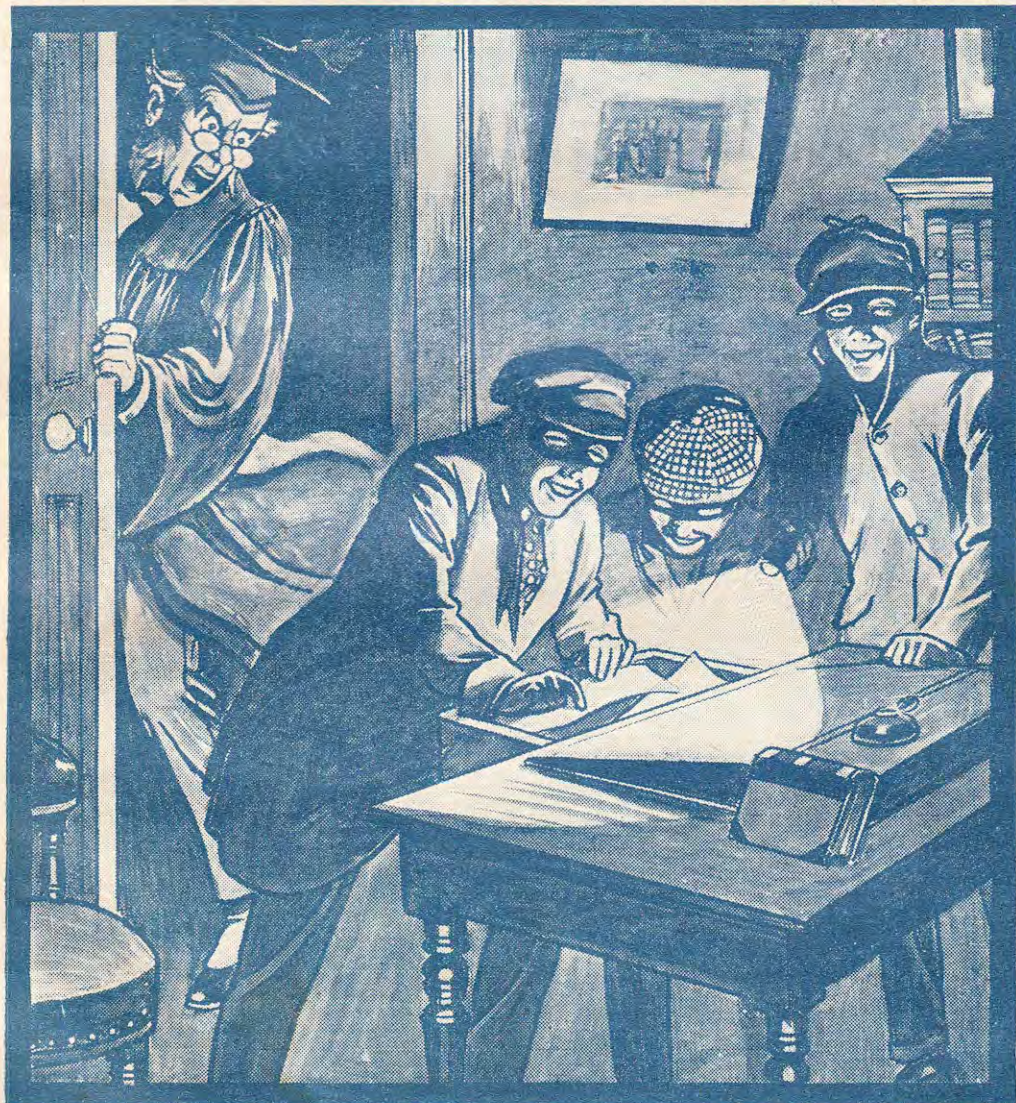
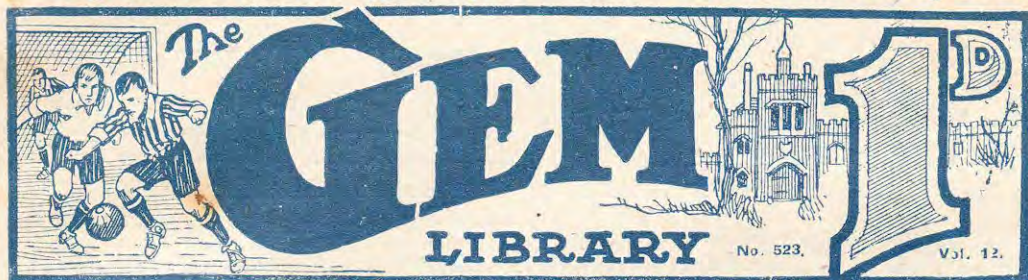


THE FOURTH-FORM DETECTIVES!

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



THREE DESPERATE RASCALS!

THE FOURTH-FORM DETECTIVES!

*A Magnificent
New, Long, Complete Story of
Tom Merry and Co. at St. Jim's.*

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

The Fags' Discovery.

"LOOK here, Reggie, come out of that! That sort of thing is jolly well off!"

The speaker was D'Arcy minor—Wally of the Third—and it was his chum Reggie Manners whom he addressed.

Wally was honorary skipper of the Third. His post might not be one sanctioned by authority; but, anyway, he called himself skipper, and few of the Form refused to acknowledge his leadership.

Reggie Manners did not refuse to acknowledge it—as a general principle. But in point of fact Reggie was very much inclined to be a rebel. When Wally's will clashed with his he was apt to throw principles to the wind and to kick.

"What's it to do with you?" he growled now.

But he took his head out of Mr. Selby's desk to growl.

Wally promptly closed down the lid. "I won't have it!" he said. "It's the sort of thing a chap doesn't do if he's decent."

"If you say I'm not decent, young D'Arcy—"

"I shall jolly well say what I like, and if you're going to talk about thick ears, young Manners, you'd better not get any further than talking, that's all!"

"Why hadn't I better?"

"Because you couldn't give me a thick ear in a week, and you jolly well know it!"

"Oh, couldn't I?" snapped Manners minor.

"Chuck it, you two!" said Frank Levison soughly.

Levison minor was always inclined to play the peacemaker when his chums were quarrelsome.

"Well, Selby's an old Hun, anyway," said Reggie ill-temperedly.

"That's no reason why you should behave like a young Hun," replied Wally, in the magisterial tone of reproach that was apt to annoy the thin-skinned Reggie.

"I didn't, you silly fat-headed chump! There's no harm in looking inside the old hunks' desk that I can see."

"You wouldn't do it if he was here," observed Hobbs.

"Catch me!" retorted Reggie, with a withering look of scorn. "I'm not quite potter—not yet!"

"Glad to hear it," said Wally blandly. "We often think you are. But that desk ought to be locked."

"Well, it ain't," answered Reggie, sulkily. "And if you don't want chaps to look inside, you'd better sit on the lid till old Selby comes back, that's all."

The point of this observation lay in the fact, known to all present, and the cause of much rejoicing among them, that Mr. Selby, after a bad bilious attack, complicated by a chill, had gone away for a week or two to recuperate.

The Third may not have been glad that their tyrant had been ill, though it

I would have been too much to expect them to be sorry. But they were certainly glad he was away.

In his absence, and the difficulty of replacing him temporarily under war-time conditions, the Third had been taken by the prefects, turn and turn about. The big Sixth-Formers might have some difficulty with the Third, never an easy Form to handle, but Kildare, Baker, Darrel, and Monteith all kept it in better order than its regular ruler, and even the tyranny of Knox was considered by the fags a lighter affliction than that of Mr. Henry Selby.

Knox had been in charge that morning, and it was he who had unlocked Mr. Selby's desk, having run short of canes. Kildare or Darrel could get through a whole morning without causing anyone; but if Knox had done that his conscience would have troubled him terribly throughout the rest of the day!

Great events often spring from small causes, as has been observed before; and Knox's shortage of canes was fated to have an effect upon the fortunes of several fellows at St. Jim's, besides Butt and Watson, for whose especial benefit the prefect had wanted the cane.

Wally vaulted on to the desk, and sat there.

"I ain't saying I mean to stay till the old Hun comes back," he said. "Perhaps he never will. You never know your luck! He might take it into his old napper to join up."

Nobody seemed to think that at all likely. Mr. Selby, though very quick to see the path of duty for younger men, had a firm conviction that it was sheer indecency to think of extending the military age much above forty-five. Mr. Selby was himself not much under fifty.

"Well, I'm not going to frown in the Form-room, if you are," said Reggie. "I'm going for a bike spin. Any of you chaps coming?"

Hobbs and Jameson, curly Gibson and Joe Frayne all volunteered. Wally looked at Frank Levison.

"You go, Wally, old scout," said Frank. "There's no reason why you should stay in because I'm crooked."

A nasty hack at footer had made Frank very lame indeed. He could only walk with difficulty, and was quite unequal to riding a bike.

"Rats, Frank! I'm going to stay with you," replied Wally nobly. "Reggie ought to, as he was the rotter who hack—"

"Don't talk rot!" shrilled Reggie indignantly. "It was an accident—young Levison knows it was an accident, don't you, Frank? He got his silly leg between me and the ball, the fathead!"

"It was an accident all serene," said Frank, good-humouredly. "The sort of accident a chap that can't kick straight often has, though."

"I bet you I can kick straighter than you can, Levison minor!" retorted Reggie warmly.

"Oh, I dare say. Anyway, don't kick my leg to show me! I've only two legs, and I don't want the other one broken as well."

"Brrr!" said Reggie as he went, followed by the rest.

Wally dangled his legs from Mr. Selby's desk.

Frank sat in the master's chair, and looked thoughtful.

"Wally," he said, after a bit, "my knife's in there!"

"Oh, don't you begin, Franky!" returned Wally uneasily.

"But this is different. You remember about my knife?"

"I know. It was the last day old Selby took us. He confiscated it."

"But not from me," said Frank.

"No, it was that little bounder Manners minor. Wants a dose of gin, that kid does! He gets above himself."

"He collared it out of my pocket without saying anything," went on Frank warmly. "I like Reggie all right; but he is rather a young Hun about some things. He knew jolly well I shouldn't have lent him that knife in class. It was a good knife, and old Selby is horribly down on what he calls playing with anything while lessons are on."

"And old Selby wouldn't let you have it back, though you went up after classes and told him it was yours," said Wally. "Reggie wouldn't— Oh, I remember! Yes, Reggie's a young Hun, and Selby's an old one; but I can stand Reggie best, though he gets jolly near the limit a bit too often."

"He said he'd let me have it back the next day," Frank went on.

"And he wasn't here then, so he couldn't. Well, kid, losing a knife is a jolly small price to pay for getting rid of old Selby, if you ask me."

"But it was a bilious attack that got rid of him, not my knife, Wally!"

"Well, I never meant you stuck the thing into him so far that it couldn't be got out," replied D'Arcy minor, grinning.

"The knife's in there now, I guess," Frank said, getting up.

Wally's only reply to that was a grunt, which might have meant anything or nothing.

"I don't see why I shouldn't have it," said Frank.

"Look here, kid, if I didn't let Reggie—"

"That was different. He was only poking about out of inquisitiveness."

"He might have been after your knife, Franky."

"If he was, I know jolly well it wasn't to hand it over to me!"

"No, I guess not. But if I let you go to the desk when I made Reggie come out of it he'll say it ain't fair."

"I don't see that you need mind what Reggie says. You don't care a scrap what anyone says, as a rule."

Wally grinned. That was quite true. Frank was sticking to his point with unusual obstinacy. The knife was a good one, and nearly new, a present from his sister Doris; and Frank's people were not particularly well off, so that he got fewer presents than most of the Third.

"I don't see why you shouldn't have your knife, kid," said Wally. "It ain't because I'm afraid of old Selby that I'm

guarding his desk. But there's a limit. I think your knife comes inside it, though, so here goes!"

Wally jumped down, and flung up the lid of the desk.

There was a rather sickly scent of apples inside, accounted for by two or three half-eaten spoils of the eagle-eye of the Form-master. And there was a smell of dusters. Also, there was a tied-up bundle of canes. There were exercise-books, which did not interest the two lads in the very least. But they could not see the knife.

"P'raps Reggie collared it," suggested Wally. "He's got cheek enough."

"It may be under that paper," said Frank.

"Why, that's a number of 'Tom Merry's Weekly'!" Wally said in surprise. "What's old Hun Selby want with that? Has our Tommy been what-d'ye-calling it him?"

"Libelling, you mean, don't you? Here's the knife, old sport! No, I shouldn't think so. Tom Merry's pretty careful what he puts in, especially after that number that Cardew—"

"Crums! This is that number! It must be, Franky! Look here! Don't you remember that bit about old Selby's red nose, and his presiding Cautiously over the Form? Here it is! Golly, I must read this! I never got a fair chance when it came out. Those chaps collected the copies in double quick time, and burned the jolly lot. What's the matter, Franky?"

Frank's face had fallen. He looked really troubled. Wally could see no reason why Frank should worry.

"Don't you see? It means an awful row for Cardew if Selby—"

"But Selby's seen it—must have. It wouldn't be in his desk else. The row would have been before now if—"

"No! He'd never let it pass. Oh, I know now! Don't you remember that yarn about Tom Merry being sent for by Ratty, and Ratty getting on to him about the paper—and old Selby, too? It was—yes, I'm almost sure it was the night before Selby went sick."

"I could never make out the rights of that affair. Tom Merry denied ever having seen the thing before; and he wouldn't tell a lie to get out of a row. Not that sort. But if it was this, it was Cardew's special number, for a cert, and it must have been this, or else how does this rag come to be in the desk?"

"Look here, Wally, let's take the thing to my brother and Cardew! If there's a row Ernie's in it, you know; he had a hand in that rotten special number."

"Right-ho, Franky! But if there's a row we both took it—mind that! I don't know that I'd risk being caned or sacked for Cardew or your brother, though I've got nothing against either of them. But I'm not jolly well going to let you face the music alone!"

"You're a brick, Wally! said Frank gratefully.

"I'm a silly ass, I know that! But him on, old son!"

CHAPTER 2.

Cardew's Way.

FRANK tucked the paper under his jacket. He did not want curious eyes cast upon it.

In Study No. 9 on the Fourth-Form passage, which was shared by Levison major, Cardew, and Clive, they found only Cardew at home.

The frost was so severe that for the time-being footers was off. St. Jim's boys were hardy enough, and they had continued the game after the clubs around had begun to scratch all their matches. But each night had added to the hardness of the turf, which was now like



Mr. Selby's Desk!
(See Chapter 1.)

adamant; and at length authority, dreading concussion of the brain or broken limbs, had stepped in with a veto.

But it was a brisk, sunshiny morning, and Ernest Levison and Sidney Clive had refused to stay indoors. They could not persuade Cardew to go out, however, and the two lads found the dandy of the Fourth sitting before the fire, with a volume of O. Henry to beguile the time.

"This is an honour as unexpected as undeserved, gentlemen," he said. "Franky's visits are usually paid in the evening, an' the effulgent light of the Honourable Walter Adolphus D'Arcy's countenance but seldom illuminates this humble apartment."

"That's just like you, Cardew! You're always rotting," said Wally, who bore a grudge against his godfathers and godmothers for calling him "Adolphus," and had not fancied that Cardew even knew he possessed that name.

"Not at all, my youthful kinsman—not at all!" replied Cardew airily.

"Come to think of it, we are sort of kind of relatives, ain't we?" said Wally thoughtfully. "That's some excuse for me. I thought I was being rather an ass."

"I regret to disabuse you of any notion that you may find comfort in, Cousin Adolphus—"

"Oh, chuck the Adolphus!" snapped Wally.

"But I fear that kinship with me is not by any means a proof that you are not an ass. Still, for what that is worth, the variety of ass would be the wild, not the common, garden, or domestic species. But I interrupt, Cousin Ass—Adolphus—er—Cousin Walter!"

"Do cry up! Franky has something to tell you—something serious!"

"I observe that the face of Franky wears a serious look," said Cardew. "But he has rather a tendency that way. What is it, Franky?"

His face softened as he looked at Levison minor. Perhaps at heart Cardew

careed more for Frank Levison than for any other fellow at St. Jim's.

"Look here, Cardew!" said Frank. And he put the issue of "Tom Merry's Weekly" into the hands of the Fourth-Former.

The face of Ralph Reckness Cardew changed as he looked at it.

"Frank," he said, after a moment's silence, "I give you my word of honour that I never saw this thing before! But I've heard of it, and Tom Merry saw it. Did that tale penetrate the precincts of the Third?"

"Yes," replied Frank. "I think pretty much all the school heard about it."

"But ain't that your number, Cardew?" asked Wally, still half incredulous, though he knew well that when Cardew gave his word of honour it was good enough.

"It is not, Cousin Ass—er—Adolphus—I mean Walter!"

"Cheese that! There's that bit in it about Selby's red old conk, anyway. That was yours, wasn't it?"

Cardew sighed.

"I seem to be doomed to go down to posterity as the writer of an essay on the rosy nasal organ of a man I regard with very complete contempt," he said sadly. "I did write something of the sort, fair cousin; an' I fear I cannot flatter myself that it was literature. But it certainly wasn't such dashed ungrammatical twaddle as this perpretation!"

"Then someone else cribbed your stuff and spoiled it? Is that what you mean, Cardew?"

"Something very like that, fair Cousin Walter. This, in short, is not my number of the 'Weekly.' It is as bad—from a casual glance I should even say that it is much worse. But mine it is not."

"It's a bit of a mystery," said Frank, rubbing his chin perplexedly. "We found it in old Selby's desk."

"An' brought it to me because—"

"Well, we thought that if there was

a row it would be a jolly big one, and you'd better be warned. So we brought it."

"My fair cousin concurrin'?" asked Cardew.

"Brrr!" growled Wally.

Frank nodded.

"I thank my fair cousin. His manners would bear improvement, but he evidently bears in mind the adage that blood is thicker than water. I'm comin' down with you kids to your Form-room."

Cardew's voice had changed suddenly. The last sentence was spoken in quite a different tone from the chaff hurled at Wally.

"What for?" asked Wally.

"Any objection, fair cousin?" returned Cardew sadly. "You distress me! I hailed your advent with pleasure. I—"

"Oh, do cheese that, Cardew! Of course, I don't mind your coming down to our Form-room. Only you're such a lazy slacker that I wanted to know what for. There's bound to be something!"

"I regret, Cousin Adolphus, to perceive that you have not yet learned to marshal your thoughts with a due regard to their proper sequence."

"Oh, crumbs! Got that out of a book, didn't you?"

"Not at all! I mean, that it was not because I am a—er—lazy slacker that you wanted to know why. But you were forced to the inference that there must be something by the knowledge—or shall we say the mistaken assumption?—that I am a lazy slacker. Which is not quite the same thing, an' shows a distinct inability to deal with the co-ordination of cause an' effect. Got that?"

"Hanged if I have!" replied Wally, scratching his ear. "I don't believe you know what it means yourself. But I know jolly well you are a lazy slacker; and I shouldn't wonder a bit if you came to a bad end—grew up to be one of those long-winded author johnnies who write books that no one reads."

"Pardon me, fair cousin," but on almost the only occasion upon which I was betrayed into authorship there was a decided rush for the fruit of my labours."

"Yes; 'cause you jolly well chipped the beaks, that's why!"

The conversation had gone on during the journey down to the Form-room. Frank, who was very lame, had limped a few yards behind. Cardew turned to him now.

"Leg still bad, Franky?" he asked.

"A bit," answered Frank. "But it's nothing much, really."

They entered the Form-room together. Cardew walked straight to the master's desk and lifted the lid. He handed the bogus issue of the "Weekly" to Wally.

"Put that inside, fair cousin," he said.

"What for?" asked Wally, staring.

"Because I tell—that is, I entreat you to, fair cousin!"

Wally did as he was ordered—or entreated—wondering.

"Will you both have the kindness to turn your backs now?" said Cardew.

They did that.

When they faced round again the lid of the desk had been shut down, and Cardew's jacket was buttoned.

"Now, at worst," he said, "you are guilty of no more than having taken that rag out of Selby's desk an' looked at it. You put it back. After that you know nothing about it—see?"

"I know jolly well it's under your—"

"I regret to observe again, Cousin Adolphus, a certain want of coherence in your thoughts!" said Cardew blandly.

"You know nothin', not havin' eyes in the back of your head—which, by the

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way, would be no worse for a brushin'. What you suspect is not evidence, any more than what the soldier said was."

"You do talk rot, Cardew!" said Wally. "There ain't any soldier."

"That may have been what the judge thought when Sam Weller quoted him," replied Cardew. "Franky, I think you twig!"

"Yes, Cardew."

"Good! Stifle your natural instincts towards veracity sufficiently not to volunteer information when your beloved Form-master lets his little temper rise about the absence of the rag—if it should prove to be absent—an' if you have to answer a direct challenge, admit no more than that you took it out, looked at it, an' put it back, like good kids. But don't admit even that unless you have to. Ta-ta!"

"That chap gets pottier and pottier!" said Wally, with huge contempt, when Cardew had gone. "He talks dic. till a fellow hasn't the ghost of an idea what he's driving at. Of course, I know he's trying to put us straight in case old Hun Selby gets at us about the thing, but—"

"Well, that's decent enough of him, isn't it, Wally?"

"Oh, yes! The chap's decent—except when he calls me 'Adolphus,' the boulder! But he's potty—clean potty!"

"I hope he'll ask Fenny about what he's better do," said Frank anxiously.

"I expect it would pay him. Your major's pretty wide, though he ain't quite the Solomon come to judgment you think him. I hope there won't be any row about it; but I bet there will!"

CHAPTER 3.

Study No. 9 in Council.

"GENTLEMEN," announced Cardew after tea in Study No. 9 that evening. "I beg leave to inform you that I am on the track of a mystery!"

Sidney Clive, who had just reached the door on his way to the Common-room, halted; and Ernest Levison looked up from the letter he was writing.

"Eh? Is that straight goods, or is it one of your little jokes, old chap?" asked Clive.

"Oh, it's quite the straight goods—quite, I assure you! I have to-day got hold of a copy of the bogus issue of the 'Weekly' which led to Merry's bein' hauled before the beaks three weeks or so ago. An' here it is!"

He flung it upon the table.

Levison snatched it up at once. Anything mysterious appealed to Levison. When he had put behind him his shady past and had started to go straight, he had not abandoned his zest in pitting his own keen brains against the craft of others.

He had shown that lately, during his visit to Grevfriars, where he had been the means of getting Vernon-Smith out of a very tight corner.

And Ernest Levison had given a good deal of thought to this affair, though he had said little about it.

There were complications in it which made it a mystery. Cardew had taken over for value received, the editorship of "Tom Merry's Weekly" for one issue, and had produced, with Levison's aid, a number so grossly libellous and frankly abusive that he would inevitably have been sacked had the eyes of authority lighted upon it.

Through the efforts of Tom Merry & Co. the whole edition—or so it was believed—had been taken up and destroyed to save the reckless editor's bacon.

But months after, Tom Merry had been called to account by Mr. Rytcliff, the sour-tempered New House master, and

Mr. Selby, the tyrant of the Third, for having published atrocious paragraphs about them in his little journal. He had seen a copy, and undoubtedly the paragraphs were there, and undoubtedly atrocious was the word that fitted them.

That issue, however, was new to him. It was very much like the famous—or infamous—Cardew special number in several respects; but most certainly it was not that number. Moreover, Tom was sure, from certain differences of type, that it had not been produced by Mr. Tiper, of Rycombe, who regularly printed the "Weekly."

He had told the two masters this, and had assured them that neither he nor any of the staff of the "Weekly" had had a hand in it.

Probably they had not believed him. But the matter had not been settled. Mr. Ratcliff was called away suddenly on private business. Mr. Selby was taken ill, and he also left St. Jim's for a brief space when he began to recover.

Now both were expected back within a few days, and with their return the investigation was certain to be reopened. It was awkward—decidedly awkward—for in the attempt to find out who was guilty of this later audacity the two masters might stumble upon the track of the earlier one. An incautious word, the accidental finding of a copy of the number supposed to have been suppressed, and Cardew's chance of escaping the sack would be small indeed.

In fact, there seemed to be little chance that some innocent person should not suffer, unless the guilty person was found. And if he should be found, and should prove to be the fellow whom Cardew suspected, he would not hesitate to round on Cardew.

The plot was against Cardew, of that Levison was certain.

And he fancied that he would not have to look far for the plotters.

But why had they done it?

He saw hope in one direction.

If they had had a copy of that special number they would never have had another one printed to counterfeit it—for that was the object of the second libellous issue, Levison was sure.

Racke had not counted on Tom Merry's getting a sight of the thing, or on Tom Merry's being able to disown it almost at a glance.

And he had counted on Tom's giving away Cardew at once to save his own skin. Crooke had warned him that this was unlikely, but Racke had paid small heed to the warning. He knew what he himself would do in such a case.

"Where did you get this, Cardew?" asked Levison.

The reply of the dandy of the Fourth seemed quite irrelevant.

"Seen your young brother lately?"

"No. Not since before morning classes—at least, not to speak to," answered Levison. "Why? What's that got to do with it?"

"Quite a lot, as it happens," said Cardew. And he proceeded to explain, while Clive collared the paper and glanced through it.

"Of course Frank would do that," said Levison gravely. "Even if I hadn't been in it, he would. The kid thinks a lot of you, Cardew. But it was jolly decent of D'Arcy minor, I must say."

"They both behaved like little bricks," replied Cardew; and there was nothing mocking in his voice now. "Did I do the right thing, old man?"

"I think so," answered Levison. "I can't see what more you could have done. If it comes out Selby will give them a thrashing for going to his desk; but if it comes out—and I think it's bound to—there will be such a merry dickens of an all-round row that the kids aren't likely

to be dragged deeper into it. There will be victims enough without them. You and I will be hoofed out, for a cert; and Tom Merry and the rest of the fellows who run the paper will catch it hot."

"Bats!" said Cardew sharply. "If the thing does come out I take the whole blame. Just you get on to that right now, an' don't forget it! Nobody's really to blame in the very least but me, an' when I'm given the kick out it won't comfort me at all to have company—not even yours, dear boy!"

Clive looked up from the paper. "It mustn't come to that!" he said. "It was a mad trick, Cardew—I told you so at the time! But it will be the giddy limit if you are sacked through it, after all these months! And through the spite of some rotten schemer, too! For there can't be any doubt that this is a plot against you, though it's a curious round-about one. I wish I had a copy of your silly-ass number to compare with this!"

"That's easy enough," said Cardew at once.

His chums stared at him. "You don't suppose," he said, "that I failed to keep a copy?"

"I thought they were all taken up and burned," said Clive.

"So did Tom Merry!" chuckled Cardew. "They did their best—I'll say that for them. But I didn't feel quite like lettin' posterity miss my one great literary effort. So I managed to get hold of one copy."

"Have you kept it locked up?" inquired Clive anxiously.

"Of course he hasn't!" said Levison. "Don't you know what a silly, reckless ass he is? It's somewhere where anyone could find it, no doubt!"

"Lockin' anything up doesn't make it safer," said Cardew coolly. "If any bounder was lookin' for the dashed thing, where would he look? He would expect it to be under lock and key, an' he'd probably find it. He wouldn't tumble to the notion of keepin' it in such an innocent place as this!"

He stepped over to the bookshelves. Except for the school books, most of the volumes there were his. There was a complete set of his favourite O. Henry, some of Mark Twain's, some of Kipling's, and most of W. W. Jacobs'. He pulled out three or four from one end, and took the special issue from behind them.

"I flatter myself it would have taken a lot of findin' there," he said. "An' it was always handy—as long as I could remember where I had put it."

"Brrr!" growled Levison.

"You frabjous idiot!" said Clive. Neither, it was plain, agreed at all with Cardew's extremely casual notion of safety. But that fact did not ruffle Cardew.

The other two bent their heads together over the two papers.

"They were comparing them carefully. But the task did not take long."

There were several points of likeness, but nowhere was there actual identity. The bogus interview with Mr. Selby had been copied—but only from memory. The general purport was the same, but no single sentence agreed word for word. Racke's memory, even with Crooke's to help it, had not been good enough for that.

"Whoever got this thing done, he hadn't a copy of your piffle," said Clive.

"I concur, dear boy—except with the last word," replied Cardew. "But you are no critic. Let it pass!"

"But he'd had one since the day this rot was published," said Levison. "I'm certain of that."

"Why?" asked Clive.

"Because neither of the chaps who were in this has a good enough memory to have got so near after such a time,"

Levison answered. "It isn't as though the things were about for ever so long. Hardly anybody got more than a glance through; and with such hot stuff as that nobody would read one contribution over twice till he'd had a squint at the rest."

"You say neither of the chaps," said Clive, looking puzzled. "But we don't know who the chaps are. We don't know that there were two. We don't know anything, in sort! Moses, when the light went out, wasn't more completely in the dark than we are."

"Speak for yourself, old scout!" Levison returned quietly. "If Cardew doesn't think the same as I do about it, I'm a Dutchman! And if we're not right I'm a Hun, that's all about it!"

"You mean—"

Cardew held up a hand to stop Clive's speech.

"No need to mention names," he said. "Not that I object on principle—I'm not so gone on principles, by gad! But the fellow at the bottom of this is the fellow I taxed with it at the outset, when we didn't know what a mystery the whole bizney was. I'm as sure of that now as I was then."

"So am I," said Levison.

"What's to be done?" asked Clive.

"There speaks the eminently practical mind!" said Cardew lightly. "What's to be done?" says Clive. What do you say, Levison?"

"We've got to ferret it all out!" growled Levison. "Who had the thing done—which is easy—where he got it done—which may not be—and why he worked it just this way. And we haven't much time to spare. Ratty and Selby will be back almost before we can turn round, and they won't wait, you bet! But if Cardew and I are going to get the push—and for all he may say I'm in this with him right to the bitter end—the rotters who schemed to get it for us are going to get it, too!"

CHAPTER 4.

A Deferred Vengeance.

"GOT the little rotter!" snapped George Gerald Crooke, dragging an unwilling and struggling rag into the study on the Shell passage which he shared with Aubrey Racke.

"Lul-lul-lul me alone, C-c-crooke!" stuttered Leggett. "I haven't d-d-done anything tut-tut to you!"

"Bring him inside an' lock the door, old man!" said Racke viciously.

"He'd got his ear to our keyhole," Crooke said.

It was a lie, and it roused Leggett's indignation. He was a decent kid, and eavesdropping was not in the least in his line.

"I—I dud-dud-didn't!" he gasped. "I I-cu-can't think what you are tut-tut-telling such bub-bub-beastly lul-lul-lies for, you bub-bub-bully!"

Leggett did not understand at all; but Racke understood quite well. Leggett and his chum Willersby had put Messrs. Racke and Crooke to considerable trouble in more ways than one. Through their contumacy the two Shell fellows had incurred a ragging at the hands of the Third; and a ragging by the Third was no joke.

When Racke and Crooke felt vengeful time seldom made much difference to their feelings. They rather prided themselves on their ability to nurse a grudge.

Leggett had been in danger for the last three weeks. So had Willersby. The two black sheep were on the watch for a chance to get even with them. But Willersby had forgotten all about the affair in two hours, and it had not lingered in Leggett's mind more than two days.

"Key's gone," said Crooke. "I'll put a chair under the knob—that will be enough to keep anyone out. Besides, the kid ain't goin' to make a row. He's goin' to take his dose like a little man, aren't you young blackleg?"

"I dud-dud-didn't sus-sus-see what I'm to have a dud-dud-doss for!" wailed Leggett.

"Oh, don't you?" said Racke, with a cruel grin on his face. "Perhaps you've forgotten your dashed cheek in the Third Form-room two or three weeks ago?" Leggett had forgotten. But naturally it all came back to him now.

"That was your own fuf-fuf-fault," he tried to explain. "It wasn't your pup-pup-paper, anyway."

"Yes, it—"

"Dry up, Crooke! That's nothin' in the world to do with it," Racke snapped. "This kid has got to be made to understand that when we order him to do anything he'd better do it."

"R-r-r-rot!" stammered Leggett. "Why shu-shu-should I? You're not pup-pup-perfects!"

"Put him on the table, Crooke!" said Racke. "I'll find something that will tickle the young beast up, by gad!"

The fog had no mind to submit tamely to the tyranny of the Shell chaps, and he struggled gamely. Crooke alone would not have had the least chance of getting him into position, face downwards, on the table. It was as much as the two could manage; and the stamping of feet, the panting of breath, and the youngster's half-stiffened cries were audible all down the passage—or would have been audible had there been anyone in the passage to hear them.

But, as it happened, all the Shell studies except No. 7, in which the noise was going on, and No. 9, in which the studious Skimpole sat, studying one of the abstruse volumes of Professor Balm-crumpet, were vacant.

It took a good deal to detach the mind of Skimpy from his studies. But even he became aware, after a few minutes, that there was a noise.

"Dear me!" he said to himself. "It sounds to me very much as if a combat were in progress. I fear that this disastrous war has an evil influence upon the receptive minds of the rising generation, leading to happenings the very reverse of pacific. It is not my business, of course, but, as an altruist, I cannot sit here and listen to the sounds of conflict without making an endeavour to appease the tumult."

Horbert Skimpole might be all kinds of an ass; St. Jim's thought him so, anyway, but he was a real altruist. He not only hoped for a better world, but did his best to help it to be better. He was often wrong, but seldom selfish—at least, intentionally.

He had little difficulty in locating the sounds.

The two black sheep had got Leggett on the table now, and Crooke was holding him down while Racke swiped savagely at the seat of his trousers with a heavy ruler.

Leggett was not a coward. But he was no Spartan youth, and this punishment was too much for his fortitude. He lifted up his voice and howled.

"Stop that row, confound you!" hissed Racke. "You'll be bringin' someone along to look into it, you dashed little funk!"

Naturally this speech did not cause Leggett to dry up. There was nothing which he more earnestly desired at that moment than the arrival of someone to look into it.

"Racke! Crooke! I beg that you will open the door at once!" sang out Skimpy, rattling the knob.

"Who's there?" yelled Crooke.

"It is I, Skimpole! Really, my dear fellows—"

"It ain't his eyes we are hittin', an' it's no bizney of yours, you chuckle-headed, potty idiot!" returned Crooke politely. "Scat! D'y'e hear? Scat, an' mind your own dashed business!"

"Ow-yow! Ow-yow! Ooooh!" howled Leggett pitifully. Racke left the talking to Crooke, and went on plying the ruler.

"I shall certainly not 'scat'!" shouted Skimpy indignantly. "Open this door at once!"

"G'way!" roared Crooke.

"What's the row?" asked a voice at Skimpy's elbow.

He looked round and saw Willersby. Willersby was new that term, and was outside Skimpole's range of acquaintance. But he was obviously of the rag tribe.

"Someone is being most unmercifully dealt with inside here, and the fellows who are wronging him refuse to open the door!" replied Skimpy, in wrath there was no mistaking.

"Well, you couldn't do much to them if they did, could you?" said Willersby. "And I don't suppose they want to be stopped."

"Ow! Owwww!" yelled Leggett. The blows of the ruler were audible.

"I say, though, that sounds like young Leg!" said Willersby, in quite excited tones. "I was looking for the silly ass; he'd mooched off somewhere. You stop here; I'll cut off and tell D'Arcy minor! Wally isn't going to put up with having one of our chaps half murdered by rotten Shellfish!"

Willersby darted off. Skimpole debated with himself the propriety of remaining. He wanted to get back to Professor Balmcrumpet; but, on a weighing of the desires which tugged him this way and that, he came to the surprising conclusion that he wanted still more to stay and see Racke and Crooke overrun and dealt with by the hordes of Wally.

"I fear that even upon me the war is exerting an unwholesome influence," he told himself.

But, though Skimpy did not realize it, there was nothing unwholesome at all in his feeling. Racke and Crooke were Huns; and, like the other Huns, they needed to be made to understand that, in the long run, Hunnishness did not pay.

"Hallo, Skimpy, what's the merry game?" asked Levison of the Fourth, coming up with Clive and Cardew on the way to their study in the next passage.

"Doin' sentry-go, dear boy?" inquired Cardew affably.

"No. Something of which I cannot approve is going on within there."

"Well, that's not surprisin'. I shouldn't think much of which you would approve ever goes on in No. 7," grinned Cardew.

Racke had used the ruler till his arm was tired, and for the moment the sound of blows had ceased. Leggett's moans had died down into sobs, not so easily heard through a stout door.

But Crooke wanted his turn.

"Here, catch hold of the little sweep, Racke!" he said. "He hasn't had half his dose yet!"

"Ooooh! Owwww! Don't!" pleaded Leggett.

"My word, they're putting some kid through it in there!" exclaimed Clive, his eyes blazing.

"You are absolutely right in your surmise, Clive," said Skimpole. "Moreover, they refuse utterly to open the door, although I first requested and then commanded them to do so!"

"Smash it in!" snapped Levison, his face flushing angrily. "If it's my minor—"

"Franky wouldn't howl like that, dear

boy," Cardew replied. "But smashin' goes! I don't fancy we can do it; but we may try, anyway."

Together the three chums dashed at the door. It did not give; but it bruised their shoulders. They paid no heed to trifles like that, however. They charged again, and this time the mild Skimpy lent his weight, and got worse bruised than any of them, his bones being rather too near the surface for work of this sort.

Skimpy's weight was not much, and his strength was puny; but his intentions were good, and his wrath was as great as that of any of the rest. Skimpy had no patience with trypnny.

"Hooray! It's giving!" shouted Clive.

It was really the chair that was giving. The weight of the human battering-ram was too much for its back. A third charge caused it to crack and collapse, and the door tumbled open.

Leggett was revealed, face downwards, on the table, with Crooke standing over him, the ruler poised to strike, and Racke holding down his legs, pressing his shins painfully against the edge of the table whenever he equirned.

But even as the four swept in a cry was heard in their rear—the war-cry of Wally of the Third:

"Rescue, Third! Rescue! Sock it into the rotters!"

CHAPTER 5.

A Clue by Chance!

THE four stood aside. Even Skimpy, most unpacifically eager to wreak retribution upon the two Shell bullies, saw that it might safely be left to Wally and his band.

They rushed in like a pack of young wolves—Wally and Frank and Reggie Manners, Joe Frayne and Hobbs, and Curly Gibson and Jameson, Hooley and Butt and Harvey, Kent and Watson and Willersby and Perkins.

Frank had forgotten all about his lame leg. Willersby danced and screamed with excitement, Red-headed Phelim Hooley went straight for Crooke's throat, and toppled him over without help, though he was not much more than half Crooke's weight. But he did not lack for help when once the cad was down, and he had only had a chance alone at Crooke, because Wally and Frank, who were with him in the lead, had both gone for Racke.

"Sock it into them!" roared Wally.

"Kill 'im entirely!" howled Hooley.

"Give the beasts beans!" yelled Manners minor.

"Poor old Leg! Have they hurt you, Leg?" burred Willersby, as he helped his sobbing chum down.

It was a very unnecessary question, for to all who saw, the fact that Leggett had been treated with gross brutality was quite evident. But Leggett seemed to find it soothing. He wept in Willersby's arms.

They were all over Racke and Crooke. The scene in the Third-Form room was outdone, for there were more of the fags this time, and the offence given was heavier. That one of their Form should be entrapped by guile or force into a Shell study, and there put through it in such cruel fashion, was a deal more than Wally & Co. could stand.

"How they must love Leggett!" said Cardew mockingly. "It's touchin', dear boys, positively touchin', to see such affection!"

"I don't suppose they really care twopence about Leggett," replied the literal Clive. "I fancy they consider him rather a little rat. They're just standing up for their Form, and I don't blame them."

"Well, one thing's plain—there's

nothin' left for us to do," yawned Cardew. "Are you comin' along, Levison, or do you mean to stop in order to make quite sure that Franky don't get into trouble for finishin' Racke off just a trifle too completely?"

"I'm not coming yet. I like this," answered Levison grimly.

"What's going on here?" asked the voice of Manners of the Shell, as the Terrible Three came up, with Talbot and Roylance of the Fourth.

"Only your minor helpin' to slay Racke an' Crooke!" said Cardew coolly. "I don't know whether you'll feel inclined to butt in. Levison don't, though his minor's also tryin' to qualify for the scaffold. Hope they'll let me serve on the jury. I'll do my best to get 'em all off on a plea of justifiable homicide."

"I say, we can't have the Third raidin' a Shell study like this!" said Tom Merry, in some perplexity. "They're making an awful row, too. They'll have Ralton up if they're not careful!"

"Well, dear boy, if one thing is quite certain in such an uncertain world as this, it is that our vigorous young friends will not be careful," Cardew said, grinning. "Let us hope that our respected Housemaster is not within hearin'."

"Those unprincipled individuals deserve all that they are receiving, and more!" rapped out Skimpole.

"Must have been pretty bad, Tom!" remarked Talbot, smiling. "Even Skimpy's philosophic calm has deserted him."

"Haven't you kids nearly finished?" inquired Lowther. "It would be as well to leave enough of the remains for identification, you know."

The crowd in the passage was growing fast. Blake and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Herries and Digby had arrived upon the scene. Contarini and Smith minor, Noble and Dane, Julian and Kerruish, Hammond and Reilly, Gibbons and Gore and Buck Finn were all there. Now the great George Alfred Grundy came up, with Gunn and Wilkins in tow.

"I say, you know, Merry, this sort of thing can't be allowed!" said Grundy hotly. "A fellow can hear the beastly din in the quad. We can't have the Shell passage turned into a bear-garden. Hallo! It's Racke and Crooke they're going for!"

"Makes a difference, doesn't it, Grundy?" smiled Cardew. "But on principle, you know—"

"D'Arcy minor!" thundered Grundy, in tones of command.

"Yes, corporal!" replied Wally, to the astonishment of all. He got off Racke as he spoke. "We've finished now. It's all serene."

Grundy glanced round him to note the impression made upon the rest by this sign of the authority he wielded as corporal in the Cadet Corps, but no one seemed to be particularly impressed. The general notion was that Wally talked with his tongue in his cheek, so to speak.

It might have been partly correct, but it was not wholly so. The Third Formers who were members of the Cadet Corps got along much better with Grundy than they had ever done before. Frank Levison had admitted to his major that they didn't want to change him for anyone—not even for Tom Merry.

"Stop it!" said Wally authoritatively.

The horde arose obediently, and Racke and Crooke were suffered to rise to their feet.

They looked very complete wrecks. Their faces were not much bruised, for, once they had been got down, there had been no punching of faces, the Third having their own ideas on the subject of what was in order in the way of punishment.

But if their faces had been black and blue, the streams of ink which ran down them would have disguised the fact; and their bodies were black and blue in places.

Except for Leggett and the faithful Willersby, every fag present had punched something, with the result that most of them had received punches from some of their comrades in the confusion. But that mattered little. Racke and Crooke had had all that they could well stand.

Crooke's jacket was ripped right up the back. Racke's smart waistcoat was in rags. The Third had certainly done their work thoroughly.

"Weally, Wally," said Arthur Augustus, surveying his minor with great severity through his monocle, "this is positively barbarous! I have no doubt whatever that Waake and Cwooko deserved punishment—"

"Well, then, what are you grumbling about, chump?" snapped Wally. "Haven't they had it? You've got no sense, Gus, that's what's the matter with you!"

"They'd got young Leggett on the table, and were laying into him with a ruler," explained Frank Levison. "They're bullying cads! I don't know whether we have gone a bit too far with them, but I know jolly well I'd do it again!"

"Serve you right, you rotters!" said Tom Merry, with a glance of contempt at the two black sheep. "Perhaps you'll leave the kids alone in future. Where is Leggett?"

"Royance took him away," said Manners. "The kid was in an awful state. He isn't very strong, I fancy, and he was jolly near fainting."

The Shell and Fourth fellows began to disperse. Wally led his band off in triumph. Racke and Crooke slunk off to bath-room or dormitory—no one knew which, and no one cared. But it was obvious that they would need both a change of clothes and a wash before dinner.

"That chap Royance is jolly soft-hearted," remarked Digby, as the Terrible Three turned one way and the chums of Study No. 6 the other. "If young Leggett had been his minor he couldn't have felt it more. He put his arm round the kid, and took him off to his own study."

Manners major swung round with a flush on his face.

"There's nothing soft about Royance!" he said, rather crossly. "But he's no end decent, and he can't stand seeing a kid bullied."

"Keep your wool on, old scout!" replied Dig good-temperedly. "When I say a chap's soft-hearted I don't mean that it's anything against him. Not sure that I don't like him better for it. I don't even mind if he's a bit soft-headed. See how I put up with Gustavus!"

"Oh, all right!" growled Manners. "Only I'm not going to have anyone say a word against Royance in my hearing, that's all."

"Bit of a difference there," remarked Blake, as the four passed on to their study.

"I rejoice to see it!" said Gussy. "Mannahs is a vewy good chap indeed, an' Royance is a topnotch fellow, an' it is quite the wight thing that they should be fwends."

"Who said it wasn't, ass?" returned Digby politely.

Ten minutes later there was a tap at the door of Study No. 9 on the Fourth passage.

"Come in!" sang out Clive.

Royance appeared, with two Third Formers—Leggett, the tears scarcely dry on his face, and Willersby.

"I've found out from these kids what those two cowardly hounds were taking it out of Leggett for," said the New Zealand junior, "and I think it will interest you fellows."

"Well, I fancy the Third did all the execution needed," drawled Cardew. "Matter of fact, we stood aside to let them. If there's anything more that needs doing, apply No. 10 in the next passage. Tom Merry is quite a champion of the oppressed. We have our virtues—Clive has most of 'em, and Levison the rest—but it's out of our line."

Royance smiled. "It isn't that," he said. "I think Racke and Crooke have had enough to be going on with. But there's something in this affair that concerns you, and you ought to hear it, I consider."

"Proceed, dear boy," replied Cardew blandly.

"No, I think you had better hear it from these two."

"Yo! tut-tut-tell them, Willy!" stammered Leggett.

"Yess, I think it would be for the best that Willy—what's his other name, by-the-by? Not that it matters in the very least—should narrate the narration," Cardew said.

"It was like this," began Willersby, in a high-pitched voice.

"Try it a few octaves lower," put in Cardew.

"Oh, leave the kid alone!" growled Levison.

"It was like this," began Willersby again. "We were sitting by the fire in our Form-room, you know. We were all alone—there wasn't anyone else there. We ain't in the Cadets; they wouldn't let us. And Leg was reading a bit out of 'Tom Merry's Weekly' about old Selby's red conk, and—"

"Eh?" ejaculated Clive.

"About old Selby's red conk: it is frightfully red, you know. He makes out it's indigestion. But Reggie Manners says he reckons it's booze. I don't know. And Racke and Crooke came in, and they tried to take the paper away from us, and Leg got shoved on to the fire. He wasn't burnt a fat lot—"

"My hair was sus-sus-singed," put in Leggett dolorously.

"Yes, that's right. His hair was singed; I smelled it. And it might have been a heap worse, of course. And the paper was burned right up. Then Wally and his lot came along, and wiped the floor with those two rotters. That's all, except that I reckon they've been laying for us ever since."

"A truly explicit and succinct narration, Willy," said Cardew approvingly.

"No, really, it's quite true—honest Injun! And my name's Willersby—Peter Richard Willersby. I wouldn't be called Willy if it was William—Willy's a jolly soft name, I think!"

"Where did you get that paper from?" asked Levison. "You just dry up, Cardew! If you don't see anything in this, I do, I can tell you!"

"Pup-pup-picked it up fuf-fuf-from the fuf-fuf-floor," replied Leggett with difficulty.

"Yes, that's right—just where Crooke and Racke had been sitting. They had classes with us that day, you know," added Willersby, who was by no means so nervous as his chum.

"See now?" said Levison to Cardew.

"Yaas, dear boy. I quite see. In fact, I saw all along."

"That's all," said Royance. "I thought it might be of some use to you, you know."

"You kids can cut," said Levison. "I say, though, don't you go, Royance!" Leggett and Willersby left. The New Zealand junior stayed.

CHAPTER 6.

A Plan of Operations.

"IT'S a distinct clue," said Clive. "An', what's more, it confirms what we imagined all along," said Cardew. "I'm grateful for the clue, but I'm still more grateful for being proved right—possibly because that's an uncommon luxury for me."

"You're jolly keen, Royance," remarked Levison, with a searching but quite friendly look at the new boy. "What made you think of letting us know about this?"

"Nothing but what I said—I thought it might be useful. You see, I'd only just come here when that trouble happened—when Merry was sent for from the Common-room, you know. And I was naturally interested. Smith and Contarini told me all about Cardew's special number of the 'Weekly,' and I've puzzled a good deal since over it—who got the thing done, and why, you know. It sounds rather like butting into what is no concern of mine, but I shouldn't have said anything about it but for the yarn these kids told me."

"Any deductions, my dear Sholmes?" drawled Cardew.

Royance flushed. "Perhaps I'm a bit of an ass to think I can see through it," he said. "But somehow, I've a notion that the fellows who had the paper that got burned were the fellows who got the other thing printed. They wanted to raise trouble; and they reckoned that when once it was raised the story of the special number Cardew had a hand in would come out, and that it wouldn't be any good his denying the new number—the one they got printed. It would never be traced home to them, they fancied."

"I should be the dog with the bad name—eh, what?" said Cardew.

"That's about it," replied Royance. "And I'm not at all sure they were wrong. It was a crafty dodge."

"There was trouble in it for Cardew, anyway," said Clive slowly. "I see that. What I don't see is what we're going to do to stop them. Yet it's certainly up to us to do something."

"Let 'em rip!" said Cardew coolly.

Royance stared at him. He had never seen the equal of Ralph Reckness Cardew for coolness.

"Rats!" snapped Levison. "We must be able to bring it home to them, however much trouble it costs us. It's the fag of it Cardew bars, Royance; he's a lazy, slacking chump! But I'm game to do anything. Will you help?"

"I shall be jolly glad to, if you think I should be of any use," Royance answered promptly. "It isn't because I've a grudge against Racke. I don't like the fellow. I never met anyone yet that I disliked so much. But I'm not laying to get even with him. I settled the score I had against him at the time."

"You can take my place, dear boy," said Cardew. "I'll stay at home an' read O. Henry, an' you three can go out an' play Herlock Sholmes. Clive can be Jotson; I don't fancy the dear Sidney is a whale at deductions; an' you two can share Herlock between you—see?"

"You'll come with us!" growled Ernest Levison. "You're as sharp as a razor when you choose to be!"

"But I don't choose to be, old top! I don't, really. You fellows can interfere with Kismet if you like, but, for my part, I'd just as soon sit down comfortably an' see how the dashed things turns out if it isn't interfered with."

"I'll see that you do your share," said Levison, with decision.

"What do you think is the best way to start, Royance?" asked Clive.

The South African junior had his share of brains; but they did not run particularly in this direction. It seemed that Roylance's, like Levison's, did.

"The important thing is to find out where the thing was printed," answered Roylance. "Tom Merry's certain Tiper had no hand in it, and he's the only printer at Rylcombe, I believe. Wayland seems the most likely place. It would help if we could get hold of a copy of the rag; but I suppose that's too much to hope for!"

"Not at all," said Cardew blandly. "Here's the rag, an' here's the other rag—my rag, y'know!"

Roylance had sat down at the table. He seized eagerly the two papers which Cardew threw across to him so carelessly, and examined them side by side with minute care.

"It was easy enough for Merry to twig," he said, looking up. "I can see at once that different founts of type were used. The fellow who did this probably didn't realise the necessity of making it an exact copy; and, anyway, he had to work with what he had. And the rotters who employed him very likely didn't know anything about such things at all."

"You seem to know quite a lot, dear boy," purred Cardew.

"Well, it would be queer if I didn't," answered Roylance. "My pater's proprietor and editor of our local paper at home!"

"What? Do you mean to tell me they have newspapers in New Zealand—real newspapers?" asked Cardew, with wide-open eyes.

"Oh, ring off! He's only rotting, Roylance," said Levison. "Go on!"

"And I've always been keen on such things. I've done a good deal of composing—"

"Didn't know you were musical," drawled Cardew.

"I should think you want the sack, you ass!" snapped Clive. "Here's Roylance willing to give you a helping hand, and you keep chipping in with your silly japes! You're worse than Lowther!"

"Oh, dear! Is it as bad as that?" groaned Cardew. "I'm finished, then. Go on, Roylance, old top! I had no intention of offence, really!"

"There wasn't any offence," Roylance said. "Only, if I were in your boots, I should take this affair a bit more seriously, I think. I've done quite a lot of type-setting, and a bit of reporting and leader-writing; my father gave me a chance at everything. Now you see!"

"I see!" replied Cardew. "Well, if you fellows want a hint, I should say start with old Curll!"

Levison and Clive looked at him with speechless indignation, and Roylance with uncomprehension in his face.

"You frabious fathead!" burst out Levison.

"Wait a moment!" Roylance said. "I really think Cardew's serious for once!"

"Dead serious, dear boy!" said Cardew. And he seemed to mean it.

"Who is Curll?" asked the New Zealand junior.

"Friend of mine—but rather more of Lowther's," replied Cardew. "Boozy old wreck—plays the piano at the cinema—used to be an actor—Irvine an' Garrick rolled into one, if you believe him—I don't—prefers refreshment liquid—knows every bar in Wayland—knows Racke an' Crooke, I fancy—knows all the Wayland black sheep, anyway."

"Just the man!" exclaimed Roylance.

Levison began to understand. But Clive still looked blank.

"I don't see—" he began.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 523.

"Your role, my dear Jotson, is to listen to the explanations at the end," struck in Cardew.

"We'll go over to Wayland this afternoon," Levison said. "Curll will talk to Cardew if he won't to the rest of us. But he's so fond of the sound of his own voice that he'd talk to anyone. Very likely he knows of some rotter in the printing line who might take on a job like this. No respectable firm would. Old Tiper shied a bit at Cardew's stuff; but we talked him round. He wouldn't have touched some of this with a pitchfork."

"Cardew's is pretty hot stuff. But some of the other number is sheer caddishness," remarked Roylance.

He evidently had the journalistic eye, which takes in at a glance the purport of a column, for already he had practically mastered the contents of both numbers.

"I don't mind ownin' that I'm glad there's a difference," said Cardew. "Will you come this afternoon, dear boy?"

"Me? Of course, I'll come!" Roylance said cordially. "Only too pleased!"

*Eat less
Bread*

CHAPTER 7. Another Clue.

THOUGH the sun shone brightly when the four ran out their bikes that afternoon, it was freezing hard; and Cardew complained of the cold.

"But I suppose I can't be left behind to keep warm," he said plaintively.

"You certainly aren't going to be!" snapped Levison.

"Ah, well! It will be warm enough when Selby an' the amiable Ratty return, anyway," said the dandy. "An' I hear Selby's expected to-morrow!"

Levison and Roylance rode on in advance. Cardew and Clive dropped far enough back to be out of earshot.

"Doesn't that chap really care what happens?" asked Roylance.

"I don't know—I'm not sure that he knows himself! But we care, anyway. Look here, Roylance, you mustn't get the impression that old Cardew's anything but a jolly good sort, for all his silly talk."

"I haven't," answered Roylance simply. "I like him. I never met one of his sort before; but I like him. Levison, we're on the track! I've found out something else since dinner!"

"Important?"

"I think so!"

"Oh, good!"

"It narrows the field. Makes it almost certain the printing was done at Wayland, you know. It might have been done anywhere; it would be easy enough to send the copy and a sample number of the 'Weekly' to some printer in London or some other big town. Safer, too. But they didn't do that."

"How do you know?"

"There was a yarn I'd heard about D'Arcy minor and some of his pals delivering those photo things Manners did of the tooth-powder picture. Manners told me a day or two ago. He said young D'Arcy got outside the window to deliver the last one, because Racke and Crooke had locked the door; and the Third Form crowd had undertaken to deliver them all. I remembered it, and I wondered whether there might be a clue in it. It's curious how the Third have got mixed up in this bizney all along."

"And there was?" put in Levison.

"Yes. It was a yarn minor who remembered. I fancy he's got about the best headpiece in the Third. Wally had told him; but they hadn't connected it with the trouble over the rag until they found that copy in Selby's desk. But when I got questioning them—only those two, and they promised to keep it dark; we don't want all the Third in it—your young brother remembered that Wally, when he was outside the window, had heard Racke say something to Crooke about a printer cad at Wayland."

"Young asses! They might have told me; I should have seen through it, anyway," said Levison, his brow darkening.

"But they hadn't the clue. I don't suppose they heard the proper story about Merry's interview with the masters. They only knew he'd been hauled up about something in the 'Weekly'—see?"

"That's about it, I fancy. Frankly generally tells me things—I don't mean that he sneaks. But he'd have told me that if he had seen anything in it."

"There wouldn't be a lot of printers in Wayland," said Roylance thoughtfully. "The local directory would give us a list. We'll try to get a copy of that before we see this Mr. Curll."

"Yes, and take it to the cinema with us," agreed Levison. "It will please old Curll if we turn up there; he will be certain we've come to hear his piano-playing. Not that he'd kick at helping, anyway; he thinks a heap of Cardew."

"Aho! there!"

It was Monty Lowther who shouted. The Terrible Three, also bound for Wayland, had caught up Cardew and Clive. Now Manners and Tom Merry rode on, and overhauled Roylance and Levison, while Lowther hung back with the other two.

"Cinema?" asked Manners.

"Yes," said Levison.

"Us, too. May as well all go together."

"We've something on besides," Levison confessed. "Of course, we shall be glad of your company. But—I say, Merry, Ratty and Selby will be back before long, and that row about the 'Weekly' will begin all over again. Have you made up your mind what you're going to do about it?"

"I don't see what I can do," answered Tom, his bright face clouding. "I don't know anything about the thing. I told the two old fossils that, and I can't do anything but stick to it."

"They won't be satisfied," said Levison.

"Of course they won't! But what can I do?"

"They'll go deeper into it, and then somehow or other Cardew will be dragged in. It means the sack for him—for me, too!"

"Cardew and you won't be dragged in through anything I shall tell them," replied Tom doggedly. "I shall stick to my guns! It's perfectly true that I've never seen that rag before; and I know jolly well Tiper hasn't. There are things in it which are like what Cardew wrote for his number. But they're not the same things, and I'm not going to

volunteer information to please those two old vinegar-casks, or to get myself out of a scrape that isn't my scrape until they can prove something against me—and they can't do that!"

He paused for breath.

"Have you thought what will happen if they've got on to the Cardew number, and put questions about it to you?" asked Levison keenly.

"I've thought. I sha'n't answer their questions. But how can they get on to it?"

Levison laughed mirthlessly.

"Do you suppose the rotters who got that thing printed haven't something more up their sleeves?" he said.

"But if they'd had a copy of the Cardew rag they wouldn't have been bothered to get anything fresh printed. They could have worked the game with that," Tom said shrewdly.

"Wait a moment, old chap!" said Manners. "Suppose they hadn't a copy and yet wanted to stir up a dust about it? What would serve their turn better than libelling Selby and Ratty in a new issue, and getting you hauled up? Then, it only needs a word to Ratty or Selby—an anonymous letter would do the trick—and you'd be asked no end of questions, and the thing would be bound to come out. You wouldn't lie about it; and if you went in for being dumb, the questions would be asked elsewhere. Old Tipper would be called on the carpet. Oh, they'd find out! Cutting your tongue out wouldn't save that."

"But they'd risk a good deal, for this new bizney would be inquired into as well," objected Tom. "I can't see chaps taking all that risk out of spite, myself."

"The risk would be very small," Roylance said quietly. "It would be taken for granted, I fancy, that Cardew was at the bottom of this affair as well. And it really would look like it, you know. I doubt whether they'd make any inquiries at all after they'd ferreted out the facts as to the Cardew issue."

"My hat! I believe you're right, and it makes things no end awkward all round," said Tom. "Have you fellows any scheme?"

"Yes," said Levison. "We're jolly certain that Racke and Crooke are the chaps who did this trick, and we're going to bring it home to them!"

"But will that stop them? They've done it now. If you give them away you're giving away Cardew and yourself, for they'll split, sure as eggs are eggs!"

"We've got to find some dodge to stop them splitting," Roylance said. "I think we can, once we have proofs of their guilt."

"You're in this, then?" said Manners. "Oh, rather!" replied Roylance, smiling. "I like this kind of thing. A mystery always appeals to me."

"The Fourth Form Detective Co., Limited!" said Tom. "Well, I wish you all the luck there is going! And, of course, if we can help, you may count on us all the way."

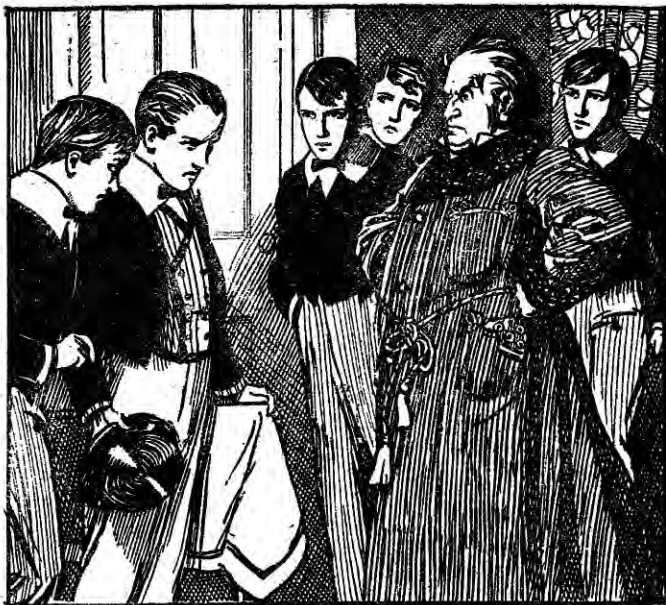
"Rather!" chimed in Manners. "I'm sure of that," said Roylance. He and Manners were the best of friends now. Perhaps the fact that both of them had cause to dislike Racke drew them more closely together now.

They were nearing Wayland by this time, and the other three drew up to them.

"Cardew says you're on the detective stunt, Levison," remarked Monty Lowther.

"Something like that," Levison replied.

"Oh, good! I feel lots of Herlock Sholmesy bubbling up in me, you know!"



Mr. Curll Speaks Out!
(See Chapter 9.)

CHAPTER 8.

Racke's Friend, the Printer.

BEFORE they went to the picture palace, Roylance slipped into a bookseller's, and came out with a local directory. He and Levison and Manners bent their heads over it together, while the other four talked.

Manners and Levison both knew the town pretty well, and neither could think of any of the four printers who appeared in the list as at all likely to have taken on such a job. The local paper people were out of the question. The others seemed scarcely more likely, from what was known of them.

"That's our dear old pal Curll, Roylance!" said Cardew, leaning across Tom Merry to draw the New Zealander's attention.

"The merchant with the fine crop of hair, you mean?"

"Rather gone to seed—yaas! What d'ye think of him?"

"Well, I really haven't much to judge on yet. But I've seen his sort at home, among the touring companies we get there."

"What? You don't mean to tell me you have theatres in New Guinea—real theatres?"

"I'm not telling you anything about what they have in New Guinea, for I don't know, never having been there. But we certainly have a theatre or two in New Zealand."

"I like that chap," Cardew confided to Clive. "He doesn't get on his ear when you jape him."

"I don't jape him," replied Clive, with a grin. "But he's certainly the right sort—jolly good-tempered, and jolly keen, too."

"Your friend Curll can play," remarked Roylance.

"Know anything about music, dear boy? I wasn't aware they had—"

"Tin-openers in Timbuctoo!" chipped in the New Zealand junior. "Well, I don't know, either. But I have seen a piano before to-day."

Mr. Curll had sighted them now, and he waved a podgy and none too clean hand towards them in the most affable manner. Mr. Curll had his points; and it would have been hard to find a better heart than his. But absolute cleanliness was as little in his line as perfect sobriety.

He was pleased to see them, that was plain. Whenever he got a chance through the raising of the lights he sent beaming smiles towards them; and towards the end of the performance an attendant brought Cardew a note, in which Mr. Curll said that though, through circumstances beyond his control, he could not offer them the hospitality of his chambers, as he would naturally have wished to do, he hoped that they would meet him after the show was over, for auld lang synce's sake.

It did not seem to them that auld lang synce had much to do with the case; but they were all quite willing to meet Mr. Curll, and some of them were quite eager.

When they went round to the door from which the old actor was wont to make his exit, however, he was not to be seen.

"Not out yet, I suppose?" said Tom Merry. "Well, we can wait a few minutes."

"Don't ask him to tea, Roylance," said Cardew. "It is regrettable, but nevertheless true, that Mr. Curll has a decided preference for the cup which, whether it cheers or not, doth certainly inebriate, though with less speed than before the war, I understand."

"The circumstances over which he has no control mean that he's in debt to his landlady again, though, not that he can't walk reasonably straight," said Lowther.

"Hallo, what's that?" cried Tom Merry.

Something was happening a little further down the side street, upon which the door they waited at opened. What it

was they could not see, for a waggon with a tilt blocked the view; but there was no doubt that there was a scuffle in progress. "You most atrocious and abominable young villain!"

Monty Lowther grinned as those words came to his ears.

"That's Curll, for a cert," he said. "He's really in a wax, but he can't help mousing his words and rolling his 'r's' as if he were on the stage."

"He's in trouble of some sort," said Tom Merry sharply. And he started at once to the aid of their queer friend.

The rest followed, over Cardew running.

As they came round the corner of the waggon, Tom and Levison, who were leading, caught sight of a fleeing figure which they recognised at once—the figure of Racke!

He was gone as soon as they saw him, disappearing into a narrow alley close by. The rest failed to get even a glimpse of him.

Mr. Curll sat on the cobbles; and, as the cobbles were both cold and dirty, it was easy to guess that he was not sitting upon them for pleasure. Moreover, there were signs of a struggle about him. His ancient greatcoat—which he would have called a surtout—had been slit right up the back. His battered, old silk hat lay some yards away, a little more battered than usual. The fact that he wore a dicky—and by no means a clean dicky, either—was rendered patent to all beholders, for the article mentioned had been dragged out of his waistcoat in the scuffle.

"You abominable and unprincipled young ruffian!" said Mr. Curll, very clearly and with great feeling. He seemed to be quite unaware that his words could not reach the ears for which they were intended.

"Which of us is that?" asked Monty Lowther, grinning, while Tom Merry and Levison helped the poor old chap to his feet.

"Ha! He has gone! He has fled! He has eluded my vengeance!" mouthed the old actor. He meant every word of it; but the language he spoke was the language of the stage. By dint of habit he had lost all command over plain English.

He really did not look much as though his vengeance were a thing to be dreaded. Roylance thought him a good deal more of a wreck than he had appeared inside the picture hall. But perhaps that was due to the treatment he had undergone since coming out.

"My dear young friends!" he said, almost weeping. "It cuts me to the heart to greet you thus. Time was when the name of Horatio Curll filled theatres to overflowing—when gilded carriages waited for him at stage doors—when the beauty of London and the provinces hung upon every word he breathed—"

"It really is pretty strong when our dear old pal has the oof to satisfy his cravin'," murmured Cardew to Roylance. "Still, that's a lot to have hangin' upon it!"

"Poor old chap!" said Roylance compassionately.

He may have thought Cardew rather hard. He did not know what the open-handed Fourth Former had done to make Mr. Curll's life easier. No one did know it all—not even Levison and Clive, though they might think they did.

"Time was—"

"It still is, you know, Mr. Curll—lots of it!" said Lowther cheerily. "Ask the late Prime Minister! And I suppose other people can wait and see if he can."

"Who knocked you down?" asked Tom Merry, coming back from a hurried

visit of inspection to the alley down which Racke had scuttled.

The cad of the Shell had disappeared. To chase him now would be futile. But Racke would keep.

"Let that pass!" said Mr. Curll majestically. "For St. James' I have the most profound and abiding respect. The friends who cherish that wreck of humanity called Horatio Curll, from that illustrious seminary, are dear indeed to his bosom. If perchance there lurk among them one unworthy to be their associate—one whose diabolical character is all too plainly graven in every line of his low and villainous countenance—if, I say, such an one—"

"Then it was Racke?" said Tom.

"I congratulate you, dear boy!" remarked Cardew. "I was just recognising the description myself."

"It wasn't the description," answered Tom. "It was the rotter."

"Oh, I fear I cannot congratulate you upon that. I see him far, far oftener than I should if it were left to my choice."

But the others had no patience with Cardew's chaff just then.

"Dry up!" growled Clive. "The old fellow don't want your silly jaw!"

But what was it for, Mr. Curll?" asked Manners.

"I am shaken—badly shaken," moaned Racke's victim. "I am hurt alike in body, mind, and spirit. I have had preferred against me a vile charge—a charge of eavesdropping, my young friends! Horatio Curll a sneaking spy! Perish the thought!"

He drew his torn overcoat around him with the majesty of Caesar folding himself in his toga, and passed a hand over his eyes.

"Racke's up to something. I guessed that from the moment I saw him," said Levison. "Something besides assailing Mr. Curll, I mean. That was why he was afraid of being spied upon."

"Tell us all about it," said Monty Lowther.

"Let us away from here. Let us repair to my chambers—nay, I did forget, to—sooth! Thither I dare not go; the base harriidan who owns them— But I will not inflict my troubles upon you. There are other places—places of public resort. We will repair thither; we will drink of the fragrant herb of China or of the berry of Mocha, well crushed and duly distilled, and, though it be at the charges of some among you, yet I know well that you will not deem Horatio Curll a niggard—that you will comprehend with the quick sympathy of budding manhood that the old man has not lost his hospitable instincts, but merely lacks the wherewithal."

"Does he always talk like that?" asked Roylance of Cardew.

But Cardew was no longer at his elbow. He had drawn nearer to Mr. Curll, and had thrust his arm through that of the old actor.

"Come along, Mr. Curll!" he said gaily. "Let us lead the way."

All but Roylance could guess what that meant. Even Roylance may have guessed, for he knew that Cardew had money to burn. It was possible that, after all, they might see the interior of Mr. Curll's chambers. After Cardew had talked with Mr. Curll, that gentleman would be able to face his landlady.

It was even so. Things must have got into a pretty desperate state, for Mr. Curll asked them to wait outside "for one, brief, fleeting moment," while he interviewed the "harriidan." But he came back with a beaming smile. The harpy had been appeased; and if there was a Treasury note or two the less in the pocket-book of Ralph Reckness Cardew—well, it mattered little. He would not miss them.

"The fonsle of the house will presently bring forth something in the nature of light refreshment," said Mr. Curll, taking off the torn overcoat and replacing it by a flowered dressing-gown. "I regret that it would be the merest empty politeness to ask you all to take chairs. Seven of you, I see, and the chairs are but three in number, while one of them cannot be guaranteed to carry weight. Ha! A new friend, I perceive! Present me, an' it please you."

Roylance was duly introduced. While this ceremony was being performed Levison stole to the door. He had heard a footstep he knew outside.

His face was full of eagerness as he drew Clive on one side, and whispered: "Racke's here! I've just seen him go upstairs with a suspicious-looking merchant!"

"Oh!" said Clive. He did not quite know what to make of it. "Did he see you?"

"No; I took care of that. My hat! I'll bet there's something in this!"

The landlady, doing her best to appear agreeable, brought in a tray at this moment.

When she had gone Levison said: "Does anyone lodge on the floor above you, Mr. Curll?"

"It is an instance of the curious coincidences that pursue us all through life that you should put that query, my young friend, for I was at that moment thinking of the—I will not call him fellow-lodger—so to call him would imply a community between us which is false in spirit, if according to fact—I would rather say the unmitigated ruffian, Sholey! I was thinking of him and of one known to you whom I care not to name. Together they struck me down, assailing in cowardly fashion a man old enough to be their—er—uncle, shall we say?"

Only Clive and Levison had the clue to that. The rest stared at one another, and wondered what on earth Mr. Curll could be talking about. It was Racke who had knocked him down; but what had Racke to do with the man on the top floor?

For a brief space I regarded the ruffian Sholey as a friend," went on Mr. Curll. "We visited together the licensed establishments of this town. Together we looked upon the wine when it was red. I will not conceal from you, my young friends, that wine, which the wise man called a mocker, is a weakness of mine. It may mock, but it comforts. Strong drink may be raging—the same wise man said so—but when oblivion is the best boon the earth hath to bestow—but let me be brief! On one occasion, when I had become overcome by liquor taken upon—not to put too fine a point upon it—an empty stomach—I crave your licence for the outspoken term—this ruffian Sholey, this vile printer man—"

"Printer!" cried Levison, almost breathlessly.

CHAPTER 9.

Caught Red-handed!

YES, Sholey is a printer—a jobbing printer. It is not a mere mechanic trade; it hath some tincture of the gentler arts. But yet a mere printer is no fit companion for one who in his day was held the peer of Irving, of Garrick, and of Keen. I condescended. Sholey betrayed. Basely he betrayed! With other fellows of the low sort he so dealt with me as to make me a laughing-stock to the populace of Wayland. Gentlemen, this ruffian, Sholey, and his vile crew put upon my head a flower-pot. Gentlemen, they turned my trousers up to my knees; they pulled my shirt outside my—er

nether garments; and they left me thus in the High Street! I weep with shame as I recall it."

He was very near, indeed, to weeping outright; the tears stood in his bleared, tired old eyes. And, seeing that, not one of them felt inclined to laugh—not even that humorist, Monty Lowther.

"It was a rotten shame!" said Lowther, with real indignation. And so they all felt.

For all his weakness and his vanity, he was a kindly old soul; with no harm in him, no one's enemy but his own.

"Gentlemen, you have hearts! The policeman who accosted me had a heart. I honour that policeman! He set straight my disordered attire; he brought me home like a friend; he preferred no charge against me. But Sholey—the villain Sholey—the man I thought a friend—some day I may have vengeance upon that vile miscreant! Let him not plead for mercy when that day arrives!"

They were listening to him; but the thoughts of most of them wandered away.

By sheer luck they had chanced upon something more than a clue—something that converted their suspicions into absolute certainty! Proof might be difficult; but none of them doubted that the printer of the bogus issue of the "Weekly" was under the same roof that covered them. And Racke was with him!

Levison and Clive knew that; and in a moment the others were made aware of it.

It was a time for action, not for words. But no one quite knew what would be the best thing to do. And Mr. Curll was rather in the way. He knew nothing about the case; and it would have taken a long time to explain it to him.

Tom Merry looked out of the window. "Crooke's kicking his heels on the other side of the street," he said.

Mr. Curll began to pour out the tea. No one really minded about having tea; but it would have hurt the old fellow's feelings had they refused. What they wanted was to get at Racke. But it was not easy to see how that could be done.

"What was he after with the printer chap?" asked Manners. "He seems to have accused Curll of listening. Well, then, there must have been something to listen to—something Racke didn't want heard."

Manners, Levison, Tom Merry, and Cardew had drawn together near the window, out of earshot of the occupant of the "chambers."

"Blackmail!" said Levison.

The word was like a lightning flash of revelation to the other three. Of course! Sholey had found that "Young Moneybags" was wealthy, and he meant to screw all possible out of him by threats of exposure.

Racke had come over to Wayland to meet him, no doubt called by some urgent summons. They had begun to talk in the side street, where Mr. Curll had come upon them; they had assaulted him; and then, thinking that it was safer to adjourn to Sholey's lodgings, had come on there. If the thought that Mr. Curll might desire to entertain his young friends had occurred to Racke, it might have been countered by Sholey's belief that he dared not bring them to his diggings.

"My hat! If we could only catch them at it!" said Tom.

"Oh, no need to trouble about that!" said Cardew coolly. "But I think it would be quite in order to make a surprise attack upon Sholey's quarters, an' seize them both."

"With a notion that we might capture

incriminating evidence?" said Manners doubtfully.

"Not at all, dear boy! More as a measure of discipline, y'know. They have assaulted our dear old pal Curll; we owe it to him to put them through it."

"Rather thick, going for a man in his own digs," said Tom. But he spoke as if he were fast conquering any dislike he felt to so drastic a measure.

"Yaas, if you call Sholey a man. I don't! An' if he's tryin' on the black-mailin' game he can't stir against us. We'd be evidence on Racke's behalf if he did."

"You really think it can be done?" asked Manners.

"Anythin' can be done, dear boy, if you make up your mind to it—anythin' in the wide, wide world!" replied Cardew cheerily. "I'm on, for one."

"Me, too," said Levison. "Shuah! There's Crooke going up!"

Crooke had rather a heavy footstep. They heard it pass the door of the room they were in, and go on upstairs.

"No time to cut to waste," said Levison. "Crooke spotted us at the window, I guess, and has gone up to warn his dear pal."

"Well, count me in," said Manners. "What do you say, Tommy?"

"Yes, I'll come," answered Tom. He did not quite like it. But he felt that he could not hang back.

Cardew turned to the group around the tea-tray.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid the tea may get cold," he said. "You don't mind if

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we go up an' have a little chat with Racke an' the excellent Sholey, do you, Mr. Curll?"

"My dear young sir, I should strongly counsel—"

"No time for that now. You can tell us afterwards," said Cardew. "You fellows comin'?"

They came, every one. They followed their leader; and for the nonce that leader was not Tom Merry, but Ralph Reckness Cardew, that queer mixture of slackness and recklessness!

As they reached the landing above they saw a door just closing, and caught a glimpse of what they recognised as the tail of Crooke's check-patterned overcoat.

Cardew dashed forward, and flung himself against the door. He was just in time. Another second, and it would have been locked. That might not have kept them out, in the long run. But the prompt action of Cardew saved quite a lot of trouble.

They poured into the room after him. Crooke stood like one dumfounded.

A short, cunning-faced man, who had his back to the fire, roared out in wrath: "What do you want here, confound you? This is my private room!"

But Racke darted forward, and tried to snatch up something which lay upon the table.

A pair of strong arms gripped him. Roylance had twiggled. The short man and Cardew made an almost simultaneous grab at the thing Racke had tried to secure.

Cardew won by an inch, and snatched from the table a copy of the bogus issue.

"Let me go, hang you!" yelled Racke, struggling fiercely.

"Put that down, you young hound!" shouted Mr. Sholey.

Tom Merry and Levison and Clive were between him and Cardew, all grimly ready. Manners and Lowther swung round. If Racke escaped from the grizzly hug of Roylance, he would find those two barring his way.

But it did not look at all likely that Racke would escape. He was like a child in the grasp of the muscular Colonial.

"Quite interestin'!" said Cardew blandly. "I've been on the look-out for a copy of this thing! Racke, dear boy, I'm sadly afraid you've committed the appallin' indiscretion of allowin' yourself to be blackmailed! Never do that, my son—resist the devil, an' he will see from you! The apparent personal reference, Mr. Sholey, is, I assure you, a pure accident. Yet there seems some fitness in it—eh, what?"

Mr. Sholey was a coward—that was plain. At Cardew's words he winced, and changed colour. He fell back a step or two, his mouth opening as if to speak. But no words came from him.

Perhaps he saw from the first that his game was up. He knew that Racke dreaded his schoolfellows finding out his crime as greatly as he dreaded the discovery of it by the masters. The discovery spoiled Mr. Sholey's little scheme. "You're caught red-handed, Racke!" said Tom Merry sharply. "Now, what are we going to do about it, you fellows?"

"I've nothin' at all to do with that affair!" said Crooke suddenly. "I'm dashed well goin'!"

"I think not, Crooke!" said Monty Lowther. And Crooke found Manners and Lowther between him and the door. He did not tackle them.

"Sholey must be put through it," said Cardew thoughtfully. "Sholey was actin' part in the assault upon our dear old pal Curll. For that we will administer to him condign punishment. As for the blackmailin' himsey, I think we may assume that it is now all up the spout. We will protect the innocent Racke against the fell designs of Sholey, and leave the rest to Sholey's conscience—if any!"

"You dare to touch me!" said the printer, with a weak attempt at bluster.

"Oh, we dare!" replied Levison, advancing upon him.

"There's a nice-lookin' came in the corner," said Cardew. "It was not intended for disciplinary purposes, but 'twill serve, methinks!"

Levison collared the walking-stick indicated, and swished it in the air.

"It gives quite nicely," he said, with satisfaction. "I think we can manage with this!"

"Come along!" said Tom Merry sharply.

"You dare! The law—"

"When the law an' blackmailers meet, it isn't at all nice for the blackmailer, my Sholey-bird!" said Cardew.

"I won't give way to you—Yaroooh! Leave go, you young ruffians! I tell you I won't—"

But Tom Merry and Clive caught Mr. Sholey by the shoulders, and twisted him over upon a couch, and Levison laid into him with right good will. He writhed and roared and threatened; but he was put through it with great thoroughness. It was not until the cane split that Levison ceased.

Racke sniggered. It was evident that he had no sympathy with Sholey.

"Your punishment will keen, Racke!" said Tom Merry sternly. "And yours too, Crooke! But before Racke goes out

of this place he's going to apologise to Mr. Curll—that's flat!"

"I'll see you all hanged first—an' that boozy old tenth-rate barnstormer as well!" snarled Racke.

"I demand your names!" raged Sholey, dancing up and down like a cat on hot bricks, with one hand to the rear portion of his attire. It was probably years since Mr. Sholey had smarted as he was smarting then.

"You fellows don't mind?" asked Cardew, sitting down at the table and tearing a leaf from his elegant pocket-book.

Nobody minded. All felt pretty sure that Mr. Sholey's threats were mere "sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Cardew wrote down the seven names in his clearest hand, his own first on the list. Not one of the seven, Mr. Sholey noted, looked in the least perturbed.

"My dear young friends! Really, my dear young friends, what are these sounds which disturb the serenity of the atmosphere?" inquired the agitated voice of Mr. Curll from below.

"Only a cur-dog howlin'," replied Cardew, lifting his voice. As he spoke he handed the leaf bearing the list of names to Mr. Sholey. His cheek was invitingly close, and Mr. Sholey's hand tingled to smack it. But Mr. Sholey's heart failed him.

"March!" said Tom Merry to Racke and Crooke.

Crooke marched in such a hurry that only an agile move by Manners and Clive prevented his escaping. But they colared him, and held him back.

"I'm not goin'!" snarled Racke. "Remember, you haven't exactly got the whip-hand of me! You may think you can prove something against me to Ratty an' Selby; but if you try it on Cardew goes under with me!"

"We'll see about that," retorted Levison.

"Such ingratitude is shockin'—positively shockin'!" said Cardew, shaking his head gravely. "We come to his rescue against the wicked black-mailer—"

"Not so much of that!" snapped Mr. Sholey. His courage was rising now that they were on their way down.

Cardew turned, and kissed his hand.

"Good-bye, Bluebell!" he said. "Send the bill for the Malacca to me!"

Racke continued to protest against any notion of apologising to Mr. Curll. The names he applied to that veteran of the art of Thespis were not pretty.

But he had to apologise in the long run. They would take no denial. Crooke urged it upon him, having a great wish to get the matter settled up and done with. Crooke appeared to have more liberal notions as to its settlement than the seven entertained.

Mr. Curll talked to the impenitent and sulky Racke with a manner something between that of a stage father and an inspired prophet. His concluding words, in which he foretold a last exit from this mortal scene by the way of the gallows for the cad of the Shell, were highly applauded by Cardew, and did not go unappreciated by any who heard, save Racke himself.

"If there's anythin' more to be said, I suppose we can say it at St. Jim's!" snarled Racke, when Mr. Curll had finished. "I'm not dashed well going to have my private affairs jawed over before this old—"

"Gentleman, shall we say?" Cardew chipped in, with a steely gleam in his eyes. "No, I don't think Mr. Curll takes any interest in such low subjects as black-mail, Racke! I think they may go—ch, Merry!"

And Mr. Horatio Curll never did know the full story of that afternoon—or of what led up to it and what followed it. But he had at least the satisfaction of knowing that one of his enemies had been humbled and made to smart, and that another had something more coming to him, as Levison remarked.

And doubtless it was a very real satisfaction to Mr. Curll.

CHAPTER 10.

A Plan Made in Haste.

THEY allowed Racke and Crooke to return alone. The seven had no taste for their company. But, of course, there was more to be said and done to that sweet pair.

And time pressed. Time pressed even more than they were aware.

"You're quite a giddy detective, Roylance, dear boy," said Cardew enthusiastically, as they pedalled back through the frosty air and the gathering dusk. "Quite a Sherlock Holmes, by gad! Every blessed deduction workin' out like an arithmetical problem when a chap has a giddy crib to the book!"

"I don't see that I've done much," replied Roylance modestly.

"Kerr couldn't have done better; and Kerr is a tip-top hand at anything in this line," said Clive.

"But it was all luck—amazing luck!" the New Zealand junior protested. "We walked right slap on to things."

"It it hadn't been for you we shouldn't have been there to walk slap on to them," Levison told him. "You saw through it farther than any of us, knowing less about it to start with; and I reckon most of the credit's yours."

"Altogether the Fourth-Form detectives have done well, and Kerr must look to his laurels. And so say all of us!" said Monty Lowther.

"Matter of that, Kerr's Fourth Form, too. You Shellfish can't hold a candle to us!" Clive reminded him.

"Have we not Grundy?" retorted Lowther.

But the Terrible Three were in full agreement that their companions had done well, even if Fate had played into their hands, and they rode home in the most friendly of comradeship. Manners and Roylance dropped a little behind the rest, and talked together. There was no doubt about those two being really good friends now.

"News!" shouted Jack Blake, as they rode up to the gates.

"Anything good?" asked Tom.

"Rotten bad, I should say! Ratty's back!"

The cheerfulness of the seven was badly dashed by that intelligence. They had hoped for at least a day or two in which to concert a plan of operations before the sour-tempered master of the New House came back.

"An' he's in a tewrible tempah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "He's drowped on Figgy & Co. already, an' is wagin' around like a lion seekin' whom he may devour!"

"Well, he can't quite eat me," answered Tom Merry, with rather a vry smile; "and I don't suppose he'll go into that affair again till Selby's here."

"Selby's coming to-morrow," said Digby. "I've just heard."

"My hat! We've run it jolly close!" muttered Levison.

"And it isn't a case of out of the wood yet," Clive said; "in fact, we're not really much forwarder."

"I think on the whole we had better postpone our little talk with Racke until we have held counsel together, an' made up our minds what we're goin' to do," said Cardew.

Jack Blake looked at him curiously.

"You chaps have found out something important, I know," he said.

"We've found out a good deal," said Tom. He saw that only the four from No. 6, who were all to be trusted even as themselves, were there, and he added:

"Through Roylance here it's been proved that Racke had that rotten thing printed."

"Good for you, Roylance!" cried Blake warmly.

"I always said that Woylance was a fellow of tact an' judgment," said Arthur Augustus. "But I am sorry that you left me out of it, dear boys. I might—"

"Hurrah!" shouted Digby.

"That puts it all straight, doesn't it?" asked Herries.

"Not by long odds!" replied Levison.

And when Herries came to think of it he saw that it did not. Racke, bowled out, would in turn bowl out Cardew, unless something was done to stop him; and, with the inquiry resumed, what could be done? The two masters concerned would never rest till they got to the bottom of the mystery.

A pow-wow took place in Study No. 10 on the Shell passage. The four from Study No. 6 assisted at it, and Talbot was also called in.

For some time there was no sign that wisdom was likely to be the outcome of the multitude of counsellors.

Most of them talked without saying anything—anything that mattered, that is. The subject was discussed in all its bearings, but the finding of a way out—the most important thing of all—still remained to be done.

While Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Monty Lowther were holding forth at great length, but to little purpose, while Blake and Tom Merry and Digby and Herries and Clive chipped in at frequent intervals, while Talbot and Manners and Roylance were, for the most part, silent and thoughtful, Cardew and Levison, who had gradually dropped out of the clamour of tongues, put their heads together in a corner.

Levison listened, while Cardew spoke earnestly and at some length.

"It's a jolly wild scheme!" he said when he had heard to the finish. "But there's a decent chance of success in it at least, and it's up to us, Cardew. We're deepest in the soup, but if the whole bizney comes out we shall drag in others, too, more or less, and it riles me to think of Tom Merry being dragged in. He doesn't deserve it, anyway."

"An' he's been so dashed decent about it," Cardew replied. "We couldn't have grumbled if he had slanged us up hill an' down dale. Has he? Not a bit of it! Merry's a great man, old top!"

"There's no better anywhere," agreed Levison. "I didn't always think so, but I know now. Are you going to tell them?"

"I'd rather not. But it will have to be done. If we do no more than say that we have a plan anything may happen. D'Arcy may get buttin' in an' upsettin' us completely with his dashed tact an' judgment. Besides, they'll have it whether we agree to tell them or not, or there will be a giddy row!"

"Shurrup, all you parrots!" said Levison abruptly. "Cardew's thought out a scheme!"

The "parrots" could not be induced to shut up all at once, but in a few minutes Cardew got a chance to expound his plan.

Faces grew rather long as the rest listened. Tom Merry expressed his opinion that it was riskier than letting the thing go on.

"No dashed fear!" said Cardew. "Even if we fail we may not be caught, an' we shall have the consolation of doin'."

our best, anyway. If we succeed—well, I suppose it's generally admitted that our dear an' venerable friends, Ratty an' Selby, can't do much in the complete absence of evidence."

"There's a good deal in that," said Blake.

"Everythin' in it, dear boy! Well, I hold two of the three copies of Racke's rag known to be in existence, an' the dear Ratty presumably has the other."

"You hold two?" asked Tom.
 "Yaas. One I took from Selby's desk. The other I grabbed from Mr. Sholey's table. If Racke had one—I don't think he had—you bet it will have been burned by this time. If Sholey has one—But it's no odds if Sholey has a dozen. Very likely he has, but he daren't use them. The one thing needed is to bag Ratty's copy. Can you give me any idea where he put it, Merry?"

"I should think it would be in the drawer of his table," replied Tom.
 "That's where he took the other from."

"But who's going to get them?" asked Lowther.

"Levison an' I, an' one more chap," replied Cardew.

"I'll go with you if you'll have me," said Talbot, before anyone else could speak. "Perhaps I could be useful."

"But you're really not in this at all, y'know, Talbot," said Cardew, blinking with surprise. "I'd thought of askin' Figgins and Kerr to arrange for our entry. I know what you mean. You could work it all serene, but—Oh, dash it all, we can't drag you in!"

"I've taken bigger risks in worse causes," replied Talbot, "and why shouldn't I go as well as anyone else?"

"It wasn't anyone else here that I meant to take," Cardew said.

Everyone stared at him, even Levison. Levison had been wondering whether Clive would go. Clive funk'd nothing, but he drew the line at some things. Tom Merry would not refuse, Levison thought, but he ought not to be asked. The others seemed to him outside the question.

"Not anyone here?" said Blake, in wonderment. "But who, then?"

"Racke!" answered Cardew blandly.

"Wacke? Oh, weally, Cardew, you must be quite potty!"

"Racke won't go," said Diggy.

"I think he will. I'm pretty sure he will," Cardew said. "The dear Aubrey is in this trouble right up to his neck, an' by this time he realises the fact. He will shiver, he will use naughty language, he will funk, but he will go."

"Well, if you can work it," said Tom doubtfully. "Racke has done lots of dirty things, but none dirtier than this, and I don't see that there's anything unfair in forcing him to share your risk. I am willing to go if I'm wanted, but not in Racke's place."

"Cardew and I must go," said Levison very decidedly. "It's up to us. We were to blame, to start with. I think Racke may be forced into it, though I don't yearn for his company. Not sure that it's fair to ask Figgins and Kerr to lend a hand, even in a small way, though I know they'd do it like a shot. But it don't seem any more fair to drag old Talbot in, and if the New House chaps aren't asked to prepare a way in for us we shall want Talbot."

"Count me in," said Talbot quietly. "I don't want to brag—it isn't the sort of thing a fellow brags about—but I really think you will have a better chance of putting it through successfully if I make one; and the thing will look more real if it's done from outside, too."

They knew Talbot was right. With the "Toff" of the days that were dead accompanying them, getting into the New House would be quite easy.

CHAPTER 11.

Boldness Pays!

"I'M not comin'," snarled Racke, as Cardew shook him by the shoulder.

Levison and Talbot also stood by the bed of the cad of the Shell.

When the two Fourth-Formers had come along they had found Talbot ready dressed, and the Terrible Three all awake. But Racke and Crooke were both asleep, or pretended to be.

As a matter of fact, it was pretence in both cases. Crooke, greatly relieved to know that his help was not required, hugged himself in his bed, but did not let on that he was awake lest the adventurers might change their minds and take him.

Cardew had talked to both Racke and Crooke, Levison and Tom Merry went with him; but Cardew did the talking. And the careless, slack dandy of the Fourth showed that evening a side of his nature that was new to Tom Merry.

Tom had known that there was a force in Cardew. He had not known before how clearly the whimsical japper could think, and with what relentless cogency he could marshal his arguments.

Racke had giped at the idea of taking any such risk at the outset; but within ten minutes Cardew had demonstrated to him that he must take the risk or prepare for the sack.

"I hold all the trumps in the game between you an' me, Racke," Cardew had said. "There's another game on, an' at present Ratty holds the ace of trumps in that. Unless we can get it away from him, you go under, for we can prove that you had that dashed rag printed, and we're goin' to prove it! Come with us to-night, or sit down an' wait for the sack! You may take it from me that I sha'n't spare you!"

And Racke had recognised the logic of the argument. Racke was no fool. He had agreed to go, and his protest now was only a feeble kick.

"Out with you!" said Cardew.

And, sulkily, with a murderous scowl on his face, Racke tumbled out of bed and began to dress.

Talbot and Levison looked very serious, though not more serious than the Terrible Three. But Cardew was smiling now.

"Look here, I'd better come!" said Tom Merry, at the last moment. "I can't stick letting you fellows go without me."

"We'd all better go!" Manners added.

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Lowther.

"Too many, dear boys!" said Cardew, shaking his head. "Royvance an' Clive had to be sat upon to keep them from buttin' in; an' Blake an' D'Arcy an' Harries an' Digby were all more than willin'." I dare say, if you woke up Crooke, he'd refuse to let his pal Aubrey run into danger without him!

"Oh, would he?" snarled Racke. "If you think that you're a bigger fool than I take you for, Cardew!"

"But this is merely a little burghin' biznez, not a raid into hostile territory," went on Cardew. "An' an Army corps would be one or two too many. Ready, Racke? It's quite a good omen for our success to see you lookin' so bright an' cheery!"

Anything less bright and cheery than Racke's appearance it would have been difficult to imagine. His face wore a most repulsive scowl.

But, with all his faults, Racke was not an utter coward. They had no fear that he would give them away by funk. He could be frightened by the threat of expulsion; but he could hardly let them down in the desperate effort to avert it.

From the box-room window they gained the quad by way of the leads, and

in the dark and cold they stole across the quad to the New House.

Not a light showed in the School House. Midnight had chimed before they started. And not a light showed in the New House, either.

They put on now black crepe half-masks, which went far to make their faces unrecognisable. All wore common, cheap caps; and in their overcoats—carefully selected from among the property of the dozen or so who had knowledge of the plot as being inconspicuous in style—they might have been taken at a glance for men of short stature.

Now came Talbot's task. For this none of the others would have been of much use. But Reginald Talbot had not forgotten the things he had learned in his days as "The Toff." He smiled now as he thought how that distinctly unusual kind of knowledge—for a schoolboy—could be used to help Cardew and Levison, for both of whom he had a strong regard, and, most of all, Tom Merry, for whom he cared more, perhaps, than for anyone else living.

What he did none of them could see. But the result of it was that a French window was open for them to walk through, and within thirty seconds they were in Mr. Ratcliff's study.

"Do you care to wait outside an' keep 'cave,' Racke?" whispered Cardew.

Racke nodded, and stole out. An electric-torch served them for light.

"Drawer's locked!" said Levison.

"Let me get at it!" replied Talbot.

He knelt in front of the table. With the point of a knife, with a twisted wire, and finally with a strong but thin pair of pliers borrowed from Clive's tool-chest, he worked. He seemed not to hurry in the least. To Cardew and Levison, watching, it appeared almost as though he was merely tickling the lock.

But their faith in Talbot was great, and they waited without a word of impatience, without a sign of nerves. It was well that Racke was on the other side of the door; his nerves would not have borne that strain so well.

"Done it!" breathed Talbot as the lock clicked.

He pulled open the drawer.

The critical moment had come. Was their risk to be all in vain?

The contents of the drawer were in confusion. Levison's hands shook a little as he turned them over, seeking the thing they wanted. Even Talbot felt the strain. But there was no sign that Cardew felt it in the least.

"Don't grab any of Ratty's love-letters!" he said coolly.

There were grins on the faces of both Talbot and Levison. Cardew himself was smiling.

Then, without the slightest sound to give warning, Mr. Ratcliff popped in his head.

In his list-slippers—which were his favourite wear, because they enabled him to steal upon the boys of his own House unperceived—he had passed Racke in the darkness of the passage, giving no chance for Racke to warn the rest. And now, if he had but kept his head, he would have caught them red-handed.

Cardew's fingers were clutching the thing they had come for when a gasp of alarm made all three turn their heads. Next moment Mr. Ratcliff fled down the passage, yelling at the top of his voice for help.

"Quick! This way!" breathed Levison.

It was not towards the window he led them. It was to a dormitory.

"Where's Racke?" hissed Talbot.

Racke was nowhere to be seen. He

had bolted alone. To wait for him was useless.

They were all three hidden under beds in the Fourth dormitory before the yells of Mr. Ratcliff woke Piggins and the rest. "Help! Burglars! Assassins! The place is being pillaged!" roared Ratty.

Figgy sat up and rubbed his eyes. Kerr woke, and tumbled out without rubbing his eyes. Kerr had a knack of waking up straight away.

Redfern woke, and Owen and Lawrence. Koumi Rao woke, and Clarke and Pratt. Digges awoke, and Robinson minor and Chowle. But Fatty Wynn calmly turned over in his sleep.

Someone caught Kerr by the leg. He did not cry out; Kerr was not easily frightened, and he was very wide and resourceful.

He stooped. Someone had switched on a light. Kerr saw the face of Ernest Levison.

"I knew this was your bed!" whispered Levison. "We're the burglars! Keep Ratty hunting a bit, and we'll go when the fuss is over."

"Right-ho!" whispered Kerr. "Who are the others?"

"Talbot and Cardew," answered Levison. "And Racke's scuttled off somewhere. Hope they won't find him. Tell you about it afterwards."

"I'll pass the word to Figgy and Reddy," said Kerr. "Best thing you can all do is to lie low. I think. They won't look for the burglars in here."

And now the New House was all astir. Montoith and Webb and Gray came from their studies, and the few Fifth-Formers from their dormitory, and the Shell and Fourth, with hurriedly-donned garments, swarmed out into the passages.

The open window was found. The open drawer in Mr. Ratcliff's table offered further proof that there really had been burglars.

But they had gone. Not a sign of them, save the drawer and the window, was to be seen. Mr. Ratcliff, keeping the big fellows all around him, searched everywhere; but there seemed no possible doubt that the rascals had got clear away.

"Three desperate, burly ruffians, armed to the teeth!" Mr. Ratcliff said, his teeth chattering. "It had been but one man I might—nay, I should—have tackled him! But three! I could but fly. As I shouted for help I dreaded each moment to get a revolver-bullet in my defenceless back!"

Figgy and Kerr, and two or three

more, might grin covertly; but the rest all believed in the existence of the burglars, even if they thought Ratty anything but a hero for his behaviour.

For fully half an hour the search continued. Racke, crouching in a small coal-cupboard, was in a terror of fear lest they should come upon him. But the forced window had been early found. It seemed reasonable to suppose that the rascals had fled by that; and, anyway, Racke's harbour of refuge would not have held three.

At last the search was given up. Mr. Ratcliff retired, still in great trepidation, but relieved to discover that no valuable's had gone. He did not think of the bogus copy of "Tom Merry's Weekly." What could burglars want with that?

Peace fell upon the New House, and darkness was everywhere, save in the Fourth dormitory, where an electric-torch was switched on while Levison, Cardew, and Talbot, with a crowd of the friendly foe round them, told as much of their story as was deemed prudent.

Piggins and Kerr saw the three safely out.

"Dashed good of you chaps!" said Cardew.

Ratcliff snorted.

"We'd expect you to do the same for us any time, ass! So what is there in it?" he said. "Jolly lucky for you we didn't take it for a School House raid, though!"

Across the cold and silent quad the three stole again. They expected to find Racke already in the Shell dormitory.

But he was not there. Cardew looked into the Fourth dormitory to report success; and Roylance and Clive and Jack Blake & Co. all came along to the Shell quarters to hear the story.

They heard it, and they chortled. Then they waited for Racke.

Before the waiting came to an end they felt little like chortling. No one said so for a long time, but in every heart there was the same dread that Racke had been captured, and had given the game away.

But he came at last, in the most evil of tempers, looking like a coal-cart man, and sneezing violently.

"Did you get it, Cardew, hang you?" he snarled.

"I got it, Racke. 'Fraid you've caught cold!" said Cardew politely.

"Brrrrr!" growled Racke.

And not another word could they get from him.

The wrath of Messrs. Ratcliff and Selby ought, perhaps, to have a whole chapter devoted to it. But all that matters may be told in a few words.

Each of them considered the other the very largest size in congenial idiots for losing his copy of the dreadful rag. Neither failed to tell the other so, of course.

And neither at first saw how hopelessly beaten they were without that absolutely necessary evidence. But they soon came to see.

Dr. Holmes could not refuse to credit a story for which both were able to vouch. That was certain. But it was equally certain that no conviction against anyone could be secured without the production of the paper. And, for all the search they made, no copy of the paper could they find.

Did Mr. Ratcliff suspect the masked burglars? No one but Mr. Ratcliff knew.

He had said that they were men—big, burly men—and to that yarn he stuck. If he doubted its truth now he would not say so.

Mr. Selby did not believe it, of course. He poured contempt upon it.

But Mr. Selby, as his colleague pointed out, had lost his own copy of the vile paper by sheer carelessness, without even the redeeming excuse of burglars.

They quarrelled violently, and for the rest of the term looked each the other way when they met.

And in the matter of the abominable libels upon them they did nothing.

What, indeed, could they do?

As for the Fourth-Form detectives, they got quite a reputation among the fellows who knew the whole story; and it was not long before all the Shell and Fourth knew. Roylance, to whom his comrades assigned the chief share of the credit, persisted they owed everything to luck, however.

Many thought otherwise, and among them was Kerr.

"The School House has a real 'tee now, Figgy," said Kerr. "I shall have to look to my laurels, old scout!"

"But it's all the Fourth, anyway!" replied George Piggins.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"THE ST. JIM'S BOLO HUNTERS!" by Martin Clifford.)



CADET NOTES.



IN response to the invitation given in "Cadet Notes" in the previous issues of the GEM Library, a great rush of inquiries has been received from readers all over the country. The Central Association is replying to these as rapidly as possible, and sending in every case the best advice and information available. But many more queries ought to come in. There must be many thousands of lads who are not yet members of Cadet Corps who ought to join the country. Don't forget that the address of the Central Association Volunteer Regiments is: Judges' Quadrangle, Royal Courts of Justice, W.C. 2, and a postcard or letter directed to the secretary there will bring a prompt reply with all the information available about local corps.

Some very interesting letters have recently been received from men in the trenches, dealing with the Cadet movement. One of them, in particular, is worth recording here. The writer, who is at the Front, says: "I

see in the 'Spectator' the proposal to catch the youngsters' interest, and perhaps one may express regret that no such scheme got hold of me as a boy. I'm a soldier ten days' pay towards any necessary expenses in working the proposed scheme, at the same time hoping to see some national support that will enable the scheme to develop to its rightful purpose as a means of rearing a more healthy generation, both in mind and body, imbued with all those attributes of manliness that make a man a 'White Man.' This is the sort of spirit that animates the men at the Front, and the boys at home ought not to be behind in patriotic spirit.

All over the country active steps are being taken to strengthen the existing corps and to form new ones where there are at present none existing. Recently an excellent start has been made in London with the Inns of Court Cadet Battalion. The object of the corps is to give military training during spare time to boys under military age, and it

appeals especially to old public school boys, students, and others employed in professions and businesses. Apply to the 1st Cadet Battalion, Inns of Court, 7, Stone Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, W.C. 2.

Worcester is taking up the Cadet movement with great activity. A meeting of the County Committee for the encouragement of Cadet Corps, etc., was held lately, over which Lord Desborough presided. The chairman was able to state that the Worcester County Council had made a grant of £100 towards the committee's work. He added that the large employers in the county had been circularised, with the object of forming Cadet corps in their works, and he was following this up by personal visits to the works themselves. This is the kind of action calculated to bring about a great revival of the Cadet movement, and ought to be extended to every other county in the kingdom. But the boys themselves must do their share by responding to the invitation.

THE TWINS FROM TASMANIA.

FOR NEW READERS.

The twins are Philip Derwent, of Highcliffe, and his sister Philippa, of Cliff House. They have a cockatoo, named Cocky, which has been until recently with Flip (Philip) at Highcliffe, but is now at Cliff House. Flip has made an enemy of Gadsby, who is plotting against Merton's eyes in a fight with Ponsonby. In their absence Flip gets too friendly with Pon, and the rest of the nuts, and, without any real taste for it at the outset, takes to gambling. He is made reckless by failing to hear from his chums, who seem to have thrown him over. Flip and his sister, the Cliff House girls consider that Flip did not back up Merton staunchly. They are grieved owing to an anonymous letter, and thus no full explanation is possible between the twins.

(Now read on.)

Out with the Seniors.

"HOLD ON, Flip!" shouted Pon. The Highcliffe First Eleven had a match with Lantham the day after Flip's meeting with Hazel-dene, and ten seniors were already on their way to the station when one junior who had the right to wear the school colours as a member of the school team—Philip Derwent, to wit—started after them.

He had been detained by Mr. Mobbs, and only Langley's urgent representations had got him off. The Fourth Form-master yielded with a very ill grace; but Langley was not to be denied, and Flip got away just in time to thrust his things into his bag and rush for the station at Courtfield.

"Can't stop!" yelled Flip back. "Get a bike and ride after me. You'll have to hustle, too!"

Just then Monson came along with his bike. Pon seized it without ceremony, and rode hard after Flip, who, seeing him coming, slowed down a little to let him draw up.

"You're in a dashed hurry!" snapped Pon. "Got to be if I'm to catch the train. And old Langley's depending on me. I can't let him down."

"I thought you were going to cut this match?"

"I'd just as soon have done that. I don't feel a bit keen. But Langley wouldn't hear of it."

"See here, Flippy, you can get back to Courtfield by the 5.15 if you try."

"Langley says we're catching the later train, some time about eight o'clock at Lantham."

"That's because they want to mooch round Lantham after the game; I know their dodges! But they don't want you, an' you don't want them. You've got your own pals. Hurry off the ground as soon as the match is over; never mind about changin', you can do that in the train. I'll meet you at Courtfield station—see?"

"Oh, as you like. I don't care, I'm sure. And I haven't any task for mooching round with the Sixth and Fifth chaps. If I don't turn up, Pon, it will be because I couldn't do the trick."

"But you must turn up, Flippy! I've got something important on. No I won't tell you now. I can't ride your dashed bike—gettin' puffed already. Cut on, my son. Play up like a good little Flippy, an' make our dashed slackers ashamed of themselves—an' don't fail me, whatever you do! Ta-ta!"

"So long!" said Flip, and he rode on.

Ponsonby wheeled round, and rode back to Highcliffe in leisurely fashion, humming an air, he felt quite satisfied with the way his schemes were working out; and if he suspected that Gadsby was scheming on his own account, he did not worry about it. Pon considered himself much more than a match in craft for Reginald Havers Gadsby.

Flip had not a minute to spare at the station. The train was already signalled when he rode up, and the rest of the team were in it before he had devoted his machine in the cloak-room and waited while a very conscientious but extremely slow girl clerk pencilled a ticket for it. Langley had promised to get his rail ticket for him.

"Come along, Derwent!" said one of the Highcliffe skippers. "We can't afford to leave you behind, y'know!"

Flip bundled into the compartment. Beauchamp, Chilcote, and Spencer were with Langley; and Beauchamp was already spreading a rug for a game of cards, while Chilcote shuffled a pack.

"Are a hand, kid?" said Spencer. "We'll make it nap if you care to, as there are five of us."

"Can't," answered Flip. "Stony!"

He had never played with the seniors yet; and they had not pressed him to join after his first refusal. But there was something in the air to day, he saw. Someone must have been talking; and these fellows knew of his share in the card-parties in No. 1.

"If that's all, I can lend you some silver," said Langley, taking out a handful. "I'm not going to persuade you to play; but play if you want to."

"You'll get a straight game with us," remarked Chilcote. "I don't want to slander anybody, but I should keep my eyes peeled if I were playin' with some of the young rotters in your Form."

"Oh, dry up, Chil!" growled Langley. "The young 'un's no fool, if he is a novice! Goin' to play, Derwent?"

"I don't mind," said Flip. And he counted ten shillings out from the coins Langley offered him, and pushed the rest back. He did not mind borrowing from Langley. The Highcliffe skipper was slack and careless; but he was a very likable fellow, and had been particularly decent to Flip.

Flip wondered as he took up his cards whether there was anything at the bottom of the charge Chilcote suggested, rather than made. It was not the first time he had been warned that the Fourth Form nuts were not straight, and a suspicion that Gadsby and Vavasour might not have won by fair means the other night fitted across his mind. He had been foolish enough to smoke, and, as he was not used to it, his cigarette had taken more of his attention than it should have done.

Well, if there had been cheating, Pon and Monson had not been in it, he felt sure. He was not so sure of the other two.

He was partly right. Ponsonby and Monson had not been in it, and had failed to see it. But the fact that they had not been in it, was not due to their strictly honourable principles. It was merely that they had not, as yet, any design to fleece Flip.

"By Jove, you've the luck, Derwent!" said Beauchamp, as Flip got home with nap for the second time in three hands, and picked up quite a pile of money; for the Highcliffe Sixth did not care for low stakes.

Then Chilcote called nap on a hand that was not worth it with five playing, and lost. Beauchamp went three, and also lost. Flip called three, and won.

"Might have had a flutter for nap on that hand, kid," said Chilcote.

"I might. But I shouldn't have got it," Flip replied. "I don't see the use of calling above your hand."

"One for you, Chil!" said Langley. "What you call a sportin' style is sheer ignorance of the game. Derwent knows it a heap better than you do, though you must have played a hundred games for his one."

"I don't believe it, dashed if I do! He's an old hand, but he's been keepin' it up his mind!"

Luck still went Flip's way.

Langley, Spencer, and Beauchamp got few hands it was possible to call nap upon, and waited for their luck to turn.

They were losing money meanwhile, for the junior's luck remained extraordinarily good, and Chilcote, who got fair hands pretty often, threw away his chances by calling nap instead of four. "Be a man or a mouse!" he said. "It's a safe three or a risky nap—I've no use for the four."

The pile in front of Flip grew so big that he was thinking of transferring some of it to his pockets; but Chilcote and Beauchamp demanded change for a pound note at that moment. Even that left quite a whack of silver, and before Lantham was reached there was another pound note in the heap,

and Langley's ten shillings had been paid back, and yet silver enough remained to weigh down the winner's pockets uncomfortably.

"It isn't always like this, young 'un," said Langley, as they got out, three of the seniors rising losers, though Chilcote had contributed by far more heavily than the other two to Flip's spoils. "You play a good game, an' you don't get above yourself when you're on the win. But you can't always win."

"Oh, I know, Langley," Flip said. "Just after we'd started I thought how jolly awkward it would be if the half-sor you lent me had gone at once. I should have paid you, of course; but it might not have been directly. And I should have had to chuck the game." "Not sure that wouldn't have been the best thing that could have happened," returned Langley moodily. The other three were in advance, and out of earshot. "Look here, kid, think it over, an' see if it doesn't strike you as quite a hefty notion to chuck this sort of foolery altogether. I've no right to preach, goodness knows! I'm not preachin' exactly. But—well, think it over!"

"Thanks, Langley, I will," said Flip. "Chuck it, y' say me!"

"I won't promise that. But I'll think it over."

"Well, that's good enough. You're not a fool. If I'd had as cool a head as you have at your age it would have been better for me—an' better for Highcliffe, too!"

Flip thought hard about that during the walk to the ground. But once the game had begun he forgot all about it. The old footer keenness returned, and he played up in a way that made the crowd yell. "Go it, little 'un!"

He was quite the smallest and youngest of the twenty-two players; but beyond all question was the best man on the field. The opposing side was but a moderate one. Countenry's Fourth Form Eleven, trained to a hair, and playing well together, would have beaten them without much difficulty. But they gave the Highcliffe first, composed for the most part of fellows who would not train and were none too keen, all they knew how to do.

Flip was at centre-forward, with Langley on his right and Ingram on his left. Those two were the pick of the Highcliffe seniors, though Beauchamp and Reedman at back were not bad. They were not good enough to prevent the Lantham side from scoring five goals; however, and it was only a smart bout of passing by the three inside forwards, with a clever pass by Ingram, and a hot shot from Flip's foot at the finish, that enabled Highcliffe to make a draw of it in the last minute of the game.

"Phew! I'm half dead!" grumbled Chilcote, whose job at centre-half had resolved itself mainly into running after a man too clever and too fast for him to stop. "An' you're fit for another dashed hour of it, kid. Do believe!"

"Not quite," said Flip, grinning. "I've had enough, thanks! I say, Langley, I'm going to catch the early train back. I promised to meet Pon in Courtfield."

"Well, don't show up at Highcliffe before our train's in," said Beauchamp. "You needn't answer call-over, y'know; an' it would rather give away the game as far as we're concerned."

"Right-ho!" replied Flip.

And neither he nor Beauchamp guessed that it would be some considerable time before he showed up at Highcliffe again!

SEE THIS WEEK'S "MAGNET"
FOR
"Hunting for Treasure!"

Held to His Promise!

"HERE you are, then, dear boy!" said Cecil Gadsby, in tones of relief, as Flip got out of the train at Courtfield.

"Well, didn't I say I'd come along if I could? You don't ask how the match went, Pon."

"Hadden't thought about it, Flippy. Does anyone care whether or not I lost or won? The slackers don't seem to care a dashed scrap themselves!"

"Oh, we're not so bad as all that!" Flip said, grinning. "Ingram really put up a good game to-day, and so did old Langley. Chilcote was run off his legs, and perspired no end. I don't think he enjoyed himself. By the way, I took a hand at nap with four of them on the way there, and fairly raked in the shelds."

"Good!" said Pon heartily. That was the sort of thing to appeal to Pon. "Glad you're well healed. You'll find a use for it." "You bet I shall! I can settle up with you now, or may."

"But that was not what Pon meant at all. He had no particular desire that Flip should get out of his debt just yet."

"No, I don't want it, old top. It will come in handy where we're going." "Where are we going?" asked Flip, with natural curiosity.

"You'll see directly."

"Look here, Pon, I'm not on—"

"Oh, don't be a prandish Pharisee! Gaddy said you'd kick; but I told him you'd chucked him! straitlaced. It's certainly a place you wouldn't take Mobby to—"

"I wouldn't take Mobby anywhere," Flip struck in. "But I don't care for going on the sly—"

"It's the only way to go. An' there's no dashed harm in it. After all, there's no more in it than we do in the study night after night, an' Mobby knows about that, all right, though he don't let on he knows."

"Keep Mobby out of it! You mean that you're counting on my going with you to some giddy gambling den?"

"Well, you can call it that if you like," Pon answered sulkily. "You might call my study the same—if you wanted to be rude. Yes, I did count on you. You made me a promise, remember?"

Flip stopped. A hot wave of indignation surged over him. He had never liked Pon less than he did at that moment.

If he had understood Cecil Ponsonby better he would have known that for a fellow who valued his word to give such a promise to him was dangerous. Pon, who would have known any other man without remorse, was astute enough to know how very differently a fellow of Flip Derwent's sort regarded his pledged word.

"You're going to hold me to that, so as to make me go where I don't choose?" Flip asked indignantly.

"In shrunken his shoulders."

"How can I hold you to it if you refuse?" he said. "I can't force you there, by gad! You're stronger than I am. But a promise is a promise, Flippy, old pal!"

"And if I won't come I suppose you'll be ass enough to go alone?"

Pon could have guessed. There was an element of danger in letting Flip think that, for he would not be pleased when he found that Gaddy and Vav were only just round the corner, so to speak. But Pon risked it. He was desperately keen on entrapping Flip. He believed himself to be playing his own game, whereas he was really playing Gadsby's, however.

"I shall certainly go," he said coolly. "But don't let that influence you. After all, you know I'm a pretty good hand at taking care of myself."

Still Flip hesitated. He did not feel so strongly about the matter as he would have felt a week or two earlier. Indeed, he had some curiosity to see what the place Pon meant to visit was like. Moreover, the money he had won weighed down his pockets; and already there was in him some of the spirit of the gambler. "Light come, light go"—it would not really matter very much if what Langley & Co. had lost he should lose in his turn.

But the strongest motive of all was the constraint put upon him by that promise. But for that, he would not have gone. The other considerations did little more than make him feel less angry with Pon.

He then thought of Meerton and Tan and Flap. What did it matter? They cared nothing about him. He did not think of others whom he might have remembered—of the soldier-father and brothers, of the sisters at home in Tasmania. They were so

very far away; they hardly seemed to count just then.

"Oh, come on!" he said recklessly. "A promise is a promise, I suppose. And what's the odds, anyway?"

"That's the spirit!" said Pon, slapping him on the back. "An' I win a quid from Gaddy on it! He said you'd kick."

"I shall kick-kick Gaddy if he gets betting on my concerns again!" Flip answered savagely. "I'm about fed-up with that chap!"

"Who's that you're fed-up with, Derwent?" asked a voice out of the darkness—the voice of Reginald Gadsby.

"I shall kick-kick Gaddy if he gets betting on my concerns again!" Flip answered savagely. "I'm about fed-up with that chap!"

"What have I done now, by gad?" "It's all serene, Gaddy. Flippy twiggled you, an' talked accordin'," lied Ponsonby.

Gadsby did not in the least believe that. But he did not want to quarrel with Flip just then.

"Oh, if that's all, I don't mind," he said, with a laugh that failed to ring true. "No chap need mind a joke."

"Absolutely not!" said Vavasour.

"You here, too, Vav?" Flip said. "By Jupiter, I'm going to the bow-wows in good time."

"Pon's told you where we're goin', then?" spoke Gadsby.

"I have an idea. But I didn't know till this moment that I was to go in such distinguished society!"

There was a touch of bitterness in Flip's tone, and he turned to put himself right.

"I wasn't sure they were coming, old sport," he said. "They hadn't made up what they call their minds when I left for the station."

"But we made 'em up directly you'd gone, an' came on after you at once," lied Gadsby.

"Oh, absolutely!" said Vav.

"That reminds me. I left my bike in the cloak-room at the station; I shall have to cut back for it," Flip said.

"Oh, never mind that now. We shall come back this way, an' it won't be too late then," Pon objected.

Flip gave way, still with the feeling that nothing really mattered much.

It was Gadsby who led the way. He knew all about the place they were bound for, of course.

"Well, I hope it's better class than it smells," remarked Flip, wrinkling up his nose.

"Oh, it ain't in this street. This is a bit of a bit, an' a better class."

But it turned out to be only just round the corner; and if the air was a trifle better—a doubtful point—the street was certainly not among Courtfield's most select thoroughfares.

"Shove that cap of yours in your bag, old top," muttered Pon. "Can't be seen here in highcliffe colours, y'know!"

Flip quite saw the force of that. Highcliffe had not the best of names already with people who valued education and sound discipline and cared less about swank.

Gadsby turned in at the front door of a tall, dingy house.

"Down here," he said, leading the way through another door and turning the light of an electric-torch upon a narrow flight of stone steps.

"Do they meet underground, by Jupiter?" asked Flip, in natural surprise.

"Safer," grunted Gadsby.

"Oh, absolutely!" agreed Vavasour.

Flip thought that Vav's voice sounded rather twittery.

At the bottom of the steps was another door, and beyond that was what had once been a wine vault. The rotting bins remained, and the place smelt of decay.

"I don't see the merry gamblers, Gadsby," said Flip.

"You'll see them soon enough," replied their guide.

There was another door at the far end, and at this he tapped.

"Who are you?" asked a rough voice.

"Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego," answered Gadsby solemnly.

"Wrong! There are four of us," grinned Flip. "But Pon can be Daniel, of course. You'd better mention him, though, or he may not be let in. Or I'll be Daniel, if you like. I shouldn't mind staying out. In fact, if it's a burning, fiery furnace, I'd heaps rather!"

"Wrong! The password, fathead!" growled Gadsby.

Little Flip thought how near the truth his jesting words were!

The gambling den might not be a burning fiery furnace, but through his folly in enter-

ing it he was to pass through the fires of affliction that are the test of manhood.

How would he come out? As the gold that is refined by the furnace, or as mere dross?

He had never been really tried yet. Things had gone easily for him; the world had been a pleasant place, and he had gained more credit for good nature than was in essence somewhat careless and easy than he had really deserved.

Now the time had come when he was to go through trials. And not alone; the burden of a weaker comrade would be upon him. That would test his good nature, as he could never be tested in easier circumstances.

But he had no foreboding of all this.

At most, he thought himself a fool to have come, and felt that Pon had taken an unfair advantage over him in the matter of that promise.

But what did it matter? Nothing mattered much.

The door swung open. "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel" passed through.

"They must have a good deal to hide," said Flip.

For even now, though the electric-torch was no longer needed, all was wrapped in gloom.

"Roulette!" whispered Gadsby thrillingly.

"Oh!" returned Flip, not at all thrilled.

He did not know much about roulette. But all three of his companions had dabbled in that fascinating game, and wanted more of it. Vav must have wanted it badly, or he would not have taken all this risk.

For it was evident that Vavasour did not think the risk light. He was in an obvious funk.

Someone drew a curtain aside, and revealed a fairly well-lighted room, with tables stocked with cards, and a bigger table in the centre, the like of which Flip had never seen before.

At present the room was almost empty. It was early yet.

Mr. Chicker was not there. Probably he was still at his munition work.

But Messrs. Hawke and Cobb were to be seen, smoking cigars, and chatting with a few early arrivals.

Flip did not like the look of the early arrivals, and still less did he fancy Messrs. Cobb and Hawke.

He had not had the advantages which Pon & Co. had had in the way of getting used to those attractive gentlemen on native health.

To speak—at the Cross Keys at Friarclade, that is.

(To be continued next week.)

The Editor's Chat.

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**For Next Wednesday:**  
**"THE ST. JIM'S BOLO HUNTERS!"**

By Martin Clifford.

Most of you have heard of Bolo, I think. He was the Hun agent in France, with lots of money at his command for the purpose of doing Germany's work in all sorts of sneaking and underhand ways.

We have our Bolo in this country. They distribute "Don't Buy the Yanks" pamphlets; spread tales about horrible disasters; they tell you that the Government means to rob you of the money you put into War Loan; and, paid or unpaid, they are pro-Huns.

The British Bolo turns up in the St. Jim's neighbourhood, distributing contemptible handbills. At the school the general opinion is that that nothing can be done to stop him.

But Roylance, the new junior, who has a taste for mysteries, thinks something might be done. And an attempt is made to discover "Bolo." With what success it met, and what parts Racke and Trimble played in the affair, you will learn next week.

**THE EDITOR WANTS BACK NUMBERS.**

A paragraph appearing in No. 529 was robbed of its effectiveness by being placed with the ordinary notices. It could not have been clear to many readers that the numbers were wanted by the Editor. But it is the Editor who wants them, and any communications about them should be addressed to "The Editor of the GEM, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4."

**YOUR EDITOR.**