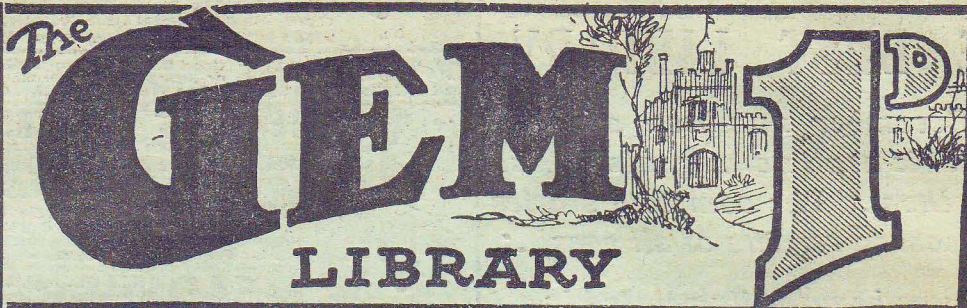


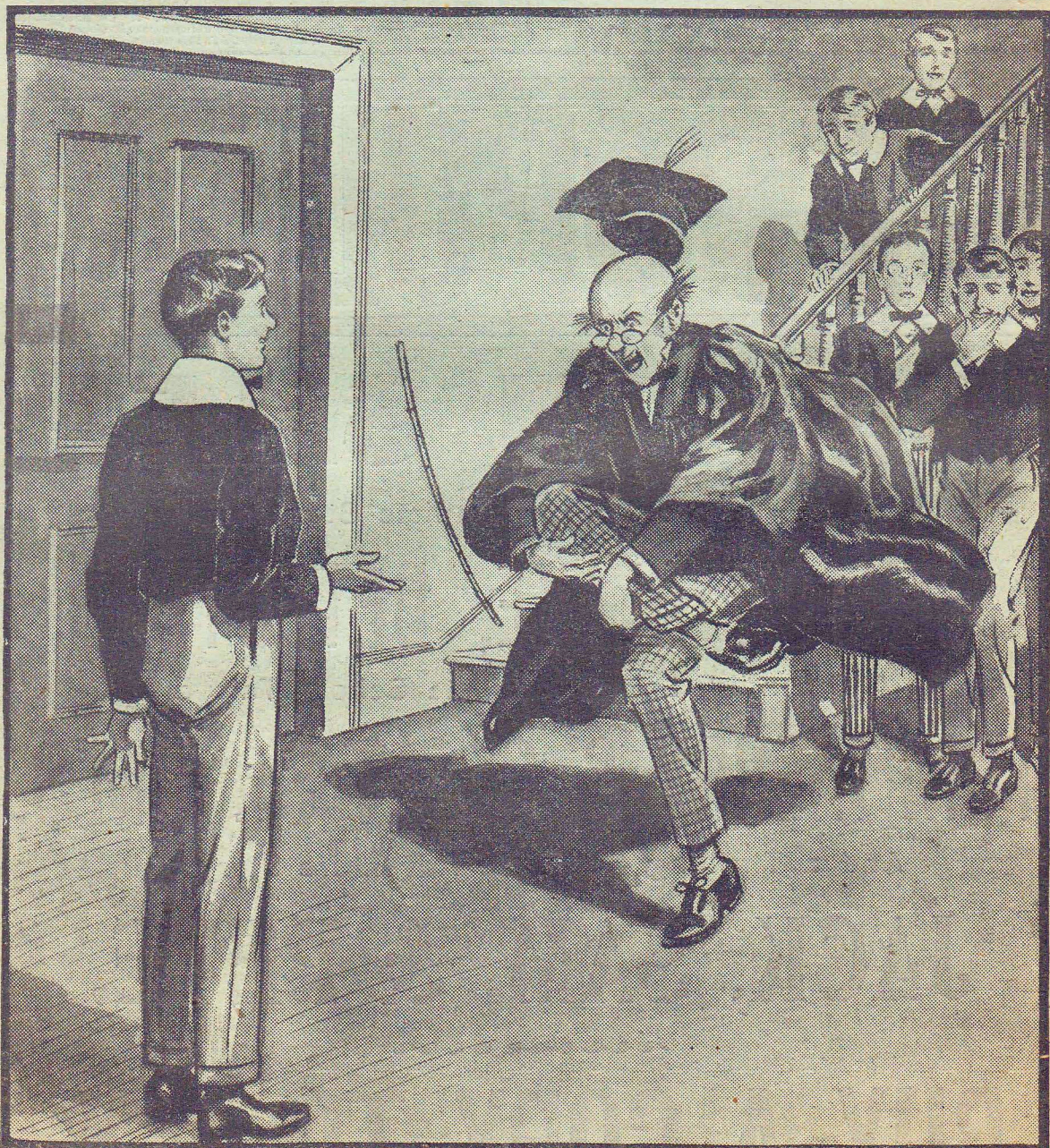
# "THE RIVAL HOUSE MASTERS!"

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At the critical moment Jack Blake sudden'y withdrew his hand, and the cane swept through the air, and, meeting with no resistance, thrashed against Mr. Ratcliff's right leg with a sound that rang like a pistol shot. The unhappy master gave a yell of anguish: "Ow! ah! oh!"

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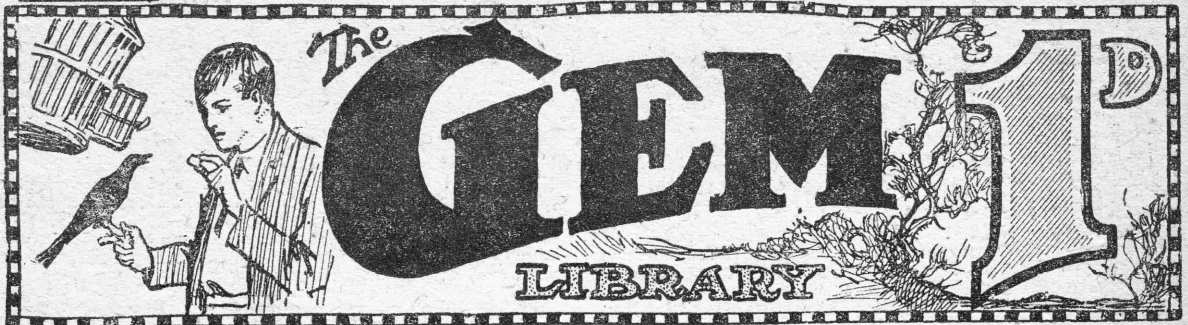
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"THE NEW BOY'S SECRET!"

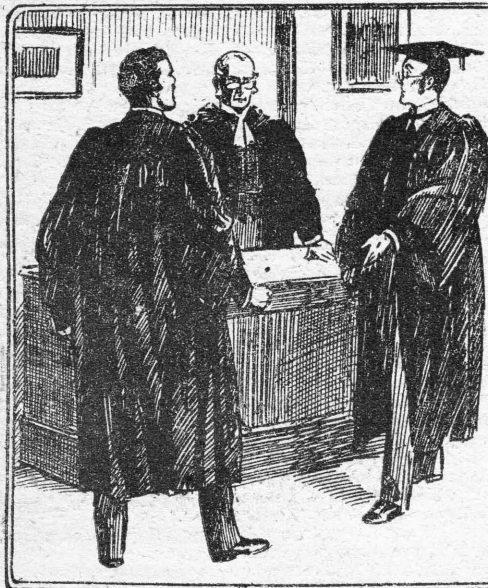
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EDITOR.

### CHAPTER 1. Caught in the Snow!

TOM MERRY pushed up the collar of his overcoat.

"More snow!" he said.

"Looks like it!" said Monty Lowther.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Might as well get under shelter for a bit," said Tom Merry, as a fierce gust of wind drove the whirling flakes into their faces. "We're late for calling over, anyway, and we shall have to ring up Taggles."

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

Tom Merry laughed.

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

"Hear, hear!" said Manners.

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

"Oh, shelter," said Lowther.

"Then nip under this tree."

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

The bitter wind was driving the flakes along the lane in clouds. The juniors drew their mufflers and their coat-collars tighter, and sheltered themselves as well as they could by the trunk of the big tree.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry suddenly.

"What's the matter?"

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

"By Jove!"

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

His form was very indistinct in the gloomy evening dusk, but there seemed to be something familiar about him to the eyes of the juniors.

He came closer, and strode past, and the juniors remained unnoticed in the deep shadow under the tree.

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

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

Monty Lowther nodded.

"Railton!"

"Yes."

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

"May be going to look for the prefects," said Monty Lowther. "You remember we saw Kildare and Darrel and North in Wayland, and I fancy the storm will keep them out a bit. By

Next Wednesday:

"THE NEW BOY'S SECRET!" AND "BIRDS OF PREY!"

No. 255 (New Series). Vol. 7.

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Jove! if we could get in now, we might get clear without being spotted. Railton and three prefects out, and I know Langton is away now. Only Knox left."

"Good! Might get out of our lines."

"Hurray!"

The thought was sufficient to make the chums of the Shell brave the snowstorm. They emerged from the shelter of the tree, and tramped through the thickening snow towards St. Jim's once more.

There was a sudden shout in the gloom.

"School House cads!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Yah!"

Whiz! whiz! whiz!

Plump! bump! Biff!

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

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

"Ugh! Yow!"

"Groooh!"

"Yowp!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "Who's cock-house at St. Jim's! Give 'em socks!"

"Give 'em beans!" yelled Kerr.

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whiz! whiz! whiz!

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

Tom Merry staggered back, blinded by breaking snowballs, and Manners sat down in the snow, and Monty Lowther reeled and staggered as if he had been imbibing strong liquors not wisely, but too well.

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

"Buck up, School House!" he shouted

"Yes, rather!"

Whiz! whiz! whiz!

"Ow! Ooooch!"

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

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

Crash! Bump!

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

"Grooooooh!"

Manners dropped underneath Fatty Wynn, and Fatty Wynn sat on him. When Fatty Wynn of the Fourth was sitting on anybody, that body had not the slightest chance of rising again until Fatty Wynn chose. Manners collapsed into the snow and gurgled.

"Groo! Lemme gerrup!"

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

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

"No fear!" said Tom Merry calmly.

"Groo! I'm chook-chook-choking with s-s-s-snow!"

"Never mind; that's all right."

"You—you chump! Lemme gerrup!"

"Lemme up, you fat idiot, Wynn!" gasped Manners. "Ow!"

I'm being squashed! I'm being turned into a pancake! Yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bump! Monty Lowther and Kerr rolled in the snow at last, kicking up clouds of it as they struggled.

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

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

"Grooh! Yes."

"Pax!" grunted Kerr.

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

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(See column 2, page 27 of this issue.)

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

"You School House fatheads!"

"You duffer!"

"You chump!"

"Look here——"

"Look here——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Shut up, all of you!"

Is that what you call pax?"

"Well, that silly ass——"

"Well, that frabjous chump——"

"Shut up! Let's get in, and get some of the snow out of our necks," said Tom Merry. "We shall have impots for missing calling-over as it is."

And the School House fellows tramped on to St. Jim's, with the juniors of the New House, in the comforting assurance that they would have lines for being late.

## CHAPTER 2.

### Ratty is Ratty!

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

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

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

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

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

Study No. 6—tenanted by Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy—could easily keep the ball rolling, so far as that went.

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

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

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

All the fellows were indoors—excepting those who were out of gates. And while in the New House order reigned, things were very much the reverse in the School House.

In the New House fellows were quietly at work in their studies, or chatting in the common-room and the passages.

But in the School House there reigned a terrific uproar.

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

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

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

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

"What's happened?" yawned Herries.

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

"Well?"

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

"Suppose he has?"

"And I have just seen Darrel, Rushden, and North, our other never-to-be-sufficiently respected prefects, take themselves off."

"Where are they gone?"

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

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

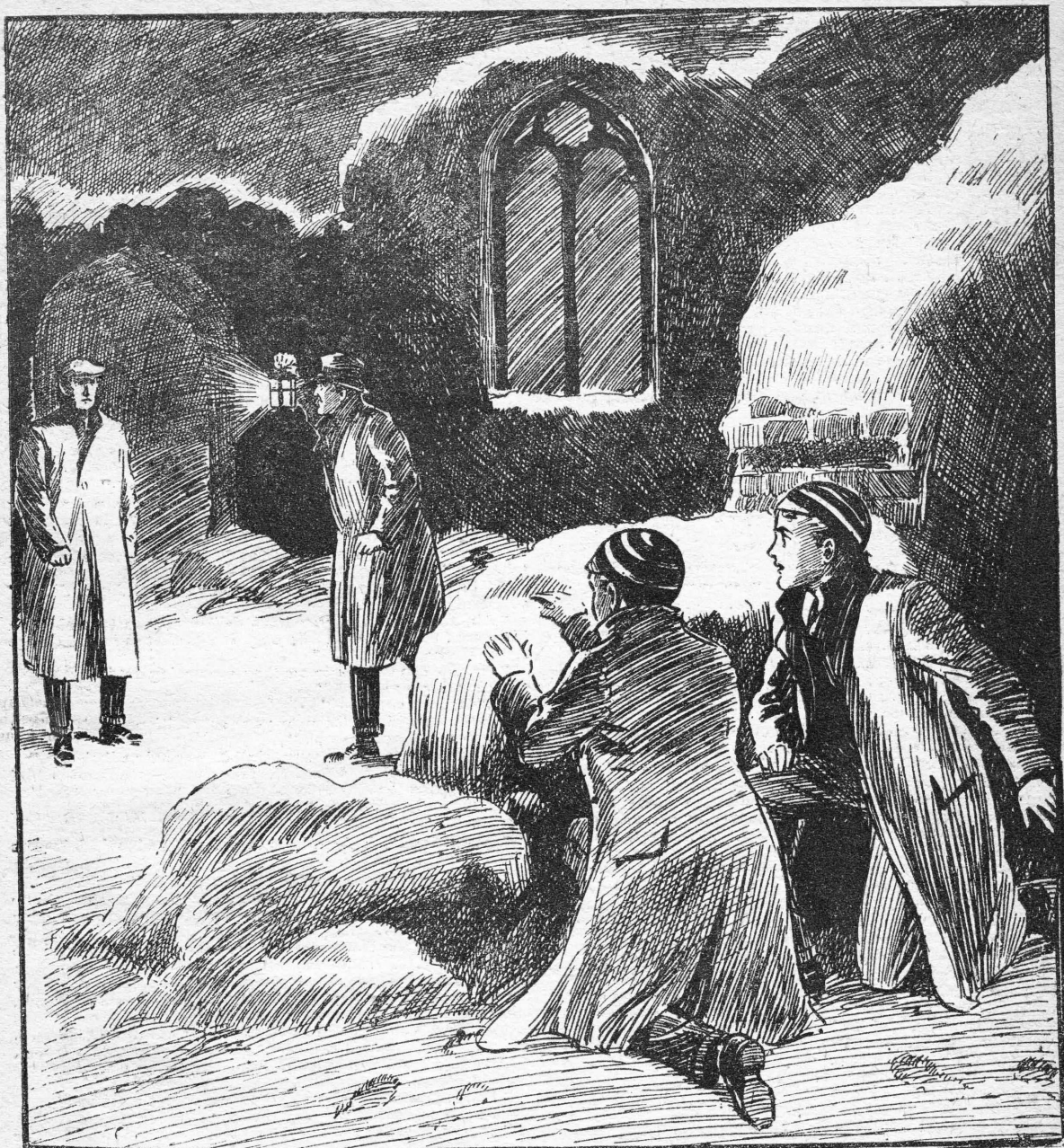
"Knox doesn't count. He's a weak-kneed chap, and wouldn't matter much, anyway. But, for the sake of making assurance doubly sure, I've shoved a wedge under his door. You know it opens outwards, so he can't get out if he wants to."

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

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

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

"Bai Jove, we can have a giddy treat now!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House.



Tom Merry and Figgins exchanged a look of mute amazement, as the figure of the School House master came into the circle of light cast by the lantern which the waiting stranger held up. (See Chapter 7.)

Blake executed a war-dance.

"Follow your uncle!" he ejaculated. "Your Uncle Blake is a mighty chief. Pull up your socks, you cripples, and buzz along!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Peace, peace!" exclaimed Blake. "Peace, my children.

This is no time for rowing each other. We're free, my infants, and now for a lark!"

The word ran through the School House.

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

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

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

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

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

Never had the School House let itself go so completely.

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NEXT  
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"THE NEW BOY'S SECRET!"

A Grand, Long, Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co, at  
St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The little fun which they had promised themselves at first was nothing to what they went in for as they grew more excited.

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

And the Housemaster was far away, the captain was gone, and the prefects had abandoned their charge, with the solitary exception of Knox, a prisoner in his own study.

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

It was some time before it dawned upon the Sixth-Former that he was the only person of authority left in the School House. When he realised that, he tried to open his door to go out and do his best to quell the riot, but owing to Blake's excellent precaution, the door would not budge.

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

The School House was fairly enjoying itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Ratcliff was the soul of order and exactness, and he considered that Mr. Railton managed his house badly, but he had never yet attempted to interfere. He was of a somewhat interfering nature, and sometimes gave advice, which his fellow-Housemaster received with scant gratitude.

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

He smiled sourly at the thought.

Mr. Railton was so sensitive about the government of his House that his rival had a chance now to give him a deep dig in a tender spot.

The master of the New House left his door and walked towards the School House. Shadows were dancing on the blinds of the lighted windows, and even at this distance he could hear the din, which showed how terrific it must be upon the spot.

"I cannot understand Mr. Railton lately," Mr. Ratcliff said to himself. "He always, in my opinion, neglected his duties, but of late he seems more careless than ever. He really seems like a man with a weight upon his mind. If I were Head of St. James's, I should certainly not consider him a proper person for a Housemaster here."

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

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

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

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"Ahem!"

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

The noise stopped as if by magic in the hall, though from other parts of the house it continued unabated.

Blake, for once taken aback, stared at the lean figure of the Housemaster at the door, for the first time aware of Mr. Ratcliff's presence.

Blake was the coolest boy in the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, but when he realised that Mr. Ratcliff must have overheard his remark he turned hot all over.

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

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

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

"Mr. Railton is out, sir."

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

"The prefects are out also, sir."

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

"Yes, sir; there's Knox."

"Where is he?"

"In his room, sir."

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

"He can't get out of his room, sir," said Blake, not wishing to get the unfortunate prefect into hot water. "His door's got fixed, and he can't open it."

"How could his door get fixed? What nonsense are you talking?"

"I believe there's a wedge of wood or something under it," said Blake demurely.

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

"Mr. Railton did not know they were going out."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I suppose—"

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

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

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

Whereat the Fifth Form boys turned red, and looked daggers at the Fourth-Formers.

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

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

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

Dead silence.

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

"I have nothing to tell you, sir."

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

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

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

But in any case, Blake was too strong upon the dignity of his House to submit to being catechised by the New House master.

"Answer me, Blake."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

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

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

"Every one of us," added Digby.

"I did not ask your opinion. Blake, step forward."

Blake reluctantly advanced.

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

"Hold out your hand, sir."

Blake's hands remained down at his sides.

A thrill ran through the crowd of School House boys

Was Blake going to defy the interfering intruder?

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

"Blake!" A dull red flush came into Mr. Ratcliff's sallow cheeks. "Blake, I told you to hold out your hand."

"Yes, sir, I heard you."

"Obey me, then, instantly!"

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

"Blake!"

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

"Hold out your hand at once!"

Blake's eyes flashed fire.

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

He held out his hand.

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

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

"The other hand, Blake."

Blake held it out, and received another slash. Mr. Ratcliff's little eyes were glittering cruelly.

"Now the other again."

Blake set his teeth.

He had gone through a good many lickings in his career at St. Jim's, but he had never had such terrible stingers as Mr. Ratcliff was giving him now. That, added to the knowledge that Mr. Ratcliff had no right to punish him, was the cause of his next action.

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

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

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

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

"Oh!—ah!—ow!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "You wicked, wretched, brutal, ruffianly boy! Oh!—ah!—ow! Ow!—ow!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shame!"

"Shame!"

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

"Shame!"

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

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

Mr. Railton had returned!

The Housemaster of the School House looked on at the scene in dumb amazement for a moment, then, with flashing eyes, he sprang forward.

"Mr. Ratcliff! Release that boy instantly!"

## CHAPTER 3.

### Rival Masters.

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

The junior promptly twisted out of his reach.

Mr. Railton advanced quickly toward Mr. Ratcliff, his eyes blazing, and for a moment the School House thrilled with the delightful anticipation that their chief intended to take hold of the meddler and pitch him neck and crop out of the house.

It is quite possible that some such thought was in Mr. Railton's mind for a second, but if so, prudence asserted itself in time.

He stopped, facing Mr. Ratcliff, who had quickly recovered his coolness.

For a moment or two the two Housemasters looked at each other, a slight sneer upon Mr. Ratcliff's sallow face, an angry flush upon Mr. Railton's.

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

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

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

Mr. Railton bit his lip.

His impulsive, quick nature was always at a disadvantage in dealing with the slow, cold, self-contained master of the New House.

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

"With pleasure," said Mr. Ratcliff blandly.

Mr. Railton turned to the boys.

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

Mr. Ratcliff smiled maliciously.

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

The master of the School House flushed red.

"Please step into my study."

"Certainly."

The boys dispersed, and the two masters went into Mr. Railton's study, and the door closed. The New House master was quite cool and collected.

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

"Will you allow me to explain?"

"I am waiting for you to do so."

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

"H'm! That is very surprising."

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

"I cannot understand how—"

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

The School House master bit his lip.

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

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

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

"I did not think so, and I was upon the spot, and you were

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out. If a Housemaster goes wandering off instead of attending to his duties, he ought to be thankful there is someone on the spot to attend to those duties for him."

"Mr. Ratcliff!"

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

"I do not choose to listen to your criticisms of the discipline of my House, sir!" said Mr. Railton, with heat. "Your explanation is specious, but I cannot credit that you interfered with the best intentions. That is plain English."

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

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

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

"I will inquire into the matter at once."

And the master of the School House sent for Blake.

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

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

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

"I am sorry, sir. I did not know Mr. Ratcliff was listening when I spoke."

"Eh? I do not understand."

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

Mr. Ratcliff turned crimson.

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

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

The master of the New House struck in hastily:

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

But Blake did not mean to spare him.

"I just happened to say to the kids that they mustn't make such a noise, sir, because if old Ratcliff heard, he would like to poke his long nose into the house."

Blake made this statement with perfect gravity.

Mr. Railton almost exploded. The expression upon Mr. Ratcliff's face was indescribable.

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, sir."

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

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

"Dear me! How comes that?"

"Somebody shoved a wedge of wood under his door, sir."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Yes, sir."

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

Blake hesitated.

"I—I'm afraid to, sir."

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

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

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

"Myself, sir," said Blake demurely.

Mr. Railton started.

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

"Blake! It was you?"

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

The Housemaster breathed hard.

"You may go, Blake."

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"Thank you, sir."

And the scamp of the School House quitted the room. Mr. Railton looked after him frowningly for some moments, and then burst into a laugh. It was impossible to be angry for long with Jack Blake.

## CHAPTER 4.

### Figgins Smiles.

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

Mr. Ratcliff, who took a deep interest in everybody's affairs, and seldom allowed anything to escape his attention, had observed that of late the master of the School House seemed to have something weighing upon his mind, and had wondered what it was. With a characteristically mean suspicion, he had decided that Mr. Railton was in trouble of some kind, which would not be to his credit if the facts came out.

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

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

His painful reverie was interrupted by a tap at the door. In a moment the Housemaster pulled himself together.

"Come in!" he called out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Railton flushed slightly.

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

"Then Knox was fastened in his room, it appears," said Kildare. "The fellow who did that wants a big licking."

Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

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

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

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

"He does not appear to have thought of that."

"No; he wanted to meddle in our House!" said Darrel, hotly. "Are we going to stand it, sir?"

"I am afraid we are in an unfortunate position," said the Housemaster. "Certainly the House got out of hand, and so Mr. Ratcliff, technically, had a right to interfere. We must see that it does not happen again, that is all."

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

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

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

"I agree with you."

And Mr. Railton nodded, and the prefects retired. They were in a far from amiable mood, for they felt quite as deeply as Mr. Railton the insult that had been put upon their House.

Kildare repaired at once to No. 6 Study. He found the

# ANSWERS



four hard at work at their neglected "prep." Blake looked up meekly as the captain of the school came in, and stood surveying them grimly.

"Hallo, Kildare!" he said affably. "Glad to see you. Have you come to tea with us? This is an honour, it is, really, old chap. Sit down, will you, and we'll have the kettle boiling in a jiffy."

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

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

"Oh, come," remonstrated Blake, "don't be such a bear, old fellow! What have we done?"

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

"How should we know he was coming?" protested Blake.

"Besides, I stood up for the honour of the House, didn't I, chaps, and caught it pretty hot, too?"

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

"Well, I started the toboggan."

"You young rascal!"

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

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

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

The captain turned to the door.

"No."

"I say, it's jolly good tea, and—"

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

"We're out of that pretty well," he said genially. "Considering what a ghastly row we made, I think we have come off all right. I'm sorry we gave old Ratty a chance to score off Mr. Railton. But that couldn't be foreseen, could it?"

"Of course not," said Herries; "and it was a jolly jape so long as it lasted. It will be a long time before we have a treat like that again."

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

Blake whistled.

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

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

"Hallo, what was that?"

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

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

Clink!

It was another pebble on the glass. Blake rose and went to the window, and threw it up. Outside, the dusk was thick in the quadrangle.

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

"All right," came back the well-known voice of Figgins, chief of the New House juniors. "We ain't going to break the glass."

"What do you bounders want, anyway?"

There was a chuckle in the dusk below.

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

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Then take it and go."

Figgins chuckled again.

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

And the Co. replied together:

"The School House kids do."

"Who has to keep 'em in order?"

"The New House."

"Who's the cock-house at St. Jim's?"

"New House! New House!"

Blake's eyes gleamed.

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

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

Digby grinned, and obeyed.

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

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

"Blake does."

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

"Ratcliff does."

"Who— Great pip!"

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

All three of the New House juniors came in for a share of

the water, and they yelled in chorus. The water soused over their heads, ran down their collars, and the tea-leaves stuck in their hair and on their faces.

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

And his comrades chimed in:

"Figgins does!"

"Oh, you horrid beasts!" gasped Figgins; and he bolted, in case there should be more water to come, and the Co. followed him promptly.

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

## CHAPTER 5.

### Monteith Makes a Discovery.

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

His companions glanced towards Mr. Railton.

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

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

Tom Merry shook his head.

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then, if you know all about it?"

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

"Not so much talk there, kids," said the prefect in charge of the Shell table.

"All right, Darrel," said Tom Merry under his breath.

"Keep your whiskers on."

"Did you speak, Merry?"

"Sort of thought aloud, Darrel."

"What did you say?"

"H'm! It's a jolly fine morning, isn't it?"

"Was that what you said?"

"Well, no," admitted Tom Merry cautiously, "that wasn't exactly what I said. But—"

"Well, shut up, or I shall come along and warm you," said Darrel, laughing.

And there was silence for about half a minute.

"It's queer about Railton," said Mellish of the Fourth, after breakfast.

"What do you know about it, Mellish?" asked Kangaroo.

"Railton had a letter this morning."

"Nothing wonderful in that," said Tom Merry.

"He was all right till he opened it," said Mellish. "I saw him. Then his face came over black, and he muttered something. And he's been looking worried ever since."

"And what do you conclude from that, ass?"

"That it is the letter that's worrying him," replied Mellish.

"Very likely some beastly poor relation writing to him to ask for money, or something of that kind."

"I suppose that would worry you, Mellish; but it might not worry him. He's not such a champion mean man as you are, you know."

"Oh, rats!" said Mellish.

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

The master's preoccupation was certainly noticeable.

Kildare, at breakfast, had made several remarks, and received answers almost at random, and had relapsed into silence, his look showing how surprised he was.

Mr. Railton caught the expression upon the captain's face, and coloured slightly, and, as if recollecting himself, began to talk in his usual cheery way.

But he left the table quickly when breakfast was over, and went down the steps into the quadrangle. The juniors poured out into the quad, before going in to morning school. Tom Merry caught a glimpse of Mr. Railton under the leafless elms, intent upon reading a letter he held in his hand. Evidently he was reading over again the missive which Mellish had declared had had such a gloomy effect upon him when he received it that morning.

But Tom was not the kind of boy to trouble himself about affairs that did not concern him. He was not at all curious.

And, as it happened, his attention was wanted elsewhere.

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

The boys rejoiced in it. Outside the New House Figgins & Co. had made a slide, which was gradually lengthened until it extended well within School House territory. Much less than that was required to send the Terrible Three on the warpath.

"Look at those horrid bounders," said Tom Merry, horrified by the presumption of Figgins & Co. "Actually sticking their old slide into our ground! Fancy such cheek! This is where we snatch them bald-headed!"

"Let's collar their slide," suggested Manners,

"Bravo!" yelled Lowther.

"What a weally wipping idea!" said D'Arcy.

Tom Merry chuckled.

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

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

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

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

Figgins gave a yell.

"Get clear, you beasts!"

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

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

It was impossible for the New House junior to stop himself. He was going at an express rate, and Tom Merry was coming with almost equal impetus to meet him. And, in fact, only a few seconds elapsed before the rivals met at the centre of the slide.

"As meets a rock a thousand waves,

So Inisfail met Lochlin!"

sings the poet; but that meeting was simply nowhere compared to the meeting of Figgins and Tom Merry in the centre of that long slide.

"Oh, oh, oh!" gasped Figgins, every ounce of breath knocked out of his body. He felt like a pancake between the School House juniors in front and his own followers behind.

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

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

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

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

"Gerrof me neck!" gurgled Tom Merry.

"Lemme gerrup!" gasped Figgins.

But it was some time before the mixed-up juniors could sort themselves out, and allow the breathless leaders to rise. Tom Merry and Figgins staggered to their feet at last, and Figgins, inadvertently stepping on the slide as he did so, sat down again with surprising suddenness.

"Oh, crumbs!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That was a good deal more than Figgins & Co. could stand.

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

And the New House juniors, bursting with wrath, rushed to the attack, to drive the intruders away by main force. A glorious melee followed, and as the footing on the frozen ground was extremely uncertain, falls were frequent—indeed, there were more of the combatants on the ground than on their feet most of the time.

"What ever is this disturbance about?"

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

"What is the matter here?"

Mr. Railton came swiftly towards them—too swiftly, in fact, for he ran upon the slide without seeing that it was there.

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

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Railton. "Oh! Ah! Ugh! What—Oh, oh, ah!"

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

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—"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY,  
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"Ah!" gasped the Housemaster. "Oh, dear me! Whatever has happened?"

He tried to scramble up. But at that moment came another of this lamentable chapter of accidents. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, had sallied out, came in hand, to put an end to the disturbance. He came out of the New House with a run, stepped on the slide as Mr. Railton had done, and came upon the scene much quicker than he had intended.

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

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

"I should think you do!" gasped Mr. Railton, as Tom Merry helped him up. "How could you be so absurdly clumsy, Monteith?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monteith scowled.

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

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

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

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

The bell began to ring at this moment, and the boys hurried away, and Mr. Railton hurried in.

Monteith scowled after him.

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

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

He broke off. A sheet of paper lying on the frozen snow attracted his attention. It was a letter, and had evidently been dropped there by someone a few minutes ago.

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

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

The prefect put the letter into his pocket and walked back quickly into the New House. His curiosity was strongly excited. He had no scruples about reading another fellow's letter; he had done meaner things even than that in his time. But the thought was in his mind that the letter did not belong to a boy, but to Mr. Railton. Before coming out of the New House he had seen the Housemaster hurrying towards the scene of the disturbance with what looked like a letter held in his hand. Was this the letter? It was very probable. In that case, he was on the track of—something.

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

Monteith grinned.

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

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

But Monteith had no intention of restoring it to its owner. He walked away to his own study, leaving Mr. Railton still searching in the quadrangle for the letter that was not there. Undoubtedly the Housemaster had remembered the letter, and missed it, and had returned at once to look for it—at once, but too late.

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

"My hat!" he muttered. "I thought, from the little

bit I saw, that it was something against the bounder; but this—well, I never expected anything like this! My hat!"

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

## CHAPTER 6.

### Mr. Ratcliff on the Track.

"CAN I speak to you for a few minutes, sir?"

"Certainly, Monteith. Is anything the matter?" asked Mr. Ratcliff, looking in surprise at his head prefect's serious face.

"I am afraid so, sir. I am not quite sure whether it concerns our house or the School House. But perhaps you will decide what is best to be done?"

"Come into my study," said Mr. Ratcliff, his interest aroused. Monteith had followed him to his door after morning school. They entered the room. Monteith took the letter he had picked up in the quadrangle from his pocket.

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

"Quite right, Monteith."

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

This is how the letter ran:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Ratcliff pursed up his thin lips.

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

Mr. Ratcliff knew very well that the master of the School House had been there. Monteith knew that he knew it; but he answered gravely:

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

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

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

"Undoubtedly!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a snap of the teeth.

"If there's a man here being blackmailed by some scoundrel, sir, it shows that he must be a pretty bad lot himself," the prefect went on. "He ought to be exposed and got rid of before he brings St. Jim's into disgrace. The difficulty is, that we don't know to whom the letter belongs."

"That is unfortunate."

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

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

"Just after I picked the letter up I saw Mr. Railton looking round in the quad, as if he had lost something. Of course,

I could not insult him by supposing that such a letter belonged to him. But he may know something about it."

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

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

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

"You could go to the ruins at ten to-night, sir, and then you would see who met this man who signs himself 'B. H.'," suggested Monteith. "That would be proof positive, and he would not be able to crawl out of it."

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

"I agree with you, sir."

"You may safely leave the matter in my hands, Monteith. I will certainly see to it. You may leave the letter with me."

"Certainly, sir."

And Monteith quitted his Housemaster's study in a mood of the most profound satisfaction. In spite of the solemn humbug Mr. Ratcliff had seen fit to keep up in talking with the prefect, Monteith knew that he would do his worst. There were breakers ahead for the master of the School House. Monteith had realised, when he first read the letter, what a weapon it would be against the School House master. But he could hardly venture to make use of it himself. His nerve was not quite good enough for that. To leave it in the hands of Mr. Ratcliff was safer, and just as sure; and this arrangement suited the cautious, spiteful prefect admirably.

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

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

And several times, as Mr. Ratcliff went about his work that afternoon, smiles broke out over his face, as if he had some very pleasant thoughts in his mind. And his boys wondered what made old Ratty so unusually good-humoured.

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

"Dear me," murmured Mr. Ratcliff, "it really looks as if Monteith's surmise is correct, and Mr. Railton does know something about the letter. It is quite possible that it is that letter he is looking for at this moment. However, I shall ascertain the facts to-night, and I sincerely hope they will be to the credit of Mr. Railton."

And Mr. Ratcliff gave a slight laugh.

And those who heard him, and saw him at the window, wondered what on earth he saw in the quadrangle to cackle about.

## CHAPTER 7.

### Mysterious!

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

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

"Shouldn't wonder."

"You're going, I suppose?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rats! Figgys is going alone."

"But—"

"I'd like to have one of you," said Tommy, "but it can't be

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did. I've got to go alone, but one of you can stay awake to let me in."

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

"Right you are!"

And Tommy turned away from the window.

"Come, let us eat, drink, and be merry!" he exclaimed. "I shall face it better with some tommy and hot coffee inside me. Gimme those sassingers."

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

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

Some distance from St. Jim's, an easy walk in summer, but a far from easy tramp in winter, was the old ruined castle on the slopes of the hill. Local rumour had it that the ruins were haunted, and that on dark nights spectres could be seen gliding to and fro amid the masses of fallen masonry. Whether the spectres really kept such late hours was not certain; but it was certain that after dark the ruins were avoided by all the dwellers round about Rylcombe and Wayland.

In the daytime, the juniors of St. Jim's liked to explore the ruins, not greatly troubled by the fact that they were out of bounds. Tommy knew his way about in them pretty well. There had been a heated discussion among some of the juniors of the two Houses, which had led to a challenge from Figgins, which Tom had not been slow to accept. Figgins having expressed an opinion that the School House leader would funk going to the ruins after dark, Tommy had offered to fight Figgins on the spot. But, as Figgy pointed out, that would have proved nothing either one way or the other. Figgy thereupon dared Tom to prove, by going to the ruined castle that very night, that he did not funk it, to which Tom Merry retorted that he would go if Figgins would meet him there. The New House leader had not expected that, but he was not the fellow to back down. And in order to go one better than the School House, he said that he would get there first, and wait for the captain of the Shell.

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

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

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

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

"Suppose you meet the ghost?" said Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

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

The chums enjoyed the feed. Then they roasted chestnuts and ate them till bedtime.

The talk ran on in a strain which was not exactly grateful and comforting to Tom Merry, with the night expedition before him.

Manners related a ghost story, in which a fellow visiting a ruined castle had been seized from behind by a grim goblin, and had disappeared from human ken.

Lowther knew a tale of a chap who had seen a spectre while going through a lonely wood at midnight, and had died the next morning.

Tom Merry was rather glad when bedtime came, and the Shell went up to their dormitory. Kildare came along to see lights out, and he found all the juniors tucked up in bed.

He glanced along the row of white beds, said good-night, and turned the light out. The door closed, and the captain's footsteps died away along the corridor.

Tom Merry yawned and sat up.

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

"My hat! It's a cold night!" he said.

"Nothing like what it will be at the old castle," said Kangaroo.

"Did you notice how it was snowing, Tommy, my dear?"

"No, I didn't!"

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

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

He hopped out of bed, and was soon fully dressed again. He

went to the big window and looked out. The snow was certainly falling.

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

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

"I wasn't talking to you, pig. Now, Kangy, Monty, Manners, don't all speak at once!"

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

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

In the flicker of the candle, Kangaroo tossed a coin.

"Now, what is it—head or tail?"

"Head," said Lowther.

"Tain't. It's tail. You're wrong. It's between you and Manners!" said the Cornstalk junior, as he chucked the penny to Lowther, who tossed.

"Head or tail, Manners?"

"Tail!"

"Tain't, it's head. You've got to get up."

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

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

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

"Quite!"

The two juniors quietly left the dormitory. As Tom Merry had said, there was not likely to be anyone about. Some of the seniors were in the common-room, and the others in their warm studies. The juniors tiptoed down the stairs, and reached a little window at the end of a deserted passage, and Tom Merry quietly opened it.

The sill was white with snow.

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

"Yes, by Jove! Still, Figgy will be just as nipped as I shall, that's one comfort. Now, don't forget to keep awake."

"You can trust me, Tommy old man."

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

"Right-ho!"

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

"Have you hurt yourself, Tom?"

"Nunno. Only sat down. My own giddy fault. Au revoir, kid."

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

Tom Merry left a trail of deep footprints behind him, but fortunately the snow was falling fast enough to cover them. He made for a point in the wall where the masses of ivy made scaling an easy task. He had crossed the wall in that place more than once, by the aid of a slanting oak.

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

Tom Merry stood for some moments in reflection.

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

The next instant Tom Merry dodged with surprising suddenness into the shadow of the ivy.

He had caught a sound near at hand—a sound faint but unmistakable, quite sufficient to alarm a junior in the act of breaking bounds. And he took cover with great promptness.

"Who's that?" he murmured.

A figure loomed up out of the darkness and the falling snow—a sturdy form in a long overcoat with a cap pulled down over his ears. Tom Merry, peeping out cautiously, saw the form and knew it at once.

"Railton, by Jove!"

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

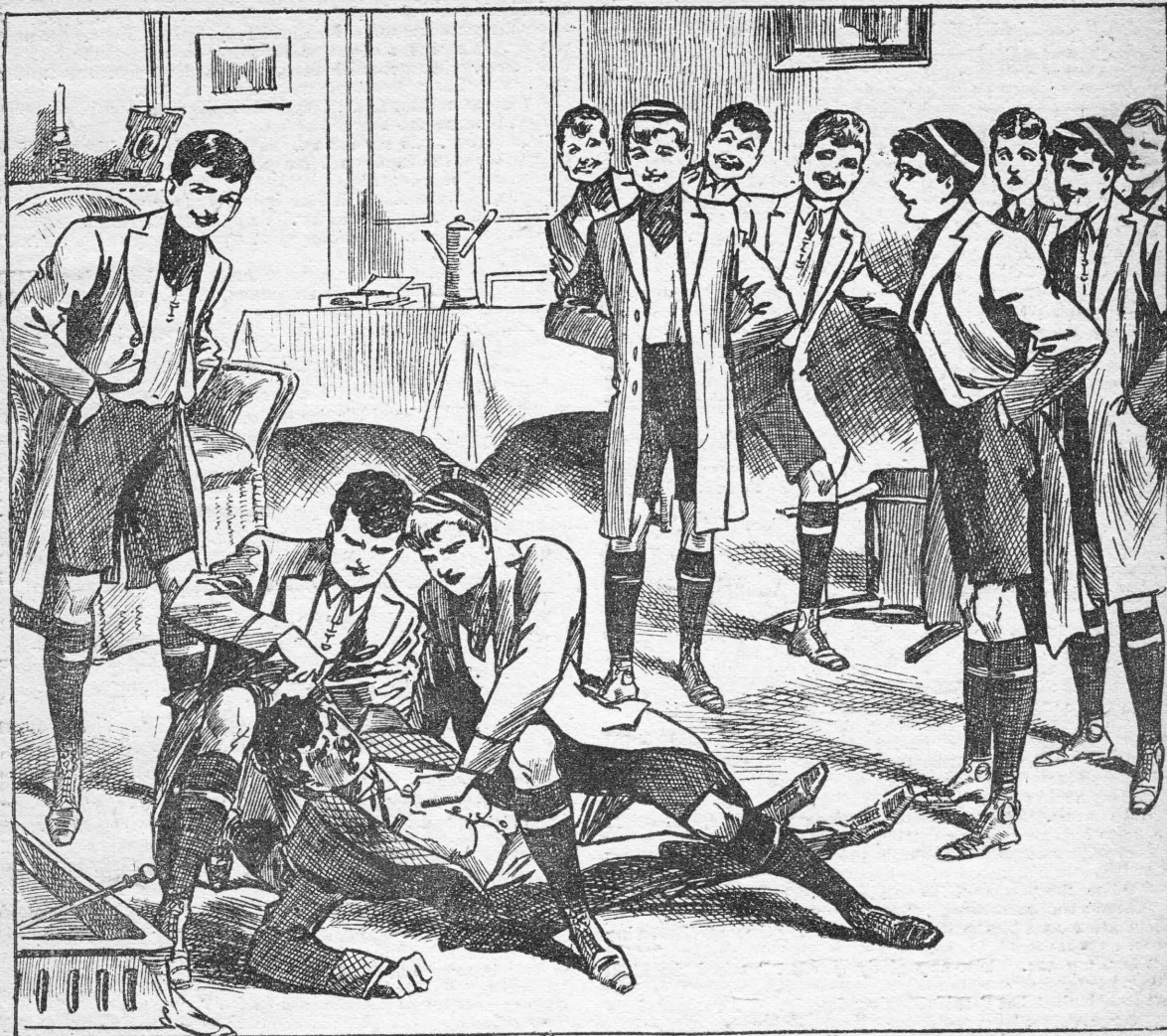
Tom Merry heard the click of a key, and the Housemaster disappeared. He had evidently quitted the precincts of St. Jim's.

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

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

A slight cough came to his ears. He lay low in the black shadow of the ivy.

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



Harry Wharton ladled the sooty mixture upon Ponsonby's features. The captain of Highcliffe writhed and struggled and squirmed frantically, "Better keep your mouth shut," suggested Wharton. "You may get some of this in it!" For the above amusing incident, see the splendid, long, complete tale of Harry Wharton & Co., entitled "HARRY WHARTON'S WIN!" by Frank Richards, which is contained in this week's issue of our popular companion paper "The Magnet" Library. Now on Sale at all newsagents', Price One Penny.

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

"Is everybody on the giddy mooch to-night?" he muttered. "I suppose I shall see the Head coming along next." But no one else appeared, and after waiting five minutes, the Shell fellow ventured to leave his concealment. He was considerably surprised.

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

He tackled the ivy again. His first attempt brought a shower of snow down upon him, and he plumped back upon the ground. The snow was soft to fall upon there, however, and he was not hurt. He returned to the attack indomitably, and succeeded in reaching the summit of the wall. To drop down outside was easy enough.

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

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

He came out of the shadow of the wood on the slopes of Wayland Hill. Had it been daylight, the old castle would now have been visible. He could see nothing but whirling flakes; but he knew the way blindfold. Without a pause he strode on.

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

Tom Merry paused in dismay.

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

The junior was utterly bewildered.

Mr. Ratcliff might have discovered that Figgins had broken bounds, but that would hardly be enough to take him out so far. It wasn't that. His visit to the castle had nothing to do with the juniors, Tom Merry felt sure.

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

The thought of giving up the expedition had crossed Tom

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Merry's mind at the sight of the New House master. He dismissed it now. He had to get to the ruins before Ratcliff, and warn Figgins.

To get ahead of the Housemaster was not difficult. Tom Merry made a detour, avoiding the path Ratcliff was following.

Mr. Ratcliff, with a wintry wind in his face, was going slowly. Tom Merry easily got ahead, and came back into the path again some distance in advance of the Housemaster. Then he ran on as fast as he could through the snow. The thick snow beneath him deadened his footsteps, and what slight sound he made was lost in the wind. It was fortunate for him, for all of a sudden he caught sight of a figure ahead, and stopped in time to avoid running into it.

He knew whom it was. He would have guessed, even if he had not recognised Mr. Railton's shoulders, and his coat and cap with the flaps over the ears.

"Railton, by all that's funny!"

Tom Merry was simply astounded.

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

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

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

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

"This is getting a bit thick," murmured Tom Merry. "I've dodged one, now I've got to dodge the other. What in the name of goodness does it all mean, anyway?"

There was no guessing that. The situation was growing rather thrilling. There was a deep mystery somewhere, and Tom Merry seemed likely to get mixed up in it. He had no time to waste. He left the path, as he had done before, and made a detour. Mr. Railton was going on at a steady tramp, and Tom Merry was easily able to calculate so as to get ahead of him. He came back into the path close before the castle, and passed through the ruined arch of the great gateway. The snow was falling more thickly than ever, and he hoped it would cover up his tracks before Mr. Railton arrived.

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

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

"That you, Tom Merry?"

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

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

"Oh, don't talk!" said Figgins sharply. "I've been here an hour, I think."

"Rats! Five minutes, you mean!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not a soul."

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

"Rot!"

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

Figgins gave a gasp of astonishment.

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

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

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

"Hallo, there comes somebody!"

There was a sound of tramping in the ruined hall. From over the wood in the distance came chiming bells, and then the hour struck. Ten strokes boomed through the snowy night.

As the last stroke died away, the new comer halted within a dozen paces of the boys, and a light gleamed out. Tom Merry

and Figgins shrunk back into the shadows. The light gleamed upon the snow from a lantern, and in its light they saw the man plainly. He was a stranger to them—a somewhat broadly-built man, with a reddish moustache and wisp of beard. He was wrapped in a greatcoat, and wore a soft hat.

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

Tom Merry gave a hopeless shrug.

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

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

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

"Look! There's Railton."

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

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

## CHAPTER 8. Trouble for Ratty.

TOM MERRY and Figgins exchanged a look of mute amazement. The two juniors, crouching among the masses of brickwork a dozen paces from the men, were quite invisible, and they did not venture to move. But now it occurred to both of them that if they remained where they were, they would be compelled to play the unpleasant and dishonourable part of eavesdroppers.

"Yes, I am here in time." It was Mr. Railton's voice, hard and cold. The juniors had never heard him speak like that before. "A pleasant night to be brought to such a place as this, Hunt." Hunt laughed.

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

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

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

"I have lost it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I hadn't made up my mind."

"Have you made it up yet?"

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

"I give you my word, Railton."

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

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

"You can trust me!" he exclaimed. "I have reasons as great for getting away from this country as you can have for wishing me away."

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

"Right you are!"

Hunt extinguished the lantern.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath, and nudged Figgins.

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

Figgins returned his nudge.

"Right-ho! Let's cut!"

While the lantern burned, there had been danger of revealing themselves if they moved, for the gleam of the snow on their coats and caps would have caught the light in the dim shadow of the ruins. And, more for the sake of Mr. Railton himself than for their own sakes, the boys would not have let him know of their presence there for worlds. They had heard

little, but they knew that Mr. Railton must have some powerful motive for meeting his relative in so secret a manner. There was some shadow over the Housemaster, which he evidently wished to keep from common knowledge.

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

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

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

Tom Merry stopped in the thick shadow of the wall, and gripped Figgy's arm.

"Look out!" he muttered.

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

Figgins drew a deep breath.

"Mr. Ratcliff, by Jove!"

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

Tom Merry and Figgins knew at once what that meant.

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

The opening in the old wall at which he was crouching was about midway between the juniors and the spot where Mr. Railton and Hunt were standing conversing. The words which came in an undistinguishable murmur to the juniors would be clear and distinct enough to the Housemaster.

Tom Merry put his mouth close to Figgy's ear to whisper:

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

Figgins nodded.

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

So far from feeling inclined to stand up for his Housemaster just then, Figgy was hot with anger at his lowering the dignity of his house in such a way, in sight of the School House leader.

"The beast is listening," whispered Tom Merry. "He's followed Railton here to listen. Very likely he picked up that letter Railton was speaking of, and read it. He's got it up against him, and you can't say he's playing the game, Figgy, old boy."

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

Tom Merry chuckled silently.

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

"Then get a snowball, and chip in."

"I'm on!"

The two juniors, grinning gleefully, bent down and gathered up handfuls of the thick snow, and each quickly provided himself with three or four snowballs.

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

This concession quite touched Figgins.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who is there?"

It was Mr. Railton's ringing voice.

Mr. Ratcliff, realising the peril of being caught there, in the act of playing the spy, by the man he had followed, leaped desperately to his feet and went plunging away into the snow and darkness. Mr. Railton and Hunt came scrambling through the opening of the wall to discover what the unexpected dis-

turbance meant. Tom Merry nudged Figgins, and the two juniors beat a hasty retreat.

They were gone before the two men were through the wall. They hurried away on the path down the hill, the snowflakes whirling round them thickly. Tom Merry was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Great pip!" he murmured. "I should like to know exactly what Ratty thinks about it. He'll put it down to the spectres, I suppose? I don't know whether spectres as a rule, go in for snowballing. But look out, Figgy, or we shall run into the boulder. He'll be on the same road."

"Yes, and there he is."

A lean figure was plunging through the snow a short distance ahead of the boys. Mr. Ratcliff was getting away from the scene of his unexpected adventure as quickly as he could.

"We've got to pass him," muttered Tom Merry. "We must get in first. Now, then!"

Figgins grinned, and they gathered a fresh supply of snowballs.

"Give the boulder a volley!"

The chance did not often come to a junior to snowball a Housemaster with impunity, and so Tom Merry and Figgins wanted to make the most of the present opportunity. And the master of the New House certainly deserved some punishment.

Whack; Smack! went the snowballs, and the sudden attack from behind sent Mr. Ratcliff staggering forward, and, missing his footing on the slippery slope of the hill, he fell on his hands and knees.

Like lightning the juniors darted past him, and disappeared ahead long before the startled and confused Housemaster could catch a glimpse of them.

"Well, we're clear of that, Figgy!" panted Tom Merry, as they entered the footpath through the wood. "And a jolly narrow escape. I reckon this is the last time I shall amble about an old castle in the middle of the night, my son."

"Well, it was a narrow shave, but it was exciting!" grinned Figgins. "But, I say, I should like to know what the giddy mystery is. What does your Housemaster mean by visiting his giddy relations in a ruined castle in a snowstorm?"

"That's his business, Figgy. I suppose there's some mystery at the bottom of it, but it don't matter to us. I'll race you through the wood. If you fall and break your leg, that doesn't count."

"Right you are!"

And the juniors made a record back to St. Jim's. There Figgins helped Tom Merry over the wall, and Tom Merry pulled him up from above, and then they went to their respective houses.

"Good-night, Figgy," said Tom Merry, as they parted in the white-sheeted quadrangle. "There's the rotten old casual ward you call a house, and you'd better buck up and get back to the other wasters. Buzz along!"

Figgins breathed hard, and "buzzed" along, but in a moment he stopped, and then turned back.

"I say, Merry, wait a moment."

Tom Merry turned back.

"What is it?"

"I've got something for you."

"Hand it over, then, Figgy—oh, ooh!"

Figgy's arm jerked forward, and a snowball smashed right in Tom Merry's classic countenance. It was followed by another from Figgy's left hand, which broke on his ear.

"That's all," said Figgins with a chuckle. "Good-night."

He was gone before Tom could get the snow out of his eyes. The faint sound of a chuckle floated back from the direction of the New House.

"Ow! You rotter!" gasped Tom Merry. "Yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Groooh! I'll—"

Tom Merry rubbed the snow out of his eyes.

Figgins was gone.

Tom Merry turned towards the School House, postponing vengeance upon the humorous Figgins for a more convenient occasion.

He groped in the snow at the foot of the School House wall for a pebble, and found one, and tossed it up to the dormitory window.

Then he went round the house to wait for Manners to let him in.

He was not without some uneasiness that Manners might have gone to sleep, and forgotten all about his duties for the night.

Fortunately, Manners hadn't.

The little window opened, and Tom Merry climbed in, and found himself in the dusk with his chum.

"Oh, you've got back!" grunted Manners.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Tom Merry.

"Seen the ghost?"

"No; not this time."

"Seen Figgins?"

"Yes."

"Oh, the New House bouncer was there, then?"  
 "Large as life."  
 "Anything happened?"  
 "Yes."  
 "What was it?"  
 "Tell you in the morning," yawned Tom Merry. "I'm sleepy."  
 They made their way quietly to the Shell dormitory. Two or three of the fellows woke up as Tom Merry came in with Manners.  
 "Groo! Who's that?" grunted Kangaroo.  
 "Only your Uncle Tom," said the captain of the Shell.  
 "Seen the giddy ghost?"  
 "Tell you to-morrow."  
 "Seen any spooks, or anything at all?" asked Bernard Glyn.  
 "Tell you to-morrow."  
 "Ass!" growled Monty Lowther. "Tell us to-night."  
 "Sleepy."  
 "Bosh!"

Tom Merry turned in, and laid his head upon the pillow. A good many of the Shell were awake now, and they were curious enough to know the result of Tom Merry's expedition to the ruined castle. But Tom Merry did not answer any of the torrent of questions. He meant to tell his chums in the morning. But the rest of the Shell were not to know about the strange meeting of the School House master and the mysterious Hunt in the ruined castle.  
 "Dear me," said Skimpole of the Shell, sitting up in bed. "If you have seen anything of a supernatural nature, Tom Merry, you should communicate it to us at once."  
 "Groo!"  
 "Scientific investigation," continued Skimpole, who was the genius of the Shell, and never used words of less than four syllables if he could help it, "scientific investigation, my dear Merry, is——"  
 "Rot!"  
 "Not at all, my dear Merry. Scientific investigation is the means of dissipating——"  
 "My hat! Fancy Skimmy being a dissipated fellow!" said Monty Lowther.  
 "Ha, ha, ha!"  
 "You mistake me, my dear Lowther," said Skimpole. "When I said dissipating——"  
 "You meant painting the town red, I guess," said Buck Finn, the American junior in the Shell.  
 "My dear Finn——"  
 "Tell us all about it, Merry," called out Clifton Dane.  
 Snore!  
 "What have you seen?"  
 Snore!  
 "My dear Merry," resumed Skimpole, "scientific investigation is the means of dissipating credence in supernatural occurrences——"  
 Snore!  
 "Are you asleep, my dear Merry?"  
 "Yes," said Tom Merry.  
 "Ha, ha, ha!"  
 "Explain, you ass!" said Kangaroo.  
 "Explain, you duffer!"  
 Snore!  
 "You chump!"  
 Snore!  
 "You fathead!"  
 Snore!  
 "Buzz a pillow at him!"  
 Snore!  
 "Oh, rats!" said Lowther. "I'm going to sleep!"

And he did, and the rest of the Shell followed his example, and Tom Merry & Co. slept the sleep of the just.

**CHAPTER 9.**  
**Told on the Telephone.**

**T**OM MERRY was curious to see Mr. Ratcliff the next day. He wanted to know what signs the New House master would show of the weird experiences he had been through at the old castle.  
 If Mr. Ratcliff had not caught a cold it would be most remarkable.  
 Mr. Ratcliff was not in a very fit state of health, and he made himself worse by doctoring himself continually with patent medicines.  
 The New House master was the best customer of Mr. Twistem, the local chemist in Rylecombe. But for Mr. Ratcliff, Mr. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 255.

Twistem would certainly have not sold fifty per cent. of the pills, medicines, mixtures, tableoids, and other dreadful remedies that he now disposed of.

When Tom Merry came out into the quadrangle of St. Jim's, still glistening with snow from the late snowfall, he looked over towards the New House.

But Mr. Ratcliff was not visible. Figgins & Co. could be seen outside their House, and at the sight of Tom Merry they showed signs of hostility.

But Tom Merry raised his hand in sign of pax as he came up.

"Cheese it, my sons!" he said. "How's Ratty?"  
 Figgins grinned.

"He's got a cold," he said. "He's talking with a beautiful accent, as if he had his head in a bag."  
 "Poor old Ratty!" said Tom Merry. "This is what comes of poking one's nose into other people's affairs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"  
 "He's having breakfast in his room," said Figgins. "I dare say he won't take the Fifth this morning. Poor old Ratty!"

"He's been on the telephone to the chemist," grinned Kerr. "I passed his study and heard him ringing away. He's ordering some Purple Pills for Chippy Chests or something."

"Ha, ha, ha!"  
 Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.  
 "On the telephone?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."  
 "He was rung up once before by a chap pretending to be Twistem the chemist, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"  
 "What's happened last night might happen again," said Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"  
 "I'm going down to Rylecombe before breakfast."

And, having obtained a pass out of gates from Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, Tom Merry hurried down to the village, and was soon ensconced inside a telephone call-box.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ratcliff was not enjoying himself. He had breakfasted lightly off tea and toast in his room, and was feeling decidedly "rotten."

He was feeling almost rotten enough to be contented to mind his own business, and keep from taking an undue interest in Mr. Railton's personal affairs, which means that he was feeling very rotten indeed.

The telephone bell rang suddenly.  
 Mr. Ratcliff started up. He had a telephone in his study, which he used chiefly for ringing up Mr. Twistem in Rylecombe.

Buzzzzz!  
 Mr Ratcliff took up the receiver.  
 "Hallo!"

"Hallo! Is that St. Jim's, New House?"  
 "Yes."  
 "Mr. Ratcliff?"  
 "I am Mr. Ratcliff."

"You rang me up this morning?"  
 "If you are Mr. Twistem, yes. I do not recognise your voice. Have you sent the articles I have ordered. I have not received them yet."

"You will get them soon."  
 "Thank you. What have you rung me up for? Can you recommend anything in addition to the list I sent you?"

"Yes."  
 "Pray tell me what it is, Mr. Twistem," said Mr Ratcliff.

"You have a cold, Mr. Ratcliff?"  
 "Yes!"

"Is it severe?"  
 "Very severe."  
 "How did you catch it?"

"I was caught in the—the snow."  
 "Were you snowballed?"  
 "Dear me—yes!"

"Is the cold in your ears?"  
 "Perhaps a little."  
 "Were you using your ears at the time?"

Mr. Ratcliff jumped.  
 "What!"  
 "Were you using your ears at the time?"

"I—I—I was."  
 "Ah! Then I should recommend you to give them a little exercise to restore the circulation."

"I think the circulation is all right in my ears," said Mr. Ratcliff, puzzled.  
 "Probably not. What you want is to have your ears pulled."

"What!"  
 "I thought I spoke distinctly."  
 "Sir!"

NEXT  
 WEDNESDAY:

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 SECRET!**

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A stalwart, athletic figure stepped in at the open door, and the Housemaster of the School House looked on at the scene in dumb amazement for a moment. Then, with flushing eyes, he sprang forward. "Mr. Ratcliff! Release that boy instantly!" he cried. (See Chapter 2.)

"Get a junior into your study, and tell him to pull your ears as hard as he can. This will do you good."

"You recommend this?"

"Undoubtedly."

"In addition to the remedies you are sending me?"

"It is better than any of them."

"Very well, I will take your advice."

A queer sound came from the receiver, as if the man at the other end had chuckled; but, of course, Mr. Twistem could not be supposed to have chuckled at such a serious time.

"Good! It will benefit you! Good-bye!"

"Thank you!"

Mr. Ratcliff hung up the receiver.

He reached for the bell, and then stayed his hand. But for a previous communication on the telephone, which had turned out to be a rag, he would have followed the advice unhesitatingly. But now he hesitated, fortunately for him. If he had called in Figgins to pull his ears, certainly Figgins would not have erred upon the side of gentleness.

He rang up Mr. Twistem to make sure.

"Hallo!" came the chemist's voice.

"Are you Mr. Twistem?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Mr. Ratcliff."

"I have sent your things, sir."

"Yes, I know. You are quite serious in recommending me to have my ears pulled?"

"Eh?"

"You told me a few minutes ago, when you rang me up—"

"I did?"

"Yes, you."

"But I did not ring you up, Mr. Ratcliff!"

"You did not?" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"Certainly not."

"Oh! It is a mistake! Very well!"

The New House master hung up the receiver again. He ground his teeth. Someone was japing him, but he could not guess whom it was. He thought of Figgins. But he glanced from his window, and saw Figgins & Co. snowballing Wally D'Arcy of the Third in the quadrangle.

Mr. Ratcliff snapped his teeth, and sat down to tea and toast again. He felt that he owed all his troubles to Mr. Railton, of the School House, who had caused him to catch that cold by having his appointments on a snowy night in a ruin. And all that he was suffering at the present moment he intended to wreak upon the devoted head of the School House master—if the chance came. And Mr. Ratcliff believed that it would come.

CHAPTER 10.

Anonymous.

"GOOD-MORNING, sir!"

"Good-morning, Monteith!"

Monteith looked at his Housemaster in surprise.

Then he grinned faintly. Mr. Ratcliff's nose was red, and his eyes were watery. He was sniffing and snuffling.

"Have you caught a cold, sir?"

"Yes, Monteith, I hab caud cold," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"May I ask, sir, if—"

"No, you may nod."

And Mr. Ratcliff passed on. Monteith looked after him with a puzzled expression. The Housemaster was evidently not in the sweetest of tempers.

"He's been to the castle, I know, because I listened and heard him go out last night," the prefect muttered to himself. "Has he caught anything besides a cold, I wonder, or was it all a giddy mare's nest? Whatever happened, it hasn't improved his temper."

It had improved neither Ratcliff's temper nor his health. He certainly had a cold in the head, and he did not attend to any of his duties that day. He kept to his own room most of the time, and was frequently heard to sneeze loud and long.

There was one fellow in the New House who could have explained how Mr. Ratcliff had caught his cold, and that was Figgins. But, with the exception of the Co., Figgins kept his own counsel.

To the Co. he, of course, confided the adventure of the night. Great was the amazement of the Co. at the story, and great their disgust at not having been on the spot when the snow-balling was going forward.

But, like Figgins, they could make nothing of the mystery, and they soon gave up trying. It was no business of theirs.

But the matter was not so easily dismissed by Tom Merry. After morning school the chums of the Shell met and talked the matter over.

At first Tom Merry's chums were inclined to think that he was romancing; but they were soon convinced that he was in earnest. Then they put their heads together over the affair.

"There's a giddy mystery," said Tom Merry, "but that has nothing to do with us. Railton can make a giddy rendezvous at the ruined castle, or at the top of the North Pole, for all it matters to us. It ain't our business. But there's that bounder who watches him, you see. Would it be fair of us to leave Railton off his guard, not knowing what the Ratcliff-bird was up to, and let Ratty nose out all his little secrets?"

"Certainly not," said Lowther. "Railton ought to be put on his guard somehow, or the other bounder ought to be stopped." "Well, we could warn Railton that he's being watched," said Manners, after a pause.

"Then he'd know we knew something, and that'd make him feel uncomfy," said Tom Merry. "Besides, we mustn't forget that if we let out that Figgy and I were out of bounds last night, it would mean a record licking for both of us. I bar that."

"I know!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"Expound, then, kid."

"Let's send Mr. Railton an anonymous letter."

"Monty, you're a howling genius! That idea is simply ripping! That gets us out of the difficulty first chop."

"But Railton knows our fists," said Manners dubiously.

"Oh, I can disguise my hand," said Tom Merry confidently.

"I'll write it backwards, and—"

"Railton won't be able to read it."

"Ass! I mean I'll slope the writing backwards and that will disguise it. Gimme some impot. paper, and I'll practise a bit first."

"Here you are."

Tom Merry proceeded to scrawl on the paper, sloping his writing the reverse of his usual style, and surveyed the result with a great deal of satisfaction.

"There, nobody would ever recognise that as my hand!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't look like my writing, does it? That's as good as Levison could do it."

"Well, no; it doesn't look much like writing at all," said Monty Lowther. "Are they words?"

"Of course they are! Don't you try to be funny! Look there, that is 'Dear sir,' and—"

"Is it really? I thought it was a spider. You'd better practise a bit more, Tom Merry, or the letter will be rather too anonymous. Railton won't know what it's about any more than whom it's from."

Tom Merry snorted, but he took Monty's advice, and put in some more practice. At last the critical chums pronounced that it would do, and then they proceeded to the composition of the letter.

This was a matter of more difficulty.

With a rare regard for Mr. Railton's peace of mind, they wanted to spare him the knowledge that anything was wrong. The letter was to appear to come from an outsider, and was to be posted in the village. How to word it was the question, and a difficult one to answer.

"Well, we must word it somehow," said Tom Merry. "That blessed bell will be going soon, and we shall have to chuck it. We mustn't put in any local colour, so he won't guess it's written at St. Jim's, that's all. Suppose we use the third person?"

"I don't think we ought to let any third person into the

matter at all," said Manners, with a shake of the head. "There's too many in the secret now."

"Sit on his head, somebody! I mean the third person!"

"Yes, that's what you said, and I don't think—"

"No, you don't, that's a giddy fact."

"Look here," said Manners crossly; "you can do as you like, but if you let any third person into the secret, you're a silly—"

"Give him a lesson in grammar, somebody, do, for mercy's sake! Why isn't there some Third Form kid here to tell him that pronouns have three persons—first, second, and third?" said Blake—"I, thou, he, she, it. Do you hear? I, thou, he, she, it!"

"Oh, I understand!" growled Manners. "Why couldn't you say what you meant? Yes, it's a jolly good idea to write it in the third person. Give it a sorter official sound. Something like this: 'It has come to the knowledge of the writer that old Ratty—'"

"Choke him! If we call him Ratty, Railton will know it's a St. Jim's chap writing."

"H'm! I suppose he will."

"That's what I meant by local colour. Now, how will this do?"

Tom Merry scrawled upon a sheet of paper, and read it out: "When a chap visits an old castle in the middle of the night, he should take care that he isn't followed and watched by a long, lean bounder with a knife-blade nose."

"Now, I think that's all right," said Tom, with an air of satisfaction. "He'll know Ratcliff by the description, and we get out of mentioning names. The letter might come from the merest stranger who happened to see Ratty up to his little game. It doesn't give us away, and it will put Railton on his guard."

"I think it will do," agreed Manners, and Lowther said the same.

Tom Merry put the letter into an envelope, and sealed it. He addressed it in the same hand, and put it into his pocket.

"I'll cut over to the village after school, and post it there!" he exclaimed. "Now, that's a good thing done! We've done our giddy duty—and there goes that blessed bell!"

And the four hurried away to their class-room, very well satisfied with themselves.

After school Tom Merry found an opportunity of slipping away unnoticed, and he posted the letter at the pillar-box in the lane near Rylcombe.

He returned to St. Jim's extremely well satisfied. The letter would be delivered that evening to Mr. Railton, and it could not fail to warn him of what he had to expect from the rival Housemaster.

When the local postman appeared in the quadrangle that evening, the Terrible Three observed him with considerable interest. The anonymous letter was undoubtedly in his bag, and had anyone been watching the chums just then, their elaborate unconsciousness might have awakened suspicion.

Taggles, the porter, took a letter up to Mr. Railton's study. The chums had a glimpse of it as he passed them, and it was their own missive.

"So that's all right," said the captain of the Shell.

The master of the School House was in his study. Taggles delivered the letter, and when the door closed after him, Mr. Railton slit it open carelessly. He did not know the writing, and attached no importance to it.

But as he read the brief communication within, his face changed. He stared at it as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "What can it mean? A long, lean bounder! What an expression! A knife-blade nose! Is it possible that it is Mr. Ratcliff who is being alluded to? Can he possibly have been mean and foolish enough to have followed me last night?"

The Housemaster paced his study in some agitation, his brow dark with thought. The happening of the previous night, which had interrupted his talk with Hunt, had remained a profound mystery to him.

That someone else had been at the ruined castle was all he knew; he could not guess who, or why.

This letter let in a flood of light upon the matter.

Someone had followed him; someone else had discovered the spy, and sent this letter as a warning. Mr. Ratcliff was evidently the person alluded to. Anonymous letters are not generally worthy of much attention, but this was evidently written in a friendly spirit. There was a smack of boyishness about it, too. A grown-up person would hardly use such an expression as a "long, lean bounder." Was it possible that the letter was written by someone at St. Jim's? The post-mark on the envelope was Rylcombe, but that proved nothing.

Alas, for Tom Merry's elaborate strategy! In less than five minutes after receiving the letter, Mr. Railton knew perfectly well that it had been written at the school!

"It must be so," he muttered. "Whoever wrote this letter saw Ratcliff following me, and knew him by sight, too! The writer is evidently disposed to serve me; undoubtedly it is a boy of my own House! But what boy could possibly have

broken bounds and ventured as far as the ruined castle on such a snowy night as last night?" Mr. Railton nodded his head as the inevitable answer to that question came into it. "The writer of this letter is Tom Merry of the Shell, I am sure."

Then his thoughts took a different turn. He threw the letter into the fire, and his brow contracted, his eyes gleamed.

"I am glad of the warning. Undoubtedly Ratcliff took it upon himself to follow me. That lets in light upon the disappearance of my letter. Ratcliff must have found it. The letter itself will have told him little, only that I am in trouble. But what may he not have overheard last night?"

The Housemaster bit his lips.

Mr. Railton was a man of action. He put on his hat, went downstairs, and walked across the quadrangle to the New House, to interview Mr. Ratcliff.

## CHAPTER 11.

### Mr. Ratcliff Sings Small.

MR. RATCLIFF'S jaw dropped when, in response to his "Cubb id!" the door of his study opened, and the stalwart form of the master of the School House appeared.

The two Housemasters were not upon visiting terms, and they seldom met to speak except at the periodical masters' meetings. The visit of the School House master to Mr. Ratcliff's quarters portended something, and Mr. Ratcliff guessed that it would prove to be something unpleasant.

The moment he saw Mr. Railton he guessed that the latter had discovered something of the truth, and he felt extremely uneasy. But he tried to remain calm and collected, and rose to his feet with as much dignity as he could assume. Dignity, however, is not easy to attain when one is suffering from a cold in the nose and a bad conscience simultaneously, and so Mr. Ratcliff's effort could hardly be described as a success. In fact, he looked uncommonly like a delinquent facing a judge as he stood up and met Mr. Railton's gaze.

"This is an unegsbeget bleasure," he said coldly.

"I have taken the liberty of calling," said Mr. Railton quietly.

"I never properly thanked you for the deep interest you took in my business the other night, when you assumed the control of my House during my absence. Now I find that I am still further indebted to you for a still greater proof of your regard, and so I can thank you as you deserve for both favours at once."

"I do nod udderstad you."

"I regret to see that you have a cold, Mr. Ratcliff. You must have been out in the snow last night."

Mr. Ratcliff coloured.

"Yes, I was out."

"I thought so! I was also out, but we never met, which is quite singular; for I think we must have been very near together!"

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes sank.

"I do nod udderstad your allusion, Mr. Railton."

"Never mind. If my meaning is not clear to you now, it may dawn upon you later," said Mr. Railton. "Meanwhile, will you kindly restore to me the property of mine which you have so kindly taken charge of?"

"I—what—"

"I am alluding to the letter."

Mr. Railton spoke so calmly and directly that Mr. Ratcliff had not the slightest doubt that he knew about the letter being in his possession. His quick thought was that Monty must have been chattering, and he inwardly resolved to make it warm for his prefect.

"The ledger!" he stammered, to gain time.

"Yes; the letter I lost! I should be glad if you would hand it over to me. Of course, I understand that you did not know I was the rightful owner," said Mr. Railton, "otherwise you would have given it to me at once! But now that I am here to claim it, you can have no further doubt upon the subject. Kindly return it to me!"

Too flabbergasted by the Housemaster's coolness to utter a word, Mr. Ratcliff drew the letter from his pocket-book and handed it to Mr. Railton.

The latter examined it carefully, and then stepped towards the fireplace and dropped it into the glowing coals.

It was shrivelled out of existence in a moment.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I really don't know how to thank you for your many kindnesses to me, Mr. Ratcliff, so I won't try!"

"Mr. Railton!"

"I hope your cold will soon be better; you must have caught a chill last night. Did you happen to go as far as the ruined castle?"

"I—I—"

The weather was shocking, wasn't it? Good-night, my dear Mr. Ratcliff!"

And, with a bow, the master of the School House quitted the room.

Mr. Ratcliff stared after him, with black brows and gritting teeth. Never had he been so humiliated in his life.

The School House master plainly knew all about it, and had come there to tell him so; and he had been weak enough to give up the letter.

"What a fool I was!" murmured Mr. Ratcliff. "I ought to have kept the letter, to be produced against him in case I have to acquaint the Head with this disgraceful business. But I was really so much taken by surprise. Dear me, I wish I had not parted with the letter!" He snapped his teeth viciously. "I will make him smart for all those insults!" he muttered, with glinting eyes. "I have a very fair idea of his relations with that disreputable fellow he called Hunt. The man is blackmailing him, as clear as daylight. There is certainly something shady in his past, and it is my duty to the school to find out what it is, and expose him before the Head. I will take care next time that he discovers nothing until I am ready to have him up in the doctor's study, and call upon him to answer the charge I bring against him!"

And the thought of that approaching triumph restored Mr. Ratcliff's good humour somewhat, and a sour smile broke out over his face.

Mr. Railton, too, smiled as he went back to his own House.

"I don't think he'll care to follow me again," he said to himself. "Neither do I think he has discovered anything material. Fortunately, Hunt will soon be gone, and even Mr. Ratcliff will hardly be able to use his peculiar gifts in the detective line any more, when Bernard Hunt is safely across the water!"

Tom Merry, of the Shell, was standing on the steps of the School House as Mr. Railton came in, after his visit to the New House master.

Mr. Railton looked very hard at the junior.

Unless it came from Blake, of the Fourth, Mr. Railton felt pretty certain that the letter he had received anonymously had come from the hand of Tom Merry.

But the handsome, sunny face of the Shell fellow was quite clear and innocent.

Mr. Railton gave him one keen look, and passed on into the house.

Tom Merry smiled.

Manners and Lowther joined him on the steps.

"It's worked!" said Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes; Railton's just been over to the New House. I hope he's given it to Ratty in the neck!"

"I hope he has!" said Manners. "Of all the rotters—"

"And he doesn't suspect?" Monty Lowther remarked.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Well, from the way he looked at me, it struck me that he might fancy the letter came from a St. Jim's chap!" he admitted. "But he hasn't said anything, so it's all right! Mind, not a giddy whisper to a soul!"

"Bai Jove!"

The chums of the Shell swung round, and looked at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth.

Arthur Augustus put up his famous eyeglass and surveyed them.

"Pway excuse me, deah boys!" he said. "I could not help ovahheavin' your last words, as I was comin' out just behind you. It appears that you have a secvet!"

"Go hon!"

"I wegar that as a wathah bad habit for youngstahs to get nto!" said Arthur Augustus, in his most fatherly manner. "You had bettah confide it to me, and I will advise you wethath o keep it or not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for laughtah in that wemark, Tom Mewwy! Undah the eires, you cannot do bettah than confide in a fellow of tact and judgment!"

The Terrible Three grinned.

"Of course, I am not cuwious!" said D'Arcy loftily. "I twst you do not suspect me of bein' cuwious, deah boys!"

"I jolly well do!" said Monty Lowther. "One of the most curious animals I've ever seen, as a matter of fact!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You had bettah tell me, though!" said D'Arcy. "I am not in the slightest deguee inquisitive, but I feel that I ought to give you some advice!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

The captain of the Shell winked at his chums.

"Shall I tell you something, Gussy?" he asked solemnly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Bend your head closer!"

"Yaas?"

D'Arcy bent his head very close to Tom Merry's lips. Manners and Lowther watched him, suppressing their merriment.

"It will startle you!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Nevah mind that!"

"You don't mind?"

"Wathah not!"

"Sure?"

"Yaas; go ahead, for goodness' sake!"  
 "Very well!"  
 Tom Merry advanced his lips close to D'Arcy's ear, and emitted a sudden, ear-splitting yell.  
 Arthur Augustus D'Arcy staggered back with a roar.  
 "Oh, you ass! Ow!"  
 "Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry. "I said it would startle you, and you said you didn't mind!"  
 "Ha, ha, ha!"  
 "Gwooh! You have thwown' me into quite a fluttah! Ow! You uttah ass!"  
 "Ha, ha, ha!"  
 And the Terrible Three walked away, leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with his hand to his ear and gasping.

**CHAPTER 12.**

**Tom Merry's Little Joke!**

**T**OM MERRY'S study was very quiet. Tom Merry was sitting in the armchair, his brows corrugated in deep thought. Monty Lowther was writing out an imposition, and Manners was cutting films. Tom Merry was gazing into space, his brain evidently very hard at work.

Suddenly a prolonged chuckle broke the silence of the study. Two heads were raised at once, two pairs of eyes fixed in mute inquiry upon Tom. He was grinning joyously.

"Well, what's the wheeze?" asked Manners.

The chums knew that something was coming.

"I've been thinking!" said Tom Merry. "Was our anonymous billet-doux to Railton quite fair on the Ratcliff-bird?"

The two looked puzzled.

"I don't see what you're driving at, ass!" said Lowther.

"Well, Ratty is so fond of spying, and poking his lengthy proboscis into the affairs of others, that it doesn't seem quite good-natured to stop him! Now we have put Railton on his guard, Ratty won't be able to watch him any more!"

"And a good thing, too!"

"Yes, in a way! But can't you feel sorry for the Ratcliff-bird? Just imagine him, with all his Sherlock Holmes instincts bottled up, simply dying for a chance to find somebody out in something shady! It's a pathetic picture, to my mind!"

"Look here, ass, what's the jape? Quick, before we slay you!" exclaimed Manners, picking up a ruler.

"Peace, kid, peace! I've been thinking that it's hard on Ratty, and that we ought to give him a treat! He seems to be a good hand at finding people's letters and reading them, and then toddling along to a giddy rendezvous! Why shouldn't we gratify him in this harmless and necessary amusement? Why shouldn't we write a nice little letter, and put it where he's bound to find it, and then——"

The chums shrieked as the possibilities of the joke rushed upon them.

"Good old Tom!" said Lowther. "Oh, it will be ripping! Something blood-curdling, that will make Ratty think he's got hold of something specially prime!"

"Bring in a murder!" suggested Manners. "That will wake him up!"

Tom Merry grinned serenely.

"That's the wheeze!" he said. "If we could get old Ratty to a convenient rendezvous, we could put him through a regular course of surprises, and teach him a little lesson about playing the giddy amateur detective!"

"Yes, if he doesn't spot us!"

"We shall have to take care that he doesn't, of course! He's on Railton's track like a blughound, and so he's bound to swallow anything! Now, this is what I was planning in my little head, kids!"

Tom Merry dashed off a letter. He read it aloud as he finished:

"Sir,—Our meeting at the castle having been interrupted, I must see you again as quickly as possible. Unless you hand me the hush-money, I shall denounce you to the police, and you will be arrested at once. You know that when your fearful crime becomes known, you will have no escape from penal servitude. If you dare to disregard this letter, tremble! Meet me at eleven o'clock to-night outside the shed in the Aere Field, or take the consequences!"

"ONE WHO KNOWS YOUR SECRET."

The Shell fellows simply yelled.

"How's that for high?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Now that old Ratty's on the scent, a discovery like that ought to please him. You see, I haven't mentioned any names; so if the letter should fall into the wrong hands, it won't do any harm. The illusion to the meeting at the castle is enough to show Ratty that it's addressed to Mr. Railton."

*(Continued on the next page.)*

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"You're a howling genius!"

"The penal servitude is ripping!" said Lowther. "But couldn't you make it the gallows?"

"No; that would be a bit too strong, and might make Ratty smell a mouse! Penal servitude is good enough, and it will make Ratty chortle!"

"Mind you disguise your hand!" said Lowther. "There would be a howling row if we got spotted over this jape!"

"Rather! I'll put it in the same hand as our billet-doux to Railton!"

Tom Merry carefully wrote out the precious epistle in the same disguised writing that had once already served his turn.

"Now, the question is, to get it into Ratty's hands without making him suspicious," said Manners.

"Leave that to your uncle," said Merry.

And with the letter in his pocket he quitted the study.

We have mentioned that Mr. Railton passed him in the hall as he returned from his visit to the New House. Tom had seen him leave the School House a short time before, and knew where he had been.

The junior passed quickly out of the house, and scuttled across the quad, in the deep winter dusk. In a couple of minutes he was in the New House, and a glance round showed him no one in sight but a couple of juniors coming downstairs.

They spotted Tom Merry at once, and accelerated their pace to come to close quarters with the bold intruder.

Tom Merry faced them, and placed the thumb of his right hand to his nose, extending the fingers, while at the same time with his left he dropped the precious letter behind him on the little rug just outside Mr. Ratcliff's study door.

The New House juniors had not the least suspicion of the hidden action; they saw only Tom's attitude of defiance, and came for him with a run, breathing vengeance.

"Collar the cheeky bounder!" exclaimed Redfern.

They rushed at Tom Merry. Tom dodged quickly out of the way and put out his foot. Pratt went sprawling over it, and crashed against Mr. Ratcliff's door. At the same moment Tom Merry seized Redfern, and, with a twist, dropped him on top of Pratt.

In a second afterwards Tom was outside the New House.

Mr. Ratcliff's door opened, and the Housemaster appeared, his face red with anger.

The two juniors, who were staggering dazedly up, were sent reeling with heavy cuffs on the ear, and they fled precipitately from the reach of the angry master.

Mr. Ratcliff had no doubt that they had come crashing against his door in the course of some horse-play, and he had not the remotest idea that a School House junior had been upon the scene. Fortune had favoured Tom Merry.

Mr. Ratcliff could not fail to see the white paper lying on his rug. It had been stepped on, but he saw that it was a letter, and he picked it up.

He gave a sudden start as he glanced at it, and stepped back into the study, closing the door swiftly.

In agitated haste he read the letter. His breath came quick and hard, his eyes gleamed, his fingers twitched. It was clear that he was greatly excited.

"This is indeed a piece of good fortune," he muttered. "Excellent! Excellent! Railton little knew that when he visited my room to show off his insolence, he would leave behind him such an incriminating piece of evidence as this. What gross carelessness on the part of a man with a guilty secret! Yet, after losing one letter, it is not surprising that he should have been as careless again!"

Mr. Ratcliff forgot his cold—forgot everything but his coming triumph.

At last he held the man he had so long bitterly disliked in the hollow of his hand! He had only to be at the rendezvous that night to ascertain, without the shadow of a doubt, what Mr. Railton's guilty secret was.

Not for an instant did a doubt cross his mind. How should it? He knew, of course, that a man of Mr. Railton's character would never be guilty of a practical joke of this nature—the thing was inconceivable. And that any junior at St. Jim's knew anything about the matter at all, he had no idea. There was no room for suspicion in the matter.

Railton, with characteristic carelessness, had lost the letter, and by a rare piece of good fortune it had fallen into Mr. Ratcliff's hands.

That was all! It was enough to make the spiteful man rub his hands with satisfaction.

"I was unlucky last time," he muttered. "Some friend of this man Hunt was evidently at the old castle, and saw me watching them, and assaulted me with snowballs. But this time I shall take great care that nothing of the kind happens."

Tom Merry re-entered his study with a beaming smile.

"Well, what luck?" asked Manner and Lowther.

"First class."

And Tom explained what had occurred.

"But are you sure he had the letter?"

"Rather! I watched him through the hall window, and he picked it up and took it into his study. That's all right."

"Then if he doesn't smell a mouse—"

"I don't believe he will, but we shall have to chance it. Now, who's coming with me to the Acre Field to educate him to-night?"

"I am!" said Manners emphatically.

"And I!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"All serene! We'll all go!" said Tom Merry. "So that's settled. I'll get Blake to open the window for us when we come back. We won't let on to him what the wheeze is, of course. That's our giddy secret."

Anxiously enough the famous four waited for the appointed hour. Would Ratcliff be there? Would he have a suspicion that the letter was a "spoo" one, and fail to bite?

There was no telling, but they hoped for the best. When they went up to the dormitory at bedtime, Tom made his arrangement with Blake.

When half-past ten rang from the clock-tower, Tom Merry tumbled out of bed in the Shell dormitory.

"Are you awake, kids?"

"Y-e-es," yawned Manners. "But, I say, Tommy—"

"Well?"

"It's jolly cold, and—"

Tom Merry jerked his bedclothes off, and he arose, shivering.

"I say, Tom," said Lowther, holding his bedclothes round him, "I've thought of a ripping idea. Ha, ha!"

"What is it?"

"Why, let the old bird get there, you know, and not find anybody or anything. He won't know what to think. We don't want to be there, you know. Let him just go and see that he's been fooled. That will be funny, won't it?"

"Awfully funny," assented Tom, "but not so funny as this, do you think?"

And he squeezed a wet sponge over Monty's countenance.

"Oh!—ah!—ooh! Lemme alone, you beast! Can't you see I'm getting up?"

And out came Monty.

"It's all right! I'm getting up!" he gasped.

Having called Blake of the Fourth, the chums went downstairs, and Blake let them out and closed the window. The Terrible Three lost no time in getting over the wall, and they warmed their chilly bodies by a race to the Acre Field.

There was no snow falling, but the ground was thickly carpeted with it. The Acre Field was close to the college. The chums did not go in by the gate on the roadside, in case they should leave footprints to alarm the expected victim. They entered the field by a gap in the fence, and approached the shed from the rear.

The shed was a half-ruined structure, with a good many gaps in the roof. The gaps showed black in the white covering of snow. The door was closed, but it was fastened only by a latch. In the summer the shed sheltered cattle, but in the dead of winter it was never used.

Tom Merry, from behind the shed, took a cautious survey of the field. The stars were glinting in a dark, steely sky, and the night was not dark. The snow round the shed was undisturbed.

"Nobody here yet," said Tom. "It's still a quarter to eleven, and Ratty won't be in a hurry to come and freeze here. But, I say, I expect he'll come scouting behind the shed, for he won't want to leave his giddy trail in the snow across the field. Keep in cover."

The shed was in a corner of the field. Behind it were trees, now leafless and bare, but covering the ground with black shadow, and here the ground, partially sheltered, had very little snow upon it. The chums had left few traces, and these were concealed by the shadow of the trees.

"Why not get into the shed?" suggested Lowther. "It would be warmer there."

"Don't you think that that brilliant idea may very likely occur to Ratty?" queried Tom Merry. "It would be a ghastly good joke to be cornered in the shed by him, wouldn't it?"

"Crumbs! I didn't think of that!"

"Then thank your lucky stars that you have your Uncle Tom with you to think for you," said Tom Merry. "I wonder what horrid fixes you kids would get into if I didn't look after you?"

"Dry up; I can hear hoofsteps!"

"Cover!"

The chums crouched in black shadows. A tall, thin figure passed in the dim starlight. It went round the shed, treading softly so as to leave as little trace as possible in the snow, pushed open the door, and entered.

Keeping still as mice, the juniors exchanged glances.

It was Mr. Ratcliff who had passed them as lightly and silently as a speetre; it was Mr. Ratcliff who was now inside the shed.

The wheeze had worked! The joke had come off!

The juniors made not a sound. They hardly breathed lest the Housemaster should hear them. They knew what Mr. Ratcliff's plan was as well as the master himself.

There was a small loft over the shed. If the master of the

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School House and the supposed blackmailer met outside the shed, Ratcliff, inside, would hear every word that was uttered. If they entered the shed, he would be concealed in the loft, and could play the listener with ease and impunity.

Mr. Ratcliff was evidently up to snuff. But the fact that there was to be no rendezvous at all, and that the whole affair was a hoax, made the situation so utterly funny, that the juniors could hardly contain their laughter.

Tom Merry held up his hand as a sign to his companions to keep still, and then cautiously crept round the shed.

Mr. Ratcliff had closed the door after him. Tom drew a strong wire from his pocket, and with deft and silent fingers secured the latch so that it could not by any possibility be unfastened from inside. As the door opened inwards, it was impossible even to burst it open from within.

Mr. Ratcliff was a prisoner!

Tom Merry rejoined his comrades. He gave a nod in reply to their inquiring grins.

"He's a giddy prisoner," he said. "Now keep out of sight and we'll wait till he gets tired of marking time in there."

Under the dark trees the juniors waited. They made a pile of snowballs to fill up the time, and stamped to keep themselves warm.

Eleven strokes boomed out from the clock-tower at St. Jim's, distinctly audible across the frozen field.

Tom Merry chuckled. It was the hour of the supposed rendezvous, and he could imagine Mr. Ratcliff's feelings at hearing nothing of the men he was waiting for.

The minutes passed away slowly.

The chums were exercising, and keeping themselves warm, but the Housemaster, who dared not, of course, make a sound inside the shed, must have found his quarters pretty chilly.

A quarter struck from the tower. There was a slight sound in the shed.

"Getting impatient," murmured Lowther. "Wait till he tries to open the door, that's all. That's where the laugh comes in."

Half-past eleven floated through the keen night air.

There was a rattling sound. The inmate of the shed was trying to open the door. Doubtless the failure of his efforts surprised him, but he kept on at it. He tugged and dragged, and dragged and tugged, but the door did not budge.

The juniors listened in silent bliss.

Mr. Ratcliff was getting reckless now. He must have realised that he was trapped, and, of course, he set it down to Mr. Railton. Evidently Railton had discovered that he was watching, and had fastened him maliciously up in the shed. Every effort to open the door having failed, the imprisoned Housemaster threw all concealment to the winds. He kicked violently upon the door.

"Open this door instantly! How dare you fasten it? Mr. Railton, I warn you that you will have to answer for this outrageous conduct!"

Tom Merry fell upon Lowther and hugged him.

"Oh, I shall die if I don't laugh! Let's get a bit further away and smile, for goodness' sake!"

"Open this door!"

Mr. Ratcliff, losing the last vestige of his temper, kicked savagely at the unyielding wood. The contemptuous silence of his supposed captor must have exasperated him. He could hardly believe that Mr. Railton had gone away and left him a prisoner there for the night.

"Will you open this door, Mr. Railton? I give you one last chance! If the door is not opened at once, I shall go to the Head to-morrow morning, and lay the whole of the facts before him!"

Tom Merry gasped.

"That will be a ripping treat for the Head," he murmured. "Oh, I know I shall burst a boiler if that giddy humorist keeps on like that!"

The imprisoned Housemaster waited one minute for a reply. As none was vouchsafed, he must have realised that his captor had, in fact, gone, leaving him a prisoner in the shed. He did not speak again, but the juniors heard a low, indistinct growling, mingled with which they thought they could distinguish words hardly proper for their youthful ears.

"Oh, come away!" said Tom Merry. "This is no place for innocent youths like us. I am distinctly pained."

"Keep your peepers open," muttered Lowther. "He'll be getting out of one of the gaps in the roof before long."

"Yes, that's the only thing he can do, unless he wants to stay there all night," assented Tom. "How lucky for him, kids, that dutiful youths are here, with an unlimited supply of snowballs, to give him a warm time on this cold and chilly night! When his head comes out of the roof, mind, I have first shot. If I don't get a bullseye, you can jump on my neck."

The crisis was coming. They heard the Housemaster rummaging about in a small lean-to attached to the shed. Then a hand came out of a gap in the roof, and a head followed it. Mr. Ratcliff was so tall that when he stood upright in the lean-to his head and neck were in the open air through the gap.

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Tom Merry's arm jerked forward.

A snowball, beautifully aimed, smote the Housemaster under the chin, and the head disappeared with surprising suddenness. Tom Merry threw himself on the ground, and gurgled.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I know I shall burst a boiler!" he gasped.

The head came out of the gap again.

Mr. Ratcliff's face was white with fury. In the open starlight on the shed his features were clearly visible; but the juniors, in the black shadow under the trees, could not be seen, and they knew they were secure.

"I might have expected this," hissed Mr. Ratcliff. "I might have expected this brutal assault, Mr. Railton. You may triumph now, sir, but my dime will gub. I repeat, sir, that my time will gub—ooch!"

The head disappeared again, as Lowther, with a really scientific shot, planted a snowball on the bridge of the nose.

"How's that, umpire?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Ripping!" gasped Tom Merry, with the tears rolling down his cheeks. "The best of it is, that the siffy ass thinks it's Railton all the time. He'll make a row to-morrow, and when Railton proves an alibi he won't know where he are!"

Out came Mr. Ratcliff's head again with the persistence of a Jack-in-the-box.

"Continue your brutality, sir!" he shouted. "Yes, sir, I say, continue it! I shall hold you to account for it, I assure you. You shall answer for this outrage. I shall leave this shed, sir, in spite of your assaults!"

And he attempted to scramble out of the gap. A volley of snowballs greeted him, and he went in again. Then the juniors, shaking with suppressed laughter, hurried away from the spot. They thought he had had enough, and no doubt he thought so, too. As soon as they were at a safe distance from the shed, they stopped and gave vent to the mirth that oppressed them.

"Oh, oh, oh!" gasped Tom Merry, when he had laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. "What price this for a night out? But buck up, kids; we don't want him to spot us going in. I shouldn't wonder if he comes home in a nasty temper."

The juniors made all haste to get back within the walls of St. Jim's. Blake was wakened, and let them in. Blake wanted to know what had happened, and The Terrible Three explained. And Jack Blake staggered back to the Fourth Form dormitory in a state bordering on hysterics.

## CHAPTER 13.

### The Mystery Clears.

**A**FTER breakfast on the following morning, Mr. Railton received a message by a fag from the Head of St. Jim's. The Head requested the master of the School House to visit him as speedily as possible in his study.

The School House master entered the Head's study. Mr. Ratcliff was there, his nose redder and his eyes more watery than ever. His adventure over night had not improved his cold. Mr. Railton bowed slightly to his fellow Housemaster, and looked at the doctor. "You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Railton." The Head's face was very grave. "Mr. Ratcliff has told me an astounding story—a story so utterly astounding that I cannot credit it, but feel certain that there is some terrible mistake."

Mr. Railton changed colour slightly for a moment. He knew what was coming now—or, rather, part of what was coming. Of the affair of the previous night, he, of course, knew nothing.

The Head did not fail to mark the slight change in his countenance, and his expression grew a little harder.

"You will repeat your statements, Mr. Ratcliff, in Mr. Railton's presence," he said. "I only hope that Mr. Railton will be able to explain them away."

"I certainly hope to be able to fully explain anything that may be considered derogatory to my character," said the Housemaster calmly.

"Very good," said the Head. "Go on Mr. Ratcliff."

Mr. Ratcliff gave the master of the School House a venomous glance.

"In the first place," he said, "I wish it to be understood that I have acted solely from a regard for the honour of the school, and not from any personal ill-feeling towards Mr. Railton. I felt it duty bound to act as I have done."

"Certainly," said the Head courteously. "No one will suspect you, Mr. Ratcliff, of having acted from any other than the very best motives, and I am sure Mr. Railton will acknowledge this if fortunately it turns out to be a mistake."

Mr. Railton did not speak.

"Then I will go on," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I have told you, sir, how a letter came into my possession. Monteith, my head prefect, picked it up in the quadrangle, and as there was no name on it, he very properly brought it to me. I have told you that the contents of that letter made me visit the ruined castle, to ascertain who it was at St. James's College that was being blackmailed."

Quite so, Mr. Ratcliff."

"There I was assaulted by a person I did not see. But I had seen Mr. Railton meet a person who certainly looked most disreputable—a person named Hunt."

"Go on."

"Unfortunately I was unable to discover more than that Mr. Railton had gone there in reply to a demand for money. I reflected upon the matter, and decided that for the honour of the school I ought to keep my eyes open; but I thought it would not be fair to bring any accusation until I had proof."

"Quite correct."

"Mr. Railton came to my study and demanded his letter. I gave it to him. I did not think at the time of keeping it as evidence."

"It was unnecessary," said Mr. Railton, interrupting him. "I have no intention of denying the existence of the letter, or any of the facts you have stated."

"Let Mr. Ratcliff finish, please."

"But in coming to my study," went on Mr. Ratcliff, with a gleam of triumph in his watery eyes, "Mr. Railton let fall another letter outside my door."

The School House master looked astounded. He was about to speak, but the Head held up his hand.

"Let Mr. Ratcliff finish first, please."

"Very well, sir," said Mr. Railton.

"I found that letter by accident," said the New House master. "There was no name on it, and I did not guess that it was Mr. Railton's till I read it. Then a reference to the previous meeting at the castle enlightened me. I have placed that letter in your hands, Dr. Holmes."

"I have it here. You shall see it when Mr. Ratcliff is finished, Mr. Railton."

"The writing was disguised," went on Mr. Ratcliff. "But I knew it must be from the same person as the other letter. I went to the rendezvous to ascertain. Then I was locked up in the shed and assaulted brutally when I tried to escape from the gaps in the roof. That is all, Dr. Holmes. I have only to ask you if Mr. Railton is a proper person to remain at the school after what I have told you."

"If Mr. Railton cannot explain, certainly not," replied the Head. "Now, Mr. Railton, I am waiting for your explanation. But I feel certain that you can explain everything."

"It is simple," replied the School House master, with quiet dignity. "I do not desire to conceal anything from you, sir, now that Mr. Ratcliff has troubled himself to acquaint you with so many details of my private affairs."

"Read that letter, Mr. Railton, before you answer."

Mr. Railton accepted the letter the Head handed to him. It was Tom Merry's precious effusion. The Housemaster noted the writing at once, as the same as that of the anonymous letter. His lips twitched as he read it through. He laid it down on the table when he had finished.

"Now for my explanation, sir. I have the misfortune to have a cousin, by name Bernard Hunt, who is frequently getting into scrapes, and expecting his relations to get him out of them. His latest freak is to get mixed up in a transaction which brings him within the shadow of the law. He is really guiltless, and has been a catspaw of a gang of scoundrels; but there is great danger that he may be made the scapegoat. He fled instead of facing his difficulties, and that action will tell so heavily against him, that now his only hope is to get out of the country. To do this, he requires money. That is why he has come to the neighbourhood of the school. He wrote to me, and I met him at the ruins, as it was not safe for him to be seen in the daylight. He has been living in a shepherd's hut on the moor, at a considerable distance from the school. I was both angry and annoyed by his conduct, but blood is thicker than water, and I resolved to help him. His demand for a hundred pounds, however, was more than I could at once meet. I am happy to say, however, that I have since raised the money, and that Hunt is gone to Southampton, and sails this morning for America, when he will certainly not return."

"Very satisfactory so far, Mr. Railton. But that letter?"

"That letter, sir, is an absurd hoax, and I marvel that it could have deceived Mr. Ratcliff. It was never sent to me, and I see it here this morning for the first time."

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"Mr. Ratcliff," continued the School House master quietly, "seems to have been possessed by the idea that Hunt was blackmailing me, and that therefore I had some guilty secret in my past. Therefore, he allowed himself to be hoodwinked by this utterly absurd hoax."

"A hoax!" murmured the New House master.

The Head could only stare.

"What does it mean?" gasped the Head at last. "Who could have written it?"

Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

"It seems that some person—someone, evidently, with a turn for practical jokes—has discovered that Mr. Ratcliff was watching me," said the School House master. "That humorous person wrote this absurd letter, and placed it where Mr. Ratcliff found it."

"It's—it's false!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff. "It cannot be!" Mr. Railton shrugged his shoulders.

"You say you were assaulted last night?" he said. "At what hour?"

"Soon after eleven."

"Ah! Last night I was in my study preparing examination papers; and at eleven o'clock," said Mr. Railton, "Mr. Lathom came in to smoke a pipe with me. Mr. Lathom will bear me out if my word is doubted."

"I don't think it will be necessary to send for Mr. Lathom," said the Head drily.

Mr. Ratcliff could only gape in his dismay. Mr. Railton looked the doctor full in the eyes.

"I can only say, further, sir, that my past is open to the fullest investigation," he said. "There is nothing in it that I desire to conceal. This letter speaks of penal servitude. If there were any foundation for it, the police would, of course, be able to establish the fact from their records. I defy Mr. Ratcliff to appeal to them!"

The Head frowned.

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "The thing is too evidently only a hoax! Have you any idea whom the perpetrators may be, Mr. Railton?"

"I could hazard a guess, sir; but it would be hardly fair to utter a name without a particle of proof," replied the School House master. "I suspect that the hoax was planned by some juniors of my own House, who were naturally indignant at seeing the New House master watching their own master about. I can really sympathise with their feelings. Of course, I need not say that I had not the faintest notion that such a hoax was being planned, or I should have stepped in to stop it!"

"I am quite satisfied, Mr. Railton. I should certainly not desire that you should suffer for the follies of your relative, and I can only admire your generosity in parting with so considerable a sum of money in order to give him a fresh start abroad. The rest of the affair is a mere joke. Mr. Ratcliff has been deceived, and I cannot help thinking, Mr. Ratcliff, that your prejudice against Mr. Railton must have been very deep and unreasonable to cause you to be deceived so easily!"

The affair had worked out in the most unexpected manner, and devoutly the New House master wished that he had let Mr. Railton's affairs severely alone.

"I suppose you admit," continued the Head icily, "that it is all a mistake, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"I—I suppose so!"

"I should like a plainer answer than that!"

"Yes, sir; it is undoubtedly a mistake!" faltered the New House master.

"Very good! Mr. Railton, I can only apologise for having been induced to force you to acquaint me with your private concerns!" said the Head.

Mr. Railton bowed.

"Mr. Ratcliff, of course, will apologise," added the Head. "He has wronged you grievously!"

"I am sorry, Mr. Railton!" said the New House master, with averted eyes. "I am very sorry! I beg your pardon most sincerely!"

"And I grant it!" said Mr. Railton. "I can only express the hope that you will not be so ready to suspect me—or anyone else—again!"

Mr. Ratcliff bowed, with humility in his face and fury in his heart.

The Head shook hands cordially with the School House master, and Mr. Railton quitted the study. Mr. Ratcliff remained for a private conversation of five minutes' duration with the Head.

After lessons, Mr. Railton sent for Tom Merry, of the Shell. The hero of the Shell left the Form-room, and repaired to his Housemaster's room, with an expression of beautiful innocence upon his face, but rather an uneasy tremor in his heart.

"Ah, good-morning, Merry!" said Mr. Railton genially. "Have you ever seen that letter before?"

He held out the letter he had brought from the Head's study. Tom Merry looked at his own effusion; then his eyes met the Housemaster's expressively.

None of the Terrible Three had ever been known to get out of a scrape by telling an untruth.

"Perhaps that was hardly a fair question," said Mr. Railton thoughtfully. "I should have put it like this: I shall be glad of information, Merry, and I shall hold you quite blameless if you can give it. Tell me everything," said Mr. Railton; "everything, mind!"

Tom Merry did, with perfect frankness.

Mr. Railton gasped at some parts of the story, and at others he was hard put to it not to laugh. At the same time, he was touched by the junior's evident faith in and devotion to himself.

"Then, in spite of all, you did not believe anything against me, Merry?" he asked, when the junior had finished.

"Certainly not, sir!" said Tom Merry. "We knew you too well for that, sir!"

"I am glad to know you have so much confidence in me, my boy!" said the Housemaster, more moved than he cared.

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to show. "I hope I shall always deserve it! I may explain, Merry, that the man I met was an unfortunate relative, who had a reason for keeping his whereabouts a secret, and is now gone to America. The secret, such as it was, was his, not mine!"

"Yes, sir! I didn't know what to think, of course, but I knew you were all serene—I mean, true blue, sir!"

Mr. Railton smiled.

"Merry, I am afraid you have taken outrageous liberties with the master of the New House, and I should advise you to say nothing of the occurrence outside your own study. As you have told me in confidence, of course, I can take no action in the matter. Go back to your class, my dear lad."

And Mr. Railton shook hands with Tom Merry and sent him away. "A fine lad," murmured the Housemaster—"a brave, true, fearless, British lad! I am proud to have him in my House."

And Mr. Railton's opinion of Tom Merry, of the Shell, was shared by a good many others in the house, as well as the Housemaster.

Tom Merry's chums were waiting for him anxiously.

Manners and Lowther and Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy and Kangaroo were all in the passage, waiting for him to come out of the Housemaster's study.

"Well?"

That monosyllabic inquiry greeted him from all the juniors. "Licked?" added Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

"No!"

"Is it all right?"

"Right as rain!"

"Good egg!" said Monty Lowther, with some relief. "I expected a change in you!"

"A change?" said Tom Merry, puzzled.

"Yes, you see—"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Blake. "I can see one of his rotten puns coming! Stop him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You see," yelled Lowther, "you went in 'Merry,' and I expected you to come out 'Sorry'! See?"

"Great Scott!"

"Rotten!"

"Never mind—laugh!" said Jack Blake. "If we don't laugh at this one, he'll tell us another! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly asses!" yelled Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, as only a roar of laughter greeted Monty Lowther's remarks, he gave it up.

"It's all right about Railton!" said Tom Merry, when order was restored. "He's explained everything, and it's nothing whatever against him! Of course, we knew all along!"

"Yaas, wathah! I back up Wailton all along the line, although you chaps wathah impertinently refused to acquaint me with the details of the mattah!"

"Old Ratty has been down on him, but old Ratty is a downy bird, anyway!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I fancy there's been a jaw, and Ratty got the worst of it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Wippin'!"

"Anyway, it's all over now! Gentlemen, our respected Housemaster has been in a bother, and he has got through it, and it's all serene now! I suggest that it is an occasion to be celebrated, more especially as Gussy had a fiver this morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah! Gentlemen," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "I am glad to say that my patah is weally playin' the game now, and handin' out tips in a weally libewal mannah! I second my friend Mewwy's suggestion that there should be a celebration."

"And I third it!"

"And I fourth it!" grinned Blake.

"And I fifth it!" said Kangaroo. "Hurrah!"

"Carried unanimously, nem. con. and without opposition!" said Noble.

"And as Figgy has played up so jolly well over the matter, we'll ask Figgins & Co., and we'll have Redfern, too, just to show there's no ill-feeling!" said Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah! The more the mewwiah, deah boys!"

And Study No. 6 was simply crammed when that celebration took place. Figgins & Co., and Redfern & Co., and the Terrible Three, and the chums of Study No. 6, and Kangaroo and Reilly, and several more fellows crammed themselves in. But if there wasn't plenty of space, there was plenty to eat, which the juniors considered of greater importance. And the rivals of St. Jim's celebrated with pleasant friendship the fact that the popular master of the School House was no longer under the shadow of a mystery!

THE END.

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"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY,  
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Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR."  
Every Friday.

## CHRISTMAS YARNS.

### QUITE SIMPLE.

Freddie had been sent to a dancing school so as to be ready for any invitations to Christmas parties that might come his way. He arrived home jubilant after his first lesson, for Freddie had an eye for beauty, and he found, contrary to expectation, that many pretty little girls also attended the class.

"Well, Freddie," said his father, "how did you like your first dancing lesson; did you find it difficult to learn the steps?"

"It was jolly fine," declared Freddie. "I didn't know there were going to be girls there, too. I enjoyed myself, I can tell you. Why, all you've got to do is to keep turning round and wiping your feet on the carpet!"

### THAT WONDERFUL HAIRPIN.

Mr. Brownlow had returned home just in time for Christmas, and his wife at once proceeded to tell him of all the reforms she had effected in his absence.

"Of course, you remember the drawer we couldn't open," she said. "Well," she exclaimed, in triumph, "I opened it simply by using a hairpin! And then there's the oven door," she continued, with calm satisfaction; "you recollect how it's been hanging by its hinges for months, just because you were too lazy to put it right. Well, that's mended now!"

"Glad to hear it," said Brownlow. "How did you manage it?"

"Oh! I did it myself—with a hairpin. Then I also hung a picture up by the same means. I couldn't find a proper hook in the place; but the hairpin served beautifully."

"My goodness!" ejaculated Brownlow.

"And as for Willie, whom you've been trying to bribe and coax out of biting his nails, why, I broke him of the habit in a week!" she concluded, with maternal pride.

"With a hairpin, too, I suppose?" he meekly asked.

"No, you silly goose, with a cane!"

### UNMISTAKABLE.

The villagers had resolved to excel themselves during the festive season by giving a fancy-dress concert. Each performer was supposed to represent by his dress the type of song he was to warble. And fearsome were some of the costumes worn by many of the singers. The pretty milkmaid's song, for instance, was spoiled by her lover tripping over her can, and measuring his length on the stage.

Mr. Snooks, the village carpenter, sang "For Ever" with such pathos and so many pauses, that the audience thought he was going on for ever, too, so stopped him with the suggestion of an orange or two.

At last the village organist appeared, well disguised as a sailor, and began to sing "Nancy Lee," in high, cracked voice.

"Who is he? Who is he?" was the general question, for none could recognise him.

"Don't you know?" said a voice at the back of the hall. "That's Sing-bad, the sailor!"

### SHE WAS NOT TO BLAME.

She hurried down the stairs to join her husband, who was waiting to go out with her to the Christmas party.

"Oh, Jack," she cried, "wait a moment, you—"

"I never saw anything like it!" exclaimed Jack impatiently. "You always forget something. You girls are enough to drive any patient man frantic."

"But, Jack dear—"

"Oh, go upstairs and get what you want, and don't for goodness' sake keep me waiting here any longer!"

"But I haven't forgotten anything, dear, it's you—"

"Good gracious! What next, I wonder? I've been dressed and ready waiting for you this last half hour!"

"Indeed!" she said frigidly. "Then why is it you've got no necktie on?"

"Goodness!" he ejaculated. "Why couldn't you tell me that before instead of staring at me and saying nothing?"

Then he rushed upstairs to put a tie on.

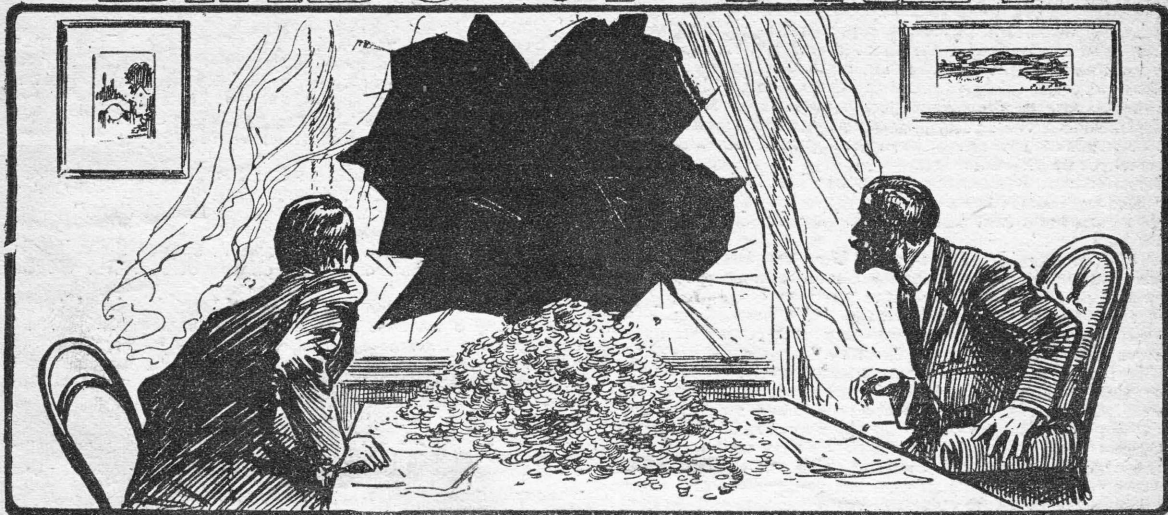
Molly: "Do you expect to have much fun at the Christmas party?"

Dolly: "How can I help having it? My hat will be trimmed with mistletoe."



OUR SPLENDID SERIAL.

# BIRDS OF PREY



A Thrilling Story Dealing with the Adventures of Nelson Lee, Detective.

By **MAXWELL SCOTT.**

## WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR.

Nelson Lee, the world-famous detective, is devoting all his energies to the task of breaking the power of a gigantic criminal organisation, known as the Order of the Ring. The infamous secret society is under the leadership of a man who is known to all the members as "The Chief," but who also passes under the name of Mr. Stephen Meredith. His principal lieutenants are known as "The Squire," "The Doctor," and "Lady Ursula"—a beautiful young girl with the heart of a tiger.

With the intention of forcing him to join the Order, the Chief kidnaps Jack Langley, a young engineer, and Miss Aylmer, his fiancée. Jack proves obdurate, and so the two young people remain the captives of the Order. Their only hope of release comes from Nelson Lee, who is hot on the track of the Chief and his associates.

The detective is reconnoitring in the neighbourhood of Elstree one morning, when he meets the Chief and the Squire. There is a short fight, but Nelson Lee is overpowered and left for dead in the roadway. The two leaders rush away to a house in the neighbourhood, where they meet the Doctor and "Lady Ursula" and tell them the news. They decide to leave the district by different ways, and the Chief, being the last to go, sets fire to the house to destroy any evidence there may be against them.

Meanwhile, Jack Langley, imprisoned at the headquarters of the Order of the Ring, makes a bold attempt at escape, but after a terrific struggle upon the stairs with his keeper, Black Bruno, and the Chief, he is knocked senseless to the ground.

(Now go on with the Story.)

### "Sister Dora."

Let us now return to Nelson Lee, whom we left lying unconscious at the end of the lane which led to the red-brick villa.

The carriage which had disturbed his assailants proved to be a high-wheeled dogcart belonging to the colonel at whose house the detective had spent the previous night, and from whom he had borrowed the clothes he was wearing. The colonel himself was driving, and, as the horse was a somewhat mettlesome brute, which needed all his attention, it is more than probable that if the colonel had been alone he would have driven past the end of the lane without perceiving the huddled object which was lying in the gutter.

But the colonel was not alone. Seated in the back of the trap was a dapper, smart-looking youth, whose diminutive form was arrayed in the colonel's livery, and whose close-cropped head was surmounted by a cockaded silk hat. This youth—this "tiger," to give him his proper appellation—caught sight of Nelson Lee as the trap flashed past the end of the lane, and his shout of alarm so startled the horse that fully five minutes elapsed before the colonel could get the animal under control, and bring him to a standstill.

"Confound you! What the deuce do you mean by shouting like that?" demanded the colonel angrily. "Have you suddenly taken leave of your senses?"

"Please, sir, I couldn't help it!" said the tiger, as he sprang from the trap, and ran to the horse's head. "There's a man's body lying in that lane, a few yards round the corner; and, please, sir, I think it's the gentleman who had breakfast with you this morning!"

The colonel literally leaped out of the trap and flew to the

end of the lane. One glance sufficed to show him that the "tiger" was right in thinking that the body was that of Nelson Lee, but a very brief examination served to show that detective was not dead. He was quite unconscious, but his heart was still beating, and ever and anon, at long intervals, his chest expanded and collapsed in a feeble, fluttering sigh.

His examination concluded, the colonel ran to the end of the lane, and waved to the boy, who promptly turned the horse round, and led him back to where his master stood.

"Get in!" gasped the colonel excitedly. "Drive back to the house as fast as you can, and bring me the ambulance-stretcher from the harness-room. Tell the footman and the butler to come with you. I'll stay here until you come back."

The boy drove off, and presently returned with the stretcher and two of the colonel's servants. With the aid of the latter the detective was placed on the stretcher and carried to the colonel's bed. The groom was then sent off in the dogcart to fetch the nearest doctor, who lived at Elstree.

"If he isn't at home," said the colonel, "find out where he has gone, and follow him. Follow him all the morning, if needs be, but on no account come back without him!"

The groom accordingly drove to the doctor's house at Elstree. The doctor was out, and was not expected to return until he had finished his morning round.

"Is it anything urgent?" asked the doctor's wife.

"Very," said the groom. "Mr. Nelson Lee, the detective, has been stabbed in the back, and the colonel has taken him to his house. Can you tell me where the doctor has gone?"

"Yes," said the doctor's wife. "He has gone to see some patients in the country. He drove from here to Barnet Gate, to see Mrs. Brown. After that he was going to Rowley

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NEXT  
WEDNESDAY:

"THE NEW BOY'S SECRET!"

A Grand, Long, Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co. at  
St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Green, to the Watsons, and after that to the Harlands, of Ridge Lane. If he should happen to come back here before dinner-time, which isn't at all likely, I'll send him up to the colonel's house at once, of course."

The groom thanked her, and drove to Barnet Gate.

"Has the doctor been here?" he asked.

"Yes, about half an hour ago," said the man whom he questioned. "He's gone to Rowley Green."

At Rowley Green the groom's inquiries met with a similar result. The doctor had been there about ten minutes ago, and had driven off in the direction of Ridge Lane.

The groom, accordingly, drove to Ridge Lane, fully expecting to find the doctor's trap standing at the door of Harland's farmhouse. In this, however, he was disappointed. The doctor had apparently been and gone. At any rate, there was no sign of his trap.

"How long is it since the doctor was here?" he asked, as he pulled up outside the door.

"The doctor?" said Harland, shaking his head. "He hasn't been yet."

"Not been!" said the groom. "How can that be? I've driven straight here from Rowley Green, and they told me there that he'd come to your house."

"I can't help that," said Harland. "He hasn't been here this morning, though we're expecting him every minute. You must have passed him on the way."

"No fear!" said the groom contemptuously. "It isn't likely that I should pass him when I've been hunting for him all the morning. Somebody must have met him and taken him to one of the houses off the main road. However, if you're expecting him, I can't do better than wait for him."

This certainly seemed the proper thing to do, under the circumstances, but when half an hour had passed, and there was still no sign of the doctor, the groom began to feel uneasy.

"I wonder what I'd better do?" he said, consulting Harland. "It begins to look as if the doctor wasn't coming."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Harland cheerfully. "He doesn't always come on the day he promises. Maybe he'll not come till to-morrow."

"Well, I daren't go back without him," said the groom. "The colonel would bite my head off!"

"If I were you," said Harland, "I should drive round to all the farms between here and Rowley Green. There aren't very many of them, and he must have gone to one of them."

"By Jove, yes!" said the groom. "Why didn't I think of that before? If the doctor comes after I've gone, send him on to the colonel's house at once."

He whipped up his horse, and drove to the nearest farmhouse. From there he drove to the next, and from there to the next. But it was labour in vain. The answer he received was always the same—the doctor had not been there.

The groom was now completely at his wit's end. He had been sent to fetch the doctor, and he had been told that he must not come back without him. He had done his level best to carry out the colonel's orders, yet there he was, after nearly three hours' search, no nearer finding the doctor than when he set out.

"It's no good!" he growled. "There's nothing for it but to go back and tell the colonel that I can't find him. There'll be the deuce of a row, I know; but it's better to go back at once, instead of wasting any further time."

In anything but a cheerful frame of mind—he had had previous experience of the colonel's wrath—he turned his horse's head in the direction of Elstree. As he was driving along the road from Barnet Gate to Deacon's Hill, he suddenly caught sight of a girlish figure coming towards him, dressed in the picturesque uniform of a hospital nurse.

"Hallo, a nurse!" he muttered to himself. "This looks as if I was on the track at last. If she's nursing anybody in this neighbourhood, she'll probably be able to give me some news of the doctor. At any rate, I'll stop her and inquire."

Little did he dream, as he drove to meet the "nurse," that this cloaked and bonneted figure was that of one of Nelson Lee's most bitter foes. Yet such it was. For the "nurse" was none other than Lady Ursula, who had disguised herself, as already described, and was now making her way to London by a roundabout route in order to join her accomplices at St. Pancras.

"Excuse me, miss," said the groom, as he reined in his horse, "do you happen to know where Dr. Barnard is?"

"I don't," said Lady Ursula, shaking her pretty head. "Are you looking for him?"

"Yes," said the groom. "You've heard of Nelson Lee, the famous detective, of course?"

Lady Ursula gave a violent start, but regained her presence of mind before the groom perceived her agitation.

"Why, of course, everybody's heard of Nelson Lee!" she said. "But what about him?"

"He's been stabbed in two places," said the groom

solemnly. "My master, Colonel Hepworth, has taken him to his house, and has sent me for the doctor. I've been hunting for him since nine o'clock this morning, but I can't find him anywhere. It's deuced awkward, isn't it?"

"It is," said Lady Ursula, and her eyes sparkled with a sudden daring inspiration. "Is Mr. Lee very bad?"

"Very!" said the groom.

"Unconscious?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Dear me, how very sad!" said the make-believe nurse. "I wonder if I could be of any service? I've had a great deal of experience, you know, and I should be very glad to do what I can for Mr. Lee until the doctor arrives."

"You're a brick!" said the groom delightedly. "To tell you the truth, I was in a mortal funk of meeting the colonel empty-handed, so that if you come back with me, you'll not only be doing a good turn to Mr. Lee, but for me as well. Are you staying in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes. I'm staying with a friend at Barnet Gate."

"Shall I drive you there for your things?"

"Oh, dear no, thank you! I sha'n't stay at the colonel's, you know. I shall only take charge of Mr. Lee till the doctor comes."

As she uttered these words she held out her hand to the groom, and a moment later she was seated by his side. As they drove to the colonel's house, the groom regaled her with a full, true, and particular account of the manner in which the detective's body had been found. From time to time she nodded her head, or indulged in a monosyllabic reply, but for the greater part of the time her hand was toying with a jewelled stiletto in her pocket, and through her scheming brain was coursing the thought:

"Give me ten minutes before the doctor arrives, and the work which the Squire began with his knife will be finished with this stiletto!"

It was an audacious scheme, worthy of the woman who had once before attempted to encompass the detective's death. But it was a scheme which was doomed to be nipped in the bud, for the first person they met as they drove through the gates which gave admittance to the colonel's grounds was Dr. Barnard.

He had evidently been to see Nelson Lee, and was now returning to his house on foot. Lady Ursula did not know him, of course, but the groom did, and he reined in his horse with an exclamation of mingled surprise and disgust.

"So you're here, sir, after all!" he said: "I've been here, there and everywhere trying to find you! I've been to Barnet Gate, and to Rowley Green and to Ridge Lane, and to most of the farmhouses on the way. I tracked you as far as Rowley Green, and then I lost all trace of you."

"That's easily explained," said the doctor. "Shortly after leaving Rowley Green my horse went suddenly lame, so I changed my mind about going to Ridge Lane, and drove straight back home. I drove by the old field road, so as to avoid the flints, and that's how I missed you, I suppose. When I reached home my wife gave me your message, and I came on here at once."

"And how is your patient?" asked Lady Ursula, who was thinking to herself that if Nelson Lee had recovered consciousness it was time she was "making tracks."

"Very ill indeed," said the doctor gravely. "I hope and believe that he'll pull through all right, but it will be a near shave for him."

"Is he still unconscious?"

"Oh, yes; and likely to remain so for a day or two! But whom have I the honour of addressing?"

"My name is Wentworth, but I am usually known as Sister Dora," said the glib-tongued traitress. "I met Colonel Hepworth's groom between here and Barnet Gate. He told me that Mr. Lee had been seriously injured, and that he couldn't find a doctor, so I volunteered to come back with him and do what I could until you arrived."

"That was very good of you," said the doctor. "Are you nursing in this neighbourhood?"

"Oh, dear no!" she replied, with a silvery laugh. "I am attached to St. George's Hospital, you know. I've been spending a short holiday at Barnet Gate, but I'm due back at St. George's to-morrow morning. In the meantime, if I can be of any service to you I shall be only too glad. You will require a nurse for Mr. Lee, I presume?"

"Yes. I'm going to wire for one now."

"Then would you like me to take charge of Mr. Lee until the nurse arrives?"

"I should!" said the doctor gratefully. "Miss Hepworth, the colonel's sister, is looking after him at present, but although she is very willing and very patient, she hasn't the experience of a trained nurse, of course. If you really wouldn't mind staying with Mr. Lee for an hour or two—"

"I should be delighted!" she said; and her eager tones, no less than her flushed and excited face, bore witness to the truth of what she said.

"Then come with me, and I'll introduce you to the colonel," said the doctor.

He assisted her out of the trap and escorted her to the house, where he introduced her to the colonel, who received her with effusive gratitude.

When she had taken off her coat and bonnet, the doctor conducted her to the sick-room, presented her to Miss Hepworth, explained the nature of the detective's injuries, and told her what he wished to have done.

Then he shook her warmly by the hand, bowed to Miss Hepworth, and took his departure.

### The Arrest of Lady Ursula.

It was half-past twelve when the doctor took his departure, and for the next six hours Lady Ursula hovered round the unconscious detective like an ill-omened bird of prey. All she wanted, all she was waiting for, was to be left alone with Nelson Lee for just one minute—one minute in which to plunge the stiletto into his heart, and cover up the wound until she could make her escape. But the fates were against her. The minute for which she craved was denied to her, for Miss Hepworth was more than a little piqued that the doctor had supplanted her by a stranger, and, in spite of all that "Sister Dora" could say, she insisted upon remaining in the room and sharing the work of nursing her brother's guest.

It was annoying, exasperating, maddening for "Sister Dora"! The precious hours were slipping by, the time was drawing near when the new nurse would arrive and "Sister Dora" would have to take her departure. Yet never for a moment did Miss Hepworth leave the room and give her a chance to carry out her fiendish plan. No wonder that Lady Ursula ground her pretty teeth in impotent rage! No wonder that she glared at the colonel's sister as though she would like to choke her!

At last, however, the longed-for opportunity came. About half-past six Miss Hepworth suddenly remembered that she had an important letter to write, a letter that she wished to send by the evening post, and, to "Sister Dora's" unbounded delight, she rose from her chair and left the room.

And even as she closed the bed-room door "Sister Dora's" hand stole into her pocket and gripped the jewelled handle of the stiletto.

In the meantime the colonel was interviewing an anxious-looking, motherly old woman in the hall below.

"My name is Jones—Mrs. Jones," the old lady was saying. "I live in Gray's Inn Road, and Mr. Lee was my lodger. As you are doubtless aware, he was lured to Hampton about five weeks ago by a woman who gave the name of Mrs. Bateman, and who is supposed to have been in the pay of the Order of the Ring. Whilst he was at Hampton an attempt was made to murder him, but he managed to escape and return to London, where he put up for the night at Roxby's Hotel in the Strand.

"Some time during that night he mysteriously disappeared, and nobody ever heard anything more about him till the papers came out this morning with the news of that strange affair at Chesham Place last night. It said in the papers that Mr. Lee had gone off in pursuit of four men and a lady, who were believed to be members of the Order of the Ring. Nobody knew exactly where he had gone until this evening, when the 'Evening News' published a special edition, stating that he had been found, stabbed in the back, about two hundred yards from your house.

"As soon as I heard the news, I put on my things and hurried here as fast as cabs and trains would bring me. You see, sir, although he was only my lodger, he was more like my son than anything else, and it would break my heart if he were to die!"

"Oh, but he isn't going to die!" said the colonel cheerfully. "He has a couple of ugly wounds in his back, but the doctor has every hope that he will recover."

"May I see him, sir? I won't speak to him, or disturb him in any way; but I haven't set eyes on him for over a month, you know."

"Why, of course you shall see him!" said the colonel. "Come with me."

He escorted her up the stairs, and along a thickly-carpeted corridor which led to the sick-room. As they turned into this corridor, the sick-room door swung open, and Miss Hepworth came out.

"Tired, dear?" said the colonel, as he drew aside to let her pass.

"No," she answered, somewhat shortly. "I've a letter to write. I shall be back directly."

She swept on down the corridor and down the stairs, without so much as a glance at the homely old lady by her brother's side. The colonel followed her with his eyes, then he shrugged his shoulders and opened the sick-room door.

"Sister Dora," who had meanwhile drawn the stiletto from her pocket, thrust the weapon behind her back, and faced the colonel with a startled glance of inquiry. The colonel, with his hand on the handle of the door, motioned to Mrs. Jones to enter.

"There's a lady here, nurse—" he began.

But the rest of the sentence was drowned by a startled cry from Mrs. Jones, who had just caught sight of Sister Dora's face.

"What is that woman doing here?" she cried, pointing an accusing finger at the shrinking nurse. "Are you all mad? That's Mrs. Bateman, the woman who lured Mr. Lee to Hampton, and tried to murder him!"

The colonel drew in his breath in that quick, spasmodic fashion which betokens intense excitement. He had no need to ask Mrs. Jones for the proofs of her startling assertion. He had only to look at Sister Dora's face to find all the proof that he required.

With one hand behind her back, still clutching the stiletto, she met his accusing glance with a bold and defiant face. Never had she looked more beautiful, more dangerous, more cruel. She reminded him of a tigress at bay. No trace of fear betrayed itself on her faultlessly-moulded face. Her lustrous eyes, now fixed on him and now on his companion, glittered with an ominous, menacing light. And through her lips, half-parted in a scornful smile, her small, white teeth gleamed brightly, cruelly, threateningly.

For several seconds no one spoke. Then the colonel found his tongue.

"You—you traitress!" he exclaimed, in tones of mingled horror and contempt. "So this is why you sought admittance to my house—to murder the man confided to your care!"

"Precisely!" she said, with a shrug of her dainty shoulders. "My intention was to make an end of Nelson Lee, and to slip away before the truth was discovered. This, of course, is no longer possible now—at least, it is impossible for me to escape discovery; but I can, and will, make an end of Nelson Lee!"

As she uttered these words she suddenly whipped the stiletto from behind her back, and aimed a lightning blow at the detective's heart.

But, quick as she was, the colonel was quicker. Like an arrow from a bow, he leaped across the dimly-lighted room, and seized the upraised arm. There was a moment's scuffle, a short, shrill scream, then the weapon dropped from the woman's hand, and fell at the colonel's feet.

"You cur!" she hissed, striking him in the face with her disengaged hand. "Let go my wrist! You're breaking it!"

The colonel calmly relaxed his grip, and, swiftly stooping, secured the jewelled stiletto.

"I'll take charge of this, I think," he said quietly.

The baffled woman drew herself up, and favoured him with a glance of vindictive fury. Her nostrils dilated, and her bosom rose and fell, as her breathing came and went in quick, short pants. Her eyes flashed fire, and her fingers twitched convulsively.

"Well, what are you going to do now?" she asked, her voice vibrating with the intensity of her passion.

"I am going to give you in charge, of course!" he said. "Inspector Webb, of the St. Albans police, is at present in my library. He has been making inquiries in the neighbourhood this afternoon, and I was interviewing him when Mrs. Jones arrived."

He turned to Mrs. Jones, who was standing just inside the door, trembling in every limb.

"Will you kindly oblige me by ringing that bell, madam?" he said.

She tottered across the room, and gave the bell-pull a vigorous tug. A moment later a footman appeared.

"Give my compliments to Inspector Webb," said the colonel, "and ask him to be so good as to step upstairs!"

The footman retired, and presently returned with the inspector—a burly, broad-shouldered man with a blue-serge suit.

"You can arrest a person for a felony, without a warrant, can't you?" asked the colonel, as the inspector entered the room.

"Yes, of course!" replied the inspector, glancing from the colonel to Lady Ursula, and from Lady Ursula to the colonel.

"I thought so," said the colonel. "And attempted murder is a felony, isn't it?"

"Certainly!" said the inspector, growing more and more mystified.

"Then arrest this young lady, if you please!" said the colonel, waving his hand towards Lady Ursula.

"Arrest her!" gasped the inspector, in tones of mingled incredulity and surprise. "What for?"

"For attempting to murder Nelson Lee," said the colonel.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 255.

A Grand, Long, Complete Tale of Tom Morry & Co, at St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"She's the woman who lured him to Hampton five weeks ago."

The inspector's eyes grew big and round, and his delight found vent in a low, excited whistle.

For more than a month the name of "Mrs. Bateman"—the woman who had bearded Nelson Lee in his den, and had lured him to Hampton—had been in everybody's mouth. Her conduct on that memorable night, her wonderful nerve, her extraordinary daring, had fired the public's imagination, and had invested her with a halo of romance. On all hands it had become an accepted fact that she was one of the ruling spirits of the Order of the Ring, and many had been the taunts which had been levelled at the police for their failure to trace and arrest her.

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that Inspector Webb felt a thrill of pride and satisfaction stealing through his nerves. If the colonel were speaking the truth, if this girlish figure in nurse's uniform were really and truly the notorious Mrs. Bateman, what a sensation would be caused by her arrest—what glory would accrue to Inspector Webb! What a hero he would be!

"You're quite sure there's no mistake?" he asked, striving to preserve a cool demeanour. "I daren't arrest her on mere suspicion, you know."

"Suspicion!" said the colonel, somewhat contemptuously. "There's no suspicion about it! Mrs. Jones here, who is Mr. Lee's landlady, recognised the woman as soon as she caught sight of her. However, I'm not asking you to arrest her because she's 'Mrs. Bateman.' That part of the charge may remain in abeyance. I ask you to arrest her because she tried to stab Mr. Lee, less than a couple of minutes ago, before my very eyes, with this!"

He handed the inspector the stiletto. The inspector examined it, and transferred it to his pocket. Then he crossed the room, laid his hand on Lady Ursula's shoulder, and uttered the formal words of arrest and caution.

"I think I'll take her to St. Albans straight away," he said, turning to the colonel. "She's not exactly the sort of prisoner to be left all night in a village lock-up."

"I agree with you!" said the colonel emphatically. "Will you take her by train, or shall I lend you my brougham?"

"I should prefer the brougham, if you've no objection," said the inspector. "It will take us to St. Albans almost as quickly as the train, and will enable me to avoid any public demonstration on the way."

The colonel rang the bell.

"Tell John to bring the brougham round," he said to the footman who answered the summons. "I want him to drive Inspector Webb to St. Albans. Also, you might as well bring up this young lady's cloak and bonnet, which you'll find in the outer hall."

"Are you going to handcuff her?" he asked, turning to the inspector.

"I am," said the inspector firmly. "It's against the rules to handcuff a woman, I know; but on this occasion I think I'm justified."

He produced a pair of handcuffs of the ordinary size, and intertwined them in such a way as to make the aperture small enough for his prisoner's dainty wrist.

A moment or two later the footman entered with the cloak and bonnet, which were both of the ordinary type, except that the cloak was provided with a massive golden clasp, fashioned in the shape of a serpent's head, with two large rubies for eyes. He handed them to Lady Ursula, who donned them without a word, turning her back on the inspector whilst she fastened the clasp. She then held out her wrists, still silent and impassive, and the inspector slipped the "bracelets" on.

A quarter of an hour later, she and the inspector had taken their seats in the colonel's brougham, and were on their way to St. Albans.

### Escaped.

It was seven o'clock when the brougham left the colonel's house. A blustering wind was blowing from the north, bringing with it gusty squalls of sleety rain. The moon was only two days past the full, but was hidden behind a sable canopy of leaden clouds. For a yard or two in front of the brougham the miry road was illuminated by a yellow haze of light, cast by the carriage lamps; but beyond this haze—in front of it and behind it, on the right side and on the left—was an inky void of impenetrable darkness.

From the colonel's house to St. Albans was a distance of seven miles. For the first two or three miles neither Lady Ursula nor her captor spoke, and the only sounds which were audible inside the brougham were the rumbling of the wheels, the click-clack of the horse's hoofs, the howling of the wind, and the rattle of the rain on the window-panes.

Then Lady Ursula roused herself from an apparent reverie and spoke.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 255

"THE MAGNET" LIBRARY.  
Every Monday.

Our Companion Papers.

"THE PENNY POPULAR."  
Every Friday.

"Wouldn't you like to light your pipe?" she said, in a low, ingratiating voice.

"No!" said the inspector bluntly.

She bit her lip. A venomous light glowed in her eyes, which she hastened to veil with her drooping lids. It was a new experience to her to be answered in this fashion, yet she could not afford to take offence; for her busy brain had already concocted a plan of escape, and a quarrel with the inspector would have ruined it. So she swallowed her pride, and resumed:

"I cannot compliment you on your politeness," she said.

"Nobody asked you to!" he grunted. Again that ominous sparkle glittered in her eyes; but again she curbed her rising wrath, and forced herself to speak.

"The reason I asked you was this," she said; "I'm dying for a smoke myself, and I thought that, if I allowed you to light your pipe, you would perhaps return the favour, and permit me to indulge in a cigarette."

"Then you thought wrongly," he replied. "In the first place, if I had wanted to smoke, I should have done so without asking your permission. In the second place, I haven't any cigarettes—"

"But I have!" she interrupted eagerly. "If you'll unfasten my cloak, you'll find a silver case—"

"Allow me to finish, if you please," he said. "I was going to say that, in the third place, if I had any cigarettes, I should certainly not permit you to smoke, so long as you are in my custody."

"Thank you!" she said sarcastically. "You are most obliging, I am sure! You are evidently determined to inflict as much discomfort on me as you possibly can!"

"Not at all," he said. "If I had been careless of your comfort, I should have taken you to St. Albans by train."

"I wish you had!" she retorted. "A well-lighted and well-ventilated railway-carriage would have been very much more comfortable than this dark and stuffy brougham!"

"It's dark, I admit; but I can't say that I find it stuffy."

"Perhaps not. I do. I'm half stifled. If it isn't against your precious rules, I'll take off my cloak."

Without waiting for his reply, she raised her manacled hands, and began to fumble with the clasp of her cloak.

"Shall I open one of the windows?" he suggested.

"And treat me to a shower-bath!" she sneered. "No, thank you! I would rather be suffocated than drowned!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and relapsed into silence. For a few minutes longer she fumbled at the snake's-head clasp; then she stamped her foot, and gave utterance to a well-earned cry of vexation.

"Are you made of stone?" she demanded, her eyes brimming over with tears. "You've deprived me of the use of my hands, yet you sit there like a statue, and watch me struggling with this clasp, and you never offer to unfasten it for me!"

"You never asked me!" he growled, leaning across the carriage, and peering at the curiously-fashioned clasp. "How does it unfasten?"

"One side of the clasp fits into the snake's mouth," she said, striving to speak calmly, though every nerve in her body was tingling with suppressed excitement. "You take hold of the snake's head between the eyes with one hand, and give it a sudden squeeze. At the same time, you take hold of the other side of the clasp with the other hand, and give it a pull."

Suspecting nothing, he stretched out his hands and took hold of the clasp in the manner she had described. Following her instructions, he squeezed the golden head of the snake; but no sooner had he done so than a tiny spike, no bigger than a needle's point, sprang up from between the ruby eyes, and pierced the skin of his thumb.

Hastily, almost involuntarily, he drew back his hand, with a startled exclamation of surprise.

"Something's pricked me!" he said.

And, even as he uttered the words, a stinging, burning pain shot up his arm, and a blood-red mist began to gather before his eyes.

He half rose to his feet; then his legs gave way beneath him, and he sank back on the carriage seat.

"What—what have you done to me?" he stammered.

And even in his own ears his voice sounded far away and indistinct.

Her reply was a silvery, mocking laugh. It stung him to the quick, and galvanised him into life. He staggered to his feet, wildly, blindly, drunkenly.

"You—you-fiend!" he gasped. "You've pois-poi-poison—"

His voice died away in an inarticulate moan. He swayed to and fro for a second or two, then a spasm of anguish convulsed his frame, and he sank in a heap at her feet.

The moment the inspector's struggles ceased, Lady Ursula went down on her knees and calmly proceeded to rifle his pockets. Having found his keys, she spent the next ten minutes in a patient attempt to unlock the handcuffs. When this had been done, she cautiously opened the door from the inside, and peered out into the darkness.

The brougham was then ascending a hill, and the horse was proceeding at a walking-pace. The wind was howling its loudest. The rain was beating down on the road with a hiss like that of escaping steam. The very elements conspired to assist her.

Drawing her cloak round her supple form, she stepped out into the road.

With matchless coolness she walked beside the brougham for a yard or two, until she had stealthily closed the door and turned the handle. Then she waved her hand in mock farewell to the unsuspecting driver, and glided away in the opposite direction.

It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that never before had the newspaper-readers of Great Britain been provided with such a startling sequence of sensations, on two consecutive days, as those which were provided for them on the Thursday and Friday of the week we are describing.

On the Thursday morning, for instance, the papers announced that Nelson Lee had reappeared the night before at a house in Chesham Place in the disguise of a footman; that he had summoned the police, and informed them that the well-known "Mr. Stephen Meredith," who lived at this house, was the notorious Chief of the Order of the Ring; that the police had raided the house, and had discovered a subterranean passage connecting it with another house in Belgrave Square; that the Chief, with three other men and a lady, had made his escape; and that Nelson Lee had gone off in pursuit.

On the Thursday afternoon special editions were published of most of the London papers, informing the public that Nelson Lee had been discovered unconscious and seriously wounded in a country lane about half a mile to the north of Elstree, and nursed by Sister Dora, of St. George's Hospital. Later in the day the streets were flooded with "extra specials," containing the startling news that "Sister Dora" had been recognised as the notorious "Mrs. Bateman," who had inveigled Nelson Lee to Hampton on the night of his disappearance; that Colonel Hepworth had given her into custody for attempting to murder her patient; that she was then, at the moment of going to press, on her way to St. Albans in charge of Inspector Webb.

And then, on Friday morning, came the latest and biggest sensation of all—the news that "Sister Dora," alias "Mrs. Bateman," had murdered Inspector Webb on the way to St. Albans, and had made her escape. "Mrs. Bateman," "Sister Dora." One heard the names in clubs and public-houses, in railway-carriages and on the tops of omnibuses, in workshops and cafes, at busy street corners and in quiet suburban roads. Sometimes, too, one heard the name of Lady Ursula, for the "Daily Mail," shrewder than the rest of London newspapers, started the theory that "Sister Dora," alias "Mrs. Bateman," was none other than the young and beautiful girl, well known in society circles, who had fled with the Chief from Chesham Place.

On Saturday night, however, all speculation was set at rest. At four o'clock in the afternoon Nelson Lee recovered consciousness. At six o'clock he was interviewed by the police and the representatives of the Press. By half-past seven his startling tale had been flashed to the uttermost parts of the kingdom, and all the world and his wife were aware of the fact that "Sister Dora" was Lady Ursula, and that the three leaders of the Order of the Ring—the Chief, the Squire, and the Doctor—were still alive and at large.

March had done, and April was well on its way ere Nelson Lee was able to leave the colonel's house. Both the colonel and the doctor exerted all their persuasive powers in a vain attempt to induce him to go abroad for a week or two, in order to recruit his shattered strength. But he would not hear of it. Despite the perils he had already encountered, he was firmly resolved—and not only resolved, but positively eager—to resume his task of hunting down the villainous birds of prey who masqueraded under the name of the Order of the Ring.

"I have sworn to devote every moment of my time to exterminating this rascally society," he said. "I have vowed to rest neither night nor day until I have brought its leaders to justice, and have cleared up the mystery which at present enshrouds the fate of Jack Langley and Ethel Aylmer."

*A grand instalment of this thrilling serial will be contained in next Wednesday's "Gem" Library. Order in advance. Price One Penny.*

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "THE NEW BOY'S SECRET!"

## A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

*The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns will be from those readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.*

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl, English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons, one taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. *Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.*

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column *must write to the advertisers direct.* No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C."

Miss D. Watt, 43, Wilson Street, South Yarra, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with an Irish boy reader, living in Dublin, of about 19 years of age.

W. C. Brookes, Rectory Avenue, Weston, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with an English reader.

H. C. Wavers, 104, Wells Street, Newtown, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England.

J. Kingsley, age 17, Sydney Technical College, Sydney, New South Wales, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader of "The Gem."

E. H. Beckman, James Street Incline, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with readers of "The Gem."

J. Wilson, Glen Lee, High Street, Dennevirk, Hawkes Bay, North Island, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader, age 14, living in or near London, Manchester, or Birmingham.

G. Johnson, 114, Thistlethwaite Street, South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader of "The Gem" living in England, of about 16 years of age.

Miss E. Cot, 283, Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, would like to exchange picture-postcards with readers in England.

J. Bennet, Paddington Post Office, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 18.

D. C. Collins, Ellacombe, Park Street, Glenferrie, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader, age about 15, living in the British Isles.

S. E. Day, John Street, Hindmarsh, Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 15, living in England.

G. Convy, 128, Bridge Road, Richmond, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy reader of "The Gem," age 13-15 years of age, living in England or Ireland.

Miss R. Convy of the same address, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader living in England or Wales, age about 17 or 19.

Miss E. R. O'Dea, Daington, 10, Napier Street, South Melbourne, Victoria, wishes to correspond with a girl reader of about 18 years of age, living in England or Scotland.

S. Dunstan, 349, Montague Street, Albert Park, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader of "The Gem," age about 17, living in the British Isles.

R. Routley, Box 10, Sandstone, Western Australia, wishes to correspond with boy or girl readers, of about 16 years of age, living in the British Isles.

J. Chard, Grey Street, Wickham, Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy reader, about 11 years of age, living in England.

*The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.*

## OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Wednesday.

**"The New Boy's Secret."**

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

In next week's magnificent, long, complete tale of the Chums of St. Jim's, Levison, of the Fourth Form—always ready to poke his nose into other people's business—undertakes a very shady commission indeed. The new boy, who is the victim of his wiles, is in a fair way to falling an easy prey to the Fourth-Former's cunning, when Tom Merry & Co. "chip in," and lend their active assistance in guarding

**THE NEW BOY'S SECRET.**

**Where "The Penny Popular" Scores.**

There is no doubt that the principal reason for the astonishing success of our new companion paper, "The Penny Popular," is the fact that it possesses an equal fascination for readers of all tastes. Tastes vary so much that very few story-papers can hope to appeal to more than a certain section of readers; but this is where "The Penny Pop." scores! For lovers of school tales, it provides every week a grand, complete story of Tom Merry & Co., the most popular schoolboy characters of the present day; for those to whom adventure stories make the strongest appeal, the great doings, at once exciting and amusing, of the famous adventurers, Jack, Sam, and Pete, need no recommendation; while followers of the world-renowned detective, Sexton Blake, will find every week in the pages of "The Penny Pop." a magnificent long, complete story dealing with some of this famous crime-detective's most thrilling cases. What story-paper could possibly offer a more comprehensive and entertaining budget of first-class reading-matter for the week-end? The wonderful way that our new companion paper has bounded ahead is sufficient evidence that my chums have been quick to recognise that "The Penny Popular" contains the cream of the best stories every Friday. In the words of an enthusiastic reader: "To recommend 'The Penny Popular' to your friends is to show evidence of your good taste, and incidentally, to do your friends a good turn."

**The Real Thing.**

The following remarkable article has been written specially for Gemites by the author, who, in the course of his adventurous career in many lands, has had prolonged experience of the actual life of a cowboy of Western America, as it really is! An ounce of fact is worth a ton of theory, and my readers will appreciate this true picture of a life which romance has too often invested with a false glamour.

**How to Become a Cowboy. By a Cowboy.**

Do you want to become a cowboy out West? Do you know that it is a life of deadly peril for a youngster whose only idea of the wild life of the vast and desolate prairies, has been taken from books and the stage? I have been a cowboy. If you wish to become one I will tell you how to do so; but don't blame me when you are nursing a broken arm or leg, or when you find a hole in some part of your body to remind you that a steer's horns are sharp, and that long and bitter fights on the plains has made the untamed brute an expert at offence and defence.

Let us suppose that you have, for a third-class passage to America, £6 10s. And that you have also about £10 to place before the official who will demand to see that sum at all ports—United States and Canada—before he allows you to land. The next thing is to get out West. From New York

to the borders of the prairies, say Kansas City, the nearest to the East, will entail a journey costing you at the very least about 35 dollars. This sum in our money is £7 6s. 10d. Money does not go so far in the United States or Canada as it does at home. For one penny you may purchase at home an article which will cost you five cents—two-pence-halfpenny—out in America.

Next you must purchase an outfit. This means more money. A stout pony will cost at least £20; saddle, bride, and guns, a revolver and repeating-rifle, will cost another £20, or more. Then you must hire a guide to the nearest ranch, which may be away some hundreds of miles from any civilised town.

When you arrive you may not be wanted!

The ranch-owners and great firms always prefer ex-Army men, who must be smart enough to jump on to a wild mustang, and tame it in a few hours! Here it is where the tenderfoot finds out his woeful lack of horsemanship. Even if he does succeed in passing the test of horsemanship, it is not at all improbable that he will have to wait for a vacancy, and at his own expense keep himself until he is proficient enough to take his place in a round-up. You may dream of fighting Indians. Well, there are some yet on the plains. These are such as hate the restraint of the Government reservations, preferring to go about the country much the same as tramps do at home, never working, and stealing when opportunity offers.

The only excitement of a cowboy's life consists in tracing lost steers. When so employed he may come across a band of lawless men who make a practice of stealing cattle, changing the brand, or, as in most cases, driving a small number into a great herd.

On such occasions there is always the chance of a fight. Fights with cattle-thieves are not at all romantic, and very often prove fatal. The pleasure of standing up to your adversary, and trying conclusions with him, is denied you; and you find yourself creeping from rock to rock, or tree to tree, to try and get in a pot-shot at the enemy, who is just as anxious to pot you and keep in cover himself.

The sport is tame, to say the least of it. Personally, I prefer a stand-up bout of British weapons—fists. The type of men you meet in the cattle-stealing line are cowards because they are thieves. Their courage, if any, is of the brute kind. Their moral courage—which makes a man do right because it is right—is nil.

Once a month, or perhaps twice a month, there is what we call a "round-up." The cowboys dash round and round in a circle, ever and ever getting the cattle into a smaller compass. Then there is a way made by which one animal at a time is allowed to pass through into a previously prepared corral. As the animal passes it is branded and counted.

The food is rough, but always plentiful. Men allow hair and beard to grow, because barbers are scarce. The strange-looking trousers which you see in pictures is only the skin of a sheep or goat, laced over the ordinary riding-breeches to prevent wear, and also to protect the legs of the rider when he happens to get caught between a couple of steers.

The "shack," as the place is called wherein the men live, is usually a long, low, wooden affair with bunks around the sides, and bare tables down the centre.

In conclusion I may say, if you happen to be in the United States, and not far from a ranch, you might like the life of a cowboy after a while. The pay is about 40 to 50 dollars per month—£8 6s. 8d., or £10 8s. 4d., as the case may be. Food being, with lodging of course, found you.

The life is nice to look at from the comfortable seat in the picture palace or theatre! But I have lived the life, and—well, I've told you what it's like.

THE EDITOR.

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