

**RUDYARD
KIPLING**

STALKY & CO.

Редъярд Киплинг

Stalky & Co.

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Rudyard Kipling Stalky & Co

“Let us now praise famous men” —
Men of little showing —
For their work continueth,
And their work continueth,
Greater than their knowing.

Western wind and open surge
Tore us from our mothers;
Flung us on a naked shore
(Twelve bleak houses by the shore!
Seven summers by the shore!)
‘Mid two hundred brothers.

There we met with famous men
Set in office o’er us.
And they beat on us with rods —
Faithfully with many rods —
Daily beat us on with rods —
For the love they bore us!

Out of Egypt unto Troy —
Over Himalaya —
Far and sure our bands have gone —
Hy-Brasil or Babylon,
Islands of the Southern Run,
And cities of Cathaia!

And we all praise famous men —
Ancients of the College;
For they taught us common sense —
Tried to teach us common sense —
Truth and God’s Own Common Sense
Which is more than knowledge!

Each degree of Latitude
Strung about Creation
Seeth one (or more) of us,
(Of one muster all of us —
Of one master all of us –)
Keen in his vocation.

This we learned from famous men
Knowing not its uses
When they showed in daily work

Man must finish off his work —
Right or wrong, his daily work —
And without excuses.

Servants of the staff and chain,
Mine and fuse and grapnel —
Some before the face of Kings,
Stand before the face of Kings;
Bearing gifts to divers Kings —
Gifts of Case and Shrapnel.

This we learned from famous men
Teaching in our borders.
Who declare'd it was best,
Safest, easiest and best —
Expeditious, wise and best —
To obey your orders.

Some beneath the further stars
Bear the greater burden.
Set to serve the lands they rule,
(Save he serve no man may rule)
Serve and love the lands they rule;
Seeking praise nor guerdon.

This we learned from famous men
Knowing not we learned it.
Only, as the years went by —
Lonely, as the years went by —
Far from help as years went by
Plainer we discerned it.

Wherefore praise we famous men
From whose bays we borrow —
They that put aside Today —
All the joys of their Today —
And with toil of their Today
Bought for us Tomorrow!

Bless and praise we famous men
Men of little showing!
For their work continueth
And their work continueth
Broad and deep continueth
Great beyond their knowing!

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“IN AMBUSH.”

In summer all right-minded boys built huts in the furze-hill behind the College – little lairs whittled out of the heart of the prickly bushes, full of stumps, odd root-ends, and spikes, but, since they were strictly forbidden, palaces of delight. And for the fifth summer in succession, Stalky, McTurk, and Beetle (this was before they reached the dignity of a study) had built like beavers a place of retreat and meditation, where they smoked.

Now, there was nothing in their characters as known to Mr. Prout, their house-master, at all commanding respect; nor did Foxy, the subtle red-haired school Sergeant, trust them. His business was to wear tennis-shoes, carry binoculars, and swoop hawklike upon evil boys. Had he taken the field alone, that hut would have been raided, for Foxy knew the manners of his quarry; but Providence moved Mr. Prout, whose school-name, derived from the size of his feet, was Hooper, to investigate on his own account; and it was the cautious Stalky who found the track of his pugs on the very floor of their lair one peaceful afternoon when Stalky would fain have forgotten Prout and his works in a volume of Surtees and a new briar-wood pipe. Crusoe, at sight of the footprint, did not act more swiftly than Stalky. He removed the pipes, swept up all loose match-ends, and departed to warn Beetle and McTurk.

But it was characteristic of the boy that he did not approach his allies till he had met and conferred with little Hartopp, President of the Natural History Society, an institution which Stalky held in contempt, Hartopp was more than surprised when the boy meekly, as he knew how, begged to propose himself, Beetle, and McTurk as candidates; confessed to a long-smothered interest in first-flowerings, early butterflies, and new arrivals, and volunteered, if Mr. Hartopp saw fit, to enter on the new life at once. Being a master, Hartopp was suspicious; but he was also an enthusiast, and his gentle little soul had been galled by chance-heard remarks from the three, and specially Beetle. So he was gracious to that repentant sinner, and entered the three names in his book.

Then, and not till then, did Stalky seek Beetle and McTurk in their house form-room. They were stowing away books for a quiet afternoon in the furze, which they called the “wuzzy.”

“All up,” said Stalky, serenely. “I spotted Heffy’s fairy feet round our hut after dinner. ‘Blessing they’re so big.’”

“Con-found! Did you hide our pipes?” said Beetle.

“Oh, no. Left ‘em in the middle of the hut, of course. What a blind ass you are, Beetle! D’you think nobody thinks but yourself? Well, we can’t use the hut any more. Hooper will be watchin’ it.”

“Bother! Likewise blow!” said McTurk thoughtfully, unpacking the volumes with which his chest was cased. The boys carried their libraries between their belt and their collar. “Nice job! This means we’re under suspicion for the rest of the term.”

“Why? All that Heffy has found is a hut. He and Foxy will watch it. It’s nothing to do with us; only we mustn’t be seen that way for a bit.”

“Yes, and where else are we to go?” said Beetle. “You chose that place, too – an’ – an’ I wanted to read this afternoon.”

Stalky sat on a desk drumming his heels on the form.

“You’re a despondin’ brute, Beetle. Sometimes I think I shall have to drop you altogether. Did you ever know your Uncle Stalky forget you yet? *His rebus infectis*— after I’d seen Heffy’s man-tracks marchin’ round our hut, I found little Hartopp —*destricto ense*— wavin’ a butterfly-net. I conciliated Hartopp. ‘Told him that you’d read papers to the Bug-hunters if he’d let you join, Beetle. ‘Told him you liked butterflies, Turkey. Anyhow, I soothed the Hartoffles, and we’re Bug-hunters now.’”

“What’s the good of that?” said Beetle.

“Oh, Turkey, kick him!”

In the interests of science bounds were largely relaxed for the members of the Natural History Society. They could wander, if they kept clear of all houses, practically where they chose; Mr. Hartopp holding himself responsible for their good conduct.

Beetle began to see this as McTurk began the kicking.

“I’m an ass, Stalky!” he said, guarding the afflicted part. “*Pax*, Turkey. I’m an ass.”

“Don’t stop, Turkey. Isn’t your Uncle Stalky a great man?”

“Great man,” said Beetle.

“All the same bug-huntin’s a filthy business,” said McTurk. “How the deuce does one begin?”

“This way,” said Stalky, turning to some fags’ lockers behind him. “Fags are dabs at Natural History. Here’s young Braybrooke’s botany-case.” He flung out a tangle of decayed roots and adjusted the slide. “Gives one no end of a professional air, I think. Here’s Clay Minor’s geological hammer. Beetle can carry that. Turkey, you’d better covet a butterfly-net from somewhere.”

“I’m blowed if I do,” said McTurk, simply, with immense feeling. “Beetle, give me the hammer.”

“All right. I’m not proud. Chuck us down that net on top of the lockers, Stalky.”

“That’s all right. It’s a collapsible jamboree, too. Beastly luxurious dogs these fags are. Built like a fishin’-rod. ‘Pon my sainted Sam, but we look the complete Bug-hunters! Now, listen to your Uncle Stalky! We’re goin’ along the cliffs after butterflies. Very few chaps come there. We’re goin’ to leg it, too. You’d better leave your book behind.”

“Not much!” said Beetle, firmly. “I’m not goin’ to be done out of my fun for a lot of filthy butterflies.”

“Then you’ll sweat horrid. You’d better carry my Jorrocks. ‘Twon’t make you any hotter.”

They all sweated; for Stalky led them at a smart trot west away along the cliffs under the furze-hills, crossing combe after gorzy combe. They took no heed to flying rabbits or fluttering fritillaries, and all that Turkey said of geology was utterly unquotable.

“Are we going to Clovelly?” he puffed at last, and they flung themselves down on the short, springy turf between the drone of the sea below and the light summer wind among the inland trees. They were looking into a combe half full of old, high furze in gay bloom that ran up to a fringe of brambles and a dense wood of mixed timber and hollies. It was as though one-half the combe were filled with golden fire to the cliff’s edge. The side nearest to them was open grass, and fairly bristled with notice-boards.

“Fee-rocious old cove, this,” said Stalky, reading the nearest. “*Prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law*. G. M. Dabney, Col., J.P.,’ an’ all the rest of it. ‘Don’t seem to me that any chap in his senses would trespass here, does it?’”

“You’ve got to prove damage ‘fore you can prosecute for anything! ‘Can’t prosecute for trespass,” said McTurk, whose father held many acres in Ireland. “That’s all rot!”

“Glad of that, ‘cause this looks like what we wanted. Not straight across, Beetle, you blind lunatic! Anyone could spot us half a mile off. This way; and furl up your beastly butterfly-net.”

Beetle disconnected the ring, thrust the net into a pocket, shut up the handle to a two-foot stave, and slid the cane-ring round his waist. Stalky led inland to the wood, which was, perhaps, a quarter of a mile from the sea, and reached the fringe of the brambles.

“*Now* we can get straight down through the furze, and never show up at all,” said the tactician. “Beetle, go ahead and explore. Snf! Snf! Beastly stink of fox somewhere!”

On all fours, save when he clung to his spectacles, Beetle wormed into the gorse, and presently announced between grunts of pain that he had found a very fair fox-track. This was well for Beetle, since Stalky pinched him *a tergo*. Down that tunnel they crawled. It was evidently a highway for the inhabitants of the combe; and, to their inexpressible joy, ended, at the very edge of the cliff, in a few square feet of dry turf walled and roofed with impenetrable gorse.

“By gum! There isn’t a single thing to do except lie down,” said Stalky, returning a knife to his pocket. “Look here!”

He parted the tough stems before him, and it was as a window opened on a far view of Lundy, and the deep sea sluggishly nosing the pebbles a couple of hundred feet below. They could hear young jackdaws squawking on the ledges, the hiss and jabber of a nest of hawks somewhere out of sight; and, with great deliberation, Stalky spat on to the back of a young rabbit sunning himself far down where only a cliff-rabbit could have found foot-hold. Great gray and black gulls screamed against the jackdaws; the heavy-scented acres of bloom round them were alive with low-nesting birds, singing or silent as the shadow of the wheeling hawks passed and returned; and on the naked turf across the combe rabbits thumped and frolicked.

“Whew! What a place! Talk of natural history; this is it,” said Stalky, filling himself a pipe. “Isn’t it scrumptious? Good old sea!” He spat again approvingly, and was silent.

McTurk and Beetle had taken out their books and were lying on their stomachs, chin in hand. The sea snored and gurgled; the birds, scattered for the moment by these new animals, returned to their businesses, and the boys read on in the rich, warm, sleepy silence.

“Hullo, here’s a keeper,” said Stalky, shutting “Handley Cross” cautiously, and peering through the jungle. A man with a gun appeared on the sky-line to the east. “Confound him, he’s going to sit down.”

“He’d swear we were poachin’, too,” said Beetle. “What’s the good of pheasants’ eggs? They’re always addled, too.”

“Might as well get up to the wood, I think,” said Stalky. “We don’t want G. M. Dabney, Col., J.P., to be bothered about us so soon. Up the wuzzy and keep quiet! He may have followed us, you know.”

Beetle was already far up the tunnel. They heard him gasp indescribably: there was the crash of a heavy body leaping through the furze.

“Aie! yeou little red rascal. I see yeou!” The keeper threw the gun to his shoulder, and fired both barrels in their direction. The pellets dusted the dry stems round them as a big fox plunged between Stalky’s legs, and ran over the cliff-edge.

They said nothing till they reached the wood, torn, disheveled, hot, but unseen.

“Narrow squeak,” said Stalky. “I’ll swear some of the pellets went through my hair.”

“Did you see him?” said Beetle. “I almost put my hand on him. Wasn’t he a wopper! Didn’t he stink! Hullo, Turkey, what’s the matter? Are you hit?”

McTurk’s lean face had turned pearly white; his mouth, generally half open, was tight shut, and his eyes blazed. They had never seen him like this save once in a sad time of civil war.

“Do you know that that was just as bad as murder?” he said, in a grating voice, as he brushed prickles from his head.

“Well, he didn’t hit us,” said Stalky. “I think it was rather a lark. Here, where are you going?”

“I’m going up to the house, if there is one,” said McTurk, pushing through the hollies. “I am going to tell this Colonel Dabney.”

“Are you crazy? He’ll swear it served us jolly well right. He’ll report us. It’ll be a public lickin’. Oh, Turkey, don’t be an ass! Think of us!”

“You fool!” said McTurk, turning savagely. “D’you suppose I’m thinkin’ of *us*? It’s the keeper.”

“He’s cracked,” said Beetle, miserably, as they followed. Indeed, this was a new Turkey – a haughty, angular, nose-lifted Turkey – whom they accompanied through a shrubbery on to a lawn, where a white-whiskered old gentleman with a cleek was alternately putting and blaspheming vigorously.

“Are you Colonel Dabney?” McTurk began in this new creaking voice of his.

“I – I am, and – ” his eyes traveled up and down the boy – “who – what the devil d’you want? Ye’ve been disturbing my pheasants. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye needn’t laugh at it.” (McTurk’s not

too lovely features had twisted themselves into a horrible sneer at the word pheasant.) “You’ve been birds’-nesting. You needn’t hide your hat. I can see that you belong to the College. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye do! Your name and number at once, sir. Ye want to speak to me – Eh? You saw my notice-boards? Must have. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye did! Damnable, oh damnable!”

He choked with emotion. McTurk’s heel tapped the lawn and he stuttered a little – two sure signs that he was losing his temper. But why should he, the offender, be angry?

“Lo-look here, sir. Do – do you shoot foxes? Because, if you don’t, your keeper does. We’ve seen him! I do-don’t care what you call us – but it’s an awful thing. It’s the ruin of good feelin’ among neighbors. A ma-man ought to say once and for all how he stands about preservin’. It’s worse than murder, because there’s no legal remedy.” McTurk was quoting confusedly from his father, while the old gentleman made noises in his throat.

“Do you know who I am?” he gurgled at last; Stalky and Beetle quaking.

“No, sorr, nor do I care if ye belonged to the Castle itself. Answer me now, as one gentleman to another. Do ye shoot foxes or do ye not?”

And four years before Stalky and Beetle had carefully kicked McTurk out of his Irish dialect! Assuredly he had gone mad or taken a sunstroke, and as assuredly he would be slain – once by the old gentleman and once by the Head. A public licking for the three was the least they could expect. Yet – if their eyes and ears were to be trusted – the old gentleman had collapsed. It might be a lull before the storm, but —

“I do not.” He was still gurgling.

“Then you must sack your keeper. He’s not fit to live in the same county with a God-fearin’ fox. An’ a vixen, too – at this time o’ year!”

“Did ye come up on purpose to tell me this?”

“Of course I did, ye silly man,” with a stamp of the foot. “Would you not have done as much for me if you’d seen that thing happen on my land, now?”

Forgotten – forgotten was the College and the decency due to elders! McTurk was treading again the barren purple mountains of the rainy West coast, where in his holidays he was viceroy of four thousand naked acres, only son of a three-hundred-year-old house, lord of a crazy fishing-boat, and the idol of his father’s shiftless tenantry. It was the landed man speaking to his equal – deep calling to deep – and the old gentleman acknowledged the cry.

“I apologize,” said he. “I apologize unreservedly – to you, and to the Old Country. Now, will you be good enough to tell me your story?”

“We were in your combe,” McTurk began, and he told his tale alternately as a schoolboy and, when the iniquity of the thing overcame him, as an indignant squire; concluding: “So you see he must be in the habit of it. I – we – one never wants to accuse a neighbor’s man; but I took the liberty in this case – ”

“I see. Quite so. For a reason ye had. Infamous – oh, infamous!”

The two had fallen into step beside each other on the lawn, and Colonel Dabney was talking as one man to another. “This comes of promoting a fisherman – a fisherman – from his lobster-pots. It’s enough to ruin the reputation of an archangel. Don’t attempt to deny it. It is! Your father has brought you up well. He has. I’d much like the pleasure of his acquaintance. Very much, indeed. And these young gentlemen? English they are. Don’t attempt to deny it. They came up with you, too? Extraordinary! Extraordinary, now! In the present state of education I shouldn’t have thought any three boys would be well enough grounded. But out of the mouths of – No – no! Not that by any odds. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye’re not! Sherry always catches me under the liver, but – beer, now? Eh? What d’you say to beer, and something to eat? It’s long since I was a boy – abominable nuisances; but exceptions prove the rule. And a vixen, too!” They were fed on the terrace by a gray-haired housekeeper. Stalky and Beetle merely ate, but McTurk with bright eyes continued a free and lofty discourse; and ever the old gentleman treated him as a brother.

“My dear man, of course ye can come again. Did I not say exceptions prove the rule? The lower combe? Man, dear, anywhere ye please, so long as you do not disturb my pheasants. The two are not incompatible. Don’t attempt to deny it. They’re not! I’ll never allow another gun, though. Come and go as ye please. I’ll not see you, and ye needn’t see me. Ye’ve been well brought up. Another glass of beer, now? I tell you a fisherman he was and a fisherman he shall be to-night again. He shall! Wish I could drown him. I’ll convoy you to the Lodge. My people are not precisely – ah – broke to boy, but they’ll know you again.”

He dismissed them with many compliments by the high Lodge-gate in the split-oak park palings and they stood still; even Stalky, who had played second, not to say a dumb, fiddle, regarding McTurk as one from another world. The two glasses of strong home-brewed had brought a melancholy upon the boy, for, slowly strolling with his hands in his pockets, he crooned: – “Oh, Paddy dear, and did ye hear the news that’s goin’ round?”

Under other circumstances Stalky and Beetle would have fallen upon him, for that song was barred utterly – anathema – the sin of witchcraft. But seeing what he had wrought, they danced round him in silence, waiting till it pleased him to touch earth.

The tea-bell rang when they were still half a mile from College. McTurk shivered and came out of dreams. The glory of his holiday estate had left him. He was a Colleger of the College, speaking English once more.

“Turkey, it was immense!” said Stalky, generously. “I didn’t know you had it in you. You’ve got us a hut for the rest of the term, where we simply *can’t* be collared. Fids! Fids! Oh, Fids! I gloat! Hear me gloat!”

They spun wildly on their heels, jodeling after the accepted manner of a “gloat,” which is not unremotely allied to the primitive man’s song of triumph, and dropped down the hill by the path from the gasometer just in time to meet their house-master, who had spent the afternoon watching their abandoned hut in the “wuzzy.”

Unluckily, all Mr. Prout’s imagination leaned to the darker side of life, and he looked on those young-eyed cherubims most sourly. Boys that he understood attended house-matches and could be accounted for at any moment. But he had heard McTurk openly deride cricket – even house-matches; Beetle’s views on the honor of the house he knew were incendiary; and he could never tell when the soft and smiling Stalky was laughing at him. Consequently – since human nature is what it is – those boys had been doing wrong somewhere. He hoped it was nothing very serious, but...

“*Ti-ra-ra-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” Stalky, still on his heels, whirled like a dancing dervish to the dining-hall.

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” Beetle spun behind him with outstretched arms.

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” McTurk’s voice cracked.

Now was there or was there not a distinct flavor of beer as they shot past Mr. Prout?

He was unlucky in that his conscience as a house-master impelled him to consult his associates. Had he taken his pipe and his troubles to little Hartopp’s rooms he would, perhaps, have been saved confusion, for Hartopp believed in boys, and knew something about them. His fate led him to King, a fellow house-master, no friend of his, but a zealous hater of Stalky & Co.

“Ah-haa!” said King, rubbing his hands when the tale was told. “Curious! Now *my* house never dream of doing these things.”

“But you see I’ve no proof, exactly.”

“Proof? With the egregious Beetle! As if one wanted it! I suppose it is not impossible for the Sergeant to supply it? Foxy is considered at least a match for any evasive boy in my house. Of course they were smoking and drinking somewhere. That type of boy always does. They think it manly.”

“But they’ve no following in the school, and they are distinctly – er brutal to their juniors,” said Prout, who had from a distance seen Beetle return, with interest, his butterfly-net to a tearful fag.

“Ah! They consider themselves superior to ordinary delights. Self-sufficient little animals! There’s something in McTurk’s Hibernian sneer that would make me a little annoyed. And they are so careful to avoid all overt acts, too. It’s sheer calculated insolence. I am strongly opposed, as you know, to interfering with another man’s house; but they need a lesson, Prout. They need a sharp lesson, if only to bring down their over-weening self-conceit. Were I you, I should devote myself for a week to their little performances. Boys of that order – and I may flatter myself, but I think I know boys – don’t join the Bug-hunters for love. Tell the Sergeant to keep his eye open; and, of course, in my peregrinations I may casually keep mine open, too.”

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” far down the corridor.

“Disgusting!” said King. “Where do they pick up these obscene noises? One sharp lesson is what they want.”

The boys did not concern themselves with lessons for the next few days. They had all Colonel Dabney’s estate to play with, and they explored it with the stealth of Red Indians and the accuracy of burglars. They could enter either by the Lodge-gates on the upper road – they were careful to ingratiate themselves with the Lodge-keeper and his wife – drop down into the combe, and return along the cliffs; or they could begin at the combe and climb up into the road.

They were careful not to cross the Colonel’s path – he had served his turn, and they would not out-wear their welcome – nor did they show up on the sky-line when they could move in cover. The shelter of the gorze by the cliff-edge was their chosen retreat. Beetle christened it the Pleasant Isle of Aves, for the peace and the shelter of it; and here, the pipes and tobacco once cache’d in a convenient ledge an arm’s length down the cliff, their position was legally unassailable.

For, observe, Colonel Dabney had not invited them to enter his house. Therefore, they did not need to ask specific leave to go visiting; and school rules were strict on that point. He had merely thrown open his grounds to them; and, since they were lawful Bug-hunters, their extended bounds ran up to his notice-boards in the combe and his Lodge-gates on the hill.

They were amazed at their own virtue.

“And even if it wasn’t,” said Stalky, flat on his back, staring into the blue. “Even suppose we were miles out of bounds, no one could get at us through this wuzzy, unless he knew the tunnel. Isn’t this better than lyin’ up just behind the Coll. – in a blue funk every time we had a smoke? Isn’t your Uncle Stalky – ?”

“No,” said Beetle – he was stretched at the edge of the cliff spitting thoughtfully. “We’ve got to thank Turkey for this. Turkey is the Great Man. Turkey, dear, you’re distressing Heffles.”

“Gloomy old ass!” said McTurk, deep in a book.

“They’ve got us under suspicion,” said Stalky. “Hoophats *is* so suspicious somehow; and Foxy always makes every stalk he does a sort of – sort of –”

“Scalp,” said Beetle. “Foxy’s a giddy Chingangook.”

“Poor Foxy,” said Stalky. “He’s goin’ to catch us one of these days. ‘Said to me in the Gym last night, ‘I’ve got my eye on you, Mister Corkran. I’m only warning you for your good.’ Then I said: ‘Well, you jolly well take it off again, or you’ll get into trouble. I’m only warnin’ you for your good.’ Foxy was wrath.”

“Yes, but it’s only fair sport for Foxy,” said Beetle. “It’s Hefflelinga that has the evil mind. ‘Shouldn’t wonder if he thought we got tight.’”

“I never got squiffy but once – that was in the holidays,” said Stalky, reflectively; “an’ it made me horrid sick. ‘Pon my sacred Sam, though, it’s enough to drive a man to drink, havin’ an animal like Hoof for house-master.”

“If we attended the matches an’ yelled, ‘Well hit, sir,’ an’ stood on one leg an’ grinned every time Heffy said, ‘So ho, my sons. Is it thus?’ an’ said, ‘Yes, sir,’ an’ ‘No, sir,’ an’ ‘O, sir,’ an’ ‘Please, sir,’ like a lot o’ filthy fa-ag’s, Heffy ‘ud think no end of us,” said McTurk with a sneer.

“Too late to begin that.”

“It’s all right. The Hefflelinga means well. *But* he is an ass. *And* we show him that we think he’s an ass. An’ *so* Heffy don’t love us. ‘Told me last night after prayers that he was *in loco parentis*,” Beetle grunted.

“The deuce he did!” cried Stalky. “That means he’s maturin’ something unusual dam’ mean. Last time he told me that he gave me three hundred lines for dancin’ the cachuca in Number Ten dormitory. *Loco parentis*, by gum! But what’s the odds as long as you’re ‘appy? *We’re* all right.”

They were, and their very rightness puzzled Prout, King, and the Sergeant. Boys with bad consciences show it. They slink out past the Fives Court in haste, and smile nervously when questioned. They return, disordered, in bare time to save a call-over. They nod and wink and giggle one to the other, scattering at the approach of a master. But Stalky and his allies had long out-lived these manifestations of youth. They strolled forth unconcernedly, and returned in excellent shape after a light refreshment of strawberries and cream at the Lodge.

The Lodge-keeper had been promoted to keeper, *vice* the murderous fisherman, and his wife made much of the boys. The man, too, gave them a squirrel, which they presented to the Natural History Society; thereby checkmating little Hartopp, who wished to know what they were doing for Science. Foxy faithfully worked some deep Devon lanes behind a lonely cross-roads inn; and it was curious that Prout and King, members of Common-room seldom friendly, walked together in the same direction – that is to say, northeast.

Now, the Pleasant Isle of Aves lay due southwest. “They’re deep – day-vilish deep,” said Stalky. “Why are they drawin’ those covers?”

“Me,” said Beetle sweetly. “I asked Foxy if he had ever tasted the beer there. That was enough for Foxy, and it cheered him up a little. He and Heffy were sniffin’ round our old hut so long I thought they’d like a change.”

“Well, it can’t last forever,” said Stalky. “Heffy’s bankin’ up like a thunder-cloud, an’ King goes rubbin’ his beastly hands, an’ grinnin’ like a hyena. It’s shockin’ demoralizin’ for King. He’ll burst some day.”

That day came a little sooner than they expected – came when the Sergeant, whose duty it was to collect defaulters, did not attend an afternoon call-over.

“Tired of pubs, eh? He’s gone up to the top of the bill with his binoculars to spot us,” said Stalky. “Wonder he didn’t think of that before. Did you see old Heffy cock his eye at us when we answered our names? Heffy’s in it, too. *Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me! Come on!”

“Aves?” said Beetle.

“Of course, but I’m not smokin’ *aujourd’hui*. *Parceque je* jolly well *pense* that we’ll be *suivi*. We’ll go along the cliffs, slow, an’ give Foxy lots of time to parallel us up above.”

They strolled towards the swimming-baths, and presently overtook King. “Oh, don’t let *me* interrupt you,” he said. “Engaged in scientific pursuits, of course? I trust you will enjoy yourselves, my young friends.”

“You see!” said Stalky, when they were out of earshot. “He *can’t* keep a secret. He’s followin’ to cut off our line of retreat. He’ll wait at the baths till Heffy comes along. They’ve tried every blessed place except along the cliffs, and now they think they’ve bottled us. No need to hurry.”

They walked leisurely over the combes till they reached the line of notice-boards.

“Listen a shake. Foxy’s up wind comin’ down hill like beans. When you hear him move in the bushes, go straight across to Aves. They want to catch us *flagrante delicto*.”

They dived into the gorse at right angles to the tunnel, openly crossing the grass, and lay still in Aves.

“What did I tell you?” Stalky carefully put away the pipes and tobacco. The Sergeant, out of breath, was leaning against the fence, raking the furze with his binoculars, but he might as well have tried to see through a sand-bag. Anon, Prout and King appeared behind him. They conferred.

“Aha! Foxy don’t like the notice-boards, and he don’t like the prickles either. Now we’ll cut up the tunnel and go to the Lodge. Hullo! They’ve sent Foxy into cover.”

The Sergeant was waist-deep in crackling, swaying furze, his ears filled with the noise of his own progress. The boys reached the shelter of the wood and looked down through a belt of hollies.

“Hellish noise!” said Stalky, critically. “Don’t think Colonel Dabney will like it. I move we go into the Lodge and get something to eat. We might as well see the fun out.”

Suddenly the keeper passed them at a trot. “Who’m they to combe-bottom for Lard’s sake? Master’ll be crazy,” he said.

“Poachers simly,” Stalky replied in the broad Devon that was the boy’s *langue de guerre*.

“I’ll poach ‘em to raights!” He dropped into the funnel-like combe, which presently began to fill with noises, notably King’s voice crying: “Go on, Sergeant! Leave him alone, you, sir. He is executing my orders.”

“Who’m yeou to give arders here, ginky whiskers? Yeou come up to the master. Come out o’ that wuzzy! [This is to the Sergeant.] Yiss, I reckon us knows the boys yeou’m after. They’ve tu long ears an’ wuzzy bellies, an’ you nippies they in yeour pockets when they’m dead. Come on up to master! He’ll boy yeou all you’re a mind to. Yeou other folk bide your side fence.”

“Explain to the proprietor. You can explain, Sergeant,” shouted King. Evidently the Sergeant had surrendered to the major force.

Beetle lay at full length on the turf behind the Lodge, literally biting the earth in spasms of joy. Stalky kicked him upright. There was nothing of levity about Stalky or McTurk save a stray muscle twitching on the cheek.

They tapped at the Lodge door, where they were always welcome. “Come yeou right in an’ set down, my little dearrs,” said the woman. “They’ll niver touch my man. He’ll poach ‘em to rights. Iss fai! Fresh berries an’ cream. Us Dartymoor folk niver forgit their friends. But them Bidevor poachers, they’ve no hem to their garments. Sugar? My man he’ve digged a badger for yeou, my dearrs. ‘Tis in the linhay in a box.”

“Us’ll take un with us when we’re finished here. I reckon yeou’m busy. We’ll bide here an’ – ‘tis washin’ day with yeou, simly,” said Stalky. “We’m no company to make all vitty for. Never yeou mind us. Yiss. There’s plenty cream.”

The woman withdrew, wiping her pink hands on her apron, and left them in the parlor. There was a scuffle of feet on the gravel outside the heavily-leaded diamond panes, and then the voice of Colonel Dabney, something clearer than a bugle.

“Ye can read? You’ve eyes in your head? Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye have!”

Beetle snatched a crochet-work antimacassar from the shiny horsehair sofa, stuffed it into his mouth, and rolled out of sight.

“You saw my notice-boards. Your duty? Curse your impudence, sir. Your duty was to keep off my grounds. Talk of duty to *me*! Why – why – why, ye misbegotten poacher, ye’ll be teaching me my A B C next! Roarin’ like a bull in the bushes down there! Boys? Boys? Boys? Keep your boys at home, then! I’m not responsible for your boys! But I don’t believe it – I don’t believe a word of it. Ye’ve a furtive look in your eye – a furtive, sneakin’, poachin’ look in your eye, that ‘ud ruin the reputation of an archangel! Don’t attempt to deny it! Ye have! A sergeant? More shame to you, then, an’ the worst bargain Her Majesty ever made! A sergeant, to run about the country poachin’ – on your pension! Damnable! Oh, damnable! But I’ll be considerate. I’ll be merciful. By gad, I’ll be the very essence o’ humanity! Did ye, or did ye not, see my notice-boards? Don’t attempt to deny it! Ye did. Silence, Sergeant!”

Twenty-one years in the army had left their mark on Foxy. He obeyed.

“Now. March!” The high Lodge gate shut with a clang. “My duty! A sergeant to tell me my duty!” puffed Colonel Dabney. “Good Lard! more sergeants!”

“It’s King! It’s King!” gulped Stalky, his head on the horsehair pillow. McTurk was eating the rag-carpet before the speckless hearth, and the sofa heaved to the emotions of Beetle. Through the thick glass the figures without showed blue, distorted, and menacing.

“I – I protest against this outrage.” King had evidently been running up hill. “The man was entirely within his duty. Let – let me give you my card.”

“He’s in flannels!” Stalky buried his head again.

“Unfortunately – most unfortunately – I have not one with me, but my name is King, sir, a house-master of the College, and you will find me prepared – fully prepared – to answer for this man’s action. We’ve seen three – ”

“Did ye see my notice-boards?”

“I admit we did; but under the circumstances – ”

“I stand *in loco parentis*.” Prout’s deep voice was added to the discussion. They could hear him pant.

“F’what?” Colonel Dabney was growing more and more Irish.

“I’m responsible for the boys under my charge.”

“Ye are, are ye? Then all I can say is that ye set them a very bad example – a dam’ bad example, if I may say so. I do not own your boys. I’ve not seen your boys, an’ I tell you that if there was a boy grinnin’ in every bush on the place, *still* ye’ve no shadow of a right here, comin’ up from the combe that way, an’ frightenin’ everything in it. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye did. Ye should have come to the Lodge an’ seen me like Christians, instead of chasin’ your dam’ boys through the length and breadth of my covers. *In loco parentis* ye are? Well, I’ve not forgotten my Latin either, an’ I’ll say to you: ‘*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes.*’ If the masters trespass, how can we blame the boys?”

“But if I could speak to you privately,” said Prout.

“I’ll have nothing private with you! Ye can be as private as ye please on the other side o’ that gate an’ – I wish ye a very good afternoon.”

A second time the gate clanged. They waited till Colonel Dabney had returned to the house, and fell into one another’s arms, crowing for breath.

“Oh, my Soul! Oh, my King! Oh, my Heffy! Oh, my Foxy! Zeal, all zeal, Mr. Simple.” Stalky wiped his eyes. “Oh! Oh I Oh! – ‘I *did* boil the exciseman!’ We must get out of this or we’ll be late for tea.”

“Ge – Ge – get the badger and make little Hartopp happy. Ma – ma – make ‘em all happy,” sobbed McTurk, groping for the door and kicking the prostrate Beetle before him.

They found the beast in an evil-smelling box, left two half-crowns for payment, and staggered home. Only the badger grunted most marvelous like Colonel Dabney, and they dropped him twice or thrice with shrieks of helpless laughter. They were but imperfectly recovered when Foxy met them by the Fives Court with word that they were to go up to their dormitory and wait till sent for.

“Well, take this box to Mr. Hartopp’s rooms, then. We’ve done something for the Natural History Society, at any rate,” said Beetle.

“‘Fraid that won’t save you, young gen’elmen,” Foxy answered, in an awful voice. He was sorely ruffled in his mind.

“All sereno, Foxibus.” Stalky had reached the extreme stage of hiccups. “We – we’ll never desert you, Foxy. Hounds choppin’ foxes in cover is more a proof of vice, ain’t it?.. No, you’re right. I’m – I’m not quite well.”

“They’ve gone a bit too far this time,” Foxy thought to himself. “Very far gone, *I’d* say, excep’ there was no smell of liquor. An’ yet it isn’t like ‘em – somehow. King and Prout they ‘ad their dressin’-down same as me. That’s one comfort.”

“Now, we must pull up,” said Stalky, rising from the bed on which he had thrown himself. “We’re injured innocence – as usual. We don’t know what we’ve been sent up here for, do we?”

“No explanation. Deprived of tea. Public disgrace before the house,” said McTurk, whose eyes were running over. “It’s dam’ serious.”

“Well, hold on, till King loses his temper,” said Beetle. “He’s a libelous old rip, an’ he’ll be in a ravin’ paddy-wack. Prout’s too beastly cautious. Keep your eye on King, and, if he gives us a chance, appeal to the Head. That always makes ‘em sick.”

They were summoned to their house-master’s study, King and Foxy supporting Prout, and Foxy had three canes under his arm. King leered triumphantly, for there were tears, undried tears of mirth, on the boys’ cheeks. Then the examination began.

Yes, they had walked along the cliffs. Yes, they had entered Colonel Dabney’s grounds. Yes, they had seen the notice-boards (at this point Beetle sputtered hysterically). For what purpose had they entered Colonel Dabney’s grounds? “Well, sir, there was a badger.”

Here King, who loathed the Natural History Society because he did not like Hartopp, could no longer be restrained. He begged them not to add mendacity to open insolence. But the badger was in Mr. Hartopp’s rooms, sir. The Sergeant had kindly taken it up for them. That disposed of the badger, and the temporary check brought King’s temper to boiling-point. They could hear his foot on the floor while Prout prepared his lumbering inquiries. They had settled into their stride now. Their eyes ceased to sparkle; their faces were blank; their hands hung beside them without a twitch. They were learning, at the expense of a fellow-countryman, the lesson of their race, which is to put away all emotion and entrap the alien at the proper time.

So far good. King was importing himself more freely into the trial, being vengeful where Prout was grieved. They knew the penalties of trespassing? With a fine show of irresolution, Stalky admitted that he had gathered some information vaguely bearing on this head, but he thought – The sentence was dragged out to the uttermost: Stalky did not wish to play his trump with such an opponent. Mr. King desired no buts, nor was he interested in Stalky’s evasions. They, on the other hand, might be interested in his poor views. Boys who crept – who sneaked – who lurked – out of bounds, even the generous bounds of the Natural History Society, which they had falsely joined as a cloak for their misdeeds – their vices – their villainies – their immoralities —

“He’ll break cover in a minute,” said Stalky to himself. “Then we’ll run into him before he gets away.”

Such boys, scabrous boys, moral lepers – the current of his words was carrying King off his feet – evil-speakers, liars, slow-bellies – yea, incipient drunkards...

He was merely working up to a peroration, and the boys knew it; but McTurk cut through the frothing sentence, the others echoing:

“I appeal to the Head, sir.”

“I appeal to the head, sir.”

“I appeal to the Head, sir.”

It was their unquestioned right. Drunkenness meant expulsion after a public flogging. They had been accused of it. The case was the Head’s, and the Head’s alone.

“Thou hast appealed unto Caesar: unto Caesar shalt thou go.” They had heard that sentence once or twice before in their careers. “None the less,” said King, uneasily, “you would be better advised to abide by our decision, my young friends.”

“Are we allowed to associate with the rest of the school till we see the Head, sir?” said McTurk to his house-master, disregarding King. This at once lifted the situation to its loftiest plane. Moreover, it meant no work, for moral leprosy was strictly quarantined, and the Head never executed judgment till twenty-four cold hours later.

“Well – er – if you persist in your defiant attitude,” said King, with a loving look at the canes under Foxy’s arm. “There is no alternative.”

Ten minutes later the news was over the whole school. Stalky and Co. had fallen at last – fallen by drink. They had been drinking. They had returned blind-drunk from a hut. They were even now

lying hopelessly intoxicated on the dormitory floor. A few bold spirits crept up to look, and received boots about the head from the criminals.

“We’ve got him – got him on the Caudine Toasting-fork!” said Stalky, after those hints were taken. “King’ll have to prove his charges up to the giddy hilt.”

“Too much ticklee, him bust,” Beetle quoted from a book of his reading. “Didn’t I say he’d go pop if we lat un bide?”

“No prep., either, O ye incipient drunkards,” said McTurk, “and it’s trig night, too. Hullo! Here’s our dear friend Foxy. More tortures, Foxibus?”

“I’ve brought you something to eat, young gentlemen,” said the Sergeant from behind a crowded tray. Their wars had ever been waged without malice, and a suspicion floated in Foxy’s mind that boys who allowed themselves to be tracked so easily might, perhaps, hold something in reserve. Foxy had served through the Mutiny, when early and accurate information was worth much.

“I – I noticed you ‘adn’t ‘ad anything to eat, an’ I spoke to Gumbly, an’ he said you wasn’t exactly cut off from supplies. So I brought up this. It’s your potted ‘am tin, ain’t it, Mr. Corkran?”

“Why, Foxibus, you’re a brick,” said Stalky. “I didn’t think you had this much – what’s the word, Beetle?”

“Bowels,” Beetle replied, promptly. “Thank you, Sergeant. That’s young Carter’s potted ham, though.”

“There was a C on it. I thought it was Mr. Corkran’s. This is a very serious business, young gentlemen. That’s what it is. I didn’t know, perhaps, but there might be something on your side which you hadn’t said to Mr. King or Mr. Prout, maybe.”

“There is. Heaps, Foxibus.” This from Stalky through a full mouth.

“Then you see, if that was the case, it seemed to me I might represent it, quiet so to say, to the ‘Ead when he asks me about it. I’ve got to take ‘im the charges to-night, an’ – it looks bad on the face of it.”

“‘Trocius bad, Foxy. Twenty-seven cuts in the Gym before all the school, and public expulsion. ‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is ragin’,” quoth Beetle.

“It’s nothin’ to make fun of, young gentlemen. I ‘ave to go to the ‘Ead with the charges. An’ – an’ you mayn’t be aware, per’aps, that I was followin’ you this afternoon; havin’ my suspicions.”

“Did ye see the notice-boards?” croaked McTurk, in the very brogue of Colonel Dabney.

“Ye’ve eyes in your head. Don’t attempt to deny it. Ye did!” said Beetle.

“A sergeant! To run about poachin’ on your pension! Damnable, O damnable!” said Stalky, without pity.

“Good Lord!” said the Sergeant, sitting heavily upon a bed. “Where – where the devil *was* you? I might ha’ known it was a do – somewhere.”

“Oh, you clever maniac!” Stalky resumed. “We mayn’t be aware you were followin’ us this afternoon, mayn’t we? ‘Thought you were stalkin’ us, eh? Why, we led you bung into it, of course. Colonel Dabney – don’t you think he’s a nice man, Foxy? – Colonel Dabney’s our pet particular friend. We’ve been goin’ there for weeks and weeks, he invited us. You and your duty! Curse your duty, sir! Your duty was to keep off his covers.”

“You’ll never be able to hold up your head again, Foxy. The fags ‘ll hoot at you,” said Beetle.

“Think of your giddy prestige!” The Sergeant was thinking – hard.

“Look ‘ere, young gentlemen,” he said, earnestly. “You aren’t surely ever goin’ to tell, are you? Wasn’t Mr. Prout and Mr. King in – in it too?”

“Foxibusculus, they *was*. They was – singular horrid. Caught it worse than you. We heard every word of it. You got off easy, considerin’. If I’d been Dabney I swear I’d ha’ quodded you. I think I’ll suggest it to him to-morrow.”

“An’ it’s all goin’ up to the ‘Ead. Oh, Good Lord!”

“Every giddy word of it, my Chingangook,” said Beetle, dancing. “Why shouldn’t it? *We’ve* done nothing wrong. *We* ain’t poachers. *We* didn’t cut about blastin’ the characters of poor, innocent boys – saying they were drunk.”

“That I didn’t,” said Foxy. “I – I only said that you be’aved uncommon odd when you come back with that badger. Mr. King may have taken the wrong hint from that.”

“Course he did; an’ he’ll jolly well shove all the blame on you when he finds out he’s wrong. We know King, if you don’t. I’m ashamed of you. You ain’t fit to be a sergeant,” said McTurk.

“Not with three thorough-goin’ young devils like you, I ain’t. I’ve been had. I’ve been ambuscaded. Horse, foot, an’ guns, I’ve been had, an’ – an’ there’ll be no holdin’ the junior forms after this. M’rover, the ‘Ead will send me with a note to Colonel Dabney to ask if what you say about bein’ invited was true.”

“Then you’d better go in by the Lodge-gates this time, instead of chasin’ your dam’ boys – oh, that was the Epistle to King – so it was. We-el, Foxy?” Stalky put his chin on his hands and regarded the victim with deep delight.

“*Ti-ra-la-la-i-tu!* I gloat! Hear me!” said McTurk. “Foxy brought us tea when we were moral lepers. Foxy has a heart. Foxy has been in the Army, too.”

“I wish I’d ha’ had you in my company, young gentlemen,” said the Sergeant from the depths of his heart; “I’d ha’ given you something.”

“Silence at drum-head court-martial,” McTurk went on. “I’m advocate for the prisoner; and, besides, this is much too good to tell all the other brutes in the Coll. They’d *never* understand. They play cricket, and say: ‘Yes sir,’ and ‘O, sir,’ and ‘No, sir.’”

“Never mind that. Go ahead,” said Stalky.

“Well, Foxy’s a good little chap when he does not esteem himself so as to be clever.”

“Take not out your ‘ounds on a werry windy day,” Stalky struck in. “*I* don’t care if you let him off.”

“Nor me,” said Beetle. “Heffy is my only joy – Heffy and King.”

“I ‘ad to do it,” said the Sergeant, plaintively.

“Right, O! Led away by bad companions in the execution of his duty or – or words to that effect. You’re dismissed with a reprimand, Foxy. *We* won’t tell about *you*. I swear we won’t,” McTurk concluded. “Bad for the discipline of the school. Horrid bad.”

“Well,” said the Sergeant, gathering up the tea-things, “knowin’ what I know o’ the young dev – gentlemen of the College, I’m very glad to ‘ear it. But what am I to tell the ‘Ead?”

“Anything you jolly well please, Foxy. We aren’t the criminals.”

To say that the Head was annoyed when the Sergeant appeared after dinner with the day’s crime-sheet would be putting it mildly.

“Corkran, McTurk, and Co., I see. Bounds as usual. Hullo! What the deuce is this? Suspicion of drinking. Whose charge??”

“Mr. King’s, sir. I caught ‘em out of bounds, sir: at least that was ‘ow it looked. But there’s a lot be’ind, sir.” The Sergeant was evidently troubled.

“Go on,” said the Head. “Let us have your version.” He and the Sergeant had dealt with one another for some seven years; and the Head knew that Mr. King’s statements depended very largely on Mr. King’s temper.

“I thought they were out of bounds along the cliffs. But it come out they wasn’t, sir. I saw them go into Colonel Dabney’s woods, and – Mr. King and Mr. Prout come along – and the fact was, sir, we was mistook for poachers by Colonel Dabney’s people – Mr. King and Mr. Prout and me. There were some words, sir, on both sides. The young gentlemen slipped ‘ome somehow, and they seemed ‘ighly humorous, sir. Mr. King was mistook by Colonel Dabney himself – Colonel Dabney bein’ strict. Then they preferred to come straight to you, sir, on account of what – what Mr. King may ‘ave said about their ‘abits afterwards in Mr. Prout’s study. I only said they was ‘ighly humorous, laughin’ an’

gigglin', an' a bit above 'emselves. They've since told me, sir, in a humorous way, that they was invited by Colonel Dabney to go into 'is woods."

"I see. They didn't tell their house-master that, of course?"

"They took up Mr. King on appeal just as soon as he spoke about their – 'abits. Put in the appeal at once, sir, an' asked to be sent to the dormitory waitin' for you. I've since gathered, sir, in their humorous way, sir, that some'ow or other they've 'eard about every word Colonel Dabney said to Mr. King and Mr. Prout when he mistook 'em for poachers. I – I might ha' known when they led me on so that they 'eld the inner line of communications. It's – it's a plain do, sir, if you ask me; an' they're gloatin' over it in the dormitory."

The Head saw – saw even to the uttermost farthing – and his mouth twitched a little under his mustache.

"Send them to me at once, Sergeant. This case needn't wait over."

"Good evening," said he when the three appeared under escort. "I want your undivided attention for a few minutes. You've known me for five years, and I've known you for – twenty-five. I think we understand one another perfectly. I am now going to pay you a tremendous compliment (the brown one, please, Sergeant. Thanks. You needn't wait). I'm going to execute you without rhyme, Beetle, or reason. I know you went to Colonel Dabney's covers because you were invited. I'm not even going to send the Sergeant with a note to ask if your statement is true; because I am convinced that on this occasion you have adhered strictly to the truth. I know, too, that you were not drinking. (You can take off that virtuous expression, McTurk, or I shall begin to fear you don't understand me.) There is not a flaw in any of your characters. And that is why I am going to perpetrate a howling injustice. Your reputations have been injured, haven't they? You have been disgraced before the house, haven't you? You have a peculiarly keen regard for the honor of your house, haven't you? Well, now I am going to lick you."

Six apiece was their portion upon that word.

"And this I think" – the Head replaced the cane, and flung the written charge into the waste-paper basket – "covers the situation. When you find a variation from the normal – this will be useful to you in later life – always meet him in an abnormal way. And that reminds me. There are a pile of paper-backs on that shelf. You can borrow them if you put them back. I don't think they'll take any harm from being read in the open. They smell of tobacco rather. You will go to prep. this evening as usual. Good-night," said that amazing man.

"Good-night, and thank you, sir."

"I swear I'll pray for the Head to-night," said Beetle. "Those last two cuts were just flicks on my collar. There's a 'Monte Cristo' in that lower shelf. I saw it. Bags I, next time we go to Aves!"

"Dearr man!" said McTurk. "No gating. No impots. No beastly questions. All settled. Hullo! what's King goin' in to him for – King and Prout?"

Whatever the nature of that interview, it did not improve either King's or Prout's ruffled plumes, for, when they came out of the Head's house, eyes noted that the one was red and blue with emotion as to his nose, and that the other was sweating profusely. That sight compensated them amply for the Imperial Jaw with which they were favored by the two. It seems – and who so astonished as they? – that they had held back material facts; were guilty both of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi* (well-known gods against whom they often offended); further, that they were malignant in their dispositions, untrustworthy in their characters, pernicious and revolutionary in their influences, abandoned to the devils of wilfulness, pride, and a most intolerable conceit. Ninthly, and lastly, they were to have a care and to be very careful.

They were careful, as only boys can be when there is a hurt to be inflicted. They waited through one suffocating week till Prout and King were their royal selves again; waited till there was a house-match – their own house, too – in which Prout was taking part; waited, further, till he had his pads

in the pavilion and stood ready to go forth. King was scoring at the window, and the three sat on a bench without.

Said Stalky to Beetle: "I say, Beetle, *quis custodet ipsos custodes?*"

"Don't ask me," said Beetle. "I'll have nothin' private with you. Ye can be as private as ye please the other end of the bench; and I wish ye a very good afternoon."

McTurk yawned.

"Well, ye should ha' come up to the lodge like Christians instead o' chasin' your – a-hem – boys through the length an' breadth of my covers. *I* think these house-matches are all rot. Let's go over to Colonel Dabney's an' see if he's collared any more poachers."

That afternoon there was joy in Aves.

SLAVES OF THE LAMP

The music-room on the top floor of Number Five was filled with the “Aladdin” company at rehearsal. Dickson Quartus, commonly known as Dick Four, was Aladdin, stage-manager, ballet-master, half the orchestra, and largely librettist, for the “book” had been rewritten and filled with local allusions. The pantomime was to be given next week, in the down-stairs study occupied by Aladdin, Abanazar, and the Emperor of China. The Slave of the Lamp, with the Princess Badroulbador and the Widow Twankay, owned Number Five study across the same landing, so that the company could be easily assembled. The floor shook to the stamp-and-go of the ballet, while Aladdin, in pink cotton tights, a blue and tinsel jacket, and a plumed hat, banged alternately on the piano and his banjo. He was the moving spirit of the game, as befitted a senior who had passed his Army Preliminary and hoped to enter Sandhurst next spring.

Aladdin came to his own at last, Abanazar lay poisoned on the floor, the Widow Twankay danced her dance, and the company decided it would “come all right on the night.”

“What about the last song, though?” said the Emperor, a tallish, fair-headed boy with a ghost of a mustache, at which he pulled manfully. “We need a rousing old tune.”

“John Peel? ‘Drink, Puppy, Drink?’” suggested Abanazar, smoothing his baggy lilac pajamas. “Pussy” Abanazar never looked more than one-half awake, but he owned a soft, slow smile which well suited the part of the Wicked Uncle.

“Stale,” said Aladdin. “Might as well have ‘Grandfather’s Clock.’ What’s that thing you were humming at prep. last night, Stalky?”

Stalky, The Slave of the Lamp, in black tights and doublet, a black silk half-mask on his forehead, whistled lazily where he lay on the top of the piano. It was a catchy music-hall tune.

Dick Four cocked his head critically, and squinted down a large red nose.

“Once more, and I can pick it up,” he said, strumming. “Sing the words.”

“Arrah, Patsy, mind the baby! Arrah, Patsy, mind the child! Wrap him in an overcoat, he’s surely going wild! Arrah, Patsy, mind the baby! just you mind the child awhile! He’ll kick and bite and cry all night! Arrah, Patsy, mind the child!”

“Rippin’! Oh, rippin’!” said Dick Four. “Only we shan’t have any piano on the night. We must work it with the banjos – play an’ dance at the same time. You try, Tertius.”

The Emperor pushed aside his pea-green sleeves of state, and followed Dick Four on a heavy nickel plated banjo.

“Yes, but I’m dead all this time. Bung in the middle of the stage, too,” said Abanazar.

“Oh, that’s Beetle’s biznai,” said Dick Four. “Vamp it up, Beetle. Don’t keep us waiting all night. You’ve got to get Pussy out of the light somehow, and bring us all in dancin’ at the end.”

“All right. You two play it again,” said Beetle, who, in a gray skirt and a wig of chestnut sausage-curls, set slantwise above a pair of spectacles mended with an old boot-lace, represented the Widow Twankay. He waved one leg in time to the hammered refrain, and the banjos grew louder.

“Um! Ah! Er – ‘Aladdin now has won his wife,’” he sang, and Dick Four repeated it.

“Your Emperor is appeased.” Tertius flung out his chest as he delivered his line.

“Now jump up, Pussy! Say, ‘I think I’d better come to life! Then we all take hands and come forward: ‘We hope you’ve all been pleased.’ *Twiggez-vous?*”

“*Nous twiggons.* Good enough. What’s the chorus for the final ballet? It’s four kicks and a turn,” said Dick Four.

“Oh! Er!

John Short will ring the curtain down.
And ring the prompter’s bell;

We hope you know before you go
That we all wish you well.”

“Rippin’! Rippin’! Now for the Widow’s scene with the Princess. Hurry up, Turkey.”

McTurk, in a violet silk skirt and a coquettish blue turban, slouched forward as one thoroughly ashamed of himself. The Slave of the Lamp climbed down from the piano, and dispassionately kicked him. “Play up, Turkey,” he said; “this is serious.” But there fell on the door the knock of authority. It happened to be King, in gown and mortar-board, enjoying a Saturday evening prowling before dinner.

“Locked doors! Locked doors!” he snapped with a scowl. “What’s the meaning of this; and what, may I ask, is the intention of this – this epicene attire?”

“Pantomime, sir. The Head gave us leave,” said Abanazar, as the only member of the Sixth concerned. Dick Four stood firm in the confidence born of well-fitting tights, but Beetle strove to efface himself behind the piano. A gray princess-skirt borrowed from a day-boy’s mother and a spotted cotton bodice unsystematically padded with imposition-paper make one ridiculous. And in other regards Beetle had a bad conscience.

“As usual!” sneered King. “Futile foolery just when your careers, such as they may be, are hanging in the balance. I see! Ah, I see! The old gang of criminals – allied forces of disorder – Corkran” – the Slave of the Lamp smiled politely – “McTurk” – the Irishman scowled – “and, of course, the unspeakable Beetle, our friend Gigadibs.” Abanazar, the Emperor, and Aladdin had more or less of characters, and King passed them over. “Come forth, my inky buffoon, from behind yonder instrument of music! You supply, I presume, the doggerel for this entertainment. Esteem yourself to be, as it were, a poet?”

“He’s found one of ‘em,” thought Beetle, noting the flush on King’s cheek-bone.

“I have just had the pleasure of reading an effusion of yours to my address, I believe – an effusion intended to rhyme. So – so you despise me, Master Gigadibs, do you? I am quite aware – you need not explain – that it was ostensibly not intended for my edification. I read it with laughter – yes, with laughter. These paper pellets of inky boys – still a boy we are, Master Gigadibs – do not disturb my equanimity.”

“Wonder which it was,” thought Beetle. He had launched many lampoons on an appreciative public ever since he discovered that it was possible to convey reproof in rhyme.

In sign of his unruffled calm, King proceeded to tear Beetle, whom he called Gigadibs, slowly asunder. From his untied shoestrings to his mended spectacles (the life of a poet at a big school is hard) he held him up to the derision of his associates – with the usual result. His wild flowers of speech – King had an unpleasant tongue – restored him to good humor at the last. He drew a lurid picture of Beetle’s latter end as a scurrilous pamphleteer dying in an attic, scattered a few compliments over McTurk and Corkran, and, reminding Beetle that he must come up for judgment when called upon, went to Common-room, where he triumphed anew over his victims.

“And the worst of it,” he explained in a loud voice over his soup, “is that I waste such gems of sarcasm on their thick heads. It’s miles above them, I’m certain.”

“We-ell,” said the school chaplain slowly, “I don’t know what Corkran’s appreciation of your style may be, but young McTurk reads Ruskin for his amusement.”

“Nonsense! He does it to show off. I mistrust the dark Celt.”

“He does nothing of the kind. I went into their study the other night, unofficially, and McTurk was gluing up the back of four odd numbers of ‘Fors Clavigera.’”

“I don’t know anything about their private lives,” said a mathematical master hotly, “but I’ve learned by bitter experience that Number Five study are best left alone. They are utterly soulless young devils.”

He blushed as the others laughed.

But in the music-room there were wrath and bad language. Only Stalky, Slave of the Lamp, lay on the piano unmoved.

“That little swine Manders miner must have shown him your stuff. He’s always suckin’ up to King. Go and kill him,” he drawled. “Which one was it, Beetle?”

“Dunno,” said Beetle, struggling out of the skirt. “There was one about his hunting for popularity with the small boys, and the other one was one about him in hell, tellin’ the Devil he was a Balliol man. I swear both of ‘em rhymed all right. By gum! P’raps Manders minor showed him both! *I’ll* correct his caesuras for him.”

He disappeared down two flights of stairs, flushed a small pink and white boy in a form-room next door to King’s study, which, again, was immediately below his own, and chased him up the corridor into a form-room sacred to the revels of the Lower Third. Thence he came back, greatly disordered, to find McTurk, Stalky, and the others of the company, in his study enjoying an unlimited “brew” – coffee, cocoa, buns, new bread hot and steaming, sardine, sausage, ham-and-tongue paste, pilchards, three jams, and at least as many pounds of Devonshire cream.

“My hat!” said he, throwing himself upon the banquet. “Who stumped up for this, Stalky?” It was within a month of term end, and blank starvation had reigned in the studies for weeks.

“You,” said Stalky, serenely.

“Confound you! You haven’t been popping my Sunday bags, then?”

“Keep your hair on. It’s only your watch.”

“Watch! I lost it – weeks ago. Out on the Burrows, when we tried to shoot the old ram – the day our pistol burst.”

“It dropped out of your pocket (you’re so beastly careless, Beetle), and McTurk and I kept it for you. I’ve been wearing it for a week, and you never noticed. Took it into Bideford after dinner to-day. Got thirteen and sevenpence. Here’s the ticket.”

“Well, that’s pretty average cool,” said Abanazar behind a slab of cream and jam, as Beetle, reassured upon the safety of his Sunday trousers, showed not even surprise, much less resentment. Indeed, it was McTurk who grew angry, saying:

“You gave him the ticket, Stalky? You pawned it? You unmitigated beast! Why, last month you and Beetle sold mine! ‘Never got a sniff of any ticket.’”

“Ah, that was because you locked your trunk, and we wasted half the afternoon hammering it open. We might have pawned it if you’d behaved like a Christian, Turkey.”

“My Aunt!” said Abanazar, “you chaps are communists. Vote of thanks to Beetle, though.”

“That’s beastly unfair,” said Stalky, “when I took all the trouble to pawn it. Beetle never knew he had a watch. Oh, I say, Rabbits-Eggs gave me a lift into Bideford this afternoon.”

Rabbits-Eggs was the local carrier – an outcrop of the early Devonian formation. It was Stalky who had invented his unlovely name. “He was pretty average drunk, or he wouldn’t have done it. Rabbits-Eggs is a little shy of me, somehow. But I swore it was *pax* between us, and gave him a bob. He stopped at two pubs on the way in, so he’ll be howling drunk to-night. Oh, don’t begin reading, Beetle; there’s a council of war on. What the deuce is the matter with your collar?”

“Chivied Manders minor into the Lower Third box-room. ‘Had all his beastly little friends on top of me,” said Beetle from behind a jar of pilchards and a book.

“You ass! Any fool could have told you where Manders would bunk to,” said McTurk.

“I didn’t think,” said Beetle, meekly, scooping out pilchards with a spoon.

“Course you didn’t. You never do.” McTurk adjusted Beetle’s collar with a savage tug. “Don’t drop oil all over my ‘Fors’ or I’ll scrag you!”

“Shut up, you – you Irish Biddy! ‘Tisn’t your beastly ‘Fors.’ It’s one of mine.”

The book was a fat, brown-backed volume of the later Sixties, which King had once thrown at Beetle’s head that Beetle might see whence the name Gigadibs came. Beetle had quietly annexed the book, and had seen – several things. The quarter-comprehended verses lived and ate with him, as the

bedropped pages showed. He removed himself from all that world, drifting at large with wondrous Men and Women, till McTurk hammered the pilchard spoon on his head and he snarled.

“Beetle! You’re oppressed and insulted and bullied by King. Don’t you feel it?”

“Let me alone! I can write some more poetry about him if I am, I suppose.”

“Mad! Quite mad!” said Stalky to the visitors, as one exhibiting strange beasts. “Beetle reads an ass called Brownin’, and McTurk reads an ass called Ruskin; and –”

“Ruskin isn’t an ass,” said McTurk. “He’s almost as good as the Opium Eater. He says ‘we’re children of noble races trained by surrounding art.’ That means *me*, and the way I decorated the study when you two badgers would have stuck up brackets and Christmas cards. Child of a noble race, trained by surrounding art, stop reading, or I’ll shove a pilchard down your neck!”

“It’s two to one,” said Stalky, warningly, and Beetle closed the book, in obedience to the law under which he and his companions had lived for six checkered years.

The visitors looked on delighted. Number Five study had a reputation for more variegated insanity than the rest of the school put together; and so far as its code allowed friendship with outsiders it was polite and open-hearted to its neighbors on the same landing.

“What rot do you want now?” said Beetle.

“King! War!” said McTurk, jerking his head toward the wall, where hung a small wooden West-African war-drum, a gift to McTurk from a naval uncle.

“Then we shall be turned out of the study again,” said Beetle, who loved his flesh-pots. “Mason turned us out for – just warbling on it.” Mason was the mathematical master who had testified in Common-room.

“Warbling? – O Lord!” said Abanazar. “We couldn’t hear ourselves speak in our study when you played the infernal thing. What’s the good of getting turned out of your study, anyhow?”

“We lived in the form-rooms for a week, too,” said Beetle, tragically. “And it was beastly cold.”

“Ye-es, but Mason’s rooms were filled with rats every day we were out. It took him a week to draw the inference,” said McTurk. “He loathes rats. ‘Minute he let us go back the rats stopped. Mason’s a little shy of us now, but there was no evidence.’”

“Jolly well there wasn’t,” said Stalky, “when I got out on the roof and dropped the beastly things down his chimney. But, look here – question is, are our characters good enough just now to stand a study row?”

“Never mind mine,” said Beetle. “King swears I haven’t any.”

“I’m not thinking of you,” Stalky returned scornfully. “You aren’t going up for the Army, you old bat. I don’t want to be expelled – and the Head’s getting rather shy of us, too.”

“Rot!” said McTurk. “The Head never expels except for beastliness or stealing. But I forgot; you and Stalky *are* thieves – regular burglars.”

The visitors gasped, but Stalky interpreted the parable with large grins.

“Well, you know, that little beast Manders minor saw Beetle and me hammerin’ McTurk’s trunk open in the dormitory when we took his watch last month. Of course Manders sneaked to Mason, and Mason solemnly took it up as a case of theft, to get even with us about the rats.”

“That just put Mason into our giddy hands,” said McTurk, blandly. “We were nice to him, because he was a new master and wanted to win the confidence of the boys. ‘Pity he draws inferences, though. Stalky went to his study and pretended to blub, and told Mason he’d lead a new life if Mason would let him off this time, but Mason wouldn’t. ‘Said it was his duty to report him to the Head.’”

“Vindictive swine!” said Beetle. “It was all those rats! Then *I* blubbed, too, and Stalky confessed that he’d been a thief in regular practice for six years, ever since he came to the school; and that I’d taught him — *a la* Fagin. Mason turned white with joy. He thought he had us on toast.”

“Gorgeous! Gorgeous!” said Dick Four. “We never heard of this.”

“Course not. Mason kept it jolly quiet. He wrote down all our statements on impot-paper. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t believe,” said Stalky.

“And handed it all up to the Head, *with* an extempore prayer. It took about forty pages,” said Beetle. “I helped him a lot.”

“And then, you crazy idiots?” said Abanazar.

“Oh, we were sent for; and Stalky asked to have the ‘depositions’ read out, and the Head knocked him spinning into a waste-paper basket. Then he gave us eight cuts apiece – welters – for – for – takin’ unheard-of liberties with a new master. I saw his shoulders shaking when we went out. Do you know,” said Beetle, pensively, “that Mason can’t look at us now in second lesson without blushing? We three stare at him sometimes till he regularly trickles. He’s an awfully sensitive beast.”

“He read ‘Eric, or Little by Little,’” said McTurk; “so we gave him ‘St. Winifred’s, or the World of School.’ They spent all their spare time stealing at St. Winifred’s, when they weren’t praying or getting drunk at pubs. Well, that was only a week ago, and the Head’s a little bit shy of us. He called it constructive devilry. Stalky invented it all.”

“Not the least good having a row with a master unless you can make an ass of him,” said Stalky, extended at ease on the hearth-rug. “If Mason didn’t know Number Five – well, he’s learnt, that’s all. Now, my dearly beloved ‘earers’ – Stalky curled his legs under him and addressed the company – “we’ve got that strong’, perseverin’ man King on our hands. He went miles out of his way to provoke a conflict.” (Here Stalky snapped down the black silk domino and assumed the air of a judge.) “He has oppressed Beetle, McTurk, and me, *privatim et seriatim*, one by one, as he could catch us. But now, he has insulted Number Five up in the music-room, and in the presence of these – these ossifers of the Ninety-third, wot look like hairdressers. Binjimin, we must make him cry ‘Capivi!’”

Stalky’s reading did not include Browning or Ruskin.

“And, besides,” said McTurk, “he’s a Philistine, a basket-hanger. He wears a tartan tie. Ruskin says that any man who wears a tartan tie will, without doubt, be damned everlastingly.”

“Bravo, McTurk,” said Tertius; “I thought he was only a beast.”

“He’s that, too, of course, but he’s worse. He has a china basket with blue ribbons and a pink kitten on it, hung up in his window to grow musk in. You know when I got all that old oak carvin’ out of Bideford Church, when they were restoring it (Ruskin says that any man who’ll restore a church is an unmitigated sweep), and stuck it up here with glue? Well, King came in and wanted to know whether we’d done it with a fret-saw! Yah! He is the King of basket-hangers!”

Down went McTurk’s inky thumb over an imaginary arena full of bleeding Kings. “*Placete*, child of a generous race!” he cried to Beetle.

“Well,” began Beetle, doubtfully, “he comes from Balliol, but I’m going to give the beast a chance. You see I can always make him hop with some more poetry. He can’t report me to the Head, because it makes him ridiculous. (Stalky’s quite right.) But he shall have his chance.”

Beetle opened the book on the table, ran his finger down a page, and began at random:

“Or who in Moscow toward the Czar
With the demurest of footfalls,
Over the Kremlin’s pavement white
With serpentine and syenite,
Steps with five other generals – ”

“That’s no good. Try another,” said Stalky.

“Hold on a shake; I know what’s coming.” McTurk was reading over Beetle’s shoulder.

“That simultaneously take snuff,
For each to have pretext enough
And kerchiefwise unfold his sash,
Which – softness’ self – is yet the stuff

(Gummy! What a sentence!)

To hold fast where a steel chain snaps
And leave the grand white neck no gash.

(Full stop.)”

“Don’t understand a word of it,” said Stalky.

“More fool you! Construe,” said McTurk. “Those six bargees scragged the Czar, and left no evidence. *Actum est* with King.”

“He gave me that book, too,” said Beetle, licking his lips:

“There’s a great text in Galatians,
Once you trip on it entails
Twenty-nine distinct damnations,
One sure if another fails.”

Then irrelevantly:

“Setebos! Setebos! and Setebos!
Thinketh he liveth in the cold of the moon.”

“He’s just come in from dinner,” said Dick Four, looking through the window. “Manders minor is with him.”

“Safest place for Manders minor just now,” said Beetle.

“Then you chaps had better clear out,” said Stalky politely to the visitors. “‘Tisn’t fair to mix you up in a study row. Besides, we can’t afford to have evidence.”

“Are you going to begin at once?” said Aladdin.

“Immediately, if not sooner,” said Stalky, and turned out the gas. “Strong, perseverin’ man – King. Make him cry ‘Capivi.’ G’way, Binjimin.”

The company retreated to their own neat and spacious study with expectant souls.

“When Stalky blows out his nostrils like a horse,” said Aladdin to the Emperor of China, “he’s on the war-path. ‘Wonder what King will get.”

“Beans,” said the Emperor. “Number Five generally pays in full.”

“Wonder if I ought to take any notice of it officially,” said Abanazar, who had just remembered he was a prefect.

“It’s none of your business, Pussy. Besides, if you did, we’d have them hostile to us; and we shouldn’t be able to do any work,” said Aladdin. “They’ve begun already.”

Now that West-African war-drum had been made to signal across estuaries and deltas. Number Five was forbidden to wake the engine within earshot of the school. But a deep, devastating drone filled the passages as McTurk and Beetle scientifically rubbed its top. Anon it changed to the blare of trumpets – of savage pursuing trumpets. Then, as McTurk slapped one side, smooth with the blood of ancient sacrifice, the roar broke into short coughing howls such as the wounded gorilla throws in his native forest. These were followed by the wrath of King – three steps at a time, up the staircase, with a dry whirl of the gown. Aladdin and company, listening, squeaked with excitement as the door crashed open. King stumbled into the darkness, and cursed those performers by the gods of Balliol and quiet repose.

“Turned out for a week,” said Aladdin, holding the study door on the crack. “Key to be brought down to his study in five minutes. ‘Brutes! Barbarians! Savages! Children!’ He’s rather agitated.

‘Arrah, Patsy, mind the baby,’” he sang in a whisper as he clung to the door-knob, dancing a noiseless war-dance.

King went down-stairs again, and Beetle and McTurk lit the gas to confer with Stalky. But Stalky had vanished.

“Looks like no end of a mess,” said Beetle, collecting his books and mathematical instrument case. “A week in the form-rooms isn’t any advantage to us.”

“Yes, but don’t you see that Stalky isn’t here, you owl!” said McTurk. “Take down the key, and look sorrowful. King’ll only jaw you for half an hour. I’m going to read in the lower form-room.”

“But it’s always me,” mourned Beetle.

“Wait till we see,” said McTurk, hopefully. “I don’t know any more than you do what Stalky means, but it’s something. Go down and draw King’s fire. You’re used to it.”

No sooner had the key turned in the door than the lid of the coal-box, which was also the window-seat, lifted cautiously. It had been a tight fit, even for the lithe Stalky, his head between his knees, and his stomach under his right ear. From a drawer in the table he took a well-worn catapult, a handful of buckshot, and a duplicate key of the study; noiselessly he raised the window and kneeled by it, his face turned to the road, the wind-sloped trees, the dark levels of the Burrows, and the white line of breakers falling nine-deep along the Pebbleridge. Far down the steep-banked Devonshire lane he heard the husky hoot of the carrier’s horn. There was a ghost of melody in it, as it might have been the wind in a gin-bottle essaying to sing, “It’s a way we have in the Army.”

Stalky smiled a tight-lipped smile, and at extreme range opened fire: the old horse half wheeled in the shafts.

“Where he gwaine tu?” hiccoughed Rabbits-Eggs. Another buckshot tore through the rotten canvas tilt with a vicious zipp.

“*Habet!*” murmured Stalky, as Rabbits-Eggs swore into the patient night, protesting that he saw the “dommed colleger” who was assaulting him.

“And so,” King was saying in a high head voice to Beetle, whom he had kept to play with before Manders minor, well knowing that it hurts a Fifth-form boy to be held up to a fag’s derision, “and so, Master Beetle, in spite of all our verses, which we are so proud of, when we presume to come into direct conflict with even so humble a representative of authority as myself, for instance, we are turned out of our studies, are we not?”

“Yes, sir,” said Beetle, with a sheepish grin on his lips and murder in his heart. Hope had nearly left him, but he clung to a well-established faith that never was Stalky so dangerous as when he was invisible.

“You are *not* required to criticise, thank you. Turned out of our studies, we are, just as if we were no better than little Manders minor. Only inky schoolboys we are, and must be treated as such.”

Beetle pricked up his ears, for Rabbits-Eggs was swearing savagely on the road, and some of the language entered at the upper sash. King believed in ventilation. He strode to the window gowned and majestic, very visible in the gaslight.

“I zee ‘un! I zee ‘un!” roared Rabbits-Eggs, now that he had found a visible foe – another shot from the darkness above. “Yiss, yeou, yeou long-nosed, fower-eyed, gingly-whiskered beggar! Yeu’m tu old for such goin’s on. Aie! Poultrice yeour nose, I tall ‘ee! Poultrice yeour long nose!”

Beetle’s heart leaped up within him. Somewhere, somehow, he knew, Stalky moved behind these manifestations. There were hope and the prospect of revenge. He would embody the suggestion about the nose in deathless verse. King threw up the window, and sternly rebuked Rabbits-Eggs. But the carrier was beyond fear or fawning. He had descended from the cart, and was stooping by the roadside.

It all fell swiftly as a dream. Manders minor raised his hand to his head with a cry, as a jagged flint cannoned on to some rich tree-calf bindings in the book-shelf. Another quoited along the writing-table. Beetle made zealous feint to stop it, and in that endeavor overturned a student’s lamp, which

dripped, *via* King's papers and some choice books, greasily on to a Persian rug. There was much broken glass on the window-seat; the china basket – McTurk's aversion – cracked to flinders, had dropped her musk plant and its earth over the red rep cushions; Manders minor was bleeding profusely from a cut on the cheek-bone; and King, using strange words, every one of which Beetle treasured, ran forth to find the school-sergeant, that Rabbits-Eggs might be instantly cast into jail.

"Poor chap!" said Beetle, with a false, feigned sympathy. "Let it bleed a little. That'll prevent apoplexy," and he held the blind head skilfully over the table, and the papers on the table, as he guided the howling Manders to the door.

Then did Beetle, alone with the wreckage, return good for evil. How, in that office, a complete set of "Gibbon" was scarred all along the back as by a flint; how so much black and copying ink came to be mingled with Manders's gore on the table-cloth; why the big gum-bottle, unstoppered, had rolled semicircularly across the floor; and in what manner the white china door-knob grew to be painted with yet more of Manders's young blood, were matters which Beetle did not explain when the rabid King returned to find him standing politely over the reeking hearth-rug.

"You never told me to go, sir," he said, with the air of Casabianca, and King consigned him to the outer darkness.

But it was to a boot-cupboard under the staircase on the ground floor that he hastened, to loose the mirth that was destroying him. He had not drawn breath for a first whoop of triumph when two hands choked him dumb.

"Go to the dormitory and get me my things. Bring 'em to Number Five lavatory. I'm still in tights," hissed Stalky, sitting on his head. "Don't run. Walk."

But Beetle staggered into the form-room next door, and delegated his duty to the yet unenlightened McTurk, with an hysterical precis of the campaign thus far. So it was McTurk, of the wooden visage, who brought the clothes from the dormitory while Beetle panted on a form. Then the three buried themselves in Number Five lavatory, turned on all the taps, filled the place with steam, and dropped weeping into the baths, where they pieced out the war.

"*Moi! Je! Ich! Ego!*" gasped Stalky. "I waited till I couldn't hear myself think, while you played the drum! Hid in the coal-locker – and tweaked Rabbits-Eggs – and Rabbits-Eggs rocked King. Wasn't it beautiful? Did you hear the glass?"

"Why, he – he – he," shrieked McTurk, one trembling finger pointed at Beetle.

"Why, I – I – I was through it all," Beetle howled; "in his study, being jawed."

"Oh, my soul!" said Stalky with a yell, disappearing under water.

"The – the glass was nothing. Manders minor's head's cut open. La – la – lamp upset all over the rug. Blood on the books and papers. The gum! The gum! The gum! The ink! The ink! The ink! Oh, Lord!"

Then Stalky leaped out, all pink as he was, and shook Beetle into some sort of coherence; but his tale prostrated them afresh.

"I bunked for the boot-cupboard the second I heard King go down-stairs. Beetle tumbled in on top of me. The spare key's hid behind the loose board. There isn't a shadow of evidence," said Stalky. They were all chanting together.

"And he turned us out himself – himself – himself!" This from McTurk. "He can't begin to suspect us. Oh, Stalky, it's the loveliest thing we've ever done."

"Gum! Gum! Dollops of gum!" shouted Beetle, his spectacles gleaming through a sea of lather. "Ink and blood all mixed. I held the little beast's head all over the Latin proses for Monday. Golly, how the oil stunk! And Rabbits-Eggs told King to poultice his nose! Did you hit Rabbits-Eggs, Stalky?"

"Did I jolly well not? Tweaked him all over. Did you hear him curse? Oh, I shall be sick in a minute if I don't stop."

But dressing was a slow process, because McTurk was obliged to dance when he heard that the musk basket was broken, and, moreover, Beetle retailed all King's language with emendations and purple insets.

"Shockin'!" said Stalky, collapsing in a helpless welter of half-hitched trousers. "So dam' bad, too, for innocent boys like us! Wonder what they'd say at 'St. Winifred's, or the World of School.' – By gum! That reminds me we owe the Lower Third one for assaultin' Beetle when he chivied Manders minor. Come on! It's an alibi, Samivel; and, besides, if we let 'em off they'll be worse next time."

The Lower Third had set a guard upon their form-room for the space of a full hour, which to a boy is a lifetime. Now they were busy with their Saturday evening businesses – cooking sparrows over the gas with rusty nibs; brewing unholy drinks in gallipots; skinning moles with pocket-knives; attending to paper trays full of silkworms, or discussing the iniquities of their elders with a freedom, fluency, and point that would have amazed their parents. The blow fell without warning. Stalky upset a form crowded with small boys among their own cooking utensils, McTurk raided the untidy lockers as a terrier digs at a rabbit-hole, while Beetle poured ink upon such heads as he could not appeal to with a Smith's Classical Dictionary. Three brisk minutes accounted for many silkworms, pet larvae, French exercises, school caps, half-prepared bones and skulls, and a dozen pots of home-made sloe jam. It was a great wreckage, and the form-room looked as though three conflicting tempests had smitten it.

"Phew!" said Stalky, drawing breath outside the door (amid groans of "Oh, you beastly ca-ads! You think yourselves awful funny," and so forth). "That's all right. Never let the sun go down upon your wrath. Rummy little devils, fags. Got no notion o' combinin'."

"Six of 'em sat on my head when I went in after Manders minor," said Beetle. "I warned 'em what they'd get, though."

"Everybody paid in full – beautiful feelin'," said McTurk absently, as they strolled along the corridor. "Don't think we'd better say much about King, though, do you, Stalky?"

"Not *much*. Our line is injured innocence, of course – same as when the Sergeant reported us on suspicion of smoking in the bunkers. If I hadn't thought of buyin' the pepper and spillin' it all over our clothes, he'd have smelt us. King was gha-astly facetious about that. 'Called us bird-stuffers in form for a week."

"Ah, King hates the Natural History Society because little Hartopp is president. Mustn't do anything in the Coll. without glorifyin' King," said McTurk. "But he must be a putrid ass, know, to suppose at our time o' life we'd go and stuff birds like fags."

"Poor old King!" said Beetle. "He's unpopular in Common-room, and they'll chaff his head off about Rabbits-Eggs. Golly! How lovely! How beautiful! How holy! But you should have seen his face when the first rock came in! *And* the earth from the basket!"

So they were all stricken helpless for five minutes.

They repaired at last to Abanazar's study, and were received reverently.

"What's the matter?" said Stalky, quick to realize new atmospheres.

"You know jolly well," said Abanazar. "You'll be expelled if you get caught. King is a gibbering maniac."

"Who? Which? What? Expelled for how? We only played the war-drum. We've got turned out for that already."

"Do you chaps mean to say you didn't make Rabbits-Eggs drunk and bribe him to rock King's rooms?"

"Bribe him? No, that I'll swear we didn't," said Stalky, with a relieved heart, for he loved not to tell lies. "What a low mind you've got, Pussy! We've been down having a bath. Did Rabbits-Eggs rock King? Strong, perseverin' man King? Shockin'!"

"Awf'ly. King's frothing at the mouth. There's bell for prayers. Come on."

“Wait a sec,” said Stalky, continuing the conversation in a loud and cheerful voice, as they descended the stairs. “What did Rabbits-Eggs rock King for?”

“I know,” said Beetle, as they passed King’s open door. “I was in his study.”

“Hush, you ass!” hissed the Emperor of China. “Oh, he’s gone down to prayers,” said Beetle, watching the shadow of the house-master on the wall. “Rabbits-Eggs was only a bit drunk, swearin’ at his horse, and King jawed him through the window, and then, of course, he rocked King.”

“Do you mean to say,” said Stalky, “that King began it?”

King was behind them, and every well-weighed word went up the staircase like an arrow. “I can only swear,” said Beetle, “that King cursed like a bargee. Simply disgustin’. I’m goin’ to write to my father about it.”

“Better report it to Mason,” suggested Stalky. “He knows our tender consciences. Hold on a shake. I’ve got to tie my boot-lace.”

The other study hurried forward. They did not wish to be dragged into stage asides of this nature. So it was left to McTurk to sum up the situation beneath the guns of the enemy.

“You see,” said the Irishman, hanging on the banister, “he begins by bullying little chaps; then he bullies the big chaps; then he bullies some one who isn’t connected with the College, and then catches it. Serves him jolly well right... I beg your pardon, sir. I didn’t see you were coming down the staircase.”

The black gown tore past like a thunder-storm, and in its wake, three abreast, arms linked, the Aladdin company rolled up the big corridor to prayers, singing with most innocent intention:

“Arrah, Patsy, mind the baby! Arrah, Patsy, mind the child!
Wrap him up in an overcoat, he’s surely goin’ wild!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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