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*Dubby Muffin's
Christmas Pudding!*

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Tubby Muffin's CHRISTMAS PUDDING!

With a clammy, sticky stuff rolling down his face, Bulkeley sat and gasped and gurgled. He heard the rapid retreating footsteps of the unknown japer, and gave a shout: "Stop him! This way! Stop that fellow!"

By OWEN CONQUEST.

Who Likes Christmas Pudding?

"YOU fellows like Christmas pudding?" Tubby Muffin asked that question in the end study.

Four faces, which had been looking rather serious, brightened up. Judging by their expressions, Jimmy Silver & Co. did like Christmas pudding!

There were five fellows in the study when Tubby looked in—the Fistical Four of the Classical Fourth, and Dudley Vane, the new junior.

Vane was standing at the open window, looking out into the misty quad, across a window-sill that was banked thick with snow.

Snow had been falling that December day, and Rookwood School was swathed in white. The old beeches loomed up, glistening with snow ridged on every branch, through the mist.

Dudley Vane did not turn from the window as Tubby asked that interesting question. He seemed interested in the outer world, not in Muffin or Christmas pudding. His eyes were fixed on a Sixth Form fellow who was tramping along the path that ran below, under the windows.

But Jimmy Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome gave the fat Tubby their attention. Funds were short in the end study—a thing that sometimes happened in the best-regulated studies. The chums of the Classical Fourth had come in hungry after a snowball battle with the Modern juniors of Manders' House. And supplies in the study were sparse. "Christmas pudding?" repeated Lovell.

"Yes—a real, topping, fruity Christmas pudding!"

"My dear man," said Jimmy Silver, "if somebody's sent you a Christmas pudding, you needn't go farther than this study to get rid of it."

"No fear!" agreed Raby. "Trot it along, Tubby."

"Like a chap to help you carry it?" asked Newcome. "Where is it?"

Tubby Muffin coughed.

"I don't mean exactly that I've got one," he said.

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"Oh! You fat ass!"

"I mean I'm going to make one," explained Tubby. "I just want to know if you fellows would like some when I've made it. See? I'm going to make it big enough for every fellow to have a whack. So if you fellows like Christmas pudding—"

"Oh, rot!" grunted Lovell. "Looks like tea in Hall, you men! Let's go down."

"That's rather ungrateful, Lovell, when I'm taking all the trouble to make a topping Christmas pudding, to stand all the fellows a treat," said Tubby Muffin warmly. "It will cost a pound. Look here, if you fellows would like a whack in that scrumptious Christmas pudding—"

"Oh, all right, Tubby!" said Jimmy Silver. "We'd like it no end. Let's get down to Hall. You coming, Vane?"

"Hold on a minute!" exclaimed Tubby hastily. "I'm going to make it ready for the last day of term. A feed before we break-up, you know! The cook's promised to boil it for me. But about the pound—"

"The what?"

"The pound," said Tubby. "If twenty fellows put a bob each—"

"Oh!"

The Fistical Four glared at Tubby Muffin. First they had supposed that he had a Christmas pudding to whack out, which would have been very welcome. Then it had appeared that he was planning a treat for the last day of term. Finally, it transpired that he had come there to "touch" them for a "bob" each.

Tubby held out a fat and rather grubby paw.

He held it out, apparently, in expectation of bobs being dropped in it.

Tubby Muffin made a Christmas pudding to share among twenty juniors, but only one fellow got a share—and he got the lot!

No bob was dropped in it. But Arthur Edward Lovell caught up a ruler from the table and swiped!

Whack!

"Yarooooop!" roared Tubby.

"Now hold out your other hand, Muffin!" said Lovell, in the manner of a Form-master administering teco to a fag.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver Raby, and Newcome roared.

So did Tubby Muffin—though in rather a different way! There was no merriment in Muffin's roar.

"Ow, ow, wow!" roared Muffin. He tucked his fat paw under his arm and squeezed it. "Ow! Ooooo! Oh crikey! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow-ow-ow! I jolly well won't let you have any of my Christmas pudding now! Ow!" roared Tubby. "Wow!"

"Come on, Vane!" said Jimmy Silver. He turned to the new junior, still standing at the window. Then he jumped. "Hold on—what the dickens are you up to, Vane?"

Dudley Vane had gathered a double handful of snow from the window-sill. He had kneaded it into a snowball was taking aim—apparently at so passing on the path below.

The missile flew!

A wild yell sounded from below. Vane jumped back from the window.

"Cut!" he said.

"But what—who—?"

"Better cut!" grinned Vane. "I've just got Carthew of the Sixth with a snowball, right on the ear! I fancy he will come up to this study shortly. I'd rather be away when that visitor calls."

"Oh, my hat!"

Evidently it was time to cut. The owners of the end study could not be too far away when the bully of the Sixth came up to investigate. Jimmy Silver & Co. scampered down the passage, with Dudley Vane at their heels.

"Cut, Tubby!" Jimmy called back.

"Ow!" answered Tubby. "Wow!"

But he cut promptly. It was not safe

—YARN OF ROOKWOOD SCHOOL, FEATURING THE MYSTERY "RAGGER" AGAIN.

to be found near the end study when Carthew came. Tubby bolted into his own study. Jimmy Silver & Co. went down the stairs two at a time.

Five breathless juniors arrived in Hall for the school tea, and they had taken their seats there, and were dealing with what they described as "door-steps and dish-water" by the time Carthew of the Sixth arrived in the Classical Fourth studies on a voyage of discovery.

They grinned over their tea.

Getting the bully of the Sixth with a snowball was an absolutely ripping idea, from the point of view of the juniors—so long as the fellow who "got" him remained undiscovered.

A few minutes later Hansom of the Fifth came into Hall.

"You fellows heard?" Jimmy Silver & Co. heard Hansom address some other Fifth Form men. "I say, somebody's been bunging snowballs at Carthew."

"Ha, ha, ha! Who did it?"

"Nobody knows. Carthew's as mad as a hatter!" chuckled Hansom. "I heard him tell Bulkeley it came from a study window—he doesn't seem to know which."

Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged smiles—they were feeling quite merry and bright when they left Hall after tea.

"Oh, here you are!" Tubby Muffin rolled up to them. "I say, Jimmy, about that Christmas pudding—"

"Want some more?" grinned Lovell. "Hold out your hand!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tubby did hold out his hand.

"Look here," he said persuasively, "it's only a bob each, as I was telling you when Vane interrupted me, bunging that snowball at Carthew—"

"Shut up, you ass!" hissed Jimmy Silver.

Bulkeley of the Sixth, the captain of Rookwood, was coming up the corridor.

Tubby, standing with his back to Bulkeley, did not see him—neither did he see any reason for shutting up—shutting up was not in Tubby's line, anyhow. He seldom shut up.

"Eh! I'm not going to tell Carthew that Vane bunged that snowball at him," said Tubby. "I was going to say—Whoop! Wharrer you stamping on my foot for, Lovell, you beast? Yow-ow!"

"Vane!" It was Bulkeley's voice. "Did you throw a snowball at a prefect under the study windows?"

Dudley Vane set his lips.

"Oh crikey!" gasped Tubby.

"Answer me, Vane!"

"Yes," said Vane quietly.

"Follow me to my study!"

"Rough luck, old man!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

Dudley Vane nodded, and followed the Rookwood captain. The Fiscal Four exchanged glum looks. They all knew what was going to happen in Bulkeley's study—"six" of the best, for the dire offence of snowballing a prefect!

"Oh crikey!" said Tubby. "I didn't see Bulkeley—But, I say, about that Christmas pudding—"

"Vane's going to be whooped, you fat idiot!" growled Jimmy Silver.

"Yes, I know; but about the Christmas pudding—"

"He will get six!" howled Lovell.

"Well, he asked for it, you know—snowballing a prefect. But, I say, about that Christmas pudding—"

"Oh, squash him!" said Jimmy Silver.

"I say—Leggo! Yarooop! Oh

crikey! Whoop!" roared Tubby, as four pairs of hands grasped him and sat him down on the floor, with a bump that almost shook Rookwood School. "Yoo-hoo-hoo-hooop!"

And, for a few minutes, at least, Tubby Muffin forgot even the Christmas pudding!

Getting It Going!

CLANG!

Clump!

Three juniors in the second study in the Classical Fourth passage stared at Cecil Adolphus Muffin. That plump and podgy youth had come into Study No. 2, bearing an enormous enamelled tin basin and a long wooden spoon.

He clanged down the big basin, and clumped down the long spoon, and stood panting. Having carried those articles up from the regions below,

The Editor, together
with the Authors and
Artists of the GEM,
takes this opportunity
of

Wishing All
Readers
A Very
Happy
Christmas.

Tubby Muffin seemed rather out of breath. He never had very much!

Putty of the Fourth, Jones minor, and Higgs stared. To what use Tubby intended to put a big basin and a long spoon was a mystery to them.

"What's that game?" asked Putty.

"That's for mixing the Christmas pudding!" gasped Tubby. "I've borrowed that basin from the cook. She's going to boil it for me."

"She's going to boil that basin!" exclaimed Higgs. "What for?"

"Not the basin, fathead—the pudding! I say, you can all help me stir, you know," said Tubby. "It's going to be a spanking pudding—a regular spanker! You fellows like Christmas pudding, what?"

"Just a few!" grinned Jones minor. "Got the stuff to make it?"

"Well, I haven't exactly got the stuff yet," explained Tubby cautiously. "It will cost a pound, and I'm raising it at a bob a time. I've got five fellows to join up so far—the end study, you

know. Jimmy Silver was very enthusiastic about it. Lovell said it was a wonderful idea. Raby and Newcome both said they wondered that they hadn't thought of it. That new chap, Vane, was awfully keen. It rather bucks a chap, you know, to have a wheeze taken up in that enthusiastic way."

Tubby blinked at his study-mates.

"I hope you fellows are going to join up," he said. "The idea is to have the pudding the day before we break-up for Christmas. You fellows know how I can cook—"

"We know how you can eat!"

"I can mix a Christmas pudding a treat! Lots of plums and currants and peel and things, and—"

"And they won't get scoffed before they get as far as the pudding?" inquired Putty.

"No," roared Tubby, "they won't! If Jimmy Silver and his friends can trust me with their money, I should think fellows in my own study could." Tubby jingled a metallic jingle in his trousers pocket. "Five, so far—you fellows will make eight. I say, shell out your bobs! I want to get the stuff before the shop closes, if I can make up the pound."

Putty, Jones, and Higgs exchanged glances. Really, it was not a bad idea—the only drawback being that Cecil Adolphus Muffin was not, as a rule, to be trusted. Still, if the end study placed faith in him, there was no reason why his own study shouldn't. If Tubby was rattling five silver shillings in his trousers pocket, it was safe to let him rattle three more.

"Oh, all right!" said Putty. He handed over a "bob." Jones minor and Alfred Higgs followed his example.

Tubby's fat face beamed. He slipped the three shillings into the pocket where he had been rattling a bunch of old keys.

"Good!" he exclaimed.

He had made a beginning, at all events. A job begun is half-done—as Tubby found. He rolled out of Study No. 2, and looked into Study No. 4, where he found Mornington and Erroll.

"You fellows joining up for the Christmas pudding?" he asked. "Bet a time—I've got three already!"

Erroll laughed, and Morny chuckled. "If any fellow in the Fourth has been ass enough to trust you with a bob, I'll do the same!" said Morny.

Tubby rattled his wealth.

"Look here!" He produced three glimmering shillings in a fat and grubby hand.

It was rather fortunate that he had not been put to the same test in his own study. He could only have produced a bunch of keys there—which would hardly have had a convincing effect! But bobs were bobs!

"Well, my hat!" said Mornington. "More duffers in the Classical Fourth than I fancied! Here you are."

"And here you are!" said Erroll, laughing.

Tubby Muffin had five shillings along with his bunch of keys when he left Study No. 4. His next visit was to Study No. 6, where he found Oswald and Flynn.

"I say, I told you about the Christmas pudding stunt—" he said.

"You did!" agreed Oswald. "Don't tell us again."

"You said you'd join up if the other fellows did," persisted Tubby.

"Faith, and so we will!" grinned

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Flynn. "We'll believe that fellows are putting money into your paws when we see it there."

"And not before!" said Dick Oswald. "The captain of the Form and his pals can trust me!" said Muffin, with dignity. "New chaps can trust me, too! I've got five bob from the end study."

"Gammon!"

"Look!"

Oswald and Flynn looked in great astonishment as Muffin displayed five shillings in a grubby palm.

"Seeing is believing!" said Tubby.

"What?"

"Well, my hat!" said Oswald. "Well, I said I'd join up if the other fellows did, and here you are."

"Sure, I won't bank on seeing the Christmas pudding till I'm eating it," remarked Patrick O'Donovan Flynn, as he tossed over a shilling.

Tubby emerged into the passage, beaming more than ever. It was only necessary to get the thing started evidently! That brilliant idea of rattling a bunch of keys in his trousers pocket had started it!

Now he had not merely keys to rattle, but shillings to show! His fat hand was full of shillings when he rolled up to Topham and Townsend in the passage—and collected "bobs" from them. So many shillings on view gave confidence! Rawson, Peele, and Gower came next, and they all contributed. Tubby rolled into Study No. 3 with no fewer than twelve shillings clutched in his grubby paw—and held them up to the view of Conroy, Pons, and Van Ryn.

"Look at that lot!" said Tubby impressively. "You fellows hinted that chaps wouldn't trust me to collect money for a Christmas pudding—well, look at that!"

The three Colonials looked.

"Now I hope you are going to play up!" said Tubby, with a great deal of dignity. "Nearly all the Form are in it. Dub up."

And, overcome by that indubitable proof of Tubby's trustworthiness, the Colonial Co. "Gubbed" up.

Tubby felt quite wealthy as he made his way to the end study, with fifteen shillings keeping that bunch of keys company in his trousers pocket!

Jimmy Silver & Co. had come up after tea with Vane. Dudley Vane was looking a little gloomy—which was not unusual after a visit to a prefect's study and "six." There was a general exclamation in the end study as the fat face of Cecil Adolphus Muffin looked in.

"Get out, Muffin!"

"Oh, all right!" said Tubby loftily. "If you fellows want to be left out of it, all right! Other fellows can trust me! I've got contributions from fifteen fellows here! I think it's a bit sickening for this study to make out that a fellow can't be trusted with cash when the whole Form is rallying round him."

"You fat, frumpions, fooling freak!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, in measured tones. "You've got nothing of the kind."

"Look!" sneered Tubby.

"Great pip!"

The Pistical Four looked. They stared! But there was no staring away from the heap of shillings that Tubby turned out of his trousers pocket!

"My sainted Aunt Selina!" ejaculated Lovell.

"Fools and their money are soon parted!" remarked Raby.

"I say, it's going to be a scrumptious

pudding!" urged Tubby. "All the other fellows are in it—"

"In the pudding?"

"No, you ass—in the scheme. I want only five more bobs to make up the pound. I think you fellows might play up, when everybody else has."

"Something in that!" said Jimmy Silver, laughing. "Let's risk it, you men."

And four shillings were added to Tubby's pile. The fat Classical blinked at Dudley Vane. He was wriggling.

"I say, Vane, old fellow—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" grunted Vane.

"I say, I'm sorry you got whopped! I really came here to ask you whether it hurt much, old chap! I've been feeling worried about it! But if you'd like to contribute to the Christmas pudding—"

Vane laughed impatiently, and sorted out a shilling.

"Now, shut up!" he said

"Oh, all right!" Tubby clutched the shilling. "I say, you're making a lot of fuss about a whopping, Vane! You're new here, of course—but Rookwood men don't make all that fuss! Bit soft, if you ask me."

With that, Tubby turned to the door, both hands full of shillings. Dudley Vane rose, stepped after him and let out a foot as Muffin reached the doorway.

Thud!

"Yaroo!" roared Muffin, as he shot into the passage.

He landed on hands and knees. There was a clattering and clinking of scattering shillings! Tubby rolled and roared, with shillings to right of him, shillings to left of him, shillings all round him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Jimmy Silver & Co.

"Ow! ow! wow! I say, I've dropped all those bobs! I say, you come and help me find those bobs! I say—yow-ow-ow-ow!"

Vane slammed the study door. Tubby Muffin, wriggling and spluttering, squirmed over the passage floor like a fat eel, groping for shillings.

Where Twenty Bobs Went!

DURING the next few days, there were several special topics in the Classical Fourth Form at Rookwood School.

One, of course, was the Christmas holidays, now near at hand. Another was the mystery of the mysterious "ragger," who had wrecked Mr. Dalton's study, and "sacked" Dicky Dalton in a coal sack. Another, and of more immediate interest, was Tubby Muffin's Christmas pudding.

Twenty fellows had contributed a bob each towards that scrumptious, magnificent treat. Twenty-one fellows were going to share it, Tubby coming in gratis as the founder of the feast and originator of the great idea.

But where was the pudding?

In Tubby's study was the big basin, and in the basin stood the long spoon. They were ready for mixing the pudding. Every fellow was going to have a stir at it. But the pudding did not seem ready to be mixed. The juniors were expecting stirring times, so to speak; but the time for stirring did not seem to arrive.

Fellows questioned Muffin.

Tubby's explanation was that he had decided not to get the stuff at the school shop. It was cheaper at Latcham, and more could be got for the money. Next half-holiday he was going over to Latcham to do the shopping.

That saw Tubby safely over the half-holiday. The half-holiday came and went; but the Christmas pudding neither came nor went. That evening Tubby was cornered in Hall, and questions grew more pressing.

"It's Dalton's fault!" Tubby explained. "He's shirty about that bargee, whoever he was, wrecking his study, and he gives a fellow lines. I had to stay in and do lines. I'm going to-morrow."

"But you weren't doing lines this afternoon," Jimmy Silver pointed out.

"I—I mean I stayed in to do them, and didn't do them, after all. I—I was going to."

"And you can't go to Latcham except on a half-holiday," said Lovell.

"I—I think we'd better get the stuff at the school shop, after all. We really ought to give Mrs. Kettle our custom, you fellows."

"Right-ho!" said Lovell grimly.

"We'll do it now! Come on!"

"I—I say, we can't go now!" said

Tubby, in alarm. "It's snowing!"

"It's left off snowing!" said New-

come.

"It—it might begin again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mornington.

"I wonder how long those twenty bobs lasted Muffin! About as long as it took him to walk to the tuckshop, I suppose!"

"I—I never spent them!" gasped Tubby. "I've got them in my trousers-pocket this very minute!"

"Show up!" grinned Putty of the Fourth.

"I—I mean, I left them in the study—for safety, you know—"

"I'll come up to the study with you and get them."

"Oh, I—I mean—" stammered

Tubby.

"Well, what do you mean exactly?"

asked Flynn.

"Oh errikey!"

Tubby Muffin blinked round helplessly

at a circle of faces. Suspicion had been

growing in the Classical Fourth on the

subject of that Christmas pudding. Now

suspicion had become certainty.

"Well, I suppose we really asked for

this," remarked Jimmy Silver. "We

jolly well knew Tubby!"

"You asked for it, you mean!" said

Putty warmly. "If you hadn't started

it—"

"Eh—who started it?"

"You did, you ass!"

"I did?" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Why, you fathead, our study came in

last, and we wouldn't have coughed up

a single bob, only that fat boulder

showed us fifteen shillings he had col-

lected from the other fellows—"

"What's that?" roared Higgs. "Why,

he told us you fellows had started it,

with a bob each, and he had the money

on him! He was rattling it in his

pocket!"

"We came in last!" roared Lovell.

"You came in first!" bawled Higgs.

"You let us all in for this, and I jolly

well think you ought to make it good,

too!"

"I tell you—" exclaimed Jimmy

Silver. "Muffin, you fat villain, did

you tell them in your study that we—"

"He had the money rattling in his

pocket," hooted James minor—"at least,

he was rattling something in his trousers

pocket—"

"Hold on, Muffin! Where are you

going?"

"I—I think Dalton called me!"

gasped Tubby.

"He can call again, then! You

spoofing brigand!" exclaimed Jimmy

Silver. "You've been telling thumping

whoppers to all the fellows to get in

their bobs, and you've blaed the lot on tuck!"

"I—I haven't!" gasped Tubby. "I—I—I had the money safe, but—but it—it disappeared mysteriously!"

"What?" yelled the juniors.

"You—you know there's some fellow in the school this term playing rotten tricks!" gasped Tubby. "He wrecked Dalton's study, and sacked Dicky in a coal-sack, and—and was never found out! Well, that fellow has been at it again! He—he—he's burgled my study!"

"You lying worm!" exclaimed Dudley Vane.

"Look here, Vane, you shut up! You



don't know anything about it! I tell you I left those bobs in my study, and—and when I looked for them they had—had mysteriously disappeared! It's that ragger, of course! Who else could it be?" gasped Muffin.

The Classical juniors gazed at Cecil Adolphus Muffin. It was true that there was a "mystery man" in the school—some unknown fellow who had been guilty of a series of outrageous rags, and had never been spotted. Had another study been wrecked, or a beak headed up in a sack, the outrage certainly would have been put down to that mystery man.

But nobody was disposed to put down the mysterious disappearance of the Christmas pudding fund to that mystery man. There was a much more probable explanation.

"That chap takes the cake, and no mistake!" said Dudley Vane, staring at the fat Tubby. "What about banging his head till he tells the truth?"

"Good egg!"

"Hear, hear!"

Tubby Muffin made a wild bound to escape. But five or six pairs of hands grasped him before he could flee.

Upended in those grasping hands, Tubby tapped the old oak floor with his bullet head.

Bang!

"Ow! Oh! Wew! Whoop!" roared Tubby.

"Where's those bobs?" roared Lovell.

"They—they disappeared!"

Bang!

"Yaroooh! I—I mean, they didn't

disappear!" yelled Muffin frantically.

"Leggo! I say, I—I went to the shop to get the stuff for the Christmas pudding—I did really—honest Injun—Ow! But—but I happened to be hungry, and—and—I say—Yaroooh!"

Bang!

"Wow! Leggo! I say, I never meant to spend those bobs!" wailed Muffin. "I only meant to have a snack! But—but they went—I say, I—I was quite surprised when Mrs. Kettle said it came to a—yaroooh—pound! I—I was really—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's the truth at last," said Dudley Vane, laughing.

"I—I say, leggo!" wailed Tubby.

"I—I'm going to make the pudding. It—it's only delayed, you know. I'll go and get the stuff now if—if—"

"If what?"

"If one of you fellows will lend me a pound!" gasped Muffin.

"Oh, my hat! Bump him!"

"Rag him!"

"Scrag him!"

"Ow! Leggo! I say, Vane, old

chap, you've got lots of money—you

lend me a pound. I'll settle next term,

or the term after at the latest."

Vane stared at the fat Tubby, and

burst into a laugh.

"Well, you deserve it, for your cheek," he said. "Hold on, you chaps! I'll lend the fat bandit a quid, and we'll all go down to the shop with him and see that it doesn't go on tuck."

The juniors stared at Vane. "Quids" were not quite so common as black-

berries in the Rookwood Fourth.

Tubby gasped with relief.

"I—I say, Vane, you're a brick," he gasped—"a real brick! I—I say, you chaps needn't trouble to come to the shop with me! I hope you can trust

me with a pound."

If Tubby Muffin really hoped that, it showed that he had a hopeful nature. So far from trusting him with the pound, quite an army of juniors marched down to Sergeant Kettle's shop with him, and under their eyes the pound was duly expended in materials for a Christmas pudding. And that evening after prep there was much stirring in the big basin in Study No. 2.

pudding for a Prefect!

BULKELEY of the Sixth gave a start.

It was a rather late hour. The Lower Forms of Rookwood had long been in bed in their dormitories. Some of the masters were still up, and light glimmered from a few study windows into the snow and mist of the quad.

The Rookwood captain was making a round before turning in. Since the mysterious outrages that had caused a sensation in the school the prefects had been very much on the alert.

Who the mystery man was nobody seemed to have the faintest idea. If any fellow had suspicions, they were



Kneading a snowball from the snow on the window-sill, Dudley Vane took aim at Carthew walking below. The missile flew, and the prefect let out a wild yell as it smashed on his ear. "Yaroooh!"

vague enough. It was not even known whether the fellow was senior or junior. The head prefect of Rookwood was very keen, naturally, on "landing" him if he could. Whoever he was, the sack awaited him immediately he was spotted.

Bulkeley, pausing on the stairs, listened to a sound. It came from above, whence no sound should have come. Unless some fellow was out of his dormitory, all should have been quiet.

If some fellow was out of his dormitory at that late hour, there could be little doubt that it was the mysterious ragger. With a gleam in his eyes Bulkeley went swiftly up the stairs.

He touched the lighting switch on THE GEM LIBRARY—No. 1,453.

the landing above, from which the junior studies ran. The light did not come on.

He set his lips. The lamp had been removed from its socket—that was clear. It was proof that someone was up, and on mischief bent.

Standing in the dark on the landing, Bulkeley listened intently. He did not intend to go down for a light, and give the fellow a chance to escape. A foot-fall came quite clearly to his ears. It came from the Classical Fourth Study passage.

Swiftly the captain of Rookwood stepped into that passage. There was a switch there; but he was hardly surprised when he pressed it, to find that no light resulted.

Farther along was a big window through which came starry light, and a gleam of snow and frost. Bulkeley went quickly up the passage. The fellow, whoever he was, was cornered there. He felt that he had him.

He caught his breath as he spotted, for a second, a flitting dark figure in the glimmer from the high window.

He ran forward.
"Stop!" he rapped. "I've got you now! Stop!"

There was no reply, but he heard a quick footfall as he ran on. The shadowy figure had vanished into an open study doorway—Study No. 2. A moment more and Bulkeley's athletic figure blocked that doorway. He had run the fellow down.

There was no escape from the study. The window was over twenty feet from the ground. And the mysterious prowler of the night was within.

"You may as well chuck it now, you young rascal," said the Rookwood captain quietly. "I've got you! You'd better give yourself up."

Dead silence.

Bulkeley peered into the darkness within. The electric switch clicked under his hand, but no light came. He fumbled in his pocket for a box of matches. Once he had a sight of the prowler it would not help him much if he dodged. There was something eerie in the dead silence when he knew that a living, breathing form was near him in the dark, probably only a few feet away.

The next second he found that it was not so far away as that. A dark shadow moved in darkness, and something descended suddenly on the prefect's head—something wet and sticky and clammy flowed in a wave over head and face—something that felt like a pot clamped over his head, and jammed down on his shoulders.

Blinded, choking, gasping, Bulkeley clutched wildly in the darkness. His hand touched something that moved, but was struck away. Something flitted past him, but he did not touch it again. He did not hear it, and he could not see it. Clammy, sticky stuff was all over his face, oozing in his eyes and nose and ears and mouth.

He staggered gurgling from the doorway into the passage. A heavy thump landed on his chest, and he went over backwards.

Clang!

It was a clang of metal as his head smote the floor. Something rolled off, clanging again. He was left sitting blindly, clawing at the sticky mess on his face. What it was he could not imagine, but he knew that it was choking and blinding him. He fancied for a moment that he heard a rapid retreating footstep in the dark.

He spat out a mouthful of clammy stickiness and shouted:

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"Stop him! This way! Stop that fellow!"

He knew that Mr. Dalton was still up, and hoped that he would hear.

A voice called back from below—the voice of the master of the Fourth.

"Who is that? What?"

"Groooh!" Bulkeley staggered up.

"Urrrrgh! I say—gurrgh!—stop that young rotter! Urrrrgh!"

Rapid feet ascended the stairs. A switch clicked—in vain! Then the light of an electric torch was turned on.

"Is that you, Bulkeley? Where—what is—"

"Here, sir! Ughh! Here—groooh!"

"What—what—" exclaimed the master of the Fourth. He ran up the passage, and the light of his torch flashed on Bulkeley.

Dicky Dalton stared at him like a man in a dream.

It was Bulkeley; but he was quite unrecognisable! His head and face were hidden by thick, sticky, clammy Christmas pudding—Tubby Muffin's Christmas pudding, which so many hands had been stirring that evening in Study No. 2.

"Bub-bub-bub-bulkeley!" stammered Mr Dalton, nearly dropping the torch.

"Urrrrghh!" Bulkeley clawed at the Christmas pudding. In its raw state it was wet and very, very clammy. It was almost ready for boiling—but it was certain now that that Christmas pudding never would be boiled! Even Tubby Muffin would hardly have thought of scraping it together.

"What—what is that?" almost shrieked Mr Dalton. "What—what have you got there, Bulkeley? What is—"

"I—I don't know. Gurrghh! It was jammed on my head—wurrghh!—in that study—yurrghh!—in the dark—"

"It—it—it is pudding, I think!" gasped Mr Dalton. "Yes, there is a basin—a large basin! A—a—a Christmas pip-pip- pudding! But who—"

"Didn't you spot him, sir?" gasped Bulkeley. "He slammed that basin on my head and pushed me over, and cut—"

"I saw nobody."

"Urrrrghh! It is that rascal again—the study ragger—yurrghh!"

"There can be no doubt of that. You—you—you had better go and—clean off that—that stuff, Bulkeley. I will search for him."

Bulkeley, certainly, was in no state to search for anybody. He tottered away, still clawing at stickiness. He liked Christmas pudding, in its completed state, and taken internally. He

did not like it in its raw state, and taken externally. Bulkeley went gurgling and gasping away, clawing at Christmas pudding, and Mr. Dalton, with a grim brow, proceeded to make a hurried search for the vanished prowler of the night.

Jimmy Silver woke as the light flashed on in the Classical Fourth dormitory. So did several other fellows. They blinked in the light at the figure of their Form-master in the doorway.

Mr. Dalton's eye ran rapidly along the row of white beds. Every one was occupied.

"Silver!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

"Yes, sir?" Jimmy sat up, blinking.

"Is—is anything the matter, sir?"

"Has anyone, to your knowledge, been out of this dormitory?"

"Eh? No—not that I know of, sir!" gasped Jimmy. "But I've been asleep—"

More and more fellows awakened. Some of them lifted on their elbows, some sat up; all of them stared blankly at Richard Dalton. Only one fellow remained in slumber—and snoring! That was Tubby Muffin, deep in a happy dream of Christmas pudding—the pudding he was destined never to devour!

"What's up, sir?" asked Mornington.

Mr. Dalton gave Morny a rather searching look.

"Have you been out of the dormitory, Mornington?"

"No, sir."

"Has anything happened, sir?" asked Dudley Vane.

"Yes, Vane. Some boy has been out of his dormitory—not, I hope, this dormitory," said Mr. Dalton. "You may go to sleep, my boys; I am sorry that I had to disturb you."

Richard Dalton turned off the light and shut the door. But the Classical juniors did not go to sleep again very soon. There was a buzz of surprised speculation as to what could have happened.

Not till the following morning did they learn. Then all Rookwood knew that the mystery man had been on the prowl again, and that Bulkeley of the Sixth, captain of the school, had been bonneted with a basinful of Christmas pudding.

Some of the fellows thought it funny, but there were serious faces among the beaks and prefects that morning. But the most serious face in all Rookwood was that of Cecil Adolphus Reginald Muffin! Tubby could hardly believe the awful news at first. It seemed too fearful to be true! Tubby was not worrying about Bulkeley, or about the wild and reckless defiance of authority by some unknown law-breaker. Tubby was thinking of the Christmas pudding. Tubby gazed into the empty basin, almost with tears in his eyes.

"Gone!" moaned Tubby. "That lovely Christmas pudding—that scrumptious Christmas pudding—that beautiful Christmas pudding! I hope they'll get that fellow. I hope they'll sack him! I hope they'll flog him! I hope they'll make him squirm! Oh crikey!"

But Tubby's hopes were not realised. The mystery man of Rookwood was still a mystery when the school broke up for the Christmas holidays!

(Next week: "THE PHANTOM MONK!" Join Jimmy Silver & Co. on their Christmas holidays and be thrilled. Lovell plays the ghost and meets a real one! Remember, the GEM will be on sale next Monday. Order early.)

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**Let the Editor be your pal. Write to him to-day, addressing your letters :
The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.**

HALLO, chums! Looking forward to the Christmas holidays? I'll say you are! Just over a week now, and you'll be enjoying yourselves and having a good tuck-in. But in the intervals of eating turkey and Christmas pudding and making whoopee, you'll want something quiet and restful to entertain you. And that's where the GEM comes in. Readers will be pleased to know that the next number of the old paper will be on sale two days before Christmas — Monday, December 23rd. So you can read it over the holidays, and I'm sure the GEM will add greatly to your enjoyment. It contains a splendid programme, foremost being the long St. Jim's yarn, entitled:

"TOM MERRY'S LAST HOPE!"

It's a dramatic story of how Tom Merry is imposed upon by a rascally senior, and how he becomes the victim of that senior's folly. Gerald Cutts comes to Tom with a story that he is faced with expulsion unless he can get twenty pounds. The junior, of course, doesn't possess such a sum, but to save the senior from disgrace, he lends him the funds of the various clubs of which he is treasurer. Not once, but many times have the generous impulses of Tom Merry led him into difficulties, but never before has he brought so much anguish and worry upon himself as when he lends a senior money which doesn't belong to him.

This great story of school and circus adventure will appeal to every reader, and as the last St. Jim's yarn of the old year, will be voted by many as also the best.

"THE PHANTOM MONK!"

Owen Conquest's contribution to this programme for the Christmas holidays is a gripping ghost story of the Rookwood chums. Jimmy Silver & Co. and

Dudley Vane spend the holidays together at Jimmy's house, where there is a legend that a monk, murdered years ago, haunts the spot where he was struck down. The legend gives Arthur Edward Lovell the idea of playing ghost to scare Vane, but it's Lovell who gets the scare—when he encounters the real phantom monk at midnight!

You couldn't wish for a more thrilling Christmas story than this one, which, with readers' prize jokes and Monty Lowther's wisecracks, completes the number. Make sure that your GEM will be reserved for you next Monday.

A GRAND CHRISTMAS PRESENT!

If you're looking for another gift book for Christmas, chums, there's no need to look beyond "The Modern Boy's Book of Adventure Stories." Here is a magnificent all-story annual, containing 240 pages of thrills and adventures on land, at sea, and in the air, that will make an ideal present. It's a grand budget of stories to suit all tastes. There are tales of the sea, the speed track, the Iron Way, flying, and many other kinds of adventure. "The Modern Boy's Book of Adventure Stories," price 5s., is an annual that I strongly recommend to readers. So if you are buying a present for a pal, or you are asked what you would like, bear this grand book in mind.

BEATING THE FOG!

This is the time of the year when we are troubled with fogs, and railway travel becomes considerably disorganised in consequence. But if the tests of a new invention railway experts are carrying out prove successful, drivers of trains will soon be able to laugh at fogs,

PEN PALS COUPON
21-12-35



A free feature which brings together readers all over the world for the purpose of exchanging topics of interest to each other. If you want a pen pal, post your notice, together with the coupon on this page, to the address given above.

Hubert A. Nicholls, Swanston Street, Queenscliff, Victoria, Australia; age 16-20; stamps, football, cricket, tennis.

Miss Edna Mayfield, c/o Mrs. Walters, 1, Cecelia St., Brighton, South Australia; girl correspondents; age 15-18; sports, stamps, etc.

Miss Jimmie Flood, 11, Francis Avenue, Brighton-le-Sands, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia; girl correspondents; age 16-18; sport, films, etc.

and send their engines speeding through the densest "pea-souper" without fear of a crash. The device, which was invented by a private engineer, is really quite simple in operation. When a signal is set at danger, a magnetic gadget fixed on the track will convey the warning to the driver by causing a siren to sound in his cab. So if the signal cannot be seen he will feel quite safe in driving on until the warning shrieks out.

A MONSTER MAP!

When the Queen Mary, the Cunard-White Star liner, sets sail on her maiden voyage to New York next May, she will have on board something entirely new in nautical maps. This map is a monster, and sets out clearly the passage of the liner across the Atlantic, from Bishop's Rock to Nantucket Lightship. As the Queen Mary progresses, so a three-inch model of her moves on the map, indicating at all times her position in the Atlantic.

It is hoped that this luxurious liner will regain for England the Blue Riband of the Atlantic, which is at present held by the French vessel, the Normandie. With the large map showing the Queen Mary's progress, it will be exciting for the passengers to check up on her time each day and compare it with the record.

A CANNY CANINE!

Meet Bonzer, the dog which can play the piano! He lives in Sydney, Australia, and is owned by a policeman. At a word from his master, Bonzer will jump up on the music-stool and start to play a tune with his front paws. Another order he will instantly obey is to switch on the light. But Bonzer's strong suit is his ability to count. He knows how many beans make five! When ten articles are placed on the floor and two taken away, he will soon tell you how many are left. Eight barks he will give, and he doesn't make a mistake. Go to the top of the class, Bonzer!

Another dog that deserves congratulations is Teddy the terrier. He has just reached the ripe old age of twenty-one. In dog years, Teddy would be reckoned to be 147! One of our years is equal to seven of a dog's. On his twenty-first birthday Teddy had a nice chicken for dinner, and in spite of having very few teeth left, he enjoyed it.

TAILPIECE.

Mother: "Johnny, when you divided those five apples with your little brother, did you give him three?"

Johnny: "No, ma. I ate one and then started dividing!"

THE EDITOR.

Miss Hilda Lehmann, the Cedars, Maitland, Yorke Peninsula, South Australia; girl correspondents; age 20-25; France, India, New Zealand.

David Harris, Maitland, Yorke Peninsula, South Australia; age 18-22; France, Java.

Miss Ghretta Campbell, Maitland, Yorke Peninsula, South Australia; girl correspondents; age 18-22; France, Scotland.

Herold Nicholls Loloma, Swanston Street, Queenscliff, Victoria, Australia; age 15-20; stamps, sport.

Jack Thorneycroft, Lichborough, Towcester, Northamptonshire; age 12-15; football, films, music.

F. Bradley, 133, Willenden Lane, Brondesbury, London, N.W.6; correspondent in the Southall Boy Cadets.

Harry Hall, Grey Street, Adelaide, Cape Province, South Africa; films, tennis, golf.

Anthony M. H. Maintenant, 112, Tothill House, Page St., Westminster, London, S.W.1; age 9-11; France, Italy; books, authors.

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The HOUSE MASTERS



"Look!" exclaimed Tom Merry as a figure stepped into the beam of the torch. "It's Railton!" "Hallo!" said the man who met the Housemaster. "You're here on time, my dear cousin." Figgins and Tom Merry gazed at the scene in amazement. What could be the reason for Mr. Railton's secret meeting in this desolate ruin?

CHAPTER 1.

Caught in the Snow!

TOM MERRY pushed up the collar of his overcoat.

"More snow!" he said.

"Looks like it!" said Monty Lowther glumly.

It did look like it. The winter evening had set in, and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther of the Shell Form at St. Jim's were tramping down Rylcombe Lane towards the school.

They had been over to Wayland, and they were in a hurry to get in for calling-over.

White snow gleamed upon the branches of the trees and upon the fences and the hedgerows. The ditch beside the road was frozen over. The countryside was in the stern grip of winter.

Far ahead, through the leafless trees and the gloom of evening, rose the old tower of St. Jim's.

The snow was beginning to fall again, and the tower disappeared amid a whirl of white flakes.

"Bless the snow!" said Manners. "It's all very well, but you can have too much of a good thing. Snow's all right for snowballing the New House bouncers, but I don't like it down the back of my neck. Groogh!"

"Might as well get under shelter for a bit," said Tom Merry, as a fierce gust of wind drove the whirling flakes into

their faces. "We're late for calling-over, anyway, and we shall have to ring up Taggles."

"This is what comes of wasting time snowballing the Grammarian cads!" growled Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Never mind, we drove Gordon Gay and Frank Monk right up Wayland High Street, and beat them hollow. It was worth fifty lines."

"Hear, hear!" said Manners.

"Well, to shelter or not to shelter, that is the giddy question," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, shelter," said Lowther.

"Then nip under this tree."

And the chums of the Shell Form at St. Jim's drew together under a big tree by the roadside, and sheltered from the snowstorm.

The bitter wind was driving the flakes along the lane in clouds.

The juniors drew their mufflers and their coat-collars tighter, and sheltered themselves as well as they could by the trunk of the big tree.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry suddenly.

"What's the matter?"

"There's somebody who's fonder of snow than we are!"

"By Jove!"

A man in a greatcoat, with a soft hat pulled down over his eyes, was striding through the falling snow from the direction of St. Jim's.

His form was very indistinct in the gloomy evening dusk, but there seemed

to be something familiar about him to the eyes of the juniors.

He came closer and strode past, and the juniors remained unnoticed in the deep shadows under the trees.

The athletic figure passed on in the gloom of the lane. Then Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Do you know who that was?" he whispered.

Monty Lowther nodded.

"Railton!"

"Yes!"

"I didn't see his face," said Manners, "but I thought I knew him. What on earth is our giddy Housemaster doing out of doors in this weather? He can't be going round to snowball the Grammarians."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The form of the master of the School House disappeared in the dusk.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Lowther. "If we could get in now, we might get clear without being spotted. Railton is out, and we saw Langton, North, Rushden, and Darrell in Wayland. Kildare is away now, and that leaves only Knox."

With the Housemaster and five prefects absent, Tom Merry & Co. had a chance of getting in without being observed.

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "Might get out of lines."

The thought was sufficient to make the chums of the Shell brave the snowstorm. They emerged from the shelter of the tree and tramped through the

—SPARKLING LONG ST. JIM'S STORY OF MYSTERY, FUN AND EXCITEMENT.

SECRET!By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

thickening snow towards St. Jim's once more.

There was a sudden shout in the gloom.

"School House cads!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Yah!"

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

Plomp! Bump! Biff!

The Terrible Three staggered as snowballs whizzed upon them from the gloom. They knew the voices of Figgins & Co., their rivals of the New House at St. Jim's.

"Ow!" gasped Tom Merry, as a ball caught him in the eye. "Ugh! Yow!"

"Groogh!"

"Yowp!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "Who's Cock House at St. Jim's? Give 'em socks!"

"Give 'em beans!" yelled Kerr.

"Buck up," said Fatty Wynn. "I want to get in to tea."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whiz, whiz, whiz!

The chums of the Shell were taken by surprise. They had not known that Figgins & Co. of the Fourth, the heroes of the New House, were also outside the gates of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry staggered back, blinded by breaking snowballs, and Manners sat down in the snow, and Monty Lowther reeled and staggered.

Tom Merry gouged the snow out of his eyes in a moment, and caught sight of his foes in the dusk. He stooped for snow, caught up two handfuls, and started retaliation.

"Buck up, School House!" he shouted.

"Yes, rather!"

Whiz!

"Ow! Oooch!"

The Terrible Three rained snowballs upon the enemy, then they rushed to close quarters.

"Look out!" roared Figgins. "Buck up, New House!"

Crash! Bump!

Figgins went down in the snow with Tom Merry sprawling over him. He gasped as the captain of the Shell rubbed his nose in the thick snow.

"Grooch!"

Manners dropped underneath Fatty Wynn, and Fatty Wynn sat on him. When the Falstaff of the New House was sitting on anybody there was not the slightest chance of rising again until Fatty Wynn chose. Manners collapsed into the snow and gurgled.

"Groogh! Lemme gerrup!"

Kerr and Monty Lowther struggled to and fro, stumbling in the snow.

"Ow!" gasped Figgins. "Lemme up, you duffer!"

"No fear!" said Tom Merry calmly.

"Groogh! I'm cho-choking with snow!"

"Never mind; that's all right."

"You—you chump! Lemme gerrup!"

"Lemme up, you fat idiot, Wynn!"

and Manners. "Ow! I'm being

squashed! Yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bump!

Monty Lowther and Kerr rolled into

the snow at last, kicking up clouds of it as they struggled.

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Looks to me like honours divided!" he exclaimed. "Shall we make it pax?"

"Groogh! Yes!"

"Pax!" grunted Kerr.

And the dishevelled juniors rose to their feet, and shook off clouds of snow.

"Ow! You silly asses!" grunted Manners. "I—I'm smothered! You silly New House burlbers!"

"You School House fatheads!"

"You duffer!"

"You chump!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

"Shut up, all of you! Is that what you call pax?"

"Well, that silly ass—"

"That frabjous chump—"

"Shut up! Let's get in, and get some of the snow out of our necks," said

~~~~~

*When the sour-tempered Mr. Ratcliff sets himself the task of spying out Mr. Railton's secret he does it with the desired object of exposing his rival Housemaster to St. Jim's. But the result of Mr. Ratcliff's spying is as unexpected as it is unpleasant for "Ratty"!*

~~~~~

Tom Merry. "We shall have impots for missing call-over as it is."

And the rival juniors tramped on to St. Jim's in the comforting assurance that they would have lines for being late.

CHAPTER 2.**"Ratty" in a Rage!**

WHILE Tom Merry & Co. were tramping through the falling snow, an unusual scene was being enacted at St. Jim's. If the Terrible Three had known what was "on" that evening in the School House, even their victory over Gordon Gay & Co. of the Grammar School would not have consoled them for being absent.

The School House at St. Jim's was enjoying itself.

It was the time in the evening usually supposed to be devoted to preparation; but at that precise time, on this particular evening, nothing was further from the thoughts of the School House juniors.

When there was mischief of any kind afoot in the School House, it was generally the Terrible Three of the Shell who were at the bottom of it.

But though the chums of the Shell were out of gates now, there were plenty of fellows left quite able and willing to live up to the noblest traditions of the House.

Study No. 6, tenanted by Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, could

easily keep the ball rolling, as far as that went.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, was perhaps a little too much given to cultivating the repose that stamps the cast of Vere de Vere to take a very active hand in a House rag.

But the other juniors of Study No. 6 more than made up for his deficiencies.

There was snow in the quadrangle of St. Jim's, snow on the school walls, snow on the leafless branches of the old elms.

Most of the fellows were indoors, and while in the New House order reigned, things were very much reversed in the School House.

It is an old adage that when the cat takes her departure the mice will proceed to improve the occasion; and this was what happened in the School House.

By a curious coincidence the House had been left for the time uncontrolled by either master or prefects, and the inmates were not slow to learn that fact, and take the fullest advantage of it.

Jack Blake of the Fourth Form had been the first to discover how matters stood, and he at once saw all the possibilities of the new situation. He made a bee line for Study No. 6 to rouse out his chums.

"Jump up, kids!" he exclaimed, putting his head in at the door. "Chuck those beastly books away! This is where we have a high old time!"

"What's happened?" yawned Herries.

"Mr. Railton, our respected Housemaster, has gone out."

"Well?"

"And Kildare, our equally respected captain, has gone to see some friends, and won't be home till late."

"Suppose he has?"

"And I saw Langton, Darrell, Rushden, and North, our prefects, take themselves off some time ago."

"Where have they gone?"

"Can't say. But I fancy they didn't know Mr. Railton was going out, and he didn't know they were going. But the result is we are free, my sons—free as the giddy air!"

"There's Knox, the other prefect," said Digby. "What price Knox?"

"Knox doesn't count. He's a weak-kneed chap, and wouldn't matter much, anyway. But, for the sake of making assurance doubly sure, I've locked his door."

The chums of Study No. 6 were on their feet now. They realised at once the grand possibilities opening out before them.

"My hat!" said Herries. "Now for a high old time!"

"Now to make the fur fly!" exclaimed Digby.

"Bai Jove! We can have some giddy fun now!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House.

"Follow your uncle!" ejaculated Blake.

And the four chums rushed downstairs. They went sliding down the banisters of the great staircase one after the other, alighting actively at the bottom, the only accident being that D'Arcy cannoned into Gore, who promptly knocked him over and sat upon him.

"Mind my jacket!" howled the swell of St. Jim's in terror. "You boundah, you are spoilin' my jacket!"

"I'll spoil your dial, too, if you run into me!" growled Gore of the Shell.

"Blake, pull the boundah off! He's wuffin' my hair!"

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Blake, grinning, bore down upon Gore and jerked him away from D'Arcy. He wagged his forefinger reprovingly at Gore, who was looking warlike.

"Pax!" exclaimed Blake. "This is no time for rowing with each other. We're free, my infants! And now for a lark!"

The word rang through the School House.

"While the cat's away," grinned Blake, "the mice will play. And we're the giddy mice!"

And the School House juniors proceeded to make the most of their chance while it lasted.

In the Junior Common-room a boxing match started between four pairs of doughty champions, and as their friends stood round and cheered every thump to the echo, the resulting noise can easily be imagined.

Blake, whose inventive genius was seldom found wanting, inaugurated a toboggan on the big staircase, and fun there waxed fast and furious.

Then racing was started in the big corridor, and proceeded in the midst of a din worthy of Babel in its palmiest state.

Fifth Form seniors came out of their studies and looked on, grinning. They were not prefects, and it was no business of theirs to stop the row; nor is it likely that the juniors would have paid them much heed had they tried to do so.

As the noise increased, and Knox realised that pandemonium had broken loose in the House, he at first took no notice, leaving the matter to the other prefects.

It was some time before it dawned upon the Sixth Former that there was something wrong in the School House. When he realised that, he tried to open his door to go out and do his best to quell the riot, but he discovered that the door was locked.

Knox made one or two attempts to force the door; but, upon the whole, he was not sorry to be prevented from venturing out to face such a storm; and so, as the door would not open, he went back to his chair, with a shrug of his shoulders. And the din continued without cessation and increased from moment to moment.

The School House was fairly enjoying itself.

The Fifth Form seniors, from being lookers-on, soon mingled in the game, and joined their voices to the din, and their weight to the tobogganing, and then the uproar was terrific.

The juniors were too excited to reflect that the noise might be heard in the New House and bring other masters upon the scene.

It was a rule at St. Jim's that a master belonging to one House should never interfere with the other, and the Head himself seldom stepped in between a Housemaster and his House.

Whether the riot now proceeding would justify interference on the part of the New House master was a question the youngsters never stopped to ask themselves. They did not know that Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House, was standing at his door, looking across the dusky quad and wondering whether he should interfere.

The rivalry between the two Houses at St. Jim's was an old story, and dated from the foundation of the New House, but of late something of that rivalry had crept in between the two Housemasters as well.

Mr. Railton, of the School House, was a great athlete and strong on sport.

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and not wholly averse to the House rivalry, which, he considered, made the boys "buck up" in many ways, especially on the football field and cricket field. Mr. Ratcliff was his opposite—thin, acrid, sharp-tempered, and heavily down upon the contending factions.

Mr. Ratcliff was the soul of order and exactness, and he considered that Mr. Railton managed his House badly, but he seldom attempted to interfere. He was of a somewhat interfering nature, and sometimes gave advice—which his fellow masters received with scant gratitude.

Now, as he stood at the door of the New House, looking across the quad at the lighted windows of the building opposite, Mr. Ratcliff thought that his chance had come. Mr. Railton was evidently away, and his House had broken loose from all restraint in his absence. What were the prefects doing? Perhaps they were away, too. Clearly Mr. Ratcliff would be fully justified in interfering here.

He smiled sourly at the thought. Mr. Railton was so sensitive about the government of his House that his rival had a chance now to give him a dig in a tender spot. The master of the New House left his door and walked towards the School House.

"I cannot understand Mr. Railton lately," Mr. Ratcliff said to himself. "He always, in my opinion, neglected his duties, but of late he seems more careless than ever. He really seems like a man with a weight upon his mind."

The fun was at its height when Mr. Ratcliff reached the School House. The door was ajar, and Mr. Ratcliff pushed it quietly open and stood for some moments unnoticed, looking on sourly at the scene of uproar within.

The din had grown deafening. The toboggan had come to grief on the big staircase, and a heap of boys had been deposited at the bottom, and were struggling to their feet, while the rest shouted with laughter.

"Here, get off my neck, Digby!" gasped Blake. "What the dickens do you mean by sitting on me? I'm not a sofa! And, look here, you chaps, not quite so much row. We shall have old Ratty coming over from the New House if he hears us. He'd just like to shove his long nose in here to worry us!"

"Ahem!" That "ahem" was quite a quiet one, but it had more effect upon the School House boys than the explosion of a bombshell would have had.

Blake, for once taken aback, stared at the lean figure of the Housemaster at the door. He realised that Mr. Ratcliff must have overheard his remark, and he blushed.

The School House boys looked at one another and at Mr. Ratcliff, and a dead silence fell upon them. The Housemaster advanced from the door.

"This is a disgraceful scene!" he said, in his thin, cutting voice. "Where is your Housemaster?"

The boys looked at one another, and it fell to Blake to act as spokesman.

"Mr. Railton is out, sir."

"I suppose he left prefects in charge of the House?"

"The prefects are out also, sir."

"Disgraceful! Do you mean to tell me that there is not a single prefect in the House?"

"Yes, sir, there's Knox."

"Where is he?"

"In his room, sir."

"Has he made no attempt to keep order here?"

"He can't get out of his room, sir."

said Blake, not wishing to get the unfortunate prefect into hot water. "His door's got locked, and he can't open it."

"Ah, I see, some of you have deliberately fastened him in his room! Disgraceful! So only one prefect is left in charge of the House, and he—"

"I suppose Mr. Railton did not know that they were going out."

"I do not wish to listen to your suppositions, Blake. This riot is positively disgraceful."

"We didn't mean any harm, sir. It was only a little fun."

"Only a little fun to turn the House into a bear-garden? I am sorry to see that Fifth Form boys have so far forgotten the dignity of their Form as to mingle in the foolish uproar of the juniors."

Whereat the Fifth Form seniors turned red, and looked very uncomfortable.

"Let this cease at once!" continued Mr. Ratcliff. "Mr. Railton having abandoned his charge, it is my duty to keep order until he returns. Some of the boys do not appear to know that I am here. They had better be told!"

The news of the Housemaster's presence soon spread, and the din died away; but the School House boys were in a rebellious mood. They keenly resented any kind of interference from the New House, and for the New House master to come over and give orders was intolerable. Yet to disobey his orders was not exactly feasible.

"And now," said Mr. Ratcliff, when silence was restored, "I desire to know who was the originator of this disturbance."

Dead silence. "Blake, you will kindly enlighten me upon that point."

"I have nothing to tell you, sir."

"Indeed, I do not think it is necessary to look farther than yourself," said Mr. Ratcliff dryly. "I have very little doubt that you are at the bottom of it. If it is not so, tell me at once who is guilty?"

Blake's face set obstinately, and he did not speak.

He had, indeed, been the leader in the uproar, but, of course, all were equally to blame, so far as any were to blame at all.

But, in any case, Blake was too strong upon the dignity of his House to be questioned by a New House master.

"Answer me, Blake."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"Then I can only conclude that you are the author of this outrageous infraction of the laws of the school."

"We were all in it, sir," ventured Herries.

"Every one of us," added Digby.

"I did not ask for other opinions. Blake, step forward!"

Blake reluctantly advanced.

Mr. Ratcliff had a cane in his hand, which he had thoughtfully provided himself with before leaving the New House.

"Hold out your hand!"

Blake's hands remained down at his sides.

A thrill ran through the crowd of School House boys.

Was Blake going to defy the interfering intruder?

Gladly enough would the whole School House have been to defy the enemy, but, after all, Mr. Ratcliff was a master, and direct disobedience to a master was a serious thing.

"Blake!" A dull red flush came into

Mr. Ratcliff's sallow cheeks. "Blake, I told you to hold out your hand!"

"Yes, sir, I heard you."

"Obey me, then, instantly!"

"You ought not to punish us, sir," said Blake. His face was pale now, but his voice rang firm. "It's for Mr. Railton to punish us, if we deserve it."

"Blake!"

"We belong to the School House, sir, and he wouldn't like—"

"Hold out your hand at once!"

Blake's eyes flashed fire.

"I'll do it, sir, if you order me, but I shall complain to Mr. Railton."

He held out his hand.

There was a slight doubt now in Mr. Ratcliff's mind. He knew that he was overstepping the bounds of his duty in inflicting corporal punishment on a School House boy. He knew that Mr. Railton would be angry when he heard of it. That was chiefly why he intended to do it. But he had never looked for this cool opposition from a junior. Blake knew that Mr. Ratcliff was in the wrong, and he had had the courage to say so. But the Housemaster had gone too far now to retreat.

He brought the cane down upon Blake's hand with a savage slash that made the boy utter a cry of pain.

"The other hand, Blake."

Blake held it out, and received another slash.

Mr. Ratcliff's little eyes were glittering cruelly.

"Now the other again."

Blake set his teeth.

He had gone through a good many lickings in his career at St. Jim's, but

he had never had such stingers as Mr. Ratcliff was giving him now. That, added to the knowledge that Mr. Ratcliff had no right to punish him, was the cause of his next action.

Down came the cane towards the already smarting palm, and Blake withdrew it suddenly.

The cane swept through the air, and, coming down with great force and meeting with no resistance, it thrashed against Mr. Ratcliff's right leg with a sound that rang like a pistol-shot.

The Housemaster gave a yell of anguish, and, dropping the cane, he hopped on one leg, claspings the injured limb with both hands.

A gasp ran through the crowd of boys, followed by an irresistible roar of laughter. The aspect of the Housemaster was comical, and his unexpected punishment was so well deserved that no one could feel sorry for him.

"Oh! Ah! Ow!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "You wicked, wretched boy! Ow, ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the School House in chorus.

Mr. Ratcliff, realising what a ridiculous figure he was cutting, set his injured leg down and ceased the hopping; but he still twisted painfully, for the cut had been a severe one.

His face was distorted with pain and rage. He picked up the cane.

"Blake!" He almost choked over the word. "Blake. This insolence—this unparalleled insolence, shall not escape unpunished! I will—ah—"

He broke off, too enraged to say more, and seized Blake by the collar.

Twisting the boy round, he began to thrash him in the most savage way, and Blake roared in good earnest.

The School House boys looked on with lowering brows, and many voices were raised in angry protest.

"Shame! Shame!"

Mr. Ratcliff glared furiously round. He had quite lost his temper now. The protests only made him lash at the junior more savagely.

"Shame!"

The murmur became a shout. But suddenly it died away.

A stalwart, athletic figure stopped in at the open door of the School House.

Mr. Railton had returned.

The Housemaster of the School House looked at the scene in dumb amazement for a moment, and then sprang forward.

"Mr. Ratcliff, release that boy instantly!"

CHAPTER 3.

Rival Masters!

MR. RAILTON'S voice rang out imperatively, and Mr. Ratcliff started, and let go Blake as if he had suddenly become red-hot to the touch.

The junior promptly twisted out of his reach.

Mr. Railton advanced quickly towards Mr. Ratcliff, his eyes blazing. He stopped, facing the New House master, who had quickly recovered his coolness.

For a few moments the two House-



Seizing Blake by the collar, Mr. Ratcliff, beside himself with rage, began thrashing him savagely. "Shame!" exclaimed the juniors in protest. But their voices died away as Mr. Railton stepped in at the open door of the School House. "Mr. Ratcliff," he said, "release that boy instantly!"

masters looked at each other, a slight sneer upon Mr. Ratcliff's sallow face, an angry flush upon Mr. Railton's.

Mr. Railton was the first to speak, and he tried to control his voice and speak calmly; but, in spite of himself, it trembled with anger.

"Mr. Ratcliff, I demand an explanation! You have been guilty of an unwarrantable intrusion and interference—"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Ratcliff icily. "Unless you can moderate your language, Mr. Railton, I can scarcely agree to discuss the matter before the boys."

"Perhaps you are right," said Mr. Railton, regaining his composure. "But I think my surprise and annoyance are quite natural in the circumstances. However, I have no doubt you have an explanation to give, and if you kindly step into my study—"

"With pleasure," said Mr. Ratcliff blandly.

Mr. Railton turned to the boys.

"Go to your rooms at once! You ought to be doing your preparation! Where are the prefects?"

Mr. Ratcliff smiled maliciously.

"The prefects, like yourself, were absent. The House was in a riot, and that is why—"

The master of the School House flushed red.

"Please step into my study."

"Certainly!"

The boys dispersed, and the two masters went into Mr. Railton's study, and the door closed.

The New House master was quite cool and collected.

"Now for your explanation, Mr. Ratcliff. I could not speak out before the boys, who, I admit, ought not to see dissension among the masters. But I do not withdraw my words. I consider that you have been guilty of an interference with my House that is wholly inexcusable."

"Will you allow me to explain?"

"I am waiting for you to do so."

"The House was, as I have said, in a state of riot. The din was so terrific that I could hear it across the quadrangle in the New House."

"H'm! That is very surprising."

"If you doubt my word, a good many there heard it beside myself," said Mr. Ratcliff sourly. "That is why I came over. I guessed, of course, that you were absent, and that the prefects were not doing their duty."

"I cannot understand how—"

"How they were all absent? Yes, it is very unfortunate. Really, my intention was to do you a service, Mr. Railton. Had the disturbance reached the Head, the result might have been very unpleasant for you."

The School House master bit his lip.

What Mr. Ratcliff said was correct, and had he interfered in a friendly and cordial manner, he would have been entitled to gratitude. But there was nothing friendly or cordial about Mr. Ratcliff.

"The boy Blake was the head of the disturbance," continued Mr. Ratcliff. "I caned him, therefore, and he was guilty of the grossest insolence to me personally."

"You had no right to punish a boy of my House. You should have mentioned the matter to me if you thought he deserved chastisement."

"I do not think so, and I was upon the spot, and you were out. If a Housemaster goes wandering off instead of attending to his duties, he ought to

be thankful there is someone on the spot to attend to those duties for him."

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

"You force me to speak plainly," said the New House master, shrugging his thin shoulders. "I had no desire to interfere, but I was compelled to do so. If you should ever find my House in a state of uproar, I should expect as much of you. But I do not think that is ever likely to happen."

"I do not choose to listen to your criticism of the discipline of my House, sir!" said Mr. Railton, with heat. "Your explanation is no doubt true, but I cannot credit that you interfered with the best intentions. That is plain English."

"It is clear that we cannot agree," said Mr. Ratcliff, smiling, "but if you like, I am willing to place the matter before the Head, and let him decide between us."

"I have no doubt that you would be glad to acquaint the Head with the details of this unfortunate occurrence," said Mr. Railton.

"You do me injustice. Now that you have returned, I leave the matter in your hands, having, as I believe, done my bounden duty. I think you should punish Blake for deliberate insolence to a master. But if you choose not to do so, I shall not complain."

"I will inquire into the matter at once."

And the master of the School House sent for Blake.

Jack Blake looked very dubious as he

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entered the Housemaster's study. He was feeling very hurt, for Mr. Ratcliff had hit hard. He wondered whether there was some more to come.

"Blake," said Mr. Railton, "Mr. Ratcliff complains that you have been insolent to him."

Blake knew well enough that Mr. Ratcliff was referring to the fact that he had withdrawn his hand from the cane, and caused the master to hurt himself. But he chose to misunderstand.

"I'm sorry, sir. I did not know that Mr. Ratcliff was listening when I spoke."

"Eh? I do not understand."

"Isn't Mr. Ratcliff referring to what I said when he came into the House?" asked Blake innocently. "He came so quietly that I didn't know he was there, sir. And how was I to guess that he was listening?"

Mr. Ratcliff turned crimson.

The master of the School House concealed a smile. No one ever got much change out of Jack Blake.

"And what did you say, Blake, that Mr. Ratcliff heard?"

The master of the New House struck in hastily:

"That is not what I was referring to. I—"

But Blake did not mean to spare him. "I just happened to say to the other

fellows that they mustn't make such a noise, sir, because if old Ratcliff heard, he would like to poke his long nose into the House."

Blake made this statement with perfect gravity.

Mr. Railton almost exploded.

"Is that what you were complaining of, Mr. Ratcliff?"

But Mr. Ratcliff did not trust himself to reply. He could not have opened his mouth just then without saying something far stronger than would have been seemly on the lips of a Housemaster.

He gave Blake one black look, and marched out of the study without a word.

Mr. Railton could not help smiling as the door closed behind him. But he became grave again once more.

"Blake, that was a very improper remark to make; but as Mr. Ratcliff has already caned you severely, I do not feel called upon to inflict further punishment."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Is it a fact, Blake, that all the prefects are absent?" asked Mr. Railton, with a rather worried look.

"Yes, sir; all except Knox; and he's fastened in his room."

"Dear me! How comes that?"

"Somebody locked him in, sir."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then tell me at once. Whoever it was is primarily responsible for what has happened. Tell me who it was, Blake."

Blake hesitated.

"I—I'm afraid to, sir."

"Nonsense! I shall hold you blameless, and you will be under my protection. You need have no fear in speaking."

"Yes, sir; in that case I suppose I ought to speak."

"Certainly you ought, and must. Who was it?"

"Myself, sir," said Blake demurely. Mr. Railton started.

He looked hard at Blake, whose expression was perfectly innocent and confiding.

"Blake! It was you?"

"Yes, sir. I thought I ought to tell you, after you promised that I should not be punished."

The Housemaster breathed hard.

"You may go, Blake."

"Thank you, sir!"

And the School House junior quitted the room.

Mr. Railton looked after him frowningly for some moments, and then burst into a laugh. It was impossible to be angry for long with Jack Blake.

CHAPTER 4.

Not So Funny for Figgins & Co.!

MR. RAILTON was alone in his study. He was waiting for the return of the prefects. But, as a matter of fact, he was not thinking of the recent row in the School House, nor even of the unpleasant incident of Mr. Ratcliff's interference. It was some weightier matter which brought a dark shade to Mr. Railton's face and lined his brow with care.

Mr. Ratcliff, who took a deep interest in everybody's affairs, and seldom allowed anything to escape his attention, had observed that of late the master of the School House seemed to have something weighing upon his mind, and had wondered what it was. With a characteristically mean suspicion, he had decided that Mr. Railton was in

trouble of some kind, which would not be to his credit if the facts came out.

He would have been confirmed in his suspicion if he could have seen Mr. Railton now. The latter gentleman was pacing his study with restless steps, and more than once a deep sigh escaped his lips.

There could be no doubt that Mr. Railton was in some deep trouble, which he did not know how to deal with. The expression on his face showed how gloomy his thoughts were.

His painful reverie was interrupted by a tap at the door.

In a moment the Housemaster pulled himself together.

"Come in!" he called out.

Kildare and Darrell came in. The Housemaster nodded pleasantly. There was hardly a trace now in his features of the gloom that had previously been there.

Kildare was looking rather disquieted. He had heard about the disturbance in the House during his absence and Mr. Ratcliff's interference.

"This is a bad business, sir," he said. "It was unfortunate we happened to be all away at the same time. It gave Mr. Ratcliff an excuse, which I cannot help thinking he has been looking for."

"Yes, it was very unfortunate," said Mr. Railton. "Naturally, when I left the House I imagined that the prefects were here."

"They did not know you were gone, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's.

"If you had mentioned to one of us that you were going, sir—" began Darrell.

Mr. Railton flushed slightly.

"Really, I should have done so," he admitted; "but I did not, so I was to blame. The whole affair is very unfortunate."

"Then Knox was locked in his room, it appears," said Kildare. "The fellow who did that ought to be licked!"

Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

"It was Blake; and he has already been sufficiently punished. You know, I suppose, that when I returned I found Mr. Ratcliff punishing him?"

"Yes, sir," said Kildare. "And I want to speak about that to you. It is simply rotten that Mr. Ratcliff should take so much upon himself in our House. He had no right at all to punish Blake."

"None!" said Darrell emphatically. "Whatever Blake had done, it was for you to punish him, sir, or one of his own prefects. Why didn't Mr. Ratcliff get Knox out of his study, and leave the matter in his hands, if he was so anxious to be friendly?"

"He does not appear to have thought of that," said Mr. Railton. "However, I'm afraid we are in an unfortunate position. Certainly the House got out of hand, and so Mr. Ratcliff had a right to interfere. We must see that it does not happen again, that is all."

"Not much danger of that, sir!" said Kildare cheerfully.

"Then we will let the matter rest here," said Mr. Railton. "The juniors acted thoughtlessly, but I shall not punish them. You might speak to the ringleaders, perhaps, Kildare."

"I will do so, sir. I have no doubt that they were Study No. 6. But they didn't mean any harm, I am sure of that."

"I agree with you."

And Mr. Railton nodded and the prefects retired.

Kildare repaired at once to Study No. 6. He found the four juniors hard at work at their neglected prep. Blake looked up meekly as the captain of the school came in and stood surveying them grimly.

"Hallo, Kildare!" he said affably. "Glad to see you! Have you come to tea with us? Sit down and we'll have the kettle boiling in a jiffy!"

And Blake jumped up industriously. Kildare tried not to smile.

"I have not come to take tea with you," he said. "I've come to blow you up, you young rascals, and for two pins I'd lick you all round!"

"Oh!" murmured Blake. "What have we done?"

"Made a thundering row, and given Ratcliff the excuse he's been waiting for to shove his nose into our House affairs!"

"How were we to know he was coming?" protested Blake. "Besides, I stood up for the honour of the House, and caught it pretty hot, too!"

"You were at the bottom of the row, of course."

"Well, I started the toboggan."

"You young rascal!"

"But, of course, I didn't mean any harm, and I didn't foresee—"

"No, of course not. Perhaps next time you will think before you act."

"Of course I will," said Blake heartily. "Sure you won't have a cup of tea, Kildare?"

The school captain turned to the door. "No."

"I say, it's jolly good tea, and—"

But Kildare was gone. Blake smiled as he sat down.

"We're out of that pretty well," he said genially. "I'm sorry we gave old Ratty a chance to score off Mr. Railton. But that couldn't be foreseen, could it?"

"Of course not," said Herries; "and it was good fun."

"The bother is," said Digby thoughtfully, "that when it all gets out the New House will chip us about it. They're sure to make capital out of it!"

Blake whistled.

"Yes, very likely. Figgins & Co. will—"

Blake was interrupted by a sudden elink at the window. He glanced towards it in surprise.

"Hallo, what was that?"

"Sounded like a stone chucked at the window," said Herries. "Some giddy

donkey in the quadrangle amusing his silly self, I suppose."

Clink!

It was another pebble on the glass.

Blake rose, went to the window, and threw it up. Outside, the dusk was thick in the quadrangle.

"Look here, you ass," he called out, "if you break this glass there will be a row—do you hear? Cluck it!"

"All right!" came back the well-known voice of Figgins. "We're not going to break the glass."

"What do you bounders want, anyway?"

There was a chuckle in the dusk below.

Blake, peering down, could now make out the lanky form of Figgins and the less lengthy figures of his two companions, Kory and Fatty Wynn, the inseparable "Co."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Then take it and go!"

Figgins chuckled again.

"Who turns the House into a lunatic asylum when the master is away!" he demanded, addressing his two companions.

And the Co. replied together:

"The School House kids do!"

"Who has to keep 'em in order?"

"The New House!"

"Who's the Cock House at St. Jim's?"

"New House! New House!"

Blake's eyes gleamed.

He had expected chipping on that sore topic, but hardly so soon. He whispered to Digby behind him:

"Take the crockery out of the basin. Dig, and hand it to me. Shove the old tea-leaves into it to give it a flavour."

Digby grinned and obeyed.

Unconscious of the impending punishment, Figgins & Co. continued their pleasantry.

"Who kicks up a shine when he's not being looked after?"

"Blake does!"

"Who has to whack him and teach him to be a good boy?"

"Ratcliff does!"

"Who—Great pip!"



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Figgins broke off with a yell as a flood of water descended from a basin suddenly inverted overhead by Blake.

All three of the New House juniors came in for a share of the water, and they yelled in chorus. The water soused over their heads, ran down their collars, and the tea-leaves stuck in their hair and on their faces.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake. "Who gets a wash when he's trying to be funny?"

And his comrades chimed in:

"Figgins does!"

"Oh—ow! Oooch!" spluttered Figgins & Co., and they retreated, in case there should be more water to come.

And the laughter of Study No. 6 followed them across the dusky quad.

CHAPTER 5.

Monteith Makes a Discovery!

"RAILTON'S looking worried this morning," said Tom Merry, as the juniors of the School House sat at breakfast a couple of days later.

His companions glanced towards Mr. Railton.

The Housemaster indeed wore a worried look, and he answered absently to several remarks that were addressed to him by the senior boys.

"Still thinking about that happening the other night, I suppose," remarked Monty Lowther, "while we were out."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"It isn't that."

"What do you think it is, then?"

"I don't know; but I hope it's nothing the matter."

Tom Merry, like most of the School House boys, was strongly attached to his Housemaster, and he gave more than one glance in the direction of Mr. Railton.

The master's preoccupation was certainly noticeable.

Kildare, at breakfast, had made several remarks, and received answers almost at random, and had relapsed into silence.

Mr. Railton left the table quickly when breakfast was over, and went down the steps into the quadrangle. The juniors poured out into the quad before going into lessons. Tom Merry caught a glimpse of Mr. Railton under the leafless elms, intent upon reading a letter he held in his hand.

The morning was cold and clear. There had lately been a fall of snow, which was frozen as hard as iron in the quadrangle, so that the ground was as slippery as glass.

The boys rejoiced in it. Outside the New House Figgins & Co. had made a slide, which was gradually lengthening until it extended well within School House territory.

"Look at those bounders!" said Tom Merry. "Actually sticking their old slide in our ground!"

"Let's collar it," suggested Manners.

"That's an idea!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Come on, ye cripples! We'll have that slide!"

And a crowd of School House juniors rushed to the fray.

A long line of New House boys, with Figgins at their head, had just entered, one after another, on the slide, and were coming at a whizzing speed towards the School House.

Tom Merry, starting from the other end of the slide, went whizzing to meet them, and after him at lightning speed came his followers.

Figgins gave a yell.

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"Get clear, you School House wasters!"

But Tom Merry hadn't the faintest intention of getting clear. He knew that there would be a terrific collision, but he didn't mind that.

"Clear the course, you silly ass!" bawled Figgins.

It was impossible for the New House junior to stop himself. He was going at an express rate, and Tom Merry was coming with almost equal impetus to meet him. Only a few seconds elapsed before the rivals met at the centre of the slide. With a crash they cannoned into each other.

"Ooh, oh, oh!"

gasped Figgins, every ounce of breath knocked out of his body. He felt like a pancake

between the School House juniors in front and his own followers behind.

Biff, biff, biff! went the sliders, unable to stop themselves, each crashing into the one in advance of him.

Figgins gasped and collapsed, and rolled over, and Tom Merry went down with him, and over them sprawled and scrambled a heap of inextricably mingled juniors.

And belated sliders coming up fell over the heap, and added themselves to it, until it seemed that half St. Jim's had piled itself there in the quadrangle.

Tom Merry and Figgins, who were undermost, were nearly suffocated.

"Gerroff my neck!" gurgled Tom Merry.

"Lemme gerrup!" gasped Figgins.

But it was some time before the mixed-up juniors could sort themselves out and allow the breathless leaders to rise.

Tom Merry and Figgins staggered to their feet at last, and Figgins inadvertently stepped on the slide as he did so, and sat down again with surprising suddenness.

"Oh crumbs!"

"Now, that was neat, Figgy!" said Tom Merry. "I should like to see you do that again."

Figgins scrambled to his feet, taking care this time to avoid the dangerous spot.

"Clear off, you idiots!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean by coming on our slide?"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Tom Merry. "Fair play's a jewel. You made the slide, and we're going to use it—that's an equal division of labour. What have you got to grumble about?"

"You ain't coming on our slide, you School House bounders!"

"Your mistake, Figgy! We've come."

Tom Merry went along the slide cheerfully, knocking several New House juniors out of the way as he proceeded.

Lowther and Manners and the rest followed fast, right up to the New House, laughing and cheering.



That was more than Figgins & Co. could stand.

"Sock into 'em!" he shouted. "Back up, New House!"

And the New House juniors, bursting with wrath, rushed to the attack, to drive the intruders away by main force.

A glorious melee followed, and as the footing on the frozen ground was extremely uncertain, falls were frequent—indeed, there were more of the combatants on the ground than on their feet most of the time.

"What is this disturbance about?"

Mr. Railton came hurrying towards the scene of action. The master still held the letter in his hand that he had been reading when the terrific din of the disputing juniors had drawn him away from its perusal.

"What is the matter here?"

Mr. Railton came swiftly towards them—too swiftly, in fact, for he stepped upon the slide.

The next moment the solid earth seemed to have slipped away from beneath him. He was flying along at lightning speed, with one leg in the air and his mouth wide open with astonishment, and his arms waving frantically like the sails of a windmill.

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Railton. "Oh! Ah! What—Oh!"

Right into the juniors he went, spinning along the slide, and cannoned into Tom Merry and Figgins, fetching them both down and falling on top of them.

"Ah!" gasped the Housemaster. "What ever has happened?"

He tried to scramble up; but at that moment Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, had sallied out, came in hand, to put an end to the disturbance.

He came out of the New House at a run, stepped on the slide as Mr. Railton had done, and came upon the scene much quicker than he had intended.

The New House prefect whizzed up as Mr. Railton rose, and ran straight into the Housemaster and floored him as if he had been shot. With a desperate effort, Monteith managed to keep his own feet.

Figgins
sudden
their h

"I—I'm sorry!" he gasped. "I beg your pardon, sir! I—"

"Have a care!" gasped Mr. Railton, as Tom Merry helped him up. "How could you be so clumsy, Monteith?"

"I stepped on the slide, sir, without noticing it. You did the same yourself."

"Well, so I did," said Mr. Railton, between his gasps for breath; "so I suppose I must not blame you. Really, the slide should never have been made here. It is too dangerous."

"Quite so, sir. I have no doubt Tom Merry was at the bottom of it, and—"

"It wasn't Tom Merry," said Figgins sturdily. "We made the slide, Monteith."

"Then take that!" said Monteith, giving him a cut with the cane, annoyed at Figgins' outspokenness. "And, remember—"

"Monteith, that is brutal!" said Mr. Railton sharply. "I do not like interfering with a prefect, but you have no right to strike a boy like that! It was very right of him to own up so promptly!"

Monteith scowled. "I do not think, sir, that Mr. Ratcliff would approve of your interfering with one of his New House prefects!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Ratcliff has set an example for me to follow," replied Mr. Railton dryly. "At all events, I order you not to touch that junior again!"

"Very well. But I shall certainly lay a complaint to Mr. Ratcliff!"

"Do so, if you choose!" said Mr. Railton contemptuously.

The bell for classes began to ring at that moment, and Mr. Railton left the scene. The juniors followed him into the School House.

Monteith scowled after the School House master.

The head prefect of the New House shared Mr. Ratcliff's dislike of Mr. Railton, and the public rebuke had not improved his feelings.

"Confounded cheek!" he muttered. "If he thinks he's going to interfere with our House just because Ratcliff did in his when he was out, he's jolly well mistaken! As for Figgins—"

He broke off. A sheet of paper lying on the frozen snow attracted his atten-

tion. It was a letter, and had evidently been dropped there by someone a few minutes ago.

Monteith picked it up. A line had caught his eye, and it was quite sufficient to rouse his curiosity.

"I must have the money on Thursday night, or—"

The prefect put the letter into his pocket and walked back quickly to the New House.

He had no scruples about reading another fellow's letter. But the thought was in his mind that the letter did not belong to a boy, but to Mr. Railton.

Before coming out of the New House he had seen the Housemaster hurrying towards the scene of the disturbance with what looked like a letter held in his hand. Was this the letter? It was very probable.

Inside the New House, Monteith turned and looked out of the high Hall window without showing himself. In a couple of minutes he was gratified by seeing Mr. Railton reappear in the quadrangle, hurrying towards the scene of the late disturbance with an anxious expression upon his face.

Monteith grinned.

The School House master stooped and began to search in all directions, evidently looking for something he had dropped there.

There was no longer any doubt as to whom the letter belonged.

But Monteith had no intention of restoring it to its owner. He walked away to his own study, leaving Mr. Railton still searching in the quadrangle for the letter that was not there.

In his own study Monteith calmly unfolded the letter and read it. But as he read it he gave a low, prolonged whistle of amazement, and his eyes opened wide. He read it again, the same astonished expression still upon his face.

"My hat!" he muttered. "I never expected anything like this!"

Monteith whistled again, and placing the letter in an inside pocket, walked away slowly and thoughtfully towards the Sixth Form Room. The letter had given the New House prefect food for reflection.

They entered the room. Monteith took the letter he had picked up in the quadrangle from his pocket.

"I picked this letter up in the quad this morning, sir. It was dropped there by someone who was mixed up in a scramble over the slide, and I looked at it to discover to whom it belonged, with a view to restoring it to its owner." But you will see that it bears no name, and the contents are of such a serious nature that I think a master ought to see the letter, and decide what is to be done."

"Quite right, Monteith."

Mr. Ratcliff took the letter and read it through at once. His face expressed amazement, not unmingled with satisfaction, as he did so.

The letter ran:

"My dear cousin,—I hoped to hear from you, but you have not written. I told you plainly that a hundred pounds would be needed to enable me to leave this neighbourhood. What do you mean by not letting me know your decision?"

"It is not safe for me to linger here much longer. I need not go into details, you know as well as I do that it would be better for me to go. Now, to put it plainly, I must have the money on Thursday night, or the consequences will be serious."

"Are you going to let me have it? Do you want to get rid of me? In any case, meet me to-morrow—Monday—night as before, in the castle ruins, and we can talk it over. I want to come to an arrangement if possible. I shall be there at ten o'clock."

"B. H."

Mr. Ratcliff read the letter through twice, and then laid it down upon the table. His little eyes were glittering.

"Have you any idea, Monteith, to whom that letter belongs?"

"Well, sir, it was dropped by one of the persons mixed up in the row in the quad."

"They were mostly juniors, I believe, of both Houses?"

"Yes; nearly all Fourth Formers and Shell fellows."

"You must see that it is quite impossible for this letter to have been addressed to a junior, or, in fact, a boy at all, junior or senior."

"Well, it would be a bit queer to ask a boy for a hundred pounds," said Monteith, with a nod. "It struck me in that light."

Mr. Ratcliff pursed up his thin lips.

"The letter evidently belongs to some grown-up person, Monteith. The question is, was there any grown-up person on that spot at the time who might be supposed to have dropped the letter there?"

"Mr. Railton was there, sir," replied Monteith; "but, of course, it would be absurd to suppose that he could have received such a letter as this."

"Yes, indeed!" agreed Mr. Ratcliff. "The letter is evidently written by a blackmailer and contains veiled threats of what will happen if the money is not paid."

"It looks as if the affair might bring disgrace upon the school, sir," said Monteith diffidently. "Don't you think it ought to be looked into, sir?"

"Undoubtedly!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a snap of the teeth. "The difficulty is that we don't know to whom the letter belongs."

"That is unfortunate."

"But I think that possibly Mr. Railton could tell us, sir."

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Co.'s yell of derision broke off into a different kind of yell as Blake y inverted a basin of dish-water overhead. The water soused over ads, and soaked them. "Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake. "Who gets a wash when he's trying to be funny?"

"Indeed! What makes you think that, Monteith?"

"Just after I picked the letter up I saw Mr. Railton looking round in the quad as if he had lost something. Of course, I could not insult him by supposing that such a letter belonged to him. But he may know something about it."

The eyes of prefect and Housemaster met. They understood each other perfectly.

Each of them knew perfectly well that the letter belonged to Mr. Railton, and there was no need for words. Without speaking, they had agreed that the letter must be used to Mr. Railton's disadvantage if possible. It was a weapon in their hands against the enemy, and they did not mean to spare him.

"It is possible," said Mr. Ratcliff, with an air of judicial reflection. "However, I can hardly approach Mr. Railton on the subject. I think it would be better for me to look into the matter myself. For the credit of the school, it ought to be cleared up!"

"You could go to the ruins at ten to-night, sir, and then you would see who met this man who signs himself 'B. H.,'" suggested Monteith. "That would be proof positive!"

"You are right, Monteith; that is what I was thinking of. I cannot say I like the task." But Mr. Ratcliff spoke in a way that hinted that he really did like it. "But I cannot consult my personal inclinations when it is a question of the good name of the school that is at stake!"

"I agree with you, sir."

"You may safely leave the matter in my hands, Monteith. I will certainly see into it."

"Yes, sir!"

And Monteith quitted the Housemaster's study, feeling very satisfied. In spite of the solemn humbug Mr. Ratcliff had seen fit to keep up in talking with the prefect, Monteith knew that he would do his worst. There were breakers ahead for the master of the School House.

Monteith had realised, when he first read the letter, what a weapon it would be against the School House master. But he could hardly venture to make use of it himself. To leave it in the hands of Mr. Ratcliff was safer, and just as sure; and this arrangement suited the cautious, spiteful prefect admirably.

When Monteith was gone, Mr. Ratcliff read the letter through once more.

"I am afraid Mr. Railton is mixed up in this matter," he said, with a smile. "But clearly I have no right to assume that the letter belongs to him. I must visit the ruins and ascertain the truth before I take any action in the matter."

And several times, as Mr. Ratcliff went about his work that afternoon, he smiled to himself, as if he had some very pleasant thoughts in his mind. And his boys wondered what made Ratty so unusually good-humoured.

More pleasant than ever grew his smile when, glancing from a window, he saw Mr. Railton walking round the quadrangle, his eyes bent upon the ground, as if still hoping to come across the lost letter.

"Dear me," murmured Mr. Ratcliff, "it really looks as if Monteith's surmise is correct, and Mr. Railton does know something about the letter! It is quite possible that it is that letter that he

is looking for at this moment. However, I shall ascertain the facts to-night, and I sincerely hope they will be to the credit of Mr. Railton!"

And Mr. Ratcliff gave a slight laugh.

CHAPTER 7.

Mysterious!

TOM MERRY looked out of the window of his study. The quadrangle was dark, save for the glimmering of the snow, and a keen wind whistled and wailed among the old elms.

"Looks pretty parley, doesn't it?" said Lowther. "I believe it's going to snow!"

"Shouldn't wonder!"

"You're going, I suppose?"

"My dear kid, have you ever known your uncle back out when he has made up his little mind to do a thing? Besides, what would Figgins say?"

"Blow Figgins! Do you think he'll be there?"

"Of course he will! He'd turn up if it rained cats and dogs, and snowed elephants and blackbeetles. Wouldn't he just like to have the grin of us if I didn't turn up?"

"I suppose so. But you were a giddy ass to agree to it!"

"Well, if I hadn't accepted his challenge, I shouldn't be worth much as chief of the School House juniors, should I? Wouldn't the New House have crowed over us?"

"You bet," said Lowther. "But I don't like you going alone, Tommy. Let one of us come with you!"

"Rats! Figgys is going alone!"

"But—"

"I'd like to have one of you," said Tom Merry. "But it can't be did. I've got to go alone, but one of you can stay awake to let me in."

"We'll toss for that," said Monty Lowther.

"Right you are!"

And Tom Merry turned away from the window.

"Let's have something to eat!" he exclaimed. "I shall face it better with some tommy and hot coffee inside me. Gimme those sossingers!"

And he put a frying-pan on the study fire, and Lowther handed him the butter and sausages, and he set to work as cook.

The appetising odour of frying sausages soon filled the study.

Although Tom Merry seemed as cool and unconcerned as ever, the prospect before him was not exactly enticing. He had accepted a challenge from Figgins without the slightest hesitation, and had no intention of backing out of it. But what he had to do was neither easy nor pleasant.

Some distance from St. Jim's, a nice walk in summer, but far from pleasant in winter, was the old ruined castle on the slopes of the hill. Local rumour had it that the ruins were haunted, and that on dark nights spectres could be seen gliding to and fro amid the masses of fallen masonry.

Whether the spectres really kept such late hours was not certain; but it was certain that after dark the ruins were avoided by all the dwellers round about Rylcombe and Wayland.

In the day-time, the juniors of St. Jim's liked to explore the ruins. Tom Merry knew his way about in them pretty well. There had been a heated discussion among some of the juniors of both Houses, which had led to the

challenge from Figgins, and Tom had not been slow to accept. Figgins having expressed an opinion that the School House leader would funk going to the ruins after dark, Tom Merry had offered to fight Figgins on the spot. But, as Figgys pointed out, that would have proved nothing either one way or the other. Figgys thereupon dared Tom to prove, by going to the ruined castle that very night, that he did not funk it, to which Tom Merry retorted that he would go if Figgins would meet him there.

The New House leader had not expected that, but he was not a fellow to back down. And in order to go one better than the School House, he said that he would get there first, and wait for the captain of the Shell.

Probably both the juniors wished they had not been quite so argumentative when the night set in with a bitter wind and with a few flakes falling, to give a hint of what was coming later.

But the challenge had been given and accepted, and there was no getting out of it, and neither Tom Merry nor Figgins was the fellow to admit to himself that he had the remotest desire to get out of it.

"When will you start, Tommy?" asked Monty Lowther.

"About half-past nine," replied Tom Merry. "It's no good trying to get away till after lights out. Then, when the prefect has gone his round, I'll nip out of the dorm, and get out into the quad. So long as I get there by ten o'clock, it will be all right. Figgys has agreed to wait till the church clock strikes ten. You can hear it from the ruins."

"Suppose you meet the ghost?" said Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, as Figgys has to get there before me, he'll interview the ghost first, if there is one. I suppose he'll have explained matters before I arrive. But it isn't the ghost that will bother me so much as the snow. Never mind, let's tuck into these sossingers. Go ahead!"

The chums enjoyed the feed. Then they roasted chestnuts and ate them till bedtime, when they went up to their dormitory. Kildaro came along to see lights out, and he found all the juniors tucked up in bed.

He glanced along the row of white beds, said "Good-night!" and turned the lights out.

The door closed, and the captain's footsteps died away along the corridor.

Tom Merry yawned and sat up.

He had removed only his outer clothes, but the dormitory was cold, and he shivered.

"My hat; it's a cold night!" he said. "Nothing like what it will be at the old castle," said Kangaroo. "Did you notice how it was snowing, Tommy?"

"No, I didn't!"

"Regular blizzard. Shouldn't like to be out to-night. Not much chance of getting back again—not alive, at any rate."

"Oh, shut up, you beastly comforter!" said Tom Merry.

He hopped out of bed, and was soon fully dressed again. He went to the big window and looked out. The snow was certainly falling.

"Oh, it's not much!" said Tom Merry. "Anyway, I'm going. Now, which of you kids is going to keep awake?"

"Excuse me," yawned Gore. "I mustn't miss my beauty sleep!"

"I shouldn't like you to lose your good looks, Gore. Now, Kangy, Monty, Manners, don't all speak at once."

This caution was given rather sarcastically, for, as a matter of fact, none of them seemed eager to speak at all.

"Better toss for it," said Manners. "Strike a match. I've got a candle-end under my pillow. That's right."

In the flicker of the candle Kangaroo tossed a coin.

"Now, what is it—head or tail?"

"Head," said Lowther.

"Wrong; it's tails. It's between you and Manners," said the Cornstalk junior, as he chucked the penny to Lowther, who tossed.

"Head or tail, Manners?"

"Tail!"

"No, it's head. You've got to get up."

"All right," said Manners. "I don't mind."

"Mind some giddy senior doesn't spot you going out, Merry," said Glyn.

"You trust your uncle. There's nobody wandering about the House this time of night, and on such a beastly cold night, too. Ready, Manners?"

"Quite."

The two juniors quietly left the dormitory. As Tom Merry had said, there was not likely to be anyone about. Some of the seniors were in the Common-room, and the others in their warm studies.

The juniors tiptoed down the stairs, and reached a little window at the end of the deserted passage, and Tom Merry quietly opened it.

The sill was white with snow.

"It looks cold," murmured Manners, with chattering teeth.

"Yes, by Jove! Still, it's the same for Figg, that's one comfort. Now, don't forget to keep awake."

"You can trust me, Tommy, old man."

"All serene. When you hear a pebble clink on the dorm window, it will be time to come down and let me in."

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry climbed out of the window. He slid to the ground, wiping off most of the snow from the sill with his coat. The ground was slippery, and he sat down suddenly under the window. Manners leaned out anxiously.

"Have you hurt yourself, Tom?"

"No; only sat down. Cheerio, Manners!"

Tom Merry rose and picked his way carefully across the snow-covered ground. Manners fastened the window and crept back to the Shell dormitory.

Tom Merry left a trail of deep footprints behind him, but fortunately the snow was falling fast enough to cover them. He made for a point where an oak-tree grew close to the wall. He had scaled the wall in that place more than once, by the aid of the slanting oak.

But as he arrived there, he gave a low whistle of dismay. The tree was covered with snow, and the climb was likely to be an exceedingly difficult one.

Tom Merry stood for some moments in reflection.

"Well, it's got to be done!" he said to himself at last. "Figg must have got out somewhere, and what a New House bouncer can do, I can do."

The next instant Tom Merry dodged with surprising suddenness behind the tree.

He had caught a sound near at hand—a sound faint but unmistakable, quite sufficient to alarm a junior in the act of breaking bounds.

A figure loomed up out of the darkness and the falling snow—a sturdy form in a long overcoat, with a soft hat pulled down over his eyes.

Tom Merry, peeping out cautiously, saw the form and knew it at once.

"Railton, by Jove!"

For a moment he thought that the Housemaster had discovered him. But his fears were soon relieved. Mr. Railton passed on, and stopped at the little wicket-gate let into the high wall. This gate was used by masters and prefects at St. Jim's when they wished to go in or out after Taggles had closed the big gates for the night.

Tom Merry heard the click of a key, and the Housemaster disappeared. He had evidently quitted the precincts of St. Jim's.

"My hat!" murmured Tom Merry. "Jolly lucky he didn't run against me! I wonder if there's any more giddy wanderers out to-night?"

It did not seem likely, but he was very much on the alert now.

A slight cough came to his ears. He kept in the black shadow of the tree.

"That's old Ratcliff's bark, if I know it!"

Mr. Ratcliff it was. The master of the New House, his long thin form well wrapped up, and a soft hat crushed down on his head, came quickly towards the little gate, unlocked it, and passed out.

It closed again, and Tom Merry rubbed his eyes.

"Is everybody on the giddy mooch to-night?" he muttered. "I suppose I shall see the Head coming along next."

But no one else appeared, and after waiting five minutes, the Shell fellow ventured to leave his concealment.

He was considerably surprised.

"Looks almost as if Ratcliff is following Railton," he muttered. "He was close behind him, and yet never showed himself till Railton was gone. But I suppose he couldn't have been. It's queer, though."

He climbed the tree, bringing a shower of snow down on himself. But he stuck to his task manfully, and, crawling along the branch which jutted out over the wall, he dropped to the ground outside.

The wind was blowing hard along the road, whirling snowflakes to and fro. Tom set his face against it and started off. There was no sign of either Housemaster, and he could not see their tracks, which were already hidden. He had no suspicion that either of them was going in the same direction as himself.

He followed the road at a swinging pace, and turned into the footpath through the wood.

Under the trees the snow was thinner, but the darkness was like pitch. He wondered where Figgins was. The thought of the New House chief, perhaps already at the ruins awaiting him, made him buck up.

He tramped on swiftly.

He came out of the shadow of the wood on the slopes of Wayland Hill. Had it been daylight, the old castle would now have been visible. He could see nothing but whirling flakes; but he knew the way blindfolded.

Without a pause he strode on.

A figure loomed up before him. It was white with snow, but Tom Merry knew it. The long, ungainly figure of Mr. Ratcliff was not easily mistaken.

Tom Merry paused in dismay.

What on earth was Ratcliff doing there? What could possibly have been his object in going to the ruined castle on a snowy night?

The junior was utterly bewildered.

Mr. Ratcliff might have discovered that Figgins had broken bounds, but that would hardly be enough to take him out so far. It wasn't that. His visit

(Continued on the next page.)



**MAKE THE JESTER SMILE
AND WIN HALF-A-CROWN!**

Send your Joke to *The GEM Jester*,
1, Talbot House, John Carpenter Street,
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WHISTLING FOR WAGES!

Jack: "Are football referees poorly paid?"

John: "No; but they have to whistle a lot for their money!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to S. Benjamin, House Moor, Black Horse, Mangotsfield, Nr. Bristol.

HIS NEW EXCUSE!

Boss: "You've already had leave, Jones, to see your wife off on a journey, to go to your mother-in-law's funeral, for your little girl's measles, and for your little boy's christening. What is it this time?"

Jones: "I'm going to get married, sir!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to F. Evans, 49, Choumert Road, Peckham, London, S.E.15.

HOME FROM HOME!

The superior young man had been shown to his room in the hotel where he was to spend the Christmas holidays.

"So this is for me?" he grumbled.

"Rather like a prison, what?"

"Well, sir," replied the manager, "it's just a matter of what you've been used to!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to S. Beresford, 143, Albert Road, Blackpool.

A LEADING PART!

Tom: "I hear your brother's got a leading part in a Christmas pantomime."

Tim: "Yes, that's right. He's the front legs and head of the dragon!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. O'Brien, 21, Ames Street, Green Street, Bethnal Green, London, E.2.

OBEYING ORDERS!

Lady: "Why did you become a tramp?"

Tramp: "It was the doctor's fault, ma'am. He told me to take walks after my meals, and I've been walking after them ever since!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to W. Bliss, 9, Primrose Hill, Sion Hill, Bath.

GAS PREFERRED!

Dentist: "I'll have that aching t-t-tooth out b-b-before you can s-s-say J-J-Jack R-R-Robin—"

Patient: "Here, I'll have gas!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to D. Vickers, Inveresk House, Tilston, Malpas, Cheshire.

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to the castle had nothing to do with the juniors, Tom Merry felt sure.

But it made things very awkward. If he found Figgins there, it would mean a row. And if Figgy was already on the spot, he would show himself as soon as he heard someone coming, thinking it was Tom Merry. He could never dream that Ratcliff would be coming there.

The thought of giving up the expedition had crossed Tom Merry's mind at the sight of the New House master. He dismissed it now. He had to get to the ruins before Ratcliff, and warn Figgins.

To get ahead of the Housemaster was not difficult.

Tom Merry made a detour, avoiding the path Mr. Ratcliff was following. He got ahead, and came back into the path again some distance in advance of the Housemaster. Then he ran on as fast as he could through the snow.

The thick snow beneath him deadened his footsteps, and what slight sound he made was lost in the wind. It was fortunate for him, for all of a sudden he caught sight of a figure ahead, and stopped in time to avoid running into it.

He knew who it was. He would have guessed, even if he had not recognised Mr. Railton's figure in the gloom.

"Railton, by Jove!"

Tom Merry was astounded.

It was surprising enough to find Mr. Ratcliff heading for the ruined castle, but to find the other Housemaster there also—

The vague suspicion that had come into his mind when he saw the two Housemasters leaving the quad now recurred with the force of certainty.

Mr. Ratcliff was following Mr. Railton with the intention of spying upon him!

It was quite clear now, and so Mr. Ratcliff's presence there was explained. Now, the question was, what on earth did Mr. Railton want at the ruins at such an hour?

There was no guessing that. The situation was growing rather thrilling. There was a deep mystery somewhere, and Tom Merry seemed likely to get mixed up in it.

He had no time to waste. He left the path, as he had done before, and made a detour.

Mr. Railton was going on at a steady tramp, and Tom Merry was easily able to calculate so as to get ahead of him.

He came back into the path before he reached the castle, and after quickly running up the hill on which it stood, passed through the ruined arch of the great gateway. The snow was falling more thickly than ever, and he hoped it would cover up his tracks before Mr. Railton arrived.

The ruins of the ancient castle covered a wide space of ground. Only a portion of the old hall was still standing, and there were some fragments of the roof which still afforded a partial shelter from the snow. This was where Figgins was to wait, and where the School House junior expected to find him.

Tom Merry, hurrying through the ruins, among masses of masonry and fragments of walls, reached the spot where he expected to find his rival.

A dim form came out of the gloom.

"That you, Tom Merry?"

It was the voice of Figgins. It came jerkily through chattering teeth.

"Yes, my son! Seen any giddy ghosts?" asked the Shell fellow.

"Oh, don't talk!" said Figgins

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sharply. "I've been here an hour, I think!"

"Rats! Five minutes, you mean!"

"Well, it seemed a long time. Let's get back to the school."

"Don't be in a hurry. I suppose it's rather ghostly being here alone; but now you've got the head cook and bottle-washer of the Cock House at St. Jim's to keep you company."

"It's too cold to punch your head, ass! Let's get going!"

"Can't! There's a giddy lion in our path!"

"What the giddy dickens are you talking about?" asked Figgins crossly.

"I mean that we've got to lie low till the coast is clear. I don't know what's up, Figgy, but something is, with a vengeance. Did you see anybody on the road here?"

"Not a soul."

"Well, if you had been a little later, you'd have seen Railton and old Ratty."

"Rot!"

"Honest Injun!" said Tom Merry seriously. "I passed them both, and had to dodge 'em. Railton is coming here for something, and Ratty is following on his track like a giddy Sexton Blake!"

Figgins gave a gasp of astonishment.

"I don't know what it means," said Tom Merry, "but it will mean a licking if either of them spot us here. So this is where we lie low."

"Rather!" said Figgy fervently. "If we were caught out of bounds this time of night, we'd be taken up before the Head! My aunt! What can it all mean?"

"Don't know, and don't care much; only we've got to keep out of sight."

"Hallo! There comes somebody!"

There was a sound of tramping in the ruined hall. From over the wood in the distance came chiming bells, and then the hour struck.

Ten strokes boomed through the snowy night.

As the last stroke died away, the newcomer halted within a dozen paces of the boys, and a light gleamed out.

Tom Merry and Figgins shrank back into the shadows. The light gleamed out upon the snow from a torch, and in its reflection they saw the man plainly. He was a stranger to them—a somewhat broadly built man, with a reddish moustache. He was wrapped in a greatcoat, and wore a soft hat.

"Who on earth's that?" whispered Figgins.

Tom Merry gave a hopeless shrug.

"Can't say. It seems as if all the giddy neighbourhood is going to gather in these beastly ruins to-night, just because we're here for a lark!"

"I say, do you think Railton is coming to meet that chap?"

"I shouldn't wonder, Figgy. And old Ratty wants to know what it's all about. Yes; I fancy that's the giddy explanation!"

"Look! There's Railton!"

The figure of the Housemaster came into the beam of light cast by the torch. His face was decidedly gloomy, but the waiting man turned to him with a grin.

"Hallo! You're here on time, my dear cousin!"

now it occurred to both of them that if they remained where they were, they would be compelled to play the unpleasant and dishonourable part of eavesdroppers.

"Yes; I am here in time."

It was Mr. Railton's voice, hard and cold. The juniors had never heard him speak like that before.

"A pleasant night to be brought to such a place as this, Hunt?"

Hunt laughed.

"How was I to foresee that there would be a snowstorm? It was fine enough last night when I wrote the letter to you."

"That letter may cause trouble yet!" said the Housemaster angrily.

"Why? I suppose you haven't left it lying about, have you?"

"I have lost it!"

"Well, you must be a—I won't say what!" said the other, in tones of deep disgust. "Fancy losing a letter like that!"

"It was not my fault. I was reading it over again when I was interrupted. I met with an accident over a slide, and the letter somehow must have fallen from my hand, and I was too shaken up to notice it at the time. Then I had to hurry off to a class, and when I remembered the letter, and came back to look for it, it had disappeared. It wasn't two minutes, but the letter was gone."

"That looks very much as if someone had picked it up."

"Yes, though it may have blown away. But I shall not be easy in my mind till I know what has become of it. If it fell into certain hands at St. Jim's, it might cause me a great deal of trouble. I have enemies there."

"I don't suppose it will ever turn up, though. Very likely it was trampled in the snow."

"Perhaps, I hope so. But, look here, Hunt, if you write to me at the school again, I will wash my hands of you entirely, whatever the consequences!"

"Oh rot! I couldn't foresee that you would be so careless! Besides, you haven't communicated with me; so what was I to do?"

"I hadn't made up my mind."

"Have you made it up yet?"

"I suppose I must yield to your absurd demand if I have some guarantee that it will really be the end of our dealings!"

"I give you my word, Railton!"

Mr. Railton made no reply, but the expression on his face showed that he was not inclined to place much reliance upon the word of his cousin.

Hunt read his expression, and gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"You can trust me!" he exclaimed.

"I have reasons as great for getting away from this country as you have for wishing me away!"

"Yes, I suppose so. But put that torch out, Hunt. We can talk in the dark, and we don't want to attract attention here!"

"Right you are!"

Hunt extinguished the torch.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath, and nudged Figgins.

"This is where we hook it," he whispered. "They're going to talk, and we mustn't hear. It may be something awfully important and secret."

"Right-ho! Let's cut it!"

While the torch burned, there had been danger of revealing themselves if they moved. And mere for the sake of Mr. Railton himself than for their own sakes, the boys would not have let him know of their presence there for worlds. They had heard little, but they knew

CHAPTER 8.

Trouble for "Ratty"!

TOM MERRY and Figgins exchanged a look of mute amazement.

The two juniors, crouching among the masses of brickwork a dozen paces from the men, were quite visible, and they did not venture to move. But



Mr. Railton came swiftly towards the juniors—too swiftly, in fact, for he stepped upon the slide. Next moment the earth seemed to have slipped away from beneath him. He went flying along at lightning speed on one leg, his arms waving wildly in the air.

that Mr. Railton must have some powerful motive for meeting his relative in so secret a manner.

The School House master had some secret which he wished to keep from common knowledge.

Tom Merry rose and glided away, treading softly, and Figgins followed.

The snow under their feet deadened the sound of their steps, and in a minute, or less, they had placed a portion of the old wall between themselves and the two men.

The murmur of voices came still to their ears. Mr. Railton and Hunt were talking again, but now the juniors could not hear what they said.

Tom Merry stopped in the thick shadow of the wall and gripped Figgins' arm.

"Look out!" he muttered.

A dim figure was stealing softly through the snow, making for the opening in the ruins from which the juniors had emerged a minute before.

Figgins drew a deep breath.

"Mr. Ratcliff, by Jove!"

The long, lean figure of the Housemaster passed within six paces of the crouching juniors, and stopped at an opening in the fragment of wall. He bent down there, and remained still, with shoulders craned forward, and head bent to listen.

Tom Merry and Figgins knew at once what that meant.

The master had reached a coign of vantage from which he could hear what was said in the ruins, without risk of showing himself to the speakers.

Tom Merry put his mouth close to Figgins' ear to whisper.

"You see what the mean beast is up to, Figgy?"

Figgy nodded.

Mr. Ratcliff was his own Housemaster, and at any other time he would have strongly resented any aspersion cast upon him, but the loyal New House junior could hardly speak up for a man in the act of listening to a private conversation.

So far from feeling inclined to stand up for his Housemaster just then, Figgins was hot with anger at his lowering of the honour of his House in such a way.

"The spying beast!" muttered Figgins. "Shall we stop him? There's plenty of snow here, and if we gave him a surprise, it would shut up his little game, and he'd never know who did it."

Tom Merry chuckled silently.

"That's exactly what I was thinking of, Figgy. He ought to be stopped. He may learn all sorts of giddy things that don't concern him."

"Then get a snowball and chip in."

"I'm on!"

The two juniors grinned gleefully, bent down, and gathered up handfuls of

thick snow, and each quickly provided himself with three or four snowballs.

"You can have first shot if you like, Figgy," said Tom Merry, with much consideration. "He's your Housemaster, you know."

Figgins nodded, and, with glinting eyes, took aim at the dim form crouching in the opening of the wall. His hand jerked forward and the snowball flew. It caught Mr. Ratcliff in the small of the back, and broke there.

The blow was not a severe one, but the unexpectedness of it made the Housemaster jump and utter a sudden, startled exclamation.

The sound of voices in the ruins ceased instantly. The noise made by the Housemaster had reached the ears of the talkers there.

Mr. Ratcliff stared round behind in amazement, wondering what had hit him. Another snowball flew, and caught him in the face. He gave a jump and a yelp.

"Good shot!" muttered Figgy. And the next instant his second ball smashed on Mr. Ratcliff's prominent nose.

The Housemaster grunted and staggered; his feet slipped on the snow, and he fell with a thump. As he struggled to rise, the two juniors pelted him with a hearty good will, and the snowballs smashed on every part of the unhappy spy.

"Who is there?"

It was Mr. Ratcliff's ringing voice.

Mr. Ratcliff, realising his unpleasant position in being caught playing the spy by the man he had followed, leaped desperately to his feet, and went plunging away into the snow and darkness.

Mr. Ratcliff and Hunt came scrambling through the opening of the wall to discover what the unexpected disturbance meant.

Tom Merry nudged Figgins, and the two juniors beat a hasty retreat.

They were gone before the two men were through the wall. They hurried away on the path down the hill, the snowflakes whirling round them thickly.

Tom Merry was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Great fun!" he murmured. "I should like to know exactly what Ratty thinks about it. He'll put it down to the spectres, I suppose. I don't know whether spectres go in for snowballing. But look out, Figgy, or we shall run into the boulder. He'll be on the same path."

"Yes; and there he is."

A lean figure was plunging through the snow at a short distance ahead of the boys. Mr. Ratcliff was getting away from the scene of his unexpected adventure as quickly as he could.

"We've got to pass him," muttered Tom Merry. "We must get in first. Now then!"

Figgins grinned, and they gathered a fresh supply of snowballs.

"Give the boulder a volley!"

The chance did not often come to a junior to snowball a Housemaster with impunity, and so Tom Merry and Figgins wanted to make the most of the present opportunity. And the master of the New House certainly deserved some punishment.

Whack! Smack! went the snowballs, and the sudden attack from behind sent Mr. Ratcliff staggering forward, and, missing his footing on the slippery slope of the hill, he fell on his hands and knees.

Like lightning the juniors, making a slight detour in the dark, got past him and disappeared ahead long before the startled and confused Housemaster could catch a glimpse of them.

"Well, we're clear of that, Figgy!" panted Tom Merry, as they entered the footpath through the wood. "And a jolly narrow escape. I reckon this is the last time I shall amble about an old castle in the middle of the night, old son."

"Well, it was a narrow shave, but it was exciting!" grinned Figgins. "But, I say, I should like to know what the giddy mystery is. What does your Housemaster mean by visiting his giddy relations in a ruined castle in a snow-storm?"

"That's his business, Figgy. I suppose there's some mystery at the bottom of it, but it doesn't matter to us. Let's run back to St. Jim's to get warm."

"Right you are!"

And the juniors sped back to St. Jim's. There Figgins helped Tom Merry over the wall, and Tom Merry pulled him up from above, and then they went to their respective Houses.

"Good-night, Figgy!" said Tom Merry, as they parted in the snow-covered quadrangle. "There's the old casual ward you call a House, and you'd better buck up and get back to the other wasters! Buzz along!"

Figgins breathed hard and "buzzed" along, but in a moment he stopped, and then turned back.

"I say, Merry, wait a moment."

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Tom Merry turned back.

"Well?"

"I've got something for you."

"What is it—Oh, ooh!"

Figgy's arm jerked forward, and a snowball smashed right in Tom Merry's face. It was followed by another from Figgins' left hand, which broke on his ear.

"That's all," said Figgins, with a chuckle. "Good-night!"

He was gone before Tom Merry could get the snow out of his eyes. The faint sound of a chuckle floated back from the direction of the New House.

"Ow!" gasped Tom Merry. "Yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry rubbed the snow out of his eyes.

Figgins was gone.

The Shell fellow turned towards the School House, postponing vengeance upon the humorous Figgins for a more convenient occasion.

He groped in the snow at the foot of the School House wall for a pebble and found one, and tossed it up to the dormitory window.

Then he went round the House to wait for Manners to let him in.

He was not without some uneasiness that Manners might have gone to sleep and forgotten all about his duties for the night.

Fortunately, Manners hadn't.

The little window opened, and Tom Merry climbed in and found himself in the dusk with his chum.

"Oh, you've got back!" grunted Manners.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Tom Merry.

"Seen the ghost?"

"No, not this time."

"Seen Figgins?"

"Yes."

"Oh, the New House boulder was there, then?"

"Large as life."

"Anything happened?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Tell you in the morning," yawned Tom Merry. "I'm sleepy."

They made their way quietly to the Shell dormitory. Tom Merry quickly undressed and turned in—to sleep the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER 9.

Told on the Phone!

TOM MERRY was curious to see Mr. Ratcliff the next day.

He wanted to see what signs the New House master would show of the weird experience he had been through at the old castle.

If Mr. Ratcliff had not caught cold it would be remarkable.

Mr. Ratcliff was not in a very fit state of health, and he made himself worse by doctoring himself continually with patent medicines.

The New House master was the best customer of Mr. Twist, the local chemist in Rylcombe. But for Mr. Ratcliff Mr. Twist would certainly not have sold fifty per cent of his pills, medicines, mixtures, tablets, and other dreadful remedies that he now disposed of.

When Tom Merry came out into the quadrangle of St. Jim's, still glistening with snow from the late fall, he looked over towards the New House.

But Mr. Ratcliff was not visible.

Figgins & Co. could be seen outside their House, and at the sight of Tom Merry they showed signs of hostility.

But Tom Merry raised his hand in sign of "pax" as he came up.

"Cheese it, my sons!" he said.

"How's Ratty?"

Figgins grinned.

"He's got a cold," he said. "He's talking with a beautiful accent, as if he had his head in a bag."

"Poor old Ratty!" said Tom Merry. "This is what comes of poking one's nose into other people's affairs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's having breakfast in his room," said Figgins. "I dare say he won't take the Fifth this morning. Poor old Ratty!"

"He's been on the telephone to the chemist," grinned Kerr. "I passed his study and heard him phoning. He's ordering some Purple Pills for Chippy Chests or something."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"On the telephone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He was rung up once before by a chap pretending to be Twist, the chemist, and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going down to Rylcombe before breakfast."

And having obtained a pass out of gates from Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, Tom Merry hurried down to the village, and was soon ensconced inside a telephone call-box.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ratcliff was not enjoying himself. He had breakfasted lightly off tea and toast in his room, and was feeling dreadfully "rotten."

He was feeling almost miserable enough to be content to mind his own business, and keep from taking an undue interest in Mr. Ratcliff's affairs.

The telephone-bell rang suddenly.

Mr. Ratcliff started up. He had a telephone in his study, which he used chiefly for ringing up Mr. Twist, in Rylcombe.

Buzz!

Mr. Ratcliff took up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

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

"Yes."

"Mr. Ratcliff?"

"I am Mr. Ratcliff."

"You rang me up this morning?"

"If you are Mr. Twist, yes. I do not recognise your voice. Have you sent the articles I have ordered. I have not received them yet."

"You will get them soon."

"Thank you. What have you rung me up for? Can you recommend anything in addition to the list I sent you?"

"Yes."

"Pray tell me what it is, Mr. Twist," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"You have a cold, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Yes."

"Is it severe?"

"Very severe."

"How did you catch it?"

"I was caught in the—the snow."

"Were you snowballed?"

"Dear me—yes!"

"Is the cold in your ears?"

"Perhaps a little."

"Were you using your ears at the time?"

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

"What?"

"Were you using your ears at the time?"

"I—I—I was."

"Ah! Then I should recommend you to give them a little exercise to restore the circulation."

"I think the circulation is all right in my ears," said Mr. Ratcliff, puzzled.

"Probably not. What you want is to have your ears pulled."

"What?"

"I thought I spoke distinctly."

"Sir!"

"Get a junior into your study, and tell him to pull your ears as hard as he can. This will do you good."

"You recommend this?"

"Undoubtedly."

"In addition to the remedies you are sending me?"

"It is better than any of them."

"Very well, I will take your advice."

A queer sound came from the receiver, as if the man at the other end of the wire had chuckled; but, of course, Mr. Twist could not be supposed to have chuckled at such a serious time.

"Good! It will benefit you! Good-bye!"

"Thank you!"

Mr. Ratcliff hung up the receiver.

He reached for the bell, and then stayed his hand. But for a previous communication on the telephone, which had turned out to be a rag, he would have followed the advice unhesitatingly. But now he hesitated, fortunately for him. If he had called in Figgins to pull his ear, certainly Figgins would not have erred upon the side of gentleness.

He rang up Mr. Twist, to make sure.

"Hallo!" came the chemist's voice.

"Are you Mr. Twist?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Mr. Ratcliff."

"I have sent your things, sir."

"Yes, I know. Are you quite serious in recommending me to have my ears pulled?"

"Eh?"

"You told me a few minutes ago, when you rang me up—"

"I did?"

"Yes, you!"

"But I did not ring you up, Mr. Ratcliff."

"You did not?" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"Certainly not!"

"Oh, it is a mistake! Very well!"

The New House master hung up the receiver again. He ground his teeth. Someone was japing him, but he could not guess who it was. He thought of Figgins. But he glanced from his window, and saw Figgins & Co. snowballing Wally D'Arcy of the Third in the quadrangle.

Mr. Ratcliff snapped his teeth, and sat down to tea and toast again. He felt that he owed all his troubles to Mr. Railton, who had caused him to catch that cold by having his appointment on a snowy night in a ruin. And all that he was suffering at the present moment he intended to wreak upon the head of the School House master, if the chance came. And Mr. Ratcliff believed that it would come.

CHAPTER 10.

Anonymous!

"GOOD-MORNING, sir!"

"Good-morning, Monteith!"

Monteith looked at his

Housemaster in surprise.

Then he grinned faintly. Mr. Ratcliff's nose was red, and his eyes were watery. He was sniffing and snuffling.

"Have you caught a cold, sir?"

"Yes, Monteith, I hab caud cold," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"May I ask, sir, if—"

"No, you may nod."

And Mr. Ratcliff passed on.

Monteith looked after him with a puzzled expression. The Housemaster

JUST MY FUN

Monty Lowther Calling!



Hallo, everybody! Young Gibson is having a new suit for Christmas. Let's wish him a Happy New Wear.

Gore says he has seventeen different objections to Christmas. Most of them are relatives.

Gussy says a fellow should dress his smartest at Christmas. But why spoil a perfectly good set of waistcoat buttons?

Fatty Wynn wants to know what Christmas would be like at sea. Swell!

Sport is a great leveller, we read. Particularly boxing.

The "Wayland Courier" will have been published 100 years this Christmas. Some of the "hot news" in the earliest issues has cooled down by now, naturally.

"Should a junior back horses?" inquires Mellish. Neigh, neigh!

"Gale Blows Down Trees." Without so much as "by your leave(s)"!

News report: "The M.P. spoke in a fruity voice." A peach of a speech?

was evidently not in the sweetest of tempers.

"He's been to the castle, I know, because I listened and heard him go out last night," the prefect muttered to himself. "Has he caught anything besides a cold, I wonder, or was it all a giddy mare's-nest? Whatever happened, it hasn't improved his temper."

It had improved neither Ratcliff's temper nor his health. He certainly had a cold in his head, and he did not attend to any of his duties that day. He kept to his own room most of the time, and was frequently heard to sneeze loud and long.

There was one fellow in the New House who could have explained how Mr. Ratcliff had caught cold, and that was Figgins. But, with the exception of the Co., Figgins kept his own counsel.

To Kerr and Fatty Wynn he, of course, confided the adventure of the night.

Great was their amazement at the story, and great their disappointment at not having been on the spot when the snowballing was going forward.

But, like Figgins, they could make nothing of the mystery, and they soon gave up trying. It was no business of theirs.

But the matter was not so easily dismissed by Tom Merry. After morning school the chums of the Shell met and talked the matter over.

At first Tom Merry's chums were inclined to think that he was romancing; but they were soon convinced that he was in earnest. Then they put their heads together over the affair.

"There's a giddy mystery," said Tom Merry; "but that has nothing to do with us. Railton can make a giddy rendezvous at the ruined castle, or at the top of the North Pole, for all it matters to us. It isn't our business. But there's that bounder who watches

A reader who has been given a dachshund says he doesn't want it any longer. Well, they're usually long enough.

My Uncle Dick is glad Christmas only comes once a year. He has twenty-seven nephews and nieces.

Then there was the barber-motorist who couldn't help "shaving" corners.

"Pantomime Actor Suffers From Indigestion." Too many new roles?

The Wayland Hippodrome stage gave way, and a singer fell through. He was accompanied by a friend at the piano.

Story: "What do you think of our two candidates for the Mayoralty of Wayland?" "Well, I'm glad only one of them can be elected."

Glyn has been trying to invent a new perfume, without success. He's on the wrong "scent."

As the American tourist at Shakespeare's home remarked: "I really don't see how Mr. Shakespeare ever got his plays written with so many people hobbing in and out!"

"A play should contain about 8,000 lines," says a writer. Crumbs! That reminds me I've got a couple of hundred to do.

The householder peered over the banisters. "What do you want?" he demanded. "There's nothing to steal here." "That's all right, guv'nor," came the response, "I'm just trying out a new explosive on your safe!" Safety first, boys!

him, you see. Would it be fair for us to leave Railton off his guard, not knowing what the Ratcliff bird was up to, and let Ratty nose out all his little secrets?"

"Certainly not!" said Lowther. "Railton ought to be put on his guard somehow, or Ratty ought to be stopped."

"Well, we could warn Railton that he's being watched," said Manners, after a pause.

"Then he'd know we knew something, and that'd make him feel uncomfortable," said Tom Merry. "Besides, we mustn't forget that if we let out that Figg and I were out of bounds last night, it would mean a licking for both of us. I bar that!"

"I know!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "Let's send Mr. Railton an anonymous letter."

"Monty, you're a howling genius! That idea is simply ripping! That gets us out of the difficulty first shot!"

"But Railton knows our fists," said Manners dubiously.

"Oh, I can disguise my hand!" said Tom Merry confidently. "I'll write it backwards, and—"

"Railton won't be able to read it!" "Ass! I'll slope the writing backwards, and that will disguise it! Gimme some impot-paper, and I'll practise a bit first."

"Here you are!"

Tom Merry proceeded to scrawl on the paper, sloping his writing the reverse of his usual style, and surveyed the results with a great deal of satisfaction.

"There, nobody would ever recognise that as my hand!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't look like my writing, does it? That's as good as Levison could do it."

"Well, no; it doesn't look much like writing at all," said Monty Lowther. "Are they words?"

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"Of course they are! Don't you try to be funny! Look there, that is 'Dear Sir,' and—"

"Is it, really? I thought it was a spider. You'd better practise a little more, or the letter will be rather too anonymous! Raitlon won't know what it's about, any more than whom it's from!"

Tom Merry snorted, but he took Monty's advice, and put in some more practice. At last the critical chums pronounced that it would do, and then they proceeded to the composition of the letter.

This was a matter of more difficulty.

With a regard for Mr. Raitlon's peace of mind, they wanted to spare him the knowledge that anything was wrong. The letter was to appear to come from an outsider, and was to be posted in the village. How to word it was the question, and a difficult one to answer.

"Well, we must word it somehow," said Tom Merry. "That blessed bell will be going soon, and we shall have to chuck it. We mustn't put in any local colour, so he won't guess it's written at St. Jim's, that's all. Suppose we use the third person?"

"I don't think we ought to let any third person into the matter at all," said Manners, with a shake of the head. "There's too many in the secret now."

"Sit on his head, somebody! I mean the third person!"

"Yes, that's what you said, and I don't think—"

"No, you don't; that's a giddy fact!"

"Look here!" said Manners crossly. "You can do as you like, but if you let any third person into the secret, you're a silly—"

"Give him a lesson in grammar, Lowther. Why isn't there some Third Form kid here to tell him that pronouns have three persons—first, second, and third?" said Tom Merry. "I, thou, he, she, it. Do you hear? I, thou, he, she, it!"

"Oh, I understand!" growled Manners. "Why couldn't you say what you meant? Yes, it's a jolly good idea to write it in the third person. Give it a sort of official sound. Something like this: 'It has come to the knowledge of the writer that old Ratty—'"

"Choke him! If we call him Ratty, Raitlon will know that it's a St. Jim's chap writing!"

"H'm! I suppose he will."

"That's what I mean by local colour. Now, how will this do?"

Tom Merry scrawled upon a sheet of paper and read it out:

"When a chap visits an old castle in the middle of the night, he should take care that he isn't followed and watched by a long, lean bounder with a knife-blade nose."

"Now, I think that's all right," said Tom Merry, with an air of satisfaction. "He'll know Ratcliff by the description, and we shall get out of mentioning names. The letter might come from the merest stranger who happened to see Ratty up to his little game. It doesn't give us away, and it will put Raitlon on his guard."

"I think it will do," agreed Manners, and Lowther said the same.

Tom Merry put the letter into an envelope, and sealed it. He addressed it in the same hand, and put it into his pocket.

"I'll cut over to the village after school and post it there," he said. "Now, that's a good thing done. We've done our giddy duty—and there goes the bell!"

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And the four hurried away to their class-room, very well satisfied with themselves.

After school, Tom Merry found an opportunity of slipping away unnoticed, and he posted the letter at the pillar-box in the lane near Rylcombe.

The letter would be delivered that evening to Mr. Raitlon. And it could not fail to warn him of what he had to expect from the rival Housemaster.

When the local postman appeared in the quadrangle that evening, the Terrible Three observed him with considerable interest. The anonymous letter was undoubtedly in his bag.

Toby, the page, took a letter up to Mr. Raitlon's study. The chums had a glimpse of it as he passed them, and it was their own missive.

"So that's all right," said the captain of the Shell.

The master of the School House was in his study. Toby delivered the letter, and when the door was closed after

this letter as a warning. Mr. Ratcliff was evidently the person alluded to. Anonymous letters were not generally worthy of much attention, but this was evidently written in a friendly spirit. There was a smack of boyishness about it, too. A grown-up person would hardly use such an expression as a "long, lean bounder." Was it possible that the letter was written by someone at St. Jim's? The postmark on the envelope was Rylcombe, but that proved nothing.

Alas for Tom Merry's elaborate strategy! In less than five minutes after receiving the letter, Mr. Raitlon knew perfectly well that it had been written at the school!

"It must be so!" he muttered. "Whoever wrote that letter saw Ratcliff following me, and knew him by sight, too! The writer is evidently disposed to serve me; undoubtedly it is a boy of my own House. But what boy could possibly have broken bounds and ventured as far as the ruined castle on such a snowy night as last night?"

Mr. Raitlon nodded his head as the probable answer to that question came to him.

"The writer of that letter is Merry of the Shell, I am sure."

Then his thoughts took a different turn. He threw the letter into the fire, and his brow contracted, his eyes gleamed.

"I am glad of the warning. Undoubtedly Ratcliff took it upon himself to follow me. That lets in light upon the disappearance of my letter. Ratcliff must have found it. The letter itself will have told him little, only that I am in trouble. But what could he have heard last night?"

Mr. Raitlon was a man of action. He put on his hat, went downstairs, and walked across the quadrangle to the New House to interview Mr. Ratcliff.

CHAPTER 11.

Mr. Ratcliff Sings Small!

MR. RATCLIFF'S jaw dropped when, in response to his "Cub id!" the door of his study opened, and the stalwart form of the master of the School House appeared.

The two Housemasters were not upon visiting terms, and they seldom met to speak except at the periodical masters' meetings. The visit of the School House master to Mr. Ratcliff's quarters portended something, and Mr. Ratcliff guessed that it would prove to be something unpleasant.

The moment he saw Mr. Raitlon he guessed that the latter had discovered something of the truth, and he felt extremely uneasy. But he tried to remain calm and collected, and rose to his feet with as much dignity as he could assume.

Dignity, however, is not easy to attain when one is suffering from a cold in the nose and a bad conscience simultaneously. And so Mr. Ratcliff's efforts could hardly be described as a success. In fact, he looked uncommonly like a delinquent facing a judge as he stood up and met Mr. Raitlon's gaze.

"This is an unegsbegeted pleasure," he said coldly.

"I have taken the liberty of calling," said Mr. Raitlon quietly. "I never properly thanked you for the deep interest you took in my business the other night, when you assumed the control of my House during my absence. Now I find that I am still further indebted to you for a still

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him, Mr. Raitlon slit it open carelessly. He did not know the writing, and attached no importance to it.

But as he read the brief communication within, his face changed. He stared at it as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Raitlon. "What can it mean? 'A long, lean bounder!' What an expression! 'A knife-blade nose!' Is it possible that it is Mr. Ratcliff who is being alluded to? Can he possibly have been mean and foolish enough to have followed me last night?"

The Housemaster paced his study in some agitation, his brow dark with thought. The happening of the previous night, which had interrupted his talk with Hunt, had remained a profound mystery to him.

That someone else had been at the ruined castle was all he knew; he could not guess who or why.

This letter let in a flood of light upon the matter.

Someone had followed him; someone else had discovered the spy, and sent

greater proof of your regard, and so I can thank you as you deserve for both favours at once!"

"I do not understand you."
"I regret to see that you have a cold, Mr. Ratcliff. You must have been out in the snow last night."

Mr. Ratcliff coloured.
"Yes, I was out."
"I thought so! I was also out, but we never met, which is quite singular; for I think we must have been very near to each other."

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes sank.
"I do not understand your allusions, Mr. Railton."

"Never mind. If my meaning is not clear to you now, it may dawn upon you later," said Mr. Railton. "Meanwhile, will you kindly restore to me the property of mine which you have so kindly taken charge of?"

"I—what—"
"I am alluding to the letter."
Mr. Railton spoke so calmly and directly that Mr. Ratcliff had not the slightest doubt that he knew about the letter being in his possession. His quick thought was that Monteith must have been chattering, and he inwardly resolved to make it warm for his prefect.

"The letter!" he said, to gain time.
"Yes; the letter I lost. I should be glad if you would hand it over to me. Of course, I understand that you do not know I am the rightful owner," said Mr. Railton, "otherwise you would have given it to me at once. But now that I am here to claim it, you can have no further doubt upon the subject. Kindly return it to me."

Too flabbergasted by the House-master's coolness to utter a word, Mr. Ratcliff drew the letter from his pocket-book and handed it to Mr. Railton.

The latter examined it carefully, and then stepped towards the fireplace and dropped it into the glowing coals.

It was shrivelled out of existence in a moment.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I really don't know how to thank you for your many kindnesses to me, Mr. Ratcliff, so I won't try."

"Mr. Railton!"
"I hope your cold will soon be better; you must have caught a chill last night. Did you happen to go so far as the ruined castle?"

"I—"
"The weather was shocking, wasn't it? Good-night, Mr. Ratcliff!"
And the master of the School House quitted the room.

Mr. Ratcliff stared after him, with black brows and gritting teeth. Never had he been so humiliated in his life.

The School House master plainly knew all about it, and had come there to tell him so, and he had been weak enough to give up the letter.

"What a fool I was!" murmured Mr. Ratcliff. "I ought to have kept the letter, to be produced against him in case I have to acquaint the Head with this disgraceful business. But I was really so much taken by surprise. Dear me, I wish I had not parted with the letter!" He snapped his teeth viciously. "I will make him smart for all those insults!" he muttered, with glinting eyes. "I have a very fair idea of his relations with that disreputable fellow he called Hunt. The man is blackmailing him, as clear as daylight. There is certainly something shady in his past, and it is my duty to the school to find out what it is, and expose him before the Head. I will take care next time that he discovers nothing until I am ready to have him up in Dr.

Holmes' study, and call upon him to answer the charge I bring against him."

And the thought of that approaching triumph restored Mr. Ratcliff's good humour somewhat, and a sour smile broke out over his face.

Mr. Railton, too, smiled as he went back to his own house.

"I don't think he'll care to follow me again," he said to himself. "Neither do I think he has discovered anything material. Fortunately, Hunt will soon be gone, and even Mr. Ratcliff will hardly be able to use his peculiar gifts in the detective line any more, when Bernard Hunt is safely across the water."

Tom Merry was standing on the steps of the School House as Mr. Railton came in, after his visit to the New House master.

Mr. Railton looked very hard at the junior. He felt pretty certain that the letter he had received anonymously had come from the hand of Tom Merry.

But the handsome, sunny face of the Shell fellow was quite clear and innocent.

Mr. Railton gave him one keen look, and passed on into the House.

Tom Merry smiled.
Manners and Lowther joined him on the steps.

"It's worked!" said Monty Lowther.
Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes; Railton's just been over to the New House. I hope he's given it to Ratty in the neck!"

"I hope he has!" said Manners. "Of all the rotters—"

"And he doesn't suspect?" Monty Lowther remarked.

Tom Merry chuckled.
"Well, from the way he looked at me it struck me that he might fancy the letter came from a St. Jim's chap!" he admitted.

"But he hasn't said anything, so it's all right. Mind, not a giddy whisper to a soul!"
"Bai Jove!"

The chums of the Shell swung round, and looked at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Arthur Augustus put his famous eyeglass into his eye, and surveyed them.

"Pway excuse me, deah boys!" he said. "I could not help overhearin' your last remarks as I was comin' out just behind you. It appears that you have a secret!"

"Go hon!"

"I wegard that as a wathah bad habit for youngstahs to get into!" said Arthur Augustus, in his most fatherly manner. "You had bettah confide it to me, and I will advise you whethah to keep it or not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see cause for laughin' in that remark, Tom Mewwy! In the cires, you cannot do bettah than confide in a fellow of tact and judgment!"

The Terrible Three grinned.

"Of course, I am not cuwious!" said D'Arcy loftily. "I twust you do not suspect me of bein' cuwious, deah boys."

"I jolly well do!" said Monty Lowther. "One of the most curious animals I have ever seen, as a matter of fact."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You had bettah tell me, though!"

said D'Arcy. "I am not in the slightest degwee inquisitive, but I feel that I ought to give you some advice!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

The captain of the Shell winked at his chums.

"Shall I tell you something, Gussy?" he asked solemnly.

"Yaas, wathah!"
"Bend your head closer!"

"Yaas."

D'Arcy bent his head very close to Tom Merry's lips. Manners and Lowther watched him, suppressing their merriment.

"It will startle you!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Never mind that!"
"You don't mind?"

"Wathah not!"
"Sure?"

"Yaas; go ahead, for goodness' sake!"

"Very well!"
Tom Merry advanced his lips close to D'Arcy's ear, and emitted a sudden, ear-splitting yell.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy staggered back with a gasp.

"Oh, you ass! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

"I said it would startle you, and you said you didn't mind!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Gwoogh! You have thwown me into quite a fluttah! You uttah ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Terrible Three walked away, leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with his hand to his ear, gasping.

CHAPTER 12.

A Lesson for Mr. Ratcliff!

TOM MERRY'S study was very quiet. Tom Merry was sitting in the armchair, his brows corrugated in deep thought.

Monty Lowther was writing out an imposition, and Manners was reading a photography book. Tom Merry was gazing into space, his brain evidently very hard at work.

Suddenly a prolonged chuckle broke into the silence of the study. Two heads were raised at once, two pairs of eyes fixed in mute inquiry upon Tom. He was grinning joyously.

"Well, what's the wheeze?" asked Manners.

The chums knew that something was coming.

"I've been thinking," said Tom Merry. "Was our anonymous billet-doux to Railton quite fair on the Ratcliff bird?"

The two looked puzzled.

"I don't see what you're driving at, ass!" said Lowther.

(Continued on the next page.)



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"Well, Ratty is so fond of spying and probing his lengthy proboscis into the affairs of others, that it doesn't seem quite good-natured to stop him. Now we have put Railton on his guard, Ratty won't be able to watch him any more."

"And a good thing, too!"

"Yes, in a way. But can't you feel sorry for the Ratcliff bird? Just imagine him, with all his Sexton Blake instincts bottled up, simply dying for a chance to find somebody out in something shady. It's a pathetic picture, to my mind."

"Look here, ass! What's the jape?" asked Manners.

"I've been thinking that it's hard on Ratty, and that we ought to give him a treat. He seems to be a good hand at finding people's letters out and reading them, and then toddling along to a giddy rendezvous. Why shouldn't we gratify him in this harmless and necessary amusement? Why shouldn't we write a nice little letter, and put it where he's bound to find it, and then—"

The chums shrieked as the possibilities of the joke rushed upon them.

"Good old Tom!" said Lowther. "Oh, it will be ripping! Something bloodcurdling that will make Ratty think he's got hold of something specially prime."

"Bring in a murder," suggested Manners. "That will wake him up."

Tom Merry grinned serenely.

"That's a good wheeze," he said. "If we could get old Ratty to a convenient rendezvous we could put him through a regular course of surprises, and teach him a little lesson about playing the giddy amateur detective."

"Yes; if he doesn't spot us."

"We shall have to take care that he doesn't, of course. He's on Railton's track like a bloodhound, and so he's bound to swallow anything. Now this is what I was planning in my little head, kids."

Tom Merry dashed off a letter. He read it aloud as he finished:

"Sir,—Our meeting at the castle having been interrupted, I must see you again as quickly as possible. Unless you hand me the hush-money, I shall denounce you to the police, and you will be arrested at once. You know that when your fearful crime becomes known, you will have no escape from penal servitude. If you dare to disregard this letter, you know what to expect. Meet me at eleven o'clock to-night outside the shed in the Acro Field, or take the consequences!"

"ONE WHO KNOWS YOUR SECRET."

The Shell fellows simply yelled.

"How's that for high?" asked Tom Merry. "Now that old Ratty's on the scent, a discovery like that ought to please him. You see, I haven't mentioned any names, so if the letter should fall into the wrong hands, it won't do any harm. The allusion to the meeting in the castle is enough to show Ratty that it's addressed to Railton."

"You're a howling genius!"

"The penal servitude is ripping!" said Lowther. "But couldn't you make it the gallows?"

"No; that would be a bit too strong, and might make Ratty smell a rat. Penal servitude is good enough, and it will make Ratty chortle."

"Mind you disguise your hand," said Lowther. "There would be a howling row if we got spotted over this jape!"

"Rather! I'll put it in the same hand as our billet-doux to Railton."

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Tom Merry carefully wrote out the precious epistle in the same disguised handwriting that had once already served its turn.

"Now the question is to get it into Ratty's hands without making him suspicious," said Manners.

"Leave that to your uncle," said Tom Merry.

And with the letter in his pocket he quitted the study.

The junior passed quietly out of the House, and scuttled across the quad in the deep winter dusk. In a couple of minutes he was in the New House, and a glance round showed him no one in sight but a couple of juniors coming downstairs.

They spotted Tom Merry at once, and accelerated their pace to come to close quarters with the bold intruder.

Tom Merry faced them, and placed the thumb of his right hand to his nose, extending the fingers, while at the same time with his left he dropped the precious letter behind him on the little rug just outside Mr Ratcliff's study door.

The New House juniors had not the least suspicion of the hidden action; and they saw only Tom Merry's attitude of defiance, and came for him at a run, breathing vengeance.

"Collar the cheeky bounder!" exclaimed Redfern.

They rushed at Tom Merry.

Tom dodged quickly out of the way and put out his foot. Owen went sprawling over it, and crashed against Mr. Ratcliff's door. At the same moment Tom Merry seized Redfern, and, with a twist, dropped him on top of Owen.

In a second afterwards Tom was outside the New House.

Mr. Ratcliff's door opened, and the Housemaster appeared, his face red with anger.

The two juniors, who were staggering dazedly up, were sent reeling with heavy cuffs on the ear, and they fled precipitately from the reach of the angry master.

Mr. Ratcliff had no doubt that they had come crashing against his door in the course of some horseplay, and he had not the remotest idea that a School House junior had been upon the scene. Fortune had favoured Tom Merry.

Mr. Ratcliff could not fail to see the white paper lying on his rug. It had been stepped on, but he saw that it was a letter, and he picked it up.

He gave a sudden start as he glanced at it, and stepped back into the study, closing the door swiftly.

In agitated haste he read the letter. His breath came quick and hard, his eyes gleamed, his fingers twitched. It was clear that he was greatly excited.

"This is indeed a piece of good fortune!" he muttered. "Excellent! Excellent! Railton little knew that when he visited my room to show off his insolence, he would leave behind him such an incriminating piece of evidence as this. What gross carelessness on the part of a man with a guilty secret! Yet, after losing one letter, it is not surprising that he should have been as careless again!"

Mr. Ratcliff forgot his cold—forgot everything but that he had another opportunity of ferreting out Mr. Railton's shady secret.

At last he held the man he had so long bitterly disliked in the hollow of his hand. He had only to be at the rendezvous that night to ascertain, without the shadow of a doubt, what Mr Railton's secret was.

Not for an instant did a doubt cross his mind. He knew, of course, that a man of Mr. Railton's character would never be guilty of a practical joke of this nature. And it was inconceivable that any junior at St. Jim's knew anything about the matter at all. There was no room for doubt in the matter.

Railton, with characteristic carelessness, had lost the letter, and by a rare piece of good fortune it had fallen into Mr. Ratcliff's hands.

That was all! It was enough to make the spiteful man rub his hands with satisfaction.

"I was unlucky last time!" he muttered. "Some friend of this man Hunt was evidently at the old castle, and saw me watching them, and assaulted me with snowballs. But this time I shall take great care that nothing of the kind happens!"

Meanwhile, Tom Merry re-entered his study with a beaming smile.

"Well, what luck?" asked Manners and Lowther.

"First-class!"

And Tom explained what had occurred.

"But are you sure he had the letter?"

"Rather! I watched him through the hall window, and he picked it up and took it into his study. That's all right."

"Then if he doesn't smell a mouse now—"

"I don't believe he will, but we shall have to chance it. Now, who's coming with me to the Acro Field to educate him to-night?"

"I am!" said Manners emphatically.

"And I!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"All serene! We'll all go!" said Tom Merry. "So that's settled! I'll get Blake to open the window for us when we come back. We won't let on to him what the wheeze is, of course. That's our giddy secret!"

Anxiously enough, the Terrible Three waited for the appointed hour. Would Ratcliff be there? Would he have a suspicion that the letter was a "spoof" one, and fail to bite?

There was no telling, but they hoped for the best. When they went up to the dormitory at bed-time, Tom Merry made his arrangement with Blake.

When half-past ten rang from the clock tower, Tom Merry tumbled out of bed in the Shell dormitory.

"Are you awake, kids?"

"Ye-es!" yawned Manners. "But, I say, Tommy—"

"Well?"

"Jolly cold, and—"

Tom Merry jerked Manners' bedclothes off, and he arose, shivering.

"I say, Tom," said Lowther, holding his bedclothes round him, "I've thought of a ripping idea! Ha, ha, ha!"

"What is it?"

"Why let the old bird get there, you know, and not find anybody or anything. He won't know what to think. We don't want to be there, you know. Let him go and see that he's been fooled. That will be funny, won't it?"

"Awfully funny!" assented Tom. "But not so funny as this, do you think?"

And he squeezed a wet sponge over Monty's countenance.

"Oh—ah—pooch! Lemme alone, you beast! Can't you see I'm getting up?"

And out of bed came Monty Lowther.

Having called Blake of the Fourth, the chums went downstairs, and Blake let them out and closed the window.

The Terrible Three lost no time in getting over the wall, and they warned themselves by a race to the Acre Field.

There was no snow falling, but the ground was thickly carpeted with it. The Acre Field was close to the college. The chums did not go in by the gate on the roadside, in case they should leave footprints to alarm the expected victim. They entered the field by a gap in the fence, and approached the shed from the rear.

The shed was a half-ruined structure, with a good many gaps in the roof. The gaps showed black in the white covering of snow. The door was closed, but it was fastened only by a latch. In

"Why not get into the shed?" suggested Lowther. "It would be warmer there."

"Don't you think that that brilliant idea may very likely occur to Ratty?" queried Tom Merry sarcastically. "It would be a good joke to be cornered in the shed by him, wouldn't it?"

"Crumbs! I didn't think of that!"

"Then thank your lucky stars that you have your Uncle Tom with you to think for you."

"Dry up; I can hear footsteps!"

"Cover!"

The chums crouched in black shadows. A tall, thin figure passed in the dim starlight. It went round the shed,

But the fact that there was to be no rendezvous at all, and that the whole affair was a hoax, made the situation so utterly funny that the juniors could hardly contain their laughter.

Tom Merry held up a hand as a sign to his companions to keep still, and then cautiously crept round the shed.

Mr. Ratcliff had closed the door after him. Tom drew a strong wire from his pocket, and with deft and silent fingers, secured the latch so that it could not possibly be unfastened from inside.

As the door opened inwards, it was impossible even to burst it open from within.

Mr. Ratcliff was a prisoner!



Mr. Ratcliff gave a startled jump and yelled as Tom Merry's snowball smashed in his face. "Good shot!" muttered Figgins; and the next moment his snowball hit the Housemaster on the nose. Mr. Ratcliff was getting just what he deserved for playing the eavesdropper on Mr. Railton!

the summer the shed sheltered cattle, but in the dead of winter it was never used.

Tom Merry, from behind the shed, took a cautious survey of the field. The stars were glinting in a dark, steel sky, and the night was very dark. The snow round the shed was undisturbed.

"Nobody here yet," said Tom. "It's still a quarter to eleven, and Ratty won't be in a hurry to come and freeze here. But, I say, I expect he'll come scouting behind the shed, for he won't want to leave his giddy trail in the snow across the field. Keep in cover."

The shed was in a corner of the field. Behind it were trees, now leafless and bare, but covering the ground with black shadow; and here the ground, partially sheltered, had very little snow upon it. The chums had left few traces, and these were concealed by the shadow of the trees.

treading softly, so as to leave as little trace as possible in the snow, pushed open the door, and entered.

Keeping still as mice, the juniors exchanged glances.

It was Mr. Ratcliff who had passed them as lightly and silently as a spectre; it was Mr. Ratcliff who was now inside the shed.

The wheeze had worked! The joke had come off!

The juniors made not a sound. They hardly breathed lest the Housemaster should hear them. They knew what Mr. Ratcliff's plan was as well as the master himself.

There was a small loft over the shed. If the master of the School House and the supposed blackmailer met outside the shed, Ratcliff inside would hear every word that was uttered. If they entered the shed, he would be concealed in the loft, and could play the listener with ease and impunity.

Tom Merry rejoined his comrades. He gave a nod in reply to their inquiring grins.

"He's a giddy prisoner," he said. "Now keep out of sight, and we'll wait till he gets tired of marking time in there."

Under the dark trees the juniors waited. They made a pile of snowballs to fill up the time, and stamped to keep themselves warm.

Eleven strokes boomed out from the clock tower at St. Jim's, distinctly audible across the frozen fields.

Tom Merry chuckled. It was the hour of the supposed rendezvous, and he could imagine Mr. Ratcliff's feelings at hearing nothing of the men he was waiting for.

The minutes passed away slowly.

The chums were exercising, and keeping themselves warm, but the Housemaster, who dared not make a sound,

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inside the shed, must have found his quarters pretty chilly.

A quarter struck from the tower. There was a slight sound in the shed.

"Getting impatient," murmured Lowther. "Wait till he tries to open the door, that's all. That's where the laugh comes in."

Half-past eleven floated through the keen night air.

There was a rattling sound. The inmate of the shed was trying to open the door. Doubtless the failure of his efforts surprised him, but he kept on at it. He tugged and dragged, and tugged, but the door would not budge.

The juniors listened in silence.

Mr. Ratcliff was getting reckless now. He must have realised that he was trapped, and, of course, he set it down to Mr. Railton. Evidently Railton had discovered that he was watching, and had maliciously fastened him up in the shed. Every effort to open the door having failed, the imprisoned Housemaster threw all concealment to the wind. He kicked violently upon the door.

"Open this door instantly! How dare you fasten it? Mr. Railton, I warn you that you will have to answer for this outrageous conduct!"

Tom Merry fell upon Lowther and hugged him.

"Oh, I shall die if I don't laugh! Let's get a bit farther away and smile, for goodness' sake!"

"Open this door!"

Mr. Ratcliff, losing the last vestige of his temper, kicked savagely at the unyielding wood. The contemptuous silence of his supposed captor must have exasperated him. He could hardly believe that Mr. Railton had gone away and left him a prisoner there for the night.

"Will you open this door, Mr. Railton? I give you one last chance. If the door is not opened at once, I shall go to Dr. Holmes to-morrow morning and lay the whole of the facts before him!"

Tom Merry gasped.

"That will be a ripping treat for the Head!" he murmured. "Oh, I know I shall burst a boiler if that giddy humorist keeps on like that!"

The imprisoned Housemaster waited one minute for a reply. As none was vouchsafed, he must have realised that his captor had, in fact, gone, leaving him a prisoner in the shed. He did not speak again, but the juniors heard a low, indistinct growling.

"Keep your peepers open," muttered Lowther. "He'll be getting out of one of the gaps in the roof before long."

"Yes, that's the only thing he can do, unless he wants to stay there all night," assented Tom. "How lucky for him that dufferly youths are here, with an unlimited supply of snowballs, to give him a warm time on this cold and chilly night! When his head comes out of the roof, mind, I have first shot. If I don't get a bullseye, you can jump on my neck."

The crisis was coming. They heard the Housemaster rammaging about in a small lean-to attached to the shed. Then a hand came out of the gap in the roof, and a head followed it. Mr. Ratcliff was rather tall, so that when he stood upright in the lean-to his head and neck were in the open air through the gap.

Tom Merry's arm jerked forward.

A snowball, beautifully aimed, smote the Housemaster under the chin, and the head disappeared with surprising suddenness.

Tom Merry doubled up with laughter. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No 1,453.

"Oh dear, I know I shall burst a boiler!" he gasped.

The head came out of the gap again.

Mr. Ratcliff's face was white with fury. In the bright starlight on the shed his features were clearly visible; the juniors, in the black shadows under the trees, could not be seen, and they knew they were secure.

"I might have expedited this," hissed Mr. Ratcliff. "I might have expedited this brutal assault, Mr. Railton. You may triumph now, sir, but my dime will gub—I robeat, sir, that my dime will gub—Oooch!"

The head disappeared again, for Lowther, with a really scientific shot, had planted a snowball on the bridge of the nose.

"How's that, umpire?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Out!" gasped Tom Merry, with the tears rolling down his cheeks. "The best of it is that the silly ass thinks it's Railton all the time. He'll make a row to-morrow, and when Railton proves an alibi he won't know where he is!"

Out came Mr. Ratcliff's head again with the persistence of a jack-in-the-box.

"Condemn your brutality, sir!" he shouted. "Yes, sir, I say, condemn it! I shall hold you to account for it, I assure you. You shall answer for this outrage. I shall leave this shed, sir, in spite of your assaults!"

And he attempted to scramble out of the gap.

A volley of snowballs greeted him, and he went in again. Then the juniors, shaking with suppressed laughter, hurried away from the spot. They thought he had had enough, and no doubt he thought so, too. As soon as they were at a safe distance from the shed they stopped and gave vent to the mirth that they had had to partly suppress.

"Oh, oh, oh!" gasped Tom Merry, when he had laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. "What price this for a night out? But buck up, kids; we don't want him to spot us going in. I shouldn't wonder if he comes home in a nasty temper!"

The juniors made all haste to get back within the walls of St. Jim's. Blake was wakeful and let them in. He wanted to know what had happened, and the Terrible Three explained. And then Jack Blake staggered back to the Fourth Form dormitory in a state bordering on hysterics.

CHAPTER 13.

The Mystery Clears!

AFTER breakfast on the following morning Mr. Railton received a message by a fag from the Head of St. Jim's.

The Head requested the master of the School House to visit him as speedily as possible in his study.

The School House master entered the Head's study. Mr. Ratcliff was there, his nose redder and his eyes more watery than ever. His adventure overnight had not improved his cold. Mr. Railton nodded slightly to his fellow Housemaster, and then looked at Dr. Holmes.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Railton." The Head's face was very grave. "Mr. Ratcliff has told me an astounding story—a story so utterly astounding that I cannot credit it, but feel certain that there is some terrible mistake."

Mr. Railton changed colour slightly for a moment. He knew what was coming now—or, rather, part of what was coming. Of the affair the previous night he, of course, knew nothing.

The Head did not fail to mark the

slight change in his countenance, and his expression grew a little harder.

"You will repeat your statement, Mr. Ratcliff, in Mr. Railton's presence," he said. "I only hope that Mr. Railton will be able to explain it away."

"I certainly hope to be able to explain fully anything that may be considered derogatory to my character," said the Housemaster calmly.

"Very good," said the Head. "Go on, Mr. Ratcliff."

Mr. Ratcliff gave the master of the School House a venomous glance.

"In the first place," he said, "I wish it to be understood that I have acted solely from a regard for the honour of the school, and not from any personal ill-feeling towards Mr. Railton. I feel in duty bound to act as I have done."

"Certainly," said the Head courteously. "No one will suspect you, Mr. Ratcliff, of having acted from any other than the very best motives, and I am sure Mr. Railton will acknowledge this if it unfortunately turns out to be a mistake."

Mr. Railton did not speak.

"Then I will go on," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"I have told you, sir, how a letter came into my possession. Monteith, my head prefect, picked it up in the quadrangle, and as there was no name on it, he very properly brought it to me. I have told you that the contents of that letter made me visit the ruined castle, to ascertain who it was at St. James' College that was being blackmailed."

"Quite so, Mr. Ratcliff."

"There I was assaulted by a person I did not see. But I had seen Mr. Railton meet a person who certainly looked most disreputable—a person named Hunt."

"Go on."

"Unfortunately, I was unable to discover more than that Mr. Railton had gone there in reply to a demand for money. I reflected upon the matter, and decided that for the honour of the school I ought to keep my eyes open; but I thought it would not be fair to bring any accusation until I had proof."

"Quite correct."

"Mr. Railton came to my study and demanded his letter. I gave it to him. I did not think at the time of keeping it as evidence."

"It was unnecessary," said Mr. Railton, interrupting him. "I have no intention of denying the existence of the letter, or any of the facts you have stated."

"Let Mr. Ratcliff finish, please!"

"But in coming to my study," went on Mr. Ratcliff, with a gleam of triumph in his watery eyes, "Mr. Railton let fall another letter outside my door."

The School House master looked astonished. He was about to speak, but the Head held up his hand.

"Let Mr. Ratcliff finish first, please!"

"I found that letter by accident," said the New House master. "There was no name on it, and I did not guess that it was Mr. Railton's till I read it. Then a reference to the previous meeting at the castle enlightened me. I have placed that letter in your hands, Dr. Holmes."

"I have it here. You shall see it when Mr. Ratcliff is finished, Mr. Railton."

"The writing was disguised," went on Mr. Ratcliff, "but I knew it must be from the same person as the other letter. I went to the rendezvous to ascertain. Then I was locked up in a shed, and assaulted brutally when I tried to escape from a gap in the roof. That was all, Dr. Holmes. I have only to ask you if Mr. Railton is a proper

person to remain at the school after what I have told you?"

"If Mr. Railton cannot explain, certainly not!" replied the Head. "Now, Mr. Railton, I am waiting for your explanation. But I feel certain that you can explain everything."

"It is simple," replied the School House master, with quiet dignity. "I do not desire to conceal anything from you, sir, now that Mr. Ratcliff has troubled himself to acquaint you with so many details of my private affairs."

"Read that letter, Mr. Railton, before you answer."

Mr. Railton accepted the letter the Head handed to him. It was Tom Merry's precious effusion. The House-master noticed at once that the writing was the same as that of the anonymous letter. His lips twitched as he read it through. He laid it down on the table when he had finished.

"Now for my explanation, sir. I have the misfortune to have a cousin, by name Bernard Hunt, who is frequently getting into scrapes and expecting his relations to get him out of them. His latest freak is to get mixed up in a transaction which brings him within the shadow of the law. He is really guiltless, and has been a catspaw of a gang of scoundrels; but there is a great danger that he may be made the scapegoat. He fled instead of facing his difficulties, and that action will tell so heavily against him that now his only hope is to get out of the country. To do this, he requires money. That is why he has come to the neighbourhood of the school."

"He wrote to me and I met him at the ruins, as it was not safe for him to be seen in the daylight. He has been living in a shepherd's hut on the moor at a considerable distance from the school. I was both angry and annoyed by his conduct; but blood is thicker than water, and I resolved to help him. His demand for a hundred pounds, however, was more than I could at once meet. I am happy to say, however, that I have since raised the money, and that Hunt has gone to Southampton, and sails this morning for America, from where he will certainly not return."

"Very satisfactory so far, Mr. Railton. But that letter?"

"That letter, sir, is an absurd hoax, and I marvel that it could have deceived Mr. Ratcliff. It was never sent to me, and I see it here this morning for the first time."

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"Mr. Ratcliff," continued the School House master, rather quietly, "seems to have been obsessed with the idea that Hunt was blackmailing me, because I had some guilty secret in my past. Therefore, he allowed himself to be hoodwinked by this absurd hoax."

"A hoax!" murmured the New House master.

The Head could only stare.

"What does it mean?" he gasped at last. "Who could have written it?"

Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

"It seems that some person—someone, evidently, with a turn for practical jokes—had discovered that Mr. Ratcliff was watching me," said the School House master. "That humorous person wrote this absurd letter, and placed it where Mr. Ratcliff found it."

"It's—it's false!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "It cannot be!"

Mr. Railton shrugged his shoulders. "You say you were assaulted last night?" he said. "At what hour?"

"Soon after eleven."

"Last night I was in my study preparing examination papers, and at eleven

o'clock," said Mr. Railton, "Mr. Lathom came in to chat with me before retiring. Mr. Lathom will bear out my word if doubted."

"I don't think it will be necessary to send for Mr. Lathom," said the Head dryly. "The thing is too evidently only a hoax. Have you an idea whom the perpetrators might be, Mr. Railton?"

"I could hazard a guess, sir; but it would be hardly fair to utter a name without a particle of truth," replied the School House master. "I suspect that the hoax was planned by some juniors of my own House, who were naturally indignant at seeing the New House master spying on their own House-master. I can really sympathise with their feelings. Of course, I need not say that I had not the faintest notion that such a hoax was being planned, or I should have stepped in to stop it!"

"I am quite satisfied, Mr. Railton. I should certainly not desire that you should suffer for the folly of your own relative, and I can only admire your generosity in parting with so considerable a sum of money in order to give him a fresh start abroad. The rest of the affair is a mere joke. Mr. Ratcliff has been deceived, and I cannot help thinking, Mr. Ratcliff, that your prejudice against Mr. Railton must have been very deep and unreasonable to cause you to be deceived so easily."

The affair had worked out in the most unexpected manner, and the New House master wished devoutly that he had let Mr. Railton's affairs severely alone.

"I suppose you admit," continued the Head icily, "that it is all a mistake, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"I—I suppose so!"

"I should like a plainer answer than that!"

"Yes, sir; it is undoubtedly a mistake!" faltered the New House master.

"Very good! Mr. Railton, I must apologise for having been induced to force you to acquaint me with your private concerns," said the Head.

Mr. Railton smiled and nodded.

"Mr. Ratcliff, of course, will apologise," added the Head. "He has wronged you grievously!"

"I am sorry, Mr. Railton!" said the New House master, with averted eyes. "I'm very sorry! I beg your pardon most sincerely!"

"And I grant it!" said Mr. Railton. "I can only express the hope that you will not be so ready to suspect me—or anyone else—again!"

Mr. Ratcliff was silent, with humility in his face and fury in his heart.

The Head shook hands cordially with the School House master, and Mr. Railton quitted the study. Mr. Ratcliff remained for a private and uncomfortable conversation of about five minutes' duration with the Head.

After lessons, Mr. Railton sent for Tom Merry. The hero of the Shell left the Form-room and repaired to his Housemaster's room with an expression of beautiful innocence upon his face, but rather an uneasy tremor in his heart.

"Ah, good-morning, Merry!" said Mr. Railton genially. "Have you ever seen that letter before?"

He held out the letter he had brought from the Head's study. Tom Merry looked at his own effusion, then his eyes met the Housemaster's expressively.

None of the Terrible Three had ever been known to get out of a scrape by telling an untruth.

"Perhaps that was hardly a fair

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"I should have put it like this," said Mrs. Raillon, "I shall be glad of information, Merry, and I shall hold you quite blameless if you can give it. Tell me everything," and Mr. Raillon, "everything, mind!"

"Tom Merry did it with perfect frankness," said Mrs. Raillon, "and at others he was as hard put to it not to laugh. At the same time, he was touched by the junior's evident faith and devotion to himself."

"Then, in spite of all, you did not believe anything against me, Merry," he asked, when the junior had finished. "Certainly not, sir," said Tom Merry. "We knew you too well for that, sir."

"I am glad to know you have so much confidence in me, my boy," said the Housemaster, more moved than he cared to show. "I hope I shall always deserve it!—I may explain, Merry, that the man I met was an unfortunate relative, who had a reason for keeping his whereabouts a secret, and is now gone to America. The secret, such as it was, was his, not mine."

"Yes, sir. I didn't know what to do, of course, but I knew you were all square—I mean, true blue, sir!" Mr. Raillon smiled.

"Merry, I am afraid that you have taken outrageous liberties with the Master of the New House, and I should like you to say nothing of this to any one outside your own study. As you have told me in confidence, of course, I can take no action in the matter. You may go, my boy."

Mr. Raillon shook hands with Tom Merry, and the junior left the study.

Tom Merry's chums were waiting for him anxiously.

Manners and Lowther and Blake, Herries and Digby, and D'Arcy and Kangaroo were all in the passage, wait-

ing for him to come out of the Housemaster's study.

"Well?" "No, monosyllabic inquiry greeted him from all the juniors.

"Kicked?" added Manners. Tom Merry laughed.

"No!" "Is it all right?" "Right as rain!"

"Good egg!" said Monty Lowther, with some relief. "I expected a change in you!"

"A change?" said Tom Merry, puzzled.

"Yes; you see—"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Blake. "I can see one of his rotten puns coming! Stop him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You see," yelled Lowther, "you went in 'Merry,' and I expected you to come out 'Sorry'! See?"

"Rotten!"

"Never mind—laugh!" said Jack Blake. "If we don't laugh at this one, he'll tell us another! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly asses!" yelled Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, as only a roar of laughter greeted Monty Lowther's remarks, he

"It's all right about Raillon," said Tom Merry, when order was restored.

"He explained everything, and it's nothing whatever against him. Of course, we knew all along."

"Yaas, wathah! I back up Weirton all along the line, although you chaps wathah."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I fancy there's been a jaw, and Ratty got the worst of it!"

"Hear, hear!" "Wipin'!"

"Anyway, it's all over now! Gentle men, our respected Housemaster has been in a bother, and has got through it, and it's all serene now! I suggest that it is an occasion to be celebrated, more especially as Gus had a header this morning!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah! Gentlemen," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "I am glad to say that my patch is weally playin' the game now, and landin' out tips in a weally libewal way! I second my friend Meww's suggestion that there should be a celebration!"

"And I third it!"

"And I fourth it!" grinned Blake.

"And I fifth it!" said Kangaroo.

"Hear, hear!"

"And as Figgy has played up so jolly well over the matter, we'll ask Figgy's and Co., and we'll have Redfern & Co., too, just to show there's no ill-

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah! The more the mewwier!"

And still, N. C. was simply crammed when that celebration took place. Figgy's and Co., and Redfern & Co., and the Terrible Three, and the chums of Study No. 6, and Kangaroo and Ratty, and several more fellows crammed themselves in. But if there wasn't plenty of space, there was plenty to eat, which the juniors considered of greater importance. And the rivals of St. Jun's celebrated with pleasant friendship the fact that the popular master of the School House was no longer under the shadow of a secret!

(Next Wednesday) TOM MERRY'S LAST HOPE! a powerful long yarn of circus and St. Jun's adventures that every reader will enjoy. See that you (L.M.) is reserved for you for next Monday.)

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