



FIXING THE BLAME

FOR long past there had been serious trouble at Rampsfield Farm. It may have been that to the outside world everything jogged along placidly enough, but appearances are very frequently deceptive, and so it was here. The farmer's wife had counted the ducklings, of which she had many, time and time again, but there was always a lamentable shortage. At first she fancied that No. 7 or No. 8 had meanly ducked, as by nature, and out of sheer wickedness had chosen to be counted twice.

However the matter was, ducklings ran short, and the evil circumstance was carried through to the next day—and the next.

The obvious thing was to fix the blame, and Mrs. Panton, the farmer's wife, who ran the farmyard, and did it well, looked round for the thief who was depopulating her run. Her ducks were famous in all that countryside, and customers who were keen on duck and green peas booked their orders early.

The good woman said it must be the cat. The cat on the staff was Timmins, a thoroughly reliable mouser, and quite equal to making a buck rat sorry he had met her. Timmins had a reputation of the best. Her young family,

six in all, was now growing up to mouse-snaffling age. Timmins was a lump of blinking, furry equanimity and did not look capable of any bad action. Moreover, she had the run of the menu in a certain bucket of "stuff" in the yard. You might almost as well have suspected a millionaire of pinching odd coppers out of a collecting plate as suggesting that Timmins descended so low as to gobble an occasional plump young duckling.

When it became quite clear that Timmins was suspected the fat was fairly in the fire.

Timmins herself blinked as usual with the mild air of one supremely conscious of rectitude. Slander fell off from her as water from a duck's back. She was inwardly hurt, but too proud to resent the absurd injustice, or to bring an action for libel. She did nothing; merely sat in her accustomed place at the farmhouse door, and winked pleasantly at the sunshine, feeling she had earned her time of repose.

Boxer, the retriever (too old now to retrieve), who seldom went more than a dozen yards from his kennel, being old and sleepy, felt the business pretty much, for he and Timmins had grown up together and, as youngsters, had cheived each other through the brick

Mysteriously duckling after duckling disappears from Rampsfield Farm, and Timmins, the cat, is the suspect, until Rollover, her son, decides to investigate . . .

yard as far as the plum-tree on the stable wall, up which a far younger Timmins had streaked when pressed too hard.

Nobody liked the peace of the place to be disturbed. Everybody talked of the sad happening. Incidentally, the crowd of ducklings continued to decrease. That was disquieting, say what you will. The ducklings got panicky. It is not pleasant to think that one morning some companion will be *non est*, just missing, vanished into thin air—or elsewhere.

And Rampsfield was no longer the same place. The little river continued to run down to the sea—or, rather, to the marsh, where it was taken in charge by a bigger waterway; Mrs. Panton went on being huffy to Timmins; there was no longer the same response when the old cat rolled at her feet, or rubbed its chin on her shoe.

Luckily, Rollover took the matter up. He was Timmins' eldest son, a smart youngster, who was about to take up an appointment at the next farm up the tiny river. He had raticulated, and was regarded generally as a coming cat.

It was his self-appointed job to watch by the old bucket in the yard, for he felt that the thief must come that way. In fact, there was no other means of reaching the wired encroachments of the ducklings—so far as he knew. He felt certain that the wrongdoer was a rat.

Rollover was not really big enough to tackle a rat, but he thought he was, and sometimes it comes to the same thing.

The first night he watched by the bucket nothing happened for a long time. The cat may have fallen asleep as he crouched in the shadow, but of a sudden he was wideawake, every sense keen and taut, for he heard a curious little rustle, then a clawing on the smooth cobbles of the yard.

What was it? The cat made a grab at a dark object. He felt something soft, but the marauder, whoever he happened to be, was elusive, and had faded out like lightning. There was nothing there—nothing, that is, more than a clawful of funny looking brown hair, which Rollover examined in the morning, but could not track down to any animal he

had ever met. Still another duckling missed roll-call that morning!

The following night it was bright moonlight, but the cat took up his watch notwithstanding.

He had not long to wait this time. A quaint long brown object darted into the yard, making straight for the shed where the ducklings were housed. The cat was too busy to think then, but he knew that he was in the presence of the slinking enemy, and he made a spring.

The stranger was an otter from a snug bank in the riverside a quarter of a mile distant. This otter had grown a bit weary of a fish diet, and, owing to one or two unlucky incidents with the otter hounds, he had felt it was time to look elsewhere than the water for his food.

The brown otter was amazed at the onslaught. He felt a huge contempt for his adversary, who was a cat, not much more than a kitten; but as the robber rolled on his back with his antagonist on top, he felt that there would be no duckling that night. The cat scratched, kicked and bit. The otter was in a flurry, and naturally nervous. He had a dab from the cat's right paw on the chin, then a left-hander which enraged him. After that the fur began to fly. Rollover was here, there and everywhere else, and the foe did not know what to make of it all, for his life had been a quiet one by the side of the river—and in it—keeping himself to himself.

But he had to fight. The two contestants rolled this way and that, with the cat making brilliant sallies, and showing right excellent strategy in retreat. Rollover was hopelessly outmatched by the otter, who had a quick way with him, being here, there and somewhere else at the same time; but nevertheless the marauder suffered considerable damage from the claws of puss. The antagonists fought on regardless of all besides, but without question the fight would have gone to the thief from the river, this wretched robber of the duck yard, had not the otter come down suddenly on his back, and rolled to that side of the yard where the trusty, though sleepy Boxer had been observing the struggle through half-closed eyes, like a lazy spectator in a front seat at a show.

As a rule Boxer dozed, but he was very much on the alert now as he saw the otter



Rollover made a spring and landed on the otter, who was so amazed at the sudden onslaught that he rolled over on his back.

lurch towards him. The big retriever never had thought much of otters, and the occasion was altogether too good to be missed. So Boxer gave a snap, and had he done what he intended doing, without a doubt that otter would have been out of the fight and have said farewell to pleasant fishing days all in one. But the intruder saw what was coming. He had had a jacketing from the cat, but Rollover had had his share of punishment as well.

Boxer's snap failed signally of its purpose. The otter saw what was coming and gave a leap. If Rollover had felt a bit fresher he would have gone in again and the otter's tale would have ended differently. As things were, the otter scored. With a movement which resembled lightning the little animal whirled off clear of the fat retriever, and whisked itself to safety.

Boxer gave a husky bark of contempt and turned in once more. Rollover blinked.

He had not got another scratch in him.

In the morning the farmer's wife found odd bits of the sad tail of an otter in the yard, and formed her own conclusions. And indeed she realised that Rollover had been in the fight, and she gave him an extra saucer of milk; for, truth to tell, he was in a sorry plight. What was more, the good woman reproached herself for her unkind accusation against Timmins, who was promptly restored to favour.

Boxer was far too dignified to put in any claim for a reward—say, an additional mutton bone. Rollover was fussed up, and felt mighty proud.

"Let the youngster have the glory," growled Boxer, as he chewed an old chop. "I'm too old for that sort of thing."

Which was a most reasonable and gallant view to take.

THE END

Our Incurable Interviewer Calls On LORD MAULEVERER

(The slacker of the Greyfriars Remove.)



"THIS afternoon," said the Editor of the HOLIDAY ANNUAL, "you will oblige me by interviewing Lord Mauleverer, of the Greyfriars Remove."

I saluted smartly, rushed out into the street, got into the Ford-Rolls, hurtled madly through town and country to Greyfriars, tore up the School House stairs, and shot into Study No. 12, in the Remove passage.

"Lord Mauleverer in?" I inquired.
"Ah! So you are taking your ease on the sofa, your lordship?"
Snore!

"I have come to interview you for the benefit of the readers of the HOLIDAY ANNUAL—"

Snore!

"I know your time is valuable, and that you are an awfully busy sort of fellow—"

Snore!

"Possibly you would like to answer one or two questions, your lordship. Just so that I can be sure that you are fully awake, do you mind if I tweak your nose—like this?"

"Yoooooop! Ow! Oh, gad!"

"Awfully sorry, your lordship! Did I hurt you?"

"Yaas!"

"Careless of me! Now for the questions! First, would you care to tell the readers of the HOLIDAY ANNUAL your greatest ambition?"

"Yaas. To find a study where silly asses don't butt in on a man's forty winks!"

"'Hem! Second question: what sort of recreation does your lordship indulge in?"

"Sleep!"

"Your favourite place?"

"Ya-a-aw! Bed!"

"Your favourite author?"

Snore!

"No good! Nothing will wake up Mauly for more than two minutes at a time!" came a laughing voice from the doorway.

I turned round and recognised Sir Jimmy Vivian, the languid aristocrat's study-mate. Sir Jimmy shook his head when I explained my mission.

"That's all you'll get out of Mauly today, take it from me!" he said. "Why not give it up, and come with me for a snack in the tuck-shop and a trot round the School?"

It was an excellent suggestion, and under Sir Jimmy's wing I spent several very enjoyable hours "doing" Greyfriars.

It was quite late when I left the old School. On my way out, to my utter amazement, I saw Lord Mauleverer racing up the stairs as though he had suddenly received a powerful charge of electricity.

"Your lordship——" I cried.

But Mauly had already passed me like a flash.

"Can't stop, old bean!" he gasped.

"It's bed-time!"

THE END