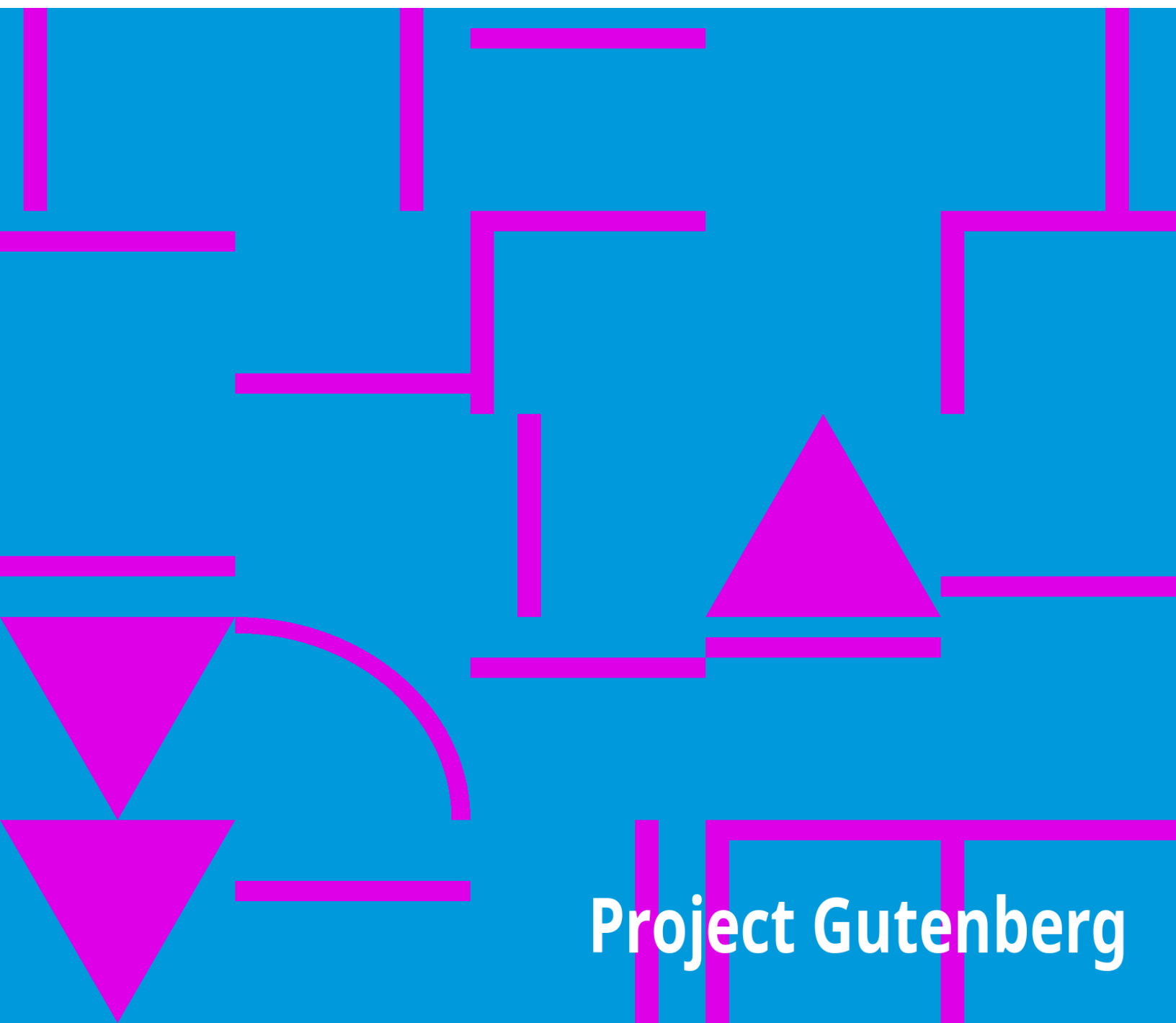


# The Hero of Garside School

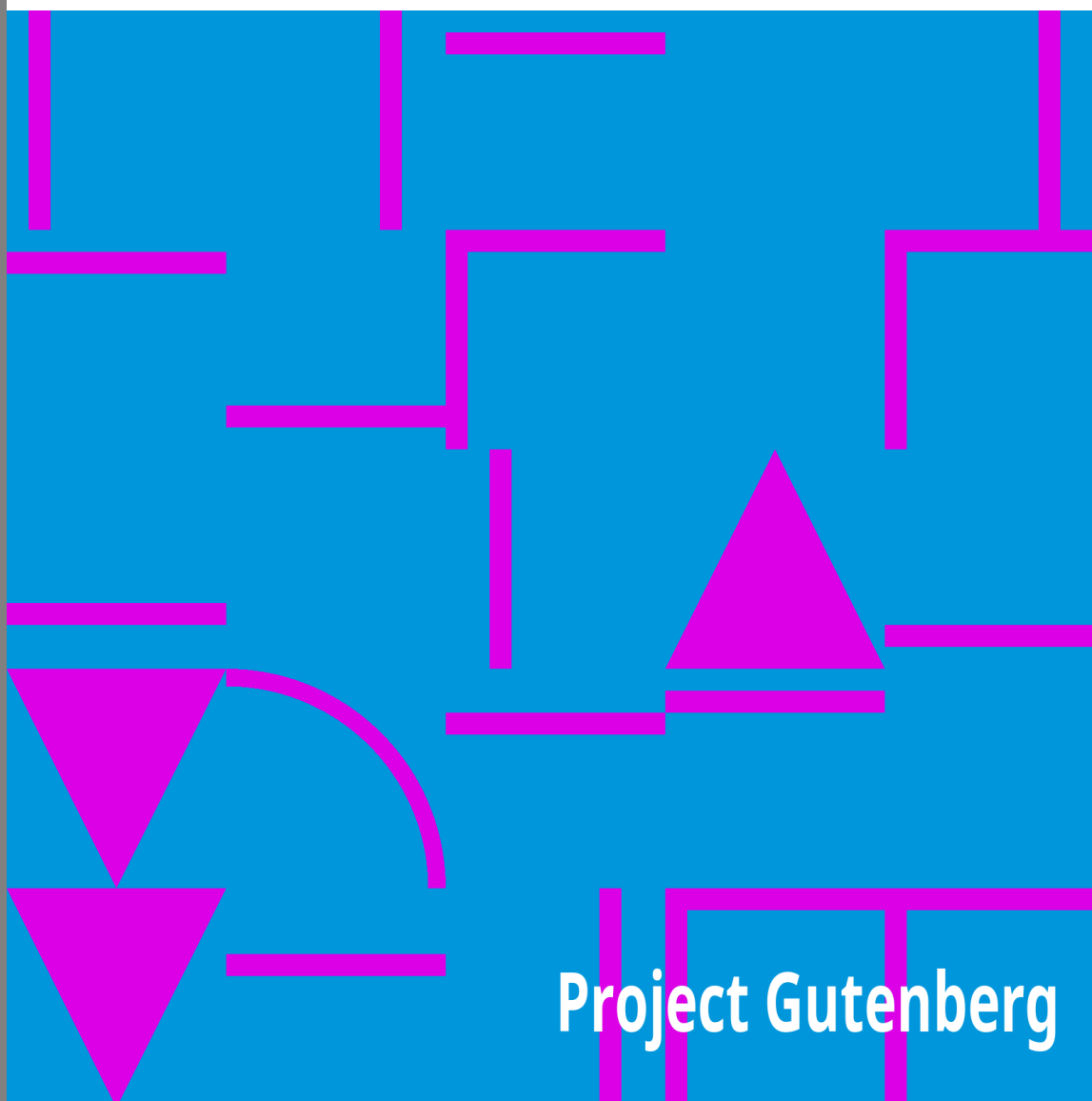
J. Harwood Panting



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# The Hero of Garside School

J. Harwood Panting



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# **THE HERO OF GARSIDE SCHOOL**

**By J. HARWOOD PANTING**

*Author of "Clive of Clair College," "The Two Runaways," etc.*

**WITH ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS**

**LONDON**

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**FALCON WAS DEAD.... TO MAKE GOOD HIS ESCAPE, NO TIME MUST BE  
LOST.**

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A SERIES OF EXCELLENT STORIES

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

FALCON WAS DEAD.... TO MAKE GOOD HIS ESCAPE, NO TIME MUST BE LOST.

"I AM MR. MONCRIEF,' SAID THAT GENTLEMAN, STEPPING FORWARD."

"AS ILL-LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, HIBBERT RAN FULL TILT AGAINST MR. WEEVIL, JUST AS HE REACHED THE OUTER DOOR."

"SLIGHTLY RAISING HIMSELF FROM HIS POSITION ON THE ROOF, CRICK LIFTED THE FLAGSTAFF FROM ITS SOCKET, AND DREW IT QUICKLY BENEATH THE TRAP-DOOR."

"THE BOY WAS KNEELING BESIDE HIM,—IT WAS MONCRIEF MINOR.... 'ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?' CAME IN A WHISPER FROM THE BOY."

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# **THE HERO OF GARSIDE SCHOOL**

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# CHAPTER I

## THE MOTHER'S PRAYER

"God grant that it may never happen, Paul; God grant that England may never be invaded, that her foes may never land upon our shores."

And the lips of Mrs. Percival moved in silent prayer. Paul regarded the loved face of his mother for a minute or two thoughtfully, as though he were longing to put to her many questions, but dared not. At length he said, breaking the silence:

"Did father ever speak of it?"

It was one of the greatest griefs of Paul's life that he had never known his father. He had been a captain in the Navy, but was unfortunately cut off in the prime of his career by a brave attempt to save the life of a man who had flung himself overboard. The man was saved, but Captain Percival was drowned, leaving a widow and son to lament his loss. Paul at that time was only a year old, so that it was not till the years went on he understood the greatness of his loss. Often and often his thoughts turned to the father who had been snatched from him by a sudden and untimely death, especially when he saw the boys of his school who were fortunate enough to possess both parents; but often as his thoughts went to his father, he rarely spoke of him to his mother. He could see that the pain and sorrow of his death were still with her—that the awful moment when the news came of that sudden, swift catastrophe had written itself upon her heart and memory in writing which would never be effaced.

Paul did not find out all that he had become to his mother till some time after his father's death—not, in fact, till his first term at school had ended. He had never been away from home so long before, and he never forgot how she pressed him to her, and with what tender earnestness she said, "Ah, dear, you do not know how I have missed you."

That same night, when she had thought him fast asleep, she entered his room, looked long and earnestly in his face by the light of a candle, and then stole gently out. And that Sunday, when he went to the old church with her, he felt her hand steal into his as the vicar read the Litany; and the pressure of her hand waxed closer as the vicar's voice sounded through the church: "From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death." Then rose the fervent response from the congregation, "Good Lord, deliver us." And none prayed it more fervently than the widow as she knelt by the side of her son.

It was not only that Mrs. Percival had lost her husband at sea, but she had lost a brother, a promising young lieutenant in the Navy, while on active service in China; and Paul's grandfather had lost his life many years back while fighting under Nelson at Copenhagen. It is little to be wondered at, therefore, that Mrs. Percival rarely spoke about the sea to Paul. She feared its fascination; she was anxious to keep his thoughts from it. He was all that was now left to her, and she had no wish that he should go into the service in which the lives of three near and dear relatives had been sacrificed.

"Yes, your father sometimes spoke of it," Mrs. Percival answered. "His father—that is to say, your grandfather—lived in the time when there was such a great scare about wicked Napoleon invading England; but that is long ago, and it was all ended by Nelson's last great victory at Trafalgar. Ah, Paul, these scares and wars are terrible. I sometimes think that it must be monsters ruling the world rather than men. If the prayers of mothers and

wives and orphans could only be heard, I am sure that war, and the danger of war, would soon be over. But why are you worrying about an invasion?"

"Well, Great Britain has a good many enemies, you know, mother, and people are talking about a possible invasion. Besides, I've got to write something about it next term, and it won't do for the son of a captain to make a mess of it altogether."

"Write something?" questioned Mrs. Percival, turning pale. Ah, the terrible fascination of the sea! Was it going to claim her son as it had claimed her husband? "How is that?"

"A prize has been offered for the best paper on 'The Invasion of Great Britain.' I may as well have a cut in."

"By all means, Paul; but for my sake—for my sake"—placing her hand upon his shoulder—"don't think too much about the sea."

She leant forward and kissed him; then went hurriedly from the room. Paul knew that it was his duty to do as his mother told him, but he found it very hard. He was a stalwart lad of fifteen, with the blood of two generations of seamen in his veins, so that it seemed as though his very blood were part of the brine of the ocean.

He stood by the window, looking from the old Manor House in which he lived to the road. Presently he saw Job Brice, who did odd jobs about the house and garden, walking across the grounds to the paddock. Job had been a seaman in the Navy at the same time as his father, and for that reason had been given employment, to add to his pension, at the Manor House; but he rarely spoke about his seafaring life to our hero. Paul suspected that this, in a large measure, was due to his mother, for whenever Job did speak, he always dwelt on the most unattractive side of a sailor's life.

So soon as Paul caught sight of Job, he seized his cap, and went after him. He came up with him just as he had entered the paddock.

"I say, Brice, I've just been talking to mother about father. I don't like to question her too much, for I can see it gives her pain."

"Quite right, Master Paul; it does give her pain," said Job, turning his scarred, weather-beaten face to the boy; "and it's very good of you to think of her. It ain't all boys who're so thoughtful of their mother."

"Oh, don't butter me, Brice, for I'm long chinks from deserving it. But perhaps you wouldn't mind answering me a question I could never quite make out. I've heard that father died in saving another man. And that is all I do know, for mother never speaks of it, and I can't keep boring her with questions. How did it happen?"

"Well, no one knows exactly. So far as could be made out, some pirate—some furrin sneak—got into his cabin while we were in port, and got at his private despatches. He was imprisoned in the hold by the captain's orders. The next day we were to make for Gibraltar, where the spy was to be tried by court-martial. The next night was a dirty one—no rain to speak of, but dark and blustery. While it was at its height, the prisoner in the hold managed to escape, and jumped overboard. Your father was one of the first to see him, and leapt after him. He reached the poor wretch and held him till the boat put out; then a fiercer gust of wind came, and they were separated. The spy was swept in the direction of the boat. Your father was swept away from it. The spy was caught up and dragged into it. Your father was never seen again. He'd saved the spy's life at the expense of his own. There wasn't a man on board the ship but esteemed—yes, loved your father. He was one of the best skippers that ever walked a deck. What we felt afterwards, Master Paul, can't be described. We felt just sick that he'd gone, and that that sneaking, shivering furrin rascal had been saved. Some of the boys

would ha' lynched him, I think, only that he looked purty sick at that time hisself, and they knew a court-martial was awaitin' him at Gibraltar. Well, he were taken to Gib."

"And what happened?" asked the lad, as the old salt paused.

"What happened? Why, he got clean off!" cried the old salt indignantly. "There was little or no evidence agen him. The one who knew all about him, and what he'd been up to, was your father, and—and——"

Job Brice came to a dead stop as the back of his big, rough hand went across his eyes.

"My father had gone to the bottom! Yes, yes, I understand it all!" said Paul in a choking voice. "So they were obliged to release the man, and he got off scot-free?"

"You've just guessed it, Master Paul! It makes me blood boil when I think of it!"

Then he ended up, as he always did: "Ah, it's a dog's life, is the sea! Don't you ever think of the sea, Master Paul!"

Paul knew from what quarter the final moral, with which Job invariably favoured him, came. Usually he smiled; but there was no smile on his face now. He could understand his mother's feelings as he had never understood them before. He could understand why she so rarely spoke of that time—why she never referred to his father's death.

"You can't remember the man's name, I suppose?"

"No, I can't remember that," answered Job, rubbing his head thoughtfully, "'cept that it was a foreign one—Zuker, I think it was, or some such name as that. Don't think no more about it. Thinking about it don't do no good."

"Poor, poor father!" said Paul, as he turned once more towards the house. "He must have been a brave man. Oh, that I could have seen him, and known him, so that I might be able to remember him as he was in life, instead of carrying about a dead image in my heart!"

Still, it was a comfort to know that his father had been loved by those under him—that he had died a brave death. Better, far better, to die a brave death than to live on in shame and infamy, as the man had probably lived whom his father had saved.

And yet this mean, despicable spy might have turned over a new leaf from the day his father had sacrificed his life to save him. He might have begun a new and nobler life. If so, the sacrifice had not been in vain.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE MESSAGE

The long autumn holiday was drawing to a close. In a couple of days' time Paul would be back again at the old school—back again at Garside House. He had had a pretty good time during the "vac.," but, none the less, he should not be sorry to meet again the fellows of his Form. School wasn't such a bad place, after all.

"Fact, if it wasn't for that wretched science master, Weevil—why wasn't he christened Weazel?—one might put up with a lot of it. Don't know how it is, but he always puts my back up."

Paul was returning home across the fields, and had just alighted over a five-barred gate into a lane which wound round the side of the Manor House into the main road, when he was arrested by a cry of distress.

"Hallo! What's that? Some one down? My—down it is!"

A horseman had come a cropper a little distance down the lane. Paul immediately ran to his assistance.

"What's wrong, sir? A tumble?"

"Yes; Falcon slipped, and before I quite knew where I was I was out of the saddle. But I don't think I'm hurt very much."

Paul extended a hand to the fallen rider. He grasped it, and tried to rise; a spasm of pain crossed his face.

"I'm afraid that you are hurt, sir."

"A little more than I thought," said the gentleman, as he leaned against the saddle. "Poor old Falcon," patting the horse, "don't look so grieved. It wasn't so much your fault as my carelessness."

Then the caressing movement of the hand ceased, and he stood listening as one who fears pursuit. He tried to mount to the saddle, but failed.

"Heaven help me!" he murmured. And then, as though Heaven had inspired him, he turned to Paul suddenly with a hopeful light in his eye: "Can you ride, my lad?"

"Rather! I learnt to ride almost as soon as I could walk," smiled Paul.

It was no empty boast. Paul had been taught riding at a very early age, and was as much at home in the saddle as on his feet.

"I seem to have sprained my leg, and it is getting more painful every moment. I've got a message of the utmost importance that must reach Redmead to-night. You know Redmead?"

"Well."

"Will you take a message for me? I ask it as a great favour, my lad."

He spoke with great earnestness, and waited eagerly for Paul's answer. Paul did not at once respond. Redmead was seven miles distant; it was getting dusk; the journey to Redmead and back would take him close upon two hours; his mother would wonder at his absence.

"You won't refuse me, lad. You don't know what it means to me, and others."

Paul liked the stranger's face. He was a man of about thirty-seven or thirty-eight, with clear, honest eyes, and an open, gentlemanly bearing. It was

plain that the business on which he wished Paul to go was important. The boy's sympathies were with him, but still he hesitated.

"Whereabouts in Redmead?"

"To Oakville, the house of Mr. Moncrief."

"Moncrief!" cried Paul. "I've a chum at school named Moncrief—Stanley Moncrief."

"He's my son. The gentleman living at Redmead is Stanley's uncle. What is your name?"

"Paul Percival."

"I've often heard my boy speak of you. Glad to make your acquaintance, though I wish our introduction had taken place under happier circumstances."

His chum's father! Paul was all aglow. He hesitated no longer.

"Give me your message, sir. I shall only be too pleased to do anything for Stan's father."

Mr. Moncrief wrote rapidly on a sheet from his pocket-book:

"Enclosed fragments have come to hand. It is a letter from Zuker, the German Jew, who is in England. Take care. Be on guard!"

When he had finished this brief note, Mr. Moncrief took from his pocket-book several fragments of torn paper, bearing on them, as it appeared to Paul, mysterious hieroglyphics. He put these inside an envelope together with the note he had written. Then he sealed it down and handed it to Paul.

"You are my boy's chum, I feel that I can trust you. Give this to my brother, Mr. Walter Moncrief—in no one else's hands. I cannot tell you how much

may depend upon those pieces of paper reaching him. You will not part with them whatever happens?"

"God helping me," said Paul, impressed with the earnestness of Mr. Moncrief's words and manner. "There is my house, sir"—pointing to the Manor House. "You will find rest there, and perhaps you wouldn't mind telling my mother where I've gone."

Paul mounted to the saddle. Falcon, as though anxious to resume its journey, sped along the lane into the open road. Though it was getting dusk, it mattered little to Paul, for he was well acquainted with every inch of the country for miles around. He could not help thinking of the strangeness of the adventure.

"Stan's father—only fancy! I'm glad that I was able to help him and take his message. Shan't I have something to tell old Stan when I get back to school!"

Then he began to wonder what the torn fragments of paper, with the hieroglyphics on them, could mean, and what could be the message of which he was the bearer. Had he seen it, his wonder would assuredly have grown.

The cool breeze of evening fell upon his face. The shadows began to lengthen. The leaves rustled beneath Falcon's feet. It was a noble, intelligent horse, and seemed as conscious of the importance of the message upon which it was going as Paul himself.

"Good horse—good Falcon!" cried Paul, stroking its neck. "I wouldn't mind a horse like you. I wonder how many times Stan has ridden you."

By this time they had reached an open common. It had been a perilous place to ride over in years gone by, when robbers abounded, but those days had gone, and no thought of danger occurred to Paul as he reached it. There

were two ways of going to his destination—one was by taking the road by the side of the common and skirting it, the other, by the more solitary but nearer road across it. Paul selected the latter, urging his horse to a gallop as he did so. Falcon immediately responded to the call of its young rider, and soon they were speeding across the common.

When they reached the other side the road leading to Redmead stretched before them. It had grown suddenly darker. The road was bounded on either side by hedges, and the branches of trees interlaced each other in an archway overhead. Whether from the sudden darkness or that he had scented some hidden danger, Falcon slackened speed.

"What's wrong, Falcon?" cried Paul. "Get on—the sooner our journey's ended, the sooner you'll have your supper. Now, then, old boy."

The horse was about to speed forward again, but scarcely were the words from Paul's lips than a man sprang from the hedge and seized the bridle.

"Stop!" came a sharp, decisive voice, with a foreign accent, "Stop!"

Paul just caught a glimpse of the man's face in the half light. The cheekbones were somewhat high, but narrowed down sharply at the chin. He wore eyeglasses on the eyes, which seemed to Paul, in that swift glance he caught of them, of a steely blue. He had a thick, military moustache, drawn out to fierce points; but his chin was clean-shaven. Directly he stopped the horse, a second man sprang to the other side of it. Paul immediately concluded they were robbers.

"What do you want? I've got no money—at least, only a few coppers. You're welcome to those, if you'll only let me ride on."

"We're not robbers," said the first man, who seemed to be the master of the two, "and, therefore, we don't want your coppers. We've got one or two

questions to put to you. If you'll only answer them civilly, we'll let you go your way. If you don't answer them——"

He broke off with a shrug of the shoulders to indicate the terrible fate which might await the boy in the event of his declining to answer the questions put to him.

"You're riding Mr. Moncrief's horse, Falcon?"

Paul wondered who the man was, and how he had come by his information.

"Yes, that's right. What of it?"

"How is it you are riding Falcon instead of Mr. Moncrief?"

Paul did not at once answer. He wondered whether by answering he would be doing wrong. Yet what wrong could he do by speaking the truth. Paul was an honest boy—as honest as the day—and detested falsehood of any kind.

"Mr. Moncrief met with an accident—that's why," he answered doggedly.

"An accident"—the stranger exchanged glances with the other man. "That's the reason he's been left behind, is it? You've come in his stead—eh?"

Paul nodded. He felt somehow that he was giving Mr. Moncrief away, but he could not help himself.

"Thought so. You're going to Mr. Walter Moncrief, his brother—eh?"

Paul remained silent. He felt that he had said too much already.

"Tongue-tied—eh? Well, I won't trouble you to answer, for I know well enough my information's right. All you need do is just to hand over to me the packet you're taking to Mr. Walter Moncrief. I'll take care of it."

The stranger's information was only too accurate; Paul marvelled at its accuracy; but nevertheless Mr. Moncrief's words, "I feel that I can trust you. You will not part with the letter, whatever happens," came to him, and he determined not to give up the packet without a struggle.

"You're not deaf as well as tongue-tied—eh? Quick! quick! hand over the packet," came the imperious voice of the stranger.

Paul saw that he was in a desperate situation—one from which it would only be possible to extricate himself by strategy. He put his hand to the inner pocket where the packet lay, and drew it a little way from his pocket. This movement disarmed the man who held the bridle. He slackened his hold. As he did so Paul brought down his riding-whip—or, rather, Mr. Moncrief's riding-whip—sharply on the other man's face.

With a cry of mingled rage and pain the man dropped the bridle.

"Good Falcon—good. Now!" cried Paul, urging the horse forward.

The second man made a lunge at the horse. Falcon, as though fully alive to the need of getting away, bounded forward like a dart along the road. It went forward at a breakneck speed, quivering in every limb, as though feverishly anxious to place as great a distance as possible between Paul and his pursuers.

"Thank God, thank God!" Paul murmured, overjoyed at their escape. "What a noble horse it is. That man is a foreigner, I'm sure of it—one who would stop at nothing to gain his ends. Who is he, I wonder?"

If Paul had only known! But all was dark to him, as dark as the road along which he was speeding. Only one thing was clear—that these men were the enemies of Mr. Moncrief; that they were anxious to get from him the packet of which he was the bearer. More and more Paul wondered what could be

the meaning of it all—what could be the meaning of the curious hieroglyphics in his pocket.

But suddenly, just as he was congratulating himself on the distance he had placed between himself and his pursuers, Falcon slackened speed, and began to breathe hard. What was the meaning of it? Had an accident befallen him, or had he grown weary? Paul knew enough of the animal to know that it would not readily slacken speed through weariness. Falcon was one of those sterling animals who would take every inch from himself before he would give in through weariness.

If he could only get it a little farther on the road, it might be possible to keep the advantage he had gained on his pursuers. Once more he encouraged the horse to go forward; and once more it made a desperate effort to obey him.

Then it reeled again. Paul had just time to extricate his feet from the stirrups when Falcon fell with a crash by the roadside.

Paul hurt one of his legs by the fall, but he had no thought for himself as he bent over the horse.

"Heaven help us!" was his fervent prayer, for in that one brief glance he could tell that poor Falcon was dying, and he knew that not long would elapse before his pursuers reached him.

"What is it, old fellow? Good Falcon—good!"

Once more Falcon responded to the call; it made desperate efforts to rise; but almost immediately slackened. Paul's hand went to its neck. It was bathed in perspiration and foam. What had happened to it? In the uncertain light it was impossible to tell. Had it injured a foot or leg? All at once Paul recalled the way in which the man had lunged at the horse at the moment of their escape. He must have injured it in some way.



## CHAPTER III

### THE CRY OF THE PSALMIST

Yes; poor Falcon was dying. A crimson stream was running from a wound in its flank, and Paul knew that the horse had not many minutes to live.

"The scoundrel!" he said to himself between his clenched teeth, as he thought of the man who had wrought this cruel deed. Paul was one of those brave lads who would never wittingly have done an act of cruelty, least of all to one of God's dumb creatures. It touched him to the quick to see the poor horse dying. He knelt by its side, and his hand went caressingly over it. Falcon turned to him with such a look of pathos in its eyes that a big lump rose in the boy's throat, as though he were choking.

"I can do nothing for you, old fellow. I wish I could!"

There was no help near, and it was clear to see that if there had been it would have been useless. Falcon was breathing hard, in its last stern fight with death. Paul could not bear to see its pain. His hand moved up to its head. It soothed the horse. For a minute it lay perfectly still, and then, as though in that brief interval of rest it had been collecting its strength for a last great effort, it tried to rise to its feet again. It rose a little way, then fell. Again it turned its head to Paul, and looked at him with glazed eyes. A shiver went over every limb; then the noble horse lay quite still, and Paul knew that it was dead.

Tears came to his eyes. It was as though he had been standing by the death-bed of a human being. And, now that he was in the presence of death, he scarcely knew how to act. Suddenly the sound of distant voices roused him

from the stupor into which he had fallen. For the moment, in his grief at Falcon's death, he had forgotten that he was being pursued—forgotten the message of which he was the bearer.

The sound of voices recalled him to his duty. If he remained there, his pursuers would soon discover him, and wrest from him the letter with which he had been entrusted. Falcon was dead. He could do no good by remaining. To make good his escape, no time must be lost. By God's good help, he might yet succeed in eluding his pursuers.

So he pulled himself together, resolved to go forward at all hazards.

"It is for Stan's father," he said to himself, as he tried to run. But he soon found that another misfortune had befallen him. The injury to his leg prevented him from running. It was only with an effort he could walk at any speed, and at every step he took he felt that his pursuers were gaining ground.

Redmead was close upon three miles away. How could he hope to reach it without being overtaken by the men who were so keenly pursuing him? Instinctively came to his memory the words he had so often heard in the village church—"The wicked oppress me—compass me about. They now compass me in my footsteps." And the cry of the Psalmist rose to his lips:

"Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not. Show Thy marvellous loving kindness, O Thou that savest by Thy right hand them which put their trust in Thee. Hide me under the shadow of Thy wings from the wicked that oppress me, from my deadly enemies, who compass me about. Arise, O Lord, disappoint him, cast him down."

With renewed strength he pressed on; but he had not gone far before he was compelled to slacken his pace. He realized that it was hopeless for him to evade his pursuers unless he could find some hiding-place. He looked

around. There was no house near. But just a little ahead of him, to the right of the road, were the ruins of an old house which had been burned almost to the ground, and never been re-built.

As a drowning man clutches at a straw, Paul made his way to the ruins. But he had not gone more than a few paces through what had once been the garden of the house, when a voice cried:

"Hallo! Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Paul was somewhat startled, for he thought the place deserted. He found himself mistaken, however, for a boy came from the ruins and faced him. He was slightly taller than Paul, and of slimmer build; but he was none the less well proportioned, and his limbs moved with the easy movement of a young athlete. In spite of the dusk, Paul recognized him. He was one of the senior boys of St. Bede's—the scholars of which were the deadly rivals of Paul's school. There had been a perpetual feud between St. Bede's and Garside for many years. Sometimes it would be patched up for a week or two; then it would break out with greater violence than ever. Just before the vacation, the feud had burst out stronger than ever. There is no telling to what length it might have been carried, but, fortunately, the vacation came on, and hostilities were suspended. The boy before him was Wyndham, one of the ringleaders on the other side. The recognition was simultaneous.

"You're one of the bounders of Garside, aren't you?"

"Yes," Paul candidly admitted; "and you—you're one of the Bede's, aren't you? I haven't time to talk. There's some one after me. Can you put me up to a place to hide in?—quick, there's a good fellow!"

"Running away—eh?" said the other contemptuously, without moving. "That's like you Garside fellows!"

"I wish I had only the time to teach you better," retorted Paul indignantly. Then, remembering all that was at stake, he suppressed his indignation, and in quick, earnest tones: "I'm not sneaking—on my word of honour. I'm the bearer of an important paper, belonging to a chum's father. Two men are following me up to try to get it from me. If I can't steer clear of them they will take it from me. You know this place. Hide me somewhere!"

The earnest tones of Paul appealed to Wyndham.

"I don't know of any hiding-place, except——"

"Except what?" cried Paul eagerly, as he again caught the sound of voices from the roadway.

"The old well."

"The old well! How is it possible to hide there?"

"Well, I can let you down in the bucket, if you care to run the risk. I've been down it myself—but I'm not a Garside fellow."

It was as much as to say that "a Garside fellow" was not capable of doing what a "St. Bede fellow" could do.

"I'd run any risk—quick! I can hear them coming! Where's the well?"

It was only a few paces from where they were standing. Wyndham led the way.

"I'll let you down a little way; then draw you up again directly the men have gone—that is to say, if they should come this way."

"They are coming this way. I feel sure of it, and there's no time to lose."

"Here you are, then. Keep steady, and don't make a sound. They won't think of you stowed away down there."

Paul got into the bucket. The chain was somewhat rusty, but though it was the worse for disuse, and creaked as it was lowered, it held firm. When Wyndham had lowered Paul a short distance, he made firm the chain; so that he was suspended half-way between the water and the top. It wasn't a very pleasant situation. A dank smell came from below, and it seemed the abode of darkness as the boy above shut out the last remnant of light by placing the cover a little way over the well.

Not a moment too soon, for he had only just finished when a man darted up to him and seized him by the collar.

"Ha! Got you at last, have I? A nice chase you've led us."

"What's the matter? That's my collar when you've done with it. Drop it, please!"

"Hand over that paper."

"What paper?"

"The paper you're taking to Redmead. Quick—out with it!"

Wyndham, though he did not appreciate the man's grip on his collar, was enjoying the joke. He could see what had happened. The man had mistaken him for "that Garside fellow" down the well.

"I would like to oblige you, but I really don't know what you're talking about. I haven't any paper."

By this time the second man had arrived on the scene. His sharp, ferrety eyes, which—like the eyes of a cat—seemed capable of seeing in the darkness, immediately went to Wyndham's face.

"Hi, Brockman! Hi! What are you doing? You have got hold of the wrong boy!"

"The wrong boy!" exclaimed the man addressed as Brockman. "Are you sure?"

"Certain! Where are your eyes?"

"They're not quite so sharp as yours, Mr. Zuker, I know; but I made sure I'd tracked the youngster here."

Paul could hear distinctly every word that passed from his uncomfortable position down the well. As the name Zuker fell upon his ears he trembled so that he nearly over-balanced himself and fell into the water below. It was not with fear. Zuker! That name was one he was never likely to forget so long as memory lasted. It was the name of the man for whom his poor father had sacrificed his life!

Could it be the same? It was not a common name, and though the man spoke English readily, it was with a German accent. Instinctively Paul felt that it was the same, instinctively he felt that the man who had been in pursuit of him was the man whom his father had tried to save from the sea so long ago. As a recompense for what the father had done he was hunting down the son!

"Thank you; it's very kind of you," said Wyndham, as Brockman released his hold. "Seems to me you're a little too hasty with your hands! The next time you take any one by the collar you'd better make sure first that you're going for the right one!"

Brockman turned away without deigning to reply. Zuker was about to follow his example, but, suddenly checking himself, he asked:

"Have you seen any one pass this way—a boy about your size—no, not quite so tall," as the sharp eyes took note of Wyndham's height.

"About my own size—not quite so tall? Let me see." Wyndham paused as though trying to remember.

"Make haste!" cried Zuker impatiently. "We haven't any time to lose. Surely you can remember."

"I'm trying to. You see, there are a good number of boys pass along this road during the day."

"I'm not speaking about the daytime—within the last quarter of an hour!"

"A quarter of an hour. Let me think."

"You'll get nothing from that blockhead, sir!" cried Brockman. "We're losing valuable time!"

Zuker had drawn near the well. His hand rested upon the handle. Wyndham was a cool boy, whom it took a great deal to disturb, but it must be confessed that he required all his coolness and self-possession at that moment. He was fearful lest Zuker might catch a glimpse of Paul down the well. But, fortunately, he was too intent on questioning Wyndham. So, after asking him one or two more questions, he said cuttingly:

"You're a sharp youth. You will set the Thames on fire some day—ugh!"

He looked for the moment as though he would spurn Wyndham with his foot; but instead of doing so he gave a vicious twist to the well-handle—to the no small alarm of Wyndham—and hastened after his tool and servant, Brockman.

Wyndham leapt to the windlass. The twist given by the German had set the bucket in motion. Paul was rapidly descending in the bucket to the bottom! He seized the handle in his hand and held on to it with all his strength. It vibrated as though it were a live thing. He feared that the sudden strain upon the chain might snap it in twain, but it held firm.

"Hi, hi!" he cried below. "Are you all right?"

A moment of intense silence—a moment which seemed interminable to the boy clinging to the handle of the windlass; then, to his great relief, the voice of Paul came faintly up the well:

"All right! But—but it's been a near thing!"

"Hold tight. I'm going to haul you up!"

Slowly he hauled Paul to the top of the well; and, with an inexpressible feeling of thankfulness, Paul stepped from the bucket.

"Have they gone?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes. A near thing, you said; what happened?"

"You just stopped me within about a foot of the water, and the sudden jerk nearly pitched me out of the bucket. The scoundrels have gone, you say?"

"Yes," smiled Wyndham; "they've gone in hot pursuit of you. They little dreamt you were down that well! You couldn't have had a better hiding-place."

"Better! Well, perhaps you're right; but it was a bit musty and uncomfortable! I'm much obliged to you, all the same. You seem a decent fellow, though you are a Beetle!"

Beetle was the nickname given by the Garside boys to the boys of St. Bede's.

Wyndham laughed. Paul glanced round the melancholy, deserted ruin. He could see no sign of human habitation.

"And you seem a decent fellow, though you are a Gargoyle." (Gargoyle was the nickname given by the St. Bede boys to the boys of Garside School.)

"What's your name?"

"Paul Percival. I have often seen you amongst the other Beetles; but you don't live about here, do you?"

"Not now." And there was a deep note of melancholy in Wyndham's voice. "You can see, it's a ruin; but before it was a ruin I lived here with my mother and youngest brother, Archie. He's gone—now."

"Gone?"

Wyndham nodded, and Paul understood too well what "gone" meant. Wyndham's brother was dead; but he wondered what his death could have to do with the ruined house. There was a painful silence between them for some moments.

"I think you said you were going to Redmead?"

"Yes; Oakville, that's the house I want."

"I know it. Mr. Moncrief lives there. He's a big man at Chatham Dockyard, and has a lot to do with the defences of the Medway and the Thames, so I've heard. He designs things, too, for the Admiralty. I'm going partly that way if you don't mind walking with a Beetle."

Paul laughed, and remarked that he could put up for once with a Beetle if the Beetle could put up with a Gargoyle.

So they started together, and Wyndham told Paul by the way the reason of the ruined house.

His father and mother had taken the house soon after they were married. He, Gilbert, was born there; so was his younger brother Archie. Three years after the birth of Archie, God visited upon them a great misfortune by calling to Himself Mr. Wyndham. Gilbert had by this time started on his

school career, for he was several years older than his brother. The second misfortune occurred while he was away at school, three years after the death of his father.

Little Archie was the idol of his mother, and a great pet with old Martha, the housekeeper, who had been in the household ever since the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Wyndham. Early one morning Mrs. Wyndham awoke with a feeling of suffocation. On looking, half dazed, around the bedroom, she found it full of smoke. Her first thought was of Archie. She made her way to his bed. It was empty! She went to the landing; that was full of smoke also. She called for her boy. No answer came. The bewildered mother imagined that he must have escaped from the burning house while she slept.

By God's providence she got out. She found that the two servants had managed to escape from the burning house; but there were no signs of little Archie! The distracted mother would have entered the burning house again to search for him, but she was held back. It was a merciful thing that she became unconscious, and did not see the end of the homestead where she had spent so many happy, peaceful hours. It was burnt almost to the ground, and amongst the ruins in the kitchen were found the charred remains of Archie.

The little fellow was fond of watching old Martha when she lit the fires. It was believed, therefore, that he had stolen out of bed that fatal morning and tried to light the fire in the kitchen on his own account. The lighted match set fire to his bedgown, the bedgown to some curtains, and so the fire had spread. Archie joined his father in heaven.

"I was away at school at the time," said Wyndham, when he had finished his painful story. "You can judge what a homecoming that was for me!"

"It must indeed have been sad," said Paul feelingly.

"My mother was ill for a long time, but at length she got well again. I was the only one left to her. After that we lived in a house about a mile from here. The ruins of the old house still remain, as you have seen. Some day my mother may build again, but she hasn't the heart for it at present."

The story of little Archie Wyndham is perfectly true. It is not fiction. It happened precisely in the way I have described. I know the terrible fascination that fire has for children. Unfortunately they do not understand its danger. When, therefore, my dear boy or girl, you are tempted to play with fire, will you remember the sad fate of little Archie Wyndham? That will enable you, by God's help, to put the temptation from you.

All at once Paul came to a dead stop. His hand went to his coat-pocket. Absorbed in Wyndham's story, he had forgotten all about the letter he was to take to Mr. Walter Moncrief.

"What's the matter?" asked Wyndham.

Paul's face had turned to an ashen hue. His hand was still searching his pocket.

"The letter!" he exclaimed.

"The letter—well, what about it?"

"It's gone!"

"Gone!" echoed Wyndham scarce able to believe his ears.

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## CHAPTER IV

### SHADOWS OF THE EVENING

But too true—the letter had gone. No wonder Paul was bewildered, stupefied. He had risked so much to get that letter to its destination—had braved more than one peril, and come safely through—that it seemed heart-breaking to find the letter gone.

"Have you searched all your pockets?" asked Wyndham.

"All," answered Paul. "It was in this one—here"—he placed his hand upon his breast-pocket. "I put it here when it was given me, and I haven't shifted it."

"Where, then, can it have gone?"

Where? Paul knew well enough that it was in his possession when he left poor Falcon by the roadside, for he had felt in his pocket, and found it there. He must, therefore, have lost it since; but where—where? That was the question he kept repeating to himself without finding an answer. Of a sudden it came to him. It must have been jerked from his pocket at the moment Wyndham caught the handle of the windlass, nearly precipitating him from the bucket to the water.

"I believe it's in the well."

"What?" cried Wyndham. "In the well? How can that be?"

Paul explained.

"You must be right," said Wyndham thoughtfully, when the explanation was ended. "Well, there's one consolation—it's better for the letter to be in the well than you. It's a pity, but it can't be helped. What will you do?"

Paul had been thinking. He could go forward to Mr. Moncrief at Redmead, and explain to him that he had lost the letter, or he could go back, and explain to the other Mr. Moncrief that he had failed in his embassy. Neither alternative was very palatable to him. Duty was before him as a pole-star. A still small voice was ever whispering to him, "Paul, thy duty. Do that in spite of anything that may happen to you. Place that first and foremost, even before self." What, then, was his duty? To confess to failure and defeat? No, never! That was the coward's part. He would not rest satisfied until he had made an effort to recover the letter he had lost, and he told Wyndham so.

"I like your pluck; 'pon my word I do. Didn't think a Gargoyle had so much—really I didn't," said Wyndham; "but it's no use being foolhardy. If the letter's at the bottom of the well, how, in the name of wonder, are you going to get it up again?"

"I don't believe it's at the bottom. The water was pretty thick, I'm certain, by the odour. There would be vegetable stuff, and that sort of thing floating on the top of it. Well, if that's so, the letter wouldn't sink. The gravity of the water would be greater than the weight of the letter."

"Oh, the Gargoyles do go in a bit for physics—eh?" smiled Wyndham. "Fire away. I believe you're right. What's the next step?"

"The next step is to go down the well again, and prove whether I'm right or wrong. Is it asking too much of you to go back with me?"

"You mean going down the well again?"

"If you'll oblige me by again turning the handle."

Wyndham was by this time thoroughly interested in Paul and his mission, and he couldn't help admiring still further his pluck and determination. He never imagined that a despised "Gargoyle" had so much of those qualities. He willingly fell in with Paul's suggestion, and soon they were back again at the well.

"I've forgotten one thing," said Paul. "I haven't a light."

"Luckily I can lend you one. Wait here for a moment."

Paul waited while Wyndham disappeared among the ruins. Presently he returned with a lantern, which he lighted and handed to Paul. Thus equipped, he once more took his position in the bucket.

"Pay out slowly, and I'll tell you when to stop."

The bucket slowly descended till Paul was within a foot or two of the water.

"Stop!" he shouted.

The bucket stopped, then Paul leaned over the side, and flashed the light of the lantern on the water. There, to his great joy, was the missing letter, floating on the weeds. He cautiously leaned forward, and grasping the letter, returned it once more in safety to his pocket.

"Haul away!" he cried.

And Wyndham hauled away, so that a minute later Paul was again at the brink of the well.

"Found it?" asked Wyndham eagerly.

For answer Paul produced the letter. It was slightly damp, but little the worse otherwise for its immersion.

"Well, you deserve it. I'm jolly glad you've found it."

"I should never have got it hadn't it been for you. It was very good of you to turn back with me, and I hope if at any time I can do you a service, you'll let me know."

The two boys tramped on once more to their destination. Wyndham wished Paul good-night at the entrance to Redmead, his home lying in another direction. It was not long before Paul came in sight of Oakville. It was a fine old country house. A light was shining from its gabled front. By its light Paul could see that there was a man hovering about the house. He could not get a clear glimpse of him, but he was certain, from the man's figure and gait, that it was Brockman, the confederate of Zuker, the German spy. Knowing that Paul must come to the house, he had evidently been on the watch for him.

Now that he had come so far, Paul did not intend being foiled at the last moment. He saw that it was useless trying to enter by the front of the house, so he crept round to the back.

A light was coming from one of the windows. Paul made for this window, and looked through. He was scarcely prepared for what he saw. It was evidently a play-room. There was a large rocking-horse in one corner. A trapeze was slung up in the centre. There were single-sticks and foils on the wall, dumb-bells, Indian-clubs, a parallel-bar, and a vaulting-horse stowed away in another part of the room. But it was not so much these things which attracted the attention of Paul as the occupants of the room. A middle-aged gentleman was kneeling. He was praying aloud. Near him was a lady. On either side of her was a girl and boy—the boy about twelve, the girl a couple of years older. In line with them were a couple of maidservants and a governess. Paul could see that they were at family prayers. He guessed that the gentleman who was praying was Mr. Walter Moncrief, the gentleman he had come in search of by his likeness to his brother.

When they had finished prayers, the lady went to the piano, and the little group joined heartily in a hymn Paul had often heard at school:

"Now the day is over,  
Night is drawing nigh,  
Shadows of the ev'ning  
Steal across the sky."

Paul listened reverently, with bowed head. How appropriate the words seemed to be. In very truth had the shadows been stealing across the sky that evening, and they had not yet dispersed. Brockman, the man without, was still hovering darkly, like a cloud, over that house. Again the singers within raised their voices:

"Through the long night-watches,  
May Thine angels spread  
Their white wings above us,  
Watching round each bed."

Paul echoed those words very earnestly in his heart as his hand clasped tightly the letter for which he had risked so much. The room was an addition to the house, and led by a separate door into the garden. When the singing had ended, Paul stepped softly to the door and knocked gently on it with his knuckles. It was opened by one of the servants. The light of the lamp fell upon Paul as the door opened, and the eyes of all in the room turned to him as he stood there, with the letter in his hand.

"Can I see Mr. Moncrief?"

"I am Mr. Moncrief. What is it you want with me, my lad?" said that gentleman stepping forward.

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**"'I AM MR. MONCRIEF,' SAID THAT GENTLEMAN, STEPPING FORWARD."**

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"I've brought a letter from your brother, Mr. Henry Moncrief. He couldn't bring it himself, because of an accident——"

"An accident?"

"Nothing very serious, sir. A sprain, I think. He asked me to take the letter for him, and as he's the father of a school chum of mine, Stan Moncrief; I brought it along, and here it is," Paul explained rapidly, as he handed Mr. Moncrief the letter.

Paul had by this time entered the room. Directly Mr. Moncrief glanced at the letter his face became very grave. He went from the room, and his wife followed him, evidently as anxious as himself to know the contents. The servants retired, and Paul was thus left alone with the boy and girl.

There was not the least shyness about the former, for directly his parents left the room, he came forward and introduced himself.

"I'm Harry Moncrief—named after the uncle you brought that letter from. He was my godfather, you know. This is my sister, Connie." Connie, who was a pretty, fair girl, looked embarrassed at her brother's blunt method of introduction, but he rattled on. "Rather good for a girl. Not so slow as most of them. Can take a turn with the bells or clubs"—by bells and clubs was meant dumb-bells and Indian-clubs—"and she can scout at cricket. Didn't I hear you say you were a chum of cousin Stanley's?"

"Yes; we're in the same Form."

"What—at Garside School?" asked the boy eagerly.

Paul nodded.

"Hurrah!—hurrah!" cried Harry. "I'm going to Garside next term. I've left Gaffer Quelch's, thank goodness!"—Gaffer Quelch's was a college for juvenile scholars in the neighbourhood—"and I'm going to see life at Garside."

Paul could not help smiling at the boy's idea of "seeing life," and the high and exalted notion he seemed to have of Garside.

"Do you know young Plunger? He used to be my chum at Quelch's, but he left there a term ago, and went to Garside. That's another reason I'm going there. Things are awfully slow at Quelch's since Plunger left. He's a big pot at Garside, isn't he?"

"Very," answered Paul drily.

Paul knew young Plunger well enough. He was in one of the junior Forms. Though he had been at Garside only a term, he had almost succeeded in

creating a record for the number of scrapes into which he had got during that short period.

"Cousin Stan being so high up in the school, I don't want to let him down, you know, by making any mistakes when I get to Garside," Harry rattled on. "I want to do things in correct form, you see; for if I let myself down, I let Stan down. So I asked Plunger the right thing to do on going to Garside. Plunger's an awfully good sort of fellow, so he took the trouble to write down for me what ought to be done; but I wasn't to show it to any one here, for some of the things are school secrets, he tells me."

Connie had discreetly withdrawn from the room, leaving Paul and her brother together. The latter, however, glanced round to make sure they were quite alone before he drew from his pocket the mysterious document which Plunger had written for his instruction on entering Garside School.

"1. Trousers to be turned up at bottom three inches.

"2. Spats on boots (patents).

"3. White waistcoat. Eton jacket.

"4. Introduce yourself to Bax, the porter, by giving him two slaps on the back and a dig with right-hand forefinger in ribs. Give him following particulars: Age and weight. Whether vaccinated—show marks. Give also measurement of biceps and chest.

"5. On seeing Mrs. Trounce (matron) go down on right knee, and present her with your portrait (for school album). Write on bottom of card, in clear handwriting, 'With love and kind regards.'

"6. Two shillings to be left at Billiter's for 'footing,' etc."

Paul could scarcely refrain from smiling at the code of rules which the audacious Plunger had drawn up for his chum's instruction, the more so as

Harry, who had never been to a public school, seemed to take them in all seriousness.

"You've been through it all, of course?" said Harry, as Paul handed the rules back to him. "Kind of Plunger to take so much trouble, isn't it?"

Paul was on the point of answering as Mr. Moncrief entered the room.

Harry hastily thrust the paper out of sight.

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## CHAPTER V

### THE LITTLE HUNCHBACK

"What is your name, my lad?" Mr. Moncrief asked as he entered the room.

"Paul Percival," answered our hero.

"And he goes to the same school as Cousin Stan. Isn't that stunning, pa?" exclaimed Harry Moncrief.

"Many thanks for the great service you have done, Paul," said Mr. Moncrief earnestly. "You have not only done a great service for me and my brother, but for your country. A duty like that brings its own reward. But how was it you came by the back way?"

Paul then explained all that had happened since he had left Mr. Moncrief's brother. The stoppage on the way by the two men who had tried to wrest from him the letter, the death of poor Falcon, the loss of the letter and its recovery, his arrival at Oakville, and his discovery that Brockman was lying in wait for him at the house.

"The scoundrels!" cried Mr. Moncrief, with flashing eyes, as he paced rapidly to and fro the room. Then, pausing again, he clasped Paul by the hand.

"I gave you credit for a great deal, but I haven't given you half credit enough. So long as you do your duty as you have done it to-night, you have nothing to fear for the future. May God bless you, and have you always in His keeping, as He has had to-night. I will return with you home, and see that no harm befalls you by the way."

Mr. Moncrief had already given orders that his trap should be in readiness as quickly as possible, and shortly after the servant entered and announced that the coachman was awaiting his master.

"Good-bye, Paul! You'll look out for me at Garside, won't you?" cried Harry, as he went out.

"Oh, yes, I'll look out for you!" said Paul, as he thought with a smile of the instructions Plunger had given Harry on his introduction to Garside School.

Mrs. Moncrief kissed Paul as she wished him good-night, just as his mother did, and he could not help blushing. He wondered whether Connie Moncrief would do the same, and was much relieved on finding that she made no attempt to follow her mother's example.

Nothing was to be seen of the man Brockman when they got outside.

"He has smelt a rat, and when he found the horse was being harnessed, got away as quickly as possible," said Mr. Moncrief. "We shan't be troubled with him again to-night."

Mr. Moncrief's surmise turned out to be correct. No further adventure befel them on the homeward journey. Paul learned, by the way, that the man Zuker was a German Jew of great ability and cunning. He was suspected to be a spy in the service of a foreign Government—which Government Mr. Moncrief did not mention, but Paul guessed which was meant.

The spy's purpose in coming to England was to ascertain all he could as to the defences of the Thames and the Medway.

"Can't you have the man arrested?" Paul asked, deeply interested in all he heard, and feeling more and more convinced that this man Zuker was the spy whom his father had saved from the sea at the risk of his own life.

"He's too adroit. He's one of the craftiest spies the Admiralty has ever had to deal with. We can get no direct evidence against him. Neither do we know his exact whereabouts. He's like some nasty slug—you can only tell where he's been by the slime he leaves behind. Of course, he has one or two confederates to help him."

"I trust they aren't Englishmen, sir?" said Paul.

"I trust so, too. But I fear there are still Judases in the land—men who would betray their country, as Judas betrayed his Lord and Master, for money, though the price would be a great deal more than thirty pieces of silver. Our enemies would give a great deal to get a draft of some of the plans in the archives of the Admiralty, I can tell you, Paul."

By this time they had reached Paul's home, to the great relief of Mrs. Percival and Mr. Henry Moncrief, who had begun to fear that some mishap had befallen Paul by the way. By the latter's request nothing was said to his mother about the peril in which he had stood, for fear of alarming her.

The two brothers had a short interview together. Then, as Mr. Henry Moncrief's leg was still painful, it was decided that he should remain at Rosemore—Paul's home—that night, and return to his own home the next morning. His brother returned to Oakville that same night.

The next morning a carriage came for Mr. Henry Moncrief, to which he was able to limp by the assistance of a manservant.

"I shan't regret the accident which has introduced me to you and your son, madam," said he, as he wished Paul and his mother good-bye through the carriage window. "I have to thank you for your hospitality, and him for the great service he has done me. God bless him and you!"

It was almost an echo of words Paul had heard before, but they fell none the less sweetly on his ears. That night he dreamed he was hard at work on the

prize essay, "The Invasion of Great Britain," and that just as he had finished it, a shadow fell across the room. He turned round to see whence the shadow came, and saw that it was—Zuker! Then he melted into thin air. When Paul turned to his essay he found that that had disappeared, too. In the shock of the discovery he awoke. Some one was bending over him, but it was not Zuker. It was his mother.

"What is it, dear?" she asked anxiously. "You cried out so loudly that I thought something dreadful had happened."

"Cried out! What?"

"Help! help!"

"Oh," said Paul, laughing, but shivering in spite of himself, "I was dreaming—that is all! I'm sorry to have disturbed you, mother."

The day following, the vacation was at an end, and Paul returned to Garside. It was an old, turreted building, dating a couple of centuries back. Flying from the west turret was a flag, known as the "old flag at Garside." It had a history which was dear to every boy in the school. It had been taken by Captain Talbot in the Crimea. The captain had formerly been a scholar at Garside. He died soon after of his wounds, and left the flag as a legacy to the school.

"Keep the flag flying at the old school," he said, almost with his last breath. And then God received his spirit.

The flag was very much stained, and had scarcely any of the original pattern remaining; but, none the less, the boys were prouder of that flag than any other decoration in the school.

Just as Paul came in sight of it flying from the turret, a timid voice sounded in his ear:

"Is that Garside, please?"

Paul, looking down at the speaker, saw a weak-looking, wizen-faced boy, with pale, thin cheeks, and one shoulder slightly higher than the other. In a word, he was a hunchback. Paul could not help a slight start as he looked at him. The boy was quick to notice it, and a slight wave of colour came to the pallid cheek. Paul was annoyed at himself for having betrayed astonishment, and answered kindly:

"Yes; that is Garside. Are you going there?"

The boy nodded.

"Very well; we'll go along together. Do you mind taking my arm? The fellows are rather a rough lot till you get to know them. Your first term, isn't it?"

The boy looked his gratitude as Paul took him by the arm.

"Yes; my first term," he said.

"Do you know anybody at the school?"

"Nobody. I'm quite a stranger."

He spoke with a foreign accent, and Paul wondered who he could be. At the same time he could not help pitying the solitary boy. He would have rather a sorry time of it amongst the other "Gargoyles."

"Well, youngster"—a junior was always "a youngster" in the eyes of his senior—"if I can be of help to you at any time, don't be afraid to come to me. What is your name?"

"Hibbert—Tim Hibbert. And—and if you don't mind, I'd like to know yours?"

Paul told him his name, and they entered the grounds together. A number of the boys had already arrived. Some stood in small groups, talking and laughing about incidents that had happened during the vacation. Others were playing at leapfrog, or chasing each other from pillar to post.

Those nearest to the gates paused in their games as Paul entered, and stared at the hunchback. Newall, a senior, said something about "Percival and his camel." The remark was as cruel as offensive. Paul did not mind for himself, but he did for his companion. He glanced at Hibbert, and again noticed the delicate colouring mount to the pale cheek. He had evidently caught the sense of Newall's remark, too.

"They have rough speech as well as rough ways, haven't they?" the boy remarked quietly.

"Some of them—yes; but you mustn't mind that. They're not such a bad lot, take them altogether."

Newall was one of the most arrogant boys at Garside. He had a rough tongue, and loved to domineer. You will always find your Newalls in every public school, no matter where it be. They are terrors to the nervous, sensitive boy; but they always succeed in attracting to themselves followers, lads of like dispositions to themselves.

Paul knew well enough that Newall intended the remark for his benefit, but he paid no heed to it. He looked round the ground in the hope of finding Stanley Moncrief, but saw nothing of him.

"Perhaps he's gone to meet that young cousin of his," he said to himself, as his mind went back to Oakville, and the never-to-be-forgotten evening on which he had met Harry Moncrief. Hibbert wished to be taken to Mr. Weevil the science master, as he was to receive his introduction to the school through that gentleman.

Paul accordingly took him to Mr. Weevil's rooms. He was fortunate enough to find the master in. He was a sallow-complexioned man, with thin, clean-shaven lips. He had a restless, hungry-looking pair of eyes, which went up quickly to Paul as he entered the room.

"What is it, Percival?"

"I've brought along a new boy, sir—Hibbert."

"Hibbert?" Mr. Weevil at once rose from his seat, and eyed the boy keenly; then his hand went out to the lad: "Welcome to Garside. You can leave us, Percival."

Thus summarily dismissed, Paul went out, leaving Hibbert and the science master together. It seemed as though the master were favourably impressed with the new boy—in spite of the fact that he was a hunchback.

"Bravo, Weevil! That's a point in your favour, at any rate. I didn't think that you had much pity for any one. Poor little chap!"

His heart went out in sympathy to the little hunchback. What a shadow his deformity must cast upon his life?

"They say that hunchbacks are spiteful, and I don't wonder at it. But Hibbert doesn't seem a spiteful sort of fellow. Where did he pick up that foreign accent, I wonder?"

As he thought of him, he could not help thinking how thankful he ought to be to God that he was healthy and straight of limb. It was not till he came in contact with poor, deformed creatures like Tim Hibbert that he understood God's goodness to himself.

"Not more than others I deserve,  
Yet Thou hast given me more,"

he said softly to himself as he returned to the ground.

He had not gone far before he saw Stanley Moncrief coming towards him. He was about Paul's age and height, with a like ruddy complexion, and frank, open face. The two chums were delighted to meet again, especially as so much had happened since their last meeting. Arm in arm they walked about the ground talking eagerly, when their conversation was suddenly interrupted by a shout of laughter from the other end of the ground.

"I say, Paul, that looks very much like my young cousin coming towards us," said Stanley, looking in the direction whence the laughter came. "What on earth has the little ass been doing with himself?"

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## CHAPTER VI

### HARRY MONCRIEF ARRIVES AT GARSIDE

Well might Stanley ask the question. His young cousin had attired himself in the most extraordinary fashion. His trousers—plaid ones—were turned up three or four inches at the bottom, as though for the purpose of displaying to the utmost advantage the white spats on his patent shoes, while surmounting the lower half of him was a gorgeous white waistcoat, cutaway jacket, and tall hat. Paul could not help smiling, for he at once saw the reason of this remarkable attire. Young Moncrief had followed out precisely the instructions sent him by his friend Plunger.

"He seems to have got himself up regardless of expense, Stan," smiled Paul. "He means making an impression on the school. But you needn't scowl so, old fellow. It's all done for your sake. He thinks it the correct form, and doesn't want to let you down."

"Correct form—don't want to let me down!" repeated Stanley, bewildered. "What on earth are you driving at?"

Thereupon Paul related to Stanley the conversation he had had with Harry on the day he had visited Oakville, and the mysterious document he had shown him from Plunger as to the correct way to dress, and what to do on entering Garside.

"And the little soft has nibbled at Plunger's bait," laughed Stanley. "It isn't a bad joke, and I suppose I mustn't spoil it."

So Stanley and Paul kept out of the way of the throng of boys who, with Harry Moncrief in their midst, were making their way across the grounds in

the direction of the schoolhouse. Harry, with his arm linked in Plunger's—a dark boy, with mischief-sparkling eyes—seemed quite unconscious of the fact that the boys were laughing at him.

"Bax is busy with some of the other freshers," Plunger was saying; "so you'd better get over your introduction to Mrs. Trounce, and we'll hunt up old Bax after."

"All right, Freddy," answered Harry, quite elated at the thought that he had at last entered a public school where there were boys bigger and older than himself, and that he was being initiated into its mysteries and ways. "After that I suppose I can find my cousin?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And there's a chum of his I met at home during the vac.—Paul Percival. Do you know him?"

"Ra-ther. He's one of the seniors—in the same form as your cousin. I didn't know that you knew him."

"I've only met him once, but I should like to meet him again. Pater thinks no end of him."

"Oh, you'll see plenty of him at Garside—a good deal too much. Those Upper Form fellows think no end of themselves, I can tell you. This way to the divine Trounce. You haven't forgotten?"

"Of course not; I've got all the rules by heart. See, here's the photo."

He drew from his pocket a photograph of himself as he spoke, with some writing on the bottom, which he handed to Plunger. The boys following behind grew black in the face trying to choke down their laughter.

"Jolly good of you, Harry!" exclaimed Plunger, regarding the photograph admiringly. "I didn't know you were such an awfully good-looking fellow. Trounce will think a lot of it, I can tell you."

The matron's rooms were a modern addition to the school, at the end of the building. Mrs. Trounce, who was at heart rather an amiable woman, was busily engaged in her room sorting out an endless array of boys' wearing apparel. Her motherly face, therefore, wore an unusually severe and worried expression as the boys entered the room. The windows outside were suddenly darkened with innumerable faces peering through the window.

"I have the honour—the distinguished privilege," said Plunger, with an elaborate bow to the matron, "of presenting to you Master Henry Moncrief, of Oakville."

Upon this he gave Harry a nudge, and Harry promptly fell on his right knee before the matron, and drawing from his pocket the photograph he had just shown to Plunger, presented it to Mrs. Trounce with a bow, and "Allow me, madam."

A titter came from the faces pressed against the windows outside. Mrs. Trounce took the photograph. The severity of her face did not relax, nor did it soften when, looking from the photograph, she saw the words beneath it, "With love and kind regards."

She looked for the moment as though she were about to administer to Harry a sound box on the ears, but, altering her mind, she bestowed it instead on the ears of Master Plunger.

"With my love and kind regards, Master Plunger!" she exclaimed.

The titters outside grew louder.

"Oh, thanks—so much!" said Plunger, with his hand to his ear at this totally unexpected reception, which he had anticipated to be the portion of his chum. "Come along, Harry; we won't waste any more of Mrs. Trounce's time. She's very busy. I'll show you your sleeping quarters, and then we'll hunt up Bax."

He beat a hasty retreat from the room, half anticipating that if he stayed longer the matron might seek to balance matters by boxing the other ear.

"Why did she do that, Freddy?" asked Harry, when they had got safely from the room.

"It was your photo that did it, Hal; that's quite certain. I noticed how she changed colour when she looked at it. It must have reminded her of some unhung scoundrel she's met with in the course of her career, and she took it out of me. She knows I like to suffer for my friends. That's my great weakness. I hope you'll make a better impression on Bax."

He led the way as he spoke through a winding passage and up the staircase to the dormitories. He entered one on the door of which was painted "E." It was a good-sized room, with six cubicles, side by side, with their heads to the windows. Over each was a text of Scripture, while on a larger card, at one end of the dormitory, in illuminated letters, were the words, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet." At the other end was a corresponding card, on which was printed, "Motto for the year, 'Be ye stedfast, unmovable.—1 Cor. xv. 58.'"

"There's your cubicle—next to mine; so that'll be jolly," said Plunger, pointing to a couple of beds at the end of the room. "The other fellows in the dorm. are Baldry, Sedgefield, and Viner."

"But that only makes three. There are four beds."

"Oh, yes! The fourth bed was Mellor's, but his pater took him away for some reason or other last term. He's gone over to the enemy."

"The enemy?"

"Don't you know who the enemy is? The Beetles—the bounders at St. Bede's. Pretty saints they are, too! You'll know enough of them before you've finished here, I warrant. They call us 'Gargoyles.' Cheeky bounders, aren't they?"

Before Hal had finished there! Lightly the words were spoken. Neither paid much heed to them. But how much was to happen before Hal Moncrief had finished at Garside. Neither could see into the future—behind that veil which young and old are ever trying to peer through, but which God in His infinite love and mercy keeps ever close drawn. That lamp of His—the lamp of which the card spoke at the end of the dormitory—is for ever burning, however, and there is no fear of our footsteps stumbling so long as we walk by its light. Then the dark veil which hides the future need have no terror for us, boys and girls; for we know that when it is at last lifted it will only reveal to us the still greater light beyond.

"Baldry and Sedgefield are decent fellows. I don't care much for Viner. He's rather deep, and does fagging now and then for Newall—a chap in the same form as your cousin. By the by, don't mention Newall to your cousin. It's like waving a red flag before a mad bull. They're this way."

He crossed his two forefingers as he spoke, as an indication of Stanley and Newall's attitude to each other.

Hal pondered over this information for a moment. His cousin, then, had his enemies? By the brief glimpse which Plunger had given him of the life at Garside, he could see that it was not all plain sailing. There were deeper

currents than any he had seen at Gaffer Quelch's school. The waves beat with stronger force, and there were shoals and rocks.

"Who'll take the empty bed? Will it be left empty?"

"There's not much fear of that. I wish there would, but they're sure to put some fresher in it. I hope he's a decent chap, that's all! If he isn't, we must make it warm for him. But come along, let's get outside!"

They turned to the door, but as they did so it opened, and Mr. Weevil entered, followed by Hibbert, the weak little hunchback, whom we have already met with in the grounds. The deep-set eyes of the science master went to Plunger, from Plunger to Hal, whom he had never seen before.

"Who are you? What are you doing here, sir?"

He spoke in a sharp, quick voice, and Harry knew at once that he was in the presence of one of the masters, and the same instinct somehow told him that the master was Mr. Weevil, of whom he had heard, but never seen.

"I'm Harry Moncrief, cousin of Stanley Moncrief, sir."

"Oh!" The master half closed his eyes as he spoke. Hal thought that he was going off to sleep as he stood there. Plunger knew better. He knew that Mr. Weevil had the habit of seeing a good deal more through his half-closed eyes than when they were wide open, and that he was taking "full stock"—a mental inventory—of Harry. He kept them closed for so long that Harry felt more and more certain that he was going to sleep. When he thought he was right off, the master startled him by opening them to their widest extent, as much as to say, "Thought me napping, did you? But I'm not! I'm awake!—wide awake!—very much awake!"

"Glad to meet you!" he said in a softer voice. "Trust you will get on well at Garside. Your father is a gentleman of some distinction. I hope you will

follow in his footsteps. This is Hibbert"—introducing the hunchback. "He also is a new boy. I trust you will be friends—close friends. He has no friends or relatives in England. His father is abroad on foreign service. That appeals to your sympathy, as it has appealed to mine—does it not?—and will draw you closer to Hibbert. He will occupy this dormitory—the bed vacated by Mellor." Then, turning to Hibbert: "I hope you will prove more loyal to Garside than your predecessor—Mellor, I mean—and that you will endeavour, along with Moncrief here, to keep up the best traditions of Garside. You see our motto for the year"—he pointed to the motto as he spoke—"Be ye stedfast, unmovable."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep to that, and you won't go far wrong."

When he had given this advice, the master left the dormitory with Hibbert, who, occupied in observing his new quarters and companions, had not spoken during the interview.

"A queer sort of chap, our new bedfellow, isn't it, Freddy?"

"And Weevil's a beastly fraud!" said Plunger, with a shrug of the shoulders. "But, come, we must hurry up! You haven't yet been introduced to good old Bax."

Soon they were in the grounds again. The same crowd of boys that had followed them to the matron's was hanging about the door as they went out, and began tittering again as Harry came in sight.

Harry did not notice them, nor did he notice the wink that Plunger gave them as he glanced in their direction.

"Great Scott!" he suddenly exclaimed. "There's Bax! Hurry up, Hal!"

And, linking his arm in Harry's, he hurried him in the direction of a short, somewhat corpulent man in buttons, who was just coming from the lodge.

"Is it the porter?" asked Harry.

"Yes, the porter. You haven't forgotten the rules? Hurry up!"

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## CHAPTER VII

### A BAD COMMENCEMENT FOR THE TERM

No need to tell Harry to hurry up. He was as anxious to introduce himself to the porter as Plunger could have been. So, running forward, he quickly gained the porter's side, and brought his hand down twice, vigorously, upon that worthy's shoulder, and, before Bax had recovered from his astonishment, dug the forefinger of his right hand sharply into his side, exclaiming:

"How do you do, Mr. Bax? Age, twelve—just turned; weight, five stone ten; biceps, eight inches; chest, twenty-eight; vaccinated, three places!"

The little porter grew purple in the face. He gasped for breath. When he had recovered, he returned the vigorous slaps he had received upon the back by a still more vigorous slap upon the head of Harry.

"Vaccinated in three places, are you, young gent. That will vaccinate you in four. Don't get practising any of your larks on Bax. He's not the one to stand it, young gent."

And, so saying, the porter strutted indignantly off. Harry had reeled under the vigorous blow of the porter; but just before he recovered, a hand came down on his top-hat, and crushed it over his ears, while a voice cried, amid roars of laughter, "Vaccinated in four places!"

As Harry with difficulty drew himself from under the crushed hat, he found himself confronted by the boy who had crushed it. It was Robert Newall—the boy who had taunted the hunchback. He was a big, strong-looking

fellow, with sandy hair, prominent nose, prominent teeth, and bold, self-confident face.

"Vaccinated in four places!" repeated Newall, with a mocking laugh. "What asylum have you escaped from, kiddie?"

"Who are you? What did you do that for?" gasped Harry indignantly, smoothing out his hat, and looking round helplessly for his friend Plunger. But now that one of the Senior Form had taken up the baiting, Plunger had been compelled to give way to him. He was only a cipher in the mob of laughing, jeering boys who had gathered round Harry.

"Chest, twenty-eight inches. What a Samson it is!" jeered Newall. "All your own?" He tapped Harry smartly on the chest with his knuckles, as though he were testing it. "Yes, genuine article. You're a wonder—a perfect wonder! And what's the biceps! Eight inches! Why, it's a regular Hercules! It isn't every day that a marvel like you comes to Garside; so walk round and show your muscle, kid."

Harry now saw that they were poking fun at him. His face was scarlet; he was quivering with indignation. He was choking. The tears seemed very near the floodgates. It was only with a strong effort he kept them back. He did not answer his tormentor, but stared at him blank-eyed.

"Did you hear what I said?" went on Newall. "Come, wake up—walk!"

With a flip of his hand he sent the hat which Harry had been trying to smooth out whirling amongst the throng of boys. There was a shriek of laughter as the hat was caught, and sent whirling in turn to another part of the throng. This was the finishing stroke to Harry. He burst into a flood of passionate tears. The public school boy holds in contempt the boy who cries. He regards it as girlish, unmanly.

"Oh, the fresher's a soft!" came from one in the throng.

"A soft, a soft!" passed from lip to lip. Plunger alone was dumb. He had not wished that the joke which he had begun at Harry's expense should go so far; but now that it had been taken from his hands he was powerless to stop it.

"Oh, it's a squealer—a dear little squealer! Has it brought its bib and tuck and feeding-bottle?" went on Newall, amid the laughter of his companions.

Harry tried to choke back the scalding tears, which were coursing down his cheeks.

"You're—you're a cruel brute!" came bursting from his lips.

"Oh, the little squealer's got a tongue, and it can speak! Come, come, walk!"

Harry did not stir. So Newall gave him a push which sent him over to one side of the throng, where another push sent him quickly back again. The sport was only at its commencement, when it was suddenly checked by Stanley Moncrief forcing his way through the throng, closely followed by Paul Percival.

They had been in the fives court while Plunger and Harry had been inside the schoolhouse, and it was not till their return to the ground that they caught sight of the throng of boys, of which Harry was the centre. On making their way towards it, Paul soon saw what was happening.

"They're baiting a fresher!" he exclaimed.

"And it's my young cousin!" cried Stanley.

He had no objection to a little fun at Harry's expense. Indeed, it was the ordeal which every new-comer to Garside had to go through in some form or other. But this seemed more than fun—more than a joke. Otherwise, his cousin would not be in tears. And it was not only the sight of his cousin in

tears—it was the sight of his tormentor—Newall, whom he cordially disliked.

"Stop that!" he cried, with flashing eyes and clenched fists, as he reached the centre of the throng. "He's my cousin!"

"Oh, your cousin, Moncrief!" answered Newall, resenting this intrusion on Stanley's part. "Nice little girl, isn't she? Heard her squeal?"

At a gesture from him, Viner—one of the boys who belonged to the dormitory in which Harry had been placed—stooped down at the back of the unsuspecting lad. Newall gave him a sudden push, with the result, of course, that he came to the ground over Viner's back. Unfortunately his head struck on the gravel, and when he scrambled to his feet again blood was flowing freely from a cut in his head.

Stanley Moncrief was a quick, hot-tempered lad, and his temper was now thoroughly aroused. Before Paul could check him, he sprang at Newall, when he saw what had happened to his cousin. The two wrestled for a moment, then separated.

Paul stepped in to stop fighting, but before he could do so Stanley had shot out his arm blindly. It passed over Paul's shoulder, caught Newall on the mouth, and sent him reeling to the ground.

Angry passions thus roused, it is impossible to say how the quarrel would have ended; but Mr. Weevil appeared on the scene, just as Newall had leapt to his feet, eager to return the blow Stanley had given him.

"What does this mean?" he demanded sternly. "Fighting?"

Not a word fell from the boys. The tumult had ceased as by magic.

"Do you hear me? I will stand no trifling! A nice commencement of the term. Taking advantage of the absence of Dr. Colville, eh?" came the stern

voice of the science master, as his eyes went round the group. Dr. Colville, the Head of Garfield, had been taken ill during the vacation, and had been ordered complete rest from his duties for another month or so by his medical adviser. In his absence the reins of government had fallen into the hands of Mr. Weevil, as second in command.

Still no answer from the boys. They were as silent as before. It seemed as though they had been smitten with sudden dumbness.

"Lost your tongues, eh? They were going briskly enough a minute since!" went on the master grimly. Then he paused, and fixed his eyes upon Stanley. "Moncrief major! It was you who started this disturbance. You struck Newall!"

"Yes, sir, I struck Newall," assented Stanley.

"Why?"

"Ask Newall, sir."

"I am asking you, sir!" came the sharp retort. "Why did you strike Newall? Quick, your answer!"

Stanley waited for Newall to speak; but Newall's lips, bleeding and swollen from the blow, were tightly compressed. He scarcely heard the master's words. He could only think of the blow he had received. It was rankling in his mind, and turning to bitter hate the ill-feeling that already existed between him and Stanley. It was the first seed of hate that in the time to come was to bring forth a bitter harvest of tares. Ah, boys, beware of the first seeds of hate! Pluck them from you, as you would your hand from the fire. Otherwise they will spring up so quickly that they will wind themselves, like poisonous weeds, round every fibre of your being, blighting and strangling all the better impulses of your nature, killing, above all, the choicest blossom that comes to us from the Divine garden—the

blossom of love. Where hate flourishes, love cannot be. There is no room for the two. Never since the world began have they ever flourished side by side—never since the seeds of hate were planted by the serpent in the first garden, the Garden of Eden. Beware, then, of the seeds of hate!

From a fine sense of honour, Stanley remained silent. Now that he had struck Newall he had no wish to implicate him. He began to feel some pity for him as he saw the blood slowly trickling from his mouth.

"Am I to understand that you refuse to speak, Moncrief?" demanded Mr. Weevil angrily. Stanley remained obstinately silent.

"Perhaps you will allow me to explain, sir!" began Paul.

Instantly Mr. Weevil swung round to him.

"Not a word, sir! Have the goodness to speak when you're spoken to. The explanation must first come from Moncrief. If he has not yet learned the lesson of obedience, he must begin to learn it. When he has given me his explanation, I shall be quite willing to hear whatever else has to be said. Now, Moncrief, I am waiting. It is your last chance."

He waited, but Stanley remained obstinately silent. Mr. Weevil's sallow face darkened.

"Very well; I'm very sorry, but I must teach you that I'm not to be defied simply because Dr. Colville is away. I must teach you that I mean to be obeyed during his absence. Perhaps a few hours in Dormitory X will bring you to your senses."

Dormitory X—a shortened form for "Extra Dormitory"—was a dormitory apart from all the rest in which, on rare occasions, a pupil was confined. It was not, as Mr. Weevil had said, a very good commencement for the term;

but Stanley saw that it was useless rebelling, so he submitted to his fate as cheerfully as he could.

"You haven't acted very well over this matter," said Paul, crossing over to where Newall was standing, as Stanley walked away a prisoner.

"Acted very well!" exclaimed Newall, all the passion that had been rankling within him surging up. "How do you mean?"

"You ought to have spoken up. Moncrief was waiting for you to speak."

"Speak!" cried Newall contemptuously. "Why should I have spoken? I didn't want to speak. All I wanted was to get that blow back that Moncrief gave me; and I'll have it back yet, if—if I die for it!"

He turned on his heel and walked away. There was so much passion and hatred in the words that even the lightest-hearted amongst the boys were impressed by them.

"Newall's got his dander up," said Sedgefield, a rather good-looking, fair boy, another of the occupants of Harry's dormitory. "And Weevil looked as though he meant business. What a start for the term!"

They strayed away one by one. Paul, turning over in his mind what had happened, thought he was alone. But presently he was conscious that some one was standing by his side. It was Harry Moncrief.

"Have you forgotten me, Percival?" the boy asked timidly, for his confidence in himself had been shaken by the events of the last half-hour.

"Oh, no; I beg pardon for not speaking to you. I'm glad to see you at Garside."

"And I—I'm beginning to be very sorry that I ever came here. I've made an ass of myself, and got Stan into a mess in the bargain. What's to be done?"

"Nothing—just yet. It won't hurt Stanley to be by himself a little while. I'm as much to blame as anybody, perhaps, as I ought to have put you on your guard against Plunger. But it's bad form here to spoil the fun of any one, and that is why I was silent. We shall all survive it. It doesn't hurt us to be laughed at sometimes. Most of us have had our turn at it; so don't be down in the mouth."

He linked his arm in Harry's, and under the influence of Paul's cheerful talk the younger boy threw off the depression that had begun to steal over him, and was more cheerful. And all the time he was speaking a strong resolve was silently forming in Paul's breast. Whatever happened he would visit Stanley in Dormitory X that night!

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## CHAPTER VIII

### FOR THE SAKE OF A CHUM

Nine—half-past! The clock in the tower had chimed the half-hour when lights were out in Paul's dormitory. In the senior dormitories there were only four beds—two less than in the junior. In that where Paul slept there were, therefore, three other occupants beside himself—Stanley Moncrief, Waterman, and Parfitt.

Parfitt was not on particularly good terms with most of the fellows. He was one of Newall's cronies. Waterman was an easy-going fellow, who was on friendly terms with everybody, so long as they did not disturb him too much. He was one of those indolent boys, with plenty of talent, if they only care to exercise it. The disposition to do so, however, only came by fits and starts. In another respect, too, he was like a great many other boys—ay, and girls, too—and that was—he would often go to a great deal more pains to avoid a difficulty than it would have caused him by boldly facing it. So true is the proverb that lazy people often take most pains.

Ten o'clock! Paul looked from his bed. There was the bed in which Stanley ought to have been sleeping—empty! Next to that, Waterman. He had been asleep for some time. Beyond his bed was Parfitt's.

Was he sleeping? Paul was not quite certain, but he thought he was. It would be better to wait a little longer, however. There was no hurry.

He could see in outline, on the wall beyond Parfitt's bed, the motto for the year, "Be ye stedfast, unmovable." He liked that motto. It had appealed to

him when he had first seen it on the wall, and he had often repeated it to himself since. He had repeated it frequently to himself that night.

"Be ye stedfast"—stedfast to his friend.

The empty bed beside him made him sad. Stan ought to have been resting there. By the stern decree of Mr. Weevil he had been turned from his bed, and was at that moment a prisoner, in solitary confinement. For what? Simply because he had refused to speak. Oh, it was bitterly unjust. If any one ought to have been sent to Dormitory X it was Newall, but he had escaped without even a word of blame.

Half-past ten! Paul listened again. He felt certain that Parfitt was at last sleeping; so he slipped out of bed as he had slipped into it—with his trousers and stockings on. He drew on his coat; opened the dormitory door, and glanced along the corridor. As he did so, the figure in the end bed moved, and glanced in the direction of Paul; then breathed hard, as though it were sleeping.

Paul, unconscious that Parfitt had seen him, passed into the corridor. Dormitory X was in the room next to that occupied by Mr. Weevil, on the floor above. Paul crept up the stairs. They seemed to creak horribly, but it was the silence of the building that magnified the sound to Paul's ears. He glanced along the passage. A light was still burning in Mr. Weevil's room. He could see it stealing faintly through a crack in the door.

"Studying late. Trying some scientific experiment, I expect. The fellows say that he burns the midnight oil a lot. That's what gives him such a sleepy look sometimes, I suppose. No wonder he's such a dab at science."

Paul knew that it was useless to try to get to Stanley along the passage. He might succeed in getting past the master's room, but what then? The door would be locked, and he could not pass through a locked door. Dormitory X

had a window looking on to the parapet outside, and it was by this window he hoped to gain Stanley's room. There was a small lavatory at the end of the corridor, and this likewise had a window leading to the roof.

"Be stedfast!" he whispered to himself, as he climbed through the window to the parapet. It was a rash thing to do—a wrong thing. Though Paul might have questioned the justice of what Mr. Weevil had done in putting his chum in Dormitory X., he had no right, from a chivalrous feeling of friendship, to run the risk of a foolhardy adventure at night. But Paul thought that he was right, and that, by visiting Stanley, he was interpreting in the best way he could the school motto, "Be stedfast."

There were but few stars in the heavens as he stepped on to the parapet. The wind blew freshly, and the clouds were scurrying quickly across the moon. It was a plain Gothic parapet, in keeping with the time-worn building. It rose a couple of feet above the gutter, and the latter, in turn, was nearly of the same width; so that there was not much difficulty in walking along it to the dormers.

Glancing along the gutter, Paul saw that the light was still burning in Mr. Weevil's room. The window beyond was in darkness. That was where Stanley was? Would it be possible for him to reach it without being seen by Mr. Weevil? He meant trying. Stealing cautiously along the gutter, he stopped within a yard or so of the master's window.

What was that? The sound of voices, and it came from Mr. Weevil's room.

"Chewing over science with one of the other masters," thought Paul. "It's jolly late to be talking that dry stuff. But hanged if I don't think Weevil talks it in his sleep; he's so hot on it. He ought to be amongst the fossils in the museum. I don't believe he's got any warm blood in him. He was never meant for a human being. Steady—steady."

He knelt on the gutter, and stretched himself along till he was just able to peer into the room. A lamp was burning on the table, on which were strewn a number of papers and documents. Over these two men were leaning, as though they were earnestly discussing their contents.

"Some musty old parchments from the Assyrians or the lost Ten Tribes, I expect," Paul told himself. "But who's the other fossil? I don't seem to know him. Not one of the masters here."

He could not see either of the faces very clearly as they bent over the documents; but one he knew to be Mr. Weevil's. The other was a stranger's.

"Why doesn't he look up?" Paul asked himself, growing curious.

The man was tracing something with his finger on the document before him, and Mr. Weevil was following the direction of his finger with the closest attention. Presently the man raised his head. In spite of himself Paul cried out. The men heard the cry, and he had only just time to draw back as they turned to the window.

Paul lay there breathing hard. Would he be found out? His heart beat violently as he heard footsteps approach the window. It was opened, and the head of the master thrust out. Paul thought that he must be found out. There seemed no help for it. He gave himself up for lost. Fortunately, the light of the moon was quite obscured at this moment, and Paul seemed only a part of the shadows that were flitting over parapet and roof.

"It sounded very much like the cry of a human being," said the master, peering out, "but it couldn't have been. It must have been the wind, or a night-bird."

Then, to Paul's inexpressible relief, he heard the window close. Some seconds elapsed, however, before he ventured to look up. He feared, in spite of the closed window, to find the eyes of the master fixed upon him. Should

he turn back? No; that would be acting the coward's part. Besides, he must catch another glimpse of the face he had seen.

Presently he heard the murmur of voices within, and knew that the two had resumed their interrupted interview. So, taking his courage in both hands, Paul peeped once more into the room.

Yes, he was sure of it. The man with whom Mr. Weevil was talking was Israel Zuker, the German Jew—the man who had tried to wrest from him Mr. Moncrief's letter—the man for whom he believed his father had sacrificed his life!

Why had Zuker come there? Paul would have given a good deal to know what the two were talking about, but not a word of their conversation reached his ears. They were bending low, and spoke in little more than whispers. For one thing, that was an advantage. They were so earnestly engaged in conversation, that they were the less likely to notice anything that happened outside. Paul therefore determined not to put off any longer the effort to reach Stanley.

He crept quickly to the other side of the window, then waited. He could still hear the hum of voices, so he felt sure that he had not been seen.

"Now for old Stan. I'm sure he won't be asleep."

Paul crept close to the window, and tapped on it with his nail.

"Who's there?" said Stanley.

The window was cautiously opened, and Paul slipped into the room.

"Paul! You don't mean to say it's you!" exclaimed Stanley as their hands met in the darkness. "What's brought you here?"

"To see you, of course."

"Well, you can't see much of me, I'm thinking, by this precious light; so, if you won't mind me saying it, old chap, it was silly of you to come."

"No it wasn't. I couldn't bear the thought of your moping here by yourself, and it was a ghastly shame of Weevil to send you."

"Oh, come to think of it quietly, he was right enough! I dare say I could have got out of the pickle by speaking, but I was obstinate. Solitude isn't so bad," he added cheerfully. "It helps you to chew the cud of reflection."

"And a bitter cud it is sometimes. That's why I've come. It's better for two to try their teeth on it than one."

"It's very good of you, Paul, coming to me. Is Harry all right?"

"Oh, he's all right, though he was rather cut up at your having to come here for him. It's Newall you'll have to look out for. He won't be satisfied till he's paid back that blow you gave him. He told me as much."

"What did he say? Tell me the exact words."

"After you had gone away with Mr. Weevil, I told Newall what I thought—that he had acted meanly in not speaking up. 'Why should I have spoken?' he burst out. 'I didn't want to speak. All I wanted was to get that blow back that Moncrief gave me; and I'll have it back, if I die for it!'"

A sound of footsteps could be heard in the next room. In his desire to console Stanley in his solitude, Paul had said nothing about what he had seen in the master's room, though it had been uppermost in his mind all the time he had been speaking to Stanley.

"Hallo! What's that? Weevil's guest on the move. Who is he, I wonder?"

"Hush! Not so loud!" cautioned Paul, clutching Stanley by the arm. "You would never guess. You remember what happened to me on the night I took

that packet to Oakville?"

Paul had confided to his chum all that happened on that night.

"Don't I? And I'm not likely to forget it in a hurry. I only wish that I'd been with you then, just as you're with me now. What about it?"

"What about it? Why, the man in the next room is Israel Zuker."

"Paul!" cried Stanley, rising to his feet in amazement.

"Hush—don't I tell you!"—again clutching him by the arm, and pressing him to his former position. "Israel Zuker! I'm sure of it."

"But what can he want with Mr. Weevil, and what can Weevil want with him?"

"Ask me another. That's what floors me. Listen! Weevil is letting him out."

They remained perfectly silent, as they listened to the footsteps in the passage; at first they were quite close, then they died away. Presently they heard Mr. Weevil returning alone. He paused as he was on the point of entering his own door, as though struck with an idea.

"What's he up to now?" whispered Paul.

They could hear the master enter the next room; then come out again. He stopped at Dormitory X.

In another moment the light of a candle could be seen through a crevice in the door, and a key was put in the lock.

"He's coming here!" exclaimed Stanley.

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## CHAPTER IX

### GOOD ADVICE

Instantly Paul crept under the bed, while Stanley as quickly crept in. Not an instant too soon, for the next moment the door opened and Mr. Weevil, candle in hand, entered. He held the light up, and glanced round the room; then came softly to the bed, and glanced down at Stanley.

Stanley feigned sleep, but directly the light fell on his face he started up as though suddenly wakened, and, staring at the master with bewildered eyes, cried:

"Where—where am I? What—what's the matter? Oh, it's Mr. Weevil. I beg your pardon, sir; but you so startled me. Is anything wrong?"

"No; nothing wrong." Then the master added with a grim smile: "I only wanted to see if you were quite—comfortable."

"As comfortable as one can be in a place like this, sir."

"It was your own fault you came here, remember, and it is an easy matter for you to come out. I hope you've decided to give me an explanation tomorrow of that disgraceful scene I witnessed in the grounds."

Stanley did not answer; and Mr. Weevil went out, locking the door once more behind him. It was not till he had gained his room that Paul crept from under the bed.

"I put him off the scent, didn't I?" whispered Stanley. "If I hadn't started up like I did, he would have looked under the bed. I'm certain he would."

"Very likely. The fat would have been in the fire then, with a vengeance. But how about the explanation he asks for? Why not? A few words will do it."

"It's not coming from me, if I stick here the term through," came the dogged answer. "Let Newall speak first; I'll follow."

Paul knew that it was extremely difficult to move Stanley from his purpose, when once he had decided on it. So he did not press the matter further just then, hoping that the morning would bring some change in the situation. His mind went back to the scene in the next room, and Stanley's went in the same direction, for the next moment he changed the subject by asking:

"How did Weevil get to know that man Zuker, I wonder?"

"That's what puzzles me. The only explanation I can see is that Weevil came across him in his travels, and is rubbing up his German by talking with him. Or perhaps they're interested in the same branch of science."

"It's rather a late hour to patter German or science, isn't it?"

The same thing occurred to Paul, but he could think of no other explanation of the mystery.

"I wonder if the light's out now?"

Paul climbed to the dormer, and, gently opening the window, looked along to that of the next room. It was now in darkness.

"Well, now you had better get back to your own bed," said Stanley, when Paul had communicated to him the news.

"I've come here for a night's lodging, and you're not going to be so hard-hearted as to turn me out."

Stanley did not speak—in fact, he would have found it difficult at that moment. The fidelity of his friend appealed to him as few things could have done. It made him feel awfully soft, like a big girl or one of the kids in the junior forms. A senior schoolboy has always a great aversion to the display of emotion. He has a notion that it's unmanly and weak; so that when Stanley did speak he assumed a gruffness he was far from feeling.

"Well, you're a muff—that's all I've got to say. I kick in my sleep sometimes—fearfully; so if you should find yourself on the floor in the night time, don't say that I haven't warned you."

Paul smiled as he coiled himself up by the side of his chum; and soon they were fast asleep. Paul woke up at daybreak, and having expressed a hope that he would see Stanley back in his place that day, returned without mishap to his dormitory. The light was only just stealing into the room as he entered. His three companions seemed to be sleeping as placidly as they had done when he left them.

"I wonder if I've been missed?" he asked himself, as he looked at the sleepers. "I don't think so."

Had he seen the figure in the end bed—the same that had watched him the night before—open his eyes cautiously, and watch him curiously when his back was turned, he would have come to a different conclusion. However, he was just as unconscious that Parfitt was watching him as he had been the night before. He lay down for another hour, then rose before first bell had sounded, washed, dressed, and went out into the grounds.

Early as it was he found Harry Moncrief there before him. He wore rather a dejected appearance.

"I've had a beastly night, Paul," he said, coming forward to greet him. "I couldn't sleep thinking of Stan. It's the longest night I've ever had, and all

the other fellows were snoring like steam-engines, except that new chap, Hibbert. I rather fancy Plunger had been playing pranks with his bed, but he didn't shout out or take on; so he was pluckier than I was. Do you think the fellows here will look down on me for snivelling?"

"I cannot say. I hope so. Is young Hibbert out?"

"He's somewhere about the ground, I think."

Paul searched about the ground, but could see nothing of him. He turned into the field adjoining, and there he found him, sitting on the trunk of a tree, quite apart from the other boys, with his face resting on his hands.

"He's just as soft as young Moncrief, but he's too proud to show it. He's been crying, I know."

If the boy had been, he brushed away all sign of it when he heard Paul's footsteps, and started quickly to his feet. The frightened look in his eyes disappeared when he saw who it was. They grew quite bright in an instant.

"What are you doing here, youngster?" said Paul kindly, placing a hand upon the boy's shoulder. "You're not going to be a moper, are you? That will never do."

"A moper? No; but I'm different, I think, from most other boys. God has made me different, you see"—with a feeble attempt at a smile, as he glanced at his shoulder, "I don't care for the games most boys care for, and—and I like quiet places like this, away from the crowd."

Paul could not help a feeling of pity as he followed the boy's glance to his deformed shoulder. He was acutely sensitive to his deformity, and that, perhaps, was the main reason why he shrank from the society of other boys—why he preferred solitude.

"Have the youngsters in your dormitory been ill-treating you?" he asked, regarding Hibbert closely as he put the question.

"Oh, no!" came the quick answer. "They've had their fun, of course, which I enjoyed as much as any of them. I never mind a joke—indeed I don't; so don't think they put upon me."

Paul did not inquire what the jokes were. It was not well to inquire too curiously into the jokes of the juniors. He had been through that mill himself. Besides, though he pitied Hibbert, he didn't want to encourage him to tell tales out of school, especially as the boy seemed averse to the practice.

"You're a plucky little chap and as good as you're plucky, I'll warrant."

"Good—good? No, don't say that!" cried Hibbert, so earnestly that Paul could not help regarding him in wonder.

He stood with his thin hands pressed tightly into each other, so that the nails seemed piercing into his flesh; and the eyes that looked into Paul's were quite wild and restless. In that moment it flashed into Paul's mind that he had seen eyes like Hibbert's before, but where he could not for the life of him make out.

"Well, I won't say it if you don't like it," he laughed; "but you're the first one I've ever met with who objected to being thought good. I won't ruffle your feathers again. Come, let's get back to the ground!"

On entering the ground one of the first they came across was Newall, along with his crony, Parfitt. Remembering the cruel jibe Newall had flung at Hibbert on the previous day, and what had afterwards happened between him and Stanley, Paul tried to avoid him. He felt as though he could hardly trust himself in his presence. But Newall would not be avoided. He came straight to them, and great was Paul's surprise when he said:

"I think the advice you gave me yesterday was right enough, Percival. I ought to have spoken when the master asked for an explanation of the shindy between Moncrief and me. It might have saved him a night in that solitary hole—Dormitory X. But I mean speaking up this morning."

"I'm very glad to hear it. I'm sure it's the right thing. Moncrief will be as pleased as I am."

"Do you think so? Well, I'm glad of that; and I'm glad you think it's the right thing. I've slept on it, and that's what it's come to. Do you know, Percival, I'm beginning to think you an authority on the right thing to do? Parfitt is of the same mind. We were talking it over as you came up, so your ears must have been burning."

Paul regarded him quickly. Was he in jest or earnest? His face was perfectly grave; so was the face of Parfitt.

"Thanks for your flattering opinion. I shall know exactly how much to take to myself after you've spoken to Mr. Weevil."

In spite of the apparent frankness of his manner and sincerity of tone, Paul could not help thinking that Newall was quietly mocking him—that he had no intention whatever of speaking to the master.

"That's the boy who called me a dromedary," said Hibbert, as they turned away. "I shan't forget him. He has a cruel face."

Hibbert spoke with more bitterness than Paul had yet heard from him, and there was a sparkle in his eyes, which sometimes had so much pain in them, that Paul had never seen in them before.

"Now, look here, youngster, if you're going to remember every rough word you hear at Garside, you'll have to have a very good memory. So take my advice, forget all the things that aren't worth remembering, and remember

only those that are. The jibe that fell from Newall isn't worth remembering. It's one of the things to forget. Promise me that you'll forget it?"

"I'll try, as you ask me," said the boy sincerely, "though it'll be jolly hard. Things worth remembering! Yes, I know of one—your kindness. I shall always remember that."

And before Paul could answer him he was gone.

"A queer little beggar!" thought Paul. "He's got a good heart, though, in spite of the queer outside of him. Poor little chap, how lonely he seems!"

Paul was more anxious than he had been for a long time for school to begin that day. It seemed for the sole purpose of thwarting him that it commenced later instead of earlier. Instead of commencing at the usual hour only one of the masters out of the six entered as the clock struck nine. Ten minutes elapsed, and still no masters. The boys commenced talking in whispers. What had happened? Something was wrong. An accident must have happened. Or could it be that the illness of the Head had taken a turn for the worse?

Paul feared that the absence of the masters must be in some way due to Stanley. Perhaps they had discovered the visit he—Paul—had paid him in the night. Perhaps they were discussing what was to be done with him. These and a hundred other suspicions flashed through his mind as he waited the entrance of the masters.

The hubbub in the school had grown louder. The boys no longer talked in whispers; their tongues were wagging loudly. Mr. Travers, the master in charge, made no effort to restrain them. He was himself talking to one of the Sixth Form boys.

Suddenly, however, he broke off, and pressed the bell.

"Silence!" he cried.

In an instant the hubbub of voices ceased, as the door opened and the masters, headed by Mr. Weevil, entered the room.

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## CHAPTER X

### TORN FROM THE BLACK BOOK

Mr. Weevil came to his desk. The other masters took up their positions at the head of the different forms. Mr. Weevil half closed his eyes for an instant; then, opening them, fixed them fully upon the eager boys before him as he said:

"I have a few words to say to you before work commences, boys, and I regret to say they are not of a very pleasant character. A most discreditable act—a criminal act—has been committed since we last met in this hall. This desk"—he turned from the boys to the desk, and brought his hand down upon it sharply—"has been forced open during the night, and five pages torn from the Black Book. That is not all. Admiral Talbot—one of the esteemed governors of this school—has offered a valuable prize, as you are all aware, for the best essay on 'The Invasion of Great Britain.' I have taken a great interest in the subject, and had prepared a few notes, together with a rough plan of the attempt made by the Dutch under Admiral Tromp to reach these shores. Those notes have gone."

The boys glanced from one to the other as Mr. Weevil paused. Who was guilty? They had no great love for the Black Book, for in the pages of that black-bound ledger were entered the names of every culprit who had been guilty of breaking the rules and had received punishment at the hands of the masters. It could be brought forward at any time in evidence against them. They would willingly have stood by and seen it burnt, but forcing open the master's desk, stealing from it important papers, and tearing leaves from the dreaded book was another matter. It was theft—theft, too, under its worst

guise, for the desk had been opened at night-time, when the rest of the school were supposed to be sleeping.

"The last entry I made in this book," went on Mr. Weevil, holding up the Black Book, "was last evening, immediately after school was over. I had entered in it the reason of my sending Moncrief to Dormitory X. Before returning the book to its place, I glanced through my notes; then placed the book on top of them, and locked the desk. I entered the room about half-past eight this morning, and, on going to my desk, at once found that it had been opened—for what despicable purpose I have explained to you. In the absence of Dr. Colville, I consulted with my colleagues—your masters. That is the reason why the school has not commenced at the usual hour. We have looked at the matter in every way, and can only come to the conclusion that some one amongst you has been guilty of this petty felony. The culprit is pretty well sure to be found out in the long run, so that it will be much better for him to speak up now. The longer he keeps silent, the heavier will be his punishment. Now, then, I am waiting."

Deep silence fell upon the school. Still, the boys glanced from one to the other. Parfitt flashed a look along the form to where Paul was sitting. Baldry quietly pinched Plunger, and Plunger returned the compliment by kicking him under the form; but no word broke the silence.

Failing to get an answer to his appeal, Mr. Weevil tried another plan.

"Did any boy leave his dormitory after lights were out last night?"

A struggle went on in Paul's breast for a moment. Should he speak, or should he remain silent? If he spoke he would bring upon himself the terrible suspicion that he had broken open the master's desk, and had torn out the leaves in which were recorded the punishment of Stanley Moncrief. It was well known also that he was one of the competitors for the essay prize.

And then if he confessed the real reason of his absence from his dormitory, who would believe him? Certainly not Mr. Weevil. How could he convince him that he was in Dormitory X that night, for had he not crawled under the bed at the time he looked in? Should he speak—should he speak? Again and again Paul asked himself the question. Why should he? What had his absence from his dormitory to do with the theft from the master's desk? He had been nowhere near the master's desk, so what was the use of speaking? Looking up, he caught the glance of Parfitt.

"What the deuce is Parfitt glaring at me for?" he thought. "Is it possible that he could have seen me leave the dormitory?"

As he put to himself the question, the voice of Mr. Weevil once more broke the silence:

"Does any boy know whether any of his companions was absent from his dormitory last night? Don't let him keep silent under any false notion of honour. It is for the honour of the school that he should speak. If he speaks, I will take care that no punishment falls upon him."

Paul sat rigid as stone. If Parfitt saw him leave the dormitory, now was his time to speak; but no voice broke the silence.

"Very well; I had hoped that the culprit would own up to his fault, or that we should have had assistance from some of you to find him out. I am disappointed in my expectation. As I have been unable to find the culprit with your assistance, I must do so without it. And be sure I will," added Mr. Weevil firmly.

Prayers were said and a hymn sung, and the boys were on the point of filing out to the different class-rooms, when Newall stepped up to Mr. Weevil's desk.

"I hope Moncrief isn't to be kept in Dormitory X any longer, sir," he said.

"What's it to do with you—eh?"

"You forget, sir. I was in the row. I ought to have spoken at the time; it was I really started the row—not Moncrief."

"You, was it? Let me hear how it all happened."

"Well, I was chaffing a new boy, and the new boy happened to be Moncrief's cousin. It upset Moncrief, and I ought to have left off; but I didn't. I kept it up, and that's how it was Moncrief came to strike me."

"Well, it's very honourable of you to own up to it. If every boy in the school was as honest as you, Newall, we should soon find out who was the culprit who went to my desk. Moncrief was guilty of a Quixotic act of disobedience, as it turns out, and I think, in the circumstances he has been sufficiently punished. It is due to you that he is released."

Newall was quite the hero of the school that morning. He had done a manly thing in speaking up for Moncrief. That was the general opinion. Paul thought the same. He had scarcely expected Newall would act up to the promise that he had given him, but he had carried it out to the letter. He had, somehow, never liked him, but he couldn't be such a bad sort of fellow, after all.

"I must try to get over my prejudice against him," he thought.

So Stanley came back to his form, looking none the worse for the night he had spent in Dormitory X.

It was not, however, till he and Paul were in the grounds that they had the chance of speaking together.

"I thought Weevil meant keeping me in that wretched dormitory another day and night," Stanley said, as Paul cordially greeted him. "How did he come to let me out, I wonder?"

"Guess."

"Have you been speaking up for me?"

"No; Mr. Weevil wouldn't listen to me yesterday, and he wouldn't have listened this morning. Guess again."

"My young cousin, I suppose," answered Stanley, after a moment's reflection. "Has he been crying to Weevil?"

"Wrong again."

"Oh, bother! I give it up, then! Who was it?"

"You would never guess. Newall!"

"What?" Stanley stared at Paul incredulously.

"Fact—Newall. And he did it very well, too. He owned up frankly before the masters and all the school that it was he who commenced the quarrel."

"Why, I thought he told you that he wouldn't speak?"

"So he did; but he has altered his mind, you see. He told me he was going to speak, but I couldn't believe my ears till I actually heard him. A night's reflection has done him good, though he hadn't the benefit of a change of air in Dormitory X. It's really very decent of him, and I rather fancy if I were in your place——"

He paused, as though reflecting on what he should do if he were in Stanley's place.

"Well, if you were in my place—go on."

"I should go up to Newall and shake hands with him."

"Would you really?" said Stanley haltingly. "I—I—don't think I can do that, Paul. There's so much bad blood between us."

"All the more reason you should shake hands. It's wonderful what a shake of the hands does for bad blood. It's the finest leech in the world—takes all the bad blood out."

"Oh, you're a better fellow than I am, and can do that sort of thing. I can't!"

"Nonsense! It's like a plunge into cold water—quite nice when the plunge is once made. Come along! I'll go with you."

He tucked his arm in Stanley's, and together they went in search of Newall. They found him with Parfitt and another companion. Stanley walked up to him.

"I hear that it's through you, Newall, I've got out of that den I was in last night. You've done me a good turn, and, if—if—you don't mind, I'd like to shake hands with you."

He held out his hand as he spoke, but Newall took no notice of it. He looked straight at Stanley.

"I really didn't know that I'd done you a good turn. What was the good turn?"

"Speaking up for me this morning to Mr. Weevil, and getting me out of that wretched dormitory."

"Oh, that"—he broke into a mocking laugh—"that! You call that a good turn?"

A wave of scarlet came to Stanley's face. The extended hand fell to his side. He looked to Paul. Had his friend deceived him? Was this only a ruse on his part to make him shake hands with Newall, or had Newall taken leave of his

senses? He could learn nothing from Paul's face, except that it looked just as mystified as he was.

"Certainly it was a good turn. I thoroughly upset Weevil yesterday, and goodness knows how much longer he would have kept me a prisoner if you hadn't spoken up for me, as Percival here tells me you did."

"Of course he did," put in Paul cheerfully. "He spoke up to Weevil like a brick. It's no use trying to hide your light under a bushel, Newall."

"Yes, it's true enough I spoke up to Weevil"—the mocking laughter had died out of Newall's eyes, and there was now a cruel, vindictive light in them, just as there had been when Paul had spoken to him the day before—"and it's true enough I wanted to get you out of that hole in the roof. But it wasn't to shake hands with you. Not at all. I got you out of that den so that I might meet you squarely face to face."

Stanley began to understand. It was not from any kindly motive Newall had spoken up for him that morning. The bitterness of his words now told him that, and the vindictiveness in his eyes spoke even plainer than speech. Paul had been deceived, and he had been deceived. Why had he demeaned himself by asking a fellow like Newall to shake hands with him? He ought to have known better from past experience.

"You understand?" went on Newall in the same bitter tone. "Oh, yes, I see you do. You struck me a blow. The marks of it are still here, you see"—pointing to his lip, which was discoloured and cut. "I'm glad of it. It kept me awake last night, thinking of you. And when I looked at myself in the glass this morning, I thought of you again. It's nice to have a memento of your friends, don't you think so?"

Stanley did not answer. What answer was possible to these mocking jibes? Paul was silent, too. All power of speech seemed taken from him.

"Well, I mean having that blow back—the cowardly blow you gave me over Percival's shoulder. I could give it to you now"—his fist was clenched as though he would have dearly liked to make good his words—"but that would only mean that one or the other would be sent to the den from which I've just rescued you. That would be idiotic and make matters worse."

"You mean to say that you don't wish to end the quarrel between us. You wish to fight it out to the bitter end?" demanded Stanley, at last finding voice.

"You've got it!" came the slow, firm answer—"to the bitter end!"

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## CHAPTER XI

### FOR THE HONOUR OF THE FORM

Paul was grieved at the turn things had taken. Just at the moment when he thought the quarrel ended it had burst out again in a deadlier form. Stanley was very pale. His hands were clenched, as were the hands of Newall, and the passion that distorted the one face was reflected in a lesser degree in the other. Hate never was, and never will be, a beautifier of the face. Like some subtle acid, it makes ugly lines. You will never see those lines in a beautiful or noble face, boys and girls. So, if you want to keep from getting ugly, never hate.

Stanley was not only angry at the jibes of Newall, but angry at being led into a false position.

"I really had no wish to shake hands with you. I'm just as keen on fighting it out as you are," he began.

"One minute," interrupted Paul, stepping between them. "Let me have a word."

"You get out of it, and speak when you're spoken to!" cried Newall roughly. "It was through you coming between us that I got this beauty-spot yesterday"—pointing to his swollen lip. "Hadn't you poked your nose in where it wasn't wanted this wouldn't have happened, and I would have given a good account of myself."

"Sorry, and yet, come to think of it, I'm rather glad," answered Paul calmly, and not receding an inch from the position he had taken up.

"Glad! How do you mean?"

"Why, if it was through me you got that blow, your quarrel's with me, and not Moncrief. What's the use of trying to pay back to him what you owe to me?"

This was a novel way of looking at the dispute which had not occurred to Newall. As he was not ready with an answer, Paul went on:

"Besides, it was you who got me to speak to Moncrief on—excuse me saying so—false pretences. I thought you wanted to end the quarrel, to shake hands with him, and have done with it. It wasn't shaking hands you wanted, it seems, but clenched fists. I brought him here on a fool's errand; so the quarrel's mine, not his."

Stanley wished to step in again, but Paul gently yet firmly held his ground.

"I don't understand quite what you're driving at," said Newall. "It's a bit of a riddle; but if you want a thrashing as well as your friend, I dare say you can be obliged, but he comes first. Let him speak for himself. You can speak for yourself after. Now, Moncrief, no more shirking."

"It's my quarrel, I say," Paul answered in the same firm tone, and still keeping Stanley back. "Of course, you think different, and Moncrief here thinks different, so let's appeal to the Form."

"What's that?" cried Newall.

"Appeal to the Form. The fellows will see things clearer than we can."

The suggestion took Newall's breath away.

"You really mean it?"

"I really mean it."

Newall thought a moment. An appeal to the Form was altogether a new thing, but as he had not the slightest doubt as to which way they would decide, why should he not fall in with it?

"Does Moncrief agree to that?" Stanley nodded.

"Very well; let it be as you say, Percival—an appeal to the Form."

Paul, gratified that the quarrel had received a momentary check, was turning away with Stanley, when Parfitt, who had scarcely spoken throughout the scene, touched him on the shoulder.

"One minute. Just a little word with you."

He used in effect the same words as Paul had used when he stood between Newall and Stanley.

"Didn't you find it rather cold in the corridor last night—eh?" he asked, with a meaning smile.

Before Paul could answer, Parfitt followed in the footsteps of Newall.

Cold in the corridor last night? What did Parfitt mean? The instant Paul put to himself the question the answer came to him—Parfitt must have seen him leave the dormitory in the night. Was there anything else in his question? Yes, he felt sure there was something behind it.

"What was it, Paul? What did he want with you?" asked Stanley, coming up to him.

"He wanted to know whether I was in the corridor last night. I thought all the fellows were asleep, but he must have been awake, playing the spy."

"What of it? You're not the first fellow who's been in the corridor after 'lights out' by long chinks."

"It was not that—it was not being in the corridor, and Parfitt knowing it—troubles me. But there's something else—much worse—a beastly insinuation. Phew!"

The air seemed to have suddenly grown oppressive to Paul. He was no longer the calm, cool, self-reliant fellow who had stood between Stanley and Newall.

"Beastly insinuation! What?"

"You do not know what has happened. While I was with you in Dormitory X some one entered the big hall, broke open Weevil's desk, took out the Black Book, and tore from it the last five pages. That wasn't all. The culprit, whoever he was, took away some rough notes and plans Weevil had made on the subject of the prize essay, 'The Invasion of Great Britain.' Well, do you see now what Parfitt means to insinuate? He means to insinuate that I am the culprit—that I was the one who broke open Mr. Weevil's desk, tore the leaves from the Black Book, and stole the master's notes."

"No, no; it can't be!" exclaimed Stanley, aghast.

"It can be, and is; I am sure of it. That is the reason why Parfitt called me aside in such a mysterious manner."

"The mean cad! But supposing he does wish to insinuate such a dastardly thing, you've an easy answer. Are you forgetting what you said just now—you were with me last night in Dormitory X?"

"I'm not forgetting, Stan. It's you. Supposing I confessed what actually happened—that I was with you, and did not go near the master's desk last night; and supposing you said exactly the same thing—what then? You forget what happened. Mr. Weevil looked in the dormitory, you remember; looked round the dormitory, you remember, and spoke to you. He saw nothing of me, because I was hiding. If I said that I was in Dormitory X last

night, therefore, the master himself would accuse me of falsehood; and he would have the same answer for you if you backed me up."

Stanley did not at once answer. He could now see clearly enough the false position in which his friend had been placed in coming to share with him in his punishment. But he could only see the chivalry of it. He did not see that the step, chivalrous though it might be, had been a wrong step, and was bringing in its train the consequences of wrong-doing.

"Mr. Weevil questioned the school this morning before you returned," Paul went on. "'Had any one left his dormitory during the night?' he asked. Perhaps I ought to have spoken then; but I let the chance go."

"And Parfitt did not speak?"

"No; but I can see plainly enough now that it wasn't out of any kindness to me. He kept quiet so that he should hold the secret over me like a whip. He gave me the first taste of the thong just now, and—and—it cuts into a fellow."

Stanley could see the pain in Paul's face, as though he could feel the thong descending upon his shoulders at that moment. He, too, could feel something of the same pain. His head fell to his breast. He blamed himself for having been the cause of all this misery. But suddenly he looked up again, and his face brightened.

"The game's ours!" he cried.

"What do you mean?"

"You twitted me just now about forgetting things, but we've both forgotten something—Weevil and Zuker. You've forgotten what you saw in the master's room when you came to me last night."

"Supposing I had; how does that help?"

"Cannot you see?" went on Stanley, quite excited. "Let's put our heads together for a moment and work it out. Supposing you go to Weevil and tell him straight out that you weren't in your dorm last night, but with me. He contradicts you point-blank. 'You could not have been with Moncrief, because I looked in at his dormitory at midnight and saw that no one else was there.' Then you bring forward your next piece, and cry, 'I think I can prove to you, sir, that I was in Dormitory X last night.' 'Your proof, quick!' 'My proof is that as I was passing by your room I happened to glance in at the window, and saw you with another gentleman—ahem!—looking over some papers.' Check! You have the master on toast, Paul. The case for the defence will be clear. Do you follow me?"

Paul did not answer. He saw that this was one solution of the problem; but he was not certain that it was the best.

"Well, what are you thinking about, old chap? Your face is as long as a fiddle."

"Your suggestion is a good one, Stan," answered Paul slowly, as though he were still following his thoughts; "but I don't think that I'll act upon it—just yet."

"Why not?"

"Let's work my reasons out as you worked yours—shall we? Reason number one: We have cause to be suspicious of Mr. Weevil, the master in charge of this school during the absence of the Head. Heaven grant that our suspicions may be wrong, but we have reason to suppose that he is in league with a traitor. Am I clear, Stan?"

"Quite."

"Reason number two: If I told Mr. Weevil what I saw through his window on my way to you I might clear myself, but it would at once put him on his

guard, and we should never have another chance of proving whether our suspicions are true or false. Is that clear, too?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, thirdly and lastly: Don't you think it will be better to keep what we know up our sleeves for the present, in view of what may come after?"

"You're right, Paul, as you always are!" exclaimed Stanley enthusiastically.

"No, old fellow, there is only One who is always right," answered Paul earnestly. "We're always patting ourselves on the back and fancying ourselves mighty clever; but we're not. We're asses—always slipping and tumbling about, and when not doing that, running down the wrong road and butting our stupid heads against posts or walls. Asses, all of us—some big, some little."

"Where do you come in, Paul?" laughed Stanley.

"Amongst the mediums," Paul laughed back; but as he turned towards the school his face grew grave again. He had tried to reason things out, but the way before him did not seem so clear as he could have wished. There were pitfalls before him, into one of which he might stumble at any moment. And as he thought there came to him the lines of a hymn he had often heard his mother sing:

"Lord, bring me to resign  
My doubting heart to Thee;  
And, whether cheerful or distressed,  
Thine, Thine alone to be.  
My only aim be this—  
Thy purpose to fulfil,  
In Thee rejoice with all my strength,  
And do Thy Holy will."

Entering the school, he sought out Hasluck, head of the Fifth. He was a quiet, studious boy, with glasses. He did not take a very prominent part in the sports, but none the less he was keen on the honour of his form, inside or outside the school.

"I want you to call a meeting of the Form, Hasluck—to-night."

"What about?"

"A little matter between Newall, Moncrief, and me. It touches the honour of the Form."

And Hasluck at once consented.

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## CHAPTER XII

### THE FORUM

"Meeting of the Fifth in the Forum."

The whisper had travelled from form to form, and, as invariably happened, conjecture was busy as to what the meeting of the Fifth could be for.

"It's a breach-of-promise case they've got on!" said Freddy Plunger confidentially to half a dozen members of the Third who had been discussing the event.

"Breach of promise?" repeated Baldry. "None of your gammon, Freddy!"

"Fact! Haven't you heard? One of the freshers has been making desperate love to the matron—giving her his portrait, with his love, and that sort of thing. You wouldn't wonder at it from an old stager like you, Baldry, or Sedgeley; but from a fresher—well, it's awful, isn't it? What's the school coming to—that's what I should like to know?"

Harry Moncrief blushed to the roots of his hair as the boys standing round Plunger turned to him and tittered.

"What are the damages?"

"A broken topper, a pair of plaids, a white waistcoat, and spats over patents."

More titters, and more glances in the direction of Harry. He knew well enough that this reference on Plunger's part was meant for him to the costume with which he had adorned himself on his coming to Garside.

"Plunger's been crowing it over me ever since I came here. I shall have to take it out of him," he thought.

The outburst of laughter that followed did not mend matters. So he hastened away, in no pleasant mood, without any regard to whither he was going. He came to a stop when he reached the cricketing-shed, in the playing-fields adjoining the school. It was this shed which was known as "The Forum." Here it was that the meeting of the Fifth was to be held.

Harry stopped and regarded it with some interest.

"Stan will be at the meeting, I suppose, and Paul Percival. Wouldn't I like to know what it's all about!"

He had an uncomfortable feeling that things weren't going quite smoothly with his cousin and Paul Percival. Bit by bit the glamour with which he had viewed the school was wearing off. He no longer regarded it through rose-coloured glasses. Plunger had lorded it over him and made fun of him; his cousin and Paul, whom he had expected to find on the same footing as himself, might have been in a different world, so great was the difference between the upper and lower forms.

The dormitory, to which he had looked forward with still greater pleasure, had proved a delusion and a snare. Often, in the bitterness of his experience in the dormitory, had he wished himself back in his warm and comfortable bed at home. He did not see—did not understand that the trials upon which he was entering were just those which were moulding him for the future. They were to test and try him, as they had tested and tried many others before him.

Some of you who read this may be going through the same experience as Harry Moncrief. Remember, rough as the experience may be, it goes to

make the man in you, and it depends upon you whether you come from these trials dross or pure gold.

By the side of the shed where Harry was standing there was a window, thick with dust. Harry tried to look through the window, but, failing in this, his forefinger went idly to work on the dust. Bit by bit he traced out a face and head, almost without knowing it, for he had been thinking of the meeting that was to take place in the shed rather than of his sketch.

"My, it isn't at all bad!" he cried, standing back a pace and admiring his handiwork when he had finished it. "If I'd really tried, I couldn't have done it so well. Perhaps the nose doesn't stick up enough, but it's got the right cut about it."

Harry was about to rub out the sketch, when he paused, as though reluctant to rub out such a masterpiece.

"'Pon my word, it's rather good! I wonder if anybody would know who it's meant for? I don't suppose anybody will. I've a jolly good mind to leave it!"

He pronounced the last words with emphasis, turned on his heels, and walked away.

Now it so happened that after Plunger and his companions had enjoyed their laugh at the expense of Harry, their attention went back again to the one absorbing topic of conversation—the meeting of the Fifth.

"Shouldn't I like to be there!" said Plunger, his curiosity growing as the time for the meeting advanced. "I would like to know what's in the wind! Is it about the Black Book, I wonder?"

"What's that to do with the Fifth any more than the rest of us?" remarked Sedgeley.

"Oh, the Fifth always put a lot of side on, and like to cock it over us!" retorted Plunger.

"You'll be just the same, Freddy, when you're sent up—if ever you are sent up," remarked Baldry. "Sour grapes!"

"Shut up, Baldhead!" retorted Plunger hotly. "I never want to get amongst the Fifth bounders. It's that keeps me back. I could have got up in the Fourth at last exam., only I said to myself: 'No; it takes me one form nearer the Fifth bounders.'" He paused for a moment, then added: "All the same, I would like to know what they're going to gas about in the Forum. P'r'aps it's about us—p'r'aps they mean sitting on us a lot more than they do now."

"P'r'aps!" repeated Sedgeley and Baldry reflectively.

"I—I've a good mind to try. Why should the Fifth have it all to themselves? If—if I could only steal a march on them!"

"If you only could, Freddy!" remarked Sedgeley encouragingly.

For the next few minutes there was some whispering together, and the end of it was that Plunger and his companions strolled in the same direction as that Harry Moncrief had strolled in a quarter of an hour or so before.

On arriving at the shed, they reconnoitred around it, uncertain as to whether or not anybody was within.

Sedgeley happened by chance to look through—or tried to look through—the window on which Harry had left a specimen of his handiwork.

His attention was at once arrested. He regarded the face seriously for a moment; then he broke into a shout of laughter.

"What are you playing the silly goat for?" demanded Plunger wrathfully from somewhere in the rear of the shed.

"Come here, Baldry, Bember, Viner!" exclaimed Sedgeley, vainly endeavouring to stifle his laughter.

The three came hurrying up, followed by Plunger, in a violent state of agitation.

"You'll spoil all, you braying ass, you laughing hyena, you giddy——"

Then he paused, as Baldry, Bember, and Viner, after a glance at the pane, burst into laughter also. "What is it, you laughing lunatics—what——"

Plunger said no more. His jaw dropped, as, following their gaze, he gazed in turn on the window-pane.

"Jolly good likeness, isn't it, Baldry?" Sedgeley at length managed to remark.

"My!" cried Baldry, with his hand on his side, as though he'd got a stitch in it. "Hold me up!"

"I—I don't see what there's to laugh at," Plunger at length remarked, with a face as red as a turkey-cock's.

"What, don't you see it, Freddy?"

"See what?"

"The likeness—oh, my side! Don't you know that nose—that hair. I should know 'em anywhere."

Now, Plunger had a very characteristic nose—it was a combative nose, and a decided pug. So was the nose on the window-pane. Plunger's hair, too, was peculiar to Plunger. It was wiry, stubborn hair, with a tuft in front which resembled the comb of a turkey-cock. The same peculiarity was seen in the head on the window. And Plunger's eyebrows had a way of mounting

to his head, as though they were anxious to get on terms of friendship with the tuft above. The same eccentricity was noticeable in the eyebrows on the window-pane.

"No. I don't know 'em—not a bit. Who do you say they're meant for?" came in jerks from Plunger.

"Who—who? Oh, dear, oh, dear! Why, they're meant for you, Freddy! It's awfully funny, isn't it? I didn't know that your face was so comical!"

Plunger shrugged his shoulders, and affected indifference. He wasn't a bit like that caricature. It was only Sedgeley pretended to see the likeness, and made the other fellows see it with his eyes. At the same time he put out his hand to rub out the sketch. Sedgeley stopped him.

"If it isn't meant for you, Freddy, we may as well see who it is meant for."

"Just as you like," answered Plunger, in his most indifferent tone.

Having assured themselves that there was no one inside, three of the conspirators—Sedgeley, Baldry, and Plunger—entered the shed. A quarter of an hour elapsed, then the door opened; but, instead of the three figures that entered, only two came out—Sedgeley and Baldry. All was silent within. Plunger had disappeared as completely as though he had dropped through the earth.

"All serene?" queried Bember, as the two made their appearance.

"All serene!" came the answer.

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At seven o'clock the Fifth Form began to put in an appearance at the shed. Arbery and Leveson were two of the first. They lit a candle, and stuck it in a

tin candle-stick. Then they rolled out one of the boxes that were piled up at the back, placed it lengthwise, so as to form a rostrum, and covered it with a baize cloth. On the top of this they placed a wooden mallet, used for knocking in the stumps in the cricketing season.

"Sounds all right," said Leveson, giving the mallet a flourish over his head, and bringing it down sharply on top of the box. "Order—order for the chair!"

Down it came a second time.

"Friends, Romans, and Countrymen——"

"Drop the cackle, Levy," shouted Arbery, "and give me a hand."

He was pulling out some of the boxes, and Leveson lent him a hand to arrange them as seats. It so happened that in one of the most dilapidated of these boxes, which had rested for weeks in the darkest corner of the shed, Frederick Plunger, Esq. was reposing. It had been selected as the most suitable hiding-place by the conspirators. It was large and commodious, and there were so many cracks and crannies in the worm-eaten, dilapidated lid that there was ample breathing space within.

In this safe hiding-place Plunger had flattered himself that he would be able to know all that passed at the meeting of the Fifth. He had not calculated on the box being shifted from its dusty, cob-webbed corner. But more by chance than design Arbery laid profane hands on it, and dragging it out with the rest, turned it over and over, something after the style of a porter with the luggage at a railway terminus in the busy season.

Bumpety—bumpety! It seemed to Plunger, so far as he had any sensation at all, that he was performing the part of a human catherine-wheel.

"My!" he gasped. "What are the asses doing with the box? I shall be most frightfully sick if they don't stop it."

Bumpety—bumpety—bumpety!

"Oh, oh! What an idiot I was to get inside this coffin; it'll be the death of me!"

Arbery and Leveson gave another jerk to the box even as Plunger was groaning within.

"It—it—it's worse than being on the Great Wheel, or on a pleasure boat when there's a sea on. Oh, my—oh dear! When are the silly fellows going to stop it?" he moaned.

At last they did stop it, almost beneath the identical window on which Moncrief minor had traced Plunger's noble features.

"That's about the ticket, isn't it, Arbery? My, it's hot work! Didn't think that old box was so heavy. You'd fancy it was stuffed with lead instead of broken bats and rubbish of that sort. Phew!"

Leveson wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Yes; that's the thing. It'll give an extra seat or two, if they're wanted."

"My word! They're going to sit on me," groaned Plunger. His groans were cut short by a loud outburst of laughter from Arbery.

"What's the lunatic laughing at now?" thought Plunger.

"Hold me up, Levy!" Arbery in rising from the box had caught sight of the caricature of Plunger on the window, and burst into a fit of laughter. "Do you see it—do you see who it's meant for?"

Leveson, for answer, likewise broke into a peal of laughter.

"The other lunatic's going it now," Plunger muttered to himself. "Seems to me I've hopped into an asylum instead of a box. There's a screw loose in one of 'em. My! Aren't they going it. Wish I could get a peep out of this beastly timber yard. I'd like to see what they're grinning at. Hark at 'em. They're off again."

At last Leveson stopped.

"See it," he cried. "Who could help it? Jolly good, isn't it? Like the young bounder to a T—the same nose, the same coarse wiry thatch, the same eyebrows running away from the forehead into the middle of next week."

The perspiration began to ooze from Plunger. He had an uneasy feeling as to whom they were referring.

"Young bounder!" he repeated. "Coarse, wiry thatch, eyebrows running away from the forehead. Leveson thinks that awfully smart, I s'pose? Still it—it—must be a bit like."

Plunger had the additional pleasure of hearing more laughter at his expense as other scholars of the Fifth entered, and added their criticisms to Leveson's. Plunger's ears tingled as they had never tingled before, for never before had he heard himself so freely criticised. In addition to the not very flattering remarks "the bounders of the Fifth" had to pass on his features, Plunger had to listen to terse descriptions of himself as "that ass, Plunger," "a mixed pickle," "a queer egg," "conceited young biped," and so on.

Plunger made remarks of his own as these pleasant criticisms reached his ears. They were scarcely less vigorous than those descriptive of himself, and were fairly divided between "those bounders of the Fifth" and "the fellow who had scratched things" on the window. But unfortunately Plunger's eloquence was wasted, as neither the "bounders of the Fifth" nor "the fellow who scratched things on the window" had the advantage of

hearing it. His attention was soon turned from himself, however, to the proceedings that were taking place in the shed.

There were about twenty in the Fifth. Nineteen put in an appearance. Hasluck, as head of the Form, took up his place at the rostrum, while most of the others sat on the boxes which had been arranged for their convenience by Arbery and Leveson, who were known as M.C.'s—masters of ceremonies—of the Form.

"All here?" asked Hasluck, after bringing down his mallet on the box before him.

"All—except Moncrief," answered Leveson.

The absence of Moncrief had been noticed with some surprise by the Form, by none more than Newall.

"Is he coming, does any one know? If so, we'll wait a little longer."

"No; he isn't coming," answered Paul. "He wanted to; but I persuaded him to stop away."

"You persuaded him to stop away," cried Newall. "Why, it's because of him we've come here."

"Excuse me," answered Paul politely. "It's because of me. At any rate, it's for the Form to decide."

"Percival called the Form together. It's for Percival to explain," said Hasluck.

"I'll explain as well as I can," said Paul, taking a step forward, and glancing round at the faces bent eagerly forward to hear him. "There was a slight shindy, as you all know, on the first day of term, between Newall and Stanley Moncrief."

"Shindy!" interrupted Newall with a scornful sniff. "Is that all you call it?"

"Call it by what name you please; I don't mind," proceeded Paul calmly. "Newall baited Moncrief's cousin unmercifully, and Moncrief did what any other fellow in the Form worth his salt would have done—interfered. I tried to get between him and Newall to stop the quarrel. You know what happened—Newall was struck."

"Yes, Newall was struck," repeated Newall grimly.

"Yes; but after all Moncrief had a good deal the worst of it. He passed the night in Dormitory X—ten times worse punishment than anything Newall got; so he more than wiped out the blow he gave in anger to Newall."

"Oh, stop this humbug," interrupted Newall angrily. "You can see what Percival's up to. He's trying to white-wash Moncrief, who's too big a funk to come here to defend himself."

There were murmurs of assent from some of those present, who resented Moncrief's absence, and who were not favourably inclined to a tame ending of the quarrel. The more thoughtful section remained silent.

"It would have been better, I think, for Moncrief to have been here," said Hasluck. And this view was received with applause.

"If there's any blame for that," said Paul quickly, "blame me. As I've said, I persuaded him to stay away. With Moncrief here and Newall here, it would have been like two barrels of gunpowder. Just a spark, and—phwitt! bang—where should we all have been? There'd have been nothing left of us."

This time Paul carried his audience with him. They were well aware that Moncrief was hasty in temper, and that Newall was no less fiery. So they smiled at Paul's description of what might probably have happened if the two had been present.

"Besides, as I've already pointed out to Newall," continued Paul, "if there's a quarrel at all, it lies between me and him."

"Stuff—gammon—more humbug!" interrupted Newall angrily.

"That's what you think," said Paul, confronting him steadily for a moment. "After all, you only count as one. That's why I've called the Form, who count a good deal more, so that they could give their opinion. Whatever their opinion is, I'll stand to it."

"You will!" cried Newall. "That's all I want. I know well enough they won't let Moncrief wriggle out of it."

"How do you make out that the quarrel has shifted from Moncrief to you, Percival?" demanded Hasluck. "I can't quite see it."

More murmurs of assent.

"I think you will when I've finished," said Paul confidently. "Newall doesn't see it, naturally, but I think you will. This is how things stand. Newall made me believe that he was sorry for the quarrel that had taken place between him and Moncrief. On that I tried to do the right thing. I got Moncrief to go up to him and offer him his hand. I was never more disgusted in my life. Newall pretended not to see it, and said insulting things, which I need not repeat. What I say is, that when he refused to take Moncrief's hand, he insulted me more than he insulted Moncrief; for it was I who brought Moncrief to him, and it was through me Moncrief offered him his hand. That is the first point I wish the Form to decide."

Paul spoke so earnestly that he carried the Form with him. It appealed to their sense of chivalry. Percival had tried to make peace between Newall and Moncrief. Failing that, he had turned the quarrel from his friend's shoulders to his own.

First one, then the other, supported Paul, and though there was a small minority against him, there was no question as to the majority.

"We think Percival right," said Hasluck—an announcement which was received with cheers.

"That only means that the quarrel is between me and Percival," said Newall grimly. "I've no objection. I'm not going to kick against the decision of the Form." Then, turning to Paul: "You've got to pay me back the blow I had from Moncrief. P'raps the Form 'll decide when it's to be."

"You mean fighting?"

"What else should I mean?"

"I don't. We don't want to waste our energies that way when there's a much better way and better work to do."

"Trying to crawl out of it again," came in a sneering aside from Parfitt. "Was there ever such a wriggler?"

"Let's hear the better way," said Hasluck; and there were many others in the Form, in spite of the sneering remark of Parfitt, who were equally anxious to hear what "the better way" could be.

"There's a shadow resting upon the school—resting upon every one of us," said Paul solemnly.

"What shadow are you talking about?" asked Hasluck.

"The leaves from the Black Book—the stolen papers from Mr. Weevil's desk," said Paul. "Until the thief is found out, suspicion rests upon every boy in the Form—upon every boy in the school. What I suggest is, that we leave off fighting till we've found out who the thief is. I don't want to

preach, but I think that will be a great deal more to our honour and the honour of our school."

Paul paused. "If Parfitt has anything to accuse me of, now will be his time," he thought.

He had not to wait long. Parfitt did speak, but scarcely in the way he had anticipated.

"Honour of the school!" he cried. "Anybody would think that Percival's the only one who cares for it. Let him take care of his own honour first, and the honour of the school will take care of itself."

Parfitt's pointed remark was loudly applauded. Paul saw that he was likely to be defeated unless he could make a stronger appeal to the sympathies of the Form.

"I don't know that my honour's questioned," he answered promptly. "Who questions it?"

"I do," retorted Parfitt.

"And I," added Newall.

Before Paul could answer, there was a knock on the door of the shed. It so startled Devey—a heavy, thick-set boy—that he over-balanced himself, and came with a crash on the box in which Plunger was hidden. Plunger had been so interested in the proceedings of the Fifth that he had lifted the lid in the slightest possible degree so that he might the better hear what was going on. When Devey came crashing on the box, Plunger thought for the moment that his head had gone from his shoulders. And then as Devey, not quite recovered from his fall, continued to sit upon the lid, he thought he would be suffocated.

Meanwhile Leveson went to the door, and demanded: "Who's there?"

"A Beetle," came the answer.

"A Beetle! What does he want?"

"He's got a challenge for the Fifth."

"A challenge for the Fifth! Oh, very kind of him!" Then, turning to Hasluck, "Shall I let him in?"

"Rather. Let's hear what the sport is."

Thereupon Leveson opened the door. Three boys were standing without—two of them belonging to the school, and the third, who stood between them, one of the much-despised Beetles—in other words, a pupil of the rival school at St. Bede's.

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## CHAPTER XIII

### A CHALLENGE FROM ST. BEDE'S

The two boys who entered with the "Beetle" were Baldry and Sedgefield, the companions of Plunger. The Beetle was a sturdy, but rather heavy-featured, boy of fourteen. He wore the St. Bede's cap—dark cloth with a white shield in front, on which were worked in old English letters, "St. B.," while beneath these were three Roman capitals—"S. S. V.," the initials of the school motto, "Suis stet viribus"—"He stands on his merit."

"Why, it's Mellor," came the cry, so soon as the face of the boy from St. Bede's could be clearly seen.

Yes, it was Mellor, till recently a pupil at Garside, and formerly an occupant of the dormitory in which Harry Moncrief, Baldry and the others slept. He had left Garside last term, and, much to the disgust of his former associates, had entered as a pupil of St. Bede's. The fact was that it was not so much Mellor's work as his father's. Mellor was good at sport, but not quite as keen on learning, so that he had remained for two years in the same form along with boys who were much younger than himself. Mellor, of course, put it down to the school, and not to any lack of diligence on his part. His father fell in with the view of his son, believing him to be a "clever boy—unmistakably clever"—if the cleverness were only brought out. In the hope that this cleverness would be brought out, he had been taken from Garside and turned over to St. Bede's.

Now the conversion of a "Gargoyle" into a "Beetle" was not an easy process. He had to fit himself into new surroundings, new conditions, new methods, with new companions. And while these new companions had

given him a cool reception, his old companions, thinking him fair game for ridicule and sport now that he had "gone over to the enemy," had determined on giving him a warm reception at the first opportunity.

It so happened that on the third day of Mellor's entrance at St. Bede's he chanced to meet Parfitt and a couple of companions of his in the Fifth. They had promptly seized on Mellor, and after congratulating him with mock gravity on rising to the "dignity of a Beetle," had ended by making him crawl on all fours "as a Beetle ought," and, using his back as a desk, had finally written this note on a slip of paper—"Beetle, otherwise cockroach—nocturnal insect, concealing itself in holes during the day, and crawling off at the approach of light."

This flattering description they had pinned to Mellor's back, with an intimation that he was to crawl back to his brother Beetles as quickly as possible or he would be "squashed before he could get to his hole again." Mellor, smarting under these indignities, had hastened back to St. Bede's and placed the note in the hands of one of the boys belonging to the corresponding form to that of his tormentors.

The Fifth had duly considered it, and a day later had despatched an answer with Mellor. And this was the answer: "Gargoyle, otherwise spout—receiving things that come from gutters. Meant to frighten people by making ugly faces. Good for little else. If the Fifth Form has one Gargoyle of any pluck amongst them, he will find a Fifth Form Beetle ready to meet him at the sand-pit, Cranstead Common, to-morrow afternoon, three sharp."

"It's a challenge," said Hasluck.

"Read it out," came in a chorus.

And Hasluck read it out.

"Don't you think you've got a lot of cheek to bring a note like that, Mellor," remarked Arbery when Hasluck had finished.

"Not half as much as Parfitt had in writing the one he sent by me," retorted Mellor indignantly.

"What does it feel like, being a Beetle?" asked Leveson politely. "Kitchen stuff's fattening, isn't it?"

"After going about on all fours, don't you find it a bit tricky to stand on your hind legs again?" remarked Arbery. "Want a balancing-pole, don't you?"

Before Mellor could reply, a mysterious gurgling sound came from the direction in which Devey was standing.

"Hallo, Devey, what's wrong?" demanded Hasluck, as every eye turned in his direction.

"Wrong? Nothing wrong! What do you mean?" retorted Devey, quite blushing at thus suddenly becoming the object of general attention.

"Thought you were trying to laugh. Never heard such a screech. Like a laughing hyena with the toothache. Don't do it again, there's a good chap. It'll get on our nerves."

"I haven't done anything, I tell you," exclaimed the indignant Devey. "I didn't laugh."

"It came from your corner. It must have been some of those youngsters of the Third eavesdropping outside. Chase 'em away a bit, Arbery."

Arbery, accompanied by Leveson, darted out with the object of giving the "youngsters of the Third" a bad time, but after searching around the shed, could find no sign of their presence.

"They must have scooted before we could get to them," reported Arbery on his return to the shed. "I can guess pretty well who it was—Plunger and his set."

Again that sound from Devey's corner which Hasluck had described as "a laughing hyena with the toothache"; and again all eyes went to Devey.

"Well, what the dickens are you staring at?" Devey indignantly demanded, when he thought that he had borne this scrutiny with enough patience.

"Beetles are bad enough, Devey, without paroquets," remarked Hasluck reproachfully. "If you feel bad, you'd better go out. We'll excuse you."

"It's not me, I tell you. I didn't laugh. It came from outside, or the roof, or—or somewhere," protested Devey.

Arbery and Leveson darted out again, with the same result as before. But they saw shadows in the distance which they believed to be some of their tormentors, and it was decided that they should take up a position close to the door, and at once dart out if the sound were repeated.

Devey was, of course, perfectly truthful when he had denied making the curious sound which had so startled his companions. Nor had it come from the "youngsters of the Third" outside. It came, as the reader has guessed, from the box in which Mr. Freddy Plunger was reposing. At first, when the heavy weight of Devey had rested on the box, he thought that he would have been suffocated. But when, in the excitement caused by the unexpected entrance of Mellor with his challenge from St. Bede's, Devey had risen with the other fellows, and remained standing, Plunger breathed more freely, and began to feel quite light-hearted again.

He felt just as excited as any of those outside at what was happening and entered just as thoroughly into the scene, so that when Leveson and Arbery began to question Mellor about the peculiarities of "a Beetle," he felt that he

must laugh or choke. The result was the curious noise which had been put down first to Devey, then to the boys outside. No one guessed for a moment that it came from the box before which Devey was standing. When the stir caused by this incident had subsided, attention was once more turned to Mellor.

"Well, Mellor, you haven't answered our questions yet," said Parfitt, taking up the fire. "What does it feel like to be a Beetle?"

Mellor flamed up the instant Parfitt spoke. It was Parfitt who had set upon him and badgered him, and written the note which had stirred up so much feeling at St. Bede's against Garside.

"You're a cad and a coward!" he cried hotly. "I don't want to answer you or speak to you either."

Parfitt, stung by the boy's words, moved towards him to clutch him by the ear. But Paul was quicker, and stood between them.

"Hands off, Parfitt! Mellor's here as a messenger from the Fifth of St. Bede's to us, the Fifth of Garside. Don't drag us in the mud! Let's be fair! They've sent us a challenge. Let's be polite enough to answer it."

"Interfering again," sneered Parfitt. "Always poking your nose where it isn't wanted!"

"Don't get waxy, Parfitt," remonstrated Hasluck. "Percival's quite right. It isn't nice perhaps to know that one of our fellows has gone over to the Beetles, but there it is. It can't be helped. What's done can't very well be undone. Let's be fair, and let's be polite. There, I'm with Percival, and so, I think, are the rest of you." ("Hear, hear, hear," from the rest, with the exception of Parfitt, who felt rather small.) "Shall we send an answer?"

"Yes, yes."

"I knew well enough you'd say 'Yes.' Well, the next point is, what's the answer to be?"

"I think there can be only one answer," exclaimed Newall, speaking for the first time. "The Fifth Form Gargoyle is quite ready to meet the Fifth Form Beetle at the sand-pit, Cranstead Common, to-morrow afternoon, three sharp."

At once a cheer broke out in favour of Newall's suggestion.

"As Parfitt wrote the elegant little note which has brought this storm upon us, he'd better write the answer," said Hasluck.

This suggestion also met with general approval. Parfitt hesitated, but at length wrote the note as dictated by Newall. Hasluck read it out.

"Will it do?" he questioned when he had finished.

"Agreed, agreed!" was the answering shout. Paul alone remained silent. His face was unusually grave. He had come there on a peaceful mission, and the peaceful mission had ended in a declaration of war.

"There you are, Mellor; take that and give it to your brother Beetles, with the compliments and best wishes of the Fifth," he said, as he folded up the note and handed it to Mellor. "Now cut!"

"Cut isn't the word," said Arbery, as he opened the door. "Crawl!"

Mellor darted out of the shed with the note, without waiting for any further references to the new title conferred upon him.

"Won't you eat your words in the sand-pit to-morrow!" he cried as a parting shot.

"The cheeky beggar got the last word in anyhow," quoth Arbery as he closed the door.

Dead silence followed for a minute or two, then it was broken by Hasluck.

"You called us here, Percival," he said, turning to Paul, "to talk over the triangular squabble between you and Moncrief and Newall. You don't mind us putting that off for a bit? This is the thing we've got to settle, this cheeky challenge from the Beetles."

Paul, seeing there was no help for it, nodded assent.

"And you, Newall?"

Newall nodded in turn.

"Good! Well, then, having decided to take up the challenge from St. Bede's, the next thing to settle is, who's to be our champion at the sand-pit tomorrow?"

No one seemed in a great hurry to answer that question, but at length Newall, a curious smile hovering about his lips, said:

"We're all of us anxious for the job, that's the reason we're so silent. But I'd like to propose one as our champion who'd do us credit—Percival."

Had a thunderbolt fallen in the shed, the boys of the Fifth could not have been more startled than when they heard Paul's name. Was Newall in earnest, or was he poking fun? It was hard to tell, for the curious smile that had hovered about his lips was there no longer. It had quite vanished, and his face was the gravest amongst them.

"Percival!" he repeated with emphasis. "He's done me a lot of honour. He's done me the honour of calling you fellows together to settle a quarrel between Moncrief and me. He's done me honour in the nice things he has

said of me. Well, I'd like to do him a little in turn. There can't be a greater honour than representing the Fifth as champion of the Form. It's one that I'd jump at myself, but after what has taken place, after all that Percival has said about the honour of the Form, I can only take a back seat. He comes first. So I again say, let Percival be our champion."

Notwithstanding that Paul had rarely been seen in a school fight, it was well known amongst his companions that he was a fine athlete and perfectly able to take care of himself, so with ready shouts they hailed the suggestion.

"Percival, Percival, Percival!" resounded on all sides.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### THE CHAMPION OF HIS FORM

Paul, as may be imagined, was as much startled by Newall's proposal that he should be the champion of the Form as at the readiness with which it was taken up by his class-mates.

"Well, Percival"—the voice of Hasluck broke the silence which had followed as they waited eagerly Paul's answer—"you've heard what Newall has said, and what the Form thinks of it. What's your answer?"

A keen struggle went on in Paul's mind as the question came to him. He had come there to settle a dispute—to ward off a meeting between Moncrief and Newall. And now, by an adroit move on the latter's part, he had been forced to accept or decline a challenge from outside. If he refused, he would have to eat his own words about the honour of the school; he would be regarded as a contemptible coward; and the quarrel between Newall and Moncrief would still remain unsettled. If he accepted, he would be held in honour by his Form, and, in fighting its battle, he might be able to settle the quarrel between Moncrief and Newall. So, coming to a swift decision, he turned to the latter:

"If I fight for the Form, will that settle the quarrel between you and Moncrief? Will you shake hands with him?"

"Yes," came the prompt answer.

"Very well; then I'll do my best to keep up the honour of the Form at the sand-pit to-morrow."

"Bravo—bravo; hip, hip, hurrah!" cried Devey, jumping on the box in which Plunger was concealed, and waving his cap wildly.

The cheers were taken up by most of the Form, but Parfitt, who took no part in the cheering, remarked, loud enough for all to hear:

"Seems to me we'd better save our shouting till to-morrow afternoon."

"For once I agree with Parfitt," answered Paul calmly. "Keep your shouting till to-morrow afternoon."

"And even then it may all be on the other side," added Parfitt, with a sneer.

"Trust Parfitt for throwing cold water on anything," said Devey, jumping down from the box. "He must have been born in a refrigerator."

He gave the box an indignant kick. Plunger shivered. He was glad that Devey's foot came on the box instead of on him.

The meeting was over, and the boys went in twos and threes from the shed discussing the forthcoming battle in the sand-pit. Plunger, greatly excited at all he had heard, was waiting eagerly the moment he could emerge from his hiding-place, when he heard Arbery shout:

"Don't all run off without lending a hand. We shall have to get the boxes back, and the shed ship-shape. Devey and I can't do all the work."

Plunger groaned. He knew what Arbery's appeal meant. One by one the boxes were shifted back to their places; then it came to the turn of the box in which Plunger was concealed, and once again he was bumped about from side to side till he got painfully mixed ideas as to where he began and where he ended—as to which was his head and which were his feet, and whether he would ever be able to stand straight again.

At last the box was rolled back to the corner in which it had previously reposed, and Arbery and his assistants followed in the footsteps of their companions. When Plunger could gather together his scattered senses, he raised the lid of the box and scrambled out.

"My!" he groaned, as he leaned against the side of the shed and felt his limbs. "Seems to me I'm all bruises. It's a wonder I've come out alive. I'd just like to put the fellow who's been putting my frontispiece on that pane inside the box I've come from for half an hour!"

Gradually, however, the worried look on Plunger's face gave place to one of satisfaction as he remembered that he was the only one outside the Fifth who knew what had taken place at the meeting, and that he alone knew what was to take place on the morrow. He had no chance of relating to his companions the secret which was burning within him till he reached the dormitory that night.

"Well," asked Baldry breathlessly, as soon as lights were out, "how did you get on, Freddy? What happened?"

"You'd never guess. There's to be a fight to-morrow between one of the Fifth fellows and a Beetle."

Every ear in the dormitory pricked up at this unexpected piece of information.

"Who's our fellow?" demanded Sedgefield, breaking the silence which followed this announcement.

"Percival."

Baldry gave a prolonged whistle of surprise.

"How's that? Why, Percival has always set his back against fighting, and all the fellows are saying that it was to keep Moncrief major from fighting

Newall that he called a meeting of his form."

"I dare say. He seemed to be steering that way till that little turncoat, Mellor, came on the scene with a challenge from the Beetles."

"A challenge from the Beetles!" cried Baldry. "Tell us all about it."

Plunger told them all about it. And never had any one more attentive listeners than Plunger had as he related to them all that had happened at the meeting in the shed. Not the least interested were Harry Moncrief and Hibbert.

"Paul going to fight," Harry repeated to himself. "I do so hope he'll win!" Then, remembering the words in which his father had once spoken of Paul, he added: "Win or lose, I'm certain Paul will bear himself bravely."

Hibbert closed his eyes in the darkness, and prayed: "Watch over Percival—keep him from harm. For Christ's sake. Amen."

The boy had not forgotten Paul's kindness to him. It stood out as the one bright spot in his memory since he had come to Garside. For once he was allowed to sleep without pillows being thrown at him, the clothes pulled from him by means of a carefully-arranged cord, and playful tricks of that sort, of which both he and Harry had been the victims as the latest recruits to the dormitory. The great event of the morrow caused everything else to be forgotten.

Paul, meantime, had not had a very pleasant time of it. It had been with the greatest difficulty he had induced Stanley to stay away from the meeting of his form. After the meeting, one or two pointed allusions were made to his absence by his class-mates, and to make these cut the deeper, he overheard Parfitt say to Devey:

"You were quite right in shouting for Percival. He came out better than I thought. It's the other fellow who's so contemptible—getting his friend to call a meeting to white-wash him, and do all the dirty work. He'd be hounded out of any decent school."

These remarks were made loud enough for Stanley to hear, and for his special benefit. Though he knew well enough that he was "the other fellow" referred to, he could not speak. Nevertheless, he felt angry with himself for allowing Paul to persuade him to stay away from the meeting. Then, from feeling angry with himself, he felt angry with Paul, and the reception he gave him on his return was not a very cordial one.

"What have you been saying about me?" he demanded.

"Nothing that could harm you," smiled Paul. "It's all right between you and Newall. The quarrel's settled."

"But how is it settled? You haven't made me swallow dirt, have you?"

"I think not," answered Paul, wounded at the suggestion. "You ought to know me better than that."

For the first time there was a rift between the two friends. Paul did not tell Stanley what had happened at the meeting, but left him to find out. He heard all about it from Waterman—the easy-going, indolent Waterman.

"Going to fight a Beetle, is he?" said Stanley, when Waterman had ended. "It was good of him to take my part, but I wish he hadn't let me down so."

But when he met Paul in the dormitory that night, he only remembered that he was his friend, and that he was going to fight for the honour of the Form on the morrow.

"I'm sorry I spoke so hastily, Paul," he whispered. "Forgive me."

The next afternoon was a holiday for both Garside and St. Bede's. It was for this reason that the challenge had been fixed for that date. Cranstead Common was midway between the two schools, and the sand-pit was in an open part of the common, where the ground for some little distance round was destitute of grass or furze.

The Fifth Form had kept to themselves the fact that an encounter was to take place in the sand-pit, for fear it might reach the ear of some of the masters, and be stopped. They were not aware that Plunger knew all that had transpired at the meeting. Plunger was as loyal to his Form as the Fifth were to theirs, and the secret of what was to happen at the sand-pit was communicated in confidence to them on the distinct understanding that it wasn't to travel farther.

When, therefore, the afternoon came, and the boys of the Fifth set out in little parties of three or four to make for the sand-pit, they could not understand how it was that little parties of the Third were found to be travelling in the same direction. Still more curious were the various articles borne by these little bands of stragglers. One group bore a football; another shouldered a butterfly net, without regard to the fact that butterflies had not been seen for many weeks; a third group fishing-rods, and so on.

Freddy Plunger was amongst the anglers. He was talking loudly about his achievements at different times with rod and line, when Devey, Arbery, and Leveson came up with him.

"What are you fishing for, Plunger?" asked Devey, catching him gently by the ear. "Whales?"

"No—eels!" retorted Plunger snappily, having good cause to remember Devey the night before. "Slippery things, eels, aren't they?"

"Not half so slippery as you are, Mr. Plunger. But don't be cheeky."

"Never am, Mr. Devey. That's my fault—always too polite. Born like it, so can't help myself. Where are you going to, Mr. Devey?"

"That's my business, Mr. Plunger. Little boys shouldn't ask questions—they should be seen and not heard. If you have a good catch, ask us to supper, won't you? Ta-ta, Plunger!"

And Devey and his companions went on, leaving Plunger and his companions chuckling in their sleeves.

"Mr. Devey thinks himself mighty clever now, but he looked an awful ass in the shed last night when all the fellows turned on him for laughing like a parrot," grinned Plunger. "I nearly killed myself trying to keep my feelings under. It was enough to make a cat scream. Oh, dear; oh, my!"

And Plunger went off at the recollection, till he received a dig in the ribs from Baldry which made him gasp.

"Shut up, Freddy; here comes the noble champion of the Fifth! He doesn't look over-pleased with himself."

As he spoke, Paul and Stanley passed them. Baldry was not far wrong. Paul was far from pleased with himself. He was going to fight in cold blood a boy with whom he personally had no quarrel, and he had not the slightest notion who his opponent was. He might be a noble-hearted fellow, as much averse to quarrelling and fighting as he was, but compelled to fight—as he had been—for "the honour of the Form." He—Paul—had faced danger, and had not shrunk from it; but somehow, he shrunk from the encounter before him.

"Look! There's quite a crowd at the sand-pit already," exclaimed Stanley, who was a great deal more excited at the coming encounter than Paul was.

By this time they had come within sight of the sand-pit. Paul, looking up, saw that on one side had gathered most of the boys of the Fifth, while on the other side were the boys from St. Bede's.

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## CHAPTER XV

### WHAT HAPPENED AT THE SAND-PIT

Though the boys of St. Bede's and those of Garside regarded themselves as adversaries, to their credit be it said no outbreak of temper had resulted from their meeting at the sand-pit. There had been some amount of good-humoured chaff bandied to and fro across the pit, but nothing more. All were eager for the coming struggle.

A cheer went up from the Garsides directly they caught sight of Paul. The Bedes eyed him critically.

"Looks grim enough—as though he meant business," said one, as Paul advanced to the pit.

The cheer of his comrades put fresh life into Paul. His blood, which had seemed stagnant, began to race through his veins.

"For the honour of the Form," he said to himself, between his clenched teeth, "I must—I will win!"

As though his comrades wished to give him all the encouragement in their power, another cheer went up as he entered the pit, and took up his position on the floor of hard-pressed sand below.

"Where's the other fellow?" he asked.

"Doesn't seem to have turned up yet," said Arbery; "but I don't think it's quite time. How goes it, Levy?"

Leveson had a stop-watch and was very proud of it. He usually acted as timekeeper at the school sports, when the stop-watch was very much to the fore. He prided himself on one thing—always knowing the right time. His was the only watch that kept the right time at Garside—so, at least, Leveson said. To ask Leveson the "correct time" was one of the greatest compliments you could pay him. It was a tacit acknowledgment that the time kept by Leveson's stop-watch was superior to any other.

"Three minutes eighteen seconds to three," answered Leveson, after examining the watch.

"Oh, we'll make you a present of the seconds," said Arbery. Then he shouted across to the Bedes: "I say, Beetles, is that champion of yours coming on an ambulance?"

"No; that's coming after," cried a bright-eyed lad named Sterry, from the other side, "to take your champion home!"

A loud laugh from the Bedes greeted this retort.

"He scored over you there, Arbery," said indolent Waterman.

Scarcely had the laughter died away than it was followed by a loud cheer.

"Their man's coming at last. What's the time, Levy?"

"One minute thirty secs. to the hour. He's cut it rather fine—must be a cool sort of bounder," answered Leveson. "Hallo, look there! Hang me if there isn't Master Plunger and a lot of the howlers from his form."

Arbery looked in the direction indicated. Plunger and his companions were lying at full length on the banks of the pit, peering over its sides and taking the deepest possible interest in the proceedings below.

"So it is. How did the little beggar get to know what was going on, I wonder?"

"Said he was going eel-fishing. Thought it was a blind," said Devey. "Hallo, they're peeling!"

Paul had taken off his coat, and rolled back his sleeves. The champion of the other Form could not at first be seen because of the throng which had gathered round him, but presently he came from the group that surrounded him with his coat off, and his arms bared, just as Paul stepped into the ring.

Their eyes met. Paul staggered back, as though he had been struck. The youth who stood before him was Gilbert Wyndham, he who had helped him on the night he was fleeing from Zuker. Fight him? Impossible! Not though his life depended on it!

The excited murmur of voices that followed the two into the ring ceased. A strange silence rested on the place, as the two boys confronted each other. Then as the two schools were waiting eagerly for the first blow to be struck, they saw Paul's hands fall helpless to his side; saw the colour go from his face; saw the white lips move. What did it mean? They stared in wonder, and the wonder grew as Paul turned away and took his coat from Moncrief.

"I cannot fight," he murmured.

With his coat on his arm he hastened from the pit. Then the silence was broken by the Bedes. They howled, and jeered and hooted. And above the hooting and the jeers there rose the cry:

"The noble champion of the Gargoyles!"

Heedless of the shouting and the jeers, Paul walked swiftly away, as one seized with sudden fear. His own Form still remained silent. They might have been struck dumb. It was all so strange—so unexpected.

Then they in turn shouted and jeered after the retreating figure.

Paul heard the shouts. Those from the Bedes made him shiver. These from his own Form cut into him like whips.

"They do not understand! How—how can I tell them?" he murmured as he pressed on, anxious to get away from the place as quickly as possible. He did not pause till he came in sight of the old flag waving above the school. Had he disgraced that flag—the legacy of a brave soldier? Had he dishonoured it? God would be his judge.

He passed three or four boys as he entered the grounds. They knew nothing of what had happened at the sand-pit. One boy spoke to him, but Paul took no heed of him. He had not heard him. He was as though deaf and blind to all around him. He did not pause till he reached one of the class-rooms; then his head fell on his arms.

The shouts and jeers followed him, and broke harshly in upon the stillness of the room. With startling distinctness he could hear them, and the cry went ringing through his brain:

"The noble champion of the Gargoyles!"

Then resting there, with his head bowed on his arms, he searched his conscience, and asked himself the question—"Have I done right?" Had he acted as his father would have wished him to act had he been living? Had he done right in the sight of God? Yes, he felt confident he had done right in refusing to fight Wyndham, though he could not explain to his class-mates why he had so acted. That night ride was known only to Stanley and him. It was impossible for him to divulge the secret to his Form. He must suffer their taunts in silence, trusting that the time would soon come when he might speak.

"There's one good thing, old Stan will understand me. I can make it clear enough to him. He ought to be here by this time. Why doesn't he come?" he asked himself.

He tried to shake off the gloom that oppressed him, but could not. His head went to the desk again, and again he heard the yells and hooting of the boys at the pit; but the cries seemed fainter.

"Why doesn't Stan come—why doesn't Stan come?" he kept asking himself.

He rested thus for some time—how long he knew not—when he was roused by a timid hand resting on his arm, while a gentle voice whispered: "Percival."

He looked up quickly. Hibbert was standing beside him, his face, usually so pale, was slightly flushed, as the brown eyes turned to Paul.

"I haven't disturbed you, have I?" he asked.

"What do you want with me, Hibbert?" Paul asked rather sharply; for he did not like the lad breaking in upon him so quietly.

"You looked so wretched and miserable I could not help coming in. You're not angry with me, are you?"

"Angry with you? No; why should I be?" answered Paul, forcing a smile to his face at the boy's eager question.

"Oh, I'm so used to people being angry with me, except you and—and Mr. Weevil."

"Mr. Weevil! Doesn't he ever get angry with you?"

"No; he's very good to me."

Paul was rather astonished at this piece of information, knowing that Weevil had a reputation for harshness.

"Glad to hear it. He makes it up on the other fellows." Paul's mind flitted back to the night when Stanley was sent to Dormitory X. "But why aren't you outside, enjoying yourself with your class-mates?"

"They never want me to play with them. I'm no good at their games," answered the boy sadly; "but I've been with some of them this afternoon. I was at the—sand-pit."

He volunteered the information with some hesitation. Paul flushed. What had happened would soon be known, then, to every boy in the school.

"We found out what was going to happen in our Form; and so I went with the rest to see you—to see you——"

Again the boy hesitated.

"To see me turn tail and run. Out with it. Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings," cried Paul bitterly. "The other fellows won't. You'll hear what they'll be calling me presently—quite a choice collection of names—cur, pariah, coward, and the rest of it."

"No, not coward. I know you couldn't be," said the boy confidently. "Any one can see that by looking in your face. I know you had some reason for going away. It's that made you so wretched. I knew you would be, and so—and so after waiting a little time to see what would happen, I followed after you."

Paul was touched at Hibbert's devotion. In that one moment the boy had repaid a hundredfold the little act of kindness he had shown him when he first entered the school. He had come to Paul in his loneliness, and had

brought a ray of sunshine into the gloom that had suddenly sprung up around him.

"Do you know, Hibbert, you're a very good little chap to speak of me as you do, and to think of me as you do? I'm a long way off deserving it, I can tell you. You waited after I left the sand-pit, you say, to see what would happen? What did happen? They kept up the groans for me till they were tired, I suppose?"

"Don't speak of it," said the boy, shivering.

"You needn't be afraid of giving me pain, I tell you. I'm getting pretty tough. After they'd done hooting me——"

"While they were still hooting you, Moncrief threw off his jacket, and leapt into your place."

"What!" cried Paul, starting to his feet, and staring at the boy. "Leapt into my place?"

"Yes, stood up to the Beetle—the fellow they call Wyndham; then the hooting stopped, and our fellows cheered madly, specially when Newall came forward and backed up Moncrief major."

"Newall! backed up Moncrief!" repeated Paul, bewildered. "Do you mean to say Moncrief fought with Wyndham?"

"Yes, wildly—madly."

Paul closed his eyes, shuddering. He could see the two confronting each other, and staggering about in the sand-pit. For some moments he could not speak, and when his hands came from his face, it was as white as the boy's before him.

"And who—who came off best, Hibbert?"

"I don't know. I—I could not stop. To see them fighting so made me—made me feel bad all over. I'm not like other boys. And—and all the time I was thinking of you; so I hastened here, and—and found you."

"They were still fighting as you left?"

"Yes, yes; but where are you going?"

Paul had seized his cap and turned to the door.

"To see what has happened."

"It will be all over by now; don't go," pleaded the boy.

But Paul was deaf to Hibbert's pleading.

"What have I done—what have I done?" he asked himself as he rushed into the grounds. "Fool—fool, not to have guessed what would happen!"

Somehow we do rarely guess what will happen. Things which seem so clear to us after they have happened are quite hidden from our sight beforehand. The best of us grope about in the dark, and stumble blindly along as Paul Percival had done.

Paul rushed on—back—back to the sand-pit. Suddenly he came to a dead stop. The hum of many voices reached his ears. A crowd of boys were coming towards him.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### "HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A LEPER"

In the midst of the boys coming along the road was Stanley. He was not so easy to recognize, for his face was bruised and swollen, and a thin streak of scarlet came from a cut near the right eye. He seemed to stagger along the road rather than walk, and, what was most strange, Newall had one arm through his, as though to support him.

Paul's heart fell. It was true enough what Hibbert had said. A fight had taken place, and, judging by appearances, Stanley had had the worst of it. For the moment Paul could not move; then, rousing himself, with an effort he ran towards Stanley.

Instantly he was greeted with a storm of hisses. Stanley turned from him with a look on his bruised and swollen face Paul had never seen there before. It was a look of repugnance, as though the affection between them had suddenly turned to loathing. Then the crowd of boys parted, and drawing away from Paul, left him standing there alone—he might have been a leper.

He began to feel indignant against Stanley. He at least ought to have known why he had refused to fight Wyndham; and then, as he recalled Stanley's bruised face, his indignation vanished. The old tenderness and affection for his friend came back in a wave.

"Why did I leave you, Stan—why did I leave you?"

He reproached himself, and still more bitterly Wyndham. It was Wyndham who had done this—who had bruised and battered Stanley, and raised this

barrier between them.

"You'll have to reckon with me some day, Master Wyndham," he said to himself.

He looked in the direction of Garside. The boys had disappeared from sight. How could he get an explanation of what had happened? He would go and demand one; but somehow as he turned to the school his feet seemed as heavy as lead. For the first time he felt as though he had no right there. What was the use of going back when no one wanted him? He had made a horrible mess of everything.

Paul felt utterly miserable, as though he would like to flee from everything and every one. Then the pale face of little Hibbert rose before him, and he heard him speaking again as he had spoken to him in the class-room:

"Coward! I know you couldn't be. Any one can see that by looking in your face."

There was one at the school, at any rate, who had not lost faith in him. And Paul was strengthened by the memory.

Thus thinking, he turned away from the school again, scarcely heeding the direction in which he went. Happening to look up, he saw Waterman coming along the road towards him. He was strolling along with both hands thrust in his pockets in his usual leisurely manner. He was one of that class of boys who never seem to have anything to do, and plenty of time to do it in.

"I wonder if he will shun me like the rest?" thought Paul. And then he added with a smile: "At any rate he won't run away from me. It'll be too much trouble."

As Paul anticipated, Waterman made no attempt to avoid him, but he would have passed on without speaking, had not Paul stood directly in his pathway.

"You were at the sand-pit this afternoon, Waterman?"

"Of course I was."

"And saw what happened?"

"Yes," was the curt answer, and Waterman endeavoured to pass on, but Paul still stood in his pathway.

"You're not in a hurry, Watey."

"Hurry!" repeated the boy indignantly, with raised eyebrows, as though that were one of the most offensive words Paul could use. "I never fag over things, you know."

"Then you can spare me a minute or two. I'll turn back with you, if you like."

Waterman neither assented nor dissented. So soon as Paul turned, he kept on his way, with both hands in his pockets, as though unconscious of Paul's presence.

"I want to know what happened at the pit after I left."

"Haven't you seen any of the other fellows? Why didn't you get them to explain? I'm never good at explanations."

"I meant speaking to them, but they booed and hissed at me, like geese."

"Really?" And Waterman's eyebrows went up, as though he marvelled at so much unnecessary exertion being expended on Paul. "I don't see the good of that, but it's the way some fellows have of showing their feeling. And come

to think of it, I don't wonder. You cut up badly at the sand-pit. I really don't know whether I'm doing quite right in speaking to you—I really don't."

"You can settle that point after. Tell me first what happened at the sand-pit, Watey," urged Paul.

"Moncrief took your place when you turned tail——"

"Yes, yes; I've heard that. After—after——"

"Well, unfortunately for Garside, Moncrief got the worst of it. He made a very plucky stand, but he wasn't a match for the Beetle—what's the fellow's name?—Wyndham. Moncrief stood well up to him, but it was no good. He was knocked down once or twice, until Newall, who was backing him, you know, threw up the sponge. Moncrief would never have given in himself. I never saw a fellow look so wretched and miserable as he did when, after coming to, they told him it was all over and he had lost. But the fellows cheered him for his pluck, and some of the Beetles joined in after they had shouted themselves hoarse over their own champion, especially that little turncoat, Mellor. He shouted himself black in the face."

"Wretched and miserable, you say?" repeated Paul. Brief as Waterman's description was, he could picture all that had happened—he could see Stanley reeling under Wyndham's blows, and the climax of it all when he had swallowed the last bitter drop—the humiliation of defeat.

"Yes, wretched and miserable, and I don't wonder at it." They walked on in silence for some moments; then Waterman suddenly spoke again: "Look here, Percival, it's an awful fag trying to understand any one, but I once thought I understood you. I never dreamt you'd turn tail like you did. I'll never try to understand any one again. I'll give it up."

"Bear with me a little longer. I had my reasons for what I did."

"I suppose you had. You can't be quite an idiot. But reasons can be explained. Why didn't you explain yours?"

"Look here," said Paul; "you've acted decently towards me, Waterman, and I'll explain to you as far as I'm able. Supposing a Beetle had done you, a few weeks back, a splendid turn—got you out of a tight corner in which you might have lost your life? Are you following me?"

"Beetle—tight corner. Yes, I follow; but don't make it too hazy. I don't want to suffer from brain-fag. You're out of a tight corner, and your life's saved by—a Beetle. Trot along."

"Well, supposing on your return to school after that, a breeze springs up between the Beetles and the Fifth; and supposing the Fifth insist on you being its champion?"

"Oh, that's absurd. They'd never insist on my being its champion. I can't follow you there, Percival."

"I know it's hard," smiled Paul; "but, we're only supposing, you know."

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten; but I can't see the use of supposing absurdities. Go on your own giddy way. Supposing——"

"The Fifth insist on you being its champion; and then supposing, when you get to the sand-pit to do battle for your form, you find that the champion of the Beetles—the one you're to do battle with—is the fellow who saved your life. Well, supposing all this, could you have fought him?"

"You don't mean to say that this is what happened to you?" demanded Waterman, rousing himself in a surprising way.

"You haven't answered me."

"Well, if I could fancy myself as a champion of any kind, I don't think I could go for one who'd saved my life—bother it, no! But is this really what happened to you, Percival?"

"Yes, it really happened to me."

"Then why didn't you explain?"

"Because I couldn't. My tongue's tied for the present. I'm only explaining to you in confidence, and I want you to promise me that you won't let it go any further."

"I hate mysteries, they're so worrying. Why should there be any mystery?"

"Why? I can't explain, except—except that there's something more important than the honour of the Fifth; than the honour of the school even. That's the reason why I'm obliged to keep silent."

"Oh, I say, this is getting more and more worrying. But if you don't want me to speak, of course, I'll keep quiet!"

Paul knew that he could trust Waterman. In spite of his slackness—in spite of his indolence—he could be relied on to keep his word. In fact, he had one or two good qualities in reserve. If he made no close friendships, he had no enemies. "It was too great a trouble," he would have told you. "Too great a fag." That was only half the truth; the whole truth was that Waterman had, at bottom, a very good heart, though it was not often seen. It was hidden under his indolence of manner.

He allowed a corner of it to be seen in a curious fashion on the way back to the school. He stuck to Paul's side—both hands in his pocket, of course—and made no attempt to "cut him," as the others had done. They passed several of the Gargoyles as they reached the school grounds, and directly Waterman's ears caught the suggestion of a jibe—and he had rather sharp

ears considering how lazy he was—he would start whistling a popular tune, so that the jibe had a good deal of the sting taken from it by the time it reached its mark.

"I wish you could make it right with the fellows," he remarked, as he took leave of Paul.

"All in good time. I'm grateful that you haven't turned your back on me, Waterman."

"Oh, don't butter me for that. I can't turn my back on any one—it's too great a fag."

And Waterman strolled away with his hands in his pocket as though they had been glued there, whistling "Hail, smiling morn."

Paul's talk with him had put him in a more cheerful mood.

"I've only to find Stan and explain things. I don't care a snap of my fingers for the other fellows—they can go to Halifax," Paul told himself, as he went in search of Stanley. But though he searched for him in every direction, he could not find him.

"He don't like to show himself just yet, with so many beauty spots on his face. Perhaps he's lying down," thought Paul, as he made his way to the dormitory. But Stanley was not in the dormitory—it was empty. "Strange. Where can he have got to?"

Descending the stairs, the first boy he ran against was Plunger.

"Seen anything of Moncrief major?" he asked.

Plunger simply stared at him, while his eyebrows went up, in the way they had, till they disappeared into the stubborn thatch above.

"Did you hear what I said?"

Plunger did another movement with his eccentric eyebrows, then turned on his heel. Paul sprang after him, angry in spite of himself.

"Now look here, Master Plunger," he said, seizing him by the collar, and twisting him sharply round, "none of your nonsense. You needn't pretend that you didn't hear me, because you did. I asked you a civil question, and I want a civil answer."

"You ought to know more about him than I do, Percival. The last I saw of him he was being knocked about for you in the sand-pit."

And Plunger laughed impudently in Paul's face. Paul's hand fell from his collar. The jibe struck home, and Plunger went laughing on his way. He was always supremely happy when he could "score," as he termed it, "off those bounders of the Fifth." Paul felt that he had descended low, indeed, when he could be used as a target for the jibes of Master Freddy Plunger.

He glanced back to the flag that waved above Garside—from the flag to the school door. As he did so, the figure he was looking for appeared in the doorway—the figure of Stanley Moncrief.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### THE "GARGOYLE RECORD"

Stanley was not alone, as Paul hoped he would be. Newall and Parfitt were with him. It was evident that his new-found friends had been "doctoring" him, for the blood had been carefully washed from his face, and it presented a less bruised and battered appearance.

As he came from the door he caught sight of Paul. Paul hoped that he had got over his bitterness towards him by this time, and that he would come forward and greet him on the old footing of friendship. But he was disappointed; for as soon almost as Stanley caught sight of him, he turned away his head and commenced talking rapidly to Newall, as though he were unaware of Paul's existence. It was perfectly evident that his feeling to Paul had not softened in any way, and it was quite as clear that he meant ignoring him.

Paul determined to speak to him, however, so, as he passed by him, he touched him on the shoulder.

"Stanley!"

At his touch, Stanley turned swiftly round and confronted him with blazing eyes.

"What do you want with me?"

"To speak with you for a few moments—alone."

"I've had as much speaking with you as I ever want to have. I never wish to speak with you again—never, never!" He was greatly agitated. His voice

was trembling with passion; but it grew calmer and harder, as, turning to his new-found companions, he said:

"You hear what I say, Newall; and you, Parfitt. You are my witnesses."

"Yes, we hear. We are your witnesses," said Parfitt.

"Thanks!" And without waiting an answer from Paul, the three passed on. Not that Paul had an answer to give. He could not have spoken had his life depended on it. He was too staggered; too pained. Never speak to Stanley again! He with whom he had been on the closest terms of friendship ever since he had been at Garside!

"Had he listened to me for a few moments I could have explained all. He doesn't dream who Wyndham is. He can be as stubborn as a mule. And what a look he gave me!" thought Paul. "I never dreamt that Stan would ever look at me in that way. I know what it is—it isn't Stan himself. It's those fellows he's picked up. He's sore against me, and they keep rubbing it in to keep the sore open. If I could only get him away from them."

Paul thought for a moment or two how he should act. In spite of Stanley's hard words, he had no intention that the friendship which had existed between them should be severed without one more effort on his part to heal the breach. They were bound to meet in the dormitory that night. It would then be possible for him to whisper a word or two of explanation.

But when evening came he found to his dismay that Stanley had left the dormitory. He had got permission to exchange cubicles with Leveson; so that he was now in the same dormitory as Newall.

"He's gone over bag and baggage to the enemy," said Paul sorrowfully. "If Parfitt had only walked his chinks, and taken up his quarters with his friend Newall, we could very well have spared him; but Stan——"

He glanced round. Parfitt was watching him from the side of his bed, enjoying his discomfiture. That did not serve to lessen Paul's sorrow.

"——forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us."

Very earnestly he breathed the divine prayer that evening. The breach between him and Stanley seemed to be widening. What was to be done? There was one way left. He would write to him on the morrow.

"He has refused to listen to an explanation, but he can't refuse to read my letter."

So Paul rose early in the morning and wrote a letter. He explained as briefly as he could the reasons which had made him act as he had done at the sand-pit.

"Wyndham was the fellow who acted so nobly when I went with your father's letter to Redmead that night, Stan. I could not raise my hand against him, and I never dreamed that you would. I hurried away because it was impossible for me to explain to the fellows what happened on that night—you alone know why. It would have got all over the place, and would have soon reached Weevil's ears. Then the last chance of finding out what is between him and Zuker would have gone. I can quite understand your soreness against me, old fellow, and I'm sorry—very sorry—that things turned out as they did at the sand-pit; but I hope you now see that I'm not so much to blame as you thought me. It is our first fall-out. Let it be our last. We were never meant to be enemies, old fellow. It mustn't be—mustn't. If all are against me, and you are with me, I shan't so much mind; so let's shake hands."

Paul put the letter in an envelope and handed it to Waterman, who was still stretching and yawning, as though not quite awake.

"Do you mind giving this to Moncrief major. You're about the only fellow in the Form who wouldn't mind doing me a favour," he said.

"Moncrief major. Yes, yes; of course I will. It's an awfully lazy sort of morning, don't you think, Percival?" answered Waterman, stretching himself as he took the letter.

That was Waterman's opinion of mornings generally. Every morning was a "lazy sort of a morning."

"Yes, Watey," answered Paul, taking him by the arm and hurrying him towards the grounds where most of the scholars were. In a little while he espied Stanley, playing with Newall and Parfitt in the fives-court.

"How fellows can fag about at that stupid game I could never make out," remarked Waterman. "Am I to wait for an answer?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Mind? Not in the least. Waiting is so restful."

He strolled off leisurely with the letter. Paul watched him. He reached the fives-court, and, waiting his opportunity, handed the note to Stanley. He looked at it; then questioned Waterman. A laugh went up from Newall and Parfitt as he did so. Then Stanley, without opening the letter, tore it into fragments and threw them contemptuously into the air.

Waterman thrust his hands deep in his pockets, shrugged his shoulders, and returned to Paul.

"You saw what happened, Percival?" he said.

"Yes, I saw what happened," came the slow answer. "What was it he asked for?"

"He only asked who it was from. I told him."

"And then he deliberately tore my letter up and tossed the pieces in the air. Waterman, I'm sorry that you were so insulted."

"Don't think of me. I rather liked it—really. A snub does one good on a lazy sort of morning like this—it really does."

He was about to pass on, but, checking himself, said in a more serious tone:

"I wish I could have brought you a better answer, Percival."

That day was one of the longest days Paul ever remembered: it dragged so slowly along. There was Stanley in the same room, sitting at times within a few feet of him, and yet they did not look at each other. No word passed between them.

"I will never hold out my hand to him again," said Paul in the bitterness of his heart. He had done all that could be done to bring Stanley to reason, but every effort failed. "He must go his own way, and I must go mine. Some day, perhaps, he'll be sorry that he did not read my letter."

Belonging to the Fourth Form was a boy named Dick Jessel. He was a fair-haired, blue-eyed boy—quite a Saxon type—with a shrewd, sharp wit. His father was the editor of a provincial paper, and Jessel ran a journal of his own at the school, by the aid of a hectograph and Jowitt, of the same Form, who was sub-editor, reporter, and "printer's devil" rolled into one. They were called the "two J's."

A couple of days after the struggle at the sand-pit a number was issued of the *Gargoyle Record*—so the journal was named. Among other items of news appeared the following:

*Motto for the Fifth.*

He who fights and runs away  
Will live to fight another day.

"Lost, stolen, or strayed.—A few pages from the Black Book. Whoever will bring the same to the P. D., at the office of this paper, will be rewarded."

"Hints on Fashion.—A fresher of the Third is prepared to give hints on the correct style in trousers, spats, and white waistcoats. How they should be worn, and why. References exchanged and given—through the matron—preferably by *carte-de-visite*."

"Lost, stolen, or strayed.—Missing Link from the Third. Last seen in all his native beauty on a window in the Forum. Believed to have hidden himself in a box so as to escape the notice of his pursuers."

"Notice.—Our poet is stuck for a rhyme to 'hunger.' If any one can oblige the poet we'll give him a paragraph all to himself in the next number. N.B.—The rhyme must be a name of some kind—bird, beast, or fish."

"Dropped. Somewhere near the sand-pit on Cranstead Common. Honour of the Fifth. When last seen was covered by crawlers—believed to be Beetles."

Plunger was one of the earliest to obtain a copy of the *Gargoyle Record*. He read the first two paragraphs, and then raced into the common room bubbling over with excitement.

Several boys were standing round the fire—some of the Third Form, including Harry Moncrief, Baldry, and Sedgefield; one or two of the Fourth, and three or four of the Fifth, including Stanley Moncrief, Newall—the two were now almost inseparable—Arbery, and Leveson.

"Oh, I say, have you seen the last number of the *Record*? It's a slashing number, I can tell you," Plunger burst out.

Immediately everybody was eager to get possession of the *Record*. Baldry made a snatch at it.

"No, you don't, Baldhead," said Plunger, putting it behind him, with his back to the wall. "Manners! If you can't listen like a gentleman, you'd better git."

"Don't mind him, Plunger. He's only an outsider," said Arbery soothingly. "Read."

"Read—read!" came in a chorus.

"And keep your eyebrows out of your head while you're about it," said Leveson. "I never saw such eyebrows."

Plunger glared at Leveson.

"Never mind him, Plunger," came the soothing voice of Arbery. "It's only envy, you know. I wish I had eyebrows like 'em. Get on."

"I will get on—I will," said Plunger, with a last savage glance at Leveson. "Listen to this—here's a splendid hit against the Fifth." And he read: "'Motto for the Fifth. He who fights and runs away, Will live to fight another day.' Isn't it just splendid!"

Those of the Fifth who were present maintained a gloomy silence, while those of the lower forms giggled and chuckled softly to themselves. They dared not do it too openly, for fear of bringing down upon their heads the wrath of the senior Form.

When Plunger thought his first item of news had soaked itself thoroughly into the "bounders" of the Fifth, he read the second item. This fell rather flat and elicited no comment.

Then Plunger began to bubble over again. He could not get on for a minute or two.

"What's the ass giggling for?" "Get on, get on," and so forth, were some of the comments that greeted him.

"'Hints on Fashion,'" read Plunger. "'A fresher of the Third'—ho, ho!—'is prepared to give hints on the correct style in trousers, spats, and white waistcoats. How they should be worn, and why.'—Ho, ho! Hold me up.—'References exchanged and given—through the matron—preferably by carte-de-visite.' Ho, ho! Hold me up."

Plunger's eyebrows disappeared into his thatch of hair, and he laughed till he was black in the face, while all eyes went to poor Harry Moncrief, who devoutly wished that the ground might open and he might sink through.

"Is that all, Plunger?" inquired Arbery. "Get on to the next paragraph, or you'll choke."

"I couldn't get any farther for laughter," explained Plunger. "I thought you fellows would like that little tit-bit, so I rushed in here." He took up the paper again, and glanced at the next item. "This seems rather a good bit. 'Lost, stolen, or strayed. Missing Link from the Third. Last seen in all his native beauty on—on——'"

Plunger came to an abrupt pause, hummed and hawed, and began to look exceedingly uncomfortable.

"'Last seen in all his native beauty——' Well, Plunger, what are you stopping for now?" cried Leveson. "If you can't read it yourself, hand over the *Record* to some one who can."

"Shan't; it's my paper, and I'm not going to hand it over to any one—see," answered Plunger defiantly, putting the paper behind his back.

"Well, read on," shouted Arbery. "We're dying to hear who the Missing Link can be."

"You'd better get a paper of your own, then; I'm not going to read any more of the trash."

"Thought it was a slashing number? What's come over you, Freddy?" asked Baldry.

"Shut up—oh!"

The exclamation came from Plunger as he felt the paper snatched from behind him by Leveson; then, as he tried to regain possession of it, his arms were pinioned behind him by one of the Fifth Form boys.

"Oh, oh, just listen!" laughed Leveson, "and see if you can guess why Plunger put the brake on. 'Lost, stolen, or strayed. Missing Link from the Third. Last seen in all his native beauty in the Forum. Believed to have hidden himself in a box so as to escape the notice of his pursuers.'"

There was an outburst of laughter, as all eyes went to Plunger, who was making furious efforts to get away.

"When it's a question of beauty, there's only one person in it," went on Leveson calmly, "and that is——"

"Plunger!" came in a chorus.

"When we do agree, our unanimity is wonderful, as the Head used to tell us," went on Leveson. "Any other pretty bits? Oh—ah! Listen to this: 'Notice. Our poet is stuck for a rhyme to "hunger." If any one can oblige the poet, we'll give him a paragraph all to himself in the next number. N.B.—The rhyme must be a name of some kind—bird, beast, or fish.' Ho, ho! Don't squirm so, Plunger. What branch of the animal kingdom do you belong to?"

While they were shrieking with laughter at his discomfiture Plunger shouted above it all:

"Go on—go on! As you have gone so far, you'd better go on a bit farther. Ah, you're not quite so ready with your reading now, Mr. Leveson."

The laughter suddenly stopped.

"Read—read," came in a chorus.

And Leveson read: "'Dropped—somewhere near sand-pit on Cranstead Common—Honour of the Fifth. When last seen, was covered by crawlers—believed to be Beetles.'"

There was an ominous silence on the part of the senior boys. The juniors tittered. Leveson screwed up the paper in his hand.

"Mind what you're doing, Leveson. That's my paper," cried Plunger. Then there was silence again, as Paul Percival entered the room.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### PAUL WRITES A LETTER

Stanley's head had fallen to his breast as Leveson read that bitter paragraph from the *Record*. He looked up quickly as Paul entered the room. For the moment it seemed as though he would speak; then he bit his lips fiercely to keep back the words that sprang to them, and went from the room. Newall followed him, then Arbery. One by one they followed his example—Third Form boys as well as Fifth—until one only remained—Waterman, who had been comfortably resting in a chair by the fire throughout the scene described in the last chapter. As the last boy went out, he glanced up.

"Hallo, Percival! Is that you?"

"Why don't you do the same as the rest of the fellows, and clear out?" asked Paul bitterly.

"I'm quite comfortable where I am, thank you."

And Waterman stretched out his legs, and settled himself more comfortably in his chair. Paul could see that it was not altogether a question of comfort with Waterman. His laziness was only a cloak to disguise a real feeling of friendship towards him.

"The fellows were discussing me as I came in?"

"I don't quite know what they were discussing. Oh, young Plunger had made himself an ass, as usual, over some paragraph in the *Record*. That was it."

Leveson had screwed up the paper, it will be remembered, when he had read the paragraph about the honour of the Fifth, and, as Paul entered, had flung it contemptuously from him into a corner of the room. Paul's eye went to it as Waterman was speaking.

"Paragraph in the *Record*," he repeated, as he smoothed it out. "What have they got to say about Plunger?"

He quickly read the paragraphs which had reference to Plunger, and then he read the one which he knew well enough had reference to himself. Waterman rose from his chair as the paper dropped from Paul's hand and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You're cut up, Percival. I wouldn't let that paragraph worry me. It's really not worth it. There's nothing in the world worth worrying about—there really isn't."

"You don't mean what you say, Waterman—though it's kind of you to say it. Honour's worth troubling about—one's own honour; the honour of one's form; the honour of one's school; and I know that, disguise it as you may, you're just as keen on it as any in the school. And all the fellows believe that I've dragged it through the mud."

"Oh, well, things will clear up some day, Percival; then you'll come into your own," said Waterman cheerfully.

"Some day I suppose they will; but it may be a long time first, and there's no game so hard to play as the waiting game."

"That's where you're wrong, Percival. There's no game in the world like it—the waiting game, I mean. There's no fag about it, and that's what I like. Just wait your time, you know—take it easy—no flurry—go as you please. It's the game of all games for my ha'pence. It really is, Percival. So don't worry, old fellow—and don't flurry."

Paul could not help smiling to himself at Waterman's easy view of things, but the smile quickly disappeared when he was once more alone. Waterman had talked about "things clearing up," and "coming into his own"; but would things ever clear up? Would he ever win back the honour of the Form, and the confidence of those who belonged to it? Saddest of all was the memory that Stanley, who had been his greatest friend, now appeared to be his greatest enemy.

Suddenly it occurred to him—he would write to Mr. Walter Moncrief, and tell him what had happened that night when he went to Dormitory X. The idea had occurred to him before, but he had put it off in the hope that he might have surer evidence to go upon. No further evidence had been forthcoming, but delay might be dangerous; so he determined to write.

So he went into the writing-room, and wrote to Mr. Moncrief, telling him exactly what had happened on the night he went to Dormitory X.

"I am pretty well certain," he went on, "that the man I saw with Mr. Weevil is one of the men who came after me on the night I came to your house at Redmead—the chief of the two. It was night-time, but I had a fairly good view of his face. What he has to do with Mr. Weevil, I can't make out. I should be sorry to think that Mr. Weevil has anything to do with a traitor to his country; but there must be something at the bottom of it all. What that something is, you may be able to find out better than I can. Dr. Colville, our Head, is away, so I cannot go to him. What ought to be done? Will you let me know what you think?"

Having written this letter, Paul felt more comfortable. So soon as he heard from Mr. Moncrief, his lips would be unsealed, and he might take steps to clear his own honour. He would then be able to explain to his Form—to all the school if need be—what had prevented him from confronting Wyndham at the sand-pit.

But having finished his letter, there was one great difficulty in the way. All letters written in the school were supposed to pass, first of all, through the hands of the master. How could he let that letter pass through the hands of Mr. Weevil? As he was thinking over this dilemma, Hibbert entered the room, and told him that Mr. Travers wished to speak to him. Mr. Travers was master of the Fifth.

Paul rose to his feet, and thrust the letter in his pocket, wondering what Mr. Travers could want with him. Then it occurred to him that Hibbert was just the boy he wanted; he could trust Hibbert with anything. Hibbert would post the letter for him.

"Hibbert, I want you to do me a great favour," he said, drawing the letter from his pocket. "I want you to post this letter for me. There's nothing wrong in it, I give you my word of honour; but, I don't want Mr. Weevil to know. That's why I am not sending it through the school post."

Hibbert expressed his willingness to post it, and Paul handed him the letter, then went to Mr. Travers' room. Hibbert hastened off with the letter, but, as ill-luck would have it, he ran full tilt against Mr. Weevil, just as he reached the outer door. In doing so, he stumbled, and would have fallen to the ground had not the master caught him by the arm.

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**"AS ILL-LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, HIBBERT RAN FULL TILT AGAINST MR. WEEVIL, JUST AS HE REACHED THE OUTER DOOR."**

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"Hallo! Where are you running to in such a hurry?" he asked, in that gentle voice he always used to Hibbert—softer than that used by him to any other boy in the school.

"Out—in—the grounds, sir."

In stumbling, Hibbert's hand had been jerked from his breast, and Mr. Weevil caught sight of the letter.

"What's that—a letter?"

Hibbert did not answer. It was useless denying it.

"Step this way."

Mr. Weevil's tone had now become quite stern. He led the way into one of the class-rooms; then closed the door.

"Now have the goodness to hand me that letter," he said, gazing at Hibbert through half-closed eyes.

Hibbert dared not refuse; so he handed him the letter.

Mr. Weevil's eyes opened to their fullest extent when he saw the address on it:

W. MONCRIEF, Esq.,  
Redmead,  
Oakville (Kent).

"For whom were you posting this letter—Moncrief major, or Moncrief minor?"

"Neither," came the low answer.

"Who, then? Come; no harm shall befall you if you speak the truth."

"I don't mind myself, but—but—I don't want any harm to happen to—to \_\_\_\_\_"

"The one who sent you—eh? Well, we'll see. Just tell me frankly who sent you with this letter? It is quite easy for me to find out by opening it, you know; but I would much rather hear it from you."

"Percival," answered the boy, hesitatingly, seeing there was no help for it.

"Percival!" echoed the master. "Wait here a moment."

He left the room with the letter. Hibbert wondered what he intended doing with it. Would he open it, or would he send for Percival? He was on thorns. Percival had particularly wished to keep the note from Mr. Weevil. The very first thing he had asked him to do—and that so simple—he had made a mess of.

"How stupid of me! How stupid of me! Percival will never trust me with anything again."

In a few minutes Mr. Weevil returned. His face had not lost its sternness.

"In sending you with that letter, Percival knew well enough he was acting against the rules of the school."

"I—I—dare say it slipped his memory, sir."

"Nothing of the sort. He knew well enough he was breaking the rules of the school, and, worse still, that he was making you an accomplice in the act. However, I do not intend to deal severely with the case, for your sake. You are quite new to the ways and rules of this place. Take the letter. Post it; but don't say a word to Percival that I stopped you. Do you understand?"

"Yes; I understand," said the boy, as he took the letter, and ran off with it to the post. He looked at the letter as he ran. Was it the same? Yes, the very same—the same address, in Paul's handwriting. It was very kind of Mr. Weevil, and he would always be grateful to him for his kindness.

Paul, meanwhile, had gone to Mr. Travers, wondering what he could want with him. The master of the Fifth was a man of about thirty, who led a studious, secluded life. He was a capable master, but had not succeeded in winning the sympathies of the scholars. One of the chief reasons was that, though he took an interest in their studies, he took little interest in their sports. He preferred instead long, solitary rambles. Paul was, therefore, the more surprised when he found that the object of Mr. Travers in sending for

him was to question him as to the relations between him and his classmates.

"I've noticed that you do not appear to be on very good terms with the Form, Percival," he said. "I should not have said anything about it, only I happened to be near the Common Room this afternoon when you entered, and found that that was a signal for the others to march out. I don't like a feeling of that kind in my Form. I know well enough that boys will have their quarrels, and that they can be usually trusted to settle them alone; but this seems to me deeper than an ordinary quarrel, otherwise I should not have spoken. I have no wish to press for your confidence, but if you will tell me what the cause of this ill-feeling is, I might do something to bring about a better understanding between you and the Form."

"Oh, it's only a bit of a dispute between me and Moncrief major."

"And for a dispute between you and Moncrief major all the Form are against you?"

"They take his side, sir. They think that he is right and I'm in the wrong—that is all."

"That is all!" echoed the master. "And that is all the explanation you can give? Remember, I'm not forcing an explanation from you. I'm not asking you as your master, but as your friend."

Paul was drawn to him as he had never been drawn before, such is the power of sympathy. He regretted more than ever that he had sent the letter to Mr. Moncrief; but it was impossible to recall it. Hibbert was on his way with it at that moment to the post.

"That is all the explanation I can give, sir."

"Very well, Percival"—the manner of Mr. Travers changed as the words fell from Paul's lips; he was again the master, and frigid as ice—"then there is nothing more to be said. I regret that I sent for you."

Thus curtly dismissed, Paul went out, feeling miserable. At the time when he so wanted a friend he had lost one. And yet how else could he have acted? There was no other way. He must wait and see what the letter to Mr. Moncrief would bring forth. And with this thought uppermost in his mind he went to the writing-room to await the return of Hibbert.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### THE SCHOOL OF ADVERSITY

Paul took up a pen as he sat and waited, and idly traced words upon the blotting-paper. But his thoughts were far away. He was thinking of the interview he had just had with Mr. Travers. He was still thinking of it when the door opened and Hibbert entered.

"Have you posted the letter?" Paul asked.

"Yes; the postman was just clearing the box when I slipped it in."

Paul would almost as soon that he had not succeeded in posting it—that he had brought the letter back with him. Perhaps it was best as it was, however.

"Thanks, Hibbert."

He did not notice that the boy was looking uncomfortable—as though he had something on his mind but dared not speak it.

"You have seen Mr. Travers?"

"Yes." Then noticing for the first time the nervous, apprehensive look in the boy's eyes, and thinking it was due to the fear that he had got into further trouble with the master, he added: "Nothing happened. He was quite nice with me."

"I'm glad of that."

By this time Hibbert was standing by Paul's side. Suddenly an exclamation came from his lips.

"Hallo! What's wrong?"

Paul, looking at the boy, saw that his eyes were fixed upon the blotting-paper.

"That—that! Do you know anybody of that name?" he asked, as he pointed to a name Paul had unconsciously traced on the blotting-paper—that of Zuker.

"Why? Do you?" Paul asked.

"Y-yes," answered the boy, with hesitation. "I—I once knew a boy of that name."

"Where?" asked Paul, at once interested.

"When I was at school in Germany; but there are a good many Zukers there, you know, and the boy I speak of is dead."

"Dead! Did you know his father?"

Hibbert shook his head. Paul tore up the blotting-paper. It was just possible that Mr. Weevil might catch sight of the name, just as Hibbert had done.

"You—you don't like the name?" the boy asked, as he watched Paul.

"Oh, it's as good as any other, I suppose."

"You must have known some one of that name—I'm certain of it," persisted the boy.

"Well, I don't mind telling you, Hibbert—you've been such a good little chap to me—it was through a man of that name my father lost his life."

"A man of the—of the name of Zuker?" stammered Hibbert.

"Yes."

"Tell me—do tell me—all about it?" pleaded the boy, clutching Paul suddenly by the arm.

"Oh, it's a sad tale, and it won't interest you."

"Indeed it will—very, very much. Anything that has to do with you interests me. Tell me."

Without intending to compliment Paul, the boy had paid him the most delicate compliment he could have done. Besides, Paul was now very much alone, and in his loneliness it was nice to have some one to speak to; so he told his eager listener the tragic circumstances that had cost his father his life. Hibbert scarcely spoke or moved all the time Paul was telling the story. He hung upon every word.

"How noble of your father to jump overboard and save the man—the man Zuker," said the lad, when Paul had finished. "There's not many who would have risked their life to save an enemy. I think you said Zuker was an enemy."

"Well, I don't know about an enemy. He seems to have been a wretched, contemptible spy; but what's wrong with you?" he suddenly exclaimed, as his eyes went to the boy's face. It was of an ashen pallor, and he was trembling in every limb.

"Nothing wrong, except—except that I can't help thinking what a lot you and your mother must have suffered after your father's death."

"I didn't suffer much, because I was too young to remember him. I was only a little more than a year old when it all happened. Still, I should so like to have known my father. They say he was very brave, and kind, and true, and one of the best captains in the Navy; and when sometimes I think of him, and what he might have been to me, I feel very bitter against the man for whom he gave his life. Then I battle against the feeling, and a better takes

its place. I think to myself—What nobler death could a man die than in trying to save the life of one who had done him wrong."

"Yes, Percival," said the boy, looking away; "it was a noble death—very noble—and your father must have been a noble man. What was it the spy did?"

"Got into my father's cabin, and tried to get at his private despatches."

"And where were they taking this man—the spy—when he jumped overboard?"

"To Gibraltar, where he was to be tried by court-martial."

"And after they'd tried him by court-martial?"

"If the court-martial had found him guilty, they would have shot him."

"Shot him?"

"Yes, they showed no quarter at that time, I believe, to one who stole, or tried to steal, State secrets."

"Oh, how horrible!" cried the boy, covering his face with his hands.

"Don't you think that a man like that deserves to die, Hibbert? Remember, it isn't only one life he places in peril, but hundreds—thousands. He betrays a country."

"Yes, yes, I dare say you are right, Percival—I'm certain you are right; but none the less, it sounds very terrible. Is it the same now as it was then—that no quarter would be given to a spy, I mean?"

"I think so. But I'm sorry I told you the story," said Paul, looking at the boy apprehensively. His face was still deathly pale, while he trembled in every limb. "I didn't think it would cut you up so. Any one would think," he

added, with a sad smile, "that it was your father's death I'd been talking about instead of mine."

"Yes, my father"—and the boy gave a little, stifled laugh. "I—I've been putting myself in your place, you see. How was it the spy got away?"

"He was tried by court-martial, but nothing could be proved against him, you see; for my father was the principal witness, and he was at the bottom of the sea."

"At the bottom of the sea," repeated the boy, as a tear stole slowly down his cheek. "And you don't know what became of the spy?"

"Oh, I suppose he returned to his own country after that," said Paul carelessly; for he did not want to tell Hibbert his suspicions that Zuker was still in England and not so far away. "But be off now, and have a good run in the open. You've had enough of my yarn, and will be dreaming about spies and drowning all night."

Hibbert brushed the tear from his eye. It seemed as though his heart were too full for speech; for he went out without a word.

"What a sensitive little chap he is!" thought Paul. "He was full to overflowing as I told him that story. I wonder what his people are like?"

He got up as he spoke and went out. A throng of boys were playing in the grounds. Too absorbed in their games, they took no notice of Paul, for which he was devoutly thankful. He walked out of the grounds, along the road leading to St. Bede's. Scarcely noticing the direction in which he was travelling, he was rudely awakened from his reverie by the shout of "A Gargoyle—a Gargoyle!" And before he could move a step farther he found himself surrounded by a dozen boys, who danced wildly round him, shouting the name of contempt again and again, as though they were a band of savages, and had suddenly discovered a victim for the sacrifice.

Paul saw at a glance that he had fallen into the hands of the enemy—in other words, into the hands of the rival school. There were senior boys and junior boys. Prominent amongst the latter he noticed Mellor, who was quite ecstatic with delight at having trapped a Gargoyle.

"Why, hanged if it isn't the fellow who turned tail and ran!" cried one of the seniors.

"Yes, Percival. Didn't you see that?" said Mellor.

"So it is," came in a chorus.

"The noble champion of the Gargoyles—ho, ho!" cried the senior.

"Ho, ho!" came in a chorus, and they commenced dancing round Paul, in a wilder, madder fashion than before. "Ho, ho, ho! The noble champion of the Gargoyles."

"And he bared his big right arm," cried one, when this chorus had ceased.

"And cried aloud, 'Come on,'" shouted another.

"Come one, come all, this rock shall fly  
From its firm base sooner than I!"

shouted a third.

A scream of laughter greeted this sally, and then the dancing was resumed to the old chorus.

"Ho, ho! ho! The noble champion of the Gargoyles!"

Paul stood motionless as a statue and as white as one in the midst of the jeering, mocking throng. He made no answer to the jibes, but waited until they had exhausted themselves. It was some time before that happened. At length the cries grew feebler, the wild dancing slackened.

"Well, have you nearly finished?" Paul asked.

"Listen. The noble champion of the Gargoyles is speaking. He's got a tongue," exclaimed the senior who had first spoken.

"And legs as well," said a second.

"And doesn't he know how to use them!" added a third—an observation which drew out another shriek of laughter. From white Paul turned scarlet.

To keep silent under provocation, more especially provocation that is undeserved, is one of the hardest lessons that can be learned, boys and girls. Paul was only a boy, with a boy's impulses, passions, and feelings. But some time was to pass before he was to learn the great lesson of how to keep these passions under perfect control—and many things were to happen in the interval—but he had begun the task. Rough and bitter though the schooling was, in no better way could the lesson have been taught than in that school of adversity through which he was now passing.

"When you've quite finished," said Paul, as they once more came to a pause, "I would like to go on my way."

"Where? To the sand-pit?" came a voice.

"No; he'd rather keep away from that. He'll always give that a pretty wide berth," some one answered.

"Why not take him there? He doesn't know what a nice place it is for a picnic."

The suggestion was hailed with delight.

"The sand-pit—the sand-pit!" was the cry.

Immediately a rush was made for Paul. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. Paul had kept wonderfully calm and cool up to the moment; but directly they tried to put hands upon him he struck out right and left. With so much vigour did he strike that he might have made his way through the howling, struggling pack, but just at the moment he had got himself free, Mellor, who was one of those who had been knocked to the ground, caught him by the legs and brought him with a crash to the ground.

"On him—on him!" was the cry.

"Back—back! Cowards all!"

At the instant they were about to seize Paul a figure dashed into their midst, scattering the struggling pack to right and left.

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## CHAPTER XX

### WYNDHAM AGAIN TO THE RESCUE

"Back, back! Twelve to one—cowards, cowards!"

The Bedes fell back as the youth fell among them, and cleared a passage to Paul. Paul, momentarily stunned by his fall, breathed freely again, and leapt to his feet.

"Why, it's Percival!" said the new-comer. "Are you hurt?"

Paul could scarcely believe his eyes, as he found himself again confronting Gilbert Wyndham.

"No, thanks," he answered stiffly.

He would rather have been indebted to any one than to Wyndham. He had wished to clear off the debt between them, but instead of that he found himself more indebted to him than ever. For a second time he had been placed under an obligation to him.

"You don't see who it is, Wyndham," came a voice from the ranks of the Bedes, disappointed of their prey. "It's a Gargoyle—the wretched Gargoyle who showed such a clean pair of heels at the sand-pit."

"Yes, I do see who it is; but, whoever he is, that's no reason why a dozen of you should set on him at once. That's not fair play, Murrell."

"Half a dozen of 'em set on me," came the voice of Mellor. "What's good enough for the Gargoyles ought to be good enough for us."

"That's just where you're wrong, Mellor," answered Wyndham coolly. "What's good enough for a Gargoyle isn't good enough for a Bede—is it, Bedes?"

A murmur of ready assent went up at this appeal—from all except Mellor.

"You see, you are half a Gargoyle yourself, Mellor, or you would have known that. You belong to the amphibia at present. When you've grown out of that you will know better, won't he, Bedes?"

A laugh went up—from all except Mellor. The storm which had looked threatening began to clear under the ready tact of Wyndham. Still, the boys did not like the idea of letting Paul go scot-free.

"Yes, you'll know better than that by-and-by, Mellor," said the youth addressed as Murrell. "Your education was neglected as a Gargoyle. You'll improve as you go along. But, I say, Wyndham, what are you going to do with the specimen you've got? You can't stick it in the museum, you know. So turn it over to us again. We won't hurt it. We'll only give it a run to the sand-pit, and a roll down. It will do it good. Eating sand is better than eating dirt."

"Yes, hand him over," came in a chorus.

"No," came the decided answer, as Wyndham twined his arm in Paul's. "The Gargoyle is my property."

"What are you going to do with him?" demanded Murrell.

"I want to have a little quiet talk with him, that's all."

What could Wyndham want with a little quiet talk with a Gargoyle? It could only be for one purpose—to gather information which might be of use to the Bedes in any future campaign against Garside. So the boys reluctantly turned away, and left Wyndham and Paul together.

"Why have you come a second time to my help?" came in a choking voice from Paul when they were alone.

"Really, I don't know," smiled Wyndham. "Does it matter much? Do you mind?"

"Mind! After what happened at the sand-pit the other day. Mind! I would rather have been under an obligation to any one than you."

"Do you mean it?" asked Wyndham, now quite grave.

"Of course I do. I was never more in earnest in my life. I had hoped to clear off the debt that was between us, and now you have placed me in your debt a second time."

"If you mean by debt that little service I was only too pleased to do for you at the well, I thought it was quite cleared off."

"How?"

"By the service you did for me at the sand-pit the other day."

"You are mocking me?"

"I was never more serious in my life," answered Wyndham, using Paul's words. "When I saw you standing before me at the sand-pit—saw who your fellows had selected as their champion—I was staggered. You were the last in the world I dreamt of seeing. I could see that you were bewildered, but not more than I was. I knew not how to act. Fight you? Impossible! Go away—turn on my heel? That seemed impossible, too. I should be stamped as a coward. I could not explain, because that would have meant giving away your secret. Then, as the thoughts flashed through my mind, you solved the riddle. You had the courage to do what I couldn't—you walked away."

Paul regarded Wyndham in wonder. The thoughts which had passed through Wyndham's mind were almost the same thoughts that had passed through his. The same struggle had gone on in both. For the moment the hard, bitter feeling that had stirred within him softened, and he was on the point of holding out his hand, when he remembered that it meant clasping the one that had so severely punished Stanley.

"I walked away," he echoed; "and then?"

"Why, then," smiled Wyndham, "things couldn't have happened better. Some bouncer amongst your mob was anxious to bound into your shoes. He jumped up in an awfully excited way, muttering something about 'the honour of the Form.' He insisted on fighting me, and I didn't mind in the least. You know how it ended."

"Too well—too well," repeated Paul sadly. "Better far had I stayed. That was my friend you punished so."

"Your friend!"

"The best friend I had at Garside. We are friends no longer. Instead of that, he looks upon me now as his worst enemy, while all the school look upon me as a cur. But it isn't that I mind so much, it's losing the friendship of Stanley Moncrief."

"I'm sorry. I did not dream things were as bad as that. Who is this Stanley Moncrief?"

"He is the son of that gentleman for whom I took the letter to Redmead on the night you met me, and did me so great a service."

"If it was a service, I've undone it now," answered Wyndham sorrowfully. "I could not have done a worse one than I did you at the sand-pit. Why couldn't you explain to your friend?"

"I've tried to, but he won't listen. He is smarting under his defeat, and I don't wonder at it."

There was silence between them for a minute or two, then Wyndham exclaimed:

"Are you going back to Garside?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I am going with you. Moncrief won't listen to you. He will listen to me."

"No, no!" said Paul firmly. "It is very kind of you, but I would rather not. If Stanley Moncrief and I are ever to be friends again, he will have to find out for himself that I'm not the cur he thinks me. I've tried to explain, but he would not hear. I shall never try again, unless he comes round and asks me."

"I think you are right," said Wyndham, after a pause. "None the less, I'm sorry—deeply sorry—that you should have lost your friend through me."

"Oh, things will work round presently," said Paul lightly. "I suppose, after that affair at the sand-pit, you were quite the hero of your school?"

"I don't know about hero. They made a lot of fuss over me, because, as you know well enough, there's no love lost between us and Garside. But if anybody deserves to be the hero of a school, it is you."

"Nonsense!"

"It is easy enough to flow with the tide, but awfully hard to struggle against it. That's what you're doing just now, Percival."

He walked with Percival for some distance on the road to Garside, and when they separated they shook hands, unaware of the fact that they had been seen by one of the Third Form. After Wyndham's explanation, how was it possible for Paul to refuse the hand held out to him?

Now, Stanley Moncrief was at this time in his dormitory, very miserable. He had been so, in fact, ever since he had broken with Paul. He had a real affection for him. He had loved him as he might have loved a brother; then, after his defeat at the sand-pit, he felt that there was only one thing to be done, and that was to—hate him. So he had broken off the friendship, and rushed into the arms of the two whom he disliked—Newall and Parfitt.

But when Stanley began to reflect a little more deeply, he began to see that he could not altogether shake off the old link that bound him to Paul. He had always been comfortable and at ease with him—could sit with him, as it were, in his shirt-sleeves and slippers. He had felt at home with him from the first day they met. He could not feel the same with Newall or Parfitt, try as he might. He seemed to be ever acting a part when he was with them, and they seemed to be doing the same when they were with him. For instance, he would have liked to have read the letter Paul sent him by Waterman; but the eyes of Newall were upon him, so he tore it up in bravado, and scattered the fragments in the way already described. It was not Stanley's real self did that—he was acting a part.

Again, when Paul entered the common room, looking so sad and miserable, Stanley's heart prompted him to stay and speak to his old friend. Perhaps he might have done so had he been alone; but he felt that the eyes of the others were upon him, especially Newall's. Something was expected of him. He was to give the lead; so he gave the lead, by walking from the room, and the rest followed him, with the solitary exception of Waterman.

Then he joined in the laughter and the jeers of his new-found friends when they got outside, all at the expense of Paul. Again, Stanley was acting a part. At heart he felt miserable. The sadness of Paul's face haunted him, and as soon as he could he escaped from his companions to the solitude of the dormitory.

He had been puzzled all along how it was Paul had acted in such a cowardly way at the sand-pit. He knew that he had no love for fighting; but once having taken up the gage of battle, he was not one to shrink from it. What was it his father had said? That no braver youth could be found than Paul Percival. His uncle had the same opinion, and they were not the men to make mistakes. Had his nature suddenly altered, or what had happened? More and more he regretted that he had not opened Paul's letter. It might have given him the answer to the riddle.

So Stanley sat on the side of the bed for a long time, very miserable. Indeed, I very much question whether of the two he was not the more miserable. It is true that nearly all Paul's companions dropped away from him; but perhaps it was better to lose companions than to have those you did not really want.

"It is all a hideous mistake. I'll go and make it up with Paul," he thought.

As he was thus thinking, the door opened, and his cousin entered.

"Well, Harry, what do you want?" he asked gruffly, as though resenting the intrusion.

Harry eyed him for a moment without answering.

"Can't you speak? Have you lost your tongue, Harry?"

"I saw Percival a little while ago, Stan."

"Well—what of it? What's that to me?"

"Nothing much, I suppose."

"Where did you see him?"

"Not very far from here. He was with that fellow—that beastly Beetle—who fought with you."

"What were they doing?"

"Oh, they were walking and talking together—very chummy. When they left, they shook hands—almost kissed each other."

"Shook hands! You are sure?"

"Positive."

"Run off, youngster. Leave me," cried Stanley hoarsely.

Harry ran out, wondering at the effect his information had had upon his cousin.

"Shook hands with him!" echoed Stanley, as he sank with a groan upon the bed.

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## CHAPTER XXI

### THE CHASM WIDENS

Unintentionally Harry Moncrief had made deeper the chasm between the one-time friends. It was quite evident to Stanley, from Harry's description of what he had witnessed, that there was an understanding between Paul and Wyndham, otherwise they would never have shaken hands with each other. The fact that Paul could take the hand of one who had thrashed him set the blood tingling in Stanley's veins. That showed plainly enough that Paul was on friendly terms with his enemy—with an enemy of the school. What was to be done?

Stanley got up and paced the room. The softer feelings that had been working in his breast vanished.

"I will never speak to Paul Percival again—never!" he said fiercely. "Perhaps the whole of that business at the sand-pit was a trap of his into which I was fool enough to fall. How else could they have shaken hands together?"

It seemed to him, thus blinded by suspicion against his friend, that it could only have one meaning—they were gloating over his defeat.

Meanwhile, Harry Moncrief had no sooner descended the stairs leading from the dormitories than he came sharply into contact with Plunger, who was hurrying along the corridor as though he were rushing full speed up a cricket pitch to prevent himself from being run out.

"Hallo, Harry, just the fellow I was looking for!" he exclaimed.

"Are you, Freddy? Then I wish you'd look for me with your eyes instead of your elbows," answered Harry, rubbing his ribs, which were aching from the blow they had just received from the boniest part of Plunger's elbows. "What is it?"

"You know that twaddle in the *Gargoyle Record* about the poet being stuck for a rhyme to 'hunger'?"

"Yes," laughed Harry, as he recalled Plunger's confusion when the paragraph was read aloud in the common room.

"What are you grinning at? You don't mean to say you saw anything funny in it?"

"Oh, no; but you're bound to laugh when the other fellows laugh, you know. It's like the measles—catching. I'm all right now. Go on. You were saying ——"

"I believe that paragraph was sent in to the editor—Dick Jessel, you know—by Baldry."

"Oh! What makes you think that?"

"He's been worrying about rhymes ever since that paragraph was read out—that's why. You see, he sent in the paragraph so that he might have another shot at me with the answer. Baldry's a deep 'un."

"But why should he send in paragraphs to the *Record* against you?"

"Well, I make fun of his name, so he's trying to score off me in return. But he can't do it, for 'Plunger's' no sort of rhyme to 'hunger.' And there's another thing I've got to tell you in confidence, Harry. I believe that cartoon of me on the Forum window was Baldry's work."

"Oh!" answered Harry drily. "What makes you think that?"

"Baldry once said that if the glue business failed"—Plunger's father was a glue and size merchant in a large way of business—"I could always pick up my living as an artist's model."

"How?"

"Well, he had the cheek to tell me I had a funny sort of face. And Baldry's smart with the pencil, you know; so, putting this and that together, I believe Master Baldry not only sent in that paragraph to the *Record*, but put my face on the Forum window."

"Very wrong of him, Freddy," said Harry sympathetically. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Well, I've got a lovely old basket, once the property of a dear and highly-respected friend of yours, Mrs. Trounce, and this basket is filled with a lovely collection of feathers. Along with these feathers will be mixed a little glutinous substance, as the chemistry master calls it, which I brought last term from the pater's works. This basket will be fixed directly over the Forum door, by means of a string, the end of which will be held by some one hidden in a tree at the back of the Forum. That some one in the tree will be you. Are you listening?"

"Ra-ther. That some one in the tree will be me. Go on."

"My dearly beloved and much respected chum, Sammy Baldry, will receive a message calling him to the Forum at half-past six. Someone will be at the side of the Forum, so as to know the exact moment Baldry appears on the scene. Directly he nears the door that some one will whistle. That will be a signal to you up in the tree. Baldhead will open the door. Then you'll pull the string. Over will go the basket, and down will come the pretty feathers over Baldhead. In the information Baldry was good enough to supply to the *Gargoyle Record*, affectionate inquiries were made, you remember, after the

Missing Link, last seen in all his native beauty in the Forum. What price for Baldry, eh? When he gets these feathers on him he'll be a puzzle. No one will be able to tell which kingdom he belongs to—animal, vegetable, or mineral."

And Plunger chuckled so that it seemed as though he would never be able to stop himself. Just to keep him company, Harry chuckled too.

"Splendid little joke, isn't it, Harry?"

"Splendid."

"I told you what fun you'd have when you got to Garside. Better than Gaffer Quelch's, eh? Things were awfully slow there, weren't they, Harry?"

"Awfully."

But, so far as fun was concerned, Harry couldn't see that he had had very much of it, except at his own expense. Plunger had, in fact, made him his butt, and now he wished to score off Baldry through his instrumentality.

"I didn't quite understand you, Freddy," said Harry presently, as Plunger went on chuckling. "Who do you say was to be up in the tree at the back of the Forum and pull the string?"

"You, Harry. I'm giving you the post of honour, because you deserve it. Baldry has poked fun at you a lot. Now it's your turn, old fellow."

"It's very kind of you, Freddy—it really is. I don't know how to be grateful enough. I'm to be in the tree, you say: but where will you be?"

"Oh, I'll do the whistling."

"The whistling?"

"Yes, to let you know up in the tree when Baldry comes along. Then, directly Baldry opens the door, you pull the string, and—there you are. Baldry in full plumage. It's all clear enough, isn't it?"

"All clear enough;—but——"

"But what? You're not going to cry off, are you?"

"I'm not going to cry off; but suppose we change places."

"How do you mean?"

"You go up the tree and do the pulling, and let me do the whistling."

"Why, it'll be ever so much more fun to pull the string. I want to give you the best position, you see."

"I know you do, Freddy. I know your good nature; but I'm not going to let you make the sacrifice. I'll do the whistling."

"Very well, if you wish it. I don't mind which I do," said Plunger, in a lofty tone. "Only don't make a mess of it."

"Oh, my part's so simple, I can't make a mess of it. Mind you don't make a mess of yours, Freddy."

Now Harry decided, immediately on quitting Plunger, that he would acquaint Baldry with the joke that Plunger intended to play upon him. It was he who had drawn that cartoon in the Forum that had stirred Plunger to wrath, and Harry came to the conclusion that it was not right that Baldry should suffer for him. Besides, as Plunger had so often scored over him, he thought it only right that he should begin to equalize matters. So he hunted up Baldry, and informed him of Plunger's kind intentions towards him.

"Oh," said Baldry, when Harry had ended, "that's Plunger's little game, is it? I thought he was getting a bit cross, but I didn't think he meant showing his teeth. The beauty of it is, I hadn't anything to do with that portrait of him on the Forum window. I know no more about it than you do."

"Than I do!" echoed Harry, smiling to himself.

"He made a better guess when he told you that I inspired those paragraphs in the *Record*. I just gave a hint to Jowett. Jowett passed it on to Jessel, and Jessel put in the smart bits that touched Plunger on the raw. Plunger's all right when he's going for other people, but he doesn't like it when others go for him."

Harry quite sympathized with this view of things.

"There's my name," went on Baldry. "I can't help my name. I didn't christen myself, and was never asked whether I liked it or not. That's the worst of names. You never are consulted. It's all done for you by your ancestors, and your godfathers and godmothers—and people of that sort. I don't know why it should be, but it is; and there you are—fixed up for life with a name, unless you happen to be a girl, and get married, then you drop it for another, but it may be ever so much worse than the one you've got. Now, what I say is this—Baldry isn't such a bad name, as names go, is it, Moncrief?"

"Better than Plunger, any day," remarked Harry, in his most sympathetic manner.

"Better than Plunger, as you say, Moncrief. Where Plunger's ancestors picked up a name like that, goodness only knows. It must have come out of the Ark. And yet he's always calling me 'Baldhead,' 'Bladder of Lard,' 'The Lost Hair,' and telling me to go in for hair-restorer, Tatcho, and making feeble jokes of that sort. But I think I went one better when I got that paragraph in the *Record*, eh?"

"Yes, Baldry you scored there; but what we've got to think about is, how to prevent Plunger from scoring back. Some one will have to go to the Forum in answer to his invitation, when it comes. It won't matter who, because Plunger won't be able to see; he'll be up in the tree, waiting for my whistle. So who's to be the victim?"

Baldry became thoughtful. He ran through the list of his acquaintances whom he thought most deserving of the honour that Plunger proposed to bestow on him. He thought of one or two in his form who might have been available for his purpose, but it was just possible that they were in the confidence of Plunger. So he turned from his own form to the Fifth—"the bounders of the Fifth."

"I've got it," he suddenly exclaimed. "Percival!"

"Percival!" echoed Harry.

"Yes; that's the ticket; the very thing—Percival. If it comes off all right, it'll be a big hit. We shall be covered with glory, and he'll be covered with feathers—ha, ha! It couldn't be better. Do you see how it fits in? A nice little present of feathers for the fellow who showed the white feather at the sand-pit. Isn't it splendid, Moncrief?"

Harry was silent. Percival had been far from his thoughts. He never imagined that Baldry would suggest Percival. For the moment his mind went back to that night when Paul came to Redmead. Once again he could hear the low, earnest tones of his father—"Many thanks for the great service you have done, Paul. You have not only done a great service for me and my brother, but for your country."

"Well, Moncrief; why don't you answer?" came the voice of Baldry. "It's the finest idea that has come to me for a long time. Feathers for the fellow who showed the white feather."

At the words, the image of his father faded from Harry's mind. He could no longer hear the echo of his words. He only saw his cousin's bleeding face as he rose vanquished from the sand-pit; and, side by side with that picture, he saw Percival walking and talking, and shaking hands with "the wretched Beetle—Wyndham," as he had seen him walking and talking and shaking hands with him that afternoon.

"A fine idea—splendid!" he cried. "Nothing could be better. Let Percival be the victim."

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## CHAPTER XXII

### HATCHING A PLOT, AND WHAT CAME OF IT

"Nothing could be better. Let Percival be the victim!"

Scarcely were the words out of Harry's lips than Viner came up to Baldry with the notice he was expecting. It was a hectograph copy, announcing that a meeting of the more important members of the Third Form would be held in the Forum at half-past six prompt to consider a matter of pressing importance.

Baldry thanked Viner. Viner smirked and retreated.

"Viner's in the know, that's certain," said Baldry, when he was out of earshot. "Viner's a crawler."

Harry had no great reason to like Viner. It was he who had gone behind him on the day that he had entered Garside, so that Newall might push him over his back. From that incident the quarrel had arisen between Stanley and Newall, and other troubles had followed in its train.

"You're right there; but now what's to be done?"

"Oh, that's easy enough. We've only got to rub out 'Third Form' and put in 'Fifth,' and then send it on to Percival; and there you are."

With the aid of a knife and some hectograph ink this alteration was soon made. The next question was how to get it to Percival without arousing suspicion. As they were considering this point Baldry caught sight of Hibbert crossing the ground.

"There's our messenger," he exclaimed. Then he shouted, "Hibbert, Hibbert!"

Hibbert looked round. Baldry beckoned him, and he came to where they were standing.

"I want you to give this note to Percival. If he asks you where it came from, tell him he will see inside. Then come away. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Hibbert, looking suspiciously at the note.

"Well, run along. It won't bite you."

Hibbert went off reluctantly with the note. It seemed now as though he were as anxious as the rest to avoid Paul. At any rate, he kept out of his way, but he could not very well refuse Baldry's request.

He found Paul by himself, as usual, in the writing-room. He had commenced work in downright earnest on the prize essay.

"Hallo, Hibbert, is that you?" he asked, looking up as the boy entered. "What have you got there?"

Hibbert handed him the notice without a word, but did not beat a retreat according to the instructions he had received.

"Another meeting of the Fifth," Paul said, as much to himself as to Hibbert, when he had glanced at the note. "I wonder they trouble to send to me. It is too great an honour!"

No suspicion as to the genuineness of the note crossed his mind. It was quite usual for Sedgefield, who acted as hon. sec. for the Fifth, to send out his notices with a messenger from the junior forms.

"What's too great an honour, may I ask?" said Hibbert timidly.

Paul explained to him the contents of the notice.

"It's to call me over the coals again, I expect. Shall I go or shan't I?" he asked himself. Then, turning smilingly to the boy: "What would you do if you were in my place, Hibbert?"

"Stay away," said the boy promptly.

"And improve my reputation for courage—eh? Why would you stay away?"

Having so far exceeded his instructions, Hibbert thought he might as well go a little further.

"Because I don't believe that the Fifth had anything to do with that notice. It came from Baldry and Moncrief minor. I believe it's a trick."

Paul, beginning to smell a rat, examined the notice with closer attention, and soon detected the erasion where "Fifth" had been substituted for "Third Form."

"Thanks, Hibbert. I don't know why you should, but you're always doing me a good turn."

"Not half the good turns you've done me," said the boy earnestly, as he went out.

"What's in the wind?" Paul asked himself, when he was alone. "Bitter as Stanley is against me, he can't have set on his cousin to hoax and poke fun at me. Surely not?"

What was it, then? He could not guess; but it seemed to him that he must have sunk very low indeed in the eyes of the school when he had become a target for the junior forms.

"I must put my foot down on that nonsense," he said to himself, as he paced to and fro the room.

At first he thought of making straight for Baldry and Moncrief minor, and demanding what it meant; but on second thoughts he decided against that course, because it would mean mischief to Hibbert. His life at the school would be made more miserable than it was.

"The best thing after all will be to face it—to accept the invitation of Masters Moncrief and Baldry to the Forum to-night. I run the risk of being laughed at, I know, but I'm getting fairly used to that. And it's just possible I may be able to turn the tables."

Having come to this decision, Paul did the wisest thing possible under the circumstances—dismissed the matter from his mind, and went on with his work.

Now it so happened that a meeting of the Fifth had really been called for that evening in the Forum, and still stranger to relate, for the express purpose of discussing Paul. The information that he had been seen in the company of Wyndham, and had actually shaken hands with him, had quickly spread, and the meeting of the Fifth had been called for the express purpose of considering this further development in the feud between the Beetles and the Gargoyles. No notice of this meeting had, however, been sent to Paul.

So it was that about the time Paul was getting ready to go to the Forum, little suspecting the proposed meeting, Newall had already started for it, just as ignorant of the little plot that had been hatched by certain members of the Third. Leveson had had some lines which had kept him late in the classroom, and Newall had taken his place in getting the shed ready for the meeting. Thus it happened he was in advance of the rest.

It was quite dark as Newall made his way to the shed. Harry Moncrief was hiding at the side, with his whistle between his teeth. The figure coming towards the shed in the darkness he took to be the figure of Paul.

"He's up to time," he chuckled to himself. "He's fallen into the trap beautifully."

Newall reached the door of the shed, opened it, and passed in. Simultaneously Harry blew the whistle. At the signal, Plunger pulled the string which communicated with the basket immediately over the doorway, sending its contents showering down on the head of Newall.

Newall gasped and staggered in the darkness, striking out wildly with his arms. He had a confused idea that some enormous bird of prey had suddenly swooped down from the roof, and was flapping its wings over his head.

"Ooshter—ooshter! Get out of it!" he gasped, as he reeled about and struck out wildly at his imaginary foe.

Meantime Plunger had slid down quickly from the tree, and, accompanied by Viner and Bember, who had been awaiting the signal in the rear, rushed round to the front. The three held on to the door, so as to keep their victim floundering about in the darkness till they saw fit to release him.

"Splendid; couldn't be better," chuckled Plunger. "My, isn't old Baldy carrying on?"

His companions could not answer. They were doing their best to smother their laughter.

"My, he's carrying on awful!" went on Plunger. "Breaking up the happy home. Didn't think Baldy had so much spring in him. Seems to be all over the shop. Do you hear him, Moncrief? Where is Moncrief?"

Moncrief had made himself scarce. He had retreated to a safe distance, where Baldry was awaiting him. By the time he reached him, he, too, was exploding with laughter.

"Well, what's happened?" asked Baldry.

"Oh, don't ask me. It's too funny for words."

"Percival's inside?"

"Percival's inside, ramping about like mad, and Plunger, Viner, and Bember are holding the door outside like grim death, and laughing like hyenas over 'old Baldy.' Good, isn't it?"

On that Baldry was seized with a fit of laughter too.

"Good? The best joke we've had at Garside for a long time," answered Baldry, between gasps. "My, what will happen when they find out their mistake? What will they say when they see Percival stagger out instead of 'old Baldy?'"

"Plunger will stagger the most of the two, I reckon," laughed Harry.

"I just reckon he will."

"And I reckon also that he'd better keep out of the reach of Percival."

"Percival!" echoed Baldry contemptuously. "Percival may ramp a good deal, but he's not likely to do much, I'm thinking, after his exhibition at the sand-pits. Percival is——"

"I beg pardon, but did I hear some one mention my name?" came a quiet voice in the rear of Baldry.

Both boys turned promptly round at the voice. To their amazement Percival was standing before them.

"Per—Percival!" exclaimed Harry.

"Per—Percival!" echoed Baldry.

"I happened to be strolling this way, and thought I heard my name; but perhaps I was mistaken."

The boys could not speak. They could only stare with open mouths at Percival. It was a shadowy figure that stood before them in the darkness. Was it indeed Percival, or was it his ghost?

"Y—y—yes; we—we—were speaking about you," stammered Baldry, at length. "We—were—just wondering—how you were getting on."

"It's very kind of you to think of me," said Paul, with a quiet smile.

Paul, quite ignorant of what had transpired in the shed, thought for the moment whether he had better tackle Baldry and Moncrief minor then and there as to their motive in desiring him to go to the shed, but on second thoughts he decided to find out for himself; so he passed on.

"Pinch me—punch me—kick me", exclaimed Harry. "Am I awake or am I dreaming, Baldry?"

"It was Percival right enough."

"Then who—who's—in—the shed?" gasped Harry, a cold perspiration coming to his brow.

"What an idiotic question to ask me," retorted Baldry indignantly. "You ought to know best. Are you sure there's anybody in the shed at all?"

"I'm sure of that. And—and—I could have sworn it was Percival."

"You've made a nice mess of it."

"Well, if I have made a mess of it, I've kept you out of it," retorted Harry, beginning to feel sore at the tone taken by Baldry. "After all, Plunger and the others will be taken in a good deal more than we've been, remember. He still thinks it's you he's got a prisoner."

"Ah, yes, so he does," exclaimed Baldry, breaking into laughter again; "I'd forgotten that. When that door opens it'll be one of the best little surprise packets Plunger's ever had in his life. Hallo, here comes a lot of the Fifth fellows, and they seem making for the shed, too!"

The shadowy figures of Arbery, Parfitt, Hasluck, and a couple of others passed within a short distance of where the two boys were standing. They were conversing eagerly together.

There was silence between them for a moment; then an unearthly yell rose on the air.

"Goodness! What was that? Enough to lift your hair off, wasn't it, Moncrief?"

Harry did not answer. He was trying to pierce the darkness to see what was happening in the direction of the shed.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE LAST BOND OF FRIENDSHIP

While Harry had been explaining to Baldry what had happened at the shed, Plunger and his two companions held fast to the door, under the impression that Baldry was within. Plunger was in a high state of glee at the capture he had made, and as soon as Harry had gone commenced crowing loudly, explaining as he did so that "as old Baldy seemed to be going in for dancing, he must give him a tune to dance to."

"Put the soft pedal on for a bit, Freddy," said Viner. "He's saying things to himself. Let's listen."

Plunger, who had nearly crowed himself hoarse, kept silent for a moment, as a smothered voice from within travelled through the door.

"Open the door—open the door!"

"Keep your wool on, Baldy!" retorted Plunger, in his most provoking tones. "Drop the clog-dancing, and give us a song; it's getting monotonous. What's the best rhyme for Baldy? How're the birds, beasts, and fishes getting on? What's the kingdom you've sprinted to—animal, vegetable, or mineral? Any more paragraphs for Jessell? We'll take them along."

"Open the door! I'll—I'll smash you when I get out of this!" came the voice from within.

"Smash us? Oh, oh, Baldy!" commenced Plunger, but Viner stopped him.

"Quiet, Freddy. Listen a moment. It doesn't sound to me like Baldy."

"Will you open that door? I'll pay you out for this! I'll—I'll——"

"Why—why, it's Newall!" whispered Plunger, aghast. "How's he got in there?"

"Don't ask me," said Viner, turning cold, for he had always been on particularly good terms with Newall.

"Can there be two of them in there, do you think?" suggested Bember.

"Ah, I see it all!" said Plunger, a light beginning to dawn upon him. "Moncrief minor's let us in for this. That's the reason he's bolted."

"Seems to me we'd better bolt too," exclaimed Bember. "There won't be much left of you, Freddy, if Newall gets hold of you."

"What price you? You're just as much in it as I am."

But Bember's advice commended itself to Plunger and Viner, neither of whom was desirous of meeting their captive when he was released, so, suddenly letting go their hold of the door, they bolted with all speed in the direction of the school.

Newall continued shouting his threats at the top of his voice for a few moments before he discovered that no one was on guard outside; then he flung open the door, and dashed through with a yell, just as Arbery, Parfitt, Hasluck, and others of the Fifth had started for the shed. They came to a sudden stop when they saw the extraordinary figure that rushed towards them in the darkness. And well they might, for Newall, smothered in feathers from head to foot, presented one of the most extraordinary sights it is possible to imagine.

"What is it?" asked Arbery, in an awestruck whisper.

"Ask me another. It—it looks like——"

But before Hasluck could explain what it looked like Newall had dashed up to them.

"Newall!" came the astonished cry.

"Who—who's been doing this?" he cried, glaring fiercely round on his companions.

"Doing what?" asked Hasluck.

"Can't you see? Nearly smothering me with feathers, and fastening me in the Forum."

"We know nothing of it. We were just coming to the meeting when we heard the shouting," answered Parfitt, in an injured tone. "Is it likely we'd play a trick on you, Newall?"

"It sounded like some of those imps of the Third. They were talking to me as if I were Baldry."

At this moment Paul joined the group, wondering what was the matter. Directly Newall caught sight of him, he turned towards him fiercely:

"Do you know anything of this? Had you a hand in it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," answered Paul coldly.

"Of course not. You never do when it suits your purpose. Can we believe anything from the fellow who shakes hands with a Beetle—with the enemy of Garside?" came the sneering answer.

Paul staggered back as though he had been struck. Some one had seen him shake hands with Wyndham then, and, without knowing the facts, his enemies were already putting the worst possible construction on it. Stanley had joined the group as Newall was speaking.

"If you can't believe anything I say, what's the use of asking me questions? It seems to me a waste of breath."

"Did you or did you not set those fellows on to keep me in the shed?" demanded Newall hotly.

"I'm not going to answer you," said Paul firmly.

"Then perhaps you'll answer me," said Stanley, stepping forward to Newall's side, pale to the lips.

Paul had not noticed his arrival, and did not know that he was present till he heard his voice. It stirred the old feeling of love and friendship within him, though there was little that was friendly in its tone.

"Answer you what, Stan?" asked Paul, in softer tones.

Stanley knew little of the grounds of the present dispute, but he guessed that he could not be far wrong in repeating the question that Newall had just put. So he repeated it.

"Yes, I'll answer it," came Paul's response, "for whatever else you may think me guilty of, Stanley, I don't think you'll believe me guilty of telling a deliberate falsehood. I haven't set anybody on to keep Newall a prisoner in the shed, and, whatever has happened to him, I've had no hand in it."

He spoke with such earnestness and sincerity that there was scarcely any one present, with perhaps the exception of Newall himself, who doubted him.

"I think you can take Percival's word for it," said Stanley, turning to Newall.

"Thanks so much for one crumb of confidence." Paul, in spite of himself, could not prevent a slight accent of bitterness creeping into his voice. "It is

really very good of you to think that my word may be taken, and I hope you won't think me ungrateful."

"If you say his word may be taken, Moncrief," said Newall, with a shrug of his shoulders, "that's enough. But as you have so much confidence in him, you'd better question him about the Beetle."

"I was going to," answered Stanley, as, once more turning to Paul, he asked: "One of the fellows saw you speaking to a Beetle yesterday. Is that true?"

"Quite true."

"Shaking hands with him?"

"Yes."

Stanley groaned inwardly. He had hoped that it was a mistake—that his cousin's eyes had deceived him, but there was no mistake. It was only too true. He turned away, unable to hide the disappointment on his face. Paul caught a glimpse of it in spite of the darkness, and was about to speak, but Newall quickly interposed.

"There's another question which Moncrief's modesty prevents him from asking," he said, with a sneer. "We've been given to understand that the Beetle you shook hands with is the same Beetle who knocked Moncrief about in the sand-pit. Is that true, too?"

Paul was silent, as though he still stood to the resolution he had made not to answer Newall.

"Is it—is it?" demanded Stanley, turning swiftly round again, his tone almost as fierce as Newall's had been.

"Yes; it is true." Then he added in a lower voice: "There are things I can't explain. Will you meet me quietly, by yourself, just for a few minutes,

Stanley?"

"There's nothing I'm ashamed of. I've no secrets," came the proud, cold answer. "If you've anything to explain, explain it now—in the presence of my friend Newall and the rest!"

"My friend Newall!" The words froze up all the warmer feelings in Paul's breast. It was as though Stanley had taken a knife from his pocket, and with one cruel stroke severed the last bond of friendship between them, and had then bound with firmer hand the bonds that bound him to Newall.

"Very well. If that is your last word, I've spoken my last word too."

And Paul turned on his heel, leaving them to draw what conclusions they liked from his answer.

Newall and his companions set to work removing the feathers which had descended on him in such a shower, and while they were actively engaged in it Waterman came leisurely along, late as usual, and drawled out:

"Hallo, Newall! What's wrong? Been moulting?"

Newall disdained to answer. It was some time before he got clear of the feathers, and then they left unmistakable marks.

"It won't be long before I find out who served me this trick," he said; "but I don't think we want to go to the shed now over the other matter."

"Newall's had more than enough of the shed already, seems to me," drawled Waterman.

"Dry up, Water. You're getting it on the brain," responded Newall gruffly.

"I think Newall's quite right," said Stanley. "There's no need for any meeting now. We've found out that it's all true enough about Percival—that

he has met a Beetle, that he has spoken to him, that he has shaken hands with him that he is on friendly terms with him. He's admitted it, so it's no use going to the shed."

There was a murmur of assent.

"Well, but you can't leave it at that. Something more must be done, else Percival will be laughing at us in his sleeve," said Parfitt.

"Why not—why shouldn't we leave it at that?" said Waterman. "What's the use of worrying over trifles? Percival talks to a Beetle. Why on earth shouldn't he, if he likes it? Percival shakes hands with a Beetle. Again, I ask, where's the objection, so long as he doesn't want me to do it, or any other fellow in the Form. What's the use of making such an awful smoke?"

"I think we'd better truss him with Waterman," suggested Newall.

"That's better than being feathered anyhow," retorted Waterman coolly.

"Come, what's to be done? We can't stay here all night," said Hasluck. "Leveson will be up presently with his stop-watch."

"We oughtn't to have a fellow like Percival in the school," Parfitt commented. "The thing is how to get rid of him. We can't go up to Weevil and ask that he shall be turned out. And we can't do what we'd like to do—kick him out."

"No, we can't very well do that," struck in Newall. "There's only one way."

"What's that?" cried four or five in chorus.

"Make it too warm for the school to hold him."

"No, no; don't do that," came in quick, tense tones from Stanley. "I wouldn't like to be one to drive Percival from Garside."

"Nor I," added Waterman, with unusual emphasis for him.

"You!" retorted Newall contemptuously; "you don't count. Moncrief does. What's your objection, Moncrief?"

"Percival was once my friend," came the sad answer.

"Friend!" was the scornful reply.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE RAFT ON THE RIVER

From this time every effort was made to make Paul's life at Garside unendurable. The dead set against him extended from the Fifth Form downwards. The views which Newall had expressed with so much force on the night he had been feathered reigned supreme throughout the school. It was felt that Paul had no place there, and that as he would not go of his own free will, it was the bounden duty of all of them to follow Newall's advice, and drive him from it. So the war against him was carried on—not so much openly as secretly—by every petty means that could be devised.

Stanley, to his credit, took no part in this secret warfare against Paul. He had still some affection for him; but though he took no part in it, he made no effort to check it. The fact was that he was getting more and more under the thumb of Newall and Parfitt every day.

Even Hibbert seemed to have deserted him. At any rate, Paul saw but little of him at this time, and when he did see him, the boy only greeted him with a wan, frightened smile, as though he were afraid to speak.

Waterman was about the only one who showed no change of manner towards him. He was still quite friendly in his lazy fashion. It was he who had first given the hint to Paul of the movement on foot against him.

"I may as well put you on your guard, Percival," he said, on the day following Newall's declaration against Paul. "You've put up the backs of all the Form, and a lot of fellows outside it. They're going for you. They mean driving you from Garside."

"I thought something was on foot. Thanks for telling me."

"Oh, you'd have soon found out, you know, without my telling you. But you needn't give me away. I only just mention it so that you may know what's in the wind. Don't worry. It's not worth it."

With this characteristic piece of advice Waterman left him.

"Trying to drive me from the school," Paul repeated to himself. "Well, they may try, and beat me in the long run, but they won't find it easy. 'Be ye stedfast, unmovable.' By God's help I'll try to be true to the school motto."

Having come to that determination, Paul set his teeth hard, and put his back to the wall. And so, though scarcely a day passed without bringing some fresh insult or tyranny, he still held firm to the position he had taken up—to the resolve he had made with himself and his God. It must be admitted, however, that the cup was sometimes very near to overflowing.

His lot might have been easier to bear had he received some answer to the letter he had written to Mr. Moncrief; but as day followed day without any response, it seemed to him that Mr. Moncrief disdained writing to him, or did not think his letter worth answering. He came to the conclusion that Stanley must have written to his uncle, telling him what had happened at the sand-pit, and the feeling against Paul at the school, and so had poisoned his mind against him.

Once or twice Paul thought of writing to the one friend who never failed him—his mother—and unburdening his breast to her; but the thought only came to him to be dismissed. It would only make her miserable. She had suffered enough in the past without being worried with his petty troubles at school. So he determined to stand alone—to fight out the battle by himself.

Things were at this pass when an event happened which caused some stir at Garside.

About a mile from the school ran the river. Its course lay in picturesque variety through peaceful pastoral country, cornfields, and orchards. One part of it was spanned by an old wooden bridge. This bridge had become so dilapidated by time and wear that the county justices had decided that it was dangerous for traffic. So to prevent the possibility of an accident, it was decided to pull it down, and replace it with a new one.

Accordingly, the bridge was pulled down, and a new one begun. To aid in this task, a raft was used by the workmen in crossing the river.

Now Plunger and his companions in the Third Form were deeply interested in the work that was going on at the river, but what interested Plunger most of all was the raft. It seemed to him that he would like to live upon that raft. What could be more delightful than gliding up and down the stream on it for ever. Then he thought of the many adventures that had happened on rafts—of the many shipwrecked passengers that had been saved on them.

"Wish I had one of my own," he remarked to Harry, as the two stood watching the men crossing the stream one half-holiday. "Wouldn't it be jolly fun?"

"Very," answered Harry, who, fired by Plunger's enthusiasm, began to share his longing.

It should be mentioned that Plunger's attitude towards Harry had changed since the night when Newall had been feathered in mistake for Baldry.

To use the phrase of the Third—"Moncrief minor had scored," and Plunger never respected anybody till they had succeeded in scoring over him—in other words, beaten him at his own game. Since then he had begun to tolerate Harry, and receive him on something like a footing of equality.

"Those fellows," went on Plunger, nodding his head in the direction of the workmen on the raft, "are so beastly selfish."

"How, Freddy?"

"Well, I tried to get on that raft when it was lying idle the other day; but they commenced shouting at me like mad. I wasn't doing any harm."

"Of course not."

"If they'd been using it, it'd have been a different thing; but they weren't. So why couldn't they have let me cross the river on it—eh?"

"I don't see why. They ought to have been glad to. They didn't know the honour they were losing. Now, if you'd only have told 'em who you were \_\_\_\_\_"

"Shut up!" cried Plunger, pinching Harry's arm. "But, I say, couldn't we just have some lovely games, if we only had a raft like that?"

"Lovely," assented Harry.

Here was silence between them for some moments, as they watched the raft and the men upon it with envious eyes.

"Duffers!" exclaimed Plunger, at length giving expression to his feelings.

"Don't take on so, Freddy."

"Can't help it—duffers!" repeated Plunger, with still greater emphasis.

Silence again, broken by Harry.

"Would you really like to go on that raft, Freddy!"

"Stow poking fun."

"I'm not poking fun, I'm quite serious. Seems to me that if we really wanted to go on that raft, and really made up our minds to it, we ought to be able to manage it."

"How?" came the eager question.

"Easy enough if we go the right way, and don't make a mess of it, like Newall did that night when he walked into the Forum."

"We're not talking about the Forum," said Plunger quickly, giving Harry another pinch. "We're talking about rafts—that raft," pointing to the one on the river.

"And it's that raft I'm talking about. Have you ever noticed what happens on a Saturday?"

"Many things happen on a Saturday; but what is the one thing that happens in particular?"

"The workmen on the bridge leave off exactly as the clock strikes twelve—a little bit sooner if they can manage it. Never later."

"Oh, yes; they're very punctual at leaving off. But what's that to do with the raft?"

"A good deal. They always leave the raft tied up under the bridge. What would be easier than to untie it, and there you are."

"Harry, you're a genius—a reg'lar genius!" cried Plunger, bringing his hand down on Harry's back. "It never sprouted out like that when you were at Gaffer Quelch's. It's come on since you've been at Garside. I must have helped it."

Plunger had undoubtedly helped in the development of what he was pleased to term Harry's "genius," but whether altogether to the advantage of Harry time alone could show.

"You helped it, Freddy! The only help you give is helping Number One. You ought to have belonged to the help-myself society. You'd have been just

the fellow for the president."

Plunger kicked Harry, and Harry returned the compliment; then their eyes went to the river again, and the raft, which was just getting under way again to cross to the other side.

"Those duffers don't know how to use a raft," said Harry contemptuously, after he had been watching the workmen for some moments.

"Of course they don't. That's the worst of being landlubbers. Wish we could only take them in hand and show them."

"One of 'em ought to be wearing a suit of goatskins and things of that sort, with a great cap on his head, with the hair on the outside to shoot off the rain if it came on," said Harry thoughtfully.

"Like Robinson Crusoe, you mean?"

"Like Robinson Crusoe. That slim fellow with the black hair would do for Friday, and the others could be Indians—if they only knew how to do things properly; but they don't."

"They don't," repeated Plunger emphatically. "My, if we only had the working of that raft, Harry, we'd make things hum!"

It was tantalizing to watch the men, so they turned away with visions of what it would be possible to accomplish if they only had possession of the raft. They could discover a desert island on the other side of the river, pitch their tent on it, and do "lots of things." Full of these splendid visions, they walked along in silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

"I think we can work it, Harry," Plunger at length remarked.

"Work what?"

"That Crusoe idea. We can get the raft next Saturday, and easily peg out a desert island on the other side of the river. I shan't want to dress up much. I've got a ragged jacket which'll be near enough for skins, and a soft felt which I can cut round the brim with Mrs. Trounce's scissors. That'll do for the hat."

"Whose hat?"

"Crusoe's hat, of course."

"And who's going to wear it?"

"Who's going to wear it?" Plunger's eyebrows disappeared into the roots of his hair in amazement at the question. "I am, of course!"

"You mean that you're going to be Crusoe?"

"Of course!"

And Plunger's eyebrows remained so high up in the roots of his hair at the bare idea of anybody else playing the part that it seemed as though they would never come down again.

"Well, but where do I come in?"

"You can be Friday or an Indian."

"And make myself black, and go about without any shoes and socks on, and get thorns in my feet, and—and things like that. No, Freddy; no, I don't! We'll change parts. I'll be Crusoe; you be Friday. You look more like a savage than I do."

Plunger did not seem altogether pleased with the compliment, for he brought his knuckles down on Harry's head; but Harry was not quite the meek boy he was when he first came to Garside, so he returned the

compliment, with interest. Then Plunger tried by cajolery to induce him to let him be Crusoe, and satisfy himself with the part of Friday, but Harry remained firm.

"I first thought of it," he argued, "and I ought to have first choice. If we're going on that raft, I'm going as Crusoe, Freddy."

Plunger preserved a gloomy silence for some moments; then he suddenly lifted his head, and his eyes sparkled.

"I've got it. Why shouldn't there be two Crusoes?"

"Two Crusoes! You and I, Freddy?"

"Yes."

Harry had never heard of two Crusoes existing on the desert island at one and the same time, but he didn't see why there shouldn't be. It would be more up to date. Besides it solved the difficulty, so he promptly consented.

"But, who'll be Man Friday?"

"Oh, we'll make the Camel Man Friday. He'll do splendidly."

"The Camel" was the cruel nickname it will be remembered that Newall had given to Hibbert. Unfortunately, a name like that sticks, and it had stuck to Hibbert.

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## CHAPTER XXV

### ON A VOYAGE OF ADVENTURE

Moncrief minor and Plunger, having decided that they would improve upon Defoe's famous story and introduce two Crusoes into their forthcoming adventures instead of one, and having further decided that Hibbert should be Man Friday, it only remained to put their project into execution as soon as possible.

A little way down the river, on the opposite side to that on which the raft was usually moored, was a plantation. It had a thick growth of furze and bushes, and save for the rabbits and squirrels, was quite desolate during the winter. What better place could be selected for the desert island?

"Just the ticket," said Plunger, rubbing his hands, after he and Harry had explored the plantation with a view to their forthcoming enterprise. "Couldn't have been better if it had been built for us. We must be careful, though, and not let old Baldhead and the others know anything about it. They'll all want to cut in—Sedgefield, Bember, and the rest. I know them. Two Crusoes are quite enough at one time, don't you think?"

Harry quite agreed with Plunger. In fact, he was rather doubtful whether two weren't too many—too many by one. But he didn't hint it to Plunger, for fear of bringing up the old dispute.

"Have you sounded the Camel?" Plunger asked presently.

"Not yet; but I don't think he'll mind, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Having his face blacked. He's sure to object to that."

"But he needn't know anything about it till we get him over in the plantation; then he can kick and squeal as much as he likes. It won't matter. Let's hunt him up now."

The two thereupon went in search of Hibbert. When they found him, Harry informed him in glowing language of their project for the coming Saturday.

"And just by way of a little treat we thought we'd take you with us," said Plunger, as Harry concluded his explanation. "It'll be fine fun. When we get on the desert island we can have splendid adventures!"

"Yes, yes; it'll be fine fun, as you say; but I'd rather not," answered Hibbert, for whom the river had little attraction. He somehow feared it. "I'll give way to some of the others."

"But you're not going to give way. You're too fond of taking a back seat. You never have any fun; the other fellows have plenty. It's a jolly shame!" exclaimed Plunger, waxing indignant. "It isn't right, is it, Harry?"

"No, it isn't," Harry promptly assented. "I don't see why the Camel shouldn't have as much fun as the rest of us."

"But—but I don't want it. I'm quite content."

"Ah, that's it. You're too content; but we're not. We mean making things better for you. It's nearly time some alteration was made. Baldry, Sedgfield, and the others would never think of giving you a bit of pleasure. They're too selfish—aren't they, Harry?"

"Awfully!"

"So we're leaving them out of it, and you're coming with us instead, Hibbert. We'll have a good time, I can tell you."

Plunger spoke with so much earnestness, and was backed up by Harry with no less earnestness, that Hibbert really thought that their sole object in taking him with them on the raft was to give him "a bit of pleasure." It was perfectly clear also that they would take no denial; so Hibbert, making a virtue of necessity, reluctantly consented.

"Whatever you do don't let out what we're going to do to the other fellows," was Plunger's parting injunction, "or they'll be eating their heads off with envy."

Nevertheless, in spite of Plunger's injunction, the secret leaked out. Indeed, it would have been an astonishing thing if it hadn't, for the proposed adventure on the raft had taken such complete possession of the mind of Plunger, that he could think of little else. He dreamt about it, and talked it over with Harry at every opportunity. In addition to this, they had been seen carrying parcels in the direction of the plantation.

The long-looked-for Saturday at length came. It had been agreed between the two confederates that, so as to avoid suspicion, Plunger should stroll up to the bridge just before the hour the men left off work, and that Harry should arrive on the scene a few minutes later with Hibbert, from another direction.

"If anybody's about they won't suspect anything," said Plunger. "We shall meet as if by accident, and keep out of the way till the road's clear."

Precisely as arranged, Plunger strolled up to the old bridge, which by this time was almost demolished. The workmen had made fast the raft to a stake at the side of the river, and, having received their wages, hastened off at the stroke of twelve. No one heeded Plunger. A few minutes later, Harry came up with Hibbert, who was trying to look as happy as possible under the circumstances, but was nevertheless far from comfortable. The river always seemed so cruel to him—so treacherous. And somehow it had seemed more

cruel, more treacherous, since Paul had told him the story of his father's death.

"All serene, Harry," cried Plunger. "The road's clear. We've got it all to ourselves."

"That's good," said Harry. "We're in luck's way. Let's make hay while the sun shines. Wait for us on the towing-path, Hibbert. We'll soon be alongside."

Leaving Hibbert on the towing-path, the two boys got on the raft, and proceeded to untie it from the stake to which it was attached. This did not take them long, and, having secured a punting-pole, they soon brought the raft to where Hibbert was awaiting them.

"I'd—I'd rather not go," said the boy hesitating.

"Don't talk rubbish. Get on. You don't mean to say you funk it?"

To tell the truth, Hibbert did "funk it," though there seemed so little to fear; but he was, as we know, a nervous, timid boy. None the less, he always tried to disguise his feelings even to himself.

"Funk—not a bit; but—but I'm never much help, and—and I thought I might be in the way. It's a jolly raft, isn't he!" he said, as he stepped on.

"Jolly."

Plunger pushed off and they went slowly down the river in the direction of the plantation.

"It's smooth enough here, but what must it be like on the sea, eh?" asked Plunger, after an interval of silence.

"Without any food or water and no sign of a sail."

"Yes, famishing with hunger and casting lots which shall die," added Plunger cheerfully, glaring at Hibbert, as though he contemplated him for a victim. Hibbert, pale before, turned to an ashen hue. "Why, what's the matter, Camel? Don't you feel well? Seasick?"

"I—I'm all right. Is—isn't it jolly?" answered Hibbert, with a feeble attempt at a smile.

Though Hibbert was far from enjoying himself, in spite of trying to impress upon himself that he was, his companions were in their element. As they floated along the river, they imagined themselves to be adventurers, bent on discovery and deeds of heroism. All the same Harry began to feel that Plunger, as usual, was trying to take up the position of command, and make him play second fiddle.

"I say, Freddy," he presently burst out, "isn't it time that I did a bit of punting?"

"I'd like you to have a try, I really would; but it's not so easy as it looks. You've never done any punting, and you don't know how hard it is."

"And what do you know about it? You've never done any of it till now. You're not going to gammon me, Freddy; so hand over the pole."

As Plunger did not seem inclined to give up the pole, Harry caught hold of it, with the intention of enforcing his demands. As he did so, the raft swayed, and Hibbert, crying out in alarm, clutched Harry in turn to steady himself.

"Don't be an ass, Harry," exclaimed Plunger hotly. "You'll have us over in a minute. We're not on dry land. We're not out for a picnic."

"Give up the pole, then. We were to go halves—share and share alike. I know as much about punting as you do; so let me have a turn."

"Put me on land," said Hibbert appealingly, fearing that a struggle would take place between the two boys.

"Don't be such an awful funk, Camel," exclaimed Plunger roughly. "Let go, Harry. Don't play about on this bit of wood or over we go. I'm not insured, if you are. I said we'd go halves, and so we will. Let me finish punting to the plantation and you shall do the punting back."

"You mean it?"

"Of course I do."

Satisfied with this promise, Harry let go the pole, much to the relief of Hibbert. The rest of the voyage was passed without further dispute, and in a little while they reached the plantation in safety. Having secured the raft, they made their way into the thicket. Hibbert timorously inquired where they were going.

"We told you we were out for adventures," explained Plunger. "Harry and me are Crusoes—twins, you see."

Hibbert nodded assent, but he could not help thinking that he had never seen twins who were so utterly unlike each other as the two before him.

"You're to be Friday, Camel."

"Friday—yes," Hibbert feebly assented. "Wha—what's he to do?"

"He's got to discover us—the twin Crusoes."

Hibbert thought that to balance things there ought to be a twin Friday, but he only repeated, "Twin Crusoes—yes." As he did so, he thought he heard a rustling among the bushes, as though some wild beast were crawling amongst them. He looked round with a shiver, but saw nothing. Plunger and Harry, too intent on their enterprise to hear anything, had been groping

about in the thicket for something they had hidden there. Presently Plunger cried, "Got it!"

He drew out a brown-paper parcel from its hiding-place as he spoke, while Harry explained as he did so:

"This is to be a sort of dress rehearsal, you see. The next time we come we shall be able to do the thing properly."

"Yes, we've only got the hats and Friday's wig, and the stuff for his face," went on Plunger, as he pitched a brimless felt hat to Harry and clapped one of similar design on his own head. "We mean having the skin coats next time. Here's your wig, Camel—Friday, I mean. Let's see how it fits."

He took from the parcel a wig, which had been skilfully designed from a couple of fluffy woollen table mats, once the property of Mrs. Trounce. Pulling off Hibbert's cap, Plunger fixed this curiously fashioned wig on the boy's head.

"Fits to a T. Doesn't it, Harry?"

Harry nodded.

"Wish we only had a looking-glass here so that you could see yourself in it, Camel," went on Plunger. "You only want painting up a bit, and there you are. Hold your face down while Moncrief puts on the artistic touches."

Hibbert feebly protested. He didn't want his face painted.

"Now, look here, Camel," said Plunger, giving his arm a twist which made him wince, "we're not going to hurt you; so don't be silly. Friday was a savage, you know, and savages don't go about with white faces, and yours is awfully white. Don't be silly, I say."

Hibbert wriggled for a moment, but seeing that it was useless for him to struggle further, gave in with as good grace as possible. Harry at once went to work on his face. First of all greasing it, he next smeared it with burnt cork, until Hibbert was as black as a nigger. Thus blackened, and with the rudely fashioned wig as crown, Hibbert presented a curious appearance indeed. The two burst into laughter when they had finished. Their laughter seemed to echo through the plantation. Suddenly their laughter was checked.

"Did you hear it? Strange, wasn't it?" said Plunger.

Hibbert looked tremblingly round. Of a sudden an unearthly yell rent the air, and half a dozen dusky figures leapt from the bushes in the distance. Flourishing curiously-shaped weapons, very like tomahawks, they rushed, yelling and screaming, towards the bewildered boys.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

### WHAT HAPPENED ON THE RAFT

Hibbert, a picture of terror, turned and fled towards the river, and Plunger and Harry, imagining for the moment that they had been set upon by real savages, promptly followed his example. The dusky figures followed in pursuit, still yelling their outlandish cries.

"Ka-pei, ka-pei! Houp, houp! O-jib-e-way! Koo-oo, koo-oo!"

Hibbert ran as he had never run before in his life. Terror lent speed to his feet. He had got the start of his companions, so that they only drew up to him as he reached the river.

"Quick—the raft!" shouted Plunger. "They'll be on us in a minute."

It was the raft for which Hibbert was making.

"Ka-pei, ka-pei! Houp, Houp! O-jib-e-way! Koo-oo, koo-oo!"

The cries of the pursuers drew nearer and nearer. Hibbert reached the raft and leapt on it.

"Undo the rope! I'll push off!" panted Plunger.

Harry never thought of the promise Plunger had made—that he should punt the raft back. His only desire was that they should put the river between them and their pursuers as quickly as possible. In less than a moment he had undone the rope which bound the raft to the bank, and leapt to Plunger's side. Brief as the space of time, it had enabled the foremost of their pursuers to reach the bank.

"Push off, Freddy," cried Harry.

Plunger pushed off in desperation. Too late! The foremost of the pursuers had followed them on to the raft. Plunger could see the dusky face looking into his. The raft had floated a little way from the bank. With another unearthly cry three more of the savage-looking figures leapt on.

The raft swayed ominously. Plunger made a wild endeavour to push further out into the stream. The raft lurched forward. There was a cry of horror, a splash, and the next moment three of the boys—Plunger, Hibbert, and one of "the savages"—were struggling in the water.

The impetus given to the raft had taken it out into midstream, and when the three rose to the surface, it was at some distance from them. By the ducking in the water the paint of the "noble savage" was running down his face, and Plunger, in that terrible moment, recognized that it was Baldry.

Plunger knew little of swimming. Fortunately, Baldry knew more of it than he did, and was able to clutch him by the arm and hold him up. But those on the raft saw with horror that they had floated right away from Hibbert, and that was he drowning before their eyes.

Harry looked round for the punting-hole, in the hope that he might go to the aid of the drowning boy. Alas! Plunger had carried the pole with him when he had fallen into the river, and it was now floating down the stream at some distance from them.

"The Camel's drowning!" gasped Harry.

The boys on the raft saw that he was. They had caught sight of the white face as it rose for the second time to the surface. And they stood there, transfixed horrified, at the tragedy that was taking place before them. Unable to find the punting-pole, Harry would have leapt into the river, but

Sedgefield, one of the "savages" who had jumped upon the raft, was just in time to clutch him by the arm and hold him back.

"Look, Moncrief! That's Percival, isn't it?"

Harry stood, trembling in every limb, on the edge of the raft, and followed the direction of Sedgefield's finger. Yes, Percival it was. Cut off from the games of his companions, left entirely to himself, he had brought out his rod and line to pass an hour or so angling. While thus occupied, he had heard the shouts and cries raised by the "savages" on the opposite bank.

"What's wrong?" he asked himself, as he stood quite still and listened.

The shouting grew louder; the yells more unearthly, and in a tongue, as it seemed to him, he had never heard before.

Dropping his rod, he raced along the bank, just in time to see from a distance the raft push off with the boys upon it, and the disaster that followed, as it floated further into the stream. He paused for an instant as he breathlessly watched the scene; then raced forward at full speed, flung off his jacket, waistcoat, and boots, and struck out, hand over hand, to where Hibbert was struggling in the water.

Fortunately, Paul was a powerful swimmer. Even in his cradle his father had taken his little hand in his large one, and, while looking lovingly in his face, had said to the wife who sat beside him:

"The son of a sea-dog, the son of a sea-dog! He must never know the fear of water."

Alas! it was the cruel water which had carried off the father, but the son had grown up true to his wish—he had never known the fear of water. So he had become a bold and powerful swimmer. With a swift, sweeping side-stroke he reached Hibbert's side, just as he was sinking for the last time. Clutching

the drowning boy by the hair, he held him up; then, turning on his back, he drew him to his chest, and, kicking out with his feet, soon reached the bank.

Placing the boy gently on the turf, Paul gazed anxiously into his face. The eyes were closed; the lips ghastly blue; the heart seemed still.

"Hibbert, Hibbert!" cried Paul, as he tried to restore animation.

No answer came to his pleading cry. The eyes still remained closed. A big fear took possession of Paul. Had the eyes closed never to open more? Had help come when it was too late? Was the little chap dead? Notwithstanding the fear that seized him, he did not relax his efforts, and presently, to his great joy, the lids fluttered, then opened, and the eyes went up to his face. They were dazed, bewildered. Slowly a look of recognition came into them.

"Per—Percival!" came in a feeble whisper from the lips; then the lids, as though exhausted by the effort they had made, closed again.

Danger was not yet past, but the boy lived, and Paul, breathing more freely, looked round to see what had happened to the others. It had been a near thing with Baldry and Plunger. Baldry had supported Plunger for some time, but neither had been able to reach the raft or the bank; while those on the raft were unable to move to their assistance. The strength of both was, therefore, giving out rapidly.

"Let go of me, Baldry. Take care of yourself!" gasped Plunger.

"Shan't Freddy," answered Baldry feebly. "Sit tight!"

Even in that terrible moment, with death looming grimly before him, Plunger smiled faintly. Baldry's advice seemed so ludicrous. Sit tight! What was he to sit tight on? They grew fainter every moment.

"God, help us!" was the prayer that came from the heart of Baldry.

Human help seemed to have failed them. So, at least, it seemed; but Paul, looking up from Hibbert at this moment, his heart gladdened at hearing his name, saw the dilemma in which they were placed—the peril in which they stood. Unless assistance soon reached them, they must go under.

What was to be done? He could not see them drown before his eyes. Yet—yet, if he were to leave Hibbert, what would happen to him? It was true that he had opened his eyes and spoken, but perhaps that was only the last feeble flicker of the candle. Paul's hand went quickly to the boy's heart. It was still beating, though feebly. Again his eyes went to where Baldry and Plunger were making a desperate fight for life. Three lives were trembling in the balance.

The prayer that had come from Baldry's lips a moment since came from Paul's.

"God, help me! What am I to do?"

He gave another swift glance into Hibbert's face. It seemed to smile at him, as though in answer to his prayer. "Go," it seemed to say. The next instant Paul plunged into the river, swimming towards the two boys, with the same swift stroke which had enabled him to reach Hibbert's side.

As he cut through the water, his right hand struck against something. His fingers closed round it. It was the punting-pole that Plunger had lost, and which had been partly responsible for the accident. God had answered his prayer. He had helped him. It would have been impossible for him to have saved the two fast-drowning boys by his own unaided efforts. Now it was possible.

"Catch hold!" he cried, as he directed one end of the pole to Baldry and Plunger.

They eagerly gripped it; then, grasping the other end, Paul swam to shore. It was a strange freight he was towing—two human lives. And his heart seemed beating like the valve of a steam-tug as he reached the bank and pulled his freight ashore.

"You're a brick—that's what you are, Percival!" were the first words that Plunger gasped, as he struggled, with the water dripping from him, up the bank.

Baldry's eyes had gone to the still figure lying on the grass.

"It's—it's the Camel! What—what's wrong with him?" he asked, as he stood gazing at the still form. "Is—is he dead?"

"I hope not—I think not," said Paul, as he raised the slight figure in his arms. "I must leave you fellows to look after yourselves."

So saying, holding Hibbert close to him, he hastened along the road that led to the school. Once or twice he paused to make sure that Hibbert's heart was beating. Yes; it was still beating, though feebly: having reassured himself, he hurried on again with his burden.

The road seemed longer to him than it had ever been before; but at length he drew near, and his eyes went up to the first thing that a Garside boy usually looked to—the old flag.

He could scarcely believe his eyes. Were they mocking him, or was he under a delusion? The flag did not seem to be flying there.

"My eyes are playing tricks with me," he thought as he hurried breathless into the grounds.

A few steps more and he met Stanley. He stopped and regarded Paul with surprise. He advanced a step, as though with the intention of speaking to

him, but quickly changing his mind, went on his way. Paul clenched his teeth hard and staggered on with his burden. Luckily it was only a light one.

Reaching the schoolhouse door, he met Waterman coming from it.

"Percival! What are you fagging with there?" For once Waterman was genuinely roused. "An accident? Why, it's young Hibbert. What's happened?"

"He's had a ducking in the river. Run for Dr. Clack—as quickly as you can."

Waterman needed no second bidding. His natural indolence of manner, under which was hidden much more energy than people gave him credit for, vanished on the instant. He darted off at the top of his speed. Paul did not relinquish his burden till, under the direction of the matron, he had placed it on a bed in the sick dormitory.

"A doctor must be fetched," said the matron, as Hibbert's eyes remained closed, in spite of her efforts to bring him back to consciousness.

"Waterman's gone for Dr. Clack."

"That's right. The poor little fellow's in a bad way. Oh, you boys—you boys!" came in a sigh from the matron's lips. "Always in mischief. Who pushed him into the river?"

"Nobody pushed him. He fell in, so far as I could see."

Paul did not tell her that two more Gargoyles had fallen into the river at the same time, for fear of alarming her still more.

"Why didn't you stop him from playing about on the river? You're old enough to know better," said Mrs. Trounce wrathfully.

Paul stood silent under this rebuke. He had not explained all the circumstances of the accident—so far, at least, as he knew them—for fear of implicating the other boys. He had caught a glimpse of the savage "get-up" of Baldry and his companions, and the black stains on Hibbert's face, which had only been partially washed away by the water. He guessed, therefore, that there was more in the accident than at first met the eye.

"If he dies we shall have the police here a-makin' all sorts of inquiries," continued the angry matron. "And I shouldn't wonder if they took you off to the lock-up, and brought you up before a judge and jury. And serve you right, ses I. You elder boys want a lesson. Instead of stopping the little fellow from playing on the river, you encouraged him, I expect. I know the way you big boys have. You use the paws of the little ones to pull out the roast chestnuts. It's disgraceful, I call it."

Thus the matron poured out the vials of her wrath on Paul's head, while she busied herself at the same time in doing all she could to restore the patient to consciousness. Her words fell unheeded on Paul's ears. He was watching the face of Hibbert, and wondering whether the eyes would ever open again, and look up to him as they had looked up to him on that day when he had put his hand timidly on his shoulder and whispered:

"You look so wretched and miserable I could not help coming to you. You're not angry with me, are you?"

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## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE OLD FLAG

As the thought went through Paul's mind, the door opened, and Mr. Weevil entered. To Paul's wonder the master fell on his knees beside the bed, and, taking Hibbert's hand in his, murmured:

"Tim, Tim, what have they done to you? Speak, Tim."

The cold nature of the master seemed to have melted as he looked at the unconscious boy. Paul had never heard him call Hibbert by his Christian name before. The ashen lips were moving tremulously. The blinking eyes were fixed tenderly on the boy's face, and—was Paul dreaming?—he thought he saw a tear roll down the master's cheek.

"Why did I leave you to yourself? Speak, Tim, speak," came the pleading tones.

For once Mr. Weevil's self-control had given way. He was strangely moved. Paul was too moved himself at the time to take much notice, but he recalled every incident in that strange scene after. Then, as no answer came to his appeal, the master seemed to wander in his talk, and babbled words in an unknown tongue.

He was still kneeling by the bed, talking in this way, when Dr. Clack, the school doctor, entered. His face remained very grave as he examined his patient.

"It's been a very near thing with him," he said, when he had finished his examination; "but with careful nursing he may pull round."

Paul heard the news with a thankful heart, for he had begun to fear that the case was hopeless. Mr. Weevil had now quite recovered his self-possession, and, leaving the patient in the hands of the doctor and the matron, beckoned Paul to follow him to his room.

On entering it he closed the door, and questioned Paul minutely as to the cause of the accident. Paul explained to him what he had seen, the more readily because the little he had seen threw no particular blame on any one.

"And you don't know how it happened?"

"No, sir; I haven't the least idea."

"You weren't in any way concerned in it?" demanded Mr. Weevil, suddenly opening his half-closed eyes and fixing them on Paul.

Paul felt indignant. He had made as little as possible of his share in rescuing Hibbert; and as a result the master seemed to have a lurking suspicion that he was in league in some way with the boys who had caused the accident.

"No, sir, I was in no way concerned in it," he flashed back. "It was quite by chance that I was at the river-side this afternoon."

"Well, the matter must be further inquired into. It is quite certain that there is something that needs explanation."

"I know nothing about that, sir; but if you've no more questions to ask me, I'd like to change my things."

Paul's clothes had nearly dried on him. He had taken no heed of himself in thinking of Hibbert; but now that Hibbert was in bed, and in the hands of those who could take care of him, he began to think a little of his own condition, which was not altogether so comfortable as might have been desired.

"I'm sorry. I really had forgotten that you were in damp clothes. Why didn't you mention it before? You must change them at once."

Mr. Weevil seemed really sorry that he had not given a thought to Paul's condition before. Paul hastened off to change his damp cloth for dry ones. While he was thus engaged, Plunger and Baldry entered for the same purpose. Otherwise they seemed none the worse for the cold bath. Plunger, in fact had got on good terms with himself again, and was as perky as ever.

"I should have punted across the river all right if it hadn't been for Hibbert," he explained. "The scream he gave threw me off my stroke. It was jolly good of you all the same to come to us, Percival. We shan't forget it in a hurry—shall we, Baldry?"

"No," was Baldry's emphatic answer. "By the by, how is Hibbert going on?"

"I was just going to ask the same thing. I would rather have gone under myself than that he should. Has the doctor been to him?"

Plunger spoke with unusual earnestness.

"Yes, Dr. Clack's been to him. He's with him now."

"And what does he say?"

"He says that it's been a near thing, but with careful nursing he may pull round."

Plunger paused with one arm in the sleeve of the jacket he was putting on, and sat down on the side of the bed. He was beginning to realize how near the Crusoe expedition had been to a tragedy—nay, the danger was not yet over. Silence fell on the room for some moments. Each was busy with his own thoughts.

"I haven't yet heard how it all happened," Paul at length inquired.

Plunger told him the origin of the "Crusoe expedition," and all that had happened up to the moment of the accident.

"I don't know anything about the savages that boarded us on the raft. Baldry can tell you that part," he concluded.

"Oh, we found out all about the expedition, and didn't like being left out of it. We thought that we'd have a cut in on our own account. So Sedgefield, Bember, Viner, and myself got down to the plantation before Plunger, Moncrief minor, and Hibbert reached it on the raft. While they landed and got ready for their part, we got ready for ours. What was the use of Crusoe without the noble savages? So we got up as savages, and frightened the life out of Plunger and the other two by swooping down on 'em just like Indians would, you know."

"You didn't frighten me, I tell you," protested Plunger.

"Of course not; but Crusoe, when he first saw savages, never sprinted along half so quickly as you did, I'll warrant! Greased lightning wasn't in it with you, Plunger."

Plunger did not answer, but diligently set to work getting his other arm into the sleeve of his coat.

"Well, but what's become of the other fellows on the raft—Moncrief, Sedgefield, and the others?" inquired Paul.

"Oh, they were still on the raft, floating gaily along, when we left. Goodness knows when they would get ashore," says Baldry.

"It's a bit unfortunate, you see, for none of the fellows now left on the raft understand anything about punting," put in Plunger. "It's rather a pity I couldn't have got back to them."

"It's just that that makes me feel easy. There's a good chance of their pulling through, now you're not with them, Plunger," was Baldry's ungracious response. "Why, here they are!"

As he was speaking, in fact, three of the four entered—Bember, Sedgefield, and Harry Moncrief. After they had spent some time on the raft, drifting aimlessly on the river, a boatman had towed them ashore. Fixing the raft in its place by the bridge, they had returned in all haste to the school, anxious to know what had happened to their companions. When they had learned all particulars, Sedgefield exclaimed:

"I don't care what those Fifth Form fellows say or think, but will you take my hand, Percival?"

Paul willingly gripped the hand extended to him. Bember and the others, with the exception of Harry, followed suit. Harry struggled with himself for a moment. He could not help remembering, in spite of his effort to forget it, that Paul was responsible for the thrashing that his cousin had received at the hands of a Beetle, and that he had seen him shaking hands with the same obnoxious creature. Yet what could have been nobler, Harry told himself, than the way in which, at the risk of his own life, Paul had gone to the rescue of Hibbert, and had returned a few minutes later to save Plunger and Baldry? He had witnessed it all from the raft, with his heart in his mouth. Yes, it was a noble deed. He had never seen a nobler. What was the defeat of Stanley—the wound of his pride—compared with it? Instinctively his hand went out to Paul as the other hands had done, when Viner entered the room.

"Have you heard the news?" he questioned, greatly excited.

"The news! What news?" demanded Sedgefield.

"The school flag. It's gone!"

"Gone!" they echoed, as with one voice.

Paul's mind went back with a rush to when he had entered the grounds with Hibbert in his arms. His eyes had not deceived him, then. The flag had really gone.

"Nonsense!" cried Sedgefield.

"Not much nonsense about it. If you don't believe me, you'd better go and look for yourself."

The intelligence was so remarkable, that Plunger and Harry raced into the grounds. A minute later they returned.

"Viner's quite right. It's gone," they exclaimed in a breath.

"But how—where—when?" questioned Sedgefield. "Who has taken it?"

"No one knows. It must have happened while we were on the river, so we could know nothing about it. Somebody must have stolen up the turret stair and got on to the roof. That's the only possible way it could be done. The senior Forms are in a rare wax over it."

"I should think so," burst out Plunger. "What fellow can rest easy now that our flag's been hauled down? I only wish that I had hold of the one who did it."

"You'd give him a lesson in punting, wouldn't you, Freddy?" observed Baldry, with a wink at those around him.

Plunger glared at Baldry. He would have brought his knuckles down on his head, only he remembered what Baldry had done for him.

"Seriously," said Sedgefield, "it can't have walked. There's not a fellow in Garside who would have pulled down the old flag, even for a joke; I'm

certain of that."

"And I." "And I." "And I," came in a chorus.

"A Beetle must have sneaked in. It must be the work of a Beetle."

"That's what I've been thinking," said Bember. "It's only one of those cads could have done a sneakish trick like that."

"Supposing it is a Beetle, which of them could have done it? Which of them could have made his way into the school without being seen, and then got to the door in the turret?" asked Baldry.

"Mellor knows all about the building. He could easily describe the way to any of the Beetles," said Viner. "That champion of theirs—Wyndham—has made us eat enough dirt already. He made our picked man turn tail"—every eye went to Paul as Viner spoke with bitterness—"and Moncrief eat dirt. Now we've lost the flag. Really, we're getting on. We can't sink much lower."

The atmosphere in the dormitory was getting oppressive. Every one felt uncomfortable. That allusion to Paul was true enough. He had turned away, like a frightened cur, from Wyndham; but who could accuse him of being a coward after what had happened that day? It was altogether inexplicable.

Baldry was the first to speak.

"You know what has happened this afternoon, Viner. Percival saved my life, and you're not going to fling mud at him while I'm standing by."

"And I say ditto to Baldry," blustered Plunger.

"Oh, I deserve it," said Paul, for the first time breaking silence. "It's true—every word that Viner said. I did turn tail. It was the act of a coward. And Stanley Moncrief suffered through me, and through me all the school has

eaten dirt. But if the school has suffered through me, through me it shall be lifted up again. If the Beetles have taken our flag, by God's help I will get it back again, and again it shall fly in its old place on the turret. If I fail——"

But Baldry cut him short, and shouted:

"Three cheers for Percival!"

The cheers were given very heartily, though Viner took little part in the cheering; but ere the last cheer had died away, a messenger came from the sick-room. Hibbert was still in a very critical condition, but he had recovered consciousness, and was asking for Paul.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

### HIBBERT ASKS STRANGE QUESTIONS

The message brought back the minds of the boys with painful abruptness to the struggle of a far different kind which was taking place in the sick-room. In the loss of the school flag they had forgotten, for the time being, the crisis through which Hibbert was passing. It was no time for cheering; it was a time of sadness—Paul, at least, felt so as he obeyed the message, and made his way to the sick-room.

"Percival," came in a low, faint voice, as he entered.

The face of the sick boy turned to him. Pale at all times, it now seemed bloodless, as white as the pillow upon which it rested. It seemed, too, to have shrunk, while the eyes had grown larger, and shone with a light which Paul had never seen in them before.

"You were the first one he asked for when he came to his senses," said Mrs. Trounce, as Paul stepped softly to the bedside. "I think he's a bit better now; aren't you?"

"Much better, thank you," said the boy, with a painful attempt to smile at her. Then the bright eyes went again to Paul's face and rested there.

"I'm glad to hear that, Hibbert," said Paul, taking the thin hand in his. "You must make up your mind to get off that bed as soon as possible, mustn't he, Mrs. Trounce?"

"Just what I tell him," said the matron, cheerfully, for she knew the value of cheerfulness on the spirits of a patient. "If he makes up his mind to it, he'll

soon be about again."

"It's astonishing what we can do when we set our teeth hard, and go for a thing," continued Paul, adopting her cheerful tone and manner.

"That's what you did when you came to me and saved my life. Oh, Percival, it was terrible!"

And the thin hand went to the eyes with a gesture of pain.

"Terrible! Hooking you out of that river? That's what I call beastly ingratitude. I think it's one of the best things I ever did in my life."

"No, no," cried the boy quickly; "don't think me ungrateful. I couldn't bear that. You don't think me ungrateful?"

"Of course not. It's only my stupid way of putting things. All you've got to do now is to forget about the river, and everything connected with it. You're now on dry land—in a nice, warm, comfortable bed, where you needn't trouble about anything except getting well again."

"Are the other fellows all right—Plunger and Moncrief, I mean?"

"Right? Rather! Going stronger than ever, especially Plunger."

"I'm glad of that. And—and the savages. Who were they?" asked Hibbert, with a shudder.

"Can't you guess?" smiled Paul. "Nobody very dreadful. Three or four of the fellows of your Form—Bember, Baldry, Sedgefield, Viner."

"I might have guessed it; but then I'm not like other boys. I'm such a coward—coward. I've fought against it so hard, but I can't get over it. I've tried to be brave—as brave as you are——"

"Hush! Don't talk of bravery. You're forgetting the sand-pit. Don't put me on stilts, for I could never walk in them. We're just what God makes of us. There are plenty of thorns and thistles about, heaps of 'em; but not many sensitive plants. That's what you are Hibbert—a beautiful, sensitive plant."

"Ah, you don't know what I am. If only I could tell you—if only I could tell you. You would hate me—hate me. Yes, Percival—hate me. You can call me a beautiful, sensitive plant, while all the time I'm a beastly hypocrite. Oh, why didn't you let me die—why didn't you let me go down in the river? Why did you save me?"

He spoke with a sudden outburst of energy, raising himself, in his feverish excitement on his elbow.

"Come, come! Master Percival will have to leave you, if you take on that way," said the matron.

"Yes, I think I'd better go now and come again to-morrow," said Paul, alarmed at this sudden outburst, which he took to be a slight touch of delirium.

"Don't leave me, Percival—don't leave me just yet!" pleaded the boy. "I—I was forgetting myself. I'll be quieter if you'll stay with me a little longer."

The thin fingers slipped into Paul's hand again, and clung to it tightly.

"I'll stay with you a little longer, if you'll just do what I tell you."

"Yes, yes. What?"

"Just close your eyes and try to sleep."

Hibbert obeyed him implicitly. He closed his eyes, as though to sleep, but still held fast to Paul's hand. In a few moments the pressure relaxed, and he seemed to be really sleeping.

"I'll watch over him for a bit, if you like," whispered Paul to the matron.

Mrs. Trounce looked at her patient. He seemed tranquil enough now, and as she had other duties to attend to, she gladly availed herself of Paul's offer.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she whispered as she went out.

She hadn't been gone more than ten minutes before Hibbert's eyes opened again.

"Still here, Percival? It's very kind of you." Then, looking round: "Where's matron?"

"Gone out for a bit. I've promised to look after you. Do you want anything?"

"No—except you. Matron's really gone?"—looking round again.

"What a suspicious chap you're getting!" smiled Paul. "Do you think she's hiding somewhere?"

"I'm glad she's gone, Percival, because I wanted to speak to you—alone."

"But you promised to sleep."

"Well, I've kept my promise. I've had quite a long doze."

"Very long—ten minutes."

"I can't sleep longer till I've said what I've got to say. Doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible that we ought to confess our sins?"

Paul could now see clearly enough that there was something troubling Hibbert, and that it would only increase the trouble if he were to refuse to answer him. So he answered:

"Of course it does. Let me see—you must know the words as well as I do —'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'"

"Yes, those are the words I was trying to think of. I remember them quite well now. The water from the river seems to have got into my brain, and things aren't quite so clear to me now as they used to be, you see."

"That will come all right presently, and things will be quite as clear to you as ever they were. But you mustn't worry, or else they won't."

"I can't help it; but I shan't worry so much when what is on my mind is off it."

"Shall I send for Mr. Weevil?"

"No, no," answered the boy quickly; "it's you I want to speak to. Don't leave me."

Paul did not move. He kept his place beside the bed, though he had no wish to hear any confession. He guessed what it was. Some boyish freak or escapade, magnified into undue proportion by the sensitive boy now that he was so weak.

"I won't leave you, but if you've got anything to say, I'm not the fellow to say it to. There's One can do you a great deal more good than I can, Hibbert. Just confess to Him when you say your prayers to-night. He'll help you a lot more than I can."

"Supposing I have done that, Percival. Supposing I did it when I closed my eyes a little while ago; and supposing even then a voice seemed whispering in my ear, 'If you want peace, if you want to meet your mother in heaven, act the hypocrite no longer. Speak to Percival.' What then?"

"Then I should say use your own judgment. Do what seems best."

Hibbert closed his eyes for a moment, as though he were trying to decide within himself what was best. At length he opened them again.

"Do you remember that afternoon when I came to you in the writing-room and told you Mr. Travers wished to speak to you?"

"Quite well. Nearly all the fellows had deserted me but you. I was wretched."

"You looked it. You gave me a letter to post. Do you remember that?"

"Yes," answered Paul shortly. He remembered it but too well. It was the letter he had written to Mr. Moncrief, to which that gentleman had not deigned to answer.

"When I came back to you in the writing-room you were tracing names on the blotting-pad. I caught sight of one—Zuker. You noticed that I was surprised at seeing it, and asked me if I knew anybody of that name. I told you that I did. That I once knew a boy of that name when I was at school in Germany. And then you told me something I'm never likely to forget—never likely to forget to my dying hour. You may think it strange, but the words came suddenly to my ears when I fell off the raft into the river."

"Indeed! What was it I told you?"

"You told me that it was through a man of the name of Zuker that your father lost his life."

"Yes, that's true enough. So it was—Israel Zuker. What about it?"

"What about it!" Hibbert made a painful effort to laugh. "Why, Percival ——"

He stopped abruptly, as the door suddenly opened, and Mr. Weevil entered.

"What, Percival! You here?" exclaimed the master. "Where is Mrs. Trounce?"

"Hibbert wanted me to sit by him, and I'm taking her place for a short time. She'll be back presently, sir."

"Are you feeling better?" asked the master, as he turned from Paul to the patient.

"Oh, yes, much better. It's done me good to have Percival here."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Mr. Weevil's hand went gently, lovingly over the boy's brow, and he watched him anxiously through his half-closed eyes. Paul recalled the master's grief when he first saw the boy after the accident, and other little traits of kindness—traits which had shown him that Mr. Weevil was not altogether the stern, harsh man he had one time thought him. None the less, he was sorry that he had entered the room at that moment. Hibbert had awakened his curiosity. What was it that was weighing on his mind? What had he to tell him about the man Zuker? He wished Mr. Weevil had kept from the room a bit longer.

Paul waited, hoping that he would go out. But the master did not move from the position he had taken up at the bedside, and his hand continued to move caressingly over the boy's forehead. After a minute or two's silence he turned to Paul.

"You've had your fair spell of watching, Percival. I'll take your place till Mrs. Trounce returns. Hibbert looks very flushed and feverish. I'm afraid he's been speaking too much."

What could Paul say? He had no alternative but to obey. Hibbert's eyes followed him as he went out.

"What was it he had to tell me, I wonder?" Paul asked himself, as he passed along the corridor.

It was a long time before he slept that night. His mind kept travelling back over the many events of a singularly eventful day. And when he at last dozed off to sleep, he could hear the voice of Hibbert sounding a long way off.

"Oh, why didn't you let me die? Why didn't you let me go down in the river? Why did you save me? Don't leave me, Percival—don't leave me. I'll be quieter if you stay with me a little longer."

Then the voice died away and all was blank.

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## CHAPTER XXIX

### AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR ARRIVES AT GARSIDE

Two things, outside the ordinary school routine, occupied attention on the morrow. The first was the adventures which had so nearly cost Hibbert his life; the second the loss of the school flag. The report as to the condition of Hibbert was neither good nor bad. There was no improvement, but neither had he gone back. His condition, in fact, was just what it had been the night before.

The loss of the flag caused the greatest excitement. The masters held a meeting about it, but nothing was done. The Sixth Form held a meeting about it, but nothing was done—for the simple reason that nothing could be done. So far there was not the slightest clue as to what had become of it. It had disappeared just as mysteriously as the pages torn from the Black Book.

But in one thing there was a manifest change. A manifest improvement took place in the school's attitude towards Paul. Whereas previously nearly all the school was opposed to him, the greater proportion of the Garsiders now came over to his side with a swing; but his own Form, with the exception of Waterman, still held aloof. He received a communication from Stanley, however, through his cousin.

"Stanley's sorry that he did not lend you a helping hand when he met you with Hibbert yesterday," said Harry. "He did not dream that anything serious had happened."

Paul had felt it even more than he dared admit to himself that Stanley had not come forward on the previous day and given him a helping hand when

he was struggling along with Hibbert.

"How could he dream that anything serious had happened unless he inquired?" he asked, with some bitterness. "Did he really send that message?"

"Really."

"It's very kind of him. When you next see him say how obliged I am. It's nice to find people so thoughtful, though it may be a little late in the day."

Harry felt uncomfortable. He could detect the accent of bitterness underlying the words.

"Tell you what, Percival, I wish you and Stan were friends again, like you used to be. It's all through that beastly Beetle, Wyndham. I wish some one had stepped on him and squashed him first."

"I don't. I can admire a plucky fellow when I see one, even though he happens to be a Beetle."

Harry opened his eyes, and stared at Paul. Paul, annoyed at the second-hand message he had received from Stanley, and seeing the astonished expression on Harry's face, could not help adding: "Yes, I can admire pluck wherever I see it. I'm not quite sure whether Wyndham isn't worth half a dozen fellows here."

Harry stayed to hear no more. A Beetle worth half a dozen Gargoyles! It seemed rank treason to listen to it. Paul felt a savage thrill of delight in praising Wyndham and seeing the consternation it had caused in Harry.

"He will tell Stanley every word I have said. Getting his cousin to bring his mean, petty message. Didn't dream that anything so serious had happened, indeed! Pah!"

Alas! alas! The breach between the two former friends, instead of closing, was widening.

All the boys who had taken part in the raft incident were severely lectured by Mr. Weevil, and were debarred from the usual half-holidays during the next fortnight, as well as receiving a heavy number of lines to keep them busily occupied during the same period. Then the master went on to say:

"Percival has done a brave act. He went to the assistance of Hibbert in a moment of extreme peril. He placed his life in jeopardy to save him. God grant that his act of bravery may not have been in vain!"

Mr. Weevil paused for an instant, with closed eyes, as though he were praying; then, when he opened them again, it seemed as though the incident and all connected with it had passed from his mind, as, in a few cold words, he turned to the duties of the day.

Paul was more than gratified with this brief allusion to what he had done, but he could not help noticing that no reference was made by Mr. Weevil to the part he had played in the rescue of Baldry and Plunger. His whole thought seemed centred on Hibbert.

"Strange, his liking for the little chap," thought Paul.

It was as though the master were trying to make up to the frail, deformed boy for the neglect of others. And whenever Paul now thought of him, it was not as he remembered him on that night when he had peeped through the dormitory window, and had seen him talking to Israel Zuker, but as he had seen him kneeling by Hibbert's bed and babbling to him tenderly in an unknown tongue.

The next number of the *Gargoyle Record* made various indirect references to the "Crusoe incident" in the editor's usual vein.

"Missing Link has turned up in the neighbourhood of the river—latest mania—punting and desert islands.... Our poet is much obliged for the response given to his appeal in our last issue. He was stuck, it will be remembered, for a rhyme to 'hunger,' and the rhyme was to be a name of some kind—bird, beast, or fish. Curious to say, all our correspondents have hit upon the same rhyme and name.

"Honour of the Fifth looking up a bit. Tarnished near sand-pit on Cranstead Common, it has just had a washing in the river. Better for its bath, though not yet up to its former lustre.

"The Fresher of the Third who was prepared to give hints on the correct style in trousers, spats, and white waistcoats has thought better of it. Gave it up in order to get some experience of desert islands and punting in company with the aforesaid Missing Link. Experience disastrous and not likely to be repeated. Has since taken to stamp-collecting and ping-pong."

Then, among the usual notices of "Lost, stolen, or strayed," appeared the following:

"Pages from the Black Book still missing. Greatest loss of all—the old flag of the school. It waves over the school no longer. We have doffed the cap and bells, and gone into sackcloth and ashes. Our heart is heavy. We can smile no longer. We can only whistle one tune—the Dead March. Our heart will continue heavy. Our noble frontispiece will never beam again. Our lips will continue to warble the same melancholy tune until the old flag once more waves over Garside!"

Stripped of its note of bombast, this last paragraph echoed pretty accurately the feeling of the Garsiders at the loss of their flag. Their pride had been more sorely wounded even than it had been by the affair at the sand-pit. They had been flouted and dishonoured, and, though no proof was

forthcoming, they felt sure that this insult had been placed upon them by their rivals—at St. Bede's.

Paul, meantime, had seen nothing of Hibbert since the day when his confession had been interrupted by Mr. Weevil. Frequently he recalled that strange scene—the boy's eerie-looking, pain-drawn face, the sad eyes fixed on his, the earnest voice, with its suppressed note of fear—as he began to unfold to him the secret that weighed upon his heart and conscience. It seemed so real, yet so unreal. The face looking up into his seemed real enough. It was the words he could not make sure of. Hibbert must have been wandering.

At any rate, he had not sent for him since the afternoon he had spoken such strange words, and that was nearly a week since.

"Of course, he was wandering, poor little chap, and has forgotten all about it by this time. I shall have a good laugh with him about it when he gets on his legs again," he told himself.

It was the sixth day after the accident on the river that Paul was informed by Bax that a visitor wished to see him in the visitors' room. A visitor! Who could it be? Paul had very few visitors to see him.

"Ah, it's Mr. Moncrief; come at last in answer to my letter!" he thought, as he made his way to the room.

He was doomed to disappointment, however, for he found, on entering the room, that the visitor was a perfect stranger to him—a slim, wiry-figured gentleman, with a frock-coat buttoned closely over his chest, reddish-brown full beard, and glasses, through which a sharp pair of eyes at once went to Paul. Mr. Weevil was standing beside the visitor on the hearthrug.

"This is the lad I spoke of, Mr. Hibbert—Paul Percival."

The master briefly introduced them. Paul was at once interested. This gentleman with the tawny beard, and erect, alert, military bearing, was Hibbert's father.

"I have only recently returned to England, and have but just heard of the accident that has befallen my son," said Mr. Hibbert. "You saved his life. I was anxious not to go before I had thanked you."

He took Paul's hand in his, and pressed it hard. A boy less strong than Paul would have winced under that grip of steel.

"I'm glad to know Hibbert's father."

"And I'm glad to know Paul Percival. It isn't often one meets with a brave lad like you."

Again he gripped Paul's hand, and seemed to be regarding him as keenly as ever through his glasses to see if he stood his grip without flinching.

"I think you would find many who would do as I did—even here at Garside. It was my luck to be a good swimmer. And that luck—if I may call it luck—I owe to my father."

"Your father taught you, you mean."

"No," said Paul, shaking his head sadly; "I wish he had. He died when I was very young—when I could scarcely more than walk; but he was in the Navy, and it was by his wish that I was taught swimming. The saddest part is that he was drowned—drowned in saving another man's life."

"Really? That is sad. I hope that the man whom your father saved from a watery grave was as grateful to him as I am to you."

Paul was silent. He was thinking that if Mr. Hibbert's gratitude were no greater than the gratitude of the spy whom his father had saved from

drowning it would not count for much.

"I trust this will not be our last meeting. When my son gets well again, I hope to see more of you. Perhaps we may see a few of the sights of London together, if your mother has no objection."

Paul thanked him and went out. He was glad that he had met Hibbert's father, though he was not a bit like the man he had pictured. He had somehow pictured him with something of the deformity that marked Hibbert, with the same sad, pathetic eyes; but they were as unlike as could be, except the voice. Hibbert's voice had somehow struck a familiar note when he first heard it. So did the father's. But there the resemblance began and ended.

That same evening Paul went to the sick-room as usual, and inquired after Hibbert. This time Mrs. Trounce beckoned him in.

"He's always asking after you, and it's cruel to keep you out," she whispered.

"Who wants to keep me out?"

"Mr. Weevil thinks it makes the lad feverish, but I asked the doctor expressly to-day, and he says it will do him good rather than harm to see any friend he asks for. Poor little dear, he hasn't many friends. His father didn't seem to care over much for him, and his visit was a short one. He asked after you directly his father was gone. I've been obliged to deny him all this time, but I can't deny him any longer. He's dozing now. Step softly to the bed. Won't he be pleased when he wakes up and sees you! I've never had a boy on my hands who is half so good and patient as he is—I fear he is too patient, poor dear."

It was quite certain that during this time of trouble, Hibbert had found one more friend in Mrs. Trounce—the kind-hearted matron, who always tried to

make the boys believe that she was a perfect virago with a heart of flint. Paul followed her on tiptoe to the bed and looked down on the sleeper. And as he looked, it seemed as though ice-cold fingers were clutching him by the heart-strings, so strangely still were the face and form of the little sleeper.

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## CHAPTER XXX

### HIBBERT FINISHES HIS STORY

"Is he in pain?" whispered Paul, as he looked down upon the still figure, for Hibbert's face looked strangely old and worn for one so young, and it was as white as the pillow upon which it lay.

"I don't think so, but I've noticed, Master Percival, that he always has that troubled look when he's sleeping, just as though he had something on his mind," answered Mrs. Trounce.

Paul's mind went swiftly back to the last time he was in that room—to the confession Hibbert had begun and left unfinished. Was it that which was troubling him?

"Does he sleep well?"

"Not always like he's sleeping now. Often and often I've heard him calling you in his sleep, as I told you just now. I'm good enough for shaking up his pillow, giving him medicine, and that sort of thing, but I've found out that boys are strange critters to deal with. They want a lot of knowing, Master Percival, but I know 'em, and what Master Hibbert wants sometimes is one of his own school-fellows to talk to. That's better than medicine. Mr. Weevil's very kind to the boy, but he don't understand him."

"Doesn't Mr. Weevil like my seeing Hibbert?"

"Well, he hasn't exactly forbidden it, or I shouldn't have let you in; but he thinks you excited him when you were with him on the night of the accident. But, as I sez, Mr. Weevil don't understand boys when they're ill.

When Mr. Colville was in charge it was different. He knew boys he did. I wish he was back again. Since he went away things have all gone wrong."

Paul heartily echoed her wish. Garside was quite different from what it had been when Mr. Colville was there. He had hoped day by day that intelligence would come of his return; but the Head still remained in the south of France, too ill to attend to his duties at the school.

Presently the eyes of Hibbert slowly opened. A glad cry came from his lips when they rested on Paul.

"Percival, is it really you? I thought they were never going to let me see you again. Thanks, Mrs. Trounce; it's very kind of you."

A faint tinge of colour came to the pale cheek; the look of pain had gone from the face. The sight of Paul seemed to have put new life and vigour into him. The matron promptly noted the change, and was very pleased that she had taken upon herself the responsibility of admitting Paul into the room.

"There, there; you mustn't get excited, or I shall be blamed for letting Master Percival in to see you, and he won't come again, will you?"

"Of course I won't," answered Paul promptly.

"I'm not the least excited, only glad—glad—so glad!"

He repeated the word three times, to make sure there might be no mistake about it, and his thin fingers closed round Paul's, as though he feared he might slip away.

"I hope the other fellows haven't got into trouble through me?" he asked. "Mr. Weevil would never tell me anything."

"Oh, no; they've got off very lightly, so don't worry about that. Plunger is going about as cheeky as ever."

A faint smile flickered over the boy's face.

"Plunger's rare fun. He was really just as much terrified as I was when Baldry and the other fellows turned up as Indians on the 'desert island.' I can laugh at it now, though I didn't laugh much then."

He lay placidly with his hand in Paul's, then turned pleadingly to the matron.

"Let Percival stay with me a bit. It'll do me good, and I'm sure you want a little change."

Mrs. Trounce could see that the presence of Paul had worked wonders, so she had no hesitation in leaving the two together, giving Paul strict injunctions before doing so that he was to ring the bell in case she was needed. Immediately she had gone from the room Hibbert turned eagerly to Paul.

"I've been waiting to go on with what I was telling you when you were last here, Percival. It has lain here—here!"—beating his breast. "It has kept me awake at night, and—and the time seemed so terribly long and dreary. I watched and waited for your coming, but though you came they would never let me see you. Mr. Weevil was the only one I could speak to, and I could not tell him what was on my mind."

"Why not? He is very kind to you."

"Why not—why not! When I've told you, you will understand."

"You must not excite yourself. You must not talk. If you do I will ring the bell and bring back Mrs. Trounce."

"You wouldn't be so cruel, Percival, when I've been waiting so long to see you and speak to you again. It's that kept me back, made me weary, and weak, and sick at heart. When I lay awake at night-time I kept saying to

myself, 'If I should die without seeing Percival again, without telling him what is on my mind, God would never forgive me.'"

"If all of us were as good as you, we should be a good deal better than we are, and God wouldn't have to forgive much," said Paul tenderly. "But, there, don't get excited, and I will listen."

For Paul could now see clearly enough that Hibbert had really suffered a good deal of mental pain and torture through not being able to complete the confession he had begun to him.

"Thanks," came the eager answer. "It will not take long, for I haven't much more to say. Let me see, where did I leave off? Oh, I was speaking about the man who was a spy on your father on that day Mr. Weevil entered the room, wasn't I?"

"Yes—Israel Zuker."

"I haven't forgotten the name," said Hibbert, with a painful smile. "I'm not likely to forget it—never, never, never! For—for it happens to be my name."

"Hibbert!" cried Paul.

"My name. Israel Zuker, the man who spied upon your father, and whose life he saved at the risk of his own, was my father."

Paul staggered back, as though he had been smitten in the face. Hibbert the son of the German spy! Hibbert the son of Zuker! Impossible! He was wandering. The story he—Paul—had once told him about his own father, and the way he had lost him, had got on the boy's mind.

"Ah, you shrink from me! I don't wonder at it!" cried Hibbert. "Didn't I tell you what a hypocrite I was—how wicked?"

"No, no, Hibbert," answered Paul, taking again the hand he had let fall from him; "nothing you can say will ever make me shrink from you. But—but you have so surprised me. I cannot understand. Let me think for a moment—Israel Zuker your father. How can that be when your name is Hibbert?"

"That is a false name. I told you once that I knew of a boy of that name in Germany. I was speaking of myself, for I spent three years of my life at a school in Heidelberg before I came here."

"Then the man I saw this afternoon—the man who thanked me for saving the life of his son, was——"

"Israel Zuker, my father—the man whose life your father saved, as you, his son, have saved mine. Now can you understand what I have suffered, Percival, by having this terrible secret on my mind? When I heard your story that day you don't know what I felt—what a mean, contemptible cad. I felt that I was a spy on you, just as my father had been a spy on your father—a spy on you, who had been so good to me. Oh, it was terrible! And then you saved my life, just as your father had saved my father's years ago. And that was heaping coals of fire on my head. I couldn't endure it."

He covered his face with his hands. He was choking back the sobs that seemed of a sudden to convulse his frame.

"I shall really have to ring the bell and send for Mrs. Trounce," said Paul firmly.

The threat had its desired effect. Hibbert uncovered his face; the sobs died away in his throat. Then Paul put an arm round him, as he might have done round a brother, and said, in a softer key:

"Look here, Hibbert—what your father may have done is no fault of yours. God only judges us by what we do ourselves; and that's all I want to judge you by. You've looked upon me as your friend; I want you to look upon me

as your friend still. Haven't I said that nothing you can say will make me shrink from you?"

"How good, how noble you are, Percival!"

"Humbug! But listen to me—we're getting a little off the track. The gentleman I was introduced to in the visitors' room this afternoon was your father, Israel Zuker, you say?"

"Yes."

"Wearing a false beard, then?"

"Yes. But how did you know that? Have you met him before?" asked the boy wonderingly.

Paul now understood what it was in the voice of the visitor that had seemed familiar to him.

"I met somebody of that name during last vacation, so I suppose it must have been the same," he answered, with pretended indifference; "but he wasn't wearing a beard. It's a good disguise. What's he afraid of?"

"Well, he's obliged to. I'm telling you this as a secret, and I know I can trust you not to repeat it. My father's an agent of one of the foreign Governments, and he's obliged to put on a disguise sometimes to get information."

"But what information does he want to get that makes him wear disguises?"

"I never could quite make out, but I know it's to do with secret service. He once told me that every Government has secret service. That's all I ever knew."

He seemed to have an uneasy suspicion that his father's profession was not a very honourable one, for his head sunk to his breast.

"Is your father a friend of the master's—Mr. Weevil, I mean?"

"Well, yes—more than a friend; but it's another secret I don't want to get about the school. Mr. Weevil would be very angry if it did, so you must promise me not to repeat it."

And Paul, scarcely knowing all his promise meant, promised him. Then the boy leant very close to him and whispered: "Mr. Weevil's my uncle."

This information was almost as startling and unexpected as the information that had preceded it. As it fell from Hibbert's lips, Paul almost feared that the door would open and Mr. Weevil would walk in, just as he had walked in before.

"Your uncle!" he repeated.

"Well, it's this way, you see. My mother was English. She was the only sister of Mr. Weevil. I know he was very fond of her, for I've heard mother say that he was a good brother, and that she was the only one for whom he had a greater love than he had for science. My father first met her when he used to give lessons in German and French—he knows three or four languages—at the school where Mr. Weevil was master before he came here. I think my father was then what they call a refugee. My mother died three years ago; then I went to Heidelberg again, and last of all I came here. You remember the day—at the opening of the term."

Remember the day! Paul was never likely to forget it. He remembered every incident in connection with it—Hibbert coming to him in the grounds, the insult put upon him by Newall, and the other incidents that followed.

"I remember," he said gravely.

The door opened as he spoke, and Mrs. Trounce entered.

"What, sitting up!" she cried, for Hibbert was still sitting, with the arm of Paul gently supporting him.

"Yes; I feel so much stronger and better," he answered brightly.

"I'm glad to hear it, but I think you'd better lie down now. If Mr. Weevil came in now he would have a fit."

Paul thought it highly probable such a catastrophe would happen if the master had any suspicion of what Hibbert had told him. So he gently laid the patient down again.

"You'll come again, Percival?" he pleaded.

And Paul promised.

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## CHAPTER XXXI

### A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

The revelation that Paul had heard in the sick-room overwhelmed him. It was not till he was in the open air that he realized what it all meant. The foreign spy, for whom his father had sacrificed his life—the man who, in turn, had tried to steal from him the packet which had been entrusted to him by Mr. Moncrief—Hibbert's father! Was he standing on his head or his heels?

Again he could feel the night wind on his face as he galloped along the road to Redmead; again he saw himself confronted by Zuker and his confederate; again he felt himself rising in the saddle and bringing down his whip on the man's face; again he felt the thrill of joy that leapt through his veins as he escaped from the clutches of his pursuers, and bounded once more along the road; and then—then that feeling of despair when Falcon suddenly sank to the ground, and he found that the noble horse was dying. This man, the man for whom his father had died, the man who had so relentlessly pursued him on the road to Redmead, the man who had caused the death of Falcon—this man of all men Hibbert's father, the father of the boy whom he had watched over and protected ever since he came to Garside, the father of the boy he had loved as a brother, and whom he had risked his own life to save, even as his father had risked his life to save the life of Zuker so long ago!

It was indeed staggering. No wonder he hastened into the fresh air. Spiders seemed spinning webs about his brain. He could neither see nor think clearly.

"Where am I standing?" he asked himself, and simple as the question was, it was not so simple to answer, for the world seemed suddenly topsy-turvy.

Gradually the night air swept away the cobwebs, and he began to see things in a clearer light. This man Zuker was a spy still; nothing had changed since the day he had been found in his father's cabin, except perhaps that he had grown more daring. A spy! What did that mean? It meant that he was a menace to honest people, a danger to England, a danger to the peace and weal of the country which had given Paul birth—the country for which so many of his relatives had given their lives, the country which he loved. There could be no quarter for such a man. The longer he was at large the greater the danger.

"He's in my power completely. A word from me will send him to prison," Paul said to himself. "To prison he shall go this very night."

Full of this determination, Paul turned to the gate. It was a couple of miles to the police-station, but what of that? He would soon cover the distance, and be back again at Garside. So he started on his journey with a run. He had not gone far, however, before a still, small voice began to whisper plaintively in his ear. It was the voice of Hibbert—the pleading, pathetic voice that had become so dear to him.

"Paul, Paul! Are you forgetting the promise you made to me so soon? Was it for this I told you my secret? Reveal my story to the police, and you will kill me—kill me, as surely as though you were to thrust a knife in my breast."

That was what the voice seemed saying to him. Paul pulled himself up with a jerk. What was he about to do? Betray Hibbert, the poor boy who had entrusted him with his secret! Betray Hibbert, who had clung to him and loved him through good report and evil, who had never shrunk from him

when one by one the boys at Garside had shrunk from him as from a leper! God help him! What was he about to do?

He was about to turn back when that other voice whispered to him: "Your country first and foremost. You have a higher duty than the duty you owe to Hibbert—the duty to your country. Besides, this boy's father betrayed your father. Why should you shrink from betraying him? Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Pay back the debt that has been owing so long."

Paul hastened on again, but again he paused as another voice—a voice that was full of wondrous and sublime melody—sounded in his ear: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay."

It seemed to him as he stood there in the moonlight, the stillness so great and solemn that he could hear his heart throb, that God had spoken. The danger to his country was not so great that it called upon him to give up the secret which had been entrusted in confidence to his keeping.

He could not be true to himself or his country by being false to Hibbert!

He would wait. Hibbert would get better. If the danger became real, he would lay bare his breast to Hibbert as Hibbert had laid bare his breast to him. He would tell him, fairly and honestly, why he could no longer keep his secret; then Hibbert would be able to warn his father, and he would be able to flee from the country he had sought to betray.

Paul felt easier when he had come to this decision. It seemed to him that he had divided his secret with God, and that he was now acting as He would have counselled him.

And surely His hand had been in it from the first—from the hour when he, Paul, had been shielded from his pursuers in his ride to Redmead to the hour which had brought the son of his pursuer to a sick bed, and induced him to pour his strange confession in his ear. Nay, could not the hand of

God be seen in it still farther back, from the very hour when, at the risk of his own life, Paul's father had sacrificed his own life for the life of his enemy? Even at that time the hand of Providence must have been at work weaving the strange events which were still unfolding themselves.

Paul was on the point of turning back as these thoughts flitted through his mind when the sound of a footstep caused him to draw back hastily into the shadow of the hedge. Scarcely had he done so than a tall, lean figure, with head thrust forward, passed quickly by. It was Mr. Weevil.

"Where is he off to, I wonder?" thought Paul.

The master had been so concentrated in his thoughts that he had no suspicion as to who was in hiding by the roadside. Paul's memory at once went back to the last part of Hibbert's story—the part which he had almost lost sight of in the overwhelming interest of the first part. Mr. Weevil was Hibbert's uncle—Zuker's brother-in-law.

Were they in league together? Paul's glance followed Mr. Weevil along the road. An overmastering desire seized him, a desire that he could not resist. Instinctively, as one in a dream, he followed in the footsteps of the master. Presently they reached Cranstead Common. Instead of turning in the direction of the sand-pits, the battle-ground of the Bedes and the Garsiders, Mr. Weevil turned to the left—to that part of it which was more thickly wooded—where there were trees and furze-bushes and bramble in wild profusion.

"Where on earth can he be going?" Paul asked himself wonderingly.

Well might he ask, for it was scarcely possible to imagine a wilder or more solitary spot. It led to no habitation, none at least that Paul was aware of, and he was pretty familiar with the common.

"He can't be on a visit to any one, unless it be the pixies, or creatures of that sort," thought Paul. "P'raps he's thinking out some scientific problem, and finds this wild part the best place to do it in."

He paused for an instant. What was the use of going farther? He was on a wildgoose chase, but still the overmastering impulse which had led him to follow Mr. Weevil held him in its grip and would not let him turn back. So he went on in close pursuit of the shadowy figure in front of him.

"Why, he'll be getting to the river presently. Perhaps that is what he is making for?" thought Paul as the master plunged deeper into the thicket.

The river skirted the far side of the common, and it was precisely in that direction Mr. Weevil was travelling. He had never once looked to the right or left, so absorbed had he been in his thoughts, but now he suddenly paused and looked back.

Paul had just time to hide himself in the friendly shelter of a tree. He stood there for an instant, then peeped out from his hiding-place. He caught one glimpse of Mr. Weevil, and then, to his amazement, he disappeared from view as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

Paul rubbed his eyes. What was the meaning of it! Where had the master disappeared to? Had he been following some phantom, or had Mr. Weevil really sunk through the ground? Paul advanced to the spot. There was apparently nothing there but bushes. Again and again he pondered on the strange disappearance of the master and was unable to account for it.

"Well, if that isn't one of the strangest things I've ever seen," said he to himself. "Mr. Weevil was there a minute since, as large as life and twice as natural. Now he's gone."

A feeling of awe stole over Paul. Mr. Weevil had always seemed a strange being, a man quite by himself, and different from ordinary beings. Had his

dealings with science taught him some dark secret by which he could make himself invisible? But Paul quickly dismissed this wild idea from his mind. The days of miracles were past. Whatever Mr. Weevil's knowledge of science, it did not lend itself to feats of magic worthy of the genii in the enchanted realms of *The Arabian Nights*.

None the less, where was he? What had become of him? Paul examined the bushes as closely as the darkness would permit, but could find no trace of the master. He stood still and listened. Save for a light breeze that was moving gently among the trees, there was no sound. It was as quiet as the grave.

"My word! That's one of the greatest mysteries I've ever struck," thought Paul. He withdrew a pace or two, and took up his position beneath a decayed elm. Possibly Mr. Weevil might make his reappearance in the same mysterious way in which he had disappeared. He waited a few minutes, but his patience was not rewarded. Nothing happened.

Paul began to fear that he might be locked out unless he hastened back, so he reluctantly retraced his footsteps, determined to visit the spot at the earliest opportunity.

He got back to Garside without mishap or incident, but when he lay down to rest that night it was not to sleep. He could not help wondering what had become of Mr. Weevil, and whether he had spent a night on Cranstead Common. He was still thinking when the school clock chimed the hour of midnight. About five minutes later he heard a quiet footstep in the corridor.

"That's Mr. Weevil," he said to himself. "I am quite sure. I could swear to his footsteps anywhere."

He listened till they disappeared in the corridor, then he turned on his pillow, and tried to sleep. But he did not succeed for a long time. The events

of that night had banished sleep.

The next day Mr. Weevil was at his post as usual, and closely as Paul watched him he could see nothing unusual in his demeanour. He was as grave as ever—the eyes opened and closed in the same manner, most wakeful when they seemed most sleepful; and he was as prompt and diligent as ever in the discharge of his duties in the school.

"Was it all a dream?" Paul asked himself, as his mind went back to what had happened on the previous night.

As that afternoon was a half-holiday, he had some idea of paying a second visit to the spot, and continuing his examination of it. But he remembered that there was a still more important duty before him. He had pledged himself in the presence of Sedgefield and his companions that he would get back the school flag, and that once again they would see it flying from its old place on the turret.

So far, he had done nothing to redeem his pledge. Those Third Form fellows who had cheered him so lustily would think there was no meaning in his words, that his boast was an empty one. The time had come for him to do something to make good his promise.

He would begin to carry out his plan that very afternoon.

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## CHAPTER XXXII

### HOW THE OLD FLAG WAS TAKEN FROM GARSIDE

At this, the commencement of another chapter, we may as well take the opportunity of explaining to the reader the secret which had caused so much excitement at Garside, namely, what had become of the school flag—who had had the audacity to capture it.

It will be remembered that one of the Bedes who always took an active part in opposition to the Garsiders was Mellor. The fact that he had been at one time a Garsider made him keener to "score off" his old companions, and he was ever to the fore in any enterprise for that purpose. But the great idea which possessed his mind, to the exclusion of most others, was the capture of the Garside flag. He knew that everybody in the school was proud of it. He himself had been proud of it when he was at Garside. The school flag at Bede's had no such history. It was just an ordinary flag, with a white shield in front, the initials of the school, and the school motto, precisely after the fashion of the school cap.

So it came about that ever since the day Mellor had been set upon by his old companions, and made to crawl on all fours as "a Beetle," the idea had come to him that he would like to inflict upon Garside the greatest blow that had yet been inflicted upon it by gaining possession of the old flag. He thought of it by day, and he thought of it by night; but day followed day, and night followed night, and there seemed little chance of carrying out his purpose.

There was only one boy at St. Bede's to whom he confided his secret, and that was his dormitory companion and chum—Edward Crick. Crick was

about the same age as Mellor, with the same love of sport, the same wiliness, and the same indifference to consequences when once an idea had taken possession of him. And that's just what happened. When Mellor confided to him his secret, the idea possessed him, and he was just as keen on carrying it out as Mellor. If between them they could only get possession of the Garside flag, it would be one of the greatest achievements in the history of the school.

They knew well enough that it was impossible to obtain possession of the flag by open assault. There was only one way—by taking the enemy unawares—by stealing a march upon them when it was least expected.

Now, it was clear enough that in order to accomplish this purpose one of them would have to steal into the school at Garside and get to the west turret unobserved. Audacious as the scheme was, both were anxious for the honour; but after discussing the point for some time, Mellor gave way to Crick. Mellor was well known at Garside. He would be at once stopped were he found entering the school, and questioned as to what he had come for. Crick was unknown to the porter, and little known to most of the boys. The main thing was to provide him with one of the Garside caps. It so happened that Mellor had retained his old cap. There were at least twenty other boys of about the same size and age as Crick in the school. With the school cap on his head it would be easy enough for him to slip into the grounds during one of the half-holidays when most of the boys would be on the playing-fields. If any one did notice him, he might pass muster as a new boy.

For the rest, Mellor was acquainted with every detail of the school building, and gave Crick precise information as to the best and surest methods to reach the west turret; so that Crick, as the result of this information, knew almost as much about the building as Mellor.

Everything having been thus clearly planned, it only remained to put the plan into execution. To this end Garside had been carefully reconnoitred by the two boys at every opportunity that offered—that was to say, on every holiday. The opportunity they sought at length came—on that afternoon when Plunger and his companions were so busily engaged in playing the part of Crusoe. On cautiously approaching the school, the two confederates found that it was almost deserted. Crick thereupon boldly entered the grounds, with the Garside cap on his head and the collar of his sweater up, just for all the world as though he belonged to the school.

A door at the rear of the building led through a narrow passage to the stairs leading to the turret. Crick was not long in finding the door, just as it had been described by Mellor.

Entering it, he quickly mounted to the turret, and reached the trap-door leading to the roof. It had not been raised for some time, and Crick did not find it easy to open; but putting his head to it, and forcing it upward with the full strength of his body, it at length opened amid a shower of dust, and the next minute Crick was through it and on the roof.

His heart beat loudly as he saw only a few yards from him the old flag flying from its staff. He did not lose his head, however. He knew well enough that, though he had succeeded in reaching the turret, his presence there might be detected at any moment. Any one passing along the grounds might chance to glance up.

So, lying flat on the roof, he took a careful survey of the scene below. An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips; he could not help it. He felt like Cortez, the famous discoverer, when, with an eagle eye, he gazed for the first time on the Pacific from a peak in Darien. The Gargoyles in the playing-fields looked like so many pigmies darting between the goal-posts. Beyond them stretched the roadway leading to the common; to the left he

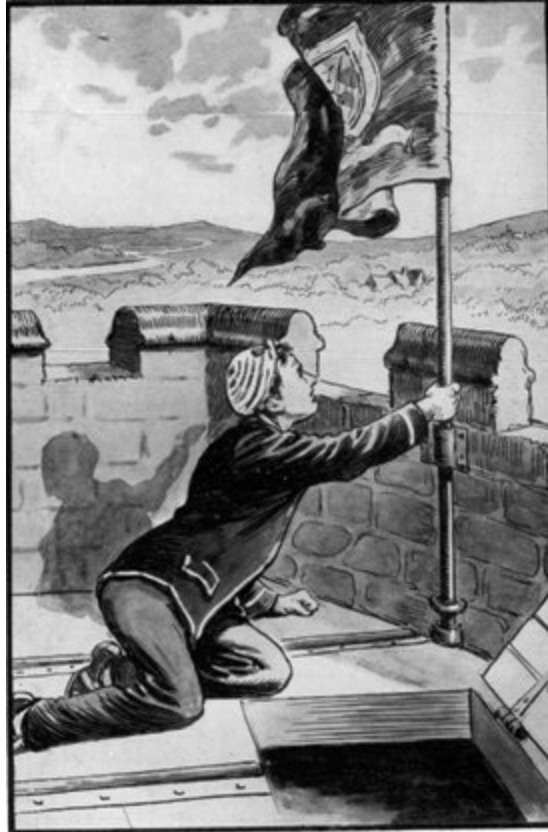
could plainly see the glint of the sun on the river. He little dreamt what was happening there, even as he gazed.

Turning in another direction, there was an almost uninterrupted expanse of country till the distance was broken by the spire of St. Bede's rising from a background of hills. He never imagined that it would be possible to see St. Bede's from Garside. He had thought the distance too great, but now the two schools, seen from that vantage ground, seemed ridiculously near.

Crick remained for some time lost in the view; then a clock chiming the quarter recalled him to his purpose. He glanced again in the direction of the playing-fields. There was nothing to fear in that direction. The Gargoyles were too much occupied in their game to pay any attention to the roof. Crick drew himself nearer to the flagstaff.

Slightly raising himself from his position on the roof, he lifted it from its socket, and, possessed of the prize for which he had risked so much, drew it quickly beneath the trap-door.

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**"SLIGHTLY RAISING HIMSELF FROM HIS POSITION ON THE ROOF,  
CRICK LIFTED THE FLAGSTAFF FROM ITS SOCKET, AND DREW IT  
QUICKLY BENEATH THE TRAP-DOOR."**

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"Got it!" he cried, with a thrill of joy, as he glanced at the old, discoloured flag which had seen so much service—"got it!"

Quickly rolling it round the staff, he next drew from under his sweater a cover of American cloth, which he wound in turn round the flag and staff, till nothing could be seen of them. No one could have told what the cloth concealed. It looked like a bundle of fishing-rods.

Descending the stairs as cautiously as he had ascended them, he once more reached the door leading from the turret stairs.

"Now for it," he thought, bracing himself up.

He had only to get outside the grounds and reach the place where Mellor was awaiting him. He crept round the side wall, and was just about to hasten through that part of the grounds which lay between him and the road, when he drew back suddenly. A boy was staggering along in the direction of the schoolhouse with a burden of some sort in his arms.

"My stars! Another moment and he would have seen me!" thought Crick, with a breath of relief. "What's he got in his arms, I wonder? Looks like another chap, as though they'd been in the wars together."

It was Paul, hastening to the school with Hibbert. In another minute he had passed by where Crick was hiding. Then Crick heard voices. It was Paul speaking to Waterman at the school door. The listener caught the word "accident." The next moment Waterman darted past him. The coast being again clear, Crick promptly followed in Waterman's footsteps. He was not long in reaching the hedge behind which Mellor was awaiting him.

"Got it?" was the eager question.

"Yes. Look!"

Mellor could have shouted with joy. Was it possible that the flag was actually in their possession?

"Bravo, Crick! It's the biggest thing we've ever scored over the Gargoyles. My! won't they be savage! There'll be no holding them in when they find their flag's gone. But what's up? There's been an accident of some sort."

"I know there has. I nearly ran into a fellow who was carrying a kid in his arms. Luckily I pulled up in time. Who were they—do you know?"

"One was Percival, the fellow who skedaddled from Wyndham at the sand-pit. I don't know the kid he had in his arms, he must be a fresher."

"A fresher! He wasn't much of a fresher to look at. He looked like a drowned rat."

The two returned to St. Bede's by the longest but less frequented way, and at length reached it without further adventure. They determined to hide the flag for the time being, and to confide the secret to their own Form only—the Fourth.

The Fourth was very jubilant, as may be imagined, at the feat performed by Crick and Mellor, who were at once looked upon as heroes. The flag, meanwhile, had been hidden in a barn, standing in a field near St. Bede's, belonging to a father of one of the day boys in Mellor's Form.

Frequently they met in the barn, and withdrawing the flag from its hiding-place, stuck it in the centre of the floor, and danced round it like a band of wild Indians celebrating a victory.

Things were at this pass when Paul came to the decision to visit St. Bede's, to see if he could obtain information as to the missing flag. Plunger and Moncrief minor happened to be out on an expedition of their own that afternoon on Cranstead Common. Plunger caught sight of Paul as he turned the bend of the road leading to St. Bede's.

"That was Percival, I'm pretty well sure of it," he cried. "Didn't you see him?"

"No. By himself?"

"Isn't he always by himself? But let's make certain."

The two boys ran to the roadway and glanced along it. There, sure enough, was Percival striding quickly along in the direction of St. Bede's.

"Where's he making for? For the seminary of the crawlers, seems to me," said Plunger. "Queer sort of chap! What can he want up there?"

Harry did not answer. He recalled the afternoon when he had seen Paul speaking to Wyndham. He had tried to forget that incident, and along with it the incident that had happened at the sand-pit. He had tried to think only of Paul's heroism on the river when he had saved the lives of three of his school-fellows. He had cheered him as heartily as the rest on that day when Baldry had called for "Three cheers for Percival!" After, as we have seen, he had tried to heal the differences between his cousin and Percival; but now all the old suspicions came back with a rush.

"Yes; what can he want up there? Supposing we find out. There can be no harm in watching him."

Plunger, as we know, had the bump of curiosity largely developed, and his curiosity to know what Paul was doing at St. Bede's caused him to forget, perhaps, that in playing the spy he was not altogether making the best return in his power to one who had risked so much to save him from a watery grave.

So he at once fell in with Harry's suggestion, and the two, keeping in the background, followed in the footsteps of Paul.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII

### FRIEND AND FOE

Paul, unconscious that he was being followed, pressed forward to St. Bede's. As he drew near a boy came from the gates. Paul recognized him. It was Murrell, one of the seniors at St. Bede's, who had taken part with the others in hustling and jibing at him the last time he came in that direction.

Murrell caught sight of him almost simultaneously, so that it would have been impossible for Paul to avoid him had he wished.

"Hallo! Turned up again, have you?" cried the youth, coming to a dead stop in front of Paul. "I thought you'd had enough of these parts the last time you were here. But p'raps you enjoy ragging. There's no accounting for tastes—specially the taste of a Gargoyle. Look here, if I were you I would cut!"

"I don't think you would. If you were me you would stand your ground, and that's what I mean doing," smiled Paul.

"You're jolly cheeky, Gargoyle! Now, look here, take the advice of one who wants to do you a good turn—cut! There are a lot of the Bedes hanging about, and if they happen to get hold of you, there won't be much left of you, I can tell you! Are you insured?"

"No."

"My stars! I wouldn't like to be standing in your shoes—I really wouldn't! Tired of life—eh? That's why you're poking your head into the lion's den—eh?"

"Wrong again—quite wrong. I've come to see one of your fellows who's been very kind to me—Wyndham."

"Oh, Wyndham! The one you ran away from at the sand-pits?"

Paul winced under the jibe. He had not yet got over that weakness. Murrell was regarding him curiously. No answer coming from his victim, he spoke again:

"You want me to fetch Wyndham?"

"If you would be so kind."

"Well, if you don't take the cake—likewise the bun, and the biscuit! A Gargoyle has the superb cheek to ask a Bede to be his errand-boy! Stands Scotland where it did? Is the world going round, or is it standing still? Am I standing on my head or my heels? Now, then—your last chance! If you don't want to go back in pieces, take it! Going—going—gone!"

"I don't intend going till I've seen Wyndham," said Paul firmly. "If you won't do me the favour I ask, I must keep on till I find some one a little more courteous."

He was about to pass on, when Murrell stopped him with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"All right! You needn't get into a wax! You're not such a bad sort of fellow, after all, for a Gargoyle! Wait here! Shan't be long!"

His tone had suddenly changed, and before Paul could say anything further he was gone. Paul was so astonished that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes and ears. In an instant Murrell's attitude had changed from a threatening to a friendly attitude. Was it meant to mislead him? Had he no intention of going for Wyndham? Did he mean instead to acquaint some of the boys who had previously set on him of his arrival, so that they

might carry out the purpose which they had been forced to relinquish? This view seemed certainly the more probable of the two, and therefore Paul was very agreeably surprised when, a couple of minutes later, he saw the well-known figure of Wyndham coming from the college gates towards him. His handsome face lit up with a smile as he caught sight of Paul.

"Percival," he said, as his hand went out to him, "I'm so glad to see you! So was Murrell."

"So was Murrell!" repeated Paul. "You wouldn't say so if you knew the reception he gave me just now. You're joking?"

"No; I was never more serious in my life. As a Bede, he was bound not to be over-polite to a Garsider; but he thinks a good deal more of you than he did, and so do most of us—all through Murrell. Why? Well, he happened to catch a glimpse of what happened on the river a week or so ago—came up at the tag-end, but heard all that had happened from some of the other fellows on the bank. Murrell and many more here are beginning to think that you are too good for a Gargoyle, though you didn't cut such a grand figure at the sand-pits. They're beginning to believe what they wouldn't swallow at the time—that you're one of the bravest fellows at Garside. To think that I'm the only fellow who knows how brave! Why don't you let me speak and set you right?"

"No, no, Wyndham! You're very good; but it mustn't be. There are reasons against it which you will know some day. But there is a way in which you can serve me."

"What way? If I can help you, be sure I will."

Paul thereupon told him the additional misfortune that had happened at Garside on the afternoon the boys fell into the river in the loss of the school

flag. Wyndham listened to the story attentively. He did not speak till Paul had ended.

"You mean to suggest, I suppose, that some of the fellows here took the flag?"

"To speak frankly, I do; but I know well enough that you've not had a hand in it."

"Thanks for your good opinion; but I don't know that I deserve it. After all, why shouldn't I have had a hand in it? The fellows here look upon you as the enemy, and you look upon us in the same light. Haven't we a perfect right to get possession of the enemy's flag if we can?"

"Yes; in fair and open battle. But this wasn't in fair and open battle; it was a theft."

"That's rather a hard word, Percival. It's as good as saying some one here's a thief!"

Wyndham spoke with greater warmth than Paul had ever heard him speak. For the first time he saw an angry light in his eye.

"Forgive me, Wyndham! I've hurt your feelings; I can see that I have. And you are the last in the world I would do that to. I'll withdraw theft. Let's call it strategy."

The cloud vanished like magic from Wyndham's face.

"That's a very polite and nice way of putting it, Percival," he smiled. "You're a great deal more considerate of my feelings than I am of yours. I tell you what"—his face became serious again—"it's done me a lot of good since I knew you; since I was able to open my heart to you and tell you about the little brother who was taken from us years back. I've often wished

that I was at Garside to stand by you. It must be very lonely for you over there."

"No, indeed; it's far from lonely, but sometimes it has been very, very hard to bear. If Moncrief had only stood by me, and all the rest of the school had been against me, I would not have minded; but——"

"Ah, do not speak of that! It makes me miserable. It gave me a savage delight at the time to fight that fellow. It made me a hero here; but since I've begun to think a little I feel very far from a hero myself. It would have been far better had I never fought. It has made bad blood between you and Moncrief; it took from you your best friend, and set your school against you. It did worse than that; it has widened the breach between St. Bede's and Garside, and deepened the old feud, which was beginning to die out. And now that it has been stirred into a flame again, it will take longer than ever to die out."

He paused for a moment, as though deep in thought. Paul, too, was busy with his own thoughts. He knew not how to answer him.

"Don't speak against yourself, Wyndham, for it pains me a great deal more than it pains you. I owe you a lot for the help you gave me on that night I went to Redmead; but there's one other debt, greater than that even, of which I have never spoken. Speaking just now of your little brother has brought it all back to me."

"Speaking of my brother?" repeated Wyndham, with that tremor in his voice which had fallen so pathetically on Paul's ear when he had first spoken of the dead boy.

"Your brother Archie. I haven't forgotten the name, you see, and I have never forgotten—never shall forget—the story. I had never tried to understand younger boys till then. We bigger boys rarely do, I'm afraid. We

think them only good for cuffing and fagging; so there's never much sympathy between us. When we pass to the upper forms we only remember the cuffs and kicks we got in the lower forms, and think it our duty to pay them back with interest. But your story—the story of your dead brother—stuck in my memory. I carried it back with me when I returned to Garside after vac. The first little chap I came across was a fresher—a poor, weak, lonely little chap, who hadn't a chum in the school. I thought of your brother. My heart went out to the boy, and I said to myself: 'By God's help, I'll stand by you; and I'll be your friend!'"

"That was noble of you!" said Wyndham, clasping Paul's hand in his. "Who is the little chap? Is he still at Garside?"

"Still at Garside!" repeated Paul, in tones that had died away almost to a whisper. "He's the little chap I fished out of the river."

"Ah, then, you've nobly redeemed your promise. You saved his life."

"I cannot say. He is still in bed—still very weak; but the link between us kept me strong when all Garside was against me. Once or twice it seemed more than I could stand, and I had serious thoughts of throwing up the sponge and clearing out of Garside. What was there to keep me there? Then I thought of Hibbert, and the thought made me strong again. So I kept on, and weathered the storm—or, rather, am still weathering it. The thought of the little chap kept me to my duty."

Once more there was silence between them. Wyndham had tucked his arm in Paul's. The two were walking along the road to Cranstead Common. The bond of sympathy between them had grown stronger and stronger during those brief moments in which they had bared their hearts to each other.

"About this flag," broke in Wyndham. "Do you know for certain that it's been taken by some fellow here?"

"No; it's only a suspicion. I may be wrong, but I don't think I am."

"When was it missed?"

"On that afternoon when the accident took place on the river. It was a half-holiday at both schools. It was waving over the turret when I left the school; it had gone when I came back."

"That's over a week ago, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"The fellow who took it must have had plenty of pluck. Well, if I can do anything in fairness to get you your flag back again, I'll do it; but at present it's as great a mystery to me as to you."

The two shook hands and parted.

Plunger and Harry had crept through a hedge, and witnessed a good deal of the interview that had taken place between the two, without hearing anything. When the two passed down the road—Wyndham with his arm linked in Paul's—Plunger and Harry prepared to follow them; but before they could move a step they were seized by the legs and thrown to the ground.

"Those Gargoyles!" The words were enough. They were in the hands of the enemy.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE MYSTIC ORDER OF BEETLES

To the bewilderment of Plunger and Moncrief minor they found themselves in the grip of four figures, with masks somewhat after the fashion of those worn by motorists. They had been taken so completely by surprise that they made no attempt at resistance. If they had it would have been useless, for their captors held them firmly by both arms, and rushed them breathlessly across the field as far as possible from the roadway.

"St—stop it, will you?" Plunger at length found breath enough to stammer. "Oh—oh!"

The last exclamation was caused by a sharp dig in the ribs, which brought his question to an abrupt conclusion. Inspired by Plunger's example, Harry thought that he might also venture on a question.

"Who—who are you? And—and—where are you taking us?"

An answer was conveyed to him in the same forcible manner in which it had been conveyed to Plunger; but, though the dig in the ribs made him gasp, it did not altogether silence him.

"Crawlers—wretched Beetles—that's what you are! Oh, oh, oh!"

A dig in the ribs from both sides effectually closed Harry's lips for the time being, while the pace at which his captors took him along was increased to such a rate that he could scarcely keep his feet. At length they stopped before a barn, and the foremost of the four captors knocked upon the door three times with his knuckles.

"Who's there?" came a voice from within.

"Four of the Brethren," answered the youth who had knocked.

"Are you alone?"

"No; we have brought two novices who are anxious to be introduced to the mystic order."

Plunger began to prick up his ears. The mystic order? What mystic order? And what were they going to do with them?

"Two novices who are anxious to be introduced to the mystic order?" came the voice from within. "They wish to become brethren?"

"Yes."

"N—n—no!" came in a gasp from Plunger's lips; but another sharp dig in his ribs reduced him once more to silence.

"Yes, most worthy K. O. P. They are dying to become brethren of the noble band."

"I say, you unkind Beetles," began Harry. "Oh, oh!"

He was silenced by the same unflinching method which had just been brought to bear upon his companion.

A short conversation took place between the masked figure who had acted as spokesman and the person within. At the end of it the former turned to his companions.

"Blindfold the novices. The Keeper of the Portal has commanded it."

Keeper of the Portal? That, then, was the meaning of the initials "K. O. P." thought Plunger.

It was getting more and more mysterious, but he did not like the idea of being blindfolded. What were they going to do with him—with Moncrief? At first he felt inclined to resist, but a sharp twist of the wrist soon convinced him that resistance was useless. Harry had come to the same conclusion, so they submitted with the best grace they could to bandages being placed round their eyes. Then they heard the door open and the voice of the "Keeper of the Portal" commanding them to enter.

They entered. As they did so, Plunger thought he heard some one sniggering, and again a wild idea crossed his mind that he would strike out and make a desperate effort to escape from his captors; but the instant he moved he was brought to a standstill by the energetic measures which were now becoming painfully familiar to him.

The sniggering, if sniggering it was, soon ceased, and then a strange silence reigned in the barn. The silence was a great deal worse to Plunger than any amount of ridicule. Who were in the barn? What was happening?

He strained his ears to the utmost. He could hear the sound of mysterious footsteps walking stealthily to and fro, but no one spoke. He stood there and shivered, though the perspiration was oozing from his forehead. Was some desperate plot on foot against them? The footsteps ceased. All was again so still that he began to think the barn had been deserted and that he had been left in it blindfolded, to make his way from it the best he could. He was about to call out to Harry when a voice he had not yet heard called out sharply:

"Gargoyle with the eyebrows, what is thy name?"

Gargoyle with the eyebrows!

"S'pose that's meant for me," thought Plunger, "but I'm not going to answer such impudent questions."

"The noble president speaketh. Answer, Gargoyle with the wiry thatch," came a voice in Plunger's ear, accompanied by a sharp kick on the shins.

Gargoyle with the eyebrows! Gargoyle with the wiry thatch! Was there ever such insolence? But that kick on the shins told Plunger that to raise any protest would only bring upon him worse punishment, so he stammered out:

"Fre—Frederick Pl—Plunger."

"Plunger! Thy name is worse than thy face."

Plunger heard sniggers on every side at this reference to his name, of which he had always been very proud.

"It's such an uncommon one, you know," he had often said to his cronies at Garside. And now the wretched crew into whose hands he had fallen were trying to make fun of it. He bubbled over with indignation, but simmered down on hearing similar questions put to his companion in misfortune.

He was aroused from these reflections by hearing the chief of the band exclaim, in tones of command:

"Make fast the portal!"

He heard the sound as of a rusty bolt being thrust into its socket.

"I say, you chaps," he protested, beginning to feel alarmed again as he heard this ominous sound, "I wish you'd stop your larks and take this wretched thing from my eyes. If you'll just oblige me, I won't give you away—I really won't."

"We're going to take the bandage from thy eyes, but first thou must promise, on the banner of our Noble Order, to become a comrade and a brother."

"I—I promise," stammered Plunger, anxious only to get the use of his eyes again.

"Thou must promise also, by the same sacred emblem, never to reveal what thou dost see."

"I—I promise."

The same questions were put to Harry, who was just as anxious as his companion to see what was going on, and thought that no possible harm could be done in following Plunger's lead. So he gave the same promises.

The bandages, however, were not immediately removed. The two boys could hear the sound of footsteps moving round them, and voices chanting in some unknown tongue what seemed to be a mysterious incantation.

"Remove the bandages," commanded the chief, when this curious incantation, of which the two prisoners could make nothing, had ended.

At this command the bandages were removed. The scene that presented itself to the astonished eyes of Plunger and Harry was one of the most extraordinary they had ever witnessed. Their four captors seemed to have disappeared. Standing around them in a circle were what appeared to be eleven beetles standing erect on two legs, instead of crawling about on four. On the breast of each was a letter, which, being white, stood out prominently from the dark background, and gave to this singular circle a still more singular appearance. The letters made up the following:

M. O. OF BEETLES.

in other words—The Mystic Order of Beetles.

Plunger rubbed his eyes. Was he awake or sleeping? He was wide enough awake, but he could not at once grasp the situation. What did it all mean?

The reader has doubtless made a better guess at what had happened than Plunger. It was in this way. Mellor and Crick, the two boys who had gained possession of the Garside flag, had found a good deal of amusement at first in making surreptitious visits to the barn, and dancing round their capture, but they soon began to long for something more exciting. Truth to tell, the capture had not made the sensation in the ranks of the enemy they had anticipated—so at least it seemed to them. They had expected early reprisals, but none had come. So, after they had performed a war-dance round the flag with their companions five or six times, Mellor yearned for something more exciting. So did Crick. So did the others.

"The Gargoyles don't seem to worry much about the flag after all," said Mellor, thoughtfully wiping his brow, after the last of these spirited exercises round the Garside standard.

"Not a bit. Seems to me they're only too glad to get rid of the wretched thing," remarked Finch, one of the boys who had been envious of the daring capture.

"Are they? That's all you know, Finch," retorted Mellor, angry that his remark should be taken so literally. "If we could only see them, we should find them tearing their hair and gnashing their teeth."

"Then why don't they come after their property and try to get it back again?"

"Because they don't know for certain who's got it. They're lying low."

"Well, we'd better do the same. I can't see much fun in hopping round the wretched rag. Why the Gargoyles should make so much of it I can't make out."

"That's because you've never been at Garside. I dare say if we'd been left a flag like that by an old school-fellow who had made a name for himself, we

should have been as proud of it as they are. It was worth getting just to set those bounders back a bit. I should like to see you do what Crick did, Finch!"

There were murmurs of approval at this, and Finch subsided into silence. Nevertheless, when Mellor began to reflect, there seemed to be a good deal of force in Finch's observation. There wasn't much fun, after all, in hopping round "the wretched rag." So he thought of a way to improve matters. Once or twice the idea had occurred to him of establishing a society calling itself the "Mystic Order of Beetles," and using it for the benefit of the rivals who had bestowed upon them so contemptuous a title.

Directly he mentioned it to his companions it was hailed with enthusiasm.

What could be better than making some of those wretched Gargoyles eat humble pie under the very flag they were so proud of? So amongst them they designed an appropriate costume for the "Mystic Order of Beetles," and the meeting-place and dressing-room were arranged in the barn.

So the society was started. Having started it, the next thing was to capture some of the enemy. In order to accomplish this interesting purpose, a band of scouts was established for the purpose of reporting on the movements of the enemy at the first favourable opportunity. It so happened that this was on the very day that Paul went to Wyndham to make inquiries about the flag.

The scouts were rather disappointed when they found, from their post of observation on the other side of the hedge, that the boy making his way to St. Bede's was Percival. There had been already one trial of strength with him which had not been entirely successful. Besides which Wyndham had championed his cause, and they were bound to respect Wyndham's opinion. Furthermore, the fame of Paul's heroism had reached St. Bede's, as the reader has seen, and they had lost their former contempt for him. They were

therefore on the point of turning disconsolately away when their eyes were gladdened by the sight of Plunger and Harry following Paul.

Here were the prizes they had longed for. The enemy was delivered into their hands.

So the scouts had carried off their prisoners to the barn, where their comrades were waiting them. What followed we have seen.

Plunger and Harry looked on the extraordinary circle which surrounded them in wonder. No word fell from the Beetles. They stood perfectly still, as though enjoying the surprise which their extraordinary appearance had created in the breast of their prisoners.

"I say, you are a rum lot!" Plunger at length burst out. "Mystic Order of Beetles! Ha, ha!"

He burst into a wild fit of laughter, but his laughter was suddenly checked by a resounding thud upon the shoulders. He then discovered that the Beetles standing around him were armed with sheepskin bladders attached to sticks. They did not hurt much, but the noise they made was considerable.

"Silence! Thy mirth is unseemly," came from the chief of the circle, who was no other than Mellor. "Remember, that thou hast been admitted to the Mystic Order of Beetles, and hast promised by the sacred emblem above thee to be true to the cause."

The sacred emblem above! The prisoners looked up. There was a flag hanging from the roof of the barn—a tattered flag. Plunger rubbed his eyes. Surely it was the old flag—the flag of Garside?

"Why—why—that's—that's——"

"Silence!"

The bladders came down in a perfect shower on Plunger's head and shoulders. As for Harry, he could not speak. The sight of the flag had smitten him dumb.

"Thou hast promised to be true to the cause," repeated the chief solemnly. "Should'st thou ever dare to break the vow, thou wilt be haunted for the rest of thy life—haunted sleeping and waking by the Beetles thou hast betrayed! Describe the mystic circle."

Describe the mystic circle! What in the name of wonder was that? The bladders descended upon Plunger as he stood in the centre of the ring with his companion, wondering what was expected of him.

"I—I don't know any mystic circles," he stammered in despair.

"On hands and knees—quick!"

Plunger hastened to obey the command.

"Crawl round the mystic circle three times."

Plunger would have refused had he dared, but he dared not; so, amid a good deal of suppressed laughter from the Beetles standing round him, he crawled round the circle three times.

"Rise, brother!" commanded Mellor, when he had accomplished this feat.

Plunger gladly sprang to his feet.

"Give him the mystic tap."

Thwack—thwack came the bladders on Plunger's devoted head. And Plunger almost regretted that he had risen. Harry went bravely through the same ordeal. This accomplished, the Beetles joined hands, and galloping wildly around the two boys, chanted:

"Beetles of the mystic band,  
Wind we round thee, hand in hand;  
Whene'er thou hear'st thy chieftain's call  
Rest not, pause not, hither crawl;  
Or to the realms of creepy-crawley,  
Shivery-shaky, we will haul thee!"

As this incantation went on, Plunger and Harry had a lively time inside the mystic circle. By the dexterous application of a knee or a shoulder, Plunger would be sent with a run in one direction, while Harry would be sent flying in another. They were whirled about from this side to that like indiarubber balls. Then of a sudden they would find themselves closely embracing each other in the centre of the ring, only to be sundered again, and sent flying in another direction.

At length the "Brethren of the Mystic Order" stopped breathless, much to the relief of Plunger and Harry.

"Keeper of the Portal conduct our newly-made brothers to the door."

The Keeper of the Portal, Crick, conducted them to the door.

"The time has come to say farewell—for the present," said Mellor, as they all gathered round the door. "Don't forget that thou art pledged to us by the bonds of our noble order. In token whereof, give them the mystic wallop."

The bladders came down with a resounding thwack on the newly-made brethren, during which the Keeper of the Portal opened the door. Plunger and Harry darted through. Roars of laughter followed them, but they did not look back. They did not pause till they were well on the road to Garside.

"I say, Moncrief minor," said Plunger, drawing up breathless, "we've dropped in for a fine thing."

The same idea had occurred to Harry, but he was not so ready to admit it.

"How do you mean?"

"Why, we've joined hands with the enemy—the Beetles. There's no getting out of it."

"I suppose there isn't," answered Harry gloomily.

They walked on in silence for a few moments. Then Harry glanced round, as though half fearful that some one was following, and whispered:

"I say, Plunger."

"Well, what is it?"

"Did you notice the flag we were standing under?"

"The flag we were standing under?" repeated Plunger innocently. "Well, not particularly. What was it like?"

"Like! I believe it was the school flag!"

"You don't say so. Never!"

"I'm positive it was."

"The school flag? This is awful! Couldn't you have let me know? What a duffer you are! I would have sacrificed my life to get that flag! I wouldn't have stood their nonsense like I did had I thought that was our flag. I would have fought them till my last breath. Why—why didn't you let me know?"

"I thought you did know."

"And to think that I crawled to them—crawled, with the flag of the old school looking on. It's nothing to you—you're only a fresher from Gaffer Quelch's; but to me, Plunger, it's—it's——" Not being able to find a word

strong enough to express his meaning, Plunger suddenly turned on Harry again. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Moncrief minor, letting me make such an ass of myself."

"How could I help it, Freddy. They made an ass of me too."

"There you go again, always poking your wretched self in. What does it matter to you? You don't count at Garside. I do—that's the difference. I wish you wouldn't look at these things from such a selfish point of view. You're always thinking of yourself—a miserable fresher, as I've said, from Gaffer Quelch's. If it ever gets about the school that I've been made a Beetle under the Garside flag, what will the fellows think of it? I shall never hear the last of it. I shall be roasted all round."

"And serve you right, too!" cried Harry, losing his temper. "A jolly good roasting will do you good. It'll take some of the bounce out of you. If it hadn't been for you, we shouldn't have got into this mess."

"What do you mean?" demanded Plunger hotly.

"It was all through playing the spy on Percival. If it hadn't been for following him, those Beetles wouldn't have got hold of us."

"Come, that's good. Your cheek's superb. That's the only thing you seem to have brought with you from Gaffer Quelch's. Who was it suggested we should follow Percival? Was it me, I should like to know, or one of the little prigs from Gaffer Quelch's?"

Harry could not immediately respond. He had forgotten for the moment that the suggestion to follow Percival had come from him. But after a moment's reflection he answered lamely:

"Yes; but it was you who caught sight of Percival as he was on the road to St. Bede's and put the suggestion in my head."

"Well, of all the bosh——Oh, shut up, or put on a strait-waistcoat. You're getting dangerous," said Plunger crushingly, seeing that he had "scored."

Harry, indignant with himself, Plunger, and all the world, went on ahead. But after a bit Plunger caught up to him.

"You needn't get into a wax because I set you right just now. I flatter myself there aren't many chaps can score over me when I choose to set about them. It's not your fault that you've got too much of Gaffer Quelch's seminary for boys and girls about you. I had it for the first term at Garside, but I soon grew out of it. And you'll grow out of it, too. Fact is, Harry, neither of us is to blame for falling into the hands of the Philistines——Beetles, I mean. Let's put the blame on the right shoulders."

"And the right shoulders are——"

"Percival. It was through following him we fell into that beastly trap, and it seems to me——though I don't like to say it——that Percival has a good deal to answer for. What was he doing at St. Bede's? What was he doing with that fellow, Wyndham, who knocked about your cousin so unmercifully at the sand-pits? Did you notice what good terms they were on——Wyndham with his arm tucked through Percival's."

Harry had seen it all, and as Plunger was speaking he recalled that other scene he had striven so hard to forget——when he had seen Percival and Wyndham together near the school. He had tried to put that from him, especially since the heroism Percival had shown on the river. But now it all came back with a rush. There was not the slightest doubt that Percival and Wyndham were on terms of friendship. No one who had witnessed the scene that he and Plunger had witnessed could question it. What did it mean? There was something behind it all.

"Yes, I noticed it, Freddy," he slowly answered. "It puzzles me, and I don't know what to make of it." Then looking up quickly, as though a sudden suspicion had come to him, he blurted out: "I say, is it possible that—that —No, I can't say it—it's too horrid."

"Out with it. There's no one to hear you but me. Remember, we're both in the same boat."

"No one to hear me but you," said Harry, looking quickly round. "And I shouldn't like anybody to hear but you; it's a horrid suspicion that came into my mind just now. There must be something between Percival and Wyndham, that's certain. I've tried not to believe it; but it's no use trying to shut our eyes to facts. Can it be that Percival's plotting against his own school, can it be that he is betraying us to the enemy—those beastly Beetles?"

"Funny! Just the same thing's been running through my mind. Can it be that he's betraying us to the enemy, and can it be"—here Plunger's voice dropped to a whisper, as though he feared the very hedges might overhear him—"that it was he who hauled down the school flag and handed it over to the Beetles?"

"No, no; I can't believe that," cried Harry, clasping his hands over his face, as though to blot out the suspicion.

"And I've been trying not to believe it, but what else are you to make of it? A Beetle couldn't have got to the turret and taken the flag off his own bat. There must have been some one helping him who knew all about the school. If it wasn't Percival, who was it? What are we to think after what we've seen?"

So it came about that while Percival had been doing his best to trace out where the school flag had gone, so as to return it to its old place of honour

on the turret, the suspicion came into the minds of these two boys that he was betraying the school.

Even at the moment that this suspicion was born, Paul was sitting by the bedside of Hibbert, with the boy's hand in his. Hibbert had been talking, but the tired eyes, which shone out so brightly from the wan face, had begun to close. Yet the hand still held fast to Paul's. And as Paul looked down lovingly on the face, he murmured to himself the words he had spoken to Wyndham that afternoon—"The link between us kept me strong when all Garside was against me."

And Paul had need of strength, for the battle had not yet ended.

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## CHAPTER XXXV

### A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY

The improvement in the school's attitude to Paul did not last long. The Garsiders who had come over to him with a swing, for some reason swung back with the same alacrity. The juniors who had cheered him to the echo in the dormitory now passed him without a word.

Fortunately, Paul's mind was too much occupied just then with other matters to take much notice of this change. First and foremost in his thoughts was Hibbert. Would he pull through? The progress he made was very slow—if, indeed, it could be called progress. One day he seemed stronger, the next found him as weak as before. A curious thing had happened on the afternoon Paul returned to the school after his interview with Wyndham. Mr. Weevil had sent for him to his room. Paul thought that it was to reprimand him for something or other. He was agreeably surprised, therefore, when the master motioned him to a chair, and in a kindly voice, altogether unlike his "school voice," bade him sit down.

"I understand that you've visited Hibbert once or twice," he began, regarding Paul through his half-closed eyes.

"Now it's coming," thought Paul. "He's going to forbid me visiting Hibbert." Then, aloud: "Yes, sir. I hope you've no objection."

"I did object at first to visitors of any kind, because I thought it would do the lad more harm than good. But I think the objection may be withdrawn as far as you're concerned."

Paul could scarcely believe his ears. Had he heard Mr. Weevil aright?

"He seems to look forward eagerly to your visits, more than to the visits of anybody"—a sigh, so slight as to be almost imperceptible, escaped the master's lips. "It would be cruel to debar the poor little fellow from any pleasure we can give him. Therefore, Percival, I hope you will understand that you are quite at liberty to visit him when you feel inclined."

"It is very kind of you, sir, and I am deeply grateful."

"You will be careful, of course, not to make your visits too long, or not to unduly excite him."

"Oh, yes, sir; I'll be careful of that."

Paul rose to go, thinking the interview at an end. As he did so, the master placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"You have been very good to the boy—God will reward you! The fear sometimes oppresses me that he will not get over this illness."

The half closed eyes were blinking in a curious fashion. Indeed, Paul saw what was suspiciously like a tear slowly making its way down the cheek of the master. His emotion was no longer a mystery to Paul. Hibbert's revelation had thrown a light upon it. He now knew that the man whom he had regarded as without emotion—as one wrapped up completely in his equations and scientific formulæ—had yet a deeply human side. Hibbert was the son of his dead sister, and he loved him—loved him with a love that was a hundred times greater than that which the boy's own father had ever bestowed on him. And Paul learnt a lesson in that brief interview which he never forgot—that lying deep down in the hearts of most men, sometimes overladen by rust, sometimes in the midst of decay, may frequently be found a vein of purest gold.

"Don't say that, sir. He was looking better the last time I saw him. He will pull round as soon as he can get out a bit."

"I hope your words will come true, Percival; but he's so frail. If he were only strong like you—but there, it's useless talking. It must be as God wills." Then his voice changed to its old frigid tone.

"You can go, sir."

Thus abruptly dismissed, Paul went out.

"Weevil's a puzzle," he said to himself. "I'm as far off knowing him as ever I was; but there seems to be some warm blood in him, and that's something. I thought he was all pothooks and hangers at one time; but he can't be as bad as that. That shows you shouldn't go by appearances. He's not half as black as I painted him."

Paul was very pleased that he could now visit Hibbert without restriction, and that same night he visited him, much to the boy's joy, and sat by his bed, as we have seen, till he slept.

Thus it was Paul took little heed of the school's attitude towards him for the next few days. Then an incident happened which was to absorb his attention still more. Thinking of Mr. Weevil, and his recent interview, his mind went naturally back to that evening when, devoured with curiosity, he had followed him to Cranstead Common. The more he thought of it, the more he wondered what could have become of him on that night he had so strangely disappeared from view before his very eyes. The ground had not swallowed him up, for he had returned to school that same night. What, then, was the meaning of it?

Paul had promised himself that he would make an effort to find out; so, as he had heard nothing from Wyndham, he seized the first opportunity that occurred to visit that part of the common where the master had disappeared. He followed the trail which the master had pursued in the direction of the

river until he came to the thickly-wooded part where the trees, furze-bushes, brake, and bramble grew in wild profusion.

This was the spot where he had lost sight of him. At first Paul could see nothing but the brambles. Examining the place more minutely, he found the bushes curiously divided in the centre. Feeling beneath them, his hand came in contact with cold iron. It was a ring, attached to a circular piece of wood, rusty and moss-grown, so that in appearance there was little to distinguish it from the undergrowth. He found little difficulty in moving it.

He thought at first that it would prove to be the entrance to a well, similar to the well in the ruins where he had hidden on the night he had fled from Zuker; but to his amazement he discovered that it was no well, but led to a sloping tunnel cut in the sandstone. That then was the place where the master had so suddenly disappeared. For what purpose? And where did it lead? It was impossible to tell without exploring it. Should he make the venture? Should he enter it?

Paul hesitated for a moment, but only for a moment. The next he entered the tunnel, cautiously drawing over the lid which concealed it. The passage in which he found himself sloped downward, and was at first scarcely large enough to allow him to walk upright. Little of light penetrated into it, and he had, therefore, to walk cautiously along, like a blind man, making sure of every step he took.

Presently the path seemed to broaden. Extending his arms to their full extent Paul could just feel the walls on either side. He proceeded still more slowly, straining his ears to catch the sound of footsteps. All was silent. It was the silence of the tomb.

"My stars, what a queer place! I wish I could only strike a light, so as to have a peep at it," thought Paul. "What can Mr. Weevil do down here? It

isn't a cheerful place, even for a man who happens to be very much in love with his own society."

He came to a sudden pause. What was the use of exploring the tunnel further? He could see nothing, hear nothing. So where was the use of groping along in the darkness? It was folly, especially when he might be precipitated at any moment into some hidden chasm. But folly though it might be, Paul could not turn back. A mysterious voice within him seemed to be urging him on. If Mr. Weevil had passed along that tunnel in safety, why shouldn't he? It must have an outlet somewhere, and Paul grew more and more curious to find out what that outlet could be.

"I feel very much like an explorer in darkest Africa," he smiled to himself. "Shall I be coming across an unknown lake presently, or a race of pigmies? Hallo! What's that? Light at last."

Light it was but of the faintest. It came with a faint streak into the tunnel. The darkness was only darkness before, but now fantastic shadows seemed to menace Paul at every footstep he took. Feeble though the light was, it was enough to show him that the tunnel had broadened considerably. Stepping warily along, the light grew stronger at every step, until he at length discovered that the path along which he was so cautiously travelling led into a cave lit with oil-lamps.

Then he came to a sudden pause again, and his heart beat wildly against his ribs, as he caught the sound of voices. The cave was not empty. There was some one inside. Who?

As he approached nearer he saw that a curtain was partly drawn over the entrance. Paul knew that a false step might betray him.

To lessen the risk of detection, therefore, he crawled on hands and knees to the curtain, and eagerly peered through the space nearest the wall.

The cave looked quite warm and comfortable. A fire of anthracite, which sent out plenty of heat but no smoke, burnt on a hearth cut out of the sandstone. Two or three lamps suspended from the roof diffused an Oriental glow, while several warm bear-skin rugs were scattered over the ground.

A couple of guns and two or three cutlasses were hanging on the wall; and what was more astonishing to Paul, several maps and designs. The nature of these it was impossible for him to ascertain. He further noticed that in one niche of the wall was a photographic camera. In another were ship models, in the third the models of torpedoes, engines, and machinery of various kind.

Paul had taken all this in at a glance. He had not yet seen the occupants of the cave, but there appeared from what he could hear, to be only two. They were conversing in low tones at the far end, where the lights from the lamps dimly penetrated. After a while the conversation became more animated, and the two moved to a table at the centre.

"I think we've succeeded in quieting suspicion," said the foremost of the two. As he spoke the light from the lamp fell full upon his face.

It was Zuker, the German Jew!

Paul's glance turned from him to the other man. It was Brockman, the burly ruffian who had seized the bridle of Falcon on the night of his flight to Redmead—the ruffian who struck the blow which caused the gallant horse's death.

"We've succeeded in calming suspicion for the time being," Zuker was saying, "and that is a great point in our favour; but still we must move cautiously. A false step, and down would fall all my plans like a house of cards. We've been very near discovery once or twice, the nearest was when that youngster got ahead of us with the packet. You remember?"

"Remember! I'm never likely to forget it," said Brockman. "I could never understand how it was the youngster slipped through my fingers."

"Well, it doesn't matter so much as it has turned out, for those Admiralty men—the Hansons—have gone to sleep again. They think that danger is passed, that Zuker, the man they so fear and dread, is out of England."

He chuckled softly to himself. Paul grew colder. He knew well enough the youngster they were referring to, no one better, for it was himself. It was quite clear that the letter he had sent from the school to Mr. Moncrief had never reached him. A staggering suspicion flashed into his mind. He recalled that he had entrusted the posting of that letter to Hibbert. Could it have been that Hibbert had failed him, or worse, could it have been that Hibbert had deceived him? Was he not the son of Zuker? But the suspicion only dwelt in his mind for one brief moment, and he felt indignant with himself that it had rested there so long.

How could he doubt Hibbert, the one boy at Garside who had so clung to him and who was at that moment lying on a bed of sickness?

"Heaven forgive me!" he said to himself; then he caught the voices of the men as they again spoke, and listened eagerly.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE "FOX-HOLE"

"They really believe you're out of England. You're quite sure of that?" questioned Brockman, in his thick, guttural voice.

"As sure of it as you're standing there," answered Zuker. "The search for me went on actively for a fortnight, and then dropped. How should they suspect a hiding-place like this? How should they suspect that when the hounds were in full chase of the fox, he had a hole to retreat to where they could never follow?"

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Brockman; "we ought to call it the Fox-Hole. I only wish we had the youngster in it who slipped through my fingers that night on the road to Redmead."

"Do you really?" said Paul to himself. "Well, the youngster's obliged you, and yet you don't seem to be grateful to him."

"*Zut! zut!* Don't worry about him. He's only a cipher—a pawn in the great game we have in hand. If we win, it'll be for a prize worth winning—fame and fortune," went on Zuker, as he strode to and fro with rapid strides. "Yes, fame and fortune, and we shall have dealt a staggering blow at a country that we hate. The risk is great, but the stakes are greater still, and each day makes our position surer."

"Surer? Do you think so? Sometimes it seems to me, master, that we're standing on the very edge of a deep precipice, and that one day we shall make a false step, and then——"

Brockman did not finish the sentence, but gave a significant shrug of the shoulders which was much more eloquent than words.

"Das ist recht—that is right; I have never hidden from you the danger. It is true that one false step might spoil all my plans, but that only makes the game more worth the winning. And listen, Brockman, we must not make that false step. We made one on that night we let the boy get through with the cipher to Redmead. We must not make another."

Paul's ears tingled as he listened. Notwithstanding the peril in which he stood, his heart beat with joy. The words of Mr. Moncrief came back to him: "You have not only done a great service for me and my brother, Paul, but for your country." He had almost forgotten those words in the whirl of events that had since happened at Garside, but now they came flashing back, shining out vividly as a beacon in the darkness around him.

"No; we must not make another," answered Brockman, sending his fist vigorously into the palm of his hand to emphasize his words. There was silence between the two for a moment, then it was again broken by Zuker.

"Those ancestors of yours were dull dogs, Brockman, but there must have been some grit in them to have got up to Chatham. See, they got to this point." Paul could see that a chart was spread out upon the table, and that Zuker was pointing with his finger to a place on it. "Here is the River Medway, which, as you know, can be reached through this tunnel."

The river through that tunnel! Was he awake or dreaming? Paul could scarcely believe the evidence of his ears. His heart thumped so loudly against his ribs that he feared the conspirators might hear him.

"A chain had been drawn across the river, for all England was in a state of alarm at the approach of the Dutchmen," went on Zuker. "Fortifications had been added to Sheerness and Upnor Castle just here."

Brockman bent over the chart and followed the finger of Zuker.

"Just there. And the chain—what happened to the chain?"

"Sheerness was first taken, and then, taking advantage of a spring tide and an easterly wind, the Dutch broke the chain."

"Broke it? But wasn't it fortified?"

"It was guarded by three ships, but the Dutch took them. They played havoc with several other vessels, and advanced with six men-o'-war and five fireships as far as Upnor Castle, where they burned three more. That was good, wasn't it?"

"Splendid! Real pluck! Dull dogs and slow, as you say, but real grit. I'm proud of my Dutch fore-fathers."

It was clear that Brockman, if not himself a Dutchman, was of Dutch descent.

"The Dutch," continued Zuker, "then fell down the Medway—see, in this direction." His finger again went to work over the chart. "They sailed next to Portsmouth; they assaulted Harwich, and then sailed again up the Thames as far as Tilbury—this point here—where they were repulsed. What has been done once can be done again. Why not?"

Zuker, in his excitement, strode over in the direction of the curtain. Paul drew back and waited. Had he seen the curtain move? Did he suspect there was a listener behind? For a moment Paul scarcely breathed. Then he heard Zuker pacing back to the table, and breathed freely again.

"You forget the difference in the times," answered Brockman. "Then there were no ironclads."

"I'm forgetting nothing. Ironclads are useless without the brains behind them. Battles nowadays are won not so much on the battlefield as by the Intelligence Department—the Secret Service"—his voice went almost to a whisper—"the service to which you and I belong."

A cold feeling of horror and repulsion stole over Paul as he listened. He felt as he might have felt in listening to the rattle of a deadly snake. These men were in the Secret Service of another country—spies, collecting material for the enemy—material which might be used at any time with deadly effect against England, dear old England! And as he looked, a mist seemed to rise before him, and suddenly out of the mist he saw a strange picture—the cabin of a ship, a man bending over a dispatch-box, and rapidly turning over the papers within. Then the door of the cabin opened. An officer, with a bronzed, noble face swiftly entered, and seized the spy at the dispatch-box. The spy threw himself at the officer's feet and pleaded for mercy. Paul saw it all as clearly as though it were on a screen before him. Looking at the spy's face, he knew it for Zuker. Looking at the officer's face, he knew it for his father's.

As the scene faded, he felt that he, too, must spring out on Zuker and denounce him. "Spy—traitor! You're the man who tried to betray my father! You are the man who would betray Britain!" By some impulse over which he had no control he tried to shriek out the words. His lips moved, but fortunately no sound came from them.

The next instant he was brought to his senses by the sound of footsteps—footsteps in the tunnel by which he had entered. Instantly he realized the position in which he stood. The new-comer, whoever he was, was probably a confederate of the two spies inside, and would be bound to pass into the cave through the curtain behind which he was hidden. Quick as thought he retreated a pace or two, well out of the light of the lamps, and drew himself close up to the wall.

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps. Presently Paul could just see the shadowy outline of a man's figure. Then he passed him, coming so close that his coat brushed against him. The figure paused. Paul held his breath, and for one brief instant thought that he had been discovered. The next, the curtain was lifted aside, and the new-comer passed inside the cave.

"Ah, Weevil! What news?" came the voice of Zuker.

Weevil! Paul crept again to the curtain, and peered through the side. It was the master, sure enough. He wore a cape, with the collar turned up and buttoned tight round the chin.

"Still the same," answered the master.

"No change?"

"No change to speak of. Sometimes he's a little better; then he goes back again, and is worse. Poor little chap! it makes my heart bleed to see him."

Then Paul knew they were speaking of Hibbert.

"Your heart! What of mine?" exclaimed the man fiercely. "You always speak as though you were the only one who cared for the boy. And a lot of good you've done for him. It was through you I had him trained as an English boy. His mother was English, said you. It was through you he went to Garside, because you could take greater care of him, said you. What care? Himmel, himmel! You let those imps of Satan torture him; through you he has been brought to the door of death."

"Cease, man—cease to torture me!" cried the master.

Paul listened in wonder, not unmixed with awe. He had heard that note of anguish in the master's voice before—on that night when he had seen him by Hibbert's bed; but the face, with the light of the lamp flickering on it,

might have been hewn from the limestone. It was as stern and rigid as Fate itself.

"I have no wish to torture you; but it sickens me to hear you speak about that boy as though it were no concern of mine—as though you were the only one who cared for him. I tell you again, I was a fool to let him go to Garside."

No answer came for a few moments. It seemed as though Mr. Weevil were struggling with his feelings. When he at length spoke, his voice was calm again. It had resumed that calm, deliberate tone with which Paul was so familiar.

"I would like to speak to you for a few minutes alone, Israel."

Brockman took the hint, and retreating at the other entrance of the cave, left the two together.

"I wished to speak with you alone, because I have discovered one or two matters which will interest you. You were struck, you may remember, with the name of the boy who saved Tim's life?"

"Yes; what of it?"

"You thought that he might be the son of that Captain Percival who years ago saved your life at the risk of his own. I knew that the boy's father was dead, and on examination of the school-books, I found that he was a naval officer. I was not aware of the circumstances under which he met his death, however. I have since discovered that he was drowned at sea 'whilst trying to save the life of a spy'—pardon me the word, but so the record runs."

"*Ach!* Is it possible?" came hoarsely from Zuker's lips. "I had my suspicions when I first questioned him."

Paul pressed his ear closer to the side of the curtain. He was anxious not to lose a word of what was spoken, for he knew that he was "the boy" to whom the master was referring; that "Tim" was, of course, Hibbert.

"I have discovered, further, that it was this same boy—Paul Percival—who got through with that letter to Redmead."

"The same? Ach Himmel! I caught but a glimpse of him in the darkness that night."

"The hand of a Higher than man is in it. You cannot escape it. Be warned in time. Give up this scheme of yours; if not for your own sake, for the sake of your son."

"Give up the scheme—the scheme for which I have worked so long. The scheme which, day by day, brings me nearer to fame and fortune. You talk like a madman. It is more to me than life itself—more to me than the life of fifty sons!"

A cry of pain came from Mr. Weevil's lips.

"I know you well enough—you have no love for my scheme. Your heart is in what you call science, and in the boy. You wish to frighten me—frighten me from the work which every day draws nearer to success. Shall I tell you what for? So as to drive me back to the Fatherland that you may keep all to yourself, my boy—the boy of your dead sister. Ach! I see through your scheming!"

"Hush, man—hush! Is it to hear reproaches from your lips that I have risked so much—that I have involved myself in these schemes of yours which may mean my ruin?" Mr. Weevil's voice was stern, fearless; but as quickly turned to a softer key. "Let us not quarrel, Israel. Heaven forbid that we should quarrel over the boy whom we both love in our own peculiar way. Remember that his life is still in jeopardy."

They shook hands, and then Mr. Weevil turned towards the curtain behind which Paul was hidden.

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## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THE LETTERS AT THE TUCK-SHOP

This time Paul did not move—he could not. He was as one rooted to the spot. Fortunately, Mr. Weevil did not come to that side of the curtain where he was crouching, but passed through on the other side. It was not till he had hastened past Paul that the power of movement returned to his limbs. To remain there longer was useless. He had heard enough—more than enough. But he was unable to think clearly in that tunnel. The air seemed to stifle him; he must get outside.

So he followed in the master's footsteps, taking care, however, to keep a good distance between them. At length he reached the entrance. He waited a minute or two, then cautiously lifted the circular piece of wood that covered the entrance, and made his way through the undergrowth to the open.

By that time Mr. Weevil had disappeared from view.

"Am I awake or dreaming?" Paul asked himself, as he drew a deep breath of relief.

It seemed, indeed, like a dream—or, rather, a nightmare—that cave, the two conspirators, the conversation he had overheard about the taking of Sheerness by the Dutch, the advance on Upnor Castle, and, lastly, the appearance on the scene of Mr. Weevil.

What was he to do? How was he to act? He was face to face with the same dilemma that had confronted him when Hibbert had confessed to him his relationship to Zuker. The more he thought of it, the more difficult it seemed to move. He was bound hand and foot by the promise he had made

to Hibbert. How could he be false to that promise—how could he give information which might cause his death?

Strange to say, his confidence in Mr. Weevil had grown by what he had overheard at that interview. It was true enough that the master seemed involved in some way in the schemes of Zuker, but it seemed equally certain that he was against them. The words he had overheard were still ringing in his ears: "You wish to drive me back to the Fatherland, and keep all to yourself, my boy—the boy of your dead sister!" Things seemed clearer to Paul. The master's purpose seemed clearer. It was his love for his nephew—for Hibbert—which had involved him in the schemes of Zuker. Paul had disliked and suspected Mr. Weevil, but, curiously enough, he now seemed to understand better than ever he had understood before, and that understanding was to the advantage rather than the disadvantage of the master.

"The hand of a Higher than man is in it." Those were the master's words. They had been spoken from his heart; there was no doubt of that. Though they had failed to move Zuker, they had moved Paul strangely. Yes; the hand of a Higher than man was in it, and the designs of Zuker would certainly be overturned.

"I wish Mr. Moncrief had answered my letter, though," he said to himself, as he returned to the school. It must have miscarried. He determined to question Hibbert about it again that very evening.

So when the evening came he went to the sick-room, and the nurse, who was now in attendance, gladly vacated her place at the bedside to him. As usual, Hibbert had been looking forward to Paul's visit, and the thin white face was at once all sunshine.

"I'm feeling ever so much better," he said, in answer to Paul's inquiries. "I'm feeling quite strong. I shall soon be out again if I go on like this. Do you

think the fellows will be pleased to see me?"

"Of course they will!"

"I was never very popular, you see," Hibbert went on thoughtfully. "It was all my fault. I never took any interest in the sports. I mean to be different when I get off this wretched bed—turn over a new leaf; go in for footer, cricket, and that sort of thing. I don't see why I shouldn't do as well as the rest of them, do you, Percival?"

"I don't see why," answered Paul cheerfully.

"And there's a lot of other things I mean to do. Do you know, I've been thinking over so much to-day about our being at the same school—how wonderful it all is that you and I should be at Garside. And when I get out again, do you know what I mean to do?"

Paul shook his head. He was looking at the face, which seemed to grow smaller and smaller, and wondering whether Hibbert would get out again.

"I mean to do my best to pay on that debt my father owed your father—the debt that never has been paid. That'll be something to live for and work for, and God helping me, I'll do it—do it! Don't say that you don't wish it—that you don't want it."

"Certainly not," answered Paul, very softly, falling in with his mood. "You shall do as you think best when you get out again."

There was silence between them for a few moments. Hibbert lay with his hands crossed on his breast and his eyes upturned to the ceiling.

"What have you been doing this afternoon, Percival?" he suddenly asked, as his eyes went back again to Paul's face.

The question took Paul by surprise. How could he tell Hibbert what he had been doing that afternoon—the discovery he had made, what he had seen and what he had heard in the cave?

"Doing?"

"Yes. Half-holiday, wasn't it? I still keep count of holidays, you see."

Hibbert smiled.

"Oh, I went for a walk!"

"By yourself?"

"By myself." Paul could see that the boy's eyes were scanning his face curiously, so he added quickly: "I'm rather fond of walking by myself."

"Have you heard anything about the flag?"

"How did you come to know that it was gone?" Paul asked, astonished, for he had thought it better not to trouble him with the information.

"Oh, Mrs. Trounce told me. I get her to tell me any special news. I like to know what's going on in the school. Matron's a good sort. It was a beastly shame to take the flag, whoever did it. Have they got any clue?"

"Not yet."

"I expect the Beetles had a hand in it. What do you think?"

"I scarcely know what to think. It's a mystery. You haven't been climbing to the turret in your sleep, and hauling the flag down just for the fun of the thing, have you?"

The idea quite tickled Hibbert, for he laughed outright.

"By the by," said Paul, turning the conversation to the purpose for which he had come to that room, "you recollect that letter I gave you to post a few weeks back?"

"Yes."

"You're quite certain you posted it?"

"Quite certain. I think that I said so at the time."

Paul noticed that though Hibbert was quite certain that he had posted the letter he spoke with some hesitation.

"Yes, yes; you said so at the time—that's quite right. But I was wondering whether by any chance you might have given it to some other boy to post."

"No; I put it in the letter-box with my own hands." Hibbert again hesitated for a moment, then added; "Something did happen, but I did not think it worth while to worry you about it."

"What was it?" Paul asked eagerly.

"I was blockhead enough to run full tilt against Mr. Weevil when I got outside, and—and he caught sight of your letter."

"Caught sight of my letter! And what did he do?"

"Made me go to his room. He asked me who sent me with the letter, and I was obliged to tell him. It didn't matter, did it?"

"It didn't matter," repeated Paul, his throat suddenly becoming parched.

"Well, well, what happened then?"

"He took the letter to his room, but came back with it in a minute or so and handed it back to me. He said that you had broken the rules of the school in sending off a letter without the knowledge of the masters, but he would

overlook the offence, for—for my sake. That's the reason I didn't make a fuss about it to you."

"He said that—Mr. Weevil said that? And he gave you back my letter? You're quite certain it was the same?"

"Oh, quite certain! I thought perhaps he might have opened it, as he said he had a right to, so I looked at it to make sure it was the same. It was the same—in your handwriting. I could tell that anywhere. But what makes you ask? Has it miscarried?"

"I hope not. I haven't had an answer yet—that's all. I dare say I shall get one presently, so don't you worry about it."

To prevent him doing so, Paul turned the conversation again to other matters, and then went out. The information Paul had given him about the letter set him thinking. What had the master done with his letter in the few brief moments he had had it in his possession away from Hibbert? Had he opened it and read it? If so, was the letter he had handed back to Hibbert to post the same letter that he—Paul—had written? to Mr. Moncrief? Hibbert was sure that it was—sure that it was in his handwriting. In any case, a letter had been posted to Mr. Moncrief. What letter was it?

In this state of perplexity, Paul determined to write briefly to Mr. Moncrief again. That was the only way in which all doubt could be ended.

So he wrote a note stating that he had written a letter of some importance a few weeks since, and wishing to know as soon as possible whether or not it had been received. This letter he directed the same as before—"W. Moncrief, Esq., Redmead, Oakville, Kent." He determined that this time he would post the letter himself; so the next day, watching his opportunity, he slipped from the grounds, and posted it at the village post-office.

"It can't go wrong now," he said to himself, as he retraced his footsteps.

Meanwhile, Plunger and Moncrief minor were thrown into a state of great excitement by finding letters awaiting them at the adjacent tuck-shop. Plunger tore the envelope open.

Immediately he drew out the letter and glanced at it he groaned. His groan was echoed by Harry. On the top of Plunger's letter was a rudely-designed facsimile of a cockroach. On the top of Harry's letter was a similarly grotesque design.

Beneath it, in scarcely less grotesque handwriting, as though one of the legs of the cockroach had been dipped in ink and made to trace words upon the paper, was the following:

"Brother of the Mystic Order,—Greeting from the Brethren. Meeting tomorrow afternoon at headquarters. Time, half-past three sharp. Be not absent at thy peril."

Then followed the lines which Plunger so well remembered—the words which had formed part of the incantation of the "Mystic Circle:"

"Whene'er thou hear'st thy chieftain's call,  
Rest not, pause not, hither crawl,  
Or to the realms of Creepy-crawly,  
Shivery-shaky, we will haul thee."

Plunger groaned again. Harry again echoed it.

"What are you making that row for, you little ass?" cried Plunger testily.

"Thought I'd cheer you up a bit. You look just awful, Plunger!"

"You look worse than that! Ever seen a petrified mummy? No? Well, just look at yourself in the glass, then! What's your letter about?"

They exchanged letters, and found that they were in precisely the same terms—that both were summonses for them to appear before "the Mystic Order" at the same date and hour.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### "FORGIVE, AND YE SHALL BE FORGIVEN"

The two boys looked at each other blankly. How were they to act? What was to be done? If they refused to obey the summons from the "Mystic Brethren," they knew not what would be the penalty. The more they looked at the letters, with their grotesque design, the more imposing they seemed.

"What's to be done, Freddy?" asked Harry, when they were outside the shop.

"We shall have to go, I suppose!" answered Plunger despondently. "We've given ourselves away, you see. We're one of them—one of the wretched Beetles. We've taken the vow of allegiance. They've got us in a tight corner."

"What's the 'realms of Creepy-crawly, Shivery-shaky' I wonder?" asked Harry, in an equally dejected tone.

"Some ditch with plenty of toads and slime about it, I expect. You needn't be anxious. We'll know soon enough!" groaned Plunger. "I wish to goodness you'd been anywhere before you let me in for this mess! Why did they ever let you loose from Gaffer Quelch's?"

"Oh, shut up, Plunger! You're tiring! After all, you wouldn't make such a bad Beetle. You can crawl a lot better than you can punt, and——Oh, oh!"

Plunger had caught him by the ear and given it a vigorous pull. Harry returned it by kicking Plunger on the shins. Having thus equalised matters, they became once more on friendly terms.

"Look here, Harry, we're both in the same boat. Supposing we don't go?"

"Then what'll happen?"

"I don't know. We shall have to chance that. They can't eat us."

"Oh, but I'm not afraid! It's not that; but—but I don't somehow like breaking my word."

"Neither do I. It's jolly awkward; yet, come to think of it, I don't see why we shouldn't."

"We promised to be true to the cause."

"Yes; but the promise was got from us by force, and that isn't binding. I've heard my pater say so."

"Oh, he's in the glue line, and ought to know what's binding! Stop it, Plunger!"—as Plunger seized him once more by the ear. "That's the worst of you. You don't know a compliment when you hear one. Don't I wish my pater was in the glue line! It's fine stuff. Made out of horses' hoofs, isn't it? Well, go on. Not binding, you said. How do you make that out?"

"Haven't I said, stupid—because it was got from us by force? But don't take my word for it. Let's ask your cousin. Will that satisfy you?"

Harry at once consented. He still had the highest admiration for his cousin, notwithstanding the fact that he had been defeated by a Beetle. They returned to the school, where they were not long in finding Stanley, who had just been joined by Newall.

"We want to talk with you alone, if—if you wouldn't mind, Stan," said Harry.

"You don't think that I'm going to clear out for any of you Lower Form cubs, do you?" sneered Newall.

"Oh, you can speak before Newall as you would before me, Harry! Come, fire away!"

Harry still hesitated. He could not forget how Newall had served him when he first came there, but while he was hesitating Plunger began:

"This is what we want to know. Supposing any fellows in this school—we won't mention names—happened to be captured by the enemy, and supposing the enemy forced them into a—a——"

"Secret society," put in Harry, as Plunger came to a standstill.

"Yes, secret society. A kind of brotherhood—vendetta, with masks and knives and forks—daggers, I mean—and that sort of thing——"

"Now, look here, Master Plunger, stop plunging! Drop it, and come to the point!" said Stanley firmly. "What do you want to know? Come, Harry; you're not so gassy. Perhaps we can get some sense out of you."

Harry explained as well as he was able what they wanted to know. Stanley at once decided that a promise given under such circumstances was not binding, and his opinion was, of course, backed up by Newall, who was eager to know what this mystery could mean. Thus assured, Plunger and Harry told them all that had happened on the afternoon they had been captured by the "Mystic Brethren." As may be imagined, Stanley and Newall were greatly excited by the story—especially that portion of it referring to Paul.

"Now are you satisfied?" cried Newall triumphantly. "Didn't I always say what Percival was? He's not only a cur, but a traitor!"

And Stanley, who in days gone by would have fiercely resented the slightest reflection on Paul, allowed the words to go unchallenged.

"You're quite certain that it was Percival you saw?" he at length asked.

"Am I certain that I see you?" answered Plunger. "Besides, Harry saw him, too. Both of us couldn't be mistaken."

"There wasn't much mistake, Stan. I wish there had been. That makes the second time I've seen them together."

"If you don't believe us, you'd better put to him the question straight. Send for him now, and put him face to face with us. See if he'll deny it then!"

"I think you're right, Plunger. We'll send for Percival, and see what he has to say. You go and fetch him, Harry. You'll find him somewhere about the grounds.

"One moment. Don't be in a hurry. We've got an artful young gentleman to deal with, and if we want to find things out, and pay back the Bedes in their own coin, we shall have to be artful as well. We mustn't show our hand too soon."

"I don't quite understand."

"No; but I'll make all clear in a word or two. If we call in Percival, we shall not get much from him. It isn't likely he'll give himself away. He'll say that Plunger was mistaken; that it wasn't him, but somebody else who was talking to the fellow up at Bedes. What we've got to do is to meet craft with craft, and go one better than Percival at his own game."

"Hear, hear!" cried Plunger. "But how are you going to do it? Strikes me you'll have to get up very early in the morning to score off Percival."

"We sha'n't score if you keep that noisy tongue of yours wagging, Mr. Plunger. All you've got to do is to keep quiet till to-morrow evening, and then you can let it wag again as much as you please. My scheme is this: We've first got to make good your word about the flag. If we can get it from that shed in which you say it is, we can prove that you haven't been dreaming. With the flag in our possession, we'll call a meeting of the principal fellows from each Form down to the Third. You and Moncrief minor can tell the story. Percival can then say what he pleases. We can produce the flag to prove our case—and—there you are! Percival will be kicked out of Garside!"

Stanley did not speak. The chasm between him and Percival had gone on widening instead of narrowing, but it was no pleasure to him to hear those words. Percival kicked from Garside! Then Garside would no longer be Garside to him. Harry, too, was silent. He did not know why, but he began to think they were not doing the right thing by Percival. They were trying to trap him, and the one setting that trap was the one who hated him.

"A jolly good idea, Newall!" exclaimed Plunger enthusiastically. "Smart—real smart! But how are you going to work it? How are you going to get the flag?"

"To-morrow's Wednesday; so we've got the whole of the afternoon before us. You're supposed to meet the Beetles at half-past three, aren't you?"

"Yes; half-past three sharp."

"Well, we'll be beforehand—half an hour, say. That will give us plenty of time to get possession of the flag, and away with it before your brethren of the Mystic Circle put in an appearance."

"You—you won't want me?" asked Plunger anxiously. He had a keen recollection of what had happened at the shed the last time he was there.

"Of course we shall. You'll have to take us to the shed and show us what's inside it."

Plunger did not like this suggestion. Why couldn't Newall have selected Moncrief minor? But he could not very well raise any objection. So, making a virtue of necessity, he raised his eyebrows to their fullest extent, and said he should be "delighted."

Then came the question as to who should go with Plunger. It was not advisable to take too many, for fear of the risk of discovery. So Newall decided that only three should accompany Plunger—Stanley, Parfitt, and himself. Stanley would gladly have given way to anybody else, but Newall insisted that he should be one of the party. He seemed determined to leave no stone unturned to blacken Paul in the eyes of his one-time friend.

Stanley crept away as soon as he could to the solitude of his dormitory.

He was very wretched. He felt as though he were acting a mean part. It might be true that Paul was not the friend to him that he had at one time been—that he had gone over to the Bedes, and acted a mean part; but that was no reason why he should act a mean part, too. Two blacks did not make a white. "Percival will be kicked out of Garside!" Newall's words kept repeating themselves in his brain. He could not forget them. Percival would be kicked out of Garside, and he would be one of those who had helped to kick him out.

No, no; whatever wrong Paul had done him, he could not do that. But how could he prevent it? How could he put him on his guard? He thought for a long time; then he got a half-sheet of notepaper, and wrote on it in a disguised hand:

"Beware! Steer clear of Bedes. Plot on foot to turn you from Garside."

The next difficulty to get over was—how to get that note to Paul without rousing suspicion. It must be read by him, and him alone. He was a long time before he could think of any means of accomplishing this purpose; then he remembered that Paul was in the habit of reading a few verses every night before going to rest from a Bible given to him by his mother. He went to Paul's dormitory—the dormitory in which he had once slept, and to which he had often longed to get back.

Glancing cautiously in, he found that it was empty. He crept softly to Paul's locker, and drew out his Bible. There was a bookmark in it. He opened it at the bookmark. The first words that met his eyes were:

"Judge not, and ye shall not ye judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned; forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.... With the same measure that ye mete, withal it shall be measured to you again."

Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven! The words seemed in a mist before Stanley's eyes. Pshaw! What had he to do with forgiveness?

His eyes went again to the Bible:

"With the same measure that ye mete, withal it shall be measured to you again."

He read the words thrice, then placed the note inside the Bible and closed it.

"He's sure to see it, I should think, and won't suspect who put it there," he told himself, as he stepped softly to the corridor.

Scarcely had he reached it when he heard a footstep coming along it.

Looking in the direction whence it came, he saw that it was he of whom he had been thinking—Paul Percival!

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## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE MISSING FLAG

Stanley did not wish to meet Paul. He might suspect his purpose in being there. There was no possibility of turning away, however, so he kept straight on, keeping as close to the wall as possible. Paul's head was bent to the ground. He seemed absorbed in thought, and passed by Stanley as though he had not seen him.

"I don't think he saw me," Stanley told himself. "He looked a bit worried, and I don't wonder at it. He can't have a very pleasant time of it."

For an instant Stanley felt inclined to turn back. "Forgive and ye shall be forgiven." Still the words he had just read were repeating themselves. Paul and he had not spoken for so long. A few words might clear up everything. Clear up everything? No. How was it possible to clear up that scene in the sand-pits? So Stanley's heart hardened again, and he went on.

Meanwhile Paul entered the dormitory, and drew from his pocket a note he had just found awaiting him at the porter's lodge. He had read it twice before, but he could not help reading it again.

"Meet me to-morrow (Wednesday), half-past two, at old elm, near sand-pits. Be sure and come. Very important."

This note was scribbled in pencil, and unsigned, but Paul knew the writing well enough. It was Wyndham's. What was it Wyndham wanted with him? What was it that was so important? Had he gained any information as to the missing flag? He was thinking over this note when he passed by Stanley,

and it was this which had given to him that "worried" appearance that Stanley had noticed in his face.

He sat for some time musing over this letter, and then, to get away from it, drew from the locker his Bible. It opened, of course, at the place in which Stanley had placed his note. Paul unfolded and read it, with no small astonishment: "Beware! Steer clear of Bedes. Plot on foot to turn you from Garside."

Plot on foot to turn him from Garside! What could the plot be? This note was more puzzling than the other. Like that, too, it was unsigned; but this time Paul was beaten. The writing was unknown to him. He could not guess the writer, but he could see plainly enough that it was in a disguised hand.

Then he suddenly realized that the two notes clashed. The one was an invitation to meet a Bede; the other warned him to steer clear of Bedes. If he obeyed the one, he would have to disregard the other. What was he to do? He did not hesitate long. Wyndham he knew. His friendship had been proved. He knew nothing of this anonymous writer—the writer who professed to warn him of a hidden danger, but did so in a disguised hand, and had not the courage to put to it his name. He would keep the appointment with Wyndham, whatever happened.

So the next day, as soon as the clock had struck two, and he was free, Paul started off for the old elm, near the sand-pits. Punctual though he was, Wyndham was awaiting him.

"I'm so glad you've come, Percival," he said, as he came towards him and shook him warmly by the hand. "I've splendid news to tell you."

"The flag?" exclaimed Paul, speaking the thought that was uppermost in his mind.

"You've made a very good guess. Yes, the flag. I've got some very good news about it—very good news indeed. In fact, I rather fancy I know where it is."

"Where—where? Can we make for it?" exclaimed Paul, excited at the news.

"Wait a bit. Don't be in such a steaming hurry!" smiled Wyndham. "Before I say a word more, I must ask you not to make use of the information I'm going to give you against any of our fellows at Bede's."

Paul readily consented. To get possession of the flag was the chief thing he cared for. That accomplished, he could afford to be magnanimous.

"From the first I suspected that one of our fellows had a hand in it," went on Wyndham. "You remember that day when you were set upon by a dozen or so of the sweet cherubs from Bede's?"

"Only too well."

"Sorry to stir up painful memories. There was one amongst the number said to belong to the amphibia. Do you recollect that, too?"

"Of course I do!" laughed Paul. "Mellor, you mean—once a Gargoyle, now a distinguished Beetle? Recollect it? Who could forget it? It labelled him to a T. You don't mean to say——"

"Yes, I do," smiled Wyndham. "He and another Beetle, whose name I needn't mention, captured the flag between them. It was a plucky thing to do, and when I found out what had happened, I don't think I should have troubled any more about it, only I remembered that there was a fellow at Garside who was standing alone, fighting against the wall."

"Wyndham!"

"Don't interrupt. This fellow was rather anxious to get hold of the missing flag; and so, out of respect for him, and not for any of the mean cads who hail from the same place, I persuaded Mellor & Co. to hand it over. It was not easy work, I can tell you. They felt that I was robbing them of their rightful prey. But at last they came round, and——"

"You got possession of the flag!" cried Paul. "How splendid of you, Wyndham! Instead of getting out of debt, I get deeper and deeper into it. But where is the flag?"

"Can't you guess?" smiled Wyndham.

"Guess?" repeated Paul, puzzled.

"Yes. I've done my part; that's your part," answered Wyndham, enjoying his mystification. "S'posing we go for the old game—'Hot boiled beans and very good butter'? Hallo!" The smile died from his face as his glance went to the roadway. "Here are some of your lot! They haven't got wind of our meeting, have they?"

Paul glanced in the direction of the roadway. Sure enough, there were four Garsiders coming along the road—Newall, Parfitt, Plunger, and Stanley. As his glance went to the road Parfitt caught sight of him; then all four stopped and glanced in the direction where Paul and Wyndham were standing. An animated conversation took place for a minute. It seemed as though they were undecided how to act. Then they came to a decision, and walked quickly on.

"I'm not sorry they didn't come, though I should have been pleased enough to meet them at any other time," said Wyndham contemptuously. "Let's get on with our game. Now, then, are you ready? 'Hot boiled beans, very good butter; ladies and gentlemen, come to supper.' At present you're frightfully cold, freezing, perfect icicle."

He rubbed his hands together, and flung them across his chest, and blew upon his fingers as though he were suffering from the same complaint; and then he laughed again at Paul's mystified expression as he gazed round. There was no sign of the flag. At length Paul's glance rested upon the decayed old elm-tree, near which they were standing.

"You're getting warmer," smiled Wyndham. Then, as Paul walked towards the tree: "In fact, quite hot."

Paul put his hand into the hollow of the tree, and drew out the missing flag, wrapped in a covering of American leather-cloth, just as it had been when Mellor and Crick had taken it to St. Bede's.

"What can I say, Wyndham?" he asked, in a thick voice as he stood there, with the prize in his hand. For the moment there seemed to be a mist before his eyes.

"Say? Nothing, of course! All you've got to do is to get back to Garside as soon as you can, for I shouldn't be surprised if those fellows we saw just now mean mischief."

The anonymous letter flashed into Paul's mind as Wyndham spoke—"Beware! Steer clear of Bedes. Plot on foot to turn you from Garside."

Could it be that the four he had seen were concerned in that plot? It was quite possible to believe it of Newall and Parfitt—they had always been his enemies—but Stanley—No, he could not believe it of him. However, he scarcely cared what happened to him now he had gained possession of the flag. He would be able to redeem his promise. The main thing was to get it back to its old place on the turret.

So he took Wyndham's advice, and started back to the college without further delay.

Meanwhile the three who had started from Garside, under the guidance of Plunger, for the purpose of capturing the flag on their own account, had passed Wyndham and Paul, as we have seen, on the way. They little suspected the purpose of that meeting. They never imagined that it had anything to do with the flag.

Parfitt, the first to catch sight of the two, gloated over the discovery. Stanley's heart fell. He now saw with his own eyes that Paul was really on friendly terms with Wyndham. He had taken no heed of his note of warning. He had treated it with scorn.

"He's playing a deep game," said Parfitt. "I believe he means turning over Garside for Bede's, like Mellor did."

"I believe so, too; but he can't do it before next term, and we must get our blow in before then. It all depends on getting hold of that flag. Now, then, Plunger, buck up!"

Plunger increased his pace, and it was not long before he reached the shed in which he and Moncrief minor had been initiated into the "Noble Order of Beetles." They reached it, as arranged, fully half an hour before the time appointed for Plunger to meet "the mystic brethren." So, as they hoped and expected, they found it empty.

"Now, Plunger, where do you say the flag is? Quick! We've got no time to lose!" said Newall.

Plunger did not answer. He stood dumfounded. There was the place where he had been initiated into the "mystic brotherhood." There was the place where he had stood and looked up at the "mystic emblem," and had discovered to his amazement that it was the missing school flag. He rubbed his eyes then; he rubbed them now. The flag had gone! Gone! Had it ever

been there? Was that scene, after all, as it had more than once seemed, only a dream?

"Wake up, sleepy!" cried Newall, kicking him on the shins to rouse him. "Where's the flag?"

"It was there, just over my head," answered Plunger, pointing to the roof above him; "but it isn't there now."

They searched the shed, but could find no trace of the missing flag. There was a large box in which it might be hidden, but that was locked, and there was no time to force it.

"You're not making fun of us, Plunger, are you?" demanded Newall, clutching him fiercely by the arm.

"Really, I'm not."

"Well, look here, you'll have to meet these fellows again, just as though you'd turned up in answer to their note, and see if you can worm out anything about the flag. If we're seen here it'll spoil the game. But we won't be far off. If you want any help, yell out, and we'll see what we can do for you. Do you understand?"

Plunger understood perfectly, but, all the same, he did not like the prospect of meeting the brethren of the mystic order again. However, there was nothing for it but to give in, so he gave in with as good grace as possible.

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## CHAPTER XL

### HOW THE FLAG FOUND ITS WAY BACK TO THE TURRET

Paul got safely back to Garside with his prize. He mounted with it to his dormitory and undid the covering in which it was encased. Yes, there was the old flag, none the worse for its temporary absence from the school. Paul's heart beat the quicker. He was as proud of the flag as any boy at Garside, and as he looked at it he realized in some degree the feelings of a soldier when he has recaptured the colours from the enemy.

Folding it up again, he hid it under one of the cubicles, and went in search of the boys who had been with him in the dormitory when the loss of the flag was first discovered.

He was not long in finding Moncrief minor, who was wandering about the ground like a lost spirit. He was unhappy at the absence of his companion in mischief, the redoubtable Plunger. He began to think that he had been left out in the cold. What a hero Plunger would be if, through him, the flag were brought back again to the school!

As he was thus thinking he saw Paul coming towards him. He quickly turned his head and walked off as though he had not seen him, but Paul came up with him in a stride or two, and, clutching him by the arm, twisted him round till he was in front of him.

"You needn't run away, Harry. I want you to do me a favour."

"What is it?" asked Harry, reluctantly.

"You remember that afternoon when the flag was lost?"

Harry looked up quickly. What was coming out about the flag now? Ha, ha, he guessed what it was! Percival had begun to smell a rat. He meant trying to pump him, so he answered cautiously.

"Of course I do, and so do most of the fellows here, I'm thinking. I wonder if we shall ever get it back again?"

"I wonder. It was Viner who brought us the news, I remember, and besides yourself there were several other fellows in the dormitory at the time—Baldry, Plunger, Sedgefield, Bember. I want you to get together again the same fellows if you can, and bring them to my dorm. Would you mind doing that for me?"

"What for?" was the curious answer.

"Oh, I'll explain what for when you're there. Will you do it?"

Harry thought for a moment before answering. What was Percival's game? He was curious to know; but there couldn't be any harm in doing as he asked.

"I can't bring Plunger—he's got something special in hand, but I'll hunt up some of the others, and bring them along with me, if I can."

So he ran off, and Paul returned to the dormitory. Half an hour elapsed before he heard the welcome sound of footsteps on the stairs. Harry had succeeded in capturing three out of the five, Sedgefield, Baldry, Viner. They were just as curious as Harry was to know what Paul could want with them.

"I'm much obliged to you for coming along," said Paul, "it's really very good of you, considering the dead-set against me. But I wanted to get together the fellows who were here when Viner brought up the bad news about the flag. I wish all six were here, but I must be satisfied with four out

of them. At any rate, there's enough of you to remember what I said. I said, you'll remember, that through me the school had eaten dirt."

"Oh, yes, we remember that well enough," said Viner bitterly, "because it was so true."

"So true; yes, Viner. As your memory's so good on that point, perhaps you can remember what else was said?"

"Of course I do. We all do, for one or two of us have laughed over it since. You talked some nonsense about the school suffering through you, and through you being lifted up again."

"And that you meant getting the flag back again, and putting it in its old place on the turret," added Sedgefield.

"You're right, Viner, and so are you, Sedgefield. I'm glad you remember things so well. I made that promise, uncertain whether or not I should be able to carry it out, but determined to do my best. Well, by God's help, I'm able to keep my word."

To the profound amazement of the boys, he drew out the flag.

"Where did you find it? Where did you get it from?" cried Viner.

Harry did not speak. He could only stare at the flag. Was it really the old flag? There could be little doubt about that. How, then, had Percival come by it? Had he stolen a march upon Plunger and the others?

"Where did I get it from? Well, that's my secret for the present. I've got the flag, and kept my promise. Now I want you to mount with me to the turret, so that we can put it back again in its old resting-place."

He waved the flag over his head, and Baldry and Sedgefield gave a cheer. Harry echoed the cheer in a dazed, bewildered fashion. He had not yet

recovered from his surprise. Viner remained silent. They followed Paul to the turret, where once again the flag was placed on the summit with another cheer.

Meanwhile Plunger was inside the shed, awaiting with no small trepidation the arrival of the "Mystic Brethren." He had not long to wait before six of the masked brethren entered. The foremost of these was Mellor, followed by five of his companions. They had put on their masks outside the door, so that Plunger was just as much in the dark as to who they were as ever.

"Gargoyle with the eyebrows, greeting!" exclaimed Mellor.

"Greeting," repeated the other masks, bowing.

"Now, then, greet," came a peremptory cry, as Plunger received the point of two or three knees in different parts of his body, which sent him staggering round the circle. It revived painful memories of a similar performance on his part on a previous occasion, and he hastily stammered out, "Gr-gr-greeting," and jerked his head in imitation of the brethren.

"We are glad thou hast obeyed the call; but where is thy brother novice—Henry Moncrief?"

"He—he's otherwise—engaged," stammered Plunger, not knowing what to say.

"Otherwise engaged! Know this, Gargoyle with the wiry thatch, no engagement should keep him from answering the call of the Mystic Brethren. It shall be inquired into."

As he spoke, Plunger saw, with fear and trembling, that one of the number had drawn from the box the weapons he so well remembered—the sticks with bladders attached to the ends. He guessed what was coming, and it came.

"Describe the Mystic Circle!" cried Mellor.

It was useless resisting. Down flopped Plunger on his knees and hands, and crawled round the ring as quickly as possible three times, while the bladders showered upon his head with amazing rapidity. Then the brethren joined hands, and galloping wildly round him, repeated as before:

"Beetles of the Mystic Band  
Wind we round thee, hand in hand;  
Whene'er thou hear'st thy chieftain's call,  
Rest not, pause not, hither crawl,  
Or to the realms of Creepy-crawly,  
Shivery-shaky we will haul thee."

And once again, to the strains of this extraordinary incantation, Plunger was sent whirling about the ring from side to side, as though he were an indiarubber ball. The last time two of them—Harry and himself—divided honours; but this time Plunger had it all to himself. Owing to this fact the brethren were able to give him their sole and undivided attention, and they did it with such effect that Plunger began to wonder whether he was himself or someone else.

"Dost thou like the Mystic Circle?" inquired Mellor, when they paused.

"Oh, y-y-yes," stammered Plunger, with a painful attempt to laugh, "very much." And then he added quickly, as he saw the uplifted bladders ready to descend: "But—but if you've got any more of it, you might keep it for my brother novice."

"It shall be as thou askest, Gargoyle with the eyebrows," said Mellor. "And now to business."

"To business? Do they call what I've just gone through pleasure?" thought Plunger, as he waited in fear and trembling what was to come next.

"Thou belongest to the Third Form?"

Plunger nodded.

"A wonderful scholar art thou, Gargoyle with the wiry thatch," was the cutting comment.

"Oh, I could be much higher in the school," exclaimed Plunger, blushing to the roots of the "wiry thatch"; "but I don't like the boys in the upper Forms, you know. They put too much side on for me."

"You look a modest, retiring kind of fellow. That's the reason the Mystic Brethren have taken such a fancy to thee."

Down came the bladders on Plunger's back as tokens of brotherly affection. Plunger felt flattered at this testimony of the brethren to his virtues, but he wished at the same time they had expressed it in some other way.

"It's very kind of you," he gasped.

"Though thou dost despise the bounders of the Upper Form, peradventure thou wouldst not mind taking a small present from the Mystic Brethren of the Fifth?"

"A present?" repeated Plunger, pricking up his ears. "Not at all. Shall be delighted to make myself useful."

"Let me see. The head boy of the Fifth is one named Hasluck, is he not, wearer of goggles?"

"Yes."

"Is there not also in that same Form one named Leveson, famous timekeeper, owner of a stop-watch?"

Plunger nodded, marvelling at the accuracy of the brethren's information. At a sign from Mellor, one of the masks, who was no other than Crick, left the circle, and brought from the corner of the shed a long parcel, wrapped in American leather-cloth—a facsimile, in fact, of the parcel which Paul had received from Wyndham a little earlier.

"Give this to Hasluck, in the presence of the timekeeper Leveson and as many other menials of the Fifth as thou canst find. It is a souvenir from thy brethren to celebrate thy initiation to the Mystic Order. Dost thou understand?"

Fluttering with excitement, Plunger clutched the parcel, and declared that he understood perfectly.

He had not got far on the homeward road before he was rejoined by his companions, who had been lying in wait for him behind the friendly shelter of a hedge.

"I've got it!" he gasped.

"Got what?" demanded Newall.

"The flag!" he cried, flourishing the precious parcel.

"Bravo, Plunger!" exclaimed Newall.

"Hurrah!" shouted Parfitt. "How did you get it?"

"Presented to me in honour of my initiation to the Mystic Order."

"Let's have a look at it."

"It mustn't be opened till we get to the school. Hasluck's got to open it, in the presence of Leveson."

As Plunger had faithfully followed out their instructions, they could not very well object to this condition, so they ran by his side, questioning him by the way as to what had happened to him in his absence. Plunger answered to the best of his ability, colouring considerably the part he had played in the ceremony, and the esteem in which he was held by the brethren.

"Why—why, what's that?" exclaimed Stanley, coming to a dead stop. The others did the same. Their eyes followed his to the turret. There was the old flag flying from the top!

Plunger turned pale; then a sickly hue went over his face as he looked from the flag to the parcel in his hand.

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## CHAPTER XLI

### FRIENDS IN COUNCIL

Plunger's bewilderment was shared by his companions as they saw the old flag fluttering on the turret. What had happened? How on earth had it got there? Newall's hand went out to Plunger's ear.

"Thought you said you'd got the flag, ass?"

"Oh, oh, oh! Le' go my ear!" roared Plunger, as he gazed first on the turret, then on the mysterious parcel in his hand. He firmly believed that the Mystic Brethren had given the flag into his care, that it was inside the parcel when he had set out from the shed, but that by some magical influence it had managed to transfer itself from the parcel to the turret. Yet there was something still inside the parcel without a doubt. What was that something?

"Yes, bounder!" exclaimed Parfitt, helping himself to the other ear. "Got the flag—that's what you told us! Presented to you in honour of your initiation! What's your game, blockhead?"

"Oh, oh, oh! Le' go my ear! That flag up there must be a beastly fraud, or there must be two of 'em! Le' go my ear, will you!"

Plunger began to think that the sympathetic attention he had received at the hands of the enemy was only to be equalled by the polite attention of his friends.

"Didn't you say you'd got the flag in that parcel, Plunger?" asked Stanley, in a quieter tone, because he detested bullying himself, and did not like it practised on others.

"Yes, I did, Moncrief!" persisted Plunger. "That's a twin up there, or an imitation, or something of the sort. Get Hasluck and Leveson, and I'll prove it to you."

"We're not going to wait for Hasluck or Leveson! You've gammoned us enough! Give it up!"

Newall snatched the parcel from Plunger's hand. It was carefully bound round with cord. Too impatient to untie it, Newall severed the cord with his knife. As he did so a small bundle of "swishers"—long sticks, such as were used by the boys of St. Bede's for "beating the bounds"—fell from the cloth. They were bound round in turn with a sheet of white paper, and on this paper was written in a bold hand:

"Your dull ass will only go with beating. You've provided the ass. We've provided the swishers. We deliver both safely into your hands. Times to be called by the Gargoyle—Leveson—with the stop-watch."

Disappointed though they were, the boys standing around Plunger burst into laughter. Plunger had been skilfully hoaxed. Under the impression that he was carrying the flag, he had delivered into their hands the formidable-looking swishers, with precise directions as to the method in which they were to be employed. Plunger's self-assurance for once gave way. Where was he standing? He scarcely knew. The ground was crumbling under his feet.

"Well, Plunger, if you don't take the cake, and the bun, and the biscuit!" came the cutting voice of Newall. "My word, how the Beetles must be sniggering at you! The flag, didn't you say?"—holding up the swishers. "Oh, oh, it's too funny! Given in honour of your initiation to the Mystic Order! Oh, oh! Help yourself, Parfitt; help yourself, Moncrief!"

He tossed them a swisher each, and selected one for himself, the quality of which he tested by flipping it in the air, much too near the crestfallen Plunger to be pleasant.

"Thanks, Newall!" said Parfitt, putting the swisher he had received to a similar test on the other side of Plunger. "Wasn't to be opened till you got to the school, was it, Plunger, in the presence of Leveson—eh?"

"Yes, in the presence of Leveson!" repeated Newall grimly. "Cut and find him, Plunger, and tell him to be sure and bring his stop-watch."

Down came the swishers—twice, thrice. Plunger did not require any second bidding. He did "cut." His speed would have astonished himself had he had time to think about it, but he hadn't. His one great desire was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and Newall and Parfitt. Moncrief major had been more considerate of his feelings, and had not made use of his swisher.

"Where can I hide myself," panted Plunger—"where?"

He was not only sore and wounded in spirit, but in body as well.

And here perhaps it is necessary to add a brief word of explanation as to how it was Plunger came in possession of the extraordinary parcel which had drawn upon him so much ridicule. When, with much reluctance, Mellor and his friends had given up the flag to Wyndham, they decided, by way of compensation, to prepare a parcel that closely resembled it. If the flag had been taken from them, they did not wish to be defrauded of their due share of sport at the hands of the enemy. So the note had been sent from the "Mystic Brethren," which, by a roundabout method, had drawn Plunger to the shed. What followed has been seen.

To return to the scene outside Garside. So soon as Newall and Parfitt had ceased chasing Plunger they turned to Stanley.

"You don't seem to be enjoying the fun, Moncrief?" said Parfitt.

"No; can't quite see where the fun lies," answered Stanley gravely. "Seems to me that Plunger's not the only ass that wants beating. We might use those sticks very well on ourselves. We've been just as much sold as he has. We've been on a fool's errand. We were going to bring the flag back, and the flag's come back without us."

"Yes; the flag's come back, sure enough," answered Newall. "And how the dickens did it come back?—that's the puzzle. Hallo! There's your young cousin. He ought to know something about it. Moncrief—Moncrief minor!" he shouted.

Harry, who was crossing the grounds at the time, turned in answer to the shouts and came towards the three boys.

"Got the flag?" he asked innocently.

"No cheek, kid, else we'll trounce you like we've just trounced your friend Plunger!" retorted Newall sharply.

"Who brought the flag back? How did it get there?"—glancing to the turret.

"Oh, it got there by a friend of yours—Paul Percival," answered Harry, hitting back. "He's beaten you, just like you've beaten my friend Plunger."

Newall scowled, and would have treated him to a taste of the swisher, only he recollected that he was Stanley's cousin.

"Be serious, Harry," said Stanley. "Percival, did you say? Do you really mean that the flag was brought back by him?"

"I am serious, Stan—never more so in my life. The flag was brought back by Percival, and put in its old place on the turret by Percival."

He then told them precisely what had happened. The three boys listened in silence. Percival had stolen a march upon them, that was quite clear. Stanley wondered whether his note of warning had put him on his guard. The thought that it had been of some service might have pleased Stanley, but the memory of Percival talking to Wyndham hardened his heart against him once more. He smothered the old feeling of friendship that would keep trying to assert itself, in spite of himself.

"I told you that we should have to meet craft with craft!" cried Newall, breaking the silence. "But so far Percival has beaten us. Plunger's an ass, but he was quite right for once when he said that we'd have to get up very early in the morning to score off Percival. What's our next move?"

As neither Moncrief major nor Parfitt responded, Newall went on:

"We saw Percival talking to a particular friend of yours, Moncrief." Stanley winced at the cold, cutting words. "That was a couple of hours ago. At that time the flag was not on the turret. We can all answer as to that, I think?"

Stanley and Parfitt nodded assent.

"What happens? In the interval Percival returns to Garside with the flag. Where did the flag come from? I think the answer's simple enough—it must have come into Percival's possession by the help of your particular friend, the Beetle who was so kind to you at the sand-pits, Moncrief."

Every word had its venom, and distilled its poison in the breast of Stanley.

"Well, well, what of it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"What of it?" repeated Newall, raising his eyebrows and regarding him with feigned astonishment. "It's all clear enough, I should think. The whole business is an artfully-concocted plot between Percival and Wyndham. The flag disappears. How it disappears is a mystery. No one knows—least of all

Percival. But he makes use of some high-sounding words in the presence of a few of the fellows—flag gone, by Heaven's help he'll bring it back again! The fellows cheer him to the echo. A short time elapses, during which the mystery deepens; then Percival turns up with the flag. He has kept his word. More cheers. Oh, yes, it's all clear—clear as day! Don't you think so, Moncrief?"

"One moment," answered Stanley, passing his hand over his forehead. "I'm a bit dazed somehow. Let me understand. You believe that—that——"

"That the hand which brought back the flag is the same hand that took it away."

"Of course!" assented Parfitt. "As you say, Newall, it's as clear as day. Nothing could be clearer."

"Nothing could be clearer," echoed Stanley, as his head fell to his breast.

Harry was silent. Like his cousin, there had always been deep down in his heart a real affection and sympathy for Paul. He had always hoped that he would be able to reinstate himself in the good opinion of the school; so it was he had cheered with the rest when Paul returned with the flag. It was all very mysterious, it was true; but Harry had shut his eyes on the mystery. The flag had come back to the school. Paul had brought it. He had made good his word. That was enough. He would be again the Paul he had once known—the Paul Stanley had known and loved.

"What's to be done?" demanded Stanley.

"Well, we can't do anything to-day. Let's wait developments to-morrow. Mr. Weevil's bound to take some sort of action."

"Oh, there you go again!" cried Stanley impatiently. "Putting things on. Yesterday it was the same."

"How do you mean?"

"I wanted to make straight for Percival. 'No,' said you; 'don't be in a hurry. We mustn't show our hands too soon.' And so on, and so on. Oh, I'm sick of it all—sick of everything—sick of waiting!"

Harry looked up at his cousin. There was a note of passionate revolt in his voice, a fierce light in his eyes; both hands were clenched, and he seemed to sway to and fro, as though no longer master of himself.

"For that matter, so am I," said Newall softly. "Perhaps I was wrong, Moncrief, in putting things off. I dare say I was. You gave in to me yesterday, I give in to you to-day; that's only fair. What do you want, old fellow?"

Newall placed a hand quite lovingly on Stanley's shoulder.

"Want? No more of this wretched waiting game! Let's go to Percival straight—straight! Do you hear?" came hoarsely from Stanley's lips.

"Yes, I hear; and I am with you."

And Newall exchanged a swift smile of triumph with Parfitt.

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## CHAPTER XLII

### UNEXPECTED TIDINGS

As soon as Paul had accomplished his purpose, and seen the flag waving in its old place on the turret, he went to the room of Mr. Weevil. He knew well enough that inquiries would be made respecting the return of the flag, and therefore he took the straightforward course of going at once to headquarters.

"Come in!" came the voice of the master in response to the knock on his door.

He was pacing to and fro the room—the same room in which Paul had seen him on that never-to-be-forgotten night with Zuker. He stopped as Paul entered, and regarded him in his usual manner—through half-closed eyes.

"You, Percival! What is it you want with me?" came the sharp answer.

"I only came to tell you that the flag is back in its old place, sir."

"I know—I know! And you brought it back, I understand? I meant inquiring into the matter. I'm glad you've forestalled me. You want to explain—eh? That's what you've come for—eh?"

"That's what I've come for, sir," answered Paul, astonished that he should have gained such speedy information as to what had happened. Sometimes, indeed, it seemed as though those half-closed eyes not only saw further than other eyes, but that they had the faculty of double sight as well.

"And yet I don't know whether I can call it an explanation, for there are things which cannot be explained."

"Not explained? How do you mean, sir?" came the sharp answer.

"I received the flag back from a friend of mine—a proved friend—on the solemn promise that I would not make use of the information he had given me to get any of the fellows who had taken it into a scrape."

"Why did you make that promise?"

"Because it was the only way of getting the flag back."

"And that is all the information you can give me?"

"That is all, sir."

"And you call it an explanation? Really, sir, it is one of the most extraordinary I have ever heard! And you expect me to accept it?" demanded the master, facing Paul, and looking him fully in the eyes.

"I trust so, sir, because I can give no other—have no other to give."

Mr. Weevil did not at once answer, but took two or three more turns across the room.

"I believe you to be a lad of honour, Percival," he said, stopping once more, "and a lad of sense. Let me put it to you, then, as a lad of honour and of sense. Supposing I am perfectly ready to accept your statement, do you really believe that the school will be as ready to accept it?"

"The school might be curious to know more, sir, but if you accept my explanation as sufficient, I don't see why anybody should question it."

"Yes, yes; that might be well enough. But there have been one or two rather mysterious things that have happened within the last month or two which have never been cleared up. There was the breaking open of my desk, for instance, and the torn pages in the Black Book."

"I could mention a still greater mystery that wants clearing up," thought Paul, as his mind went back to the afternoon when he had seen the master enter the strange hiding-place of Zuker.

"The culprit in that case has never been found out. It still remains a mystery," continued Mr. Weevil. "Then came the mysterious disappearance of the flag, and its equally mysterious return. The school will be getting suspicious—uneasy. If no better explanation is forthcoming than that you have given me, suspicion will grow—I am certain of it."

Paul saw that the master was right. Still, he had no intention of giving up his secret.

"I have given my word, sir," he answered firmly. "You would not have me break it?"

"You said that you have received the flag from a friend, if my memory serves me—a proved friend?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask in what way his friendship has been proved?"

How could Paul answer him? How could he tell the man before him in what way Wyndham had proved his friendship to him? Suddenly, it flashed into Paul's mind that the bold course was the best.

"When I was home last vacation, sir, a gentleman had an accident with his horse. He asked me to take a packet for him to Mr. Moncrief, the father of Moncrief minor. I took the packet. On the way I was set on by two ruffians. I got away from them, but they followed me, and would have got the packet from me had it not been for the friend I speak of."

Mr. Weevil's eyes began closing as Paul was speaking. When he finished they opened again.

"What did this friend do?"

"Hid me till the ruffians had gone."

"Good! And that enabled you to get the packet to Mr. Moncrief?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent! But, do you know, Percival, this really seems a stranger story than the other."

"Perhaps so, sir; but I can prove every word of it, if you like. By your permission, I will send for Mr. Moncrief——"

"No, no; that is altogether unnecessary!" said the master quickly. "Strange though the story is, I accept every word of it—every word. The friend you speak of was indeed a friend in need. You must keep your word to him—it would be an act of baseness to break it. I did not know the facts, you see. You may leave the rest to me."

Paul's heart bounded joyfully. The bold course had been the right one. It had succeeded where a weaker course might have utterly failed.

"Thank you, sir. It is very kind of you."

Paul was about to withdraw, when the master called him back.

"Let me see, there was a letter came for you while you were out. There it is in the rack."

Paul took the letter from the rack as Mr. Weevil turned to his books. Again his heart gave a great bound. One glance at it told him who it was from. It was the letter he had been so anxiously awaiting from Mr. Walter Moncrief.

"It *is* for you, isn't it?" Mr. Weevil asked, glancing into the boy's eager face.

"Yes, sir," answered Paul, wondering whether the master suspected who it was from or had any knowledge of its contents. He inspected the envelope as he hastened to his dormitory. No; it did not seem to have been tampered with. Mr. Weevil could not have seen its contents. On reaching his room, he tore open the envelope, and read:

"My dear Paul,—I received your first letter, but was away from home at the time, so was unable to answer it. Pardon my delay. You need not worry about the man Zuker. I am kept informed as to his movements.

"With regard to your master Mr. Weevil, I quite agree with you—I cannot think that he has anything to do with a traitor to his country, though appearances may be against him. At any rate, till anything is distinctly proved, give him the respect due to a scholar and a gentleman.

"To turn to other and more agreeable matters. I trust that Harry is getting on well. He seems too busy to write much. And when he does write, it's nothing but 'Plunger, Plunger, Plunger,' from start to finish. You would fancy there was nobody else but Plunger in existence. Tell him that when he can get away from Plunger we shall be very glad to hear from him again.

"I know the great friendship there is between you and my nephew Stanley. I only hope that Harry will find as good and worthy a friend. Tell Stanley that he has to come here during next vacation, and bring you with him. I think we shall be able to provide you with plenty of amusement, though I can't promise you it will be of so exciting a kind as you had last vacation.—Your sincere friend,

"WALTER MONCRIEF."

A great feeling of relief came over Paul when he read the first part of this letter. There was nothing to worry about Zuker. Mr. Moncrief was kept informed of his movements; and yet, and yet——If Mr. Moncrief knew of

his movements, why, in the name of wonder, did he not arrest him? But perhaps there were reasons against it. In any case, the answer was satisfactory, and he felt relieved.

It was with far different feelings he read the last part of the letter.

"I know the great friendship existing between you and Stanley," Paul read again, with sorrow. "I only hope that Harry will find as good a friend."

And the message? What was he to do with the message Mr. Moncrief had asked him to deliver to Stanley? He turned the letter over and over in his hand. He must deliver it to him somehow.

"Stanley must answer it; not I. I will give it to his cousin."

As he passed along the corridor a deep groan came from one of the dormitories. It sounded like some one in pain. He stopped and listened. A few seconds more, and the groaning was repeated. He opened the door softly and looked in. The dormitory was to all appearances empty.

"Strange! My ears must have deceived me," thought Paul.

He was on the point of retreating when the sound came again to his ears.

"No; I wasn't mistaken," he said, stepping softly into the room and closing the door after him. "It was somebody, but who?"

He looked round, puzzled. There was no one visible. He stood perfectly still and waited. A few seconds more, and the groaning was repeated. But this time he detected whence it came. It came from under one of the cubicles. He crossed to it and looked underneath. A boy was huddled up on the floor. One glance was sufficient to tell him who it was—it was Master Plunger.

"Here. Plunger, come out of that!"

Plunger did not attempt to move.

"Come out of that, I tell you!"

As Plunger still refused to move, Paul took him by the leg and hauled him out.

Such a woebegone Plunger it was! His wiry thatch was more dishevelled than usual. The eyebrows seemed to have made a more desperate attempt than ever to invade the territory of the forehead. The self-assurance which had been the distinguishing mark of Plunger's manner had gone.

"Le' me go—le' me go!" he groaned. "I want to die!"

"Die!" Paul could scarcely refrain from laughing. "There's not much of that about you! You're not one of those whom 'the gods love,' so you'll never die young, Plunger. What have you been up to? I believe you've been smoking."

This accusation brought Plunger to a sitting posture on the bed.

"I haven't been smoking—I haven't been smoking! It's the flag!"

"What about the flag?"

"I angled for it, and thought I'd hooked it; but I hadn't. Some other fellow had; so instead of hooking the flag I got a beastly swishing. That's not all. I shall get roasted all round, and, of course, the Two J.'s will be poking fun at me in the 'Gargoyle Record.' I'd like to know who the fellow was who got the flag. Have you heard?"

"I have heard, but I haven't time to go into it just now. Your friend Moncrief minor can tell you all about it. Cheer up, Plunger, and don't talk any more about dying."

Paul hurried off, leaving Plunger to digest the scanty information he had given him as best he could.

"Now for Stan!" he said, as he made his way to the common room, but little dreaming what was there in store for him.

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## CHAPTER XLIII

### THE STORM BREAKS

As Paul approached the common-room, the sound of voices came through the open door, and clear above the hubbub rose the voice of some one making free use of his name. He knew the voice well enough. It was Stanley's. Why were they discussing him?

On entering the room, the voices ceased as by magic. Every eye was turned in his direction. Several boys were gathered round the fireplace. Foremost in the group were Newall, Parfitt, and Stanley.

"I thought I heard my name?" Paul exclaimed, as he stepped into the room.

"Quite right," said Stanley, coming from the group and confronting him. "I've been looking for you."

Paul was on the point of saying that he also had been looking for Stanley, but the silence that followed Stanley's words, the concentrated gaze of that group of boys, and, above all, the face of Stanley himself—white, yet with a burning, feverish light in the eyes—kept back the words.

"Looking for me?" he repeated.

"Yes; I did hope that I should never have to speak to you again, but one or two things that have just happened make me. All the fellows here know how much it's against the grain."

Paul's face fell. He had come in search of Stanley with the hope of bringing about a reconciliation. That hope receded in an instant to the far distance.

"If it's against the grain, I wonder you should trouble," he could not help answering.

"Oh, we have to swallow things we don't like sometimes." Then he broke off into a tone of banter. "So you've brought the flag back to Garside?"

Paul did not answer. He was only conscious that the group had drawn closer to him, and that Stanley's eyes were burning at a fiercer heat. It seemed some other than Stanley who was speaking. He had assumed the tone and manner of Newall; but he was forcing himself into a part which did not suit him, so that he acted it badly.

"The worst of Percival is that he's so modest. He doesn't know what a smart thing he's done," went on Stanley. "It isn't to be wondered at that the kids of the Third and Fourth have been cheering him like mad. Why should we be left out in the cold, eh?"

"Why?" echoed Parfitt. "Let's give him a rouser."

Parfitt led off the cheers—cheers which fell with a hollow sound on Paul's ears, for he knew well enough they were only mocking him.

"When we hear about a smart thing, we're naturally anxious to know how it was done," jeered Parfitt.

"Naturally," echoed Newall, followed by cries of assent from the rest.

"Order! Order for Percival!" exclaimed Stanley, holding up his hand for silence.

Silence instantly reigned. You might have heard a pin drop as they waited for Paul to speak; but they waited in vain. He neither spoke nor moved. He was not thinking of himself, nor of the boys that stood around him. He had ears and eyes for Stanley, and no other. It was a transformed Stanley—not the Stanley he had once known.

"Lost your tongue?" cried Stanley, breaking the silence. "Come, out with it. We can't wait here all day! How did you manage to get hold of the flag? Who had it, and how did you get it back to Garside? Don't be so awfully modest? You've hidden your light under a bushel too long."

"The flag is back at Garside," answered Paul firmly, ignoring the taunt. "For the rest you had better ask Mr. Weevil. I don't owe any explanation to you or any other fellow in the Form!"

He turned away, but Stanley sprang between him and the door.

"That won't do? You do owe us an explanation, and I mean having it!"

"You?"

There was more of sorrow than anger in Paul's voice, but to the sensitive ears of Stanley, strung to the highest tension, it sounded strangely like contempt.

"I! What were you doing with the Beetle we saw you with near the sand-pits this afternoon?"

"The Beetle you ran away from, you know," added Newall. "The Beetle you left Moncrief to fight for you!"

This wholly unnecessary piece of information sent the scarlet back for a moment into the white face of Stanley. His hands opened spasmodically; then closed in a firmer grip than before.

The gibe acted differently on Paul. He recalled that Stanley had really suffered for him; he recalled too, the note of warning that had been left for him in his dormitory. Perhaps, after all, it had been written by Stanley? The Stanley he had once known as a friend. And there came over him the old longing to clasp him by the hand.

"I will try to explain to you if you will meet me somewhere alone," he said, drawing near to Stanley, and speaking in a little more than a whisper.

"Speak out! I want no secrets!" cried Stanley.

"All the fellows in the Form have as much right to hear as I have! What I can hear they can hear! I don't want to go about sneaking and whispering in corners!"

Murmurs of applause greeted this expression of opinion.

"If that's the way you look at it," answered Paul sorrowfully, "the thing's ended. I've nothing more to say."

"But I have, and you must hear—must!" repeated Stanley, with emphasis, as Paul tried to pass him. "It's your honour I'm thinking of, as much as the honour of the school. Do you know what they are saying?"

"I don't know or care," came the swift answer. "As for my honour, it can very well take care of itself."

"Like it did at the sand-pits," put in Parfitt, amid an outburst of laughter.

Paul bit his lip to keep back the angry words that sprang to his tongue. And the gibe went again as a poisoned shaft to the wound that was lying as a canker in the breast of Stanley.

"Well, we'll leave your honour out of it, if you don't care to stick up for it. But there's the honour of the school, and do you know what they're saying? They're saying that the flag business was all a dodge—that it's been engineered between you and the Beetle you would not stand up to in the sand-pits!"

"Engineered! How do you mean?" demanded Paul, staggered by this fresh accusation.

"That it was all arranged between you and the Beetle."

"I—I can't quite see. I don't understand. Do you mean——"

"Let him have it straight; so that he can't wriggle out of it!" exclaimed Newall, as Paul paused, unable to get out the words that came as a torrent to the lips.

"I mean that the theft of the flag was arranged between you and that fellow at St. Bede's; and that it's come back again by the same clever piece of trickery."

"Is that what they're saying?" demanded Paul.

"That's what they're saying."

"And—and—what do you say, Stan?" The name came out in a gulp.

Had Stanley only followed his better impulse, he would have answered:

"I don't believe it. Though appearances are against you, I cannot believe it. I still have faith in you, as I used to have. We have wandered apart, but Garside has never been what it was since we ceased to speak. I have been unhappy—miserable."

But the gibes of Newall and Parfitt were still rankling in his breast. He seemed to feel again the blows of Wyndham on his face. So instead of answering as his better nature dictated, he replied:

"I stand by the Form. I say the same."

"Then it's a lie—a dirty lie. Let me pass."

Paul was choking. It would not so much have mattered what his Form said. He could trust to time to bring them round again; but that Stanley could have believed him guilty of such mean, despicable trickery—there was the

sting. Stanley had felt the blows of Wyndham on his face, but that was as nothing to the torture endured at that moment by Paul. It was as a flail cutting deep down into his very flesh.

Stanley still barred the way to the door, and did not move.

"Let me pass!" came again the hoarse, choking cry.

Stanley did not budge. Neither did he answer. He was as dumb, as immovable, and as white as a block of marble. Paul could endure it no longer. He caught him by the arm to turn him aside. His touch started the statue before him into life. As though it were an insult to be wiped out, Stanley struck out blindly with his fist. Paul received the blow full on the face, and fell to the ground like a log.

It was a cruel blow. Stanley knew it the moment he had struck his one-time friend, and he would have given all he possessed to have recalled it. But it was too late.

"Well hit!" applauded Parfitt, as though Stanley had just made a brilliant drive in the cricket-field instead of striking his best friend.

"First knockdown and blood to Moncrief!" exclaimed Newall. "Oh, he's all right, Waterman. He doesn't want any help from you."

Waterman, who had been standing in the background, leaning in his usual indolent manner against the most comfortable corner of the fireplace, shook on his lethargy as Stanley struck the blow which felled Paul to the ground, and at once left his favourite spot by the fireplace and went to his assistance.

"Hurt, Percival?" he asked as, heedless of Newall's remarks, he wiped away the blood that was trickling down Paul's cheek.

Paul had been momentarily dazed by the unexpected blow; but he was strong, and soon shook the feeling off.

"Thanks, Waterman. No; I'm not hurt," he whispered, rising slowly to his feet.

The boys gathered round. The excitement had grown from the moment Paul had entered the room. From that instant the storm-clouds had begun to gather, and with the blow struck by Moncrief major they had burst.

What would happen?

"Steady yourself, Percival," whispered Waterman. "So—Are you sure you are all right?"

"Quite."

Waterman let go his arm. The blood still trickled down Paul's face, but he walked steadily up to Stanley, who had thrown up his arms in defence, as though expecting a return of the blow.

"You can put down your hands, Stanley. I'm not going to fight you," said Paul calmly.

"He's moulting again—more feathers!" cried Newall.

"And aren't they white ones?" added Parfitt.

"I'm not going to fight you," repeated Paul, looking Stanley squarely in the face; "but I'll pay you back again—some day."

Stanley did not attempt to stop him this time; so Paul made his way back to his room, and sank upon his bed thinking. He had done nothing of which he was ashamed, but the blow of Stanley was burning on his cheek, and he felt wretched, miserable. He had striven for the best, but somehow things had

turned out for the worst. Once before when things were at their blackest, there was one who had come to him, and placed a little hand in his; but now there was no one, save the good God above.

He was thinking thus, when there was a tap on the door; the door was jerked open with a shoulder; and Waterman, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, strode indolently in—just for all the world as though he were coming to a picnic.

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## CHAPTER XLIV

### IN THE GARDEN

"It's tiring work getting up stairs, especially these stairs—ugh!" said Waterman, as he entered. "If you don't mind, I'll take a seat."

And without waiting for Paul to answer, Waterman dropped down, with his hands still in his pockets, beside him on the bed.

"It was very good of you to give me a helping hand just now, Waterman."

"Oh, humbug! I've got a wretched sort of memory. Fact is, it's too great a fag trying to recollect half the things crammed into you at school, but I seem to have a better memory than most fellows for some things. And there's one thing I can't forget—I can't forget you coming across the ground with that little chap, so like a drowned rat, in your arms. I shall have to be blind, deaf, and silly before I forget it."

Waterman spoke in his usual drawling tone, but its underlying note of earnestness was quite unusual. Strange that Paul, too, had just been thinking of Hibbert, but in a scene far different from that to which Waterman had referred. God had been very good to him after all. He had been thinking how utterly lonely he was, and yet a friend—true, a somewhat indolent one—had come to him in his hour of adversity.

"And look here, Percival," went on Waterman, "there's something else I remember. I don't know why, you know, but I do."

"What's that? Seems to me your memory's improving," said Paul.

"Oh, my memory's fairly good when it's not grubbing about amongst Latin roots, or making a fellow bald-headed worrying over problems invented by a fiend calling himself Euclid ever so many years ago. Why the undertakers couldn't have buried them along with old Euclid, or stowed them away with his mummy, is one of those things I could never understand. Then if people wanted to dig them up again, they'd have been in their right place—in the mummy department of the British Museum. Where was I? Oh, on memory. Yes, there's one thing I remember, in spite of the Latin roots and weary old Euclid. I recollect what you told me on that day when you surprised every one by turning tail at the sand-pits. I've kept it to myself all this time. Is it necessary to keep it a secret any longer?"

"Yes, Waterman," answered Paul firmly.

"Why? Let me set you right with the Form? It'll be an awful fag, I know. Still, the vac's coming on, and one can have a good long rest after one's pulled through."

"No, Waterman," said Paul, shaking his head; "I'm not going to curry favour that way. You've been a friend to me—a friend where I least expected to find one. Bear with me a little longer."

"But you don't understand the dust that Newall, Parfitt & Co. are kicking up? Can't you see that they've got Moncrief major completely under their thumb? They'll make Garside too hot to hold you."

"We'll see. I'm not beaten yet."

"Better let me speak," persisted Waterman.

Paul shook his head.

"I give you up. You are worse than old Euclid!" exclaimed Waterman, plunging his hands deeper into his pockets.

With a yawn he strolled towards the door, edged his shoulder round it until he had opened it wide enough for his body to pass through, closed it by a like man[oe]uvre, and with the same measured step went on his way.

"After all, I've got one friend at Garside," thought Paul, with a smile, "though he does like to take his time over things."

He looked in the glass. His cheek was swollen and bruised. His appearance was very much what Stanley's had been when he had returned from the sand-pits after his encounter with Wyndham.

"I hope Stanley is satisfied," he said, smiling grimly at himself in the glass.

Then he remembered that he hadn't carried out the purpose for which he had gone to the common room. He had gone there for the purpose of speaking to him about Mr. Moncrief's letter. It was useless to think of doing so now. He would put the letter in his desk till a more convenient season. His hand went to his pocket. The letter had gone!

The old feeling came over him that had come over him on the day when he had lost that other letter on his way to Redmead. It had disappeared from his pocket just as mysteriously. He looked around. There was no trace of it in the room. Then he remembered that he had pulled out his handkerchief in the common room to staunch the blood from his cheek. He must have pulled out the letter with it.

It would not have mattered much had it been an ordinary letter. But it was not an ordinary one. Far from it. It contained references to Zuker and Mr. Weevil which might cause no end of mischief were it to get into the wrong hands.

He did not like the idea of returning to the common room; it was like swallowing a nauseous draught of medicine. Probably the boys were still

there, laughing over his discomfiture. Yet, nauseous though the draught was, it had to be swallowed, and it was best to swallow it quickly.

So he again descended to the common room. He faintly hoped that it might be deserted, but that hope vanished as he reached the room. This time he heard the voice of Newall. He paused for a moment; then went boldly forward.

Stanley had gone—he saw that at a glance; so had most of the others; but Newall, Parfitt, and two or three more had remained, and were evidently discussing recent events.

They could not have been more startled had a ghost entered, instead of a being of flesh and blood. Paul searched round the room in the hope of finding some trace of the missing letter, but found none.

"Dotty!" came the voice of one of the boys, who had by this time recovered from their surprise at the unexpected return of Paul.

"Looking for the courage that oozed out at his heels," sneered Parfitt.

"I've lost a letter," said Paul, on whom these facetious remarks were quite lost. "You don't happen to have seen it?"

No one answered him. They stared blankly at him. They did not mind speaking at him. Speaking to him was quite a different thing.

It was perfectly useless to expect an answer from them; so Paul went out, feeling far from comfortable. He could only hope that no bad use would be made of the letter, supposing it had fallen into their hands.

*The Gargoyle Record* came out next day. Among other items of information were the following:

"Old flag back to tower. Brought back by 'two P's' of the Fifth. Great enthusiasm—little waddlers of the Third cheering like lunatics; big cacklers of the Fifth hissing like geese. Mystery in three volumes. Vol. I.—How the flag disappeared from Garside. Vol. II.—Where it went to. Vol. III.—How 'two P's' got it back again. Snorters of the Fifth getting excited. A commission of inquiry into the conduct of 'two P's.'

"Rumours of a scrum in common room. 'Two P's' again distinguishes himself. Still living up to his old motto:

"He who fights and runs away  
Will live to fight another day."

"What has become of that promising junior whose name rhymes with hunger? Nothing has been seen or heard of him for the last day or two. What has come over him? His native modesty seems to have left him. He has retreated to a back seat. Is he projecting further adventures in desert islands, or giving lessons in punting? Anxious inquiries are being made at the offices of the *Record*. Colonial papers in the neighbourhood of desert islands, please copy."

Paul, on reading these paragraphs, knew well enough who was meant by "two P's." They were the initials of his own name—Paul Percival.

But his mind was taken from these happenings by a message from the sick-room. Hibbert had been up for a few hours each day, and had pleaded hard with the doctor to be allowed to go out; so the doctor at last gave the nurse permission. On two days the invalid went out with the nurse.

On the third day he asked Paul, as a special favour, to take him out. Paul willingly consented, only too pleased to feel that he could be of some help to him again. There was one favourite spot to which the solitary boy used to go when he was well. It was in the garden attached to the schoolhouse,

apart altogether from the playing-fields. It was marked "Private," and the boys, as a rule, were not allowed there. It was chiefly used by the masters.

It was because it was so tranquil, so different from the playing-fields, and because the sun seemed to linger around this old garden longer than anywhere else, that the dreamy boy loved it, and used to steal there when he was well.

"I'm so glad to feel you on my arm again, Hibbert!" said Paul, as he led him to a basket-seat, with cushions, beneath a wide-spreading elm.

"I feel better now than I've felt for a long time, Paul. How I must have wearied people lying up there!"

He glanced in the direction of the school.

"Don't say that, Hibbert. It sounds as though there was no one in the world who cared for you."

"I know it sounds ungrateful; but even when we care for people, we must get weary of them when they're ill a long time. I don't mean you, but the nurse, and doctor, and—other people."

Paul knew that Hibbert was thinking chiefly of his father, who, absorbed in his own schemes, had only been to see him once since his illness—on that afternoon when Mr. Weevil had introduced him to Zuker.

To turn the boy's mind from these sad thoughts, Paul told him some of the latest exploits of Plunger, winding up with his recent discovery of him under the bed in his dormitory. Hibbert was amused and interested.

"Plunger's a funny lot. He makes me smile to think of him. I hope he's never worried himself much about that raft accident?"

"Plunger's not the sort of fellow to worry himself much about anything for long; but he's often asked me about you."

"I was thinking a good deal about what happened on the raft last night. I could not sleep for thinking of it; and then, when I went to sleep, I dreamed—dreamed that my mother was standing by me all in white. She was smiling down at me, and held out her arms to me. I tried to get to her, and in trying to get to her I awoke. Do you know, I was so disappointed! The dream was better than the awaking. I so wished my mother had lived, for then you would have known her, Paul. I'm sure you would have liked her, and that she would have liked you. But perhaps it is best as it is."

"I'm sure it's for the best, though it seems hard to say so. Everything is for the best, Hibbert. We don't see it, because we're only blind people leading the blind. But God sees, and God knows. That's what my mother has told me so often that I've never forgotten it. It has helped me a lot—more than I can tell you. You've talked about your mother, let me tell you a little about my own."

And Paul talked to Hibbert about his own mother. The boy listened eagerly, with one hand resting in Paul's, a smile upon his lips. Suddenly he drew a deep sigh of content; the fragile head fell back upon the chair; the hand in Paul's grew suddenly cold.

Paul looked into the boy's face. The smile still hovered about his lips, but he saw something in the face he had never seen there before.

"Hibbert!" he cried. But there was no response.

Paul gently withdrew his hand and ran to the house. He met Sedgefield, and sent him for the nurse, while he hurried back to Hibbert.

The little fellow was still lying back in the chair. A wren had perched itself lovingly upon his shoulder, but Hibbert knew nothing of its presence. He

was fast asleep—in the long, last sleep that knows no waking.

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## CHAPTER XLV

### HOW THE VOTE WAS CARRIED

Hibbert's death caused a lull in the storm that recent events had raised at Garside. Notwithstanding his illness, it was thought that he was getting better. It came, therefore, with a shock to the school when he was found sleeping that afternoon in the garden. The little fellow was laid to rest in a country churchyard, at some distance from the school, by the side of the mother whom he had so loved.

No one in the school, with the exception, perhaps, of Mr. Weevil, missed him so much as Paul did. He had a great pity for Hibbert, and that pity had grown to love. He never forgot that last scene in the garden—in the warm sunshine, with the shadows creeping over it, and the Great Shadow of all drawing nearer and nearer, until it at last rested on the boy's head.

Nor did he forget the interview he afterwards had with Mr. Weevil, when, with tones that were strangely uneven for Mr. Weevil, he had questioned him about all that Hibbert had said in those last moments before he had fallen asleep. When Paul told him what the boy had said about his mother—of his dream, and the awakening—the master's eyes blinked as he had never seen them blink before.

"Ah! He has his wish; he is with her—with his mother," said the master, as one speaking to himself rather than to Paul. "He is at rest and—happy."

Then he remained silent for so long, as one buried in deep thought, that he seemed to have quite forgotten the presence of Paul. Paul knew of whom he

was thinking; that he, too, was thinking of the boy's mother—the sister whom he had loved and revered; so he stole quietly from the room.

During this time Paul saw nothing of Hibbert's father. He wondered whether he was still carrying on his schemes in the cave, or whether the death of his son had altered his plans in any way. In any case, Paul felt no cause for alarm. The letter of Mr. Moncrief had removed all cause for anxiety. None the less he could not help feeling anxious as to what had become of the letter itself. Where had it gone to on that day it had fallen from his pocket? Into whose hands had it fallen? Had it fallen into the hands of the enemy, Newall and his lot? If so, what use were they making of it?

He was still left pretty much to himself, so he was able to put the finishing touches to his essay on "The Invasion of Great Britain," a subject, as the reader knows, which had occupied some share of his time and attention. Then the essay was sent in with others for the competition.

The breach between him and Stanley, as may be imagined, had not been lessened by what had happened between them in the common room. Stanley avoided him as much as possible, and they never spoke.

After the momentary lull in the storm caused by the death of Hibbert, it broke out again more violently than ever. This was due to the fact that Mr. Weevil had made no inquiry, or seemed to have made no inquiry, into the circumstances which had brought about the return of the flag. Newall and his parasite Parfitt said it was a disgrace to the school.

Thus the storm, which had momentarily lulled, broke out with fresh vigour. While it was at its height, the Fifth once more assembled in the Forum. Hasluck presided, as usual, and the rest of the Form, with one exception—Paul—were present. Arbery and Leveson guarded the door against invasion from "the little beggars of the Third and Fourth."

Hasluck mounted the rostrum, and brought his mallet down with a bang as a signal that the meeting had commenced.

"Now then, you fellows, order! I'm not going to spout a lot——"

"Couldn't if you tried!" put in Devey.

"Look here, Devey, are you in the chair, or am I? If you don't keep quiet, I'll chuck the mallet at you," said Hasluck, raising it threateningly. "As I said before, till I was interrupted by an ass braying, I'm not going to spout a lot. What we've got to do is to get to business, and most of you know what that business is."

"Hear, hear, hear!"

"Most of you were present in the common room when certain charges were made against Percival by Moncrief major. He told Percival to his face that the flag business was all a dodge; that it was engineered between him and the champion of the Beetles. Percival denied it; but you know what happened after that. Moncrief struck him, and Percival went away with his tail between his legs just as he did at the sand-pits. We were all disgusted ——"

"All!" echoed the others, with the exception of Waterman, who was reclining languidly on a box, apparently quite unconcerned in what was going on.

"We were all disgusted, and decided to take some action which would bring matters to a point. Unfortunately, Hibbert died just then, and we could do nothing. We were obliged to wait a decent interval. The time for waiting's past." (Cheers.) "We've got to get to business. Moncrief major will explain."

Stanley, with white, set face, was standing between Newall and Parfitt. After the charge he had made against Paul at Newall's instigation, and the

blow that had followed it, he had been forced into a position from which it was impossible for him to retreat. First he had been adroitly forced into the position of being Paul's accuser; and now, with no less adroitness, he had been compelled to take a step which struck more cruelly at his friend.

"Oh, I haven't much to explain," he said, in a thick, unnatural voice. "As Hasluck has said, we all decided to take action after what happened in the common room. Hibbert's death prevented us. I think you know what that action is. We're going to call upon the Head to expel Percival from the school."

A loud cheer greeted this announcement. There could be no doubt as to the feeling of the Form, and that Stanley had voiced it.

"Move, move!" came from several of the boys, when the cheers had subsided.

"Yes, we must have everything in order," said Hasluck. "It's about the first time that we've ever called upon the masters to expel a fellow."

Stanley hesitated. How was it possible for him to strike at Paul again—this time behind his back!

"Get on—move! What are you stopping for?" demanded Parfitt, nudging him with his elbow. "I'll back you up."

"Get on," repeated Newall, nudging him from the other side.

"I—I move," said Stanley, in faltering tones, "that we call upon the Head to expel Percival from the school."

"And I second!" cried Parfitt.

"And I support!" exclaimed Newall.

"Hands up for!" demanded Hasluck.

"One minute before you vote," came the languid voice of Waterman, as the hands shot up. "You don't want to be in such a hurry. It's bad for the nerves. People in a hurry have fits. They get themselves into knots and tangles which take no end of time to get out of, and leave them with a lovely headache into the bargain. That's what you're going in for—fits, tangles, headaches. I gave Moncrief major credit for sense. You're not going to follow his lead, are you?"

The arms that were held up fell. The boys stared at Waterman in astonishment. It was not often that he took the trouble to speak at these meetings, but when he did it was usually to the point.

"Of course we are. Why shouldn't we?" exclaimed Parfitt.

"You'll be bigger asses than I took you for—and that's saying a good deal, you know—if you do. I didn't hear all that took place after Moncrief struck Percival. The atmosphere was getting bad, you see, and I don't like breathing bad atmosphere, if I can help it; so I don't know what passed between you fellows. I've no doubt it was something choice, and that I lost a great deal; so perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me why Percival's to be expelled."

This demand on Waterman's part, made in the most innocent manner, was met with howls of derision. They could never quite tell from Waterman's manner whether he was serious or poking fun at them; but this time it seemed quite clear that he could only be poking fun.

"Yes, that's very musical," proceeded Waterman calmly, when the howling had subsided. "I couldn't do better myself, if I tried. You're going to expel Percival because you believe he engineered the flag. That's it, isn't it?" (Cries of assent.) "Good! I like to get at things," retorted Waterman, still

keeping his languid position on the box. "Engineering the flag means—what? It means that Percival, by trickery, got it away from Garside. Is that it?"

"Yes, yes!" came the approving shout.

"Well, vote as you like. Here's one that's going to vote against you."

"Why? What's your reason?"

"Because I happen to remember what happened on the day the flag was lost. Seems to me most of you have forgotten."

Waterman had started up from his languid position on the box; his face had lost its wearied, languid expression, and had become quite animated.

"I haven't, and never shall, though I never pretend to remember things; they're so beastly uninteresting, as a rule. This wasn't. That's why I remember, I suppose. Well, on the afternoon the flag was lost I was going from the school, when I nearly ran full tilt against a fellow who was carrying a little chap, dripping wet, in his arms. The fellow was Percival; the little chap was Hibbert. You know what happened, though you seem to have forgotten it. Percival, at the risk of his own life, saved the little chap from the river."

Stanley's head fell to his breast. The scene came to him as Waterman was speaking. Had he not met Paul on that day staggering along with his burden? Had he not avoided him, when he might have given a helping hand?

"What's that to do with it?" demanded Newall. "Supposing Percival did pull the youngster out of the river, what's that to do with the flag?"

"What's that to do with the flag!" repeated Waterman. "It's this to do with it—how could Percival be playing tricks with the flag, and fishing at the

same time a poor little chap out of the river? Besides, would a fellow who'd done a splendid thing like that stoop to such a mean thing as the other?"

"Yes," retorted Newall boldly. "A fellow who would turn tail like he did at the sand-pits, and again in the common room, would do anything. It's you who forget, Waterman. We've asked Percival for an explanation. If he's innocent, why doesn't he explain?"

"I don't know, and what's more, I don't care. What I've seen of Percival is quite good enough for me."

"Vote, Vote!" cried Parfitt. "We don't want any more twaddle."

Hasluck brought down his hammer as a signal that discussion was at an end. Then he put the motion moved by Stanley—"That the Form call upon the Head to expel Percival from the school."

Stanley would have voted against his own proposal had it been possible. But it was impossible; so his hand went up with the rest—all save one.

"Against!" cried Hasluck.

Up went the hand of Waterman, amid the derisive cheers of those around him.

"Phew! The atmosphere of this place is getting beastly, just like the common room on the day when the shindy was. Phew! I don't wish to be unpolite, but I'm sure you fellows won't mind if I get out of it."

And thrusting his hands into his pockets, Waterman sauntered out.

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So the vote was carried that Paul Percival should be expelled from Garside.



## CHAPTER XLVI

### WATERMAN DOES A STRANGE THING

For one who had professed himself as beastly hot and fagged, Waterman did a strange thing after he had left the Forum. He walked with a speed that was simply amazing for him in the direction of St. Bede's; and what was still more remarkable, he did not stop until he had reached it. None of the Beetles were about at the time, but he had not long to wait before he caught sight of one of the junior form.

"Will you tell Wyndham I wish to see him—as quickly as possible."

The boy stared at him, as Murrell had stared at Paul when he had visited St. Bede's. It was not till he had repeated his message that he seemed to comprehend.

"Quick, there isn't much time to lose!" exclaimed Waterman, as though it were a matter of life and death.

Then the boy hurried off, and a minute or two later Wyndham appeared. Waterman was unknown to him; so that he was just as much astonished at seeing him as the smaller boy had been.

"I'm a Gargoyle, you can see that. My name's Waterman, and I've come here about a fellow named Percival. Spare me the fag of explaining too much."

"Percival! What about him!" demanded Wyndham, at once interested.

"There's a strong movement on foot to get him expelled from Garside. It's chiefly over the flag. His best friend, or one who was, has turned against him; and things are looking as black for Percival as they can look. I'm afraid

that he'll get the worst of it, unless something's done. I can do nothing; so I've come to you. There's some beastly mystery about the whole business. Percival won't explain because of somebody else, and that somebody else is you. I'm certain you won't see Percival kicked from Garside, if a few words from you will set things right."

"Kicked from Garside!" exclaimed Wyndham. "Tell me what happened?"

Waterman, feeling that the time for speaking frankly had come, told Wyndham all that had happened—from the day Wyndham had fought and conquered Stanley in the sand-pits.

They remained a long time in conversation, and when Waterman at length returned to Garside, Wyndham returned with him.

In the meantime an interview of a different nature was taking place at Garside. After the meeting in the Forum, Stanley, feeling very wretched, had retreated to his dormitory, where in a few minutes he was joined by his cousin Harry, who was looking just as miserable and uncomfortable.

"I say, Stan, is it right what I hear—that Percival is to be kicked out of Garside?"

"Well, what if he is? Doesn't he deserve it?"

"I don't know. It's a puzzle. I can't make things out. Look at this letter. I picked it up while the shindy was going on between you and Paul in the common room. All the fellows were crowding round you. No one saw the letter but me. Paul dropped it when he was mopping the blood from his face. I ought to have given it back, but I saw that it was father's handwriting; so I sneaked off with it, and read it; and then—then I knew that I'd done a mean thing and did not like to give it back to Paul."

He handed Stanley the letter—the letter in which Mr. Moncrief had answered Paul's inquiries about Zuker and Mr. Weevil, and concluded by inviting him and Stanley to Redmead at the next vacation.

"What does it all mean?" demanded Stanley, when he had read the letter.

"I can't make out. I thought, perhaps, you might be able to throw light on it."

"I'm afraid not; but you might leave it with me. I'll think it over."

"All right; but I say, Stan, you must do something to prevent Paul being chucked from the school. That's going it a bit too strong. I know whose working that beastly dodge—Newall and his jackal Parfitt."

How could Stanley tell his cousin that it was he—Stanley Moncrief—who had actually moved that Paul should be expelled from the school? If it were possible for Stanley to have felt more wretched than he had felt when Harry came to him, he certainly did so when he was once more alone. "I know the great friendship there is between you and my nephew Stanley." Those were the words which stared him in the face. Friendship? What mockery! How had he proved his friendship? By doing his best to get Paul expelled from the school. What would his uncle say to him when he next visited Redmead? It was to show him this letter Paul had doubtless come to him that day in the common room. And he had met him—with a blow. It was dastardly.

He must do his best to undo the mischief he had done. Stanley started up, and went to the door; then he paused, and his heart began to harden again.

After all, if mischief had been created, Paul was alone responsible. It was he, and not Stanley, who had acted in a dastardly manner. It was he who had run away at the sand-pits, and left him to fight his battle with the beastly Beetle; it was he——

His meditations were cut short by the door being opened, and the entrance of Waterman.

"Hallo, Moncrief. The very fellow I've been looking for. Horrid bore looking for fellows. Phew! Close in here, isn't it? You look a bit off. Come for a little stroll. I've got a fellow who's dying for an introduction to you."

Waterman slipped an arm through Stanley's, and before Stanley was aware of it, had led him through the door.

"A fellow—wants to be introduced to me! What fellow?" he demanded.

"Ah, that's it. What fellow? You'd never guess. It's a pleasant little surprise I've got in store for you. Think of all your rich uncles and aunts, and people of that sort. Ha, ha! A pleasant surprise, lovely, delightful. Mustn't spoil it by telling you. Come along."

Waterman's reference to uncles at once reminded Stanley of the uncle whose letter he had been reading. Could it be that his uncle Moncrief was paying him a surprise visit? But Waterman did not take him to the visitors'-room. He took him out of the grounds to some elms which flourished not far from the school. Here a boy was leaning against one of the trees. Stanley glanced at him; then turned white. It was Wyndham.

"Told you I had a little surprise," said Waterman. "Wasn't I right? I like little surprises—don't you? Explanations are an awful bore. I never like explanations if I can get out of them. Wyndham's got something to tell you. You'll find him very decent for a Beetle."

And Waterman vanished with a speed which was really marvellous for him, leaving the two together. The last time they had met face to face they had met as antagonists, and had fought hard. The memory of that time was present to both of them, for neither seemed anxious to break the silence.

"Do I understand that you wish to see me?" Stanley presently asked.

"Yes; it was kind of you to come."

"You needn't compliment me, for I mightn't have come had I known whom I had to meet," answered Stanley coldly. "Waterman misled me."

"Anyhow, I'm glad you have come, and so will you be, I think, before you go back. I hope you don't look upon me as an enemy?"

"How else can I look upon you? Have you sent for me to mock me?"

"That's my last wish. I've sent for you to prevent you doing a great wrong to a friend of yours—Paul Percival."

"A friend of mine!" repeated Stanley, scornfully.

"Well, one who was your friend, and who, I hope, will soon be your friend again."

"You have more reason to be thankful to him than I have," laughed Stanley, bitterly. "He ran away from you, and left me with the work he hadn't the courage to go on with. I know that I didn't come very well out of it, but I didn't run away."

"No; you did well—much better than I did. I'm sorry, very sorry, I fought with you. More so, as by fighting you I separated two friends. Often and often I have prayed to be forgiven. It has all been a ghastly mistake."

"Mistake? Percival running away—there wasn't much mistake about that, I'm thinking."

"That is the greatest mistake of all. All of you put it down to fear of me; but it wasn't—far otherwise. I don't believe that Paul Percival knows what fear is; and you, who were his friend, ought to have known that as well as I do."

"So I thought—up till then. After, what could I think? What could any of us think?"

"Your best of him, instead of your worst. Haven't you ever suspected the reason why he would not stand up to me?"

"Never! Why?"

"Blind—blind! Do you remember that Percival on one occasion—during last vacation—helped a gentleman in distress by acting as his messenger?"

"Quite well, seeing that that gentleman was my father."

"Your father? Yes, that was the gentleman, I believe, for whom Percival did this kindness. He was set upon by the way by two ruffians, but managed to escape. Did he ever tell you how he managed it?"

"By hiding down a well."

"Right! But there was a boy who helped him to this queer hiding-place. That boy was me!"

"You?"

"Yes. On the day Percival came to the sand-pits to meet the champion of the Beetles, he little knew whom he was to meet. I knew as little whom I was to meet. He looked upon me as one who had saved his life. How could he fight me? So he turned away."

"Why didn't he explain?" asked Stanley.

"And give away his secret, or, rather, your father's secret, before that mob of boys? You—you ask that?"

"But after——"

"After? From what he has told me, he made more than one effort to explain to you, but you would never listen to him."

It was true enough. Stanley remembered it all—the effort Paul had made to speak to him immediately after the fight, and later. Everything was now clear. How noble Paul had been! How he had wronged him! He covered his face with his hands. He could not speak. Wyndham respected his silence.

At length he placed his hand upon the bowed shoulder. Stanley did not shrink from it.

"I'm sorry if I've caused you pain; but it was the only way. Mischief is being done. You must prevent it from going any further."

"I will—I will! You can trust me," cried Stanley, fervently. "Paul, Paul, how I've wronged you!"

"I'm glad you see that. You will make it up with him—you will be friends with him once more?"

"Yes, yes; if he will have my friendship. But I don't deserve it. I deserve kicking. It was kind of you to take so much trouble."

Wyndham turned on his heel, but as suddenly turned round again.

"Would you mind taking my hand, Moncrief?" he said.

Stanley took it in his, and shook it heartily.

"Thanks; I am very sorry it was raised against you. But we understand one another better now."

Stanley wiped away the mist that had somehow gathered in his eyes, and when he could see clear Wyndham had gone.

Then he went in search of Paul, anxious to ask his forgiveness, and undo, as best he could, the mischief that had been done. But he could not find him.

He searched everywhere with the same result. And, what was still more astonishing, his cousin was also missing.

Night came on, and still Paul and Harry were missing from the school.

Mr. Weevil began to get alarmed. It was past ten, and still no news of the missing boys. What had become of them?

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## CHAPTER XLVII

### IN THE FOX'S HOLE

What had become of Paul? What was the cause of his absence from the school? Had he heard of the decision come to by his Form, and instead of waiting to be expelled, had he left of his own accord? That was the view of Newall and others of the Fifth.

"About the best thing he could have done," said Parfitt. "It wasn't only the flag business, but there were other things in the background. The Black Book business has never been cleared up, you know."

Parfitt made this remark in his most significant manner, with uplifted eyebrows and a shrug of the shoulders.

"That's right. Kick a man when he's down," drawled Waterman. "Parfitt's better at a drop kick than any fellow I know."

The Third were just as much concerned over the disappearance of Moncrief, jun., as the Fifth were over the disappearance of Percival. Stanley was doubly anxious—anxious for Paul, anxious for his cousin.

Could they have gone away together? That was scarcely likely. They were hardly on speaking terms for one thing; and even if the idea of running away from Garside had suddenly come into Paul's head, it was not at all likely that he had induced Harry to run away with him. What, then, had happened?

While the school was thus anxiously awaiting news of the missing boys, we will try to explain what had really happened.

Paul knew that a meeting of his Form had been called, and that he and his doings were to be discussed, probably censured. When would the time arrive that he might take steps to defend himself? When would his lips be unsealed? How much longer would Mr. Moncrief keep him in suspense, and what had become of Zuker?

Unconsciously Paul had strayed from the school to the garden where Hibbert had, not so long since, fallen asleep—in the sleep that knows no waking. He sat for a long time under the tree, thinking of these things, with no one to disturb his thoughts, save the birds that fluttered around him as they used to flutter around Hibbert.

What had become of Hibbert's father? Again and again the question came to him, and he could not dismiss it from his thoughts. He thought of the strange circumstance under which he had last seen him—of that weird scene in the cave with the man Brockman. All that had happened at that interview was fixed indelibly on his memory. He could see Zuker tracing with his finger on the chart the passage of the Dutch to the Medway—could hear his voice as he described all that had happened as they broke the chain on the river and advanced on Upnor Castle. Then—then had followed the strange appearance of the master, and the still stranger interview between him and Zuker.

Was the cave still there? Often and often a strong desire had seized Paul to go there again, but he had resisted it. Now, however, as he thought of all that had happened on the evening he went there, the impulse grew so strong upon him that he could wrestle with it no longer. He must respond to its call.

So, as one under some mighty spell, Paul passed from the garden, and was soon on his way to Cranstead Common.

It was beginning to get dusk as he followed the trail along which he had once followed in the footsteps of Mr. Weevil. After travelling some time in the direction of the river, he came to the thickly-wooded part, where the master had disappeared.

Searching amongst the brambles, he found the curious division which marked the centre, and placing his hand beneath the bushes as before, he was not long in finding the ring that was attached to the circular opening. Raising it, he entered again the sloping tunnel cut in the sandstone.

Though he had only been in that tunnel once before, he had travelled along it so often in imagination since that it seemed to him he was on familiar ground. He had hesitated when he first entered it. He knew not whither it would lead him, what dangers might meet him on the way. He hesitated no longer. Still he walked cautiously, with his hands before him, like a blind man in the darkness, until it began to broaden. Once he thought he heard footsteps behind him, and he came to a sudden pause. Was some one really following him, or was it only the echo of his own footsteps?

He listened attentively, but could hear nothing. It was as silent as the tomb.

"My ears must have deceived me," he told himself, as he continued his way.

Presently he came to that part of the tunnel where a faint film of light penetrated into it, and again the fantastic shadows he had before seen seemed to menace him at every footstep he took. The cave, then, was not deserted. It was still inhabited by some one. Who? Zuker and Brockman—the same tenants as before, or had some one else come into possession?

Yes, there was the curtain, partly concealing the main entrance to the cave. To reach it, he crawled on hands and knees as before, and peered through the space between the curtain and the wall.

There was no anthracite fire burning this time. It was dimly lighted by one of the lamps suspended from the roof. There was no sign of life. The place seemed deserted.

Paul waited for a long time listening. No sound came from the cave. It was as silent as the tomb. But as he listened, he thought that he could again hear the sound of a light step behind him, coming along the path he had travelled.

Was it possible that some one else had entered the tunnel? Surely the master had not again followed unconsciously in his footsteps? Paul turned his head and listened, but it was as silent in that direction as the other.

"I'm getting as nervous as a kitten," he laughed to himself. "My ears have again deceived me."

No one appeared to be in the cave. Mr. Moncrief had said in his letter that he knew about Zuker's movements. Could it have been that he had been arrested? It was just possible. Anyhow, he would like to have a nearer view of the cave. There could be no danger, and if there were, it was worth the risk.

So Paul rose from his hiding-place behind the curtain, and stepped cautiously into the cave. The guns and cutlasses were still hanging on the wall, but the models and designs had gone, and the photographic camera had gone from its niche.

There was a passage on the other side of the chamber similar to the one through which he had come.

"Where does that lead to, I wonder?" thought Paul.

There could be no harm in exploring it a little way. He might just as well know where it led to, if it were possible to find out. The information might

be useful. Paul was animated with the adventurous spirit of the explorer, which knows no rest until it is satisfied. He crossed to the opening. At the moment he reached it, a figure emerged from the darkness, and confronted him. It was Zuker.

It was so sudden, so unexpected, that Paul could not move. He stood there as one rooted to the spot. Before he could move, the man had sprung upon him with the swiftness of a tiger, and seizing him by the throat, dragged him to the light.

"You!" he cried. "The boy from Garside. Your name is——"

"Paul Percival," gasped Paul, as the fierce grip relaxed.

"Paul Percival. *Ach Himmel!* It is Fate itself."

He had in turn shrunk back, as though Paul were no longer a being of flesh and blood, but a phantom. Then he murmured hoarsely to himself: "Weevil was right. The hand of a Higher than man is in it."

In the uncertain light he had not at first recognized Paul; but now he saw him, and knew that just as he had once been face to face with the father at a supreme crisis in his life, now he was face to face with the son. Had Paul seized that moment of stupefaction, he might have escaped, but he made no effort. And the moment passed.

"Who showed you this place? Who brought you here?" demanded Zuker, himself again.

"No one; I found it out myself."

"How?"

"That is my secret."

Zuker's hand went to his breast, to a weapon concealed there.

"Be careful how you answer, boy. You're not now in school, and you haven't a school-master to deal with. Is this the first time you've been here?"

"No."

Zuker started in spite of himself.

"Not the first time! How many times have you been here before then, may I ask?"

"Once."

"*Ach!* Now I understand. It is through you my plans have been defeated. It is through you my man—*mein* Brockman—has been arrested. It is through you that I have scarcely dared venture from this hole for two days past. You have been a mean, dirty spy."

"As you were to my father when I was a child." The words were upon Paul's lips, but he forced them back. Then aloud, "I've not been a spy. I've told no one."

Zuker looked searchingly into Paul's face.

"Who has told, then—who has given information to the police, to what is called your Secret Investigation Department—if it is not you?"

Paul was silent. He now understood Mr. Moncrief's letter. It must have been Mr. Weevil who had given information to Mr. Moncrief, it must have been he who had kept him informed of Zuker's doings. Mr. Weevil was not a traitor to his country, after all. Nay, it seemed as though he had striven, in his peculiar way, to defend it against traitors.

"Silent, eh? I can see what you've told me is false. You have worked against me from the first. It was you who outwitted me once before. It was you who got that packet through to the man who has always stood between me and my plans, the Admiralty man, Moncrief. All would have been over; I should have got all through had it not been for that. *Ach Himmel*, you will not have the chance of blabbing any more secrets! I have you now—tight in the Fox's Hole—and you will not leave it alive. Let me see what your school is good for. I will give you five minutes to get ready for *sterblichkeit*. *Ach*, it is a long word! Do you know what it means?"

Paul knew what it meant. It was the German word for mortality.

"Thank you," answered Paul simply. "That is longer than my father had when he was called upon to die, and it should be enough for me."

Zuker's hand trembled as it fingered the weapon concealed in his breast. Paul closed his eyes, and repeated in a low, yet clear voice:

"Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us——"

"Halt! Stop!" cried Zuker hoarsely. "You spoke of your father just now—how he died. Tell me quickly how it was."

"He was drowned, in saving the life of a man who had robbed him."

"*Ach!* And do you know who that man was?"

No answer came from Paul's lips for several seconds, seconds that seemed as hours. Deep silence reigned in the cave, then it was broken by the clear voice of the boy:

"Yes; I know who that man was. He called himself Israel Zuker."

Zuker could not repress a movement of astonishment as Paul pronounced his name.

"Knowing this—knowing that it was through me your father lost his life, you could yet say that prayer—'As we forgive them that trespass against us'? You are as brave as your father was," came hoarsely from his lips.

"I could wish no greater praise than that," answered Paul. "But I had not finished. Shall I go on?"

"You need not be in so great a hurry. Wait till I tell you. I have one or two more questions to ask you. How did you come to know that I was the man who spied upon your father—the man through whom he lost his life—the man——*Ach!*" He stopped himself suddenly. His brow darkened; the veins stood out in knots upon his forehead. "Fool! Why didn't I guess it? I see it all now. It is your master—it is Weevil who told you. It is Weevil who has betrayed me."

His hand went to the weapon in his breast again.

"No, you are mistaken; Mr. Weevil has told me nothing. He has not betrayed you."

"You are telling me false. You are trying to mislead me. Beware! No one else knew my secret. Who else could tell you?"

"I learned it from a little fellow whom I loved as a brother, and who loved me as a brother, too. Alas, he is now dead! We called him Hibbert."

"Hibbert—my son!" Zuker's voice softened wonderfully as the words passed his lips; then it hardened again, as he demanded: "How was it my son came to betray me?"

"It was after that accident on the river. Perhaps you have forgotten? It was I who helped him back to the school. And the dear little chap was always so

grateful for it—always made such an awful fuss about it. That was his way—ever so much too sensitive and grateful. Poor little chap!"

Paul brushed the back of his hand quickly across his eyes; and somehow the man did the same.

"Well, I was often with him after that," he presently continued. "He felt that he would never get well, I think, and I could see that he suffered a good deal from something he had on his mind. I never guessed what it was; but one night, when I was sitting beside him, he told me that he could not sleep because of it, and he felt that if he didn't speak, God would never forgive him. That's how it was he came to tell me that you, Israel Zuker, were his father."

"I see—I see! Now I understand!"

Zuker strode across and across the chamber, as though uncertain how to act. At length he disappeared into one of the recesses of the cave, evidently used as a storehouse, and almost as instantly appeared again with a coil of rope in his hands.

"For all you did for my son, I spare your life; but I must keep you here for a few hours. My safety depends on it."

Paul knew that it was useless to protest. He knew well enough that Zuker had the power of shooting him as a dog, and he was not the man to stand any nonsense. So he allowed himself to be bound; and when he had bound him, Zuker brought out some cushions from the recess, and placed Paul on them.

"There! I am making you as comfortable as circumstances will permit," he said. "*Gute nacht*—good-night. Remember Israel Zuker again in your prayers. *Ach!* it was good of you to be kind to my boy when others so mocked and hated him. Adieu!"

With these words, he passed swiftly out by the way he had come. Paul rested for a few minutes, thinking quietly over the strange interview through which he had just passed. It was kind of Zuker to spare his life, but he did not much appreciate the prospect of lying there, bound hand and foot, for several hours—nay, it might so happen that Zuker would never return.

His last words had an odd sound. It was difficult to know what he meant by them. He might have an intention of returning, or he might not. Perhaps he was uncertain himself. He knew well enough that he might be arrested at any moment, just as his confederate had been. In that case he (Paul) might lie there, bound hand and foot, for days and nights, gradually getting weaker and weaker, and finally dying of starvation. The prospect was not a very agreeable one.

So Paul determined to do his best to free himself of the coils that bound him. He was a strong boy, and struggled might and main to loosen them; but Zuker seemed to have tied them with devilish cunning. Struggle as Paul would, he was unable to loosen them. And the more he struggled, the more the rope cut into his flesh.

"My! The tightest knots I've ever struck," said Paul, as he lay back gasping.

"Paul!"

What was that? An echo, or some one calling him by name?

"Paul!"

There it was again. Surely it was some one calling him. He tried to turn his quivering limbs in the direction whence the voice came. Was he awake or was he dreaming?

The figure of a boy was creeping towards him—creeping, as it seemed to him, from the shadows in the tunnel. Who—who was it? Was it really a being of flesh and blood? At first it seemed to him that it must be the wraith of the little fellow about whom he had been speaking—Hibbert—but even as the thought filtered through his mind the boy was kneeling beside him, looking anxiously into his face.

It was Moncrief minor.

"Harry!" cried Paul in amazement.

"Are you all right?" came in a whisper from the boy.



**"THE BOY WAS KNEELING BESIDE HIM,—IT WAS MONCRIEF MINOR....  
'ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?' CAME IN A WHISPER FROM THE BOY."**

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"Right enough, but not altogether comfortable. Where in the name of wonder did you spring from?"

"Is there any chance of that man you called Zuker coming back?"

"No; you may be sure of that."

"Then, first, let me get that rope off."

Paul, as may be imagined, was by no means opposed to that proceeding. So Harry drew out his pocket-knife and promptly severed his bonds.

"Ah, that's better," cried Paul, springing to his feet and stretching his limbs. "It's worth while being tied up, so as to feel how nice it is to be free again. Now perhaps you'll tell me how you got here?"

"There's really no fear of that man, Zuker, coming back?"

"No; I'm sure of it."

"Then I'll explain. First of all, I must tell you that I've done a mean thing. You lost a letter when that scrimmage took place between you and Stan in the Common Room. I found it, and seeing that it was from my father, read it; then I was too ashamed to give it back to you, so I kept it. Hearing that there'd been a meeting about you in the Forum, I took the letter to Stan and showed it to him. As I came away from interviewing Stan, I saw you hurrying through the gates. You looked round, and seemed anxious that no one should see you. That made me curious. I'd just been reading my father's letter to you—remember. I'd begun to see there was some mystery which

wanted clearing up. Why shouldn't I have a hand in it? I asked myself. So forgive me, Paul, I followed you."

Paul was silent. How could he blame him? Was it not the same spirit of curiosity which had first led him to that place?

"It was fortunately dusk, and I took good care that you shouldn't see me," continued Harry. "Besides, you seemed to be so taken up with your own thoughts that you scarcely looked round once when you had gained the common. It was easy following you after that. I was never so puzzled in my life when I saw you creeping about amongst the bushes, then disappear through the ground.

"I was so close to you then, that I saw the exact place where you had disappeared, so that it did not take me long to find the opening to the tunnel. I must say that I funked following you farther; but my curiosity grew. I was on the verge of a big discovery. If I followed you, I should find out the secret which would explain the mystery about you, and set you right with the school. Believe me, Paul, that was what I longed for, and I don't think that anything short of that would have made me go farther, and so I felt my way along the tunnel until I could just see you stretched at full length beside the curtains at the entrance to this place."

Paul recalled the sounds he had heard as he made his way along the tunnel. His hearing had not deceived him after all.

"I was still more amazed when I saw that, I can tell you. I was struck all of a heap," went on Harry. "What were you up to? What were you doing there? You seemed to be watching for somebody. Who? I was burning. I got more and more curious. All thought of turning back had gone. I must find out what it all meant. So, when you rose to your feet, and stepped cautiously into this chamber, I just as cautiously crept to the place where you had been

lying, and watched you moving about. Then I saw the man you called Zuker enter, and all that went on after.

"It was fearful, Paul. I saw you were in a fix, but I could do nothing to help you. Once I tried to cry out. It was when that man used the long foreign word. I did not understand what it meant at first, though you seemed to; but presently, when you began to say 'Our Father,' I knew what it meant. Then it was I tried to cry out, but no word came from my parched throat. I think it must have been God who prevented me from crying out, for had I done so, it might have been worse for both of us.

"A minute later I could see that a great change had come over the man when you began speaking about your father and Hibbert. Then I was knocked all of a heap again when I learned that poor little Hibbert was the man's son, and that you knew it. I think that the time I passed while I was watching and listening behind the curtain was the most awful I have ever been through—yes, worse than the time on the raft, and that's saying a great deal; but there was one good thing about it—I was beginning to see how we had all wronged you at Garside—what a noble fellow you really are, Paul."

"Humbug! Get on."

"There's little more to tell. I didn't so much mind when the man bound you, especially as I saw that he was going to leave you. I waited till he had gone—long enough to make sure that he didn't mean popping in his head again; then I crept from my hiding-place. The rest you know. I hope you're not sorry I followed you?"

Paul began to think that the hand of God was in this, as it had been in so many other things. It must have been Something Higher than mere chance which had prompted Harry to follow him to that place.

"Heaven only knows what might have happened to me, Harry, if you hadn't followed me. But come, we mustn't waste any more time. We don't want to spend the night in this place."

"Not quite, though I would not mind exploring it some other time," exclaimed Harry, gazing round the chamber curiously. "Plunger would give something to strike on a place like this. It's chalks better than desert islands. Where does that other passage-way lead to?"

Paul had more than once put the same question to him self. That place of mystery had often been in his thoughts since the day he had first visited it, and frequently had he asked himself—Where does it lead to on the other side? He had now seen clearly enough that there must be some way out on the other side, for Zuker had gone that way. If he could only find out, the information might be of some service to Harry's father.

"I don't know, Harry; but I'd very much like to find out. Would you mind waiting here for a few minutes? I won't be long."

"What are you going to do?"

"Going to explore—just a little way. The coast's clear."

"Going to explore? Well, then, I do mind waiting here. If you mean exploring, I mean going with you."

"Very well, Harry, we'll explore together."

So the two boys passed together through the passage on the other side of the chamber.

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## CHAPTER XLVIII

### THE BURNING SHIP

The two boys had not gone very far before they came to a pause. It was impossible to see more than a few feet in front of them because of the darkness.

"Let's try to get a light," suggested Paul. "We can get one, I think, in the place we've just come from."

They returned to the chamber. Paul entered the recess from which Zuker had brought the rope and the cushions, and found that it was quite a storehouse; one part of it for provisions, tinned meats, fruits, fish; another for wood, tools, weapons, models; a third, for a curiously mixed wardrobe, which Paul guessed served the purpose of disguise. Here he found a lantern and matches, and thus provided with a light, they resumed their way.

The gallery or tunnel along which they now passed was about two hundred feet long. The width, as Paul roughly judged, was about thirteen feet, narrowing to some six or seven feet at the top. It had been cut through the chalk bed, at a depth of about six feet below the sand which covered it. At the end of this gallery were two passages, extending right and left. Passing down the former, they found it blocked by heaps of sand and chalk.

"It's quite certain we can't get out that way, Harry," said Paul; "we'd better try the other."

So, retracing their footsteps once more, they passed along the other passage. It was not so wide as the one they had already traversed, but the way was clear for a hundred yards or so; then the tunnel came abruptly to an end.

Paul regarded the wall in wonder. There was no way through it. Where, then, had Zuker gone? How had he managed to get out? Paul held the lantern up and examined the roof. It was clear to see that he was standing below what had once been the shaft to the tunnel. There were footholes in the sides.

"Ah, there's the way out! Hold the lantern, Harry, while I try to find the open sesame," said Paul.

Harry took the lantern, and Paul quickly made his way by means of the footholes to the top. He could then see that there was a square space which, though similar in appearance to the rest of the gallery, concealed the entrance to the shaft. He pushed it upward. It gave easily. It was a trap-door, leading into a square, ramshackle shed!

Paul made his way through into the shed, and a minute later Harry followed his example. They closed the trap-door, which then formed part of the floor, and completely concealed the opening into the shaft.

"Well, if that doesn't beat all!" exclaimed Harry, as the trap-door fell. "Mr. Zuker and his confederates must have been very tricky. No one would imagine what's beneath this old shed. Hallo! What's that?"

As Harry spoke a lurid gleam of light lit up the semi-darkness of the shed; only for an instant; then it as quickly died out.

"Seems like a fire somewhere," said Paul, as he tried to open the door of the shed; but it would not open. It was locked on the outside.

"We shall have to get through the window, Harry."

There was a small window on the right of the shed, just wide enough to get through.

"All right. Follow my leader, Paul."

Paul soon mounted to the window and climbed through. Harry quickly followed him. As he reached the ground there came another lurid gleam of light; then it died out as quickly as before.

"There it goes again, Paul. What is it?"

Paul was asking himself the same question. What was it? Whence did the light come? It was a dark night—no moon and few stars. But in the distance they could see lights flitting about like will-o'-the-wisps from the mastheads of ships; so they knew they were not far from the Medway.

"Thought so. We're close to the river," said Paul. "Now that we've found out all that we can, we'd better make for Garside."

"Yes. Hallo! there it goes again! Why—why, it's a ship on fire!" exclaimed Harry.

It was now clear enough to see that Harry was right. A ship was on fire. The flames, at first spasmodic, uncertain, had now gained a complete hold of the ship, and were shooting upward, like fiery serpents, into the sky.

All thought of Garside vanished from the boys' minds as they raced towards the river. As they drew nearer, they could see that the unusual spectacle had already attracted a great throng of spectators to the banks.

Little wonder, for as the flames crept upward to the rigging, writhing inward and outward to the arms, it was a grand, if terrible sight. And there was pathos in it, too; for the ship on fire was one of the great wooden ships in the Navy of the past. Its day of action—of fighting—had long since passed. So, moored in midstream, it had been used as a storeship.

The signal-lights "Ship on Fire" flashed along the river, and a picket-boat from a flagship, with other boats, approached as near as they could to the

burning ship. Was there anybody on board? It seemed not—so far, at least, as could be seen.

But suddenly a cry of horror went up from the crowd. A man had suddenly made his appearance on the deck. He rushed about like a hunted fox, trying to elude its pursuers; then, finding it impossible, flung himself, with a strange cry that long haunted Paul's ears, into the river.

Paul knew that the man was Zuker. The picket-boat tried to reach him, but could not. The fire had enveloped the sides of the old ship, and shot out tongues of flame from every porthole. For the space of a minute Zuker's figure was seen silhouetted in flame against the darkness. Then the waters closed over him, and he was seen no more.

"That—that was Zuker. I'm sure of it," Paul whispered to Harry, when he could speak.

"I thought it looked like him, too," said Harry, in an awestruck whisper. "What could he be doing on that ship?"

"Up to no good, I'm afraid; but good or ill, his work is ended now."

Zuker had at last come to his death by the element from which Paul's father had saved him so long ago.

"Yes; I don't think he'll trouble anybody again," answered Harry, as he slipped his arm, with a shudder, through Paul's.

The flames from the middle of the ship were now leaping fifty feet into the air. The river manuals played upon it, but made little or no impression. It seemed to hiss back contempt and defiance as the water fell.

The excitement of the spectators grew, for a new and terrible source of danger had revealed itself. The chains by which the old ship was moored

were beginning to give way. If that happened, she might drift, a mass of flame, against any one of the warships lying in her path.

"I say, Paul, this business may get father into a mess," Harry whispered.

Paul had forgotten, for the time, Mr. Moncrief's connection with the Government dockyard. Harry's words reminded him. A dread fear took possession of him. Perhaps the fire had all been designed—perhaps it was the work of an incendiary, and that incendiary Mr. Moncrief's enemy—Zuker. So long as the fire was limited to the old wooden ship it would not much matter, but if it once got from its moorings, it was impossible to say where the mischief would end.

"Oh, you needn't worry about your father, Harry," Paul answered, putting on his most cheerful voice and manner. "No one could blame him for a ship catching fire."

"I don't know so much about that. Pater's held responsible for almost everything. It's a great shame, that's what it is."

Paul thought the same, but did not venture to express an opinion. A buzz of excitement from the crowd broke in upon his meditations.

Looking in the direction in which all eyes were turned, he saw that a gunboat was steaming along the river. It was making for the flaming hulk.

"What's it going to do?" cried Harry, clutching Paul's arm excitedly. "It'll be right into the burning ship."

Paul was too intent on watching the man[oe]uvres of the gunboat to answer.

Suddenly, when it had got to within one hundred yards of the burning ship, it stopped and opened fire, just as though it had entered into action. Its target was the old ship—a mass of flame from bow to stern. The first shell,

missing its mark, went hissing into the river. Jets of water shot upward into the air and fell in a sparkling cascade.

Boom! A flash of light from the gunboat, a whiff of smoke. This time the shell finds its target. Myriads of sparks are whirled in a mad dance to the heavens, then drop again like golden rain into the river. Shell followed shell. The old warship, engaged in its last great battle, fought grimly on. Like the old Guard, it refused to surrender. Twelve shots had been fired. Raked from bow to stern, it was a pathetic spectacle, like some huge leviathan lying wounded to death on the water, with its undaunted heart throbbing a requiem.

Shell could not vanquish it, so a charge of guncotton was exploded immediately beneath it; then the old warship gave a lurch. There was a flash of light—its last dying effort. After, darkness. The great tongue of flame was engulfed in the waters.

The boys had been so absorbed in the terrible spectacle that they had taken no heed of time. But when the ship had gone down, they found that it was ten o'clock. Garside was a good three miles distant, so that it would be close upon eleven before they reached the school again.

Three or four search-parties had been formed under the masters, and they met one of these as they neared the gates. It had been decided between Paul and Harry that nothing should be said about their adventures in the cave until Paul had had an explanation with Mr. Weevil. There was, of course, no reason why they should not speak of the exciting spectacle they had witnessed on the river.

"It must have been a remarkable sight," admitted Mr. Travers, the head of the search-party, "but I don't think Mr. Weevil is likely to accept it as an excuse for your long absence from the school. Besides, you had no business to take with you a junior boy."

Harry was about to explain that he had followed of his own accord, but a glance from Paul kept him silent. When they reached the school, they found Mr. Weevil awaiting them in the hall. He seemed to know that something unusual had happened.

"Come to my room, Percival," he said.

Percival followed him to his room, just as he had done on that day when Hibbert died.

"Something has happened. What is it?" he demanded, as he closed the door.

There was no need for secrecy longer, so Paul told the master everything—how he had discovered Hibbert's parentage; how he had discovered the cave, and all the events that had happened in the train of these discoveries up to the moment of Zuker's death.

"Zuker dead!" exclaimed the master, when Paul came to this part of his story. "You are sure of it?"

"As certain as I can be of anything, sir."

Mr. Weevil paced up and down the room with his arms behind him. It was very clear to Paul to observe that he was very much agitated.

"Dead! dead!" he kept repeating; then suddenly stopped, and confronting Paul astonished him by abruptly demanding: "And what do you think of me—eh? What do you think of your master—eh? You think him a precious scoundrel—eh? You think that he ought to be with Zuker in the river—eh?"

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## CHAPTER XLIX

### THE PETITION—WHAT BEFELL IT

The master put the questions—the questions which formed so strong an indictment against himself—with grim solemnity. Paul scarcely knew how to answer him, so was silent.

"Well?" persisted Mr. Weevil.

"I must say that at one time I was suspicious of you, sir. I thought you were in league with traitors against your country—against England."

"When did your opinion alter?"

"When I heard you in the cave appealing to Zuker to give up his scheme; when I heard you telling him that the hand of a Higher than man was in it. Then I remembered that however stern you had been to others, you had been kind and tender to Hibbert, and it slowly dawned upon me that it was for poor Hibbert's sake you kept in with Zuker, that for his sake you were playing a part you did not care for."

"Thank you. I'm glad you've done me justice in your own mind, Percival," answered the master, with more feeling than he was in the habit of displaying. "You have guessed my motive precisely. It was for Hibbert's sake—the son of the sister I loved—that I kept on friendly terms with Zuker. But my duty to Hibbert—my love for him—did not make me blind to the interests of my country. All along I have been in communication with the Moncriefs. It was I who first communicated with Mr. Henry Moncrief, in cipher, the information of Zuker's arrival in England. It was arranged, however, that Zuker was to be allowed to develop his plans, along with his

confederates, before any action was taken to checkmate him. The Admiralty wished to obtain complete information of all the details of the scheme, and I alone was in the position of giving it them. First of all, however, I made my terms with the Admiralty. They were these: When Zuker's plans were developed, they were at liberty to take what action they pleased to counteract those plans, and arrest any accomplice who might be engaged in work with Zuker, but I made this proviso, that no step should be taken to arrest Zuker himself, without my knowledge and sanction. Furthermore, that in return for the information I was able to furnish as to every detail of the plot, I was to be permitted in the last resort to warn Zuker, so that he might escape to his native country, if he cared to.

"In that interview you overheard, I made my first strong appeal to him. Unfortunately it was not successful, and worse than that, he became suspicious of me. The death of dear little Hibbert took away the only link that bound me to Zuker. One or two of his confederates were arrested, and he himself became conscious that the net was closing round himself. Your appearance in his hiding-place must have brought that home to him. What happened after that I can only guess. I have two theories—the first, that, in escaping by the river, he might have taken refuge for a time on the old battleship, and was in hiding at the time when the fire broke out. The other theory is that, recognizing that his schemes had been a complete failure, he deliberately set fire to the ship, and perished in the flames. He who knows the motives as well as the actions of all men, will alone know which of these theories is the right one. God be merciful to him, as to me, miserable sinner."

Mr. Weevil stood with bowed head. And as he breathed, thus reverently, the response he had so often heard, Paul felt his mother's hand stealing into his, as it had so often stolen into it in the village church in days gone by, when the good vicar read the Litany, and prayed for deliverance from "lightning

and tempest, from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death." The man who had brought about "the sudden death" of his father, had ended his with tragic swiftness, and now stood before the Judge of all. The time for the last great trial had come for Israel Zuker.

"Before Him—before the Judge of all men," said Mr. Weevil, at length breaking the silence, "I hope to justify myself for what I have done, as well as for what I have left undone, but in the meantime I shall never forget the part that you have played, Percival. It is true, profoundly true, that no good deed is ever lost. Your kindness to Hibbert will ever be a sacred memory to me. Good-night, Percival, and God bless you."

"Good-night sir."

And Paul, with his heart very full, turned from the room.

When Paul went out, Mr. Weevil did not retire to rest. He was one of those men who require very little sleep. He unlocked a drawer in his desk, and took from it several loose sheets of paper, with entries on them. These he regarded closely for a moment or two, then leaned reflectively back in his chair, with eyes closed. Then he looked at the pages again, together with some memoranda jotted on a separate sheet of paper. His scrutiny ended, he put them back into the drawer, and locked them up again.

Having done this, he took up a sheet of foolscap, on which was written, in the form of a petition, the resolution of the Fifth calling upon Mr. Weevil to expel Percival from Garside. To this petition were attached the names of the mover and seconder of the resolution—Stanley Moncrief and Parfitt—followed by the names of the other boys in the Form, with the exception of Waterman.

Mr. Weevil had not yet answered this unusual petition, so he took up a pen and paper and wrote:

"Mr. Weevil's compliments, and he will be pleased to meet the Fifth, and go into their petition to-morrow. As so delicate a matter cannot be discussed before the whole school, the form will return to the class-room, where the master will come to them at the end of the day's work. One last proviso, as it is the conduct of Percival which has been impugned, it will, of course, be necessary for him to be present at the inquiry, so that he may be heard in his own defence."

This note he folded up, placed in an envelope, and directed to Hasluck, the head of the Form. The following morning it was delivered to Hasluck by Bax, the porter. Having read it, Hasluck passed it round the Form. Waterman was next to Percival. Instead of passing it to him, he just glanced at it and passed it back to Parfitt with a yawn.

"Doesn't interest me. More in your line, Parfitt."

Waterman, in this dexterous manner, escaped the painful duty of passing on a note for which he was in no way responsible.

As he afterwards said, "he liked to see others troubling over their own underhand business."

Parfitt bit his lip, then, without a word, handed it to Paul. Paul read it. He had no difficulty in understanding its meaning. Harry had told him about the meeting that had been held about him. This letter was the result of it.

Adopting Parfitt's own tactics, he handed it back without a word, but he could not help stealing a glance at Stanley. His eyes were heavy, as though from want of sleep. He looked quite haggard and ill. He kept his eyes away from Paul, as though uncertain as to himself. He looked very miserable, and, indeed, he was even more miserable than he looked.

At the close of school that day, the Fifth passed back to their class-room. Soon after, Mr. Weevil entered. He looked cold, stern, implacable—a different man from the one Paul had seen the previous night speaking in tremulous tones about Hibbert. Those little human traits seemed to have vanished with the night. He was no longer the man, but the judge.

"Step forward, Percival," he said briefly.

Paul stepped forward.

"You know the charge against you?"

"No, sir; I've come to hear."

"The charge is in this petition," said the master, taking up the petition, which he unfolded and placed on the desk. "I needn't read it, but I can tell you briefly what the charge is. The charge is that you connived with the boys of a rival college—St. Bede's—to have the flag, which is held in so much honour and esteem here, stolen from the tower."

"Yes, sir. Anything more?" asked Paul, as the master paused and glanced down at the petition.

"The petition further alleges that having placed this dishonour on the school, you connived with the enemy to keep it by them till it suited your time and purpose, and that then you arranged for its return."

"Time and purpose?" repeated Paul. "What purpose?"

"What purpose?" repeated the master, glancing again at the petition. "It is clearly enough set forth. Listen. 'Percival had made enemies of his Form, and had looked for his friends at St. Bede's. His object in getting back the flag was to try to regain at one stroke some of his lost popularity.' Is that clear enough?"

"Quite clear, sir. What followed?"

"A resolution was moved and carried, with only one dissentient, that you should be expelled from the school."

"Who—who moved the resolution?" asked Percival, with an effort.

"Is it worth while my giving names?"

"I would like to know, sir, if you would be kind enough."

Mr. Weevil glanced at the names. He did not answer. The silence was broken by Stanley.

"I moved the resolution, Percival—Paul!" he cried, in a voice that seemed to be choking him. "I did you an injustice before all the Form. I now ask your pardon before all the Form. I'm ashamed of myself—ashamed that I so degraded myself as to move that resolution. My eyes were shut. Now they're open. I've been groping about in the dark. Now I'm in the light. I was a fool ever to doubt you, but appearances were so against you. It was your turning away from Wyndham at the gravel-pits that so rankled in my mind, and—and your friendly meetings with him after. I did not know——"

"Stop! Not quite so fast!" commanded Mr. Weevil. Stanley had poured out at a feverish rate the words that had been burning at his heart throughout the whole of the night and day. "Do I understand that you, Moncrief major, who proposed this resolution, now wish to withdraw it?"

"Yes, sir; every word of it. I have wronged Percival—deeply wronged him, and before all the Form I ask his pardon."

Paul's heart leapt with joy. He cared little what the others might think. Stanley had come round of his own accord. He had voluntarily asked his pardon. Paul grasped the hand stretched out to him.

"I see that it was you, Parfitt, who seconded this resolution, asking that Percival should be expelled from the school. Is it your wish to withdraw also?" asked the master.

"Certainly not," said Parfitt indignantly. "I'm not going to turn tail because Moncrief has. If Moncrief has sold me, I'm not going to sell all the other fellows who signed that petition."

A murmur of approval came from "the other fellows," except Waterman. He greeted it with the customary yawn.

"You still hold to your wish that Percival should be expelled from Garside?" asked Mr. Weevil.

"Yes, sir."

"You understand that expelling a scholar from Garside is a very serious matter. It is a grave stigma placed on him at the commencement of his career—a stigma which clings to him when he goes from school into the sterner battle of life. I'm bound to impress this upon you, Parfitt, so that you may understand the gravity of the step you wish me to take."

"I understand, sir. We all understand."

"And you decline to do what Moncrief has done—withdraw from the petition?"

"Yes, sir. We can't stand Percival any longer."

"Hear! hear!" from Newall.

Suddenly, to the astonishment of the Form, the master opened the desk before him, and drew from it a book.

"You know this book?" he demanded.

Know it? They knew it but too well. It was the dreaded Black Book.

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# CHAPTER L

## FOUND OUT

Why had the master produced the Black Book?

What was it to do with the question whether Percival should or should not be expelled?

"You are wondering why I produce the Black Book," said the master slowly, as though reading their thoughts. "I will explain—we have never yet discovered who tore out the leaves from this book. It occurred to me that before taking the step of expelling Percival from the school, it would be as well to make one more effort to find out who is the culprit.

"A few weeks ago, I received an anonymous letter suggesting that Percival should be questioned as to what he was doing on the night that part of the Black Book, and other documents, disappeared from my desk. As a rule, I take no heed of anonymous communications. The testimony of any one who is ashamed to put his name to a letter is, as a rule, worthless. But I was keenly interested in trying to discover who the culprit was who opened my desk, and I thought it just possible that if I could only find out the writer of this anonymous letter, it might lead to other discoveries which would throw light upon the theft of my notes."

The boys listened intently. What did it mean? Was yet another and more serious charge to be made against Percival?

"The letter was in a disguised hand, like most anonymous letters," the master proceeded; "but a master becomes a bit of an expert in handwriting, so, with the help of Mr. Travers here, the master of your Form, I was not

long in finding out who wrote the anonymous letter. It was written by Parfitt."

The accusation was made slowly, deliberately, as by one who makes sure of his facts before speaking. It fell as a bomb in the midst of the listening boys. Parfitt turned to an ashen hue, and muttered something between his teeth.

"Speak up, sir! Please not to mutter," commanded Mr. Weevil, turning to Parfitt. "Do you deny that this letter"—he held up the anonymous letter, with its cramped, disguised handwriting—"is the work of your hand?"

Parfitt held up his head, and put on a bold front.

"No, sir; I don't deny it. That letter was written by me. As there were other things coming out against Percival, I thought it only right that you should make some inquiry into what he was doing on the night when the pages were torn from the Black Book. I did not want to push myself forward. I thought the inquiry would be better made by you; but as no steps seem to have been taken to find out what Percival did, I don't see why I should keep back what I know any longer."

"Well, what is it? What do you know? I am here to learn all I can."

"Well, sir, on the night that the pages were torn from the Black Book, I saw Percival get out of bed, slip into some of his things, and out of the dormitory. I saw him steal along the corridor, for what purpose I couldn't guess. I made a pretty good guess the next day."

"Your guess was that Percival opened my desk, and stole the papers?"

"I believe he did, sir. For what else could he have stolen from the dormitory in the dead of night?"

"Well, but what could be his purpose? Can you explain that?"

"Oh, that's easy enough explained. There were entries against himself and his friend Moncrief in the book. A serious one had been made against Moncrief that very afternoon, for which, you will remember, sir, he was sent to Dormitory X."

"I remember—quite well," said the master. "Well, Percival, what have you to say against this last charge?"

"Only that it is as false as the other."

"Did you leave your dormitory that night?"

"Yes, sir; I don't deny that. I did leave my room, but not to steal. I left it to go to Moncrief in Dormitory X. I thought the punishment too severe, sir, if you'll pardon me for saying so, so I thought that I would keep him company. It was wrong of me, I know; but I did not give it much thought at the time."

"And I can confirm every word that Percival has said!" exclaimed Stanley. "He came to me that night—to Dormitory X."

"Pshaw!" cried Newall, taking up Parfitt's case. "How could he get to you through the locked door?"

"He didn't get through the door. He came along the parapet, and got through the dormer window."

Blank amazement fell on the group.

"It's all very well to say that. Any one could say that," cried Parfitt; "but we want something better than that. We want proof!"

"If you won't take Moncrief's word, I think I can prove it by Mr. Weevil," said Paul, turning to the master. "As I passed by the window of your room,

sir, I took the liberty of peeping in. I saw you discussing some plans with a friend. Perhaps you can recall it, sir?"

Mr. Weevil's mind had gone back to that night. He knew well enough to whom Paul was referring thus delicately as his friend—Zuker.

"Percival is right in every particular, but"—he broke off, as though suddenly recalling something—"there is one thing I ought to say. Fancying I heard a noise in Dormitory X that night, I paid it a visit, but found nobody there, except Moncrief, and he seemed fast asleep."

Parfitt, who had been looking glum, brightened up at this again.

"Seemed, sir," repeated Stanley, with a smile; "but I was just about as wide awake as I am now, and Percival was—under the bed."

There was a titter of laughter at this piece of information. The ghost of a smile played across the stern face of Mr. Weevil.

"I think Percival has made it perfectly clear as to where he was that night. You see that he is perfectly innocent of the charge brought against him by Parfitt; so we are thrown back into precisely the position we were in before. We have still to find out who is the real culprit—who it was opened my desk that night. As Parfitt has failed in his purpose, let us put our heads together and see if we can get a little nearer the truth. I will try to reconstruct the case for you, as the French say. Who was the culprit? What was his motive? His motive was to get possession of certain pieces of paper in my desk which gave valuable information for a prize competition which was taking place amongst the seniors—the prize, that is to say, to be given by Admiral Talbot for the best essay on 'The Invasion of Great Britain.' He did not want the Black Book. That would give him no assistance in his essay; but what he wanted was to throw suspicion on a certain boy—also a competitor for the prize—who was absent from his dormitory that night. He

did this by removing the leaf, amongst others, which referred to the boy himself and the detention of his friend in the Punishment Dormitory. Am I clear?"

The Form were following Mr. Weevil so closely that they could only murmur an assent.

"I have told you about the anonymous letter," continued Mr. Weevil, "and the conclusion I had arrived at by the help of Mr. Travers. You have seen that that conclusion is correct, for Parfitt has himself admitted it. So much is clear. Now follow me a little farther. Not long after receiving this anonymous letter, some of the competitors began to send in their essays for the Talbot prize. Among others was one from Parfitt."

A profound silence fell on the room as the master once more pronounced that name. Every eye was turned to Parfitt, who was still doing his best to put on a bold face.

"It was a remarkably clever piece of work and would assuredly have won the prize. It was too clever, in fact. It contained information which astonished me—information which could not be obtained from the school library. It was information, in fact, such as I myself had obtained after special research, and which had been embodied in the notes that had been stolen from my desk."

"You mean to say that I am the thief—that I stole your notes!" blustered Parfitt.

"Silence, sir!" came the stern voice of the master. "Have the courtesy to hear me to the end. I have but little more to add, and then I shall be only too pleased to hear anything you may have to say in your defence. The way in which the information was used was so ingenious that it would have been quite impossible to declare that the writer of this essay was the culprit. I

was quite certain of it in my own mind, but it needed additional proof. How to get it was the next point. In consultation with Mr. Travers here, a speedy decision was come to. It was of the utmost importance that the innocent should be cleared; the guilty punished. A locksmith was called in on the next half-holiday. Parfitt's box was opened, its contents examined. At the bottom we discovered the missing notes. The pages from the Black Book, as being useless, had been destroyed. The same fate would doubtless have followed my notes, so soon as the result of the competition was known. I took the notes from the box. A facsimile was put in their place. Here are the originals."

He held up the notes. All heads were eagerly craned forward to look at them.

"These are the originals," repeated the master, when the sensation caused by their production had abated. "I doubt not the facsimiles to which I have referred will still be found in Parfitt's box. What I suggest, therefore, is that he hand over his key to Hasluck, the head of this Form, that the porter should then bring the box to this room, and that it be opened in the presence of all of you. We shall then see if the facsimiles are still there."

Not a word fell from Parfitt's lips in answer to this appeal. At that moment he was passing through one of the most terrible ordeals a boy can pass through. The silence in the room became painful.

"I hope it won't be needful to call in the locksmith again, Parfitt," said the master. Then in a burst of agony came from the wretched boy's lips:

"You needn't open the box. I—I did it."

He dropped to the form, and covered his ashen face with his hands. Then came the master's voice again, with the solemnity of a judge pronouncing sentence:

"I did not wish to go through this ignominy, Parfitt, before the whole school. That is the reason I confined the inquiry to your Form and this room. Everything has been done to spare your feelings, though I cannot help saying that you do not seem to have cared very much for the feelings of others. I am sorry to say that the sentence you wished passed on Percival must be passed on yourself. You can no longer remain a scholar at Garside."

Parfitt knew well enough what that meant—it was a sentence of expulsion. He staggered to his feet, and was about to pass out without a word, when the voice of Paul brought him to a standstill.

"I do not mind what has been said against me—indeed, I don't!" exclaimed Paul; "we've all made mistakes; so please don't go so far with Parfitt. Don't expel him. Give him another chance!"

Parfitt could scarcely believe his ears. The boy whom he had sought to expel was taking his part—pleading that he might remain.

"It is generous of you to plead for him, but after what has happened, how is it possible for him to remain?" said the master.

Paul scarcely knew how to answer; but as he stood nonplussed a mist rose in the room, and as the mist cleared he saw a garden, with a delicate-faced boy, lying in an invalid chair, as though asleep. A little wren had perched itself upon his shoulder.

"Let him stay for—for Hibbert's sake," came in a gulp.

The master turned his head for a moment. When he once more faced the boys, the hard light had vanished from the blinking eyes, and a softer light shone there.

"What has happened has not gone beyond this room. The facts, so far, have not been disclosed to the whole school," he said. "It may not, perhaps, be

necessary. I will see what can be done in consultation with my colleagues. I trust it may be possible for us to respond to Percival's generous appeal. Attention! Half-turn! March!"

And the boys filed slowly from the class-room.

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Vacation at last!

To Paul the term through which he had passed was the most memorable in his school life, as it was, perhaps, the most memorable in the history of the school. He spent a week with the good mother whom he loved, and who so loved him. He sat again in the old church with her, and heard again the vicar's fervent voice in the Litany:

"From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death."

In the days gone by he used to wonder how it was that his mother's hand used to tremble in his when those solemn words echoed in the church. Now he understood, as he knelt once more by her dear side—none better. The last term at Garside had taught him a lesson which would never be erased from his mind so long as life lasted.

At the end of the week he went to Redmead, in response to the invitation which Mr. Walter Moncrief had sent him in that letter to Garside which had caused him such heart-burning. Stanley was there to meet him. The old friendship between them was resumed. The clouds had passed away, leaving them the better, the stronger—they were once more in the sunshine.

Mr. Moncrief had learnt all that had happened at Garside. Harry entertained them at tea-time with his and Plunger's adventures as members of the

Mystic Order of Beetles, and his sister nearly had a fit of apoplexy as he described Plunger crawling on hands and knees round the ring while the Mystic Brethren proceeded to initiate him as "a brother."

Stanley was the only one who was not infected with Connie's mirth. He remained so serious amid the general merriment that Harry suddenly brought down his hand upon his shoulder and in a tragic voice declaimed the incantation which had made so remarkable an impression upon Plunger:

"Beetles of the Mystic Band,  
Wind we round thee hand in hand,"

and so on.

"No, we're not going to send Stan to the Realms of Creepy-Crawley," smiled Connie, putting her arm through her cousin's with an air of possession as Harry ended:

"We don't mind Mr. Plunger going there. He'd be quite at home; but not Stan."

Stanley smiled, but soon relapsed into his former gravity.

"A penny for your thoughts, Stan!" said Mrs. Moncrief.

"Oh, I was only thinking of one of the Beetles—Wyndham. I was wondering whether we should see anything of him during the vac."

"Would you like to meet him?" asked Mr. Moncrief.

"Very much."

Paul said nothing; but he felt a keen sense of gratification at the words that fell from Stanley. It showed that all animosity towards Wyndham had completely vanished, and that he was anxious to meet him again, not as an enemy, but on a footing of friendship.

Mr. Moncrief was absent for a good part of the next day. On the day following he announced that he was going to take them for a drive in the wagonette. They were, of course, anxious to know where.

"Well, Harry has asked me once or twice whether we couldn't travel over some of the ground over which Paul travelled on the night when he broke in upon us here at the end of his last vacation. I think this is the most

favourable opportunity we shall have to carry out his suggestion, if you're all agreeable."

Of course they were agreeable. So, early the next morning, the wagonette came to the door, and the little party, in the best of spirits, started on the drive.

No contrast could have been greater than the contrast between that morning of bright sunshine and the night when Paul started from Redmead with Mr. Moncrief. On that never-to-be-forgotten night danger seemed to be lurking in every hedgerow. The shadows lay thickly across their pathway, and the sight of home had never been so dear to Paul as when he at length came in sight of it that night. How different it all seemed in the bright sunshine!

By an indirect route they came to the common over which Paul had ridden on Falcon. They stopped at the spot where Zuker and his confederate had seized Falcon's bridle. Then they turned back, and paused once more where the brave horse had staggered and fallen. Paul had not seen the place since, and as they reached it, he lived once again through the incidents of those few terrible moments when the life-blood of Falcon was slowly oozing away. He could see it lying there; he could see the crimson stream running from its flank, the look of pathos in its eyes as it turned to him.

"I think we will drive on," said Mr. Moncrief gently. "We owe a good deal to Falcon, so I mean to have a little memorial to his memory some day—to the memory of a noble horse. There are some animals, it seems to me, who are as much entitled to it as human beings."

A great surprise was in store for them when they reached the well down which Paul had hidden from his pursuers. Wyndham was standing there, just as he had stood on the night when he had covered Paul's retreat!

Then it turned out that Mr. Moncrief had arranged this little surprise on the previous day; that he had visited Wyndham, and appointed to meet him at the well. To the delight of the boys, the arrangement went still further—Wyndham was to return with them, and spend a few days at Redmead.

Stanley was one of the first to give him a hearty greeting.

"You must be my friend as well as Paul's," he said earnestly, as he shook him by the hand.

"There's no one, I suppose, who would like to repeat Paul's experience in the well?" smiled Mr. Moncrief, when the excitement of the meeting had cooled down.

The invitation, it is unnecessary to say, was "declined with thanks."

The happy party returned to Redmead. When the evening came on, the blinds drawn, the lamps lit, and the friends were all together, Paul could not help thinking there was just one thing missing to complete the day's experience.

"When I came here that night and listened at the door, you were singing," he said.

"Singing what?" asked Mrs. Moncrief.

"Now the day is over."

"Happy thought! Let us have it again!" exclaimed Mr. Moncrief.

Mrs. Moncrief went to the piano, and heartily they sang:

"Now the day is over,  
Night is drawing nigh,  
Shadows of the evening

Steal across the sky.

Through the long night watches,  
May Thine angels spread  
Their white wings above me,  
Watching round my bed."

Of a surety that fervent appeal had been answered. God had indeed guarded the boys through the "long night watches" at school, and through much trial and temptation had brought them safely together under the same hospitable roof.

**THE END**

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