose to three times the height of the tallest minaret of the temple.

Then it was that the tongues of the people were loosened again. A veritable scream of terror rose up from thousands of throats—and the stampede began.

The man
who makes
the
whole world
laugh.



Don't miss
him.
He will
make you
scream.

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O'Hara dropped his axe, for he hadn't time to swing it up to deal an effective blow. Then he gripped his adversary round the body, and with one tremendous heave, lifted him shoulder high, and then hurled him straight at his colleagues. (See page 26.)

On the roof of a tall building, one figure stood out clear and distinct in the ruddy glow. It was Argolis, the high priest. His hands were raised above his head; he seemed to be shaking his clenched fists at the palace, as though calling down imprecations on the queen, and all who stood by her.

He was a weird figure, and as he appeared then, so he lived in the memories of Hal and his comrades. For it was their last sight of him.

"He's at the end of his tether," said Jim.

And even as he spoke, the building on which Argolis was standing, collapsed like a house of cards, blown down by a breath, and flames leaped up where it had been. The high priest vanished in the gulf of fire.

"A fitting tomb," said Clytemna; "for no more evil man than Argolis ever lived. But it is time now for us to go, for the palace cannot escape destruction. This is my last hour as a queen, and truly it is one that will not be forgotten."

She gazed over the stricken city, which was being shattered into ruins, as though by a great earthquake. In effect, it was an earthquake, for the vast reservoirs of natural gas far below the earth's surface were exploding with frightful violence, causing an upheaval of the ground both in the city, and for some distance around it.

"There will not be one stone left upon another," she murmured. Then: "Come, this way! There will be no one now to interfere with us!"

The remnant of her guard was mustered in the council chamber, and then they all marched to the eastern gate. Here there were four camels, three of them loaded up with provisions and other necessities for a long journey, and one with a sort of double saddle on it, covered with rich rugs.

This was for Clytemna, and the one female attendant she was taking with her, to ride on.

To the surprise of Hal, Jim, and Sigsbee, and also to their delight, they found this attendant was Zenobia, the girl they had rescued from the crocodile lake. O'Hara had, of course, not seen her before.

By choosing her, Clytemna was making what amends she

could for the suffering she had unintentionally inflicted on the girl in past days.

"I guess we've got to hurry," called out Sigsbee. "Look! The palace is going, and we sha'n't be safe till we're well outside the walls."

"Have we got the treasure?" asked Jim suddenly.

"Tis packed on wain av the camels," replied O'Hara.

"Sure, we wouldn't be ather laving that behind!"

All preparations for the flight had been made beforehand, and now they started off along a well-kept road, with the guards acting as an escort. But no escort was needed, for the panic-stricken rebels were thinking only of their own safety. Most of them believed that the destruction of the city was brought about by the "anger of the gods," because the people had risen up against their queen.

Clytemna and her faithful little band had proceeded no more than a hundred yards, when an appalling crash behind them caused them all to look round. The whole west wing of the palace had fallen, and was now no more than a mass of crumbling debris.

Flames leaped up from the ruin. A scorching blast of hot air, which seemed to shrivel their very skins, caused them to hurry on at a quicker pace. The ground rocked beneath their feet, so that at times they could hardly prevent themselves from falling.

Two miles from the eastern gate they came to a low hill, on the summit of which they halted, for they were out of danger from the eruption, and in a region of calm—compared to the wreck and tumult they had escaped from.

They stood here to look their last upon the doomed city, and it was a sight which they would never forget in all their lives.

Written words can only convey a feeble description of that last scene. Great buildings, which had withstood the storms of centuries, rocked to and fro like toy houses, and then collapsed into a tumbled mass of stone. Everywhere there was ruin, hideous and complete. From twenty different parts of the city masses of flame roared up, hundreds of feet in the air.

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The lurid glare lit up the country for miles around, and streams of terrified fugitives could be seen, still running for their lives. Many must have perished in that sea of fire, wreckage, and destruction.

"I hope all the women and children got away safely," said Hal.

"I believe they did," said Zenobia, who overheard the remark; "for Clytemna sent a warning to them. The women would heed it, but the men would not. They thought it was a scheme to break up the rebellion."

Clytemna stood a little apart from the others, her eyes fixed upon the city of a thousand memories, now a reeling ruin, wrapped in a winding sheet of flame. She did not speak, and her companions respected her silence.

Suddenly, with an ear-splitting roar, a pillar of fire shot up skywards to a tremendous height. It died down, and a pall of smoke hung over the place where the city had been.

"That is the end," said Clytemna.

She turned to Hal.

"Lead on," she added. "I wish to see no more. Keep always towards that mountain peak, the point of which, with the moonlight on it, looks like a burning star."

Back to Civilisation.

It was five days' journey to the mountain of the "burning star," and here the escort of guards bade them farewell. None of them had any desire to quit their own country, which perhaps was just as well. European manners and customs and Western civilisation would never have suited them. Shoa was very far from being a desirable country to live in, but they were used to it, and it was their home. True, the royal city where they had spent most of their lives was no more, but there were many villages in the land where they could settle down, living the same lives as the other scattered inhabitants.

Jim confided to his chum that he was glad the guards were coming no further.

"They ain't bad chaps in their way," he admitted, "but it's not our way; and in the long tramp to the coast that's in front of us, I should have got tired of their company."

"We shouldn't have let it off after a time," replied Hal, "and I fancy the plans which Clytemna has mapped out for herself don't include any men of her late country."

"No; they'd be too much of a handicap if she means to start in as a rich Society beauty, or anything of that sort, in London or Paris, or wherever she means to go to," laughed Jim.

The road out of the land of Shoa—it being impossible to go back the way they came—was a secret known only to Clytemna and a few of the head officials, many of the latter now dead, and she had to give directions as to the route.

It was a long journey, and in places a difficult one, when they were only able to make a few miles each day; also every fourth day they called a halt for one day's rest.

They were all glad of these rests, and particularly Clytemna and her attendant; for riding on a camel is rather a bone-racking business for those who are not accustomed to it, and the two ladies often walked in preference to riding, when ground was level.

Adventures they had in plenty, and often enough they were faced with perils, which a few months ago they would have thought worthy of special record; but they had become so accustomed to dangers that they scarcely heeded them.

So one evening, six weeks after they had quitted the ruined City of Flame, they reached a point on the coast where it was possible for them to hire an Arab dhow to take them across to Aden. For it was to Aden that Hal's yacht, the Isis, had been sent when the two chums and Sigsbee had started on their adventurous quest into the Unknown.

The crew of the yacht had given them up for dead, and great was their delight at seeing them back again safe and sound. When they saw Clytemna they thought their

captain had brought back a wife with him, but Hal very soon undeceived them on that point.

Once more in comfort on board the Isis—and after what they had gone through it seemed like luxury—the course was set for home. But Clytemna was going to part with them at Suez, it being her intention to go on to Cairo, and remain there until she had mastered the French language. This was on Hal's advice, as with French she could make her way in any country of Europe. At Cairo she could easily pass as an Egyptian princess, and with her beauty and wealth she would be sure to be well received.

The treasure was divided while the yacht was in the Red Sea. Clytemna keeping one-third, and the remainder—after a portion had been given to Zenobia—divided between Hal, Jim, Sigsbee, and O'Hara. Afterwards, when the jewels were sold in England, they found that each of their shares amounted to a hundred and twenty thousand pounds. Clytemna's share was, of course, twice that sum.

Then came the eventful hour of parting when the Isis anchored in Suez Bay, Hal having first arranged with a trustworthy agent to see about engaging rooms at a hotel, and attending to other business matters of which Clytemna was profoundly ignorant.

"It is hard to bid you farewell, my true and gallant comrades," said Clytemna, and her dark, gleaming eyes were wet with unaccustomed tears as she spoke, "and I would gladly go with you all the way to your land of which you are so proud, Britain; but it is for the best that I remain in Egypt for a while. Yet we may meet again. This need not be a parting for all time."

"We all hope to meet you often again," exclaimed Hal. This sentiment was endorsed by the others, and they included Zenobia in the wish.

"Then if you have the will," said Clytemna, "we shall meet. But except to you I shall never again be known as Clytemna, any more than I shall be known as a one-time queen of an ancient kingdom. In the new life which is before me—in which I trust I shall find happiness—I shall choose another name. I have not yet made a choice, but some day you will learn it. I can say no more, for my heart is heavy. Fare ye well, comrades!"

She spoke the last word in English.

They stood bareheaded on the deck as she stepped into the waiting boat, in which Zenobia was already seated. Then as it rowed away Jim sprang aft to the flagstaff, and lowered the ensign in salute.

"I'm thinking," said O'Hara that night, as they sat on the deck of the yacht, "that we're well out of the land of Shoa. Ould Oireland's good enough for me in future, more by token that I'm now a rich man. I wouldn't go back to Shoa, not even to dig for the remainder of the Queen of Sheba's treasure, the most of which we had to leave behind us."

"I allow you wouldn't find it," put in Sigsbee. "It's sure all melted in that gulf of fire that raged beneath the city."

"Hurrah for Old England, say I!" exclaimed Jim. "I want to have a look round some of the theatres and music-halls in London, and dine a few times at some of the swell restaurants. I suppose we shall all settle down to quiet, orderly lives now, like respectable citizens."

Hal laughed softly.

"Not a bit of it!" he said. "After a spell of the artificial life of bustling cities, we shall have the longing again to wander in search of fresh adventures. It's in our blood."

"Sure," replied Sigsbee. "Now, as we've got some champagne on board, I vote we go down into the cabin and drink the health of Clytemna, ex-queen of Shoa, and still a queen among women."

"And so say all of us," cried Jim, springing to his feet, and making for the companion hatchway.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK :

"UNDER THE DRAGON!"

Do not miss the first long instalment of this splendid serial.

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The most amazing 50,000-word
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THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to —
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EVERY MONDAY | EVERY FRIDAY | EVERY SATURDAY.

For Next Wednesday—

"FOR THE OLD SCHOOL'S SAKE!"

By Martin Clifford.

In next week's splendid, long, complete tale of the heroes of St. Jim's Tom Merry and Talbot come across an old boy of the institution, who, having run into debt, and been guilty of embezzlement, is a fugitive from justice. The man makes such a touching appeal to the two schoolboys that they vow to stand by him in his sorry plight, and shield him, if possible, from the police. Unfortunately, however, Ernest Levison sees what is afoot, and determines to do his best to bring about the old boy's arrest. Stirring times follow; but, although the former St. Jim's fellow proves to be the blackest of black sheep, the juniors never regret the numerous sacrifices they made.

"FOR THE OLD SCHOOL'S SAKE!"

HAVE YOU ORDERED YOURS?

The question printed above refers to the Grand Summer Double Number of our companion paper, "The Magnet" Library, which is packed from cover to cover with the finest features human brains can devise, and which will be on sale on Monday next at all newsagents for the moderate sum of twopenny.

The outstanding feature of this vast array of reading matter is, of course, the 50,000-word complete school story, entitled:

"SCHOOLBOYS NEVER SHALL BE SLAVES!"

By Frank Richards.

This story—which is one of the most powerful and absorbing tales Martin Clifford's colleague has yet produced—describes the desperate stand which is made by the heroes of Greyfriars against an obnoxious drill-sergeant, who, forgetting the thousand years of freedom enjoyed by the sons of Britain, chooses to rule his charges with a rod of iron, and to conduct himself like a first-class Hun. The "Gemite" who allows himself to miss such a stirring story as

"SCHOOLBOYS NEVER SHALL BE SLAVES!"

will nourish an almost lifelong regret, for the tale is one which claims the interest and sympathy of every British boy. A splendid free supplement is contained in the issue in question, and takes the form of a grand summer number of

"THE GREYFRIARS HERALD!"

the popular little paper in which all "Gemites" have been interested since a copy was published in their favourite paper at Easter-tide.

A Special War Supplement, the first of a fine series of poems, and a grand instalment of a great sea serial, will go to make up one of the greatest numbers our companion paper has ever yet boasted.

May I urge all my reader-chums not to let this gilt-edged opportunity slip by, but to purchase a copy of "The Magnet" Library as soon as they have read these comments? By so doing they will assure themselves of several hours of truly delightful entertainment.

ORIGINAL DRAWINGS OFFERED TO READERS.

I have been asked at various times by certain readers who take an interest in art if I could supply them with the

original sketches of those artists who have made the companion papers famous. In such cases I have been pleased to allow my chums to have the illustrations they require at a very nominal sum, and it has occurred to me that other of my readers would like to enjoy the same benefit.

Accordingly, I have organised a scheme whereby my chums can obtain the original work of the following well-known draughtsmen:

"The Gem" Library—

R. J. Macdonald,
G. M. Dodshon.

"The Magnet" Library—

C. H. Chapman

"The Boys' Friend"—

J. A. Cummings,
E. E. Briscoe,
R. J. Macdonald,
Harry Lane,
G. W. Wakefield.

The scale of charges for these drawings is as follows:

	s.	d.
Original Cover Pictures	2	7 6 each.
Original Headings or Illustrations	5	0 each.

When applying for any of the above, readers are requested to state the number of the issue in which the drawing appears; and in the event of more than one reader requiring the same picture, the boy or girl who sends in the earliest application will be considered first.

Bearing in mind that each sketch is worth treble the value at which I offer it, I hope many of my chums will take advantage of this excellent scheme.

LETTERS GALORE!

A perfect storm of letters has assailed me during the past few weeks, and I am almost at a loss to know how to thank the many kind friends who have sent me cheering messages and useful suggestions. At the same time, I do thank them most cordially and sincerely, and am only sorry that lack of space prevents a personal reply to each.

The letters in question have come to hand from:

"A Constant Reader" (Smerthwick), "Ada" (Victoria), "An Inquisitive Girl Reader" (New Zealand), "A Loyal Canadian" (Montreal), A. P. (Bradford), "A Canadian Gemite" (Lachine), "Alfie" (Birkenhead), "An Unfit Yorkshire Lad" (Leeds), "A True Girl Reader" (Southampton), "A Reader" (Poplar), "Caledonia" (Fifeshire), D. L. Evans (Newport), "Fidelity" (Rhonda), W. Gregory (Andover), S. Hoare (Addington), F. Haskins (Staple Hill), A. Hunt (Middlesbrough), W. Kemp (Norwood), "Khaki" (Victoria), R. Keary (Penrith), L. G. B. (Sydney), T. Maguire (Fermanagh), J. McLoughlin (Victoria), "Two New Zealand Readers" (Auckland), J. Muirland (Melbourne), "Nino" (Bristol), "Poppy" (Manchester), D. Pawlett (Manitoba), Elsie R., S. Russell (Rock Ferry), "Six Jolly Britishers", L. Sinclair (Lerwich), A. Smith (Briestfield), S. B., Private J. Sellars (Invergordon), G. Sykes and chums, "Australian Reader" (Melbourne), E. Dillon (Sandy Bay), E. Thyer (Sydney), "Tomboy" (Ardath), "Two Ipswich Gemites", "Viscosity" (Bristol), D. Vincent (Clapham), A. White (Toronto).

YOUR EDITOR.