

clever for old Richards! 'Twas on the born tip o' my tongue to tell, tu, but... he said us niver washed, he did. Let his dom boys call us 'stinkers,' he did. Sarve un dom well raight, I say!"

Richards spat on a fresh boot and fell to his work, chuckling.

#### THE IMPRESSIONISTS.

They had dropped into the chaplain's study for a Saturday night smoke---all four house-masters--and the three briars and the one cigar reeking in amity proved the Rev. John Gillett's good generalship. Since the discovery of the cat, King had been too ready to see affront where none was meant, and the Reverend John, buffer-state and general confidant, had worked for a week to bring about a good understanding. He was fat, clean-shaven, except for a big mustache, of an imperturbable good temper, and, those who loved him least said, a guileful Jesuit. He smiled benignantly upon his handiwork--four sorely tried men talking without very much malice.

"Now remember," he said, when the conversation turned that way, "I impute nothing. But every time that any one has taken direct steps against Number Five study, the issue has been more or less humiliating

to the taker."

"I can't admit that. I pulverize the egregious Beetle daily for his soul's good; and the others with him," said King.

"Well, take your own case, King, and go back a couple of years. Do you remember when Prout and you were on their track for hutting and trespass, wasn't it? Have you forgotten Colonel Dabney?"

The others laughed. King did not care to be reminded of his career as a poacher.

"That was one instance. Again, when you had rooms below them--I always said that that was entering the lion's den--you turned them out."

"For making disgusting noises. Surely, Gillett, you don't excuse--"

"All I say is that you turned them out. That same evening your study was wrecked."

"By Rabbits-Eggs--most beastly drunk--from the road," said King. "What has that?"

The Reverend John went on.

"Lastly, they conceive that aspersions are cast upon their personal

cleanliness--a most delicate matter with all boys. Ve-ry good. Observe how, in each case, the punishment fits the crime. A week after your house calls them 'stinkers,' King, your house is, not to put too fine a point on it, stunk out by a dead cat who chooses to die in the one spot where she can annoy you most. Again the long arm of coincidence! Summa. You accuse them of trespass. Through some absurd chain of circumstances--they may or may not be at the other end of it--you and Prout are made to appear as trespassers. You evict them. For a time your study is made untenable. I have drawn the parallel in the last case. Well?"

"She was under the centre of White's dormitory," said King. "There are double floor-boards there to deaden noise. No boy, even in my own house, could possibly have pried up the boards without leaving some trace--and Rabbits-Eggs was phenomenally drunk that other night."

"They are singularly favored by fortune. That is all I ever said. Personally, I like them immensely, and I believe I have a little of their confidence. I confess I like being called 'Padre.' They are at peace with me; consequently I am not treated to bogus confessions of theft."

"You mean Mason's case?" said Prout heavily. "That always struck me as peculiarly scandalous. I thought the Head should have taken up the matter more thoroughly. Mason may be misguided, but at least he is thoroughly sincere and means well."

"I confess I cannot agree with you, Prout," said the Reverend John. "He jumped at some silly tale of theft on their part; accepted another boy's evidence without, so far as I can see, any inquiry; and--frankly, I think he deserved all he got."

"They deliberately outraged Mason's best feelings," said Prout. "A word to me on their part would have saved the whole thing. But they preferred to lure him on; to play on his ignorance of their characters--"

"That may be," said King, "but I don't like Mason. I dislike him for the very reason that Prout advances to his credit. He means well."

"Our criminal tradition is not theft--among ourselves, at least," said little Hartopp.

"For the head of a house that raided seven head of cattle from the innocent pot-wallopers of Northam, isn't that rather a sweeping statement?" said Macrae.

"Precisely so," said Hartopp, unabashed. "That, with gate-lifting, and a little poaching and hawk-hunting on the cliffs, is our salvation."

"It does us far more harm as a school--" Prout began.

"Than any hushed-up scandal could? Quite so. Our reputation among the

farmers is most unsavory. But I would much sooner deal with any amount of ingenious crime of that nature than--some other offenses."

"They may be all right, but they are unboylike, abnormal, and, in my opinion, unsound," Prout insisted. "The moral effect of their performances must pave the way for greater harm. It makes me doubtful how to deal with them. I might separate them."

"You might, of course; but they have gone up the school together for six years. I shouldn't care to do it," said Macrae.

"They use the editorial 'we,'" said King, irrelevantly. "It annoys me. 'Where's your prose, Corkran?' 'Well, sir, we haven't quite done it yet.' 'We'll bring it in a minute,' and so on. And the same with the others."

"There's great virtue in that 'we,'" said little Hartopp. "You know I take them for trig. McTurk may have some conception of the meaning of it; but Beetle is as the brutes that perish about sines and cosines. He copies serenely from Stalky, who positively rejoices in mathematics."

"Why don't you stop it?" said Prout.

"It rights itself at the exams. Then Beetle shows up blank sheets, and trusts to his 'English' to save him from a fall. I fancy he spends most of his time with me in writing verse."

"I wish to Heaven he would transfer a little of his energy in that direction to Elegiaes." King jerked himself upright. "He is, with the single exception of Stalky, the very vilest manufacturer of 'barbarous hexameters' that I have ever dealt with."

"The work is combined in that study," said the chaplain. "Stalky does the mathematics, McTurk the Latin, and Beetle attends to their English and French. At least, when he was in the sick-house last month--"

"Malingering," Prout interjected.

"Quite possibly. I found a very distinct falling off in their 'Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre' translations."

"I think it is profoundly immoral," said Prout. "I've always been opposed to the study system."

"It would be hard to find any study where the boys don't help each other; but in Number Five the thing has probably been reduced to a system," said little Hartopp. "They have a system in most things."

"They confess as much," said the Reverend John. "I've seen McTurk being hounded up the stairs to elegise the 'Elegy in a Churchyard,' while Beetle and Stalky went to punt-about."

"It amounts to systematic cribbing," said Prout, his voice growing deeper and deeper.

"No such thing," little Hartopp returned. "You can't teach a cow the violin."

"In intention it is cribbing."

"But we spoke under the seal of the confessional, didn't we?" said the Reverend John.

"You say you've heard them arranging their work in this way, Gillett," Prout persisted.

"Good Heavens! Don't make me Queen's evidence, my dear fellow. Hartopp is equally incriminated. If they ever found out that I had sneaked, our relations would suffer--and I value them."

"I think your attitude in this matter is weak," said Prout, looking round for support. "It would be really better to break up the study--for a while--wouldn't it?"

"Oh, break it up by all means," said Macrae. "We shall see then if Gillett's theory holds water."

"Be wise, Prout. Leave them alone, or calamity will overtake you; and

what is much more important, they will be annoyed with me. I am too fat, alas! to be worried by bad boys. Where are you going?"

"Nonsense! They would not dare---but I am going to think this out," said Prout. "It needs thought. In intention they cribbed, and I must think out my duty."

"He's perfectly capable of putting the boys on their honor. It's I that am a fool." The Reverend John looked round remorsefully. "Never again will I forget that a master is not a man. Mark my words," said the Reverend John. "There will be trouble."

But by the yellow Tiber  
Was tumult and affright.

Out of the blue sky (they were still rejoicing over the cat war) Mr. Prout had dropped into Number Five, read them a lecture on the enormity of cribbing, and bidden them return to the form-rooms on Monday. They had raged, solo and chorus, all through the peaceful Sabbath, for their sin was more or less the daily practice of all the studies.

"What's the good of cursing?" said Stalky at last. "We're all in the same boat. We've got to go back and consort with the house. A locker in the form-room, and a seat at prep. in Number Twelve." (He looked regretfully round the cozy study which McTurk, their leader in matters



of Art, had decorated with a dado, a stencil, and cretonne hangings.)

"Yes! Heffy lurchin' into the form-rooms like a frowzy old retriever, to see if we aren't up to something. You know he never leaves his house alone, these days," said McTurk. "Oh, it will be giddy!"

"Why aren't you down watchin' cricket? I like a robust, healthy boy. You mustn't frowst in a form-room. Why don't you take an interest in your house? Yah!" quoted Beetle.

"Yes, why don't we? Let's! We'll take an interest in the house. We'll take no end of interest in the house! He hasn't had us in the form-rooms for a year. We've learned a lot since then. Oh, we'll make it a be-autiful house before we've done! 'Member that chap in 'Eric' or 'St. Winifred's'--Belial somebody? I'm goin' to be Belial," said Stalky, with an ensnaring grin.

"Right O," said Beetle, "and I'll be Mammon. I'll lend money at usury--that's what they do at all schools accordin' to the B.O.P. Penny a week on a shillin'. That'll startle Heffy's weak intellect. You can be Lucifer, Turkey."

"What have I got to do?" McTurk also smiled.

"Head conspiracies--and cabals--and boycotts. Go in for that 'stealthy intrigue' that Heffy is always talkin' about. Come on!"

The house received them on their fall with the mixture of jest and sympathy always extended to boys turned out of their study. The known aloofness of the three made them more interesting.

"Quite like old times, ain't it?" Stalky selected a locker and flung in his books. "We've come to sport with you, my young friends, for a while, because our beloved house-master has hove us out of our diggin's."

"Serve you jolly well right," said Orrin, "you cribbers!"

"This will never do," said Stalky. "We can't maintain our giddy prestige, Orrin, de-ah, if you make these remarks."

They wrapped themselves lovingly about the boy, thrust him to the opened window, and drew down the sash to the nape of his neck. With an equal swiftness they tied his thumbs together behind his back with a piece of twine, and then, because he kicked furiously, removed his shoes. There Mr. Prout happened to find him a few minutes later, guillotined and helpless, surrounded by a convulsed crowd who would not assist.

Stalky, in an upper form-room, had gathered himself allies against vengeance. Orrin presently tore up at the head of a boarding party, and the form-room grew one fog of dust through which boys wrestled, stamped, shouted, and yelled. A desk was carried away in the tumult, a knot of warriors reeled into and split a door-panel, a window was broken, and

a gas-jet fell. Under cover of the confusion the three escaped to the corridor, whence they called in and sent up passers-by to the fray.

"Rescue, Kings! Kings! Kings! Number Twelve form-room! Rescue, Prouts--Prouts! Rescue, Macraes! Rescue, Hartopps!"

The juniors hurried out like bees aswarm, asking no questions, clattered up the staircase, and added themselves to the embroilment.

"Not bad for the first evening's work," said Stalky, rearranging his collar. "I fancy Prout'll be somewhat annoyed. We'd better establish an alibi." So they sat on Mr. King's railings till prep.

"You see," quoth Stalky, as they strolled up to prep. with the ignoble herd, "if you get the houses well mixed up an' scufflin', it's even bettin' that some ass will start a real row. Hullo, Orrin, you look rather metagrobolized."

"It was all your fault, you beast! You started it. We've got two hundred lines apiece, and Heffy's lookin' for you. Just see what that swine Malpas did to my eye!"

"I like your saying we started it. Who called us cribbers? Can't your infant mind connect cause and effect yet? Some day you'll find out that it don't pay to jest with Number Five."

"Where's that shillin' you owe me?" said Beetle suddenly.

Stalky could not see Prout behind him, but returned the lead without a quaver. "I only owed you ninepence, you old usurer."

"You've forgotten the interest," said McTurk. "A halfpenny a week per bob is Beetle's charge. You must be beastly rich, Beetle."

"Well, Beetle lent me sixpence." Stalky came to a full stop and made as to work it out on his fingers. "Sixpence on the nineteenth, didn't he?"

"Yes; but you've forgotten you paid no interest on the other bob--the one I lent you before."

"But you took my watch as security." The game was developing itself almost automatically.

"Never mind. Pay me my interest, or I'll charge you interest on interest. Remember, I've got your note-of-hand!" shouted Beetle.

"You are a cold-blooded Jew," Stalky groaned.

"Hush!" said McTurk very loudly indeed, and started as Prout came upon them.

"I didn't see you in that disgraceful affair in the form-room just now,"

said he.

"What, sir? We're just come up from Mr. King's," said Stalky. "Please, sir, what am I to do about prep.? They've broken the desk you told me to sit at, and the form's just swimming with ink."

"Find another seat--find another seat. D'you expect me to dry-nurse you? I wish to know whether you are in the habit of advancing money to your associates, Beetle?"

"No, sir; not as a general rule, sir."

"It is a most reprehensible habit. I thought that my house, at least, would be free from it. Even with my opinion of you, I hardly thought it was one of your vices."

"There's no harm in lending money, sir, is there?"

"I am not going to bandy words with you on your notions of morality. How much have you lent Corkran?"

"I--I don't quite know," said Beetle. It is difficult to improvise a going concern on the spur of the minute.

"You seemed certain enough just now."

"I think it's two and fourpence," said McTurk, with a glance of cold scorn at Beetle. In the hopelessly involved finances of the study there was just that sum to which both McTurk and Beetle laid claim, as their share in the pledging of Stalky's second-best Sunday trousers. But Stalky had maintained for two terms that the money was his "commission" for effecting the pawn; and had, of course, spent it on a study "brew."

"Understand this, then. You are not to continue your operations as a money-lender. Two and fourpence, you said, Corkran?"

Stalky had said nothing, and continued so to do.

"Your influence for evil is quite strong enough without buying a hold over your companions." He felt in his pockets, and (oh joy!) produced a florin and fourpence. "Bring me what you call Corkran's note-of-hand, and be thankful that I do not carry the matter any further. The money is stopped from your pocket-money, Corkran. The receipt to my study, at once!"

Little they cared! Two and fourpence in a lump is worth six weekly sixpences any hungry day of the week.

"But what the dooce is a note-of-hand?" said Beetle. "I only read about it in a book."

"Now you've jolly well got to make one," said Stalky.

"Yes--but our ink don't turn black till next day. S'pose he'll spot that?"

"Not him. He's too worried," said McTurk. "Sign your name on a bit of impot-paper, Stalky, and write, 'I O U two and fourpence.' Aren't you grateful to me for getting that out of Prout? Stalky'd never have paid... Why, you ass!"

Mechanically Beetle had handed over the money to Stalky as treasurer of the study. The custom of years is not lightly broken. In return for the document, Prout expounded to Beetle the enormity of money-lending, which, like everything except compulsory cricket, corrupted houses and destroyed good feeling among boys, made youth cold and calculating, and opened the door to all evil. Finally, did Beetle know of any other cases? If so, it was his duty as proof of repentance to let his house-master know. No names need be mentioned.

Beetle did not know--at least, he was not quite sure, sir. How could he give evidence against his friends? The house might, of course--here he feigned an anguished delicacy--be full of it. He was not in a position to say. He had not met with any open competition in his trade; but if Mr. Prout considered it was a matter that affected the honor of the house (Mr. Prout did consider it precisely that), perhaps the house-prefects would be better...

He spun it out till half-way through prep.

"And," said the amateur Shylock, returning to the form-room and dropping at Stalky's side, "if he don't think the house is putrid with it, I'm several Dutch-men--that's all... I've been to Mr. Prout's study, sir." This to the prep.-master. "He said I could sit where I liked, sir... Oh, he is just tricklin' with emotion... Yes, sir, I'm only askin' Corkran to let me have a dip in his ink."

After prayers, on the road to the dormitories, Harrison and Craye, senior house-prefects, zealous in their office, waylaid them with great anger. "What have you been doing to Heffy this time, Beetle? He's been jawing us all the evening."

"What has His Serene Transparency been vexin' you for?" said McTurk.

"About Beetle lendin' money to Stalky," began Harrison; "and then Beetle went and told him that there was any amount of money-lendin' in the house."

"No, you don't," said Beetle, sitting on a boot-basket. "That's just what I didn't tell him. I spoke the giddy truth. He asked me if there was much of it in the house; and I said I didn't know."

"He thinks you're a set of filthy Shylocks," said McTurk. "It's just as well for you he don't think you're burglars. You know he never gets a



notion out of his conscientious old head."

"Well-meanin' man. Did it all for the best." Stalky curled gracefully round the stair-rail. "Head in a drain-pipe. Full confession in the left boot. Bad for the honor of the house--very."

"Shut up," said Harrison. "You chaps always behave as if you were jawin' us when we come to jaw you."

"You're a lot too cheeky," said Craye.

"I don't quite see where the cheek comes in, except on your part, in interferin' with a private matter between me an' Beetle after it has been settled by Prout." Stalky winked cheerfully at the others.

"That's the worst of clever little swots," said McTurk, addressing the gas. "They get made prefects before they have any tact, and then they annoy chaps who could really help 'em to look after the honor of the house."

"We won't trouble you to do that!" said Craye hotly.

"Then what are you badgerin' us for?" said Beetle. "On your own showing, you've been so beastly slack, looking after the house, that Prout believes it's a nest of money-lenders. I've told him that I've lent money to Stalky, and no one else. I don't know whether he believes me,

but that finishes my case. The rest is your business."

"Now we find out," Stalky's voice rose, "that there is apparently an organized conspiracy throughout the house. For aught we know, the fags may be lendin' and borrowin' far beyond their means. We aren't responsible for it. We're only the rank and file."

"Are you surprised we don't wish to associate with the house?" said McTurk, with dignity. "We've kept ourselves to ourselves in our study till we were turned out, and now we find ourselves let in for for this sort of thing. It's simply disgraceful."

"Then you hector and bullyrag us on the stairs," said Stalky, "about matters that are your business entirely. You know we aren't prefects."

"You threatened us with a prefect's lickin' just now," said Beetle, boldly inventing as he saw the bewilderment in the faces of the enemy. "And if you expect you'll gain anything from us by your way of approachin' us, you're jolly well mistaken. That's all. Good-night."

They clattered upstairs, injured virtue on every inch of their backs.

"But--but what the dickens have we done?" said Harrison, amazedly, to Craye.

"I don't know. Only--it always happens that way when one has anything to

do with them. They're so beastly plausible."

And Mr. Prout called the good boys into his study anew, and succeeded in sinking both his and their innocent minds ten fathoms deeper in blindfolded bedazement. He spoke of steps and measures, of tone and loyalty in the house and to the house, and urged them to take up the matter tactfully.

So they demanded of Beetle whether he had any connection with any other establishment. Beetle promptly went to his house-master, and wished to know by what right Harrison and Craye had reopened a matter already settled between him and his house-master. In injured innocence no boy excelled Beetle.

Then it occurred to Prout that he might have been unfair to the culprit, who had not striven to deny or palliate his offense. He sent for Harrison and Craye, reprehending them very gently for the tone they had adopted to a repentant sinner, and when they returned to their study, they used the language of despair. They then made headlong inquisition through the house, driving the fags to the edge of hysterics, and unearthing, with tremendous pomp and parade, the natural and inevitable system of small loans that prevails among small boys.

"You see, Harrison, Thornton minor lent me a penny last Saturday, because I was fined for breaking the window; and I spent it at Keyte's. I didn't know there was any harm in it. And Wray major borrowed twopence

from me when my uncle sent me a post-office order--I cashed it at Keyte's--for five bob; but he'll pay me back before the holidays. We didn't know there was anything wrong in it."

They waded through hours of this kind of thing, but found no usury, or anything approaching to Beetle's gorgeous scale of interest. The seniors--for the school had no tradition of deference to prefects outside compulsory games--told them succinctly to go about their business. They would not give evidence on any terms. Harrison was one idiot, and Craye was another; but the greatest of all, they said, was their house-master.

When a house is thoroughly upset, however good its conscience, it breaks into knots and coteries--small gatherings in the twilight, box-room committees, and groups in the corridor. And when from group to group, with an immense affectation of secrecy, three wicked boys steal, crying "Cave!" when there is no need of caution, and whispering "Don't tell!" on the heels of trumpety confidences that instant invented, a very fine air of plot and intrigue can be woven round such a house.

At the end of a few days, it dawned on Prout that he moved in an atmosphere of perpetual ambush. Mysteries hedged him on all sides, warnings ran before his heavy feet, and countersigns were muttered behind his attentive back. McTurk and Stalky invented many absurd and idle phrases--catch-words that swept through the house as fire through stubble. It was a rare jest, and the only practical outcome of the Usury

Commission, that one boy should say to a friend, with awful gravity, "Do you think there's much of it going on in the house?" The other would reply, "Well, one can't be too careful, you know." The effect on a house-master of humane conscience and good intent may be imagined. Again, a man who has sincerely devoted himself to gaining the esteem of his charges does not like to hear himself described, even at a distance, as "Popularity Prout" by a dark and scowling Celt with a fluent tongue. A rumor that stories--unusual stories--are told in the form-rooms, between the lights, by a boy who does not command his confidence, agitates such a man; and even elaborate and tender politeness--for the courtesy wise-grown men offer to a bewildered child was the courtesy that Stalky wrapped round Prout--restores not his peace of mind.

"The tone of the house seems changed--changed for the worse," said Prout to Harrison and Craye. "Have you noticed it? I don't for an instant impute--"

He never imputed anything; but, on the other hand, he never did anything else, and, with the best intentions in the world, he had reduced the house-prefects to a state as nearly bordering on nervous irritation as healthy boys can know. Worst of all, they began at times to wonder whether Stalky & Co. had not some truth in their often-repeated assertions that Prout was a gloomy ass.

"As you know, I am not the kind of man who puts himself out for every little thing he hears. I believe in letting the house work out their own

salvation--with a light guiding hand on the reins, of course. But there is a perceptible lack of reverence---a lower tone in matters that touch the honor of the house, a sort of hardness."

Oh, Prout he is a nobleman, a nobleman, a nobleman!

Our Heffy is a nobleman--

He does an awful lot,

Because his popularity

Oh, pop-u-pop-u-larity--

His giddy popularity

Would suffer did he not!

The study door stood ajar; and the song, borne by twenty clear voices, came faint from a form-room. The fags rather liked the tune; the words were Beetle's.

"That's a thing no sensible man objects to," said Prout with a lop-sided smile; "but you know straws show which way the wind blows. Can you trace it to any direct influence? I am speaking to you now as heads of the house."

"There isn't the least doubt of it," said Harrison angrily. "I know what you mean, sir. It all began when Number Five study came to the form-rooms. There's no use blinkin' it, Craye. You know that, too."

"They make things rather difficult for us, sometimes," said Craye. "It's

more their manner than anything else, that Harrison means."

"Do they hamper you in the discharge of your duties, then?"

"Well, no, sir. They only look on and grin--and turn up their noses generally."

"Ah," said Prout sympathetically.

"I think, sir," said Craye, plunging into the business boldly, "it would be a great deal better if they were sent back to their study--better for the house. They are rather old to be knocking about the form-rooms."

"They are younger than Orrin, or Flint, and a dozen others that I can think of."

"Yes, sir; but that's different, somehow. They're rather influential. They have a knack of upsettin' things in a quiet way that one can't take hold of. At least, if one does--"

"And you think they would be better in their own study again?"

Emphatically Harrison and Craye were of that opinion. As Harrison said to Craye, afterwards, "They've weakened our authority. They're too big to lick; they've made an exhibition of us over this usury business, and we're a laughing-stock to the rest of the school. I'm going up (for

Sandhurst, understood) next term. They've managed to knock me out of half my work already with their--their lunacy. If they go back to their study we may have a little peace."

"Hullo, Harrison." McTurk ambled round the corner, with a roving eye on all possible horizons. "Bearin' up, old man? That's right. Live it down! Live it down!"

"What d'you mean?"

"You look a little pensive," said McTurk. "Exhaustin' job superintendin' the honor of the house, ain't it? By the way, how are you off for mares'-nests?"

"Look here," said Harrison, hoping for instant reward. "We've recommended Prout to let you go back to your study."

"The dooce you have! And who under the sun are you to interfere between us and our house-master? Upon my Sam, you two try us very hard--you do, indeed. Of course we don't know how far you abuse your position to prejudice us with Mr. Prout; but when you deliberately stop me to tell me you've been makin' arrangements behind our back--in secret--with Prout--I--I don't know really what we ought to do."

"That's beastly unfair!" cried Craye.



"It is." McTurk had adopted a ghastly solemnity that sat well on his long, lean face. "Hang it all! A prefect's one thing and an usher's another; but you seem to combine 'em. You recommend this--you recommend that! You say how and when we go back to our study!"

"But--but--we thought you'd like it, Turkey. We did, indeed. You know you'll be ever so much more comfortable there." Harrison's voice was almost tearful.

McTurk turned away as though to hide his emotions.

"They're broke!" He hunted up Stalky and Beetle in a box-room. "They're sick! They've been beggin' Heffy to let us go back to Number Five. Poor devils! Poor little devils!"

"It's the olive branch," was Stalky's comment. "It's the giddy white flag, by gum! Come to think of it, we have metagrobolized 'em."

Just after tea that day, Mr. Prout sent for them to say that if they chose to ruin their future by neglecting their work, it was entirely their own affair. He wished them, however, to understand that their presence in the form-rooms could not be tolerated one hour longer. He personally did not care to think of the time he must spend in eliminating the traces of their evil influences. How far Beetle had pandered to the baser side of youthful imagination he would ascertain

later; and Beetle might be sure that if Mr. Prout came across any soul-corrupting consequences--

"Consequences of what, sir?" said Beetle, genuinely bewildered this time; and McTurk quietly kicked him on the ankle for being "fetched" by Prout. Beetle, the house-master continued, knew very well what was intended. Evil and brief had been their careers under his eye; and as one standing in loco parentis to their yet uncontaminated associates, he was bound to take his precautions. The return of the study key closed the sermon.

"But what was the baser-side-of-imagination business?" said Beetle on the stairs.

"I never knew such an ass as you are for justifyin' yourself," said McTurk. "I hope I jolly well skinned your ankle. Why do you let yourself be drawn by everybody?"

"Draws be blowed! I must have tickled him up in some way I didn't know about. If I'd had a notion of that before, of course I could have rubbed it in better. It's too late now. What a pity! 'Baser side.' What was he drivin' at?"

"Never mind," said Stalky. "I knew we could make it a happy little house. I said so, remember--but I swear I didn't think we'd do it so soon."

"No," said Prout most firmly in Common-room. "I maintain that Gillett is wrong. True, I let them return to their study."

"With your known views on cribbing, too?" purred little Hartopp. "What an immoral compromise!"

"One moment," said the Reverend John. "I--we--all of us have exercised an absolutely heart-breaking discretion for the last ten days. Now we want to know. Confess--have you known a happy minute since--"

"As regards my house, I have not," said Prout. "But you are entirely wrong in your estimate of those boys. In justice to the others--in self-defence--"

"Ha! I said it would come to that," murmured the Reverend John.

--I was forced to send them back. Their moral influence was unspeakable--simply unspeakable."

And bit by bit he told his tale, beginning with Beetle's usury, and ending with the house-prefects' appeal.

"Beetle in the ro'le of Shylock is new to me," said King, with twitching lips. "I heard rumors of it--"

"Before?" said Prout.

"No, after you had dealt with them; but I was careful not to inquire. I never interfere with--"

"I myself," said Hartopp, "would cheerfully give him five shillings if he could work out one simple sum in compound interest without three gross errors."

"Why--why--why!" Mason, the mathematical master, stuttered, a fierce joy on his face, "you've been had--precisely the same as me!"

"And so you held an inquiry?" Little Hartopp's voice drowned Mason's ere Prout caught the import of the sentence.

"The boy himself hinted at the existence of a deal of it in the house," said Prout.

"He is past master in that line," said the chaplain. "But, as regards the honor of the house--"

"They lowered it in a week. I have striven to build it up for years. My own house-prefects--and boys do not willingly complain of each other--besought me to get rid of them. You say you have their confidence, Gillett: they may tell you another tale. As far as I am

concerned, they may go to the devil in their own way. I'm sick and tired of them," said Prout bitterly.

But it was the Reverend John, with a smiling countenance, who went to the devil just after Number Five had cleared away a very pleasant little brew (it cost them two and fourpence) and was settling down to prep.

"Come in, Padre, come in," said Stalky, thrusting forward the best chair. "We've only met you official-like these last ten days."

"You were under sentence," said the Reverend John. "I do not consort with malefactors."

"Ah, but we're restored again," said McTurk. "Mr. Prout has relented."

"Without a stain on our characters," said Beetle. "It was a painful episode, Padre, most painful."

"Now, consider for a while, and perpend, mes enfants. It is about your characters that I've called to-night. In the language of the schools, what the dooce have you been up to in Mr. Prout's house? It isn't anything to laugh over. He says that you so lowered the tone of the house he had to pack you back to your studies. Is that true?"

"Every word of it, Padre."

"Don't be flippant, Turkey. Listen to me. I've told you very often that no boys in the school have a greater influence for good or evil than you have. You know I don't talk about ethics and moral codes, because I don't believe that the young of the human animal realizes what they mean for some years to come. All the same, I don't want to think you've been perverting the juniors. Don't interrupt, Beetle. Listen to me. Mr. Prout has a notion that you have been corrupting your associates somehow or other."

"Mr. Prout has so many notions, Padre," said Beetle wearily. "Which one is this?"

"Well, he tells me that he heard you telling a story in the twilight in the form-room, in a whisper. And Orrin said, just as he opened the door, 'Shut up, Beetle; it's too beastly.' Now then?"

"You remember Mrs. Oliphant's 'Beleaguered City' that you lent me last term?" said Beetle.

The Padre nodded.

"I got the notion out of that. Only, instead of a city, I made it the Coll. in a fog--besieged by ghosts of dead boys, who hauled chaps out of their beds in the dormitory. All the names are quite real. You tell it in a whisper, you know with the names. Orrin didn't like it one little bit. None of 'em have ever let me finish it. It gets just awful at the

end part."

"But why in the world didn't you explain to Mr. Prout, instead of leaving him under the impression--?"

"Padre Sahib," said McTurk, "it isn't the least good explainin' to Mr. Prout. If he hasn't one impression, he's bound to have another."

"He'd do it with the best o' motives. He's in loco parentis," purred Stalky.

"You young demons!" the Reverend John replied. "And am I to understand that the---the usury business was another of your house-master's impressions?"

"Well--we helped a little in that," said Stalky. "I did owe Beetle two and fourpence at least, Beetle says I did, but I never intended to pay him. Then we started a bit of an argument on the stairs, and--and Mr. Prout dropped into it accidental. That was how it was, Padre. He paid me cash down like a giddy Dook (stopped it out of my pocket-money just the same), and Beetle gave him my note-of-hand all correct. I don't know what happened after that."

"I was too truthful," said Beetle. "I always am. You see, he was under an impression, Padre, and I suppose I ought to have corrected that impression; but of course I couldn't be quite certain that his

house wasn't given over to money-lendin', could I? I thought the house-prefects might know more about it than I did. They ought to. They're giddy palladiums of public schools."

"They did, too--by the time they'd finished," said McTurk. "As nice a pair of conscientious, well-meanin', upright, pure-souled boys as you'd ever want to meet, Padre. They turned the house upside down--Harrison and Craye---with the best motives in the world."

"They said so. 'They said it very loud and clear. They went and shouted in our ear,'" said Stalky.

"My own private impression is that all three of you will infallibly be hanged," said the Reverend John.

"Why, we didn't do anything," McTurk replied. "It was all Mr. Prout. Did you ever read a book about Japanese wrestlers? My uncle---he's in the Navy--gave me a beauty once."

"Don't try to change the subject, Turkey."

"I'm not, sir. I'm givin' an illustration--same as a sermon. These wrestler-chaps have got sort sort of trick that lets the other chap do all the work. Than they give a little wriggle, and he upsets himself. It's called shibbuwichee or tokonoma, or somethin'. Mr. Prout's a shibbuwicher. It isn't our fault."



"Did you suppose we went round corruptin' the minds of the fags?" said Beetle. "They haven't any, to begin with; and if they had, they're corrupted long ago. I've been a fag, Padre."

"Well, I fancied I knew the normal range of your iniquities; but if you take so much trouble to pile up circumstantial evidence against yourselves, you can't blame any one if--"

"We don't blame any one, Padre. We haven't said a word against Mr. Prout, have we?" Stalky looked at the others. "We love him. He hasn't a notion how we love him."

"H'm! You dissemble your love very well. Have you ever thought who got you turned out of your study in the first place?"

"It was Mr. Prout turned us out," said Stalky, with significance.

"Well, I was that man. I didn't mean it; but some words of mine, I'm afraid, gave Mr. Prout the impression--"

Number Five laughed aloud.

"You see it's just the same thing with you, Padre," said McTurk. "He is quick to get an impression, ain't he? But you mustn't think we don't love him, 'cause we do. There isn't an ounce of vice about him."

A double knock fell on the door.

"The Head to see Number Five study in his study at once," said the voice of Foxy, the school sergeant.

"Whew!" said the Reverend John. "It seems to me that there is a great deal of trouble coming for some people."

"My word! Mr. Prout's gone and told the Head," said Stalky. "He's a moral double-ender. Not fair, luggin' the Head into a house-row."

"I should recommend a copy-book on a--h'm--safe and certain part," said the Reverend John disinterestedly.

"Huh! He licks across the shoulders, an' it would slam like a beastly barn-door," said Beetle. "Good-night, Padre. We're in for it."

Once more they stood in the presence of the Head--Belial, Mammon, and Lucifer. But they had to deal with a man more subtle than them all. Mr. Prout had talked to him, heavily and sadly, for half an hour; and the Head had seen all that was hidden from the house-master.

"You've been bothering Mr. Prout," he said pensively. "House-masters aren't here to be bothered by boys more than is necessary. I don't like being bothered by these things. You are bothering me. That is a very

serious offense. You see it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, now, I purpose to bother you, on personal and private grounds, because you have broken into my time. You are much too big to lick, so I suppose I shall have to mark my displeasure in some other way. Say, a thousand lines apiece, a week's gating, and a few things of that kind. Much too big to lick, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Stalky cheerfully; for a week's gating in the summer term is serious.

"Ve-ry good. Then we will do what we can. I wish you wouldn't bother me."

It was a fair, sustained, equable stroke, with a little draw to it, but what they felt most was his unfairness in stopping to talk between executions. Thus: "Among the--lower classes this would lay me open to a charge of--assault. You should be more grateful for your--privileges than you are. There is a limit--one finds it by experience, Beetle--beyond which it is never safe to pursue private vendettas, because--don't move--sooner or later one comes--into collision with the--higher authority, who has studied the animal. Et ego--McTurk, please--in Arcadia vixi. There's a certain flagrant injustice about this that ought to appeal to--your temperament. And that's all! You will

tell your house-master that you have been formally caned by me."

"My word!" said McTurk, wriggling his shoulder-blades all down the corridor. "That was business! The Prooshan Bates has an infernal straight eye."

"Wasn't it wily of me to ask for the lickin'," said Stalky, "instead of those impots?"

"Rot! We were in for it from the first. I knew the look of his old eye," said Beetle. "I was within an inch of blubbing."

"Well, I didn't exactly smile," Stalky confessed.

"Let's go down to the lavatory and have a look at the damage. One of us can hold the glass and t'others can squint."

They proceeded on these lines for some ten minutes. The wales were very red and very level. There was not a penny to choose between any of them for thoroughness, efficiency, and a certain clarity of outline that stamps the work of the artist.

"What are you doing down there?" Mr. Prout was at the head of the lavatory stairs, attracted by the noise of splashing.

"We've only been caned by the Head, sir, and we're washing off the

blood. The Head said we were to tell you. We were coming to report ourselves in a minute, sir. (Sotto voce.) That's a score for Heffy!"

"Well, he deserves to score something, poor devil," said McTurk, putting on his shirt. "We've sweated a stone and a half off him since we began."

"But look here, why aren't we wrathful with the Head? He said it was a flagrant injustice. So it is!" said Beetle.

"Dear man," said McTurk, and vouchsafed no further answer.

It was Stalky who laughed till he had to hold on by the edge of a basin.

"You are a funny ass! What's that for?" said Beetle.

"I'm--I'm thinking of the flagrant injustice of it!"

#### THE MORAL REFORMERS.

There was no disguising the defeat. The victory was to Prout, but they grudged it not. If he had broken the rules of the game by calling in the Head, they had had a good run for their money.