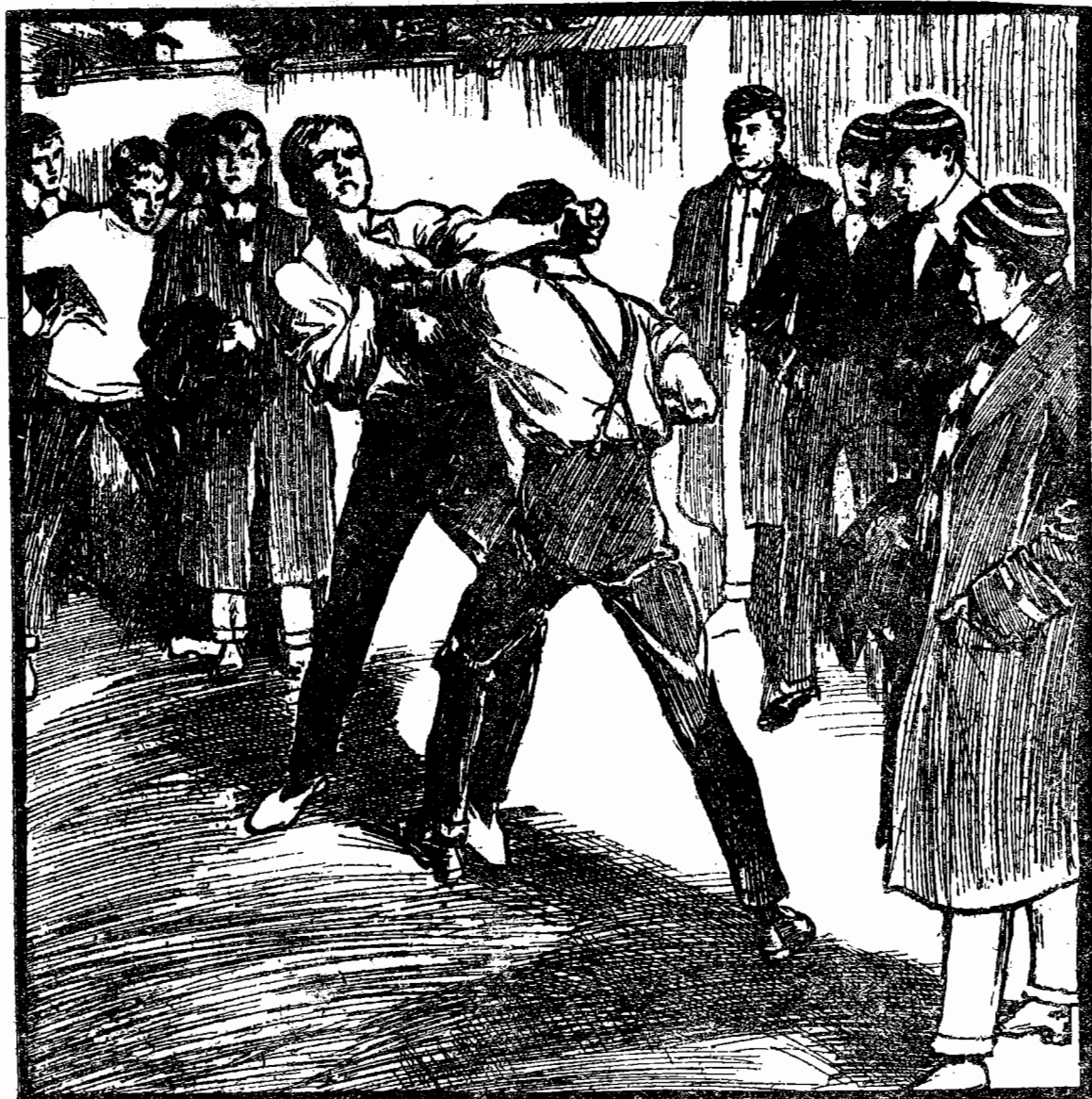


NEXT WEEK: STORIES OF HARRY WHARTON & Co.

The
Penny
Popular

NUMBER 221.

3 Grand Complete Stories.



A FIGHT TO A FINISH!

(A Great Scene from the Grand Long Complete Tale of TOM MERRY & Co.,
contained in this issue.)

SEXTON BLAKE—CASHIER!

A Magnificent Long Complete Story, dealing with the Further Amazing Adventures of

SEXTON BLAKE, THE WORLD-FAMOUS DETECTIVE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Missing Ledger—Blake Delivers a Parcel and Gets a Receipt for it.

AS Sexton Blake made his way from Baker Street to the offices of Messrs. Tope & Walderson, merchants, of Crutched Friars, E.C., he pondered over the case he had in hand.

Here he was, spending his time as chief cashier to the above-named firm, actually impersonating the real cashier, Tom Hathaway, who was away ill with a nervous breakdown.

For some time past the junior partner, Walderson, had been in sole charge of the business, as Mr. Tope was away on the Continent. Walderson was doing his best to get absolute control, and, with this motive in view, had done his best to get rid of Tom Hathaway by finding continual fault with his accounts; and, assisted by his rascally nephew, Norman Joyce, had several times of late been able to discover a shortage in the petty-cash box at the end of the day. These constant mistakes, for which Hathaway could not account, had had the effect of worrying Hathaway to such an extent that he had completely broken down in health.

Knowing that absence from work would give Walderson an excellent excuse for giving Hathaway the sack, Blake had taken his place at the office, at the same time hoping to find out the junior partner's little game. Tinker was also at the office in the guise of office-boy.

Blake, having gone through the chief facts of the case in his mind, at length arrived at the office, and, having hung his coat and hat up, spent the next quarter of an hour searching for something.

First he had gone to the safe, then he had looked at the bookrail over his desk, then he had gone back to the safe again.

Not finding what he wanted, he looked rather blankly round the office, going first to one desk, then to another, lifting up bundles of papers, peering beneath tables and chairs, looking behind the copying-press. Then, having exhausted all possible places in which anything might be concealed, he began his programme all over again.

Norman Joyce had been to a smoking concert overnight, consequently his nerves were in a jangled state. With fiercely knitted brows he turned round on Blake.

"What the dickens do you keep rambling about for, Hathaway?" he demanded irritably. "Can't you sit still?" "I'm—I'm looking for a book," said the cashier mildly. "I'm looking for Number Two ledger. I—I can't find it anywhere."

"Whose fault's that?" growled Joyce. "Nobody inter-



Tinker had taken up the glass and was about to drink, when something upon it caught his eye. A sprinkling of powder, soft and smooth to the touch, with a tendency to crystallise where the liquid had touched it. Instantly he set the glass down.

fers with the books but yourself. You should put 'em away properly overnight, then you'd know where to find 'em."

The cashier passed one hand wearily across his brow. "I feel almost certain I did lock the ledger up with the other books," he said. "I haven't had it out this morning, yet it isn't in the safe now. I—I wonder if Mr. Walderson has it?"

"Better ask him," Joyce rejoined sarcastically, "and hear what he says when he learns that one of the firm's ledgers is missing!"

Ignoring the sarcasm, Tom tapped at the junior partner's door, and passed into the inner office.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," he stammered, "but I can't find Number Two ledger anywhere."

"Number Two ledger!" echoed Walderson, lifting his eyes quickly from his desk. "Well, do you think I've got it?"

The last question was uttered snappishly, but there had been a perceptible pause between its utterance and the previous words. A closer observer than Tom Hathaway might have noticed a sudden, half-suppressed gasp from the man sitting there, might even have seen a confused look in the junior partner's eyes, and might have observed one bead of perspiration gathering on his brow. His recovery from embarrassment, however, was prompt.

"Think I've got the book?" he repeated.

"I—I thought it might be in this room, sir."

"Well, it isn't! Go and find it!"

"I've looked everywhere, sir."

"What ridiculous nonsense! A book like that can't walk away. Go and look again!"

Humbly enough the cashier went back to the outer office and started on a further search. Thirty seconds afterwards the door of Walderson's room, giving on to the corridor, opened, and closed with a slight bang.

Blake's head was inside his own desk, supporting the hinged top. Tinker was alongside him.

A SPLENDID PLATE IS PRESENTED FREE WITH NEXT FRIDAY'S ISSUE!

"See if that's Walderson gone out," the detective whispered. "If it is, see where he goes."

The boy slid out of the room. Blake continued his search for the missing ledger in vain for another ten minutes. Abandoning it then, he turned his attention to other work.

Soon after twelve he went out to lunch. Soon after one he returned. He took a quick glance round the office. In a corner, thrown negligently down, were two or three newspapers that he well knew had not been there before he went out. He stooped and lifted them, to behold upon the floor the very book for which he had been looking.

The missing ledger!

Relief showed plainly on his pale face as he carried it back to his desk. Norman Joyce, about to go out, saw the book.

"So you've found the book, have you?" he sneered. "About time, too, after wasting half the morning searching for it! Confounded cheek, I call it! You must have known where the book was all the time!"

"I—I didn't, really!—I can't imagine how I came to overlook that corner before."

"That's a poor sort of excuse for gross waste of time. What d'you think Mr. Walderson will say when I tell him?"

"Oh, please don't tell him, Mr. Joyce!" pleaded the cashier nervously. "It was silly of me, of course, but I'll make up for lost time by staying late to-night."

Joyce went out of the office with a sneer upon his face. Blake turned to Tinker, who was busily engaged indexing a letter-book.

"Well, my boy, what happened?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Walderson took a taxi at Fenchurch Street Station, and was driven all the way home to Loughton. I followed him in another. Had a rare job to keep him in sight, we did, guv'nor; he went such a rip. He entered his house, and came out with that very book in his hand."

"Ah! I thought as much. He took the book home last night, and didn't want me to know. It was he who placed it under those newspapers. What a fool he must think me, to imagine that I should be taken in by a dodge like that!"

"You must remember, guv'nor, as he thinks he's dealing w' poor Tom Hathaway. He counted on you not rememberin' where you had looked. What's his game, d'you think—takin' the ledger home?"

"That, Tinker, is what I'm going to find out."

Blake stayed late that night. The result of his staying was a discovery—a slight discovery, but an important one, nevertheless.

On one of the pages of the ledger he found a blot. Not only was it the only blot in the book, it was something more.

It was a blot made by a different ink from that used in the ledger entries.

An ink of poorer quality—thinnish, watery stuff, that dried brown instead of black.

Blake looked at that blot for quite a long time—looked at it with his naked eye, and afterwards brought his lens to bear upon it. That done, his lips pursed up, and he whistled.

It was pretty late that night when a burly fellow, dressed like a carman, in a cardigan jacket and a leather apron, delivered a package of free samples from a certain enterprising firm at Mr. Walderson's house at Loughton.

"Anything to pay?" asked Mary, the housemaid, who answered the kitchen door.

"Nuthin', missy, only jist yer name wanted there—in hink, please." Mary fetched pen and ink promptly. "Yer name jist there," the carman said, pointing to a space in his receipt-book.

"There now! You've made me make a blot!" the housemaid exclaimed. "Twas your fault; you knocked my arm!"

"Oh, well, ne'mind, missy!" the carman said cheerily, taking the book from her after she had signed her name. "I ain't got no blotting-paper, but that'll dry in a jiffy. Good-night, missy!"

When Sexton Blake arrived at the office the next morning his first action was rather curious. From an inner pocket he took out a piece of paper.

It was a sheet torn from a carman's receipt-book. It had a blot upon it.

He opened No. 2 ledger at a certain page; that also had a blot upon it. He put the two blots side by side, and looked at them intently.

"The same ink," he muttered—"exactly the same ink! Mr. Walderson, I don't know precisely what your game is, but I think I'm on the way to finding it out."

THE SECOND CHAPTER, Norman Joyce and Michael Chesney Exchange Confidences —A Job for "Mike the Scribbler."

FOLLOWING the missing ledger incident of the previous day, Alexander Walderson, considerably worried and annoyed, had taken his nephew completely into his confidence about it. Norman Joyce was unscrupulous enough, but even he was amazed at the colossal nature of his uncle's projected knavery.

"It's a biggish job, isn't it—to forge a duplicate ledger?" said he dubiously.

"It's the only way, Norman. The job may be big, but the reward will be big, too."

"But how are you to do it? I know you generally carry out most things that you make up your mind about, but I didn't know you fancied yourself at the forgery game."

"That's the one weak point—I don't. I'm practising, though, and I'm improving."

"Pity we don't number among our acquaintances some fellow who could do the job for us—one of those chaps you read about who get their living by signing other people's names to cheques. They are mostly in prison, though, I suppose. Generally the place where forgers land, ain't it, uncle?"

"Not always—not always," returned Walderson, wincing nevertheless. "I wish we could find such a man. But we can't, so there's no use discussing it."

"Not quite the sort of fellow you could advertise for—eh, uncle? Wanted, an expert forger, who can cook the accounts of an old-established firm by faking the ledgers. Wouldn't quite do—eh, what? Ain't there any other way?"

"No, none," Walderson answered, setting his teeth. "I must have a lot of money by the time Tope returns, and what I have suggested is the only plan."

Uncle and nephew spent most of the afternoon discussing that plan and reviewing its difficulties.

One obstacle in the way of it was Tom Hathaway. He was constantly using No. 2 ledger; while for their purpose they would be constantly wanting to take the book away.

"Why don't you get rid of him?" Norman Joyce asked. "I know Tope is against it, but hang it all, you're a partner! Take the matter in your own hands and get rid of the fellow."

Walderson shook his head.

"That would be a silly move," said he. "Tope's suspicions would be aroused immediately. So long as the ledgers are kept by Hathaway, Tope will be satisfied that the figures are correct. If I sack him, both Tope and the auditors will be more on the alert than ever. Once the job's done, it will be a different matter."

When at about six o'clock that evening Norman Joyce left the office, he turned out of Crutched Friars into a narrow way leading to Fenchurch Street Station. Some steps gave on to the station square. At the foot of those steps someone touched Joyce upon the shoulder.

He turned, to behold a man with red-rimmed eyes and a hawk nose.

"Excuse me," said the stranger, "but I believe you are Mr. Norman Joyce, of Messrs. Tope & Walderson's?"

"Yes. What d'you want with me?"

"Please don't get cross," said the other smoothly. "I believe I can be of service to you."

"In what way?"

"You have a man in your employ named Tom Hathaway?"

"Yes; he's our cashier and bookkeeper. He's at the office now."

Michael Chesney shook his head and smiled curiously.

"That's where you're wrong, Mr. Joyce," said he. "Tom Hathaway hasn't been in your office for over a fortnight."

"What do you mean? Age you mad?" cried the astonished Joyce.

"No; I'm particularly sane."

"But I've seen Hathaway there myself. I've seen him to-day. I saw him less than five minutes ago. I tell you he's at the office now."

"And I tell you, Mr. Joyce, that he isn't!"

"You must be— If the man in the office isn't Hathaway, who is he?"

The red-rimmed eyes blinked; the nostrils of the hawk nose quivered.

"The man in your office," answered Michael Chesney, "is not Tom Hathaway at all. Tom Hathaway is being impersonated."

"Impersonated! By whom?"

"By Sexton Blake, the detective!"

Michael Chesney and Norman Joyce had met. They were strangers, knowing absolutely nothing of each other. But both were villains. Both of them hated Sexton Blake, though for different reasons. Each was filled with the desire to wreak his vengeance on Sexton Blake.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 221.

CHUCKLES, 1/2 D. THE CHAMPION COLOURED PAPER. EVERY SATURDAY

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At the end of two hours Norman Joyce was in possession of a good deal of Chesney's life-history—knew that he had done "time" in a penal prison.

"What was the charge against you?" he asked.

"Forgery," the other returned—"the forgery of a will."

"Forgery!" Joyce was thinking hard as he repeated the word. "And the forgery was detected? Must have been badly done, eh?"

"Bad!" almost screamed the other, and drew himself up with the strange pride of the accomplished criminal. "No, it was good! Why, even the Treasury counsel said it was one of the most skilful forgeries he had ever seen! I should never have been taken, only I was betrayed by one of the gang. It was through that that this very man, Sexton Blake, dropped on me. But for him—confound him!—I should have been rich. Well, well, I'll be rich yet if ever I get the chance to do another job of the same sort."

Norman Joyce's hands closed convulsively. He thrust his head across the table at which they were sitting.

"Do you want another job of the same sort?" he asked eagerly. "Would you do another job if you got the chance?"

The hawk-like nose quivered and the red-rimmed eyes flashed.

"Wouldn't I!" Chesney exclaimed. "Wouldn't I jump at the chance! And wouldn't I do the job as no other man in England could!"

Norman Joyce sprang to his feet.

"Then you're the very man we want! Come with me to my uncle."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Disappearance of Tom Hathaway.

"WHERE is Hathaway?"

Mr. Walderson had asked the question half a dozen times that afternoon. Norman Joyce had asked it on as many occasions, and the other clerks had asked it of one another somewhat wonderingly.

It was true that the supposed cashier had, after lunch that day, gone down to Wandle's, the big ships'-chandlers in Shadwell, to see about a long-overdue account owing to the firm. But now it was nearly six o'clock, and it was quite unusual for the punctilious cashier to be away from the office for so many hours.

Moreover, a telephone message to Wandle's had elicited the information that the cashier had called and had departed with a cheque in settlement at about half-past two.

What did it mean, then, that up till nearly six o'clock Hathaway had not put in an appearance?

It seemed plain that Mr. Walderson was worried about it. His continual inquiries—none of which could be satisfactorily answered—and his continual harping on the fact that Hathaway had Wandle's cheque in his possession, began at length to sound like an insinuation that the cashier had absconded with the money.

Nobody in the office, unless we could count Walderson himself and Norman Joyce, gave the smallest credence to that explanation. All knew Tom Hathaway to be a man—despite his shortcomings due to ill-health—of absolutely unimpeachable honesty and integrity. Which, of course, made his prolonged absence the more strange and unaccountable.

You may be sure that, if the others wondered, Tinker was worked up into a state of the greatest anxiety by his master's absence.

A dozen times during that afternoon he had slipped out of the office to gaze anxiously up and down the street for any sign of his master. Once, when sent out on an errand, he had even gone to the expense of a taxicab, and had driven down to Wandle's to inquire about the cashier's visit. All he had learned there was simply a confirmation of the telephone message.

Hathaway, said one of the ships'-chandlers' clerks, had left with the cheque at half-past two. He had turned to the right along Cable Street, apparently on his way back to the City, and since then nobody there had seen anything of him.

Tinker returned to Crutched Friars, lost in a maze of mystifying thought. No other inquiries that he could make threw any light on the cashier's absence.

"There's been foul play!" he exclaimed to himself at last. "There must have been foul play! Nothing else would make the gov'nor go away like this."

When, at something past six o'clock, everybody departed without any news of the cashier having been received, Tinker decided at once to put his foul-play theory to the test.

Leaving the office, another taxicab bore him quickly to Baker Street. Keeping the vehicle, he presently re-entered it with Pedro in his company.

"Cable Street" was his order to the driver; and thither he was promptly driven.

"It's the gov'nor that's missing, Pedro," the boy explained

gloomily, as he and the dog walked along the street. "I'm going to take you to the last place where I know he was seen. Then you've got to do your best to track him, old chap."

The dog gave one whisk of his tail, and lifted his head with a look in his eyes that was almost human. Beyond all doubt, the bloodhound understood what was required of him.

Tinker lost no time. He led the way to the door of the ships'-chandlers' office.

"This is where the gov'nor was, old chap," he said, addressing the dog again. "What we've got to do now is to find out where he went to."

With his nose to the ground Pedro moved backwards and forwards. Suddenly from his throat came the short, sharp bark that Tinker knew so well. The dog had struck the trail. In a moment he was following it, with Tinker hurrying behind him.

During the day the trail must have been crossed and re-crossed many times. That, however, made but little difference. Over and above his ordinary marvellous powers of scent, Pedro had often astonished Tinker by the ease with which he could follow Blake even through a crowd.

In this instance there was no hesitation whatever in the dog's manner. For five minutes he pursued his way along Cable Street. Arrived at a corner, the dog dived down a narrow street to the left.

Proceeding thus for about fifty paces, he again turned to the left along another street.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tinker. "This looks the least bit rum. We're doublin' on our tracks. This street is parallel to the one we came along. Where's Pedro? Oh, there he is in a doorway! What's that mean? Why, it's—it's a pub!"

He had come abreast of a narrow court into which Pedro had previously turned. Nailed to the wall of this court was a board upon which was inscribed:

"THE LOST LEGION—BACK WAY TO SALOON BAR."

The bloodhound, trotting along this court, stopped abruptly at a low, sunken door upon the right.

Coming up to it, Tinker peered through its glass panels. It gave on to a low-pitched bar-parlour with a sanded floor. The parlour was empty. He stepped in. As he did so a panel slid up, to disclose a pigeon-hole like that of a railway-station booking-office. Through this a swarthy, unshaven face peered.

"What d'you want?" demanded the landlord gruffly, for the face belonged to no other.

"It's all right, old sport!" Tinker returned good-humouredly. "I'm more than seven—I'm more than double seven—so you needn't fear about breakin' the laws o' the country by a-servin' me on the premises. Gi' me a bottle of ginger-pop wi' a good head on it and no cork. I've got a thirst on me like a baked brick. I s'pose it's walkin' through these country lanes o' yourn."

"Country lanes!" rejoined the landlord, with a scowl. "Think yer funny, I s'pose, callin' 'em that? Wot are you a-doin' of in these country lanes—eh?"

"Well, I ain't been blackberryin', mister. Now, don't be ratty! Fact is, I've lost a pal, and I thought he might have looked in here. Tallish chap he is, with a sort o' humpy back as makes him look as if he's in trainin' for a camel. Happen to have seen anything of him?"

"No, I ain't!"

The man's face had changed during Tinker's chaffing description of the missing cashier. He rapped out his denial of having seen the latter in quite a savage tone, and, having served Tinker with a ginger-beer, retired to the further end of the bar, and sat down with his chin resting on his doubled-up fist.

Tinker could see him through the pigeon-hole; could see that his swarthy face had gone a little pale, and that his mouth was twitching.

"Wonder what that means?" the boy murmured to himself. "I've said little enough to upset him—that is, providin' he ain't seen the gov'nor—and he says he ain't. But the gov'nor must have been here; Pedro don't make that sort o' mistake. Hallo! What's this?"

He had taken up the glass and was about to drink, when something upon it caught his eye. A sprinkling of powder, soft and smooth to the touch, and with a tendency to crystallise where the liquid had touched it.

Instantly he set the glass down, and, without a moment's hesitation, quitted the place.

There was a frosty bite in the air outside, but as he regained the street Tinker had to pause to wipe his brow.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "That was a narrowish squeak! What sort of a landlord is it as tries to doctor the drink of a casual customer? What's it mean? It can only mean one thing. The gov'nor has been there, and he's met wi' foul play. Directly I turns up to inquire, the landlord gets

frightened. He drags my drink to make me unconscious. No doubt he expected to see me lyin' on my back by now in the bar-parlour. I think I'd— Hallo! Somebody coming! Back, Pedro—back into this doorway! Keep close, old chap. That's right! Now they won't see us."

Both he and the dog shrank back in the shadow. Hardly had they done so than three men issued from the narrow court and hurried past where he stood concealed.

"The landlord!" exclaimed Tinker to himself, catching sight of the face of the foremost man. "Looks excited, too. So do the other pair o' beauties with him. What's their game, I wonder? Seem in a rare hurry. Good heavens! Supposin' they should—I'd better follow 'em."

He turned in the direction the men had taken. With Pedro on his chain, he exercised the greatest caution in following. Care in this regard was necessary; for, despite the ruffians' hurry and excitement, they now and again paused to look round, or to glance up some alley or courtway as they passed it.

"Lookin' for me, shouldn't wonder," was Tinker's guess. And his guess was right. For, as a matter of fact, the landlord, finding that the boy had left his ginger-beer, had been seized with quick suspicion, and had promptly called from an inner room the two rascals who were now with him. At once they had hurried into the street to try to find Tinker. Failing in that, they were now hurrying forward to—where?

That was a thing that now fully aroused Tinker's curiosity. Anxious as he was about Blake's whereabouts, and convinced as he was that Blake had been inside that public-house, some instinct told him that the action of these men was in some way connected with the missing detective. So he followed without hesitation.

Very soon the men in front of him ceased to look round, and hurried along at an increased pace. The way was longish. It led eastward, past Stepney Docks, over the canal to Limehouse.

At a point almost opposite the gray-towered church they turned sharply to the right. Tinker followed them down a winding street that led into another and then another.

In and out among a veritable maze of passages they turned, until they finally palmed at a low-set door studded with iron, and with a padlocked bar across, set in the otherwise blank wall of a tall, dilapidated warehouse.

This door lay halfway along a dark alley leading right down to the river. Tinker, from a place of concealment at the top of the alley, could see the gleam of waters and the twinkle of barge lights right beyond them.

The distant view, however, was not his immediate concern. He eyed the three men steadily. He saw the landlord, whose name was Loader, take a key from his pocket; he heard the chirp of it in the rusty padlock, and he heard the clack of the bar as it was removed, the opening of the door, and then its closing, as quickly the men disappeared into the building.

Waiting for the space of half a minute, Tinker cautiously advanced to the door and tried it. His heart jumped as he found that it had been left unlocked. Cautiously he turned the ring-handle, and with a whispered injunction to Pedro to be quiet, passed in and closed the door after him.

He now stood in a passage so dark that it took a minute for his eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom. At the far end he detected one faint, pale glimmer of light. Moving towards this, he found that it came from a dirty window facing the river, and set in the wall up the stairs upon the first landing.

Still moving with the greatest caution, he ascended, and, making the turn of the stairs, listened again. From somewhere overhead came the sound of footsteps and the soft opening of the door. A mumbling of voices followed.

He moved upward, listening at every step. As he ascended the mumbling grew more distinct.

Pausing upon the second floor, he could even distinguish the landlord's voice coming through the closed door near to his left hand.

"You'll need to be mighty careful!" Loader was saying. "Somebody's on the track. It must have been Blake's dog, and it's pretty clear he's got on the scent."

"Hist! Not so loud wi' yer names!" said another voice. "You may be quite right, Loader, but even if Blake's was tracked to your place, the dog could never follow the trail. Sexton Blake is safe in our power, an' you needn't fear as it'll ever be in his power to turn on us agen!"

"What!" exclaimed Loader. "You haven't done him in?"

"No, we ain't."

"Goin' to?"

"We're goin' to do nuthin'—except leave him where he is. Starvation 'ull do the rest."

"Dangerous game, isn't it?"

"Why, who's ever to know? He can't hold out agen starvation for many days. He'll soon die 'ere of hungor an' cold. When he's done for, all we shall have to do will be to pitch him into the river at high-tide. And then—and then—

well, if the Thames Police find him it'll be either a case of accidental drownin' or suicide. You needn't have any fear."

"Glad to hear it," said Loader, hearing a sigh of relief. "I'm bound to say I did quake a bit when that kid come into my bar. And I thought it best to give warnin'. But you seem to have all your plans pretty well cut and dried, and if it all works out as you say, there'll be nothin' to fear. But how about the money for this job?"

"That'll be paid up all in good time. Chesney will see to that, an' 'ull treat you 'andsome."

"Hope he will. Whatever he pays, the job 'ull be worth it. Well, mates, we'll be goin'. Good-night to you, Plews! You looks sleepy."

"It's a sleepy job sittin' here hours an' hours. I shall turn in for a snooze now. Good-night!"

The door opened and shut again. Three men passed down the stairs and out of sight.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Tinker Finds Blake—The Missing Ledger.

TINKER, from a place of concealment on the next flight of stairs, heard the three men depart. His heart was beating wildly with excitement. He had overheard every word of the conversation detailed.

Blake, then, was here—in this old wharf warehouse! The man inside—Plews by name—was acting as his gaoler. He would remain there, probably, until Sexton Blake succumbed to his intended fate—namely, death by starvation.

Tinker shuddered as he thought of the horrible plan. With a grateful heart he thanked Heaven that he had arrived in time to prevent the plan being carried out.

But where was Blake?

The building was old, big, and rambling. It had many rooms. In which one was the detective to be found? He must discover that without loss of time.

A sudden sound made him start—the sound of a loud snore. It came from the room within. Plews, then, was asleep!

A daring idea shot into Tinker's brain. He moved to the door of the room in which the gaoler slumbered. It was unlocked. He opened it, and softly passed in.

At a whisper Pedro stopped upon the threshold, quite still, but all alert, and ready for a spring at the slightest suggestion of danger. No danger threatened for the moment, however. Plews—a man with a close-cropped black beard and a receding forehead—lay sprawled back in one chair, with his feet on another. He was sound asleep.

Upon the table against which he leant stood a bottle of spirits, an empty glass, a ring of rusty keys, and a revolver.

For a second Tinker looked at the sleeper; then he moved. Two quick, silent strides brought him beside the table. A grab of each hand, and he had secured the keys and the revolver. One swift glance round the room showed that there was no second door. Blake, then, could be nowhere within.

Swiftly Tinker retreated backwards out of the room. Pulling the door after him, he tried one key after another. The third key turned the lock.

Plews, the gaoler, was now a prisoner.

A sigh of relief escaped Tinker as he realised this. So long as Plews continued to sleep, he was free to search the building; while, even if Plews woke up, he would soon have ample warning by the noise the man would make on finding himself locked in.

Tinker acted promptly. He dashed up the stairs to the next floor, which was the top of the building. Three doors faced him. All were locked.

He fitted a key to one of them, and opened it. The room was empty. Another key opened another door. That room was empty also.

Only the third door remained! With fingers that trembled with excitement, Tinker fumbled with the keys. That door opened, too. All within was absolutely pitch-dark. The windows were shuttered and barred.

From his pocket Tinker drew out his electric lamp, and switched it on. The white beam of light mowed down the darkness as a sickle does wheat. It penetrated to the further wall, to reveal a floor half an inch deep in dust, and—something else!

"Something else in the corner! A huddled-up heap! A man with ankles and hands bound, and a gag placed across his mouth—Sexton Blake!

No words did Tinker utter. Only a great gasp escaped him as, having snatched the gag away, he set to work with his knife to cut the confining bonds.

"Thanks, old boy! I'm much obliged!"

"What, guv'nor, you're conscious?"

"Ay, Tinker, and safe and sound."

"But ain't those villains hurt you?"

"Nothing to speak of, my boy. They sandbagged me in the street, drugged me, and afterwards, I suppose, brought me here."

"Then you don't know where you are, gov'nor?"
 "Not exactly. I can only guess that I'm near the river somewhere. But don't let us waste time in talk. Let's get out of this as soon as possible. Are you armed?"

"Yes. I brought my own shooter, gov'nor, and here's another that I sneaked from a bloke downstairs as was set to watch you. You needn't worry about him; he's a-sleepin' like a hinnercent babe, an' a-smorin' away like a hinnercent sawmill. Come on, gov'nor, and mind the step!"

They passed down the stairs, Tinker indicating with a jerk of his thumb the room in which Plews was.

Down to the ground floor they went, Pedro being restrained only with difficulty from betraying them by his demonstrations of delight at once more seeing his master. They had got to the end of the ground floor passage, and had tried the outer locked door before Tinker bethought himself of the outside bar.

"We can't get out this way, gov'nor. These keys ain't no good for the padlock outside!"

"We must find another way out, then," Blake said; and led the way back.

Two minutes' search was sufficient. At the end of that time they came upon another door, which Tinker unlocked with one of the keys on his bunch.

A cold, damp gust of wind blew upon their faces as they emerged into the outer air. They were upon the wharf itself. In front of them lay a mudbank, and beyond that the gloomy river, with its twinkling lights.

They rounded the building, reached the street, and hurried along. At a corner they encountered a policeman.

"Ah, the very chap I want!" exclaimed Blake, addressing him. "Got another man handy?"

"My mate'll be at the corner of Filter's Alley in a minute, sir," the constable answered, a respectful finger to his helmet, for Blake had made himself known.

"Good, then! There's a job for you. You know the old, disused wharf at the end yonder?"

"Know it well, sir."

"I've been a prisoner there for some hours past. My gaoler is asleep in a room on the first floor—the one to the right, facing the river. You can't mistake it. The door's locked, but here are the keys. I'd come back with you myself, but I haven't time. Go along with your mate, and take the man into custody. You'll hear from me, at the station later."

"Right you are, sir! Ah, there's my mate! I'm off!"
 And the officer hurried away.

"Why can't we go back, gov'nor?" Tinker asked.

"Because we've something else to do, my boy. Come along, back to Crutched Friars!"

They took the first cab they found. During the journey to the City Blake and Tinker made each other acquainted with what had happened.

Blake's story was meagre enough. He had collected the cheque at Wandell's, and had started on his return journey. At the dark corner of a street three men had sprung upon him, and sandbagged him, and had clapped a drugged handkerchief over his mouth. That was all he remembered. Nobody had seen, a thickish fog obscuring at the time.

"So you see, Tinker," concluded Blake, "my information's meagre enough, but yours is more valuable. The Lost Legion is the name of the public-house, you say? There's another policeman yonder. I'll give him information, so that the police can take the necessary steps. Pull up, cabby!"

The taxicab stopped. For the space of two minutes Blake's head and the policeman's were bent towards each other in a whispered consultation. Then off the taxi went again.

Arrived at Crutched Friars, Blake stepped out. His disguise as Tom Hathaway had not been interfered with. He rang the bell at Tope & Walderson's, and was readily admitted by the caretaker, with whom he seemed to be on curiously friendly terms.

He disappeared. Five minutes later he was back.

"No. 2 ledger is missing again," he said to Tinker. "Ah, there's what I want—a taxi!"

"Where off to now, then, gov'nor?"

"To Loughton."

"What for?"

"To get a sight of Walderson, if possible. He's up to some game with that ledger, and I want to find out what the game is!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

What Blake Saw—The Forger—Walderson's Scheme.

A LONG drive of a dozen miles, and the taxicab, with instructions to wait, set Blake, Tinker, and Pedro down upon a lonely country road. They were at Loughton, a village in the heart of Epping Forest.

Alexander Walderson lived upon the outskirts of the village. Blake knew the rambling, old-fashioned house; he had been there before. It stood along a dark lane in its own two acres of ground.

Its front was screened by a thick shrubbery, through which a short drive wound from the brown wooden gate to the pillared porch. The main part of the house was old, but out to the end of it a previous tenant had built a billiard-room.

Very cautiously Blake advanced along the drive. Tinker, leading Pedro, came close behind him. A distant clock boomed over the forest trees, striking eleven.

"Everybody gone to bed," murmured Tinker, looking at the dark house in front of them. "There ain't a single light to be seen!"

"Isn't there? What d'you call that, then?"

Blake pointed to the lantern that crowned the shallow slope of the billiard-room roof. Through the glass sides of this oblong dome came the reflection of gas lights.

Treading softly, they advanced to within a foot or two of the closely-shuttered windows. Blake listened intently. Then, with a finger to his lips to enjoin silence, he backed away towards the stable-yard, which ran along at the side.

"There's somebody in that room, and they are not playing billiards, either," he whispered. "I'd like to see what they are doing. I wonder if we can find a ladder?"

They passed into the stable-yard. Almost immediately Tinker stopped.

"There's the very thing," he said, pointing to a ladder hitched on pegs along the coach-house wall. "I should think that'll just about be long enough!"

In two minutes they had carried the ladder along, and propped it against the billiard-room wall.

Blake climbed up, and disappeared over the parapet. A moment later, and Tinker could see him crawling up the shallow roof towards the lantern.

The roof was frosty, and the glass sides of the dome were covered with crystal patterns. Cautiously Blake rubbed one of the panes clean ere he could see through. When at length he was able to see through, he only restrained himself with difficulty from crying out, for immediately below him he saw a sight that took him by surprise.

The great billiard-table was there, but its green top was covered over with a sheet of American cloth. Upon this a writing-slope was placed, at which a man sat working.

For a minute Blake's attention was diverted from this man by the sight of Alexander Walderson, who was seated a little distance off, busy with many big bundles of invoices and other accounts.

In dead silence the two men sat there. Presently Walderson spoke in a low tone. The other man looked up from his writing. Across his face fell the bright light of one of the gas-jets beneath its green shade.

In that moment the face revealed itself to Sexton Blake as that of Michael Chesney!

Recovering from his momentary surprise, the detective turned his eyes from the man's face to the improvised desk.

What he saw there increased his astonishment. Upon the desk were two big account-books. Both were open.

Michael Chesney resumed his work. What he was doing Blake discovered in a minute. He was copying into one book the writing and figures which were in the other. Not copying quickly, but laboriously, and with the most studied care.

Blake caught his breath as he pressed his eyes closer and closer to the glass. His detective instincts had already told him the exact nature of Michael Chesney's task; but he wanted to make quite sure.

He shifted his position slightly to get a better view. Suddenly something went snap. A piece of beading had broken beneath his weight. A second afterwards, and a piece of glass fell inwards, and splintered itself upon the billiard-table below.

Both men leapt to their feet, and gazed upwards. Blake had dodged back in an instant, only to dislodge a second piece of glass in his hurry.

Quicker than it takes to tell he was scrambling over the parapet, and sliding down the ladder.

"Quick, Tinker!—Away with you! They are coming!" he exclaimed, in a hoarse whisper.

Tinker did not hesitate, but turned on the instant, and dashed away, with Pedro alongside him.

Blake reached the ground. As he did so a side door opened. Two dim figures appeared in the doorway. One of them raised something to his shoulder.

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THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 221.

NEXT FRIDAY: "THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!" BY FRANK RICHARDS.

Bang!

A rifle rang out, and a bullet whizzed past Blake's ear, to bury itself somewhere in the wall beyond.

In a moment he was dashing through the stable-yard and across the paddock beyond, listening the while for any sign of pursuit.

He heard none. Evidently Walderson and Chesney had not followed.

Blake came up with Tinker at a point in the hedge some two hundred yards along the lane.

"It's all right, my boy," he said. "I'm not hurt."

Walderson and Michael Chesney had not attempted to pursue Blake. After firing that shot in the dark, Walderson had carefully locked and bolted the door, and had then returned with his companion to the billiard-room.

There they had talked the matter over, and had both come to the decision—which Blake had surmised they would—namely, that the man on the roof was no other than a burglar.

Having arrived at that decision, they had turned their attention to other matters.

"And, therefore, Mr. Walderson, the quicker the job's done, the better—eh?"

"Yes, that is so. The quicker the better," said the junior partner nervously. "I promised you a thousand pounds for doing this job. I'd willingly make it two thousand pounds if you could complete it within a week."

"You would—eh? And what would you give if I could complete it in forty-eight hours from now—three thousand?"

"Yes, willingly, if you could do it. But it's impossible!"

"It's nothing of the sort. I've been through the books carefully, and I see a way. Hundreds of the folios in your ledger are merely records of accounts long since closed. There is no need to copy those folios."

"But they must be copied. I see no other way."

"I do! These hundreds of pages can be detached and bound up with the forged pages in this new book. Paper, watermark, and everything are exactly the same, and will defy detection. All I need do, then, is to copy the entries from current accounts—making the necessary alterations in amounts, of course, as I proceed. By continuous labour I can do the whole thing in forty-eight hours. A man I know can bind up the new book in the old covers in the space of a single evening, in such a way that nobody will ever suspect the book has ever been tampered with. How will that suit you?"

"Excellently! Forty-eight hours! It is better than I had ever hoped for. Hathaway won't trouble us again, because I have to-day sacked him; and, with Sexton Blake in safe keeping, nobody is in the least likely to inquire for the ledger for the next three days. Meantime, Mr. Chesney, you will stay here and work continuously until the job is completed. I shall probably stay with you most of the time."

Which decision, forthwith acted upon, was destined to prove calamitous to them both, inasmuch as they were to miss the warning they would have received, had they known of the arrest of their accomplices.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Tom Hathaway Receives a Letter—Sacked.

WALDERSON had spoken of having sacked Tom Hathaway. He had spoken the truth. The discharge—"at a moment's notice"—had been sent by post that very day. Poor Tom Hathaway!

For a period amounting to nearly twelve months Tom, as we know, had been hovering on the brink of a



For a second Tinker looked at the sleeper; then he moved. Two quick, silent strides brought him beside the table. A grab of each hand, and he had secured the keys and the revolver.

nervous breakdown. The first serious sign of his illness had shown itself on that night, nearly twelve months ago, when he had heard of the smash of the bank to which he had entrusted his whole savings.

Following on that had come the uncertainty of his position in the office, owing to Mr. Walderson's dislike of him, and his worries in connection with the periodical shortages in the petty cash.

These things, trifling enough in themselves, had yet had, as we know, a cumulative effect on Tom that had threatened to end disastrously. His nature, too shrinking and sensitive and conscientious to stand the buffetings of the rude business world around him, had threatened to give way entirely.

The culminating point had come on that night when, in a fit of desperation, he had attempted suicide, and had been saved therefrom by Blake.

A long period of unconsciousness had followed that desperate act of his. Not exactly unconsciousness in the ordinary sense of the word, however, but a sort of detachment of mind—a dulling of comprehension amounting to an inability to grasp the true significance of his position.

This blunting of sensibility was, in the opinion of Dr. Darbyshire, all in his favour. It gave that supersensitive brain of his a rest, and a chance to his jaded, quivering nerves to recuperate.

His condition, then, had been one in which, while he was able to grasp the trivial matters of everyday occurrence, he was no longer inclined to indulge in the morbid broodings that had troubled him before.

This in itself was a great thing gained. It had enabled Dr. Darbyshire, acting in concert with Blake—whom Tom Hathaway regarded as simply a friend of the kindly medico—to convince Tom Hathaway that his position at the office was quite secure. The explanation given to the cashier was that in consequence of ill-health, he had been granted leave of absence, and that he was not to worry about anything until his health was completely restored.

Of Blake's impersonation of him at the office Tom knew absolutely nothing. His gentle, honest nature would have recoiled from such deception—harmless and justifiable

though it was. This, therefore, had to be hidden from him.

Similarly, the possibility of his spoiling Blake's plan by sending a letter of gratitude to his employers had to be guarded against. This had been done.

A letter had been received by Tom, ostensibly from Mr. Tope. The letter had confirmed the granting of leave of absence, but had strictly enjoined the cashier not to acknowledge to the firm any supposed kindness, and had further bound him never, under any circumstances whatever, to refer to the matter in the future.

A curious sort of letter, yet by no means out of keeping with the senior partner's somewhat brusque and eccentric character. Anyway, Tom Hathaway accepted it as such, and since his salary came to hand regularly every week, no suspicion as to the genuineness of the whole affair ever entered his head.

Yet, as a matter of fact, that letter was a forgery. A harmless forgery, but a forgery nevertheless—the entire handiwork of Sexton Blake.

The living of a calm and quiet life, and the absence of anything approaching business worries, were doing wonders for Tom, and he was mending rapidly. To his wife and family this, you may be sure, was matter for great rejoicing.

Judge, then, of the consternation into which the whole household were thrown when, on the particular night with which we are now dealing, a letter arrived for Tom from the office. This was an eventuality that had been overlooked by the well-intentioned plotters.

At the postman's rat-tat a younger child of Tom's had darted to the front door, and before Mrs. Hathaway could interpose—as, guided by instinct, she might possibly have done—the letter was in Tom's possession.

He tore the envelope open eagerly. At the moment of his doing that his face was flushed and his eyes bright. A moment afterwards, however, and he was leaning back with pale face, wild eyes, and quivering limbs.

His wife was by his side in an instant.

"Mother, what is it? What does it say?" asked Clara, the eldest daughter, in an excited whisper.

"It contains—it contains bad news! Clara dear, the letter is from Mr. Walderson. He has discharged your father—discharged him at the moment's notice!"

"Oh!"

The first word came from Mrs. Hathaway.

"It is bad," said Tom, half-roaring himself. "I am sacked—sacked at a minute's notice!"

"It can't be—it is too cruel!" cried Mrs. Hathaway involuntarily. "Think of the time of the year! After what Mr. Tope said, he would never discharge you a fortnight before Christmas!"

"It isn't Mr. Tope, it's Walderson—Walderson who hates me!"

"But a fortnight before Christmas!"

"Yes," said Tom, with a tinge of bitterness in his tone. "The worst time in all the year for such a thing to happen. Oh, Mary, Mary, it will be a miserable Christmas for us, I fear!"

Gloomy indeed was the next half-hour, though Mrs. Hathaway, and Clara, too—in that hopeful way that women have—did their best to put a more cheerful view on matters.

Hopeless, however, for the moment to try and shake poor Tom out of the fit of depression into which this latest incident had thrown him. He sat there in his chair, with his head upon his hand, looking a picture of abject misery.

Sacked! Out of work! With a wife and young family dependent upon him. And Christmas that should have been a season of gladness looming in the immediate future.

And the days—several of them—were to pass and to find no lifting of the Christmas shadows which were hovering over the Hathaway household, and threatening to envelop it in a hopeless gloom.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Mr. Walderson Gets a Shock—Mr. Tope Returns—

The Arrest.

ALEXANDER WALDERSON entered his office with a flush of satisfaction upon his face.

He threw himself into his chair and touched a bell.

"Send Mr. Joyce to me!" he said to the clerk who answered the summons.

His nephew entered a minute later.

"Well, uncle, is it all serene?" asked Joyce expectantly.

"The job is done, Norman. The duplicate ledger, with the necessary alteration of figures, is completed."

"That's good! Then if old Tope came back now, and decided to examine the books—"

"He would find that the firm had only made twenty thousand pounds profit, instead of thirty-seven thousand."

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"Leaving a surplus of seventeen thousand pounds—eh, uncle? A nice, pleasant little sum to pocket. But it's been a risky game to play."

"Not at all, if you saw the ledger. The forgery is perfect. I defy Tope, or the auditors, or anybody else to discover that the figures have been tampered with."

"What about Sexton Blake?" asked Norman Joyce, with a snigger.

"Oh, you need have no fear of that fellow! He's a prisoner at the old wharf. Perhaps by this time he may even be—Who's that?"

A knock had come at the side door—a quick, peremptory knock.

Norman Joyce stepped across, turned the key, and opened the door. Into the room came Michael Chesney. His face was pale and working with excitement.

"You, Chesney? What on earth's the matter?" Walderson demanded.

"Matter enough!" returned the forger huskily. "We are discovered! We are in danger of immediate arrest!"

Walderson sprang to his feet.

"What—what do you mean, Chesney? Explain yourself, man!"

"Sexton Blake has escaped from the wharf. Pews and the others were arrested several days ago!"

"Great heavens! Do you mean that?"

"It's true, every word of it. I tell you we are in immediate danger! One of them may split on us at any time. I wonder they haven't done it before this!"

"Great heavens!" gasped Walderson again. "What shall we do?"

"Do! Why, there's only one thing to do. We must skip—must fly the country at once. Don't stop to argue! Only provide yourself with money, and then come with me immediately. We shall just have time to get to Dover and catch the Continental boat!"

Three minutes with no word spoken. Only a great bustling about, an unlocking of the safe, a thrusting of a big wad of banknotes—drawn from the bank that very day—into Walderson's pocket, the burning of a few odd papers, the collecting together of several small articles of personal property. Then the preparations were complete. Walderson looked round.

"Last thing," he said.

"This way, then," said Chesney, and stepped towards the door.

But ere he could reach it the door was thrown open, and into the room came—Mr. Tope! Walderson staggered back in astonishment.

"What? You—you returned?"

"Didn't expect me—eh?" the old man said, in a curious tone, as he glanced round the office.

"No—no!" answered Walderson, in some confusion. "You have come back before your time."

"Not much too soon, though, I dare say!" old Tope rejoined drily. "But you, Walderson—you look as if you were just going out!"

"I—I am going out, Mr. Tope. I—I have an important engagement."

"I must trouble you to postpone it!"

"Postpone it? Why?"

"Because I have an important matter to talk to you about. Walderson. I want to inspect a particular book. Will you please let me see No. 2 ledger?"

Had a thunderbolt fallen into that office Walderson could not have been more startled! He staggered back, white to the lips.

"No. 2 ledger?" he repeated, in a hollow whisper, and shot a glance at Michael Chesney.

The latter's face had undergone a wonderful change. Into the forger's eyes had come a look of demoniac ferocity. His teeth ground together as, turning to Tope, he demanded defiantly:

"What do you want with that book?"

"What's that to do with—"

The old man said no more, for even while he was speaking Chesney and Walderson sprang right at him and bore him to the ground.

Another five seconds and it might have gone ill with the senior partner. But at the sound of his fall the door opened again suddenly, and into the room bounded Sexton Blake, followed by four other men.

With one quick movement Blake forced Michael Chesney to release his hold of Tope's throat. Another movement and Walderson was sent staggering across the room, full tilt against his terror-stricken nephew.

"Now, sir," cried Blake, assisting old Mr. Tope to rise.

"You've a charge to make against these men, I've no doubt?"

"Yes, I have—the charge of committing a violent assault on me."

NEXT FRIDAY: "THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!" BY FRANK RICHARDS.

"Good! That will do excellently," said Blake, with a smile. "The other charge can wait. And, in any case, we weren't quite ready for it."

"Other charge?" demanded Walderson, with a show of indignation. "What other charge?"

"You'll know in the course of a day or two," returned Blake. "Meantime, it's sufficient to say that the charge is in connection with a certain ledger used in this office."

"Curse you! Curse you!" rapped out Michael Chesney. "Save your curses!" retorted Blake, and then turned to the four men—plain-clothes officers they were—who had entered with him. "Officers, do your duty!"

No use for Walderson to cry out; no use for Norman Joyce to make a dash for the door; equally, no use for Michael Chesney to resist.

In a minute the three villains were in custody.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Christmas Eve—Sexton Blake, Santa Claus.

CHRISTMAS EVE!
Once again the glad season had come round. Once again the shops were full of Christmas dainties. The butchers' shops displayed their shows of gaily-bedecked prize beef; the poulterers' shops were hung over to their outer walls with rows on rows of prime geese and turkeys; while amid holly borders the grocers gave their usual display of tempting "goodies."

And the Christmas joy, of which these good things were the outwardly visible signs, doubtless found an inward spiritual reflection in the hearts of the people.

But of Christmas happiness precious little was to be found

in the home of the Hathaways. That blow, which had fallen nearly a fortnight before, had plunged poor Tom into utter wretchedness.

"We used to be so happy at Christmas-time, Mary," he said.

"And we shall be happy again, you'll see, Tom," said his wife cheerfully, though her heart, too, was sinking.

Rat-tat-tat-tat!
Tom himself staggered to the front door and opened it.

"Mr. Tope!" he gasped, in utter amazement.

"Yes, Tom—yes, my boy! Mr. Tope—old Tope—your silly, blind, pig-headed, mule-brained master! Pre come to see you, Tom. I've come to spend Christmas with you, if you'll have me. And somebody else has come to see you, too—somebody you've seen before, but whose real name you perhaps don't know—Mr. Sexton Blake."

Tom Hathaway had been sufficiently astonished by the unexpected appearance of his employer, and by the strange words he had used regarding himself. Now he was thrown into an even greater state of amazement by seeing Sexton Blake suddenly step from a cab which was in waiting outside Hawthorn Cottage.

"Mr. Sexton Blake!" he gasped at last. "Why, this is Dr. Darbyshire's friend, Mr. Robinson!"

"An alias only, Tom," put in Blake, with a laugh. "My real name is Blake."

"The famous detective?" exclaimed Tom.

"Ay, ay," chuckled old Tope, "a very famous detective. He's detected one precious set of rascals, anyway. He's saved me a clear seventeen thousand pounds, and very likely saved me from future ruin. But I'll tell you all about that later."

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"I'm hungry now, and should like a bit of supper. So would Mr. Blake, I'm sure."

"Oh, dear me!" groaned Tom. "I'm afraid we— we haven't—haven't—"

"What, you're not going to object to our eating a bit of supper in your house, are you, Tom?"

"No, no—of course not, sir. You're welcome to anything we've got, but—but I'm afraid that beyond a bit of bread and cheese—"

"Very good fare—excellent fare! Nothing I like better than bread and cheese—to finish a meal with."

"But that will be all the meal, sir. I—I've nothing else to offer you."

"Who asked you to offer us anything? Bless my soul, Tom, d'you take us for spongers? We've brought our own supper. We only ask you to lend us a table to lay it on."

"Brought your own supper, sir?"

"Yes, of course we have; and to-morrow's dinner, too; and to-morrow's supper, and Boxing Day's dinner, and Boxing Day's supper, if we like to make it last, which I'm doubtful about, hungry as I am. It's all in the cab yonder. You wait a minute; I'll fetch it. Sha'n't be two ticks."

He wasn't much longer. At the end of a minute he was back again in the house, carrying a turkey in one hand and a goose in the other.

"There!" he exclaimed, as he set the things down before his astonished hosts. "There's something for to-morrow. And there's four pounds of sausages that perhaps Mrs. Hathaway can cook for supper to-night. And here's Mr. Blake with the rest of the things."

Surf enough, at that moment Sexton Blake, followed by Tinker, entered, staggering under a load of fancy boxes and parcels comprising bonbons, candied fruits, children's toys, and other things appropriate to the festive season.

"I—I don't understand," muttered Tom at length. "I don't understand all this kindness after I've been sacked, sir."

"Sacked!" exclaimed Mr. Tope. "Who sacked you? That ungrateful villain Walderson, of course!"

"Villain, sir?"

"Yes, of course he is! The man I made my partner has proved himself an out-and-out villain. Didn't know that, eh, Tom?"

"I—I never dreamt of it," stammered the bewildered cashier. "I—I can scarcely believe it, and I don't understand it a bit. Mr. Walderson a villain! Oh, it seems impossible!"

"It's like you, Tom, to hesitate to believe ill of a man by whose side you have worked for so many years. But it's true, as Mr. Blake here will tell you."

The detective did tell him—told him what he had already told Mr. Tope. How, in order to force Tom to take a rest, he had impersonated him at the office; how everyone had been deceived by that impersonation until Michael Chesney had come on the scene; how Chesney and Walderson had plotted together to kidnap him; and how, after further putting of their heads together, they had conspired to forge one of the firm's ledgers, and so defraud Mr. Tope of a large amount of money.

"And I should have been defrauded but for Mr. Blake," put in the senior partner. "It was he who discovered their rascally scheme, in which they were aided and abetted by Norman Joyce. Then Mr. Blake cabled to me in Egypt. Ah, well, they are all under arrest now, and will get their punishment in due time!"

(Which prediction, it may be recorded here, proved to be true—Walderson and Chesney being duly sentenced to long terms of penal servitude, while Joyce was sent to hard labour for two years.)

"But no more business now, only pleasure. Here's supper," said Mr. Tope. "Mrs. Hathaway, I fill my glass, and I rise to propose your very good health. And may this Christmas be the happiest we have ever spent."

"It will be, sir," said Tom, with overflowing heart, "thanks to you and—to Mr. Sexton Blake."

"That's right, don't forget Mr. Blake, otherwise Santa Claus!" exclaimed Mr. Tope.

And everyone in the place murmured a fervent "Hear, hear!"

THE END.

BETWEEN OURSELVES

A Weekly Chat between The Editor and His Readers.

NEXT FRIDAY'S AMAZING ISSUE!

Next Friday's great issue of the PENNY POPULAR is going to create a sensation. It is an issue that thousands of you have, no doubt, been looking forward to with eagerness, and I am confident that you will be in no way disappointed with the contents.

First and foremost amongst the amazing attractions of next Friday's issue is the magnificent, long, complete tale of the Greyfriars chums entitled

"THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!"

This story deals with Harry Wharton's arrival at Greyfriars School, and it is without doubt the most famous tale of school life ever written. Much against his will Harry is sent to school by his uncle, and on the way he makes the acquaintance of Frank Nugent, with whom he has a violent quarrel. Harry Wharton possesses an uncontrollable temper, and it gets the better of him.

At Greyfriars, Wharton's temper makes him disliked by all his schoolfellows, and he is practically shunned by his Form. But, in spite of his temper, Wharton possesses any amount of courage, and the heroic act which he performs, shows that he is one of the right sort.

I feel sure that those of my readers who have never met Harry Wharton & Co. will greatly appreciate this grand new series of stories dealing with the early adventures of the Greyfriars chums, and will look forward eagerly to the succeeding stories.

The second story in next Friday's issue is that dealing with the adventures of Jack, Sam, and Pete, the famous comrades. As you will see in this week's story, the comrades are penniless, and realise that they will have to work for their living.

In next Friday's tale, which, by the way, is entitled,

"WITH PICK AND LAMP!"

the comrades obtain work in a coal-mine. There they meet with many thrilling adventures, and Mr. S. Clarke Hook deserves every credit for the excellent way in which he has described the comrades' efforts to earn their livings.

Our third story is that dealing with the adventures of Tom Merry & Co., the popular juniors of St. Jim's, and the title of this story is

"TOM MERRY & CO.'S CINEMA!"

The juniors decide to run their own picture palace, and as this is a very big venture, you may rest assured that there is any amount of fun in the story. Of course, the juniors take their own films, and I can tell you that the methods they adopt will make you roar with laughter.

There is still one other great attraction in next Friday's amazing issue, and that takes the form of

A MAGNIFICENT PRESENTATION PLATE

of the Greyfriars chums, a facsimile of which appears on page 9 of this issue. This plate is a most attractive one, and it is well worth framing and hanging up in the best room of your house. In fact, the plate alone is well worth the penny charged for next Friday's grand number.

In conclusion, I wish to utter a word of warning. You must

ORDER YOUR COPY IN ADVANCE,

unless you wish to be disappointed. Next Friday's issue is being well advertised, and, this being the case, there is bound to be an immense increase in the demand for the number. Only those readers, therefore, who have taken the necessary precaution will be absolutely certain of getting a copy.

YOUR EDITOR.

Next Friday—A Grand Long Complete Tale of the Chums of Greyfriars, entitled

"THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!"

Please order your copy of the "PENNY POPULAR" in advance, and hand this number to a non-reader.

THE GREAT MISUNDERSTANDING!

A Magnificent
Long Complete
School Tale,
dealing with the
Early Adventures
of
TOM MERRY & CO.
of St. Jim's.

BY

**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**



"Go it, Figgy!" "Pile in, Reddy!" Figgins and Redfern went at it hammer and tongs. The former got in several body-blows upon his adversary that made Redfern stagger, and the chief of the New Firm was driven round the ring; but just at the end of the round he deceived Figgins with a feint, and delivered a crashing upper-cut that swept the long-legged junior fairly off his feet.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. A Matter of Prestige!

"IT'S not good enough!" said Figgins of the New House at St. Jim's to his study-mates, Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

"What isn't good enough, most noble, grave, and reverend signor?" asked Kerr.

"The state of things in this House!" said Figgins.

Kerr looked puzzled.

"Do you mean the grub arrangements?" he asked.

"No, I don't, you ass!"

"Has old Ratty, our respected Housemaster, been treading on your noble corns?"

"It isn't Ratty."

"Then who, what, and which is it?"

"It's Redfern."

"Oh," said Kerr comprehensively, "Redfern!"

"Yes," said Figgins, smiting the table again with a mighty smite. "It's Redfern—Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence! The New Firm, in fact."

"I say, layo mercy on that table!" said Kerr anxiously. "One of the legs is rather gammy already."

"Blow the table!"

"Very well," said Kerr resignedly. "But smashing the study furniture won't keep our end up against Redfern & Co., that I know of!"

Figgins enorted.

"It's not good enough," he said. "How long have Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence been in the New House of St. Jim's?"

"Blessed if I know! I forget."

"Well, not many weeks," said Fatty Wynn. "I remember they stood a good feed the day after they came—"

"Yes, you would remember that!" said Figgins witheringly. "Now, you fellows know that when Redfern came, I explained to him like a Dutch uncle that I was the junior leader of the New House, just as Tom Merry was in the School House, and I offered him a thick ear if he didn't keep his place. I couldn't say fairer than that, could I?"

Kerr chuckled.

"Impossible!" he agreed.

"But has he kept his place?" demanded Figgins excitedly.

"He hasn't—he's kept yours," said Fatty Wynn.

And Kerr chuckled.

"He's actually had the cheek to say that he's not looking for a leader, you know!" said Figgins, in great wrath. "He doesn't admit that I'm junior captain of the House, though I told him so plainly. He's been planning raids on the School

House, and raids on the Grammarians, all on his own, without consulting us!"

"And getting the best of it," said Kerr.

"Yes, that's the worst cheek of the lot. Some of the fellows are beginning to say we're played out, you know."

"What rot!"

"I know it's rot, but they're saying it. Look here, it's not good enough! We've got to put Reddy & Co. in their place, once for all."

"Hear, hear!" said Kerr heartily.

"I wonder what they've got for tea?" said Fatty Wynn thoughtfully. "We might raid them—"

"That's just what we're going to do," said Figgins emphatically. "I happen to know what they are doing, and it's a first-class chance of putting them in their place. Reddy said it's such a fine afternoon that he's going to have his tea, out of doors, and the three bouncers have taken their grub in a basket to picnic under the trees behind the chapel."

Fatty Wynn's eyes gleamed with the light of battle.

"What have they got?" he asked.

"I heard Lawrence mention a cold chicken—"

The Falstaff of the New House made a movement towards the door.

"Come on!" he exclaimed.

"Hold on a minute!"

"What is there to hold on for?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn peevishly. "What about the prestige of the study? We've got to put those bouncers in their place, haven't we?"

"And collar their cold chicken," murmured Kerr.

"Really, Kerr—"

"Listen to me!" said Figgins. "We're going to deal with the matter in the right way. We shall go to Reddy and explain to him with perfect patience and calmness that we are cocks of the walk in the New House. As proof of it, and as a punishment for his cheek in setting up his study against ours, we shall eat their tea. If they object, it will be taken as rank mutiny, and we shall wallop them!"

"Good egg!" said Fatty Wynn.

"What do you think, Kerr?"

"Oh, good!" said Kerr, laughing. "I'm on!"

"Come on, then!" said Figgins. "Never mind the impot, and never mind the pudding! I'll help you do your impot this evening, and we shall get enough tea from Reddy. They had a basket full of stuff when they went out."

"Did they?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn eagerly.

"They did!" said Figgins. "Mind, we've got to talk to them like Dutch unless first! We don't want to give an impression that we're after their grub."

"Eh?"

"We don't want to let the bounders think that we're merely wanting their tommy, you know?"

"Well, ain't we?" demanded Fatty Wynn innocently.

"No!" roared Figgins. "We're acting for the prestige of the study!"

"Oh, I see! Let's buck up, Figgy! I'm hungry—I—I mean, the prestige of the study, you know—"

Figgins snorted.

"Oh, come on!" he said. "I know where they are, and if they don't toe the line, we'll fall on 'em, and smite 'em hip and thigh, and knock 'em into a cocked hat, and give 'em the giddy kyoshi!"

"And collar the grub!" said Fatty Wynn. "Don't forget that!"

"I'm not forgetting it, porpoise!"

"Don't jaw to them too much first, Figgy, you know."

"Rats! Come on!"

And Figgins led the way from the study, and his two chums followed, Fatty Wynn in deadly earnest, thinking of the cold chicken, and Kerr grinning. Figgins frowned a warlike frown as he led the way across the quadrangle.

During the short time that Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen—the three County Council scholarship boys—had been at St. Jim's, they had certainly made their mark in the New House.

Figgins & Co., who had always been considered the leaders of the juniors of the New House, had been in danger of being eclipsed by the new-comers on more than one occasion.

And Redfern had not seemed to understand in the least when Figgins explained that he was the great chief of the New House juniors, and that all rotten outsiders were expected to toe the line.

Lately, some of the New House fellows had chipped Figgins on the subject, asking him if his Co. had gone out of business, and questions of that sort. And Figgins had decided that it was high time he did something, and now he was doing it.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Figgins Puts His Foot Down.

FIVE or six School House juniors bore down upon Figgins & Co. as they crossed the quadrangle. Figgins held up his hand in sign of peace.

"Pax!" he exclaimed. "We are on the war-path.

We're putting down a rebellion in our own House, and we've got no time for rows with you School House chaps. We're going to bring Redfern & Co. to their senses.

"Redfern! What's Reddy been doing?"

"Getting his ears up," said Figgins darkly. "We're going to bring 'em down again for him! You School House chaps can come and see the fun, if you like."

Tom Merry & Co. grinned at one another. They had tasted the quality of Redfern & Co., and they had more than a suspicion that Figgins & Co. would not find it easy to put the New Firm in their place.

"We'll come, rather!" said Tom Merry. "What are you going to do to them?"

"Something lingering, I suppose, with-boiling oil in it," suggested Monty Lowther blandly.

Figgins snorted.

"Oh, don't be an ass! Come on, you fellows!"

And the New House trio proceeded on their way. Tom Merry & Co. followed them, greatly interested to see what would happen, and several other School House fellows joined them en route. Lumley-Lumley, and Levison and Gore, and Herries, and two or three more fellows came along to see the promised entertainment; so it was quite a little party that arrived upon the scene where Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen were enjoying their *al fresco* spread.

Redfern & Co. certainly looked as if they were enjoying themselves. They were seated upon the grass, under the big trees near the old chapel, and they had a little white cloth on the ground in their midst. Three or four bottles of lemonade, a cold chicken on a dish, buttered toast galore, and cakes and jam-tarts, made a most enticing array.

Redfern had just filled the three glasses with a foaming, gurgling lemonade when the avengers of the prestige of Figgins' study arrived, and, with them, the School House crowd.

Redfern glanced up coolly.

"Hallo, you fellows!" he said cheerfully. "So kind of you to give us a look in! Will you sample the lemonade, Figgins?"

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"I haven't come to tea," said Figgins.

"Well, there isn't any tea, if you had," said Redfern.

"Have you come to lemonade?"

"I've come to talk to you!" said Figgins abruptly.

"Good! My great-grandmother used to say that what was nice at meal-times was light and entertaining conversation," said Redfern. "Lawrence, shut up! Owen, don't say a word! Figgins is going to talk to us. Go on, Figgins!"

"Mum's the word!" said Lawrence solemnly.

"Not a whisper!" said Owen.

"There you are, Figgins!" said Redfern, turning to the junior captain of the New House. "Now pile in. You don't mind if I go on with my lemonade, do you?"

Figgins turned crimson. The New Firm were chipping him with great solemnity, with never a grin on their faces; but the School House fellows were grinning gleefully.

"Look here, Redfern," said Kerr, in his keen and incisive way, "we're the leaders of the New House. You fellows have got to toe the line. You savvy? Get up!"

"Eh?"

"We're going to eat your feed for you," said Kerr coolly. "Not because we want it—"

"Oh, don't we?" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Shut up, Fatty! Not because we want it," said Kerr loftily, "but just to show you and everybody else that we are the leaders of the New House juniors, and that you, and all the rest, have to toe the line, Savvy?"

Redfern cocked his head thoughtfully on one side.

"Yes," he said. "I think I savvy."

"Then get up!"

Redfern made a sign to Owen and Lawrence, and they rose to their feet. Their quiet meekness astounded Tom Merry and his chums, and indeed Figgins & Co. as well. Redfern and Owen and Lawrence were not wont to take orders meekly from anyone. But they obeyed Kerr's command with the meekness of pet lambs.

"Anything else?" asked Redfern.

"Yes; you can wait on us while we eat your tarts."

"Certainly!"

"And buck up!" said Kerr.

"Your humble servant," said Redfern, with a bow.

And Tom Merry & Co. stared at the amazing spectacle of Figgins & Co. sitting down to Redfern's tea, and Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence waiting on them with meek attention and civility.

Figgins was so astonished that he could hardly eat the jam-tarts.

The coolness and "cheek" of the New Firm had caused the great Figgins to rise in his wrath, and declare that Redfern & Co. must be put in their places, and kept there. But Figgins had not been prepared to find the task so easy as this.

The School House fellows looked on at this lesson in House discipline, simply gaping. They could not understand Redfern & Co. at all.

Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence were perfectly grave.

They waited upon Figgins & Co. with meekness and polite attention. They handed them things to eat, and changed their plates, as if they had been born to the work of waiters.

"More ham," said Fatty Wynn, breaking silence at last—a silence that had been deep and joyful.

Redfern looked politely regretful.

"I'm sorry," he said, "there isn't any more ham. But there are heaps of jam-tarts."

"Jam-tarts galore, sir," said Lawrence humbly.

Fatty Wynn grunted.

"I want to lay a solid foundation," he said. "Keep the jam-tarts for a bit. I'll have some of those cold potatoes. Is there any more chicken?"

"No; you've finished it."

"You ought to have had two chickens," said Fatty Wynn. "Still, you didn't know I was coming to tea. Are they sausages in that bag?"

"Yes; they are."

"Hand them over, then!"

"Certainly!"

"Look here, Reddy!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What's the little game? What are you fellows playing the giddy ox for this for?"

Redfern looked surprised.

"We're waiting on Figgins," he said, as if that were quite sufficient explanation.

"Yes. But what are you doing it for?"

"Because he told us to."

"You jolly well don't obey orders as a rule," said Blake suspiciously.

"The flesh is weak," said Redfern blandly, "but the spirit is willing, you know. We've got a lot of arrears of respectfulness to make up."

"Look here, you ass—"

"They're pulling Figgy's leg," said Monty Lowther.

"Well, they can always pull my leg, too, if they do it this way," Manners remarked. "It's a good feed, and Fatty

Wynn seems to be enjoying himself. If this is a joke, I don't see where the fun comes in—for Reddy."

Redfern looked shocked. "You don't think I'd play a joke on Figgins, surely?" he exclaimed. "You don't seem to understand what a great man Figgins is."

Figgins turned red. "Don't be an ass!" he exclaimed.

"I'm only saying what I feel," said Redfern humbly. "It's an honour to wait on Figgins. It's jolly kind of him to live in our House; in fact, it's pretty condescending of him to inhabit this world at all. We feel that."

"Oh, rather!" said Lawrence solemnly.

"It's our place to wait on Figgins," said Owen, with owl-like gravity; "and we're doing it. What more could anybody want?"

"Look here," said Figgins warmly, "if you're trying to be funny—"

"But we're not," said Redfern, in surprise. "We're toeing the line, and waiting on you, just as you ordered us to."

"Obeying orders from superior officers, you know," said Lawrence.

Kerr looked very suspicious. He could not understand the sudden and amazing humility of the New Firm, though he tried to look as if he took it all as a matter of course. Fatty Wynn finished the sausages and potatoes, and looked round for fresh fields to conquer. Only the jam-tarts remained, but, as Lawrence had said, there were jam-tarts galore.

Redfern had taken them out of the bags, and arranged them in tempting array upon plates. He had replenished the jam in them from a jar. Dame Taggles, who kept the school tuckshop, made excellent jam-tarts, but the juniors considered her a little "close" with the jam. But Redfern had made up for that. There was plenty of jam on each tart now, and they really looked very nice.

"Try the tarts now, Fatty?" asked Redfern.

"Pile in, Fatty!" said Owen encouragingly.

"Well, if you press me—" said Fatty.

"We do—we does!"

"Then I may as well finish the lot, as you're so pressing."

And Fatty Wynn finished the lot.

He had some little difficulty in rising to his feet when he had finished. He had eaten not wisely, but too well.

"Enjoyed yourself?" asked Redfern respectfully.

"Yes, rather! Thanks!"

"Not at all. It's our duty, you know."

"All serene," said Figgins. "You keep this up and it will be all right. All I want is for you chaps to understand what's what, and to keep in your place."

Redfern turned seriously to his chums.

"Do you understand what's what, Owen?"

"Yes, Reddy."

"Do you understand what's what, Lawrence?"

"Yes, Reddy."

"Good! We all understand what's what, Figgy. What are you School House fellows sniggering at?" demanded Redfern, looking round inquiringly. "It's very important for a chap to understand what's what, and Figgy is very particular about it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see anything to snigger at. We've done our duty, looking after Figgins' health in this way—"

"Looking after my health!" repeated Figgins. "What do you mean?"

"Your health, and Kerr's, and Wynn's," said Redfern blandly. "Wynn's most of all, as he's eaten the most. If Wynn has any pains in his little interior, he must remember that it is for his good."

Fatty Wynn looked alarmed.



Tom Merry & Co. stared at the amazing spectacle of Figgins & Co. sitting down to Redfern's tea, and Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence waiting on them with meek attention and civility. "Look here!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What's the little game?" "It's our place to wait on Figgins," said Owen, with owl-like gravity, "and we're doing it!"

"Pains!" he repeated. "Look here, you bounders, what rotten game have you been playing?" "Game!" said Redfern. "Nothing of the sort. It was for your good. We've only done our duty, haven't we, you chaps?"

"Certainly," said Lawrence. "England expects every man to do his duty. England often gets disappointed. But this time it is all right. We've done our duty."

"Done it brown," agreed Owen.

Figgins & Co. had been about to depart. But they stopped now, and looked very queerly at Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen.

"Look here," said Figgins, with an effort, "if you've been doctoring that grub in any way—"

Fatty Wynn turned quite pale.

"Doctoring the grub!" he murmured.

"Only the jam-tarts and the lemonade," said Redfern cheerfully. "It was for your good, you know—for the sake of your health."

"I—I noticed the lemonade had a taste!" murmured Kerr.

"You villain, what did you put in the lemonade?"

"Only mixed-up some Epsom salts," said Redfern innocently, "and some syrup of figs in the jam. You've taken about enough for a whole hospital, among you. But it will do you good. We've done our duty. Come on, you chaps!"

And Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence walked solemnly away, arm-in-arm. Figgins & Co. stood quite still, looking very pale. From the interested crowd round them came a wild roar. They understood now the extraordinary meekness of Redfern & Co. They yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh!" murmured Figgins.

"Ow!" muttered Kerr.

"Groo!" groaned Fatty Wynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Wynn pressed his hands to his ample waistcoat.

"Ow! Ow! I've got a pain!"

The juniors shrieked.

"I—I—I'll slay that beast Redfern!" gasped Figgins, turning very white. "I—I—I—ow!"

"Yow!"

"Groo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins & Co. dashed away. A roar of laughter followed them from Tom Merry & Co. The leaders of the New House were not seen in public again for some time, but fellows who passed their door in the New House heard the most hair-raising groans proceeding from their study. After the feast had come the reckoning.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Mr. Ratcliff Comes Down Heavy.

TOM MERRY & CO. were almost weeping when they gathered in Blake's study for tea. The joke on the unfortunate Figgins had made them laugh themselves hoarse. The absurd scene of Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence waiting meekly upon the leaders of the New House, and its climax, was too funny.

"Poor old Figgins!" murmured Tom Merry. "He's caught a Tartar in Reddy. That new kid is hot stuff, and no mistake!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Undah the circs, I am wathah pleased that Figgins has been put through it. The awful wottah treated me with the grossest disrespect. I am very much inclined to go and ask Weddy to tea."

"Go ahead, then!" said a cheerful voice at the door. Redfern tapped at the open door and came in, followed by Lawrence and Owen. The heroes of the New House were grinning serenely.

"Hallo!" said Blake.

"Please, we've come," said Redfern.

"Well, of all the cheek—"

"We had a sort of feeling that Gussy wanted to ask us to tea," explained Redfern. "At any rate, we had a sort of feeling that we wanted to come. Didn't we, my children?"

"We did," said Lawrence and Owen.

"Figgins & Co. have scoffed our tea," said Redfern. "We have nothing to eat, and we are thrown on the cold world."

"Pway sit down, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "We have got a weally good spread, you know, and you are vewy welcome."

"Thanks, we will!"

And the New Firm sat down to tea with cheerful faces and good appetites.

Tea in Blake's study was always a cheerful meal—when the juniors were in funds. At other times, when the supplies were low, and there was only a sardine to share among four, it was not so cheerful. But just now there was an excellent spread, and the juniors did it full justice.

A merry buzz of voices ran round the table, and the juniors were all in high spirits, when the door opened, and Monteith, the head prefect, of the New House, looked in.

"Oh! So you're here," said the prefect grimly.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy nodded.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy, we're here," he replied. "Have you come to tea?"

Monteith frowned.

"No, I haven't come to tea; and I wasn't addressing you," he said. "I'm looking for three young rascals belonging to my House."

"You'll have to look further, then," said Redfern. "There are none here."

"I mean you three," said Monteith. "Mr. Ratcliff wants you."

"Ratty wants us!" said Redfern, in astonishment. "My dear chap, there must be some mistake. Ratty can't possibly want us. We don't get on together at all."

Monteith shook a warning finger at the cheerful Redfern.

"You'd better go to his study at once," he said. "He isn't in a good temper, and he might come over to fetch you himself."

"Oh, dear! What does he want us for?" asked Lawrence.

"He knows about your latest little game, that's all."

And Monteith walked away.

Redfern & Co. looked dismayed, and the School House fellows looked sympathetic. Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House, did not have a sweet temper. When he was in a bad humour the New House fellows were always on the look-out for trouble; and he generally was in a bad temper.

"Bai Jove, that's wotten," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Surely Figgins hasn't told him about your little trick?"

"I suppose the awful rotter has found out somehow!" groaned Redfern. "It's marvellous how Ratty finds things out. He's got a wonderful nose for poking into things that don't concern him. What does it matter to him if we've physicked Figgins?"

"Nothin' at all, deah boy. You'd better explain that to him."

"No good explaining things to Ratty," grunted Redfern, as he rose. "Good-bye, you fellows; thanks for the feed."

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"Not at all, deah boy!"

And the New House juniors quitted the study. Their faces were glum as they crossed the quadrangle towards the New House. Mr. Ratcliff seemed to live only for the purpose of making himself obnoxious to easy-going juniors.

"Blessed if I know how he knows anything about it," said Owen. "I suppose he's been listening to the fellows talking. No other master at St. Jim's would take any notice of anything he overheard."

"Oh, it's no good trying to make Ratty play the game," said Redfern despondently. "I'd change him for Railton of the School House with pleasure. What does it matter to him if we jape Figgins & Co.?"

"I believe he'd like us to be on bad terms with Figgys's study," said Lawrence savagely. "He enjoys stirring up mischief!"

Thompson of the Shell met the three as they came in. He greeted them with a solemn wag of the head.

"You're in for it," he remarked.

"Ratty very bad?"

"Yes," said Thompson—"rotten! He's just given me fifty lines for whistling in the passage. He had indigestion all the afternoon, Lefevre says, and the Fifth had a very rough time with him. He takes those rotten white powders for his indigestion—I mean, for his digestion—and they make him worse. They make his temper worse, anyway. Mind how you handle him."

"Nice, ain't it?" growled Redfern, as the trio made their way to Mr. Ratcliff's study.

Redfern knocked.

A voice that bore a great similarity to the grind of a rasp answered the knock.

"Come in!"

The chums of the Fourth entered the lion's den.

Mr. Ratcliff was sitting at his table. His long, thin nose was very red at the end, and that was always a sign that his digestion was at fault. His brow was knitted, and his thin lips drawn tightly together.

"You sent for us, sir?" said Redfern meekly.

Mr. Ratcliff frowned at him.

"Yes, Redfern." He rose to his feet and picked up a cane. "Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn are suffering very much from your mischievous prank, and I am going to punish you for it. I do not approve of these absurd jokes, Redfern, and I must see justice done. I have promised Figgins that you shall all three be punished."

Redfern gasped.

"Did—did Figgins tell you, sir?" he exclaimed.

"Certainly he did."

"My hat!"

"You should not utter those ridiculous speculations in my study, Redfern. Try to show a little better behaviour here, please."

"Sorry, sir. But—but I never dreamed that Figgins would sneak," said Redfern, in amazement.

"The awful rotter!" murmured Owen.

"Silence! It is not sneaking for Figgins to inform his Housemaster of an ill-natured trick that was played upon him, to the detriment of his health," said Mr. Ratcliff. "You do not deny it, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Then hold out your hand!"

Redfern held out his hand. His face was white with anger. He was not angry with Mr. Ratcliff. He expected the Housemaster to be "down" on him; there was no love lost between the hearty, breezy junior and the sour Housemaster of the New House. But Redfern was very angry with Figgins. Whatever might be the japes and raids among the juniors, it was always understood that no fellow was ever to sneak to a master. However they might suffer at one another's hands, the masters and prefects were to be kept out of it—that was the unwritten law that was never broken.

True, Figgins & Co. had been very ratty lately about Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen declining to toe the line, as they called it. They had tried to assert their position as the born leaders of the New House juniors, and they had not succeeded. But that Figgins should come to so disgraceful a resort as sneaking to a master was almost incredible. But Mr. Ratcliff evidently knew all about it, and he stated that Figgins had told him.

Redfern's blue eyes glistened with anger as he held out his hand.

Swish!

Mr. Ratcliff brought the cane down with force. Redfern had to hold out the other hand, and the cane descended upon it with a terrific swish. Redfern had only the two cuts. But they hurt as much as five or six by any other master. Mr. Ratcliff had a way of laying on the cane that was quite his own.

Lawrence and Owen awaited their turns, which soon came. Two cuts each almost doubled them up, and they stood with

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their hands squeezed under their arm-pits, and their faces almost pale with pain.

Mr. Ratcliff laid down the cane, and waved his hand to the door.

"You may go!" he said.

And they went, without a word.

As the door closed behind them, Mr. Ratcliff sat down again, and a sour smile came over his face. His digestion was still bad, but the caning of Redfern & Co. seemed to have afforded him some relief.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
A Bitter Quarrel.

"OH!"

"Ow!"

"Yowp!"

Thus Redfern & Co.

The three chums had gone to their study immediately after leaving Mr. Ratcliff. They sat down in the study and rubbed their hands, and squeezed them, and twisted them to assuage the pain in their aching palms.

But it was not much use. Mr. Ratcliff had laid on the cuts quite scientifically, and the juniors simply had to wait for the pain to pass away.

"Ow!" repeated Redfern, for the twentieth time. "Can't the beast lay it on? Yow!"

"I think he must have been practising with Indian clubs on purpose!" groaned Owen. "Ow! I should like to give him just one! Yow!"

"Groo!" said Lawrence. "But it isn't Ratty who's the worst. It's Figgins! Fancy Figgins sneaking to a House-master!"

"The rotter!"

"I knew he was wild about our setting him down," said Redfern thoughtfully, "and I dare say we were rather liberal with the medicine—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But that's no excuse for his giving us away to Ratty. I can hardly believe it of him," said Redfern.

"Oh, you never know a chap till you find him out!" said Owen. "Ow! I shan't be able to use my hands for hours! Yow!"

"We've got to get even with Figgins & Co. for this!" said Lawrence savagely.

Redfern nodded.

"What-ho! If they're going to take up sneaking to the masters, the sooner they're downed for good the better. But—but it's a queer bizney. I think we'll go and ask Figgins just what he said to Ratty."

"We got it plain enough from Ratty."

"Still, we'll ask Figgins."

"I don't want to speak to the ead!" growled Owen. "You can go if you like!"

"Same here!" said Lawrence.

Redfern rose.

"Then I'll go," he said. "I'll soon get at the facts."

And Redfern, still squeezing his aching hands, walked down the Fourth Form passage to Figgins' study. He knocked at the door and opened it. There was the sound of a mumbling grunt as he opened the door. Figgins and Kerr were there, but Ratty Wynn was not to be seen. Figgins and Kerr glared at Redfern.

"What do you want?" growled Figgins.

Redfern grinned.

"Got over the pain in the little inside?" he asked.

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"Look here," said Redfern. "I dare say that gave you a twist, but you deserved it for your cheek in ordering us to hand over our tea to you. And it was only a jape, too. You've been just as rough on us at times, and we never thought of complaining to a master. That's always supposed to be barred."

"What?"

"Sneaking is a bit too thick, you know!" said Redfern sharply. "Whatever you might have done to us, we should never have said anything to Ratty. And I think you might have shut up. It's rotten!"

"What's rotten?" demanded Kerr.

"Sneaking!"

Figgins and Kerr jumped up.

"Get out of this study!" roared Figgins.

Redfern did not move.

"I want to know whether you've got any explanation to make," he said. "I've come here to speak—"

"You've come here to get a licking!" said Figgins angrily. "I'm open to take all the lickings you can give me!" said Redfern disdainfully. "I'm not afraid of a sneak!"

"A what?" yelled Figgins.

"You heard what I said—a sneak!" retorted Redfern. It was sneaking to tell old Ratty about the jape—"

Redfern got no further. Figgins rushed right at him, and they closed and waltzed round the study. Redfern was dragged round to the door, and sent whirling out into the passage. He crashed upon the floor with a loud bump.

"There!" gasped Figgins.

"Yaroo!"

"If you come into this study again——"

"I'm jolly well coming, anyhow!" roared Redfern furiously.

He was up again in a moment, and rushing at Figgins.

"Pitch him out, Figgy!" yelled Kerr.

"I'm going to!" gasped Figgins.

They struggled in the doorway. The heavy tramping of feet, the fierce gasping for breath, brought a crowd of juniors to the spot, and also Kildare of the Sixth.

The St. Jim's captain uttered an angry exclamation at the sight of the two fighting juniors.

"Stop that!" he roared.

Redfern and Figgins did not even hear. Kildare strode up to them, and each of them was seized by the collar in a grasp of iron, and Kildare, exerting his great strength, wrenched them forcibly apart.

"Ow!" gasped Figgins.

"Oh!" grunted Redfern.

"You young asses, what do you mean by this?" Kildare exclaimed angrily. "You will take two-hundred lines each, and go and write them out at once! That will keep you busy till dinner! Cut off to your own study, Redfern!"

"Look here, Kildare——"

"I say——"

"Cut off, and don't let's have any more of this!" said Kildare, frowning. "Mind, I shall keep an eye on you!"

"We'll settle this after school to-morrow!" said Figgins savagely, as soon as Kildare was out of earshot.

Redfern nodded.

"Just what I was thinking," he agreed.

"Half-past five, behind the chapel, then!"

"I'll be there!"

"Good!"

And then they separated.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Figgins against Redfern.

REDFERN, Owen, and Lawrence arrived upon the scene well to time the next afternoon. Lawrence carried a little bundle under his arm, which, when opened, revealed a sponge and a towel and a tin basin. The New Firm had come prepared.

Tom Merry looked in a perplexed way at the New House rivals. He did not understand how matters had come to this pass, and it troubled him. He was convinced in his own mind that Redfern and Figgins were two of the best, and yet it was evident that they were very bitter against one another. And bitterness was really quite foreign to the natures of both the juniors.

"I don't want to chip in, in a New House affair," said Tom Merry; "but this seems rotten to me. Can't this be arranged?"

"No!" said Figgins. "It can't! Unless Redfern chooses to take back what he said, and apologise for it!"

Redfern's eyes gleamed.

"I'm not likely to take back the truth!" he said.

"That's enough!" said Figgins.

"Weally, if you would allow me to arrange the mattah——"

"Oh, shut up, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to shut up!"

"Why can't you explain what you've got up against one another?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I've told you!" growled Figgins. "Don't waste time!"

"What did you call Figgins a sneak for, Reddy?"

"Because he is one!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, don't jaw!" said Figgins savagely. "If you don't buck up with the arrangements, you fellows, I shall start on the rotter at once!"

"I'm ready!" snapped Redfern.

"Gloves on, I suppose!" said Tom Merry.

"No!"

"Well, you're a pair of silly asses, that's all I've got to say!" growled the captain of the Shell.

"Quite enough, too!" said Redfern.

Redfern stripped off his jacket and waistcoat, and tied his braces round his waist. The two adversaries faced one another, and Kerr called to Tom Merry:

"You can keep time, Tom Merry, as an outsider in this!"

"All serene!"

And Tom Merry took out his silver watch to keep time.

"Two-minute rounds, and one-minute rests!" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good! Got ready!" A pause. "Time!" Figgins and Redfern did not shake hands. At the call of "Time!" the fight began, and in a moment it was raging furiously.

Tom Merry stood watch in hand, and the other fellows formed a ring round the combatants.

The crowd, which was increasing in numbers every moment, looked on with breathless interest at the first round of that historic fight.

Figgins and Redfern had had many little rubs since Reddy's first arrival at St. Jim's; but they had never stood up to one another in a set mill before. And as both of them were keen, athletic, and had boundless pluck, the combat was certain to be a severe and a protracted one.

Redfern was not quite so tall as Figgins, and not quite so long in the reach, but he was more stoutly built, and he was known to possess very unusual strength; and both the juniors were famous boxers.

They seemed to be pretty evenly matched as they toed the line and faced one another in the first round.

And so they were. The fight was hard from the beginning, and when Tom Merry called "Time!" at the end of the first round, both the juniors were looking pretty well punished.

Redfern staggered a little as he moved to his corner, and sank upon the knee Lawrence made for him, while Owen sponged his heated face.

Figgins gasped as Kerr performed the same office for him. "Stick to it!" murmured Kerr. "You're bound to lick him, Figgy, old man!"

Figgins gritted his teeth. "I'll lick him or bust!" he said.

"That's the music!" "I think you ought to have had your tea first," said Fatty Wynn anxiously. "It's no use going into a thing of this sort hungry. You want to lay a solid foundation, you know!"

Figgins grinned. "That's all right, Fatty. We'll have tea when I've licked Redfern!"

"If you'd like a snack between rounds, I'll cut across to the tuckshop, Figgy, old man!"

"Ha, ha, ha! No!" "Time!" said Tom Merry.

Figgins jumped up. Redfern rose from his second's knee with equal alacrity, and they came into the ring again.

"Now look out for fireworks!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! I disapprove of this, you know."

"Go it, Figgy!" "Pile in, Reddy!"

Figgins and Redfern were "going it" and "piling in" with a vim, and they needed no encouragement.

They were at it hammer and tongs. Neither thought so much of defence as of attack, with the result that both were badly punished.

Figgins got in several body blows upon his adversary that made Redfern stagger, and the chief of the New Firm was driven round the ring; but just at the end of the round he deceived Figgins with a feint, and delivered a crashing upper-cut that swept the long-legged junior fairly off his feet.

Bump!

Figgins came down heavily upon his back, his senses swimming, and the chapel and the trees seeming to swim around him.

Had the round gone on, Figgins would certainly have been counted out; but the call of "Time!" came to his rescue.

"Time!" Kerr and Wynn picked up their champion, and bore him to his corner.

Figgins was looking dazed and a little sick as he sat on Fatty Wynn's knee. He put his hand to his jaw, which was aching terribly.

"Teeth all right?" muttered Kerr.

"Yes, I think so."

"You must look-out for that upper-cut. It's a trick of his!"

"He shan't do it again," said Figgins.

On the other side of the ring, Lawrence and Owen were jubilant. They knew that that heavy fall must tell upon Figgins, powerful as he was.

"Another like that; and he's out," said Lawrence. "You are handling him splendidly, Reddy, old man! The blessed sneak won't last two more rounds!"

"He's putting up a good fight, though," remarked Redfern. "The beggar's got plenty of pluck, sneak or not!"

"Pile in, and he's done," said Owen confidently.

"Yes, I'm going to pile in, rather!"

Perhaps Redfern piled in a little recklessly in the next round. At all events, he laid himself open to a terrific right-hander from Figgins, which crashed upon his nose and sent him spinning. He grunted painfully as he struck the earth.

"Count! Count!" yelled Kerr.

Tom Merry was counting.

"One—two—three—four!" Redfern did not move.

Lawrence and Owen watched him anxiously. If he was counted out now the fight was over, and their champion was licked.

"Five—six—seven—"

"Oh, Reddy!" murmured Lawrence.

"Eight—"

Figgins stepped back.

By all the laws of the Ring he was entitled to stand by, and knock Redfern down again as he attempted to rise, and had Figgins done so, Reddy would infallibly have been knocked out.

But Figgins was not inclined to use his advantage. He was very bitter against Redfern, but he did not want to take any advantage of him. He stepped back and dropped his hands, and stood waiting quietly.

"Nine!"

Redfern staggered to his feet.

"Come on!" he muttered thickly.

And he groped half-blindly towards Figgins.

"Good old Figgy!" said Jack Blake. "That's just like him!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wogard Figgay's conduct as vewy wight and pwopah!"

Just as Tom Merry was about to call time there was a shout from Pratt of the Fourth, who was perched on the chapel aisle, and had a view over the heads of the crowd.

"Cave!"

"Some rotten prefect, of course," growled Blake.

"It's Ratty."

"Oh!"

"Time!" shouted Tom Merry.

Figgins and Redfern dropped their hands and stepped back, gasping, and very unsteady upon their feet. At the same moment the ring of juniors opened, and Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House, strode upon the scene.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Taken Before the Head.

MR. RATCLIFF did not speak for a moment. He stood looking at the two battered juniors, in the midst of a general silence. There was dismay in every face.

Figgins and Redfern looked at Mr. Ratcliff as he stood scanning them—or, rather, they tried to look at him. Their eyes were blinking very painfully, and certainly their faces wore in a state that Mr. Ratcliff was justified in considering disgraceful.

The silence grew quite painful.

"So you are fighting," said Mr. Ratcliff, at last.

No reply.

"Which of you began it?"

There was a sniff from the crowd. That was just like Mr. Ratcliff—to try and make a fellow sneak if he could.

Neither Redfern nor Figgins answered.

"I asked which of you began this disgraceful combat?" said Mr. Ratcliff, raising his voice a little.

Still no answer.

"Very well," said the New House master, compressing his lips. "I must take it that you are equally to blame."

"Yes, sir," said Redfern.

"This is perfectly disgraceful," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Look at yourselves! Do you think you are fit to be seen in any respectable school?"

Silence.

"Are you not ashamed of yourselves?"

Silence.

"I shall not deal with this matter myself," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I shall take you both to the Head. Follow me."

"Oh, sir."

"Follow me at once."

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ANSWERS

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The juniors did not move. Mr. Ratcliff, if he had thought the matter out for hours could not have devised a way of hitting them harder. Redfern and Figgins respected the kind old Head of St. Jim's, and valued his good opinion very much, and to be taken before him in their present battered and bleeding state went more against the grain than the hardest caning from Mr. Ratcliff.

"If—if you please, sir," stammered Figgins, "I—I'd rather you caned me, sir!"

"So would I, sir," said Redfern. Mr. Ratcliff smiled sneeringly. "You do not wish Dr. Holmes to see you in that disgusting condition, apparently," he said.

"No, sir, please," said both juniors at once. "Well, you should have thought of that before. Follow me."

And Mr. Ratcliff stalked away. Redfern and Figgins followed him. There was no help for it; they had to obey the Housemaster's orders. But they went with heavy hearts and glinting eyes. They had never liked the harsh, sour Housemaster, but they came perilously near to hating him at that moment.

They followed Mr. Ratcliff into the Head's study. Dr. Holmes rose from his chair and looked at them in amazement and horror.

Black eyes and swollen noses, and cut lips, and rumpled hair, and torn collars, certainly presented a shocking sight to the eyes of Dr. Holmes.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "What has happened, Mr. Ratcliff?"

The New Housemaster smiled grimly. His chance had come at last. These two boys, who had been the leaders of the outbreak against his authority in the New House, were at his mercy at last, and he did not mean to spare them.

"I have deemed it my duty to bring this matter to your notice, sir," he said. "I feel that it is too serious for me to deal with, even as a Housemaster. These two utterly abandoned boys have been fighting like hooligans, or rather like wild cats. You see the state they are in."

"Bless my soul!" "If they had been fighting with gloves on, I should have dealt with the matter myself, sir—severely, but, I hope, justly," said Mr. Ratcliff. "But this disgraceful exhibition of savagery is quite beyond me. As their Housemaster, I can-

not give these two boys a good character. If you thought fit to expel them from the school, I could only approve, and I should not feel justified in asking for leniency towards them."

Dr. Holmes looked sternly at the two culprits. "What have you to say?" he demanded. The juniors looked at one another, and then at the carpet. Evidently they had nothing to say; at all events, they did not say anything.

"You have been fighting, Figgins and Redfern?" "Yes, sir." "With one another." "Yes, sir." "Why?"

"We—we had a row, sir," said Figgins hesitatingly. "That's all, sir," said Redfern.

Dr. Holmes sat down again and scanned the two juniors closely. Their battered and bruised faces reddened under his searching glance. They were only too keenly conscious of their disreputable looks—which seemed more out of place than ever in the quiet, cool, reposeful study of the Head of St. Jim's.

"I do not understand this," said the Head slowly. "I think it will be necessary to investigate a little further, Mr. Ratcliff."

The New Housemaster looked as impatient as he dared. "The matter appears to me quite clear," he said. "These two boys have been guilty of outrageous and disgraceful conduct. Their faces will be battered for days, if not weeks, after this hooligan combat. They are a disgrace to the school. I think they should be sent away, sir. That is my firm opinion."

Figgins gave a little gasp of dismay. Redfern's eyes gleamed. They had never realised before how thoroughly their Housemaster detested them, and how bitterly he remembered that old affair of the barring-out.

At the worst, what they had done would be well punished by a flogging; but it was evidently Mr. Ratcliff's desire to get them expelled if possible.

Dr. Holmes did not reply to the Housemaster. He seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Well, sir?" said Mr. Ratcliff. The Head looked at the juniors again.

"I think there is more in this than appears on the surface," he said quietly. "Figgins and Redfern, I must have a full explanation of this."

The Head's tone was quiet, but very decided, and Mr. Ratcliff bit his lip and was silent.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER, Quite Cleared Up.

Figgins looked at Redfern, and Redfern looked at Figgins. Neither spoke.

They had nothing to say. They had fought because they were on bad terms, and they both believed that they had every reason to be on bad terms. But they did not want to explain all that to the Head. For one fellow to complain about another to a master came under the head of "sneaking." And that was a thing that Figgins and Redfern wanted to avoid. They stood with their eyes upon the carpet, and the flush deepening in their cheeks, and made no answer to Dr. Holmes.

"Come," said Dr. Holmes quietly and kindly. "I will ask you first, Figgins. Both of you boys have impressed me favourably. Neither of you is of a spiteful or revengeful nature. You must surely have had some powerful motive for acting in this manner which Mr. Ratcliff justly describes as outrageous and disgraceful. You must admit that you are in a state which would be a disgrace to any school."

"I—I suppose so, sir," said Figgins. "Why did you fight without gloves?"

"Because—because—"

"Well?" "Because we were ratty, I suppose, sir."

"You mean you felt very bitter against one another?" "Well, yes, sir."

"Why?" Figgins was silent. "Can you answer me, Redfern?"

No reply. "Come," said the Head, who could see far more deeply into the matter than the juniors themselves, "Come, this will not do. What cause can you possibly have had for this bitterness? What had Redfern done to you, Figgins? I insist upon an answer!"

Figgins looked at Redfern. "Go ahead," murmured Reddy. "I don't mind."

"He called me a sneak, sir," said Figgins, flushing at the remembrance of the insult.

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"That was very wrong, Redfern. Why did you do so?"

"Because he sneaked, sir," said Redfern promptly.

Figgins clenched his hands.

"If we weren't here——" he began hotly.

Dr. Holmes frowned.

"Silence, Figgins."

Figgins turned crimson.

"I—I'm sorry, sir."

"You deny what Redfern has stated?"

"Yes, sir. I've never sneaked in my life. It's a rotten thing to say about any chap," said Figgins. "I've never given him any cause to say it."

"You jolly well have, and you know it!" said Redfern.

Mr. Ratcliff walked to the window, biting his lip. His impatience at this peculiar scene was so great that he could scarcely hide it, even in the presence of the Head. The Head of St. Jim's was acting like a good-natured prefect trying to make peace between two quarrelsome juniors. It seemed absurd to Mr. Ratcliff. He had certainly never tried to make peace in his life.

It did not seem absurd to the Head. If he could remove a misunderstanding, and set two fellows who were bitter against one another upon good terms, he would not regret the quarter of an hour it had cost him.

"We will go into this," said the Head good-naturedly. "I think perhaps there is a misunderstanding. Tell me the whole matter. You have no objection, Figgins, to Redfern telling me why he makes this charge against you?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Then go on, Redfern."

"We japed Figgins yesterday, sir," said Redfern. "He raided our tea, and we physicked him—put physic in the jam and lemonade, sir, and gave him and Kerr and Wynn a twist. I dare say it was rather thick——"

The Head smiled.

"You should not have done that, Redfern. But, after all, there was no great harm done, I dare say."

"No, sir," said Figgins, "we didn't mind—after we got over the physic. Redfern can't say that we bore malice about it. We jape each other often enough."

"But you sneaked about it," said Redfern.

"I didn't!" roared Figgins. "I——"

"Silence, Figgins!"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

"Do you mean, Redfern, that Figgins informed a master?" asked the Head.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ratcliff sent Monteith to fetch us into his study, and he cued us for it," said Redfern. "We didn't mind the caning, if Ratty—ahem!—if Mr. Ratcliff had found it out by accident. But to have a fellow sneak——"

"Look here, Redfern——"

"Did you inform Mr. Ratcliff, Figgins?"

"No, sir."

"My hat!" exclaimed Redfern. "How can you have the nerve to stand there and say that, with Mr. Ratcliff himself present?"

"Perhaps you made a mistake, Redfern, in supposing——"

"But Mr. Ratcliff himself told us, sir!" exclaimed Redfern excitedly.

"Oh! That alters the case, of course," said the Head.

Figgins almost staggered.

"You—you say that Mr. Ratcliff told you we had told him?" he gasped.

"Yes, he did."

"Impossible!"

"He told all of us—Lawrence, Owen, and me."

"But—but he couldn't have!" panted Figgins. "I tell you we didn't tell him. I——"

"Please be silent, Figgins. Mr. Ratcliff, perhaps you can clear this up?" said the Head gently. "As I supposed, it is a case of misapprehension."

Mr. Ratcliff turned from the window, his lips tightening a little. He was beginning to wish that he had not brought Figgins and Redfern to the Head's study, after all. He had certainly not anticipated anything of this sort. But he felt that he ought to have remembered that Dr. Holmes' methods were nothing like his own.

"Did I tell you about that jape of Redfern's, sir?" burst out Figgins.

"Ahem——"

"You will not mind clearing this up, I am sure, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head gently, but with a tone of firmness in his voice, that was like iron. "You are aware that it

would be very much against my wish to encourage tale-bearing among the boys, and I am sure that you have not intentionally done so."

"Redfern appears to—have placed a somewhat erroneous construction upon what I said to him," said Mr. Ratcliff haltingly. "I cannot say that Figgins actually informed me of the occurrence."

"Oh!" said Redfern. "But you said he had, sir!"

"I did not, Redfern. I said I had learned of it, and that Figgins had—er—told me what was the matter with him, or words to that effect. I do not remember the exact words I used, as I attached no importance whatever to the matter. You see, sir," the Housemaster explained, turning to the Head with a slightly flushed face, "after I had learned of the affair, which was the talk of the whole House, I saw Figgins and questioned him, and extracted from him what was the matter with him and with Kerr and Wynn. I cannot say that he mentioned Redfern's name. In fact, he did not do so, and I did not convey to Redfern that he did. I told Redfern that Figgins had informed me of the matter, meaning to refer to the dose of physic from which he and Kerr and Wynn were suffering."

"Oh!" gasped Redfern.

Dr. Holmes looked hard at the Housemaster.

"I certainly did not mean to infer that Figgins had informed me of the matter in the first place, or had mentioned Redfern's name. That information I received from the talk that was going on all through the House, and which I could not help hearing."

"Indeed," said Dr. Holmes coldly.

Redfern looked at Figgins.

"I—I say, I'm sorry, Figgys," he faltered. "I—I misunderstood Mr. Ratcliff, and—and I came to your study, and you didn't deny it—you just went for me——"

"What would you do if a chap asked you if you were a sneak?" demanded Figgins.

"Go for him!" said Redfern promptly.

"Well then——"

"This is a very unfortunate matter," said the Head. "You appear to have used unfortunate words, Mr. Ratcliff, which gave Redfern the impression that Figgins had been telling tales. I do not see what other construction he could really have put upon your words, though, of course, I understand that you did not wish to give him that impression. It was very, very wrong for these juniors to fight as they have done. But I am sure that both of them are very sorry now."

"Oh, yes, sir!" said both the juniors.

"I shall therefore excuse you," said the Head.

Mr. Ratcliff gasped.

"Excuse them, sir!" he ejaculated.

"Certainly!" said the Head. "As a matter of fact, they appear to have punished one another severely enough. And, as the whole matter was due to a misunderstanding, I shall allow it to pass. I warn them never to allow such a thing to happen again, and I caution them to be more careful before they jump to conclusions. You may go, my boys."

"Thank you, sir!"

The two juniors quitted the study.

"One moment, Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head, as the New House master was about to follow. "I have a few words to say to you."

Mr. Ratcliff paused, almost blind with rage. He did not speak—words failed him at that moment.

"You have been the unconscious cause of this trouble. Mr. Ratcliff," said the Head gravely. "I regard it as a serious matter for a boyish friendship to be broken. You might even give a suspicious boy the impression that you had deliberately misled Redfern, in order to break a friendship. I know you have a prejudice against these two boys, on account of the old trouble in your House. I must ask you, Mr. Ratcliff, to be more careful, and to try to overcome this prejudice against two boys who may be a little unruly, but who have splendid qualities, and are a credit to the school. I hope you will think over what I have said."

Mr. Ratcliff left the study, breathless with fury. He had taken Redfern and Figgins there to be severely punished—to be flogged, if not expelled. And, instead of that, the Head had reconciled them—and reprimanded him. Truly, Mr. Ratcliff was a bad hand at Machiavellian plotting! Mr. Ratcliff's face was quite white as he walked across the quadrangle to the New House. And he did not even turn his head as somebody hissed him from behind the elms.

THE END.

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A sailing ship was coming up with the breeze, and she appeared to be coming directly towards them. Pete started the steam man's arms flashing against the tray.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Steam Man Runs Amok—The Comrades at Bay—A Narrow Escape—Terrible Privations—Side by Side with Death.

JACK, Sam, and Pete had just finished breakfast at their hotel, and they had made arrangements to spend the next few days in the forest.

The fact is, they were running short of money, pending their next remittance, and when they had settled up their hotel bill they made the pleasing discovery that there was nothing left for themselves. Thus it was they decided to camp in the forest until such time as the mail arrived.

Pete was at the present moment waiting for the comrades, who had gone upstairs to make their final preparations, and as he had nothing to do, he decided to help the waiter by allowing his steam man to clear the breakfast-table.

There was a large tray in the hall, and Pete fixed this in his steam man's hands; then he piled it up with all the things that were on the table.

"Oh, here you are, boys!" he exclaimed, as Jack and Sam entered the room.

"Ha, ha, ha! What are you trying to do?" inquired Jack.

"I ain't doing anything, Jack," answered Pete. "You see, Smithers, de landlord, ain't in a good temper dis morning. I don't tink he likes us going away like dis, 'cos he won't be able to swindle us during de next week. Well, I want to please de man before we leabe, and so I am letting my steam man assist him wid de work. Oh, dere you are, Smithers! Get out ob de way of my steam man!"

"Take those things off at once!" roared Smithers. "I am helping you wid your house duties, old hoss," said Pete, starting his steam man marching from the room.

"I won't have this! Stop the brutal thing!" cried Smithers.

"Hi, golly! De steam man is going do wrong way!" cried Pete, touching one of the levers with a view to stopping him.

In his haste he had the misfortune to touch the one that moved his arms, and the effect was really extraordinary. The steam man flung his arms above his head, and the whole of the breakfast-things fell clattering over the landlord's head. He received a shower-bath of broken china, for plates and dishes smashed as they struck against each other, but not so badly as they smashed when they fell to the floor.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "You will break dat china if you dance amongst it like dat, old hoss. I will bring your tea-tray back when we return. Sorry I can't stop to finish de clearing, but my steam man appears to be in a hurry. Golly! He's damaging an old gentleman now!"

Pete got his steam man through the doorway, but as the puffing creature gained the street, he brought the tray down on the top of a gentleman's head with a force that caused the astonished man to sit on the path; then the steam man kicked him into the road, and went prancing along the path, banging his tea-tray up and down, and effectually clearing the pathway.

The assaulted gentleman leapt to his feet, and rushed after Pete, howling to him to stop, but that worthy was trying to keep pace with the steam man, who was going through the town full-tilt.

"I ain't got time to listen to your conversation now, old hoss!" bawled Pete. "Don't you see I'm busy wid my steam man? Talk to Jack and Sammy!"

Jack and Sam, however, had crossed the street, not caring to take the blame for the steam man's extraordinary behaviour.

It was not until they had left the town that Pete slackened the steam man's pace, and stopped the movement of his arms, and now Jack and Sam caught him up.

"We can return dat tray later on," observed Pete. "It will do to carry all de game we shoot. What are you guffawing at, Jack?"

"The landlord and the crockery. You made him cross." THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 22.

A SPLENDID PLATE IS PRESENTED FREE WITH NEXT FRIDAY'S ISSUE!

"He will get ober dat. Now we will hab a nice time ob it in the Asiatic African forest. You need not shoot lions, Sammy, only tings fit to eat."

It so happened that Sam shot nothing, and Pete was wrong on another point. They were not destined to have anything like a nice time in the African forest.

In the first place, they decided to follow the river, and they did so until they reached the first cataract, and now, without the slightest warning, a shower of spears struck upon the rocks around them.

The comrades sprang to cover, Pete whistling to his dog Rory to follow, while spears and arrows rattled upon the steam man.

"Well, dey won't do him any harm," observed Pete. "At de same time, it seems to me dat dey are likely to do us some harm."

"They cannot attack us in the rear," observed Sam, gazing up at the rocks that towered above them; "but then we cannot escape that way."

"Neither could we swim the river," said Jack. "If we were to attempt it we should be carried down by the tide, and become an easy mark for the spears and arrows. Besides, we should have to abandon your steam man."

"Was tinkin' if I could send him amongst dem, so as to scatter dem," observed Pete.

"Here, you keep under cover!" cried Sam, dragging him back, for as he stepped from behind the rocks that sheltered them the savages once more opened fire; and the worst of it was that the surrounding bushes were so dense that it was impossible for the comrades to see their foes. Sam had not yet fired a single shot.

He was soon, however, compelled to do so, for suddenly the savages' war-cry rang out, and a vast number charged down on the spot where the comrades had sought shelter.

Then their rifles rang out, and the yelling savages wavered as the galling fire met them. Every shot was emptied from the repeating-rifles, for the comrades knew that the rush must be checked at any cost.

There was no time to reload the weapons, but Jack and Sam drew their revolvers, and as they fired into the yelling throng, Pete sprang from cover.

How he escaped the spears and arrows that were darkening the air seemed miraculous. Yet escape them he did, and having gained his steam man, started his arms and legs, he dashed into the midst of the savages, striking them down with his tray, and kicking them from his path.

The savages were not accustomed to such a strange foe as this. They rushed from the spot, and Pete brought his steam man round, while Jack and Sam reloaded as quickly as they possibly could.

"Well, dat's all right, boys," exclaimed Pete; "and de steam man in dat position will sort ob protect us from de foe. I don't quite see how dey are going to take dis place by storm."

"I reckon they won't try a rush just yet!" exclaimed Sam. "If they make a second attack, they are nearly sure to wait till it is dark."

"P'raps dey will gib us up as a bad job, Sammy," suggested Pete.

"Trust a savage for that!"

"I ain't going to trust a savage for anything."

"What I mean to say is, that they will naturally be savage at the wounds some of them have received, and in that case they are nearly certain to remain here till they get us into their power."

"Well, dat's all right. Dey can do de waiting, but I ain't going to do anything ob de sort. We ain't had anything to eat since breakfast, and it stands to reason dat we shall be mighty hungry by night-time. Now, dere are plenty ob trees about dis part. What is to prevent us building a raft? Dey will neber guess what we are doing. De chances are dey will tink we are just cutting down de trees for fortifications. Well, when we hab made de raft, using our free lassos to tie it togeder, we can just slip it into de water, all get on it, and escape in de darkness. See?"

"It is not a bad idea," said Jack.

"I ain't able to form bad ideas, Jack. All my ideas are good, only some are better dan oders. Dis may be one ob dese dat is better dan de ones dat ain't so good, but I shall be able to tell you dat directly we hab escaped de savages. You neber can tell weder an idea is good or bad till you hab worked it out. In dat respect dere's a lot ob similarity between an idea and a nut or an egg. You want to know de inner meaning ob it before you can tell weder it is bad or good."

"I reckon if you are going to build a raft, you had better start on it," said Sam. "There is too much talk about you, and too little work."

"I don't care for dese impersonal remarks, Sammy!"

said Pete, setting to work. "Just you two keep a mighty smart look-out for de savages, and if dey show demselves, as dey are nearly sure to do directly dey hear de sounds ob chopping, just you try to convince dem dat it would had been sort ob safer if dey hadn't done so."

Pete worked splendidly now. He believed that his idea of the raft was the only way in which they could escape, as it was very certain that if they attempted to make their way through the forest they would be attacked by the savages, whose numbers were such as would give them very little chance.

Once or twice Sam had to fire, and each time one of the savages was wounded, for Sam was not the sort of man to miss his aim in a case of life or death like that.

Pete worked magnificently. There were plenty of trees round about, and although arrows were shot almost continuously, the branches of the surrounding trees afforded him shelter, while his comrades kept such close watch that the savages were afraid to expose themselves to take proper aim.

By the time it was dark Pete had constructed his raft, which was of such dimensions that it would carry them and the steam man with the greatest ease; indeed, it would have carried far more than their weight.

Pete now cut rollers, and, using a long pole as a lever, got his raft into the water without very much difficulty, while the noise of the falling waters prevented the savages hearing the plunge.

The comrades only waited until it was quite dark, and then they determined to run the gauntlet, for they knew that any moment an attack might be made.

Pete got his steam man aboard all right, and placed him in the exact centre of the raft, and Jack and Sam were just about to follow, when once more the savages' war-cry rang out.

"Go on, boys!" cried Pete, pitching Rory on the raft. "You can fire from dere."

Jack and Sam did so at random, though they knew pretty well the direction from which the savages would be coming. But although they kept up a very heavy fire with their repeating-rifles, it failed to check the savages' furious rush.

On they came, howling like a pack of hungry wolves. Pete leapt on the raft, and with the long pole urged it into the rapids; then onwards it was swept, and the savages uttered howls of fury when they found that their enemies were no longer in their stronghold, which the vindictive wretches had now gained.

They seemed at once to guess how they had escaped, for showers of spears and arrows fell into the water, some of them striking the raft.

Pete kept the raft in the centre of the rapids, and as it was swept on by the raging torrent, twice it was hurled against the rocks, and the comrades were nearly jerked from it.

Now, also, it seemed as though the savages had caught sight of them, for the arrows fell with greater precision. They rattled against the steam man, and both Jack and Sam were wounded, although so far Pete had escaped.

Onwards they were swept by the swift tide, and now the spears and arrows dropped astern of them. Jack and Sam ceased firing, and they were just congratulating themselves on their lucky escape, when, in trying to steer the raft clear of some rocks, Pete gave such a violent wrench to his pole that it broke off short.

"Look at dat now!" he growled, flinging the short piece left in his hands into the water. "Ain't it disgusting to tink dat a pole ain't stronger dan dat! Still, de tide is bound to take us where we want to go. Dere ain't any more falls, so we needn't boder ourselves 'bout avoiding dem. Now, den, boys, I hab an idea you are wounded, and de next best ting to do is to bind up de wounds."

Neither of the wounds was serious, provided that the arrows had not been poisoned; but Pete knew there was considerable fear of this, and he felt very uncomfortable about the matter, although he said nothing concerning his fears.

At last the shouts of their pursuers died away in the distance, and now Pete seated himself on the raft, lighted his pipe, and chatted with the comrades, who followed his example.

The day had been intensely hot, and a mist hung over the river, which deepened as they were swept down the tide, until at last they found themselves in a fog so dense that it was impossible to see many yards ahead.

"I tell you what it is!" exclaimed Jack, when several hours had elapsed. "We are being carried out to sea. This is a sea fog."

"Do you tink dat matters, Jack?" inquired Pete.

"Well, it will naturally matter if we never reach the shore again."

"Den what's de next best ting to be done?"

"We can only wait till the fog lifts, or until day breaks."

"In dat case, I should say we may as well do it sleeping as waking. Seeing dat you two are wounded, suppose you try to get some sleep while I keep watch?"

"I reckon the wounds are nothing," said Sam. "Does yours give you any pain, Jack?"

"No; it is little more than a scratch! I don't think the arrows could have been poisoned, or we should have felt the effects before now. As a matter of fact, it is quite useless for any of us to keep watch, because there is nothing to be seen, and even if there, were it would be quite impossible for us to see it in the fog. However, it is sure to clear directly the wind springs up. The water is salt here, so that if we are not already at sea, we must be near the river's mouth."

"Should say dat directly de day breaks de people on shore will see us, and put off in a boat," observed Pete, stretching himself at full length on the raft.

Towards morning a wind sprang up, but it did not clear the fog away as quickly as Jack had anticipated.

Fortunately, the wind was very light, so that there were no waves to speak of; but the darkness remained intense, and it was still pitch black when Jack and Sam fell asleep. Pete had been snoring for a couple of hours or more.

Pete was the first to wake the following morning. Day was just dawning, and the fog had cleared away, but there was not yet sufficient light to enable him to see far.

By the time the sun had risen above the horizon Jack and Sam awoke.

"How are de wounds, boys?" inquired Pete.

"I'm all right," answered Sam.

"So am I," said Jack, gazing round. "Ah, I very much doubt if any of us are right! We are out of sight of land!"

And so they were! They did not know in which direction to look for it, but all directions were the same. There was no sign of land on any side, only one great circle of water, without a vessel on it.

They had taken the precaution of filling their flasks in the river, but they had already been nearly twenty-four hours without food, and their position was such as might fill any men with dread.

Pete did not seem to trouble himself about the matter. All he cared for was that Jack and Sam were all right, and he appeared to be quite confident that they would be picked up by some passing vessel.

So lively and sanguine was he that, somehow, Jack and Sam felt their spirits cheered, and they were soon laughing with him.

But as the day passed by, and the sun rose to its full power, their sufferings commenced.

Poor Rory suffered keenly, too; and this so affected Pete that he did not dare to speak about it. Several times Rory tried to drink the salt water, and as his thirst increased, Pete had the greatest difficulty to prevent his doing so.

From time to time he gave the poor dog some of the water from his flask; but Rory did not appear to understand the position at all, and at last Pete allowed him to taste the salt water, hoping he would understand why he was not allowed to drink it.

But soon every drop of water was gone, and then commenced sufferings such as only those who have undergone them can realise.

From time to time Rory would utter a plaintive howl, but Pete could generally soothe him, and at last the faithful dog seemed to realise the true state of things. He ceased to howl, and lay so still that it frightened Pete more than the howling.

Then Jack and Sam showed signs of sinking.

Neither the heat nor the privations affected Pete so much. He had a wonderful constitution, and he kept as cheerful as possible under the circumstances, although it was a very difficult task, seeing that he was compelled to watch his comrades gradually growing weaker and weaker.

Three awful days passed by, then, on the third night, Pete uttered a shout of joy that caused his comrades to raise themselves wearily.

It was about midnight and very dark. The sea was as calm as a pond, for there was not a breath of wind.

But as the comrades listened they heard the throbbing of an engine, and presently they saw the white light of a steamer.

Pete discharged his rifle again and again, and shouted as loudly as he could; but his throat was so parched that his voice did not carry far. That white light was rushing towards them, and he knew that the steamer was heading dead for the raft, and would surely run it down unless her course were changed.

Nearer and nearer that light rushed. Pete kept firing

the weapons, and shouting as loudly as he could. It seemed to him that being run down would be preferable to the steamer passing them unheeded.

His eyes were fixed on the light all the time, then, to his dismay, he gradually saw a red light as well, and he knew that the vessel would pass them in the darkness.

It was her port light, and soon that was the only one Pete saw, while the great vessel swept past them so close that the wash she caused flooded over the raft.

"Dere will be anoder one just directly, boys!" gasped Pete. "Plenty ob vessels will be passing dis way, and de wind is going to spring up in de night, so dat we shall hab sailing vessels coming along as well."

Pete was right about the wind, but he was utterly wrong concerning the vessels, for when day broke none were in sight.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Loss of the Steam Man—Bill, the Doctor—Marks, the Skipper—A Nasty Voyage—Trouble Aboard—Penniless.

THE comrades felt that it would be utterly impossible to go through another day, and yet they were compelled to do so, but as it was drawing to a close, once more their hopes were raised.

A sailing-ship was coming up with the breeze, and she appeared to be coming directly towards them. Now, an idea occurred to Pete. He filled the boiler of his steam man with sea-water, and started his arms moving so that he clashed his fist against the large tin tray.

"It's all right, boys!" he exclaimed. "Dey are bound to hear dat noise. I'll fire some shots as well, and de two combined will let dese aboard know dat we'm aboard dis raft."

Jack and Sam were too weak and exhausted to reply. Pete, on the other hand, appeared to regain strength in a remarkable manner. The fact is, he felt hope once more.

It was still light, and although the vessel was a great distance from them yet, he felt confident that if she came at all close to them that they must be seen by those aboard.

The wind was very light, and at first the dread seized Pete that she could not be coming towards them, though he said nothing of these fears, and, at last, he saw that there was no need for them. The vessel drew closer and closer, and now Pete started his steam man going at full speed, while the noise he made with the tray certainly ought to have been heard aboard.

In deep anxiety the comrades watched. She was passing them, though so close that they could see men looking over her bulwarks at them.

"Can dere be such men in all dis world?" groaned Pete. "Ah, I tought not! I felt sure ob it. Her course is changed. She luffs! Dey are going to save us, boys, dough I'm most inclined to tink dat dey will hab to lower a boat to do it."

Pete was wrong, however. The vessel was cleverly manoeuvred so that she ran so close to the raft that a rope was flung to the comrades.

Pete grasped it, and held it firmly as the raft was towed alongside. Then other ropes were flung, and he quickly

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made them fast round Jack and Sam, who were hauled aboard in a semi-conscious condition.

Next, Pete fastened a rope round Rory, who yelped as he went up, because he thought he was leaving his master.

"Now then, Snowball!" bawled a voice, as Pete fastened a hawser round his steam man. "Never mind the gent with the tray. We are not a life-saving apparatus. It's bad enough to have to save niggers. We don't want to save their idols. Tie the rope round your own carcass, you lubber, or I'll let you drift!"

Pete had already made the steam man fast, and, grasping the rope above his head, drew himself up with a strength that was simply astounding considering the privations he had gone through.

It was the skipper who had been speaking. He was a small, spare man, with long, black beard, and curling, black hair. His eyes were small and nearly black, while his nose was of the Roman type, and was of abnormal size.

"Haul up de steam man, old boss!" said Pete. "He's saved our lives!"

"I have saved your lives, you lubber!" snarled the skipper. "And I'll have you know I'm Captain Marks. None of your nigger's slang for me!"

"Well, don't cut de steam man adrift, Captain Marks," pleaded Pete. "He's worf a lot ob money, and—"

"Haul him up, you swabs!" cried the skipper. "Up with him, I say! Haven't you got any strength in your rats' bodies?"

As the sailors hauled on the rope, and the steam man rose, the raft drifted away. The steam man was no light weight, and Pete watched over the bulwarks with considerable anxiety.

"Port your helm!" shouted the skipper, who was also watching, though he glanced once at his sails. "That will do! Keep her at that, and—"

There was a sharp twang. The hawser had parted with the strain. The steam man plunged into the sea. For an instant he appeared on the surface, then there was a loud explosion, and amidst the foam of water, which spurted on high, the steam man sank to his death.

"No matter!" growled Pete, turning away. "He's saved de lives ob Jack and Sam, and he's saved de life ob Pete and Rory." "Nuff said!"

"Don't you want a drink, mate?" inquired one of the sailors, handing Pete a jug of water.

Pete took it, and swiftly raised it to his lips. Then he stopped, and, kneeling on the deck, he held the water for Rory to drink, and the sailors cheered.

"Get to your work, you lubbers!" roared the skipper. "Because a nigger is a raving maniac there is no need for you to make that row aboard my vessel!"

And the skipper strode towards the helmsman, muttering as he went.

But it was not until Rory had ceased drinking that Pete drained the remainder of the water that was in the jug, and then another jug was handed to him by another sailor, for those rough men did not view the matter as did the skipper.

Now, Pete was taken below, and he found Jack and Sam in a small cabin lying on berths, for there was little life left in them, and no strength.

If the captain was not sympathetic those sailors were. They brought some soup. It was not very nice, but it appeared to be so to the starving men. One of the sailors—they called him Bill—regulated the amount they were to take, according to his own ideas.

Bill had an idea that he ought to have been a ship's doctor, and he was always reading a medical book he had, and was always dosing such sailors as would allow the operation.

Strange to say, but the skipper believed in his skill, because he had once cured him of a violent headache. Bill had done it with sulphuric acid, only, fortunately, he had not made a mistake with the amount. He guessed what gave the skipper that aching head.

At any rate, Bill was in his glory now, and he quite hoped that he would be able to get off his duties for the next few days by attending to the comrades. At the same time, Bill wanted to do his best for the comrades, and, barring accidents, because he had the run of the skipper's medicine chest, he was likely to do it.

Having felt the comrades' pulses, because Bill knew that was the correct thing to do, he pulled out his metal watch—whose case was a little battered, and the watch had no second hand—heaved a sigh, and shook his head gravely.

"You need treatment, mates, that's what you need, and you can thank your lucky stars that I'm aboard this craft to give it to you. There's signs of febrile decay in this ere pulse, and what you need is bracing up. Plenty of salts will suit your case, and the same remarks apply to Sam. I'll just go and consult the skipper."

This was on the third morning after they had been picked up, and Bill gave his usual tap at the skipper's door, and entered.

"Well," exclaimed that worthy, "are they all right this morning?"

"They ain't, sir, and I won't deceive you in saying they are. Still, I find they-ain't suffering from yaller jack. I took it in time, and saved 'em from that. They want some more bracing up, and another bottle of rum will do the job, then it will be safe for you to see 'em without fear of infection."

"See here, you swab!" roared Marks. "You have had one bottle of rum for them, and you will get no more, unless I get pay. I believe you have swilled best part of my rum yourself."

This was only partially right, because Bill had drunk it all. It is true that he had offered some to his patients; but as they declined it with thanks, he drank it himself.

"I am going to see them now," declared Marks. "If they think they are going to live on the fat of the land aboard this craft without work or payment for their passage, they make a great mistake."

"They are far too ill to work, sir."

"I suppose they are not too ill to pay me for their food!" snarled Marks, making his way to the cabin which he had set apart for the comrades' use.

"Now, see here, my lads," he exclaimed, "I want to know what arrangements you are going to make about payment for this voyage."

"Dat will be all right, old boss, when we land and get some money," said Pete cheerfully. "You see, we-ain't got any money wid us, but—"

"Here, that won't do for me!" cried Marks. "You will have to pay for your keep, and a bit over for your accommodation, and so I tell you; and what's more, I'm having the money in advance. I don't give credit."

"We hab got plenty ob money when we get to Liverpool. Bill tells us dat's whers we are bound for, and—"

"I know the ways of niggers," interposed the skipper. "That yarn won't do for me. You will fork out now!"

"How do you suppose we are going to do dat when we ain't got any money?"

"I don't know, and I don't care, but I'm not having three lazy swabs aboard my vessel."

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THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 221.

NEXT FRIDAY: "THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!" BY FRANK RICHARDS.

"Jack and Sam ain't fit to work."

"You are, and chance it, and work you shall. I'm short-handed, so I can make some use of you. The other two will have to work in a day or so. And, see here, my lad, when you address me, just you call me 'sir.' Do you understand that?"

"Should say so, old boss."

"You silly black beast! Every time you call me that I'll fine you half-a-crown. Now, then, start work at once. You can consider you are one of my crew. Take him above, Bill, and start him swabbing down the deck. If he doesn't work properly, report him to me, and I'll give him a dozen; and just send the cook to me, I've got a few orders to give him concerning their food."

After that Pete had a rough time of it. Marks kept him at work from morning to night, while the food the comrades got was atrocious.

No slave was treated much worse than was Pete, especially when Marks found that Jack and Sam made no perceptible progress towards recovery.

This was scarcely to be wondered at considering the food that was supplied to them. It was utterly unfit for human consumption; and the worst of it was that the cook, who took pity on the comrades, sent it up to them in all sorts of forms, so that they should not detect its true nature.

As the time passed by Pete became seriously alarmed at the state of his comrades' health, and he determined to make an appeal to Marks.

"It ain't no good!" exclaimed Bill, whom he consulted about the matter. "He's as hard as nails; and I tell you straight, he wouldn't have picked you up at all if he hadn't been for the mate, who insisted on it. They had a rare row over the job, I can tell you; but the old man had to give way, 'cos he knew we was all on the mate's side. The mate is a decent sort, but the skipper is a downright beast. I'll see what I can do for 'em with medicines, only he grudges even those."

"Shall tackle him to-morrow morning. I 'spect he will keep me at de helm all night, as it is going to blow."

It was blowing already, and as it was a head wind, there was a good deal of tacking to be done. Towards morning the skipper came on deck to give orders to shorten sail, and he was in an execrable temper. He bullied Pete in the most shameful manner, and he finished up by giving him a blow over the head with his speaking-trumpet, which got badly bent.

Now, Pete had been on duty for twenty-four hours at a stretch, with just a few minutes' time to get food, and when the skipper went below, leaving orders that Pete was to remain at the helm till he came up again, that worthy determined to make an alteration.

"Here, old boss," he said to the mate, "you will hab to take de helm for a bit. I'm going to hab a bit ob a rest." And without waiting for a reply, Pete followed the skipper into his cabin.

"You insolent black scoundrel!" roared Marks, drawing a revolver, which he levelled at Pete's head. "How dare you leave the helm against my orders?"

"I dunno, but I hab been on duty for twenty hours, and—"

"I don't care if you have been on duty for forty hours. You are not going to disobey my orders."

"Now, see here, Captain Marks," exclaimed Pete, treating the levelled revolver with supreme contempt, "you can treat me just as you please, and I sha'n't say anything. I'm willing to do free men's work, and I consider dat I hab been doing it. Bery well, I will do it for de rest ob de voyage, if you will gib Jack and Sam proper food. De stuff you are gibing dem is like so much poison, and it's mighty certain dat dey can't get well while dey hab to eat it. Nunno! You won't frighten me wid dat pistol. I know mighty well you dare not fire."

"But I dare do that," roared the skipper, striking at Pete's face with all his strength. He struck the top of Pete's head, because that worthy preferred receiving the blow there, and Marks' knuckles suffered considerably, a thing that did not improve his temper.

"You dirty, black brute of a nigger!" he snarled. "You and your precious friends shall eat what I choose, and if you don't eat it I'll stuff it down your throats. Do you think I am going to have a nigger dictating to me? Now sheer off! If you are not out of this cabin and back to your work, I'll perforate your nigger's hide with a bullet!"

"Now, see here, my poor old fermented boss," exclaimed Pete, getting possession of the revolver, and coolly putting it in his pocket; then he caught the skipper by his long nose, dragged him round the cabin, and shoved him into a chair. "Stop dat noise, else I shall pull your nose again—like so!"

"You hound of a nigger!" yelled the outraged skipper. "I'll clap you in irons!"

"Where's dat nose? Oh, you are going to shout for help, are you? Bery well, I'll gib you something to shout about. De louder you yowl de better it will suit my purpose. Nice, ain't it? You will hab a snout as long as a tapir's before I hab done wid you."

It was not until Pete heard the tramp of feet that he released the maddened skipper, whose fury was such that he was more like a raving maniac than a sane man.

Pete determined to take advantage of his state by making use of his wonderful ventriiloquial powers, and the mate, accompanied by half a dozen men, no sooner rushed into the cabin than Pete commenced.

"I'm most afraid dere's something gone wrong wid de captain's brain box," observed Pete, shaking his head gravely.

What the skipper said, and what Pete made him say, required some sorting out, but as Pete mimicked his voice exactly, it sounded rather surprising, and not at all like the words of a sane man.

"Seize that nigger, and—kiss him. Fury! Lend me a revolver—to shoot myself. I'll warble sweet songs. I'm not saying this—in fun. The demon has assuaued me—little demons have pulled my nose. He's making me say this. He seized my nose, and—didn't pull it hard enough."

Pete got in the words as the skipper gasped with fury. He was foaming at the mouth, and, drawing a knife, he sprang at Pete; but that worthy gripped his wrist before he could use the weapon, and some of the sailors bolted from the cabin.

"Baker," howled the skipper to his mate, "come and kiss me! Perdition! I'll dance and sing!"

"Seems rader rocky on de crumpet, don't he?" exclaimed Pete, in his natural voice.

"Hold him, my lad!" exclaimed the mate, glancing at a spirit-bottle that was on the table, with a glass beside it. He knew from past experience that the skipper had a falling in that direction, and believed that he was intoxicated at the present moment. "Get that knife away from him."

"I want to speak to you in private, Baker," howled Marks.

"Shiver my timbers if you shall!" growled Baker.

"I'm as sane as a moo-cow, I tell you I'm insane. I'm sane—mad. Liar! Meaw, meaw! Puss, puss!"

"Do you know what's the matter with him, Bill?" demanded the mate, beckoning him out of the cabin.

"Yus, sir; he's got the jim-jams. What he wants is a black draught, and a little diluted sulphuric acid. There's nothing like that to cure a man as has drunk hisself mad."

"I don't want to put him in irons, but he must certainly be kept under control."

"I tink I had better stop his noise for de time being!" exclaimed Pete, clapping his hand over the skipper's mouth, and holding it there so that he could not bite. "You see, it ain't good to let de man excite himself. Would you like to feel his pulse, Bill?"

"No fear, mate. You hold him tight. I can see his pulse is too rapid."

Pete had got the maddened skipper on his knee now, and although he fought and struggled with all his strength, he could not get away, Pete having pinioned his arms to his sides.

"Now, you keep calm, old boss!" said Pete. "You ain't at all well, and it don't gib Bill a chance ob curing you if you fight and yowl in dis fashion. Hurry up wid de medicine, Bill. I tink he's rader feverish."

"How are you going to get his mouth open, mate?" inquired Bill, who had mixed some awful-looking black slop.

"I can easy do dat. De difficulty would be to make him keep it shut. You see, if I force him backwards, like so, and den get a gentle grip on his beard, de mouf is bound to come open unless de beard comes off! Just shove your finger between his teef to keep it open."

"No thumping fear! I don't want to get driven mad wid his bite!"

"Well, pour it in while I keep de mouf open like so! Gently, Bill. We don't want a shower-bath ob dat black sloppiness. Yah, yah, yah! He's swallowing dat quite nicely. You can hear it gurgle as it goes down."

The skipper took the dose, and then Pete muzzled him again.

"Now, see here, Bill!" he exclaimed. "Just you buzz off and gib Jack and Sammy some nourishing food. I'll attend to this man. You can bring de food you tink he requires, and I will feed him."

"He ought to be kept low."

"Dea, don't gib him any ob dat meat he has been gibing us, 'cos dat was high enough to reach de top ob de Monument!"

"I tink as I'll take this spirit, 'cos he's better without that. You shout for me when you want me."

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NEXT FRIDAY: "THE MAKING OF HARRY WHARTON!" BY FRANK RICHARDS.

Bill went, and Pete locked the cabin door, then he fixed his eyes on the skipper and grinned.

"You'm in rader an aykward position, ain't you, old hoss?" observed Pete. "Now, don't make dat noise, else I shall pull your smout again. You hab got to behave yourself while you are my patient."

"You demon! I'll—"

"Here, dat will do!" exclaimed Pete, rapping him over the head with his knuckles. "I ain't going to allow my maniac ob a patient to make any noise. You can consider you are under my orders for de remainder ob dis voyage, and if you don't obey dem, you will hab a mighty rough time ob it."

"I will put you in prison for this outrage! Just you see if I don't!"

"Well, we will talk about dat later on. In de meantime you must behave yourself like a respectable maniac, else I shall be compelled to rope-end you!"

Neither the mate nor the crew bothered themselves much about the matter, and Pete was able to keep up the farce for several days; then the mate quite upset his calculations by coming into the cabin.

"Look here, Baker!" exclaimed the skipper. "This is a trick of that ruffian of a nigger. I am as sane as you are, and was never anything else!"

Marks was wise enough to keep perfectly calm, and his manner was so convincing that Pete decided to leave him to explain.

"But look at the nonsense you talked, captain!" exclaimed Baker.

"I never said a word of it. I believe that villain is a ventriloquist, and it was he who put the words in my mouth."

"Well, at any rate, you are all right now," said the mate. "You can't blame me for what has happened."

"Ah, that is just where it is! I do blame you, and, what is more, I shall make it hot for you when we get into port! I am talking quietly to you, because I don't want you to have an excuse for saying that I am mad. I shall put that nigger in irons for the remainder of the voyage."

"Seems to hab his fit ob madness coming on again," observed Pete calmly. "Should advise you to keep him wat'ed for a bit. You see, it is de way Marks. If you like to make a fuss about it, but his temper is more de mad and all de crew to prove dat you were mad—"

"It's a lie!"

"Well, it is mighty certain dat dey tought so."

"You made them think it, you black hound!"

"Now, don't excite yourself, my poor old boss! Don't you see, you told de mate dat you had sunstroke once, and eben if you weren't mad, as you say, it was natural for him to think it. Bery well, suppose for de sake ob argument dat you were never mad, it stands to reason dat de mate and crew must prove you were! See? Bery well, dey ain't going to let a captain who goes mad periodically hab command ob a ship."

"Miscreant! You assaulted me and pulled my nose!"

"Yah, yah, yah! Is it at all likely dat a nigger would do a ting like dat?"

"You know you did it!"

"Say, for de sake ob argument, dat I did. You would hab to prove it to de satisfaction ob de mate, and dat wouldn't be at all an easy ting to do, 'cos, don't you see, it might be aykward for him when he got into port. Now, men who drink as hard as you do on de top of sunstroke are bery likely to go dotty, and I'm quite certain de mate acted under de belief dat you were dotty. It doesn't matter to me weder you were or not, 'cos if you gabe de order to me to be put in irons, de mate would naturally refuse to do it, tinkin you were mad again. You see, if de mate had put in irons, or badly treated me in any way, he would be only proving dat he had made a mighty blunder. Ob course, de mate would point out dat you tought you were a pussy cat, and—"

"Ruffian! I said nothing of the sort, and you know it!"

"Weder you did or not doesn't help you a bit, 'cos de mate heard what you said, and dat's what he would naturally do in court, and it wouldn't be no de slightest good."

For some moments the skipper thought the matter over, and he came to the conclusion that he was in rather an awkward position. But he was quite determined to have

vengeance on Pete, and he strode from the cabin with the intention of ordering him to be put into irons, but no sooner had he reached the deck than the whole of the crew fled into the fore-castle.

Bill was at the helm, and the skipper strode towards him, then Bill let the wheel go, dodged the captain round the wheel, then bolted after the rest.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete, who had followed up to see what would happen. "You see, dey tink you'm still mad, old hoss!"

"Take the helm, you black hound!"

"Nunno, old hoss! If you had treated Jack and Sammy properly I would hab worked, and eben let you knock me about a bit. As it is, I'm not going to do anoder day's work. I am going to look after de boys, and if I hab any ob your nonsense, you can bet all de money you are woff dat you will hab anoder attack ob madness. 'Nuff said!"

Pete, flatly refusing to do anoder stroke of work, spent all his time nursing his comrades; but although they got decent food now, they got very little stronger, and Pete felt very thankful when they reached Liverpool.

Arrived in port, Pete at once set about obtaining apartments. In this he was successful, and the rooms he obtained were very clean and comfortable.

He saw Jack and Sam to bed, and then commenced looking after them in real earnest. Pete was as good as a mother to the comrades, and he did everything in his power to make them well.

Jack and Sam were really bad, and many days elapsed ere they were able to leave their beds. Then they were not strong enough to go far; but there was no need for them to do so, as Pete did everything that was necessary.

At length the sick comrades were able to go for a walk, and then they decided to go to their bank to draw some money. They had run very short, and were greatly in need of some ready cash.

The comrades never expected to receive the surprise they did when they reached the bank. The clerk behind the counter seemed surprised to see Pete.

"You here again?" he said incredulously.

"I want to draw some money out," said Pete. "We'm very short."

The bank clerk looked more amazed than ever, and then he said, "I'm sorry, but I can't draw all your money out. It's not in the bank."

"Golly!" gasped Pete. "We've been stranded in de sea, and I'm sure I've not been here since we left England."

"Wier, you came here only a fortnight ago," said the bank clerk.

"A fortnight ago!" cried Pete. "We were on de sea then. You must be mistaken."

"No, I'm not," said the bank clerk. "You came here right enough, else it was your ghost."

"Golly!" cried Pete. "It's dat rascal Sambo, I'm sure. The scoundrel! I wish he was here now; I'd put him for impersonating me. It's him for a pension! Don't you tink so, Sammy?"

"I suppose it was," said Sam. "But what are we going to do? We're penniless!"

"Can't help dat," said Pete. "We shall hab to make de best ob a bad job. I'm strong and well, and shall hab to work."

"So shall we," said Jack and Sam, in one voice.

"No, you won't, boys!" said Pete. "You'm not strong enough yet."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Jack. "You've done too much for us already, and I'm not going to remain idle whilst you work to keep us."

"Neither am I," said Sam.

"Bery well, boys," said Pete, "if you're determined, I won't say anything more. It's rough dat we should be stranded like dis, but it's no good crying ober our troubles. We must make light ob dem, and do our utmost to retrieve our misfortunes. Come on, boys, de way to find work."

It was very hard on the comrades that they should be stranded like this, but they were not despondent. They were determined to get on their feet, and resolved to win through at all costs.

THE END

A Grand Long Complete Story of JACK, SAM, and PETE in Next Friday's Issue, entitled:

"WITH PICK AND LAMP!"

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

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