

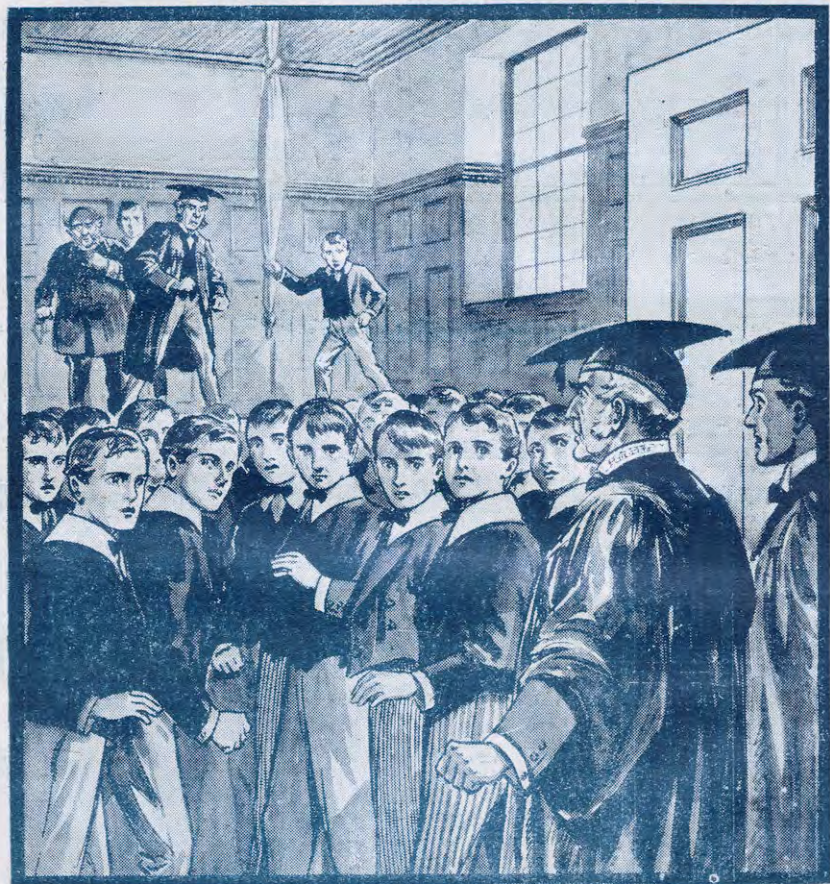


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"THE DISAPPEARING FOURTH!"



DR. HOLMES' TIMELY ARRIVAL.

A Dramatic Scene in the Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale in this Number.



THE DISAPPEARING FOURTH!

A Magnificent Long Complete Story dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry and Co., of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. No Surrender!

BAI Jove, deah boys! Wising-bell!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jumped from his bed as he made that announcement.

Most of the other members of the Fourth Form were awake.

"Get up, chaps!" bawled Jack Blake. "Mind how you rise, Digby! Your head's half under Lumley-Lumley's bed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Robert Arthur Digby awoke with a start, sat up, and gave a howl as his head cracked against the bottom rail of Lumley-Lumley's bed.

"Yow-ow!"

"I told you so!" grinned Blake. Digby had slept all night upon the floor, so had Levison and Kerruish.

Their beds were piled up against the dormitory door, minus the clothes, of course.

"Groogh!" moaned Digby ruefully, rising to his feet and rubbing his head. "Some as though my head's on strike, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, tumble up, chaps!" chuckled Blake. "We must be ready to receive the genial Ratty, when he makes us his morning call."

"Yass, wathah!"

The Fourth-Formers tumbled up, and dressed themselves, amidst much excited chatter.

The advent of Mr. House Ratcliff, the unpopular master of the New House, in the School House, had caused "high strikes" in the literal sense of the words.

Mr. Ratcliff, the School House-master, had been called away by the War Office, and in his absence Dr. Holmes had installed Mr. Ratcliff as master of the School House, appointing Mr. Linton housemaster in the New House.

Mr. Ratcliff was well known as a tyrant in his own House, but he had exceeded himself during his first day in command of the School House.

Lines and lockings had been distributed

galore, and the Fourth Form in particular had squirmed under the yoke of Mr. Ratcliff's spoon. The Head was away ill, and Mr. Ratcliff ruled the roost at St. Jim's.

Gussy had been detained from playing in the Grammar School footer-match, but he had eluded Ratty by climbing up the Form-room chimney, and had gone, all the same. And, what counted more to the heroes of the Fourth, Gussy had scored the winning goal!

For this breach of discipline Mr. Ratcliff had sentenced D'Arcy to a public flogging and expulsion. Gussy had protested, and stirring times had resulted. Jack Blake had backed up his chum, and Mr. Ratcliff had expelled him, likewise.

It was the last straw. Jack Blake had called the Fourth Form round him, and they had decided upon "direct action" in the form of a strike.

The Fourth Form was barricaded in the dormitory, on strike against the tyrannies of Mr. Ratcliff. In the silent watches of the night Blake and a few others had raided the school pantry, and provided themselves with food.

They had slept well that night, and were quite cheerful, and resolute as ever this morning.

"I wonder where old Baggy Trimbble is!" grinned Blake, as he surveyed his benchman in the dormitory. "He managed to get locked out. I suppose they slept him with the Third."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, deah boys! I wathah think Watty will be wild when he finds we don't come down to breakfast!" observed Gussy. "Theah goes the breakfast bell!"

At this several of the fellows looked worried.

"—I say," began Percy Mellich. "What about Ratty, Blake?"

Blake growled.

"Shurrup!" he snapped, turning towards the door. "Unless my ears deceive me, this is Ratty approaching."

A hasty, impetuous tread was heard outside the dormitory door, and a fierce

voice was heard coming from the key-hole.

"Blake, open this door!"

"No fear!" replied Blake. "Go and eat coke, Ratcliff!"

"You—you—you—"

"We're on strike, sir, as I told you last night!" called back Blake cheerfully. "If you go back to the New House, and promise not to interfere with us again we'll come out and be good little boys."

"You impertinent rascal—"

"Hear, hear!"

Mr. Ratcliff's response to this was inaudible, but next minute the door rattled furiously, and it seemed that Mr. Ratcliff was using both his hands and feet upon it.

Bang, bang, bang!

"Keep it up, old scout!" sang out Blake. "You'll wear all the paint off the door soon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Ratcliff's voice was pent with fury as he ceased to bang at the door.

"You young scoundrels! Come out here at once! You'll all be flogged!"

"Go ahead then, ducky!" retorted Blake. "We're not coming out until you're gone back to your kennel, that's a cert!"

"No fear!"

"Wathah not!"

"No surrender!"

Again the door rattled, and again the infuriated Housemaster kicked upon it, but the heavy bedsteads piled against the door stood like adamant, and the more Mr. Ratcliff kicked the higher mounted his ire, until he was almost fuming.

"Ose more. I command you!" he howled. "Come out here at once before I call assistance!"

"Rats!" replied Blake. "Call as much assistance as you like! Call the police and the fire-brigade if you like! Run away, Ratty, and play marbles!"

"You—you—you—"

"Go and eat coke!" said Blake cheerfully. "We're on strike, old son, and we won't give in until you agree to our conditions!"

"Heah, heah!"

A sound as though Mr. Ratcliff were

choking, came through the keyhole, and Mr. Ratcliff strode away next minute. The Fourth Form "strikers" looked at each other, and grinned.

"He's gone to fetch assistance, I expect," grinned Blake. "Well, we shall be ready for him. Fetch those jugs of water over here, chaps!"

"What-ho!"

Half a dozen jugs of water were carted over to the barricade of beds, and Jack Blake mounted the barricade, peering through the fanlight over the door.

Suddenly he gave a chuckle.

"Here he comes!" the leader of the Fourth Form strikers announced. "He's got old Knox and old Taggles with him. Taggles's got a coke-hammer!"

"Whew!"

"Take your stand at the bottom, Gussy," said Blake, "and hand me up the water-jugs when I command. Levison, old chap, you might bring over a few cakes of soap!"

"With pleasure!" grinned Levison.

Mr. Ratcliff, his face purple with fury, arrived outside the dormitory door, with Taggles, the school porter, and Knox, the cadish prefect of the Sixth, to back him up.

Mr. Ratcliff thumped upon the door.

"Now, you young scoundrels!" he hooted. "Will you open this door?"

"Wats!" sang out Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, standing ready with a water-jug. "If you don't I shall avail myself of assistance!" howled the irate master, beating a tattoo upon the door. "Taggles is here, and I have others—"

"Do your worst, tyrant—I defy thee!" replied Blake, in a deep, thrum voice. This served to make his chums chuckle, and Mr. Ratcliff fumed the more.

He turned to Taggles, and signalled for him to commence operations with the coke-hammer.

At the same instant, Blake motioned to D'Arcy to hand him up the water-jug.

Taggles raised the coke-hammer, took aim at the lock of the door, and—

Swish!

Blake, with the fanlight at its full aperture, sent a deluge of icy water full upon Taggles.

It was a well-directed aim, and the water swamped full into Taggles' face, pouring across his shoulders and down his back.

"Yerrugh! Yah! Hoo-ooh! Wow!" howled Taggles, and dropped the coke-hammer.

Immediately there was a fiendish howl from Mr. Ratcliff as the coke-hammer crashed upon his toes.

"Yaroo-ooh! Ow-ow-ow!" wailed Mr. Ratcliff, dancing about on one leg clapping his injured foot. "You clumsy rascal—you—"

Swish!

Blake sent the remainder of the contents of the jug full upon Knox, who had begun to cower back, and the prefect sent up a howl of dismay as the whole upper part of his body was drenched. "Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Blake, from the fanlight. "How do you like that, dear boys?"

"Gerrugh—gug! Gug!"

The howls of the three hapless beings in the passage mingled in one piercing, melancholy song of distress, and the Fourth Form strikers in the dormitory chuckled with glee when they heard it.

"Yah! Ow!" moaned Mr. Ratcliff. "Taggles, attack that door! Beat it down this instant—never mind the water!"

"Gerrugh!" spluttered Taggles, his bloodshot eyes blinking nervously at the fanlight. "Which wot I says is this 'ere—I don't see as 'ow—"

"Do as I tell you, man!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff, dancing with wrath and

pain. "I command you to burst open that door!"

Still spluttering, Taggles raised the heavy coke-hammer for another shot. Knox was gradually backing away down the passage, when Mr. Ratcliff's steely eye sought him out.

"Knox! Come here!" he rasped sharply. "I need your assistance to charge into the room, when the door is down!"

"When—ah, when!" chuckled Blake, and he motioned to Gussy for another jug of water.

Swoo-oosh!

"Yaroo-ooh!" howled Taggles, losing his foothold before the torrent, and collapsing upon the linoleum, on top of his coke-hammer. "Yah—Hoo-ooh!"

"Taggles!" screamed Mr. Ratcliff. "I command you to—Gerrugh! Gug! Gug! Yah!"

"Another avalanche of wetness, smote Mr. Ratcliff in the waistcoat, and that irate gentleman staggered back, his spirits very much "damped."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Blake, from his vantage point at the fanlight. "Have

Billy Bunter.

The famous fat junior of the "Magnet" is always expecting a postal-order or a Tuck-Hamper from one or other of his titled relations.

Neither of these much-hoped-for articles ever turn up, because he hasn't any titled relations!

But if you get the "Grieffrars Herald," and enter for the competition which is running in that wonderful school journal, you may expect a Tuck-Hamper, with some hope of getting it.

Tuck-Hampers are being given away as prizes, and you have a splendid chance of winning one if you enter the competition at once.

some more? There's plenty of water here!"

"Yow—oooh! Blake, you scoundrel!"

"Careful with your luggage, Ratty, old bean!" cautioned Blake darkly. "I shall have to drown your sorrows still more if you don't shut up and let us alone!"

Taggles struggled to his feet, wringing water out of his eyes and ears.

"Which he hain't goin' to stand any more!" bellowed the outraged porter.

"H'im wet, and—"

"You will do as you're t-t-told!" snorted Mr. Ratcliff, shivering from the cold of the water down his back. "Once more, I command you to—"

"Don't do it, Tagger, old boy!" grinned Blake. "Follow our example and go on strike till the Head comes back!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taggles blinked rebelliously at Mr. Ratcliff. Knox was sinking in the sea, evidently fearful of approaching misfortunes.

"This is rebellion, Blake!" screeched Mr. Ratcliff. "Rank rebellion in the school—"

"I reckon you're right, sir!" replied Blake cheerfully. "We're on strike, in other words!"

"I—I—I—"

Mr. Ratcliff seemed at a loss for words. While he was still fuming, Blake reached down and took up three tablets of wet soap from Levison.

He took careful aim, and sent a tablet whizzing at Mr. Ratcliff.

The soap caught that gentleman in the

eye, and immediately Mr. Ratcliff burst out into a wild yell of agony.

"Yoooh! Yaroooh! I—I—I— Oh, dear! Gerrugh!"

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes streamed with water, and he had perforce to shut them, they smarted so.

"Now, Tagger," said Blake, tossing the soap gently in the air and catching it, "there's a bit of soap for you, and another bit for Knox—to say nothing of gallons of water—if you don't buzz off and leave us alone. Got me?"

"Which he hain't stoppin' 'ere hain't no!" spluttered Taggles, taking up his coke-hammer and rolling away. "Let 'im bloomin' well do 'is own dirty work!"

And Taggles disappeared down the passage, squelching water from his boots.

"Blake, you rotter—" began Knox. "Are you going?" inquired Blake pleasantly, displaying the soap. "I'll give you five seconds to hop it, Knox. One—two—three—Good-bye-ee!"

Knox had "hopped" it!

Mr. Ratcliff stood there gouging soap from his eyes, and groaning and spluttering horribly.

"Give him some water to wash the soap out," chuckled Blake, raising another jug of water. "Steady, now

"Yaroooh! Help! Gerrugh!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff, and, with his hands to his eyes, he rushed blindly down the passage, and disappeared round the corner with a swish of his gown.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Blake. "Good-bye, Bluebell!"

"Hooway, deah boys!" chirruped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We've wouted the enemy, bai Jove! They've wetted in confusion—Hooway!"

The Fourth Form strikers sent up a loud yell of triumph.

"Hurrah!"

"No surrender, boys!" yelled Blake, closing the fanlight. "Are we down-hearted? Shall we give in to Ratty?"

And the reply of the Fourth Form strikers came in a roar.

"No fear!"

"Rats to Ratty, and many of 'em!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 2.

Money for the Strike Fund!

C LINK!

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Gussy, "That's a stone on the window, deah boys. Somebody is twining to attract our attention."

A rush was immediately made to the window, and Arthur Augustus sent up a chirrup of delight when he saw Wally D'Arcy, his minor, standing below.

"Wally, you young beggar!" he cried. "You—"

"Cheerio, Gus!" said D'Arcy minor cheerfully. "A letter arrived for you this morning from the gov'nor. I cut out quick after brekker to give it to you."

"Bai Jove, how awfully wipin' of you, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Throw it up, Wally!"

"Chump!" said the young hero of the Third witheringly. "Anybody got any string?"

There was a general fumbling in pockets, and Kerruish found a length of cord.

This was lowered from the window, and Wally D'Arcy tied Gussy's letter to it.

"Pull!" he called, and Arthur Augustus hauled the string in.

He gave a murmur of satisfaction as he recognised his noble pater's handwriting.

He ripped open the envelope, and drew

forth a letter, followed by a rustling booknote.

"Oh, good!" murmured the swell of St. Jim's. "The patrol's turned up stamps, again, dear boys! It's a treat!"

"Hoors!" cried Blake. "Good old guy nor!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye and surveyed his comrades of the Fourth.

"I reckon we can vespudate Watty, dear boys, until he gives in," he said. "This fivah will keep us going for some time yet. What?"

"Rather!" said Blake effusively. "You're a sport, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake, it's for the good of the cause!"

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Blake. "A fiver goes a long way in times of dice necessity!"

"Yas, wathah!"

Wally D'Arcy surveyed the strikers at the window and grinned.

"I wish I was up there with you," he said enviously. "It wouldn't take much for us lot to kick against Ratty!"

"Bai Jove, you young boundah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You will do no such thing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the cheery young hero of the Third. "I like that, Gussy, old top! You're on strike yourself, and plucking the pater's tip into the strike fund!"

"Ahem!" coughed D'Arcy major. "That's a vewy different mattah, dear boy. We are senahs!"

"Rats!" replied Wally cheerfully. "How's your chivey, Gus?"

Wally referred to the large red welt across Gussy's face, the mark of Mr. Ratcliff's cane, delivered with cruel spite the day before.

"The mark was not quite so red this morning, but the noble swell of St. Jim's flushed to the roots of his hair as his minor referred to it."

"Thank you, Wally, it is vewy much bettah," he replied.

"That's good!" replied Gussy's minor. "Ratty ought to be scragged for whacking into you like that!"

"The Fourth-Formers looked solemn. At that moment, three figures strolled up. They were Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, the Terrible Three of the Shell."

"Morning, you chaps!" called Tom Merry cheerily. "How are things?"

"Oh, top-hole!" grinned Blake. "We mean business this time, Thomas!"

"So does Ratty!" responded Monty Lowther. "He's simply tearing his hair this morning. What have you been doing to the poor chap?"

"Oh, just treated him to some soap and water!" replied Blake, and he gave an account of the morning's adventure.

"Gee-whizz!" exclaimed the captain of the Shell when Blake had finished. "I reckon there'll be ructions before this job is over, Blake!"

"That's good!" said Blake cheerfully. "We're not backing out of this until either the Head or Railton comes back. We're not going to knuckle under to that outsider Ratcliff. If Figgins & Co. stand him, we won't!"

"Hallo!" broke in a hoarse voice. "What's that about us?"

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, the heroes of the New House at St. Jim's, hove into view.

"Talk of angels!" grinned Monty Lowther.

Figgins peered up at Blake & Co. at the dormitory window.

"Well, you are a set of merry bounders!" said the leader of the New House juniors. "I hear you don't like our dear Ratty!"

Blake snorted.

"I'd like to boil the cad in oil!" he growled.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn chuckled. "We're jolly glad he's given us a rest, anyway!" said Figgins. "How is the old bird this morning?"

"Oh, in a giddy tantrum!" said Blake. "We're not knuckling under to him, Figgins. I can tell you! You New House chaps don't know how to stick up for yourselves! We're rucking!"

"So I see!" grinned Kerr. "I wish you luck, old chap!"

"I say, Blake," said Fatty Wynn, with brotherly feeling. "How are you off for grub? You can't go on strike without grub, you know?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't worry, Fatty!" replied Blake, with a grin. "We raided the pantry last night, and have got enough for a couple of days. Gussy received a nimble fiver this morning, and has planked that down for the good of the cause!"

"The Palstaff of St. Jim's heaved a sigh of relief."

Fatty Wynn was always very considerate with regard to the commissariat department.

Tom Merry & Co. chuckled, and at that moment Kerr spotted Kildare and Darrel and Rushden of the Sixth approaching.

The captain of St. Jim's looked grimly up at Jack Blake & Co.

"You young rascals!" he rapped. "Blake, don't you know you are doing a very serious thing? What will the Head say when he returns?"

"Dunno!" replied Blake. "When he does come back, he shall hear both sides of the question—I know that much! Ratty's expelled Gussy and I for simply nothing at all, and—"

"I say, you fellows!"

It was Baggy Trimble, and he rolled up with a very peevish expression on his podgy features.

"Hallo, Baggy!" grinned Blake. "How did you spend your night?"

"Rotten!" growled Baggy Trimble pathetically. "Ratty shoved me in with the Third-Form kids—"

"Watch your step, Baggy!" said Wally D'Arcy darkly. "You'll get a thiek ear if you're not careful!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you are a set of young asses!" said Kildare grimly. "You'd better think seriously of this, Blake, before you carry this affair too far!"

"Thanks, Kildare!" said Blake. "We've already made up our minds, you know."

From the School House the bell for lessons clanged out, and the seniors strolled away.

"Well, take, you chaps!" said Figgins. "If you can persuade Ratty to leave St. Jim's, we'll get up a special feast in your honour!"

He and his chums strolled off.

"Cheerio, Blake!" said Tom Merry, following with Manners and Lowther. "See you later, I expect!"

"All serene!" replied Blake cheerfully. "No lessons for us to-day. Aren't you wild?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Ratler!"

Wally D'Arcy wagged an admonitory forefinger up at Arthur Augustus.

"Mind how you go, Gus!" he said. "If you get into any scrapes, just come to your brother!"

"Weally, Wally—"

"Toodle-o, you chaps," grinned the hero of the Third. "Shall I give your love to Ratty?"

"If you like," grinned Blake.

"Right-oh, I will—perhaps!"

And Wally D'Arcy scampered off, arriving just a minute late for lessons, and being called over the coals in consequence by the testy Mr. Selby.

Baggy Trimble lingered after the bell had stopped.

"I—I say, you fellows," he said. "What shall I do?"

"Better go into the Form-room for lessons!" grinned Blake. "You'll have our old pal Ratty all to your giddy self this morning. It's Latin, oral, and Euclid, sonny!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, don't rot, you know!" said Baggy peevishly. "Take me up there with you—"

"Can't be did, old son!" replied Blake, shaking his head. "We dare not open the door, and we'd need a crane to haul you up through the window!"

"Really—"

"I tell you what you can do, though," said Blake thoughtfully. "You can act as spy for us, Baggy. That's just in your line, isn't it?"

Baggy Trimble looked wrathful at this aspersion.

"Look, here, Baggy," said Blake, "we'll pay you five bob a day as long as the strike lasts, to keep an eye and an ear open for us, and keep us informed of the enemy's moves. All's fair in love and war, you know. Will you take it on?"

Trimble's eyes gleamed covetously.

"Gimme the money!" he said, nodding vigorously.

Two half-crowns tinkled to the ground, and Baggy snatched them up eagerly.

"Report frequently and accurately," said Blake. "Cut off now, Baggy, and plant some soft sawdow on Ratty!"

The Fourth Form strikers chuckled deeply, as Baggy Trimble, the only member of the Form not on strike, rolled away.

Blake organised a band, and by means of mouth-organs, and combs, and paper, the Fourth Form strikers kept up a concert of rousing tunes all the morning.

The boys in the Form-rooms heard the tuneful notes, and grinned. There was a certain liveliness at St. Jim's that morning!

CHAPTER 3.

An Amazing Discovery!

JACK BLAKE & CO. had many callers that day.

Mr. Ratcliff made another attempt to break down the door in person, but was forced to retreat.

Mr. Lathom, the easy-going master of the Fourth—now taking the Shell under the new arrangement of things—approached Jack Blake & Co., and mildly reasoned with them.

The Fourth-Formers liked their master, and replied to his entreaties very respectfully, but very firmly.

Mr. Lathom retired at last, shaking his head in deep worry.

In his heart of hearts, he realised that Mr. Horace Ratcliff was at the bottom of all the trouble.

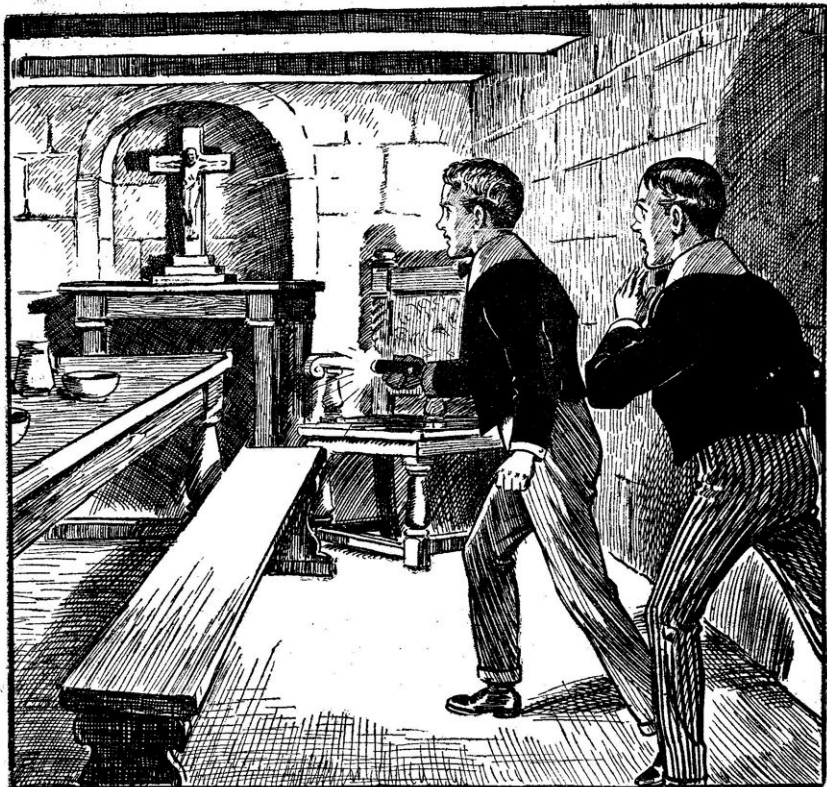
Kildare and the prefects of the Sixth came along to argue, but Jack Blake & Co. cheerfully repeated their tenets, and severed not one iota from them. Mr. Ratcliff came along in the midst of the argument, and ordered the prefects to attack the dormitory door en masse.

But Eric Kildare and his colleagues refused to walk away when the vials of Mr. Ratcliff's wrath burst upon them.

Wally D'Arcy once more held intercourse with the Fourth-Formers that day after dinner, but Knox caught him—with the result that Wally was caned for his delinquency.

"The hero of the Third kept a stiff upper lip, however, and announced to his fellow flags that it wouldn't take much to make him 'kick' after that!"

And so the day wore on, the strikers in the Fourth Form dormitory whiling away the hours by singing, and playing leap-



The two juniors drew deep breaths of amazement and wonder as they gazed upon the scene that presented itself to them. "Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in awe. "A secwet wetwet of the monks I suppose." (See Chapter 3.)

frog, and reading such books as were in their lockers.

That evening, when the shadows of another night were beginning to fall, and the rest of the school were at prep, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made a startling discovery.

"Bai Jove, deah boys!" he exclaimed, a look of consternation on his noble features. "I've lost my diamond tiepin!"

"What?"

"I didn't notice it till just now," said Gussy distressfully. "It was in my tie yesterday, I'm positive. I wemembah I had it when I climbed up the chimney to escape Watty, you know."

"My hat!" breathed Blake. "D'you mean to say you lost it up that blessed chimney?"

Gussy shook his head.

"I weadly don't know, Blake," he said. "I have a faint suspish, tho' I droppod it on the woorf, when I had left the chimney, and was taking off those beastly pyjamas."

"Oh, you chump!" groaned Blake. "You'll have to sneak out and fetch it, I suppose. You can't let a thing like that go!"

"No wathah not!" said Gussy

anxiously. "That was a present to me from my bwothah Conway, an' it's wort' no end of money. I—I suppose I shal have to wun out to-night, climb up that beastly chimney, and search for it!"

Jack Blake grunted.

"Well," he said, "supplies are running low, and we shall have to send out for some grub to-night. I vote Clive and I cut out now, visit Mrs. Mumble for some tuck, whilst Gussy and Digby make their way to the form-room, up the chimney, and search for the missing pin!"

This resolve was greeted with hearty assent from the other two concerned.

"I'm game," said Digby. "Gussy would want an escort, anyway, in case he got copped!"

"Weally, Dig—" began D'Arcy warmly.

"I'll come and lend a hand with the tuck, Blake," said Sidney Clive readily. "When shall we start?"

"Now, I reckon," said Blake. "Ratty's had enough of arguing with us for one day, and I think he'll give us a wide berth till to-morrow, at any rate. Gussy and Dig had better slip on some pyjamas again, as a protection from the soot!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Gussy.

Thus it was arranged. Whilst D'Arcy and Digby were scrambling into their pyjamas, the bedsteads piled up against the door were carefully—very carefully—removed.

Gussy handed over his fiver to Blake, and the four left the dormitory, proceeding with infinite caution, lest they should be spotted and captured by Mr. Ratcliff, or any of his minions.

At the end of the passage, Blake and Clive went one way, whilst Gussy and Digby went the other.

The first two got out of the box-room window, and scuttled across the darkened quadrangle to Dame Taggles' tuck shop.

Gussy and Digby climbed to the Fourth Form room, which at that time of the evening was in utter darkness.

The fire, which had been alight during the day, was out, so it was a comparatively easy task to get up the chimney.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy led the way, for that was the means he adopted to escape from the toils of Mr. Ratcliff yesterday.

The two juniors could not forbear sneezing and coughing in the smoky

sooty atmosphere of the chimney. It was a wide, old-fashioned chimney, and they ascended with comparative ease.

At length they arrived at the top and climbed upon the roof.

Digby pulled out a pocket torch, and flashed his light around on the leads, whilst Gussy searched for his missing tie-pin.

Ten minutes they searched, and Digby was getting cold and impatient, when Gussy gave a sudden exclamation of joy, and picked up a small, glittering object.

"Found it!" growled Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!" replied D'Arcy joyfully. "All sewene, Dig, deah boy. Now for the downward journey!"

Digby grunted, and climbed into the depths of the chimney again. This time he went first, feeling for foothold on the crumbling ledges, and clutching at the sooty sides for support.

He flashed the pocket-lamp before him as he proceeded.

Suddenly D'Arcy gave a yelp of dismay, lost his foothold, and came bumping down upon Digby. Digby made a frantic clutch at the wall, and his electric light went out. It was only by a miracle that Digby retained his hold upon the torch.

"Yarough!" roared Digby. "Oh, you howling ass!"

"Gwooh! Oh deah!" gasped D'Arcy, clutching wildly at the soot-laden wall.

"Hang on, Dig, deah boy. I—Oh. Gerrugh!"

A small torrent of soot swept down, and filled Gussy's mouth. His leg involuntarily sailed through the air, and crashed upon the side of the chimney, missing Digby's head by mere inches.

"Click!"

It was a queer sound, coming in the eerie depths of the chimney, like the snapping of a lock or a trigger, followed by a creak that set the juniors' teeth on edge.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "What was that, Dig?"

"Dunno!" grunted Digby. "Careful, you ass. Don't move until I've got this confounded light switched on!"

Digby fumbled with the torch with his one free hand, and at last succeeded in getting it alight.

A brilliant, beam of electric light swept the interior of the chimney.

The two juniors looked round curiously, wondering as to the cause of that mysterious click.

They gave a smothered gasp of amazement when their eyes beheld a yawning hole in the side of the chimney, and a large stone slab swinging inward.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Digby. "It—it's a trap door!"

"A trap door! Great Scott!"

Their minds inadvertently went back to those days of old, when the monks in the monastery of St. James were persecuted by the barons.

This part of the School House was a portion of the original building of the monastery, and there were still many hidden mysteries within it that the passing of time had not yet divulged.

The two Fourth-Formers stared mechanically at this startling discovery.

"Bai Jove!" muttered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Is—is it real?"

Digby's eyes gleamed, and he flashed the light through the aperture.

A flight of stone steps was disclosed. "My hat!" breathed Digby. "Here's a find, Gussy! A trap-door and hidden steps in this old chimney, by gad! Come on. We'll look further into this!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Moving very cautiously, Gussy scrambled through the aperture, and stood upon the stone steps beyond.

Digby followed, the light from his pocket-lamp shining brilliantly.

The two stood upon a flight of small stone steps, ascending steeply.

A massive stone swung back upon a hinge, and the light of the lamp disclosed a rusty iron bolt, worked by means of a spring.

"Deah me!" murmured D'Arcy. "My foot must have hit that trap-door wight upon the spwing, deah boy, and unlocked it."

Digby nodded, and commenced to ascend the spiral.

He had proceeded but four yards or so, when he came to a halt.

"Careful, Gussy!" he cautioned. "The steps end here, and you have to step upon a platform."

He climbed upon the platform from the steps, and D'Arcy followed.

They now stood upon the threshold of a long, shallow room, in height barely sufficient for them to stand up.

Digby took off the bullseye from his lamp, so that the light was diffused in a wider radius.

The two juniors drew deep breaths of amazement and wonder, as they gazed

upon the scene that presented itself to them.

The walls, which were of stone, were bare, and the mildew of age hung upon the ancient stonework. The ceiling was raftered, and Digby rightly judged that it was the underneath of the floor of a room above.

The long, shallow room was furnished with a number of oak forms, in a wonderful state of preservation, considering the centuries old they were. Upon these tables lay earthenware vessels and bowls. At the further end was a crude table, with a crumbling cloth upon it, over which stood a stone crucifix, indented by the ravages of time. It had evidently served as an altar to the monks of centuries past.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in awe. "A secret retreat of the monks, I suppose."

Digby nodded.

"Seems like it," he said. "They must have used this as a hiding-place when some hostile baron invaded the monastery."

The two juniors drew deep breaths.

"My word!" murmured Digby. "We'd better cut back and tell the others. They'll be interested to hear of this discovery, you bet!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Moving cautiously, lest their heads should bump against the low ceiling, the two Fourth-Formers retraced their steps to the chimney, leaving the trap-door open.

Bursting with the exciting news they had to tell, they descended the chimney, and reached the form-room without mishap.

The carefully removed traces of the soot they had dislodged, took off the sooty pyjamas they had used to protect their clothes from the soot, and left the form-room stealthily.

Moving with great care, they descended to the Fourth Form dormitory, and were admitted by Levison and Carver.

Blake and Clive had not returned.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry Captured.

JACK BLAKE and Sidney Clive stood outside the school tuckery, a large bag between them.

They had succeeded in rousing Dame Taggles, who had closed her shop half an hour ago, and prevailed upon her to supply them with a consignment of tuck.

The good dame had demurred at first, but when the dimensions of the order became known to her, she immediately opened wide her portal and served Blake and Clive with all the supplies they ordered.

Nearly three pounds of Gussy's fiver were expended, and the provisions were inside the bag.

"So far, so good," murmured Blake. "It's pretty dark in the quad now, so I think we can venture back—eh, what?"

"I think so," replied Clive.

Bearing the bag between them, the two Fourth Form rebels staggered across the quadrangle, keeping well within the shadows.

Suddenly a figure approached out of the gloom, and the two juniors crouched low in apprehension.

"All serene!" breathed Blake, rising. "It's Tom Merry. I say, Tommy!"

Tom Merry started, and looked in amazement at Blake.

"Sh—sh—sh!" cautioned Blake. "Not a giddy whisper! We're fetching provisions, you know. Anybody about?"

"Not so far as I know," he said. "My hat! You two are running it

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pretty risky. I must say. Did Dame Taggles let you in?"

"What-ho!" chuckled Blake. "We can last till the end of the week on this little lot, if we ration ourselves."

"Good job you haven't got to feed Bagger Trimble," grinned Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha!" Rather! replied Blake.

"Crums! This bag is jolly heavy! I suppose you wouldn't care to help me across with it, Tommy, so that Clive can keep fresh with a spell?"

"Certainly!" replied the captain of the Shell willingly. "I must say, you Fourth-Form kids have got some nerve!"

"Oh, rats!" grunted Blake, hauling up the bag, which Tom Merry grasped at the other end.

In silence they bore the bag of provisions across the quadrangle. Clive ready to take his turn when Tom Merry had had enough.

"Clive, cut off with this bag as best you can, while Blake and I deal with Knox!"

Clive had no time to reply, for Knox was upon them.

Blake and Tom Merry closed with the burly prefect, and engaged him in a fierce tussle. Clive dragged the bag out of danger.

"Help!" roared Knox. "Rescue, St. Jim's!"

"Here, stop the rotter's row!" muttered Blake. "Gimme that cap, Tommy!"

Blake grabbed the cap and jammed it into Knox's mouth. The prefect's howls were suddenly muffled, and he spluttered furiously.

"We've got him now!" panted Tom Merry, pinning Knox's arms to his sides.

"Buzz off with that bag, Clive, while we keep the coast clear!"

"Right!" muttered Clive, and, hoisting the bag on his shoulder, he ran

ing. Next minute Cutts of the Fifth appeared.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated, seeing Blake and Tom Merry struggling with the prefect. "Blake, you young sweep!"

"Gerragh-gug-gug!" spluttered Knox.

"Yaw-aw-aw!"

Cutts, his eyes gleaming maliciously, wasted no more time in words. He dashed at the combatants, intent on securing the leader of the Fourth Form rebels.

Tom Merry looked round quickly, and pushed Blake off.

"Run, Blake!" he panted. "Don't mind me! Scoot!"

Blake darted a quick look at Cutts, and dodged, just as the rascally Fifth-Former rushed at him. Cutts floundered wildly forward, saving himself from sprawling by almost a miracle. Blake, with a muttered word of thanks to Tom



Mr. Ratcliffe's eyes nearly started out of his head, as they roved across the deserted room. "They—they have flown during the night!" gasped the dumbfounded master. "Knox—I-I—I—" "It's jolly queer, sir!" faltered Knox. (See Chapter 6.)

Suddenly a burly form loomed up in the darkness, and Jack Blake gave a start, and stopped.

"Oh crikes!" he gasped. "Knox!"

Knox spotted the three juniors at that moment, and his jaw dropped.

"Blake!" he rasped, a note of deep exultation in his voice. "Copped, by Jove! And Merry helping you!"

Blake set his teeth.

"We're copped, but not captured!" he replied. Then he turned to Tom Merry.

"Run for it, Tommy!" he said. "No need to get yourself into more trouble than you can help!"

Tom Merry shook his head with a look of grim resolve on his rugged face.

"I'll help you, Blake!" he said firmly.

away as fast as the heavy load would allow.

Knox, worked up almost to madness in his temper, struggled furiously. Burly and muscular though he was, the two juniors were more than enough for him. Besides, he had Blake's cap in his mouth, and Knox found that a great disadvantage.

He succeeded at last in getting the cap from between his teeth, and he let out a bellow that re-echoed across the quadrangle.

"Help! Help! Yaroooh!"

"Stow it!" muttered Blake. "Steady, Tommy!"

The two juniors' hearts beat wildly as a patter of footsteps was heard approach-

Merry, took to his heels and stroaked across the quadrangle, running as if he were on the cinder-path.

"You young lion!" bellowed Cutts, dashing after him. "Come back!"

"Rats!" called back Blake, putting a spurt on. "Go and chop chips!"

Cutts ground his teeth, and ran hard. But smoking had affected his wind considerably, and ere the chase after Blake had lasted three minutes, Cutts was panting and gasping.

As the elusive rebel's footsteps died away in the distance Cutts gave up the chase, and returned to Knox and Tom Merry.

Tom Merry was struggling gamely

with the burly prefect, but when Cutts arrived, he saw the game was up, and he submitted.

"Fax, Knox!" he panted. "I give in!" Knox's face was black with fury. "Collar the young cad!" he snarled to Cutts. "He'll catch it hot for this night's work. Run him straight over to Ratcliff!"

"What-ho!" gasped Cutts. Tom Merry set his jaw grimly, and suffered himself to be hustled across to the School House in the rough grip of his two assailants.

A chorus of amazed cries arose from the School House fellows as Knox and Cutts appeared in the doorway, dragging the captain of the Shell with them.

"Tommy!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, springing forward and grasping his chum's arm. "What's happened?"

"Nothing much," replied Tom quietly, with a rueful grin. "These rotters caught me helping Blake, that's all. I'm in for it now, I suppose."

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Monty Lowther, his face a picture of dismay.

"Come on!" snarled Knox, wrenching at Tom Merry's collar. "You'll come to Mr. Ratcliff at once!"

Tom Merry clenched his fists; but, suppressing his wrath, he went quietly.

He left the juniors in a buzz of startled conversation.

Knox and Cutts dragged him up to Mr. Ratcliff's study, and bundled him without ceremony inside.

Mr. Ratcliff jumped to his feet at the intrusion.

His sour face went pink as he saw Tom Merry in the grasp of the two seniors.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Ratcliff. "Knox—Cutts—Merry! What is the meaning of this?"

"We caught him in the act of helping Blake get away with provisions, sir!" replied Knox, his face suffused with malicious triumph. "Blake and Clive and he were dragging a bag across the quadrangle when I came upon them. Evidently they had been getting supplies from the tuckshop!"

"Ah!" grated the tyrannical House-master.

"Merry was assisting Blake and Clive, sir," went on Knox, darting a vicious look at Tom Merry. "And when I interfered, he deliberately helped Blake and Clive to escape!"

Mr. Ratcliff's brow was dark as he glared at the listener to the rest of Knox's narrative.

His spiteful eyes fixed upon the captain of the Shell, but Tom Merry faced the master unflinchingly.

"Merry," rapped out Mr. Ratcliff in concentrated accents, "you shall pay dearly for this night's work. I have half a mind to expel you! Expel you—do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," replied Tom Merry, in a low, steady voice.

Tom's calmness added to the flame of Mr. Ratcliff's fury.

"I have enough to put up with already with those young scoundrels of the Fourth Form!" roared the enraged master. "I certainly shall have no interference from the Shell! I have been openly defied in this House, and you, Merry, have assisted the rebels. I shall flog you publicly to-morrow morning!"

Just as Mr. Merry's jaw dropped, in spite of himself.

"Flog me!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, flog you!" reiterated the master, with vicious malice in his voice. "You shall be publicly flogged in Big Hall to-morrow morning, and a notice to that effect will appear on the board immediately."

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Tom Merry drew a deep breath, and looked in horror at the master.

Knox's eyes were gleaming with keen satisfaction, and Cutts darted a triumphant leer at Tom Merry.

Mr. Ratcliff pointed to the captain of the Shell.

"Take that boy away to the detention-room!" he commanded the two seniors. "If there is any trouble with him, as there was with D'Arcy yesterday, call upon the masters and the prefects to assist you!"

"Yes, sir!" said Knox and Cutts together.

Tom Merry looked steadily at the master.

"Mr. Ratcliff," he cried, in ringing tones, "you have exceeded your liberties to-day, sir! There will be a reckoning when Dr. Holmes returns!"

Mr. Ratcliff's lips set in a straight, hard line, and his face went purple.

"None of your impudence!" he snapped. "Knox, remove the depraved young rascal at once!"

Tom Merry, with a curl of the lip, looked once more at the master, and

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before that contemptuous glance, Mr. Ratcliff dropped his eyes.

Then Tom Merry turned on his heels, and went with Knox and Cutts.

He was resolved not to show the white feather in front of the tyrant of the School House.

He set his teeth on this way to Nobody's Study, imparting to his chums, by looks and not by words, not to interfere.

He was resolved to carry this through to the end, and if it meant a strike of the whole Junior School of St. Jim's, Tom Merry was ready.

CHAPTER 5. Changing Quarters!

"WHEW!" gasped Blake. "That was a close shave!"

He arrived at the door of the Fourth Form dormitory, panting and breathless.

By great good fortune, he had got in at the box-room window, and had navigated the passages undetected.

His eyes sought the assembled faces eagerly, and he gave a gasp of satisfaction when he saw Sidney Clive.

"All serene!" said Clive. "These chaps hauled up the grub through the window, and I got in the way you came."

"Good egg!" panted Blake. "Poor

old Tom Merry has copped it, I'm afraid!"

And he gave an account of his grim struggle with Knox and Cutts.

"Baj Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, blinking at Blake in deep distress. "Watty won't half go for Tom Mcwewy, I'm afraid. Oh crumbs!"

"Anyhow," said Blake, "Tom Merry won't knuckle under to him, and he's at liberty to join us, if he likes. He can barricade his own dormy, the same as we have."

"Gwast Scott, I have some most extraordinary news to tell you, Blake," broke in Gussy. "Dig and I made a great discovery up the chimney!"

"What-ho!" chimed in Digby. "A trap-door, leading to a secret room!"

"Wha-a-at!" gasped Blake.

Hurriedly, D'Arcy and Digby told their story. Blake's face became blank with amazement as the tale was unfolded to his wondering ears.

"My only sainted Aunt Maria!" he gasped at length. "You must be spoofing!"

"Weally, Blake, I wufuse to be called a spoofah!" exclaimed Gussy frigidly. "I considah—"

"Honest Injun, Blake!" said Digby. "True as you're a foot high!"

Jack Blake drew a deep breath.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed.

"What a giddy surprise-packet! I—Hallo! Who's that?"

Sounds of somebody tapping at the dormitory door assailed their ears.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Baggy Trimble!" breathed Blake, in immense relief.

He crossed to the door, and spoke through the keyhole.

"That you, Baggy?"

"Yes!" came the reply. "I say, lemme in!"

"Sorry!" replied Blake. "It can't be did, old son! Got Baggy to report?"

"Rather," came Baggy Trimble's eager tones through the keyhole.

"Tom Merry's going to be flogged in Big Hall to-morrow morning—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Honour bright!" said Baggy.

"There's a notice on the board, telling school to assemble in Big Hall after prayers to-morrow!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Blake! I say, Blake!" called Baggy Trimble breathlessly. "What do you think?"

"What?" demanded Blake eagerly.

"Got it off your chest, ast?"

"Ratty's going to stink you out!"

"Stink us out?"

"Yes!" said Baggy Trimble. "I spied outside his study keyhole just now, and heard him talking about it to Knox. They are going to burn sulphur in here, and fumigate you until you give in."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Blake.

There came a sound as of a chuckle from Baggy Trimble at the other side of the door.

"I reckon you're in for it, Blake!" said the fat youth of the Fourth.

"Better give in, you know!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "Anything more?"

"No," replied Baggy Trimble. "I—I say, Blake, chuck us out a bit of that grub you got from the tuckshop to-night, will you? I—I'm starving!"

"Sorry!" replied Blake. "We shall need all we've got!"

"But you'll have to give in to-morrow!" said Baggy Trimble. "You can't stay in there and be suffocated!"

"We shall see!" growled Blake. "Cut off, Baggy!"

"But, I say—"

"Hop it!" said Blake. "If Ratty

comes along, you'll share the same fate as Tom Merry in the morning!"

"Oh crumbs!" Baggy Trimble beat a hasty retreat, the bare thought of a flogging making him go pale.

Jack Blake turned to his followers with a grim face.

"Did you hear what Baggy said?" he asked.

The Fourth-Formers nodded their heads in silence.

Jack Blake set his lips firmly.

"Tom Merry won't be flogged in the morning!" he declared. "We'll see to that, even if it means us getting out of here and attacking Ratty in Big Hall. What do you chaps think?"

A murmur of assent arose from most of the fellows.

"Bai Jove, you are wight, Blake!" said Gussy, his eyes gleaming. "Tom Mewway was a bewick for standing up for us, and we'll stand up for him if he needs us, bai Jove!"

"Hear, hear!" said Digby, Herries, Clive, Levison, Cardew, Talbot and a score of others.

"Good!" said Blake. "And now for the stinking out part of the business. I reckon Ratty's going to have a great disappointment to-morrow when he starts his fumigating stunt. We won't be here!"

"Bai Jove!"

"We're going to shift our quarters," said Blake. "Gussy's discovery comes in handy, under the circumstances—a heaven-sent blessing, in fact! To-night, when the rest of the school is asleep, we'll all shift from here into that secret room off the Form-room chimney, and Ratty can search high and low for us—he'll never find us out!"

A chorus of delighted exclamations arose.

"My lat!" cried Digby, his eyes shining, with delight. "What a ripping wheeze! I reckon Ratty will be ready to fall through the floor when he finds we have disappeared in the morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not half!"

"He'll have the shock of his life!" chuckled Blake. "We'll disappear from human ken, and he can go ahead with the sulphur bizny in the dormy. We shan't be here!"

"Bai Jove, that's toppin'!" chirruped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We'll do the disappearin' twice—what?"

"Rather!" chuckled Blake. "But before we do any more talking, let's have some supper, chaps. It will be all the less to carry up the chimney when we shift our diggings!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A ration of cocoa, biscuits, and corned beef was served out to each fellow, and they all fell to and enjoyed a hearty meal.

That over, preparations were made for the retreat into hiding.

Blankets, pillows, bolsters and quilts were rolled up into separate bundles, tied round with sheets. Each boy put on an old suit of pyjamas as a protection from the soot, and the food was made up into parcels large enough to go up the chimney.

That being done, Jack Blake proceeded to outline his plans for their departure.

Mr. Ratcliff made one visit to the Fourth-Form rebels that night.

It was a completely mission, typical of the tyrannical master.

He offered to let Tom Merry off his flogging, if Jack Blake & Co. would come out and submit to his authority.

If Mr. Ratcliff reckoned upon using this as a trump card, he miscalculated, for Jack Blake laconically told him to "go and eat coke," and so exasperated

the master that when he at last retired baffled, Mr. Ratcliff was on the verge of apoplexy.

The Fourth-Formers awaited the hour of midnight with calmness and determination.

When at last the witching hour tolled forth from the old clock-tower, Jack Blake arose, and announced to his followers that a move was to be made.

Scouts were sent out in advance, to find out how the land lay. They returned with the news that the coast was clear.

Mr. Horace Ratcliff, congratulating himself that his ruse of fumigating the Fourth-Form dormitory next morning would bring the rebels to book, went to sleep, resting assured that he would have the revolt under way before Dr. Holmes returned.

Creeping along the darkened passages in single file, and without any boots on, the Fourth-Formers made their way to the Form-room.

Digby went first, leading the way, and Gussy stood below, giving the fellows a

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Away you go elsewhere, and again that cutting little sentence. And so on.

You know what it's like, don't you? You've heard those words dozens of times, haven't you?

All this is by way of warning. You may hear "Sold out!" yet again if you do not get your copy of "The Holiday Annual" soon. Don't leave it too late. Go and get one now. "The Holiday Annual" is selling like wildfire, and before long it may be—

SOLD OUT!

helping hand as they climbed up into the depths of the chimney.

Within the space of half an hour every boy in the Fourth Form, with the exception of Jack Blake, D'Arcy, Levison and Clive, had navigated the chimney and was safely ensconced within the secret upper room that Gussy and Digby had so unexpectedly discovered.

Blake and Levison returned to the dormitory, whilst D'Arcy and Clive made their way up the Form-room chimney to the roof.

Climbing across the leads, they arrived on the canopy directly above the Fourth-Form dormitory window.

Blake and Levison were leaning out, and hailed the two above softly.

"All sewene, dear boys!" called Gussy, lowering a rope.

Blake pulled in the rope and affixed it to two of the bundles.

Giving a jerk as a signal, Gussy and Clive hauled the rope up again, taking the bundles upon the roof.

In this manner were the bedding and the provisions conveyed from the dormi-

tory to the roof. The boys worked silently and swiftly, and within another half an hour the clothes of nearly thirty beds, and enough food to last the Fourth-Form strikers two days, was safe on the roof.

Then, with a last glance of joyous exultation round the dormitory, Jack Blake and Levison retired, leaving the door wide open for anyone to enter who cared.

"That's that job jobbed!" chuckled Blake, as he and Levison crept away to the Form-room. "I reckon Ratty will have a surprise packet in the morning!"

"If he doesn't, call me a Dutchman!" grinned Levison.

From the Form-room they gained the roof, passing the trapdoor, at which Digby and Herries stood ready.

Arriving upon the roof, Blake and Levison helped Gussy and Clive bring the numerous bundles across the leads to the top of the chimney.

Then, by means of a game rope, the bundles were lowered down the chimney, to be received by Digby, and conveyed into their secret quarters by Herries, and other willing helpers.

When the last bundle was down, the four juniors on the roof followed.

They climbed in through the trap-door, and made their way up the steps and into their new abode.

Jack Blake looked round the long, shallow room for the first time, and drew a deep breath.

"Well!" he announced. "This is a giddy campaign, I must say! Nobody would ever find us up here if they searched from now till doomsday. Did you clear away all traces of the soot from the grate beneath, Dig?"

"Trust me!" replied Digby. "Ratty will never smell a rat in that quarter, don't you worry! What about the roof?"

"We've left no trace!" chuckled Blake. "We worked in our socks, you see."

"Bai Jove! I wathin think we've diddled Watty this time, dear boys!"

The Fourth-Formers were undoing the parcels and arranging their beds for the night.

They were quite cheerful, and, indeed, enjoying the novelty of their new quarters immensely.

"We'll have a look round in the morning," said Blake, as he stretched his bolster on the floor. "Good-night, chaps, and pleasant dreams!"

"Good-night!"

And, in half an hour, the whole Fourth Form, with the sole exception of Baggy Trimble, who was again sleeping in a spare bed in the Third-Form dormitory, were sound asleep in the mysterious room somewhere in the School House.

CHAPTER 6.

A Shock for Ratty!

CLANG, clang, clang! It was the rising-bell, ringing clear upon the cold, crisp air of the next morning.

St. Jim's, after its first indolent grumbles at having to leave its cosy bed, arose, and the boys descended from their dormitories.

Monty Lowther and Manners looked glum. Tom Merry had spent the night in the detention-room, under sentence of a flogging at the hands of Mr. Ratcliff after prayers. And his clumsy were feeling very apprehensive on his behalf.

Before he settled that matter, however, Mr. Horace Ratcliff had other equally important work to perform.

Knox brought the sulphur to him, and Mr. Ratcliff, followed by Taggles and the

rascally prefect of the Sixth, made their way up to the Fourth-Form dormitory.

Mr. Ratcliff's face was much brighter that morning, in anticipation of victory over his rebellious pupils.

His face underwent a startling change, however, when he reached the dormitory and found the door wide open.

With a queer sensation in his breast, the tyrant of the School House strode inside, and fell back with a smothered gasp of stupefaction when his eye beheld an empty dormitory, with the bedsteads standing bare, stripped of the bedclothes.

"Gug-good heavens!" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff, hardly daring to believe the evidence of his own eyes. "The—the room is empty!"

Knox rubbed his eyes in wonder, and Taggles blinked.

"Oh crumbs!" muttered Knox. Mr. Ratcliff's eyes nearly started out of his head as they roved around the deserted room.

"They—they have flown during the night!" gasped the dumfounded master. "Knox, I—I—I—"

"It's jolly queer, sir!" faltered Knox, as much surprised as the master. "Where have they gone to?"

Mr. Ratcliff looked into the lockers, but found that they were empty. He looked out of the window, and looked downwards, sideways, and upwards. Whether he expected to see his missing juniors soaring away into the heavens in an aeroplane is not possible to say.

It was apparent, however, that no good could be done by staying in the dormitory, so, with a muttered imprecation under his breath, Mr. Ratcliff stamped out, followed by Knox and Taggles.

The fumigation of the Fourth-Form dormitory, in view of the disappearance of the Fourth Form, was indefinitely postponed.

Breakfast was in progress, and Knox went down to the Sixth-Form table, where he found the startling news to his fellow seniors.

Soon the news leaked out, and the breakfast-room was buzzing with it.

When breakfast was over, the sole topic of conversation was the disappearance of the Fourth Form.

Fellows went in scores up to the Fourth-Form dormitory, but beyond the empty room and the stripped beds, they discovered nothing.

Mr. Ratcliff was frantic with rage and mortification.

He summoned Kildare and all the seniors to him, and an elaborate search was made throughout all St. Jim's.

Every room was searched, every passage, every box-room and attic.

The woodshed and the gymnasium were searched. Even the domestic quarters were invaded in a futile hunt for the missing Form.

Tom Merry's flogging was put off for that morning—much to the relief of Monty Lowther, Manners, and most of the Shell.

Mr. Ratcliff was too busy searching for Jack Blake & Co. who seemed to have disappeared from human ken altogether.

All that morning the Sixth Form and Mr. Ratcliff were engaged hunting in all likely and unlikely places for the missing Fourth Form.

The cloisters, the ruined chapel, the vaults, the old tower, were all searched, but with the same result. Even the roof was scoured, but nothing was revealed. Mr. Ratcliff and the searchers drew blank everywhere they looked.

Jack Blake & Co. seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

It was unbelievable, but true. The whole Fourth Form—over twenty THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 615.

boys in all—had flitted away as if by magic in the silent watches of the night, leaving no trace, no clue, behind them.

Mr. Ratcliff tore his hair. He fumed and he raved. He beseeched and he threatened alternately, but all to no purpose, other than to increase his own anxiety and temper.

The other masters of the school stood aloof from Mr. Ratcliff and treated him with curt abruptness. He had brought this state of affairs upon himself. He would have to render an account to the Head when he returned. Mr. Ratcliff was in a dilemma, and he knew it.

His obstinacy, however, overruled his common-sense for a period.

His only contention was that Jack Blake & Co. had escaped beyond the school walls; but if they had, they must have done it by aeroplane, for not a footprint, not a single clue, could be found.

Mr. Ratcliff, furious and chagrined as he was, forebore from conducting a man-hunt—or rather, a boy-hunt—outside the school walls.

If the disappearance of the Fourth Form got to the ears of the police the scandal would be intense.

It would bring Mr. Ratcliff into further hot water with the Head, and the tyrant of the School House had enough to contend with inside St. Jim's without a further scandal outside.

"It's uncanny!" announced Monty Lowther to a congregation of the Lower School in the Common-room after dinner that day. "Where on earth they have got to, goodness only knows. And yet,

they must be somewhere. They can't have melted away into thin air!"

"But where can they be?"

Monty Lowther shook his head.

"I give it up," he said. "It ticks me entirely. I'm glad, though. For one thing, it's put off Tom Merry's flogging for a time, at any rate!"

"Hear, hear!"

Wally D'Arcy was looking worried. "I'm thinking of old Gus," he said.

"Blessed if I don't think they've all been spirited away somewhere!"

There was a general shaking of heads. Nobody could offer any solution to the mystery. Every conceivable hiding-place had been searched, but not a trace of the missing boys could be found.

St. Jim's wondered vaguely whether the age of miracles had really passed.

CHAPTER 7.

Gussy's Narrow Escape.

"YAW-AW-AW!" Blake awoke with a sleepy yawn, and stared indolently around him.

When his eyes beheld the rafted roof, and then wandered round to the stone walls of the chamber, he sat up with a start. Then he gave a grin.

"Oh, of course!" he murmured. "We're not in the dormy. Say, chaps, wake up!"

In response to Blake's call, a dozen or so heads bobbed up.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I wonderd which we were at first, you know. It seems awfully strange up heah!"

"I reckon Ratty thinks it stranger still!" chuckled Blake. "What's the time, Gus?"

Gussy consulted his wrist-watch. An expression of amazement overspread his noble features when his eyes beheld the dial.

"Gweat Scott! Imposs!"

"What is it, ass?" demanded Blake.

"Half-past eleven, bai Jove!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"Great pip!" exclaimed Levison. "I reckon Gussy's right. It's half-past eleven!"

A chuckle went round the room.

"My hat!" gasped Blake. "We've overslept ourselves this morning, and no error. Tumble up, chaps; we shall have to have dinner and brekker in one!"

The chaps tumbled up, and were soon dressed.

Blake then decreed that each fellow should make his bed, which the majority of them did with a good will. Mellish and Racker, and a few other slackers hung back, but Blake soon settled with them in his own rough, but extremely effective way.

Then a hasty meal was made of coffee, ham, biscuits, and bread-and-butter.

"Well," said Blake, when breakfast-things were cleared away. "I wonder how things are down below?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chirruped Cardew. "I reckon they're searchin' high and low for the giddy wanderers. Wonder if Ratty would play the good father stunt, if we went back to him like the regulation prodigal sons?"

"Bai Jove! Wathah not, deah boy!" responded Gussy. "Besides, Cardew, we shouldn't think for a moment of going back to Watty, unless he gives in!"

"No fear!"

Blake let out a warning hiss.

"Quiet, you chaps!" he murmured. "Goodness knows where we are—between two rooms somewhere, I suppose. Anyhow, don't talk loud, else we may be heard through the walls. We don't want Ratty pulling the giddy School House down, you know, looking for ghosts."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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Gore and Buck Finn of the Shell got in Gussy's way, and the swell of St. Jim's bent down his head and charged at them. Gore and the American junior went sprawling. Then up came Mr. Ratcliff, followed by Knox and a pack of juniors. (See chapter 7.)

"Anyhow, let's have a look round," said Horries practically. "We may be able to find out where we are exactly."

"Good idea!" said Blake. "Don't put your boots on, chaps, and don't make a noise. My word, this is something new—eh, what?"

Walking on tiptoe, the Fourth-Formers proceeded to inspect their new quarters. There seemed to be nothing of real value in the room, although Digby had ventured the opinion that the treasure of old St. James' might be hidden there.

It seemed just a bare room, actually a space between two rooms, sparsely furnished, extremely stuffy, and dark.

They had to use candles as a means of illumination.

Suddenly, however, Blake made a startling discovery.

Just beneath the table, or altar, at the end of the room, he caught sight of a rusty bolt. Calling the other fellows round him, he made an effort to shift it. But time had made it stiff, and it took the combined efforts of Blake, Cardew, and Sidney G'live to shift it.

It shot back suddenly—so suddenly, in fact, that the three juniors collapsed on top of each other.

Then, worked by a secret spring somewhere, a square aperture in the floor opened, and a ray of light penetrated the room.

Necks were craned forward eagerly to peer through, and a gasp of astonishment arose when they found themselves gazing down upon the raised platform of the Big Hall.

"Ye gods!" exclaimed Blake breathlessly. "So that's where we are—on top of Big Hall. This door is one of those oaken panels that form the ceiling of Big Hall. My hat, what a merry go!"

Big Hall, of course, was deserted. The Fourth-Formers grinned as they thought of what might have happened had it been one of the Form-rooms instead.

Blake examined the lock, and greased it with a morsel of butter.

He closed the trap-door, and found that the bolt worked easily now, and he was able to open and shut it almost noiselessly.

"We're in luck's way," observed Kerruish.

"Yaas, watah!"

The Fourth-Formers returned into the middle of the secret apartment.

Unfortunately, they had forgotten the question of illumination, for there was no window to the room.

Two candles were there, and they were burning very low.

"Oh crunks!" growled Blake. "We can't live up here in the dark. Somebody must go down and get some candles, or a lamp."

The fellows looked at each other.

"I know," said Digby. "Let's draw lots."

The idea caught on at once.

Lots were drawn as to who should be the fellow to venture out for candles, and the lot fell to Gussy.

Blake did not seem best pleased at that.

"You are sure to bungle it, somehow, Gussy," he said. "I—"

"Weally, Blake, I vepudiate your aspersions!" said Gussy haughtily. "I have drawn the lot, and I shall go."

"All right," said Blake. "Keep your wool on, old son. But, for goodness' sake, be careful, and don't give away our hiding-place, on any account."

"That goes without sayin', Blake," observed D'Arcy.

Blake thought a moment.

"Better not go down the chimney: the fire's alight in the Form-room," he said. "I think the best and safest way would be for us to let you down through that trap-door in the ceiling of Big Hall."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed D'Arcy; but, with a heroic effort, he added: "Very well, Blake. That's all right."

Sheets were tied together, and Gussy was lowered down into Big Hall.

He arrived on the platform without mishap, and the makeshift rope was

haunted back. Whilst Gussy was gone a watch was kept at the trap-door for when he should return, so that he could be hauled up again.

Creeping noiselessly, Arthur Augustus made his way out of Big Hall and into the passage outside.

He was running a great risk, he knew, and perhaps the success of the Fourth Form strike depended upon whether he succeeded in eluding observation or not. If he could reach the back stairs, then he could make his way down to the domestic quarters, where he would have no difficulty in persuading Toby to get him a consignment of candles.

Proceeding with infinite caution, Gussy reached the end of the passage, where the lecture-room adjoined. Fortunately, the day was a dull one, and the window recesses afforded the junior apex secretion when somebody came along.

Lessons were now over, and there were a good many people about.

However, D'Arcy, putting all his scout-craft to the best advantage, reached the top of the stairs leading down to the kitchens without mishap, and he crept down silently.

Toby was there, warming the dinner-plates, whilst the cooks bustled about getting dinner ready. Toby was by himself, and Gussy gave a cautious whistle.

Toby looked round with a startled countenance.

"Toby!" called Gussy from the staircase. "It's me, dear boy."

The school pace heaved a sigh of relief when he saw who his mysterious visitor was.

Briefly D'Arcy made his wants known, and slipped half-a-crown into Toby's palm. That was sufficient bribe to Toby, and ten minutes later the envoy of the Fourth Form strikers was retracing his steps, with a bundle of candles under his arm.

Fortune seemed to smile on Gussy so far, for he reached Big Hall without being disturbed by chance wanderers in the passage.

He opened the door of Big Hall and entered.

He gave a jump as his eyes beheld Mr. Ratcliff and Knox, standing just below the platform.

The master and the prefect saw D'Arcy at the same moment, and they ceased their discourse, and stared at him as if he were an apparition.

"D'Arcy!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff, going pale. "Good heavens! Is it really the boy?"

"It's him right enough, sir!" cried Knox. "Look out, sir, he's hotting!"

For Gussy, seeing his danger, had turned on his heel and fled down the passage like lightning.

With the parcel of candles clutched tightly to him, he ran for dear life, seeking the Fourth Form-room as a very present means of safety.

Mr. Ratcliff and Knox, breathing incoherent threats, dashed to the door of Big Hall, and pounded after the elusive junior as fast as they could.

"Stop him!" howled Mr. Ratcliff. "Help!"

Fellows came from far and near in response to Mr. Ratcliff's calls. The boys fell back in amazement when they saw the form of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy speeding along, with Mr. Ratcliff and Knox on his track.

Gussy's way lay straight upon the passage on his left. One or two fellows were running down it, but he set his teeth hard, and made a desperate dash for it.

Gore and Buck Finn of the Shell got THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 615.

In Gussy's way, and the swell of St. Jim's bent down his head and charged at them. Gore and the American junior went sprawling. Then up came Mr. Ratcliff, followed by Knox and a pack of juniors, and the whole party collided with Gore and Buck Finn.

Gussy gave a swift look round at the scene of confusion, and with a look of triumph on his face, he sped onward. Mr. Ratcliff & Co. were up in an instant, and pelting after Gussy; but D'Arcy darted into the Fourth Form-room, which was deserted, and slammed the door to, locking it.

His pursuers dashed up a moment later, to be met by the closed door.

"Never mind, sir," panted Knox, breathless from his exertions. "We've got him now!"

"North," tapped Mr. Ratcliff to the prefects. "Sixth," take some boys down with you, and keep guard beneath the window of this room! I am determined the young rascal shall not escape this time!"

Gussy, inside the Form-room, chuckled when he heard this.

"D'Arcy," screeched Mr. Ratcliff, beating upon the door, "will you open this at once?"

"It will be worse for you if you don't," came the voice of the infuriated master, almost choking.

"Wun away and play marbles, dear boy!" chuckled Gussy, forgetting in his triumph, that brand of elegance that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. "Go and fry your face, Mr. Watcliff!"

A howl of merriment burst from the crowd outside, and Mr. Ratcliff raved. Gussy heeded not the ravings of the angry master. He went over to the grate. The fire was burning low at the time; but, still, Gussy could not venture up the chimney. He had a remedy, however.

Going to the coal-scuttle, which was well-filled, he picked out the largest lumps of coal, and placed them carefully over the fire. He covered the fire with new coal, and found that barely any heat arose upwards.

Then, distributing the candles in his various pockets, and utterly regardless of his beautiful clothes, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy trod upon the coal-laden fire, bent down, and hauled himself up into the chimney.

In the eerie, smoke-laden gloom a voice called to him.

"All serene, Gussy?"

"Yas, wathah!" gasped D'Arcy, holding his breath lest he suffocated in the fumes of the fire.

"Good egg!" said Jack Blake.

"You're a brick, Gus!"

D'Arcy attained the trap-door, and Blake helped him in.

Gussy presented a very comical aspect, for he was covered in soot.

Blake chuckled as he led his noble chum up into the secret retreat.

"You deserve well of your country, Gus!" he said. "Ha, ha, ha! You look like a Christy minstrel!"

Gussy's face went pale beneath the outer covering of soot.

"Oh, Gweat Scott!" he exclaimed.

"Bai Jove!"

"What's up, Gus?" inquired Blake.

"Theah's no wathah up heah, for me to wash with!" gasped Gussy, in accents of deep dismay.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Oh crumbs! That's awksah, Gussy!"

"Oh dear!" groaned the noble swell of St. Jim's. "I nevah thought of that!"

Blake chuckled, and relieved him of the candles.

Sounds of wild commotion were faded

up through the chimney, and the Fourth-Formers went to the mouth of the trap-door to listen.

Evidently, Mr. Ratcliff had succeeded in getting the Form-room door open, for the room was a hubbub of noise.

Mr. Ratcliff's voice could be heard, raised in accents of wild amazement.

"I tell you, he was in here a minute ago, Knox! You heard him—er—insult me!"

"Hear, hear, sir!" came the reply cheerfully.

Mr. Ratcliff seemed to choke.

"It's a thundering mystery, sir!" came the voice of Knox. "He couldn't have got out of the window. The only other way is the chimney!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Ratcliff.

A rush was made to the chimney, and Blake, peering down from the trap-door, very careful not to let his head protrude, saw the face of Mr. Horace Ratcliff below, peering up the chimney.

It was a temptation Blake could not resist. He scooped out a huge handful of soot and swept it downwards.

"He's not in here!" Mr. Ratcliff was saying. "He's got out upon the roof, I expect, and—Gerrigh! Yah-ha-hoooh!"

His voice trailed off to a muffled gurgle as the soot swept down and filled his mouth.

Mr. Ratcliff jumped back, and dislodged some of the coal from the fire.

A brisk little flame shot up and caught the master's gown.

"Look out, sir!" yelled Grundy of the Shell, choking with laughter. "You're alight, sir—ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Ratcliff's scholastic gown was burning in violent agony at the back.

The luckless Housemaster whisked round, and a gush of flame darted at his trousers.

He gave a wild leap into the air, shrieking with fear and pain.

"Yaroooh! Murder! Help!" he howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came the roar of the onlookers, who saw the funny side of it.

Mr. Ratcliff ripped the blazing gown from him in terror, dashed it to the ground, and stamped frantically upon it.

The crowd of juniors and seniors looked on, chortling in glee.

"Don't stand there laughing like lunatics!" howled the master, leaping away as the flames licked up his legs.

"Bring some water—quick!"

Sobbing with laughter, Kildare and Darrell strode forward, and, stamping upon the burning gown, at last succeeded in extinguishing the fire with the aid of water.

Mr. Ratcliff's face, as he strode away, was truly a sight to behold.

His feelings were too deep for words.

The tyrannical Housemaster was in a frame of mind that was quite homicidal, and the unsuppressed merriment of the School House boys made him more savage than ever.

Jack Blake & Co., who had been amused listeners, chuckled hugely when the tumult in the Form-room ceased, and the crowd had dispersed.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled the leader of the Fourth Form rioters. "Poor old Ratty copped it hot that time—in more senses than one! He'll begin to believe in black magic after this, I reckon!"

"He, ha, ha! Rather!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the only fellow not in cheerful spirits among the rebels.

With soot all over him, he was in a very disreputable state indeed.

Like the Israelites of old in the wilderness, Gussy sighed for water, but there was no Moses to strike a rock and give it him!

CHAPTER 8.

The End of the Strike!

"TOM MERRY'S in for it!"

Thus spake Jack Blake, some half an hour later.

His followers nodded gloomily.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy polished his monocle—the only part of him that he could polish—and looked curiously at Blake.

"What were Watty and Knox jawin' about before I enticed Big Hall, Blake?" he inquired.

"Making arrangements for Tom Merry's flogging!" replied Blake glumly. "Ratty's determined not to let him off, and Tommy's going to be flogged in public this afternoon, before lessons."

"Oh, bal Jove!" Blake's eyes glistened.

"The flogging will take place—or, at least, Ratty thinks it will take place—in Big Hall, right underneath us. Now, chaps, we can stop that flogging—eh what?"

His followers looked at him breathlessly.

"You mean——" began Clive.

"We'll chip in from our little abode up here!" chuckled Blake. "This trap-door is directly above the platform, where Tommy will be placed for flogging. I've an idea in my noodle whereby we can get him away from Ratty's clutches. It will mean us showing ourselves up here, but I don't see how that will make Ratty any the wiser."

And Blake proceeded to swiftly outline his scheme to the Fourth-Formers.

Meanwhile, dinner was in progress in the School House below.

In vain did the masters and prefects command silence at table.

Everybody was discussing the uncanny disappearance of the Fourth Form, and the mysterious disappearance of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy from the Fourth Form-room.

Thinking that Gussy had climbed up the chimney to the roof, Mr. Ratcliff had organised a search on the roof, but nothing came of it.

Gussy had vanished into thin air, as also had the rest of the Fourth.

Nobody could make head or tail of it. The mystery deepened every moment.

After dinner, Mr. Ratcliff visited Tom Merry, who was still confined in Nobody's Study.

Tom's face was quite calm, although his brows contracted at the sight of the tyrant of the School House.

Mr. Ratcliff looked grimly at him.

"I've come to talk seriously with you, Merry," began the master, controlling his anger with an effort. "Are you aware of the whereabouts of the Fourth Form?"

Tom Merry stared blankly at the master.

"The whereabouts of the Fourth Form!" he echoed. "Well, I suppose they are still in their dormitory, unless you have given in to them."

It was a thrust that Tom intended, and Mr. Ratcliff's face went purple.

"You impudent young rascal!" he screeched. "You know very well where they have gone to! Tell me where they are, and—and you shall not be flogged!"

"If they are not in the Fourth Form dormitory, sir, then I don't know where they are," said Tom Merry quietly. "I suppose they haven't disappeared, have they?"

Mr. Ratcliff gulped.

"You know very well where they have disappeared!" he booted. "Where are they, I say? Speak, you younger rascal!"

Tom Merry set his jaw grimly.

"I don't know where they are," he said. "It's no use asking me, Mr. Rat-

cliff. If I did know I shouldn't inform you!"

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes seemed to narrow down into mere slits, through which his eyes gleamed maliciously.

"So you refuse to speak, in defiance of my offer to let you off the flogging?"

"I can tell you nothing," said Tom Merry quietly and calmly.

"Very well," said the master, gritting his teeth. "You shall be flogged at two-thirty this afternoon!"

When the master had gone, and the key once more turned in the lock, Tom Merry sat down at the bare table of the detention-room, and stared straight before him, trying hard to puzzle the matter out.

What's Blake been up to now, I wonder? he muttered, half aloud.

"Ratty got his rag out, that's certain, and he thinks I can explain. Well, the cad can do his worst. He'll have to reckon for it afterwards."

Tom sat, deep in melancholy thought, until the unlocking of the door roused him.

Mr. Ratcliff once more appeared, and behind him came Taggles, the gardener, and Knox.

"There he is!" said Mr. Ratcliff, pointing to Tom, who had sprung to his feet. "Take him to Big Hall at once!"

"Yes, cad!" snarled Tom Merry, facing the oncoming foe with gleaming eyes. "You lay your hands on me—"

"Rush the young sweep!" grated Knox, and he led the attack on Tom.

The captain of the Shell put up a gallant fight, but against such overwhelming odds he was powerless.

He was borne away from the detention-room in the grip of many strong arms, and hustled into Big Hall.

The school had already assembled, with the exception of the missing Fourth Form.

Jack Blake & Co. were conspicuous by their absence!

A buzz of excitement arose as Taggles and the gardener appeared, followed by Mr. Ratcliff, bearing the struggling captain of the Shell with them.

"Tom Merry?"

After that sudden cry a hush fell upon the assembly, as Tom was borne to the platform.

Kildare and his fellow-prefects in the Sixth were looking black.

Their hearts were full of anger and resentment against this tyrannical usurper from the New House.

Messrs. Selby, Latham, and Twigg were there. Mr. Selby was looking sour as usual, but quite unmoved. The other two masters darted bitter looks at Mr. Ratcliff.

In the tiered ranks of the Shell there was an ominous stir.

Monty Lowther and Manners were fidgeting uneasily.

"Oh, poor old Tommy!" muttered Lowther. "I—I say, Manners, what can we do?"

Manners shook his head.

"If we interfere——"

Monty Lowther looked round upon the other members of the Shell.

"Chaps," he whispered, "going to chip in?"

"Hear, hear!" replied George Alfred Grundy, clenching his fists. "I'll wallop all the innards out of that cad Ratcliff. I'll lead you——"

But Grundy's heroic announcement fell rather flat at the lack of enthusiasm from some of the other fellows.

Talbot and Kangaroo and Clifton Dane, and many other chums of the Terrible Tens, were willing to stand up for their leader.

The others hesitated, irresolute.

Tom Merry, by this time, had been hauled upon the platform, and was pinned between Taggles and the gardener, who looked as if they didn't enjoy their job.

Mr. Ratcliff raised his hand, facing the assembled school.

"Silence!" he rasped, in commanding tones. "The school has been assembled here this afternoon to witness the chastisement of a junior who has been a prime mover in the unprecedented disturbances that have occurred during the last few days. I——"

A low rumble of resentment arose, mostly from the junior sections of the school; but Mr. Ratcliff quelled it with a howl for silence.

"During the absence of Dr. Holmes," he proceeded, when the noise had subsided, "I have been left in complete charge of the school, and it is my duty to see that discipline and order are maintained. I have had the unheard experience of being openly defied by a whole Form—a whole Form!" Mr. Ratcliff gulped in his throat in the intensity of his feeling. "My authority has been flouted, and a complete Form of juniors has revolted against me!"

Again there was that rumble of angry, excited voices, and it was some time before Mr. Ratcliff could make himself heard.

"This boy," he cried, pointing an accusing finger at Tom Merry, "this boy has aided and abetted the insubordinate boys, and assisted them in their defiance of me. I have given him the chance to retract, but he openly defies me, and——"

"You cad! You unspeakable rotter!" Tom Merry's voice cut in like the lash of a whip. All eyes were turned upon the captain of the Shell, as his cheeks flushed red, he denounced the tyrant of St. Jim's. "You cad!" repeated Tom Merry, in ringing accents. "I have aided the Fourth-Formers in a certain degree, and I am not sorry for it. That does not warrant a flogging. You ask me where the Fourth Form are, and I said I do not know. I repeat, I do not know, and——"

"You lie!" screeched Mr. Ratcliff.

"You know where they are hiding!"

"I know nothing of their whereabouts," cried Tom Merry. "And, as I said before, I should not betray them, even if I did!"

Mr. Ratcliff turned to Taggles.

"Hoist him up!" he yelled. "Take off his jacket, and hoist him up! He defies me before the whole school! I'll box him within an inch of his life."

The master took hold of a cruel-looking birch, and whistled it in the air.

Taggles and the gardener, struggled with Tom Merry, who, with jaw sternly set and teeth clenched hard, commenced once more to fight gamely for his liberty.

The boys of St. Jim's were all on their feet now. Monty Lowther and Manners were clenching their fists, prepared to dash forward to their chum's assistance, when——

Swoosh!

From somewhere up above a huge, black torrent descended—a cloud of black dust, which descended upon the platform and obliterated everything upon it from view for a moment.

It was an avalanche of soot, let loose by Jack Blake & Co. from the trap-door in the ceiling.

Swoosh!

Blake's intervention had been well-timed and well-directed.

Mr. Ratcliff collapsed as a load of soot swept down upon him from above, filling his mouth, his eyes, and his ears.

"Xarough! Yah-hugh!"
 "Look hout!" yelled Taggies, letting go of Tom Merry. "I— Yooough! Grooogh! Hooough!"

A torrent of soot smote him, and enveloped him from head to foot.

Taggies flourished forward, tripped over Mr. Ratcliff's prostrate form, and crashed heavily on top of the master.

"Xarough!"
 The school stood spellbound, incoherent at this strange turn of events.

Then, from out the ceiling, a long, white rope appeared.

It consisted of half a dozen sheets, rolled up and knotted together.

The head of Jack Blake appeared through the panel in the ceiling, and his face came down, ringing through Big Hall above the turmoil on the platform.

"Come on, Tom Merry! Up here—quick!"

Then the dumfounded school found its voice, and a cry arose, half incredulous, half amazed:

"Blake!"
 Mr. Ratcliff scrambled to his feet, gouging soot from his eyes.

Blake's voice had aroused him from a sear stupor.

"Tommy—quick!" called Blake again.

For Tom Merry had stood as one transfixed at the sound of Blake's voice above.

"Hooray!" came the voice of Monty Lowther from the ranks of the Shell.

"Cut off, Tommy! Bravo, Blake!"

"Stop!" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff, darting forward. "Stop, I say!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 A roar of derision answered him, coming from the throats of every person there, except those upon the platform and perhaps the masters.

Covered from head to foot in soot, Mr. Ratcliff presented an utterly absurd and ridiculous figure.

Choking and gasping, both from the soot and his fury, the tyrant of St. Jim's made a grab at Tom Merry as he darted for the rope.

But before his grasp fell upon Tom Merry, before Tom was upon the rope, the door at the other end of Big Hall opened, and two figures entered.

They stood for a moment, transfixed at the scene enacted before them, and then a voice lashed through the air:

"Good heavens! Mr. Ratcliff—boys, what is the meaning of this?"

Mr. Ratcliff whipped round as if he had received an electric shock.

Tom Merry turned and gazed in the direction from which the voice had come.

The boys, the prefects, and the masters in Big Hall wheeled round, and their gaze became riveted upon the door.

Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, and Mr. Railton, the Schoolhouse master, stood upon the threshold, majestic, awe-inspiring.

Mr. Ratcliff, what is the meaning of this, thundered Dr. Holmes.

The master of the date recoiled. If the soot upon his face had allowed it, his skin would have shown pale as death.

"The—The Head!"

The cry arose from a hundred throats. Then, from the regions of the ceiling, came a wild, joyous cry:

"Dr. Holmes! Mr. Railton! Hooray!"

"Hooray!" came in a roar—a distant roar—from nearly thirty boys, crowded as best they could round the trap-door in the ceiling.

The eyes of the Head roved upwards, and he started back in amazement when he beheld a cluster of boyish faces in an aperture in the ceiling—an aperture where once had been an oak panel.

"Good heavens!"

Mr. Ratcliff's voice, as he uttered the

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ejaculation, was almost incoherent with horror and fear.

"What—what does this mean?" cried the Head, in awe-stricken accents.

"What has happened?"

"I—I—," stammered Mr. Ratcliff, cowering back.

"Half a mo', sir!" yelled Jack Blake.

And a moment later his figure was seen slithering down the rope from the ceiling.

Dr. Holmes strode down the aisle towards the platform. Mr. Railton, amazement and horror depicted upon his handsome face, followed.

Taggies had risen to his feet, spluttering and sneezing wildly.

Mr. Ratcliff stood like one turned to stone, only his glaring eyes displaying the conflicting emotions he felt.

Arriving on the platform, the venerable old headmaster of St. Jim's turned to Mr. Ratcliff.

"Mr. Ratcliff," he rapped, "I demand an explanation!"

Mr. Ratcliff trembled violently, and for a moment speech failed him.

Then Jack Blake lifted his voice once again, addressing the boys above.

"Come down here, chaps!" he called.

The school looked on blankly as, one by one, the boys of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's slithered down the rope of sheets.

When they were all down—even Mel-

lish, in his excitement, had risked his neck in descending that way—Jack Blake spoke up, pointing accusingly at Mr. Ratcliff.

"That—that man," he said, in steady, measured accents, "he is the cause of this trouble! In your absence, sir, he has tyrannised over us unmercifully until we could not stand it any longer!"

We went on strike, sir!"

"On—on strike?"

Blake nodded.

"We revolted, sir," he said. "Mr. Ratcliff—"

"Hold your tongue, you lying young scoundrel!" screamed Mr. Ratcliff, shaking with passion. "Dr. Holmes—"

The Head's eyes turned upon him coldly.

"Well, Mr. Ratcliff," he said sternly, "is this how you conduct affairs in my absence?"

"I—I have been defied—"

"We refused to knuckle under to your tyranny!" retorted Blake. "You tried to grind us down under your thumb, but it didn't work!"

"Silence!" commanded Dr. Holmes, his brow clouding like thunder. "Kildare, kindly step up here!"

The captain of St. Jim's came forward.

"Will you give me a true, unbiased account of all that has passed during my absence?"

"Yes, sir," said Kildare quietly.

And in cool, even tones he related as much as he knew of what had transpired since Mr. Ratcliff assumed command of the Schoolhouse.

Once or twice Mr. Ratcliff, boiling with mortification, interrupted, but Dr. Holmes cut him short.

Even when Kildare had finished, the Head waved Mr. Ratcliff to silence, and turned to Blake.

"Now, Blake," he said, "give me an explanation of this unprecedented affair."

"We are very sorry to have caused all this disturbance while you were away ill, sir," replied Blake quietly. "I know it seems to make us appear untrustworthy, but it wasn't our fault. Mr. Ratcliff took his discipline too far, and we—"

we—had to ruck against it. The coward struck D'Arcy across the face with a cane, after having expelled him; and, when D'Arcy was powerless to

resist him, he expelled me for coming to D'Arcy's aid when we tried to prevent his removal to the detention room for flogging in the morning. And, what with that and other things, we became fed-up with Ratcliff."

"We demanded that he should return to his own House and leave us alone, but he refused. Then we banded ourselves in our dormitory, and went on strike. We needed provisions, and Clive and I went out next day to buy some. Tom Merry helped us escape from Knox, who caught us, and for that Mr. Ratcliff sentenced Tom to a flogging. The school has been assembled here this afternoon to witness the flogging, but we interfered, as you can see."

"B-but, how did you get up there?"

The Head's eyes roved towards the ceiling.

"Oh, we have been missing all day, sir!" rapped Blake, with a grin. "We discovered a secret room leading off from the Form-room chimney, and, hearing that Mr. Ratcliff intended flogging us out, we shifted our quarters from the dormitory to there. The secret room is on top of the Hall."

A low murmur of amazement arose from the assembled school, and Mr. Ratcliff seemed on the verge of apoplexy.

The Head turned to the covering master, and addressed him in stern, severe accents.

"I am glad, Mr. Ratcliff, that I came back when I did!" he said cuttingly.

"Fortunately, the visit to my physician was not so prolonged as I thought, and Mr. Railton here settled his business at the War Office sooner than he expected. We both arrived by the two-o'clock train, expecting to find the usual law and order at St. Jim's!"

Dr. Holmes gave an ominous pause, and looked steadily round the room. He frowned deeper than ever when he saw the soot.

"I am shocked—disappointed and shocked, to find such a terrible state of affairs at my school," went on the doctor, in biting accents. "It is a disgrace for any master to have allowed such a disturbance to come to pass! I have no doubt that it could have all been avoided!"

"I did my best!" panted Mr. Ratcliff passionately. "They openly defied my authority!"

"So it seems!" retorted Dr. Holmes drily. "I fear, however, that you carried your authority too far. There is such a thing as strictness, but it should also be carried out with justice and equity. It is not always practicable, when dealing with growing, healthy boys, to discipline them harshly!"

"Hear, hear, sir!" murmured Blake audibly.

Mr. Ratcliff darted a venomous look at Mr. Railton.

"These boys have had a far too easy time under Mr. Railton's tutelage!" he snapped. "They do not know what it is to be governed by a firm hand!"

"Excuse me—" began Mr. Railton hotly.

"Mr. Ratcliff—sir!" thundered the Head, his kind old face now as stern and set as a Roman judge. "Kindly refrain from any comparisons here. There has always been equity and discipline in the School House under Mr. Railton."

"Heah, heah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who presented rather a curious aspect. "Mr. Railton's a right, sir, and we won't have any outside interference in the School House, bai Jove! That is why we went on strike. We wanted Mr. Watch to return to the New House, and let us caww on by ourselves!"

Dr. Holmes snarled grimly.

"Mr. Ratcliff will now be relieved of his duties in the School House," he said. "Blake and Merry will come with me! Also you, Kildare and Mr. Iathorn. I will thresh this matter out in private. Mr. Ratcliff, will you have the goodness to step into my study?"

Mr. Ratcliff's face was a picture of dismay and chagrin. He seemed to be at daggers drawn with all mankind.

Dr. Holmes turned to Taggles, who was still making frantic efforts to clear the soot from his face and person.

"Taggles, kindly have this mess cleared up at once," he said. "You junior lads had better help, too. Such an affair is disgraceful! I am amazed to find this state of things on my return! The rest of the school will disperse."

It was a long time before Big Hall was cleared. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy cheerfully led his Form-fellows in the work of clearing up the soot on the platform.

"It's all right now, dear boys!" he said between his sneezes. "Watty will get it in the neck properly!"

"I hope so!" growled Horries. "I've been wondering how poor old Towser has been going on these last few days."

"Oh, botha Towser!" grinned Gussy, more grimy and disreputable than ever after his exploits with the soot. "Bai Jove, that strike was frightfully exciting, while it lasted!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lessons were forgotten that afternoon. When at last Big Hall was cleared the boys congregated in the passages near the Head's study, waiting to hear the result of Dr. Holmes' "inquest," as Monty Lowther humorously put it.

Sounds of angry voices were heard. Mr. Ratcliff's stern tones about the rest! Later, the Head's door opened, and Tom Merry and Blake emerged.

Their faces were radiant. "Tommy!" cried Monty Lowther, springing forward. "What's the verdict?"

"Not guilty!" grinned Blake. "All serene, chaps! Ratty's being called over the coals by the Head beautifully. His face was almost green when we came out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, dear boy, is it really settled in our favour?" asked D'Arcy.

"What-ho!" replied Blake. "After all the evidence had been given, the

Head ragged us a bit for doing what we did do, but he didn't mention a word of punishment. He just told us to go, saying that he would see that nothing like this occurred in the future."

"And Ratty will go back to the New House!" put in Tom Merry. "I reckon you've scored a ripping victory, Blake!" "Yaas, wathah!" chirruped the swell of St. Jim's. "I wathah think we may congratulate ourselves in our triumph o'vah the tywant, deah boys."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Everything's all O.K., chaps!" said Blake cheerfully. "And—Hullo, Figgins! We've got some bad news for you, old scout!"

The faces of Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, as they came up, were glum.

"Yes, so I hear," replied George Figgins. "Ratty's coming back to the New House, isn't he?"

"Yes, and good riddance!" said Blake.

"Oh, it's rotten!" growled Fatty Wynn disgustedly. "I—I hoped the Head would sack the rotter!"

"No such luck, old chap!" grinned Tom Merry. "But I think this affair has sobered Ratty down—for a time, at any rate!"

"And if he starts any more of his old tantrums, Figgie," put in Blake, with a grin, "just take an example from us chaps, and go on strike!"

"H'm!" growled the leader of the New House juniors. "Thanks for the advice, Blake!"

At that moment the Head's study door opened, and Mr. Ratcliff himself emerged.

His face was black as thunder, and when he saw the boys, the look he gave them would have notified them on the spot if such looks had power to kill.

He spoke not a word, however, but strode down the passage, the boys making room for him as he went.

Then, as the unpopular master turned the corner, a hiss broke out from the assembled juniors. Mr. Ratcliff heard it, and his eyes gleamed.

He did not interfere, but strode out of the School House, in a very unconvincing frame of mind indeed.

Before he left, however, a roar of cheering smote his ears, a roar that came from the throats of scores of lusty boys, and it was like gall and wormwood to the humiliated tyrant of St. Jim's.

"Hurrah for Mr. Railton!" Jack Blake led the cheering, as the School House master left the Head's study. "Hip-hip-hooray!"

"Hurrah!"

"Thank you, my lads!" was Mr. Railton's quiet response. "Please make no more disturbance, but return quietly to your quarters."

At their master's bidding, the juniors dispersed willingly.

Jack Blake & Co., Tom Merry & Co., and Figgins & Co. sauntered up to Study No. 6 together.

The Fourth-Formers were feeling considerably chirpy over their victory.

"I suppose the Head will have that giddy secret chamber blocked up," said Blake ruefully. "It's a pity—a great pity. It might have come in handy, one way or another."

"It might!" observed Tom Merry. "I knew nothing of your disappearance till Ratty told me."

"My word, we thought you had been spirited away, or something," said Monty Lowther. "That was a new sort of strike, by gad!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy. "But," he added thoughtfully, with a glance at his disreputable attire, "I'm jolly glad it's o'vah, deah boy!"

Figgins & Co. took their departure, and Tom Merry & Co. prepared to follow.

"Oh, that reminds me!" said Monty Lowther, with a twinkle in his eye, pausing at the door. "I saw in the paper this morning that at twelve to-night there is going to be a strike involving thousands of hands all over the country."

"Bai Jove!"

"Egad!" said the humorist of the Shell, "adding farther away through the door." "At twelve to-night it will be midnight—and the clocks all over the country will strike!"

Jack Blake & Co. let out a roar, but Monty Lowther was gone before either of the Fourth-Formers could "strike" at him.

(Chuckling at his little joke, the humorist of the Shell struck out for the Shell passage, and disappeared until the storm blew over—taking an excellent example from the Disappearing Fourth!)

THE END.

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THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

Dick Danby, a stalwart lad of sixteen, obtains the promise of partnership from Captain Morgan Kidd, skipper of the auxiliary schooner Poam, and his daughter Stella, in a treasure cruise to the wrecked Pathan. Dick is the sole survivor of the Pathan, which was torpedoed, and is lying half-submerged, off an island in the South Seas. In the strong-room of the ill-fated ship is two millions sterling in bar-gold and money, and the Dragon's Eye—a wonderful diamond.

Otto Schwab, posing as a Dutchman—though in reality the commander of the U-boat which sank the Pathan—and Sulah Mendoza, a villainous Malay, are their unscrupulous rivals for the treasure.

Harry Fielding and Joe Maddox join the expedition, also Wang Su, a Chinese boy. They reach the island off which the Pathan is sunk, and a fierce encounter with the Red Rover takes place, in which our friends are victorious. Later, Dick and Stella go for a swim around the island. During their absence from the ship a cyclone approaches, and the Poam has to leave them and make for safety.

Stella discovers a tunnel through a great rock, which leads to a stronghold of some savages. She penetrates too far into the tunnel, during Dick's absence, and is captured by the high priest, who orders her to be bound hand and foot to a tree.

Dick is distracted by the disappearance of the girl, and on his return finds the tunnel, down which he creeps very stealthily.

Now Read on.

The Rescue of Stella.

His hands pressed against the sides of the tunnel to support the greater part of his weight, Dick Danby crept, inch by inch, down the slope, the grating noise and the ominous chant sounding louder at every step.

Two minutes later he was crouched immediately behind the swaying snake of feathers, as he peered over the bent form of the High Priest to where, beyond the pillared entrance of the temple, he saw that which set the blood coursing rapidly through his veins with rage.

Tied to a palm-tree, her lovely locks falling in a golden cascade about her shoulders, and almost hidden beneath a mass of flowers, was the missing girl, and he, who had seen many dusky maidens so befowelled, knew that it was Stella for whom the sacrificial chant was being raised.

Glancing down at his feet, he learned the meaning of the strange grating which had puzzled him.

It was the High Priest sharpening his axe on a huge stone before the altar, on which, unless he could save her, Stella would be slain, as an offering to the dread Snake God.

Drawing his knife from the sheath at his back, Dick Danby launched himself

full at the priest, who stared, open-mouthed, at the unexpected apparition which had flashed upon him from out of, what he believed to be, solid rock.

With a squeal of terror, he turned to flee.

Too late! Ere he could take a single stride in the direction of the entrance, Dick Danby was upon him, and the next moment white man and black were rolling on the floor of the temple.

Dick could have plunged his knife to its hilt in the fleeing man's back, but it seemed too much like murder, even though he knew of old that the ruthless old savage deserved the worst that could befall him, and thus it was that he gave his foe the opportunity to utter a loud, shrill cry of terror.

Too late, Dick brought the heavy hilt of his knife with crashing force on the High Priest's head, who, with a low moan, rolled unconscious on the floor.

Rising to his feet, Dick Danby glanced through the temple doors, to find that the stricken man's cry had been heard, and that some half-dozen priests were already running towards the temple.

Frantically the young Britisher looked round for a weapon.

His eyes fell upon the sacrificial axe, which lay where the High Priest had dropped it.

Snatching up the heavy weapon, he rushed to meet his foes.

A few seconds later he was in their midst, whirling the axe round his head, and shouting he knew not what, in the excitement of the moment.

Two fell at the first sweep of the keen-edged weapon, and the others, after a single glance at their assailant's face, fled in panic-stricken flight, yelling that which brought a grim smile to Dick Danby's lips.

As, without a moment's pause, Dick rushed towards the tree to which Stella was bound, the islanders took up the fleeing priests' cry, and, scattering like a covey of frightened partridges, fled in all directions.

"Quick, Stella! Back to the temple!" cried Dick breathlessly, as he cut his girl-chum loose.

Only stopping to pick up a shark's-tooth sword, which one of the priests had dropped in his flight, Stella obeyed, and the next moment the two were racing side by side towards the home of the Snake God.

A howl of rage greeted their flight. Glancing over their shoulders, they saw that both islanders and priests, recovering from their superstitious terror at the sight of those whom they had endowed with supernatural powers running from them, had taken up the pursuit.

But both Dick and Stella were fleet of

foot, and, easily maintaining the start the savages' panic had given them, reached the temple well ahead of their pursuers.

"Quick, Stella, the doors!" cried Dick, as they reached the pillared entrance.

The valves were made of stout timber, and their rough hinges rusty from want of use; but both Dick and Stella were strong, and by dint of straining muscles and iron determination had closed the doors, and thrust in place the heavy slab of wood that barred them, just as the foremost priest reached the entrance.

With the thunder of heavy blows showered upon the stout doors ringing in their ears, Dick Danby and Stella Kidd raced across the temple, and sprang on to the altar on either side of the serpent's head.

"Quick, Stella, let me help you into the mouth of the passage! Then you can pull me up!" cried Dick.

But his girl-chum shook her head.

"Why this unseemly haste?" she demanded, with a laugh. "It will take the islanders some time to batter down those doors, and I've taken quite a fancy to this dainty little piece of featherwork!" she added, pointing to the snake's head.

Dick Danby grinned.

"Topping idea! We'll take it with us!" he agreed.

As he spoke, the young sailor grasped the idol's head and tugged vigorously at it.

For some minutes it not only resisted his efforts, but commenced to sway from side to side, with a creaking of wood upon wood which told that it was balanced on a pivot with a heavy weight beneath to keep it moving.

But Dick stuck gallantly to his task, and was rewarded by feeling the wicker-work frame to which the feathers were attached moving upwards—but so suddenly that he lost his balance and reeled back against the rocky wall at the rear of the altar, with the serpent's head and neck clamped tightly to his breast.

"Got it, Stella! Here's your—"

began Dick.

Then, snatching up the battle-axe, sprang from the altar and rushed towards where his girl-chum was standing with her back to the door, holding off the hideous old high priest.

Unnoticed in the excitement of the fight from the savages, the priest whom Dick Danby had stricken down by the steps of the altar had recovered, and had crept towards the door, intent upon admitting his followers.

Fortunately Stella's sharp eyes had detected his slinking form moving through the obscurity of the temple, and, covering the intervening space in one breathless sprint, had reached the door just in time to send the hideously-garbed



Wang Su, holding on to the wreckage, examined the jagged opening in the stout walls of the strong-room, then thrust his long, skinny arm through it.

man reeling back before the threatening point of her shark's-tooth sword.

It was well for the brave girl that the high priest was unarmed. As it was, he was a brawny foe, and well she knew that, strong though she was, she would not stand a chance once those muscular arms closed around her.

Yet she had uttered no cry for help, but with shining eyes presented the point of her sword to her foe whichever way he turned.

Literally foaming at the mouth with baffled rage, the old savage crouched for a spring, then, with a wild yell, sprang at the beautiful girl, sweeping her blade aside with a blow from his bare arm, careless of the jagged wound inflicted by the shark's teeth which studded the blade of the weapon.

But even as he rose from the ground Dick Danby was upon him, and, with a piercing yell, Stella's attacker sank dead at his feet.

The girl flashed a grateful glance at her stalwart young rescuer; but the words of thanks which rose to her lips were drowned by a thunderous crash immediately behind her, which told that, despairing of forcing open the door in any other way, the savages were using the trunk of a tree as a battering-ram.

Side by side Dick Danby and his girl-chum rushed to the altar and jumped on to it.

Seizing Stella beneath the arms, Dick almost threw her into the shelving opening through which they had descended.

"Take my battle-axe—it may come in handy! And here's your souvenir!" he cried, handing her his weapon and the Snake God's head. "Now stand clear! I am going to jump!"

A loud crash, accompanied by the sound of rending wood, told that the door was giving beneath repeated blows of the islanders' battering-ram, and a jagged streak of daylight showed through a crack in the stout doors.

The next moment he had reached the lip of the tunnel-like hole at the back of the altar, and, assisted by Stella, had drawn himself up to the elbow in the subterranean path which marked the beginning of the sloping descent.

Here they crouched, listening to the triumphant cries of the savages as they burst into the temple, which changed to shouts of amazement when they found their prey had evaded them, and were followed by howls of dismay at the loss of the Snake God.

"What are they saying?" whispered Stella.

A low laugh escaped Dick Danby's lips as he replied.

"They don't seem quite certain whether we have eaten the Serpent God, or the Serpent God has eaten us!" he replied. "At any rate, they don't seem to know anything about this tunnel, so we need not remain on guard over it."

This was true, but, nevertheless, it was not until the priests marched out, carrying the body of their chief, and the temple was deserted once more, that Dick and Stella ventured to return to the grotto.

From the Depths.

FROM the "seat" of the Chair Rock, Stella and Dick Danby surveyed the still agitated waters of the lagoon.

The storm had passed to northwards,

but huge Pacific rollers still beat on the coral reef, sending up walls of spray, which reflected the light of the sun in a hundred different tints, until it seemed as though they were hemmed in by an enormous lateral rainbow.

But Dick Danby had no eyes for the savage grandeur of the scene.

His thoughts were fixed upon the unhappy schooner he had seen carried to its doom at the commencement of the storm, and he was oppressed by the contemplation of the task that lay before him, when he could no longer hide from Stella the news of the Foam's destruction.

Despite their perilous position, she was so brave and confident that Dick had not the heart to cast a shadow over her young life until all hope was past.

After all, the schooner had been too far away for him to be certain that it was the Foam, and it would be cruel to make her miserable, even for a day, if it could be avoided.

But he could not hide his sombre thoughts from his girl-chum's quick eyes.

"What's the trouble, Dick? You surely do not think the Foam foundered in a capful of wind such as we have just had?" she asked at last.

"There's no telling what has happened to her without her mate," returned Dick, trying to speak lightly.

Stella's silvery laugh floated over the lagoon.

"I dare say dad managed all right without me. He is quite a good sailor, you know," she replied. "All the same,

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I always think the schooner understands me better than anybody."

"At any rate, he made his offering before the storm broke, and it is unlikely he was driven back on to the reefs," mused Dick, half aloud.

Stella looked sharply at him, but said nothing for several minutes.

"At any rate, dad is certain to make the island as quickly as he can, for he will be anxious about us; so we will divide the day and night into four hour watches. As the commodore is in my hands, I'll take the first watch below," she suggested, and Dick, agreeing, she glided into the water, and disappeared beneath the submerged arch leading to the grotto.

But though one or the other of the two chums thus kept watch during the rest of the day, their vigilance was unavailing, for night fell without disclosing the schooner's eagerly looked for white sails.

As the moon did not rise until close upon midnight, Dick retired to rest in the grotto, whilst Stella occupied her cave-bedroom as before.

It was still dark when Dick Danby awoke, but knowing that should the schooner return during the night Captain Kidd would send a boat in search of them, directly the moon rose, he groped his way into the gorge and looked up.

A faint glow tinged the rugged tops of the towering cliffs, told that the moon was rising, so, throwing off his native garments, he plunged into the pool.

As he rose to the surface beyond the tunnel, he found the lagoon still dark beneath the shadow cast by the mighty cliffs.

Immediately before him loomed the rugged outline of the Chair Rock. Swimming towards it, he had soon drawn himself on to its flat top.

The waters of the lagoon had regained their wonted quiet, and he peered carefully into the dark waters he had just left.

So far below him, that at first he thought it was but the reflection of a star, appeared a tiny speck of light.

Even as he gazed, it grew larger and larger, until at last it seemed as though the whole bottom of one of the yawning chasms with which the bed of the lagoon was pitted, was ablaze with light.

Nearer and nearer it came, whilst blaze after blaze separated from the main light, until at length the thought flashed through the wondering boy's mind that he was gazing at some wondrous submarine liner, with a hundred port-holes ablaze with light.

But the lights were far too small and too close together for that, to say anything of the fact that instead of keeping a straight course, they swayed from side to side until they looked like a moving letter S, picked out with electric lights.

As this startling apparition approached the surface, a long, eel-like body was revealed, terminating in a loathsome head, and with enormous jaws, saw-like teeth, and a pair of distended nostrils, which opened and shut like gills of a fish.

So far as he could see the repulsive monster was blind; but around the nostrils were a number of long feelers, which took the place of eyes.

About a dozen feet from the surface the luminous eel—as these strange creatures are called for want of a better name—commenced swimming round the Chair Rock, accompanied by a host of smaller fish of all kinds, attracted by the brilliant lights.

At first Dick Danby watched the

strange creature with idle curiosity, but when he found that every time its trailing lights flashed into view it was drawing nearer the surface, it was borne upon him that the brute knew he was there, and was manoeuvring to seize him.

Suddenly the monster came to a halt, and, curling its long body like a snake about to strike, raised its awful head a dozen feet above the surface; then, ere Dick had well grasped the meaning of that ominous move, darted at him with mouth agape.

So unexpected was the attack that Dick had barely time to spring upwards, and seize a protruding spur of rock immediately above him, ere the brute's head struck the spot on which he had been standing a fraction of a second before.

Eager only to put as great a distance as possible between himself and his fearful assailant, Dick climbed to the summit of the rock, then gazed despairingly around him.

The moon had risen above the cliffs, flooding the whole lagoon with its silvery beams. By its light he could see the electric sea-serpent, baulked in its first attempt, thrusting its horrible head and seaweed-festooned neck towards him.

Now and again it would pause, and gasp as though it found it difficult to breathe in the clear night air; but that fearful head pressed ever upwards, the seaweed fringes guiding it to where the rocks were smoother.

For a moment Dick Danby hesitated then, though he knew that the weird monstrosity would speedily overtake him in its native element, he prepared to jump into the sea, preferring to perish fighting against the awful fate that menaced him, rather than be dragged down without a struggle by those awful jaws.

But his action was arrested by a hideous hollow of pain, as the serpent threw itself backwards into the sea.

Wonderingly he looked down, and the relief which had swept over him when he first realised that he was saved, was drowned in a feeling of horrified repugnance, as he saw what looked like a ribbed-iron cylinder rolling on the surface of the waves. From the end of the cylinder protruded an enormous claw, which held the electric serpent's tail as in a vice.

Then he saw a fan-shaped tail lying on the water, and knew that the black, limpet-covered mass was the giant lobster's body. The illuminated body of the snake had coiled round its attacker, while the fearful jaws snapped in vain at the crustaceans' thick armour. Presently the huge, bluish-black body began to sink beneath the surface in a smother of blood-stained foam.

Scarcely able to persuade himself that he was not the victim of some fearful nightmare, Dick watched the fighting monsters sink to the bottom of the lagoon, then the lights grew fainter and fainter, and he knew that the brute, which had so nearly caught him, had itself become the prey of the giant lobster.

Falling, rather than sliding, back to the rocky ledge, Dick Danby crouched, shivering, as though with cold, on its hard surface.

The Return of the Red Rover.

MORE shaken by his terrible experience than he would have cared to have owned, it was some time before Dick Danby recovered sufficiently to mount the rock and resume his watch for the Foam.

Even when the light of the moon faded before the stronger beams of the rising sun, he found it difficult to look at the water lying in such a deceptively calm around him, without a shudder.

He knew the electric monster which had risen from the lower depths of the ocean would trouble him no more, but who could tell what other fearful shapes lurked in those infested waters.

By sheer strength of will, he forced himself to dive from the rock, for he knew that, until the treasure was recovered, he would have to make his home in the lagoon.

The plunge into the cool waters banished his fears, and he even ventured to dive to where he had last seen the lobster and its dreadful prey.

Broken coral, and crushed anemones on the very edge of the chasm marked the site of the battle of giants, and he rose to the surface relieved by the thought that most probably the lobster and its victim had fallen into the black void from whence one, at least, had come.

He gained the surface just as Stella's smiling face, with its glistening crown of golden hair, arose above the waves.

"Sorry I am late, Dick, but I stopped to prepare your breakfast; you will find it ready for you by the side of the pool," she explained, as they swam towards the rock.

"Not more ready than I am for it!" laughed Dick, clambering on to the ledge and stooping to draw his girl friend from the water.

"No sign of the Foam, I suppose?" queried the girl.

Dick Danby shook his head.

"No; but there's a stiff breeze blowing outside, and as she may puff in an appearance at any moment, I will only stop to appease the ravenous inner man; then return," laughed Dick, as he dived off the ledge.

But barely had he reached the base of the cliff, beneath which was the submarine entrance to Stella's secret domain, ere a glad shout from his girl chum caused him to look back.

Stella was standing on the summit of the rock, her face turned seawards, her glorious hair streaming in the wind, her sharply arms waving frantically.

But even as he thought what a pretty picture she looked, silhouetted against the deep-blue Southern sky, she sprang at a bound on to the flat ledge.

Already Dick Danby was swimming back as fast as his strong young arms could force him through the water.

"What is it, Stella? Has the Foam returned?" he demanded breathlessly, as he drew himself on to the rock.

"Oh, Dick, how I wish you had a pair of heavy boots, hob-nailed for choice!" was Stella's astonishing reply.

Then, as Dick stared at her in amazement, she continued:

"That you might kick me—kick me good and hard! Oh, what a fool!"

"What on earth for? What have you done?" demanded her amazed companion.

"Oh, nothing! Only given the whole show away, just because I was such a blind idiot as to mistaking the Red Rover for the Foam!" she replied, with a short, vexed laugh.

"The Red Rover!" repeated Dick in dismay.

"For goodness' sake don't stand there repeating everything I say!" snapped the girl irritably. "Forgive me, Dick, I am mad with myself to think that I, who have been, so to speak, born and bred on the good old Foam, should have

thought the Red Rover was her last because the Malay has lost her fore-top-mast and has rigged a jury mast astern."

"Do you think they saw you?" demanded Dick.

"Saw me! Of course they saw me! They came from behind the Pathan Rock, and her bows were crammed with men," retorted Stella impatiently.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter much, they'll never find the grotto!" said Dick consolingly.

His girl chum took him by the shoulders and shook him.

"There's two of us on this rock! Two of the soft-shelled clams that ought not to be allowed out without keepers. They have seen me, and will come to look for me, or I don't know that wretch Mendoza!" she exclaimed despairingly.

"Still, I don't see—" began Dick, when Stella interrupted him, saying impatiently:

"Oh, you can't see anything! Let us hope the pirates will be equally blind so that they will not be able to see the Pathan's stern!"

"Great Scott! I never thought of that! They'll find the treasure and carry it off under our very noses, and we shall be helpless to prevent them!" he cried.

"I don't think it is quite as bad as that, but they'll find out where the treasure is, which will be a point in their favor. Dad will see that they don't carry it off, so long as he has a shell for the Bull Pup!" replied Stella more hopefully.

Dick nodded, but made no reply.

How could he tell her of his fears that the Foam and its good-natured, blustering skipper had been wrecked in the cyclone.

Fearing lest Stella should read his thoughts in his downcast face, he climbed on to a jutting elbow of the Chair Rock, and peered between two jagged pinnacles.

A single glance at the Red Rover showed that Stella's fears were but too well-founded.

The schooner was swinging to a single anchor, and a boat was already being launched over her side.

Reckoning Stella to his side, the two watched the Malays as they swarmed into the boat, and with Mendoza and Otto Schwab in the stern, pulled towards the reef.

It took them some time to find a spot deep enough to float their light craft, but at last they succeeded, and commenced pulling straight for the rock.

"Time to be moving, Dick!" whispered Stella, taking the water as noiselessly as an eel and disappearing at once beneath the surface.

As Dick followed, he seemed to hear a sharp crack, like the report of a rifle, but it was so faint that, thinking he had been mistaken, he thought no more about it.

It was not until two hours later that

they ventured out, intending to remain under the surface as long as possible, and turning to the right directly they were through the tunnel so as not to disclose the vicinity of the grotto, should they be seen as they rose to the surface.

As Dick, who was leading, emerged from the undersea entrance to their retreat, he saw a pair of yellow legs treading water immediately above him.

There was no mistaking to whom those spindle shanks belonged. Seizing the swimmer by the ankles, he jerked him smartly downwards.

His practical joke was near ending in tragedy, for a rage-contorted face appeared above his own, and a long, keen knife flashed before his eyes.

But even as the blow descended Wang Su, for the swimmer was he, recognised his assailant, and turned his hand just in the nick of time, so that the haft of the knife struck the young Britisher just at the back of the neck, where, if it had been the blade, it would assuredly have severed his spine.

But Wang Su was not willing that his friend should escape scot-free after the fright he had given him.

Rolling over, he thrust his legs astride Dick's back, with the result that when the Britisher forced his way to the surface, Stella saw, to her amazement, that he was carrying the grinning Celestial pig-a-back.

"Thank you, Mister Dick! You top-hole fine swimmer!" cried the Chinaman, as he threw himself off the other's back and swam to a safe distance. "Molting, missie! Wang Su velly pleased Chinaman dat you fust chop, allee lightee!" he added, turning politely to Stella.

"Thanks, Wang. But where's the Foam?" demanded the lovely girl, as she swam round the Chair Rock, and glanced over the reef in search of the schooner.

"She makee things velly hottree for Led Lovel," was the Chinaman's somewhat vague reply.

But the sharp bark of the Bull Pup provided the necessary explanation.

It came from some distance to westwards of the lagoon, and was accompanied by the sharp crackle of rifle-fire, which told that the Malays were putting up a stiff fight.

By this time they had reached the Chair Rock, and were climbing to its towering summit.

"Hard luck being out of the fun!" grumbled Dick, looking discontentedly at some wreaths of thin white smoke that were being wafted over their heads by a smart breeze.

Stella laughed merrily.

"Don't be a pig, Dick; you would have thought you had had enough adventure the last two days to have lasted a little while, at any rate," she said reprovingly. "But how is it you are not with them, Wang?"

"Me velly frightened Chinaman. Led Lovel, he anchored neal lock while big

skippee gooe down. Skippel gooe fol pilates like mad doggee! Pilates no sailer, but callee back boat, skippee eable, and him like cbeck at one! Me no likee lightee, me swim to lagoon!" explained the Chinaman.

Dick Danby grinned.

He knew that Wang Su's cowardice was about as genuine as his inability to swim.

"Cut the cackle and come to the horses, Wang! What are you really doing here?" he demanded.

Wang Su looked with reproachful surprise at the speaker.

But he made no reply, and, knowing that nothing short of a surgical operation will extract information from a Chinaman who does not feel disposed to give, Dick gave up the attempt.

A louder burst of firing reached their ears.

"Come on, Dick, I'm going to climb the cliff to see what is going on!" cried Stella, unable to bear the suspense.

"I'm on! Coming, Wang!" inquired Dick, pausing with his arms above his head.

"Wang velly tired Chinaman!" replied the Celestial, squatting down on the rock and crossing his hands.

Dick laughed, and, plunging into the lagoon, was soon swimming by Stella's side to the sandy cover from whence he had climbed the cliff on the previous day.

Through half-closed eyes Wang Su watched the boy and girl chums until they had commenced the perilous ascent of the cliff, then rolled over on his side and continued rolling until he had plunged noiselessly into the sea.

Swimming below the surface, he struck out for the Pathan's stern, with a certainty that showed he had already discovered its whereabouts.

Rising to the surface, he looked cautiously around, as though to make sure he was not observed.

But Stella and Dick were the only living creatures in sight, and they were too engrossed in their arduous climb to have a thought to waste on their little, pig-tailed companion.

Taking in a deep breath, Wang straightened out his legs and allowed his body to sink to the bottom.

A tiny mound of gold lay at his very feet, but he paid no attention to it, as, holding on to the wreckage, he examined the jagged opening in the stout walls of the stow-room, then thrust his long, skinny arm through it.

As he withdrew his hand, a stream of sovereigns followed.

But Wang Su passed them by unheeded.

Minted coins had apparently no attraction for the little Chinaman.

(Another long instalment of this magnificent adventure story will appear in next Wednesday's GEM. Be sure to order your copy in advance and thus avoid disappointment.)



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FOR NEXT WEDNESDAY.

"A LINK WITH THE PAST!"

By Martin Clifford.

This is a magnificent story of St. John's, describing the arrival of a new boy named Stewart. He begins his career with a severe fight with Alfred George Grundy.

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The Head calls in Dalton Hawke, the boy detective, who figured so prominently in a recent story.

You will vote

"A LINK WITH THE PAST!"

a splendid yarn.

"SUNNY DUCROW."

This is the title of a fascinating novel by Mr. Henry St. John Cooper, whose name is well-known to my readers, the same as it is familiar to everybody in the world over.

Mr. Cooper's new book is published by Messrs. Sampson, Low & Co., and I should like my chums to tell their mothers and sisters about it. It is the sort of story which grips the attention of the reader all the time. I do not think anyone could fail to be enthralled in the adventures of Sunny Ducrow, who overcomes all difficulties, and becomes the most popular actress of the day.

Sunny Ducrow starts life in the humblest way, but she means to win, and she succeeds, just by pluck and perseverance.

I am quite certain that none of my girl chums will miss this absorbing romance.

JUST BY THE WAY.

I should like to say a word about Mr. Cooper. I have met scores of writers in my time, but never one who was a better and more interesting companion than the talented author of "Sunny Ducrow."

I was strolling along his garden one afternoon not so long since, and he was talking about his dogs.

"Like the Frenchman," he said, "I am fond of every big beastly." That was how the Frenchman put it when what he

really meant to say was that he was fond of all animals. Mr. St. John Cooper is that way—a kindly, many-sided Englishman, who loves his dogs, as they love him.

Mr. Cooper has been writing hard all his life, but, none the less, he has found time to master lots of difficult, technical subjects. He is one of those men who look into things, and make new discoveries for the improvement of life.

You will see his cheery nature in the pages of the story I have mentioned. The characters have their ups and downs, and, of course, there are some black sheep. I suppose we shall always find some of these specimens. But the author manages to let in the sunshine.

He is an optimist all through, and he sees into human character in rare fashion. He has always stood for that brighter view of the world, which some miss partly through their own fault, partly because of defective mental vision. Cooper writes romances, but they have real life in them, life with its hopes as well as its fears, life which is a good thing, and a far better and nobler thing than many appear to think.

WELL DONE LEICESTER.

There is no pleasing everybody, but a little complaint that comes through from Leicester is couched so pleasantly, that it really seems more like a compliment than a complaint.

It is on the subject of serials. If there are two it means shorter instalments, and the fact is one of those rockbottom ones there is no doing anything with. You just say to yourself, "Yes, this is a fact!" and let it go at that, realising there is nothing to be done.

But I think my correspondent will see the point that the need of variety compels serial curtailment, so to speak. I am very fond of bumper numbers myself, with large slices of serials every time, and longer yarns generally, but we have to get along as we can, and make the best of small portions.

Anyhow, my Leicester chums are doing their duty handsomely by the Companion Papers, and they have my sincere thanks.

A PAT ON THE BACK FROM TUNBRIDGE WELLS.

"We are writing to tell you how much we like the GEM. We have read it for years, and it is as good as the day we started it, perhaps better. Tom Merry & Co., Talbot and Blake, also Figgins & Co., are all old favourites, and Cardew, too. The GEM is absolutely top hole. By the way, we are girls."

And also, by the way, I am not a bit surprised at it. I am much obliged to my girl chums of the famous spa, and I consider it was a very cheery, and particularly friendly action on their part to drop me a line.

There is no mention of Baggy, but I expect the quaint little cavedropper has often made my Tunbridge Wells supporters smile indulgently.

A WORD IN SEASON.

It comes from Rugby, and it gives me a great deal of pleasure. The writer says that it was quite a long time before he came across the Penny Popular.

Of course, this is but natural, since the "P.P." is a late-comer, but it fills a well-recognised place now, and I feel sure there are even bigger destinies ahead for that weekly. I must tell my chum that the tours may be carried on next year.

There was a very special note about the remarks of this correspondent, which gave me real literary distinction to what he said. He feels Rugby, so to speak, and he is proud of the fact that he lives near to the famous town, whose school represents so much that is grand and appealing in the name of England.

Rugby is a word to conjure with. Personally I shall never be tired of reading of Tom Brown. There you see the real Rugby of an earlier day, but Rugby now, as always, has stood in the van. There principles are learned which carry the holder on through the stiffest fight to victory. Long live Rugby, and all it stands for in our history!

THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL.

Yes, I am bound to mention it, because of a note which came from Nottingham.

It would not have mattered, says my correspondent, if the book had cost more. It would have been worth it. It is just the thing which had been wanted.

I am rather proud of the annual. I was looking at it the other day, and I felt that the right nail had been hit on the head.

We get Smithy at his best, also Gussy, likewise the great Bunter (perhaps one should say, "at his worst" of the last named), while, for a good study of character, could anything be better than the sketch of Lovell, in his long-sustained feud with Loring? Here one has Mr. Owen Conquest at his best.

Still, I am not going to cry my own goods any more.

Your Editor

Stop Press.

IMPORTANT

The First Great Edition of "The Holiday Annual" was sold out in a few hours. Readers finding it difficult to obtain a copy of this wonderful book containing a host of postal orders, and a valuable list of addresses, are invited to apply to the Editor, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. All orders will be taken in rotation, and the books sent, post free, as rapidly as possible. Postal orders must be made payable to the Amalgamated Press, Ltd., and crossed "and Co."