



The Cliveden Detectives

A Very Laughable Complete Story.
Specially Written by CHARLES HAMILTON.

The 1st Chapter. The Missing Stamp.

WHAT'S the matter with Gatty?"
"Sure, and he looks excited,"
said Micky Flynn.

"I guess he's off his rocker," drawled Lincoln G. Poindexter.

The Cliveden Combine—Neville, Flynn, and Poindexter—were standing at the door of their study, No. 4, when Gatty of the Fourth came along the passage. Gatty was usually a quiet and serious fellow, an active member of the Fourth Form Hobby Club, and an enthusiastic philatelist. He was not often seen excited, but he was excited now. His face was flushed, and his eyes were sparkling, and he came dashing along the passage as if he were on the football field making a desperate run for goal. He did not see the chums of the Fourth, and was tearing past them, when Lincoln G. Poindexter thrust out a long arm and grasped him by the shoulder.

Poindexter's grip was like iron, and Gatty turned almost completely round from his own impetus, as the American chum stopped him in full career.

"What the—what—" gasped the junior.
"That's what I want to know," drawled Poindexter. "What's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing."
"Then why are you flying about as if you had a blighound after you?" demanded Neville.

"Faith, and is it runnin' a race ye are wid yerself in the corridor?" exclaimed Micky Flynn.
"Let me go, Poindexter."

"But what's the rumpus?"
"Oh, I've got it."
"Got what?"
"The stamp."

"What stamp?"
"The yellow green."
"Yellow rats! You don't mean to say that you are making all this fuss over a measly old stamp?" exclaimed Poindexter in great disgust.

Gatty gave him an indignant glare.
"You don't know what you are talking about," he exclaimed. "If you knew that what you call a measly old stamp was worth four pounds—"

"Sure, and it would appeal to his American business instincts intoirly," said Micky Flynn, grinning.

"Four pounds!" was Poindexter's ejaculation. "That's twenty dollars! Do you mean to say that you've given twenty dollars for a stamp?"

"I haven't—I would have given it if I'd had it, only I hadn't! But I had to have the yellow-green Ceylon to complete the set in my album, and I never could afford it, and now my uncle has bought it for me for a birthday present," said Gatty, with a glowing face. "What do you think of an uncle like that?"

"My hat! I think he might have bought you a camera with the money—"

"A camera!" sneered Gatty. "I might have expected that of a chump like you! A camera—instead of a yellow-green 1864 Ceylon twopenny! Rats!"

Poindexter laughed. He knew how keen Gatty was upon stamp-collecting, and that it was of no use arguing with a really enthusiastic philatelist.

"Well, tastes differ," he said. "I'd rather have a new jigger myself. But as it pleases you so much, I'm glad you've got it, and your uncle is certainly a decent old boy to blue twenty dollars on a single stamp for you."

"Yes, rather, I should say so! I could never have afforded four pounds in a lump," said Gatty, "and I've wanted the yellow-green for a long time. I've got the other two, you know."

"The other two what?"
"The other two greens of the same issue."
"Oh, have you," said Poindexter. "Well, if you're fond of greens, I hope you'll get a whole cabbage-garden of 'em—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Oh, you're a set of asses," said Gatty disdainfully. "What you don't know about philately would fill a jolly big book. The stamp came down by post this morning, and I had only just time to take it out of the envelope before the

bell rang for classes. I haven't had time to stick it in my album yet."

"If you've got it about you, I'd like to see the thing," said Poindexter. "A stamp that fetches four pounds must be worth looking at."

Gatty sniffed.
"Why, that's nothing," he exclaimed. "Stamps fetch hundreds of pounds sometimes. There is the two cents stamp of British Guiana, earliest issue, for instance. Two of them have been sold for £1,000—"

"My word! Have you got one?"
Gatty snorted.

"Well, you ass, I should be likely to have one, shouldn't I? Then there's the first issue of the Sandwich Islands—they fetch between seven and eight hundred pounds each—"

"Great Scot!"
"Then there's the—"

"Faith, and let's see your yellow-green," said Micky Flynn, interrupting the young philatelist, who would have gone on for ever, probably, if uninterrupted.

"I haven't it about me," said Gatty. "You can come along to my study and see it, if you like."

"I guess we will," said Poindexter. And the Combine followed Gatty along the passage. They understood now the haste with which he was tearing along, when that never-to-be-sufficiently-admired stamp was lying unmounted on his table, and the empty space in the stamp-album was, as it were, crying aloud for the yellow-green Ceylon twopenny.

Gatty kicked his study door open, and ran to the table. A letter and an envelope lay there, just where he had left them in the morning.

"Here's the stamp," he said, unfolding the letter. "You—why—what—how—"

He broke off, gasping in dismay.
The stamp was not there!

"Well, where is it?" asked Poindexter.
"My—my word! It's gone!" gasped Gatty.
"Gone?"
"Yes."

And Gatty sank into a chair, his face pale, the picture of utter dismay.

The 2nd Chapter. Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn, Private Detectives.

POINDEXTER closed the study door.

His face was very grave as he came back towards the table, and the faces of Neville and Flynn were grave, too.

Gatty sat in the chair, pale and crushed.

"Gone!" he repeated. "My stamp's gone!"

"Are you sure you left it on the table?" asked Poindexter.

"Gone!"
"Listen to me, Gatty. This is a serious matter."

Gatty pulled himself together.
"Eh! What did you say, Poindexter?"

"I said this is a serious matter."
"So it is! I'll go to the Head—I'll go to Mr. Lanyon! I'll have the whole school searched for

it!" howled Gatty, recovering himself, and dismay giving way to anger. "Some beast has taken it off my table—"

He sprang excitedly towards the door. Poindexter caught him by the shoulder and jerked him back.

"Let me go, confound you!"
"Where are you going?"
"I'm going to the Head!"

"You're going to do nothing of the kind."
Poindexter jammed the excited junior into his chair again, and kept him there. Gatty wriggled in his grasp, but he could not escape.

"Let me go, Poindexter," he howled. "I'm going to the Head! Somebody has boned my stamp, and I'm going to have it back again."

"If anybody has taken it, kid, you shall have it back again, but we're not going to have a scandal in the school if it can be helped," said Poindexter sternly. "First of all, we'll make sure that it has been stolen. Then we'll see if we can't recover it ourselves, without bringing the Head into the matter."

"Faith, and it's right ye are, Puntbuster."
"But the stamp's gone—"

"You know what an absent-minded beggar you are," said Poindexter doubtfully. "You're always losing things."

"I didn't lose that stamp."
"Are you certain you left it here?"
"Yes. I told you that I opened the letter, and saw the stamp, and then the bell rang and I had to dodge off. I just left the letter lying on the table."

"And the stamp still in it?"
"Certainly. It was fastened to the letter by a paper mount, same as you use in stamp albums for mounting the stamps."

"Let's see! You share this study with Greene and Rice, don't you?"
"Yes, but I know Greene or Rice wouldn't take it. They don't know anything about stamps. Greene is always pottering over his camera, and Rice thinks of nothing but carpentry when he hobbies. They wouldn't know the value."



"Hallo!" said Pankhurst, as he strolled up to the Combine with Price, "Have you seen Philpot lately?"

"Have they been in the study since you left it?"

"I don't know."
"I can answer for that," exclaimed Neville. "Greene and Rice were in the study room before Gatty, and they haven't been on the stairs since the Form was dismissed at all."

"That settles it."
"Besides, I know they wouldn't,"

"But if the stamp has been stolen it was somebody, I suppose," said Poindexter, wrinkling his brows in an effort of reflection. "Somebody must have known about it, and dodged into the study and collared it."

"That's it," said Gatty. "I told the fellows in the form. I promised to show it to Philpot, but—"

Poindexter started.
"Then Philpot knew?"
"Oh, yes, he knew! He knows a lot about stamps, and—"

The Combine were not listening. They looked at one another significantly. Philpot was a cad of the Fourth, and the Combine had known him out in more than one action that came perilously near dishonesty. Was it possible that it was Philpot who had stolen the stamp? He had known that it was there, and he had known its value, which few fellows in the Fourth would have known.

"I wonder—" began Poindexter.
"Faith, and we'll look into this."

"I guess—"

"Sure, and there's no need to tell the Head as yet, at any rate. We don't want a scandal about the Form."

"I guess—"

"We're quite able to look into it ourselves," went on Micky Flynn. "Sure, and I've known enough about Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee to know how to investigate a case like this. The Case of the Stolen Stamp."

"I guess—"

"You'll keep it dark, Gatty?"
"I won't."

"I guess you will," said Poindexter. "Come up, Micky Flynn, while I'm talking. You'd better keep the hind-leg off a mule. Keep this dark, Gatty, and we'll investigate the matter, and get your stamp back for you. If we fail, then you can go to the Head. You can understand yourself that the Fifth would chip us if it got out that we was a thief in the Form."

"That's all very well, but I haven't much faith in your getting the stamp back," said Gatty dubiously. "Suppose you fail, and then I'll be the Head too late for him to have any chance of getting the stamp back?"

Poindexter made an impatient gesture.
"I guess we should have more chance than the Head of getting it back," he said.

"Yes; but suppose—"

"Well, if we don't succeed in two days, you can tell the Head, and if the stamp never shows up, I'll ask my popper to stand you another one," said Poindexter. "He would do it, if I asked him."

Gatty brightened up.
"Well, that's satisfactory enough," he said. "Of course, we all think of the honour of the Form, but I can't afford to lose a stamp worth four pounds."

"Then it's settled. You won't speak to the Head or any of the masters about it for the next eight hours?"

"No. I know I can take your word, Puntbuster."

"You can take my word, but you can't take liberties with my name, unless you want me to wipe the floor up with you," said Poindexter.

"Oh, really—"

"It's settled," said Poindexter. "We'll be into the matter. I fancy we've got a clue already. Come on, kids!"

The Combine quitted the study, leaving Gatty to mourn over the blank space in his stamp-album.

"You suspect—" began Dick Neville, who they were out in the passage.

"Philpot," said Poindexter quietly.
"Faith, and it's meself that agrees wid you."
"That's a clue to follow, anyway," said Poindexter. "We shall see. And if we clear up the mystery, kids, and save the Form from scandal, it will be one to us, and a whack in the eye for the Old Firm—what?"

And Neville and Flynn replied together emphatically:
"Yes, rather!"

The 3rd Chapter. Pankhurst and Price Take Up the Case.

HALLO, Gatty, where's that stamp? We've come to see it."

"Quite so!"
Gatty looked up from his stamp-album. Pankhurst and Price, the red-headed chums of the Fourth, had just come into his study.

"Hallo!" he said. "You can't see it, I'm sorry."

"Why, what do you mean? Didn't you tell me in the Fourth Form this morning that you had the yellow-green Ceylon?"

"Yes. But—"

"Exactly. But—"

"And asked us to come along after school to see it?"

"Certainly. But—"

"Well, we've come."

"Quite so."

"I can see you have, but—"

"Well, trot it out!"

"I can't! It's been stolen!"

Pankhurst and Price gave a jump.

"Stolen!" ejaculated both partners in a Old Firm simultaneously.

"Yes, Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn are in with me to see it, but it was gone. Some

rotter had boned it off my table," explained Gatty.

"By Jove! I suppose you're sure?"

"Of course I am!" snapped Gatty.

"You know you lost a penknife once, and thought that Piper had it, and found it in your waistcoat-pocket afterwards."

"I know I left the stamp on this table, and that it was taken while I was away."

"Have you complained about it?"

"No. Poindexter wants it kept dark, so that he can look into it, and get the stamp back if possible without making a row."

"Good wheeze," said Pankhurst approvingly.

"It's a jolly good idea to keep it dark, and I think it ought to be kept dark from the rest of the Form as well as from the masters, Gatty. We don't want to get it talked all over the place."

"Quite so," said Price, his usual remark.

"But about Poindexter looking into the matter," went on Pankhurst, with a grave shake of the head, "that's not much good. As heads of the Form, that's for Price and me."

"Quite so."

"You can look into it, too," suggested Gatty.

"I don't mind, so long as I get the stamp back. I think the thief ought to be shown up, too."

Pankhurst scratched his head.

"I can't think of anybody in the Fourth who'd be mean enough to steal anything," he said. "Unless it's—" He paused, and looked at Price.

Price nodded a full assent.

"Quite so," he said.

"You know whom I'm thinking about?"

"Of course."

"We'll look up the case in that direction," said Pankhurst. "Keep the whole thing dark, Gatty, and we'll get your stamp back for you. Of course, Poindexter and those fellows mean well; but they won't be able to do anything."

Gatty grinned. He knew of the keen rivalry existing between the rivals of the Combine and the Old Firm. If Poindexter and his chums had undertaken to restore the stamp, Pankhurst and Price were certain to join in the hunt and attempt to forestall them.

"Well, you can do your best," said Gatty.

"I'll tell Poindexter—"

"No; don't tell him anything," said Pankhurst hastily. "He might try some game to fool us, you know, and waste time. You know those kids in No. 4 are always setting themselves up to oppose us."

"Yes; but you're always setting yourself up to oppose—"

"Never mind that. Don't say a word to the Combine, Gatty, and we'll look into the matter," said Pankhurst, with a wave of the hand. "We'll recover your stamp for you, and make the canned-beef Combine sing small."

And Pankhurst and Price left the room.

Pankhurst led the way to his own study, No. 10. He closed the door before he said a word on the subject. Then he looked at Price.

"Whom were you thinking of as the only possible thief?" he asked.

"Philpot!" said Price promptly.

Pankhurst nodded.

"Same here."

"It seems a bit rough to suspect him," said Price, after a pause. "It's like giving a dog a bad name and hanging him. But he's such a hopeless cad; and you know that that wheeze of his over the sweepstake was an absolute swindle, and he tried to sell a football match. A fellow who would do that would do anything."

"That's my idea. If Philpot is innocent we shall find it out; but I don't see that we shall owe him any apology, because we shouldn't suspect him in the first place if he wasn't such a low down sweep."

"Quite so."

"That's the clue we're to follow," said Pankhurst. "If Philpot stole the stamp, he would have to keep it till he had a chance to dispose of it. I imagine he would wait for to-morrow, as it's a half-holiday, and he would be able to go away without exciting notice."

"Very likely."

"Meanwhile, he's got the stamp hidden about him, or in his room."

"More likely about him than in his room, as he shares that with another fellow."

"Perhaps; but he has his own desk, you know. Quite likely it's looked up in his desk. He mightn't keep it about him, in case it should fall out of his pocket, or get left in his pocket when he changes his clothes. You see, he'll most likely guess that he's suspected, knowing that we know him so well; and if Gatty says nothing in public about his loss, of course the thief will know that the stolen stamp is being hunted for on the quiet."

"I suppose so."

"His game will be to look it up in his desk for safety. It's easy enough to hide a stamp. We've got to examine his desk."

"Suppose it's looked?"

"It's pretty certain to be looked."

"You wouldn't break a lock, Panky?" asked Price, startled.

"For the honour of the Form, yes."

"I say, Pointpusher may come along at the same game."

Pankhurst wrinkled his brow thoughtfully, and ran his fingers through his rich auburn hair.

"H'm! We must take care that he doesn't!"

"How?" asked Price.

"The chief of the Old Firm gave a quiet chuckle. 'I've got an idea!'"

The 4th Chapter.
Laying the Snare!

PHILPOT must have been the rotter, of course," Poindexter said, in a low tone, to Flynn and Neville, as the boys came out of the class-room in the dusk after afternoon school. "There's simply no other

fellow at Cliveden capable of it—excepting Grahame, the prefect, and we can't very well suspect a prefect of stealing a stamp."

"Sure, and it was Philpot right enough," said Micky Flynn. "Bedad, and here he comes along! Stop a minute, chaps; I've got an idea."

Poindexter and Neville stopped. They did not think much of Micky's ideas as a rule; there were plenty of them, but they were generally impracticable.

Philpot was coming along the passage. He was a lad with a sallow face, and looked as if he were in want of fresh air and exercise—as, indeed, was the case. He never went in for any sports if he could help it, and he had not the excuse of "swotting." He was idle by nature, and no credit to the Fourth Form at Cliveden.

"Well, what's the idea, Micky?" asked Dick Neville.

"Faith, and it's this! Let us collar the rotter all of a sudden, and ask him what he's done with Gatty's stamp, and he'll be so surprised that he'll probably blurt it out at once, begorra!" said Micky Flynn, with a grin of satisfaction at his own wisdom. "Here, I say, Philpot—"

Poindexter and Neville seized the Irish junior before he could get any further, and ran him along the passage at top speed. Micky, amazed by the sudden attack, struggled, but his resistance counted for nothing. Philpot stared after them.

"Did you call me, Flynn?" he called out.

Micky Flynn made no reply; he couldn't! He was being rushed breathlessly along, and his chums did not stop till they were fairly out in the school Close.

"Phwat are yez doin' intiorely?" roared Micky Flynn, who always became more Irish when he was excited. "Yez spalpeens—ye howlin' omadhauns, it's intiorely spoiled my illigant idea yez have!"

"You utter ass—"

"You howling lunatic—"

"Phwat's the matter intiorely?"

"If you had said a word to Philpot, you ass, you would have given everything away. He would have known that we were on the track."

"Faith, and that was the idea!"

"You wouldn't have startled a cold-blooded rotter like that into betraying anything, but you would have spoiled our chance of getting the stamp back."

"I don't see it."

"No, because you're a silly owl!"

"Faith, and if ye think ye can manage the thing better than I can, Pound-painter, sure and ye can manage it!"

"I guess that's what I'm going to do," said the chum from Chicago. "We won't have any more of your 'illigant ideas,' thank you!"

"Rather!" said Neville emphatically.

"We'll look into the matter without putting the suspected person on his guard first," grinned Poindexter. "I guess that's more like Nelson Lee and Sexton Blake."

"Faith, and have ye're own way. But shut up! here come those rotters from No. 10 study; and sure, they'll smell a rat if ye're not careful."

"Be careful yourself, Micky, and don't look so beastly mysterious, or—"

"Faith, and—"

"Hallo!" said Pankhurst, as he strolled up with Price. "Have you seen Philpot lately?"

"I guess so."

"Faith, and sure—"

"Have you noticed anything wrong with him?" asked Pankhurst seriously.

The Combine stared at him.

"No," said Poindexter. "He's not ill, is he?"

"Ill! Not that I know of. But don't you think he's been acting rather curiously to-day—as if he had something on his mind?"

Poindexter stared.

"Have you thought so, Panky?"

"Well, a chap has eyes in his head, you know," said Pankhurst. "But it wasn't so much that that I was thinking of, as what— But never mind; I suppose it was of no consequence."

"What was it?"

"Why, it was just before afternoon school— But there, I dare say he had a reason for going up the old tower, though I'm blessed if I can see why."

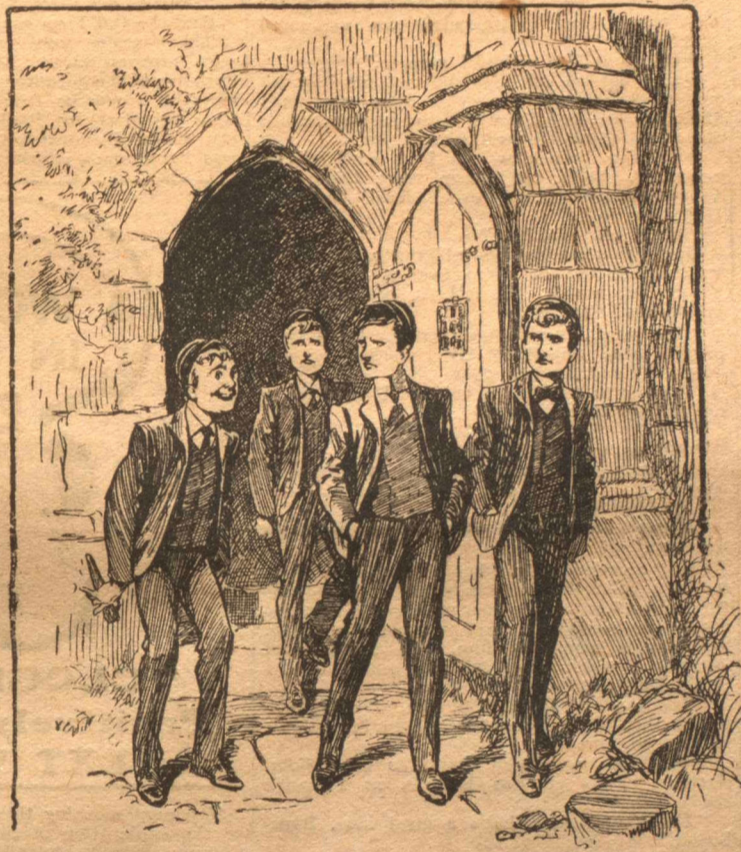
The Combine exchanged an involuntary glance.

"He went up into the old tower, did he?" said Poindexter, with a glance up at that relic of the ancient buildings which had once occupied the ground upon which Cliveden College was built.

Pankhurst shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it was nothing," he said. "Only what a chap should want to go up the old tower for just before afternoon school puzzles me."

"Quite so."



The Combine came out ruefully. They glared at Gatty as he stood cackling, and marched off without a word. And still the sound of the philatelist's cackle followed them.

"You see, when a chap looks worried, and then goes wandering up into a place like that—"

Pankhurst broke off suddenly.

"Hallo, there's Greene! I want to speak to him about those photographs. Come along, Pricey!"

And the Old Firm hurried off.

"My only hat!" said Dick Neville emphatically, "if Pankhurst knew what was on, and knew how much he had given away to us, I think he'd be ready to use his head for a football!"

Poindexter grinned gleefully.

"I guess so, Dick."

"Faith, and we're on the thrack now, wid a vengeance, begorra!" exclaimed Flynn. "It's as plain as anything that Philpot went up the old tower to hide the stolen stamp."

"I guess so."

"Come along, me bhoys; let's go and look for it!"

"Hold on, you wild Irishman!" exclaimed Poindexter, catching him by the arm. "We can't go up the tower now with Panky and Price in sight. They'd suspect something at once."

"Faith, I never thought of that, Puntbuster darling!"

"We'll leave it till after tea, I guess."

"But it will be dark then."

"Well, it's pretty dark already inside the old tower, and what's the matter with taking a lantern, anyway?"

"Sure, and it's right ye are. If ye like, I'll lead Panky and Price on a false scent while ye search the tower."

"No, you won't," said Poindexter grimly.

"I guess we're not going to have you giving the whole show away."

"Sure, and I'd be careful—"

"You stay along with us."

"Faith, and if ye can't trust me discretion, Pointbuster—"

"I guess I can't, all the same. Come along and have tea, and don't try to get any more ideas. They'll make me an old man before my time."

Pankhurst and Price kept an eye on the Combine as they walked away. They chatted for a few minutes with Greene, the photographer of the Hobby Club, and then left him. They grinned joyously at one another.

"I think they took the bait, Pricey," said Pankhurst.

"Quite so!" grinned Price.

"They'll go up the old tower exploring for that giddy stamp."

"They will."

"And then we shall come on the scene—"

"What ho!"

"And if they get out of the tower again in a hurry, it won't be the fault of the Old Firm at Cliveden."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The 5th Chapter.
Catching the Combine.

TEA in No. 4 study was usually a leisurely meal, but on this particular evening the Combine hurried over it. They had more important matters than tea to think about. Their first essay as amateur detectives seemed certain to be crowned with success, and they were already anticipating their triumph over the Old Firm.

"The cream of the joke," Neville remarked, "is that Panky himself gave us the clue. He was tant to kick himself hard when he knows all."

"I guess so."

"It's a good idea to go after dark. We can slip away without being seen, and not light the lantern till we're inside the tower and have the door shut. Then there will be no danger of our game being spotted."

"Sure and it's right ye are."

"Finished?" asked Poindexter, getting up from the table. "Come on, then. We'll take my bicycle lamp, as it's an acetylator, and shows a ripping light."

The Combine went quietly from the study.

Poindexter cast a glance along the passage towards No. 10 study. A light gleamed from under the door, and Poindexter chuckled.

"Those two asses are in there," he said. "They're feeding, I suppose, or doing their prep. I guess we shall surprise them later."

The chums went downstairs, and quietly out into the Close. It was a cold March evening, and quite dark already. It did not take them long to reach the old tower. The ancient structure was partly in ruins, the upper part being gone; but for a height of fifty feet it stood intact, with masses of thick ivy growing over it. Within was a spiral stair, which led almost to the top of the remainder of the ancient edifice. The tower was entered by a little door set in the heavy brickwork, which opened outward on shrieking, rusty hinges.

"By Jove, what a row that door makes!" muttered Dick Neville, as Poindexter pulled it open. "Nuff to alarm the school. Close it gently, or ye shall have some of the fellows nosin' round to see what's the matter."

"I guess you're right."

The three juniors entered the tower, and Poindexter closed the door behind him. He did it as quietly as possible, but the hinges groaned as the door moved. Within the tower was impenetrable darkness.

"Don't move," said Poindexter. "I'll get a light in a jiffy. Keep still, whichever of you is moving."

"Faith and sure I—"

"You ass, you've knocked the matches out of my hand now!" exclaimed Poindexter, stooping to search for the dropped box.

"Sure and I'm sorry, Puntbuster," said Micky Flynn; and he stooped to grope for the matches, unaware that Poindexter was doing so.

There was a terrific yell from the American chum as Micky's head came against his in the darkness with a crash.

"Ow! You utter idiot! Ow!"

"You clumsy spalpeen, ye've busted my head intiorely!"

"Ow! You lunatic!"

"Ye omadhaun!"

"You've nearly brained me!"

"Sure and it's kilt intiorely I am, begorra!"

"You—"

"You—"

"Oh, shut up!" said Dick Neville. "What a row you make over a trifle. You'll have half Cliveden on the spot soon."

"I guess—"

"Sure I—"

"Hush! Hark! What was that?"

It was a sudden, indefinable sound in the darkness. It came from the door.

"Blessed if I know," said Poindexter. "It sounded like somebody knocking at the door, but it can't be that. My hat! There it is again!"

It was certainly the sound of a dull, thudding noise outside the door of the tower. Poindexter started towards the door. It occurred to him that it would be no joke—from his point of view, at least, if some mischievous junior had seen them enter the tower, and should fasten the door on the outside. Unfortunately Dick Neville was between him and the door, and Poindexter's sudden movement in the dark sent Dick reeling. He knocked his head against the stone wall with an audible biff, and the sound of a whoop rang through the tower, and echoed far and wide.

"Ow, ow! My head! Ow, my napper! Ow, ow!"

"Begorra, and sure what a row ye're makin' over a thrifle!" howled Micky Flynn.

"Ow, my napper! Ow—"

"Oh, dry up!" grunted Poindexter. "Anybody would think you were hurt."

"I am hurt!" yelled Dick.

"Well, then, be hurt quietly. Look here. I believe somebody's playing a game with that pesky door." And the American chum groped his way to the door and pushed it.

It did not budge.

Poindexter put his shoulder against it, and exerted his strength. The door remained as firm as a rock. The American chum set his teeth.

"Faith, and why don't ye open the door, to see whether it's fastened or not, Puntbuster?" asked Micky Flynn innocently.

"It is fastened."

"But there's no fastening on the outside."

"It is fastened all the same, I guess."

"Sure and ye must be mistaken, Pointplunger. How can it be fastened on the outside when there's no fastening on the outside of the dure?"

"I guess they've driven a peg into the ground close to the door. That was the noise we heard."

"Faith, and sure I never thought of that."

"They!" exclaimed Dick Neville. "Who?"

Poindexter laughed rather savagely.

"Pankhurst and Price, of course."

"My only Panama hat!"

"They were fooling us with a yarn of having seen Philpot go up the tower," growled Poindexter, whose keen American brain was not long in arriving at a correct conclusion. "Now I come to think of it, Panky never said that he had seen Philly do anything of the kind. He wouldn't tell a lie. He just hinted, and like silly idiots we swallowed the bait—and here we are."

"Faith, and it would have been better to take my advice, Pointbuster, and—"

"Oh, shut it! How are we to get out?"

"But—but if you're right, Poindexter, Panky and Price must know that we're playing the giddy

THE CLIVEDEN DETECTIVES.

(Continued from the previous page.)

detective, and that we suspect Philpot," said Neville.

"Of course they know it. I suppose Gatty has told them. They'd guess we suspected Philpot, because they'd immediately suspect him themselves."

"Thru for ye."

"And now"—Poindexter exerted his strength on the door again, but it refused to budge—"we're shut up here like rats in a trap."

"But sure they were in their study when we came out."

"Ass! They left the light burning to fool us, and were hanging round the tower all the time, waiting for us to fall into the trap."

"Let's all shove on the door at once," said Neville.

"It's no good; but we may as well try, I guess."

The three juniors put their shoulders to the door, and pushed with all their strength. But it did not move. It was clear that a peg had been driven solidly in outside the door, and a dozen men could not have moved it.

Poindexter hammered on the door with his fist. "Open this door, you beasts!"

There was no reply, save the echoes of the shout which filled the old tower with almost deafening noise for a few moments, and then died away.

"Panky! Price! We'll skin you for this!"

Still no reply. Pankhurst and Price probably were not there. The Combine shouted and kicked and beat upon the door. But no word, no sound came in reply, and at last they desisted.

"I guess it's no good," said Poindexter. "We're prisoners here till they choose to come and let us out. We may as well make up our minds to it."

And the Combine waited with all the patience they could muster, which was not much.

The 6th Chapter.

Pankhurst Investigates.

"CAUGHT!"

Pankhurst murmured the word as he heard the hammering of the Combine on the inside of the door of the old tower. And Price murmured, "Quite so!"

Pankhurst and Price had, of course, been watching near the tower for the time when the Combine should arrive. Pankhurst had had the peg and the mallet all ready, and to drive it into its place was the work of only a few seconds. The Combine were prisoners, and the Old Firm listened to their vain hammering and shouting with great amusement.

"I fancy we score this time," said Pankhurst. "But we'd better be moving. Some ass may come along and let them out. We've got to get the search over in Philpot's study before they get loose."

"Quite so."

The chums hurried away. The sound of hammering died into silence behind them as they crossed the shadowy ground towards the school-house.

"Suppose Philly is in his study?" asked Price. "He's not likely to be at this time; he's usually in the common room. But if he is, you must get him away with some yarn or other, while I do the trick."

"Good."

"If Brown's there, just the same. You can easily get Brown to go to the gym, with you if you ask him to put on the gloves."

"I'll do it."

But as it happened, the study was dark and empty when the Old Firm arrived. Pankhurst opened the door and they went in.

"Shut the door, Pricey, while I light the gas. Look it. We can't allow Philly to interrupt if he comes back."

Price chuckled and locked the door. The gas gleamed out, and Pankhurst turned at once to Philpot's desk. It was locked, as he expected; but Pank had been prepared for that, and he had brought the mallet along with him, and he had brought the mallet along with him.

"How are you going to open—" began Price. A terrific crash answered him before he could finish, and the lock of the desk, and some of the desk, lay scattered in fragments on the study floor.

"My hat!" gasped Price. "That's one way, but it's hard on the desk!"

"What can a chap expect who goes about stealing valuable stamps?"

"But suppose he didn't steal the stamp?"

"What's the good of raising difficulties?"

"Well, but—"

"That's all right. Let's have a look for the stamp."

The Old Firm set to work. They ransacked the desk thoroughly. They found some papers which proved that the cad of the Fourth had not quite given up his old game of lending money out at interest among the juniors. They found several racing papers with marginal notes in Philpot's hand. Under the circumstances, Pankhurst did not feel justified in interfering with these. He was after the yellow-green Ceylon stamp, and nothing else just at present. But the yellow-green Ceylon stamp was just the thing that he could not find.

There was not a quarter of an inch of space in the desk that the Old Firm did not carefully search. But there was no trace of the stamp.

Annoyed and fatigued, the chums gave it up at last.

"It's not here," said Pankhurst, "and as this is the only safe place where it could be hidden,

it stands to reason that Philly has got it about his person."

"Quite so!"

"He's keeping it in his togs, and I'm pretty certain that he'll go off to-morrow afternoon to try and dispose of it," said Pankhurst sagely. "That's where we come in. We can't very well jump on him and search him in the Close, but as soon as he's outside the walls of Cliveden, we'll have that stamp, or bust something!"

"Good!"

"We'd better be off now, I think, before Philly comes back. I suppose it's no good trying to conceal the fact that we've been here," said Pankhurst, with a rather rueful look at the smashed desk.

Price chuckled.

"Rather not, I should say."

"Never mind. Philly won't dare to make a fuss, for he'll know that whoever busted his desk must have seen those sporting papers and the I.O.U.'s."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Still, we may as well get clear. Come on."

The Old Firm left the study, having turned out the gas. They strolled into the junior common-room. Philpot was there, conning over a racing book which he had cunningly fastened in the covers of an old Latin primer, so that it presented a most innocent appearance. There was no sign of the Combine. They were doubtless still in the old tower.

"I say, Gatty, you haven't heard of your stamp yet?" asked Pankhurst, aside, of the youthful philatelist.

Gatty shook his head.

"Well, I have an idea that Poindexter has gone to look for it in the old tower," said Pankhurst. "Why don't you go and see how he's getting on?"

"What on earth should he look for in the old tower for?" demanded the astounded philatelist.

"Oh, some idea of his, I suppose."

Gatty hurried off. He did not see how his missing stamp could possibly have come into the old tower, but if it was there, he was anxious to see it. Pankhurst winked at Price.

"They've been shut up long enough," he remarked. "We can't keep them there over to-morrow, so they may as well be let out now. Gatty can do it."

"Quite so. Ha, ha!"

Gatty soon reached the old tower. The door was closed, but he could hear a murmur of voices from within. He tried to open the door, but it was fast.

"My word!" exclaimed Gatty. "It's been pegged from outside!" He knocked on the door. "I say, are you there?"

"I guess so," came the voice of Poindexter in reply. "Is that Gatty?"

"Yes."

"Let us out, old chap, like a good fellow. We've been fastened up here by a couple of beasts."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to cackle over. Unfasten the door."

Gatty apparently saw something to cackle over, for he continued to cackle, while he pried out the peg, and pulled the door open. The Combine came out ruefully. Gatty was still cackling. The chums glared at him, and marched off without a word. And still the sound of the philatelist's cackle followed them.

"It's beastly," growled Neville. "Gatty will tell all the Fourth how we were done in by those red-headed rotters."

"We'll get even with them," grunted Poindexter. "Let's go and look in at Philpot's study now."

"Faith, and sure that's a good idea, Punt-buster."

The Combine entered the house, and made their way to Philpot's study. Poindexter lighted the gas, and then the Combine stared at the smashed desk.

"My only aunt Jane! They've been here before us!"

The Combine looked at the desk, and at each other, in dismay. And as they did so, a footstep came along the passage, and Philpot entered the study. He glanced at the lighted gas and at the three juniors standing there. Then his eye fell on the desk, and he gave a yell.

"What have you smashed my desk for?"

The 7th Chapter.

Rival Detectives.

THE Combine stared at the furious junior. He sprang towards the desk, and glared at it, and glared at them. His rage was too great for words. He mumbled at them, and it was easy to see that fear was a great part of the emotion he felt.

"We didn't smash your desk," said Poindexter at last. "We have only just come in, and—"

"Liar!" spluttered Philpot.

Poindexter turned red.

"Better language, you rat! I admit that it looks suspicious, but we have not touched your desk. It was done before we came here."

"It's a lie. You've taken my papers—"

"Eh, what papers?"

Philpot bit his lip. He ran his eye quickly through the desk. He could see that the contents had been disturbed, but nothing appeared to have been taken away. Poindexter made a quick step towards him.

"What's that, Philpot? Have you been up to your rascally tricks again?"

The question showed Philpot that it could not have been the Combine who had ransacked his desk. He could have bitten his tongue out then.

"It's—it's all right," he stammered. "I—I believe you."

"N-nothing. Leave my study. You say yourself that it looks suspicious. Somebody has broken my desk and searched it. I'll complain to the Head if you don't get out."

It was evidently useless to linger. The Combine went out into the passage. Poindexter was looking worried.

"I guess it was Panky and Price that busted the desk and searched it," he said. "The question is, have they found the stamp?"

"No," said Neville decidedly. "They haven't. Philpot was only nervous about his papers, whatever they are, and he said nothing about a stamp. It's pretty clear that the stamp wasn't in the desk, I should say."

Poindexter nodded.

"I guess you're right. Those rotters haven't got ahead of us after all, in spite of their confounded tricks. And I guess it's pretty certain that Philly's keeping the stamp in his togs, somewhere."

"Faith, and it's right ye are, Punt-dodger."

"We'll see to-morrow," said the American chum determinedly. "Philly is certain to go out—he might even go to sell the stamp—and we'll waylay him somewhere, and have the rotten thing if he's got it about him, and then we shall make that beastly Old Firm sing a bit smaller."

And that was all the comfort the Combine had. They avoided the Old Firm that evening, but they were compelled to meet at bed-time, when the Fourth Form went up to the dormitory. The Combine would gladly have taken no notice of their enemies then, but the red-haired chums were not to be denied.

"I hear you've been exploring the old tower this evening, Poindexter?" called out Pankhurst.

Poindexter grunted.

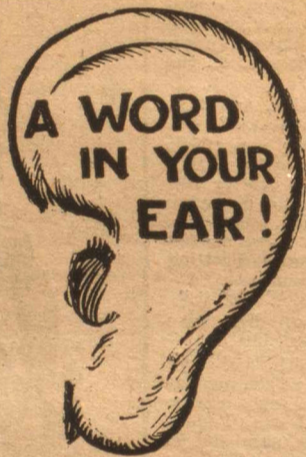
"Were you looking for anything?"

"Oh, rats to you!"

"Any mare's nests, for instance?"

And the Old Firm gave a roar.

The Combine went on with their undressing with crimson faces. After lights out, in the darkness of the dormitory, for a considerable time chuckles could be heard proceeding from the beds occupied by Pankhurst and Price. The last sound Poindexter heard ere he fell asleep was Pankhurst's chuckle.



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The next morning there were more references to the exploration of the old tower, which the Combine bore as stoically as they could. Their time was coming—at least, so they said to themselves. When they turned up with the stolen stamp, the Old Firm would have to hide their diminished heads.

Neville contrived to ascertain during the morning that Philpot was going to the village in the afternoon. As Philpot usually spent his half-holidays in the village, there was nothing unusual in that. But the Combine needed accurate information to lay their plans.

"We don't want to follow the rotter from the school, you see," said Poindexter. "Panky and Price may have their eyes on us, and they would tumble at once. We'd better be ahead of him, and drop on him suddenly from ambush—say at a stile, where there's plenty of cover for us in the trees."

"Faith, and it's a janias ye are, Puntpusher."

And so it was settled. After dinner the three juniors strolled down to the football ground, where a match was beginning, and thence by easy stages, to the gates. They slipped out, and sprinted along the lane to the village.

Meanwhile, Philpot, all unconscious of the plans laid for his discomfiture, put on his cap about half an hour later, and walked away from the school. Pankhurst and Price were lounging near the gates, with a great appearance of indifference; but their eyes were alert, and as soon as Philpot had gone out, they followed.

The cad of the Fourth kept straight on towards the village without looking back once. Pankhurst chuckled as he and his chum shadowed the unconscious junior.

"We'll let him get as far as the stile," said Pankhurst. "That's about halfway, and a lonely spot. Then we'll put on a spurt and collar him."

"Quite so."

Totally unconscious of the Old Firm's kind intentions, the cad of the Fourth kept on his way. He had reached the old stile, and the shadows were quickening their pace, when three forms started up suddenly from the bracken under the trees. Philpot halted in astonishment. Before he knew what was happening, Poindexter, Neville, and Flynn were upon him.

"Collar him!" roared Poindexter. Down went the cad of the Fourth, under the combined grasp of the three chums. He lay and wriggled in the dust, with a knee on his chest.

"What—what—what do you want?" he gasped. "Have you gone mad?"

"Where's the stamp?"

"Eh?"

"Where's the stamp?"

"What stamp? Do you want a stamp? You can get one at the post-office."

"None of your funny business," said Poindexter severely. "You know very well what I mean—the stamp you stole from Gatty's study."

"I—I— You're dotty! I haven't stolen any stamp! I—I'll complain to the Head!"

There was a sound of running feet in the lane, and Philpot yelled frantically, "Help! Help!"

"Off you go!" roared Pankhurst, hurling himself upon Poindexter, while Price biffed into Neville and Flynn with equal violence. "That's our prisoner!"

"Rats! He's ours!"

"He's not; he's ours! We're after the stamp—"

"So are we—"

"I tell you—"

"I guess—"

"Faith, and sure—"

In a moment the Old Firm and the Combine were engaged in a wild and whirling combat. Philpot sprang to his feet; the Combine were too busily engaged to hold him now. The cad of the Fourth did not stop to ask questions. He bolted through the trees, and disappeared. In the excitement of the fight the rivals of Cliveden did not observe his flight.

Poindexter and Pankhurst reeled to and fro breathlessly. Price was fighting valiantly, but Neville and Flynn pinned him to the ground. A sudden shout broke from Pankhurst:

"He's gone!"

"Well, of all the idiots—" said Poindexter.

"Well, of all the idiots—" said Pankhurst.

"Hallo, you chaps, what's the row about?"

It was Gatty, the philatelist. He was strolling along the lane, looking remarkably pleased about something. He grinned at the dusty and dishevelled quintette.

"We were after the stamp," said Poindexter. "We should have had it, too, if these asses hadn't come up and mucked up the whole show."

"You mean we should have had it," said Pankhurst, "if you hadn't—"

"The stamp!" said Gatty.

"Yes."

"The yellow-green Ceylon—?"

"Yes, of course."

"Oh, that's all right! I've found it!"

The 8th Chapter.

Gatty Pays the Piper.

FOR a full minute the Combine and the Old Firm were simply dumb.

Poindexter was the first to break the silence.

"You've found it?" he said, in measured tones.

"Yes," said Gatty. "I meant to tell you at dinner, but I forgot. You know how absent-minded I am. I found the stamp in my study. It had got shoved into a book that was lying on my table at the time, you see. Blessed if I know how, unless I put it there for safety and forget all about it!"

"Then it wasn't stolen after all?"

"No, of course not."

The Combine and the Old Firm looked at one another. It was an expressive look, and was understood. They separated, and moved so as to form a circle round the cheerful philatelist. Gatty seemed to be quite unconscious of having given any kind of trouble or annoyance. He beamed on the five juniors, in the happy satisfaction of having recovered his valuable stamp.

"It wasn't stolen!" said Pankhurst. "We've ragged Philpot almost out of his wits, and busted his desk, and generally made asses of ourselves—and it wasn't stolen!"

"And now you stand there as cool as a cucumber and tell us so," said Poindexter.

"Yes," said Gatty, beamingly, "I'm jolly glad I've found it."

"We'll pay Philpot for his desk," said Pankhurst. "But it occurs to me that this cheerful idiot has got something to pay for."

"Quite so."

"I guess you're right for once, Panky."

"Faith, and it's a janias ye are, Panky!"

"Righto!" said Neville. "Collar the howling idiot!"

"Here, what are you doing?" yelled Gatty, as they seized him. "I—I—I—ow!"

They did not heed his remonstrances. They gave the philatelist the most terrific ragging that five enraged juniors could give anybody. They frog-marched him, they bumped him into the ditch, they did everything but jump on him. When they left him at last, he sat up amid a mass of dry fern in the ditch, with his collar hanging by one end, his hair like a lump of half-picked oakum, his face dusty, and his clothes dustier, and an expression of absolutely idiotic bewilderment upon his face.

And then, somewhat relieved in their minds, the Combine and the Old Firm returned to Cliveden, with a firm resolution in their breasts to very carefully consider the matter before they started in the amateur detective line again.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!

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