THE ALL-SCHOOL-STORY PAPER!

The Penny Popular

Week Ending January 19th, 1918.

No. 276.

Three Complete Stories of—
HARRY WHARTON & Co.—JIMMY SILVER & Co.—TOM MERRY & Co.

COUSIN ETHEL INTERVENES!

An Exciting Scene from the Grand Long Complete Tale of TOM MERRY & CO. contained in this issue. 19/1/18

A TOUGH HANDFUL!

By FRANK RICHARDS.

A Magnificent Long Complete Tale, dealing with the Early Adventures of Harry Wharton & Co. at Greyfriars School.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
On the Warpath.

MR. QUELCH, the master of the Remove at Greyfriars, opened his bed-room door to retire for rest. He knew where to find the matches—or he usually did. But as he put his hand to the table beside the door for them, he did not find them in their usual place. He regretted then that he had not brought up a candle with him.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "This is most annoying. Someone has taken my matches."

He groped into the room, and groped over the table. He murmured something under his breath as he heard the inkpot fall over, and some papers go rustling to the floor. Then he went out of the room, descended the stairs again, and came up with a lighted candle.

By that time Mr. Quelch was not in the best of tempers. He had reached a time of life when ascending stairs was no light matter to him.

He was looking pink as he came into his room again. He wished very much to know who had taken away his matches.

Mr. Quelch lighted the gas, and proceeded to divest himself of his coat.

The bed was in an alcove in the wall, and partly hidden by a curtain.

The master of the Remove did not observe that it was occupied, nor was he likely to observe it till he went to step in.

But suddenly, as he took off his coat, he stopped, and gave a start.

A sound of deep and steady breathing had struck upon his ears.

Mr. Quelch stood quite still, the coat in his hands, his heart beating. He could scarcely believe his ears for a moment, and he listened intently to make sure that he was not mistaken.

But there was no mistake about it!

There was a steady breathing in the room, and it came from the direction of the bed.

In a moment Mr. Quelch saw it all.

His matches had been moved by the same person whose breathing he could now hear—a burglar, who had hidden himself under the bed.

Mr. Quelch stood quite still, listening, for several moments. Then he quietly put on his coat again.

The deep, steady breathing showed two things. First, that the burglar had lost all caution, and was not careful to conceal his presence; second, and consequently, that the wretch had fallen asleep under the bed.

Mr. Quelch smiled grimly.

A burglar under the bed might be a dangerous customer to tackle, especially if he were armed; but by falling asleep he had thrown himself into the hands of the law, as it were.

Mr. Quelch quietly extinguished the gas, so as not to alarm the burglar by a light if he should awaken, and stepped softly from the room.

In the passage he paused a few moments to consider.

The point now was to capture the burglar, and it was necessary to bring such a force against him that he would not venture to struggle, or to use his revolver, if he had one.

Mr. Quelch thought of Gosling, the porter, but shook his head.

Gosling was a long way off, and he was not brave.

Then he thought of Mr. Prout. Mr. Prout was master of the Fifth, and a great sportsman, and always kept two or three guns in his study.

Mr. Prout, as a man of war and an owner of deadly weapons, was just the man to deal with the burglar. Mr. Quelch descended at once to his study, and tapped at the door. He entered, and found Mr. Prout there, reading a book dealing with big game in America. The Fifth Form-master glanced up with a nod.

"Sorry to disturb you, Prout, but——"

"Not at all," said Mr. Prout, waving the Remove-master to a chair. "On the contrary, I shall be delighted to have a chat. I am just reading in this volume——"

"Yes, but——"

"That the number of buffaloes shot in the Rocky Mountains——"

"My dear Prout——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Quelch, but this is a deeply interesting subject. When I was in the Rockies in '95——"

"There is a burglar in my room!" said Mr. Quelch hastily. When Mr. Prout started with "When I was in the Rockies in '95," the Remove-master knew from of old that only a sudden shock would stop him.

Mr. Prout started.

"A burglar?"

"Yes!"

"In your room?"

"Yes, under the bed."

"Good heavens! Did you see him?"

"No, but I heard him breathing. He must, I think, have fallen asleep there. As I was alone and unarmed, you may be sure that I did not try to get to close quarters with him," said the Remove-master drily.

"Quite so—quite so!" exclaimed Mr. Prout, jumping up, forgetting all about when he was in the Rocky Mountains in 1895. "I am glad you came to me. I will load my rifle——"

"Ahem! I was thinking that a firearm might frighten the ruffian into surrender," said Mr. Quelch. "Unloaded, however, in case of accidents."

Mr. Prout smiled superior.

"My dear Quelch, suppose he has a revolver? Suppose he fires? It will be necessary in that case to wing him."

"To—to what?"

"Wing him," said Mr. Prout, with quite a bloodthirsty look. "I have never shot a man yet——"

"Dear me!"

"Of course, I should not kill him," said Mr. Prout. "Not if it could be avoided, at all events. I might wing him in the arm or leg."

"You—you are sure of your aim?"

"I have shot buffaloes on the plains of Texas, grizzly bears in the Rockies, lions in South Africa——"

"Yes, yes; but——"

"Rely upon me, Quelch. I will make sure of the villain."

Mr. Prout was all excitement now. Whether he was really as great a hunter as his stories on the subject would imply, or not, there was no doubt that he was keen enough. He took down a rifle from the wall, and unlocked a drawer for cartridges. Mr. Quelch watched him in some uneasiness as he loaded.

"There," said Mr. Prout, "I am ready now. Lead on."

"Pray do not point that gun in my direction," said the Remove-master.

Mr. Prout laughed.

"I assure you, Quelch, that I am not likely to have an accident with firearms. You would be quite safe if I levelled the rifle point-blank at you."

"I—I would rather you did not, however. Pray come on!"

They quitted the study.

Mr. Quelch dropped behind the Fifth Form-master in going upstairs. He wasn't afraid of the burglar, but he was decidedly afraid of Mr. Prout's rifle. If the Fifth Form master had stumbled, he might have killed the Remove-master; and Mr. Quelch did not desire to end his days in that manner.

They reached the door of the Remove-master's bed-room, and Mr. Quelch stepped in quietly and relighted the gas.

"Good!" said Mr. Prout. "He cannot escape now."

Mr. Prout dropped on one knee, and levelled the rifle with depressed muzzle to command the space under the bed.

"I shall have him covered now," he remarked. "You may wake him up and drive him forth. If he will not come, I will fire."

"But—but—but——"

"It's all right," said Mr. Prout, with a smile. "This is a magazine rifle, and the first cartridge is blank."

"But—but if there should be some mistake ——"

"Stuff! I never make mistakes with firearms. If I made mistakes with firearms, my dear Quelch, I should not be here to tell the tale. When I was in the Rockies in '95——"

"I will arouse the villain, then."

"At once."

Mr. Quelch bent beside the bed, and raised the edge of the coverlet. His heart was beating hard, and he was very excited; otherwise, he would probably have noticed that the sound of breathing did not come from underneath. But his mind was full of thoughts of the burglar now.

"Come out!" he exclaimed.

"Come forth!" said Mr. Prout threateningly. "Come forth, scoundrel! Mind, I have you covered, and my finger is on the trigger! Come forth!"

There was no reply from the burglar.

"Come forth, or I fire!" shouted Mr. Prout.

No answer.

"Then——"

"Pray do not fire, Prout. You see——"

"It is the only way. He must be awake now, and you cannot venture under the bed to drag him out. He probably has a knife."

"Yes; but——"

"I had better fire. Wretch, your last chance—come forth!"

And still no one came forth.

Mr. Prout's eye gleamed along the barrel, and he pressed the trigger.

Bang!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Not a Burglar.

BANG!

The report rang through the house, and rolled back in a thousand echoes. The room seemed full of stunning noise and the smell of gunpowder. Mr. Quelch jumped almost clear of the floor.

"Oh, dear!" he gasped.

In spite of Mr. Prout's assurance, he could not help having a lurking fear that the cartridge might not be a blank one. Mistakes do happen.

The Fifth Form master smiled the grim smile of a great huntsman.

He clicked the rifle in a businesslike manner. The next cartridge in the magazine was loaded, and Mr. Prout was ready for the burglar.

But still the burglar did not come forth.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Quelch. "Listen!"

"What?"

"I cannot hear him breathing now."

"Oh, he is keeping quiet on purpose, of course!"

Mr. Quelch was quite pale.

"I only hope that you did not make a mistake with the cartridges," he murmured. "Heaven forbid that you have killed the wretched man!"

"Good heavens, Mr. Quelch!"

"I can hear no sound."

"I never make mistakes with firearms. When I was in the Rockies——"

"We must look."

"Undoubtedly. I——"

"Ciel! Vat is it zat is ze mattair?" asked a voice at the door, as Monsieur Charpentier, the French-master, looked in. "Vat has happen viz itself?"

"There's a burglar under the bed!"

"Ciel!"

"Mr. Prout has fired a blank cartridge to frighten him out," said the Remove-master. "He refuses to stir, however."

"I zink zat you pokes him viz ze poker."

"Ah! A good idea!"

Mr. Quelch stepped to the grate, and took up the poker.

He poked under the bed. He was half afraid of finding a dead body there, in spite of Mr. Prout's assurance that he never made mistakes with firearms.

But, to his surprise, the lunges of the poker encountered only space.

He lowered his head at last, at the risk of damage from the hidden burglar if he should be waiting with a bludgeon for such a chance, and peered under the bed. It was very dark and shadowy there; he could see nothing, but it certainly seemed to him that the space was vacant.

Mr. Quelch was amazed.

"Monsieur Charpentier, pray bring the candle here," he said.

"Dear me! Who—what——"

"It is a boy. It is not a burglar. It is zat zere has been a mistake. Ciel!"

Monsieur Charpentier's face relaxed into a grin. Crimson was slowly covering the countenance of Mr. Quelch.

He understood now what an egregious blunder he had made. Monsieur Charpentier, grinning, slipped quietly from the room, mysterious cachinnations proceeding from him as he went down the passage. Mr. Prout sprang up, and rushed towards the bed. His face was a study as he saw Nugent minor.

"Gr-gr-great Scott!" he gasped.

"Boy!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch, in a voice of thunder.

"This is the burglar, Mr. Quelch?"

"There—there appears to have been some mistake," said the unhappy Remove-master. "I—I certainly thought there was a burglar under the bed."

Mr. Prout grunted. He put his gun under his arm, and stalked away. A great many fellows had gathered in the passage, attracted by the report of the firearm. They looked curiously at Mr. Prout, who was very pink as he strode away, without vouchsafing a word to anyone.

Mr. Quelch remained alone with the new junior. His face was crimson, his eyes sparkling with anger. He felt that he had made himself look absurd, though really he could not blame himself for the mistake. How was he to have guessed that a fag of the Second Form would have the amazing impudence to go to sleep in his bed?

And Nugent minor had not simply lain down there, either—he had gone to bed. Mr. Quelch now observed his clothes, and saw the collar of a nightshirt round the

"Yes."

"It is customary here to address a master as 'sir,'" said Mr. Quelch, with a dangerous gleam in his eye.

"I'm sleepy."

"Get out of that bed!"

"I want to go to sleep."

"Why are you not in the dormitory with the rest of your Form?" asked Mr. Quelch, as much perplexed as annoyed.

"I don't like them. I'm not going to sleep in the dormitory."

"Eh?" said Mr. Quelch, scarcely able to believe his ears. "What?"

"I wish you'd let me go to sleep!" said Dick irritably.

"Boy!"

"Oh, don't bother!"

"Boy, boy, are you mad? Get out of that bed at once!"

"Sha'n't!"

Mr. Quelch simply staggered.

Nugent minor settled his head more comfortably on the pillow, and closed his eyes. Mr. Quelch stared at him speechlessly for a full minute. He was too astounded to do anything else. Then he woke to action.

With one stride he reached the bed. He grasped the bedclothes with both hands, and dragged them off the junior. Then he grasped Dick Nugent by the shoulders, and dragged him off the bed.

Nugent minor rolled on the floor with a yell.

"You rotter!" he roared. "Lemme alone! What d'you mean?"

"I never came across such a boy in my life before!" exclaimed the Remove-master. "Dress yourself at once and leave this room!"

"Oui, oui! Viz ze pleasure!"

And Mossoo brought the candle, and lowered it to the floor, and both of them peered under the bed, while the warlike Fifth Form master remained kneeling with levelled rifle, ready for eventualities.

"Ceil!"

"Dear me!"

Monsieur Charpentier and Mr. Quelch uttered those exclamations simultaneously. For the space under the bed was vacant; there was no burglar there.

Mr. Quelch and Monsieur Charpentier rose, staring blankly at one another.

"Well?" said Mr. Prout.

"There—there is no one there!"

"What!"

"I can see no one."

"But—but——"

"Ciel!"

"What is it, Monsieur Charpentier?"

"It is zat he is in ze bed!" exclaimed the French-master, springing away from it. "Look!"

"Good gracious!"

Mr. Quelch dragged aside the curtain. Nugent minor was revealed sitting up in bed, with a pale and scared face, and startled eyes.

He stared at Mr. Quelch, and Mr. Quelch stared at him. Monsieur Charpentier gave a sort of crow of astonishment.

"Ciel! It is a garcon!"

junior's neck. And he had certainly been fast asleep.

Nugent minor had evidently settled there for the night.

Mr. Quelch stood looking at the boy for some time in silence. He really did not know what to say.

Dick Nugent was recovering from his astonishment now.

He was not pleased at being awakened and frightened in the middle of the night, and his look was growing as angry as Mr. Quelch's.

"Boy," said the Remove-master at last, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm sleeping—or was, till I was woke up," growled Dick. "What's all this row about?"

"Boy!"

"I want to go to sleep."

And Dick settled down again, with his head on the pillow, and drew the bedclothes up round his neck.

Mr. Quelch was almost petrified as he viewed this proceeding.

"Boy," he gasped—"boy! Who—who are you?"

"I'm Nugent minor."

"What Form do you belong to?"

"Second," said Dick sleepily.

"You—you—— How dare you go to sleep in my room?" roared Mr. Quelch. "You—you are a new boy at this school, I presume?"

Dick Nugent looked at the Remove-master, and met his grim eye. It occurred to him then that he had better obey.

Slowly and sulkily he put on his clothes, and then Mr. Quelch took up the candle and led the way to the Second Form dormitory. Dick followed with reluctant steps, and a scowling, sullen face.

Mr. Quelch opened the door of the dormitory.

"This is the place," he said. "I will show you a light to bed. Mind, I shall overlook your outrageous conduct this evening because you are a foolish and inexperienced new boy. But nothing of the sort must occur again. There is your bed. Get in!"

And Nugent minor got in.

Mr. Quelch closed the door and returned to his room. Nugent minor grunted and settled down. A sleepy voice came from Gatty's bed:

"Is that you, young Nugent?"

"Yes!" growled Dick.

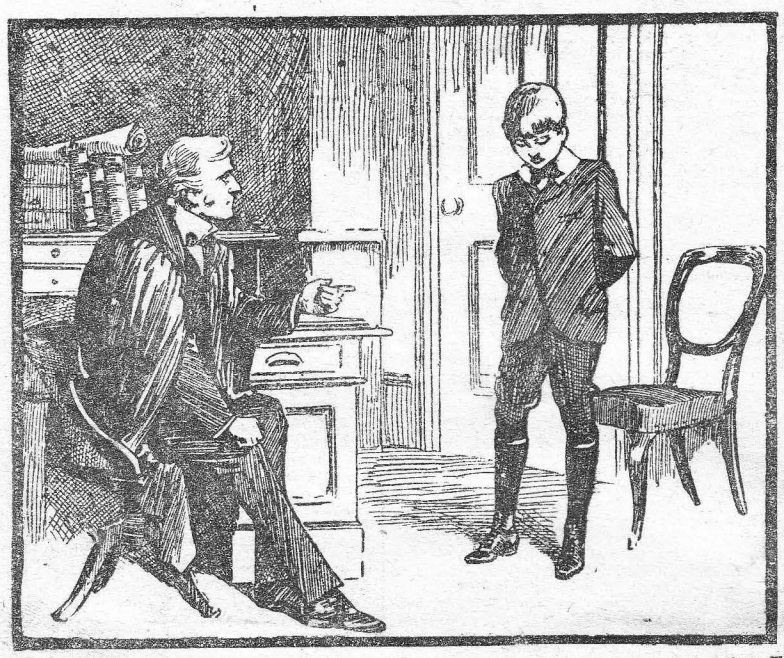
"You're jolly late!"

"That's not your business."

Gatty snorted.

"You young cad! We were going to put you through it to-night, but I'm too jolly sleepy to get up now. It must be past eleven. What on earth have you been doing all the time?"

No reply.



"I repeat that I am sorry you are expelled, Nugent minor," said Dr. Locke. "You may go now and pack your box!"

"Was that Mr. Quelch who brought you in?"

"Find out!"

"Have you been licked?"

"Oh, don't bother!"

"Very good!" said Gatty grimly. "I won't bother—I'm too sleepy at this time of night. I'll talk to you in the morning, Nugent minor."

And he went to sleep. Dick Nugent followed his example.

He had been saved, after all, from the ragging prepared for him by the Second Form, though only for the time. On the morrow the fags were likely to make up for lost time.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Nugent Minor's Punishment.

DICK NUGENT was leaning against a wall in the Close the next morning, with his hands in his pockets, when he was spotted by Gatty & Co. of the Second.

The crowd of Second fags came up with a rush and surrounded him. Dick drew his hands from his pockets and looked at them in alarm.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Here he is!"

"Here's the cad!"

"Look here," exclaimed Dick fiercely, "you let me alone! I don't want to have anything to do with you! I'm jolly sorry I ever came to this rotten school!"

"Hark at the cad!"

"Collar him!"

Gatty and Todd, and two or three more, seized the new boy. He was hurried and hustled away in spite of his struggles. Whither they were taking him he had no idea, or for what; but he guessed that it was for something decidedly unpleasant to himself.

The Second-Formers crowded into the toolshed with their helpless victim, and jammed him down upon a wooden bench, two or three of them holding him there.

"Now, keep still!" said Gatty threateningly.

"Sha'n't!"

"You cheeky young cub, you want a lesson!" said the chief of the Second Form. "Some of you get a rope."

"Good!"

"Let me go!"

"Rats!"

"I tell you I won't stay here!" shouted Dick Nugent, struggling furiously. "You cads! Let me go! I'm not going to stay here!"

"Your mistake—you are."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tie his legs to the bench!"

And, in spite of Dick's resistance, his legs were tied to the wooden bench, and he was a helpless prisoner. He gasped with rage.

He was helpless in the hands of the fags, and they clearly meant to show him no mercy.

"Prisoner," said Gatty, "you are found guilty of crawling to Upper Form fellows, and cheeking your Form. You're going to be put through it!"

"Rats!"

"Where's the burnt cork?"

"Here you are!"

"Good! Hold his hands!"

Myers and Todd hung on to Nugent minor's arms. Gatty, with a chunk of burnt cork, proceeded to blacken the unfortunate prisoner's face all over.

This done—with startling results in the way of changing Nugent minor's appearance—they dragged off his jacket and waistcoat, and substituted a ragged old coat in their place. The old coat was one worn by Gosling, the porter, when he was doing rough work in the woodshed. It was about a dozen sizes larger than was necessary for Dick Nugent, and full of holes and smothered with dirt and grease.

Dick's eyes burned through the black on his face.

"You beasts!" he gasped. "You cowards!"

Gatty laughed.

"Think that will do, you kids?"

"Well, he looks very pretty."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nugent minor, are you ready to go down on your knees and beg the pardon of the Second Form for being a rotten outsider?"

"Rats!"

"Very good. Open the door and yank him out. He's going round the buildings in a procession, to show the school how the Second Form deal with outsiders."

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick gasped with rage at the thought of being marched round the Close with a blackened face, in Gosling's old coat. But there was no help for it. He had put the backs up of the Second Form, and they were merciless.

The shed door was opened, and Dick was cast loose from the rope, and dragged out into the open air.

The winter sunlight was falling upon the Close, and nearly everybody was out of doors.

The Second Form was on the spot almost to a man—or, rather, to a boy—and they crowded round Dick with shouts and gusts of laughter.

"This way!" shouted Gatty.

"March!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick Nugent struggled furiously. The perspiration ran down his face, making streaks in the black of the burnt cork.

But many hands grasped him, and he was hoisted upon the shoulders of Gatty and Todd, and marched forward, his wrists and ankles held by strong hands.

A yell of laughter greeted his appearance on all sides.

"My hat!" gasped Temple of the Upper Fourth. "Who—what is that?"

"Looks like a nigger," remarked Fry.

"Or a Christy minstrel."

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"My word!" shrieked Tom Brown. "It's young Nugent!"

"Nugent minor! Ha, ha, ha!"

One of the Second-Formers had pinned a card across the breast of the old coat Dick Nugent was wearing. It bore in large letters the single word "OUTSIDER!"

It was a sufficient explanation to the onlookers as to what his punishment was due.

"No business of ours," remarked Temple. "And if he's been acting the rotter, serve him jolly well right!"

"Oh, rather!"

But Tom Brown thought differently. He had not taken a liking to Dick by any means. But he was thinking of Nugent, with whom he was very chummy. He ran off towards the footer-field to apprise the chums of the Remove of what was going on.

The Second Form procession, avoiding the masters' windows, marched on, and as it happened they skirted the football-ground, and arrived there soon after the New Zealand junior.

Tom Brown ran on the field, where Harry Wharton & Co. were practising passing and kicking at goal.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "What's the row?"

"Young Nugent—the Second are ragging him!" exclaimed Brown breathlessly. "I came to tell you, Frank!"

Frank Nugent looked worried.

"What are they doing to him?"

"Look—there they come!"

The footballers looked at the procession as it came swarming towards them.

Nugent's eyes seemed almost to start from his head as he saw the figure with the blackened face, and in the absurd coat, borne on high before the uproarious procession.

"Great Scott!" gasped Harry Wharton. "That's not Dick Nugent, surely!"

"Yes, it is!"

"My hat!"

"The hatfulness is terrific!"

Nugent cast an appealing glance at his chums.

"Stand by me, chaps!" he exclaimed. "I know Dick has brought all this on himself; but I can't stand by and see it. I'm going to stop them."

"Right you are, Franky! Come on!"

"The readyfulness of our esteemed selves is terrific to back up our worthy chum."

And the Removites, leaving the footer, rushed towards the procession, in football-shorts as they were. Tom Brown, Mark Linley, and several others of the Lower Fourth joined them, always ready to back up Harry Wharton.

"Put that kid down!" roared Nugent.

There was a yell of defiance from the Second Form, strong in numbers.

"Rats!"

"Go home!"

"He's an outsider!"

"Yah!"

"Put him down, I tell you, or we'll jolly soon make you!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Now, then, down with him!"

"Go and eat coke!"

And the procession swayed on.

"Come on!" said Nugent between his teeth.

And the Removites rushed to the attack.

The procession broke up at the first rush.

It was not particularly agreeable to Nugent minor, however, for as the fellows who were carrying him staggered and reeled he came to the ground with an unpleasant bump.

Then the swaying and struggling juniors trampled over him, and he was rolled over and over, and a dozen or more fellows sprawled across him.

The uproar was, as Hurree Singh would have said, terrific.

The Second Form, though they had the advantage of numbers, had no real chance against the fighting men of the Remove, and

after a brief scramble they were scattered to right and left—all who were not scrambling on the ground.

But the tussle was hardly over when Wingate of the Sixth came up, with a face pink with anger, and cuffing right and left.

"What do you mean by making this row?" he roared.

"Ow! Oh!"

"Chuck it!"

"Yah!"

Removites and Second-Formers promptly scattered. Nugent minor sat up, dazed and bewildered. He was so confused that he hardly knew what was happening.

Wingate uttered a gasp as he saw the black-complexioned stranger.

"Wh-wh-who are you?" he gasped.

Nugent minor scrambled to his feet.

"Who—who are you? What does this mean? What are you rigged up like this for?" exclaimed Wingate, grasping the new boy by the shoulder.

Nugent minor struggled savagely.

"Let me go!"

"You are Nugent minor?"

"Yes! Leggo!"

"Then what do you mean by this?"

"Leggo!" yelled Nugent minor furiously.

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Wingate angrily. "Do you know who I am?"

"I don't care who you are! Let me alone!"

Wingate's grip tightened. He was very angry now.

"You will learn to care who I am in time, I think, if you're not kicked out of Greyfriars too soon," he said quietly. "I am the captain of the school."

"Let go!"

"You young fool, I——"

Nugent minor kicked out furiously.

"Oh!" gasped Wingate.

He staggered back in pain. The savage kick had taken effect upon his shin, and for the moment he was helpless, and he released the junior.

Dick Nugent took advantage of the opportunity.

He darted away at top-speed.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Licked!

WINGATE compressed his lips hard. He was in great pain. The kick had been a hard one in a tender place. His face went quite pale for a moment.

But he was as much amazed as hurt. He had come in contact with all sorts and conditions of boys at Greyfriars, but no one just like Nugent minor before. For a Second Form fag to kick the captain of the school! Wingate could hardly believe it, though his leg was aching with pain.

The Removites had witnessed the scene from a distance, and Frank Nugent's face was a study.

"He's done it now!" he said.

And the Nabob of Bhanipur murmured that the donefulness was terrific.

"Come back, Nugent minor!" shouted Wingate.

But the junior did not heed.

Wingate limped after him for a few paces, and then stopped, and called to the fags, who were looking on from a distance with scared expressions.

"Fetch that young fool back!" he said. "Bring him to my study."

"Yes, Wingate!"

"Right-ho!".

"We'll get him!"

So chorused the fags, eagerly enough.

Wingate, the rugged but kind-hearted captain of Greyfriars, was the idol of the Lower Forms. The fags felt more incensed against Nugent minor for his treatment of Wingate than for anything else.

They entered into the chase with zest.

"Your minor is in for it this time!" Gatty leered to Nugent as he passed him.

Frank made no reply, only looking worried. But Bob Cherry put out a foot, over which Gatty promptly tumbled, rolling on the ground.

He jumped up in a fury; but, seeing Bob Cherry's fists doubled, he thought it more prudent to dash on after the other fags.

Wingate went into the House. He entered his study, and rubbed the bruise on his leg—and a big bruise it was, too.

He was still so engaged when a crowd of fags came tramping along the passage, with a struggling prisoner in their midst.

Gatty threw open the door of the study, and put an untidy head and red, triumphant face into the room.

"Got him!" he ejaculated.

"Here he is!"

"Here's the cad!"

"Shove him in!"

A struggling form was projected through the doorway.

Nugent minor staggered in, and fell upon his hands and knees on the carpet, gasping for breath. The doorway was crammed with triumphant fags, many of whom had smears of black upon their faces from Dick Nugent's burnt-cork complexion.

"Thank you!" said Wingate quietly. "You can clear out."

Rather reluctantly Gatty & Co. withdrew. They wanted to see the interview. They crowded back into the passage, but Gatty kept the door an inch ajar, his eye to the aperture.

"Close that door!" rapped out Wingate.

Gatty reluctantly obeyed.

Nugent minor scrambled to his feet. He looked a pitiable object. His blackened face, and the old ragged coat reaching below his knees, made him look utterly absurd. Wingate fixed his eyes upon him.

"I want to speak to you, kid," he said, not unkindly. "You are on the worst of terms with your Form. You have kicked my shins; but you don't understand yet what that might mean to you if I were hard. You seem to be a wilful and obstinate young rascal, and amenable to only one kind of persuasion—a licking. I'm going to give you a licking, not on account of this big bruise, but for your own good."

Dick eyed him warily and sullenly.

"I won't be licked," he said.

"Your opinion won't be asked," said Wingate, taking up a cane. "Hold out your hand."

Dick put his hands behind him.

"Will you obey me, Nugent minor?"

"No!"

Wingate breathed hard through his nose.

"Very well," he said. "You only make it harder for yourself. You will have the licking all the same in a more painful way."

He stepped towards the junior to take him by the collar.

Dick Nugent promptly dodged round the table.

"Come here!"

"Sha'n't!"

Wingate paused.

It was extremely undignified in a big Sixth-Former, captain of the school, too, to chase a nimble fag round a table.

Wingate's temper was rising again.

He had been very patient with Nugent minor, and it was not surprising that his patience was failing at last.

"Nugent minor, come here!"

"I won't be licked!"

"I give you one more chance. If you put me to the trouble of catching you, I'll make this a licking that you won't get over for weeks."

Nugent minor made no reply, but he stood warily watching. It was evidently not his intention to give in.

"Very well," said Wingate. "You will have only yourself to thank for what you get."

"I won't be licked. I don't want to stay at this school," said Dick. "I'm going to write to my people to take me away. I hate the place, and everybody in it."

"Will you come here?"

"No!"

Wingate said no more. He ran round the table after the fag.

Dick Nugent dodged again, and Wingate, reaching across to seize him, bumped against the table and sent it flying.

There was a crash as a heap of books and papers, accompanied by an inkpot, went to the floor. The table rocked wildly.

But Wingate's grasp was upon the fag now.

Dick Nugent struggled desperately. He kicked and fought and yelled, while Wingate fastened a strong grip upon his collar, and lashed him with the cane.

Wingate laid it on well, and every blow brought a fresh yell from Nugent minor, who was helpless in the powerful grasp of the senior.

Wingate had said that it should be a good thrashing, and he made it so.

He gave Nugent minor a dozen powerful lashes across the back, and then he jerked him to the door of the study, and opened it.

"I hope that will be a lesson to you," he said. "You will get it worse next time."

And he tossed the yelling fag out into the passage, and closed the door.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Struck Down.

DICK NUGENT staggered to his feet. He was hurt—very much hurt—and the Second Form fags, who had intended to give him a further ragging when he emerged from the captain's study, felt that he had had enough. He stood for some minutes leaning against the wall, his whole form shaken with dry gasping. They locked at him, and let him alone.

"Come on," said Todd. "The poor beggar's had enough this time."

"Right-ho!" said Gatty.

The Remove-master turned pale. "I only hope," he gasped, "that you have really fired a blank cartridge. I can hear no sound." The new boy sat up in bed, hardly daring to breathe.

And the Second-Formers streamed away.

Nugent minor was left alone in the passage, quivering from head to foot, as much with passion as with pain, and trying hard to keep back the tears.

He glanced up savagely at the sound of a footstep.

It was his major.

"I'm sorry for this, Dick," said Frank Nugent softly. "It's awfully rough. Come along, old fellow, and——"

"Let me alone!"

"Dick!"

"Can't you leave me alone?"

Nugent bit his lip.

"Oh, very well," he said. And he walked away. Dick Nugent looked after him with sullen, glowering eyes.

The fag's heart was burning with hatred and malice and all uncharitableness. Towards Wingate he felt a furious hatred.

All his thoughts were directed towards revenge upon the senior who had given him that severe but well-deserved thrashing.

He went slowly down the passage, and the grins and chuckles which greeted his appearance reminded him of the absurd figure he was cutting.

He tore off the old coat, and threw it upon the floor, and hurried away to a bath-room to get the burnt cork washed off his face.

In the streaming hot water he rubbed and rubbed, but it was long before the black was off his face, and then some traces of it still lingered round his ears.

When he had finished, and looked into the glass, he saw a face dark and sullen, with the eyes glinting, the brows contracted.

He was aching all over from the thrashing and the rough handling he had received from the Second Form fags.

He left the bath-room, and went out into the Close; and, to his relief, the fags took no further notice of him. They were not done with him yet, but they realised that it would be only decent to let him alone after the licking he had had in Wingate's study.

If they had known what was working in his mind, however, probably they would have acted differently. The thrashing Wingate had given him had been far from reducing Nugent minor to a state of subordination.

He glanced up at Wingate's window as he went into the Close. The captain of the school stood at the window, which was open, watching some football practice, his window commanding a view of the football field.

Nugent minor's eyes glittered.

His eyes fell upon a big, round, heavy stone, and he glanced from it to Wingate, and from Wingate back to the stone again.

He stooped, and his fingers closed convulsively on the stone.

The spoiled, passionate boy was not given to calculating the consequence of his actions. At home, he had done what he liked, and generally his elders had taken great trouble to placate him if he were annoyed. Now he was thinking only of his revenge upon the captain of Greyfriars.

He stood under the leafless elms, looking up at Wingate, who was quite unconscious of the fag below his window, stone in hand.

Harry Wharton, who had come off the football field, and was walking towards the House, caught sight of Nugent minor, saw the stone in his hand and the look on his face, and guessed his intention. He gave a shout of warning.

"Look out, Wingate!"

Wingate started, and looked downward. At the same moment Nugent minor's hand swept through the air, and the stone flew.

Wingate gave a sharp cry, and disappeared into the room.

"Good heavens!" cried Wharton. "You mad young fool!"

He ran into the house, and up to Wingate's study. The captain of Greyfriars had staggered away from the window, and sunk into a chair. There was a dazed look on his face. A dark, bruised mark was forming on his temple.

"Wingate! You're hurt!"

"I—I—yes!" stammered the senior, rubbing his forehead with his hand. "I—I feel stunned. Did that young fool throw a stone at me?"

Wharton did not reply.

But no reply was needed; the stone was lying on the floor, where it had crashed down after striking Wingate. The captain of Greyfriars essayed to rise from his chair, but sank back again. The concussion had almost stunned him, and the effort to rise made his senses whirl.

"I—I—oh!"

Wingate lay limp in the chair.

Wharton's face went white. He dashed to the washstand in the alcove at the foot of the bed, and seized the water-jug. He dashed cold water into the captain's face. Wingate gave a shuddering breath, but did not open his eyes.

"What on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Carberry, looking in at the open door. "What are you doing, Wharton?"

"Wingate's been hurt."

"Phew! Who did that?"

"Somebody threw a stone."

"Great Scott!"

Carberry loosened Wingate's collar and tie. Wharton bathed his face as he lay limp in the armchair. Other fellows came crowding into the study, alarmed and curious. The prefect waved them back.

"Don't crowd round," he said. "He wants air. Some mad idiot has been throwing stones from the Close, and he's stunned."

"My hat!" said Loder. "I shouldn't care to be the chap who did it."

"Hardly."

"Who was it, Wharton?"

"I think Wingate knows," said Harry.

"What is the matter here?" said a deep voice at the door.

The fellows turned round in surprise and some dismay. A form in cap and gown stood there. A pair of searching eyes looked into the study.

"The Head!"

Dr. Locke looked into the room.

"What has happened?"

"Wingate's hurt, sir," said Carberry respectfully.

"Bless my soul!" The Head came into the study, the seniors respectfully making way for him, and stood looking down in horror at the pale face of the captain of the school, with the big bruise on the temple. "Who—what has done this?"

"It was a stone from the Close, sir."

The Head glanced at the big, round stone on the floor.

"Who threw it?"

"Wharton says Wingate knows, sir."

"He's coming to," said Harry quietly.

Wingate's eyes opened. He blinked wildly about him, and tried to sit upright. Harry gently detained him.

"Don't try to get up," he whispered. "Stay as you are. You'll feel better."

"The young rascal!" muttered Wingate faintly. "He threw it because I licked him, you know. He must be mad!"

"Who was it, Wingate?" said Carberry.

"The new kid in the Second—Nugent minor."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head.

Wingate started. He had not observed the doctor at his side. He glanced round at the Head with startled eyes.

"Some of you find Nugent minor, and bring him to my study, please," said the Head. "I am sorry to see you like this, Wingate. Such an outrage is unprecedented—unheard of. There shall be no chance of its repetition at Greyfriars. The boy shall leave the school this afternoon."

And the Head strode from the room.

Carberry and Loder and another Sixth-Former went to look for Nugent minor. Wharton brought a towel, and Wingate mopped his face dry. He was very pale, and felt sick and dazed.

"Thank you, Wharton," he said, with a faint smile. "I feel better now. You can cut. Tell Nugent I'm sorry his brother's going to be kicked out; but it can't be helped. We couldn't allow this sort of thing at Greyfriars."

Harry nodded sadly.

"I suppose not, Wingate. It will be rough on old Nugent."

"Tell him I'm sorry. But the kid will be better away from the school; after the beginning he's made here, he would have an uphill time of it."

Harry nodded, and left the study.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Expelled!

DR. LOCKE sat, with a hard, stern brow, waiting for the delinquent to be brought before him.

Tap!

"Come in!" he said quietly.

Carberry and Loder entered, bringing in Dick Nugent between them.

Dr. Locke looked at the boy searchingly.

"Nugent minor," he said quietly—that quiet voice of his that was more impressive than the loudest tones from anyone else—"I have only a few words to say to you, Loder and Carberry, you may go!"

"Yes, sir."

The two seniors left the study.

"Nugent minor, I hope you realise the seriousness of what you have done? You hurled a heavy stone at Wingate——"

"He licked me!"

"It was a cowardly and cruel act of revenge, even if your previous punishment had been undeserved," said the Head, raising his voice a little. "I am assured, however, that whatever punishment Wingate meted out to you, it was fully deserved."

Dick was sullenly silent.

"Your action will be viewed with abhorrence by every boy at Greyfriars," said Dr. Locke. "It will probably be for your own comfort to leave the school. Because you are so young, and because I can guess that you have not had certain advantages of training which fall to other boys, I shall not flog you before you go!"

Nugent minor started.

"Before I go!" he faltered.

"Certainly! You are expelled from Greyfriars!"

Dick started again.

He had wanted to leave the school—passionately desired to be sent home, to quit the place, and never see it again.

But now that his wish was granted——

It seemed different now, somehow. It was one thing to be taken at his own request, another to be turned out in disgrace.

There were the people at home to be faced.

What was he to say to them? If he had written to his mother and she had persuaded his father to take him away, that would have been all right.

But now he would have to admit that he was kicked out—that he was sent home because he was not considered fit to remain at the school. The thought made the colour burn in his cheeks.

He fancied he could already see the pitying and contemptuous looks, and hear the remarks of those who had said always that he was a spoiled boy, and would never get on at a public school.

The Head watched the boy's face, which was like a mirror to the thoughts that thronged within.

"Have you anything to say, Nugent minor?" he said at last.

"I—I——"

The boy broke off.

What could he say? He would not beg for mercy, that was certain. He knew, too, that if he did, he would beg in vain.

There was no respite for him.

"I am sorry for this, Nugent minor," said the Head. "A term or two at a public school would do you more good than you imagine—if you had not made it impossible for you to remain at Greyfriars. You have been guilty of a cruel, cowardly act. I hope that, on reflection, you will be sorry for what you have done."

Dick was sullenly silent.

"Have you anything to say?"

"I—I'm sorry I threw the stone," said Nugent minor, with an effort. "I—I didn't mean to hurt him so much."

"You do not deny throwing it?"

"No, sir."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because he licked me."

"You know that the captain of the school has authority to punish the younger boys?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Then I am to conclude that you might have acted in the same way if it had been a master who had punished you!" exclaimed the Head.

Nugent minor was silent.

"You are certainly not fit to be at this school," said Dr. Locke. "I am only sorry, for your own sake, that I do not think that a flogging would meet the case. You will go at once and pack your box, and Gosling will take you to the station for the three o'clock train. I shall wire to your parents, and write a letter of full explanation. Your father will understand that I cannot keep the responsibility of a boy of your nature upon my hands."

Dick Nugent shivered a little.

His mother, he knew, would greet him on his return with boundless confidence and affection, but his father——

It was his father who had insisted upon his going to Greyfriars, because his mother was spoiling him. What would he say when the boy returned on only the second day—in deep disgrace?

But it was too late to think of that now.

"I repeat that I am sorry, Nugent minor," said Dr. Locke. "You may go up now and pack your box!"

"Yes, sir," said the junior heavily.

And he left the Head's study.

Dr. Locke remained, with a troubled look upon his face.

"There is good in that lad, with proper training," he murmured to himself; "but he has come to Greyfriars too late. In any case, I cannot pardon him now; he must leave the school. I only hope he will have better fortune elsewhere."

Dick Nugent went slowly upstairs to the Second Form dormitory to pack his box. He opened the box, and then sat down on the edge of it to think, and forgot all about packing. His thoughts were gloomy enough.

After all, he might have had a good time at Greyfriars—if he had started there in a different spirit. How was it that everybody and everything had gone against him? Was it all his own fault?

Home in disgrace!

"Dick!"

Frank Nugent entered the dormitory. Dick looked up at him with a dull, dogged expression. Frank came over quickly towards him, with an anxious face.

"What are you doing, Dick?"

"Packing."

"What for?"

"I'm leaving the school!"

Nugent's face lengthened with dismay.

"You don't mean to say you're expelled, Dick?"

Nugent minor shook himself irritably.

"Well, I am," he said. "There's no help for it now. I biffed Wingate with a stone, and he seems to be hurt more than I intended. It can't be helped."

"It was a beastly cowardly thing to do, Dick!"

Dick reddened.

"Well, it's no good jawing me now!" he said. "I'm expelled!"

"It's rough—rotten rough!"

"I can stand it!"

"I wasn't thinking of you," said Frank savagely; "I was thinking of mother!"

"Oh!"

"She thinks a lot of you—why, I'm blessed if I can make out! It will be a blow to her to have you kicked out of school on the second day. I—I wonder if it could be stopped?"

"The Head's as hard as a rock!"

"Yes; but Wingate. It's worth trying, though it seems an awful cheek to think of speaking to him, but I'll try!"

Before Dick could speak again, Nugent hurried from the dormitory.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
Good for Evil.

WINGATE was sitting in his study, a cushion behind his head, his face very pale, and with an expression of pain upon it. His head was aching terribly, and he was fit for nothing, either work or play.

To a fellow who never passed an hour indoors if he could help it the inaction alone was torment, and he could not even read now. He grunted as a tap came at his door, and frowned as Nugent of the Remove entered.

Frank Nugent was looking very red and uncomfortable, but he had resolved to go through with the thing. After all, it could do little harm, if it did little good.

Wingate fixed his eyes on him.

"I don't want to be disturbed," he said grimly.

"I'm sorry, Wingate."

"All right. Get out!"

Nugent hesitated, with his hand on the door.

"Won't—won't you let me speak to you for a minute?" he said.

"Oh, come in, and get on, then!"

Nugent closed the door.

"It's about my minor."

"I guessed as much."

"The Head has expelled him."

"Good!"

"He's leaving Greyfriars this afternoon."

"All the better for Greyfriars!"

"I—I dare say it is, Wingate. But it's rough on his people at home—my people. But—but I suppose I was a cheeky ass to come here. I'll go."

And the boy, with a miserable face, turned to the door again.

Wingate's expression changed.

"Stay here!" he said.

Nugent turned back.

"Now, what did you come here to say?" asked the captain of Greyfriars. "It won't do any harm to say it, at all events."

"It's an awful cheek, under the circumstances——"

"Oh, get on!"

"It's about young Dick, my minor. I—I—I was going to ask you if—if you'd look over it," stammered Nugent. "I know it's an awful cheek. I know what he's done. He ought to be skinned for it! I think I should like him to have a flogging. But—but—— Of course, I suppose it doesn't matter to you, but my mother——"

Wingate smiled slightly.

"But perhaps it does matter to me," he said. "Go on."

"It will come very rough on the mater if he goes home, that's all," said Frank. "You see, he's been spoiled——"

"Yes, that's pretty clear."

"Mother is awfully fond of him, but he's a fearful worry to her all the time, all the same; and he puts the dad into bad tempers, too," said Frank. "I know jolly well that they'll be happier at home if Dick is at Greyfriars; but, besides that, they take a lot of pride in him, and if he's sent home in disgrace—— They—they'd feel it less if I were expelled."

Wingate nodded.

"If you could lick him instead, Wingate, and let him off——"

"But the Head has sentenced the young fool!"

"Yes, I know; but—but if you were to speak to the Head——"

Nugent's voice trailed away. It dawned upon him what a colossal nerve he was displaying in asking this of Wingate. If the captain of Greyfriars had risen and bundled him neck and crop out of the study Nugent would not have been surprised or offended. He felt that he deserved it for his cheek.

But Wingate did not do anything of the sort.

He sat quite still and silent for a full minute, looking at Nugent with a curious expression on his face. Then he rose to his feet.

The motion brought a throb of pain through his head, and he had to grasp the table for support, and his face went paler for a moment.

"Oh, I'm a brute to disturb you now!" said Nugent remorsefully. "And it's all that young cad's fault. But in an hour it will be too late!"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Oh, Wingate!"

"I'll go to the Head. Wait here."

Nugent burst into incoherent thanks, but Wingate did not stay to listen to them. With slow and uncertain steps the captain of Greyfriars made his way to the doctor's study.

Five minutes later he returned to his room, where Nugent was waiting with a clouded face and a heavy heart.

The junior looked up eagerly.

Wingate smiled as he clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's all right, my lad!"

Nugent drew a deep breath.

"Wingate, have you got him off?"

"Yes."

"He's to stay at Greyfriars?"

"Yes, on probation. According to how he shapes his conduct for the next week or two, so the Head will decide. You had better let him know it, and warn him to mind his p's and q's."

"Wingate, you are awfully good! I—I don't know how to thank you!" stammered Nugent.

Wingate laughed.

"Don't try! Get out now; my head aches."

And Nugent got out.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
A New Start.

"EXPELLED!" said Gatty. "Well, you jolly well deserve it, I must say! If you hadn't been expelled we'd have ragged you bald-headed!"

"What-ho!" said Todd.

"You'd learn that you couldn't biff old Wingate on the napper with things," said Myers. "Why, you young cad, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! I've a jolly good mind to give you a licking now myself!"

"Oh, let him alone!" said Todd. "He'll get enough."

"Yes, that's so."

Dick Nugent made no reply to the remarks of the crowd of Second-Form fellows in the doorway of the dormitory.

He went on packing his box, with a heavy heart.

The fags had tracked him to the Second-Form dormitory with the intention of renewing their ragging, but they had learned that he was expelled, and that news stopped them. It was not "cricket" to rag a fellow under sentence of expulsion.

Nugent major came into the dormitory, pushing his way through the fags. Gatty & Co. walked away, leaving the brothers alone.

Dick looked up. There were tears in his eyes now. The unaffected satisfaction of the Second Form at the prospect of getting rid of him had wounded him deeply. It was not pleasant to be told that his departure was as good as a whole holiday to the Form he belonged to.

"It's all right, kid!" said Frank abruptly. "Wingate has got you off!"

"Wingate?"

"Yes. He interceded with the Head."

Nugent minor stood motionless.

"Wingate?" he repeated again. "After the way I treated him? He asked the Head to let me off?"

"Yes."

"Blessed if I understand it!"

"You'll get to understand Wingate better if you stay at Greyfriars," said Frank. "He's the best fellow here. Of course, you're going to be punished. You'll be flogged, and you'll have to stand it."

"Flogged?" said Nugent minor slowly.

"Yes. But anything's better than being expelled. You've got a chance to get out of this way you've got into. After a flogging the fags will let you alone for a bit, and you will have a chance to pull round. The best thing you can do in the Second Form is to fight Gatty. He's nearly twice your size, but you had better tackle him. If you lick him, you'll be a favourite; if he licks you, as I suppose he will, it will make the other fellows respect you. No more sulking and snarling, mind! Keep a stiff upper lip, and try to be a man!"

Dick coloured.

"I'm sorry I threw that stone at Wingate," he said. "I—I never expected him to speak for me. He must be awfully decent."

"I'm glad you can see that, at any rate."

"And—and I'm not to leave Greyfriars?"

"Not if you behave yourself, and show that you're worth being given a chance."

Nugent minor nodded without speaking.

The bell rang for afternoon lessons, and Frank Nugent left his brother and went into the Remove room as usual, but Nugent minor did not go to the Second. He was taken into the Head's study by Gosling, who waited there, with a lurking smile on his face, which would have shown anyone that knew Gosling that a flogging was coming.

Dr. Locke looked sternly at the junior.

"Little as you deserve it, Nugent minor," he said, "Wingate, the victim of your brutality, has interceded for you. I have commuted your punishment to a flogging. Gosling, you will take him up."

And Gosling hoisted Nugent minor. The boy did not speak a word. He took his flogging—and a severe one it was—almost in silence.

When it was over he left the Head's study, and, to the great surprise of the Second-Formers, made his appearance in the classroom, but his uneasiness on the form, and the desire he showed to stand up on every possible occasion, showed them what had taken place—that Nugent minor had been flogged after all, instead of being expelled from Greyfriars.

After lessons, Dick Nugent hung about the passages for a chance of seeing Wingate. The captain of Greyfriars had missed lessons with the Sixth that afternoon, but he came out of his study later, and Nugent minor met him in the Sixth-Form passage. Wingate looked down grimly at the fag.

"I—I want to speak to you," faltered Dick. "I—I want to say I'm sorry. I—I'm very sorry I did that. I hope you'll believe me. It was a cad's trick."

Wingate's face softened a little.

"All right," he said. "You needn't bother."

And he passed on. Harry Wharton & Co. came along, and carted off the new fag to tea in Study No. 1, and that afternoon marked a new starting-point in the career of Nugent minor.

THE END.

THE SCHEME THAT FAILED!

A Magnificent Long Complete Tale, dealing with the Early Adventures of Jimmy Silver & Co. at Rookwood School.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Ordered Off!

"I'VE got it!"

With a serene smile on his face, Jimmy Silver dashed into the end study at Rookwood.

All might have been well had Jimmy's entry been of a more ceremonious nature.

As it was, he collided with the table at which Lovell, Raby, and Newcome were working.

They were doing lines which Mr. Bootles, the Fourth Form master, had seen fit to bestow upon them.

A minute or so ago, with the exception of a sundry blot or two, the papers on which the chums were working were fairly clear.

Now, however, Jimmy Silver's violent contact with the table had caused the ink to splatter over the table generally, and on the juniors' lines in particular.

"You frabjous idiot!" bawled Lovell, jumping up. "What do you mean——"

Jimmy Silver waved a letter in his hand.

"I've got it!" he repeated cheerfully.

"You're going to get it, and jolly quick, too!" snorted Lovell savagely.

"What-ho!" concurred Newcome and Raby.

"Let's rub his face in the mess!" said Lovell savagely. "After all, he made it, and it's only right——"

"Peace, my infants!" urged Jimmy Silver.

"Peace be hanged!" roared Lovell. "You've started war, and you're jolly well going to have war! Collar him!"

Jimmy Silver backed towards the door.

"Look here, you silly asses!" he exclaimed, eluding Lovell's determined grasp. "I've got some jolly good news!"

"Blow the news!"

"But it's important."

"Not so important as our lines," growled Lovell. "And as they're mucked up——"

"But about that fishing expedition——" began Jimmy Silver.

"Eh?"

"I've got permission for all of us to fish in the pond in Squire Heath's grounds this afternoon," declared Jimmy, keeping a wary eye on Lovell's hands.

Immediately the indignant looks disappeared from the faces of Lovell & Co.

Just recently the Fistical Four had become possessed of some ripping fishing-rods, and the pastime had taken a firm hold on them.

The Classical juniors had heard that there were some splendid fish in Squire Heath's pond, and, naturally, they had become eager to fish there.

It had been Jimmy's idea to write to the squire for permission to fish in his pond. He had written to the latter, and the juniors had been anxiously awaiting a reply.

At last it had come.

Lovell smiled faintly, and then gave Jimmy Silver a severe glare.

"Why the dickens didn't you explain yourself before?" he asked.

"You didn't give me a chance. You——"

"Why, you——"

"Now, stop arguing," said Jimmy Silver pacifically. "We ought to have a ripping afternoon, and we don't want to begin it by rowing."

"What about my lines?" asked Lovell, glancing at the mix-up on the table.

"Leave them until after tea," said Jimmy blandly. "I'll give you a hand. You haven't got to turn them in until bed-time, and you'll have plenty of time after tea."

"Oh, all right," said Lovell resignedly.

"Get your rods ready," said Jimmy Silver. "Mustn't waste any time."

Lovell & Co. quickly forgot about their spoiled lines in their eagerness for the fishing expedition.

The fishing tackle was soon got ready, and then the Fistical Four took their departure for the pond in Squire Heath's grounds.

The squire's place was a very short walk from the school, and the juniors soon came up to the gates.

They entered, and seeing no one about, they went straight on in the direction of the pond.

"Here, where yer goin'?"

The Fistical Four turned round quickly, to see a rough-looking fellow in coarse, check trousers, and a muffler round his neck.

Jimmy Silver & Co. took him to be a gardener on the squire's estate, which surmise was perfectly correct.

"We're going to fish in the pond," said Jimmy Silver promptly.

"Oh, are yer?" growled the man. "You'll 'op it, and sharp, too! These grounds belong to Squire Heath, and——"

Jimmy Silver drew out the squire's letter from his pocket.

"I'm quite aware of that," he said. "We've got permission from the squire to fish in his pond this afternoon."

"You can't kid me——" began the man.

"Read his letter, then," said Jimmy Silver, handing the squire's communication to the unbeliever.

The man squinted at the note, and then grunted something beneath his breath.

"Oh, all right, then," he muttered, handing the letter back to Jimmy Silver. "You can get along, but mind you don't damage no trees. I know what you young rapscallions are."

"I suppose you don't mind us touching the water?" asked Jimmy Silver placidly.

"Don't be imperent!" growled the man, and he ambled away.

The Fistical Four went on their way, and were soon sitting on small stools by the side of the pond.

They baited their lines, and soon four rods hung over the pond, and four eager faces stared at the water, anxious for the sight of a bite.

The gardener went on his way, mumbling to himself.

He was feeling in a very irritable mood, and eager to wreak his vengeance upon somebody.

The fact was, the squire had called him to account for not keeping the village boys off the estate, and to correct George Sparkes was to ruffle that worthy's never-reliable temper.

George ambled on, grumbling and discontented.

Suddenly he pulled up short, and pricked up his ears. The sound of voices raised in revelry could be plainly heard in the distance.

George was on the trail with a vengeance now, and moving quietly forward through the undergrowth, gripping a thick stick tightly in his hand, he crept towards the spot from whence the voices came.

Utterly unconscious of the fact that they were being tracked, Townsend & Co., the nuts of Rookwood, were indulging in a quiet smoke and a game of cards in a secluded spot at the end of the squire's estate.

Just recently Jimmy Silver had interfered and prevented, for a time, at any rate, the nuts from playing cards in their study.

Townsend and Topham of the Fourth, and Smythe and Howard of the Shell, had forthwith decided to seek other quarters for the purpose of indulging in their shady practices.

Townsend had discovered that it was possible to get into the squire's grounds unnoticed, and thence the nuts had wended their way on that particular afternoon.

"Your deal, Toppy!" said Townsend, with a drawl, as he handed a pack of cards to his nutty chum.

"I say, dear boys," drawled Adolphus Smythe, "this is rippin'—what? Jolly good idea of yours, Towny, to come to this place."

"Oh, it's toppin'!" agreed Howard. "No one to interfere with us. We can smoke as much as we like without havin' that cad Silver chippin' in."

"Ha, ha, ha! We've done him this time all right," remarked Topham, with an air of satisfaction. "I guess—— Hallo! Who—what——"

Topham had caught sight of a grim, evil-looking face peering through the branches of a tree in front of him, and the startled look on his own face caused his nutty chums to stare in the same direction.

"By Jove!" gasped Adolphus Smythe. "Who the dickens——"

Smythe had no time to say anything more. Next instant the vindictive George had leaped forward, and grabbed the dandy by the shoulder.

"Let me go, you low-down rascal!" spluttered Adolphus. "What do you mean by interferin'——"

"I'll interfere with you!" roared George spitefully. "I've caught yer in the act. What d'you mean by trespassin' on these 'ere grounds?"

"I—I—— Toppy, Towny, Howard, don't run away, there's good fellows!"

The three nuts had taken to their heels. They were pelting to a place of greater safety, without devoting a thought to Smythe's plight.

"It ain't no good yelling to your pals," jeered George. "They ain't got no pluck. They're scared, that's what they are. And you're goin' to be scared, too, before I've done with you!"

"Release me this instant, you scoundrel!"

"Not so much o' the scoundrel!"

"Let me go!"

"No blessed fear!" roared George savagely. "But I tell you what. You look like a young gentleman, and——"

"Of course I'm a gentleman," interrupted Smythe indignantly. "And I refuse to be man-handled by such a ruffian as you!"

"You'd better not get nasty," said George calmly. "If you do I shall cart you off to the police-station, and——"

"You won't!"

"Now, look here," said George with emphasis, "are you going to listen to my proposal or aren't yer?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been playing for money?"

"I haven't—really I haven't," said Adolphus hastily. "We were just havin' a friendly game!"

George wagged a warning finger at the cringing dandy.

"Don't tell me no lies!" he snapped. "I know you have, and that's an end of it. If you've got money to gamble with, you've got money to give me!"

"What——"

"I don't want much. Ten bob will square me."

"You blackmailing scoundrel!" exclaimed Smythe. "I won't give you a penny-piece! I won't——"

"Very well, then," said George artfully. "We get off to the police-station!"

"No, no!" said the dandy, frightened. "I'll do anything you like!" He slipped his hand into his pocket. "Let me make you a present of a few shillings. Mind you, it's a present. Nothin'——"

"Oh, rather, sir!" grinned George. "I wouldn't think of calling it anything else but a present. Of course, I didn't want to interfere with your little game. I like young fellows to enjoy——"

"Here you are," said Smythe, forcing several silver coins into the man's hand. "Now let me go!"

The man released his hold on the dandy.

"You can go with pleasure, young sir," said George cunningly. "I wouldn't detain you another minute." He picked up Smythe's cap, which had fallen to the ground, and slipped it into his pocket. "It was awfully kind o' yer to make me such a splendid present, and——"

"Give me my cap!" exclaimed Smythe, mystified at the fellow's action.

The man giggled.

"I'll send that on to yer to-morrow," said George. "I just want to keep that in case you feel inclined to let a word drop to the police."

"But——"

"Good-day to yer," said George. And he turned on his heel and walked away.

Smythe stood and gasped, astounded at the other's action.

The man had got ten shillings of the dandy's money, but that did not trouble Smythe so much as the loss of his cap.

Supposing the scoundrel turned traitor, and gave an account to the Head of what had happened that afternoon?

Adolphus shuddered at the thought of what would occur again.

He did not quite trust George, and there was no doubt that his distrust was justified.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Called Over the Coals!

"ON the ball!"

It was the day after the Fistical Four's fishing expedition.

Their bag had been a good one, and they had returned to Rookwood highly elated.

Tommy Dodd & Co. of the Modern side had met them coming in, and, needless to say, the Classical chums had not lost an opportunity of "crowing" over their rivals.

Thus, when the next day the Modern juniors caught sight of the Fistical Four crossing the quad, and noticed that Jimmy Silver carried a football under his arm, they became filled with the desire to obtain their revenge.

"On the ball!" repeated Tommy Dodd, and before Jimmy Silver was aware what was happening, the ball had been knocked out of his grasp.

Tommy Dodd fastened on to it at once.

"This way, Doddy!" yelled Tommy Cook.

Tommy Dodd promptly passed the ball to his chum.

"Stop it, you Modern rotters!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver wrathfully.

"Yah! Classical cads!" responded the Moderns.

"On the ball!"

The next moment more than half a dozen juniors were engaged in a determined chase for the footer.

The Moderns' passing was splendid, and though they tried their utmost to regain possession of the ball, the Fistical Four were unsuccessful.

"Knock off, you Modern bounders!" shrieked Jimmy Silver.

"Do you want your ball, Silver?" asked Tommy Dodd blandly.

"Of course I——"

"Here you are, then," said Tommy Dodd, and he pretended to pass the ball to Jimmy.

Whether Tommy Dodd got his foot too far under the ball or not, the fact remains that the ball sailed over Jimmy Silver's head to where Tommy Doyle was waiting.

"Faith, an' that was a rippin' pass, Tommy darling!" said Tommy Doyle, making off towards the School House.

"After him!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

"What-ho!"

Tommy Doyle sprinted like a hare. Keeping the ball nicely in front of his feet, he ran it up towards the house.

Tommy Doyle's gaze was fixed on the ball. Thus he did not notice the figure of a coarse-looking man making towards the House.

"Shoot, Tommy!" sang out one of the Moderns.

Tommy Doyle shot, but he scored a far different goal than he expected.

The footer flew swiftly through the air, and would have gone sailing on towards the House had not the stranger got in the way.

The ball crashed full into the side of the man's face, and staggering backwards, he fell to the ground.

"My hat!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver in surprise. "It's that fellow who stopped us in Squire Heath's grounds yesterday."

"So it is," said Lovell. "I wonder what he's doing here."

"Better give him a hand," said Jimmy Silver generously.

The Fistical Four stepped forward, and helped George to rise to his feet.

"You young scoundrels!" roared the man. "You've busted my 'ead! Ow! Yow! You've cracked my skull! I'm sure——"

"Imposs, old scout," said Jimmy Silver quietly. "Nothing short of a chopper will crack wood—— I mean—— I say, I'm sorry if you're hurt!"

"I should think I am hurt!" roared George savagely. "I'll give you in charge. I'll——"

"Don't talk rot!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver disgustedly. "It was an accident!"

"It wasn't!" raved the man. "You meant to do me an injury. I know who you are; you're the rascals I caught in the grounds yesterday."

"We is—we are!" sang out Lovell.

"You can laugh," snapped George spitefully. "But the laugh will be on my side soon. I'm going to see your 'eadmaster, I am, and I'm going to tell him something about yer. Let me go!"

"Wouldn't detain you for worlds!" said Jimmy Silver sublimely.

With a muttered oath, the fellow trudged off in the direction of the Head's house.

Meanwhile, Jimmy Silver and his chums remained in the quad, roaring with laughter at the man's discomfiture.

"Want your ball, Silver?" cried Tommy Dodd.

"Yes, you Modern bounder!"

"Here you are!"

The ball flew from Tommy Dodd's foot like an arrow from a bow.

Jimmy Silver was hardly ready to receive it, and thus it was that the muddy leather cannoned on the Classical junior's head.

"Ow! Yow! Yaroooh!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Moderns roared.

"How do you like 'em done, Silver?"

"You Modern bounders, I'll——"

"Good-bye, Bluebell!" sang out Tommy Dodd; and he and the other Moderns raced off to their House.

"Collar the bounders!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

But it was no good. The Moderns had got a good start, and they were soon within the walls of their own House.

Jimmy Silver knew that to follow Tommy Dodd & Co. was to court disaster, so he contented himself with shaking his fist at the Moderns.

The Fistical Four marched up to their study.

Jimmy's eye was covered in mud, but the application of a little soap and water soon brought his clear skin to view.

The juniors were seated at tea a little later when the page entered and announced that the Head wanted to see them at once.

"My hat!" exclaimed Lovell. "I suppose that rotter's spinning the Head some frightful yarn."

"Well, we'd better get along," said Jimmy Silver wisely.

They wended their way towards the Head's study.

Jimmy Silver tapped at the door, and in response to the Head's "Come in!" the four of them entered.

The Head was sitting at his desk, a severe, stern expression on his face, whilst George stood at his side, with a self-satisfied grin on his face.

"I have received a very serious accusation against you four boys," said the Head in measured tones. "To begin with, I understand you are guilty of kicking a football at this man's head."

"No, sir!" said Jimmy Silver promptly. "We didn't kick the ball.. We——"

"You were kicking a ball about in the quadrangle, were you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it matters not who actually kicked the ball at this man. No doubt it was an accident. But——"

"It wasn't an accident, I tell you!" interrupted George, with a grunt.

The Head gave him a severe look.

"Please be good enough to remain quiet whilst I am speaking," he said coldly. "Now, Silver, I understand you went fishing in Squire Heath's grounds yesterday afternoon."

"That is quite correct, sir," said Jimmy Silver at once. "We had the squire's permission to fish."

"Quite so. But did you have the squire's permission to smoke in his grounds?"

"My hat!" gasped Jimmy Silver, thunderstruck. "We—er——"

"No doubt you are amazed that your disgraceful behaviour has been discovered," said the Head icily. "I am surprised—nay, disgusted—to learn that you boys, above all, have lowered yourselves to behave in such a disgraceful manner. You——"

"If you've been telling lies about us——" began Jimmy Silver heatedly, giving George a steely glare.

"Silver!" rapped out the Head commandingly. "How dare you raise your voice in my presence?"

"But we're innocent, sir!" protested Jimmy fervently. "If that man says he caught us smoking, he lies!"

The Head turned to the man.

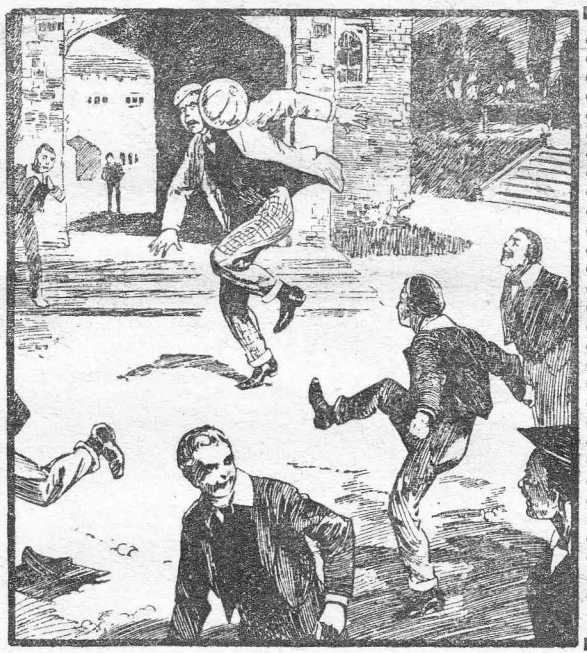
"Do you adhere to your statement?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," said Dr. Chisholm. He turned to Jimmy Silver, and held out a penknife, which Jimmy recognised as his own. "This is yours, I believe, Silver?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I—I lost it."

"Yes, Silver. I am aware of that fact," said the Head coldly. "According to this man's statement, this knife of yours was found in a deserted part of the grounds, and by it were a number of cigarette ends. How



"Shoot, Tommy!" sang out one of the juniors. Tommy Doyle shot, and the ball crashed into the man's face, sending him reeling backwards.

can you account for the knife being found under such peculiar circumstances?"

"I can only conclude that I dropped it accidentally," said Jimmy Silver.

The Head knitted his brows in deep thought, and for a moment complete silence reigned in the study.

"I am sorry, Silver," he said at length, "but I am afraid I cannot accept your explanation. My faith in you has been strong, but I am sorry to say it has been severely shaken by this unfortunate occurrence. I will not, however, pass sentence on you until to-morrow. Meanwhile, I shall strive to obtain further proof of your guilt—or your innocence," he added as an afterthought. "You may go."

The Fistical Four went.

There were anxious looks on their faces.

They were confident that the man had lied to the Head for some reason or other. What this reason was, however, neither of the chums could fathom.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Bowled Out!

DIRECTLY he had finished his prep that evening, Jimmy Silver obtained a pass to go down to Coombe for the purpose of posting a letter.

He was approaching the school gates on his return, when the sound of voices raised in anger could be plainly heard outside the porter's lodge.

"I tell you as you can't see Master Smythe at this time o' night!" came the voice of Mack, the school porter.

"I want to see him, and, what's more, I'm going to see him!" replied a voice, which Jimmy Silver recognised as belonging to George Sparkes. "An' old buffer like you won't stop me, neither!"

"Which as I will!" replied the school porter angrily. "You move an inch, and—— Oh, would you? Jest move back a bit, my son."

At mention of Smythe's name Jimmy Silver wondered what Squire Heath's gardener could want with the dandy of the Shell.

He passed through the gates, and stopped at the door of the porter's lodge, at the same moment as Mack pushed the man aside.

"What's the matter, Mack, old scout?" asked Jimmy Silver cheerily. "Surely they haven't made you chucker-out as well as porter?"

"Which as I've got a big job on 'and, Master Silver," said Mack, with a grunt. "Jest lend me a hand in shoving this obstreprous young feiler out."

"What's he want, Mack?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"'E wants to see Master Smythe," explained the porter. "I never 'eard o' such a thing at this time o' night!"

"Why shouldn't he see him?" asked Jimmy, whose suspicions were aroused.

"'Cos he ain't goin' to."

"But he may be a special friend of Smythe's."

"Of course I'm a friend of his!" said George blandly. "I shouldn't come here to see him if I wasn't."

"You've been drinking, that's what you've been doin'!" snapped Mack.

"I ain't! I——"

"Just you stay here a minute," said Jimmy Silver. "I'll tell Smythe to come and see you."

Jimmy Silver tore off towards the House. He made his way to Smythe's study.

Smythe was seated by the fire alone when Jimmy Silver entered. He was gazing moodily into the fire.

"Chap down at the gates wants to see you, Smythey," said Jimmy Silver, watching the dandy's face closely.

Smythe looked up in surprise. His face changed colour.

"See me?" he gasped. "What—what——"

"Says he's a particular friend of yours," said Jimmy Silver calmly. "I didn't know Squire Heath's gardener was an acquaintance of yours."

"By gad!"

"Personally, I think he's an awful rotter," went on Jimmy Silver, without commenting on Smythe's startled expression. "What do you think, Smythey? That fellow came here this afternoon, and told the Head a yarn about catching us smoking in the squire's grounds."

Smythe bit his lips hard.

"By gad!" he gasped, moving restlessly in his chair. "Tell him I'm out, Silver. Tell him I'm not well—tell him anything, so long as you get rid of him!"

"But he particularly wants to see you, Smythey."

"He doesn't."

"But he said——"

"Oh, dear!" groaned the dandy. "What ever am I to do?"

"Do?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver, in mocked surprise. "I don't understand you, Smythey. Surely you aren't afraid to meet this chap!"

"By gad! It's awful!" muttered the dandy.

"Look here, Smythey," said Jimmy Silver quietly, "you're in a bit of a mess."

"An awful mess!" added Adolphus.

"Yes, I can see that by your face," said Jimmy Silver. "I suppose you weren't caught smoking in the squire's grounds yesterday afternoon?"

"Who—who told you, Silver?"

"Nobody. I was merely wondering, that's all."

The dandy of the Shell looked at Jimmy Silver questioningly, and for a moment there was complete silence. Adolphus wondered how much Jimmy Silver knew about his adventure of the previous afternoon.

But Jimmy's face was calm and impassive. Not a hint did he give Adolphus of what he really knew.

It was left to Jimmy Silver to break the silence.

"Look here, Smythey," he said plainly, "you're a shady young cad, but I don't like to see you in trouble. What's the giddy row? Tell me, and perhaps I can help you out of it."

"You wouldn't——" began Adolphus.

"Well, try me and see."

Smythe gave Jimmy Silver one glance, and then he made a clean breast of his trouble.

He related how he and his nutty chums had gone to the squire's grounds to gamble and smoke.

He also told how George had caught them, and how he had been compelled to "buy" the rascal off.

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver hotly, as Smythe concluded his explanation. "He's a beastly blackmailer, nothing more or less! You can bet your boots he's come here to extort more money out of you."

"Oh, dear!" groaned the dandy.

Jimmy Silver gave Adolphus a hearty slap on the back.

"Keep smiling, Smythey!" he said. "I guess I've got a wheeze for getting you out of this merry scrape. You deserve all the trouble you've had; but, all the same, I'm not going to stand by and see that rotter blackmail you. You'll have to see him."

"I c-c-can't!" muttered Smythe dolefully.

"Nonsense! You've got to see him. Let him say what he wants to, and argue the matter out with him."

"But——"

"Then a few of us chaps will chip in, and give him socks. Buck up, Smythey; show you've got some ginger in you!"

"By gad! It's risky."

"Piffle!" snorted Jimmy Silver restlessly. "No risk in it at all, if you've got any pluck. Come on!"

Adolphus went, but he had very little enthusiasm for the task on hand.

"Entice him over to the old elms," said Jimmy Silver, as he reached the end study. "I'm going to fetch Lovell and Raby and Newcome. I guess we'll give George a little more than he bargained for."

Smythe walked on down the stairs, and as soon as he entered the quad he heard the school porter arguing with the blackmailer.

"I tell you, I'm going to see that chap Smythe!"

"By gad! D'you want to see me?"

George turned round quickly at sound of the dandy's voice.

"Oh! So you've come, then?" he said, eyeing the dandy up and down.

"Yaas! Sorry if I've kept you waiting," drawled Adolphus. "Come along with me."

"With pleasure, Master Smythe!"

Smythe led the way to the old elms in the far corner of the quad. The dandy's heart was beating fast as he stood in the darkness.

"What is it you want?" he asked nervously.

"What d'yer think I want?" growled the man, bad temperedly. "I've come to 'and you your 'at."

"Oh, good!"

"But I want another little present first."

"I—I——"

"Now, don't argue," said the man warningly. "Five bob will do me this time!"

"You utter rascal!" exclaimed Smythe indignantly. "D'you mean to say you're goin' to blackmail me?"

"'Tain't blackmail," said the man, with a coarse laugh. "All I asked for is a little present. You—what——"

George broke off suddenly, for the sound of rushing footsteps could be plainly heard in his rear.

"Collar the rotter!"

It was Jimmy Silver's voice, and Adolphus breathed a sigh of thankfulness as he caught sight of the Fistical Four in the darkness.

Next moment the four Classicals had thrown themselves on the man, and borne him to the ground.

"Bump him!"

"What-ho!"

Bump!

"Give him another!"

Bump! Bump! Bump!

"Ow! Yow! Yarooogh!" roared the man. "Let me go! I'll have the law on you! I'll——"

"You won't do anything of the kind!" said Jimmy Silver emphatically. "You'll buzz off pretty quick! And if you show your face near here again, we'll have you arrested for blackmail!"

"What—what——"

"We heard every word you were saying just now," said Jimmy. "We heard you trying to get money out of Smythe, and, what's more, we know why you wanted the money."

George's face changed colour.

"You don't understand——" he began.

"We understand just a little too much about your little game," said Jimmy Silver firmly. "Now, what's it to be? Are we to hand you over to P.-c. Boggs, or——"

"No, no!" faltered George. "I'll go this very instant. I——"

"I say, Jimmy," broke in Lovell, "don't you think we ought to make this chap tell the Head that the yarn he spun about us was all lies?"

"What-ho!" exclaimed Jimmy. "I quite forgot about that. Come on, you villain! You've got to tell our respected headmaster that you've made a mistake, and if you say a word about any Rookwood chap we'll——"

"I won't, young sir—I won't really," mumbled George. "I'll do anything for you."

"Yes, you beastly blackmailer, I——"

"Oh, really, young sir, I'm not a blackmailer! It was only a lark, you know. I didn't——"

"Come along!" said Jimmy Silver commandingly. "Let's get the job over. It's a bit chilly out here."

The juniors piloted the ruffian over to the Head's house, and waited for him to reappear.

He returned in about five minutes, walking slowly, but he soon quickened his pace when Jimmy Silver & Co. brought their boots into play.

They saw the rogue off the "premises," and then returned to their own study. Needless to say, the Fistical Four gave the nuts a severe bumping, for, although George's cunning scheme had failed, they felt that Towny & Co. had been the cause of the trouble, and deserved the punishment.

THE END.

THEIR DISHONOURABLE CHUM!

A Magnificent Long Complete Story, dealing with the Early Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Levison's Photographs.

"CAKE, of course?" said Tom Merry of the Shell.

"Yes; and tarts——"

"And some cream puffs——"

"Good!"

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

Manners grunted.

"I'm thinking about my camera."

"About which?"

"My camera!" snorted Manners.

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

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

"Leave that over till to-morrow——"

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

"Well, never mind that now——"

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

"Oh, blow Levison——"

"But I want my camera!" howled Manners. "I'm going to take Cousin Ethel to-morrow morning, if it's sunny. Do you know where Levison is?"

"In his study, perhaps. Suppose we say half a dozen tea-cakes——"

"I've looked in his study."

"Nicely toasted——"

Manners snorted, and left the study. He was quite as keen as the others about properly entertaining Cousin Ethel, but he was anxious for his camera. It was an expensive camera for a junior to possess, and it was an old and trusty friend, too.

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

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

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

Manners gave a contemptuous sniff.

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

"Ye-es."

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

Levison bit his lip.

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

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

Levison threw away the stump of his cigarette.

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

Levison yawned.

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

Manners stared.

"Then you admit having borrowed it?"

Levison nodded.

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

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

Manners paused.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

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

"Well, of all the cheek——"

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

He drew three shillings from his waistcoat-pocket.

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

"There's the money."

"Very well."

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

"Of course, you silly ass!"

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

Manners followed the cad of the Fourth to his study in the School House. Exasperated as Manners was by the borrowing of his precious camera without his permission, he was less angry now than he had been.

Anybody with a taste for photography could not be wholly bad, Manners considered, and he was really interested to see how well or otherwise Levison had taken his pictures.

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

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

"Oh, yes!"

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

Manners nodded, and left the study with the camera in his hand.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Backbiter!

THE early dusk was settling over the old quadrangle of St. Jim's. Lights were gleaming from the windows of the School House, ruddy and rosy, into the shadows of the quad.

Cousin Ethel came out of the old stone porch of the Head's house with her light step. She was on her way to the School House to keep the appointment with Tom Merry & Co. for tea in the study.

"Miss Cleveland!"

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

She knew Levison's voice.

He had stepped into her path, and so she could not very well avoid stopping; but she frowned a little as she did so. Ethel Cleveland did not like Levison. Her frank and

honest nature recoiled from the dark and tortuous character of the cad of the Fourth.

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

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

"Only a minute—and it's important."

"Well?"

"It's about Figgins," explained Levison.

Ethel's face grew icy.

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

"I want you to help him."

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

"To help Figgins!" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I do not understand you."

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

"Yes, I know that."

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Levison smiled unpleasantly.

"I was the somebody," he said.

"You?"

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

"What?"

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

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

Levison sneered.

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

"It is not true!"

"It is true!"

"I do not believe you!"

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

"It would be difficult."

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

"I cannot believe you!" said Ethel.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

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

"I want you to interfere. Figgins has seen the exam questions and I haven't. Something will have to be done. If I speak to Figgins on the subject, he will hammer me again. That won't do any good. But I'm not going into the exam with Figgins knowing all about the paper in advance. It's not to be expected. Figgins will have to withdraw from the exam, or else Mr. Ratcliff's paper will have to be destroyed, so that he must draw up a new one. If nothing is done I shall go to Dr. Holmes. I'm not going to let Figgins beat me in an exam for twenty-five pounds by foul play."

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

"When you see the photograph——"

"I have not seen it yet."

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

"Let me go now."

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

Was it true?

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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Tea with Tom Merry.

TEA in Study No. 10 was held over until Manners came in, with a purple splash on his nose, and his fingers still stained in spite of a hasty wash.

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

"Weally, Mannahs——"

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

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

"Let him try," said Figgins drily.

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

"Oh, blow the photographs!" said Lowther.

"Look here, Lowther——"

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

"Trust a girl to talk sense," said Manners admiringly. "They're really good, you know. Three views of your House, Figgy. What have you been doing in old Ratty's study to-day?"

Figgins started.

"I——"

"Yes, you."

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

"Caught!" grinned Manners.

"What do you mean?" Figgins demanded warmly.

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

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

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

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

"Nice man!" grinned Lowther.

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

"Oh, come," said Manners.

Figgins stared at him.

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

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

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

The girl's heart was like lead

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

And Figgins denied it.

Why?

Figgins had spoken an untruth.

Ethel felt her cheeks burning.

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

Tea was over at last.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy prepared to take his cousin back to the Head's house. But Ethel did not rise.

Digby went away to begin his preparation, and Herries to feed his bulldog, Towser. Blake meditatively cracked a final nut.

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

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

"What-ho!" said Tom Merry.

D'Arcy looked a little surprised.

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

"Vewy well, deah gal!" he replied.

And he left the study with Blake.

Cousin Ethel remained alone with the Terrible Three.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther glanced at her.

That she had something unusual to say they felt certain, and they wondered what it was.

Cousin Ethel was silent for some minutes, and the chums of the Shell waited.

When the girl broke the silence at last, her cheeks were very red, and her voice faltered.

"I—I—I want to ask you——"

She paused.

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

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

"Right-ho!"

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

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

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

"Yes, rather!" exclaimed Monty Lowther heartily. "Figgins is a brick! Of course, we have to go for him every now and then, just to show that the School House is really cock-house at St. Jim's. But if there's anything wrong, you can rely on us to stand by old Figgy."

"Certainly," said Manners, but less enthusiastically.

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

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

"He'd give himself away if he tried, I

think," said Lowther. "It wouldn't be in his line at all."

Manners was silent.

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

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

Cousin Ethel looked at him directly.

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

"Me! Why?"

"You specially."

"But—but——"

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

Manners did not speak.

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

"I have just heard something from Levison," she said slowly. "I met him in the quadrangle as I came here. He told me a wretched story about Figgins, and I couldn't believe it. But now—now——"

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

"I know, but——"

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

Cousin Ethel hesitated.

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

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

Tom Merry started.

"Impossible!"

"Oh, that's all rot!" said Monty Lowther at once.

Cousin Ethel looked troubled.

"But that is not all," she said.

"What more is there?"

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

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

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

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

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom Merry and Lowther together.

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

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

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

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

Manners nodded.

"Any photographs of the New House among them?"

"Three."

"Did they show Ratty's study window?"

"Yes; all of them."

"Oh! And Figgins——"

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

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

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

"Well, he was!" said Manners.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manners shook his head.

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

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, disappointed.

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

That was unanswerable.

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

Figgins was guilty!

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

"No, no!" said Manners hastily.

And Lowther nodded.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Proof!

MANNERS was up very early the next morning. Tom Merry and Monty Lowther came down with him, and watched him in the study while he cut up the films and put them in the printing-frames.

There was a bright burst of sunshine before breakfast, and Manners put the frames on the window-sill of the study, where the sun's rays fell brightly and warmly. They watched the progress of the negatives with anxious eyes, and Manners gave them a sight of the pictures before they were fixed in the solution.

The face of Figgins at the window of Mr. Ratcliff's study came out in one of the pictures with startling clearness, and in the other two it was unmistakable. The Terrible Three were very silent when they went down to breakfast.

There was nothing to say. Figgins' presence in Mr. Ratcliff's study on that occasion was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, and Figgins had denied it point-blank. The conclusion was obvious.

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

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

"Here they are," said Manners.

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

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

Ethel gave a sigh.

"This is terrible!" she said.

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

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

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

"Then if he wins the prize——"

"It will be cheating."

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

Tom Merry whistled softly.

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

"That is better than winning dishonestly."

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

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

The tears were glistening upon the girl's lashes.

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

"And at once," said Ethel—"at once!"

"Yes—yes!"

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

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

"Here he is!" said Manners.

Figgins was coming towards them at a run. His face was a little flushed as he halted by the Terrible Three and glanced over the gate. Cousin Ethel was not to be seen now.

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

He paused, colouring.

Tom Merry nodded.

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

"Go ahead!" said Figgins.

"It's about the Southcote."

Figgins looked surprised.

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

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

"What!"

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

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

"Well, you see——"

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

"You see, we know now——"

"You know what?"

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

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

"And help you out," said Manners.

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

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

"What?" yelled Figgins.

"We know it, and——"

"Do you mean the Southcote exam paper?"

"Yes."

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

"Well, you denied going, so——"

"I denied going because I never went."

"But we know——"

"We've got the proofs——"

Figgins clenched his hands hard.

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

"Yes, it's plain enough!" said Tom Merry angrily. His temper was beginning to rise now at what he regarded as Figgins' obstinacy, and the names Figgins had applied to the Terrible Three were not very pleasant to hear, either. "It's plain enough, and I'll give you some plain English in return. You were seen in Ratty's study yesterday. You looked out of the window, and were photographed there——"

"It's a lie!"

"We've got the photographs——"

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

"What!"

"You heard what I said."

"Look here——"

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

"You don't seem to mind accusing me," said Figgins. "And I tell you again, if you've got any photographs of the sort, you've faked them, and that's flat! And if you say again that I'm a liar, I shall hit out! I'm not the kind of chap to stand that sort of thing!"

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

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

Clang, clang!

It was the bell for lessons.

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

"You cad!"

"You rotter!"

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

The juniors hurried into their class-rooms.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

To Save Figgins.

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

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

Tom Merry coloured.

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

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

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

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

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

"But he won't!"

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

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

"No doubt about it!"

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

"Destroyed?"

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

Monty Lowther whistled.

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

"We are!"

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

Tom Merry set his lips.

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

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

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

Tom Merry nodded.

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

"Alone?" asked Manners.

"Yes."

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

"You bet!" said Lowther.

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

"Rats!"

Tom Merry smiled.

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

"Right-ho!"

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

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

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

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

And that was settled.

As soon as afternoon school was over, the Terrible Three slipped out from the School House.

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

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

"Good!"

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

"Quick!" muttered Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three stepped into the study, and Tom Merry closed the door quickly behind him.

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

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

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

"We shall have to light the gas."

"Just a glimmer."

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

They looked on Mr. Ratcliff's table, and then raised the lid of his desk. Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"Look!"

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

"SOUTHGATE PRIZE EXAMINATION."

"That's it!"

"What luck!"

"Oh, good!"

Tom Merry picked out the paper.

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

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

"Yes, rather!"

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

"Buck up!"

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

The Terrible Three were feeling elated.

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

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

It flared up at once in flame.

The chums of the Shell watched it breathlessly.

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

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

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

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

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

But he did not speak.

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

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

Then he spoke.

"So I have caught you!"

Mr. Ratcliff's voice was thin and acid, like his face and his nature. But in the silent study, to the startled juniors, it seemed to have a sound like thunder.

They started and swung round.

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

Mr. Ratcliff smiled sourly.

"I have caught you!"

"Oh!"

"What paper are you burning there?"

No reply.

The Terrible Three were utterly taken aback.

"What is that paper?"

The last fragment of the paper had been reduced to ashes.

Still the Terrible Three did not speak.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"You have deliberately taken that paper from my desk and burnt it?" said Mr. Ratcliff, hardly able to believe himself that it was so.

"Yes," said Tom Merry.

"I can hardly credit it!" said Mr. Ratcliff slowly. "You have always been disobedient, unruly, and insubordinate boys, never respectful to your masters, and in my opinion a disgrace to the school, but I

should never have suspected this, even of you. You are aware that drawing up such a paper is a long and troublesome task?"

"I—I suppose so, sir!" said Tom Merry.

The other two were silent.

"Yet you have destroyed it?"

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

The juniors were silent.

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

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

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

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

The Terrible Three followed him in silence.

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

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

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

"No, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Or you, Manners—Lowther?"

"No, sir."

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

"No, sir."

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

"Ye-es, sir."

"I can hardly credit it of you," said the Head sternly. "Is it possible that you were actuated simply by dislike of a master when you acted in this discreditable and dishonourable way?"

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

"But you knew——"

"Yes, sir, we knew; but——"

"But what?"

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

"Then why did you destroy the paper?"

The juniors were silent.

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

"Well, yes, sir."

"What was the motive?"

"I—I can't explain."

The doctor's brow grew dark.

"This is mere prevarication, Merry," he said sternly. "You cannot expect me to listen to that. Mr. Ratcliff, I leave the punishment of these boys in your hands."

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

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

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

"No, sir."

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

"Very well, sir."

The Terrible Three left the Head's study.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Facing the Music.

AFTER prayers the next morning the school was assembled in Big Hall.

The fellows went in with very grave faces.

There was hardly any need for the prefects to walk up and down, keeping order. The boys were orderly enough. Even those who condemned the action of the culprits, felt sorry for them.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther entered the Hall with a firm tread, and took their places quietly in the ranks of the Shell.

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

The Head was not present.

The punishment had been delegated to the injured master, and the whole matter was left in Mr. Ratcliff's hands. There was no danger that Mr. Ratcliff would spare the rod. It was more likely that he would err upon the other side.

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

The Terrible Three were summoned on to the raised platform at the upper end of the Hall. Mr. Ratcliff's keen, ratty eyes searched their faces.

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

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

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

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

The juniors were silent.

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

The three juniors flushed.

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

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

"No, sir."

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

"No, sir."

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

Monteith, Baker, and Powell obeyed.

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

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther made no resistance.

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

The first blow was about to fall upon Tom Merry when suddenly the door of the Hall was flung open, and in rushed Cousin Ethel, breathless and excited.

A buzz, growing to a shout of amazement, burst from the school as Ethel ran up the Hall. In a moment she was upon the platform.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!"

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

Ethel sprang forward.

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

There was a shout in the crowded Hall.

"Stop!"

"Oh, Ethel!"

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

"Miss Cleveland!" he ejaculated.

Ethel's lips were drawn with pain.

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

"What!"

The whole Hall was in a buzz.

Mr. Ratcliff frowned heavily.

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

"It was not his fault!" the girl exclaimed breathlessly. "He tried to stop me. But I had to come—you must not punish them, Mr. Ratcliff! I will tell you what happened; they were not to blame!"

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

"Yes—yes—but——"

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

Mr. Railton interposed quickly.

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

Mr. Ratcliff gave him a sour look.

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

"But——"

"The punishment will proceed——"

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

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

And he quitted the Hall.

A few moments later the Head entered.

His face was very grave.

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

Cousin Ethel caught her breath. But she kept her courage, and spoke in a voice that only trembled slightly.

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

"Precisely."

"They were not to blame."

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

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

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

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

"Yes?" said the Head kindly.

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

"Good heavens!" murmured the Head.

Ethel stood firm.

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

"If this is correct, I certainly should pardon them for what they did, and I am sure Mr. Ratcliff would regard their conduct leniently," said the Head gravely. "What was the name, Miss Cleveland?"

Ethel's lips trembled.

"Must you know it, sir?"

"Certainly."

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

"Most decidedly."

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

There was a breathless hush in Hall.

"Go on," said the Head.

Ethel's voice was faint as she answered: "It was Figgins, sir!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
On Trial!

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

"No, sir," said the New House master.

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

"By whom?"

Cousin Ethel hesitated.

"Must I tell you, sir?"

"This matter must be threshed out to the very end now, my dear child," said the Head gently.

"It was Levison, sir."

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

"Yes, sir."

"Levison, come forward!"

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

"Figgins!"

"Here, sir!" said Figgins.

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

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

He halted before the doctor.

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

"Yes, sir."

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

"Yes, sir."

"Upon what grounds?"

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

"Is that true, Figgins?"

"No, sir."

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

"No, sir."

"Where were you?"

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

"Quite right, sir!" called out Kerr.

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

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

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

The doctor nodded. He was of the same opinion.

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

"He did, sir."

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

"Yes, sir."

"What was the proof?"

"It is here, sir," said Manners.

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

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

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

"No, sir. Levison did."

"When did you take them, Levison?"

"On Wednesday afternoon, sir."

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

"Totally, sir."

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

"Manners can, sir," said Levison.

"What have you to say, Manners?"

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

The Head looked very thoughtful.

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

"Yes, sir."

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

"Exactly so, sir."

"What have you to say, Figgins?"

Figgins was very pale.

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

Mr. Ratcliff stepped forward, and faced the Head.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but may I question Levison?"

"Certainly," replied Dr. Holmes.

"You have stated that you saw Figgins in my study on Wednesday afternoon?" said Mr. Ratcliff.

"Yes, sir," said Levison boldly.

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

"Yes, sir."

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

"Well, I suspected that was his little game, sir."

"But did you actually see him with the paper?" said Mr. Ratcliff. "He might have gone there to play some trick, as on a previous occasion."

"He went to see the paper, sir."

"How can you know?"

"Because I saw him reading it."

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

"Yes, sir."

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

"Quite ready, sir."

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

There was a buzz.

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

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

Levison staggered.

Dr. Holmes drew a deep breath.

"Yes, it is quite clear now, as you say," he said grimly. "Have you anything to say, Levison?"

Levison's tongue clove to his lips.

What could he say?

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

He was fairly caught.

He gazed at the doctor almost wildly, standing unsteadily, his face like chalk.

Cousin Ethel gave a cry.

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

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

"Hurrah!"

"Yes, Figgins is innocent," said Dr. Holmes. "That has been proved clearly enough. Mr. Ratcliff, I leave Levison to you, and I trust you will not be too lenient."

"Very good, sir," said the New House master.

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

The Terrible Three were elated enough. Their chum of the New House was not dishonourable after all, and that discovery meant more to them than their escape from the flogging.

Cousin Ethel had saved them from that, and had been the means of the truth coming to light. But the girl was feeling very miserable as she left the School House. She had distrusted Figgins—she had allowed herself to be imposed upon by a cunning slanderer—and how could she expect Figgins to forget it?

But Figgins was not the kind of fellow to bear malice or to nurse injuries. And when Tom Merry & Co. caught sight of Figgins talking to Cousin Ethel in the Head's garden later that day it certainly did not look as if Figgins was in anything but the best and happiest of tempers.

THE END.

Printed and published weekly by the Proprietors at The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4. England. Subscription, 7s. per annum. Agents for Australasia: Gordon & Gotch, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z. South Africa, The Central News Agency, Ltd., Cape Town, Johannesburg, and branches. Saturday, January 19th, 1918.