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GEM LIBRARY

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A MAGNIFICENT LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY—

RATTY'S BID.

He wants to be a councillor! Who does? Why "Ratty," otherwise Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the unpopular master of the New House at St. Jim's! It wants a bit of believing, but there it is; Ratty's out for the job, and no one is more amazed than Tom Merry & Co., our cheery chums of the Shell and Fourth.

CHAPTER 1.

Gussy's Off-Break!

FIGGINS sniffed, Kerr laughed sardonically, and Fatty Wynn grunted. Apparently the three heroes of the New House at St. Jim's were not impressed, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his eye and surveyed them.

"I wegard you as disbeliefin' wottahs!"

"Good!" said Figgins. "But you didn't expect us to believe a tall story like that, Gussy? It isn't credible—simply isn't! You know you always bowl wide!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sniffed.

"Wats! I will pprove to you that I can bowl a vevy clevah off-bweak! I have been makin' a vevy careful study of bowlahs, and—"

"You don't say," exclaimed Kerr, "that you're giving up toppers! Oh, Gussy, in our hours of ease uncertain, coy and hard to please—"

Fatty Wynn chuckled at that, and Arthur Augustus went pink with indignation.

"I was wefewwin' to ewicket bowlahs, you know, not to headgeah. I believe you knew that all along, Kerr. You were waggin'!"

"Waggin'! I'm not a flag, my dear old Gussy! Go and sit in a shady place until it wears off! You've been left out in the sun! Those chaps in the School House should look after you better! Here comes Blake! I'll tell him so!"

Jack Blake, Herries, and Digby, the chums of Study No. 6 on the Fourth Form corridor in the School House, were just then crossing the quadrangle.

Kerr waved to them.

It was Wednesday, and a half-holiday, therefore, at St. Jim's. Consequently, there was to be a cricket match between the New House and the School House, a match which Arthur Augustus had threatened to enliven with some cunning off-breaks.

"Blake," said Kerr, "come hither, little one! Gussy's telling bed-time stories!"

"You uttah ass! You may disbelieve me now; but latah, when you return to the pavilion, you know, you will be vevy sowwy indeed!"

Blake wagged a forefinger at Arthur Augustus.

"Gossiping again, Gussy?" he asked. "And with these New House bounders, too!"

"Wearly, Blake, I was not gossipin'! I have been warnin' Figg that I can bowl some wonderful off-bbreaks!"

"You can what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat! Gussy bowling off-breaks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed Herries and Digby.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy pushed back the cuffs of his blazer in a war-like manner.

"I wegard you as a set of uttah asses! Put up your hands, Blake!"

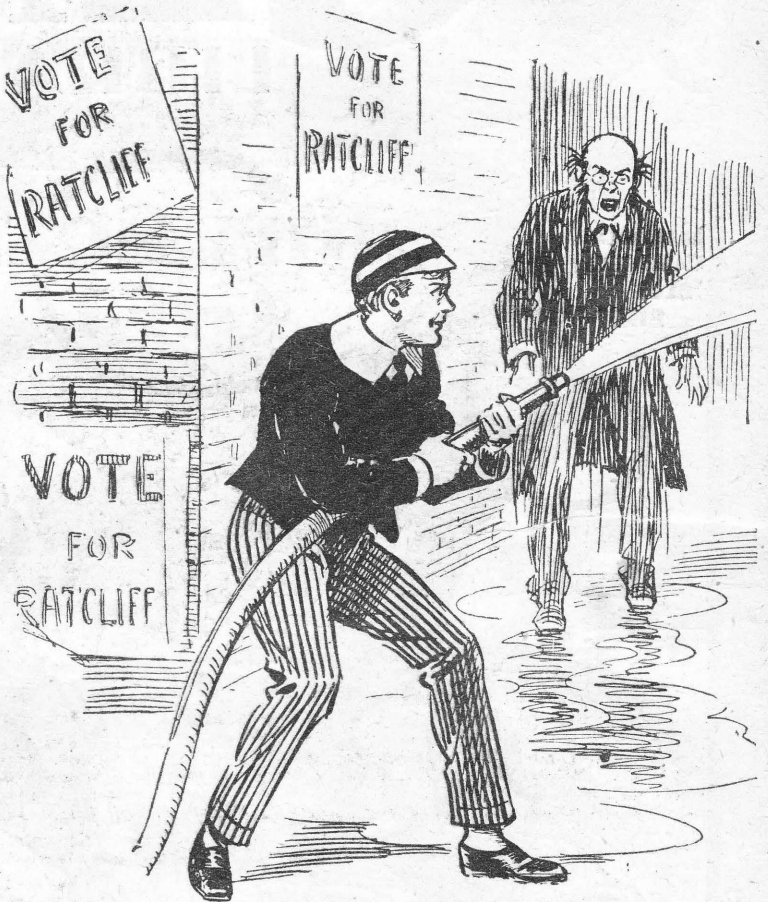
Jack Blake put his hands over his head.

"Going through my pockets?" he asked.

"Put up your hands!" said D'Arcy angrily. "Hewwies, you wottah, were you laughin' at my bowlin'?"

George Herries shook his head.

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"Oh, no, Gussy! It usually makes me weep, you know! I burst into tears, and have to be led away!"

Arthur Augustus started forward, but Figgins laid a hand upon his arm.

"Whoa, there!" said Figgins. "Don't be a duffer, Gussy! You're right in front of Ratty's window!"

"Yes, have mercy!" implored Blake. "Spare my youthful, lithe young body from bruises, Gussy! It is wonderful to have the strength of a giant, but cruel to use it, as Shakespeare didn't quite say, especially in front of Ratty's window!"

"Vevy well," said the swell of the Fourth. "Pewwaps it would be as well not to fight heah! Howevah, anothah time, wemember, I shall not be so lenient!"

"Ahem! Just so!" said Blake. "I believe I saw old Ratty peeping out a minute ago, you know!"

Wild horses could not have held Arthur Augustus from combat, but Mr. Ratcliff was more fearsome than a wild horse, or even a whole team of them. Mr. Ratcliff was Housemaster of the New House, and a gentleman with a very acid temper, so that, on the whole, discretion for the moment was decidedly the better part of valour.

"And here comes Tom Merry, and Lowther and the others!" added Kerr. "Now behave yourself, Gussy!"

Tom Merry, the junior skipper of the School House, came across the quadrangle with his usual sunny smile, followed by Lowther, Manners, and several others of the team. Tom Merry had a new leather in his hand, and he tossed it to Arthur Augustus.

"Catch!" he said.

As Arthur Augustus was looking reflectively at Mr. Ratcliff's window, he did not see the ball. But he felt it, for it hit him where ordinarily he would have been guarded

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-FOR FAME!



by a fancy waistcoat, but where now there was only a cricket shirt for protection.

He gave a wild howl, and leapt into the air.

"Ow! You wottah, Blake! Was it you who hit me when I wasn't lookin'?"

Blake backed behind Herries, and Figgins pointed to the ball.

"Go for it, Gussy! It's given you the coward's blow! Sail into it, and we'll make a ring!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But D'Arcy did not "sail into it." He picked up the ball.

"Tom Mewwy," he said, "I call upon you as witness!"

"Good!" said Tom Merry, raising his right hand. "I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth! Gussy is an ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I wish you would dwy up! I am goin' to pwove to these New House boundahs I can bow! an off-bweak!"

"Not here, Gussy!"

"Wathah not! But I will show Fatty Wynn how to hold the ball!"

Fatty Wynn fairly snorted, and Figgins gasped.

"You'll show me how to bowl?" asked Fatty Wynn. "I like that! Why, who bowled you out first ball last week?"

"Ahem! I had taken w'ong guard, deah boy! Pway watch my fingahs!"

The members of the cricket team halted in a group to watch the apparently marvellous demonstration, and Monty Lowther took off his cap and passed it round.

"Gents, my mate is now a-going to show yer 'is famous swallowing-the-pill trick which 'e has done before all the crowned 'eads of America!"

"Lowthah, you wottah! Pway stand back!"

"All right, matey!" said Lowther, touching his forehead. "Just collecting in the coins! 'Elp a pore bloke wot ain't in his right mind! The champion pill-swallower!"

"I'm not goin' to swallow the pill," shrieked D'Arcy—"I mean, the ball! I'm goin' to show a bweak-off—I mean, an off-bweak! You hold the ball so, and then so—"

Arthur Augustus took a run, but the grass was wet, and he did not judge matters properly, for he slid and landed in a sitting posture.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Broken anything?" asked Lowther.

"Ow! No!"

"Then it didn't work! Try it again!" said Lowther. "Gents, my pore young friend will try again!"

Arthur Augustus picked himself up and looked ruefully at his previously white flannels, which now showed patches of bright green on the knees.

"Bai Jove, I shall have to change, you know! I can't start bowlin' in these twousahs!"

"That's all right!" said Tom Merry comfortingly. "You're not going to bowl, Gussy! Come down to the ground, and don't bring Ratty out on the warpath!"

"Unless you're asking for trouble!" added Fatty Wynn.

But Arthur Augustus did not heed. He looked at the ball and clasped his fingers about it.

"You'll never get it out again," said Lowther.

"This is a new gwip, deah boy. The ball swerves in—an in-swingah like Woot bowls—and then it bweaks as well."

"Well, we don't want it broken. We're going to play with that," said Lowther. "Get one of your own."

D'Arcy, however, took another run and showed what was to happen. Of course, he had no intention of releasing that marvellous hold on the ball. Indeed, it did not seem the sort of hold that could ever be released.

To the swell of St. Jim's horror, however, the ball was released. It sailed through the air with terrific velocity, and did not touch terra firma until it had gone some twenty-five yards.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Bai Jove! Who thweh that ball?"

"That's yours, you duffer!" said Tom Merry. "Oh crumbs, it's going for the window! After it—"

But there was no hope of catching that ball. It took one mighty long hop from the ground, did not swerve, and certainly did not break. But something was bound to be broken, all the same—they could all see that—and that something was Mr. Ratcliff's window.

In horrified silence, they stood and stared, unable to move. Straight at the window the ball leapt, and then—

Crash! Tinkle, tinkle!

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CHAPTER 2.

Ratty Astonishes the Natives!

CRASH!

As the ball hit the window, glass flew in all directions, and Arthur Augustus' monocle dropped to the length of its cord. As for Figgins, his face was a picture of dismay. Figgins knew Mr. Ratcliff well—knew his glittering eye and the touch of his hand—through the medium of the cane!

"That's your finish!" said Kerr reflectively. "Oh, Gussy, why do you go about asking for trouble? Ratty will be out in a second!"

But Mr. Ratcliff was out in less than that time—at least, his head was. It appeared through the smashed window and stared across at the juniors. Mr. Ratcliff was not a handsome man at any time; even in his 'Varsity days no one had ever called him pretty, and on the days when his indigestion affected the colour of his nose he was almost unsightly. Now he looked like a demon.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" groaned Fatty Wynn. "You've done it!"

"Poor old Gussy!"

"Of all the chumps!" said Tom Merry.

"Of all the duffers!"

Arthur Augustus looked distressed.

"Weally, deah boys, it was an accident! I will explain to Watty, and he will understand. An apology from one gentleman to another, you know, sets all things wight."

"It won't mend a window," said Lowther, "and it won't write lines!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Go it Gussy!" urged Blake.

"I'll be your second!" said Manners.

Arthur Augustus, with a good deal of assurance, went forward. There was no reason that he could see why an apology should not set matters right. But the juniors saw a good many why it should not. Apologies, as Monty Lowther had pointed out, did not mend windows, and that window would have to be repaired.

All the same, it would be interesting to see what Mr. Ratcliff did, and to hear what he said, although perhaps not so interesting to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"D'Arcy!" barked Mr. Ratcliff.

D'Arcy removed his cricket cap at the sound of the master's voice.

"Pway accept my apologies, Mr. Watcliff, for bweakin' your window! It was quite an accident, but I was showin' these fellows how to bowl an off-bweak, you know!"

Mr. Ratcliff did not speak, and the silence was really tense. It looked as though he could not force the words to his lips.

"You broke the window with a cricket-ball, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, wathah, my deah sir! It is a mattah of vewy gweat wegwet; but an apology sets all mattahs wight, and if we could have the ball—"

Mr. Ratcliff's face was a study.

"I assume, D'Arcy, that you were practising some cricket stroke?"

"Ahem! Bowlin' deah boy—I mu-mean, Mr. Watcliff! I'm wathah a good bowlah!"

"Indeed! But you should know that the quadrangle is not the place to practise bowling!"

Figgins fairly held on to Fatty Wynn in amazement, and Kerr's jaw dropped in complete astoundment, for Mr. Ratcliff spoke with a voice as sweet as honey. When Mr. Ratcliff was expected to turn the air blue with wrath, his manner came as a bombshell to all those who knew him.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Trust not the Greeks," whispered Kerr wisely, "when they come bearing gifts, you know! There's a trap somewhere!"

But the innocent D'Arcy did not suspect a trap.

"I trust you do not think I would be guilty of bowlin' a cwicket ball in the quadwangle, Mr. Watcliff," he said in slight reproach. "I was weally only showin' the fellows a new way of gwippin' the ball. If I can give them a few hints I am only too willin' to do so, of course."

"Naturally, D'Arcy. A boy should help his friends," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I am glad you were not actually bowling the ball. It was apparently an accident."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Very well; you may come and fetch the ball."

With a quick glance of triumph over his shoulder, D'Arcy walked in, head in air.

The other juniors, however, just stared, almost speechless. "Of course, this isn't really happening?" said Sidney Clive, who had come up with Levison and Cardew.

"Can't be," nodded Cardew. "Walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly." Life's very sad at times. "Requiescat in peace," or, as they would translate in the Shell, "May he rest in pieces!" Poor old Gussy!

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And Cardew removed his cap and bowed his head. "Poor old Gussy!" nodded Levison. "My hat, Ratty will tear him to pieces! Perhaps we ought to go and help carry him out!"

"Or catch him as he comes through the window!" observed Lowther.

They waited, quite expecting to hear wild yells from Mr. Ratcliff's study, but no sounds came. They watched to see if Gussy came through the window, but he did not. Instead, he came through the door, and, what was more amazing, Mr. Ratcliff came with him.

"By gad!" said Cardew. "Noble man! The lion and the lamb—what? I wonder if they'll lie down together in the quad!"

Mr. Ratcliff and D'Arcy came up together, and D'Arcy was holding the ball.

It was amazing, it was staggering, but it was true.

Lowther rubbed his eyes, but the vision remained.

"Pinch me, someone! I'm dreaming!" he said, and then leapt a yard into the air, with a wild howl. "Yarrooh!"

"Awake!" said Manners pleasantly.

"You silly ass!" roared Lowther, rubbing his leg.

"What did you do that for?"

"You asked me to pinch you."

"I didn't say you could have a pound of flesh!"

But Lowther and his injury was less interesting than the spectacle of the master of the New House and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walking together across the quadrangle. Really, it was quite like a dream. Figgins could find no other explanation than that Mr. Ratcliff was "touched."

"Perhaps he's fallen on his head," said Kerr. "It does upset people."

"Or perhaps he's been reading about Good Little Eric," suggested Blake.

But whatever the cause of the change in Ratty, the great fact remained. Mr. Ratcliff was in chastened mood; he was amiable, he was kindly, and he had actually accepted D'Arcy's apology.

"If this establishes a precedent," said Kerr, "I'm going to apologise as one gentleman to another next time I forget my prep!"

"Hear, hear!"

As Mr. Ratcliff approached, the juniors raised their caps. "Good-afternoon, boys!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "D'Arcy tells me you have a little match this afternoon!"

Little match was perhaps not the way the juniors would have described it themselves, but they let it pass.

"Yes, sir," said Figgins, concealing his surprise. Mr. Ratcliff had never before taken the slightest interest in matches except to detain a fellow when he knew one was due. "A house match."

"Then I trust the New House will win," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"Mr. Watcliff," said D'Arcy, "has kindly decided to umpire, Tom Mewwy."

Merry's jaw dropped, and he very nearly staggered back a pace.

"Oh, my hat! I mu-mean, really—er—jolly good. Thank you, sir."

"Ahem! Ripping of you, sir," said Figgins meekly.

"I suggested it," said Arthur Augustus triumphantly.

"You did—you—" But Figgins coloured deeply as Mr. Ratcliff looked at him.

"I consider it only fair to my House that I should umpire," said Mr. Ratcliff. "It is many years since I watched a game of cricket, but I remember the salient points of the game. Of course, you will play double wickets."

"Oh, my giddy aunt—I mean, yes, sir," said Tom Merry, while Lowther nearly choked and had to turn away.

"And we're playing with a hard ball, sir," warned Cardew thoughtfully.

"Indeed, Cardew? That is the right spirit. Do not mind hard knocks, boys. Now let us hurry. I can spare half an hour or so."

Mr. Ratcliff led the way with D'Arcy by his side, while the juniors exchanged wondering looks.

"Of course, he's batty," said Jack Blake, tapping his head. "That's all that's wrong with him. What does he know about umpiring?"

"And we've asked two of the Sixth men to do it," said Tom Merry. "Darrell is one of them."

"And Monteith the other," nodded Figgins. "As Monteith is New House he'd better drop out."

Although there was no chance of dissuading Mr. Ratcliff, Figgins as gently and as subtly as he could pointed out that it would mean a good deal of standing. He did not go into details about Mr. Ratcliff's poor feet; but it seemed Mr. Ratcliff was prepared to sacrifice physical comfort.

The juniors took their cricket seriously—very seriously and the idea of Mr. Ratcliff as umpire was not precisely pleasing. If Mr. Ratcliff had not even watched a cricket match for a number of years it was likely that he would have forgotten the finer points of the game. And so it proved.

Figgins won the toss and batted first with Kerr. The wicket was wet, but the sun was shining, and by the time the School House innings came the wicket would be really sticky.

Darrell took up his position at the bowler's end, but, to the astonishment of them all, Mr. Ratcliff remained in the pavilion, deciding to umpire from there.

Tom Merry did his best, and then Monteith intervened and explained, so that some minutes later Mr. Ratcliff went on to the field and took his stand in the middle of the pitch. Jack Blake, "behind the sticks," doubled up, and once more Tom Merry made explanations, so that at length Mr. Ratcliff was where he ought to be.

those stumps! Put those top things back and return the ball to Talbot at once."

Jack Blake gasped, looked at Darrell, who shrugged his shoulders, and then, as there seemed nothing better to do, sent the ball back. How cricket was to be played on those lines Blake did not know; but Mr. Ratcliff had to be obeyed.

Figgins had been out, and the New House captain did not know quite what to do. According to the spirit of the game one obeyed the umpire's decision. But when the umpire was a "poor goop," as Blake put it, or somewhat batty in the opinion of Monty Lowther, what was a batsman to do?

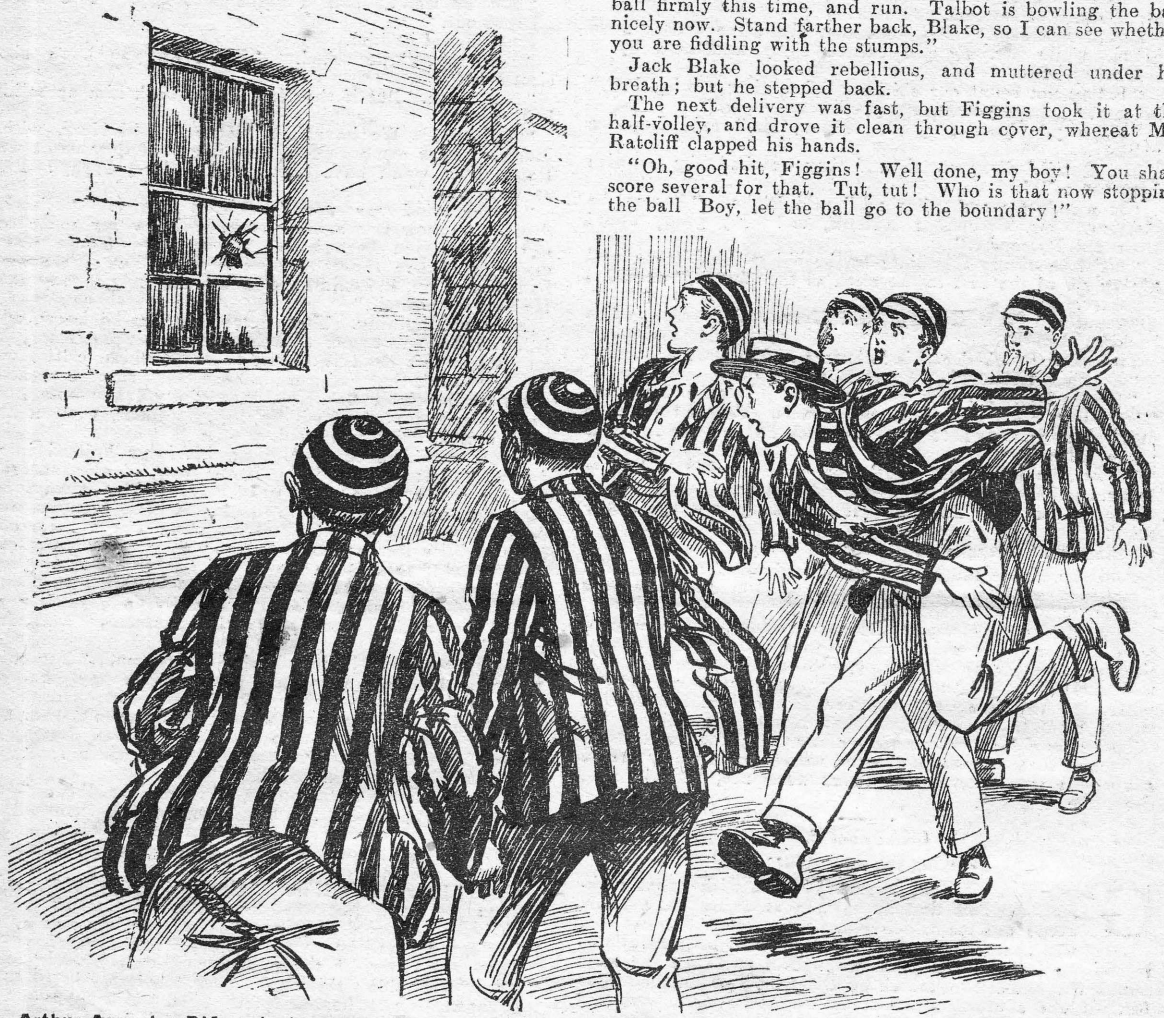
Figgins, therefore, was undecided.

"Figgins, do not delay!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "Smite the ball firmly this time, and run. Talbot is bowling the ball nicely now. Stand farther back, Blake, so I can see whether you are fiddling with the stumps."

Jack Blake looked rebellious, and muttered under his breath; but he stepped back.

The next delivery was fast, but Figgins took it at the half-volley, and drove it clean through cover, whereat Mr. Ratcliff clapped his hands.

"Oh, good hit, Figgins! Well done, my boy! You shall score several for that. Tut, tut! Who is that now stopping the ball. Boy, let the ball go to the boundary!"



Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took a run and swung his arm round. He did not intend his fingers to release their grip of the ball. But they did! The ball curved through the air, and there was a crash, and a gasp of horror from the crowd, as it sailed clean into Mr. Ratcliff's window. "Oh, my hat, Gussy!" gasped Tom Merry. "You've done it now!"
(See Chapter 1.)

Talbot was taking first over, and he sent the ball down. It was fast, and Figgins wisely left it.

"Too fast!" said Mr. Ratcliff sharply. "Figgins could not hit that. Start again!"

Talbot looked over to Mr. Ratcliff in surprise, and Darrell of the Sixth grinned.

"Just carry on," whispered Tom Merry. "He hasn't signalled anything."

That seemed the only thing to do, and Talbot nodded agreement.

He sent down another delivery, better than the last. It looked a beauty for a square cut, and Figgins stepped across. Alas! It did not rise as much as he anticipated, and he came down late.

"Still too fast!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

Talbot bowled again, more slowly, and this time Figgins opened his shoulders and stepped out. But his foot slipped under him, and he fell on his hands and knees. In a moment Blake had whipped off the bails.

"How's that?" he asked Mr. Ratcliff.

"Blake," said Mr. Ratcliff irritably, "do not play about! Take the game seriously. How dare you meddle about with

Mr. Ratcliff's idea of cricket was so crude that the juniors could not restrain themselves; they howled with laughter.

Nevertheless, Levison threw in weyy, and more by luck than judgment tore out a stump some yards before Figgins, who was not really trying, reached home. Figgins was out.

What decision Mr. Ratcliff would have given then, however, no one knew, for at that moment a telegraph-boy came trotting across the field, distracting his attention. Figgins looked at Darrell, who raised his hand to signal "out," and the New House captain, immensely relieved, walked to the pavilion as the master took the telegram.

"Name of Ratface, sir?"

"What—what, Ratcliff? This is for me?"

It was, and the master read it. Then he smiled broadly and put the telegram in his pocket. It was not his custom to tip anyone, but he gave the telegraph-boy a shilling and then approached Tom Merry.

"Merry," he said, "I regret that I shall be unable to continue as umpire this afternoon."

"Oh, good—goodness me," corrected Tom Merry hastily. "I hope it isn't bad news, sir."

"On the contrary," said Mr. Ratcliff proudly, "it is good news. In future this district will be better managed. I may say much better managed. My nomination as candidate for this ward of Rylcombe Rural District Council has been accepted, and I see no reason to suppose that I shall not be elected by a very large majority—a very large majority," said Mr. Ratcliff, with evident satisfaction.

"Oh—er—jolly good, sir!" said Tom Merry. "If I may have the honour of congratulating you—"

"Thank you Merry. I have no doubt one or two of you boys could act as canvassers. It will be an honour for St. Jim's."

"Oh, rather, sir!"

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther. "Three cheers for Mr. Councillor Ratcliff, you men!"

Lowther winked judiciously, and the three cheers were given, while Mr. Ratcliff smiled coyly and held up a reproving hand.

"Let us not count our chickens before they are hatched," he said. "I hope you have a good game, boys."

"Hope you have a good election, sir," said Lowther politely.

Mr. Ratcliff disappeared, and they watched him go with immense relief.

"It wasn't the sun, after all," said Blake. "It was the election. Mr. Councillor Ratcliff, eh? My giddy aunt! Poor old Rylcombe."

"He'll be giving fifty lines to the oldest inhabitants, and giving six of the best to the clerk of the council," chuckled Lowther.

"Good old New House," said Kerr. "Of course, we're backing Ratty."

Tom Merry looked at his followers and smiled.

"Depends," he said, "if our Housemaster is standing."

"Rot! Railton's not such a chump," said Manners.

"Only very aged buffers go on councils. People they can't find room for anywhere else, and they haven't the heart to throw away."

"Bosh!" said Kerr. "It's—er—um—a noble task, you know. Self-sacrifice and—er—all that. We're backing Ratty all along the line. Especially if he's going to keep on like this."

"Man in!" interrupted Talbot.

And the House match continued without the aid of Mr. Ratcliff who, some minutes later, went hurriedly out of the school. Mr. Councillor Ratcliff certainly sounded well. But would he be elected? Did the residents of Rylcombe want Mr. Ratcliff meddling in their affairs? Perhaps whether they did or not they would have to have him, and then as Lowther prophesied the fur would begin to fly.

Mr. Ratcliff, however, was New House, and his election would mean a "crow" for that House. Of course, the School House could not possibly allow that; honour forbade. It looked then as though the fur would begin to fly before the result was known, and looks were not, in this case, deceptive.

CHAPTER 3.

Rallying the New House!

GEORGE FIGGINS stirred his tea with great satisfaction. Not that there was anything remarkable about the tea which Kerr had made; but the fact was that Figgins felt that the world in general was in smiling form, and all was well. Not only had the New House won the cricket match by fifty runs without the aid of Mr. Ratcliff's umpiring, but, in addition, there was the knowledge that the lion, represented by Mr. Ratcliff, had, as it were, become a lamb. It was amazing; but there it was, evidence that the age of miracles was not past.

"Good!" said Figgins, for the third time.

"Um!" mumbled David Llewellyn Wynn. "They're prime, Figgy! Glad you like them! Nothing like meringues."

"I wasn't thinking of meringues," said Figgins, rather shortly. "Can't you think of anything else?"

"Well, there's macaroons," admitted Fatty Wynn. "Try some of them."

"Blow the macaroons!" snorted Figgins. "Blessed if I know how a chap can bowl as you do, and think of food! You took seven for thirteen, too!" he added admiringly.

"Gool old Fatty!" nodded Kerr. "You were bowling at the top if your form to-day!"

"Pretty well," admitted Fatty modestly. "If I'd had that second helping of dinner, Figgy, I could probably have taken ten for thirteen."

"Probably have gone to sleep," said Figgins. "But I was thinking of Ratty more than cricket at the moment. Of course, I'm jolly glad we beat the School House men, but that's what we expect to do."

"But don't always do it," pointed out Kerr, who had a level Scotch head, and did not believe in letting it swell.

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"Wouldn't be any fun in winning always," Figgins said seriously, "they'd throw up cricket and take to chess. Fact is, I wonder why they don't sometimes. But about Ratty."

"Don't!" urged Fatty Wynn. "I've got fifty lines of his to do still. I'm trying to forget them."

Figgins grinned.

"Perhaps you won't have to. Ratty seems to have reformed since he started up as a candidate for the local council. It looks to me, you men, as though he's going to be a good little chap—"

"Yes, until the election," admitted Kerr. "That's like Ratty. But wait until the election's over. And suppose he loses?"

"But he won't," said Figgins decidedly. "I've worked all that out."

Kerr stared at him.

"You have?" he asked. "What do you know about elections?"

"Not much. But if the New House back him up solidly, he'll win."

"Fathead! We haven't got votes," said Kerr, with a laugh. "How can we affect anything? If they don't want Ratty, they won't have him. That's plain, Figgy! Plain as your nose!"

"Never mind my nose," retorted Figgy. "Elections depend on how the agents work. I know my uncle only lost an election because of his agents. There was a majority of five thousand against him; but if the agent had bucked up, it would have been a majority for my uncle. He said so himself."

Kerr said nothing. There were times, as he knew, when it did not do to argue with Figgins, for when Figgy had an idea in his head it stayed there. Unkind critics were apt to remark that because his ideas were rare he regarded them as precious, but Kerr was a loyal henchman, and he was prepared to back up Figgy's ideas, even if they were a little wild and woolly.

"Now consider," said Figgins, his brow knitted into a frown, "what we could do in the way of electioneering. You've got a jolly good head, Kerr! I've always said that, and now's the time to use it. A little practice won't do us any harm either. Perhaps when I'm a little older I'll stand for Parliament."

"My hat!" said Kerr.

"What did you say?"

"I said—of course, Figgy. Naturally, a chap like you would be a fine asset to any Parliament," said Kerr tactfully.

"Jolly good idea!" mumbled Fatty Wynn. "You might get some of these silly Acts taken off, Figgy. Fancy a chap not being able to buy chocs after eight o'clock! It's a scandal! And steak-and-kidney pies weren't what they were. Parliament ought to look after these things, you know. How can chaps be tempted when their food's not well cared for, I'd like to know?"

"I should give attention to more serious things," said Figgins. "Like cricket. I should make cricket compulsory, and, instead of squandering a lot of money on Dreadnoughts and things, you know, I'd build cricket grounds. However, that's for the future."

"Hear, hear!" said Kerr. "George Figgins, M.P., would look rather well. But we were talking of Ratty."

"Just so," nodded Figgins. "It will be experience, and I dare say we shall be up against the School House men."

"You think they'll try to queer Ratty's pitch?" asked Kerr. "I shouldn't think so. After all, Ratty is St. Jim's, you know. It's an honour for the school if he gets in."

"An honour for the New House, though," argued Figgins. "We've simply got to get Ratty in, and my idea is to go round canvassing. Putting it to the people straight. And, if I hear anyone run Ratty down while the election's on," he added darkly, "there'll be a few thick ears floating around."

It seemed to Kerr that Figgins' ideas of canvassing were somewhat primitive; but he was wise enough to make no comment. For, after all, life would be considerably easier in the New House if the fellows put their backs into the election, and worked for Mr. Ratcliff. As Figgins had said, it would be an honour for the New House.

"I'm game enough," admitted Kerr. "But what will the other chaps say? Reddy got a hundred lines from Ratty this morning. Lawrence is having his tea standing up because, thanks to Ratty, that's the only comfortable way he can live for the next few days, and—"

"Oh, they'll kick a bit!" said Figgins. "But I'm looking to you chaps. Ratty showed a new side to his nature to-day. He let Gussy off. And he umpired for us."

Kerr smiled at the memory of that, and Fatty Wynn chuckled.

"Well, I suppose he meant well," Kerr agreed. "What do you suggest now, Figgy?"

"Rallying the House, of course. I'm going along to see how the fellows take it. You coming?"

Figgins finished his tea, and then pushed back his chair. He obviously meant business, and Kerr jumped up readily. "I'll come when I've finished these macaroons," offered Fatty Wynn.

"You'll come now, you fat duffer!"
"Oh, I say, Figgy! Seven for thirteen," said Fatty Wynn imploringly.

And George Figgins, remembering that brilliant performance relented. Of course, the wicket had helped Fatty Wynn considerably, but the wicket had not been the main factor. Fatty's cunning bowling had been that, and Figgins was not likely to forget it.

So while Figgins and Kerr went to rally the House, Fatty Wynn polished off what remained of the macaroons.

Most of the New House fellows were at tea, so now was the time to sound them all. That Mr. Ratcliff was not dearly and deeply loved Figgins knew. On the whole there was no reason for any love; for Mr. Ratcliff wielded his cane in warlike manner, and distributed lines more thickly than leaves had ever fallen in Vallombrosa.

Redfern & Co. were the first to be visited, and Redfern looked up with a smile.

"Enter!" he said affably. "Stands the School House where it did, Figgy?"

"Not quite. We shifted it a bit this afternoon," said Figgins. "You played a stunning innings, Reddy."

"Thanks! Same to you, and no one could have umpired better than Ratty. I can't help feeling we'd have won by an innings if he'd stayed on."

Figgins grinned. "Turned out rather well, didn't he? Of course, you're backing him up?"

"Backing up Ratty—in the election, you mean?" asked Redfern dubiously.

"He can have all my votes," offered Lawrence.

"I don't mean votes," explained Figgins. "But I

think we ought to bury the hatchet, you know, and stand by Ratty for the good of the House. It's up to us."

Lawrence grunted, and Owen looked at Redfern.

"Something in that," conceded Redfern. "But I'm dashed if I see that he'd be any good. What's Ratty, separated from his cane? And I can't see the local council bending over and taking six of the best."

Lawrence chuckled and Owen winked. "Just picture old Popperwhistle writing out 'I must not talk at the Council meetings' fifty times. Oh, my giddy aunt, I say, we must get Ratty home," said Lawrence humorously.

"Of course we must," said Figgins earnestly. "For the honour of the House."

"Don't know about that," objected Lawrence. "How could Ratty do the House any credit? He's the giddy skeleton in our cupboard, you know. Let's keep him dark."

"Rats! Ratty for Rylcombe," said Figgins. "There's a fine election cry for you."

"Better call him Ratcliff," warned Kerr. "Ratty's not exactly a good electioneering name, you know. It's suggestive of unpleasantness to come."

"Well, Ratcliff then," agreed Figgins. "But the thing is, we must hang together. And, if any fellow in this House doesn't back us up, well, he'd better look out, or he'll get a dot on the nose."

"Hear, hear!" said Redfern. "That's the line to take. I'm all for Brighter Electioneering, you know. Old Wiggs, the butcher, gave me some dud sausages. I'd love to dot him on the nose if he doesn't vote for Ratty. Good old Figgy. Firmness does it."

Figgins nodded his head approvingly, and then, deciding that Redfern & Co. were with him in this matter, he passed on. Other studies did not prove quite so easy to convince, however. Fellows who had recently felt the power of Mr. Ratcliff's arm were not at all keen on acting as his agents; quite the reverse. But Figgins had a heavy

frown, and a heavier hand, which he was prepared to use in argument. He had used it fairly often by the time his task was half completed.

"There's Keith and Pratt," said Kerr, after they had finished most of the studies, and Figgins was getting a little stumped for arguments.

"Pratt. Oh, he'll be all right," said Figgins. "I could lick him with one hand. Keith, young bouncer; I don't know that he matters."

Pratt and Keith had finished tea when Figgins reached their study. Pratt was practising on the saxophone while

Keith, a shady youth, was glancing at the racing intelligence in a newspaper he had bought in Rylcombe.

Keith hurriedly hid the newspaper as the door opened, and Pratt pretended that he was merely polishing the saxophone. Mr. Ratcliff, who had a musical ear, was not in favour of the saxophone as played by Pratt, and there was no telling when he might be on the prowl.

"Hallo!" said Pratt. "Nice of you to look us up, Figgy! Want to hear me play 'There's one little girl who loves me' on the saxophone?"

"No," said Figgins decidedly. "I don't. And the girl won't love you if you make that beastly row."

"Tisn't a beastly row. There's a good deal of prejudice against the saxophone," said Pratt. "But it's merely prejudice. Just listen to this. Of course, mind you, I don't say they all sound like this."

Ta, ta, ta, tata, ta, ta, blah, blah!

"Shut up!" roared Figgins. "I haven't come to hear your beastly saxophone, I tell you! Thank goodness they don't all sound like that!"

Ta, ta, blah, ta!

Figgins put his hands to his ears, and Kerr flung a book at Pratt, who dodged. But he did not stop. Nothing could stop Pratt when he was in full blast.

"You silly chump," roared Figgins. "We've come here to tell you something. Will you dry up? If you don't, I'll jolly well empty the milk into your blessed saxophone."

Ta, ta, blah!

Figgins was as good as his word. He whipped up the milk jug and shot some of the contents into the saxophone. Blah! Ta! Ug-gug!

"Yaroooh!"

The milk was ejected from the saxophone immediately, and perhaps it was poetic justice that Figgins received it back, coming, as it were, into his own again. The stream of milk shot over his face, and he hopped back with a wild roar on to Kerr's foot. Pratt nearly bursting himself from the effort, stopped blowing the saxophone and then commenced to empty it.

"You rotter! Look what you've done!" howled Figgins.

"Well, you slopped it into my instrument," retorted Pratt.

"You maniac!"

"You idiot!"

"Jolly funny," laughed Keith. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You think that's funny?" asked Figgins.

"Yes I do."

"Funny when a fellow gets some milk in his face?"

Figgins demanded, in a most sinister manner.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Keith. "Yes, rather!"

"Then there's something to laugh at!"

Splosh!

Figgins hurled the remaining contents of the milk jug at Keith's face, and Keith's laugh ended in a gurgle.

"Ug-gug-gug! Ooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Keith. "Laugh, Keith. Laugh away, my son!"

Keith scowled savagely, and mopped at his face and collar.

"You silly ass, Figgy!" he howled. "I've got to go and report to Ratty in a minute."

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"Well, you won't have anything to laugh at then. Now you've had a laugh in advance, you ought to be pleased. Teach you not to laugh at your betters, too," added Figgins, his good humour returned. "Now, you chaps, listen, and be sensible."

Figgins had undoubtedly a strange method of setting about asking fellows' support, and Pratt and Keith glared at him in wrath.

"Get out!" said Pratt. "It'll take me hours to clean this saxophone."

"Blow your silly saxophone," said Figgins. "I've come to tell you to back up Ratty. Ratty's standing as a councillor in the local election, and we're backing him up."

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

Figgins pushed back his cuffs.

"What did you say, Pratt?"

"I said, rats! I'm not going to back up Ratty at all."

"Do you want a punch on the nose? Think of the honour of the House."

"Blow the honour of the House. A chap who says that a saxophone makes a hideous, bleating row, can't be an honour to anyone."

"And you needn't look at me," said Keith savagely.

"Ratty's got a down on me. Besides, there's something else."

"Good! Say it all," said Figgins, "before I begin to mop up the floor with you two mutineers. What's the other thing?"

"The other thing," said Keith, still dabbing at his collar, "is that my brother is standing for that election, too! If I'm going to back up anyone, it'll be him."

"Oh, your brother," said Figgins, with interest.

"R. T. J.?"

"R. T. J." nodded Keith. "And if you think that they'll elect Ratty instead of a fellow who captains his County team at cricket, you're mistaken."

Figgins looked thoughtful, but shook his head.

"I'm sorry for your brother," he said, with a touch of pathos in his voice. "He's a ripping good sort. A fellow who scores a century against Yorkshire must be some good; besides, he's an old St. Jim's man. All the same we're backing up Ratty."

"Ratty can go and eat coke!" said Keith. "Blood's thicker than water. I'm backing R. T. J."

"Just as you like," said Figgins. "But understand this. Any fellow who goes against the will of the House has to reckon with me. I'll meet you in the gym later, Pratt."

"Oh, can it!" said Pratt. "Anything for a quiet life. If you want to back up Ratty, back him. I tell you what—I'll play that saxophone in a triumphant procession if he's elected."

"Serve him right," agreed Keith. "That'll pay him out, Pratt. I'm all for that. But you won't get me backing up Ratty!"

Figgins paused for a moment, and then inclined his head in assent. After all, a fellow could scarcely be expected to do his best to lose his brother an election. House honour was House honour, but then blood was also thicker than water. Figgins saw that clearly enough, and he relented.

"I'll let you off, Keith," he said. "But 'ware Ratty, if you're backing up against him."

Keith winked.

"I'm playing possum," he said. "I hear Ratty's cooled off a bit since he's become a candidate."

"Yes, he has."

"Well, I'm going carefully," said Keith knowingly. "I've an appointment with him at half-past six. Half a dozen of us have, and we'll see which way the wind blows."

"Half-past six?" said Kerr. "It's five-and-twenty to seven now!"

Pratt dropped his saxophone, Keith gave another dab at his collar, and then leapt for the door, to collide in the corridor with Brown and Jordan, who were also keeping an appointment with Mr. Ratcliff; and for once they showed eagerness. For upon this interview much depended.

"He can't let off Keith," said Figgins, as he watched them go. "Keith's a rotter, despite the fact that he's R. T. J.'s brother, you know. Ratty caught Keith writing out a betting slip."

George Kerr looked serious.

"I don't quite like the look of things," he said. "Ratty has no right to let his politics interfere with the school. He oughtn't to let us off punishment really, just to get our favour."

"Of course not," said Figgins. "But perhaps he's really turning over a new leaf."

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Kerr smiled. He did not share Figgins' sublime faith in human nature.

"Perhaps," he said; "and perhaps not!"

CHAPTER 4. Rival Claims!

"**B**AI Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy halted in the doorway of the School House, and jammed his monocle into his eye. Tea was over in Study No. 6, and Jack Blake & Co. were on their way to the cycle shed to get their machines; but Arthur Augustus came to a halt and stared.

Through the school gates had just swung the bonnet of a large car, a sporting four-seater, with a healthy exhaust-note that set every ear on the alert.

"Hallo, hallo!" said Blake. "Stunning bus!"

"Yaas, wathah! I believe it's my bwothah Conway, you know. It's a Big-Six Bentley."

"My hat!" said Herries. "Gussy, remember your old pals. Remember the friends of your youth."

"Yes, cling to me like a brother," urged Blake, and caught hold of D'Arcy's jacket. "Remember who it was nursed your topper when it was seedy, and whose gentle hands smoothed the ruffles from your brow when Herries' bulldog took a lump out of your Sunday trousers."

"You uttah ass! Welaase me! You are cwumplin' my jacket!"

"Is this a time to think of jackets," said Blake, "when a Big-Six Bentley dawns upon us? Oh, Gussy!"

"Hurry up!" urged Herries. "Is this your brother Conway, Gussy? Smarten up! Dust your shoes, and try to look intelligent!"

"Rather! Try to look as though you've got to get to Rylcombe in the shortest possible time," said Blake. "Here it comes."

The Big-Six Bentley drew nearer. The back seats were empty, as was the seat beside the driver, and four fellows could have crowded in easily enough. Six would not have scorned the attempt, and there were fellows at St. Jim's game enough to ride on the mudguards—always provided, of course, that the owner had no serious objection.

Lord Conway, D'Arcy's brother, was a sportsman, and sufficiently mindful of his own youth to suggest a run round the lanes. But as the car drew to a standstill Arthur Augustus' face fell.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured.

But Blake, Herries, and Digby hurried him forward.

"Here he is, sir!" said Blake.

"The noble Gussy, all complete, in one piece!" added Digby.

The man at the wheel smiled, and then the juniors fell back in confusion. He was not Lord Conway.

"Bai Jove! I'm feahfully sowwy, deah sir," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally thought you were my bwothah."

"Sorry, I'm not," said the pleasant-looking young man. "But, in point of fact, I'm on the look-out for a brother. A young shaver named Keith."

"Keith. Keith of the New House," nodded Blake. "Then—er—ahem!"

He looked at the man with interest. R. T. J. Keith was well-known to all followers of cricket, and now there was no mistaking his face. It was the great Keith himself. Any man who wore a Free Foresters' tie was welcome as a visitor to St. Jim's, and other juniors who strolled up regarded him respectfully. The car which had taken prime interest before was but secondary now, although the "experts" stooped down, and critically surveyed the four-wheel brakes and such of the chassis as was visible.

"I'm feahfully sowwy for wushin' forward like that, my deah sir," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps I could go and fetch your bwothah."

"Thanks awfully, if you would."

It was a pleasure, and Arthur Augustus hurried off, while the others remained.

"Cricket this afternoon?" asked Mr. Keith.

"Yes, sir; House match," said Blake, rather uncomfortably, mindful of having been bowled second ball for a "blob."

"Good! Top the century mark?"

"Ahem! No, not exactly," said Jack Blake. "As a matter of fact, it was a sticky wicket, you know."

"Tough luck!" smiled Mr. Keith. "I've made ducks myself, and you can't have done worse than that."

Jack Blake grinned.

"Matter of fact, it was a duck," he admitted. "Those New House rotters have got a demon bowler."

"Really! Not my young brother, of course?"

Jack Blake shook his head; for he knew that Keith minor was not included in the New House side, for the excellent reason that he did not take the trouble to

interest himself in the game, even though his brother's reputation was a good send-off, had he been so inclined.

It was some minutes before D'Arcy returned, and in the interval Mr. Keith chatted to them about cricket and of St. Jim's as he had known it.

"By the way," he said, "Mr. Ratcliff still in charge of the tin-pot affair they call the New House?"

"You were School House, sir?" asked Blake. "Good stuff! Of course, I might have known," he added. "The New House doesn't turn out cricketers."

"It used not to. Yes, I was School House. I always was up against Ratty, and I'm up against him now. You've heard of the election?"

"What ho!"

Tom Merry & Co., hearing that Keith was present in person, had strolled up, and had been introduced when Mr. Keith had wanted to know who was skipper of the

Tom Merry looked at Blake, and Blake looked back at Tom Merry.

"If you want any agents," said Tom Merry, "I dare say we could lend a hand."

Mr. Keith's eyes gleamed. It was some time since he had been a schoolboy; but cricket had kept him young, and with old scenes old memories were revived.

"Do the New House in the eye," he said thoughtfully. "My hat! That's an idea! School House was always top House."

"Yes, rather!"

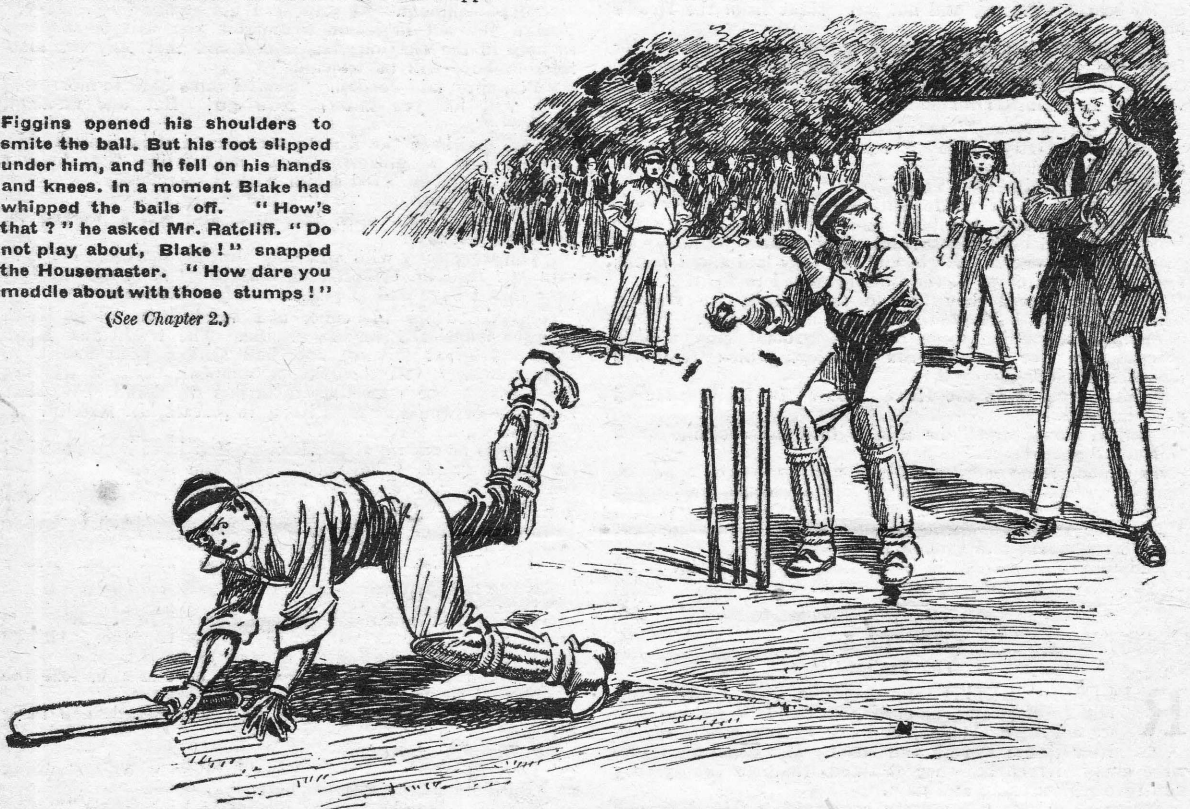
"Rot!" came a distant New House voice, followed by a scuffle.

"I repeat," said Mr. Keith, "School House was always top House. Are we going to let the New House score, you men?"

"Rather not!"

Figgins opened his shoulders to smite the ball. But his foot slipped under him, and he fell on his hands and knees. In a moment Blake had whipped the bails off. "How's that?" he asked Mr. Ratcliff. "Do not play about, Blake!" snapped the Housemaster. "How dare you meddle about with those stumps!"

(See Chapter 2.)



junior Side of the School House these days. At the mention of the election everyone was on the alert.

"Ratty's going to be a councillor, sir," smiled Tom Merry.

"Not if I know it."

Mr. Keith chuckled, but his reply made them jump. "Oh!" said Blake. "You don't mean that you—"

"That I'm standing—rather!" Mr. Keith chuckled again. "I always was a fly in Ratty's ointment, the thorn in the flesh, you know, and I haven't altered. Ratty's going to prevent the kids of the district from having a playing ground."

"My hat!"

"He'll make them have a museum instead if he gets in." "The old spoil sport!" frowned Blake. "Hope you get in, sir."

"I'll do my humble best. Ah, here's Beau Brummell!" he added, as D'Arcy returned.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Arthur Augustus, "that your bwothah has—er—an appointment at the moment with Watty—I mean, Mr. Watcliff."

"Reggie has? Poor young Reggie!" said Mr. Keith. "He won't be fit to see anyone after that."

No one answered. Mr. Keith knew as much about Mr. Ratcliff as they did, apparently, and his opinion that his young brother would not be in a fit state to keep other "appointments" was seconded nem. con.

"In that case," he said, "I wonder if you could hand these over to him? Electioneering stuff. I thought he might rally round me."

"Oh, rather, sir!"

"Are you going to let old Ratty in?" said Mr. Keith. "Old—er—ahem!"

"Down with Ratty!" said Herries; and then went crimson as he saw Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's, approaching.

"Mum's the word," said Mr. Keith hurriedly, and forgetting that he was no longer a schoolboy, tossed aside his cigarette.

Two minutes later he was walking towards the Head's private house, having left his Big-Six Bentley to the mercies of the crowd.

"Stunning chap!" said Tom Merry. "Of course, we're for Keith. Vote for Keith!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Down with Ratty!"

"Here comes Figgy!" shouted Blake.

There was a silence as George Figgins approached, looking very serious, followed by Kerr.

"Evening, Figgy!" said Tom Merry.

"Good-evening!" said Figgins, rather startled by the politeness. "I've come to bury the hatchet."

"Where?" said Lowther. "You can't bury it in our ground, unless it's in Gussy's head. That'll make a fine chopping-block."

"You uttah ass, Lowthah!"

"Pax!" said Figgins, holding up his hand. "I've come with the—er—olive-branch of peace, you know. Of course, we put St. Jim's before Houses?" he asked.

"Sometimes. What's the bee in your bonnet?" asked Tom Merry suspiciously.

"I was thinking of Ratty," said Figgins.

"Down with Ratty!"

Figgins started.

"What?" he exclaimed in wrath.

"Vote for Keith!"

"You silly ass!" roared Figgins. "Ratty's a St. Jim's man. Vote for Ratty!"

"So is Keith—and School House at that!" said Tom Merry. "Vote for Keith!"

"Do you want a thick ear, Tom Merry?"

"If you can give it to me."

In a moment Figgins leapt at Tom Merry, and Tom Merry leapt at Figgins. Kerr seized Blake, and Herries piled upon Redfern. The electioneering campaign had begun!

"Back up, New House!"

"Rally, School House!"

To and fro the combatants raged, going at it hammer and tongs, oblivious to the fact that they were in full view of the school windows, and not far distant from the Head's house.

But of that fact they were soon to become aware; for from the New House Monteith emerged, and from the School House Kildare, both bearing ashplants, which they wagged in a sinister manner.

"What's this mean?" snapped Kildare.

"Vote for Ratty! Wow!" roared Figgins, as Kildare's ashplant descended upon him.

"Vote for Keith—Yeop!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Monteith—Yow!"

Quite impartially, Monteith and Kildare sailed into the fray, hitting School House and New House juniors with equal vim and vigour. Right and left they laid about them; and, with howls of pain, the juniors ceased to fight.

With one accord they fled to their respective Houses, while Kildare and Monteith followed up tirelessly. Where a moment before had been a battle ground was now a desert, save for the Big-Six Bentley, which remained monarch of all it surveyed.

From a window in the Head's house Mr. Keith watched and chuckled.

"School House won!" he said, with a shake of the head. "That's a good omen."

And then, remembering that he was no longer a school-boy, he turned with serious mien to Dr. Holmes and talked "cricket-jaw" until the sun went down and darkness fell. But in the school the scene was not nearly so pleasant; for there were moans and groans, aches and pains.

The election had come in like a lion, but it was not likely to go out like a lamb. Quite the reverse!

CHAPTER 5.

The Traitor!

REGINALD KEITH tapped on the door of Mr. Ratcliff's study and listened cautiously. Behind him were Brown, Jordan, and one or two others of the New House Fourth and Shell. Mr. Ratcliff's levees were always lively, but they attained whatever beauty they had through suffering and pain.

A lion's den was a tea-party compared to Mr. Ratcliff's study at times, and the fellows who now waited made no attempt at all to look merry and bright.

All the same, there was some reason for hope. Hope, it is said, springs eternal in the human breast; and it took a good leap now in the breasts of Keith, Jordan, and Brown. For had not Mr. Ratcliff showed signs of mending his ways?

"He may be all right," whispered Keith. "Tactfully does it! If he knows my brother's up against him, though—Lucky I put that cardboard in place!"

"No good!" said Brown moodily. "Ratty always knows if there's padding, and then he lays it on twice as hard."

Mr. Ratcliff whisked open the door of his study. That was one of his pleasant little ways, and more often than not he caught some whispered remark that was not intended for his ears.

To the alarm of them all, Mr. Ratcliff looked annoyed. His eyes had the gleam of old, his nose had a glow that was all its own—a poor thing, but his own.

"Well—well, and what are you boys doing here? I am busy!"

"You sent for us, sir," said Keith.

"What? Why did I send for you?"

For a moment it occurred to Keith that Mr. Ratcliff was not himself. He might have guessed that if he had asked boys to come to his study it was to punish them. As a rule, Mr. Ratcliff was not absent-minded.

Jordan, a sallow-faced youth, had the inspiration of his life. Great inspirations come by strange means. Newton pondered upon gravity as the result of being hit on the head by a falling apple; Watt turned his attention to steam power by fiddling with a teaspoon and kettle. But Jordan's in-

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spiration, although perhaps not so world-shaking, came as a result of something he saw in Mr. Ratcliff's room—a sketched-out card with "VOTE FOR RATCLIFF AND REASON!" on it.

"We—we thought, sir, we might have some pamphlets to distribute," said Jordan.

"Some pamphlets. Ah! You wished to engage in a little electioneering, Jordan?"

"Yes, rather, sir!"

"Certainly, sir!" nodded Brown.

"Very well. But at present I have no pamphlets for distribution. I seem to remember, Jordan, that you were talkative in class."

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Jordan. "Nun—not really talkative, sir."

"I will not have chattering during lessons," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Remember, Jordan, that you will be liable to severe punishment. At present I am rather busy. If you behave yourself in lesson to-morrow you will be allowed to help in the election; but understand that only the most reliable boys will be selected."

"Yes, sir," said Jordan. "Shall I come back to-morrow?"

"I will let you know. Now go! But one moment, Keith—"

Keith had been the first to move up, but he halted. Mr. Ratcliff had a glittering eye, not unlike the Ancient Mariner's, and he fixed Keith with it mercilessly.

"Did you want me, sir?" asked Keith anxiously.

Mr. Ratcliff held open the door, and Keith walked in, groaning heavily.

"You were busy with a betting slip this morning, Keith!" said Mr. Ratcliff, compressing his lips. "It is not the first time that I have had to punish you for that reason."

He reached for his cane, and swished it, while Keith thought frantically for an excuse. The truth and Keith were not great friends, and had seldom been known to keep company. At the present moment, then, it was not the facts of the case that disturbed his mind, but what sort of story would be most likely to placate Mr. Ratcliff.

"I—it wasn't for me, sir!"

"That is no excuse at all, Keith. You have been punished for smoking. If I had proof that you intended to hand that slip to a bookmaker you would be reported to the headmaster. As it is"—Mr. Ratcliff swished his cane—"I will do my humble best, my boy! My arm is not as strong as it was, and I seem rather to have lost my knack. But great achievement, Keith, must ever wait upon strong endeavour."

Keith went pale.

He knew just how much power there was in Mr. Ratcliff's arm, and Keith was not noted for his courage. All the good qualities of the family seemed to have been given to R. T. J., and Keith was a remnant, an also ran, like the horses that he was wont to rely upon.

"It was my brother's horse, sir," he faltered, and hung his head.

Mr. Ratcliff started.

"Your brother's horse? Your brother who is standing as candidate in the election here?"

"Yes, sir. He—he wanted me to—to back it, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff looked serious. If R. T. J. Keith had been inciting his brother to back horses the matter was serious, and Mr. Ratcliff's mind at the present moment was not attuned to believe anything favourable of his opponent.

"This is disgraceful!" he said angrily. "Is your brother given to following horses? Does he wager money on horse racing?"

"Yes, sir," lied Keith, knowing quite well that R. T. J. regarded backing horses as a "mug's game." As recently as the previous holidays Keith had received a sound tanning from him; and not for backing a loser, either, but for picking a winner. Such is the irony of Fate!

"Very well, Keith. I will leave the matter over for the moment, and will speak to your brother about it."

Keith started. This was not at all what he had intended.

"I'm willing to take my punishment," he said, with a certain amount of Dutch courage. "I don't want to bring my brother into it, as he's a candidate. It might not do him any good."

"Indeed, it might not. On the contrary," mused Mr. Ratcliff, "I do not consider a man who backs horses is a fitting person to have charge of the People's interests. If your brother ever makes such a request to you again, Keith, refer him to me."

"I don't suppose he'll win, sir," said Keith hurriedly.

Mr. Ratcliff took a tighter grip of his cane.

"Why not?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

It was scarcely wise to enter into that sort of discussion with a boy, but Mr. Ratcliff was intensely curious with regard to the popularity of R. T. J. Keith with the people.

"Well, sir, you see, if they found out— But perhaps I ought not to say," said Keith cunningly.

CHAPTER 6.

Hoist with their own Petard :

"H OLD the ladder steady!" warned Figgins.
 "Yes, Figgy."
 "And hand me the paste-pot when I get up."
 It was the day following the inauguration of Mr. Ratcliff's election campaign, and events were moving rapidly. Posters had arrived at St. Jim's, and pamphlets, too. Mr. Ratcliff certainly did not allow the grass to grow under his feet, for the printing had been done in record time, and now Figgins & Co. were in Rylcombe, putting the posters into position.

It was an armful of those posters which Kerr now held, while Figgins mounted a ladder supported by Fatty Wynn. The village of Rylcombe, usually quiet and peaceful, felt considerably disturbed by the election, and the most disturbed element of all was the village boys.

"Oo's that for?" asked one boy, named Spinks.
 "The chap who's going to win the election," said Kerr.
 "Yah! Down with Ratcliff!" came a chorus.

"What?"
 "Down with Ratcliff!" said the crowd, and took on a truculent tone.

"E's going to stop our 'avin' the big field for games," said Spinks indignantly. "That's what he's going to do, and he's going to 'ave a mooseum put up instead."

Figgins looked down at Kerr. Despite the fact that they were Mr. Ratcliff's agents, they could not pretend to be fully conversant with his principles. Perhaps in that respect they were not different from other agents, but this news certainly came as a shock.

"My hat! Is that so?" said Figgins, in some dismay.

"Course it is!" said Spinks, as Figgins took the paste-brush and can from Kerr. "And if you're sticking up posters for Ratty, we'll pull you down."

He grasped the ladder, and Figgins gave a howl.

"Leggo!"
 Kerr jumped into the breach, and the crowd was fended off.

"Well, what's the good of a mooseum?" said Spinks.

"Keep you in, my dear chap!" said Kerr.

"Suppose you make your playing-fields into a museum?" said another boy.

That really was hitting rather below the belt, and Kerr went pink.

"Look here," he said, "Ratty's all right! He's our Housemaster."

"You keep him then," Spinks suggested. "We don't want him meddling. Mewseum! Crikey! Full of mummies and bits from Toot-and-Come-in's Tomb, that's all."

Slap, slap, went Figgins' paste-brush, and a magnificent poster announced to the world that "Ratcliff Stands for Reason. Vote for Ratcliff!"

"That's one up!" said Figgins.
 "Yes, and 'ere's one down," said Spinks, and dived at the ladder. The ladder shook, and Figgins yelled out in alarm and clung to the top rung fearfully.

"Let go!" he roared. "Or I'll come down to you!"
 Spinks and his friends gathered round and shook the ladder.

"You're coming down, cocky!" said Spinks. "Don't worry! The shortest way, too, eh, mates?"

"Haw, haw, haw!"
 "Rally round, Fatty," said Kerr, doubling his hands.
 "Now then, back, you lads."

Kerr pushed, and Fatty Wynn pushed. Fatty's weight was considerable, but he had also to cling hold of the ladder, which was a handicap. All that the youths had to do was to heave at the ladder from all sides.

"Monkey on a stick!" guffawed Spinks. "Shake 'im orf, boys!"

Figgins grasped his paste-brush and swung it high. Then he swung it low, and Spinks gave a howl as it swept across his face.

"Now stick a poster on him, quick!" chuckled Figgins, and descended the ladder as quickly as he could. Once he

Mr. Ratcliff looked surprised.
 "You mean to say, Keith, that your brother has some—some skeleton in the cupboard?"

"Perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it, sir," said Keith, with assumed discomfort. "It doesn't seem fair, just because he and I haven't always hit it off."

"This is loyal of you, Keith," said Mr. Ratcliff. "But—"

The Housemaster pursed his lips, and then shook his head, realising the impossibility of carrying on such a conversation.

Mr. Ratcliff was not scrupulous, but he drew a line at finding out secrets in his opponent's past which might be dangerously used against him.

Keith, misunderstanding the signs, brightened considerably. He felt that the danger was past. He had told one or two lies about his brother; but, then, what was one or two amongst so many? The chief thing, as Keith looked at it, was to avoid feeling how strong was Mr. Ratcliff's arm. And he seemed to have succeeded. He even made for the door.

Alas, that hope should be raised but to fall.

"Bend over, Keith!" said Mr. Ratcliff. "Whether your brother were to be blamed or not, you had no right to accede to his request to back the horse."

Keith bent over, and Mr. Ratcliff—perhaps from force of habit, or perhaps thinking of his opponent in the election—used what strength he had still to great effect.

Swish, swish, swish!

"Ow!" roared Keith.

Three mighty swishes, three loud yells, and then Keith went groaning to the door. He looked back at Mr. Ratcliff, his face white, and then closed the door violently.

For once Mr. Ratcliff did not call him back, and Keith stood there shaking his fist at the door.

"I'll pay you out, you rotter!" he fumed. "My hat, I will! I don't care about R. T. J.'s winning, but I'm hanged if you're going to after that!"

And Keith went back to his study, feeling that it was a strange state of affairs when traitors met with no reward. He had betrayed his brother, lied against him; but that was not of so much concern as the fact that he had gained nothing at all thereby.

When he reached his study and, through the window, saw his brother's car in the quadrangle, he made no effort to go out, but stood in silence planning; while Pratt, in readiness for election triumph, practised "See the Conquering Hero Comes!"

"Shut up!" roared Keith.

"I'm getting ready for Ratty's great win!" chuckled Pratt.

"Ratty won't win!"

"Of course, you're backing your brother; but the New House is backing Ratty!"

"Bosh! Ratty won't win!" snarled Keith.

"Nor will your brother!"

"I don't care a hang if he doesn't! Hang the lot of them!" said Keith, and savagely kicked a cushion across the room.

"You mean you're backing against your own brother?" said Pratt, in astonishment.

Keith stopped short and frowned.

"Don't be a fool!"

And he swung out of the study, and went down to the quadrangle just as Monteith was driving the New House juniors back to their quarters. It was a most unfortunate moment to choose. Monteith was not in a discriminating mood, and when Keith mingled with the fleeing crowd he became Monteith's special mark.

"That's your way," said Monteith. "Hop in—"

And Keith, having no argument with which to confront an ashplant, hopped in, and fled up the stairs with the rest! It was Keith's unlucky day; but, then, justice always comes to him who waits, even though it is sometimes rough in the coming!



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was down, the ladder was allowed to fall. It fell on to Kerr who collapsed on the ground.

"Keith! Keith!" called Spinks.

Apparently that was a war-cry; for from nowhere came half a dozen more boys and youths of the village, all of whom apparently were supporting Keith.

The situation was serious, and Figgins looked desperately at Fatty Wynn, who was helping up Kerr.

"Stand by, you chaps!" he said. "Rally round!"

They stood shoulder to shoulder, and met the rush, but although for two or three thrilling moments they held their own, it was not for long. Then lanky Figgins was sprawled on the ground, and Fatty Wynn was tumbled over with three boys sitting on his chest. Kerr was last, but down he went eventually.

"Are you sticking to Ratty?" asked Spinks, who apparently was leader.

"Yes," said Figgins, struggling wildly.

"Good; then we'll make him stick to you," said Spinks.

"Haw, haw!"

Spinks raised the paste-brush, and selected a poster.

"Ere, 'arf a mo!" said another youth. "What about one of Mr. Keith's own?"

That elicited a shout of approval, and Figgins struggled fiercely.

"Keep that paste off me!" he roared.

"Oh, just a dab!" suggested Spinks. "That's what you gave me."

Figgins spluttered as the paste-brush swept across his face. It looked as though they would be in a sorry state unless help came. In another part of the village, Redfern & Co., were doing stout work, and Figgins looked hopefully down the lane. But help was far away, and the Keith posters were near.

"One in front," said Spinks.

A poster was stuck to Figgins' chest.

"Another behind—"

"Haw, haw!"

"And one little 'un on 'is foice," suggested a pimply-faced youth. "Must 'ide it up somehow."

"You—you beast!" said Figgins. "Keep off!"

"Keep your mouth shut!" warned Spinks. "I'm just a-going to put a little more paste on!"

"You rotter—ug—gug—oof!" spluttered Figgins, as some paste trickled into his mouth.

"I told you so," said Spinks. "You're getting quite Ratty yourself."

"Haw, haw!" guffawed his followers, at that stab of pretty wit. "Ratty for rattiness!"

"Tie his hands!" said Spinks. "Now the fat one. More room on his waistcoat for half a dozen of the best, boys."

"You dare!" said Fatty Wynn, his eyes goggling as the paste-brush was brought near. But the boys dared, and Fatty Wynn was turned into a human sandwich-board, with, as Spinks had pointed out, plenty of room for show.

Kerr was last of all, and he had the sense to lie quietly and let them do their worst. They got very little satisfaction out of the Scots junior, and he came off most lightly of them all.

"Now stand up!" said Spinks.

"I won't!" howled Figgins. "Take all this rot off!"

"Tie 'em together!" ordered Spinks, with a lordly wave of the hand.

Figgins, Kerr and Wynn, were heaped into a small group and tied securely. To walk was a matter of extreme difficulty; but was possible if one of them walked sideways and another backwards, with Figgins marching ahead.

"Haw, haw!"

The three New House juniors, red with fury, under their paste and posters, glared and struggled. But struggling only hurt and did not help, so they soon gave it up.

"How are we going to get home?" demanded Figgins, trying to blow off the handbill from his face.

"How are you going to get into a home?" asked Spinks.

"Easy. Just carry on, you know."

"You silly duffers!"

"Language!" said Spinks. "Can't stand here listening to that. Come on, you lads, and stick up some of them posters of Mr. Keith's. Blot out them Ratty things."

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, struggled a yard or two along the road, painfully. How they were going to return to St. Jim's they did not know; nor indeed were they very keen to get there in their present state. To have started out electioneering for Mr. Ratcliff and to return bearing Keith posters, was humiliating in the extreme, but there was no other course open to them.

It was after ten yards of difficult going that Figgins called a halt.

"Tom Merry & Co!" he said, as some cyclists appeared in sight.

"They won't help us!" groaned Kerr.

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"We'll see."

Tom Merry, and half a dozen more St. Jim's juniors were cycling down the lane. Tom Merry carried a can of paste, Lowther had a brush, and various of the others had handbills and posters. Their intentions were apparent.

"My hat! Who's this?" gasped Merry.

"Looks like a hoarding," chuckled Lowther. "A human hoarding. What a natty idea. I like the barrel."

"You rotter!" said Fatty Wynn. "It's me!"

"I," corrected Lowther gently. "Obviously a New House man, by his grammar. Can that piece of scaffolding be Figgins?"

"You fearful dummy!" shrieked Figgins. "You know it's me—I."

"Then they've come to their senses," laughed Manners. "Voting for Keith."

"Yaas, wathah! I had no ideah Figgy had so much sense. Wathah not."

Figgins sniffed. He could do no less nor more with that hand bill adhering to most of his face.

"Look here, play the game and let us out," he implored.

"Let you out?" said Lowther. "What, to Fatty's size? He wants taking in, you know. But I don't think we can let you out, Figgy. Eh, you men?"

"Decidedly not!" drawled Cardew. "This fascinating electioneering stunt, Figgy. The mighty brain has seethed to good purpose, what?"

"Look here," said Kerr briskly. "There's a meeting being held in the hall along there, and the people will be coming out in a minute."

Tom Merry looked at the others and a brief consultation was held, while Figgins & Co. waited impatiently. There was a good deal of chuckling during the conference and Figgins' hopes collapsed like a punctured tyre.

"We think," said Tom Merry, "all of us together, you know, that this is such a fine brain-wave of yours, Figgy, that we can't spoil it. When the audience from the Hall has passed by and read all the posters, then we'll remove you."

"You rotters!"

"No rotting!" said Tom Merry. "That's a straight deal. Is there room for another poster on you anywhere?"

"Has Fatty got any more space to let?"

"No!"

"Then march on!" said Tom Merry.

And on they marched, leaving the human hoarding in situation, ready for the people in front of the meeting hall! If most of the posters were passed by, those would not be; for an electioneering stunt it would have taken a good deal of beating. As he thought of that crowd to come, Figgins was, for the first time, glad of the handbill on his face, and made no further effort to remove it. But what he did do, was to start off as fast as he could go to the nearest hedge in the hope that the posters could be removed, and then escape made! But the hope was very faint indeed!

CHAPTER 7.

D'Arcy Does It!

TOM MERRY was in command, and he laid his plans carefully. Having seen the fate that Figgins had met, he was prepared against such a crisis. There was a dozen of his party and all they meant business.

As they were supporters of the redoubtable Keith, and therefore of "playing-fields," they did not meet with any animosity from the village youths; on the contrary, they were promised help.

"Now," said Tom Merry thoughtfully, "don't forget to put a huge 'Do' in front of every 'Vote for Keith,' and put it close enough to prevent any silly chump from adding an 'n't.'"

Lowther chuckled.

"I've often wondered," he said, "why one Johnny takes many a weary hour of labour pasting up 'Vote for Snob-face,' when all the other chappie has to do, is to put a huge 'Don't' in front!"

"Still, they do," smiled Tom Merry. "And Cardew, Clive, and Levison, have got the 'Don't' paint."

"Rather," said Clive. "But Reddy & Co. are on the prowl. I suppose we'd better tell them about Figgy."

"Yes, may as well," agreed Tom Merry. "Now, Gussy, what are you going to do?"

"I'd wathah thought of addressin' a meetin', deah boy."

"Ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy!"

"I mean about sticking up posters," said Tom Merry. "I wegard bill-postin' as a sticky job, deah boy, and liable to wuin a fellow's twousahs. I think pewwaps as the gals are goin' to have the vote, I might as well call a meetin'. There's a wathah charmin' gal in the chemist's shop."

Jack Blake roared with laughter.

"Gussy thinks this is a flirting contest," he said. "He's going to persuade all the nice girls to vote for Keith."

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as a gwoos insinuation, Blake. Naturally, I want the gals on our side, and I dare say by usin' vewy clevah argument, I can persuade them to our cause."

"Vote for Keith, and Kisses!" said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard that as bein' in the worst possible taste, Lowthah. Gals to-day are vewy sewious. Yaas, wathah! My Cousin Ethel is a vewy good judge of fancy waist-coats—"

"Blow fancy waistcoats!" said Tom Merry. "Paste-pot this way! Catch hold of these posters and don't you stick your finger in the paste, Gussy."

"You uttah ass. I am goin' to the chemist's."

"Whoa!" said Blake. "No you're not, Gussy. You're going to do some work. Go and borrow a ladder from the builder's yard."

"Wats! Hewwies can do that. Pewwaps I had bettah start at the tea-shop. Theah's wathah a nice gal—"

"They haven't got a vote," said Levison. "Sorry, Gussy. But that's off."

"Pewwaps they could persuade their matahs?"

"Perhaps not."

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not convinced. He was not averse to work; but he leaned towards congenial work, and after all, persuading Miss Bunn to vote for Keith would be extremely congenial. Also, there was Miss Binks the chemist's daughter, who had bobbed hair of really golden gleam and blue eyes that made D'Arcy's heart turn somersaults. On the whole it was a good idea, and D'Arcy set out on his wanderings.

Alas! Mr. Binks was in the shop when D'Arcy arrived, and whatever might have been found in favour of Mr. Binks' eyes, they did not make D'Arcy's heart turn somersaults.

"Ahem! I was wondewin' if Miss Binks was in," said D'Arcy.

"Out," said Mr. Binks. "Anything I can get you, sir?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm canvassin' for Mr. Keith."

Mr. Binks business smile suffered a violent change for the worst.

"What! Turn the field into a rough house for the boys,"

said Mr. Binks. "Nonsense! Stuff and nonsense—"

"Bai Jove! But Mr. Keith is a Wuggah Blue, a Cwicket Blue—"

"That's why he gives me the blues, perhaps," said Mr. Binks. "A museum and library is what Mr. Ratcliff suggests the endowment should be expended on. It's left to the council to decide, and Mr. Ratcliff is the man for me."

"Ahem!"

"Good-evening!" said Mr. Binks, rather pointedly.

Mr. Binks went into the back of the shop, and Arthur Augustus shook his head, and walked out. In the doorway he bumped into Redfern.

"Hallo, Gussy!" said Redfern cheerfully. "Vote for Ratcliff!"

"Wats!"

Redfern planted a handbill on the counter, and Lawrence, with a wink at Owen, affixed one neatly with a pin to Arthur Augustus' back.

"You're backing Ratcliff," said Lawrence humorously. "No use denying it, Gussy."

"Vote for Keith, deah boy. Do you happen to know if Miss Bunn is in the teashop, deah boy?"

"Ha, ha! Good old Gussy!" said Redfern. "Afraid he isn't. And, anyway, old Bunn is hot stuff on Ratty, you know. He has to keep in with the school for his custom."

"Bai Jove! I wegard that as wotten, you know. It's wathah widic that nice gals should have wotten fathahs, you know. Howevah, pewwaps I could persuade her?"

"Do you really want to do some persuading?" asked Redfern, with a wink at Lawrence.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, how about addressing a meeting?" said Redfern. "I'm telling you this, because if you address a meeting in favour of Keith, that's enough to make it vote for Ratty."

"You silly ass!"

"Well, it is so," said Redfern, with owlsh seriousness. "There's a meeting waiting for a lecturer even now, in the Masonic Hall."

"Weally? Are you wottin'?"

"Honest fact!" said Redfern. "It'd do Keith more harm than good if you can make a speech. Can you?"

"Yaas, deah boy. I have a wippin' speech w'ritten out. I'm wathah good at speakin'—"

"Well, look at the practice you get," said Lawrence. "It's the nearest approach to perpetual motion I know—your chin. Cheerio!"

The three New House juniors departed, and Arthur Augustus looked after them indignantly as they went down the High Street distributing hand bills. Then, his mind made up, he turned towards the Masonic Hall.

After all, why should he not address a meeting? Had not his father often addressed the House of Lords? It seemed to D'Arcy the idea of a lifetime, and if the meeting were awaiting Mr. Keith, what better substitute could be found? It was not that D'Arcy was conceited, but he knew that there were some things a fellow could do, and do well; and when it came to tenor solos and wise speaking, he felt that he was in his element.

Of course, he had no intention of delivering a tenor solo to the audience, although it might be one way of pleasing the voters. But he planned, as he walked, the speech he was to deliver.

The Masonic Hall was not full, but there was a goodly number present, and some of the most notable townspeople

There was the master builder, the grocer, an undertaker, and a florist, with their wives, representing Rylcombe; men and women waiting to be addressed, their ears in full readiness to be lent to some great speaker.

On the platform at the end of the hall was a small table, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy walked up to it. The audience, as he saw, showed signs of restlessness, and it really did seem too bad that they should be kept waiting.

As Arthur Augustus walked to the platform there came a ripple of laughter; but not being aware of the placard on his back, he did not heed it. It did not occur to him that he could possibly be the cause of the laughter.

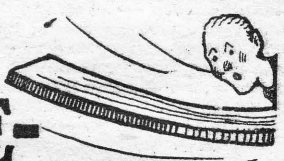
With his topper in one hand and his gloves and stick in the other, he mounted the platform, and such was his assurance that no one said him nay.

"I am sowwy to be late, deah boys," he said. "I mu-mean ladies and gentlemen. Howevah—"

The master builder, who had prepared a speech of introduction, and was mumbling it to himself at the back of the

(Continued on next page.)

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platform, came to earth with a start as he heard D'Arcy's voice.

"I say—" he began.

"Pway allow me," said Arthur Augustus gracefully, "I wewget that you have been kept waitin', you know, but I am now goin' to give you seweral excellent weasons for votin' for my noble fiwend, the vewy gallant gentleman who will win by a huge majority."

"Hear, hear!"

Arthur Augustus beamed and ignored the master builder, who tapped him on the sleeve with increasing persistence.

"I am suah when you have heard my speech," said D'Arcy, "that you will wush off and vote for Mr. Keith!"

"What!"

"Vote for Mr. Keith," said D'Arcy firmly. "He is the best man for the job, and he will give you the playing-fields that you want—"

"Boo!"

"Stand down!"

"Get off that platform!"

Arthur Augustus started in surprise.

"Bai Jove! Weally! Pway let me continue. I say that Mr. Keith is—er—a wippin' chap, you know, and all that; a jolly good chap, you know," said D'Arcy, becoming flustered. "And—er—a fine fellow—"

A missile came hurtling through the air. It was a cabbage, and it hit the master builder in the face. Accuracy of aim is not an essential of political argument, and Arthur Augustus looked in surprise at the master builder, who subsided on the floor, and then continued.

"I was wemarkin' what a wippin' fellow Mr. Keith is, and how wippin' he will be as a councillor, you know— Bai Jove!"

Something else whizzed through the air. It was a tomato, and it hit the back of the room with a squeleh.

Arthur Augustus turned his head and stared it. Slowly it began to revolve in his mind that he had lost the grip of his meeting. There is a time at all meetings when a speaker feels that he is losing grip, that he had not his audience with him, and that there is not the whole-hearted friendliness and other signs which marks complete comradeship. That moment Arthur Augustus felt had arrived.

It was not only the moment that arrived, either; it was eggs, and tomatoes, and cabbages.

"Bai Jove— Ow!"

"Get off that platform!"

"Ratcliff for ever!"

"Boo!"

Arthur Augustus dazedly wiped egg from his chest, and a moment later a tomato from his face. If this was how Mr. Keith was to be received, he decided there was not much hope at the poll.

"Young man," said the master builder, "kindly leave the building—kindly— Yow!"

An egg became an omelet on his face, and the builder stood there spluttering and gasping, while Arthur Augustus stared at the seething meeting. It was in an uproar, and a moment later three men mounted the platform and dragged him down.

"Bai Jove! Pway welcase me, you wottahs! You'll wuin my jacket!"

"What do you mean, comin' and addressing this meeting for Keith?" demanded the thick-set man. "This your idea of a joke, hey?"

Arthur Augustus blinked.

"But it's Mr. Keith's meeting."

"Nothing of the sort! This is a meetin' to be held by Mr. Ratcliff— Yes, and here he comes!"

Arthur Augustus' heart leapt. Mr. Ratcliff was indeed coming into the hall, and at his appearance the tumult died and cheers rang out. In D'Arcy's mind doubt no longer lingered. He had, as it were, awakened the wrong passengers; he had addressed the wrong meeting, and upon the whole he decided it would be wiser not to wait upon the order of his going, but to go at once. He went, as swiftly as he could, up one side of the hall, as Mr. Ratcliff came down the other.

In the roadway Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bumped into Digby and Herries.

"Bai Jove! Wun like anythin', deah boys!"

"Whoa, there!" said Herries. "What's wrong?"

"I've been addressin' a meetin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Hewwies!"

"You look like a walking advertisement for Tomato Ketchup, and fried eggs," said Digby. "Oh, Gussy! But what were you addressing Ratty's meeting for?"

"I thought it was Keith's, deah boy."

"Oh, my hat! And you asked them to vote for Keith?" gurgled Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! I fail to see any cause for mewwint. I feel howwibly stickay."

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"Never mind," said Herries, with a wink. "Here comes Miss Binks. Now's the time to tell her how to vote, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus took one look at Miss Binks and then bolted. There was, he knew, a time for all things, and this, far from being the time for dallying with the Flappers' Vote, was a time for washing and brushing up. For once in his life he was right!

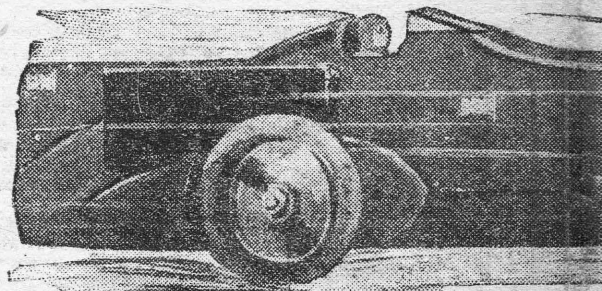
CHAPTER 8. Below the Belt!

"GROO!" George Figgins of the New House shifted uncomfortably and rolled on to Kerr, who pulled Fatty Wynn sideways, what time a small but admiring crowd gave them encouragement.

The unhappy New House trio had managed to crawl to



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the side of the road, but there they were stuck. Most of their posters had been removed by the hedge, but a portion still remained, and the juniors were feeling none too comfortable.

When, therefore, Tom Merry's voice was heard, Figgins looked up hopefully.

"Rescue, St. Jim's!" he called.

"Let 'em be!" cried Spinks. "They're for old Ratty."

"They've been long enough," chuckled Merry. "All right, Figgy. To the rescue!"

The village youths crowded round, but there were enough

juniors to form an escort. There were good fighting men present, too, and they looked like business.

Blake pushed back his cuffs ominously, and Monty Lowther took hold of the paste-can and swung it to and fro in a suggestive manner, while Manners wielded the paste-brush, fully loaded.

"Any offers?" asked Lowther. "Now's the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party, you know. Stick together, my lads, and if you want assistance—"

But the village youths crowded back.

"Yah! Turncoats!"

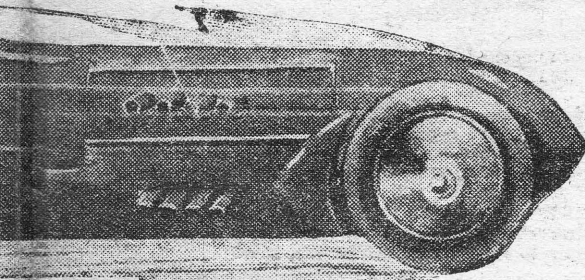
"Who said turncoat?" demanded Jack Blake wrathfully.

"We're for Keith!"

"Then leave them fellows be!"

Instead of accepting that piece of advice, however, Tom Merry opened his pocket-knife and released the New House juniors, who eased their cramped limbs and groaned afresh.

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"Too late!" said Figgins. "Thanks, you men, but Ratty's been by!"

"My hat! Not really?" said Tom Merry, in dismay. "I say, I'm sorry, Figgy! Was he—er—pleased?"

"Was he!" said Kerr bitterly. "Told us to go to his study! I don't know how he thought we were going to do it!"

Figgins gave a faint grin at that.

"You know what Ratty is, Merry! He ordered Spinks to undo us!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Someone threw something," said Kerr. "And a jolly good shot, too! Took Ratty's hat off!"

"That was me!" said a village urchin cheerfully.

Kerr took a step forward, and the urchin vanished immediately with considerable speed and precision, while Kerr brushed himself and plucked off portions of "VOTE FOR KEITH."

"I suppose Ratty thought you were doing it for fun!" chuckled Lowther. "Poor old Ratty! What a sense of humour, you know! Wearing posters is not as funny as it's supposed to be!"

"If you make puns," warned Figgins, "you'll get a thick ear!"

"One good turn deserves another!" said Tom Merry. "Reddy told us that Gussy has gone to address a meeting—Ratty's."

"What!"

"Fact!" chuckled Lowther. "We're going to collect souvenirs of him. A little bit of Gussy would look rather well pinned on the study wall! Come on, you men! Clear the way!"

The rescue-party set out then upon another errand of mercy, and Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, deciding that the crowd did not look so merciful as it did immense, joined the rest of the St. Jim's fellows and went towards Mr. Ratcliff's meeting hall.

They had only gone half-way when they encountered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in person. Eggs and tomatoes combined to give him the radiance of the setting sun.

"Oh, my hat!" said Talbot. "Look at this! The glass of fashion—eh?"

"Gussy!"

"Yaas, wathah! Pway gathah wound, deah boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' to laugh at! I am vevy stickay, you know! Egg is twicklin' down my neck, and it's most unpleasant! I'm afraid Miss Binks is comin', too!"

"She'll think you need a bib!" said Lowther, with a shake of the head. "I'm surprised at you, Gussy, not being able to manage your egg and tomato better than that! You should stick to hard-boiled eggs; they're safer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass, do you think I have spilled this?"

"Some of it!" nodded Lowther.

"You feahful duffah, Lowthah! I have been gwoosly assaulted! I was addressin' a meetin' in favour of Mr. Keith, when people started thowin' things, and then Ratty came, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus glared as the juniors roared; but if he did not see anything to laugh at, they did. What was more, they laughed, and, laughing still, they encircled him protectively.

"Of course, it's our fault for letting him off the lead," said Blake. "He really can't be trusted, you know! Don't you know, Gussy, that candidates only preach to the converted? If Ratty addresses a meeting, they're only the people who'd vote for him, anyway, unless they've come to boo!"

"Yaas, wathah! Pewwaps we ought to go and wipe up the meetin', deah boys!"

"You'd better start wiping up that egg!" said Tom Merry. "But if Ratty's addressing a meeting, we might go and listen to it."

"He'd have us thrown out!" warned Kerr. "No raggin'!"

"Of course not! But we can gather round the windows," said Tom Merry. "It'll be interesting to hear what he has to say, anyway."

So they all went back to the Masonic Hall. Mr. Keith was addressing another meeting at the moment; but that was crowded, and an army of helpers was gathered outside. As Mr. Keith appealed to the younger members of the community, and Mr. Ratcliff to the older and more staid, feeling ran high in Rylcombe. Even old Gaffer Jones, who had not walked more than half a mile for the last ten years, had deserted his armchair to go and hear Mr. Keith under the delusion that he was listening to Mr. Ratcliff, and already there were one or two discoloured eyes and swollen noses to be seen in public as a result of powerful arguments.

Darkness was beginning to fall, and the juniors, if they did not return soon, would be late for calling-over; but that did not immediately concern them. They wanted to hear Mr. Ratcliff's platform manner.

Tom Merry stood on Manners' back and perched on a window-sill, while Monty Lowther climbed the rainpipe and reached the roof, peering down through a roof-light into the hall below.

Mr. Ratcliff was on the platform, and he looked as though he were addressing the Third Form on the subject of quadratic equations.

"Less talking there!" said Mr. Ratcliff, and added as an afterthought: "Please! Now the point I wish to make clear is this: We are sane people here, level of judgment, and not likely to be led astray by the more boisterous and foolish elements of the community. We have to consider the future. What possible advantage can accrue to the rising generations from a playing-field which will become a bear garden? What? I say. And the echo answers—"

"Fathead!"

The answer came from the roof, and Mr. Ratcliff glanced up, while a titter came from his audience. His eyes glittered, and he reached for his cane in force of habit. But, alas! it was not there.

"You are asked," he said, "to vote for a man because he has obtained a Blue for cricket. But this is not cricket; this is reasonable discussion. Of what service to you is a young man who spends his life playing games and betting, and—"

"Aha!"

"I happen to know," said Mr. Ratcliff grimly, "that my opponent is given to gambling on horse-racing, and not only that—he is inciting the younger members of the community to follow suit!"

"Disgraceful!"

"Shame!"

Tom Merry looked down at Figgins, who shook his head. "Never heard of that!" said Figgins in puzzled tones.

"It isn't true!" said Tom Merry angrily. "My hat, this is hitting below the belt!"

The sensational announcement caused a stir amongst the audience, and Mr. Ratcliff pressed his point home.

"I do not wish to run down my opponent," he said, "but the facts must be known! We are not to be bullied and cajoled by the riotous, irresponsible element!"

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered. He felt that he was doing his duty, and he certainly did not consider that this was hitting below the belt. He was a man apt to believe the worst of his people, and when Reginald Keith had informed him about his brother Mr. Ratcliff had been only too ready to believe it. He had seen no reason why Keith should lie. Further, he was apt to regard all games-playing as evil and little better than an inducement to gambling.

His audience, being for the most part serious-minded and truly rural, were horrified at the suggestion that their small council might be dominated by a man who led the young astray by advising them to gamble.

"Shame!"

"We won't have him!"

"I trust," said Mr. Ratcliff, "that you will not. I have nothing to say against Mr. Keith save this—that he appears to be irresponsible, and that he is deserving of severe censure for inciting schoolboys to bet! Such a man would not make a good councillor! His influence cannot be for the good! Already you have seen how he is stirring the young people to riotous disorder!"

"Hear, hear!"

Outside the building, Tom Merry dropped to the ground and set his lips.

"This is a bit thick!" he said. "There are reporters there from the local papers! It will be all over the place in no time!"

"It is a rotten trick!" said Manners.

"Bah! Jove! I wegard Watty as a boundah, hittin' below the belt! I am suah that Keith is not an outsidersah!"

"Of course, he isn't," said Tom Merry. "And that's the fellow you're backing, Figgy."

Figgins looked confused.

"It is a bit low," he admitted. "But—but it may be true. After all, young Keith bets."

"He's the black sheep of the family."

Figgins was silent, torn by doubt. In his heart he had no sympathy with either Mr. Ratcliff personally, or his cause. So far as Figgins could see the utilising of the field for games would be of greater service than a dry-as-dust museum. But Mr. Ratcliff was New House, and Figgins had pledged himself to this cause, right or wrong.

"There may be something in it," he said.

"Must be. Ratty wouldn't make it up," said Kerr uneasily. "Although it doesn't sound likely."

Tom Merry set his cap straight, and frowned.

"If Mr. Keith is still at his meeting, I'm going there."

"Oh, my hat! Why?" asked Kerr anxiously.

"If a fellow is charged with anything, he may as well be charged to his face," said Tom Merry. "Let him deny it now in front of the reporters. Hark at them! They're all down on him, red hot!"

The applause that greeted Mr. Ratcliff's tirade could not be mistaken. The New Housemaster had made a good point which his audience appreciated, when he had accused Mr. Keith of inciting the youthful element of the populace to bet.

There were fathers present who became anxious for their

sons; employers who thought of the danger their tills would be in, if a popular hero, such as Mr. Keith, set an example of that sort.

Consequently as Tom Merry had realised the flames would spread, and as with mud is thrown some sticks, it was probable that Mr. Keith would have a hard task to clear his name later.

Now was the time, and Tom Merry did not delay. He ran as hard as he could to Mr. Keith's meeting, arriving there just as deafening applause greeted the speaker. That meeting was composed of the youngest element, and not many of them had votes. But there were others there, too, who had votes, and Mr. Keith, with his good-humoured way, his clean, straight-forward manner, had impressed them.

For, after all, although cleverness in a councillor was an asset, honesty was even more so, and much rarer. If that honesty were to be impugned, the strongest plank of Mr. Keith's platform would give way, and that could only mean collapse.

Tom Merry, breathless and excited, stated the case while Mr. Keith listened.

"Must be a mistake. Ratty's rather an old worm, but he couldn't play low like that."

"But I tell you it isn't a mistake," said Tom urgently. "Look here! Come along and hear for yourself!"

To that Mr. Keith assented, and so it was that he joined the group of juniors outside the building. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, looking at him, felt somewhat aggrieved that their candidate was not a strapping athlete, good-looking, and straightforward.

As Mr. Keith listened his brow darkened.

"This is a bit thick," he said. "I'm going in."

"Hurrah!"

"We'll back you up, sir," said Tom Merry eagerly.

But when the juniors reached the entrance they found that others were gathered there already. Tom Merry's conversation with Mr. Keith had apparently been overheard, and now that what Mr. Ratcliff said could be heard, much booing and indignation arose.

Mr. Keith marched straight down the hall, pushing his way past people to the front until he was standing before Mr. Ratcliff.

The New House master, taken off his guard, stared, adjusted his glasses, and stared again.

"I understand, Mr. Ratcliff," said Mr. Keith, "that you have some criticism to make of me."

"Er—er—yes—"

"Would you mind repeating it?"

"Why should I mind?" said Mr. Ratcliff irritably.

"Apparently you have brought a crowd of hoodlums to the door. That is my point. I have accused you of gambling—betting on horses—"

"Not true!" said Mr. Keith briefly. "Anyone who cares to can; but I regard it as a mug's game. I don't bet. Anything else?"

Mr. Ratcliff was taken aback, and a red spot showing in either cheek, he wagged a forefinger at Mr. Keith, suddenly forgetting that they were rival candidates, and that Mr. Keith was no longer a St. Jim's junior.

"Keith, remember you are making a serious statement!" he said. "Yes or no! Do you bet on horses?"

"No!"

Mr. Ratcliff bit his lip.

"On your honour?"

"Naturally!"

"You stand there and tell me that you do not back horses—that you do not own race horses?"

"Certainly not! I haven't the cash for one thing, nor the inclination."

"Oh! But—but I understand that—"

Mr. Ratcliff gritted his teeth helplessly. He saw that to proceed with the charge of inciting boys to gamble when Mr. Keith did not gamble himself would be absurd. He was cornered.

"You seem to have made a mistake, Mr. Ratcliff," said Mr. Keith. "But I am ready to let the matter drop on your offering an apology."

"An apology?"

The audience was on its feet, and there were strange remarks and exclamations. The position was very awkward indeed for Mr. Ratcliff, and he knew it.

"If I have been misled into making false statements I apologise," the New House master said bitterly. "But—but investigation will be necessary."

"My word is not enough?" said Mr. Keith coldly.

"Shame!" came a chorus.

"Make him take it back!"

"Boo!"

Mr. Ratcliff held up his hand.

"Silence!" he thundered. "I have spoken in good faith. I will question my informant again. I have been misled—deliberately misled!"

"Oh!"

"I was given this information by a member of Mr. Keith's own family."

Mr. Keith gave a violent start of surprise, and Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered.

"Ah, you are taken aback! I do not wonder!"

Mr. Keith nodded his head, and everyone seemed to be hanging upon his reply. The situation for the famous cricketer was an awkward one; but R. T. J. always played up.

"I'd like to know the name of the person concerned," he said quietly.

It was Mr. Ratcliff's turn to hesitate then, and he realised that he had been exceedingly rash. The New House master was inclined to be led astray by his liver, and that day it had been troubling him. Added to that disorder, there was the fact that he had come across Figgins & Co. bearing posters of the opposition, so that by the time he reached the meeting hall, Mr. Ratcliff was feeling in a sufficiently ill-tempered mood to speak strong, but unwisely.

"The name—er—yes. It was your brother Reginald."

Mr. Keith started as though he had been shot, yet he might have expected that name. To an honest mind, however, it is always difficult to foresee the dishonesty of others, and R. T. J. Keith had not been prepared for this treachery.

"My brother said that I backed horses?"

"He did, indeed! Either he was telling a deliberate untruth, or he was right. If an untruth," said Mr. Ratcliff, his eyes glittering keenly, "it would seem that he wished to place me in the position of having made a false statement."

Tom Merry & Co., crowding in the doorway, watched and listened intently.

"My hat! Young Keith, the villain!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"Of course it's lies!" said Manners. "Must be! But why doesn't R. T. J. deny it?"

"He's not going to lose the election, just to save his brother's face?" asked Lowther.

It seemed, indeed, that that might be passing in R. T. J.'s mind. For if he denied the charge, then it would be obvious that his brother had told a downright lie—the lie direct. That would mean trouble for him at the school.

There were others, however, to be considered—the electors. "It is a contemptible lie!" said Mr. Keith clearly. "Or it is all a confusion of misunderstanding. At the moment I do not know which. But what I do know is that the whole charge is absurd, and utterly unfounded."

Mr. Ratcliff bowed.

"That I must accept, for the moment," he said ungraciously. "But I will go farther into the matter, and discover with what object the charge was ever made."

"Take it back!"

"Be a man!"

"Apologise!" came from the back of the hall.

From the front came altogether different remarks, yet equally angry.

"It's a put-up job—"

"To get sympathy!"

The cries became angrier, and at last those supporters for Mr. Keith who were gathered round the Hall burst through in dangerous mood.

For Mr. Ratcliff had impugned their hero. He had spoken untruths about him, and they were incensed. They did not wait for the lead from Keith, or they would have waited all night. In they came in their wrath.

Mr. Ratcliff went pale as he saw them, for he was no hero. Nothing of the blood of Drake, Nelson, or Cœur de Lion ran in his veins.

"Stop! Keith, stop this rabble!"

Mr. Keith wheeled about and pushed back his cuffs.

"Stand back!" he ordered. "Have some sense! Stand back, I say!"

All might have gone well, even then, had not one of Mr. Ratcliff's supporters pushed Mr. Keith aside. Keith staggered back, and was surrounded instantly by men holding his arms to prevent his struggling.

It was the worst tactics they could have adopted, for Mr. Keith's supporters became more angry than ever. On they charged; and Mr. Ratcliff, white to the lips, crouched back on the platform.

"On him!"

Tom Merry looked at his followers, and his face was serious and grim.

"Come on! This is getting too stiff. Rally round Ratty!"

"What-ho!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The St. Jim's juniors rallied with a will. They were made of stern stuff, and now was the time to show it. Solidly, en masse, they bored their way through the Hall.

"Rally round!" said Mr. Keith. "Save Ratty!"

His supporters, however, rallied round him, and a free

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fight was soon in progress. Blows were exchanged, missiles flew, and the more staid members of the audience hastened in alarm for the door. But the door was barred by some of the rougher element of the village youths.

Mr. Ratcliff, the table between him and a few lads who leaped on the platform, called out shrilly:

"Rescue! Help! Send for the police!"

"I'll give him perlice!" said a rough youth, and flung his arms round the master's neck.

Mr. Ratcliff struggled frantically, dignity thrown to the winds. He kicked and plunged unavailingly, and a youth whom he kicked on the shin took revenge by hitting him violently in the middle.

Mr. Ratcliff doubled up.

"Rescue, St. Jim's!" called Tom Merry.

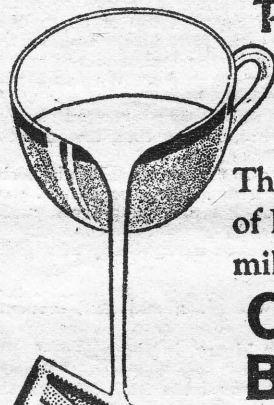
He leapt forward, hitting out, and the youth who had just struck Mr. Ratcliff reeled back and fell full length. Lowther pounced on another's back, and Jack Blake, like a tiger, went into the fray.

"Bai Jove! Wescue, deah boys! Heah I am, Watty—I mean, Mr. Watchiff!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, always polite, bowed deeply; but next moment fell full length as a boot was put in violent contact with his person.

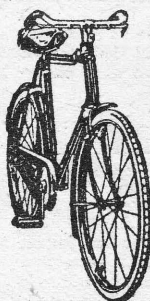
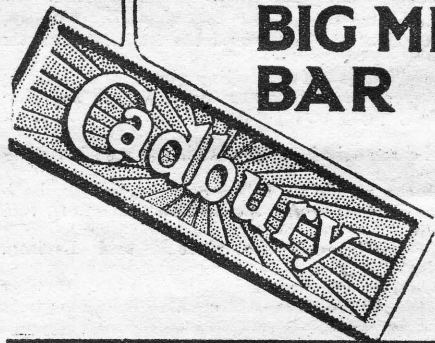
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The swell of St. Jim's jumped up and danced forward, brandishing his fist. Round the master the juniors gathered protectively, but the odds were heavy.

To and fro they tramped, taking and giving blows. Manners fell from a terrific under-cut, and Monty Lowther spun dizzily from a mighty smash on the nose. But the juniors were giving as good as they got.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with vengeance in his mind, lashed out his left, and a village youth, who was guffawing at the idea of D'Arcy's being able to hit anything, turned a somersault off the platform.

"Charge!" said Tom Merry.

It was a sudden rush, and the village youths retreated to the edge of the platform.

To go farther they were unwilling; but they went. One after another they were toppled off, and St. Jim's held the fort.

"Hold hard!" said Tom Merry breathlessly. "Rally round, you fellows! Figgy, take Ratty out the back way," he added in a whisper.

So, while the St. Jim's juniors held on, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn went to their Housemaster's aid.

"Are you badly hurt, sir?" asked Figgins.

Mr. Ratcliff shook his head.

"Bless my soul!" he muttered. "I—I have been assaulted!"

"It's all right now, sir. All clear!" said Kerr.

Kerr spoke rather too soon, for now the enemy had rallied, and it looked very much as though they would raid the platform before Mr. Ratcliff was removed.

"Look out! They'll charge!" said Tom Merry.

Mr. Keith, from the side of the Hall, gave a call. He had fought away those nearest to him, and now a respectful ring was cleared. His left had the power of a kicking mule, and his right was apt to follow close on top of it, so that even the sternest roughs of Rylcombe gave him a wide berth.

But numbers were sure to tell in the end, and the crowd was in ugly humour. Men had come in from Wayland, and they were not using discrimination. Mr. Ratcliff was their objective, for they had heard he would bar greyhound racing, which they hoped to organise; but, failing him, anyone else would do.

It was then that Cardew came to the rescue. Ralph Reckness Cardew was a useful man with his fists, as he had just had pleasure in proving. But his brain was even more nimble; and now, with a cynical smile, he edged his way to the side of the platform, and looked thoughtfully at a glass case which housed a fire-hose.

Crash!

Cardew's foot went through the glass, and next moment he had dragged out the hose.

"Cardew, you ass!" said Tom Merry, in alarm.

"Just going to water the pitch," said Cardew. "Water, water everywhere," as our old friend the Ancient Mariner remarked.

The key was applied to the controlling gland, and a steady jet flowed with great force. Cardew nonchalantly held the powerful vibrating pipe, and pointed to one or another of the roughs.

"Now, sir," he remarked. "You with the purple tie—Ah!"

The man with the purple tie rolled over backwards, half-drowned; and as Cardew swung the hose round, others, too, departed in haste.

"Stop him! He'll soak the place!" said Levison.

"Cardew, you fool!"

He leapt at Cardew and wrestled with the pipe. Cardew struggled and the nozzle was deflected. In passing, it drenched Arthur Augustus, who leaped into the air. To and fro went the nozzle, and wild shrieks announced that the stream was finding something to dampen.

It eventually found Mr. Ratcliff. As Levison had then released the nozzle, and there was a twinkle in Cardew's eye, it looked as though accident would be made to happen.

Mr. Ratcliff looked like a drowned rat, but he was of Sahara-like dryness, compared with the men who were struggling to get on to the platform.

S-s-s-s!

The riot was ended. The enemy had been beaten off; and Mr. Ratcliff, soaked through to the skin, was led off by juniors, as badly off as he.

"Cardew, you dummy!"

"You fearful idiot!"

But Cardew only smiled.

"Had to be impartial—what? Fair play's a jewel. Wouldn't do for Ratty to think I wanted to soak him, you know."

"You footling fathhead!"

"Oh, come, we won, you know, hands down!" said Cardew. "The enemy went down with all hands, too. Nothing like water for damping a fellow's ardour."

The ardour was decidedly dampened everywhere, and out

in the field at the back of the Hall the St. Jim's party gathered itself together.

Mr. Ratcliff took one glance back at the hall and then gritted his teeth.

"Hurry, boys, and stick close to me!"

Hurry they did, with Mr. Keith acting as rearguard in case there were any more attacks. But the enemy had been vanquished completely, and was now suffering yet again at the hands of the police.

There was no time for recriminations, and no one knew quite how it was that the roughs had entered the Hall. Mr. Keith's keenest supporters were youths, although a large section of the voting populace was in his favour. But the roughs had not looked like locals. They seemed to be of the type that clusters wherever there is a chance of a rough-and-tumble. A rough-and-tumble there had certainly been, but Mr. Ratcliff was safe, and for that, he had to thank the St. Jim's juniors. Whether he would do so or not, however, remained to be seen. Gratitude, unfortunately, was not one of Mr. Ratcliff's redeeming virtues.

CHAPTER 9.

Looking for Keith!

"KEITH? Anyone seen Keith?"

George Figgins went up and down the New House at St. Jim's calling out that name.

Figgins & Co. had just returned from the meeting in Rylcombe, and now once more in their right frame of mind, they were hunting for Keith.

Reginald Keith, for once, was in great demand, but like the bone in Mother Hubbard's cupboard, he was not to be found. In view of the fact that the exciting events which had occurred in Rylcombe were now public property, it was but natural that he should have chosen to lie low. As Kerr said, after a low lie, such as he had told, that was obviously the thing to do.

But Figgins had a glitter in his eye, and he did not mean to search in vain. Redfern was on the hunt, too, and so were Lawrence and Owen, so that if Keith slipped through their net, he would be a clever fellow indeed.

"Of course he's hiding," said Figgins knitting his brow.

Kerr chuckled.

"Good old Figgins. How you work these things out beats me. He's hiding. That simply must be it, you know."

"Perhaps he's gone to the tuckshop," suggested Fatty Wynn hopefully. "It's still open. Shall I go and look, Figgy?"

"You'll stay here," said Figgy shortly. "If you once get inside the tuckshop we shan't see you again. Has Reddy come back from hunting in the quadrangle?"

"Yes, no luck though," answered Kerr.

Then the three juniors drew up as Mr. Ratcliff came down the staircase of the New House. Figgins & Co. were standing in the Hall, and Figgins hedged to the door, but not in time.

Mr. Ratcliff's eye had a cold gleam, and his nose was quite brilliant, his visit to Rylcombe having improved neither his digestion nor his temper. His hand was itching to hold a cane.

"Figgins!" he snapped. "Where is Keith?"

"I don't know, sir. We've been hunting for him everywhere."

"Send some other boys to look for him, and follow me to my study."

All was grist that came to Mr. Ratcliff's mill, and Figgins & Co. would do as well as anyone else. Apparently Mr. Ratcliff's memory was not as short as they had hoped, and he had not forgotten his suggestion that they should repair to his study on their return to school.

"Oh, my hat!" said Figgins in dismay. "This is all we get for working for Ratty, you know."

"Nothing to what Keith will get for working against him," Kerr added consolingly. "Cheer up, it may not be so bad."

Mr. Ratcliff was awaiting him in his study, and he had selected a new cane from his store. It was said that Mr. Ratcliff had "vintage" canes, keeping them in bins, and selected the choicest "year" when he wanted to put in some extra stout work. It certainly was a splendid cane that lay on his table now, and he rubbed his bony hands together as Figgins & Co. entered the room.

"Ah, Figgins," he began. "Did I see you in Rylcombe this evening, wearing electioneering placards?"

"Yes, sir. We were sticking up posters for you," explained Figgins. "And there was—er—a little interference."

"Interference. You were set about?" asked Mr. Ratcliff, his manner undergoing a change.

"Yes, sir. In a way," demurred Figgins. "Village kids."

"Supporters of Mr. Keith?"

"Yes, sir—but—"

Figgins felt rather concerned about that. He had thought

that if Mr. Ratcliff knew that they had suffered in a good cause, he could not very well punish them. There Figgins had been right, but he had overlooked the fact that Mr. Ratcliff would not regard the incident as a boyish prank incidental to all electioneering.

His nature was such that it had caused him to place the very worst possible construction upon every action, and now it was easy to see what he was thinking. The interference of Spinks & Co. had been harmless enough, and in no way attributable to Mr. Keith, but Mr. Ratcliff was not likely to consider that. His brow darkened.

"This is very serious indeed. Undoubtedly Mr. Keith is encouraging the riff-raff of Rylcombe to engage in a conflict with, and organise onslaught upon, my supporters."

"Oh," said Figgins. "Ahem—I—er—I don't think so, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff raised his head and glared.

"I did not ask your opinion, my boy. What you think is not likely to carry much weight. Could you name these people who set about you so roughly?"

Figgins coloured deeply. A rag was a rag, and he was just as likely to set about Spinks, as be set about. Besides, sneaking was absolutely barred.

"Well—"

"Phew! Under the table, you mean?" said Figgins brightly. "My hat! Just the sort of thing he would do, too."

They went with all possible speed to Keith's study. To all appearances it was empty, but Kerr held up his hand.

"I heard a scuffling as we came along," he remarked. "I wonder if there's anyone under the table?"

Figgins stepped forward to raise the cover, but Kerr held his arm.

"Just a minute, better way than that," Kerr said, and picked up the poker. "No sense in stooping, and letting the blood run to your head, you know. I'll just grope—"

Kerr's idea of groping was to swish the poker under the table, a method as simple as it was effective.

Swish!

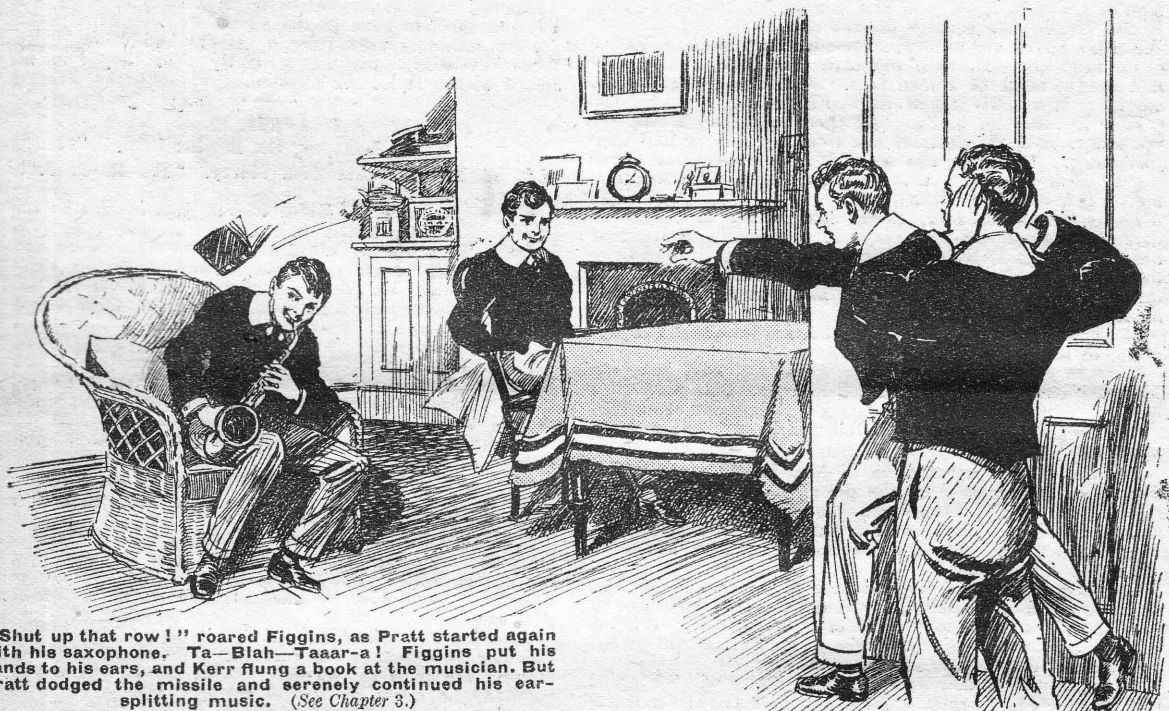
"Yow—ooo—"

As that wild cry came from under the table, Figgins leaped forward and pushed it over. The table crashed against the wall, and Keith appeared in view crouched on all fours holding his leg.

"Yow, you fearful ass!" groaned Keith. "Look out with that poker!"

"Get up!" said Figgins curtly.

"All right. I was—I was only looking for a stamp."



"Shut up that row!" roared Figgins, as Pratt started again with his saxophone. Ta—Blah—Taaar—a! Figgins put his hands to his ears, and Kerr flung a book at the musician. But Pratt dodged the missile and serenely continued his ear-splitting music. (See Chapter 3.)

"Answer me at once," snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "Are you endeavouring to avoid punishment by telling untruths, or were you the victim of the onslaught?"

"We were ragged a bit, sir. But it was a mere nothing."

"A mere nothing to be plastered with handbills? Do not be an imbecile, Figgins. This is obviously due to Mr. Keith's definite instructions. This matter must be seen into. You give me your word of honour you are speaking the truth?"

"Oh yes, sir, but—"

"Then go, and send me Keith."

Figgins & Co. went, looking none too happy. Mr. Ratcliff was evidently getting worse and worse. Before long, he would imagine that he was a marked man, and that hundreds of assassins had been hired to prevent his winning the election.

"I say, this is a bit serious," said Figgins despondently. "We don't want to get Keith into trouble. He's rather a good sort. Besides his brother has done enough of that."

"More than enough," frowned Kerr. "We've got to find the young rotter, and squeeze the truth out of him. He must be telling lies. I can't imagine that Mr. Keith would have denied every thing so frankly, and quite in that way, if there had been anything in young Reggie's story."

"Oh, of course it's all rot," nodded Figgins, "and he's hiding somewhere. We've been down to his study."

Kerr nodded thoughtfully; he was not easily duped.

"We've been everywhere, but I wouldn't mind trying that study again. Reggie's an artful dodger, and we only just looked in. He might be easily hiding there."

"Well, what you'll find," said Figgins darkly, "is a House ragging, my son. What's this yarn you've been telling Ratty?"

Keith had recovered his composure, but even so, looked shifty-eyed and pale. He did not mean to be trapped, but he had not sufficient control of his facial expression to conceal the truth.

"Yarn, Figgins—what yarn?" he said.

"Oh, don't bluff!" said Figgy. "Hand me that poker, Kerr. Thanks!"

Figgins pushed back his cuff, and grasped the poker firmly. The third degree might be looked upon darkly in official quarters, but Figgins had an idea that the truth might be stirred out of Keith with the poker. Certainly Keith eyed the poker with apprehension.

"What are you going to do with that?" he demanded.

"All in good time," Figgins replied affably. "The whole truth, and nothing but the truth, remember. Sorry I haven't anything softer than a poker, but I have to take what comes to hand. Now—does your brother bet?"

"My brother? Oh, no!" said Keith hurriedly. "Of course not. Too much of a prig!"

"Oh, then why did you tell Ratty he does?" snapped Kerr.

Keith gave a slight start, but he was not completely off his guard, even though he was surprised by their knowledge.

"I didn't. Ratty caught me with a betting slip. But I didn't say anything about my brother. Why should I?"

Figgins paused, rather nonplussed. He was a bluff

fellow himself and up against a liar he did not show at his best. He did not trust Keith, nor did he not think he was telling the truth, but he wagged the poker ominously. "Ratty says you did. Are you calling Ratty a liar?"

"Of course not, my dear fellow!" said Keith smoothly. "Ratty must have misunderstood."

"Um! Awkward for him," said Figgins. "And awkward for your brother."

"He can soon prove that he doesn't bet," said Keith. "Quite easy. It's generally known."

Kerr shook his head at that. He knew that such a statement would not go down at all well.

"All very fine to say what people know, but we want proof. There are such things as dark horses. He might bet on the sly. Even if he does, it won't matter unless there's some kind of proof. Did you tell Ratty your brother backed horses?"

"Of course not! I—look here, what's the game, Figgins? You want Ratty to win?"

"Yes—fairly—"

"Well, that's all right," said Keith comfortably. "Quite all right." He was nearest to the door, and heard a soft step in the corridor.

"Ratty's looking for you; and you're going to see him. You're going to Ratty and you're going to tell him," said Figgys, "that your brother doesn't bet."

Keith's lips moved to form a smooth retort, but he stiffened quite suddenly. Through the chink in the open door, he had caught sight of a lean face. Mr. Ratcliff was in the corridor; it was his step Keith had heard.

How Mr. Ratcliff had arrived there so quietly Keith did not know. But Mr. Ratcliff was listening, and he had only just come. The door was ajar, and he could hear every word. How long he had stood there Keith did not know, but he licked his dry lips.

He began to see now, rather late in the day, what a dangerous game he was playing. Suppose Ratty had heard; suppose Ratty knew that a deliberate lie had been told? Keith trembled with fear, and his mouth became dry and parched. But Ratty had not been there long, and he took heart.

"Look here, don't rot, Figgys," he exclaimed. "I'm not going to be bullied!"

"You're going to Ratty," said Figgins slowly, but very firmly. "And you're going to tell him your brother doesn't bet."

"I won't!" cried Keith. "I tell you I won't! You can't make me!"

Figgins, utterly unconscious of Mr. Ratcliff outside the door, took a new grip on the poker, and turned to Kerr and Wynn. This, it seemed, was the time for action. Keith had admitted that his brother did not bet, and yet refused to go and tell Mr. Ratcliff so. What construction was there to be placed upon that?

To the mind of the three chums, only one. Keith had lied and refused to admit it; was too much of a coward to own up. That no fellow would care to go to Mr. Ratcliff and make a confession was obvious; but Keith was going. Figgins was determined on that point.

"I'll give you something worse than Ratty will," Figgins said in contracted wrath. "Bend him over the table, Kerr. Catch hold, Fatty. I'll give him ten as a start, and if he won't go, then you can take a turn."

Keith struggled fiercely, fully conscious that Mr. Ratcliff was outside, and that every word he said would be heard.

"Leggo, you rotter!" he yelled. "Figgys! Put down that poker. If you lash me with that," he cried, "I'll go straight to Ratty, you bully. I'm not going to tell lies just to please you."

"Lies!" said Figgins, in surprise. "My hat! Why—"

And then, just as Kerr and Fatty were bending Keith over the table, the door of the study opened and Mr. Ratcliff stepped in.

Figgins turned, saw him, and dropped the poker with a clatter to the ground as if it had become suddenly red-hot. Kerr and Fatty Wynn released their hold; and Keith, scarcely able to conceal a grin, settled his collar straight. What would be the ultimate result of this lying and scheming he did not pause to consider, but for the moment, he was saved. Mr. Ratcliff's look showed that.

Mr. Ratcliff stood in the doorway of the study and glared from one junior to the other.

"So you have been caught in the act, Figgins. Bullying this wretched boy to make him tell me untruths."

Figgins was fairly staggered, and Kerr puckered his brow. "Not to tell lies! But the truth, sir," said Kerr. "Keith admits that his brother does not really bet on horses."

"Nonsense! How dare you stand there and tell me such untruths, boy? I have been standing outside the study for at least five minutes. I have heard everything that has been said. Do not attempt to deny it—you were endeavouring

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to bully him into making false statements to me, when he has already told me that his brother is a gambler."

"Oh!"

"He—he said that?" exclaimed Kerr. "We thought as much, sir."

"Ah! And now you are endeavouring to make the wretched boy tell me the opposite. Is that it? Unfortunately for you, I have heard everything, and I am aware now that you were trying to make him give a false statement. Have no fear, Keith, my boy, you will not be bullied. Figgins, Kerr and Wynn, you will come to my study and you will receive a severe caning."

"But, sir—" gasped Figgins.

"It's all wrong!" exclaimed Kerr.

"Silence! I have heard enough! Keith, remain here. Figgins, Kerr and Wynn, follow me to my study. Now, I think I understand more clearly what has been appending. It has all been a plot. Keith hired those ruffians to attack me in the hall, and you boys joined in. Very well, the last has not been heard of this."

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn gave Keith dark looks, and then followed Mr. Ratcliff to his study. But explanations were of no avail. Mr. Ratcliff had listened at the door of the study too late to understand fully what had happened, and, with the look of battle in his eyes, he swished the new cane in the air.

Five minutes later Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn crawled from the study, wishing fervently that they had never heard of the Rylcombe election.

CHAPTER 10.

Betraying His Brother!

"MY hat!" said Tom Merry. "It's R. T. J. himself!"

R. T. J. Keith it was, just inside the school gates, which had some minutes before been locked. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were taking a final stroll round the quad, before scurrying through prep, and they halted in surprise to see Mr. Keith there. And yet there was little real reason for their surprise, since it was natural that he should come to the school to have the matter thrashed out.

There was a dark bruise on Tom Merry's cheek, and Lowther's nose showed the signs of punishment. But Mr. Keith himself had not escaped quite unhurt, as his lip showed when he grinned cheerily but somewhat painfully. "Hallo, hallo! I thought it was your bed-time, youngsters!" he said.

"Not quite, sir," smiled Tom Merry. "New House, you know, go to bed earlier. We have to tuck them in and tell them fairy stories."

"Good! Well, I hope no one starts telling Ratty any more fairy stories. Do you think I can find that young brother of mine? Don't treat him roughly. If you must drag him, drag him by one ear, and not two. I don't like roughness."

Tom Merry chuckled, and, leaving Manners and Lowther to entertain the guest, he hurried off to the New House. He knew his way about that House, but it was as much as he could do to get through without a scuffle. School House visitors were apt to be regarded with suspicion.

The door of Keith's study was locked, and he found several fellows kicking the panels.

"Hallo!" said Tom. "What's wrong? Lost key?"

Redfern sniffed. "That young bouncer has locked himself in—"

"And I can't get my saxophone!" groaned Pratt, kicking the panels furiously.

"Shouldn't have thought that would have upset you, Reddy!" chuckled Tom.

"Well, it doesn't," said Redfern. "Only, you see, we're looking for Keith."

Then he told Tom Merry what had happened, and Tom frowned in some perplexity. The situation certainly was rather difficult, since, from all accounts, Keith had admitted that his brother had not gambled, and this contradicted his own first lie. As Mr. Ratcliff would not now accept that story in the belief that Keith had been bullied into making it, the situation was worse than before.

"It's his brother, R. T. J.," explained Tom. "I suppose the kid will come out for him."

"He will—even if we have to smash down the door," nodded Redfern. "Keith, your brother wants to see you."

"Tell him to go and eat coke!"

"He'll come up after you," said Tom Merry, "with a stump I'll lend him!"

A moment later the door opened, and Keith appeared, white-faced and anxious. The crowd fell back, however, as Tom Merry took him by the arm.

"This way, my son! We're going to get the truth." Redfern gave Keith a passing kick, and Lawrence pulled

his ear for him; but that was all. The rest could comfortably come later. There was still some of the term left in which to impress Keith with the folly of his ways.

Keith, with Tom Merry as guide, suddenly went down the stairs and across the quadrangle to where his brother stood with Manners and Lowther, near the gates.

"Look here!" said Keith. "I'm not going to have a giddy audience. I've got something private to say to R. T. J."

"Well, we don't want to eavesdrop," said Manners shortly.

"Of course they don't," boomed R. T. J., eyeing his brother in disfavour. "Thank you, you fellows, for fetching him. See you later. Sorry about the scrap."

The juniors walked away, and Keith found himself face to face with his brother. R. T. J. had a strong arm, and he had used it often enough for educative purposes, where his brother was concerned, so that Reggie eyed him now warily. R. T. J. was anything but a bully; but he had a firm belief that Reggie would take the right path eventually, if he were shoved hard enough in the proper direction, guided by boot and hand unerringly.

"Well?" said R. T. J. "What about it? What have you been telling Ratty about me?"

"Nothing. Really, I haven't, Bob. Honest Injun!" said Keith plaintively. "Fact is, Ratty had me up about a betting slip."

"Ah! Still betting! I thought I'd cured you of that." Keith looked sullen.

"Only a bob or two, and I can't help it," he said. "It's Banks' fault."

"Banks?" exclaimed R. T. J. "So that wretched bookie is still hanging about, is he?"

"Yes." Keith's shifty eyes did not meet his brother's. He hung his head and ground his heel into the earth. "Banks makes me go on betting because—because I'm in his debt. I mean to give it up, but how can I—when he keeps holding my debt over my head?"

R. T. J. dived his hands into his pocket, and surveyed his younger brother grimly.

"You're a poor sort of worm, young Reggie," he said. "How much are you in debt to this Banks chap?"

"A fiver!"

"Phew!" R. T. J. stroked his head and thought for a while. "Banks the only one?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I'll see Banks."

"You will, really? I say, R. T. J., how ripping! I'm no end grateful! I'll—I'll never bet again."

"I don't suppose you will," said his brother, with a grim smile. "Let me see, I promised you a lick of the stump for every shilling you bet. How much have you won?"

"Nothing. I've lost all the time."

"A fiver—that's a hundred shillings," said R. T. J. thoughtfully. "Well, well; keep me in practice a bit. I can imagine you're Constantine sending down some fast stuff. Banks again, is it? Banks used to hang around when I was here. Once I gave him a thick ear. This time I'll dot him on the nose! And, by Jove, I'll make this place too hot to hold him!"

Keith looked up.

"I wish you would!" he said fretfully. "I really do!" But there was no gratitude in his face, only a look of anger. He knew that his brother meant to use the stump, and he knew what it felt like. He had been stumped for telling lies, for being cruel to animals, and for betting, and he was not looking forward at all to the prospect of renewing the acquaintance.

"Where can I see Banks—and when?" his elder brother asked.

"He'll be expecting me in the woods to-morrow. By the big tree near the path," said Keith. "And I say, really, I didn't say anything at all like that to Ratty. It was all a misunderstanding. You know what the rotter is. He told me off about betting, and I said you did it—meaning, gave me a licking in the hols, and he jumped to the wrong conclusion. Why should I say things against you?"

"Well, there doesn't seem much sense in it," R. T. J. admitted. "It's a confounded lie, in any case! If you have told him—well, my son, life wouldn't be worth living. But you're going to tell Ratty I don't bet."

Keith's eyes gleamed.

"Oh, rather, I will! Like anything! You can come along now and hear me tell him if you like."

"Right! I will."

R. T. J. and his brother walked towards the New House; and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther watched from the other side of the quadrangle. Whatever fears Keith may have felt, he showed none, as he and his brother halted outside the door of Mr. Ratcliff's study.

Mr. Ratcliff opened the door of the study; and then,

seeing his visitors, started in surprise. But he stood aside for them to enter.

"Good-evening, Mr. Ratcliff!" said R. T. J. "My young brother has come to make a statement voluntarily."

"Yes, I've come to say that my brother doesn't bet on horses," said Keith, hanging his head.

He well knew what line Mr. Ratcliff would take then, but it came to R. T. J. as the shock of his life.

Mr. Ratcliff snapped his fingers and leaned forward, starting into R. T. J.'s handsome face.

"Ah! Very clever move, Mr. Keith!" he sneered. "But not clever enough. A few minutes ago I found three wretched youths in this House bullying your brother—threatening to beat him with a poker if he did not come to me and swear that you did not bet."

R. T. J. jumped.

"My word, sir! I—I say, that's a bit steep, you know! You really mean—"

"Ask him—ask the boy. Is it true, Keith?" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Oh dear! They were threatening me," mumbled Keith. "They were going to lick me with the poker if I didn't come and say my brother never bets."

R. T. J. gasped and passed a hand across his forehead. He was feeling quite dazed.

"Oh, I see!" he murmured. "Then—then, in the circus, of course, the evidence—"

"The evidence is worthless," said the Housemaster.

"Nor do I admire you for coming forward to present the boy to make it."

"Nothing of the sort, Mr. Ratcliff! You have no right to say that—"

Mr. Ratcliff pointed to the door.

"Before I lose my temper, kindly leave the study. There is more in this affair than meets the eye."

The two brothers went out of the study, and Reginald looked back a second, to see Mr. Ratcliff's door opened slightly. The New House master was renowned for his sly methods of obtaining evidence. He was noted for creeping about in rubber shoes, up to dormitories, and even outside studies; and Reginald Keith was quite aware that Mr. Ratcliff would hear every word they said.

"I'm sorry, Bob!" he said humbly. "But you see how it is."

"Yes, in a way. But why did they want to lick you to make you go? I should have thought—"

"It was Figgins," said Keith hurriedly. "He's a fearful bully! I say, will you keep your promise about to-morrow?"

"To-morrow? Yes. But, look here, Reginald—are you telling me the absolute truth?"

"Yes, yes! Honour bright, I am!"

Keith walked down the corridor with his brother, and then parted with him at the New House doorway. That he was suspected, he knew. That his brother was half inclined to believe he was a traitor, was apparent; but also he knew that R. T. J. would prefer to believe that Mr. Ratcliff had misunderstood, rather than that a Keith was black-hearted, a traitor, and a liar.

So Reginald Keith walked back past Mr. Ratcliff's study, and was not at all surprised when the master hailed him.

"Keith, one moment!"

"Yes, sir?"

"What is this promise your brother has made?"

Keith hung his head.

"I—I wasn't to say, sir."

"I command you to say!"

"Well, he's going to meet Banks in the woods to-morrow by the big tree on the small path by the stile. I—I'm not supposed to say, though."

"Ah, very well! Very well, Keith!" said Mr. Ratcliff grimly. "That is what I wished to know. Thank you!"

And Keith, as he walked away, felt a load shifted from his mind. On the morrow Mr. Ratcliff would spy on his brother and see him with a bookmaker. Therefrom Mr. Ratcliff would be convinced that R. T. J. had dealings with a bookmaker, and he would not vent his rage on Reginald. To Reginald that was all that mattered. If, in addition, his brother lost the election—well, there were the stumpings to be taken into consideration! That was how Keith regarded it, not being burdened with a conscience!

CHAPTER 11. Running Amok!

"**B**AI JOVE!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy paused and jammed his gleaming monocle into his eye. He stared and stared yet again through the bushes in the wood, and then caught Jack Blake by the arm.

"Mind, you dummy!" growled Blake. "You'll upset the paint!"

"Look, deah boy!"

D'Arcy pointed through the trees. His three chums stared in the same direction, and then all three gasped. For what they saw was indeed amazing.

Some distance away, and yet clearly visible, was a man in his shirt-sleeves and trousers. He was struggling into a heavy coat of faded green, and wore a wig of black hair. It was a wig to be recognised by reason of the fact that it rested coyly on one ear. Even more remarkable was his red beard, rather bushy, which protruded sideways, as though his chin had slipped when eating caramels and had stayed like it.

"My hat!" gasped Blake. "Who ever can it be?"

"Someone up to no good, anyway," said Herries. "He's in disguise, you know. A burglar, as like as not! Here's Tom Merry. Let's ask him."

Merry, Manners, and Lowther came to a halt just behind them at the moment.

"Look over there, you chaps," said Blake. "Some queer fellow disguising himself. What do you make of it. Some lunatic, eh?"

Before Tom Merry could answer someone else came into view by the tall tree near the path through the woods. He was a burly man, easily recognised if only by reason of the loudness of the pattern of his coat. It was of a vivid pattern, and his cigar was long and strange-smelling.

"Banks, the bookie!" said Tom Merry. "Well, anyone who has dealings with him must be a lunatic."

But the man was not, apparently, intending to have dealings with Banks. He was, by all appearances, hiding from him. But there was someone else who had business with him, and that was a tall, athletic-looking man who came striding through the woods.

"R. T. J.," said Tom Merry, with a gasp of surprise.

"And meeting Banks!" said Jack Blake in dismay. "Well, my giddy aunt! This is queer, you know."

"Looks funny!" said Tom Merry. "I say, can it really be true, you know? Can he really be betting on the sly?"

"Sly enough," frowned Manners. "If he has to meet him in the woods."

But Banks stood up in surprise as Mr. Keith approached him.

"Oh!" said the bookmaker. "Wasn't expecting you, sir."

"No," said R. T. J., and his tone dashed any belief that he might have a friendly reason for the meeting. "But here I am. I understand that you've been encouraging my young brother to bet."

"No, come off it, guv'nor," said Mr. Banks. "He didn't need no encouragement. Game young shaver! Owes me a fiver now."

"Yes, that's what I have come about. Here's the fiver. I want his IOU and your receipt."

He handed over the five-pound note, and Mr. Banks, after some hesitation, took out a bulky pocket-book and made over the IOU. Still more reluctantly he made out the receipt.

Tom Merry gave a guilty start.

"I say, we're spying!" he exclaimed. "Better shift on. I didn't mean to stay on and watch, but—"

"Just a minute," said Blake. "It's good proof that he isn't a betting man—in case anyone needs it; and I fancy there's going to be a scrap."

Hardly had he said the words when R. T. J. laid a heavy hand on Mr. Banks' shoulders.

"Some years ago, Banks, my cheery friend," he said. "I gave you a warning that if you took bets from St. Jim's kids I'd give you a licking. I was a prefect then."

"I remember, sir," said Banks, with a short, uncomfortable laugh. "Just your joke, sir. Ha, ha!"

"Just my joke," nodded Mr. Keith. "I'm rather a joking merchant myself. That was a screaming joke I landed on your nose, I remember. Ticked you immensely. Well, I

(Continued on next page.)

Free Gifts For All!

STARTING NEXT WEEK!

YOU fellows have gathered from previous announcements some idea of the wonderful series of treats I have in store for you, but here, at least, I can dilate further upon their merits with pardonable pride. The topping coloured cover of this issue shows in miniature what these gorgeous FREE GIFTS look like, but, for obvious reasons, it does not do the actual models full justice. No. 1, Malcolm Campbell's famous racing car, Blue Bird, is a real prize, which anyone would be pleased to cherish. The model is accurate in detail and correctly coloured. One can, with this faithful model in front of them, almost picture the long stretch of sands at Daytona over which Malcolm Campbell sent his car hurtling at the breath-taking speed of 206.9 miles per hour. Here, boys, is a Free Gift that will last a lifetime—a Free Gift with a splendid history attached to it, that adds to the glory of Britain and the Britisher. And it's yours next week! Nothing extra to pay. The old paper complete, with an extra special programme as befits the occasion, of which I shall speak later, is, as usual, price twopence. Is that making you enthusiastic? Of course. Why, on a place of honour in my den, I've got a model of the Blue Bird myself, side by side with the other beautiful models which will eventually come to you, so that will show you what I think of them. Free Gift No. 2 is a striking model of the L.M.S. Railway Express

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a new record. And to you fellows is offered the wonderful opportunity of possessing a lifelike model of this giant of steel FREE! But we don't stop there. Not a bit of it! The third FREE GIFT is also unique, nothing less than a striking metal model of the

WORLD'S LARGEST AIRSHIP— R. 100!

Just think of it, boys, and quickly put the kybosh on that fellow who sneers at the GEM. Jove! I'll bet he'll rally round the old paper as soon as he knows what's going free. Most of us will not have the experience of taking a flip in the R. 100, but, with this handsome model and a little imagination, many's the trip we shall take through the clouds. Can you stand another "blow," boys? Well, how about this one? The fourth FREE GIFT is a grand lifelike metal model of

SIR ALAN COBHAM'S ROUND- AFRICA PLANE!

You'll agree, I feel sure, that no better souvenir of Britain's might in the air could be offered you than this magnificent flying boat in miniature. Round Africa went Sir Alan Cobham in his trusty Short Singapore Seaplane, and right nobly did this machine stand up to the wear and tear of such a terrific journey. We all said, "Bravo, Cobham!" when he returned to Blighty. "What a wonderful airman, and what a wonderful machine!" And it's a model of this history-making plane that is being given to you chaps—Free! Some series—what? Where can you find a paper to beat this programme? Echo answers—where? And, talking of programmes, let me mention it, Martin Clifford has piled in with a top-hole series of St. Jim's yarns, dealing with a nephew of Mr. Railton. He's a weird chap, this nephew; but I won't

spoil your treat in advance by giving too much away. So just watch out for the first yarn, entitled:

"FOOL'S LUCK!"

and be prepared to enjoy yourselves.

Then there's a special serial, written by popular Alfred Edgar, whose motor-racing yarns abound in thrills and realism. He's piled in with a masterpiece which kicks off in Ireland, and deals with the Royal Automobile Club Tourist Trophy race. "Skid" Kennedy, the central character, is a lad after your own hearts, full of grit and the will to win; the fellow who makes light of his own troubles—the fellow who can always see a silver lining to the darkest cloud. You'll make a real pal of Skid, take it from me, and you will agree that this wonder yarn will bring fresh laurels to Alfred Edgar. Get ready, then, boys, to make the acquaintance of

"SKID" KENNEDY—SPEED KING!

That little lot doesn't complete the programme, for we mustn't lose sight of the "Oracle," as we have in this week's issue on account of space limits. He'll be there again next week; all merry and cheery, overflowing with his own verbosity, and prepared to answer all questions. If you want to know anything, send your query in, and the "Oracle" will answer it for you. You chaps agreed that this programme of good things is A 1, first class, top-hole, etc. Of course you are. I can visualise you all madly excited about these fine Free Gifts and the wonderful stories in store—can see you all hastening to that newsagent chappy with an order for next week's GEM and the week after, and in many cases—as is wise—with a regular order for the finest school-story paper on the market. Cheerio, chums, and spread the good news, and no one will be more grateful than

YOUR EDITOR.

know heaps more jokes like it." He pushed back his cuffs in preparation.

"Now, look here, this is assault and battery," began Mr. Banks.

"Of course it is. There's going to be a fearful lot of battery, too," said R. T. J. ominously. "Shove up your fist."

"I shan't!"

Smack!

Mr. Banks received that smack across his cheek.

"Wow! Ow!" he groaned.

"Never mind the music; that can play during the intervals. Stand up again now. How can I hit you when you sit down. Get up, you toad! I'm going to give you a punch for every pound my brother owed you."

Mr. Banks struggled up to run, but he was caught by the shoulder, and, not being able to run away, he stayed to fight. But he was much better at betting than boxing. He lasted for almost a minute, and then a mighty blow sent him clean off his feet to stretch full length on his back, his head thumping back against the ground.

Turning on his heel, R. T. J. disappeared with Mr. Banks groaning and shaking his fist. The bookmaker struggled up at last, and as he did so the man with the red beard peered out through the bushes.

Mr. Banks leapt clear of the ground.

"Strike me!" he howled. "A lunatic!" And, despite the punishment that he had just taken, he leapt off the mark in surprising time, with the red-bearded man in pursuit.

What that man was saying could not be heard, for Mr. Banks' howls of fear stopped that completely. Clearly, however, he could not run for long, and the St. Jim's juniors looked at each other anxiously.

"After 'em!" said Tom Merry. "Quick's the word!"

Jack Blake took the lead with his paint-can, and the others followed. The weird figure had halted now, for from the road came a crowd of men, armed with implements—forks, spades, scythes, and hammers.

That they were not a picnicking party was obvious to the meanest intelligence, and the lunatic halted. Then he made a dash sideways.

"There he is!" groaned Mr. Banks. "The lunatic."

Of course, the armed party jumped to the conclusion that it was the lunatic who had inflicted the punishment upon Banks, and with wild cries they set off in pursuit.

"Come on!" yelled Blake.

But Tom Merry halted, a queer expression on his face.

"Listen a minute, you chaps," he said.

"Stuff! We've got to be in this," said Herries.

"Just a minute, you asses! I think I know who that fellow is," said Tom Merry. "It's Ratty!"

"What!"

"Ratty," said Tom Merry. "I caught sight of his face when Blake threw the paint. It's Ratty all right."

"But disguised!" said Blake, in bewilderment. "What on earth for?"

And then he suddenly realised, and the others did, too.

"He was watching R. T. J.!" gasped Blake. "That's what you mean? He got on to it somehow that Keith was meeting Banks. But how?"

"Never mind that now!" said Tom Merry briskly. "If we don't step in they'll do him an injury with those pitchforks and things!"

Tom Merry & Co. ran for all they were worth, realising that Mr. Ratcliff was now in real peril.

"He disguised," panted Tom Merry, as he ran along, "because he—he didn't want Keith to recognise him."

"Of course. Poor old Ratty!"

Poor old Ratty indeed! For Mr. Ratcliff had heard not proof of R. T. J.'s gambling propensities, but of the reverse. He could not but be convinced now of the truth, and he was being punished for his spying in no mean way.

Friardale was not far ahead, and Mr. Ratcliff, his eyes staring wildly from his green face, his red beard blowing in the breeze, hounded along in a manner that the Marathon runners of old might have envied. He was nearly exhausted, and his legs were like clockwork, but fear seemed to lend him wings. As a debater Mr. Ratcliff had made a name for himself. He had a great ability for argument; but, alas!—argument with a pitchfork was not in his line.

In Friardale everyone crowded out to see him, and the moment the strange sight was in their line of vision the people fled.

"Stop 'im!"

"The lunatic!"

"Help!"

R. T. J. Keith was in the High Street, in his car, and he brought about the climax by swinging his car suddenly across the road.

Mr. Ratcliff swerved sideways, and then crashed down into

the road, the crowd surrounding him, pitchforks pointing all in readiness.

It would have gone ill indeed with the New House master then had not his beard slipped off, showing the ungreened portion of his face—his well-known chin.

"Ratty!" cried Kerr.

"Mr. Ratcliff!" said Figgins.

The pitchforks were lowered, and R. T. J. stepped across from his car and stared at the gasping, groaning figure on the ground.

"By Jove, it's old Ratty!" he said. "I really believe it is, after all! Are you Mr. Ratcliff?"

"Heugg—ooof—ug—gug!" said Mr. Ratcliff faintly.

"He's cracked!" said the burly man with the pitchfork.

"Let me give him a dig! Just one," he pleaded—"only a little one—"

But they held him back, and R. T. J. helped Mr. Ratcliff to his feet, and before the crowd could interfere bundled the New House master into the car.

But the crowd retained their firm opinion. Mr. Ratcliff, or not, the creature was clearly a lunatic walking about with a red beard and green face.

"Old Ratty! That's 'oo it was," said Spinks. "Wot's 'e bin up to—ch?"

"Yes, a fine thing a man trying to be councillor playing their games."

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn exchanged glances. Mr. Ratcliff's name was mud—nothing more than mud—and they turned away, meeting Tom Merry & Co. some way down the street.

"He must be dotty," said Figgins—"absolutely dotty, you know! What did he do it for?"

Then Tom Merry & Co. explained, and Figgins whistled.

"Oh, crumbs! He's bitten off more than he can bite, you know! My hat! He'll never be able to show his face again in Rylcombe after this!"

"And I threw the paint!" groaned Blake. "Phew! Still, he won't say anything; he'll want it kept dark, I should think."

And there, of course, Blake was right, Mr. Ratcliff wanted it kept very dark indeed. Not a word did he say to Blake about it, although the looks he gave were very expressive—marred by a certain greenness.

"Ratty's resigned! Keith has won!"

Tom Merry took the glad news into the junior Common-room the following day, waving a local paper in his hand. There it was, in black and white. Mr. Ratcliff had decided to retire from the fray—on doctor's orders; and, what was more, he had published an apology.

The apology appeared in full, and it went all round the school. As gracefully as he could, Mr. Ratcliff had climbed down, and admitted that he had been misled; that no discredit attached to Mr. Keith's name.

It was complete victory, and there was a cheer in the Common-room. Of course, such a victory was, in a way, a hollow one, but it counted, all the same. Mr. Ratcliff had been defeated in his own cunning. If he had not decided to spy he would not have been chased as a lunatic, so that in every way justice appeared to have been done.

Tom Merry, in jubilation, took the paper over to the New House and showed it to George Figgins, who was arguing with Kerr. Figgins read the paper and nodded.

"Of course," he said, "if Ratty had kept on he'd have won. The New House would have seen to that."

Tom Merry winked.

"Retired hurt," he said. "Never mind. Show it to young Keith."

Figgins did so, but Keith was not interested. He was in the dormitory, lying down, his face drawn and pale. Not a single word could be lured from him. All he could do was to groan and try to forget how hard Mr. Ratcliff had "laid it on."

Rylcombe proceeded without Mr. Ratcliff, and the playing fields were opened with great ceremony; but on the very day that that occurred D'Arcy had an invitation to see Mr. Ratcliff. The interview was brief.

"You threw a ball through my window the other day, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove; but, weally—"

"Hold out your hand!"

Swish, swish!

Mr. Ratcliff had come into his own again.

THE END.

(There will be another magnificent yarn of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's GEM entitled: "FOOL'S LUCK!" This is the first of a grand new series of yarns featuring Mr. Bailton's nephew. Make his acquaintance next week, chums, by ordering y'ur GEM well in advance.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,068.

CONCLUSION OF THIS POPULAR SPORTING SERIAL!

A straight bat always eaves a wicket; a straight character always pulls through difficulties. Dick Dare's the fellow with both these things, and they bring him his just reward!



The LUCK of the GAME!

RICHARD RANDOLPH

A GRAND NEW CRICKET STORY, DEALING WITH THE ADVENTURES OF A BOY WHO LOVES THE GREAT SUMMER GAME, AND IS A MASTER AT IT, TOO!

In the Nick of Time!

DICK owned to himself that the ball that had beaten Tryon would probably have been too good for him, as would have been that which bowled Westland. He was getting the luck of the game.

No luck for Fallows, one of the staff youngsters brought in. He barely touched a ball, and was snapped in the slips. Ferguson was not yet on the ground. Reeve came in, hit a six off a loose ball, and a four off one that most men would have been content to pat back to the bowler, and then lifted one to Walker fielding deep, and had to go. John Ainsley had told him to play his own game, and he had played it. That he had not lasted longer at it was a pity; but it could not be helped.

Peter Nevern joined Dick. Since lunch the colt had had little of the bowling—not enough to play himself in again. Now came another slow spell, for neither he nor the stumper would risk anything.

Four wickets had been down for 152 when Reeve left. An hour later the total was only 187, but there were still only four wickets down. And more runs had been made than the whole side might have been counted worth.

Dick was 86 when Peter Nevern left, snapped by Lilley behind the wicket. A roar from the crowd, swollen to half-holiday size and beyond it by this time, greeted Ferguson. For here was one of the reliables—a man who would never have been left out, but that he could not always play.

With his coming Dick quickened up again. It was as though a load had been taken from his shoulders. For a short time Ferguson had most of the bowling, and from the outset he made runs. The bowlers were not fagged out, but they had lost some of their freshness.

Then, in the course of an over from Flint, Dick carried his score to 98 with a 4 to the off. Three good balls he played, while a hush held the ground. Then he swung round and got fairly hold of one going away to leg, and a mighty roar burst from those who watched as they saw that there was no one to stop or overtake the red sphere on its swift way to the boundary.

None roared more loudly than the little group which watched from the pros' quarters. Balkwill and Peter Nevern, Toplady, and Fallows, Matthews and Armlay, Rayner and Rayle, strikers and loyalists, they were all of one mind in that moment.

What happened next was not Dick's fault. Kenneth Ferguson admitted frankly that he was a fool to risk a wicket so valuable for the sake of a stolen single. He called, Dick responded, and ran his hardest; but that old hand, George Gunn, had seen that the better chance was at the end farthest from him. And Lilley got the ball right into his hands, and swept off the bails while Dick was still a yard short of the crease.

But to the end of his life Dick will bless that mistake of Ferguson's.

The crowd rose at him as he made his way to the pavilion. The cheering was deafening. His brief unpopularity was forgotten. He was for the hour the idol of Marchester.

He was hurrying to the dressing-room when he saw Urwine

emerge from the amateurs' quarters, and caught a glimpse of something which the man who carried it fancied concealed—something that glistened blue-black.

Leonard Urwine had worked himself to such a pitch that he was morbid, and conscious of only one thing—that he had been most grossly wronged by John Ainsley.

It was all up with his chance of coming into the bulk of Ainsley's wealth. He would get nothing—nothing!

Well, John Ainsley might think he had pronounced Urwine's doom when he stood him down—stood down the captain of the side because a horde of upstart pros. had revolted against him. He might have made up his mind that his special pet, young Dare, the worst upstart of them all, should be the chief beneficiary under his will.

And if Dare had all the luck there was going he might inherit; but Urwine thought not. The little gun in his bag was good for more lives than one.

He had carried that gun about for quite a long time now, with no very definite notion as to why he should carry it. The murderous fury within him was largely due to the quantity of liquor he had swallowed. In his normal state of mind he had far too much regard for his own safety to let himself go thus. But the potent spirit working upon a brain obsessed by the notion of wrong made him forget all prudence.

Though it was in his mind to shoot Dick after shooting John Ainsley, he actually passed Dick without seeing him. He made his way to the president's room.

Dick laid down his bat, and followed him. Mr. Ainsley was in his room, watching the game from one of the windows, in company with Mr. Frost and two members of the committee.

His eyes bloodshot, his legs unsteady under him, but the hand that gripped the revolver steady enough, Urwine pushed open the door.

He did not know that Dick was but a couple of paces in the rear.

"Ainsley!" he cried. John Ainsley turned to face that gun.

And in that instant Dick struck. He had gone on when Urwine halted, and had put himself in exactly the right position to deal a blow to the point of the jaw.

The revolver clattered to the floor. Urwine dropped. In an instant Dick had snatched up the weapon, and had his knee on Urwine's chest.

"John, he meant to kill you!" gasped Robert Frost. "There's no doubt of that, Bob."

John Ainsley's face had gone deadly pale; but it was horror rather than fear that had blanched it.

"I'll go for a constable," volunteered Colonel Jones.

"No. Lock the door, Frost, will you? Thanks to Dare's readiness, we can avoid a public scandal."

"There's some virtue in a punch at the right time, eh, John?" said Robert Frost dryly, as he obeyed.

"I would not think of denying it. You have come to my rescue again, Dare. I am very grateful to you."

"It's nothing, sir. I saw him with the revolver. It meant risk to someone, so I followed him, that's all."

"You behaved with great courage and presence of mind,

Dare," said the colonel. "But, Ainsley, surely the only thing to be done is to give this blackguard in charge?"

"No. Blackguard he is, and henceforth I have done with him. But he is my kinsman. I must let him go. But for Dare it would not have been possible, for if a shot had been fired we should have had a rush here. As it is—Jones, Killard, Frost, and you, Dare—I count you all my sincere friends. I tell you that I do not want this to leak out, and I ask you to keep it a dead secret. Will you do this for me?"

"Of course, sir!"

That was Dick—the first to answer, though he had an interest in the exposure of Urwine's baseness that no one else there had. But it was not of one man's baseness he thought; only of the other's generosity.

"As you say, John," Mr. Frost concurred.

"I will do as you wish, but I think you are wrong, Ainsley," said Mr. Killard.

"Good gad, Ainsley, it's against the law and against all reason!" fumed Colonel Jones. "You can't ask us—"

"I have asked you, and I shall take it hard if you refuse."

"Then there's no more to be said. But let the sweep get out of my sight, or— Oh, confound it all, after all you've done for him!"

"Let him up, Dare," said Mr. Ainsley quietly.

For a few seconds Urwine had lain half-stunned. Then, coming to himself, sobered by the shock of the blow, he had glared up at Dick with eyes that still had the lust of murder in them. But under Dick's steady gaze of contempt those eyes had faltered, and passion had ebbed.

When Dick allowed him to rise he looked at no one. Like a beaten dog, he slunk out of the room.

Out of the room—out of the pavilion—off the ground. Dick made sure that he was going before he went to join his comrades.

"What's kept you?" asked Toplady.

"I had to go to Mr. Ainsley's room," Dick answered.

The secret was safe with him.

Urwine was barely outside the gates when someone accosted him.

It was Jonty Dunk. Dunk was not satisfied with Urwine as a paymaster. He reckoned that there was more to come to him. Not his fault that Balkwill had saved Dick Dare from being crushed to death—no reason that he could see why he should not have more than the miserable fiver paid him in advance. He did not expect the full sum promised for success; but he did count on another twenty pounds or so.

"I say, Mr. Urwine—" he began.

He got no further. Urwine struck at his face, and sent him crashing down. There was a constable on duty outside the gates; but his back was turned. If it had not been Jonty would hardly have had the nerve to hold up Urwine thus. And now the wretch dared not complain.

He picked himself up, and stood holding his aching jaw while Urwine strode on past the unwitting guardian of the peace.

"Orl right, my fine feller, orl right!" muttered Jonty Dunk.

Then, after his custom, he faded away.

Meanwhile, things were happening in the cricket match. Ferguson, upset at having run Dick out, had given an easy

catch. Rayle had scored only a single. Matthews had gone first ball. John Ainsley had joined Arnulf, who had scored a four, and had been bowled neck and crop by Larwood. He could not have hoped at best to stand for long against first-class bowling, out of practice as he was; and he had gone in while still suffering from the shock of Urwine's murderous attempt.

Markshire were all out for 231. It was more than might have been expected from so scratchy a side; but it was far less than had looked likely when 200 had gone up with only four men out.

Before stumps were drawn Whysall and George Gunn had sent up the hundred against bowling and fielding that was well below county standard.

Secrets Come to Light!

"DICK," said Balkwill, when the Markshire players came in, "do you mind if I call a kind of meeting at your digs in an hour's time? I've something to say that I can't very well say here, and I want all the other fellows to come."

"That's all right, Greg," Dick answered.

"You'll all come?" said Balkwill.

They all agreed. There was a touch of mystery about it; but there had always been that about Balkwill for a long time past. But a rough guess at what he meant to say was not difficult.

Dick hurried off. He would not be found lacking in hospitality. He got in drinks and sandwiches for the crowd.

The crowd came. The strikers and the loyalists were all there; only Alan Edmead, still at Brighton, was an absentee. It was curious to note that there was not the least sign of feeling between loyalists and strikers.

Most of the others took the refreshment offered them. But Balkwill refused his glass.

"For the present," he said, "I'd rather talk first. And I'm going to say, straight away, that I'm ashamed of myself! I gave you the wrong lead to-day. There never was, and never will be, a straighter and fairer man than John Ainsley! To strike was to strike against him, when we had only to ask for justice. I'm going to apologise to him personally. Oh, I don't like it; I'm one of those stiff-necked bounders who hate admitting themselves in the wrong. But I mean to do it."

"I don't see but what we might make it a joint affair, Greg," said Toplady. "If there's a man among us who isn't of your way of thinking I don't know who he is."

"If there is such a man let him speak up," Peter Nevern said.

No one spoke. Armley beamed; and on Rayner's brick-red face there was a look of relief beyond words. Rayner had been the first to repent of striking.

"I'd rather not have it that way," Balkwill said. "I'll sign the apology with the rest of you; but I'm going to try to see Mr. Ainsley this night. If any of you think that I'm meaning to steal a march on you—"

"He'll be a mean rascal, Greg," said Peter Nevern quietly. "We haven't always been able to get you; but you've never played any of us a low trick. I wouldn't wonder if we thought rather better of you than you fancy."

"Hear, hear!" spoke Toplady.

Balkwill looked round at them. He saw no face that was unfriendly.

"Then I think it's time I spoke out," he said. It was plain that the words cost him an effort. "Urwine had me under his thumb. I'd done what wasn't square, and he knew it. He could have smashed up pretty nearly everything—all that I cared for, anyway—for me. I don't know but that he'll do it yet. But I must chance that. I chanced it when I struck, rather than stick his captaincy any longer."

"I don't believe you've done anything that would make a man among us turn his back on you, Greg," Peter Nevern said.

And again there came a "Hear, hear!" from Toplady.

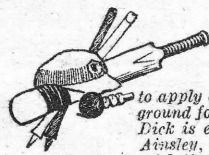
"I'm not sure. It was a pretty mean thing. But I was hard pressed. There's no danger of any attempt to force Urwine upon us again—I know Mr. Ainsley too well to

think that. But I think it only right to say that what brought me to the desperate move I took was Urwine's treatment of Dare here. I can't tell you all; but I know that Urwine set Batts upon him. I'm sure it was through Urwine he nearly missed his first chance. I believe—I'm opening my mouth widely, I know, but I'm among friends—that Urwine has twice attempted his life, once by the hands of a tool, and again down at Brighton. It was no accident that he smashed up our boat, though I don't think he knew I was there. You all know that Dare has never had anything like fair play from him. I don't just fathom what's at the bottom of it; but I can guess it in part, at least."

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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE.

Driven to rebellion by the tyranny of an over-bearing manager, young Dick Dare is sacked from his job in an insurance office and decides to apply at the Markshire County Cricket Club ground for a place on the staff. A born cricketer, Dick is engaged to play for his county by John Ainsley, the man who has brought Markshire to



the forefront of cricketing counties, and whose life Dick had saved a few days before. The youngster acquits himself well in his new job, but unfortunately falls foul of Leonard Urwine, the Markshire skipper, and a relative of Mr. Ainsley, for Dick's name is mentioned in John Ainsley's will. Fearing Dick might sooner or later cut him out entirely in the eyes of Mr. Ainsley, Urwine plots to drive the youngster out of the team. In consequence of this the Markshire players, with the exception of Dick and Peter Nevern, refuse to play under Urwine's captaincy in the forthcoming match against Notts. Accordingly, Mr. Ainsley makes up the team with substitutes. Batting first, Markshire puts up a creditable performance, scoring 142 runs, with the loss of Westland and Tryon.

(Now read on.)



Everyone's eyes were on Dick. But those eyes were full of sympathy and comradeship. They were good-hearted fellows, one and all; they had accepted Dick from the first as one of themselves. Vaguely they felt now that he had been the means of making Gregory Balkwill one of them, and they liked him for it.

"I'm going straight up to the house," said Balkwill. "I shall tell Mr. Ainsley that the strike's at an end. Didn't amount to much, did it? Only cost us our chance of the championship, that's all! You'd better see to getting an apology written out, Walter; we'll all sign that. I shall offer to go. I dare say I can get some other county to take me on at a pinch. I can't blame him if he feels that you'd get along better without me."

They did not like that, and they said so. But Balkwill stuck to his guns, and Dick felt that he was in the right.

"May I come with you, Greg?" Dick asked.

"If you care to, old fellow. Yes, I'd be glad to have you."

"Don't clear out, you men," said Dick. "Sling your letter together here. Andy!"

Andy Whelan had retired when the players came in. But he reappeared now, and was left with the congenial task of playing host to them. He had never before in his life felt so proud.

Balkwill and Dick walked from the tram stop to the big house—a full mile—without a word. There was no need for words between them.

Mr. Ainsley was at home. They were shown in to him at once.

"I've come to apologise, sir," said Balkwill. "I'm only doing it in advance of the rest because I want to make it clear that it was really all my fault. You'll get a formal apology from all concerned in the morning. I have to say that I quite understand that this business gives the club a right to rescind my contract. I am ready to go to-morrow."

"Sit down, Balkwill. You, too, Dare," said Mr. Ainsley. They obeyed.

He looked hard at them both.

"Gregory," he said very quietly, "do you think we want to lose you? I've found some good men for the county; but you're the best I've found."

"Oh, I can play cricket, sir—in the middle! What's the matter with me is that I can't play it in the larger sense."

"Now I wouldn't say that, either. I'd say that you are rather too apt to play the fool, though I fancy you are cutting your wisdom teeth now. It was a mistake that you should ever have become friendly with Urwine."

"The biggest mistake I ever made, sir! I must speak out now. He can show me up for the rotter I am. He holds a bill of sale on the furniture in my house. I gave it to him when I was desperately pressed by what I'd lost in gambling. And the furniture isn't mine—never was mine—it's my mother's—and I think that to know what I've done would kill her!"

And at that Gregory Balkwill's arms were thrown on the table, and his head went down on his arms, and his shoulders shook with the dry sobs that mean so much more than tears.

His eyes were dry. But Dick's were not, and it seemed to Dick, though he saw as through a mist, that John Ainsley's were not, either.

Mr. Ainsley left his seat and went to a small safe. He unlocked it and took out a paper.

"Gregory," he said, "are you sure that Urwine still holds that bill of sale?"

Balkwill sat up. His face looked ten years older for a moment; then, as he discerned the purport of that query, the years dropped from it.

"He has always held it over me," he said.

"But it was not in his name—you knew that, I suppose? Possibly you did not know that all bills of sale are registered, so that the public has the opportunity to know of them? I thought not! I came to know of this, and I bought it. Now, this is the last of it!"

As he spoke Mr. Ainsley slit the paper across and across again, and flung the fragments into the wastepaper-basket.

"The end of that!" he said. "If I had known its story—But I didn't know. You did wrong, Balkwill; I won't pretend that I don't think that. But you have suffered enough, and you have championed the cause of our friend here most gallantly. Dare, I must tell you now that when I was in a mind to decide definitely against you Balkwill came along and made it clear to me that you were not to blame for that fight with Blair."

"Greg!" exclaimed Dick. "I never guessed that."

"I'll pay you sooner or later, sir," said Balkwill. "The money, I mean; I can never repay the kindness. And if you don't want me to go—"

"If! Don't talk rubbish, my boy. Markshire can't afford

to do without you or Dare. We have other good men; but there are three in whom my trust is firm—you two and Reginald Westland. He doesn't like the captain's job, but is the man for it, and he must take it. With you and the rest backing him loyally, Markshire ought to be at the top some season before long. As for the strike—that's no matter. I'm glad Peter Nevern stood by me—glad you did, too, Dare; but I've nothing against any one of the others. And as to the money, you shall pay it, with five per cent interest, at the rate of two pounds a month. If I didn't know your pride I'd refuse to take a penny of it; but we shall be firmer friends if I accept. And now you'd better clear out. I have to field to-morrow, and I'm going to bed in good time to get fit for it!"

He gripped their hands, and they went.

A Tough Tussle!

DEFEAT at the hands of Notts did seem all but inevitable. With all their wickets to fall the visitors were only 127 behind. On the form shown by Markshire in the field during the last hour or so of Wednesday's play there seemed no reason why they should not make five or six hundred.

But Markshire were like another team on the Thursday. Short of bowling, with two men in the field who were all right when the ball came to them but too stiff to chase it or even get a yard or two to cover it, they yet bucked up most amazingly.

The air was cleared by the acceptance of the strikers' apology and the news that Urwine would be asked to resign the captaincy. Balkwill, Toplady, and the rest, though chafing at being out of the game, were relieved and happy, and their generous applause helped the men who fought the fight from which they had stood aside.

"If only young Dare could bowl both ends we might have a chance yet!" said Armley.

For Dick had begun in great form. Whysall and Walker had both fallen to him with fewer than ten runs added.

"Well, Matthews isn't so dusty," remarked Toplady. "Oh, good lad, Matthews, good lad! Oh, great work, Peter!"

George Gunn had strolled out of his crease in the seemingly casual manner that is his alone. Very seldom is George stumped in doing this, for it is not his way to miss the ball. But a flighty one from the left-handed colt had deluded him, and before he could get back Nevern had whipped off the bails.

Payton joined Carr. The captain was lashing out. Payton made runs by neat placing, and kept level with Carr, though he did not appear to be scoring at half the pace.

Twice Carr hit Dick over the ropes. A third time in the same over he slammed mightily. But this ball was just a trifle slower; he did not time it as accurately as he had done the others. It went higher, and would obviously drop short of the boundary.

Running hard, Neville Tryon got to it just in time, and made a splendid one-handed catch.

A stand that had produced 61 in half an hour was broken. Then Ferguson, who had gone on for Matthews, got Payton caught at short leg—another good catch by young Rayle—and Dick bowled Ben Lilley with one of his expresses. Notts had six out for 183.

When Flint left three runs later Markshire seemed on top. But at cricket one never can tell. Larwood shaped well and confidently, and Barratt opened his broad shoulders and hit out as he does once in a way. Dick had to be taken off; Matthews was heavily punished; Ferguson could do no good. Before those two were parted the home side's score had been topped.

Then came another dramatic change. Tryon was given a chance. He had pace, but little else, not even length or direction as a rule. But this time he kept them straight. How long he would have continued to do so can only be guessed. He was not put to the test. He bowled Larwood in his first over, and upset Voce's middle stump with his next ball. The total was 258—only 27 runs ahead.

The innings closed within five minutes of the luncheon hour. There remained rather more than half the full period of play, and the chances seemed all against Markshire's doing so well again. Time was against the weaker side. They had to set Notts a pretty stiff figure if the visitors—strong in batting of the type that can bide its time—were not to have all the time they needed.

Again Dick and Westland gave their side a good start. John Ainsley had come to the dressing-room after lunch

with a new cap in his hand, a cap of the county's bright red.

"Here you are, Dare," he said. "You've more than earned it."

That was true. It was also true that Dick's place in the team could not in any case be in doubt henceforward. The cap was a sign; but in a sense it was more than that. Nothing could have given the young player greater confidence; and when he went out wearing the red cap—though hitherto he had always played bare-headed—the crowd spotted it at once and cheered him.

The scoring was not fast. Larwood and Sam Staples were at their best, and the fielding was keen. But the batting, though restrained, was first-class; and those who watched knew that so much hung upon what these two did that they were justified in refusing to take risks.

Barratt, Voce, and Flint had all had a go before Westland was snapped at first slip off Larwood, who had just gone on again. The total was 107—exactly the same number the pair had made together in the first innings. But this time the amateur's share was 60.

Again Reeve was told to play his own game. He hit up 25 before he left, and they were made out of 31 for the second wicket. Ferguson came next, and there was another useful stand. When the third wicket fell the score had been taken to 169—142 on. Dick was then 64.

Tryon started shakily, and had the luck to be missed off a regular sitter. Then he pulled himself together and settled down to good defensive play. And now Dick was scoring faster, because now he could hit without risking too much.

When his score reached 85 his comrades began to talk of the double century feat.

Then Tryon had to go, and there followed a terrible slump. One after another Fallows, Peter Nevern, the veteran Arnulf, the colts Rayle and Matthews—all failed!

John Ainsley came in. He had never been a great batsman, and for years past he had had but little practice. But he had learned to wield a straight bat, and he had not forgotten what he had learned. Moreover, he had a big heart.

He played three balls from Larwood in capital style. Then Dick, now 89, faced Barratt, with most of his field clustered to the on.

There were a couple of men out deep; but Dick lifted the first ball over the heads of the near field, to find the boundary long before either of the pair could get to it. Then he got a plain one dead on the middle stump; and his bat flashed in a late cut, and he was 97!

But he could not get another run that over, and again Ainsley stood up to Larwood.

"Come on, sir!" cried Dick, as the ball went off the edge of the veteran's bat between the wicket and first slip. It was an easy run for Dick, though it would have been impossible for Ainsley from the other end.

A brace past mid-off took Dick to 99, and round the

ground men held their breath; and some thought Dick a fool for not risking everything on one of the next four balls. But he knew them too good to be hit safely.

The field were almost on top of John Ainsley when he faced Barrett. But he kept three balls down, and the fourth he steered between two of the cluster, and Dick ran.

The next ball settled it. It was on the short side, and Dick stepped out and drove it hard and high right on to the pavilion roof—a mighty stroke!

It did not seem to matter to anyone that John Ainsley succumbed to the first ball of Larwood's over. He had done all that was required of him, and the cheers were for him as well as for the gallant boy who had fought so heroically for his county.

The total was 251, which meant that Notts needed 225 for victory, and had a whole day to get the runs in.

A STORY WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS!



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An Account Settled!

LEONARD URWINE occupied the upper part of a big house in the High Street.

Here he was looked after by a man who was as thorough-paced a rascal as his master, but a most competent servant.

On that second day of the Notts match Urwine did not stir out. He knew that he could count on John Ainsley's forbearance, and it was not the dread of any consequence arising from his attempt to kill his kinsman that troubled him. It was the knowledge that he had come to a desperate crisis in his career. While men believed him John Ainsley's heir matters had never grown impossible, though often difficult.

But when it became generally known that he had been deposed from the captaincy of the Markshire team, all would be up, for everyone would read what that meant.

He had cursed when shouting newsboys told him the news of Dick Dare's second hundred against Notts. Now he cursed, because the invaluable Leeds, who had gone out hours ago, had not come back. Urwine wanted his dinner, and he did not want to go out for it.

A footstep sounded on the staircase. He called, thinking Leeds must have returned.

Jonty Dunk shuffled into the room. Jonty had found the outer door ajar, and had made his way up.

"Get out!" roared Urwine.
"Not without my cash," replied Jonty, trembling as he spoke, and keeping one hand, his right, under his jacket.
"Get out, or I'll kick you out!"

Urwine should have known better. He made the mistake of despising the tool he had been willing to use. This man was a coward, yet a killer. He had brooded over that knock-down blow and over the refusal to pay him what he held his due until he was ready to shoot.

Urwine rushed at him he shot. Urwine gave one gasp, put a hand to his chest, and fell heavily.

Dunk dared not stay to plunder. Panic was upon him now. He darted down the stairs, and ran right into the arms of Slogger Batts, that day released from hospital.

These two knew one another pretty well, and Batts saw that something had happened.

"Ere, wot's the matter?" he growled.

Dunk showed his gun. The Slogger turned back. Together they passed out of the door, and Batts pulled it to.

"Op it, Jonty!" he said. "A dirty dog, 'e was, an' I ain't blamin' you overmuch. But I don't mean to be let in on this, so you 'op it, sharp!"

The hospital held Leeds that night in place of Slogger Batts. The valet had been run down by a car. There had never been any chance for Urwine, in any case; as it was, he died alone within half an hour.

But his murder was not known that night or until well into the next day. Jonty Dunk had a chance to hop it, and he took his chance. But he did not escape in the long run.

All's Well!

"HEARD the news, Dick?" asked Balkwill next morning.

"Haven't heard anything in particular."

"That cad Blair—arrested for embezzlement! Seems he's been letting money entrusted to him by some of his firm's clients stick to his fingers. Well, I oughtn't to say much. I was another who went the pace with Urwine, and let myself down by doing it. But I never could stand Blair."

No one expressed any sympathy with the embezzler, for no one had liked him. Armley wondered what Urwine would think of it, unknowing that Urwine was past thinking of anything.

"If only we had Balkwill and Toplady!" said Dick to Peter Nevren, as they went into the field.

"But we haven't, so it's up to you, my son," replied Peter.

Whysall and George Gunn refused to take chances with Dick's bowling, though both scored more freely off the men tried at the other end. John Ainsley rang the changes on them, while he persevered with Dick.

The fifty had been passed when Whysall got in front of a straight one and received marching orders. Dick had tricked him fairly.

Carr hit so hard that he rattled up thirty while George Gunn added only four to his score. Then Matthews missed him, and had to retire with a badly split hand. One of the few bowlers was out of action.

Twenty runs later, with the hundred up, Carr drove one back breast high at Dick. There was a tremendous force behind the stroke, and a gasp came from the crowd. Almost everyone expected to see the hope of the side knocked over, knocked out!

Next moment a mighty burst of cheering rose. No catch is more difficult than one at this height; but, somehow Dick had made it, and was tossing the ball up.

Walker and George Gunn were together at lunch. Since Matthews' retirement from the game, Ferguson had had to do most of the bowling at the Cathedral end. But he did not look like getting wickets.

When George Gunn left, for a very valuable, though slow innings of 53, the score was 158, and only 93 were needed with seven wickets to fall.

Then, Tryon bowled an over at the pavilion end to 1st Dick cross over, and Payton touched a fast one, and Dick, in the slips, shot down his left hand and held it within three inches of the ground.

Four for 160.

Walker and Lilley looked like hitting off the runs needed. Dick had to be rested at length. Only 35 were wanted. Tryon went on for Dick, and at the other end John Ainsley himself took the ball.

There was a roar from the crowd as two simple catches were made off the Markshire skipper's slow twisting lobbs and six wickets were down for 200.

Flint hit Tryon for two fours and a two, and only 15 were needed.

John Ainsley threw the ball to Dick.

"You must try again, Dare," he said. "I've had all the luck I can hope for."

Lilley hit Dick for a single, which would have been a four but for Tryon's speed. Dick got in one that Flint could not stop.

Then he sent Larwood a palpable slow, and the young England player ran out to it—and missed it! Peter Nevren did the rest.

Eight for 211. Anyone's game now!

Barratt slashed, and Westland at cover jumped and held the ball one-handed from a hit that might well have cleared the ropes.

But the game was not over yet. Voce showed pluck and steadiness, and Lilley was batting well. By twos and singles they took the score to 221—four to win!

Then Lilley drove one from Dick hard back. Voce started to run, but scuttled back at his partner's warning call.

He was too late! Dick had gathered the ball, swung round, and tipped off the bails while he was still a yard away, and Markshire had pulled the match out of the fire. That one over of John Ainsley's had proved the turning-point of the innings; but it was Dick Dare's great all-round play that had won the match.

The crowd roared as the players left the field. But in the pavilion there was a strange hush.

Word of the finding of Urwine's body had just come through on the telephone from the police; and the shock was a big one, though among all who heard there was none who had counted him a friend.

Westland took over the captaincy, and soon proved himself the right man for the job. Match after match was won, and, though a defeat at the hands of Gloucestershire checked the flowing tide, Markshire met Middlesex in the final game of their programme with the knowledge that a victory would give them the championship, and won by seven wickets.

Dick Dare is down in the will of John Ainsley for a very substantial sum. He does not know it; even if he did he would still hope that many long years would pass before he received it. And that looks likely enough.

Gregory Balkwill's mother may not be able to understand how it is that she has so many more visitors now; but she is happier for it. It rejoices her to see how much Toplady, and Rayner, and Peter Nevren, and Tom Armley think of her son. As for Dick, he is almost like a younger son to her. She has never heard of the false step of which Balkwill repented so bitterly; no one has ever heard, but John Ainsley and Dick. It is best so.

And in these days the Markshire team are as nearly a band of brothers as any cricket eleven can be.

(You've read the particulars of our grand new serial on page 27, haven't you, chums? Well, now look out for the opening instalment of this thrilling motor-racing serial which will appear in next week's bumper FREE GIFT NUMBER of the GEM.)



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