

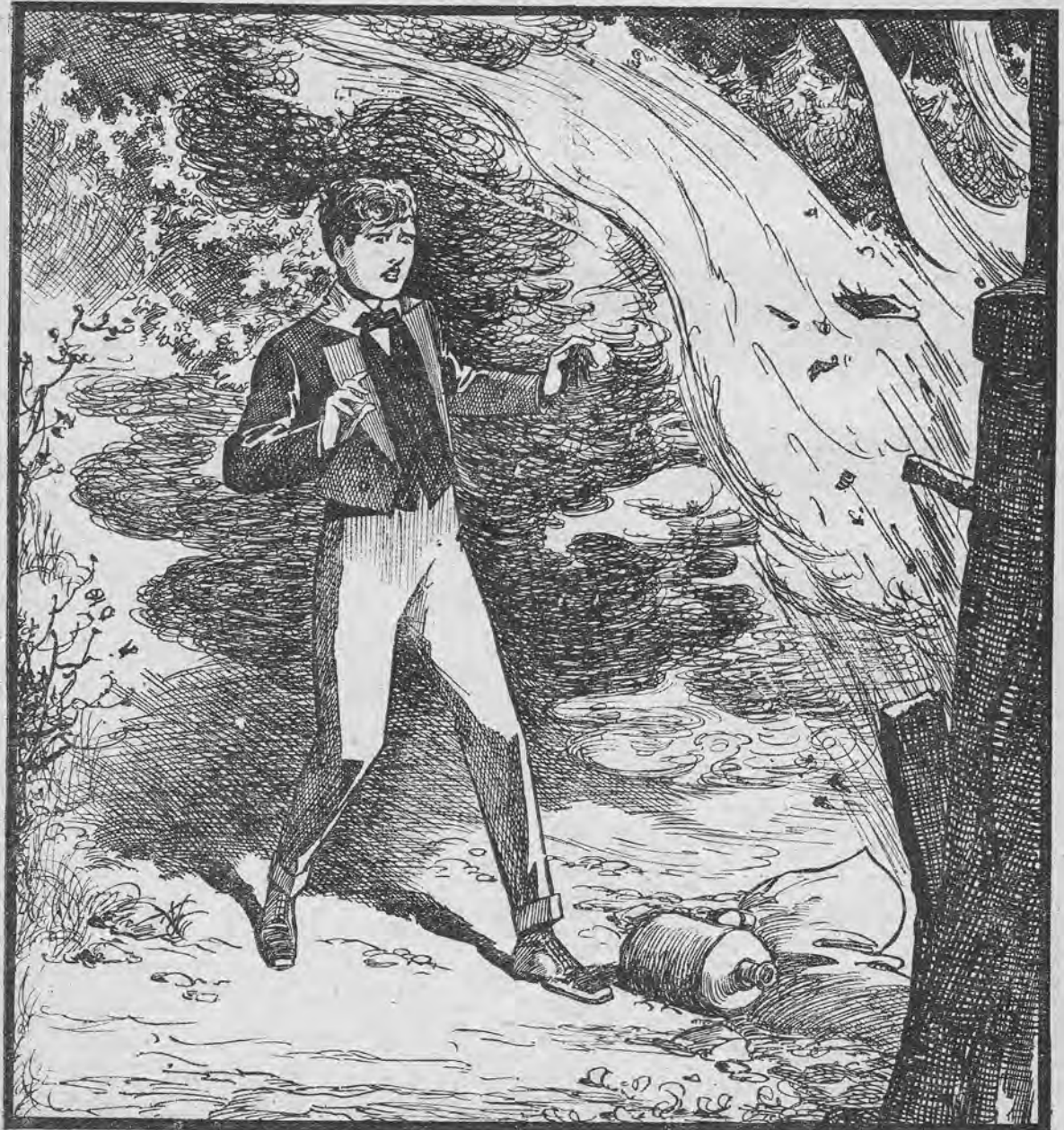
THREE NEW STORIES INSIDE!

The Penny Popular

Week Ending
October 11th, 1919.

No. 38.
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DENNIS CARR'S ACT OF REVENGE!

(A Dramatic Scene in the Magnificent Long, Complete Tale of the Chums of Greyfriars.)



The Shadow of Expulsion

A Grand Long Complete Story, dealing with the Adventures of the Boys of Greyfriars School.

... By ...
FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. One Against the School.

"MORE cake, Bob?" Harry Wharton broke the long silence in Study No. 1 by putting that question to his chum.

Bob Cherry shook his head, and pushed his plate away from him.

"I can't eat what I've already got," he growled. "Seems to stick in my throat."

"Buck up!" said Frank Nugent.

"How can a fellow buck up when the best pal he ever had has been slung out of the school?"

Bob Cherry, whose disposition was usually as sunny as the day, was morose and irritable. And he had reason to be.

Only an hour before a calamity had come upon the chums of the Greyfriars Remove.

Mark Linley—the loyal, good-natured Lancashire lad—had been expelled by the Head's command.

"You are a thief! Your name shall be expunged from the school register, and you will leave Greyfriars by the next train!"

The Head's relentless sentence still rang in the ears of the chums whom Mark Linley had left behind.

And was Mark Linley a thief? Had he merited the sorry fate which had befallen him?

Bob Cherry was prepared to stake his life on his chum's innocence, and so were the other members of the Famous Five.

"Marky a thief?" said Bob Cherry. "Never! He'd sooner starve first!"

"Of course, a ghastly mistake has been made," said Harry Wharton.

Bob gave a snort.

"I don't call it a mistake. I call it a shameful miscarriage of justice! There's not a fellow at Greyfriars who's fit to tie Marky's bootlaces. He's straight as a die—a fellow in a thousand. The Head must have been potty to expel him!"

"The pottiness of the esteemed Head," murmured Hurree Singh, "must have been terrific!"

"You can hardly blame the Head," said Johnny Bull. "After all, Marky made an open confession that he stole Wharton's ten quid."

"Bah!" Bob Cherry's tone bristled with scorn. "The Head ought to have ignored what Marky said. He would have known, if he had any savvy, that the confession was made simply to shield that cad Carr."

Harry Wharton nodded.

"There can be no doubt that Carr was the thief," he said. "He gambled and got into money difficulties, and finally helped himself to the cash in my desk. Then he must have got round Linley to make a bogus confession, though goodness knows how he managed it."

"Carr's as deep as a well," said Frank Nugent. "He lands himself in a fearful mess, but he takes jolly good care that some one else has to suffer. It's as clear as daylight that he stole the money."

"But how can we bring it home to him?" said Johnny Bull helplessly. "He'll deny it, and go on denying it to the end of the chapter."

"And meanwhile," said Bob Cherry bitterly. "Marky's gone back to his mill in Lancashire, and he'll be slogging all day and half the night. He's branded for life, his prospects are ruined, and he's innocent! My hat! It fairly makes my blood boil to think of it!"

Feeling ran very strongly against Dennis Carr.

During his brief stay at Greyfriars, Dennis had never been popular. He was too proud and independent to seek popularity. And at this moment he was less popular than ever.

There was silence in Study No. 1 for some moments.

Tea was on the table, but it seemed to have no attractions for the Famous Five. Seldom, indeed, had such a cloud hung over the chums of the Remove. The memory of the recent injustice to Mark Linley rankled. With Mark Linley's departure the joy of life seemed to have departed also.

The juniors had not sat down tamely under the injustice. Bob Cherry, in particular, had created a sensational scene in Big Hall by jumping up and making an indignant protest against the expulsion of his chum.

But Bob's hot-blooded eloquence had made no impression whatever upon the Head's decision. Linley had to go. It was unwise and unsafe to harbour a thief at Greyfriars any longer. That was the Head's view. And the Head had acted according to his lights.

"I've never really hated a fellow until now," said Bob Cherry at length. "I only hope that bounder Carr gets kicked out of Greyfriars soon. If he stays here much longer I shall do him an injury."

The speaker's eyes were gleaming, and he meant what he said.

Had Dennis Carr entered Study No. 1 at that moment nothing could have kept Bob Cherry's temper in check. There would have been a scene—a disastrous scene as far as Dennis Carr was concerned.

"I know how you feel, Bob," said Harry Wharton quietly. "Linley meant more to you than he did to any of us. All the same, we're mad to think he's been sacked without cause."

"If only we could get him to withdraw that idiotic confession he made!" said Frank Nugent.

"Why not write to him?" suggested Johnny Bull.

Bob Cherry's eyes gleamed hopefully.

"I will!" he said. "There's just a chance that he'll be sensible, and expose the real thief."

"In which case," said Wharton, "the Head will let him come back to Greyfriars."

"Yes, rather!"

Bob Cherry cleared the table, and for some moments nothing could be heard save the laboured scratching of his pen. Bob was not a facile letter-writer.

"There!" he said at length. "I think that hits it off."

Bob's chums read the letter over his shoulder. It ran thus:

"My dear Marky.—You were a priceless ass to make such a silly sacrifice for another fellow."

"Not one of us believes that you took Wharton's money. Dennis Carr's the thief right enough, and we can't understand why you should want to shield him like this. You were his friend, I know; but friendship doesn't demand sacrifices of that sort."

"We want you back, Marky. And we won't be happy till you're with us again."

"It's up to you to write to the Head, pointing out that your confession was not genuine, and stating the facts—namely, that it was Carr who stole the money. You will then be restored to your old place at Greyfriars."

"We miss you most awfully, and we hope you'll have the savvy to write to the Head as suggested. Why should your life be ruined for the sake of a selfish and utterly worthless bounder like Carr?"

"Ever your chum,
"Bob."

"That ought to do the trick," said Wharton. "I'll just add a postscript."

"Same here!" said Nugent and Johnny Bull together.

"I, too, will send my kindful and esteemed regards!" murmured Hurree Singh.

By the time the Famous Five had finished

Bob Cherry's original letter was almost lost sight of in a maze of postscripts.

The envelope was sealed and stamped, and Bob posted the letter in the pillar-box in the Close. He was hopeful that Mark Linley would take this last chance of saving his reputation.

On the way back to No. 1 Study Bob Cherry caught sight of Dennis Carr, pacing up and down the dusky Close.

Bob's hands clenched convulsively, and it was only with great difficulty that he restrained from hurling himself upon the fellow who had caused all the trouble.

Dennis Carr was the most wretched fellow at Greyfriars just then—far more wretched than Bob Cherry himself.

Dennis had been a gambler and a thief, and his conscience did not allow him to forget it.

Moreover, he had allowed Mark Linley to suffer in his stead. Though guilty, he had kept silence, and had raised no protest when Mark had been expelled with ignominy from Greyfriars.

"What a worm I am!" muttered Dennis over and over again. "I've let Linley stand the racket—and he's innocent. It's awful! I wish I were dead!"

"I wish you were, too!" cackled a voice. "He, he, he!"

Turning swiftly, Dennis found himself confronted by Billy Bunter, of the Remove.

"You rotten spy! You were listening!" "Don't be alarmed," said Billy Bunter. "I only happened to hear the last thing you said. You were wishing you were dead. And a good many other fellows wish the same!"

"Buzz off!" growled Dennis.

"Of course, your life won't be worth living after what's happened!" Bunter went on. "You'll be well advised to chuck in your mit. And when you do, you can leave it to me!"

"Oh! Leave what to you?"

"Your gold tucker!"

Dennis Carr glared at Bunter through the gloom.

The mind of the Owl of the Remove was always mercenary, and always would be. The fat junior resembled the ghosts who scour a battlefield after an action has taken place, to see what they can find. He quite thought that Dennis Carr, driven to distraction, would do something desperate, and, anticipating this, he had designs on Dennis' gold watch.

Dennis soon showed him that there was nothing doing. "If you don't buzz off," he said, "I'll smash you!"

Billy Bunter retreated to a safe distance. Then, making a megaphone of his hands, he shouted:

"Yah! Thief! Keep your mouldy brass watch! Which pawshop did you steal it from?"

Dennis Carr took a quick stride towards the Owl of the Remove; but Billy Bunter promptly scuttled into the building.

Tired of pacing to and fro, Dennis also went in.

As he passed along the Remove passage he heard the sound of a hiss.

"My hat!" he muttered, stopping short. "I'll brain that beast Bunter!"

And then he saw that Bunter was not responsible for the hiss. It was the joint performance of Skinner, Stott, and Bolsover major.

The trio stood aside to let Dennis pass. They carefully buttoned up their pockets as they did so.

Dennis paused, frowning.

"What's the little game?" he demanded. Skinner chuckled.

"Beware of pickpockets!" he said. "Do you mean to insinuate—"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Bolsover major.

"You make me feel tired. Everybody knows, from Wingate of the Sixth down to the youngest fag, that you stole Wharton's ten quid."

"And bribed Linley to take the blame on himself," added Stott.

"You cads—" began Dennis. But he was interrupted by a chorus of contemptuous voices.

"Yah!"

"Get out!"

"Get back to your Thieves' Kitchen!"

With burning cheeks and clenched hands, Dennis Carr passed on to the study which he shared with Lord Mauleverer and Sir Jimmy Vivian.

He saw that the Removites were against him to a man.

The Head had been deceived into thinking Mark Linley was the thief; but the juniors were not to be so easily duped. They knew that Mark Linley would retain his honesty to the last ditch; and they were quite cer-

tain, in their own minds, that the theft had been committed by Dennis Carr.

When Dennis walked into the study, Lord Mauleverer and Sir Jimmy walked out.

They said no word; but their action was sufficiently cutting. The sudden lash of a whip could not have caused Dennis a more acute pang.

Left to himself, the unhappy junior sank into the armchair, and buried his face in his hands.

Clearly, as through a mirror, he reviewed the past.

And what a past it was!

The germ of the trouble had been his fight with Bolsover major on the day he arrived at Greyfriars. Dennis had not fought fairly. He had kicked his man, and in the eyes of the Remove this was an unpardonable offence.

Instead of apologising, and trying to set himself right with his schoolfellows, Dennis had gone from bad to worse.

By playing football for a team outside the school, he had made further trouble for himself.

And then had come the shattering blow of his mother's death.

That was the last straw. Throwing his caution and self-respect to the winds, Dennis had sought the company of Ponsonby & Co., the cads of Highlife.

And to what depths had that company dragged him down!

Dennis, who up to that moment had never smoked or played cards in his life, became a "blade." The life was distasteful to him, but he persisted in it.

As a natural consequence, the wretched junior had fallen head-over-ears in debt.

Threatened by Ponsonby-faced with ruin and disgrace—he had yielded to the voice of the tempter, and had become a thief.

And then, to crown everything, he had allowed Mark Linley to bear the burden of his misdeeds.

Mark had been cast out of Greyfriars; Dennis Carr remained. But Dennis was the more miserable of the two. Mark Linley had the satisfaction of a clear conscience; not so the boy who remained behind.

What was going to happen now? Dennis scarcely dared to ask himself the question.

He had no friends at Greyfriars. His hand was against every man, and every man's hand was against him. The future presented a far from rosy prospect.

At this stage of his reflections, Dennis noticed a letter on the study table addressed to himself.

Mechanically, he picked it up and opened it. Then his brow grew dark.

"Ponsonby again!" he muttered. "Why can't the fellow leave me alone?"

Cecil Ponsonby had requested the pleasure of Dennis Carr's company at a "little flutter," to be held in the barn in Friardale Wood known as "The Retreat."

A few weeks previously, Harry Wharton & Co. had done considerable damage to the furniture in that barn, but Ponsonby pointed out that the necessary alterations and repairs had been carried out. "Please drop in and complete our merry party!" concluded Ponsonby.

Dennis Carr threw the note on to the fire.

"So Pon thinks he can have another go at fleecing me, does he?" he murmured. "There's going to be nothing doing. He wants me to turn up at midnight, but he'll be unlucky!"

And then a sudden idea occurred to Dennis. He hated Ponsonby, and he wanted to get even with him.

"Why not go along to the Retreat at a time when nobody's about," he reflected, "and smash the place to bits? Or, better still, burn it down?"

The more he thought about it, the more convinced Dennis became that it was a good plan.

The barn was constructed of wood, and would burn swiftly. And when the High-life "nuts" arrived later on they would find themselves confronted with a heap of smouldering ruins.

For the first time in many days Dennis Carr smiled. But it was not a nice smile. It was one of anticipated revenge; and it boded ill for Cecil Ponsonby and all his works.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Nipped in the Bud.

"HERE he comes!"

"Here's the giddy thief!"

These exclamations greeted Dennis Carr as he entered the Remove dormitory.

Dennis stopped short, and it looked as if

he were about to speak. But he checked himself, and walked quietly to his bed.

Looking up, he saw that a score of accusing eyes were turned towards him.

"Yah! Thief!" said Billy Bunter. And he kept repeating the words like a parrot.

Dennis Carr started to undress.

"What have you done with the fool?" inquired Bolsover major.

Dennis remained silent.

However sensitive he might be to these taunts, he knew that he deserved them.

"We shall have to be careful of our property, you fellows!" said Skinner. "I vote that all valuables should be deposited with Mr. Quelch!"

Even that sneering suggestion did not succeed in "fetching" Dennis Carr. He wisely decided that silence would avail him much more than speech, for the simple reason that he had nothing to say in his own defence.

His silence, however, goaded the Removites to anger.

"Don't you think, Harry," said Bob Cherry, "that we ought to deal with the cad tonight?"

"Hear, hear!" said Peter Todd. "Personally, I'm in favour of a court-martial. We'll have Carr up on two charges—firstly of theft, and secondly of causing Mark Linley to be sacked. Don't you think that's a good wheeze, Dutton?"

"No fear!" said Tom Dutton, the deal junior.

"What?"

"Peas and mutton make a poor sort of mid-night feast," said Dutton. "I should be inclined to vote for rabbit-pies and fancy pastries."

"Oh, my hat!"

Peter Todd glared at the deal junior.

"You're getting as bad as Bunter," he declared. "Always thinking of grub, like a blessed profiteur—"

"Eh? Of course we should stuff it here!" said Dutton, in surprise.

"Oh, help!" Peter Todd raised his voice to a roar. "Shall we court-martial Carr?"

The words fairly thundered through the Remove dormitory.

Tom Dutton comprehended at last.

"Yes, by all means!" he said. "Hang him, if you like! Half a jiffy, though! Hangin' a much too good! Can't you arrange to give him something lingering, with boiling oil in it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll decide what form his punishment is to take at the end of the court-martial," said Peter. "I hereby appoint myself president."

"Guess I'll stake a claim for the job of chief executioner!" murmured Fisher T. Fish. And there was a laugh.

"Do you think he'd bust if we were to drop him out of the window?" asked Billy Bunter.

"Ha, ha! I fancy he would!" chuckled Frank Nugent.

"Now, Wharton! What about this court-martial?" said Johnny Bull briskly.

"I think we'd better postpone it," said the captain of the Remove.

"Postpone it! Why?"

"Linley's reply to Bob's letter should arrive in the morning. If he decides to make a clean breast of everything to the Head, he'll come back to Greyfriars, and Carr will be sacked. And if that happens, it will be quite good enough for us. We needn't pile on the agony."

Dennis Carr gave a violent start.

What was Wharton saying?

Bob Cherry had written to Mark Linley!

Dennis guessed at once the purport of that letter. It was urging Mark Linley to tell the Head the facts—to clear himself at the expense of the actual thief.

Would Mark Linley act on this appeal? If he did, then it was good-bye to Greyfriars, so far as Dennis Carr was concerned.

This new possibility occupied the junior's mind long after lights out.

If Mark Linley wrote and acquainted the Head of the true facts of the case, this would be Dennis Carr's last night at Greyfriars!

This appalling prospect almost caused Dennis to forget his intention of burning down the Retreat.

When the midnight chimes rang out, however, he remembered his mission. If this was to be his last night at Greyfriars, then it was all the more essential that he should get even with Ponsonby before the crash came.

Dennis slipped out of bed, and dressed rapidly in the darkness.

The dormitory was silent, save for the joint, unbroken snore of Billy Bunter.

Having dressed, Dennis moved cautiously along between the two rows of beds.

"Who's that?"

It was a sharp ejaculation from Harry Wharton.

Dennis Carr stopped short, scarcely daring to breathe. He hoped that Wharton would not repeat the inquiry.

The hope was ill-founded.

"Is that you, Carr?"

Harry Wharton was sitting up in bed now, peering through the gloom.

"Yes!" growled Dennis, recognising the intuity of further evasion.

"Where are you going?"

"Mind your own bizney!"

"It is my business!" said Wharton sharply.

"Very much so! You've disgraced yourself and the Form quite enough as it is. You're not going to break bounds again so long as I'm awake to prevent you!"

"I'm not going on the razzle, if that's what you're thinking!" said Dennis. "I'm going to bump—"

"The midnight oil in your study, I suppose!" said Wharton sarcastically. "Do you imagine I'm going to swallow a yarn like that?"

"I tell you—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob Cherry, stirring at the sound of the voices.

"What's up, Harry?"

"Carr's up to his old shady games again."

"He's going to break bounds?"

"If he gets half a chance."

Dennis Carr realised that it was a time for prompt action.

He rushed swiftly from the dormitory, plunged down the dark staircase, and printed along the passage towards the box-room.

Dennis could hear the pad of slipped feet behind him, and he hastily threw up the lower part of the window.

In a twinkling he had wriggled through, and was out into the night air.

Pausing for one instant only, in order to get his bearings, he made a bee-line for the school wall.

Quick as he had been, he realised that his pursuers had been quicker. He could hear their footsteps close behind him.

Unfortunately for Dennis, the school wall was very high at that part—almost insurmountable, in fact.

The junior took a flying leap, and his fingers gripped the top of the wall.

He at once began to draw himself up, but the effort was too late.

Dennis was seized from behind and dumped down none too gently into the Close.

"Got you, my pippin!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"Only just!" panted Harry Wharton. "He jolly nearly gave us the slip!"

Dennis Carr made a bold bid for freedom, but he was soon rendered helpless in the grasp of his captors.

"Bring him along!" said Wharton.

"You silly chumps!" protested Dennis. "I wasn't going on the razzle—"

"You can tell that to the Marines!" growled Bob Cherry. "We've tumbled to your little games long ago! This way! And you'll get a clump on the head every time you try to break loose!"

Dennis Carr, with a tight grip on each of his arms, was marched across the Close.

Harry Wharton clambered through the box-room window, and Bob Cherry, exerting all his strength, bundled the captive through after him.

Dennis ground his teeth in helpless rage. He would not be able to burn down the Retreat after all—not that night, at any rate.

When the trio reached the lobby adjoining the Remove dormitory, Bob Cherry stooped and picked up a coil of rope.

"What's the little game?" asked Dennis.

"You deserve to be rope-ended!" growled Bob. "Still, you'll get your dose later on. This is to tie you to your bed, to prevent any further trouble."

"You wouldn't dare—"

"We'll soon see about that!"

"Get hold of his legs, Bob!" said Harry Wharton.

Dennis Carr was lifted bodily into his bed, and Wharton pinned him down while Bob Cherry got busy with the rope.

In a very short space of time Dennis was securely bound to his bed.

Bob Cherry was anything but cruel, in the ordinary way. But when he thought of his chum, Marl Linley, grinding out an existence of drudgery in a Lancashire mill, for the sake of a person like Dennis Carr, Bob's blood

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boiled. He tied the rope so tightly that it would be impossible for the victim to sleep in comfort. Every time he moved those bonds would chafe his limbs.

"That's that!" said Bob Cherry grimly. "Now we shan't have to lose any more of our beasty sleep in keeping this bounder in order. Good-night, Harry!"

"Good-night, Bob!"

The two juniors went back to bed, and Dennis Carr was left to fret and fume.

"I'll destroy that beasty barn to-morrow night, that's all!" he reflected.

But had Dennis Carr been able to foresee what would happen on the following night, he would have been far less sanguine.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Court-Martialled!

DENNIS CARR had only slept in snatches that night.

When the rising-bell rang out, and the Removites got up, they caught sight of Dennis bound to his bed, and there were many chuckles.

"Who chained the dog up?" inquired Belsover major.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows!" said Billy Bunter. "Now that Carr can't move, shall I tickle his nose with a feather?"

And there was a fresh outburst of merriment.

"Let me loose!" snapped Dennis.

"All in good time," said Bob Cherry. "You can stay as you are for a few minutes, and brood over your crimes."

"You'll make me late for brekker—"

"Who cares?"

Not until Bob Cherry had finished his allusions did he release Dennis Carr. Even then he might not have done so but for pressure from Wharton.

Dennis stretched his cramped and aching limbs, and glared at the chums of the Remove.

Harry Wharton & Co. took no further notice of him. Having dressed, they went clattering down the stairs and out into the Close, where they waited for the arrival of the morning post.

"I hope Marky's decided to do the sensible thing," said Bob Cherry.

And the others echoed Bob's hope.

After what seemed an age, the ancient and decrepit postman came shuffling across the Close.

"Letter for me?" inquired Bob Cherry eagerly.

"Yes, Master Cherry."

"Hand it over!"

The postman sorted out Bob's letter from the rest, and Bob took it quickly.

The postmark was that of a big manufacturing town in Lancashire, and the envelope was addressed in Mark Linley's neat handwriting.

Bob Cherry opened the letter, and as he perused it he stamped his foot impatiently.

"No luck?" asked Frank Nugent.

Bob shook his head.

"Marky's sticking to his guns," he said wearily. "He seems determined to keep up this silly pretence of being a thief."

Bob handed the letter to his chums. This is what they read:

"Dear Old Bob,—Much as I should like to come back to Greyfriars, it can't be done."

"I miss you all very much, and I'm not going to pretend that I'm happy in my new life. I'm not! It's a terrible grind, after the placid routine of Greyfriars. But I have taken the plunge, and there is no retracting now. I can't write to the Head, as you suggest—firstly, because I should be betraying a confidence, and, secondly, because it's extremely doubtful whether he would believe me."

"Please don't try to persuade me any more. It only makes things harder for me."

"Perhaps we shall meet again one of these days. I can't think that we're separated for ever."

"Tell Wharton that I hope to find time to write an occasional story for the 'Greyfriars Herald,' and ask him if he would mind sending me the results of all the Remove footer matches."

"That's all for now. I'll write again on Sunday, which will be my first day of leisure."

"My kind regards to all the fellows, and particularly to you."

"Ever yours,"

"MARKY."

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"Linley's a very decent fellow, but he's likewise a silly ass!" he said.

"Hear, hear!" growled Johnny Bull. "Why does he persist in this tommy-rot? I'm sure that if he wrote to the Head he'd be allowed to come back!"

"Yes, rather!" said Nugent.

"But he won't write."

"Exactly!"

"That's just like Marky!" said Bob Cherry glumly. "He can be as obstinate as a pack of mules when he likes."

"The only thing to be done now," said Wharton, "is to force Carr to confess."

"That's hopeless!" said Johnny Bull.

"Carr will decline to refuse to confess anything," said Hurree Singh.

"We'll court-martial him to-night," said Wharton, "and we'll give him such a drubbing that he may decide to own up!"

"I don't think that's at all likely," said Bob Cherry. "Still, we'll have the court-martial. Carr's got to be punished. It would be a crying shame to let him go scot-free!"

There was a flutter of excitement throughout the Remove that day.

It was unsafe to advertise the court-martial by means of an announcement on the notice-board lest it should be seen by any of the masters. But the details were passed from one junior to another, until the whole Form knew what was in the wind.

Dennis Carr got to know through the medium of Billy Bunter, who rolled up to him in the Close after morning lessons.

"You're going to get it in the neck to-night, you beast!" said the fat junior.

"What do you mean?" demanded Dennis.

"That court-martial's coming off, after all. And I jolly well hope you're sentenced to be shot! I shall bring my peashooter ready."

"You silly fat clump!"

"Don't call me names," said Bunter. "In case I happen to be elected president of the court-martial, I shall sentence you to life-long imprisonment if you're cheeky!"

And, wagging a reproving forefinger at Dennis Carr, the fat junior rolled away.

Dennis uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

He was not faking the ordeal which awaited him; but he realised that he would be again prevented from carrying out his intention with regard to the Retreat.

The court-martial was certain to take up a good deal of time, and there would be no chance of breaking bounds that night.

For once in a way the Removites actually looked forward to bed-time.

When Wingate of the Sixth appeared in the doorway of the junior Common-room, and announced that it was time to retire, the juniors trooped up to their dormitory as meekly as lambs. Had Wingate stopped to think about it, their conduct must have struck him as suspicious.

After lights out, there was the usual buzz of conversation, and Dennis Carr hoped that his schoolfellows would drop off to sleep one by one. But he hoped in vain.

Even the two biggest sleep-lovers in the Remove—Billy Bunter and Lord Mauleverer—managed to keep themselves awake.

There was a storm brewing in the Remove dormitory, and its violence was shortly to burst upon Dennis Carr.

Boom!

The first note of eleven sounded from the old clock-tower.

"Tumble out, everybody!" said Peter Todd.

"Who said you were the master of the ceremonies, Toddy?" inquired Harry Wharton.

"I appointed myself."

"Then the sooner you disappoint yourself the better!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Every junior in the dormitory turned out, with the exception of Dennis Carr.

Candle-ends were lighted, and blankets were ranged along the floor.

The "common herd" seated themselves on the blankets, while the president and members of the court-martial availed themselves of Harry Wharton's bed. Wharton himself was to conduct the proceedings.

"Bring the prisoner here!" he commanded.

And half a dozen juniors advanced towards Dennis Carr's bed.

"Out you come!" growled Bulstrode, throwing back the clothes.

"Look here!" said Dennis. "I'm not going to be a party to this silly rot!"

"You've got no choice in the matter!" said Dick Russell. "Heave-ho, you fellows!"

Dennis Carr was lifted bodily from his bed in his pyjamas, and dumped upon the floor without ceremony. Johnny Bull and Hurree Singh mounted guard over him, and then the proceedings started.

"We are here to-night," said Harry Whar-



Russell and Ogilvy were just about to turn Dennis Carr back again between the two rows of waiting pillow-wielders when the door of the dormitory was thrown open, and a grinding voice exclaimed: "Boys! What does this disturbance mean?" (See page 6.)

ton, in clear but quiet tones, "for the purpose of trying this cad"—he indicated Dennis Carr—"by court-martial."

"Good!"

"On the ball!"

"Carr has behaved like a prize blackguard ever since he came to Greyfriars," continued Wharton. "He's caused more trouble and friction in the Remove than any fellow I can remember."

"Even more than I did, in my palmy days!" murmured Vernon-Smith.

And there was a laugh. Certainly the Bouncer had proved a hot handful in the days of his recklessness and folly.

"It might be possible to overlook most of the things that Carr has done," Wharton went on. "But we can't overlook his latest action. He's stolen money from my desk; and he's somehow wangled it that Mark Linley should take the blame. Linley's been sacked; but the guilty party is still with us. And to-night we will endeavour to show him what we think of him, and to make him feel heartily sorry for himself!"

"Lynch the rotter!"

"Pulverise him!"

"Make him run the gauntlet!"

Harry Wharton turned to Dennis Carr.

"If you care to make a voluntary confession, here and now, that you were the thief, we'll close the proceedings," he said. "If not, you're going properly through the mill. The punishment you had before will be a picnic compared with what you'll get now!"

Dennis Carr was silent.

"Are you going to confess?" asked Wharton.

"No!"

"Do you admit that you stole the money?"

"I admit nothing!"

"Very well! If you don't choose to confess voluntarily, we'll endeavour to drag the facts from you by force!"

"Is this supposed to be a court-martial, or

a new form of Spanish Inquisition?" sneered Dennis.

"There's only one way to deal with a worm like you!" said Wharton. "This is a case where brutality is justified!"

"Yes, rather!"

"You've proved yourself to be quite outside the pale," said the captain of the Remove, "and you've caused the expulsion of a fellow who's worth fifty of you!"

"Let's cut the cackle, and come to the horses!" said Bolsover major. "Jawing is sheer waste of time!"

Harry Wharton motioned to his chums.

"We'll begin by tossing the cad in a blanket," he said.

"That's the ticket!" said Rob Cherry. "Clear the decks for action!"

A space was cleared in the centre of the dormitory, and Dennis Carr was dumped on to a blanket.

A number of juniors stood at each corner, and at Wharton's command they started operations.

Dennis Carr shot up into the air, and pitched down again into the blanket. It was not a pleasant experience, but the victim uttered no sound.

"Up again!" rapped out Wharton.

The blanket-tossing continued. Dennis Carr soared higher each time, and he soon became so giddy that he scarcely knew where he was, or what was happening.

Then, when he alighted in a sprawling heap for the sixth time, Harry Wharton addressed him.

"Will you confess now?"

"No—hang you!"

"We'll change our programme, then. Bump him!"

And Dennis Carr was seized by many hands, and bumped on to the hard floor of the dormitory.

He struck the boards with an impact which

shook every bone in his body. And before he could pull himself together he was bumped a second time.

"Keep it up!" said Wharton grimly.

Half a dozen times Dennis descended to the floor. He was very badly shaken, and his face was as white as a sheet.

But the juniors did not spare him. They thought of the injustice which had been done to Mark Linley, and they told themselves that Dennis was getting no more than his deserts.

Harry Wharton repeated his question.

"Will you confess now?"

"You're wasting your breath!" panted Dennis. "I refuse to confess to something I never did!"

"My hat!" said Peter Todd. "He seems determined to brazen it out. We shall have to make him run the gauntlet. That ought to do the trick!"

Dennis Carr shivered a little. He had been made to run the gauntlet before; and the experience had been so painful that he did not want a repetition. He must either go through with his punishment or confess; and he dared not do the latter.

"Line up, you fellows!" rapped out Harry Wharton.

The juniors ranged themselves in two rows, armed with pillows, bolsters, and knotted towels.

Dennis Carr looked at their faces, grave and grim in the candle-light, and he decided that he would not be able to stand the ordeal.

Just as he was about to be pushed through the waiting rows of juniors, he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Help! Help!"

Great consternation followed.

"Gag him, somebody!"

"He'll bring Quicky on our track!"

"The rotten sneak!"

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A gag—in the form of a handkerchief—was promptly pushed into Dennis Carr's mouth, and his hands were secured behind his back with a piece of rope.

"Now!" muttered Bob Cherry, standing ready to smite. "Give him a shove, Harry!" And Harry Wharton sent the victim reeling between the avenging lines of juniors.

"Biff! Thud! Biff! Thud!" Dennis Carr fairly staggered under a torrent of blows.

Every fellow was craning to get in his "whack."

Bolsover major was not satisfied with delivering one blow. He followed Dennis Carr along the lines, and dealt him a series of stinging cuts from behind.

Finally, Dennis reached the other end; and Russell and Ogilvy were just about to turn him back again when the door of the dormitory was thrown open, and a grinding voice exclaimed:

"Boys! What does this disturbance mean?"

Some of the juniors stampeded hurriedly to their beds. The others, realising that such an action would not save them from the wrath to come, stood their ground.

"Oh, my hat! Fancy old Quelch turning up!" said Billy Bunter, in a whisper which was distinctly audible.

"Bunter," snapped Mr. Quelch, "take five hundred lumps for disrespect!"

"Oh crumbs!"

The Remove-master turned to Harry Wharton, who was still clutching his holster.

"Pray give me an explanation of this affair at once, Wharton! This is not the first time I have caught you persecuting Carr. Unless you can produce sufficient justification for your action, you will be severely punished!"

Wharton was about to reply, when Bob Cherry did it for him.

"We were showing Carr what we think of people who steal, sir!" said Bob.

"Cherry!"

"It was Carr who stole Wharton's money, and it's Carr who should have been expelled—not Linley!" Bob went on.

Mr. Quelch's brow grew black as a thunder-cloud.

"Do you dare to suggest, Cherry, that there has been a miscarriage of justice?"

"I'm sure of it, sir!"

"Boy! Do you realise what you are saying? You are presuming to criticise the judgment of Dr. Locke!"

"The Head's been fooled, sir—" began Bob.

"Enough, Cherry! I refuse to listen to your wild and disrespectful statements. You, in company with Wharton, Nugent, Bull, and Singh—who, I have reason to believe, are the ringleaders in this affair—will report to me in my study before breakfast in the morning. I shall cane you severely. In addition, the entire Form will forfeit the next half-holiday!"

"Oh!"

The faces of the juniors fell. When Mr. Quelch handed out punishment he did not err on the side of mercy.

The Remove-master turned to Dennis Carr, who stood leaning against the wall, with his hand pressed to his forehead.

"I am sorry this should have happened, Carr. You appear to have been treated with gross brutality. You may, if you so desire, spend the remainder of the night in the school sanatorium."

"I'd prefer to stay here, sir," muttered Dennis.

"Very well. Go to your beds, everyone!"

The Removes obeyed.

"If there is any further disturbance in this dormitory," said Mr. Quelch, "the matter will be reported to Dr. Locke. There has been more trouble in my Form during the past month than there usually is in a whole term. I am determined to put a stop to it!"

So saying, Mr. Quelch withdrew, leaving blank consternation behind him.

Dennis Carr was not molested again that night—except verbally; but he was feeling far too sore to pay his contemplated visit to the Retreat. The burning of Ponsonby's barn would have to wait.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Caught Red-Handed.

NEXT morning the Famous Five went through the mill.

Mr. Quelch wielded the cane very effectively; and Harry Wharton & Co. crawled rather than walked out of the Form-master's study when the ordeal was over.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 28.

"Goo!" mumbled Bob Cherry, rubbing his tingling palms. "I shan't be happy till we've slaughtered that fellow Carr!"

"Quickly heard him shouting for help last night," said Nugent.

"Of course!"

Peter Todd encountered the Famous Five in the passage.

"Had it hot?" he inquired sympathetically.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Thanks to Carr!" he said.

"Never mind!" said Peter. "We'll drag that confession from him yet!"

Wharton shook his head.

"Afraid we shall have to give it up," he said. "The boulder means to brazen it out!"

And even Bob Cherry had to admit that the situation was pretty hopeless. Dennis Carr would flatly refuse to confess—even at the pistol's point.

Nobody spoke to Carr that day. He was avoided as if he were a leper. Not even the talkative Bunter had anything to say to him.

Dennis Carr did not mind. He was only too glad to be left alone with his thoughts, even though those thoughts were far from pleasant.

No further attempt was made to force a confession from Dennis Carr's lips. Harry Wharton & Co. realised the hopelessness of such a proceeding, and they left Dennis severely alone.

That evening Dennis received a further note from Ponsonby of Highcliffe.

"You did not acknowledge my last letter," it ran. "In case it went astray, I am writing to you again, to invite you to our little party at the Retreat to-night. There will be great doings, and we can guarantee you a good time. Stumps will be pitched at midnight."

That was Ponsonby's pleasant way of putting it; but Dennis Carr did not swallow the bait. He had had quite enough experience of smoking and gambling to last him throughout his lifetime.

Dennis had sunk very low—in fact, he could not very well sink lower. But he was resolved to wash his hands of Ponsonby once and for all.

"I'll go along to-night," he told himself grimly. "And when Ponsonby & Co. turn up they'll find that the Retreat is no more. Not a thousand Whartons will stop me from going to-night!"

As a matter of fact, Harry Wharton made no effort to stop Dennis Carr.

Shortly after eleven o'clock Wharton awoke out of a doze, and he fancied he heard someone stirring.

Peering intently through the gloom, he saw that Dennis Carr was in the act of dressing.

Wharton's first impulse was to prevent Dennis from breaking bounds, but he refrained.

If Carr went out "on the razzle," or for any other purpose, he was almost certain to be caught. Mr. Quelch had been very vigilant of late; and if he came into the Remove dormitory during his prowls, and discovered Carr's bed to be empty, the game would be up. Dennis would be sacked; and Harry Wharton reflected that this would be an excellent thing for Greyfriars.

So far from wishing to prevent Dennis Carr, Wharton was anxious for him to go ahead. The sooner he came a cropper the better.

Dennis was fully dressed now.

It was blowing great guns outside, and the rain lashed against the windows of the Remove dormitory.

Dennis Carr gritted his teeth with annoyance. It was not the thought of venturing out into the storm that worried him. It was the difficulty of setting fire to the barn under the damp conditions.

The junior stole noiselessly from the dormitory; and Harry Wharton, as he watched him, fervently hoped that he would be walking into a trap. It was not Wharton's way to wish any fellow harm; but when he thought of Mark Linley his feelings towards Dennis Carr were almost savage.

"Hope Quelch collars him in the Close!" muttered Wharton. "If he gets sacked from the school he'll probably confess to stealing that money. And then Linley will be brought back."

Meanwhile, Dennis Carr had wriggled through the box-room window, and a moment later his head was bared to the storm.

"Phew! What a night!" he muttered. The rain, to his belief, had abated; but the wind blew up from the sea with angry violence. The branches of the old elms groaned and creaked.

Before quitting the school premises Dennis

went round to the wood-shed, where he had placed a sack of shavings, soaked with paraffin, in readiness.

He swung the light sack across his shoulder, and then headed for the school wall.

No thought of danger had occurred to him as yet. He imagined that no master or prefect would venture out on such a night.

With a quick stride—for it would soon be midnight—Dennis struck off through the wood.

He advanced cautiously when he came in sight of the barn. But the place was dark and still, and the "nuts" of Highcliffe had not yet arrived.

Having satisfied himself that the coast was clear, the junior proceeded to surround the barn with little heaps of shavings.

"There's some expensive furniture made!" he muttered. "So much the better. The whole jolly lot's going west!"

And then, after a furtive glance over his shoulder, Dennis Carr produced a tinder-lighter, and ignited the shavings in a dozen different places.

The fire started slowly. Dennis feared that in a few moments it would blaze out completely.

After a time, however, the flames gathered strength and cohesion. They shot and splurged up the woodwork, and presently their spluttering changed into a roar.

Springing back from the blazing barn, Dennis experienced a glow of satisfaction.

He was getting quits with Ponsonby.

The flames had enveloped the barn by this time. Myriads of sparks shot upwards, and a lurid glare lit up the clearing in the wood.

Dennis Carr took cover behind a tree lest Ponsonby & Co. should arrive on the scene, or lest others, attracted by the glare, should put in an appearance.

"It's well under way now!" muttered Dennis, with grim satisfaction. "I give it another half-hour!"

But it was less than that when a crash of falling timber heralded the end.

Dennis surveyed the blazing wreckage without regret or remorse. Even where he stood he could feel the hot breath of the flames.

"Ponsonby will have to find another retreat now!" exclaimed Dennis. "He'll have to invest in a fresh stock of furniture, too. Serve him jolly well right! If he hadn't cheated at cards, this wouldn't have happened!"

The work of destruction was now complete. All that remained of the Retreat was a heap of smouldering ruins.

There was a sound of approaching footsteps, and Dennis Carr's heart beat quickly.

Then, peering round the tree-trunk, he discerned six figures—the figures of Ponsonby & Co. of Highcliffe. They were clad in rain-coats; and Dennis heard their expressions of wonder and dismay as they stepped into the clearing.

"What on earth—" began Ponsonby.

"Great jumping crackers!" exclaimed Gadsby. "The place is burnt to a cinder!"

"Absolutely!" gasped Vavasour.

"But who—"

"And what—"

"And how—"

The Highcliffians stared first at the smouldering embers, and then at each other. Blank consternation was written on their faces.

"Somebody's been here, begad!" said Merton.

"It doesn't need the savvy of a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that much!" growled Ponsonby.

"But who—who could have done it?" stammered Monson.

Ponsonby clenched his hands.

"The Greyfriars cads, of course!" he said.

"Who else would have done it?"

"This is Wharton's work, sure enough!" said Drury.

"He wasn't satisfied with smashin' up the place before," said Gadsby. "So he's destroyed it altogether!"

Ponsonby became purple in the face.

"All our furniture's gone to pot!" he said savagely. "It cost no end of tin, too! My hat! We'll make those bouncers sit up for this!"

"They can't have left long," remarked Vavasour. "This has been done within the last hour!"

"Let's scout round an' see if there's any sign of 'em!" suggested Drury.

"All serene!"

Dennis Carr gave a start. If he were discovered, he would fall into the hands of the Philistines with a vengeance.

Still peering round the tree-trunk, he saw Ponsonby and Gadsby making a move in his direction.

It was useless to remain in hiding. If

Dennis was to get out of the tight corner he must run—and he must summon all his speed to his aid.

Accordingly, he came out from behind the tree, and set off at top speed along the footpath.

The alarm was raised at once.

"Carr!" muttered Ponsonby. "After him!"

And the Highcliffe juniors dashed off in pursuit, like a pack of hungry wolves.

Dennis Carr did not have much of a start, but he made the most of it. He was a very fast runner, and he happened to be sound in wind. The same could not have been said of Ponsonby & Co.

When the pursuit had been in progress for some moments, Monson and Vavasour dropped out. Shortly afterwards, Merton and Drury also threw up the sponge. The pace was too hot for them.

Ponsonby and Gadsby continued the chase, but it proved futile.

Dennis Carr was running like a hare. He did not know what had happened behind him; consequently, his speed did not slacken. The junior did not stop until he emerged into the road. The pursuit had been abandoned by this time.

And then, just as Dennis was making for the school wall, the strong rays of an electric torch flashed upon him, and a voice—the stern voice of Mr. Quelch—exclaimed:

"So I have caught you, Carr!"

Dennis stopped short, pumping in breath.

This was the last thing in the world he had thought possible.

The storm was still raging; though with less violence, and the junior had not dreamed that Mr. Quelch would be abroad at such an hour.

He was fairly trapped. Evasion would be useless, for the Form-master had already recognised him.

"You are out of bounds, Carr!"

Dennis ground his heel savagely into the gravel. Mr. Quelch had an exasperating habit of saying things which were perfectly obvious. Dennis was on the wrong side of the school wall; therefore, it was only too apparent that he was out of bounds.

"You will come with me!" rumbled Mr. Quelch.

Dennis obediently followed the Form-master in at the school gates, which had been unlocked.

There was further conversation as master and junior crossed the Close.

Mr. Quelch monopolised it.

"This is not your first offence of this nature, Carr. I warned you before that if you were discovered out of bounds again you would be summarily dealt with."

Dennis was silent.

"Late though the hour is," continued Mr. Quelch, "I will take you before Dr. Locke, and I have no doubt that you will be expelled from the school. You have acted abominably, and you have deliberately disregarded my warning."

A light was still burning in the Head's study. Thither Mr. Quelch escorted his captive.

Dr. Locke was extremely surprised to receive visitors at that time of the night.

The worthy old gentleman—who was looking worn and ill—had been dozing over his desk. He looked up with a start as Mr. Quelch entered, followed by Dennis Carr.

"Bless my soul! Is anything amiss, Quelch?"

"This boy, sir," said the Remove-master, "has repeatedly broken bounds in the face of several warnings. Five minutes ago, I discovered him out in the roadway. He had been absent for more than an hour from the dormitory."

Dr. Locke fixed his stern gaze upon the dishevelled junior.

"This is disgraceful, Carr! I presume you have been paying a visit to some place of ill-repute in the village?"

"No, sir," said Dennis, in a low tone.

"Where, then, have you been?"

Dennis did not answer. If he stated the facts—namely, that he had broken bounds in order to set fire to a barn, it would not help him much. The Head, on making inquiries, would find out all about his previous transactions with Ponsonby, and the whole wretched business of the theft of Wharton's money would be opened up afresh.

Dennis sought refuge in silence. He was hoping that perhaps the Head would not administer the extreme penalty. A severe flogging might be made to meet the case.

But the hope proved to be vain.

"The fact that you are silent, Carr," said the Head, "leads me to believe that your actions whilst out of bounds have been dishonourable. You are an utterly perverse and foolish boy. You have been given plenty

of chances, and you have wilfully spurned them. I will not go further into the matter now, except to say that, unless any extenuating circumstances come to light, you will be expelled from Greyfriars. I cannot think what the Remove Form is coming to. You are the second junior I have been under the necessity of expelling within one week!"

Dennis Carr was very pale now. So it had come at last—the crash which he had feared. He had not been convicted of theft, but of breaking bounds; but the punishment was all the same. His career at Greyfriars—a career dark with dishonour—was nearing its close. He would not get another chance.

The Head turned to Mr. Quelch.

"Would you be good enough to conduct Carr to the punishment-room, Mr. Quelch?"

"Certainly, sir!"

Dennis Carr glanced wildly round the study, but he saw nothing to give him any hope.

The Head's face, in addition to being worn and lined, was set and stern.

"Come, Carr!"

With faltering steps, Dennis Carr followed Mr. Quelch from the Head's study.

Was this to be his last night at Greyfriars?

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Wild Resolve.

LEFT to himself in the cold and cheerless punishment-room, Dennis Carr passed the remainder of the night in gloomy speculation as to his future.

His short innings at Greyfriars was over. There would be a general assembly in Big Hall, and he would be expelled—cast out from Greyfriars in disgrace.

And not a soul would be sorry!

Mark Linley's going had been deplored by a host of loyal chums. But in Dennis Carr's case it would be different. No one would care. Many, in fact, would rejoice.

The night seemed interminable.

Dennis had not availed himself of the bed. He was seated on one of the hard chairs, staring into the gloom, while the wind rattled and shook the window.

Dawn came at last—a grey and dismal dawn, in harmony with the wretched junior's thoughts.

There was great excitement in the Remove dormitory when Dennis Carr's bed was discovered to be vacant.

"Carr must have got up jolly early!" remarked Vernon-Smith.

"He got up at eleven o'clock last night," said Harry Wharton, "and he hasn't been back since."

"My hat!"

"I suppose he's been on the razzle, and made an all-night sitting of it?" said Peter Todd.

"He's probably in the punishment-room," said Wharton. "Quelch came into the dorm. shortly after Carr left it. He asked me if I knew where the fellow was. I said I hadn't the foggiest notion."

"And what did Quelch do then?" asked Frank Nugent breathlessly.

"He stalked out of the dorm, looking like thunder, and muttering to himself. It's not difficult to guess what happened after that. Quelch must have collared Carr when he came in and hauled him up before the Head."

"In which case we shall witness another expulsion to-day," said Johnny Bull.

"Jolly good riddance!" growled Bolsover major. "The fellow ought never to have come to Greyfriars! He's a blessed criminal!"

"And yet he's quite a decent-looking fellow," said Squiff thoughtfully.

"Criminals often are."

"I say, you fellows!" said Billy Bunter. "Now that Carr's going to be sacked I expect he'll hand me over his gold tucker."

"If he does he'll get it in the neck for being a receiver of stolen property!" said Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry! How do you know it was stolen?"

"A fellow who steals another chap's money will steal anything!" said Bob.

The juniors trooped down to breakfast in a state of anticipation. They wanted to see how Dennis Carr would bear himself under the ordeal of expulsion.

But they were destined to be disappointed. After breakfast news was received that Dr. Locke was unwell, and would be unable to attend to his duties that day.

The General Assembly was postponed for twenty-four hours. And, meanwhile, Dennis Carr was to remain in the punishment-room.

It was Wingate of the Sixth who told Dennis the news; and the prospect of having

to spend another day and night in the punishment-room was anything but pleasant. Dennis doubted whether he would be able to stick it.

"Why don't they get it over?" he kept muttering to himself.

The suspense was becoming intolerable.

All day long the skies had been dark and overcast, and nightfall brought in its train another storm, far more terrible in its intensity than that of the previous night.

The gale shrieked furiously round the old roofs and chimneys of Greyfriars.

It was a wild night. And Dennis Carr, physically weary though he was, knew that sleep would be impossible.

He must wait. All through the long, tempestuous night he must keep his solitary vigil.

And when the morning broke—what then?

He would be summoned to appear in Big Hall, and in the sight of all Greyfriars he would be expelled—sent home to face his father. And his father's wrath would be comparable only to the wrath of Jove of old.

Dennis groaned aloud.

He felt that he could not face either the ordeal in Big Hall or the subsequent ordeal at home.

Yet how could he escape them?

And then—as if borne on the wings of the storm—came a harsh, insistent voice.

"Get clear, you fool! Run away! You dare not face a public expulsion! You dare not face your father! Clear out, and defy them all!"

Dennis gave a start.

Why had he not thought of this before? Obviously, the best, the only thing to do was to run away.

But where could he go? What could he do?

The voice thundered in his ears again.

"You're young; you're loaded with energy—and energy's very scarce just now—and you'll soon get a job. Make for one of the big seaports and try your luck! Anything's better than resigning yourself to the tender mercies of your father. Clear out now, while you've got the chance!"

Dennis Carr hesitated no longer. His mind was made up. Rather than wait for expulsion he would go of his own accord.

He had no money, and lack of funds would be a terrible handicap. But he would worry through somehow. Other fellows had done it. He remembered to have read of runaways who had made good, and who years later had visited their old schools as successful and distinguished men. Why should he not do the same?

Dennis sat plunged in thought.

He roused himself, with a start, as a muffled boom from the clock-tower signified midnight.

"I'll do it now!" he muttered between his clenched teeth. "And if Quelch spots me this time he won't get a chance to collar me. I'll cut and run!"

So saying, Dennis proceeded to wrench the sheets off the bed, tear them into strips, and knot them together.

The task was accomplished at length, and Dennis tied one end of the knotted sheets to the bedpost. He then started on the most hazardous part of his enterprise.

He lowered the sheets from the window, and then clambered through himself.

It was a terribly precarious undertaking, and more than once the reckless junior nearly lost his hold.

Fortune favoured him, however. He had to drop a matter of eight feet or so at the finish. Then he scrambled to his feet, and battled his way across the Close through the blinding storm.

The school wall was successfully surmounted, and Dennis Carr set out on the shore road leading to Pegg.

He did not know why he took this road. Perhaps it was because he had the wind at his back when travelling in that direction.

Anyway, he trudged on through the night, no longer a prisoner, but free!

The die was cast. Dennis Carr had fared forth into the world, to take whatsoever of good and ill Fate had in store for him.

Would this rash enterprise lead to success or to starvation?

What would befall the wayward boy on his wild adventure?

He had taken the plunge, true; but would it prove to be for better, or for worse?

THE END.

(Another splendid long, complete story of Harry Wharton & Co., next week, entitled *Redeeming the Past!* by Frank Richards. Next week's PENNY POPULAR will be enlarged to 20 pages! Don't miss it!

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 33.



THE TRICKSTERS!

A New Long Complete Story of
JIMMY SILVER & Co., the
Chums of Rookwood.

By OWEN CONQUEST.



THE FIRST CHAPTER. Peele & Co.'s Debts!

"I SAY, Gower!"
It was Peele, of the Fourth Form at Rookwood, who called out to his chum as he was passing down the corridor. Peele was the cad of the Fourth, and Gower and Lattrey, his chums, were of much the same kidney.

Peele had a letter in his hand, and his face expressed anxiety.

Gower came back and entered the study. There was a scowl on his face.

"What do you want?" he asked surlily. "I've just got two blessed hundred lines to do for Bulkeley, the rotter!"

Peele chuckled.
"You'll get another two blessed hundred if he hears you calling him a rotter!" he said.

Gower glowered.
"Did you call me back to tell me that?" he demanded.

"No!" said Peele quickly. "Here, I've just had this letter. Read it—it will interest you!"

Gower took the proffered letter, and drew it from the envelope. His eyes opened wider and wider as the meaning of the badly-written scrawl dawned more and more upon him.

"M-m-my hat!" he stuttered. "M-m-my stars!"

He looked at Peele in dull amazement, and Lattrey, coming in at that moment, stood in the doorway and stared.

"What on earth is the matter with you chaps?" he said. "You look as if the Head has given you the sack!"

Gower handed him the letter without a word, and Lattrey, after a moment's hesitation, quickly read it through.

It had the same effect upon him as it had had on Gower. He whitened visibly as he stared from one to the other of his chums.

"M-m-my hat!" he stammered. "This—this has properly done it!"

Peele muttered something under his breath, and snatched the letter from Lattrey's hand.

"What are we going to do?" he demanded, his voice shaky. "If—if we say we sold the bike, it means prison!"

"Let's have another look at the letter!" said Gower anxiously.

Peele handed it out without a word, and Gower read it again. There were only a few words.

"Mr. Alfred Charman presents his compliments to Mr. Peele, and begs to inform him that, as the instalments for the bicycle purchased on the hire system have not been paid for two weeks, he is claiming the bicycle, according to the agreement signed and witnessed on August 22nd, 1919."

"Perhaps we can buy it back!" said Peele hopefully.

"It's your fault it was sold, Lattrey," said Gower, turning savagely upon his chum. "If you hadn't had the appetite of a cormorant, we should still have had the bicycle."

"Well, I like that!" said Lattrey indignantly. "You shared the feeds we had when we sold the bike, didn't you?"

"Y-y-es, but—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Peele irritably. "The thing is, what are we going to do about it?"

Gower sat down heavily in a chair, and Peele and Lattrey followed his example.

Peele got up again, and shut the door. He did not want any passers-by to know their business, for it was such that could not bear the light.

Some few weeks previously, Peele & Co. had

purchased a bicycle on the hire system, and Peele had signed an agreement to the effect that if the instalments were not paid every week, the firm from which he obtained the machine should have the right to demand the return of the cycle.

Quite a good sum had been obtained, when the cads of Rookwood decided to go against the agreement and sell it, and Peele & Co. had been in funds for some considerable time as a consequence.

But their thoughts of it being quite easy to raise the necessary money for the instalments out of their pocket-money had been rudely disturbed.

Peele & Co. found they wanted several things which took quite a large portion of their pocket-money to procure. Hence the instalments had not been paid according to the agreement.

Now Mr. Alfred Charman, who had sold the bicycle to Peele, was taking advantage of the agreement to demand the return of the machine. Of course, he did not refund the instalments already paid by Peele & Co.

It was a very serious position in which Peele & Co. found themselves. They had broken the agreement with Charman, and had sold the bicycle before it was really theirs to sell.

"My hat!" said Gower suddenly. "Do you chaps know that we're in a rotten position?"

Peele and Lattrey snorted.

"Ass!" growled Peele. "Don't we look as though we do?"

"Has it only just dawned on you?" sneered Lattrey.

Gower nodded thoughtfully.

"The worst part of it is, we can't get the bike back!" he said, ignoring his chums' remarks.

"Why?"

"Have we got the money, fathead? Fifteen quid we had. Can you raise fifteen quid now?"

"Oh! We shouldn't have to pay all that now, should we? I mean, it must be worn a bit now."

"That doesn't make any difference. The prices have gone up by leaps and bounds since we sold it."

"In a month?"

"Certainly!"

Gower was no comforter. He seemed to be putting the blackest point of view before his chums.

"Then we're done!" said Peele, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I suppose—I suppose it's the sack this time!"

"Sure!" said Gower laconically. "Unless we get the bike back!"

"Haven't you just said we can't do that?" snapped Lattrey.

Gower nodded calmly.

"No! I said we couldn't buy it back!" he said slowly. "But there's more ways than one of killing a cat, you know!"

Peele and Lattrey stared at their chum as if he had suddenly gone mad.

"Off your rocker!" asked Peele laconically.

"Must be!" said Lattrey.

Gower leaned forward until his head was almost touching Peele's, and Lattrey got up and went across, so that he could hear what was said.

"We shall have to take it back!" said Gower, in a low voice. "That is, pinch it!"

Peele and Lattrey almost staggered back.

"S-s-steal it!" stammered Peele.

"M-m-my hat!" stuttered Lattrey. "You're off your rocker!"

Gower shook his head.

"We've got to get the bike back," he said quickly. "If we can't produce it when Charman comes along, off we go to the Head, and he gives us the sack! Then Charman hands

us over to the police, and exit three juniors, late of Rookwood, from freedom for a year or so!"

"My hat!" said Peele, with a shudder. "It isn't so bad as that, is it?"

Gower nodded again.

"Every bit of it!" he said. "I don't like it any more than you do. But we've got to get down to the bare truth. We've sold what doesn't belong to us, and we're going to get it in the neck unless we can produce the bicycle when Charman turns up."

"Does he say when he's coming to demand the bike?" asked Lattrey.

"No; but you can bet your life he won't wait long!" said Gower.

Peele & Co. sat back in their chairs, their brows puckered in thought as they pondered over the situation. Their position was a most unenviable one; there was no doubt about that.

But for Gower to suggest stealing the machine from the person to whom they had sold it was absolutely the last resource.

"Have we got anything we can sell?" asked Peele. "I'd wire my guv'nor for the money to pay the instalments, only—we're not very friendly just now."

"Eh? How's that?" asked Gower quickly.

Peele flushed painfully.

"Something turned up—a bill I ran up whilst on holiday last vac," said Peele hurriedly. "Nothing to do with this bizz, though, so it doesn't matter."

Gower looked at Lattrey significantly. That explained why Peele had been short of money recently. Gower and Lattrey had footed all bills in connection with their pleasures for the last week or two, Peele having promised to repay them in the near future.

"I couldn't raise more than a couple of quid!" said Lattrey. "What about you, Gower?"

"Ten bob is about my limit!" said Gower. "And the instalment due is five pounds. It's no good our trying to borrow it from the chaps. They wouldn't lend us a bean!"

Gower was right enough there. There were not half a dozen fellows at Rookwood who would help Peele & Co. They were disliked too intensely for that.

"So the only thing to do is to sneak the bike!" said Gower. "It might sound jolly awful, but it will have to be done, or we shall get the sack."

Peele sat up suddenly, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!" he said curtly. "It was Melville to whom we sold the bike, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Gower. "The chap who lives in that thatched cottage just before you get to Coomb."

"Then we shall have to go soon," said Peele. "We can't go at the dead of night—we're not giddy burglars!"

"We shan't be much else," said Lattrey nervously. "I vote we face the music here. No need to run the risk of a double charge."

Gower and Peele started. They had not thought that they might be found out if they stole the bike. If they did, it would be as Lattrey said—a double charge against them. The first would be selling property which was not theirs to sell, and the second would be theft.

"My hat!" said Gower. "I hadn't thought of that!"

"Hang everything!" said Peele. "We've got to go through with it now!"

Gower and Lattrey hesitated only a minute before they agreed with Peele. Something had to be done, and done quickly, for there was no knowing when Mr. Alfred Charman would come to claim the machine.

"We'll go as soon as it begins to get dark—" began Gower.

But he was interrupted by a knock at the door. It opened the next moment, and Tubby Muffin, the fat junior of the Classical House at Rookwood, poked his head into the study.

"Johnnie named Charman wants to see you," explained Tubby. "He looks as if he's on the warpath."

And with that comforting information, Tubby Muffin hurried away.

But the news had an effect on Peele & Co. that would have astonished Tubby Muffin could he have seen Peele & Co. after he had imparted the news.

The cads of the Fourth simply stared at one another, for the moment absolutely speechless.

It was Gower who found his tongue first. "My hat!" he ejaculated. "What are we going to do now?"

There was another tap at the door, and Jimmy Silver, captain of the Classical Fourth, looked in.

"A Mr. Charman is waiting for you," he said shortly. "He's down at the gates."

And the junior shut the door and walked quickly down the corridor. There was no love lost between Jimmy Silver and Peele & Co.

"Come on!" said Gower hastily. "Half the giddy house will know why he's here if we don't buck up!"

And the three cads hurried down to the gates.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Mr. Charman is Not Charming!

"GOOD-EVENING, young gentles!" It was Mr. Alfred Charman who greeted Peele & Co. with that remark as they reached Rookwood's famous gates.

"G-g-good-evening, Mr. Charman!" said Gower nervously. "D-did you want to see us?"

Mr. Charman nodded. "I did!" he said. "Leastways, it was Mr. Peele I wanted to see. And he knows perfectly well why I've come down here."

Peele knew only too well! "Y-yes!" said Peele. "But—but don't stand there, Mr. Charman. Fellows at Rookwood are not allowed to purchase bikes on the hire system; there'll be a row if anybody should hear us speaking."

"It won't take a minute to 'and over the machine," said Mr. Charman shortly. "See, I've got a cart all ready to put it on!"

And he pointed to a trap that was waiting a few yards down the road. It was empty, and Peele & Co. had not thought that it belonged to Mr. Charman when they first saw it on reaching the roadway.

"C-come and—have a chat," said Peele nervously.

He looked helplessly at Gower as he spoke. Gower was the most cool of the three, and Peele, although he professed to lead the Co., invariably looked to Gower to help them out of awkward corners like that in which they now found themselves.

"Look here, Mr. Charman!" said Gower briskly. "We've had rather a rotten time of it lately, and can't pay to-day. We will settle up with you to-morrow afternoon. How will that do?"

"It won't do at all!" said Mr. Charman curtly. "You signed an agreement that the bicycle should be returned if you didn't keep up the instalments. You ain't done so—I want the bike back!"

"But we will pay you five pounds to-morrow, I tell you!" said Gower impatiently. "I don't want your five pounds!" snapped Mr. Charman. "I'm going to have the bike, or I'm going to sue you for it! You signed the agreement, Master Peele, and you'll have to stick by it!"

Gower's lip curled into a sneer. "What you mean is bluntly this," he said bitterly. "You've had the value of the bike in instalments, and if you get the machine back again, and sell it to somebody else, you'll make a double profit!"

"I ain't going into my business with you, young sir," said Mr. Charman. "I want that bike, and I mean to 'ave it!"

Peele looked at Lattrey helplessly. Mr. Charman was evidently determined to get it back, and Gower had hit the right nail on the head when he bitterly accused Mr. Charman of his desire to make a double profit.

Contrary to what one might expect, Mr. Charman never cared if his customers failed to pay their instalments at the specified

times. When instalments were in arrears, then Mr. Charman took full advantage of his agreements, and claimed the machines back.

When sold again—second-hand for spot cash—Mr. Charman found that, coupled with the instalments already paid by luckless customers, a bicycle could be a very paying article to trade with.

He was evidently determined that the bicycle sold to Peele & Co. on the hire-purchase system should be returned. He was acting within his rights, but his business methods reflected no credit upon him.

"Well, you can't have it to-day," said Gower bluntly. "We've lent it to one of our chums, and he won't be back until to-morrow morning."

The lie left Gower's lips as easily as the truth comes to most people.

Mr. Charman looked annoyed.

"You ain't got no right to lend the machine!" he said angrily.

"Why not?" asked Gower coolly.

"Because it was not yours to lend!" retorted Charman. "You hadn't finished paying for it, had you?"

Peele & Co. could find no answer to that question.

Gower shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you can't have the machine now, Mr. Charman, for the very simple reason that it's not here!" he said. "You will have to wait until to-morrow, whether you like it or not!"

Mr. Charman frowned, and bit his lips angrily.

"Then see it's here ready for me to-morrow afternoon!" he said curtly. "I ain't going to hire the trap a second time for nothing. If the machine isn't here when I come, then I see your headmaster about it."

And Mr. Charman turned on his heel and walked quickly to the trap. Peele & Co. did not speak until the horse had been turned, and the trap was speeding towards Coomb.

"That's put it off for a time!" said Gower thankfully. "Much might happen between now and to-morrow afternoon!"

"Yes; we might get caught pinching the bike!" said Lattrey bitterly. "That would be just our luck!"

Peele and Gower failed to see the humour in their chum's last remark. It was certainly funny that Lattrey would consider it had luck to be caught stealing other people's property!

The three cads returned to their study, and found that it was occupied.

Jimmy Silver, the Classical Fourth's captain, was there with his chums, Raby, Newcome, and Lovell.

"Hallo!" said Gower, in surprise. "Why-for this honour?"

Jimmy Silver's hands clenched.

"Look here, you rotters!" he said warmly. "We didn't come here to give you thick ears, but we're quite ready to oblige!"

"We is!" assented his chums heartily.

"Sure you wouldn't like us to try, Peele?" asked Newcome obligingly.

"No!" growled Peele.

"You're not sure?" echoed Raby. "Then you want a thick ear?"

"I mean yes!" said Peele hastily, and backed away as Raby went towards him. "Keep off, Raby! What's the matter?"

"You said you wanted a thick ear—"

"Chuck it, you chaps!" interposed Jimmy Silver. "Look here, Gower, have you got some business stunt on with Charman?"

Peele & Co. started.

"Have you been listening?" demanded Gower hotly.

Jimmy Silver & Co. flushed.

"We're not eavesdropping rotters!" snapped Jimmy Silver hotly. "And another suggestion of the same sort, Gower, and you'll get it in the neck!"

"How did you know, then?" asked Gower, in a quieter tone. "You were not down at the gates?"

"No, we weren't!" growled Jimmy Silver. "But there are such things as windows! We saw you talking to Charman, and as we know that he only sells bicycles on the hire-purchase stunt, we came to tell you to drop it!"

"Why?"

"Because Dr. Chisholm has ordered that no Rookwood fellow is to purchase articles otherwise than by spot cash!"

Gower shrugged his shoulders.

"The Head doesn't get to hear everything!" he said slowly.

Jimmy Silver snorted.

"Pity he doesn't! You rotters would have had the sack long ago!" he snapped. "Take

my tip, Gower, and don't have anything to do with Charman!"

"Hear, hear!" said Raby.

"Come on, you chaps!" said Jimmy Silver to his chums. "I don't suppose the rotters will take much notice of what we say."

"We shan't!" muttered Peele under his breath.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not hear that whisper, or they might not have gone out of the study feeling that they had done their duty and done it well.

Jimmy Silver had issued the warning; it remained to be seen if Peele & Co. heeded it or not.

Once the door had closed behind the Fistic Four—the name by which Jimmy Silver & Co. were known to their Form-mates—Peele & Co. sat down to wait for the darkness.

Lattrey grew more and more nervous as the shadows of night swiftly approached. He had no liking for the job in hand; it carried too much risk, to his way of thinking.

But Gower and Peele were sanguine of success. They realised that to steal the bicycle was the only way to get on the right side of Alfred Charman.

"I—I—I wish Jimmy Silver & Co. hadn't spotted us!" said Peele, a trifle uneasily. "They might ask awkward questions when Melville reports that his bicycle has been stolen."

"How will they do that?" asked Gower, with a laugh. "They think we're out to buy one, not to give one back."

"Yes; but Lovell's got a nasty way of putting two and two together to make four," murmured Peele. "You remember how he nabbed us over the books when we tried to stop Jimmy Silver playing for his cap?"

But Gower refused to acknowledge that there was a possibility of their dastardly trick being found out. He was so confident that he convinced Peele of their safety. But Lattrey refused to be convinced. He hardly spoke whilst they had a light meal, and was obviously sulky when he, Peele, and Gower, quietly left the Classical House at eight o'clock and climbed the wall that enclosed Rookwood.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Fire!

"MY hat!" It was Jimmy Silver, captain of the Classical Fourth, who made that remark. He was standing at the window of his study, moodily staring across the quadrangle.

The evenings were fast drawing in, a fact which gave the chums of the Fourth a little less time to devote to pleasure after they had finished their prep of an evening.

Raby, Newcome, and Lovell were reading, and they looked up quickly as Jimmy Silver spoke.

"What's the matter with your hat?" asked Raby.

"Come and have a look, you chaps!" said Jimmy Silver, without turning round.

Raby, Newcome, and Lovell dropped their books and hurried to the window.

"Fire!" said Raby at once.

"My hat!"

"In the village!" A dull red glow hung over the little village of Coomb, and even as the chums watched hundreds of sparks suddenly shot up into the air.

"Come on!" said Jimmy Silver excitedly. "There's work to be done!"

He turned and rushed towards the door.

"Rouse out the fellows!" shouted Raby. "Only let's get to the top of the stairs first, so that we can be first on the scene!"

The chums of the Fourth rushed out of the study and scamped down the corridor. When they reached the top of the stairs Jimmy Silver made a megaphone with his hands, and shouted at the top of his voice.

"Fire! Fire! Down at the village!"

There was the sound of many chairs being knocked over, and almost before Jimmy Silver & Co. had traversed the first flight of steps there came to their ears the scuttling of many feet.

"Fire! Fire! Coomb's on fire!"

The cry was taken up by juniors and seniors alike, and all rushed towards the stairs. And as the news spread so it was enlarged upon.

"Fires all over Coomb!" shouted Tubby

Muffin excitedly. "Goodness! I hope the tuckshop is saved!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, it's no laughing matter!" panted Tubby indignantly, as he pushed and jostled his way down the stairs. "Ow! You're poking my ribs in, Mornington!"

"Shouldn't take up so much room!" snapped Mornington.

"Fire! Fire!"

Half Rookwood seemed already to be out of the Houses and running across the quadrangle. Jimmy Silver & Co. were first out of the gates, only by a few yards, for Tommy Dodd & Co., their rivals of the Modern House, dashed out a moment later.

"Hi, Jimmy!" shouted Tommy Dodd.

"Can't stop!" roared Jimmy Silver. "Catch up with me!"

Tommy Dodd put on a spurt and caught up with Jimmy Silver, who was slightly ahead of Raby, Newcome, and Lovell.

"What is it, do you know?" asked Tommy Dodd as he ran.

"Can't say!" said Jimmy Silver. "Might only be a huge bonfire for all I know!"

Tommy Dodd chuckled.

"If it is I can see somebody getting a licking!" he said. "The chap who has startled the whole of Rookwood down to Coomb, I mean!"

Jimmy Silver started.

"Jehosaphat!" he ejaculated. "Why, I was the first to shout 'Fire!'"

Tommy Dodd chuckled again.

"Then the best thing you can hope for is that there's a real fire!" he said. "Not a nice thing to say, perhaps—"

"We'll wait and see!" interrupted Jimmy Silver.

Coomb was reached at last, and Jimmy Silver & Co. put on a spurt.

"It's Thatch Cottage!" said Jimmy Silver, as they came upon the scene of the fire.

"Melville's place!"

He started suddenly, and peered intently through the smoke at what appeared to be the figure of a Rookwood fellow riding a bicycle away from the scene of the fire.

But the form had disappeared the next moment, and Jimmy Silver put the matter from his mind. It was unlikely that the rider belonged to Rookwood after all, for he was certain nobody had passed him on the dash from the school.

The village fire-brigade had turned out, but there was little hope of saving the cottage. It was very old, and the thatched roof, having fallen in, added fuel to the flames.

"Not much hope of saving the place," said Jimmy Silver, turning to his chums. "The cottage will burn like fury. Jolly rotten luck for old Melville!"

A burst of cheering broke out from the other side of the cottage, and Jimmy Silver & Co. hurried round to see the cause. The Rookwoodites were coming up at a great rate, but they were powerless to avert the ruin of the cottage.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were not long in learning the cause of the cheering.

On the ground, a few yards away from the blazing cottage, lay the figure of a junior from Rookwood. His clothes and cap made that fact common property at once.

"Hallo! One of our chaps!" said Jimmy Silver in surprise. "Who is it, and what's happened?"

A villager who was standing near turned to the juniors.

"One of your young gents rushed into the

cottage," he explained. "There were two of them, both young lads, but we've only seen one come out so far!"

"My hat! There's a Rookwood chap in there now, then!" gasped Jimmy Silver, and dashed forward.

"Keep back!" roared a brawny fireman; and he caught Jimmy Silver by the shoulder and pulled him back.

"There's one of our chaps in there!" shouted Jimmy Silver hotly.

"No, there ain't!" said the fireman. "He fetched out Melville's daughter!"

"My stars! Hurrah for Rookwood!" shouted Tommy Dodd, running up in time to hear the fireman's last remark.

"But—who is it?" said Jimmy Silver in amazement.

He ran towards the little group that surrounded the prostrate form of the Rookwood fellow, and elbowed his way through to the front.

He almost dropped in sheer astonishment as he recognised the white, tense features of the Rookwoodite.

"Peele!" he gasped. "My hat! Jumping Aunt Sempronia!"

It was Peele—sure enough. His eyes were closed, and he lay as one in a dead faint. Behind him, Jimmy Silver noted for the first time, was a village woman soothing a crying child.

"Did—did—did he rescue that kiddy?" stammered Jimmy Silver, turning to one of the crowd.

"He did—as gallant an act as I ever heard tell of!" said the villager stoutly. "He rushed in through the flames and smoke, and brought out little Elsie Melville! There she is, in her mother's arms!"

Jimmy Silver looked at Tommy Dodd & Co. and his chums in amazement. Peele, the cad of the Fourth and a coward to boot—a hero!

It was impossible!

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "Sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"Certain sure!" affirmed the villager. "I see'd him with my own eyes!"

"Goodness! Wonders will never cease!" He hurried to Peele's side, and the hero of the moment opened his eyes and stared dully up at Jimmy Silver.

"Did—did you get it?" he asked weakly.

Jimmy Silver looked mystified for the moment, but he put it down to the shock which Peele had received.

"No—you got it yourself!" said Jimmy Silver. "She's quite safe—and you're a hero, Peele!"

Peele closed his eyes and lay still again.

Jimmy Silver stood up, and rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Blessed if I thought Peele would ever turn out a hero!" he said to Raby.

"Nor I!" said Raby, with conviction. "But there's no doubt about it!"

Raby was right. There was not the slightest doubt that Peele had saved little Elsie Melville from the flames. Nor was there any doubt about the action being heroic.

But Peele—hero! It was almost unbelievable.

The ravaging flames began to die down at last, and there was little left of the cottage when the firemen at last put out the fire. All that was left of the cottage was a mass of steaming, blackened debris.

Peele recovered in a very few minutes, and Jimmy Silver and Tommy Dodd each took an arm to help him back to Rookwood.

The news of Peele's gallant rescue of Elsie Melville had spread very quickly, and it was a cheering crowd of Rookwoodites that escorted the hero of the hour back to the school.

Dr. Chisholm was waiting at the gates, and he listened patiently whilst Jimmy Silver detailed the story of the rescue.

"I am very proud of you, Peele!" said the Head, shaking Peele warmly by the hand.

"Under the circumstances, I shall cause no inquiry to be made into the rash way in which the juniors dashed from the school. Take Peele up to the dormitory, Silver, and see that he is made comfortable."

"Yes, sir!" said Jimmy Silver.

And Peele, who had hitherto found few fellows willing to even walk up to the dormitory with him, was escorted by the whole of the Classical Fourth.

It was not until the next day that Gower and Lattrey had a chance to speak to Peele alone, and then their conversation was of a nature which would have considerably amazed the Fourth, could they have but heard.

"Did you get the bike?" asked Peele, as soon as they reached their study after breakfast.

"Yes—but hang the bike!" said Gower quickly. "How on earth did you come to be made out a hero?"

Peele flushed.

"I lost you in the smoke," he said slowly. "Then I came across the kid. I was going out, so I took her with me!"

Gower chuckled.

"And you're the hero of the hour!" he said; and there was a sneer in his tones.

"My hat! If the fellows only knew that you really went into the place because you were afraid the bike would be burned, and Charman would let the Head know all about our little biz!"

"Shut up!" snapped Peele. "What have you done with the bike? That's the thing that matters!"

"Rode it to Latcham, and left it outside Charman's private house with a note," said Gower.

"Then Charman will be satisfied now!" said Peele. "My hat! I'm jolly glad to hear the last of that beastly bike!"

Melville's bicycle was presumed to have been destroyed in the fire, though no trace of it could be found. And Peele & Co. sojourned their consciences with the thought that Melville was insured, so that he would not lose by it—the fact that they had swindled an insurance company was something they preferred to overlook.

Peele & Co. lived in mortal terror lest their trick should be discovered. But, fortunately for them, the truth never came to light.

The fire had been a boon to the cads of the Fourth, and nobody ever knew that it was sheer desperation that had driven Gower and Peele into the burning cottage to find the bicycle.

Nevertheless, Peele was feted as a hero for many a day by juniors and seniors alike, and only Gower and Lattrey knew the true facts of the case.

It was fortune that had brought the fire; it was fortune that had really rescued little Elsie Melville.

Peele was a hero to the Fourth—but he was known to be a thief by his chums.

THE END.

(Another fine story of Jimmy Silver & Co. next week, entitled "Jimmy Silver & Co.'s Visitors!" Order your copy in advance!)

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THE FIRST CHAPTER. Skimpole in Trouble.

I HAVE the very highest opinion of your ability generally, and more especially of your acuteness in what I may term the ordinary affairs of life, Kerr. Your ratiocinatory powers—

"Cut out the 'rats,' Skimmy, and get to the horses!" interrupted Kerr, grinning.

Herbert Skimpole, of the Shell and the School House at St. Jim's, had come across to the New House to interview Figgins & Co.

Or, rather, to interview George Francis Kerr, the exota member of that fraternity of three. Skimmy had made it quite plain that George Figgins and Fatty Wynn did not matter to him. Only his politeness had prevented his asking them to retire while he talked to Kerr, and even that had not hindered him from looking as if he wanted them to go.

It was early in the Christmas term, and footer was in full swing. Figgins & Co. had come in from a kick-about on Little Side, ruddy and healthy and hungry, more than ready for tea. Skimmy, with his pale, thoughtful face and big, bumpy brow, presented a queer contrast to those three athletic juniors. For, though there was no gaining the fact that David Llewellyn Wynn was fat, there was also no denying that he was an athlete.

Fatty knelt in front of the fire now, busy upon culinary operations.

Figgins, still in footer garb, lay back in the armchair, his shorts exposing to view quite a considerable expanse of bare legs. Kerr, who had changed, sat with one elbow on the table laid for tea, and his chin on the palm of his upturned hand. Skimmy had taken a chair opposite to him.

"In brief, Kerr, I am in a considerable quandary," said Skimmy, looking very woe-begone.

"Means a bit of a fix," murmured Figgins. Kerr nodded.

"Tell your uncles all about it, Skimmy!" he said.

"My uncles? Er—oh, I perceive! A figure of speech—a harmless pleasantry. Yes, I will tell you all about it, Kerr. I came back this term in a position of unusual affluence."

"He's going to ask us to tea to-morrow, and give us a thumping good spread, Fizzy!" said Fatty, looking up to beam at the notion.

"Bet you he's not! There's no difficulty about getting you to a spread, Fatty, old son!"

"Alas! My money has gone, and, I fear, irretrievably!" Skimpole said.

"Blued it already?" asked Kerr sympathetically. "We do that sometimes. We can feel for you."

"No, I cannot say that I have—er—blued it, Kerr. I designed to expend it for the advancement of science, and—"

"Some rotten invention that won't work! Skimmy's never do!" Fizzy murmured.

"That statement is not accurate, Figgins, my dear fellow. And, as a matter of fact,

this was no question of an invention. As you are probably aware, I have written several books on important subjects, which the perverted blindness of the publishers to whom I have submitted the manuscripts—

"Nothing doing, eh?" cut in Kerr. "Go on. We've got that."

"Have some tea, Skimmy?" asked Fatty hospitably. "We're just going to have ours."

"Thank you, I will take a cup of tea with pleasure, my dear Wynn. But I am really in such a state of anxiety that I cannot eat a mouthful."

"Glad I'm not!" said Fatty.

"You couldn't be," Figgins said.

Skimmy stirred the cup of tea handed to him, and regarded them thoughtfully. He looked—and probably felt—at least a hundred years older than these light-hearted juniors. For a brief space Reginald Talbot had succeeded in making Skimpole more like a human boy, but Skimmy had relapsed now.

"Go on, Skimmy!" said Kerr encouragingly.

"They say you can't do two things at once, but that's wrong, for I can listen and eat kippers."

"Julius Caesar—" began Skimpole.

"My hat! Is he mixed up in your troubles?" asked Figgins.

"You misunderstand me, my dear fellow. I was only answering Kerr's remark, and was about to point out that Julius Caesar—"

"Dead and buried long ago!" put in Kerr.

"Pompey killed him, didn't he?" said Fatty.

"No, I don't mean Pompey—" said Fatty.

"Somebody killed him, and he said 'Oh, you beast!' and collapsed at the foot of Pompey's statue!" Figgins interrupted.

"Better get on with the washing, Skimmy."

"The fact of the matter is, my dear fellows, that I am not at all sure that I have not been robbed—or, to say the very least, swindled."

"Comes to much the same thing, doesn't it?" Kerr rejoined. "Pretty bad either way. Who's the villain, dear boy?"

"I should hesitate to apply to him that appellation, Kerr, but I am sure he is not entirely straightforward."

"Who is he?" snapped Figgins.

"I do not know his name. He is living for the present at Rylcombe, and he is a printer."

"What's he done to you?" queried Fatty wonderingly. "Can't see what bizney you could have with a printer jobbing himself."

But Kerr and Figgins guessed.

"This person accosted me one day on the road between the school and the village, and said that he had been informed by friends of his that I was an author—an author of scientific works, philosophical treatises, and the like."

Skimmy paused. They could all guess how that flattery had got him. Even now, when he had more than half come to realise that it was only part of a dodge to get his money, he pulled out his meagre chest and looked important as he told of it.

"And he offered to print 'em for you cheap, and got cash in advance, and now he isn't printing them at all, and you can't get the cash back! Isn't that about the size of it, Skimmy?"

"My dear Kerr, your acumen surpasses anything I had expected, even of you!" gasped the genius of the Shell.

Figgins and Fatty grinned. Kerr's acumen, as displayed by that particular guess, did not surpass that of Figgins, and was not so greatly ahead of that of Fatty, though the Welsh junior had been left rather behind at the outset.

"What's the fellow's name?" asked Kerr, the only one of the three who did not grin.

Memories and suspicions were waking in Kerr. There was a printer person of most improper ways with whom he and some of his chums, including Tom Merry & Co., had had to do in the past. And there was the individual, unknown, who had printed for someone those bills offering a reward of £50, at the back end of last term, for the five run-aways—Figgins & Co., and Kerruish and Julian, of the School House.

Could it be that Skimmy's printer man was the shady rascal whom Kerr had once impersonated? Could it be that the same shady rascal had been responsible for the printing of those bills?

The fellow was supposed to have cleared out of the neighbourhood, and Kerr had not heard of his return. But these suspicions were not unnatural, all things considered.

"I really do not know, my dear Kerr," replied Skimpole meekly.

"But you didn't hand him over your cash without getting a receipt from him, surely?"

"I regret to say that I did so. It should not really be a matter of regret, for in a properly constituted state of society such things as receipts would be unnecessary, even if the present monetary system were to be continued, as it would hardly be in a really Socialistic community. But I fear—"

"You didn't get a receipt, and the boulder's probably blued your oof by this time," Kerr said, cutting Skimmy short.

"Well, it's a bit late to come for help, but I'll do all I can. We may be able to bluff some remnant of the cash out of him, if we can get at him."

"And I hope you will endeavour to get back the manuscript of my valuable work also, Kerr," replied Skimmy, brightening.

"Oh he'll give that up easily enough," said Figgins. "He can't want that. Who on earth could?"

"But he might make a great deal more money out of it, my dear fellow!"

Figgins stared. Fatty's china-blue eyes goggled. Kerr smiled.

"Great snakes!" Figgins gasped. "How?"

"By selling it to some London publisher as his own, of course."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That triple peal of laughter really was not a compliment to the philosopher of the Shell; but it did express as plainly as many words might have done the candid opinion of Figgins & Co. as to the value of Skimmy's MS.

"You don't know his name. Do you know where he lives?" said Kerr.

"Somewhere in Rylcombe. It should not be very difficult to find out where."

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"Any notion who were the kind friends who put him on to swindling you?"

"I—You know my principles, Kerr. I do not like to express suspicions that may prove to be unfounded."

"That is to say, you want me to take up this case for you, and you refuse to give me any clue—is that the size of it, Skimmy?"

"When you put it in that manner, I confess that I begin to see it in rather a different light. I have really nothing definite to go upon; but I have seen this man talking to Racke and Crooke."

"Whew!"

Kerr's whistle told Figgins and Fatty that he saw importance in this statement. A moment's thinking enabled both of them to guess at least why he should think it important.

"What's the enemy like?" Kerr inquired.

"He is a short man, with a thin face and a sharp nose."

"That will do, old gum! I will start in on the case to-morrow, and report to you when there's anything definite to report."

Skimmy rose.

"There's a kipper left," said Fatty. "Have it, Skimmy!"

"I thank you, Wynn—no!"

"Then I will!" answered Fatty cheerily.

He took it, and Skimmy went.

"Figg, old son—Fatty, my prodigious porpoise—it's Sholey, for a dead cert!" cried Kerr.

"That's what I had begun to think!" said Figg.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Blackmail.

"DASH Snipe-nose, an' all his ways an' works!" snarled George Gerald Crooke.

"I wish we could dash him!" replied Aubrey Racke dismally. "I never thought the little brute would play this game. We put him on to Skimmy, an' he wangled twenty quid out of that silly ass. That ought to have been good enough for him, you'd think. It was easy money—a free gift from us, you might almost call it. But now he wants another twenty out of us."

"An' says he'll give away the secret of those rotten reward bills if we don't shell out, by gad!" returned Crooke. "Haden't you better cash up, Aubrey?"

"I can't!" snapped Racke.

The eads of the Shell were in their own study, the atmosphere of which was, as usual, full of the aroma of Egyptian cigarettes.

Both looked disconsolate, and both had reason to look so.

The new term had begun unpleasantly for them.

Crooke had come back after such a wiggling from his father as he had seldom received before.

There had been big trouble when he had definitely spoiled his chances of ever becoming the heir to the wealth of his uncle, Colonel Lyndon. But the people at home had never heard the whole truth concerning that; Crooke had been able to make out a case against his cousin, Reginald Talbot, and his father and mother still looked upon Talbot as an intriguing young scoundrel.

This had been worse by far. Crooke senior had learned how his hopeful son had been going the pace, and had had heavy bills to settle on account of it. He had not only lectured Gerald—which that youth could have borne with fortitude—but he had sent him back with no more than a mere fiver in his pocket!

Racke was in little better case.

Everybody was talking economy, and war profiteers were incurring a good deal of odium. Messrs. Racke & Hacke had made so much money during the war that they had no need to do more now than sit tightly on what they had made. But Racke senior had taken alarm. He no longer wanted Aubrey to make a splash at St. Jim's. He wanted Aubrey to lie low for a bit. And to that end he had cut down Aubrey's allowance to what seemed a mere pittance to that festive youth, though it would have been wealth to many St. Jim's juniors.

The curious thing was—if, indeed, it were curious—that Racke and Crooke did not believe one another.

Perhaps it was not strange, after all. Each knew what a liar in grain the other was.

"Can't be banged for a tale!" snarled Crooke now. "You've got plenty!"

"I tell you I haven't!"

"I know you tell me so. That don't prove anything!"

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"You think because you are lyin' I am!"

Racke said bitterly.

"I'm not lyin', but you are!" retorted Crooke, with no less bitterness.

It really is rather hard on two fellows who, for once in a way, are telling the truth to one another, to find themselves met with utter disbelief.

But they were too dejected and too frightened for the quarrel that might otherwise have come out of it.

The point is that, somehow or another, we've got to satisfy that greedy little brute Sholey," said Racke.

"The point is that you've got to satisfy him. I can't. An', besides, I'm not really in this," replied Crooke. "It was your bizny from first to last. I should never have thought of it, by gad!"

"Tell that to the fellows concerned when the game's given away to them, an' see how much of it they believe!" sneered Racke.

He had Crooke there, and Crooke knew it. The spiteful scheme had originated in Racke's mind; but Crooke had really been as deep in it as his precious pal, and it was very unlikely that the fellows who had suffered by the plot would distinguish between their degrees of guilt.

"I—Oh, see here, Aubrey, this is all I've got—honour: bright it is!" said Crooke, producing three pound-notes and some small change.

"I've a bit more than that, but nowhere near what that shark says he must have," replied Racke.

They were beginning to believe one another.

"We shall have to go an' talk over the rotter!" Crooke said.

Racke shrugged his shoulders.

"Easy enough to say that—not so easy to do it, by gad!" he said.

"Well, we're due for the dashed kick-out if he gives us away to the Head," answered Crooke. "I don't know what my dashed people would do with me if I got the sack from here. Send me to the Colonies, likely enough—some unearthy place in Canada, snowed up about three-quarters of the year, or a beastly hole up-country in Australia!"

"Rough on Canada, or Australia?" Racke said unsympathetically. "But I suppose we should get the order of the boot right enough. We didn't think how hard up against the Head we were when we had that rotten bill printed."

"The Head would go for Snipe-nose, though," said Crooke thoughtfully.

"Yaas, that's so. It's one of the things we might tell him. But even then he could give us away to those bounders in the New House, an' Kerr an' Figgins are the sort of fellows who can make it dashed hot for a chap when they like; and they're pretty nearly the whole crowd behind them."

"Let's go an' see the little brute. No good puttin' it off!" Crooke said.

So they mounted at the gates, and rode in dismal mood to Ryleombe.

Skimmy might not know where exactly to find Mr. Sholey, but Racke and Crooke knew.

The typographical gentleman hung out in a small house tucked away in a corner, behind the dilapidated cottage in which Mr. Pepper, the village miser, dwelt. It belonged to him.

Mr. Pepper stood at his door as the two rode up and dismounted.

He scowled at them. The very sight of a St. Jim's cap was enough to make Mr. Pepper scowl in these days. He had not forgotten how the five runaways and their rescuers had put him through it at Blayd's Hill, after the unsuccessful attempt which he and his friend Mr. Looker had made to earn the bogus reward.

But even yet Mr. Pepper had not been convinced that the reward was bogus.

Racke and Crooke did not speak to him, and he did not speak to them.

They passed on. Sounds which proceeded from the house of Mr. Sholey indicated that that gentleman had got some sort of job in hand.

He did not often get jobs, partly because most of the people who wanted them done went to Mr. Tipper, whom they knew and respected, and partly because he usually demanded something in advance, and invariably spent the advance in liquid refreshment before he got on with the job.

Racke and Crooke walked in without ceremony.

Mr. Sholey left the machine at which he had been busy and came forward, rubbing his hands.

"Very pleased to see you, gentlemen!" he said. "I'd been looking out for you to come."

There was the hint of a threat in that, as the precious pair saw.

"Well, we've come," said Racke weakly.

"So I see—so I see!"

"But we can't do what you demand, an', what's more, we're not goin' to do it!" Racke said, with an attempt at bluster.

"Excuse me, sir, but you don't do that quite correctly. If you couldn't do it—which I take leave to doubt—it would be a heap more than all your bluff about not going to do it—a heap more, it would!"

Mr. Sholey had had drink enough to make him very awkward, but not enough to cloud his mind. Racke realised now that he had made a bad start. He should have concentrated on the inability to pay up, and have said nothing about the refusal to do so.

"I only said that I wouldn't because you've fairly made us desperate with your dashed demands!" he growled. "We can't raise twenty quid! We're short of cash."

"It can be had, gentlemen—it can be had!" said Mr. Sholey knowingly. "Now, I'm sure that neither your folks nor Mr. Crooke's would fancy seeing you expelled."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Crooke. "Look here, as far as I'm concerned I'm in beastly hot water at home already, an' it will put the lid on it if you get tryin' it on with my pater. Tell you what we'll do—we'll hand over a fiver an' call it square—won't we, Racke?"

"You may call it square, but I shall not!" replied Mr. Sholey, with growing truculence.

Racke took a five-pound note from his pocket-book.

"Here you are!" he said. "You won't get any more, however hard you may try on your blackmailin' game. We put you on to Skimpole, an' you had twenty quid out of him. You ought to consider that."

"I'll take the fiver on account," said Mr. Sholey, grabbing the note. "As for my dealings with your learned schoolfellow, they have really nothing whatever to do with you. I am grateful for the introduction, though I regret to find that it was not exactly bona fide on your part; but I shall have to give value—full value, and more, as I have undertaken the work cheaply in order to fill up my time—for the money I have received from him."

The two Shell fellows stared at him. They knew that he had no notion of setting a word of Skimmy's great work.

But how could they prove it?

At that moment voices were heard outside, and Racke said in alarm:

"I say, hide us somewhere—sharp! We don't want to see those chaps!"

Crooke had recognised the voices also. They were those of Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn.

Mr. Sholey threw open the door of a small inner room, and Racke and Crooke bolted into it like startled rabbits as there sounded a rap upon the printer's front door.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Kerr's Investigations.

Racke and Crooke did not know it, but Figgins & Co. had sighted them ahead in the distance, and had felt sure that they must be on their way to Ryleombe.

The three might have caught up the eads of the Shell by putting on speed. But instead of that Kerr slowed down.

"Nothing in catching them up," he said. "Nothing in the fact of their going to the village, I dare say. On the other hand, there may be; and if there is, seeing us will put them on their guard."

Thus it happened that the three had lost sight of the two by the time the village was reached. And there they had inquiries to make as to the whereabouts of Mr. Sholey.

They chanced to make them of Binks, assistant to the butcher, who was known to the village as "Bingo." Binks had become quite a popular personage, alike with the grammarians and the St. Jim's juniors, owing to circumstances which have been duly related elsewhere.

"Oh, I know 'im!" said Bingo. "But, if you take my advice, you won't have nothin' to do with 'im. That one's a wrong 'un!"

"He won't come over us!" Kerr said. "And we're bound to see him! Got business with him, you know."

"Well, you'll find the little sweep in the house behind Pepper's. Friend of yours, Mr. Pepper, ain't he?" returned Bingo, grinning.

Bingo seemed to have heard something.

Figg snorted; but Kerr said smoothly:

"A dear friend, of course!"



Mr. Pepper scrambled to his feet and dived for the door of the inner room. He struck it with his head, and it burst open, revealing Racke and Crooke. At that moment Skimpole appeared with his treasured MS. under his arm. (See page 15.)

They passed on.
Mr. Pepper still stood at the door of his cottage as they came up.

"How do you do, Pepper, old top?" said Kerr, dismounting.

The scowl which Mr. Pepper gave in return for that greeting was of the blackest.

"What d'ye want here?" he growled.

"Oh, we haven't come to tea!" answered Kerr.

"Come to tea! I should rather think not! Let me tell you that I haven't fully made up my mind whether I won't have the law on you for what you did to me at Blayds Hill!"

"I should make it up pretty soon, old chap, or you may forget what we did!" said Kerr.

"There ain't no danger of that!" snarled Pepper. Then he looked hard at Fatty Wynn, and said rudely:

"You don't get any thinner, young Daniel Lambert!"

"Perhaps not. But I might if I had lived with you!" replied Fatty.

"And you've still got those ugly long legs!" said Mr. Pepper, looking at Figgins, with spite in his eyes.

"Same legs," answered Figgy. "Same feet, too—always ready to hoof anyone who's rude to me!"

At that moment Erasmus Zechariah drew back a pace or two, as though to take precautions against a rearguard action.

The three passed on, chuckling.

"He didn't get much change out of you two," said Kerr.

Then he tapped at the door of Mr. Sholey's dwelling.

It was opened without much delay. Racke and Crooke had got a move on them.

"I don't think I know you," said the sharp-nosed, crafty-faced little man who opened the door.

"That's your misfortune!" said Kerr.

"Ours is that we do know you."

At that Mr. Sholey blinked.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"A little conversation with you," replied Kerr.

"I'm busy."

"But this is important."

"So you may think. I tell you I'm too busy to talk."

"We're coming in, and we're going to talk to you!" said Figgins. "So you may as well make up your mind to go through with it."

"Oh, come in!" said Mr. Sholey, in sheer desperation.

They walked in, leaving their bicycles outside against the wall.

Kerr shut the door.

"You may not like the dear Pepper to hear what we have to say," he remarked.

"I can't see what you can possibly have to say to me," answered the printer morosely.

"Don't worry! You'll soon know!" Fatty said.

"Get on with it, then! My time's valuable."

"Do you happen to know a fellow at our show named Skimpole?" Kerr inquired.

Again Mr. Sholey blinked nervously.

"Skim—er—which?" he asked. "The name does not seem familiar."

"It may help your memory," Kerr said incisively, "if I recall the fact that you had twenty pounds from him!"

"I—I had twenty pounds from—from a person named Skimmilk!"

"No, you didn't. It was from Skimpole. Get me? But he didn't know your name, so it's just possible that you didn't inquire his, though I should think it must have been on the manuscript."

"What manuscript? You are talking in riddles!"

"Look here, that kind of thing doesn't go!" said Figgins, with fast rising wrath.

"Skimmie's a silly ass—nobody but a silly ass would have trusted a fellow with a dial like yours—but he's dead straight, and when he says that he paid you an advance of twenty pounds towards the printing of some of his piffle, we know that it's so, whatever you may say."

"You—you must be confusing me with

somebody else!" said Mr. Sholey nervously.

"Try Tiper, at the 'Gazette' office. It's much more likely to have been Tiper."

"But it wasn't; it was you!" snapped Kerr.

Mr. Sholey put a hand to his head in quite a pathetic way.

"Young gentlemen," he said, "I must ask you to bear with a man who has had troubles that have affected his memory."

"Got those particular troubles at the Green Man, didn't you?" asked Figgins, who had not failed to notice the aroma of whisky that clung about Mr. Sholey.

"No, Figgy—no!" said Kerr. "He merely tried to drown them there. Do you begin to recall Skimpole, Sholey?"

"Let me think. A studious youth, with big glasses, is he not? I do dimly remember such a youth accosting me and inquiring as to what it would cost to bring out a volume of two hundred and fifty thousand words or thereabouts on—er—Determination, I think."

"He's improving!" said Kerr cheerily. "It would be Determinism, though—not determination. And what did you say to the studious youth?"

"To the best of my recollection—"

"No, don't say that! Let's have the truth, for we mean to have it sooner or later."

"I am telling you the truth, young sir! To the best of my—"

"Oh, cut it out!"

"I offered to give him an estimate."

"And did you give him one?" asked Figgins.

"Don't look much like the sort of boulder who would give anyone anything," murmured Fatty, contemplating Mr. Sholey with evident contempt.

"I—Really, I cannot remember. The matter ended there, to the best of my—"

"Don't say 'recollection'!" snapped Kerr.

"That's off. You're going to remember quite a lot more yet."

Racke and Crooke could hear every word that passed, and at this point in the conversation Crooke remarked:

"Kerr's a dashed awkward boulder to deal with, by gad!"

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"Why, you idiot, he's playing our game!"

lissed Racke.

Crooke stared.

"Dashed if I see that!" he said.

"You never see anything!" The upshot of all this will be that the snipe-nosed little brute will do a bunk, for fear of what may happen to him for baggin' Skimmey's oof."

"Oh! I see now. Yes, he may. Dry up! They're talkin' again."

"Where's the manuscript?" asked Kerr abruptly.

By this time the printer, his nerves ruined by drink, was in just the state to be caught out by such a query, so put.

"I regret to say that I have mislaid it," he answered tremulously. "To the best of my—er—belief, I told Mr. Skimmik so!"

"Have you mislaid the cash he paid you, too?" snapped Kerr.

"I—I— But I have already told you that he paid me nothing!"

"You've told us lots of lies!" growled Figgins.

"Don't you think you could find that manuscript if you tried really hard?" Kerr said.

"No, no! I fear that it may inadvertently have been destroyed."

"Oh, that's what you fear, is it? Anything—er—inadvertently happened to the cash, eh?"

"Haven't I told you that I had no cash from your friend?"

"You don't mind us looking for the manuscript, I suppose?" Kerr asked.

"Not much good looking for the cash," remarked Fatty.

"We must go through his clothes," said Figgys, with a grim smile.

"I have the strongest objection to your doing— Stop that, I tell you! I decline to have my property meddled with by outsiders!"

"You two can hold him, if necessary," Kerr said coolly, as he began to turn over untidy bundles of papers which lay on a dusty table near the type-boxes.

Mr. Sholey made a dash at him. But Figgins caught Mr. Sholey by the collar, and swung him almost off his feet. He struggled, and the struggle ended by his coming to the floor with a thump.

"You can sit on him, Fatty," said Figgins.

And Fatty sat.

"My hat! I've found something!" said Kerr.

It was a big sheet of paper, printed in large type, that he showed his chums, and they recognised it at once.

Kerr folded it up and pocketed it.

"That's valuable evidence," he said.

"You cannot take my property in that cool manner!" fumed the man on whom Fatty was sitting.

"Your mistake! I can!" replied Kerr.

He went on with his research.

"Here it is!" he cried a minute later.

And he held up a bulky bundle of paper, representing many hours of hard work by poor old Skimmey, and worth—its price as waste-paper!

But the question of its value from a literary or scientific point of view was not what mattered now.

"Look here, Sholey," said Kerr. "There can't be any possible doubt that you have tried to do down Skimpole. You may think you have succeeded, as you've got his cash, and have spent it, no doubt. But you haven't heard the last of this."

"I—I—"

"That's enough! You'll hear further to-morrow at latest. Come along, you fellows!"

And the three passed out.

"That does it," said Racke to Crooke. "The little brute will clear out to-night, for a dead cert!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

An Encounter With Pepper.

"Hullo! Where are our bikes?" said Figgins.

The machines had disappeared.

They had not been left by the side of the road. No one could have got at them without passing Mr. Pepper's cottage.

And Mr. Pepper was still standing at his front door.

"Someone must have run off with them," said Fatty.

And he darted rather a suspicious look at Pepper.

That gentleman smiled in a peculiarly exasperating way.

"Have you been there all the time since we spoke to you, Mr. Pepper?" asked Kerr sharply.

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"Eh? I'm a trifle deaf to-day," replied the village miser.

"Have you seen anyone meddle with our bikes?" yelled Figgins.

"Strikes? No, I've no interest in strikes. What I say is that the working man ought to be thankful to get any grub at all, with prices at what they are now!"

And again Mr. Pepper smiled.

All three were quite sure that he heard them, and almost sure that he knew what had become of the bikes.

"I believe he's heard them!" said Fatty.

Kerr shook his head. He did not think Mr. Pepper would risk doing that.

Just at that moment the voice of Bingo was heard from the street.

"All right, you young 'bund! I know whose bike that is!" roared Bingo.

Figgins & Co. hurried to the spot.

A village urchin of ten or so stood ruefully contemplating Kerr's machine, and rubbing his own right arm.

It was evident that he had had a spill. It was also evident that Kerr's bike had suffered in that spill rather more than he had.

"Oh, 'ere you are!" said Bingo. "This kid has borrowed your bike—one of your bikes, anyways—an' made a bit of a mess of it."

"Have you seen the other two machines?" asked Figgins.

Bingo waved a hand.

"Down the road somewhere," he said, "with two more of the young beggars on top of 'em."

"Mr. Pepper—he said I might, he did!" wailed the dismounted culprit.

"Oh, did he?" returned Kerr. "This is interesting."

"Yuss, he did, then. Me an' Bill Worker an' Tommy Snaggs see them bikes, an' he called to us, an' said we might have a ride if we liked."

"But you knew they weren't his," said Kerr.

"Don't see how I could know," replied the youngster sulkily. "He giv us leaf. 'Course we reckoned they was his."

"Here come Snaggs and Worker!" said Figgys.

The other two youngsters had reappeared. But when they saw the group of which their comrade was a member they acted circumspectly.

They did not ride up and hand over the bikes. They simply dismounted, stood the machines against a wall, and mizzled.

Figgins and Fatty went to retrieve their property.

"What's your name?" Kerr asked the damaged urchin.

"Jim Whistler. What do you want to know for? If you're going to summons anybody, it ought to be old Pepper—not me."

"Oh, I'm not going to 'summons' you, kid. All I want is that you should come along with me and talk to the dear Pepper."

"I don't mind doin' that; I ain't afraid of old Pepper. We call after him mostly. You won't let him hurt me, will you?"

"No; he shan't hurt you."

Figgins and Fatty came up, and the three bikes were given into the charge of Bingo.

The New House trio marched off with Master Jim Whistler to interview the generous Mr. Pepper.

When he saw them coming he retreated into his cottage and shut the door. They naturally attributed this to a consciousness of guilt.

From the house of Mr. Sholey, Racke and Crooke watched with disgust the return of the three.

"Hang them!" said Racke viciously. "We shall have to lie doggo here till they've done."

Kerr rapped at the door of the cottage.

"I don't want anything to say to you!" snarled Mr. Pepper from within.

"I suppose not. But we have something rather important to say to you!" called back Kerr.

"Well, you ain't coming in—that's flat!"

"Stand aside, Kerr!" said Figgins.

He charged the door, getting his shoulder hard against it, and it quivered.

Again he charged, and it almost gave.

Then it was suddenly opened, and only a clutch by Kerr saved Figgys from sprawling at the feet of Mr. Pepper, who stood just inside, his dirty-grey moustache bristling with rage.

"I'll see whether you young hounds can damage my property with impunity!" he snarled.

"And we'll see whether you can damage mine by deputy," answered Kerr coolly.

"What d'ye mean?"

"You were kind enough to give three youngsters permission to ride our bikes, and—"

"It's a lie!"

"It ain't! You know it ain't, Mr. Pepper!" piped up Jim Whistler. "It was me an' Bill Worker an' Tommy Snaggs. You said we could—"

"That boy," said Mr. Pepper, "is the most notorious liar in the village of Rycombe!"

"When you're out of it, do you mean?" queried Figgins.

"He isn't lying now," Kerr said.

"Prove it!" snarled Pepper.

"Oh, we don't need to do that. We believe him. He's had a tumble from my bike, and has damaged it."

"I hope he hurt himself!" said Mr. Pepper kindly.

"Are you going to pay for that damage?" asked Kerr.

"I am not!" replied Mr. Pepper, very distinctly.

"I thought you wouldn't agree to," Kerr said mildly. "But if you don't, we shall take it out of your hide, that's all."

"What?"

Mr. Pepper could hardly believe his ears. Kerr spoke of the contemplated proceedings in the coolest possible tone. Those three had helped to handle Mr. Pepper before, with good cause, and no doubt that fact made them more ready to handle him again. But, though his memory of what had happened at Blayds Hill was vivid enough, Erasmus Zechariah found it hard to believe that they would attack him now.

Belief was forced upon him next moment, however.

The three moved forward as one man. Mr. Pepper turned tail and bolted.

"See him run!" roared Jim Whistler.

"Come along and see old Pepper get it in the neck, you chaps!"

Half a dozen more of the young gentlemen of the village appeared, Snaggs and Worker, looking very innocent, among them.

Through the cottage ran Pepper, with the three in hot pursuit. He bolted out by the back door, and just eluded Figgys's grab.

Straight for Sholey's door he made, yelling.

Racke and Crooke beat a hasty retreat to the inner room, their hearts fairly in their mouths.

Sholey slammed the door. He had had quite enough of Figgins & Co.

With clenched fists Pepper beat upon it. But it was only for a moment he was allowed to do that. Then the three were upon him.

Their rush burst open the door, which had only been shut, not locked, owing to the fact that the key was not in the keyhole.

"Yoooooop!" howled Mr. Pepper, as he came to ground with the three on top of him.

"Really, young gentlemen!" protested Mr. Sholey, whose rent was a trifle overdue. That did not spur him to risk himself in defence of his landlord, but he felt called upon to speak a word in season.

"Stay there, Fatty!" Kerr commanded, as he and Figgins got up.

"Hoora!" yelled the village youngsters.

"Look at old Pepper! They're goin' to give him mustard!"

"You shall answer to the law for this!" bellowed the miser. "Help me, Sholey, you coward!"

"Really, Mr. Pepper, the young gentlemen are so extremely violent that I do not feel I can risk giving you any help," replied the printer.

"Where do you keep your printers' ink, Sholey?" snapped Kerr.

"My ink? But—"

"We want something to improve Pepper's complexion, that's all. Hurry up!"

"Hoora! They're goin' to black old Pepper's face!" roared Snaggs.

"That's nothin' much. They can't make it much dirtier than it is," replied Whistler.

"If I was them," said Worker, "I should skin him! That's what he wants—skinning!"

"Are you going to get that ink, Sholey?" demanded Kerr.

"I cannot—really, you know—"

"Yaroooooh!"

Mr. Pepper had found a long pin in his coat, and had used it upon Fatty. It had penetrated more than the garments of the stout junior, and he had jumped up.

With activity hardly to have been expected in a man of his age, Erasmus Zechariah scrambled up the instant he was relieved from the weight, and made a dive at the door of the inner room.

He struck it with his head, and it burst open, revealing Racke and Crooke.

"Oh-ah!" roared Mr. Pepper, clutching his head and reeling back half stunned.

"My dear fellows, what does this scene of confusion indicate?" spoke a mild voice from the door.

And Skimmy appeared, with a bulky and untidy bundle under his arm.

Kerr had meant to be careful with Skimmy's valuable MS., but he had dropped it and forgotten all about it.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Dragged to Light!

"HALLO, Skimmy! What do you want, old duffer?" asked Kerr.

He turned one way, but Figgins and Fatty turned the other.

They confronted Racke and Crooke.

"There's something jolly fishy about this bizney," said George Figgins, "and it wants explaining."

"Rather!" agreed Fatty.

"There's nothin' fishy about it at all, as far as we are concerned," replied Racke. "Why shouldn't we be here, if we choose, by gad?"

"Come inside and shut the door, Skimmy," said Kerr. "No, let Pepper out first. That whack of the crumplet will do instead of what we were going to give him, and there are things to be gone into that aren't any concern of his—or of those kids outside, either."

"Not so fast, young man!" snorted Mr. Pepper. "I've been assaulted and sat upon."

"You'll be jolly well assaulted again if you don't clear!" said Figgins.

"And sat upon, too!" Fatty added. "Only don't you stick a pin into me next time, or you'll be sorry for it!"

"There is no need for you to go on my account, Mr. Pepper," said Sholey, remembering the overdue rent again. "I have nothing to discuss with these young gentlemen, and I see no reason why they should force themselves upon me thus."

"We'll show you reason!" said Kerr incisively.

"Look here, we're goin'!" Crooke said un- easily.

"What with the people who want to go when they've got to stay, and the old bouncer who wants to stay and argue when he's got to go, and Sholey, who wants the wrong people to clear out, this is getting tedious," said Kerr.

"We'll soon settle it, old fellow!" Figgins replied, taking Mr. Pepper by an arm. "Catch hold of his other fin, Fatty! Now, Pepper, are you going quietly, or will you be slung out?"

"I'm not going at all, and you can't make

"Your mistake! We can. Heave-ho, Fatty! Open the door, Skimmy!"

Mr. Pepper was not a heavy-weight, and both Figgins and Fatty were strong. In spite of his struggles, they forced him towards the door.

Skimpole, with a bewildered face, threw it open. Skimmy really could not understand at all how Mr. Pepper had got mixed up in the affair.

"Lift him from behind, Kerr!" suggested Figgins, when Pepper had reached the threshold.

But the thrust forward that he and Fatty gave accomplished what was needed without the help of Kerr's boot.

"Hurrah!" yelled the village crowd, grown bigger now, as the most unpopular man in Rylecombe sprawled on his hands and knees.

The door closed behind him. He got up, and went snarling to his cottage. But he knew perfectly well that he had put himself on the wrong side of the law by that spiteful suggestion to the three village lads as to borrowing the bicycles, and that he had no remedy against the St. Jim's trio.

"I don't know what you've come back for," said Mr. Sholey to the three.

"And you don't really seem pleased to see us," returned Kerr. "But you'll know directly—not sure that you'll be any better pleased, though."

"That's about enough of this!" said Racke. "Whatever you fellows may have to say to this chap, we're not in it, an'—"

"But you are!" Kerr interrupted him. "You'll have to stand by for a minute or two, but your turn will come. Now, Sholey, is this the distinguished gentleman who arranged with you for the printing of his great work?"

He pointed to Skimpole.

Mr. Sholey peered at the genius of the Shell as if he were shortsighted.

"I am not quite sure," he said. "But I think this may be the individual with whom

I had some slight conversation on that subject."

"Is this your printer-man, Skimmy?" asked Kerr.

"It is most assuredly the person to whom I paid twenty pounds in the expectation and on the understanding that—"

"Cut it out! This is the boulder?"

"That is hardly the manner in which I should express myself, Kerr; but this is certainly the man."

"And that's the manuscript—that bundle you're lugging?"

"This is the MS. of my great work on—"

"Sholey says he never had the manuscript, though he found it among his papers. But there isn't any doubt that he had the twenty quid. Do you want him to print that screed for you?"

Skimpole wavered for a moment. He very much wanted to get that great work printed. But he had just sense enough to realise that he had no chance of getting it printed by Sholey.

"No, Kerr, I do not," he said.

"All right, then. No contract was signed, so you're not bound in any way. All that remains is for Mr. Sholey to hand you back your twenty pounds."

"An' a dashed big all, too!" whispered Crooke to Racke.

"I deny ever having had that sum, or any money whatever!" Sholey said brazenly.

"Mr. Sholey, I am positively astounded at your extraordinary want of veracity!" exclaimed Skimmy, holding up both hands, and letting the cherished bundle of manuscript drop.

"You needn't be," Kerr said, picking it up and handing it to him politely. "He can't tell the truth if he tries, and he doesn't try. Now then, Sholey, are you going to shell out?"

"I do not owe the money. Moreover, I have not twenty shillings, let alone twenty pounds," replied the printer.

"It looks to me as if your dear pals, Messrs. Racke and Crooke, will have to settle up for you," Kerr said coolly.

"Us! What are you talkin' about, you idiot?" snarled Racke.

"Yes, you! I'm not such an idiot as you pretend to think, Racke, and you can't pull the wool over my eyes! You've been mixed up with this rascal in more than one shady business, and I've the best reason to believe that it was you who put him on to swindling Skimmy!"

"Oh, rats! What proof have you that we have had anything to do with Sholey?"

"My memory's not so short that I've forgotten things that happened a few months ago," Kerr interrupted him. "Sholey was warned off the course then, but he seems to have come back again. Skimmy, isn't it a fact that you've seen these three pretty beauties with their heads together?"

"That is certainly correct, Kerr."

"Will you tell us when and in what circumstances?"

"Let me think!" said Skimmy, with his head on one side. "I begin to recall things which had previously eluded my memory. There was one day last term—one of the days on which you and Figgins and Wynn, with Julian and Kerruish, were absent—"

"When we ran away, you mean!" broke in Kerr. "Never mind our feelings. Which day was it? Think hard!"

"It was not the first day, because I believe I was almost the only member of the Shell who did not go out to look for you. I am positive that Racke and Crooke went on that day. It must have been the next—yes, I am sure it was, because so many fellows were away, and there were no classes. I was perambulating the quadrangle, thinking hard, when I saw Racke and Crooke get out their bicycles, proceed to the gates, and take the road to Rylecombe. It may have been half an hour later, or perhaps an hour, when, having occasion to visit the village to make a purchase, I saw them talking to Mr. Sholey, whom I did not then know."

"That was the day when Sholey printed this bill for them!" said Kerr.

And he drew from his pocket, unfolded, and displayed a copy of the reward bill which had caused so much trouble. It was this he had found before finding Skimmy's MS.

"He never printed it for us, I swear!" cried Racke.

"No, that he didn't!" faltered Crooke.

"It's the first I've seen of the thing!"

"They were trying to brazen it out; but the faces of both gave them away."

"Printed it on his own account, of course!" said Kerr mockingly. "Well, he may have had a score against me to pay off; but I

don't see how he could ever have thought of this way of doing it without help. That he did print it is as certain as anything can be, for I found this thing on that table, and showed it to Figgins and Wynn when I found it. It hasn't the printer's name on it; but Sholey will have to answer for that, among other things. You've enough on your backs, I fancy."

"I— Look here, young gentlemen, I will make a clean breast of the whole matter!" panted Sholey, fairly cornered.

"You fool!" hissed Racke, his face convulsed with rage.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Settlement.

"NO, I really think he's more knave than fool, Racke," said Kerr.

"Hear, hear!" cried Figgins and Fatty.

"Speak on, Sholey!" Kerr said.

"Keep your dashed mouth shut! They can't prove anything!" snarled Racke.

But it was quite obvious to Mr. Sholey that they could prove a good deal; and if he had been in any doubt, Kerr's next words would have relieved that doubt.

"We can prove the technical offence of publishing this bill without the name of the printer upon it, as the law requires," Kerr said, slowly and gravely. "That's a small thing; but there's more than that. We can prove two separate and distinct conspiracies—that which had to do with the bill, and that of which Skimpole was the victim. I don't doubt that this little rat here black-

mailed you two noble specimens, and that you thought it cheaper to put him on to Skimpole than to shell out yourselves. Then, against him, we can prove an attempt to swindle Skimpole. Think that's enough?"

Kerr's quick brain—the brain of a detective or a lawyer—had marshalled fact and inference in a manner that made Figgins and Fatty and Skimpole gasp with admiration, and Sholey and Racke, and Crooke gasp with fear.

He had it all! They might try to brazen it out—might lie as even as they had never lied before. But Kerr's story would convince any unprejudiced person. Told to the Head, it would mean certain expulsion for the rascals of the Shell. Told in court, it would mean certain conviction for Sholey.

Sholey had given way. Now Crooke buckled up.

"I say, you fellows," he faltered, "there's a certain amount of truth in what Kerr says—I'll admit that. But the reward bizney was only a joke, on my honour!"

"On your what?" asked Kerr.

"Well, then, I swear it was only a joke. An', even so, it wasn't my notion at all. Racke thought of it."

"You treacherous hound!" hissed Racke.

"What's the use of lyin' any longer?" demanded Crooke wildly. "It's all come out, an' the blame ought to be put where it dashed well belongs—that's what I say. You an' this chap made up that thing between you—you know that very well."

"And who put Sholey on to Skimpole?" asked Kerr.

"Racke did!"

"We shall have to acquit Crooke, on his own evidence!" Kerr said, with bitter irony. "Rats! He's as bad as the other two!"

snorted Fatty.

"Has Sholey blackmailed you, Racke?" in-

quired Kerr.

"Find out!"

"Has he blackmailed you, Crooke?"

"Yes, then, he has, the rotter!"

"Curious, that, when you're quite inno-

cent!"

"It's a lie!" shrieked Sholey. "I never attempted blackmail. I should scorn such an action!"

"That was too much for Racke."

"What were we here for to-day, you worm?" he roared. "Do you think we'd have come to you if you hadn't threatened all sorts of things if we didn't shell out twenty quid?"

"Isn't that rather giving the game away, Racke?" Kerr said quietly.

"Oh, what do I care? You can make your story believed, I suppose; an' that will mean the dashed sack for me—an' for Crooke, too, I'm glad to know!"

"You ought to be sacked," said Kerr.

"But I've no particular liking for the notion of getting a chap sacked myself—have you, Fatty?"

"When the chap's Racke or Crooke, and they've been playing dirty tricks like this—yes!" replied George Figgins.

And the "yes" came with real snap.

"I think they ought to be kicked out," said Fatty. "But I don't quite like it all the same."

"What do you say, Skimmy?"

"My dear Kerr, I find myself divided between conflicting theories. On the one hand I deprecate anything in the nature of private revenge, and I have little belief in treating criminals with severity. On the other, I have, I must confess, a strong feeling of resentment against Racke and Crooke. But that is not theory—I am getting mixed. My theory is that the presence of criminals among normal persons is a mistake—"

"Do you want 'em sacked? That's the question!" snapped Kerr.

Skimmy really was too long-winded for anything.

"On the whole, Kerr, the reply is in the negative," he said.

"I'm jolly sure St. Jim's would be a better and cleaner place without them," Kerr resumed. "But if they'll put things as far straight as they can, I don't propose to bring the Head into this bizney. He's got enough to worry him, anyway. And if the Head doesn't come into it I suppose we can't have Sholey presented at court."

Looks of relief appeared on the faces of all three of the schemers.

They were not out of the wood yet, they knew. But it did seem that something short of smashing them up totally might satisfy Kerr.

"If you're goin' to be reasonable about it—" began Racke.

"Oh, we'll be reasonable! I don't say that you're likely to get much enjoyment out of what we consider reasonable; but at worst you'll get off better than you deserve."

that Crooke. Shall we say Racke twelve-ten, and Crooke seven-ten?"

"That's about it," Figgins said; and Fatty nodded his agreement.

"Oh, I say, you know, I can't pay seven-ten or anything like it!" groaned Crooke.

"It's absurd! They simply can't force us to shell out!" Racke said.

"We're going to, whether we can or not," Kerr said. "Let's see what you have on you!"

Crooke immediately produced his three pound-notes. He felt that he must get out of this at any price, and if it could be done for three pounds, then so much the better.

"Now, Racke!" snapped Figg.

Racke darted at the three a malevolent glance. Then slowly and unwillingly he took out his pocket-book.

For all that he might say, the thing had to be done.

"Seven-ten," said Kerr. "Crooke pays a first dividend in bankruptcy of forty per cent., Racke one of sixty. Not so bad, eh?"

"You won't get any more out of me," snarled Racke. "An' that's really black-mail!"

"Think so?" Kerr replied coolly, handing over the ten guineas in notes to Skimpole. "No, I don't. I shall want your 100 for five quid, Racke, and yours for four-ten Crooke!"

"If anyone ought to have our 100 U, it's Skimpole, not you," protested Racke.

"Oh, no! I'm Skimmy's uncle, so to speak. He might forget to dun you; I shan't!"

Very unwillingly, the two defeated cads wrote their 100's.

Mr. Sholey's increasing cheerfulness irritated Figgins extremely.

Mr. Pepper did not come to the rescue. P. C. Crump did not come. The place did not catch fire, and no murder was done! But Kerr and Fatty forced Mr. Sholey down, and Figgins laid into him vigorously.

"Yaroooh! Ow-yow! Yooop!" roared Mr. Sholey. "Stop it!"

"I've finished," said Figgins, panting a trifle. "Shall it be Racke or Crooke next, Kerr?"

"Do you really consider, Figgins—"

"Oh, dry up, Skimmy! They're going through it!"

"Crooke," Kerr said.

"Look here, if I give in and take it quietly, this finishes it, I suppose," said Crooke.

"There's the four-pound-ten still," Kerr replied.

"Oh, I know I've got to pay that."

"Right-ho! If you take your whacking without making a sound, I'll never say a word to anyone about the bizney, and neither will these fellows."

Crooke thought he could do it, but he counted without George Figgins in that.

Figg laid on with a will, and at about the tenth stroke Crooke's fortitude gave way, and he howled for mercy.

"That does it!" Kerr said. "Might stop now, Figg. Are you coming quietly, Racke, or must we force you to the execution-block?"

Racke had made up his mind. Even this was better than the worst that might happen to him.

"I'll take it," he said, between set teeth. "But I'll make you fellows sorry for it one day! And you won't get a sound out of me!"

"I'm not promising you anything," Kerr answered.

"And I'll bet I will get a howl from you!" snapped Figgins.

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"What are you goin' to do about it?" asked Racke.

"We haven't made up our minds yet. The first thing to settle is what you are going to do."

"Well, what do you expect of us? I don't say we'd do it, but—"

"Oh, yes, you will, Racke, because the alternative is one that you can't face. Figgins, Wynn, Skimpole, do you all agree with me that, as Sholey here is a mere man of straw, and can't possibly make good his swindling, Racke and Crooke between them will have to fork out that twenty quid?"

"Oh, by gad!" groaned Racke.

"I consider it quite a fair proposition," said Mr. Sholey, rubbing his hands together and looking pleased.

"You'll want to rub something else besides your hands before we've finished with you!" growled Figgins, regarding him with contempt. "Yes, Kerr, I agree to that!"

"So do I," Fatty said.

"Skimmy?"

"Let me think a moment, Kerr. Principles of justice are involved here, and I cannot decide on such matters lightly!"

"Hurry up, ass!" Figg snorted.

"On the whole, Kerr, I think you are right. Now that I have recovered my valuable manuscript, I regard the money as a lesser consideration. But the want of it might prevent my giving the world some invention that would possibly prove of the greatest benefit to all mankind, and—"

"Yes—I think not!" muttered Figgins.

"You mean you agree?" said Kerr.

"I imagined that I had indicated my agreement—"

"Right-ho! Now, what do you fellows say about the shares? Racke's a wealthier beast

"Your turn's coming, and don't you forget it!" said Figg to the printer.

"Now I suppose you're done with us?" Crooke said hopefully.

"Then you'd better invest in a new supposer, for the one you have seems hopelessly out of working order!" said Kerr.

"Well, what else do you expect of us?" Racke asked bitterly.

"We know you won't keep this dark at St. Jim's," added Crooke.

"No, we shan't. There are people who will have to know, and in the long run the story will get round a bit, no doubt," replied Kerr. "But that's for the future. It's the present we're concerned with, and I don't see how it's possible for us to leave you three pretty beauties without making you smart. Oh, I dare say you're smart enough now, in your own estimation; but that's not quite what I mean. See anything about that would serve the purpose, Figg?"

Figgins did not ask what the purpose was. He looked round both rooms, and brought to light at last a walking-stick, which was slender enough to hold promise of sting in it.

"I think I can make them sit up with this," he said.

"You're executioner, then?" returned Kerr.

"That's my job. You've done near enough all the rest."

"You're welcome to the job. As Sholey has got off without any pains or penalties so far, I propose that you deal with him first."

"Lie over that table!" snapped Figg, flourishing the stick in front of Mr. Sholey.

"Wha-a-a-at?"

"Not deaf, are you? You're going to take a jolly good hiding!"

"I refuse! Nothing shall induce me—"

"Stop! Help! Rescue! Mr. Pepper! Police! Fire! Murder!"

Perhaps he might have done had he been left to himself. For there were limits to Racke's capacity to bear things. But Kerr stopped Figg at the twelfth stroke.

"That will do!" he said.

Racke and Crooke went at once, without another word to their fellow-schemer. Figgins & Co. stayed for a few more words with him, and Skimpole stayed with them.

Kerr was spokesman, of course. The door stood open now, and Mr. Pepper was looking in. The village youngsters had cleared off.

"You'll get out of this within twenty-four hours, Sholey!" Kerr said. "I don't want to use threats, but you know we can make matters very hot for you if you don't."

"I'll go," replied Sholey sullenly.

"You won't go without paying your rent!" fumed Mr. Pepper. "It ain't a fair thing, Master Kerr! I appeal to you whether—"

"No good appealing to me, Pepper!" said Kerr. "Come along, you fellows! Let them fight that out between them. But don't you forget what I've said, Sholey."

And the four went.

Racke and Crooke were not given away to St. Jim's generally. Figgins & Co. told only a score or so of the Shell and Fourth, including, of course, Kerruish and Julian, Tom Merry & Co., Levison & Co., and Dick Redfern.

Even the fags who had assisted in the rescue of the prisoners of Pepper did not learn the truth about that reward bill.

And Mr. Sholey cleared out! Whether he paid his rent or not they never heard. But it hardly seemed likely.

THE END.

(Next week's long, complete story of Tom Merry & Co., is entitled "Playing for St. Jim's!")