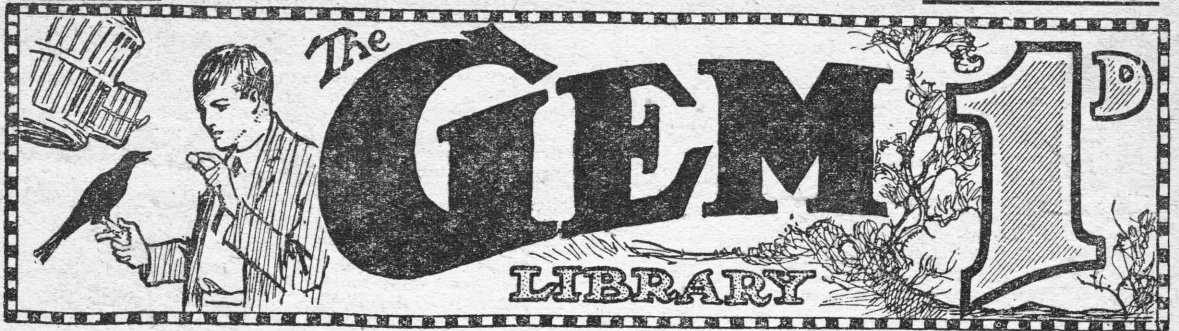


Every

Thursday.



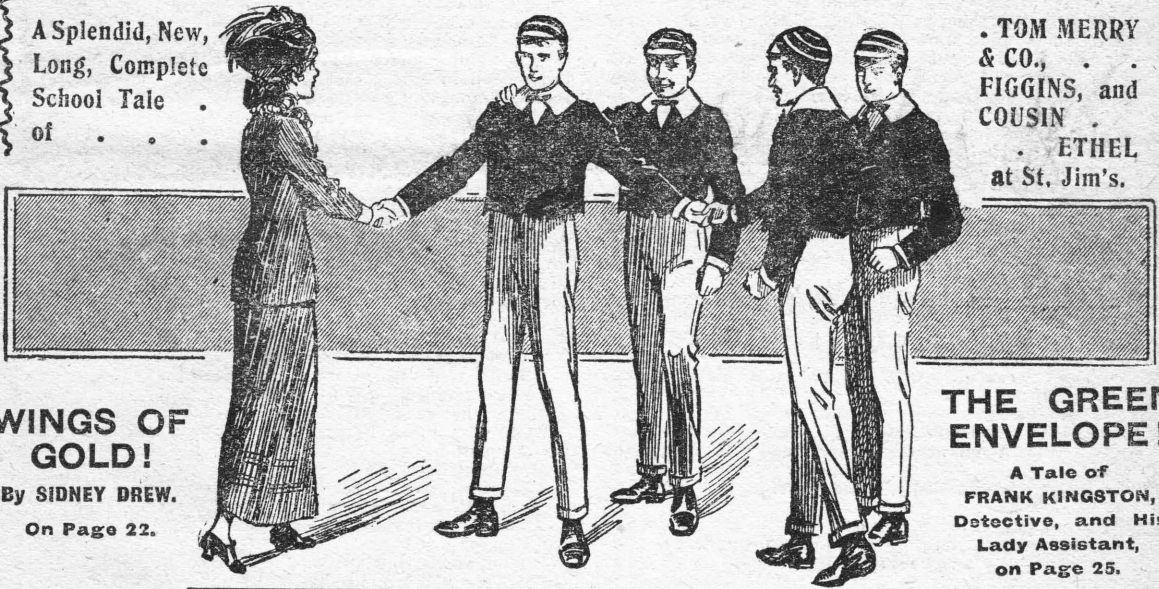
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School Tale
of . . .

. TOM MERRY
& CO.,
FIGGINS, and
COUSIN
. ETHEL
at St. Jim's.



WINGS OF GOLD!

By SIDNEY DREW.
On Page 22.

THE GREEN ENVELOPE!

A Tale of
FRANK KINGSTON,
Detective, and His
Lady Assistant,
on Page 25.

A GRAND COMPETITION ON PAGE IV. COVER.

CHAPTER 1. Figgins is Not Ready.

"ARE you weady, Figgins?" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, called up the question, from the quad, to the open window of Figgins's study in the New House. There was no reply, and Arthur Augustus took out his famous gold tucker, and looked at it, and an expression of impatience passed over his aristocratic face. "Figgins, deah boy!" he called out. Three juniors came across the quadrangle from the School House, and joined D'Arcy. They were Tom Merry and Lowther, of the Shell, and Blake, of the Fourth. All of them were dressed very nicely, and their polished silk hats gleamed in the sun. Not that they could bear comparison, for a moment, with Arthur Augustus. Arthur Augustus was resplendent. The shine on his silk hat was only equalled by the beautiful polish on his boots, and nothing could exceed the neatness of his beautiful tie, unless it was the perfect fit of his Eton jacket, or the crease in his trousers.

Arthur Augustus was ever thus; but the unusual elegance

of Tom Merry and his companions showed that they were bound upon an expedition of more than usual importance. Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and was pleased to look upon them with approval.

"You'll do, deah boys," he said.

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "I was feeling quite nervous about what you would think, Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"And you'll do, too, Gussy," said Monty Lowther, eyeing the swell of St. Jim's with a critical eye. "The waistcoat is a little too loud, perhaps, but then, that is really what we expect of our Gussy."

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah. The waistcoat is in perfect taste," said D'Arcy, with a glance downward at his fancy waistcoat, which indeed exhibited most of the hues of the rainbow. His monocle dropped out of his eye, and he replaced it carefully. "Figgins isn't weady."

"Well, we're not pressed for a minute or two," said Blake.

"I twust you do not suggest wunnin' the wisk of keepin' Cousin Ethel waitin' at the station, Blake," said D'Arcy

Next Thursday:

"THE TERRIBLE THREE'S RECRUIT!" AND "WINGS OF GOLD!"

severely. "I weally wondah why Figgins isn't weady. He nevah twoubles about dwessin', or I could excuse him—"

"He generally puts on a clean collar when Cousin Ethel comes," said Lowther. "Give him a chance."

"Oh, wats! Isn't Mannahs weady, eithah?" asked D'Arcy.

"Yes; he'll be here in a minute," said Tom Merry. "He's missed his camera; somebody has borrowed it without asking permission." He shouted up to the window: "Figgins!"

"Figgay, deah boy!"

"Figgins!" called out Blake. "Figgins! Figgay! Fig!"

"Hallo, Figgay!"

"Buck up, Figgay!"

A head was projected from the study window above. It was the head of Figgins, of the Fourth. Figgins's face looked a little red and flustered, and he had no collar on.

"Bai Jove! Haven't you finished dwessin', you ass?" exclaimed D'Arcy.

"Just a minute," said Figgins. "I'm trying on a new necktie."

"Oh, my hat!"

Figgins's head disappeared. A few seconds later, his voice could be heard floating from the open window.

"Where's that stud? Where's that blessed stud? Where the dickens is that giddy stud? Fatty Wynn, you ass, have you moved my stud?"

"Haven't seen it, Figgay."

"Did you shift my stud, Kerr?"

"No, Figgay."

"Oh, dear! I know we shall be late! Where's that stud got to?"

The juniors in the quadrangle below grinned. Figgins was never careful in his dress, excepting when Cousin Ethel was coming to St. Jim's. Then he would make a sudden effort to make up for lost time, as it were. Figgins was in a very excited frame of mind now. He had burst the stud-hole of one collar, and had to put on another, and now he had lost his stud. Kerr and Wynn were very sympathetic. They hunted for the stud; and Figgins having finally found it in his waistcoat-pocket, the collar was satisfactorily adjusted at last. Then Figgins looked over the three ties he had on the table, and invited the criticism of Wynn and Kerr.

Kerr was doing algebra, and Fatty Wynn was hastily bolting what was left of a pork-pie, in case he should get hungry going to the station. But both of them, like true chums, quitted their occupations, to help Figgins in his difficulty.

"What about the blue one?" said Figgins dubiously.

"Good!" said Kerr.

"But the one with the red spots suits my complexion better, don't you think?" said Figgins.

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Kerr.

"But the brown one—"

"You can't wear all three, Figgay," said Fatty Wynn.

"Better toss up for it."

Figgins glared.

"If you're going to talk out of your hat, Wynn—"

"Sorry," said Wynn meekly. "I should recommend the brown one."

"The brown one, decidedly," said Kerr.

"Oh, all right!"

And Figgins put on the brown one.

Four voices came floating up from the quadrangle.

"I say, Figgay, ain't you ready?"

"Oh, blow!" said Figgay.

"Better have a snack before you start," said Fatty Wynn.

"I've saved a piece of the pork for you, Figgay—"

"Blow the pork!" said Figgins.

"Ahem!"

"Do put that rotten algebra away, Kerr," said Figgins, with unusual irritability. "I should think you had enough of that in class."

"Right-ho!" said Kerr cheerfully, rising from the table.

"I'm just finished."

"Well, I'm ready."

"Figgay, deah boy—"

"Oh, rats!"

The three New House juniors turned to the study door. Figgins paused, and took a final look into the glass.

"I think I'll have the one with the red spots after all," he said suddenly.

Kerr drew a deep breath.

"All serene, Figgay; we'll wait," he said.

"Certainly," said Fatty Wynn.

There was a yell from the quadrangle.

"We're starting, Figgins."

Figgins put his head out of the window.

"Start, and be blowed!" he roared.

"Bai Jove!"

"The noble Figgins is getting excited," said Monty Lowther, with a grin. "Cousin Ethel would be pleased if

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she knew what a flutter she made in Figgay's dovecote. I wonder he doesn't turn Kerr's hair grey."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Manners hasn't come yet," said Tom Merry, looking towards the School House. "Hallo! Here he is!"

Manners of the Shell came up, red and panting.

"I haven't found the camera," he said. "Some silly ass has borrowed it. I'll scalp him when I get back. I shouldn't wonder if it was Levison; I caught him messing about with my camera once before, and gave him a thick ear. Come on; we shall be late for the train."

"Waiting for Figgins," said Tom Merry.

Manners gave a snort.

"You don't mean to say that you're going to keep me waiting, when I've bolted over here without staying to find my camera!" he bawled.

"Well, you see—"

"You fellows start!" shouted Figgins from the window.

"I'll cut along and overtake you on the road."

"Yaas, wathah; we'd bettah!"

"Sure you don't mind, Figgay?" called out Tom Merry.

"Oh, I shall be glad!" snorted back Figgins.

And the School House juniors grinned and started. In Figgins's study, that excited youth had dragged off the brown necktie. Kerr and Wynn were waiting patiently; too patiently, Figgins thought by their expressions. He turned upon them with sudden fury.

"Don't you fellows wait," he said.

"Oh, we'll wait," said Fatty Wynn. "I haven't quite finished the pork—"

"Oh, buzz off!"

"But—"

"Start, I tell you; I can easily catch you up!"

"Oh, all right!"

And Kerr and Wynn left the study. Figgins was left alone, with a flushed face before the mirror, tying the tie, which, as was natural under the hurried circumstances, persisted in tying itself in a way that was eminently unsatisfactory, and required continual readjustment.

CHAPTER 2.

Caught in the Act.

LEVISON, of the Fourth Form, stood at his study window in the School House, with a very unpleasant expression upon his face. Levison, the cad of the Fourth, never looked very pleasant; but just now he looked more unpleasant than usual. Mellish, his study-mate, was sitting at the table, watching him. Levison was looking out towards the gates of St. Jim's. He had just caught a glimpse of the plump form of Fatty Wynn disappearing through the grey old gateway.

"They're gone!" he said, turning back into the study.

"Now's your chance, then," said Mellish.

Levison nodded without speaking.

"Sure they're gone?" asked Mellish.

"Oh, yes; I saw Fatty Wynn, anyway, and they were all going together."

Mellish grinned.

"Figgins wouldn't be late to meet Cousin Ethel at the station," he remarked. "You'll find his study empty now, Levison, if you cut across to the New House."

"I suppose so."

"Well, now's your chance."

Levison sat down, his hands driven deep into his pockets, thinking. Mellish watched him with a curious expression.

"You know how careless Figgins is," said Mellish. "He leaves his things about, and never dreams that anybody might look at them. You'll find all the work that he's been doing for the Southcote exam, and you'll be able to tot up what chance he's got. My opinion is that he's got a good chance. He hasn't very much brains, you know, but he can work like a horse. I think he'll get the exam. by sheer swotting."

Levison nodded.

"I must win the Southcote," he said. "It was a stroke of luck, only Figgins and myself being entered for it. If Figgins loses, I win—and he must lose. He hasn't the brains for it; and if I worked hard, I should beat him easily."

"Only you don't work," said Mellish, with a grin. "You've hardly worked at the subjects at all."

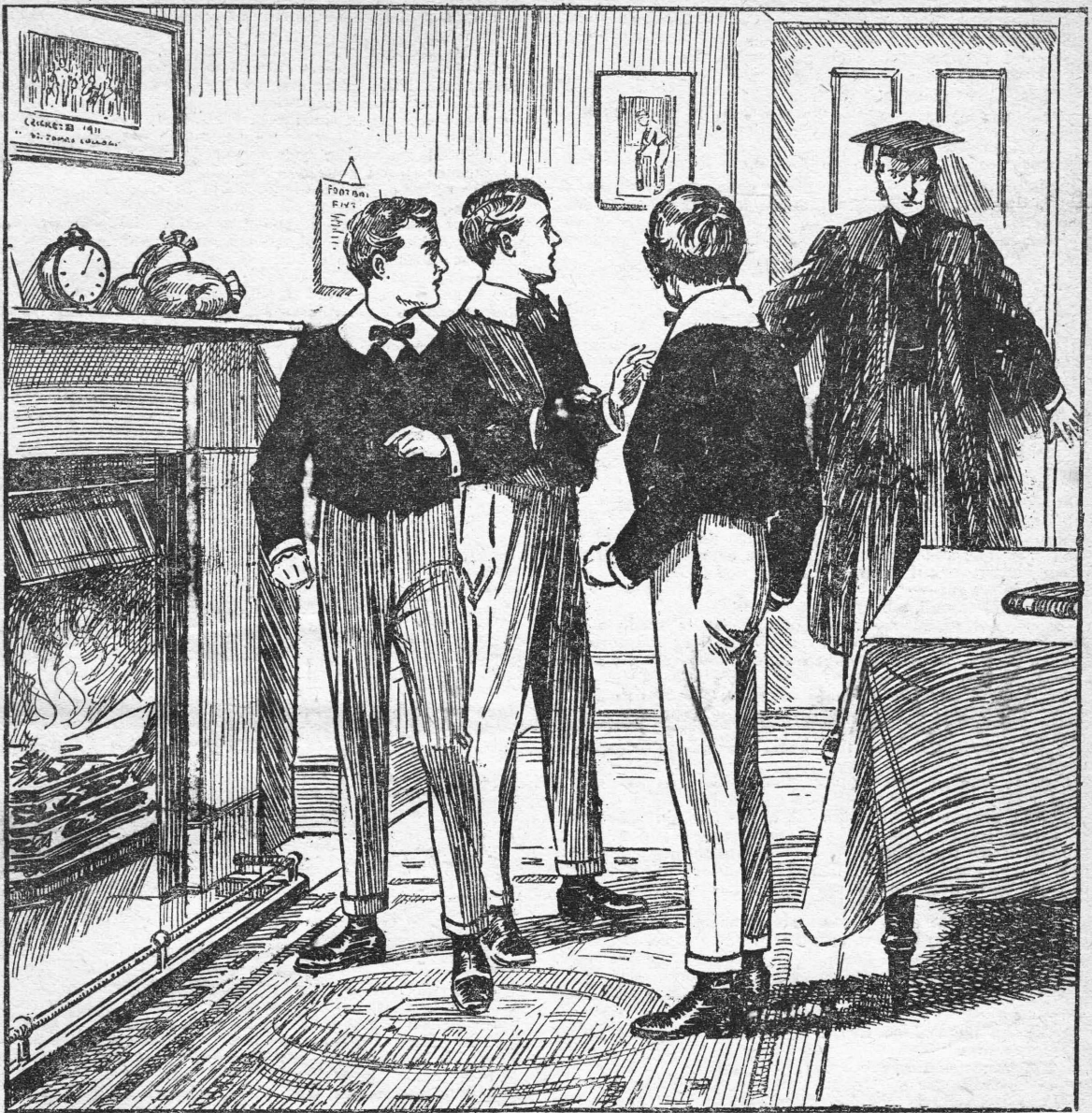
"Oh, hang it! It's too late to jaw about that now," said Levison. "I was always going to swot, only—"

"Only you never did!"

"Still, I don't believe Figgins can beat me. But—but I want to know just how he stands. He's bound to have left his work in his study. You might cut across and get the papers for me to look at, Mellish. It wouldn't look so suspicious if you were caught in his study."

"No fear!"

"One of the fellows might see me there, and guess what I'd come for," urged Levison.



"So I have caught you!" Mr. Ratsiff's voice was thin and acid, like his face and his nature. But in the silent study, to the startled juniors, it seemed to have a sound like thunder. They swung round just as the examination paper flared up! (See Chapter 10.)

"I don't see it. Anyway, I'm not going, and that's flat!" said Mellish. "If you want to see what Figgins has done, now's your chance; but I'm not pulling your chestnuts out of the fire for you—no, thanks!"

Levison scowled, and rose.

"I suppose I can risk it!" he muttered.

"Of course you can. I should be jolly glad to see you win, Levison. I hate Figgins as much as you do—hang him! Look here." Mellish sank his voice. "It's close on exam. day now, and if you could burn up what Figgins has done, and get rid of his books, it would give him a set-back, and might make a difference on the day."

"I'll try."

Levison left the study, and the house, and strolled across to the New House, with as careless an air as he could assume. It was a half-holiday, and a burst of spring sunshine had made the old school very bright and cheerful. The playing-fields were crowded, and the houses were almost deserted. Levison encountered no one as he walked into the New House, and went upstairs to the Fourth Form studies.

His eyes glittered as he paused outside Figgins's study. Truly, it was a chance; he seemed to have the place to himself. An uninterrupted ten minutes in Figgins's study, and

he would be able to ascertain what progress Figgins had made in his work for the Southcote examination, and might be able to play some treacherous trick which would hinder Figgins in his work, as Mellish had suggested.

And Levison had no scruples upon the point. He wanted very much to win the money prize attached to the Southcote exam. Levison was not given to feeling scrupulous when he had a purpose to serve.

He opened the study door quietly and quickly, and stepped in, and closed the door instantly behind him.

He had not the slightest doubt that the study was empty.

But as he closed the door and turned from it, he gave a sudden guilty gasp.

Figgins, the necktie tied to his satisfaction at last, turned from the glass, and met the cad of the School House face to face.

He stared at Levison in amazement.

The cautious way Levison had entered and closed the door behind him, his suddenly pale face and startled eyes all told of guilt.

Figgins's brow grew dark.

He advanced towards Levison, who cowered back against the door, so taken by surprise at the unexpected sight of

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Figgins in the study that all his usual self-command and cunning had deserted him.

"I—I—I thought you were gone with the others!" he stammered.

Figgins's eyes gleamed.

"And you came sneaking into my study, because you thought I was gone," he exclaimed.

"I—I—"

"What did you want here?"

Levison's eyes rested involuntarily upon a page of Latin prose on the table. Figgins glanced at it, and he understood.

"You cad!" said Figgins, between his teeth. "You came here to spy on my work for the exam."

"I—I didn't," panted Levison. "I—I—"

"Then what did you come here for?"

"I—I—"

Levison's voice trailed away. As a rule he was not at a loss for a falsehood, but just now he was so taken by surprise that all his usual cunning had deserted him.

Figgins eyed him angrily and scornfully.

"You cad! Are you trying to think of a lie?" he exclaimed.

"I—I came here to—to—"

"Well, what?"

"I—I was going to raid the study," said Levison. "It— it was just a House raid, that was all."

Figgins laughed scornfully.

"You couldn't think of that at first," he said. "If it was that, you would have said so at once. I know what you came here for, and it would have been easy enough for you to spy on my work if I'd been gone, as you thought."

"I didn't want—"

"Oh, rot! Don't tell any more lies!"

Levison's eyes gleamed. Contempt, it is said in the Eastern proverb, will pierce even the shell of the tortoise, and Figgins's scorn woke something like anger in Levison's breast.

"Get out of my study!" said Figgins. "I shall lock the door when I go now, and put a stop to your rotten tricks. Get out before I kick you out!"

"You wouldn't find that so easy," said Levison, with a snarl.

Figgins laughed contemptuously.

"I'll jolly soon show you!" he exclaimed.

And he came straight at the cad of the Fourth.

Levison, setting his teeth savagely, caught up a heavy inkstand from the table, and whirled it in the air. The ink-pots slid off and crashed upon the floor, smashing as they did so. Levison glared furiously at Figgins.

"Hands off," he muttered, "or—"

Figgins did not even pause. He came right on, and his fist, crashing upon Levison's jaw, sent him staggering back.

The inkstand crashed down, but it missed Figgins's head, and came upon his shoulder. Figgins gave a sharp cry; the pain was very severe. But he hit out again, and Levison, inkstand and all, crashed to the floor.

"Let me alone!" he shrieked, as the New House junior bent over him.

"I'm going to throw you out, you cad!"

"I—I—oh!"

Figgins's strong hands closed upon the cad of the Fourth, and he was whirled bodily to the door. Figgins dragged the door open, and the luckless Levison was hurled through into the passage.

"Now, buzz off!" roared Figgins.

"Ow!"

"Are you going, or shall I start on you with my boots?"

"Groo!"

Biff—biff—biff!

Levison yelled as Figgins kicked him along the passage. Figgins did not kick hard enough to hurt very much, but his boots were of a large size. Levison picked himself up and ran, and went bolting headlong downstairs. Figgins paused in the passage, gasping for breath after his exertions.

"The rotten cad!" he muttered, as he returned to his study. "I wish I'd given him a licking now."

He looked into the glass. His jacket had been torn, and discoloured with ink by the blow Levison had given him, and his collar and shirt were splashed with ink, and there was ink on his face. It was impossible to go to the station to meet Cousin Ethel in such a state. Figgins, breathing fury, changed his collar and jacket, and the difficult business of the tie had to be gone through again. He knew that now he could not hope to overtake Tom Merry & Co. before they reached the station. The utmost he could hope was that he would meet the party as they came towards St. Jim's from Rylcombe.

Figgins quitted the New House at last, still with traces of angry excitement in his face and with a bitter twinge of

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pain in his shoulder, where Levison's cowardly blow had fallen.

Meanwhile, the cad of the Fourth had returned to the School House. Mellish was waiting for him in his study, and he stared in astonishment as Levison came in and threw himself into a chair, groaning.

"What on earth's the matter?" Mellish demanded.

"Hang you!"

"Oh! Has anything gone wrong?"

"Figgins wasn't gone!"

"Phew!" Mellish whistled. "Did he catch you there?"

"I walked right in on him, you idiot!"

"I suppose he licked you?" said Mellish, perhaps not entirely without a trace of satisfaction in his tone.

Levison ground his teeth.

"He went for me," he said. "I'll pay him out for it! The brute guessed what I had come for, and there won't be any chance again. But I'll make him suffer for it, the cad!"

"But I say—"

"Oh, shut up!"

Mellish shrugged his shoulders, and left the study. His study-mate was evidently not in a reasonable mood. Levison, with a savage scowl on his face, stamped to the window. He saw Figgins as he hurried out of the gates, and ground his teeth. Schemes of vengeance upon the New House junior flitted through Levison's brain—schemes dim and unformed so far, but destined to take definite shape ere long.

CHAPTER 3.

Rough on Figgins.

F IGGINS hurried out of the gates of St. Jim's, and broke into a rapid run as soon as he was in the road.

He knew that he was late for the train; but he thought that there would probably be some delay before the party started for St. Jim's, and by taking the short cut through the wood he might intercept them. He reached the stile, and jumped over it, and went through the footpath at a fast run. He came out into the old High Street of Rylcombe breathless, and ran on to the station.

The sleepy old porter of Rylcombe Station was sunning himself outside, engaged in a drowsy and desultory conversation with the driver of the hack, who was leaning against his vehicle and chewing a straw meditatively.

"My friends here?" gasped Figgins, as he came up.

The porter shook his head.

"They're gone, Master Figgins."

"How long?"

"About a quarter of an hour."

Figgins grunted.

His taking the short cut had done it. He had just missed them. If he had come on by the road he must have met them. He turned back and tramped down the street in a very disconsolate mood, murmuring remarks about Levison the while.

There was just a chance left. Fatty Wynn might have called a halt at Mother Murphy's tuckshop. Fatty Wynn never passed that establishment without a halt, if he could help it. Figgins quickened his pace and went into the tuckshop. It was empty. As the little shop-bell rang, Mrs. Murphy came out of her little parlour.

"Have the chaps been here, Mrs. Murphy?" Figgins asked.

Mrs. Murphy shook her head.

"No, Master Figgins."

"Oh, thanks!"

Figgins left the shop.

There was nothing for it now but to walk back to St. Jim's alone.

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Figgins walked back in a miserable mood. His shoulder was hurting him, where Levison had struck him with the inkstand, and though he hardly noticed the pain, in his preoccupation, it gave him a sense of discomfort.

He was fatigued by his sprinting, too, and he walked all the way back to the school, and reached the gates of St. Jim's once more, quite tired. Taggles, the porter, was standing there.

"I suppose the chaps have come in, Taggy?" said Figgins. Taggles nodded.

"Miss Cleveland with them, of course?"

"Yes."

Figgins walked on. The juniors were not to be seen in the quadrangle, and he went on to the School House.

The Terrible Three were standing in the porch of the School House, and they greeted Figgins cheerfully.

"You look fagged," said Monty Lowther.

"I've been running."

"Why didn't you come to the station?" asked Manners.

"I did, ass!"

"We didn't see you there," Tom Merry remarked.

"I was delayed in the House," said Figgins.

"Trying on a new necktie?"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Figgins, whose temper was unusually sharp owing to his disappointment that afternoon.

"I suppose you met Cousin Ethel at the station?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Where is she, then?"

"Gone in to see Mrs. Holmes."

Figgins's heart sank again. He had hoped to find Cousin Ethel in the School House.

"What was it delayed you?" asked Lowther.

"I had a row with Levison."

"Well, you must have been an ass! You could have had a row with Levison any time," said Lowther.

"Oh, rot! I suppose Kerr and Wynn are in the New House?"

"I believe so."

Figgins stalked away to the New House. He found Kerr and Fatty Wynn at the door, and both of them were looking cross.

"What on earth have you locked up the study for?" Fatty Wynn demanded indignantly. "I suppose it was you?"

"Yes," growled Figgins.

"I couldn't get in to get anything to eat," said Fatty Wynn, "and there are the saveloys in the cupboard—"

"Blow the saveloys!"

"And I've left an impot. half done, and I sha'n't be able to finish it before tea now," said Kerr. "Monteith will double it."

"Blow Monteith!"

"What the dickens is the matter with you, Figgy?"

"Oh, rats!"

"What did you lock the study door for?"

"Find out!"

Figgins tramped into the house.

Kerr and Wynn exchanged glances. If any other junior at St. Jim's had replied to them in that manner they would have bumped him, and bumped him hard. But with Figgins it was different. They knew that Figgins must be very upset to speak in such a way.

"I suppose he's feeling rotten about not meeting Cousin Ethel at the station," Kerr remarked, in a low voice, as Figgins disappeared upstairs.

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"I suppose so," he agreed. "He can slang us if he likes, poor old chap! But why the dickens didn't he come to the station if he wanted to?"

"Blessed if I know!"

Figgins unlocked his study door and went in. He was feeling in a gloomy and very despondent mood. Cousin Ethel would think that he had missed meeting her at the station because he did not want to come, perhaps. If the other fellows had explained, they had probably done so in a humorous way, with little jokes about his care in selecting his necktie. And he could not very well explain the facts to Ethel himself. He did not want to tell her that he had missed joining the party at the station because he had stayed behind to fight with Levison. That was not exactly a reason which would excuse him in a girl's eyes.

He stared gloomily from the study window, and suddenly he gave a start, and a light came into his eyes.

From the window of his study he could see a part of the Head's garden, and in that garden he caught a glimpse of a pretty frock.

One glimpse was enough for him.

He crossed the study with a bound, and ran down the stairs three at a time. Kerr and Wynn spoke to him in the hall, but he did not reply—he did not, in fact, even hear. He ran out into the quad., leaving his two chums staring after him in astonishment.

In a minute or less he reached the gate of the Head's garden. That gate was kept locked; juniors, excepting upon very special occasions, were not allowed in the precincts. But the locked gate did not delay Figgins. He laid one hand on it, and vaulted over, and ran into the garden.

There was a quick exclamation.

"Oh! How you startled me!"

Cousin Ethel was looking at him.

Figgins panted, and turned very red. He realised that his arrival had been sufficiently unceremonious.

"Cousin Ethel!"

The girl smiled.

"I—I saw you here," Figgins exclaimed. "I—I wanted to speak to you. I'm so sorry I couldn't get to the station in time."

"Why, it does not matter," said Cousin Ethel.

"N-no, I suppose it doesn't," said Figgins, disappointed. "But—but I did come, only I got there after you had left, you see. I came back here alone."

"I am sorry!" said Ethel.

"I—I wanted to come to the station," stammered Figgins, "but—but I was delayed—" His face went crimson, and it grew all the more crimson because he could see that Cousin Ethel was looking at him curiously, and wondering. "It was rotten! A fellow delayed me, you see; that was how it was, and—and—" He broke off.

Cousin Ethel laughed a little.

"Well, it doesn't matter," she said. "I am sure you would have come if you could. I am going to have tea in Tom Merry's study this afternoon, so I shall see you, I suppose? But—but are juniors allowed in this garden?"

Figgins started.

"By Jove, no! I forgot! But I wanted to tell you—"

"It is all right!"

"Ethel!"

It was Mrs. Holmes's voice. Figgins raised his cap hurriedly, and disappeared behind the shrubs. He jumped over the gate again, glad that Mrs. Holmes had not seen him in the garden. He felt a little more cheerful as he walked back to the New House. He had certainly not succeeded in explaining very coherently to Cousin Ethel, but at all events she was a sensible girl, and she was not offended, so he had nothing to worry about. Cousin Ethel, indeed, had been so kind that Figgins felt that he could even forgive Levison.

CHAPTER 4.

Levison's Photographs.

"TAKE, of course?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes; and tarts—"

"And some cream puffs—"

"Good!"

"Got any suggestions to make, Manners?" asked Tom Merry, pausing as he made up the list. "We want to get a decent tea for Cousin Ethel."

Manners grunted.

"I'm thinking about my camera."

"About which?"

"My camera!" snorted Manners.

"But you can't eat cameras," said Monty Lowther innocently. "My dear chap, you must be off your rocker! What's the use of a camera?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Manners. "I tell you some rotter has borrowed my camera, and I want to know where it is."

"Leave that over till to-morrow—"

"Rats! The ass may be using it, and damaging it. Besides, there was a new roll of films in it, and films cost me three bob a dozen. I'm not going to have the ass who's borrowed my camera squandering my three bobs' worth of films!"

"Well, never mind that now—"

"It might be Skimpole," said Manners thoughtfully.

"He borrowed my camera once, but I hammered him for it. It might be Glyn—he took it to help him in some rotten invention a week or two ago, but he promised not to do it again. Levison—"

"Oh, blow Levison—"

"But I want my camera!" howled Manners. "I'm going to take Cousin Ethel to-morrow morning, if it's sunny."

"I don't suppose the camera will be sunny—"

"Ass! I mean the weather. Look here, you can worry over the grub. I'm not having tea till I've found my camera."

"Oh, bosh! I suppose tea-cakes would be all right if we could get them nicely toasted?" Tom Merry said thoughtfully. "What about having Fatty Wynn over here to toast them?"

"Good!" said Lowther.

"Do you know where Levison is?"

"In his study, perhaps. Half a dozen tea-cakes—"

"I've looked in his study."

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School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.:

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"Nicely toasted—"

Manners snorted, and left the study. He was quite as keen as the others about properly entertaining Cousin Ethel, but he was anxious for his camera. It was an expensive camera for a junior to possess, and it was an old and trusty friend, too. And the films in it were new, and had cost three shillings—no inconsiderable item to a fellow in a junior Form. And if some ass like Skimpole had borrowed the camera it might be hopelessly damaged before it was recovered. On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion Manners had stopped Skimpole just in time, when he was going to open the camera to see how it was made.

Manners looked into Levison's study once more. Lumley-Lumley was there, and so was Mellish, but Levison was not, and they could give him no information.

Manners looked in the common-room, without finding the cad of the Fourth, and the Form-rooms and the passages were drawn blank. Then, remembering some of Levison's nice little ways, Manners directed his steps towards the wood-shed. He knew that the cad of the Fourth sometimes went there to smoke. A smell of tobacco greeted him as he looked in, and he knew that he was in the right place at last.

Levison was seated on a pile of faggots, smoking a cigarette and reading a pink paper, which he hastily thrust into his jacket as Manners came in.

Manners gave a contemptuous sniff.

"Studying for the exam., I suppose?" he said.

"Ye-es."

"Questions about horses in the exam. paper, of course, and jockeys, and so on," Manners suggested sarcastically.

Levison bit his lip.

"Mind your own business!" he retorted. "I suppose it's got nothing to do with you what papers I read?"

"Not at all," said Manners. "You can keep on, and get yourself expelled, and the sooner the better, so far as I'm concerned. What I want now is my camera."

Levison threw away the stump of his cigarette.

"I can guess that you've borrowed it," said Manners. "I thumped you for borrowing it before without asking permission. You want another thumping, I suppose?"

Levison yawned.

"Thanks, no! I'm quite willing to pay for the films I've used."

Manners stared.

"Then you admit having borrowed it?"

Levison nodded.

"You cheeky cad!" Manners exclaimed wrathfully, and he pushed back his cuffs in a most suggestive way.

"Oh, don't play the goat!" said Levison. "If you lay a finger on me I won't tell you where the camera is, and you can hunt for it."

Manners paused.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"I wanted to take some pictures to send to my people," Levison explained. "They wanted some views of the school. I know how to use a camera, and I haven't hurt it. I've taken all twelve films, but I haven't been able to get them developed. If you want the camera, will you develop the films for me?"

"Well, of all the cheek—"

"Oh, rats!" said Levison. "You can do it quite easily, and I haven't the apparatus, and I've never done any developing, either. I don't see why you can't do it. As for the price of the films, here it is."

He drew three shillings from his waistcoat-pocket.

"Well, it was like your rotten cheek to take my camera without permission," said Manners, "and worse still to make terms about giving it back. But if you're getting a taste for photography, it's the most decent thing I've seen about you, and I'm quite willing to help you. I'll develop the films for you with pleasure, if they are any good, and if you pay for them you can keep them."

"There's the money."

"Very well."

"You'll develop the films properly, and hand them to me?" asked Levison. "I can trust you?"

"Of course, you silly ass!"

"All right; come into my study and I'll hand you the camera."

Manners followed the cad of the Fourth to his study in the School House. Exasperated as Manners was by the borrowing of his precious camera without his permission, he was less angry now than he had been. Anybody with a taste for photography could not be wholly bad, Manners considered, and he was really interested to see how well or otherwise Levison had taken his pictures.

Levison unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out Manners's camera.

"There you are!" he said. "The pictures are still in it. You'll let me have them as soon as they are developed, won't you?"

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"Oh, yes!"

"You can keep copies if you like, of course," said Levison. "There are views of the School House and the New House, and I think they're pretty good."

Manners nodded, and left the study with the camera in his hand. Lumley-Lumley looked up from his work, and stared at Levison.

"Taking up photography on the cheap?" he asked.

"Mind your own business!" said Levison cheerfully.

Manners went into Tom Merry's study. The table was laid with a nice white cloth, and Fatty Wynn was kneeling before the fire, with a very ruddy face, toasting tea-cakes. Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy were in the study, too, making themselves useful—at all events, three of them were. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy seemed to confine his usefulness to giving directions which nobody obeyed.

"I've got it!" announced Manners.

D'Arcy's eyeglass glimmered at him.

"Got what, dear boy?"

"My camera."

"Oh, your camewah!" said D'Arcy indifferently.

"Yes, ass! Levison's been taking photographs with it, and I've promised to develop them," said Manners. "I suppose I shall have time before tea?"

"You'll have to buck up, then," said Tom Merry.

"Right-ho!"

And Manners disappeared with the camera. The amateur photographer of the School House was allowed a key to Mr. Lathom's dark-room, and he spent a good deal of time in it with his negatives. Tom Merry & Co. continued their preparations for tea, but Manners did not return. It was extremely probable that in the engrossing interests of the dark-room Manners had forgotten all about the tea.

CHAPTER 5.

The Backbiter.

THE early dusk was settling over the old quadrangle of St. Jim's. Lights were gleaming from the windows of the School House, ruddy and rosy, into the shadows of the quad. Cousin Ethel came out of the old stone porch of the Head's house with her light step. She was on her way to the School House to keep the appointment with Tom Merry & Co. for tea in the study. Whenever Cousin Ethel came to stay with Mrs. Holmes, she had tea at least once in the study with the chums of St. Jim's, and on those occasions the juniors were in the habit of expending reckless sums at the tuckshop, and raiding other studies for clean crockery and extra chairs and spoons and knives and forks.

"Miss Cleveland!"

Cousin Ethel started, and paused, as a shadow loomed up from the old elms.

She knew Levison's voice.

He had stepped into her path, and so she could not very well avoid stopping; but she frowned a little as she did so. Ethel Cleveland did not like Levison. Her frank and honest nature recoiled from the dark and tortuous character of the cad of the Fourth.

"I hope I did not startle you," said Levison, raising his cap. "I want to speak to you, if I may, just for a minute."

"I am in a hurry," said Cousin Ethel.

"Only a minute—and it's important."

"Well?"

"It's about Figgins," explained Levison.

Ethel's face grew icy.

"Surely you do not imagine that I shall allow you to talk to me about Figgins—behind his back, too!" she exclaimed. "Let me pass!"

"I want you to help him."

Levison had calculated well. Ethel's expression changed at once.

"To help Figgins!" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I do not understand you."

"I will explain. I suppose you know that Figgins is entered for the Southcote exam.? There is a money prize of twenty-five pounds, and it is awarded every term."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, as it happens, there are only two names down this term—mine and Figgins's. I don't think Figgins has any chance—"

"That will be proved at the examination, I suppose?" said Cousin Ethel drily.

"Yes. Never mind that," said Levison hastily. "Only, I think Figgins thinks the same, judging by what he's done."

"What do you mean?"

"He did not come to meet you at the station to-day," said Levison. "He sent the other fellows off with an excuse, and stayed behind for a good reason. Don't be angry, Miss Cleveland. I'm telling you this to save the necessity of going to the Head and giving Figgins away to him."

"What can you mean?" said Ethel, with a chill of apprehension at her heart.

"Figgins had jolly good reasons for staying behind this afternoon," said Levison. "I suppose you don't know the conditions of the exam. The Southcote exam. was founded by Lord Southcote, who was a chap here once. He was a New House chap fifty years ago or more. The conditions of the exam. are that the examination is held in the New House, under the New Housemaster, who draws up the paper. Mr. Ratcliff has drawn up the paper for the Southcote exam. this time, and he keeps it, of course, in his study. As there are only two entrants for the exam. this term, the paper is not being printed; but a copy will be made for exam. day, and Figgins and I will have one each. I haven't found that out myself, you know. Mr. Ratcliff said so."

"Well, I don't understand what this has to do with me," said Ethel coldly.

"Please let me explain. This afternoon was a half-holiday, and as it was fine, everybody was out of doors. Figgins sent off Kerr and Wynn with the rest to the station, and stayed behind in the New House by himself."

"That was an accident," said Cousin Ethel. "Figgins told me himself that he was delayed by somebody."

Levison smiled unpleasantly.

"I was the somebody," he said.

"You!"

"Yes," said Levison coolly. "I knew—I mean, I guessed what Figgins's little game was, and I went into the New House to see just before I took the photographs. I found Figgins in Mr. Ratcliff's study."

"What!"

"You can guess what he was there for. I did. As soon as he saw me he came for me," Levison rubbed his jaw reminiscently, and Ethel, looking at him, saw the very plain mark where Figgins's heavy fist had struck. "He turned me out of the House. He's stronger than I am, the cad, and—"

"If you call Figgins names I shall not listen to you!" said Ethel sharply. "You would not do so if he were here to hear you!"

Levison sneered.

"Very well," he said, "I won't. Anyway, he turned me out of the House, and I had to go. I knew perfectly well that he was going back to Mr. Ratcliff's study to look at the examination question paper—"

"It is not true!"

"It is true!"

"I do not believe you!"

"I haven't finished yet," said Levison. "I didn't know what to do to stop him. But I had Manners's camera in my coat. I had borrowed it to take some photographs. I thought of snapping Mr. Ratcliff's study. You know the sun is on it in the afternoon, and there is a good light, and I thought if I could snap Figgins in the study I should have him."

"It would be difficult."

"Yes; but it was a chance, and with a proof like that I should have him on the hip," said Levison, with a grin. "I took out the camera, and went over to the elms just opposite Mr. Ratcliff's study window, and watched there; and as it happened, Figgins looked out of the window, most likely to see whether I was coming back. I got three snaps of him while he was at the window."

Ethel's heart seemed to turn to ice.

"You have three photographs of Figgins at Mr. Ratcliff's study window?" she faltered.

"Yes."

"I—I don't believe it! I know photographs can be made up. It is quite possible to put a figure from one picture into a window-frame from another. I have heard of such things."

Levison laughed.

"I expected some objection of that sort," he said. "As a matter of fact, the films are not developed yet, and Manners is going to develop them. It was his camera I used, and I gave it back to him with the films in it. He doesn't know what the pictures are like. He won't know till they come out in the developing. When he gives me a proof of them I'll let you see it."

"I cannot believe you!" said Ethel.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Why have you told me this?" the girl asked.

"I want you to interfere. Figgins has seen the exam. questions, and I haven't. Something will have to be done. If I speak to Figgins on the subject, he will hammer me again. That won't do any good. But I'm not going into the exam. with Figgins knowing all about the paper in advance. It's not to be expected. Figgins will have to withdraw from the exam., or else Mr. Ratcliff's paper will have to be destroyed, so that he must draw up a new one."

If nothing is done I shall go to Dr. Holmes. I'm not going to let Figgins beat me in an exam. for twenty-five pounds by foul play."

"I don't believe you—I don't believe you!" Cousin Ethel cried passionately. "It sounds plausible enough, but—but you have lied before! I know that you are untruthful!"

"When you see the photograph—"

"I have not seen it yet."

"I can show it to you this evening, I think," said Levison. "I am willing to let the matter rest till then."

"Let me go now."

Levison stepped back now, and the girl hurried on, her face very pale, and her heart beating very fast.

Was it true?

Was it possible that Figgins—whom she had always believed to be frank, and honest, and true—Figgins, as honest as the day—Figgins had done this mean and dishonourable thing? It was impossible!

But if the evidence of the photographs bore out Levison's statement, what was she to think then? And if it did not bear him out, why should he tell her these falsehoods, which would be immediately disproved?

In spite of herself, in spite of her faith in Figgins, Cousin Ethel's heart was heavy with fear and anxiety.

She hurried into the School House. She wished she had not listened to Levison; and yet, if it was true—if Figgins had really yielded to this wretched temptation, she might save him—save him from himself. It was better to know.

Left to himself, Levison stood in the shadows of the elms, his face a little pale, his eyes gleaming. He was amazed, himself, at the facility with which plausible falsehoods had rolled from his lips. There was not one of them that had not a specious resemblance to truth; and Levison, as he reflected upon the web he had woven round the unsuspecting Figgins, could not see a loophole through which the unfortunate junior could escape. He had blackened Figgins in the eyes of Cousin Ethel, in the eyes of all of her friends to whom she should tell what she knew, and the cad of the Fourth was satisfied.

CHAPTER 6.

Tea with Tom Merry.

F IGGINS sat down in Tom Merry's study, and rose again, and sat down once more. He had repeated that performance five or six times, when Tom Merry looked at him inquiringly.

"Chair not comfy, Figg?" he asked.

Figgins turned red.

"Yes, the chair's all right," he replied.

"Then what's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing!"

"You seem to be in wathah a state of uneasiness, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon the New House junior.

"I? Oh, no!"

"Time Cousin Ethel was here," said Blake, taking D'Arcy's watch out and looking at it, and then leaving it dangling at the end of the chain.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Yes. I—I thought I heard a step in the passage," said Figgins.

"Oh!" said Tom Merry.

Figgins rose to his feet again. This time he did not sit down. He flew to the door and opened it. It was really Cousin Ethel's step at last, and the girl came into the study.

"Here we are again!" said Digby cheerfully.

Cousin Ethel smiled.

But it was not her usual bright and cheerful smile. It was somewhat strained, and her manner, as she replied to the greetings of the juniors, was not so happy as was her wont.

All the juniors saw in a moment that Cousin Ethel was not her usual sweet and happy self. They concluded that she was tired from the train journey, and they busied themselves in trying to make her comfortable.

Cousin Ethel sat down, and Tom Merry stirred the fire under the kettle, which began to sing at once. Figgins came to help him.

"Cup of tea, quick!" whispered Figgins. "Ethel's tired, you know. Girls always want a cup of tea when they're fagged, you know."

"Sha'n't be a minute!"

"Better let me make the tea," said Figgins. "I know just how Ethel likes it."

Tom Merry grinned, and yielded the teapot to Figgins. Figgins made the tea with special care, and did not spill any hot water over anybody, which was quite a record for Figgins.

Cousin Ethel certainly did feel better when she had had her cup of tea. But the cloud remained in her eyes.

She could not help thinking of what Levison had told her.

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It could not be true—it could not, and yet—yet how could she be as frank and careless with Figgins as of old, with that dreadful doubt in her mind.

"Manners is not here," she remarked presently.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, he's developing," he replied. "Time and space are quite lost to Manners, when he gets into a dark-room. He's developing something for Levison now, I believe."

Cousin Ethel started.

"For Levison!" she echoed.

"Yes. Levison had the cheek to borrow his camera, and he's been taking pictures about the school, and Manners is returning good for evil, you see, by developing the films for him. Awfully decent of Manners, I think."

"So do I," said Figgins, "considering what an awful beast—" Figgins paused and coloured. He did not like speaking against any fellow in his absence.

"Yes. You had a row with Levison to-day, over in your house, didn't you?" said Monty Lowther.

"Yes. Never mind that," said Figgins hastily.

"What did he come into the New House for?" asked Lowther.

Figgins hesitated.

"Spying, as usual, I expect," said Herries, who always said out what he thought, and left reflection till afterwards.

"Was that it, Figgy?"

"Well, yes," said Figgins; "but never mind now."

He did not want to discuss Levison and nose-punching in the presence of Cousin Ethel. But the girl noticed his unwillingness to speak on the subject, and she could not help thinking how it fitted in with Levison's story, which she had just heard in the quad.

Levison had been spying. His own story was that he had been investigating, which was another word for the same thing. Was the story true, after all? Certainly he had been in the New House, just as he declared, and had had a row with Figgins there. More and more plausible the story seemed now to the girl.

The subject of Levison was dropped, by common consent, but it remained in Ethel's mind. She found herself feeling keenly anxious for Manners to come. When he came she might hear about the photographs.

Tea was held over before Manners came in, with a purple splash on his nose, and his fingers still stained in spite of a hasty wash.

"Hope I'm not late!" he exclaimed.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Yes, you're late, and all the toast is done in, and it serves you jolly well right," said Tom Merry.

"I'm so sorry, Cousin Ethel," said Manners ruefully.

"But I've been developing some queer photographs. Levison would make a good photographer if he took it up. I believe that chap could do a lot of things if he chose to work. He'd wipe you out in the Southcote, if he swotted over it, Figgy."

"Let him try," said Figgins drily.

"That's just what he won't do—he's too much of a slacker," said Manners. "But about these photographs—"

"Oh, blow the photographs!" said Lowther.

"Look here, Lowther—"

"Yes, let's hear about the pictures," said Cousin Ethel.

"Trust a girl to talk sense," said Manners, admiringly.

"They're really good, you know. Three views of your house, Figgy. What have you been doing in old Ratty's study to-day?"

Figgins started.

"I—"

"Yes, you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Figgins, puzzled. "I haven't been in Ratty's study to-day."

"Caught!" grinned Manners.

"What do you mean?" Figgins demanded warmly.

"I mean what I say—caught! If you've been japing Ratty, you're bowled out," said Manners, with a chuckle. "You needn't mind owning up."

"Of course not," said Tom Merry. "We're all friends here, I suppose. And if ever a Housemaster wanted japing bald-headed, it's your Housemaster, Figgy."

"But I haven't done it," said Figgins. "I'd admit it if I had. I know you fellows wouldn't jaw. But I haven't! I caught it too thick last time, for one thing."

"That was a week ago," said Kerr. "Figgy put treacle in his armchair, and Ratty sat down in it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I know how Ratty traced the treacle to our study," said Figgins. "But he did, and when he asked me plainly whether I had done it, of course I had to own up. I believe he would have been pleased to catch me in a whopper."

"Nice man!" grinned Lowther.

"I had six on each hand," said Figgins, with a reminiscent shiver. "Ratty can lay it on, too. Since then I've let him alone."

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"Oh, come," said Manners.

Figgins stared at him.

"Blessed if I understand you, Manners," he said. "I tell you I haven't been in Ratty's study to-day. It doesn't matter whether I have, or not, so far as I can see; but, as a matter of fact, I haven't. I suppose you can take my word."

"Oh, of course," said Manners, very awkwardly.

And he dropped the subject at once. But he looked very queerly at Figgins several times, as Cousin Ethel could not help observing.

The girl's heart was like lead.

Manners' remarks could only mean one thing—that he had found Figgins in the window of Mr. Ratcliff's study, in the photograph of the New House. The photographs bore out Levison's statement.

And Figgins denied it.

Why?

Figgins had spoken an untruth. Ethel felt her cheeks burning. The tea-party, which should have been so jolly, became a torture to her. She was anxious for it to be over. She felt that she must question Manners, to learn the truth, but she would not shame Figgins by drawing it out before the others.

Tea was over at last. Cousin Ethel's preoccupation was so evident that the juniors felt depressed by her evident want of spirits. A gloom fell upon the little party in Tom Merry's study. Manners was openly constrained, and Cousin Ethel could hardly speak. Much as the juniors had looked forward to that tea-party, they were all pleased when it was over. Kangaroo took his leave first, and then Lumley-Lumley, and then the three New House juniors departed. Figgins hesitated a little, hoping for a single encouraging glance from Ethel, so that he could offer to take her back to the Head's house. But Ethel carefully avoided meeting his eyes, and Figgins departed in a mood of great depression. He felt that there was something wrong, somehow, between himself and Cousin Ethel, though he could not imagine in the least what it was.

"Ethel's annoyed about something, I think," said Figgins, as he tramped with his two chums through the dusk back to the New House.

"A mole could see that," said Fatty Wynn. "She must have been upset. She ate hardly anything."

"But, with me, I think," said Figgins.

"Somebody been making mischief, perhaps," said Kerr, whose practical mind generally went right to the heart of any thing.

"But who—how!" said Figgins.

And Kerr had to confess that he gave it up.

In Tom Merry's study, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy prepared to take his cousin back to the Head's house. But Ethel did not rise. Digby went away to begin his preparation, and Herries to feed his bulldog, Towser. Blake meditatively cracked a final nut.

Cousin Ethel looked at them. Her frank nature could not bear keeping secrets.

"I want to speak to Manners about—about something," she said. "Tom Merry will take me back, Arthur."

"What-ho!" said Tom Merry.

D'Arcy looked a little surprised. But D'Arcy was too much of a Chesterfield and Grandison rolled into one to think of disputing a feminine wish.

"Vewy well, deah gal," he replied.

And he left the study with Blake.

Cousin Ethel remained alone with the Terrible Three. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther glanced at her. That she had something unusual to say they felt certain, and they wondered what it was. Cousin Ethel was silent for some minutes, and the chums of the Shell waited. When the girl broke the silence at last, her cheeks were very red, and her voice faltered.

CHAPTER 7.

What Manners Knew.

"I—I want to ask you—"

She paused.

"Shall we get out?" asked Lowther. "It's Manners you want to speak to, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—but I know you three never have any secrets from one another," said Ethel. "And—and I want to know what you think about it, too. Stay here."

"Right-ho!"

"It's about Figgins," said Ethel, the colour deepening in her fair cheeks. "I—I am afraid that Figgins is in trouble."

Manners looked at her curiously. Tom Merry and Lowther looked astonished.

"Old Figgy in trouble!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Ah! And you want us to help him. This is just the right shop."

"Yes, rather!" exclaimed Monty Lowther heartily. "Figgins is a brick! Of course, we have to go for him every now and then, just to show that the School House is

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really cock-house at St. Jim's. But if there's anything wrong, you can rely on us to stand by old Figgy."

"Certainly," said Manners, but less enthusiastically.

"You have never known Figgins tell a falsehood, have you?" Ethel asked.

"Never!" said Tom Merry promptly. "He couldn't do it."

"He'd give himself away if he tried, I think," said Lowther. "It wouldn't be in his line at all."

Manners was silent.

"Speak up, Harry, you ass," said Tom Merry, slapping Manners on the shoulder.

"Oh, that's all right," said Manners awkwardly.

Cousin Ethel looked at him directly.

"I want you to answer, Manners," she said.

"Me! Why?"

"You specially."

"But—but—"

"I should think you could answer that question easily enough, Manners," said Tom Merry, in wonder. "We all know that Figgins never told a crammer in his life. He simply couldn't do it."

Manners did not speak.

There was a very awkward pause. Tom Merry and Lowther stared at their chum in blank amazement. They did not understand Manners at all. Cousin Ethel broke the painful silence, with a low, faltering voice.

"I have just heard something from Levison," she said slowly. "I met him in the quadrangle as I came here."

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "That accounts—"

Cousin Ethel nodded.

"Yes," she said. "That made me very dispirited and miserable. He told me a wretched story about Figgins, and I couldn't believe it, but now—now—"

"Don't believe a word that cad says," Tom Merry exclaimed quickly. "It's just like him to slander old Figgins. He's not fit to breathe the same air with Figgins."

"I know, but—"

"What did he tell you?" asked Lowther. "Tell us what it is, and I've no doubt that we can prove that he was lying, if it was anything rotten about Figgins."

Cousin Ethel hesitated.

"Go ahead," said Tom Merry encouragingly. "I'm sure it's all right about Figgins. Levison has been lying, as usual."

"Levison says that Figgins stayed behind this afternoon on purpose, so that he could go into Mr. Ratcliff's study, and see the paper for the Southcote exam."

Tom Merry started.

"Impossible!"

"Oh, that's all rot!" said Monty Lowther at once. "Figgy was as waxy as anything about not being able to come, and he was really delayed by Levison going over to the New House and getting up a row with him."

"Levison says he suspected what Figgins's motive was, and went over to see, and found him in Mr. Ratcliff's study."

"I don't believe it."

"Surely you don't believe it, either, Cousin Ethel?" exclaimed Tom Merry in astonishment. "You know that Figgy isn't that sort of chap."

Cousin Ethel looked troubled.

"But that is not all," she said.

"What more is there?"

"Levison says he had a camera with him, and he took photographs of Figgins at the window of Mr. Ratcliff's study. He says Figgins was looking out of the window to see whether he was gone."

"Then we know it's all rot," said Tom Merry, "for Figgy just said himself that he hadn't been in Ratty's study to-day at all."

"Where are the photographs?" asked Lowther. "It's no good Levison yarning like that if he can't produce the photographs. And photographs can be faked, too."

"So I told Levison, but—but he said he gave Manners the films to develop."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom Merry and Lowther together.

"It all depends upon the films," said Cousin Ethel. "That is what I wanted to speak to Manners about."

Tom Merry and Lowther looked at their chum. The amateur photographer of St. Jim's was looking very red and uncomfortable.

A chill of doubt smote Tom Merry. He remembered Manners's queer look when Figgins stated that he had not been in Mr. Ratcliff's study that day. He remembered, too, what Manners had said when he first came in after working in the dark-room.

"Hang it all, Manners," Tom Merry exclaimed abruptly, "you can settle this, you know. You have developed the photographs Levison took?"

Manners nodded.

"Any photographs of the New House among them?"

"Three."

"Did they show Ratty's study window?"

"Yes; all of them."

"Oh! And Figgins—"

"I—I don't know whether I ought to speak about it," said Manners, very uncomfortably.

"Please tell us the facts," said Cousin Ethel, in a low voice. "If it is possible that Figgins has done this, we can never respect him again; but—but he must be saved from doing what he is thinking of."

"Yes, rather!" said Lowther. "You'd better have it out, Manners. Was Figgy in the picture?"

"Well, he was!" said Manners.

"In the picture of Ratty's study window?"

"Yes. That is why I said what I did when I came in. I thought Figgins had been in there japing Ratty, while he was away. I knew Ratty was out all the afternoon."

"You are sure?" asked Tom Merry anxiously. "Of course, you haven't been able to take a print?"

"I shall take some prints to-morrow, and that will settle it," said Manners. "But it was plain enough to me in the developer. It quite made me jump when Figgy's face came up. I am quite certain about it."

There was silence in the study for some minutes. The chums of the Shell were dismayed. Cousin Ethel was very white. This was proof, as positive as could be desired.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly. "Levison may have taken those photographs another time. He would lie about the time—"

Manners shook his head.

"He didn't have my camera before to-day," he said. "You remember, I missed it just before we got ready to go down to the station. I used it this morning myself."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, disappointed.

"And the films were still in the camera—he hadn't taken them out," said Manners. "The camera hadn't been in his hands more than a few hours. It was a fresh roll of films I put in this morning myself. Levison did it to-day."

That was unanswerable.

Figgins—Figgins the honest; Figgins, who had always been believed incapable of a mean action or a falsehood—Figgins was convicted! He had lied in the study before them all; it was plain now. And if he had lied, why—if not because he had visited Mr. Ratcliff's study for a motive he dared not explain? It all seemed only too terribly clear to Cousin Ethel and the chums of the Shell.

Figgins was guilty!

"We'll keep this dark," said Tom Merry uneasily. "It's frightfully rotten of Figgins, but—but I don't like the idea of giving him away."

"No, no!" said Manners hastily. And Lowther nodded.

"Besides, there's a chance yet," said Tom Merry. "It's possible to make a mistake. Anyway, there's a chance. We'll wait till Manners has printed out a proof of the pictures before we make up our minds."

"I can do that in the morning," said Manners.

Cousin Ethel rose.

There was a slight chance that the schoolboy photographer was mistaken in what he had seen on the film as he developed it, but the morning would show. Slight as the hope was, the girl clung to it. She would not easily lose her belief in Figgins's honour.

Tom Merry walked back to the Head's house with Cousin Ethel. They spoke hardly a word on the way. Both were silent and miserable. It was a shock to both of them, and the hope they had was very, very slight.

Tom Merry returned to his study, and found Manners and Lowther looking very glum.

"Do you think there's a chance you made a mistake, Manners, old man?" Tom Merry asked.

"No," said Manners.

And Tom Merry could not help thinking so, too.

CHAPTER 8.

The Proof!

MANNERS was up very early the next morning. Tom Merry and Monty Lowther came down with him, and watched him in the study while he cut up the films and put them in the printing-frames. There was a bright burst of sunshine before breakfast, and Manners put the frames on the window-sill of the study, where the sun's rays fell brightly and warmly. They watched the progress of the negatives with anxious eyes, and Manners gave them a sight of the pictures before they were fixed in the solution. The face of Figgins at the window of Mr. Ratcliff's study came out in one of the pictures with startling clearness, and in the other two it was unmistakable. The Terrible Three were very silent when they went down to breakfast. There was nothing to say. Figgins's presence in Mr. Ratcliff's study on that occasion was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, and Figgins had denied it point-blank. The conclusion was obvious.

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Next Thursday's Grand Long, Complete "THE TERRIBLE THREE'S RECRUIT!" By MARTIN CLIFFORD. Please order your copy early.

School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. :



The chums of the Shell felt miserable and dejected. Figgins, the leader of the New House juniors, had always been their rival in House rows, but at bottom they had always liked one another well, and, in spite of House rivalry, they were good chums. And Figgy was the very last fellow at St. Jim's whom they would have suspected of dishonesty or falsehood of any sort. To discover that their chum was dishonourable was a terrible shock to the juniors. It seemed impossible, but it was true—the photograph could not lie. If Levison had shown them finished photographs they would have suspected a "fake." Manners, above all, knew how easy it was to fake photographs, and combine parts of different pictures into the same scene. But Manners had actually developed the films himself—the photographs had been unseen by any eye until his had seen them. How could there be any fake about the matter?

The chums of the Shell had arranged to meet Cousin Ethel and show her the photographs after third lesson, when the juniors had a quarter of an hour to themselves. By that time Manners had finished the pictures, and he had three good proofs. Cousin Ethel came to the gate of the Head's garden, and there the three juniors met her. Ethel looked eagerly at Manners, who had an envelope in his hand.

"You have the pictures?" asked the girl eagerly.

"Here they are," said Manners.

He drew the proofs out of the envelope, and passed them to Cousin Ethel. Ethel looked at them, and her fair face grew very pale.

Each of the pictures showed the window of Mr. Ratcliff's study, and in each of them Figgins was shown at the window. In one of them the portrait was very distinct—it was the clearest possible photograph that could have been taken of Figgins.

"Levison knows how to use a camera," Manners remarked. "The exposure is just right in each case—not too much, and not too little. He's a jolly clever chap to be able to do it, considering that he isn't a photographer, and only borrowed the camera."

Manners was inclined to feel some respect for Levison in consequence. But the others were very little interested in Levison's ability as a photographer.

"There can be no mistake, then?" Cousin Ethel said, handing the pictures back to Manners at last.

Manners shook his head.

"It would not be possible for Levison to arrange this somehow?" said the girl wistfully.

"Impossible. You see, the films were undeveloped—if they had been exposed to the daylight, they would have been ruined. Levison handed me the camera with the films still in it—he couldn't have touched them in any way."

Ethel gave a sigh.

"This is terrible!" she said.

"It's rotten!" said Tom Merry miserably. "Who'd have thought it of old Figgins? If any chap had told me that Figgins would do a thing like this, I'd have punched his head. But there's no doubting one's own eyes."

"It seems clear, then, that Figgins has seen the examination paper?" said Ethel, in a low and troubled voice.

"Well, he must have been in Ratty's study to see it, and as he had the place to himself I suppose he did."

"Then if he wins the prize—"

"It will be cheating."

"It must not happen!" said Cousin Ethel hastily. "I—I don't know what has made Figgins do this—it is not like him. But—but he must be saved. You must speak to him, and tell him that he must not use the knowledge—he must not!"

Tom Merry whistled softly.

"That means that he'll have to withdraw from the exam, and leave Levison a clear field," he said.

"That is better than winning dishonestly."

"I don't know whether Figgins will do it."

"He must—he must! You must speak to him, and point it out to him," said Cousin Ethel earnestly. "Figgins must not be allowed to do this! I don't know what has made him think of it, but he is not mean—he is not base. Think of what he will suffer afterwards, when he realises what he has done. He must be saved from that!"

The tears were glistening upon the girl's lashes.

"We'll do our best," said Tom Merry.

"And at once," said Ethel; "at once!"

"Yes; yes."

Cousin Ethel nodded, and went up the garden-path. The juniors could see that she could not help crying, and they felt a little bit like it themselves. They knew, by their own feelings, what a shock this must be to Cousin Ethel.

"It's a rotten business," said Tom Merry gloomily, as they turned away from the gate. "I suppose we'd better go and look for Figgins now."

"Here he is!" said Manners.

Figgins was coming towards them at a run. His face was a little flushed as he halted by the Terrible Three and

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glanced over the gate. Cousin Ethel was not to be seen now.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "I thought—I saw—"

He paused, colouring.

Tom Merry nodded.

"We want to speak to you, Figgins," he said. "There's a few more minutes before next lesson, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead," said Figgins.

"It's about the Southcote."

Figgins looked surprised.

"Yes," he said. "What about it?"

"About your going to Ratty's study, I mean."

"What!"

"You said yesterday evening in my study that you hadn't been there, you know," said Tom Merry uneasily. "I suppose that was a—slip of the tongue."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Figgins. "It wasn't a slip of the tongue. Do you mean that I was telling a lie?"

"Well, you see—"

"If you mean that, we'd better drop the subject," said Figgins, flushing angrily. "I don't want to punch your head, Tom Merry, but I don't allow anybody to call me a liar."

"You see, we know now—"

"You know what?"

"That you were in Ratty's study yesterday."

"We've got proofs of it," said Monty Lowther. "We're not saying this in an unfriendly way, Figgins. We want to stand by you, and—"

"And help you out," said Manners.

"Unless you've gone dotty, I don't know what to make of you!" exclaimed Figgins, staring at the Terrible Three. "You tell me I'm a liar, and explain that you're doing it in a friendly spirit. What are you driving at? Is it a rag?"

"No, it isn't," said Tom Merry quickly. "The fact is, Figgy, it's come out about your seeing the exam. paper—or trying to see it—"

"What?" yelled Figgins.

"We know it, and—"

"Do you mean the Southcote exam. paper?"

"Yes."

"You think I went to Ratty's study yesterday to see it?"

"Well, you denied going, so—"

"I denied going because I never went."

"But we know—"

"We've got the proofs—"

Figgins clenched his hands hard.

"Anybody who says I went to Ratty's study yesterday is a liar," he said very distinctly; "and anybody who says I ever thought of looking at an exam. paper in advance is a cad and a rotter! Is that plain enough?"

"Yes, it's plain enough," said Tom Merry angrily. His temper was beginning to rise now, at what he regarded as Figgins's obstinacy, and the names Figgins had applied to the Terrible Three were not very pleasant to hear, either.

"It's plain enough; and I'll give you some plain English in return. You were seen in Ratty's study yesterday. You looked out of the window, and were photographed there—"

"It's a lie!"

"We've got the photographs—"

"If you've got anything of the sort, you've faked it," said Figgins.

"What!"

"You heard what I said."

"Look here—"

"If you accuse me—" began Manners, flushing very red.

"You don't seem to mind accusing me," said Figgins.

"And I tell you again, if you've got any photographs of the sort, you've faked it, and that's flat! And if you say again that I'm a liar, I shall hit out! I'm not the kind of chap to stand that sort of thing!"

"Well, you are a liar, if you come to that," said Manners warmly.

Full in Manners's face came Figgins's heavy fist, and the Shell fellow staggered back with a cry. Tom Merry had had enough. He sprang forward, hitting out, and in a moment he and Figgins were fighting furiously.

Clang! Clang!

It was the bell for lessons.

Tom Merry and Figgins, breathing hard, separated by mutual consent, glaring at one another. Tom Merry's left eye was closing; and Figgins mopped a stream of red from his nose with his handkerchief.

"You cad!"

"You rotter!"

"Come in, you fellows!" bawled Jack Blake, from the School House door. "What are you rowing now for? You'll get lines."

The juniors hurried into their class-rooms.

CHAPTER 9.

To Save Figgins.

TOM MERRY took his place in the Shell Form-room in a most uncomfortable mood. His remonstrance with Figgins had certainly not turned out well. He had meant to act in a friendly spirit; but it was difficult to call a fellow a liar and a rascal in a friendly way. He realised that. If anybody had said such things to him, he would have acted just as Figgins had done; but then—if he had been guilty—and surely Figgins was guilty. Could there be any doubt on the subject? The photographs, and Figgins's denials, told their own tale.

Mr. Linton glanced at Tom Merry as he sat in his place in the class. Tom's eye was rapidly becoming of a decidedly dark hue.

"You will take fifty lines for fighting, Merry," said the master of the Shell.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

He did not mind the lines. His eye was causing him considerable discomfort; but he did not mind that very much. What was to be done about Figgins? That was what troubled the Shell fellow.

Figgins, of course, had gone into the Fourth Form-room with the Fourth; and Tom Merry did not see him again till after morning lessons were over. Then he had only a glimpse of him. Figgins walked away at once to the New House.

The Terrible Three met in their study to consider matters. Tom Merry's left eye was almost closed, and he rubbed it tenderly. The chums of the Shell were in a worried and angry mood.

"I suppose Cousin Ethel will have to know how matters have gone," Manners remarked thoughtfully.

Tom Merry coloured.

"Well, one of you chaps can see her," he said quickly. "I—I don't want her to see this blessed eye. No need for her to know there was any fighting. It will only worry her for nothing."

"Quite right," agreed Lowther. "It was rotten of Figgins to cut up rusty like that. He ought to be grateful to us for trying to save him from disgracing himself."

"I suppose when a fellow takes to the wrong path, there's no getting on with him," said Tom Merry. "He must have been wild at being found out. But the question is—what are we going to do? We can't let Figgins go on like this, and collar the prize. It wouldn't be fair on Levison, for one thing. Levison is a School House chap, and we're bound to stand up for him to that extent. He's an awful worm, I know; but he's entitled to fair play."

"Besides, he would not stand it, if we would," said Monty Lowther. "He knows as much as we do, and he would complain to the Head. I don't know that it could be called sneaking, when it's a question of being cheated out of twenty-five quid."

"Figgins will have to chuck the exam., that's all."

"But he won't!"

"And we can't give him away in public, or let Levison do it," said Monty Lowther. "He's always been decent, and it would be altogether too rough. He would be expelled."

"I suppose he would be expelled," said Tom Merry miserably. "Fancy old Figgins being sacked from the school! It would be rotten; and you can bet that all the New House fellows would persist in thinking that it was a School House plot against him. They'd never believe that he was guilty, if the evidence were as clear as daylight. It would make fearfully bad feeling between the two Houses."

"No doubt about it."

"It mustn't come to that," said Tom Merry decidedly. "Look here, I've thought of a wheeze, and I think it will work. The way Figgins has acted shows pretty plainly that he has really seen the exam. paper. If he enters for the exam., he will win unfairly. But suppose the exam. paper was destroyed?"

"Destroyed?"

"Yes. Suppose it was destroyed? It would be rather hard on old Ratty, having to draw up a new one; but that's better than disgracing Figgins, or letting him win by foul play."

Monty Lowther whistled.

"But who's going to destroy it?" he asked.

"We are!"

"Jolly risky business, getting into a Housemaster's study and meddling with his papers; in the New House, too!"

Tom Merry set his lips.

"Can you think of any other plan?" he asked.

"Not without giving Figgins away," said Monty Lowther, after a long pause; "and I suppose we've decided not to do that."

"But it's frightfully risky," said Manners. "Blessed if I care to risk a flogging for the sake of a chap who wants to cheat at an exam."

Tom Merry nodded.

"You're right," he said. "It's my idea, and it's only fair that I should carry it out; and one could do it as easily as three, if it can be done at all. I'll go."

"Alone?" asked Manners.

"Yes."

"Bosh!" said Manners promptly. "You won't do anything of the sort. If you go, we go. That's understood, of course. We sink or swim together."

"You bet!" said Lowther.

"But there's no need for you fellows to run the risk—"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry smiled.

"Well, we'll settle on that, then, unless some other plan turns up," he said. "You can see Cousin Ethel, Manners. My eye won't calm down for some time; though I don't think it's going to be very bad, and I don't want Ethel to see it. You can tell Ethel what we've thought of, and see what she thinks of it. She's a jolly sensible girl, you know, and her opinion's worth having. Only don't pile on the risk. No need for her to think that we're running into danger."

"Right-ho!"

The Terrible Three left the study, and Manners went to see Cousin Ethel. He returned in a quarter of an hour.

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"Cousin Ethel thinks it's the only thing to be done," said Manners; "and she says she's very grateful to us for taking the trouble and risk."

"Oh, that's rot!" said Tom Merry. "But it's all right. We'll do it."

And that was settled.

During afternoon school, Tom Merry thought out a plan of action—somewhat to the detriment of afternoon lessons. When Mr. Linton asked Tom Merry in what century the Cape of Good Hope was discovered, and Tom Merry replied that it was discovered in Mr. Ratcliff's study, the master of the Shell stared at him, as well he might.

"You will take a hundred lines for inattention, Merry," said Mr. Linton; "and if you allow your mind to wander again, I shall cane you!"

And Tom Merry tried to think of his work after that. He was glad enough when afternoon classes were dismissed; he had, as he told Manners and Lowther, something more important to think of.

The Terrible Three had agreed that the raid in Mr. Ratcliff's quarters must be made after dark. The hour of tea was the most suitable time, when most of the New House fellows would be in their studies or in hall, and Mr. Ratcliff would be at the head of the Fourth-Form tea-table in the New House. It was but seldom that Mr. Ratcliff had tea by himself in his own study, as they knew. If he were there, of course, the attempt would have to be postponed.

"Comin' to tea, Tom Mewwy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, sighting the hero of the Shell in the doorway of the School House just before six. "We've got wathah a spweed in No. 6."

"Thanks, Gussy—no! We're going out."

"Wight you are, deah boy."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy went up to Study No. 6 without a suspicion of where the chums of the Shell were going. Dusk was thick now in the old quadrangle, and the Terrible Three slipped out from the School House.

Lights gleamed from the windows of the New House as they approached it. There was a light in Figgins's study, and they caught a glimpse of Figgins passing the window. The window of Mr. Ratcliff's study was quite dark.

"He's not there!" Monty Lowther whispered.

"Good!"

The Terrible Three had chosen their moment well. The passage was deserted, and they reached the door of Mr. Ratcliff's study unseen, or, at all events, unnoticed. Tom Merry tapped at the door and opened it. If by any chance Mr. Ratcliff had been there he would have made some excuse, but the study was empty.

"Quick!" muttered Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three stepped into the study, and Tom Merry closed the door quickly behind him. For a second or two the three juniors stood there in the dark, breathlessly, their hearts throbbing with suppressed excitement.

CHAPTER 10.

Suprised.

THERE was a dull, red glow from the grate in Mr. Ratcliff's study, and as the juniors' eyes became accustomed to the surroundings, they found that the study was not so dark as it had seemed at first. Objects loomed out dimly in the dim glow of the fire. The study was very silent—the suppressed breathing of the juniors was the only sound audible there, and it seemed strangely loud to their ears.

"It's all right!" Tom Merry muttered.

"Let's get to work; Ratty may come in any time."

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"Well, he's bound to stay in the dining-room another quarter of an hour at least, I should think. But let's buck up."

"We shall have to light the gas."

"Just a glimmer."

Tom Merry struck a match. He lighted the gas, turning it a third part on. It afforded light enough for the juniors to look about them.

The place was theirs, for the time, but they hesitated to begin. Up to that moment they had thought only of accomplishing the task they had set themselves, but now a hesitation seized upon them. Mr. Ratcliff was a hard and unpopular master, and they would willingly have played any jape upon him. But to search among his papers—it struck the juniors that they were in his study, that that was not an action that was worthy of them. But it was to prevent dishonesty—to save a chum from disgracing himself. Surely they were justified. And the destruction of the Southcote paper only meant a little extra work for Mr. Ratcliff.

"We've got to do it," said Tom Merry, at last. "It's no good wasting time. Let's begin."

And they began. Manners turned the light up a little higher. They looked on Mr. Ratcliff's table, and then raised the lid of his desk. Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"Look!"

On the top of all the other papers in the desk, lying full under their eyes, was a sheet, with a list of questions marked and numbered, and across the top was written, in Mr. Ratcliff's cramped hand:

"SOUTHGATE PRIZE EXAMINATION."

"That's it!"

"What luck!"

"Oh, good!"

Tom Merry picked out the paper.

The questions were written out in Mr. Ratcliff's handwriting, but the paper did not seem to be complete. There was a second sheet attached to it with a paper-clip, and on that sheet were numbers marked, but without the questions attached.

"Ratty hasn't finished the paper," Tom Merry remarked. "He's done about three-parts of it—enough for a fellow to win the exam. on, if he's copied down the questions and mugged them up in advance."

"Yes, rather!"

"But it shows there's no second copy made yet, as he hasn't finished this," said Tom Merry sagely; "so that's all right. We's only got to get rid of this, and the sooner the quicker."

"Buck up!"

Monty Lowther stirred the fire, and Tom Merry stepped towards it with the examination paper in his hand.

The Terrible Three were feeling elated.

They had run considerable risks in coming there, and they had been by no means sure of success, but fortune had favoured them. They had found the paper in a few minutes, and the fire, burning in the study, afforded a quick and easy means of getting rid of it.

They gathered round the fire. Monty Lowther stirred it to a blaze, and Tom Merry tossed the paper upon it.

It flared up at once in flame.

The chums of the Shell watched it breathlessly.

For the moment they were too engrossed by what they were doing to have eyes or ears for anything else.

They did not hear a light step in the passage—they did not hear the handle of the door turn, or the door open.

As they stood before the fire their backs were to the study door, and they saw nothing.

Mr. Ratcliff, with the quiet, almost stealthy tread that was habitual to him, came into the study.

He gave a violent start at the sight of the Terrible Three.

But he did not speak.

He gazed at them with his little, keen eyes, and the sour expression upon his thin face grew sourer and more forbidding.

He closed the door quietly, and put his back to it, his arms outspread as if to stop any sudden rush of the juniors to escape.

Then he spoke.

"So I have caught you!"

Mr. Ratcliff's voice was thin and acid, like his face and

his nature. But in the silent study, to the startled juniors, it seemed to have a sound like thunder.

They started, and swung round.

They could not speak for the moment. They could only stare at the Housemaster in dumb dismay.

Mr. Ratcliff smiled sourly.

"I have caught you!"

"Oh!"

"What paper are you burning there?"

No reply.

The Terrible Three were utterly taken aback.

As a rule, Tom Merry & Co. had plenty of nerve, and seldom lost their presence of mind. But the entrance of Mr. Ratcliff was so sudden and so stealthy that for once they were completely thrown off their balance.

They could only stare at the hard face of the Housemaster like animals fascinated by the glare of a serpent.

Mr. Ratcliff's ratty eyes never left their faces. In the gleam of his eyes could be seen his triumph and his satisfaction. He disliked the Terrible Three more than any other fellows at St. Jim's—and he disliked a good many. He had never been able to catch them in any action that was really culpable, but now his chance had come. They were at his mercy now, and he could feed fat his old grudge against them.

"What is that paper?"

The last fragment of the paper had been reduced to ashes. Still the Terrible Three did not speak.

Mr. Ratcliff's glittering eyes left their faces at last and roved round the study. He was curious to know what they had done. His instant suspicion was, of course, that they had deliberately destroyed some of his papers for revenge for the many petty injuries he had done them.

His eyes fell upon the open desk, and he started.

He made a quick stride forward. He knew where the examination paper had been left, and he saw that it was missing. Then he knew the truth.

He turned upon the Shell fellows with savage anger in his face now.

"You have burnt the Southcote paper?" he exclaimed harshly.

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"You have deliberately taken that paper from my desk and burnt it?" said Mr. Ratcliff, hardly able to believe himself that it was so. Much as he disliked the Terrible Three, he had never thought that they would be guilty of such an action as that from sheer wantonness. For the preparation of a new paper would mean hours of work for him, and that was more than a joke—it was an unfeeling injury—if that had been the object of the Terrible Three. Mr. Ratcliff's feelings at that moment were a strange mingling of surprise and anger and satisfaction—satisfaction, because this discovery gave him a just cause for the long grudge he had borne against the chums of the Shell. It was pleasant to find that his judgment had been correct—that they deserved his antipathy—that, like the prophet of old, he did well to be angry.

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"I can hardly credit it," said Mr. Ratcliff slowly. "You have always been disobedient, unruly, and insubordinate boys, never respectful to your masters, and in my opinion a disgrace to the school, but I should never have suspected this, even of you. You are aware that drawing up such a paper is a long and troublesome task?"

"I—I suppose so, sir," said Tom Merry. The other two were silent.

"Yet you have destroyed it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know," said Mr. Ratcliff, "that I could not possibly remember what I had written there with any distinctness—that I shall have, in fact, practically all my work to do over again."

"I suppose so, sir. I'm sorry."

"Your sorrow comes a little late, Merry," said Mr. Ratcliff satirically. "I have never in all my experience come upon such an example of unfeeling, detestable spite. Have you any excuse to offer for your conduct?"

The juniors were silent.

"Have you any explanation to give—anything at all to say that may make your conduct appear less heinous?" demanded the Housemaster.

They did not speak. They could not speak without betraying Figgins, and that was not to be thought of.

Mr. Ratcliff's sharp eyes read their faces. He read there nothing but confusion, guilt, and dismay. His teeth closed together sharply.

"Very well!" he said. "Follow me! You will explain your conduct to the Head!"

The Terrible Three followed him in silence.

ANSWERS

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CHAPTER 11.

A Flogging for Three.

DR. HOLMES was in his study. He looked surprised when Mr. Ratcliff entered, his face white with anger, with three silent and dismayed juniors at his heels. He looked more than surprised when the New Housemaster told his tale. He was shocked and grieved. Unlike Mr. Ratcliff, the Head of St. Jim's had always had the highest opinion of the Terrible Three, and he was a far better judge of boys.

"I have brought this matter before you, sir, because I feel that I ought not to deal with it myself," said Mr. Ratcliff. "It is too serious a matter for a Housemaster, and these boys, too, are under the authority of Mr. Railton."

"Quite so!" said the Head. He turned his glance sternly upon the juniors. "Have you anything to say, Merry?"

"No, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Or you, Manners—Lowther?"

"No, sir."

"You do not deny, of course, having done what Mr. Ratcliff states?"

"No, sir."

"You entered his study during his absence, abstracted a paper from his desk, and burnt it in the fire, knowing perfectly well that it was a paper upon which Mr. Ratcliff had expended a great deal of time and trouble, which would have to be spent over again if the paper was destroyed?"

"Ye-es, sir."

"I can hardly credit it of you," said the Head sternly. "I am afraid that my opinion of you has been a mistaken one. You have been guilty of a base action."

The Terrible Three winced. They knew in what light their action must appear to the Head and to Mr. Ratcliff, but there was no help for it. They could not exculpate themselves without betraying Figgins.

"I am astonished and grieved," said the Head. "I am very disappointed in you. Is it possible that you were actuated simply by dislike of a master when you acted in this discreditable and dishonourable way?"

"No, sir," said Tom Merry hastily. "We didn't mean it against Mr. Ratcliff, sir. I am very sorry about the trouble he will have doing the paper over again."

"But you knew—"

"Yes, sir, we knew; but—"

"But what?"

"We didn't want to give Mr. Ratcliff any trouble."

"Then why did you destroy the paper?"

The juniors were silent.

"Do you mean that you had some other motive, Merry, which I am not acquainted with?" asked the Head.

"Well, yes, sir."

"What was the motive?"

"I—I can't explain."

The doctor's brow grew very dark.

"This is mere prevarication, Merry," he said sternly.

"You cannot expect me to listen to that. Mr. Ratcliff, I leave the punishment of these boys in your hands."

Mr. Ratcliff's lips seemed to grow thinner and harder.

"Thank you, Dr. Holmes. I think that they should be publicly flogged, in Hall, before the assembled school, and that I should inflict the punishment."

"It is perfectly just." The Head turned once more to the Terrible Three. "You have nothing more to say?"

"No, sir."

"Then you may go. After prayers to-morrow morning, the school will be assembled to witness your punishment, and you will be in your places."

"Very well, sir."

The Terrible Three left the Head's study. In the passage they looked at one another, without speaking, for some moments.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom Merry at last. "We've done it now, and no mistake!"

"Fairly done it," said Monty Lowther. "It's impossible to explain, of course. I think I'll go over to the New House again, and punch Figgins's head, though. That would be some comfort."

"Not much good in that. We've given old Ratty an excuse to get at us, and he's on our track with a vengeance. A flogging in Hall, by Jove!"

"And the Head thinking we're a set of cads," said Manners gloomily. "That's worse than the flogging. Hang it all, we're in a pretty hole! If we had burnt Ratty's papers out of malice, it would have been a rotten trick like one of Levison's or Mellish's. No wonder the Head was waxy."

"No wonder! But it's beastly hard on us!"

"Poor us!" said Monty Lowther.

The Terrible Three walked away in a gloomy mood. Blake and his chums were coming out of their study as the Shell fellows went upstairs.

"Had your tea?" asked Digby.

"No."

"There's supplies left in our study, if you're stony," said Blake generously. "We've been blueing a fiver of Gussy's. Never shall it be said that we refused to give everybody a share of Gussy's fivers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No; it's all right," said Tom Merry.

Blake looked at them curiously. "It isn't all right," he replied. "It's all wrong. You're looking as cheerful as a boiled cat. What's the matter?"

"I suppose you'll know soon, so we may as well tell you," said Tom Merry miserably. "We're booked for a flogging in Hall to-morrow morning after prayers."

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"A flogging!"

Tom Merry nodded gloomily.

"But what have you done?" asked Blake, in astonishment.

"Raided Ratty's study."

"Well, that was an asinine thing to do, with Ratty loose about the premises," said Herries. "But surely they won't flog you just for raiding a study. A caning is enough for that."

"We burnt a paper of his."

"What paper?"

"The Southcote exam. paper."

"Phew!"

"That was a beastly thing to do, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a solemn shake of the head. "It means a lot of work for Watty, and work is a howwid thing at any time. I would nevah have a hand in any twick that made a fellow work."

"Hang it all," said Blake, "that was rather thick, wasn't it? I don't think even old Ratty deserved that."

Tom Merry flushed.

"It wasn't a jape," he explained. "We had a special reason for getting rid of the paper, and if it had belonged to Mr. Railton, or the Head himself, we should have done it just the same. It's just our rotten luck that it belonged to Ratty, and that he caught us. We had to get rid of the paper, that was all; it wasn't up against Ratty in any way, though of course we can't expect him to believe that."

"What on earth did you want to get rid of the paper for?" asked Digby. "You're not entered for the Southcote; and if you were, you'd have no right to mess about with the exam. paper."

"That's the worst of it," said Tom Merry glumly; "we can't explain. It's a secret, you see, and it concerns another chap. But we simply had to do it; it couldn't be helped. But I hope you fellows won't think we did it to spite old Ratty. That would have been rotten mean; I know that. I suppose the school will think we did it out of spite."

"Blessed if I can see what else they are to think, unless you give a reason," said Blake, puzzled. "Of course, we take your word for it, if you tell us you weren't doing it out of spite. But I'm blessed if I can guess why you did do it, then."

"Pway explain your extwaordinawy conduct, deah boys."

"Can't!"

"Why not?"

"It's a rotten secret," growled Monty Lowther. "We can't say a word."

"It's jolly queer," said Blake.

"Cousin Ethel knows about it," said Tom Merry. "I should think that that's a sufficient guarantee that it was all fair and square."

"Quite suffish, deah boys."

"My hat," said Blake, "the plot thickens, as they say in the newspaper serials! Looks to me as if you're all off your chumps. Does Cousin Ethel know you're going to be whopped to-morrow morning?"

"No, no," said Tom Merry hastily; "and she's not to know, either. I want you fellows to help us keep that dark. She would be awfully cut up if she knew."

"You'll be awfully cut up, too, I think," said Blake. "It's rotten, and I'm sorry. But it does really look to me as if you went out hunting for trouble."

"Yaas, wathah! But I'm aw'ly sowwy, deah boys."

The Terrible Three went to their study, leaving the chums of the Fourth in a state of great amazement. There was unusual gloom in Tom Merry's study that evening. The chums of the Shell ate their tea with little appetite. It was not only the flogging they minded, though that was bad enough. But the disgrace of a public punishment, with all the school looking on, and thinking they had been guilty of a mean action—that cut them more deeply. And they had forfeited the good opinion of the Head, whom they loved and respected. It was, as Monty Lowther said, a rotten business all round. Figgins was the cause of it all, and their feelings towards Figgins were not amiable just then.

"We told Cousin Ethel we'd let her know how it went,"

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Manners remarked. "She'll be anxious to hear. I shall have to go and see her about it."

"Tell her the paper's burnt," said Tom Merry. "Not a hint about the flogging, mind. She would very likely give the whole show away to save us, and that would ruin everything. We've got to stand it. She needn't know anything about it till afterwards."

"Yes, that's best."

And a little later Manners called in at the Head's house, and saw Cousin Ethel for a few minutes. The girl learned that the examination paper was destroyed, and that was all. Of the punishment that was to fall upon the Terrible Three she had no suspicion.

CHAPTER 12.

A Blow for Figgins!

IN the common-room in the School House there was only one topic that evening—the coming punishment of the Terrible Three. The juniors could talk of nothing else. The Terrible Three bore such a good character in the school, that the mere idea of their being flogged in public was at first scouted. But it had to be believed; and when it came out what they were to be flogged for, the general amazement increased. What the chums of the Shell had done was so unlike them, that most of the fellows were convinced that there was some mistake. There was indeed for some time a constant procession to Tom Merry's study, to learn the precise facts, until Tom Merry locked his door, and refused admittance to all comers.

It had been impossible to keep the matter a secret—if the juniors themselves had said nothing, it would have made no difference—for Mr. Ratcliff talked, and the prefects had received instructions to assist in the punishment on the morrow morning. Everybody in both Houses knew of it, and there was one fellow in the New House who was not so sorry as the others. It was Figgins, of the Fourth. At any other time Figgins would have been overwhelmed with concern at such a fate falling upon his friends in the School House. But he was on the worst of terms with the Terrible Three now. The New House fellows were all angered by the burning of the examination paper; some of them, indeed, suspected that it had been done in order to benefit the School House candidate for the prize, in some unknown way.

The Southcote exam. was one that specially concerned the New House. It had been founded by an old New House fellow, and the examination had to be held in the New House, and managed by the New Housemaster. The interference of the School House chums was altogether out of the picture, as Thompson, of the Shell, said. Why couldn't they mind their own business? And it was a rotten, mean thing to give even old Ratty a lot of extra work to do for nothing. As for the Terrible Three's denial that they had wanted to jape Ratty, if they hadn't done it for that, what had they done it for? Why couldn't they explain, if they had any explanation to give? That was what the New House fellows wanted to know; and the question could not be answered.

Even in the School House, where Tom Merry was second in popularity only to Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of the

school, the fellows had had a painful shock. If Levison or Mellish or Crooke had done this, they would not have been surprised. But Tom Merry had done it! They wouldn't have believed it, in spite of any evidence; but Tom Merry had admitted it. After that, there was no more to be said.

The chums of Study No. 6 stood up for their friends. They held that there was more in the matter than met the eye, and that if it all came out, it would not be to the discredit of the Terrible Three.

But that view found many scoffers.

Even fellows like Kangaroo, and Clifton Dane, and Bernard Glyn, and Lumley-Lumley—all staunch friends of Tom Merry's—did not know what to say.

But whatever view the House took of the matter, one thing was certain—the Terrible Three were to be flogged in the morning, before the assembled school.

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They kept to their study that evening; they felt that they could not endure the talk, the comments, the glances of the crowd in the common-room. Tom Merry was chiefly anxious about one thing—that Cousin Ethel should not learn anything of the matter till it was over. Then it would be too late for her to take any step, and she would realise that it was best to keep silence.

For, in spite of all, the chums of the Shell were anxious to keep Figgins's guilt a secret—to save their dishonourable friend from public disgrace.

They had prevented what he intended—that was enough. He was saved from himself, and now it was best for nothing to be said.

Knock!

It was a sharp rap at Tom Merry's door, and the handle was tried. Tom Merry turned an angry and irritated glance towards the door; he supposed that it was another curious seeker for information.

"Oh, go away!" he shouted. "You're not coming in here."

"It's I—Figgins!"

"Oh!"

Tom Merry rose and unlocked the door. The long-limbed New House junior, with a very flushed face, came into the study.

The Terrible Three looked at him grimly. "Well?" said Monty Lowther. "What do you want, Figgins?"

Figgins set his teeth.

"I've heard about your latest exploit in our House," he said.

"No need to talk about it," said Tom Merry drily.

"I think I can see a bit more clearly than the other fellows what you did it for," said Figgins unheeding. "You have some idea that I had seen the examination paper, and you burnt it because you thought I had an unfair chance over Levison."

"We knew you had," said Manners.

"It's a lie!"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"We don't want to row with you, Figgins," he said. "If you want the plain truth, we've done this to save you from making a rotten blackguard of yourself. We know you had seen the exam. paper in advance, and so we burnt it. Levison is a cad, but we're not going to see him welched in the exam. And there were other reasons, too."

Figgins turned white.

"Then you've made up your mind that I'm guilty of one of the rottenest, meanest things a fellow could do!" he exclaimed.

The juniors were silent.

"I haven't come here to row with you," said Figgins, in a strained voice. "I thought that fellows who've always known me to be decent might think a bit better of me, and might listen to reason. So far as I can see, you've got no reason to think such a thing, excepting some lie of Levison's."

"If it were only what Levison said——"

"What else is there?"

"The photograph."

Figgins laughed scornfully

"If that proves anything, it proves that you are in a plot against me. If Manners says he photographed me at Ratty's window yesterday, it's a lie!"

"I didn't say so," said Manners. "It was Levison took the photo."

"Oh! Levison again!"

"Yes; with my camera. He took it just before we went out with the other fellows to the station, and used it while we were gone."

"He says he photographed me at Ratty's window?"

"Yes."

"He lies!"

"We've got the photographs."

"They're faked!"

"They couldn't be faked," said Manners. "I know enough about photographs to know that. If Levison had touched the films in any way they would have been spoiled, and could not have been developed. What's the good of

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"Stop!" cried Cousin Ethel, as she rushed upon the platform. "Stop!" Mr. Ratcliff paused for a moment, then his hand was thrown back, and the birch descended with a spiteful swish! Hardly knowing what she did, Cousin Ethel, her arms extended to ward off the blow, ran between the Housemaster and his victim. (See Chapter 14.)

keeping this up, Figgins? We know the truth, and Cousin Ethel knows it."

Figgins staggered.

"You villain!" he shouted. "You've told her!" He clenched his hands furiously.

"Steady!" said Tom Merry quietly. "We didn't tell her. She told us."

Figgins stared wildly at them.

"She told you? Ethel told you?"

"Yes."

"Who told her?"

"Levison," said Tom Merry. "Then we saw the photographs. It's no good, Figg! We want to hush the matter up, for the sake of old times, but you can't fool us any longer!"

Figgins did not seem to hear.

"Do you mean to say that Ethel believes me guilty of such a thing?" he exclaimed huskily.

"Yes."

"It's—it's impossible! I can't think so! I—I—"

Figgins did not finish. He ran out of the study, and his hurried footsteps echoed down the passage. The chums of the Shell looked at one another.

"He's gone to see Cousin Ethel!" said Monty Lowther.

"She won't see him."

"I suppose not."

The juniors were right. It was indeed a late hour for Figgins to ask to see Mrs. Holmes's guest. He was told at the door of the Head's house that Cousin Ethel could not see him, and he retired baffled and bewildered. If she knew, and if she believed in him, she would have seen him, if only for a moment, he knew that. He returned to the New House with his mind in a whirl.

Kerr and Wynn came to him at once as he entered. Figgins's face was white, and his step was unsteady.

"For goodness' sake, what's the matter, Figg?" exclaimed Kerr, in alarm.

Figgins did not reply.

He waved his chums aside, and tramped on up to the Fourth Form dormitory, and went to bed, without speaking a word to anyone.

But he did not sleep.

During the hours of darkness that night Kerr and Wynn spoke to him several times, worried and sleepless themselves. But Figgins never answered.

CHAPTER 13. Facing the Music.

THESE were very serious faces in the School House on the following morning.

The public flogging of a junior was a very uncommon occurrence at St. Jim's, especially of juniors like the Terrible Three. And for three to be flogged together in one morning was still more unusual. There were few fellows at St. Jim's who could remember any similar episode. The whole school had to witness it, whether they liked it or not. There were few to whom the spectacle was likely to be gratifying. Mellish, perhaps, was the only one. Levison was more disquieted than pleased. The cad of the Fourth was, as a matter of fact, a little scared at his own success. He had effected more than he had expected; but he had not wanted the matter to assume such proportions. Publicity did not suit the wily, tortuous methods of the cad of the Fourth. But he was like the magician's servant of old, who borrowed his master's wand, and raised an evil spirit, and found that he could not control it when raised. Matters had passed beyond Levison's control now.

The Terrible Three were very quiet and subdued at breakfast. There was no bravado about them. They would not pretend that they did not care. They did care, and they felt the disgrace that had fallen upon them deeply. But there was no help for it, and they were prepared to go through their punishment manfully. It had to be stood, and they had British pluck enough to stand it.

After prayers, the school was assembled in Big Hall. The fellows went in with very grave faces. There was hardly any need for the prefects to walk up and down, keeping order. The boys were orderly enough. Even those who condemned the action of the culprits, felt sorry for them. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther entered the Hall with a firm tread, and took their places quietly in the ranks of the Shell.

All eyes were turned upon them, but they did not meet the glances. There was nothing of shame in their demeanour, and nothing of bravado. They were ready to go through the ordeal, and to go through it with fortitude, and that was all.

The Head was not present. The punishment had been delegated to the injured master, and the whole matter was left in Mr. Ratcliff's hands. There was no danger that Mr. Ratcliff would spare the rod. It was more likely that he would err upon the other side.

There was a slight buzz in the crowded Hall when Mr. Ratcliff entered by the upper door; but it died away as the Housemaster's steely glance roved over the school.

Mr. Ratcliff signed to three prefects, Monteith, Baker, and Powell, all of the New House, and they joined him. He spoke to them in a low voice, and there were evident signs of discontent in their faces. The school looked on eagerly. Every fellow at St. Jim's was present now, and the door was guarded by Taggles, the school porter. Perhaps Mr. Ratcliff had had some idea that the Terrible Three might break out and escape; but there was no danger of that. Taggles had closed the door, and was waiting outside; but his services were not likely to be needed—on account of Tom Merry & Co., at all events.

"Shall I call in Taggles, sir?" asked Monteith. He spoke in low tones, but everybody in the Hall heard his words. Mr. Ratcliff frowned.

"Certainly not, Monteith! You will do as I tell you!"

"But, sir—"

"That will do!"

The New House prefect bit his lip.

"Very well, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff glanced towards the breathless school. He raised his hand.

"Merry! Manners! Lowther!"

The three juniors stepped out from the crowd of Shell fellows.

"Come here!"

Every eye was upon the trio as they advanced up the Hall.

"Keep a stiff uppah lip, deah boys!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as they passed him.

Tom Merry smiled slightly and nodded. D'Arcy's remark was kindly meant, though his advice was not of much use to the unlucky juniors.

Mr. Ratcliff frowned darkly. He had heard the whisper, faint as it was.

"D'Arcy!" he rapped out.

The swell of St. Jim's looked calmly towards the platform.

"Yaas, sir?"

"Take fifty lines for talking in Hall!"

"Yaas, sir!" said D'Arcy quietly.

Mr. Railton, the master of the School House, bit his lip. D'Arcy was one of his boys, and it would have been better taste on Mr. Ratcliff's part to let him alone. But Mr. Horace Ratcliff never was conspicuous for good taste.

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The Terrible Three reached the raised platform at the upper end of the Hall, and stepped upon it. Mr. Ratcliff's keen, ratty eyes searched their faces.

The birch was in his hand now. He made it swish a little in the air. The sound was, perhaps, music to his ears.

"Manners! Lowther! Merry! You are aware of the punishment to which you have been sentenced by the Head for an act of outrageous vandalism. I trust that you have the good sense and proper feeling to realise the justice of your punishment."

"I have nothing to say, sir," said Tom Merry.

"You deliberately, and without the slightest excuse, destroyed an examination paper, upon which I had expended several hours of hard work," said Mr. Ratcliff.

The juniors were silent.

"I caught you in the very act," continued Mr. Ratcliff. "I am sure that all your schoolfellows see your conduct in the same light that I see it in, and regard it as mean, and base, and contemptible to the last degree."

The three juniors flushed. Mr. Ratcliff's thin and acrid voice was very clearly heard in the silent Hall, and it reached every ear. The New Housemaster knew how to make his tongue cut deeper than his cane.

"Have you anything to say before you are punished?"

"No, sir."

"No excuse to offer for your wicked and outrageous conduct?"

"No, sir."

"Very well. I do not see, indeed, what excuse you could have to offer," said the New Housemaster. "Prefects, take these boys up!"

Monteith, Baker, and Powell obeyed. The school understood, now, what were the orders Mr. Ratcliff had given them. They were to hoist the juniors for flogging—a duty usually assigned to the school porter. But it pleased Mr. Ratcliff to have the three hoisted at once, in order to make the spectacle more impressive, and the prefects had no choice but to obey their Housemaster's orders.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther made no resistance.

They submitted quietly to being hoisted upon the broad backs of the Sixth-Formers, and Mr. Ratcliff grasped his birch a little harder, with a gleam in his eyes.

A pin might have been heard to drop in the crowded Hall as the new Housemaster raised his hand.

CHAPTER 14.

Just in Time.

COUSIN ETHEL came into the great arched doorway of the School House, with a perplexed expression upon her face. The girl was looking unusually pale that morning. The discovery, beyond a doubt now, of Figgins's guilt, had been a terrible shock to her, and one she was not likely to recover from for some time. The destruction of the examination-paper had relieved her mind; at all events, Figgins could not make use now of the knowledge he was believed to have gained of the examination questions. But the girl was feeling very uneasy on account of her friends. That Mr. Ratcliff would miss the paper, and that he would make searching inquiry about it, was certain; and she feared for Tom Merry and his chums, if inquiry should be turned in their direction. Of the fact that the discovery had already been made she knew nothing as yet; but she was anxious to see the chums of the Shell before morning school, to ask them how matters were going. She had expected to see them without difficulty after chapel, if only as they went to their Form-room; but matters did not seem to be going on as usual at St. Jim's that morning. There were no juniors lingering in the quadrangle and there was no one in the passages. The Form-rooms, as yet, were deserted. Ethel realised that the school must be assembled in Big Hall, and she wondered, with growing anxiety, why.

Taggles was standing, outside the big, oaken door, with a stolid expression upon his face. The school porter touched his cap to Miss Cleveland. Even tough, bad-tempered old Taggles could not help having a soft corner in his heart for the kind and bright-eyed girl.

Ethel came up to him almost breathlessly.

"Where is everybody, Mr. Taggles?" she asked.

Taggles jerked his thumb towards the door.

"In 'All, Miss Cleveland."

"Is the school all assembled there?"

"Yes, miss."

"What for?"

"To see the flogging, miss."

Ethel caught her breath.

"The flogging, Mr. Taggles?"

Taggles nodded.

"Yes, miss. That was the horders—the whole school was to see it. And I must say I 'ope it will do them young rips

good. Burning up a master's papers, indeed! I never 'eard of sich goings hon!"

"Who—who is to be flogged?" gasped Ethel.

"Master Merry, and them other two, miss."

"Manners and Lowther?"

"That's it, miss."

"What for?"

"You ain't 'eard?" asked Taggles, very gratified at having such an interesting piece of information to give. "They was caught, red-'anded in a manner of speaking, burning up Mr. Ratcliff's papers in the New 'Ouse, miss."

"Oh!"

"Reg'ler conflagration there was, so I 'ear, miss," said Taggles, drawing upon his imagination for details. "Mr. Ratcliff, 'e comes into his study, like as any gentleman might, and finds these 'ere young rips a-burning of his valuable dockments—examination-papers and sich. Banknotes among 'em, for all I know, miss—which I says again, I never 'ear of sich goings hon, and I've been a school-porter many a year now, I 'ave."

"They are going to be flogged?"

"Yes, jest now," said Taggles.

"You—you say they were caught burning the paper?"

"That's 'ow it was, miss. Mr. Ratcliff comes into 'is study, and—"

"And Manners never told me!" murmured Ethel. "They were going to keep it a secret! Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do?"

Taggles was still talking, but Ethel did not hear him. Her brain was in a whirl. Tom Merry & Co. disgraced, sentenced to a disgraceful punishment, for what they had done—what they had done to please her, because she wanted to save Figgins.

For a moment Ethel felt as if she would faint. But she was not a girl of the fainting kind; and there was no time for that now. She struggled to compose her mind—to think!

What was she to do?

She knew that Tom Merry could not have told the facts, or if anybody was flogged, it would be Figgins. The Head, and even Mr. Ratcliff, must forgive the juniors for what they had done, if the real motive was known. It was not known—but it was her duty to make it known.

Figgins would suffer—but what then? If anyone was to suffer, it must be the guilty, not the innocent.

Ethel was not long in making up her mind upon that point. She must save the chums of the Shell, who were facing this for her sake—she must save them, even if she had to tell all, and leave Figgins to his fate.

"Mr. Taggles! Open the door! Quick!"

Taggles stared at her.

"Eh?" he ejaculated.

"Open the door—I must go in!"

"Go hin!"

"Yes, yes—at once!"

"Well, I never 'eard sich things!" exclaimed Taggles, in astonishment. "You don't mean to say that you want to see the flogging, miss."

Ethel choked.

"No, no! How could you think such a thing! I must go in—I must stop it!"

"Stop it!" echoed the amazed Taggles.

"Yes, yes! Open the door—or stand aside and let me open it."

Taggles did not move.

"You can't go in, miss. Stop it, hindeed! I never 'eard—"

"Let me in!"

"It can't be done, miss. Why, I should be sacked if I let you go in and interrupt the proceedings," said Taggles. "I never 'eard—"

"You don't understand—you don't understand!" cried Ethel, her voice becoming almost shrill with fear and anxiety.

"I must speak to the Head—I can tell him—"

"It ain't the 'Ead, miss, it's Mr. Ratcliff wot's goin' to flog them young rips—"

"Mr. Ratcliff, then! I tell you I must see him; I know all about it! I can tell him how it was—"

"You knows about it, miss," said Taggles, still more amazed.

"Yes, yes! Let me in!"

The stolid porter shook his head.

"I can't do it, miss!"

"You must! I must go in! Stand aside!"

Taggles shook his head again, and did not stir. Ethel, greatly excited, tried to reach the door, to push the porter aside. Taggles raised his hand in quite a magisterial manner.

"Miss Cleveland, I'm really surprised at you! You can't go in—"

"I must—I must!"

"It ain't allowed—"

"I tell you that Mr. Ratcliff will not flog them when he knows what I have to tell him!" almost shrieked Ethel.

"They were not to blame—it was somebody else—don't you understand? Man, can't you understand? Let me go in?"

"I understands this much, that you can't go in!" said the porter surlily. "And I says—"

"Let me in! It may be too late if you delay me!" cried Ethel. "Let me in—I tell you I will go in!"

The girl was in an agony.

Even at this moment the blows might be falling, and she might be too late to stop the punishment.

"Now, look 'ere, miss—" began Taggles persuasively.

But Ethel did not listen. The girl was too anxious and excited to waste words upon Taggles further. She caught the sleeve of the porter, and with a strength she would never have believed herself capable of, tore him aside. Taggles snorted angrily, and tried to stop her, but the girl was past him in a flash; she had thrown the great door open, and dashed into the hall.

Taggles stood dismayed.

"Well, my heve!" he murmured. "There will be a row about this 'ere! I never 'eard of sich goings hon!"

Ethel ran into the hall.

Her fleeting glance took in the whole scene. The school ranked there, seniors and juniors in their places, on the platform the three prefects with the juniors hoisted for punishment—Mr. Ratcliff with the birch in his hand, raised to strike. The first blow was about to fall upon Tom Merry.

A buzz, growing to a shout of amazement, burst from the school as Ethel ran up the hall. She passed them like a fleeting gleam. In a moment she was upon the platform.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!"

Mr. Ratcliff had paused for a second. He had given one unpleasant glance round. Then his hand was thrown back again, and the birch descended with a spiteful swish.

Ethel sprang forward.

Hardly knowing what she did, she ran between the House-master and his victim. Her arm was thrown up to ward off the blow, and then even Mr. Ratcliff would have paused. But it was too late. The blow was descending—and it descended upon Ethel's outstretched arm, and the girl reeled back with a sob of pain.

CHAPTER 15.

Cousin Ethel Speaks.

THERE was a shout in the crowded Hall.

"Stop!"

"Oh, Ethel!"

Mr. Ratcliff lowered the birch, his face going very pale. He was a hard man, but he was shocked at what he had inadvertently done.

"Miss Cleveland!" he ejaculated.

Ethel's lips were drawn with pain.

"It—it is nothing!" she muttered, trying to recover herself. "It is nothing! But—but you must not flog them, Mr. Ratcliff—they are not to blame—I know all about it—I will tell you."

"What!"

The whole Hall was in a buzz.

The three prefects had let the juniors slip from their backs. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stood in dismay. They knew that all must come out now; but Tom Merry made a last attempt to ward it off.

"Ethel," he exclaimed, "don't—don't say a word!"

"I must!"

"It's all right—we can stand it!" said Monty Lowther. "You needn't worry about us. Run away, Ethel; let's get it over!"

"I cannot!"

Mr. Ratcliff frowned heavily.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed sharply. "I do not understand. Miss Cleveland, this interference on your part is extraordinary—extraordinary! I am astonished! You know perfectly well that you have no right here, and Taggles will be severely reprimanded for admitting you."

"It was not his fault!" the girl exclaimed breathlessly.

"He tried to stop me. But I had to come—you must not punish them, Mr. Ratcliff! I will tell you what happened; they were not to blame."

"Nonsense!" said the New Housemaster. "You cannot know the facts. I caught them in the very act of burning my papers."

"Yes—yes—but—"

"I cannot listen to you, Miss Cleveland. It is exceedingly wrong of you to interrupt a punishment in this way. If you do not immediately retire, I shall complain to Dr. Holmes of your conduct."

If looks could have knocked people down, Mr. Ratcliff would have fallen at once, under the glances the St. Jim's fellows cast upon him.

Mr. Railton interposed quickly.

"It appears that Miss Cleveland has something to tell us, Mr. Ratcliff. Would it not be better to hear her before proceeding with the punishment?"

Mr. Ratcliff gave him a sour look.

"I do not think so," he retorted. "The matter has been settled, and I decline to reopen it to please a foolish girl."

"But—"

"The punishment will proceed—"

"I object!" said Mr. Railton firmly. "These boys belong to my House, and I ask for a further inquiry before they are punished, under the circumstances."

"The matter is settled—"

"Do you refuse my request, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Yes, I do," said the New Housemaster tartly. "You have no right to interfere here, Mr. Railton. The punishment will proceed!"

"Then I shall appeal to Dr. Holmes," said Mr. Railton quietly. "Kildare, will you go to the Head at once, and ask him to step into the Hall, if he will be so good, as Miss Cleveland is here, and offers fresh evidence on the subject."

"Certainly, sir," said the St. Jim's captain at once.

And he quitted the hall.

Mr. Ratcliff bit his lip. He felt that perhaps his victims were escaping him. But under the circumstances he could hardly proceed with the punishment until the Head came. Mr. Railton, indeed, was determined that he should not, and the New Housemaster would have gained nothing by an open dispute.

Cousin Ethel pressed her arm, where the blow had fallen, with the other hand. There was a long and painful silence in hall. Mr. Ratcliff was chafing; the boys were all eager and excited, wondering what Ethel had to say that would throw new light upon the strange affair. Only the Terrible Three knew.

The Head entered.

He came the instant he received Mr. Railton's message, and there was a hush in the crowded hall as he came in by the upper door.

His face was very grave.

"I understand that you have something to tell us about this strange affair, Miss Cleveland," he said. "Under the circumstances, it is quite right to delay the punishment. Please proceed."

Cousin Ethel caught her breath. The excitement that had buoyed her up till now had passed, and she was painfully conscious of hundreds of eyes fixed upon her. But she kept her courage, and spoke in a voice that only trembled slightly.

"They are going to be punished for burning Mr. Ratcliff's examination papers, sir?"

"Precisely."

"They were not to blame."

"But they were seen to do it, my dear child, and they have not denied it," said the Head gently.

"Yes, I know—I know; but their motive—"

"Their motive was wicked spite and revenge," said Mr. Ratcliff acidly.

"No, sir—oh no! They destroyed the examination paper because—because—"

"Yes?" said the Head kindly.

"Because they knew someone had seen it, and they did not want that—that boy to win the examination unfairly," gasped Ethel.

"Good heavens!" murmured the Head.

Ethel stood firm.

"That was their reason, sir. Now I think you will not blame them. They could not betray the boy to you, and they could not let him win the prize unfairly. They thought it their duty to destroy the paper."

"If this is correct, I certainly should pardon them for what they did, and I am sure Mr. Ratcliff would regard their conduct leniently," said the Head gravely. "Certainly, they ought to have reported it to me, instead of taking the law into their own hands, but—"

"That would have been sneaking, sir," said Monty Lowther.

"Yes, I admit that," said the doctor. "The situation was very curious, and very difficult. You certainly had no right to touch Mr. Ratcliff's paper, but if this is correct your action may be pardoned. But is it correct? Surely Miss Cleveland is labouring under a mistake?"

The Terrible Three were silent.

"I ask you, Merry, to give me an account of the matter," said the Head. Mr. Ratcliff was quite in the background now. "Is Miss Cleveland's statement correct?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry reluctantly.

"You three boys knew that someone had seen the examination paper in advance?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was it?"

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Silence.

"It must, of course, have been one of the boys entered for the Southcote prize," said the Head. "No one else would have had any object in looking at the paper."

"Yes, sir."

"As it happens, this term there are only two competitors entered for the Southcote prize," said the Head. "The boy in question must, therefore, be either Levison or Figgins."

No answer.

"It must be one or the other, if it was either," said the Head. "I demand the name of the boy whom you suspected of seeing the examination paper, Merry."

Tom Merry set his lips.

"Unless the name is given, and the whole matter investigated and cleared up, I can take no notice of what Miss Cleveland has said," went on the Head. "It is a case that requires clear proof. What was the name, Miss Cleveland?"

Ethel's lips trembled.

"Must you know it, sir?"

"Certainly."

"I—I mean, will the punishment proceed unless I tell you?"

"Most decidedly."

"Then I will tell you, sir," faltered Ethel.

There was a breathless hush in Hall.

"Go on," said the Head.

Ethel's voice was faint as she answered.

"It was Figgins, sir."

CHAPTER 16.

On Trial!

FIGGINS!"

The name was repeated up and down the hall in every tone of amazement.

"Figgins!"

As the matter lay between two boys, Figgins and Levison, everybody had expected to hear Levison's name uttered, for the character of the cad of the Fourth was very well known. The name of Figgins came like a thunderclap.

"Figgins!" repeated the Head. "Impossible! I—I mean, this is very extraordinary. You would not have suspected Figgins of anything of the sort, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"No, sir," said the New Housemaster.

"What reason had you to suppose that Figgins had seen the examination paper, Merry?"

"He only knew what I told him, sir," said Ethel. "I was told about it, and I asked them to interfere, to prevent a wrong being done."

"Oh! You were told that Figgins had seen the examination paper?"

"Yes, sir."

"By whom?"

Cousin Ethel hesitated.

"Must I tell you, sir?"

"This matter must be threshed out to the very end now, my dear child," said the Head gently. "I think you have been deceived. At all events, I hope so. I must know the name of your informant, in order to call upon him to prove his allegation."

Some of the Fourth-Formers noticed that at this moment Levison turned very pale. Cousin Ethel replied in a low voice, which was, however, heard by everyone present.

"It was Levison, sir."

"Levison! Figgins's rival in the examination!" said Mr. Railton sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"Levison, come forward!"

Levison dragged himself from the ranks of the Fourth, and approached the Head. If ever a rascal repented of his rascality, Levison did so then. But it was too late; he had to go through with the matter now, and he meant to brazen it out.

"Figgins!"

"Here, sir!" said Figgins.

Figgins came up the hall with a firm step, his bearing a very marked contrast to that of the cad of the Fourth.

Figgins did not look at Cousin Ethel, and she did not look at him.

He halted before the doctor.

"Do you deny having seen the paper, Figgins?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Levison, you informed Miss Cleveland that Figgins had seen the examination paper?"

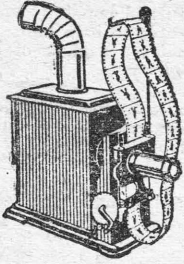
"Yes, sir."

"Upon what grounds?"

"I saw him in Mr. Ratcliff's study on Wednesday afternoon, sir."

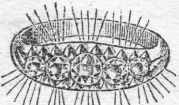
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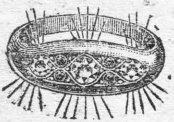


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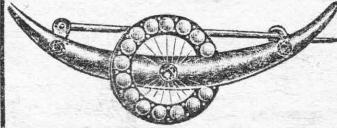
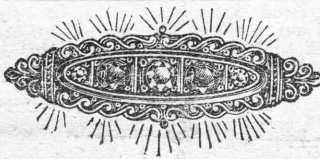
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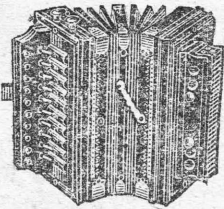
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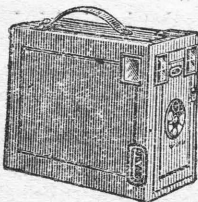


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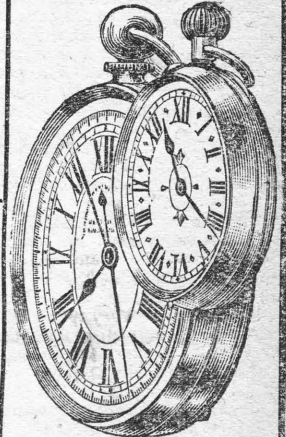
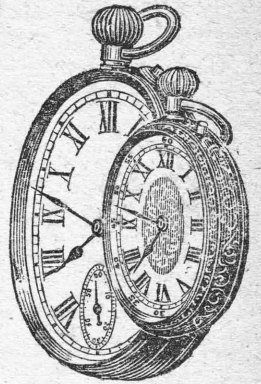
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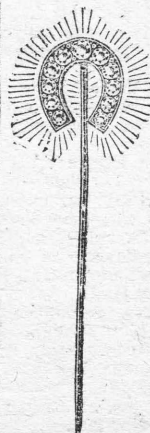
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"Is that true, Figgins?"

"No, sir."

"You did not enter Mr. Ratcliff's study on Wednesday afternoon?"

"No, sir."

"Where were you?"

"I remained behind when the other fellows went out to meet Miss Cleveland at the station. I was going to follow them, when Levison came into my study. I guessed that he had come to look over the work I had been mugging up for the exam. to discover how I stood, and I kicked him out, sir. He upset ink over me, and I had to change before I could go out. I missed Miss Cleveland at the station, and came back alone. After that I was with Kerr and Wynn all the time, as they can prove."

"Quite right, sir," called out Kerr.

"Miss Cleveland," said the Head quietly, "did you allow Levison's bare statement to convince you that Figgins had entered Mr. Ratcliff's study to look at the examination paper?"

"Oh, no, sir!" said Ethel breathlessly. "I would have taken Figgins's word against anybody's, especially against Levison's, for I know that Levison is not truthful."

"That is my experience of the boy, also," said Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth. "If it is Levison's word against Figgins, sir, I should unhesitatingly believe Figgins."

The doctor nodded. He was of the same opinion.

"I must understand, then, Miss Cleveland, that Levison offered you some kind of proof?" asked the Head.

"He did, sir."

"A proof which satisfied you, and satisfied Merry, and Lowther, and Manners, in spite of your previous faith in Figgins?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was the proof?"

"It is here, sir," said Manners.

He drew the three photographs from his pocket, and passed them to the Head. Dr. Holmes took them in surprise and looked at them, and handed them to Mr. Ratcliff.

"That is a photograph of the New House, showing the window of my study, with Figgins at the window," said Mr. Ratcliff, in surprise.

"Yes," said the Head; "that proves that Figgins certainly was in your study at the time the photographs were taken. Did you take these photographs, Manners?"

"No, sir; Levison did."

"When did you take them, Levison?"

"On Wednesday afternoon, sir."

"Oh!" The Head glanced at Figgins. "You have denied being in Mr. Ratcliff's study on Wednesday afternoon, Figgins?"

"Totally, sir."

"Can you prove that these photographs were taken on Wednesday afternoon, and not on any other afternoon, Levison? It all rests upon that."

"Manners can, sir," said Levison.

"What have you to say, Manners?"

"Levison borrowed my camera on Wednesday morning, sir," said Manners. "When I made him give it back to me, I found that he had been taking photographs, and all the films were used up. I developed them for him, and these three pictures were among the rest. The pictures must have been taken on Wednesday, because Levison didn't have the camera until then, and they couldn't be faked, because the films had been quite untouched until I took them out of the camera myself. You know, sir, that if the films are exposed to light they are useless. These had not been exposed—Levison could not have touched them, only he knew what pictures he had taken."

The Head looked very thoughtful.

"And you regarded this as conclusive proof that Figgins had been in Mr. Ratcliff's study on Wednesday?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the fact that he denied it made you think that he had been there with an unworthy object, such as looking at the examination paper in advance?"

"Exactly so, sir."

"What have you to say, Figgins?"

Figgins was very pale.

"I don't know what to say, sir, excepting that it's rotten to be suspected by chaps who have known me a long time. I wasn't in Mr. Ratcliff's study on Wednesday; I never thought of going there. Levison is telling lies. About the photographs, I simply can't understand it."

There was a murmur in Hall.

To the crowd of fellows, as to the Terrible Three, the evidence appeared conclusive enough. But there was one fellow there whose keen, acute brain seized upon a chance. It was Kerr, of the Fourth; the Scottish chum to whom Figgins always turned for advice when he was in difficulties, and who did not fail him now. Kerr came out of his place.

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"May I speak, sir?" he exclaimed.

"Certainly, if you have anything to say upon this matter," said the Head.

Figgins's look, almost haggard now, turned hopefully upon his chum. He felt that Kerr might be able to help him.

"How do we know that Levison hasn't a camera of his own?" said Kerr.

"By Jove!" murmured Tom Merry.

"That is beside the point, Kerr," said the Head. "These photographs were taken in Manners's camera, and the films were still inside it when it was handed back to Manners, so I understand."

"That is so, sir," said Manners.

"Yes, sir," said Kerr eagerly. "But just look. Suppose Levison had a camera the same size? Manners's camera is an ordinary Kodak. Levison could easily hire one in the village of the same size exactly. Suppose he took photographs with it, he could roll up the films inside, ready to be developed. When they're rolled up, they can be taken out of the camera, of course. Then it would have been perfectly easy for him to put that roll of films into Manners's camera, and pretend that they had been taken with Manners's camera."

"What!"

"My hat!" said Manners.

"Figgins was in Mr. Ratcliff's study one day last week," said Kerr. "Mr. Ratcliff will remember; he caned Figgins for it. On that occasion, I remember that Figgins went to the window, to see if Ratty—I mean Mr. Ratcliff, was coming."

"Yes, rather!" said Fatty Wynn. "I remember that—only Mr. Ratcliff came in the other way."

"Well, sir, suppose Levison took the photographs then, and put the roll of films by," said Kerr excitedly. "When he borrowed Manners's camera, he only had to take Manners's roll out, and put his own roll in, and then hand the camera back to Manners, pretending that he had taken the photographs that day, though they were really a week old."

"My only hat!" roared Jack Blake, forgetting where he was, in his enthusiasm. "Kerr ought to be a giddy detective. Talk about Sherlock Holmes!"

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!"

The Head turned his glance upon Levison. The cad of the Fourth was white as chalk, and seemed hardly able to breathe.

CHAPTER 17.

Light at Last.

COUSIN ETHEL looked at Figgins for the first time.

Kerr's suggestion had brought a flood of light with it. The girl only wanted the least reason for believing in Figgins; if there was a loophole in the evidence, she would take advantage of it, whatever others thought. And here was at least a loophole.

"Oh!" she murmured. "How could I suspect that? Oh, I was wrong!"

The Head was speaking.

"Your suggestion is a very ingenious one, Kerr. But it is almost impossible for me to believe that any boy could be wicked enough, and cunning enough, to lay such a scheme. Do you not see that, if this is correct, Levison must have planned a week ago to blacken Figgins's character in this way, and must have proceeded with utter unscrupulousness to his end."

"I think he is quite capable of it, sir."

"It is a lie, sir," said Levison huskily. "I haven't a camera; I don't really know how to use one."

"That's not true," said Manners sharply. "I remarked at the time how wonderfully well you had taken the photographs, and I thought it very queer that you had the exposures so exact, if you hadn't handled one before."

"Are you willing, Levison, that your belongings should be searched for a camera, and that inquiries should be made in the village, as to whether you have hired one?" said the Head.

"Yes, sir."

"That means that he hired it from a distance, perhaps by post, sir," said Kerr.

"Kerr is against me, of course, sir," said Levison. "He sticks up for Figgins, because Figgins is his chum. He'd blacken me or anybody else to save Figgins."

Some of the fellows nodded. Certainly it was plain enough that Kerr was only thinking of helping his chum.

The Head was silent for some moments. That the Terrible Three were not to be flogged now was clear enough. But a much more important matter had arisen out of Cousin Ethel's revelations. Had Figgins seen the examination paper? If he had, he deserved to be expelled from the school; if it could be proved, he undoubtedly would be expelled from the

school. The proof had appeared conclusive, till Kerr's curious suggestion threw doubt upon it again.

Was it possible to believe that Levison could have concocted this deeply-laid plot, to blacken Figgins, and perhaps exclude him from the examination, in order to make sure of the prize?

If not, the proof against Figgins was clear. He had gone to Mr. Ratcliff's study, and his denial that he had gone there was proof enough that he had gone to see the examination paper.

A strange expression had been coming over Mr. Ratcliff's face for some minutes. His eyes were watching Levison very sharply. He broke in now, as the Head was silent and perplexed.

"You have stated that you saw Figgins in my study on Wednesday afternoon, Levison?"

"Yes, sir," said Levison boldly. He was feeling bold enough now; matters seemed to be going all his way. Whether he convicted Figgins or not, he was safe himself, and the balance of evidence certainly was against Figgins. Levison was no longer sorry that the matter had been brought out into public notice.

"You thought he had gone there to see the examination paper which was in my desk?"

"Yes, sir."
"The paper which Merry and his companions found and burned—with the name of the examination written upon it," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Why did you think Figgins had gone to see that paper?"

"Well, I suspected that was his little game, sir."
"But did you actually see him with the paper?" said Mr. Ratcliff. "He might have gone there to play some trick, as on a previous occasion."

"He went to see the paper, sir."

"How can you know?"

"Because I saw him reading it."

"He was actually looking at the paper of questions for the Southcote examination?" asked Mr. Ratcliff, appearing very much struck by Levison's statement.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, sir," exclaimed Figgins, "it's not true! You've punished me often enough for things, sir, but never for anything like that. You know me well enough to know that I wouldn't do such a thing, sir."

"We all do, Figgay, deah boy!" called out Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Hear, hear!"

"Silence!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "Let Levison finish. The paper for the Southcote examination which Merry and his companions destroyed, was a double sheet, fastened by a paper-clip, and the words 'Southcote Prize Examination' were written upon it in large letters. You are sure that this was the paper Figgins was looking at, Levison?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you were in a court of law, upon oath, would you be prepared to make the same statement, Levison?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"Then you are a most wicked and unscrupulous boy," said Mr. Ratcliff, suddenly changing his tone. "Dr. Holmes, it is perfectly clear now that Levison is lying."

There was a buzz. Everybody in the hall, including Levison, had supposed that Mr. Ratcliff was dead against Figgins, and helping to pile up evidence against him. They realised now that he had been trapping the false witness; not in a particularly scrupulous way, either, but the fellows could forgive him that, for getting at the truth.

"I—I do not quite see it, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head.

"It is quite clear, sir. Levison is prepared to swear, if necessary, that he saw Figgins in my study, looking at a paper which was marked 'Southcote Prize Examination,' on Wednesday afternoon. As a matter of fact, I first drew up that paper on Wednesday evening, and intended to do so on Wednesday afternoon, but I went out to see a friend. It was left till the evening. Many persons, I have no doubt, imagined that the paper was already drawn up, and they are sometimes done weeks in advance. But on Wednesday afternoon, sir, there was no paper of questions in my study, or anywhere in the school, bearing the words 'Southcote Prize Examination,' as Levison states."

Levison staggered.

Dr. Holmes drew a deep breath.

"Yes, it is quite clear now, as you say," he said grimly.

"Have you anything to say, Levison?" Levison's tongue clove to his lips.

What could he say?

He could not unsay his whole story, and make up a new one; and he could not persist that Figgins had been looking at a paper which was not in existence.

He was fairly caught.

He gazed at the doctor almost wildly, standing unsteadily, his face like chalk. Cousin Ethel gave a cry.

"Oh, Figgins is innocent! I knew it."

"Yaas, wathah!" came from the ranks of the Fourth. "Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

"Yes, Figgins is innocent," said Dr. Holmes. "That has been proved clearly enough. As for the photographs, there is no doubt now that Kerr's suggestion is the true explanation. Levison has been guilty of base conduct. There will be a flogging this morning, but the boy to be flogged is Ernest Levison. Mr. Ratcliff, I leave him to you, and I trust you will not be too lenient."

"Very good, sir," said the New Housemaster.

Figgins went down the hall. There was a cheering crowd round him; all order was at an end, and the masters and prefects did not interfere. Cousin Ethel and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were all trying to shake hands with Figgins at once.

"So sorry, Figgy," said Tom Merry repentantly. "But how were we to know? We couldn't guess that dodge with the blessed camera."

"It was a rotten criminal dodge," said Manners. "I never suspected anything of the sort; I had no idea that Levison had a camera himself."

"We've been a set of asses," said Monty Lowther. "You can kick us if you like, Figgy."

Figgins laughed.

"And I—I should have known better," said Cousin Ethel, her eyelashes wet. "But—but it all seemed so horribly clear and convincing. Will you ever forgive me, Figgins?"

"Oh, it's all right!" said Figgins.

"But—but I should have known you better—"

"Yaas, wathah! The pity is, deah gal, that you didn't come to me for advice, instead of to those Shell duffahs, you know," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a wise shake of the head. "In a case like this, you know, what is required is a fellow of tact and judgment."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows—"

"I must remark that the Terrible Three have been terrible asses," said Kerr. "But it's all over now, and I'm jolly glad it's turned out so well."

They crowded out of the hall. From behind came the sound of wild howls, and a deadly swishing. Levison, of the Fourth, was receiving the punishment he had so nearly brought upon the chums of the Shell; and he was not taking it with fortitude. But his cries fell upon deaf ears; there was no one to pity the miserable plotter, whose cowardly schemes had recoiled upon himself.

The Terrible Three were elated enough. Their chum of the New House was not dishonourable after all, and that discovery meant more to them than their escape from the flogging. Cousin Ethel had saved them from that, and had been the means of the truth coming to light. But the girl was feeling very miserable as she left the School House. She had distrusted Figgins—she had allowed herself to be imposed upon by a cunning slander—and how could she expect Figgins to forget it? But Figgins was not the kind of fellow to bear malice or to nurse injuries; and when Tom Merry & Co. caught sight of Figgins talking to Cousin Ethel in the Head's garden later that day, it certainly did not look as if Figgins was in anything but the best and happiest of tempers.

THE END.

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"THE TERRIBLE THREE'S RECRUIT!"
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MATTHEW REDLAND—The talented inventor of a wonderful airship. He is drowned at the entrance of the ice barrier.

JOSEPH JACKSON or **SHOREDITCH JOSE**—A Cockney member of the crew, whose constant companion is a game bantam named the Smacker.

TEDDY MORGAN—Ship's engineer.

WILLIAM TOOTER—The hairy first mate.

barrier of eternal ice near the South Pole. The capture of a curious creature, with golden wings—half bird, half reptile, inside which is found the shell of the extinct ammonite—works those on board the Foamwitch up to a pitch of highest enthusiasm. As soon as the first land is reached, the construction of the aeronef, Wings of Gold—which has been carried in pieces on the Foamwitch—is proceeded with.

It is during these operations that a serious fault is found with the aeronef. It is the lack of warmth. Teddy Morgan, the engineer, sets to work and constructs an electric radiator, which brings the temperature of the room up to 63deg., Fahr.

At the conclusion of a football match, which the crew play on the snow, Maurice Fordham, Lance Morton, the professor, and the engineer, go into the long saloon to make final arrangements for their journey into the realms of the unknown.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Foamwitch is on an expedition with the object of exploring the strange land which is believed to lie beyond the

The Final Arrangements

There was no luxury about the aeronef. The walls of the saloon were draped in dark-blue velvet, and it was thickly carpeted. This was more for warmth than elegance. There was a bookcase, a table, and four easy-chairs. The saloon was well forward. The great size of the engine-room necessitated this. Under the saloon was a tank containing mercury. Without it the weight of the machinery would have thrown the aeronef out of balance.

Amidships were twelve cabins on the port side. Opposite the cabins was a day-room and mess for the crew the size of four cabins, and then the galley. Beneath these a low hold ran the complete length of the whole ship.

Wings of Gold was science's crowning triumph; but science is sometimes a harsh mistress. The vertical columns running from forty feet above deck to the keelplates took up a great deal of room, and were provokingly in the way. When the screws were working they vibrated unpleasantly, although sheathed in rubber. Here, again, Matthew Redland's genius had reached its limit over a little thing, and the others overlooked it. A pneumatic cushion—a mere pumping of air beneath the rubber—would have reduced the vibration to a minimum.

Lance lighted the electric stove and sprawled lazily in a chair.

"Well, Sir Wisdom," he said, smiling at the professor, "you are a miserable footballer. You could weigh any of the planets or fixed stars up to the tenth of an ounce; but you couldn't shoot a goal for toffee."

"Ah, no!" said the professor. "I do not like toffee, dear lad. Why do you laugh, Maurice?"

"I was only coughing, dad! It takes me like that sometimes. Have a smoke after your terrific exertions? Where's that evil-smelling pipe of yours?"

Von Haagel brought out the fragments of his briar, and sighed as he surveyed them.

"I believe he's been sitting on it," said Morton. "Give him a cigar. Great Scotland, what a chap he is for smashing things! What now?"

The professor pulled out a watch from his pocket. Like

the pipe, it was smashed. The broken glass pattered down on the carpet.

Lance and Fordham could not have controlled their mirth. "Shame! Your extravagance is awful!" laughed Fordham. "By the look of the wreckage, that watch must have cost a handful of sovereigns."

"It's reckless and unpardonable waste," said Lance.

Then, at the sight of the professor's almost tearful countenance, they lay back in their chairs, quite convulsed.

A tiny wrinkle crept into Von Haagel's eyes, and the two little wrinkles formed at the corner of his mouth. But his voice was sad and sorrowful as he spoke.

"Ach, dear, dear, dear!" he sighed mournfully. "Laugh away, dear lads, and make fun of me. Dot watch is ruined. I am very sorry, Maurice—very sorry. I regulate all the chronographs; and my watch, he stop this morning. So I go to your cabin, Maurice, and I see der watch on der table, and I take him, and—"

"What?" yelled Fordham. "Is that my watch, you—"

"Alas! yes!" sighed the professor. "At least, it is all of him dot is left!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" screamed Lance. "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Fordham shook his fist at Von Haagel, but it was impossible to be angry. The professor laughed and wheezed and snorted until he developed signs suggestive of apoplexy or speedy strangulation.

"Well," said Fordham, "I'll give you another chance, as I happen to know you. Learned sir, when next you perform your gambols on the football-field, kindly leave my giddy fifty guinea hunter at home, and take your own with you."

The night came—still, keen, and cold, and aglow with stars. A meeting was held in the saloon of the steamer to decide their final plans. The second officer had been suddenly taken ill with acute rheumatism. The doctor was also unwell, and had volunteered, under pressure, to remain behind.

"It is jolly awkward!" said Morton. "We're pledged to take Tooter with us. Warley is a sound, steady chap, but he doesn't hold a master's certificate."

"That's nothing at all, old chap," said Fordham. "There are no such things as Board of Trade prosecutions down here.

Warley can navigate as well as anybody. The second officer will soon be well again, and then he can take command. Let us give Warley a chance. Tooter thinks a lot of him."

"And you seem to think a lot of that hairy rascal Tooter."

"So do you," said Maurice. "He's twenty-two carat. I'll talk to Warley. All he has to do is to run up and down the coast, or lie at anchor. We ought to be back in a fortnight, but you must wait two months. If we don't turn up in that time—"

"We shall have our tootsies turned up!" added Lance flippantly. "Will you let those things alone, you wicked old man?"

He was addressing Professor von Haagel. The professor was endeavouring to inflate a balloon of goldbeaters' skin, which he had taken out of a box. Fordham had purchased a gross of the costly and delicate miniature balloons and a small plant for the rapid manufacture of hydrogen gas. As the professor invariably damaged everything he touched, they were compelled to exercise a certain amount of firmness.

The professor meekly laid the balloon aside and beamed over his glasses.

The conversation dwindled, and they began to yawn. Maurice took a last survey of the weather.

"To-morrow!" he thought, peering into the Southern darkness. "To-morrow—and then—"

The strains of a mouth-organ rose from the recesses of the ship.

Fordham chuckled as he leaned over the rail to listen. The irrepressible Jackson and the equally irrepressible Tooter were answering his questions in the most absurd way.

Above the hideous noise of the instrument of torture the hoarse voice of Mr. Tooter bawled:

"And then you'll see the things to make a dead chap stare— You'll see the dawg-and-monkey show when you get to the fair.

You'll see the living mermaid and the twenty-footed calf— For at our village wakes, you bet, we do do things—not 'arf!"

Still chuckling, Maurice rolled into his bunk and slept a dreamless sleep.

Southward Ho!

"Fr-r-r-r-r!"

With that long-drawn scream, ever increasing in intensity and shrillness, the ship that had conquered the air rose from the platform in the grey-blue sky. The cold was more bitter than any they had yet experienced. The men on the deck looked shapeless in their heavy muffling of furs. The white land and the heavy sea appeared to be falling away with intense velocity. The ship became a toy vessel, their comrades below mere specks. The platform was only a thin black patch.

Morgan gripped the wheel between the knees, and clutched the lever as he stood in the shelter of the deckhouse. Von Haagel, quivering and panting with excitement, was staring at the aeronoid, and whispering the altitude as the marvelously sensitive instrument registered the diminishing atmospheric pressure.

"Ach Himmel!" he gasped. "Dree thousand feet! Lance, it is dree thousand feet! Ah, wonderful—wonderful and suplime!"

"Fr-r-r-r-r!"

The suspensory screws were shrieking at the top of the uprights, and the air was almost unbreathable, it was so intensely cold. Mr. Tooter's beard was white—as white as that of a man of ninety. His breath had frozen on it. Four thousand feet!

"Enough!" yelled Maurice.

Morgan slid the brass felt-covered lever to the left, and it dropped into the clutch. The Wings of Gold was descending. Then a deep, hoarse buzzing mingled with the noisy scream of the suspensory screws. The great propellers were spinning and driving the aeronef ahead.

"Keep her at that, Mr. Maurice," said the engineer, "and I'll try her pace."

He checked the descent and opened the door. The pressure of the wind made him clutch an upright. Every plate in the deck was quivering and dancing in unison with the lash and throb of the engines. Morgan clawed his way astern, and crawled past the rudder he had fitted. He opened a metal chest, and took out a triangular object resembling a tailless kite. It shot away as he released it, and sailed behind the aeronef, spinning swiftly.

Morgan knelt beside the box. A brass finger began to move jerkily round a figured dial. The engineer looked at his watch, and pushed the finger back to nought. Tick-tack, tick-tack, tick-tack! The finger advanced slowly, and Morgan followed its movements, pencil in hand. Then, glancing at his watch, he made a rapid calculation.

"If the thing is accurate," he muttered, "we're doing

about eleven miles an hour at half speed. But who is to tell if that is accurate? We seem to be moving faster. I never saw such an instrument before, and I don't rely on things till I've tested them. The only way to find out what she can do is to run her over a measured mile. And we'll do it!"

He struggled back to the wheelhouse after a sharp glance at the suspensory screws. He had no intention of plunging into the unknown until he had given the vessel a thorough and exhaustive testing. He brought her round and drove her towards the ship. Then he slackened the speed of the screws and the propellers.

Wings of Gold fell swiftly. She approached the platform. Morgan gave the wheel a downward twist. He reversed the screws as she glided too far ahead, and brought her back. For an instant she hovered above the platform like a bird, and then sank foot by foot, but she was edging to the left.

"Still the same old fault," said Maurice.

"By thunder, give me time, sir!" said the engineer.

"How's that?"

The new rudder shot over, and the aeronef settled down without a jar or shudder.

"Bravo, Morgan!" cried Lance.

"Suplime, wonderful, glorious!" puffed Von Haagel.

"Morgan, I shall shake your hands. Ach, dot is suplime! Wings of Golt, Wings of Golt, ach, how I love you!"

He shook his fist at the Southern sky.

"Ach," he panted, "you have us to scorn laughed; you have snapped your fingers at poor puny man. You haf deivid him to tear der secret from your icky heart. But we shall laugh at you now; we shall conger you, beast dot you are! Himmel, ve are going to see you and to know you! Ach, suplime, wonderful!"

Morton, like the engineer, was very anxious to run the vessel over a measured mile. Mr. Tooter volunteered to mark off the mile along the shore with the aid of a pedometer which was carefully adjusted on deck. The attempt was abandoned, as, in any case, the result would have been misleading. The length of Tooter's paces on deck hardly varied an atom, but no one could have possibly maintained a regular and even step in the snow, so the mile was measured with a cable.

The aeronef rose a hundred feet, and darted away. Mr. Tooter held up a flag, and a mile away Jackson watched. The Wings of Gold churned through the air, and the flag fell. The result delighted them all. She covered the space in exactly one hundred and twenty seconds—a pace of thirty miles an hour.

Morton brought her down without a hitch, and without any help from the engineer.

"She's not exactly the sort of aeronef you read about in books—the chap whizzes round at one hundred and twenty knots per minute—but she's absolutely perfect."

"By thunder, when she's fairly broken in, we might make the miles knots!" said Morgan. "She's a bit stiff yet, but I've got so much confidence in her, that I'd sail her all the way to London to win a shilling bet."

The voyage into the unknown was to commence on the morrow. The doctor reported that the first officer was improving. Fordham saw him, and he was quite agreeable for Warley to command the ship until he was well enough to return to his duties.

"Whenever we get a promising wind," said Maurice, "we'll send off a few balloons, so keep an eye open for them. You know what to do if we don't show up."

In spite of the bitter frost, an impromptu dance was given on board the aeronef. Her own lights were all burning, and the steamer threw the blaze of her searchlights upon her, and flung rockets into the air. Teddy Morgan took no part in the festivities. Work was play to him, and play was work. He spent the evening with the machinery. At eleven o'clock Lance gave the signal, and the vessel, luminous and aglow, soared up and hung majestically over the bay. They supped in mid-air.

At noon on the morrow the last farewells were said. Waving handkerchiefs and shouting, the crew leaned over the rail.

"Good-bye and good luck! Hurrah! Keep up your peckers! Bring us a chunk of the Pole! Bye, Teddy! Ta-ta, Josh! Look after the bantam! Mind you shave regular, William. So long!"

Amid a chorus of cheers, chaff, and merry badinage, Morton uttered his warning.

"Hold fast, lads!"

The suspensory screws uttered their shrill fr-r-r! The Wings of Gold soared from her resting place. As she hung in the air, lusty voices sang "Auld Lang Syne."

"Hold tight lads!" shouted Lance.

With a buzz the propellers began to revolve. The figures dwindled, and the sound of voices was lost in the distance.

"Bonny blackbirds!" said Mr. Tooter. "Here, stop the cab and let me get out! I've left my watchkey on the mangle."

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"THE TERRIBLE THREE'S RECRUIT!" By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

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There was a roar of laughter. Crooks, the long, lean, one-eyed sailor, fixed his solitary but astonishingly brilliant and active orb on Mr. Tooter, and pointed a bony finger at Mr. Tooter's visage.

"There's 'air!" he said solemnly, and strode away to the galley.

"Well," added Jackson, "nah I comes ter look at it closely, I believe old Wall-Heye was truthful. It does look more like 'air than fevers, and not 'arf!"

The ship was still in sight nearly an hour later, for the atmosphere was wonderfully clear. The scene from the decks was one of hideous desolation. Here and there the hummocks were intercepted with streaks of grey. The aeronef was gliding above a frozen sea. Teddy Morgan had gone to the wheel. He had no intention of hurrying. An accident to the machinery would have hurled them all to eternity, and it is as fatal to overdrive machinery as it is to overdrive horseflesh.

Morgan was an engineer, and engineering was all and everything to him. He looked upon Von Haagel as a good-natured crank, with visionary ideas and a wild imagination. He could not even understand Lance Morton's devotion to history, botany, and geology. To Teddy a butterfly or a beetle was only an insect, birds and beasts were vermin, all flowers and plants were weeds, and a fossil was a wretched stone. Lance had tried once or twice to interest him in the professor's theory. It was useless. Teddy had only one reply.

"It may be so, but, by thunder, sir, I think it's lunacy! What you will find if you ever get there is ice, and lumps of it."

The novelty of it all kept Lance, Fordham, and Von Haagel on deck. They were unable to converse in the ordinary tones owing to the clamorous din of the whirring fans. Nor did they care to talk much. Lunch-time came, and Crooks served up his first meal of eggs and bacon and potatoes. At least, they came to the conclusion that the objects in the dish had at one time been eggs and bacon and potatoes. They resembled fried shavings, and tasted like them.

"Ach!" said the professor, turning over the mixture with his fork. "Lance, dear lad, can you classify these fossils? I have not with any like them met. Himmel, what can they be?"

Fordham arose in his wrath, and made for the galley. He thrust the plate under the lean sailor's nose.

"Confound you, Crooks," he roared, "what do you call that?"

Crooks's one gleaming eye bored downwards into the mass. Crooks seemed to carry his voice down in his boots, and as he was so tall, a considerable time elapsed before it could reach his mouth. He was a man of few words. With a skewer he indicated the three brown heaps one by one.

"Thim's rashers," he growled, "thim's heggs, and thim's taters. Why not?"

"Then, lop-sided, overgrown son of a bean-pole, what have you been doing with them?"

Slowly Mr. Crooks touched each heap with the skewer, and still boring a hole through the plate with his glittering eye, he solemnly replied:

"I fried them, I fried them, and I fried them! Why not?"

Maurice sat down on the galley table in despair.

"Fried them!" he gasped. "Why, you blithering mass of impossibility, you've fried them to charcoal. A two-stomached ostrich couldn't eat the stuff without dropping dead. They said you could cook!"

"Well, ain't them cooked?" growled Crooks, his glare threatening to melt the plate. "I say they is. Why not?"

"Then eat them yourself," shouted Maurice, "and consider yourself squared."

He dashed the contents of the plate into the cook's face, and shut the door with a crash. Mr. Crooks closed his gleaming eye, and thrust his big hand under the table. There was a clink of money. Mr. Crooks spat on a couple of half-crowns that had mysteriously entered his palm. The hairy face of Mr. Tooter emerged at one end of the table, and the grinning features of Jackson at the other.

"Why not?" chuckled Crooks. "There's 'air!"

He placed more rashers, eggs, and chipped potatoes in the pan, and winked over his shoulder.

"Dashed if I thought you'd cheek it, Wall-Eye!" said Tooter. "Winking blackbirds! I wonder Mr. Maurice didn't kick you."

"He oughter have chased his fists all over yer face," chuckled the Cockney. "Bang's gorn 'arf-a-crown at one wicked slap. It was me as told the governor you was such a toff, Cockney. Look here, Bill; why, the bantam won't look at the stuff! Say, Wall-Heye, I'm getting peckish. 'Ow abart a Welsh rabbit, Bill?"

"I'd prefer a jugged hair," said Mr. Tooter; "but a Welsh rabbit will serve, with an onion or two an' some beer."

"Jose," Mr. Crooks said gruffly, "I'm short of heggs."

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Just look an' see if any birds have laid eggs in Bill's whiskers. Why not?"

"Steady hon! 'Ere's the police coming, and no error!" said Jackson hastily. "Look good and innercent, Bill."

The footsteps, however, passed on. Lance and Maurice were not hungry, and Von Haagel was writing up the log. Maurice had gone on deck. Having won his bet, the lean sailor cooked the rashers, potatoes, and eggs to a turn, dished them up, and bore them to the saloon.

"Go away!" said Lance. "We don't want any more of your fried cinders. Go away!"

Mr. Crooks raised the covers, an appetising steam arose, and Lance looked in surprise at the tempting food.

"Why didn't you do them like that before, you villain?"

"Some gents like 'em overdone, sir; some likes 'em underdone; some likes 'em frizzled dry. I didn't know. Why not?" answered Crooks.

After uttering this undeniable truth, Mr. Crooks slewed his eye doorways and vanished.

"That chap is a queer stick," laughed Morton. "Come and take a snack, dad. You want some nourishment to keep that massive brain on its wheels. Oh, my blessed stars and stripes, he's at it again! There goes the ink! Don't touch it, or you'll make it worse. Oh, you beautiful bungler!"

Von Haagel's sigh of contrition ruffled the surface of the widening surface of ink. He had upset the inkpot, and he had made matters worse by attempting to mop it up with his serviette, and, worse still, by wiping the perspiration from his brow with the ink-sodden serviette.

"Never mind the mess, come and peck," said Lance. "As I've so often told you, you want a nurse. Don't worry about it."

Regret and penitence did nothing towards spoiling the professor's appetite. He was quite unaware that his face was streaked with ink, and Lance did not trouble to enlighten him. After lunch, as Von Haagel puffed along the corridor, he was startled by a yell. The yell came from the lungs of Mr. Tooter, and the bantam was the cause of it. While Mr. Tooter was busy with the Welsh rabbit and beer, the Smacker, perched on the back of the chair, had taken the lobe of the first officer's ear for something to eat.

Three circular windows lighted the galley from the corridor. One of them was open. The professor rose on tiptoe, and managed to fill the circle with his face. The outraged Tooter threatened to throw a loaf at the bird. The bird was astute, and it could scent danger, for much of its life had been spent in evading missiles. It flew for the window, and was just about to escape, when it saw the professor's inky features barred the way. The Smacker gave Von Haagel a dig on the nose that filled the professor's eyes with tears, and made him hop away.

"Teuful!" he gasped. "What was dot? Ach, I am struck! They shall not throw things through the ports! I shall be angry, I know. Ach, no; not angry. I shall be indignant! It is not right."

The bird had gone. Wiping his eyes, the professor again rose on tiptoe, and inserted his face. Mr. Crooks's eye was on the move. It moved from the ceiling and down across the wall. Then it stopped with a sudden jerk as it saw a black face with gleaming spectacles. Slowly the jaw of Mr. Crooks dropped, and his knees began to shake. He could not shift his gaze from the apparition. He spilled his beer on Jackson's plate, and Jackson was about to hit him, when he, too, caught sight of the face at the window.

"Ach, my lads, you must not throw tings!" said a voice.

"Winking blackbirds!" gasped Mr. Tooter. The face melted away.

"Why not?" Mr. Crooks growled, turning to Jackson.

"Why not, if he likes it? He has washed in tar!"

"That hain't no reason why you shud wash my cheese in hale. Not 'arf!" growled Jackson angrily.

"I was skeered!" said the cook. "Why not?"

"But we never throwed nothing," said Mr. Tooter.

"Why not?" said Crooks meaningly, tapping his brow.

"If I was as dotty as you, yer elongated torfee-stick, I'd chase myself wiv rat pizen!" said Jackson. "Not 'arf, I wouldn't! Wot abart turnin' my cheese into a brewery? If I didn't know yer, I'd snap yer in two! That bantam'll be takin' you fer a long worm one o' these days, and then you'll be missing. Shall we offer any rewards much? It's time you were outed—killed—and that's a fact."

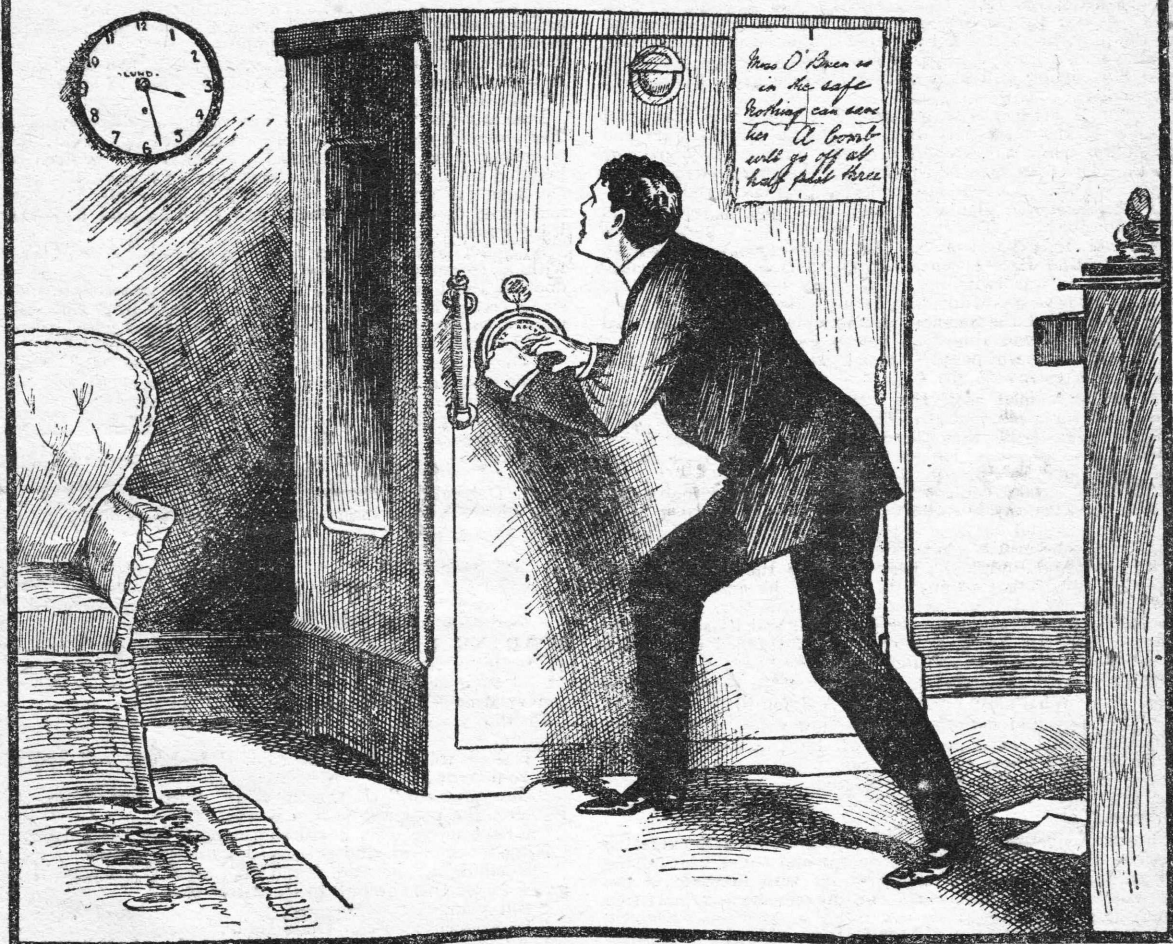
"There's 'air!" he growled. "And there's a grin on the 'air. Why not?"

Then he stood up, blew his nose, and departed.

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DOLORES IN THE SAFE, WITH A BOMB, WHICH WILL EXPLODE AT 3.30!

CHAPTER 1.

"Take Warning!"

THE dress-circle," whispered Dolores, while the orchestra was playing the overture to a popular musical comedy, "is really ever so much nicer than the stalls. You can see the whole of the stage, not only just the front. I wonder they don't make it more expensive than the stalls."

Frank Kingston, the wealthy and talented young detective, who had come into the front rank of investigators of crime under the auspices of the better-known Carson Gray, smiled back at Dolores O'Brien, his fiancee, and assistant in many of his principal cases.

"I wish I could have got a box," he said; "but there were none left. "Funny thing," he added. "There were two men waiting at the box-office when I arrived, and each took a box—the only two left. There, that's one of the men."

Dolores glanced in the direction which Frank Kingston had indicated by a nod of the head. In the box nearest to the left-hand side of the dress-circle, and on the same tier, she saw a man sitting all alone, leaning forward, with his elbows

resting on the padded railing. He was a man of about forty, in slovenly evening-dress, with a face lined and seamed, and piercing black eyes, which moved restlessly from the stage to the auditorium, and from the auditorium to the gilded ceiling twinkling with lights.

"Strange that he should want a box all to himself," Dolores murmured. "He doesn't look very rich, either, does he? Where is the other man?"

"The other man?" Kingston repeated, looking round. "I don't think he's come in yet. Ah, yes, there he is—in the opposite box to the other man. There—with a lady. They've just been shown in."

Dolores was not more naturally curious than the profession she had adopted made her, but the overture was long and the music dull, and anything to rouse interest, and so beguile the time, was welcome. Looking across at the other box, she saw a man of middle-age taking the wraps from a lady's shoulders.

"Husband and wife," Kingston said. "You can tell a middle-aged married couple a mile off. Look, she's lecturing him for letting her silk shawl drop to the floor, and—Hallo! What's this?"

The man had picked something from the chair on which

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"SKILL AGAINST CUNNING!"

he had been about to sit. As he held it up to the light Kingston and Dolores saw that it was a green envelope. An expression of amazement flitted across the man's face as he broke the seal. Then the expression changed to terror. He must have uttered some exclamation, for his wife turned sharply and looked at him, at which he crushed the green envelope and the letter contained in it in his hand, and tried to smile. But the smile was fixed and mirthless, and only enhanced the ghastliness of his face.

"What can be the matter?" Dolores whispered.

"Heaven knows!" was the answer. "A note sent in. Bad news, that he wants to keep from his wife for the present for fear of spoiling her evening. Ah! At last!"

The curtain rose, and a procession of girls trooped back and forth across the stage, singing the opening chorus. Dolores and Frank Kingston gave most of their attention to the play, but at times their eyes wandered in the direction of the man who had received the green envelope, and they saw him sitting still as a statue, his face grey, thoughtful, immobile.

The first act came to an end, and there was the usual exodus of the male part of the audience for the bars and corridors, while the orchestra struck up the latest popular waltz. The man who had picked up the green envelope sat very still, with his eyes fastened upon the curtained stage.

Frank Kingston glanced at him, and then at the man in the opposite box. The latter had turned half round, so that he faced that part of the dress-circle in which Frank Kingston and Dolores were sitting. His face was horribly distorted; it was twitching as if every muscle had become a pulse. There was wild terror in his wide-open, staring eyes. Dolores noticed the strange and terrible change which had overtaken the man almost as soon as Frank Kingston.

"Look," she whispered—"look! He must be ill. He is going to have a fit."

It really seemed as if this was so. Frank Kingston sat irresolute for a moment. Surely it must be something more than a coincidence that these two men in opposite boxes should be so affected. He got upon his legs with a whispered "Excuse me!" to Dolores.

"Where are you going?" Dolores asked, in a low voice.

"What are you going to do?"

"Going to find out what's the matter with that chap, and see if I can be of any use to him."

So saying, he walked sideways along the row of seats, pressing slowly past people's knees until he emerged in the side gangway. As the box was on the same tier, he had but to push open a door and enter. He did, and its single occupant turned and faced him with a half startled cry, and a hand upraised, as if to ward off a blow.

"All right!" said Kingston lightly. "No one's going to hurt you. What's the matter, sir? Are you ill?"

"Ill?" repeated the other, in a hollow voice. "Nigh unto death, I think! Look at this, man! Look at it—look at it!"

He thrust a green envelope, from which a scrap of green paper protruded, into Kingston's hand.

"It's my death-warrant," he gasped—"my death-warrant!"

Frank Kingston took the envelope gravely, and extracted a sheet of green paper. The envelope and paper were of the identical hue which the man who sat with his wife in the opposite box had received. On the paper a typewritten message ran as follows:

"Take warning! Your life is forfeit within the next forty-eight hours. Nothing can save you.—THE GRAND MASTER."

"I don't think I should let it worry you," Kingston said quietly, although he could not help thinking of the man in the opposite box.

"Not worry me? Man, man, does it look like a joke?"

"What something like that," Kingston answered. "How did it come here?"

"It fluttered down from the ceiling on to my knees."

Kingston's brows knit for a moment in a puzzled frown.

"I am a detective," he said. "It is just possible that I may be able to help you. May I know your name and address?"

"Yes. My name is Peter Dayer, and I live at 3, Heston Mansions, Bayswater. Let me give you my card. I shall be truly grateful if you would help me, as I am already for the kindly consideration you have shown for a fellow-creature in distress. I am a rich man, although I do not look it. I can afford to pay you well if you—"

Frank Kingston cut him short with a quick gesture.

"We will talk of that when I've been of any real use," he said.

"Here is my card. You will see my address—No. 100, Charing Cross. If you should ever require my assistance you will know where to find me. If I should be out, my partner, Miss Dolores O'Brien, lives at the Hotel Cyril. And now, perhaps, you can tell me who is the Grand Master?"

"My good sir, I know no more about it than you!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 207.

Next Thursday's Special
Frang Kingston Story

"SKILL AGAINST CUNNING!"

Please let your friends
read these wonderful stories.

"You have never belonged to a secret society?"

"Never! Neither can I think how I could have acquired the enmity of one."

"If I am to help you," Kingston said warningly, "I shall want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"You have had it," Dayer said curtly.

The little bell which gives warning two minutes before the curtain rises tinkled far away down in the wings. Kingston moved towards the door.

"I may see you for a few minutes after the show," he said. "Don't worry yourself, and don't take a cab home to-night. You never know who may be driving one. Good-bye for the present."

With that he made his way out and rejoined Dolores. He had scarcely whispered half a dozen words of the extraordinary story he had to tell when the curtain rose on the second act. Simultaneously a hideous scream rang out, and it came from the box immediately opposite that of Dayer's. It was a woman's voice, loud, shrill, and full of horror.

"Murder—murder!"

Instantly the whole theatre was plunged into commotion. The audience sprang up and craned forward like grass before a strong wind. Men shouted excitedly, and women sat huddled in their places. The first man to receive the green envelope sat upright and very still in his chair. His chin had sunk down on his chest, and his face and shirt-front were smothered in blood.

Kingston leaped to his feet and forced his way along without ceremony. He was one of the first to arrive at the door of the box. He and two attendants entered, while a small crowd flocked round the door. They were met by a woman with a white face and features stamped with horror.

"My husband!" she cried. "He is dead—murdered!"

"There is a bullet in his brain," Kingston said quietly. "How it could have happened, Heaven knows! It was from a silent pistol. What's this he's got in his hand?"

Frank Kingston wrested the green envelope from the still supple fingers. It was the identical message which Dayer had received, but in this case the Grand Master had fulfilled his threat within half an hour of making it.

Mr. Gabriel Baxeter had slipped into eternity before the eyes of nearly two thousand people, and none had seen the hand that sent him there.

CHAPTER 2.

Only One Minute!

FRANK KINGSTON had been able to glean nothing from the half demented widow, and as they made their way out of the theatre he exchanged a whispered conversation with Dolores, who was as puzzled as he.

In the vestibule they met Dayer, who was white and shaking.

"I shall walk home," he said. "I—I will call and see you to-morrow."

"One moment," Kingston said. "Do you know Mr. Baxeter, the poor fellow who was shot?"

"I have never even heard the name," was the answer.

Kingston nodded, and preserved a mask-like face.

"Good-night," he said, "and take care of yourself. I am going to see this through to the bitter end."

"But your own safety—"

"Is my own concern. Good-night!"

Dayer turned on his heel, raising his hat to Dolores, and at that instant Kingston noticed a boy standing on the pavement. It was Tim Curtis.

"Tim," said Kingston, "shadow that gentleman, and if anyone follows him give him a word of warning."

Tim nodded comprehensively, and hurried away. A minute later Frank Kingston and Dolores were together in a taxi, bound for the Hotel Cyril.

"It was an air pistol, of course," Kingston said, referring to the instrument with which the murder had been committed. "But Heaven knows who could have fired it, or why! But we'll win through, Dolores, you see if we don't. We'll lay this Grand Master, whoever he is, by the heels before we're many hours older."

Next morning the whole of England was ringing with the news of the murder of Gabriel Baxeter. It was also stated that Mr. Stephen Shortover, another stockbroker, had also received a mysterious warning.

By the first post Frank Kingston received a green envelope. He thought grimly as he opened it, that the Grand Master had lost no time as far as he was concerned.

The envelope bore a West End postmark, but there was no further clue to glean from it. After breakfast Tim called and asked to see him.

"I followed that gentleman last night, sir," the boy began excitedly as soon as he was shown up, "and nobody seemed to be shadowing him, so I followed him to Heston Mansions,

Bayswater, where he seems to live. I waited outside, and heard the commissionaire say 'Good-night, Mr. Dayer, sir.' So after a bit I went up and asked if Mr. Dayer lived there. The porter said 'Yes; number three,' and told me to go up. I went up and listened outside his door for a bit, to see that everything was all square, and then came down again."

"You didn't hear anything?" Kingston questioned, with a sudden inspiration.

"No, sir; nothing but a type-writer going."

"Ah!" said Kingston thoughtfully. "A type-writer?"

He slipped some money into the boy's hand, and dismissed him, and then sitting down, began to piece the case together.

Shortly after noon he called at the office of Mr. Stephen Shortover, who, the papers alleged, had received one of those terrible green envelopes.

He was informed that Mr. Shortover had gone out to lunch, but the head clerk asked him to wait. Kingston waited for an hour, at the end of which time news reached the office that Mr. Shortover had been shot dead in a taxi while on his way to a restaurant.

Kingston left the office, feeling that he must act quickly, and yet not knowing how to act.

On his return to his rooms, he found a note awaiting him. It was from Dayer:

"I am going away into hiding. My escape is arranged for. I hope to see you when this terrible business is all over. In the meanwhile, I beg of you, for the sake of your own safety, to have nothing more to do with the business. It is the affair of the police. Let them investigate it."

Frank Kingston laid this note aside in wonder. At the best, Dayer was a pretty cool customer to implore his help and then discard it in a few hours. He went over to tell Dolores, only to learn that she had been out for some time. She had received an urgent message, and her maid did not know when to expect her back.

Frank Kingston went back to his private suite of rooms, in which a telephone had been installed for his special use. Suddenly the buzzing of the bell called him to the receiver. He took it down, shouting a cheery "Hallo!"

"Hallo!" came back the answer. "Are you Mr. Frank Kingston?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I have a message for you. Miss Dolores O'Brien is at present a hostage. Directly you move hand or foot to discover the identity of the Grand Master, or the author of the deaths of Gabriel Baxeter and Stephen Shortover, her life will be forfeit."

Frank Kingston stood quite rigid for a moment. An impulse, seemingly absurd, but in reality natural enough, prompted him to ask whom he was addressing.

"The Grand Master," came back the answer, punctuated by a laugh. "Good-bye! Remember my warning!"

"One moment," cried Kingston.

But he got no answer. Then he called up the exchange.

"Who was that ringing me up just now?" he asked.

"It was a public call-office," was the answer.

"Where?"

"At Hassock Road Tube-station."

"Thank you!"

Frank Kingston banged down the receiver and snatched up his hat. He knew that Dolores was in deadly peril, whether he moved further in the game or not. She knew too much for those who held her captive ever to let her go, even if he complied with their conditions. He scrambled into a taxi, and in a very little time found himself at Hassock Road Station. The telephone-box there happened to be next to the bookstall, and the detective soon learnt from the clerk that it was Dayer himself who had been the last man to use the telephone.

Kingston drew a deep breath.

"Dayer," he muttered to himself—"Dayer! I ought to have guessed as much!"

He had kept the taxi in waiting. He jumped in and told the driver to convey him with all speed to Heston Mansions, Bayswater.

"Double fare if you can do it in ten minutes!" he said.

"I will pay all fines!"

The driver took the advantage of Frank Kingston's words, and they dashed through the broad West End streets, heedless of police or traffic.

Frank Kingston sprang out of the cab outside Heston Mansions, leaving a gold coin in the driver's hand. He was conscious for a moment of Dayer's face, stamped with subtle malevolence, leering at him from a first-floor window; but it vanished as he raised his eyes.

He dashed up the stairs, taking no notice of the commissionaire, and banged at the door of No. 3.

A smothered chuckle from within, and the banging of a heavy iron door was all the answer he received.

Kingston charged the door, using every atom of his weight, only to rebound with a bruised shoulder. The door was thick, and the lock too strong to be forced. Within, every-

thing was horribly silent, but presently he heard the opening and shutting of a window.

Then, with a flash of inspiration, Kingston pulled a revolver from his hip-pocket and thrust the barrel against the keyhole. He pulled the trigger, and a deafening explosion awoke the echoes. The door swung open before him and he staggered into a narrow hall.

The first room he entered was a bed-room, and empty. The second was a bachelor's living-room, and seemed empty, too; but as he gazed round it, a notice pasted on to a great steel safe caught his eye, and he advanced farther into the room to read it.

Used as he was to shocks, the message scrawled there in bold, slanting handwriting, froze his blood, and for the moment left him paralysed with horror.

"Miss O'Brien is in the safe. Nothing can save her. A bomb will go off at half-past three."

Frank Kingston did not realise at first that the bomb must be in the safe with Dolores, and as he understood an icy hand seemed to clutch and tighten round his heart. A clock on the wall was ticking noisily. It was twenty-seven minutes past three.

His inaction lasted only for a moment, but it was despair that loosened his joints and set his brain working at fever-heat in a wild effort to discover some way of liberating the helpless girl inside.

The safe was fitted with a word lock—one of those locks which the owner may set at whatever word he chooses. There were seven little revolving discs, and Kingston knew that the word must be one of seven letters.

Countless words flashed through his mind as the discs spun round beneath his feverish fingers, and all the while precious moments ticked callously away.

"Dolores!" he cried out, in his agony of mind. "How can I save you?"

All his powers of deduction and reasoning seemed to have gone. The name Dolores kept on running through his mind and singing in his ears. Then, with a start, he realised that Dolores was a word of seven letters. It might have entered Dayer's head when he found himself suddenly called upon to think of a word of that length. There was just a chance!

It was twenty-nine minutes past, and as his fingers wrestled with the discs, the passing seconds ticked in his ears like strokes on a brazen gong. With trembling fingers he completed the word and pulled at the door, and what followed seemed like a dream to him.

A fainting girl rested in his arms for a moment. He remembered feverishly laying her aside and snatching up something round and heavy that lay on the floor of the safe. The clock struck half-past as he ran with it in his hands to the window, and with a hoarse cry that was half hysterical, he flung it from him. An instant later the world seemed to come to an end, and the deep roar that followed threatened to burst his ears.

The window overlooked narrow gardens bounded by a wall. He saw a great red light, and as the shock threw him backwards, saw the wall heave itself up towards the sky. With fading consciousness he heard a rain of debris descend.

A few minutes later, people were bending over him, and his first question was for Dolores. It was Dolores who answered him, resting a hand for a moment on his forehead. She had fainted in the safe through shock and lack of air, but she had been quick to recover.

Presently she told him how Dayer had sent her an urgent message, begging her to come to his flat at once, since he wished to consult someone, and he—Kingston—was out. Once there, she had been overpowered, and bound, and gagged, until such time as the scoundrel had locked her in her iron prison.

"I'll lay him by the heels before I'm many hours older!" Kingston cried, struggling to his feet. "I'll find him if I have to search until my dying day!"

But Dayer was quite close at hand. They found him under the ruined wall, close by where the bomb had exploded, and in his hip-pocket was an air-pistol, powerful as a revolver and wonderfully silent.

The truth was not long in coming out: How Dayer had lost much of a great fortune through speculating on the Stock Exchange. It was more than probable that his losses had turned his brain. In order to kill those men who had been the cause of his losses, and shield himself, he had pretended to be the emissary of a secret society, and with marvellous cunning had pretended to be in danger from the same society.

Long as they may live, and many as their adventures may be, Frank Kingston and Dolores are never likely to forget that awful afternoon, or gaze without a shudder upon a green envelope.

THE END.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 207.

Please let your friend read these wonderful stories.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE

**"The Terrible Three's Recruit!"**

This is the title for next Thursday's long, complete school tale of Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's. The famous study-mates are compelled to have a stranger in Study No. 1, and as this stranger is possessed of wonderful hypnotic powers, the Terrible Three "take him on," and what happens when they thus make use of him you will read about next week.

By the way, in the number of our companion paper, "The Magnet Library," now on sale, appears the grand opening instalment of Sidney Drew's splendid serial story, "Through Trackless Tibet." Do not miss reading it!

From a New South Wales Reader.

One of my many Colonial girl chums writes me a very pleasant and interesting letter, as follows:

"Merry Dale Farm,
"Tamworth,
"New South Wales.

"Dear Editor,—I live on a tobacco farm in sunny New South Wales, and I have been a reader of THE GEM since it commenced its career, and I think it is a splendid book for girls as well as boys. Please accept my heartiest congratulations for the new feature—the Chat Page—which you have introduced. I think it a splendid idea, and ought to catch on. I live five miles from the nearest town, so Saturday is a red letter day for me, for I get THE GEM on that day. I followed the story of 'The Brotherhood of Iron' with great interest. When reading a story of the doings of Tom Merry & Co., I like to imagine that they are real boys, and, indeed, this is not very difficult to do, for the stories are told in such a vivid and realistic way. If you think it would be of sufficient interest to readers of THE GEM, in my next letter I will tell you about the growing of tobacco. And now, wishing you, your staff, and the dear old GEM a long and happy life,

"I remain, etc.,
"LILLIAN MAY W."

Many thanks, Miss Lillian. I shall look forward with great interest to your next letter.

More "Junior Dramatic Society" Wanted.

A short letter from a Southend-on-Sea reader contains a request that the "Junior Dramatic Society" at St. Jim's should be given more prominence in future.

"Southend-on-Sea.

"Dear Sir,—I have been a reader of THE GEM for about a year and a half, and I must say that I have thoroughly enjoyed the tales of Tom Merry & Co. Your last Christmas Double Number was simply ripping! I wish you would introduce the 'Junior Dramatic Society' a bit more in the good old GEM, and also football. D'Arcy is a gem; Fatty Wynn, although very fat, is a good goalie. In fact, all the chums of St. Jim's are bright and healthy boys. I am looking forward to winning a prize in the new GEM Competition. Wishing you good-luck,

"I remain, yours truly,
"A GEMITE."

What do my readers say on the matter of this Gemite's request?

Our Correspondence Exchange.

Miss Clare Howard wishes to exchange letters with Victor C. Liddaman. She is just eighteen years old, and her address is 235, Speakman Road, St. Helens, Lancs.

Reuben Hardy, of Norwood House, Queenborough, Kent, wishes to correspond with any "Gemite" or "Magnetite."
H. W. Henbest, of 17, Dicken's Terrace, Wainscott,

Rochester, Kent, wishes to correspond with fellow-readers, with a view to exchanging stamps.

Master Frank Illingworth, of 10, West Vue, Paddock, Huddersfield, wishes to correspond with a reader of the "Magnet" of either sex.

Making Good Photograph Negatives. (Special Article.)

Beginners spoil many plates through want of cleanliness and care, but there is no reason why the novice should not be able to turn out successful negatives from the very commencement of his career as a photographer.

From the unpacking of the plates to the time when they are of no further value to the owner, the plates should be treated with the greatest possible care.

The same warning applies to the use of the camera and lens; especially the latter. Before loading the sheaths or dark slides, it is best and safest to see that no dust has accumulated in the camera or on the lens. If any has, it must be removed at once. The sheaths or dark slides must be treated in the same way, for many a negative will be spoilt by "pinholes" or spots, unless this precaution is taken.

Another fault common with beginners is finger-marking the coated side of the plate. There is only one way to avoid this, and it is quite obvious. The plate should be held by the edges only.

When the camera is loaded, and everything is in readiness for the taking of the photograph, the difficulty that arises is the estimation of the correct exposure. Until the beginner has had sufficient practice in judging the exposure correctly, it is best to resort to the exposure meter.

Now, although a negative can be, and is, spoilt by over and under exposure, many are the mistakes made in the developing, that would ruin any plate, correctly exposed or otherwise.

Of course, the dish used for developing should be used entirely for this purpose, and should be kept perfectly clean. Otherwise a "spotty" negative will be the result. All other dishes should be kept clean, and used for one purpose only.

When developing, the exposed plate should be placed into the dish, which must be held at a slight angle, and the developer poured over it evenly. This should not be done in the direct light of the ruby lamp, as even the best lamps will sometimes affect a plate.

The question of time to be allowed for developing is an important one. A good method of judging this is to leave the plate in the developer, rocking it the while for fourteen times as long as the time taken for the first image to appear. To judge this a clock or watch should be kept in the dark-room.

When the developer is complete the plate must be well rinsed in water, and then placed in the fixing bath, where it should remain for ten to fifteen minutes, after fixing is complete—i.e., after the white film has passed from the back of the plate.

Note.—Use plenty of all solutions.

At the completion of fixing, the plates should be thoroughly washed in perfectly clean water. Water is the best hypo-eliminater, if plenty of it is used, and if the plate is not thoroughly washed, it will be spoilt by hypo stains.

When at last the fixing and washing is complete, the negative should be dried in a place well ventilated, not too warm, and perfectly free from dust, for even at this stage the negative can be spoilt by dust, uneven drying, the film melting or frilling at the edges.

Thus it has been shown that the greatest care in all operations must be taken if the photographer would be successful in his negative-making, and on no account, at least until he is sufficiently well versed in drying by methylated spirit, should the beginner try to hurry the drying of his negatives, or any other part of the process, for that matter, for no time should be counted a loss if the result is satisfactory.

THE EDITOR.