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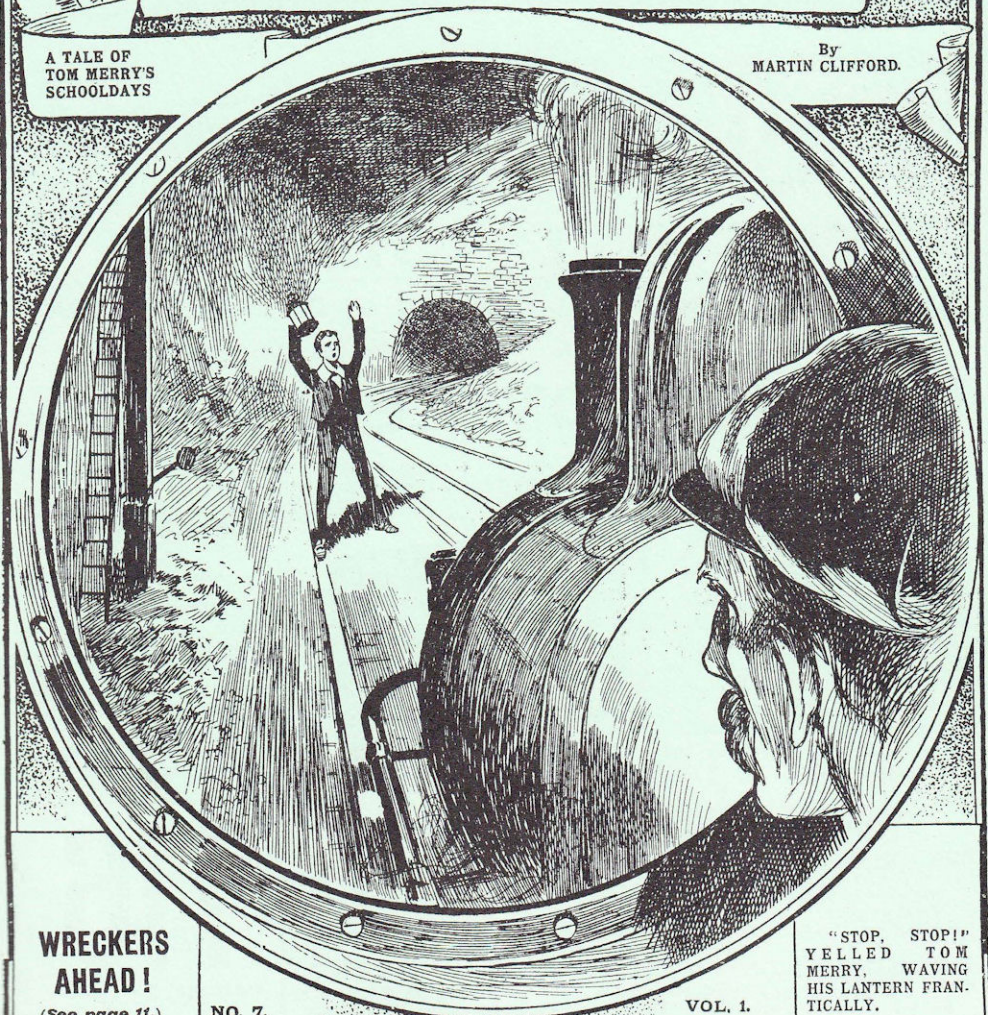
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OUR CAPTAIN.

A TALE OF
TOM MERRY'S
SCHOOL DAYS

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.



**WRECKERS
AHEAD!**

(See page 11.)

NO. 7.

VOL. 1.

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MERRY, WAVING
HIS LANTERN FRAN-
TICALLY.

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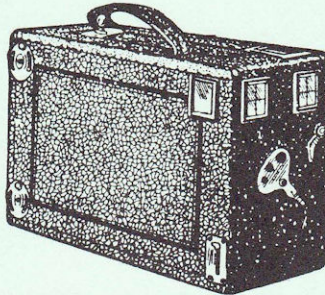
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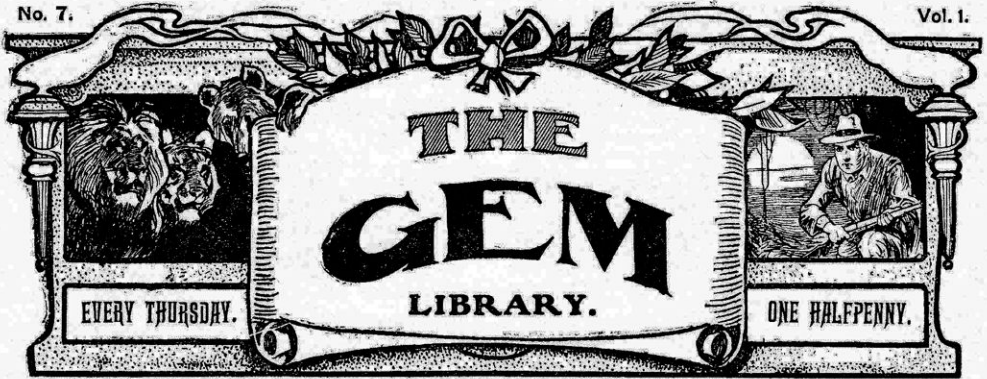
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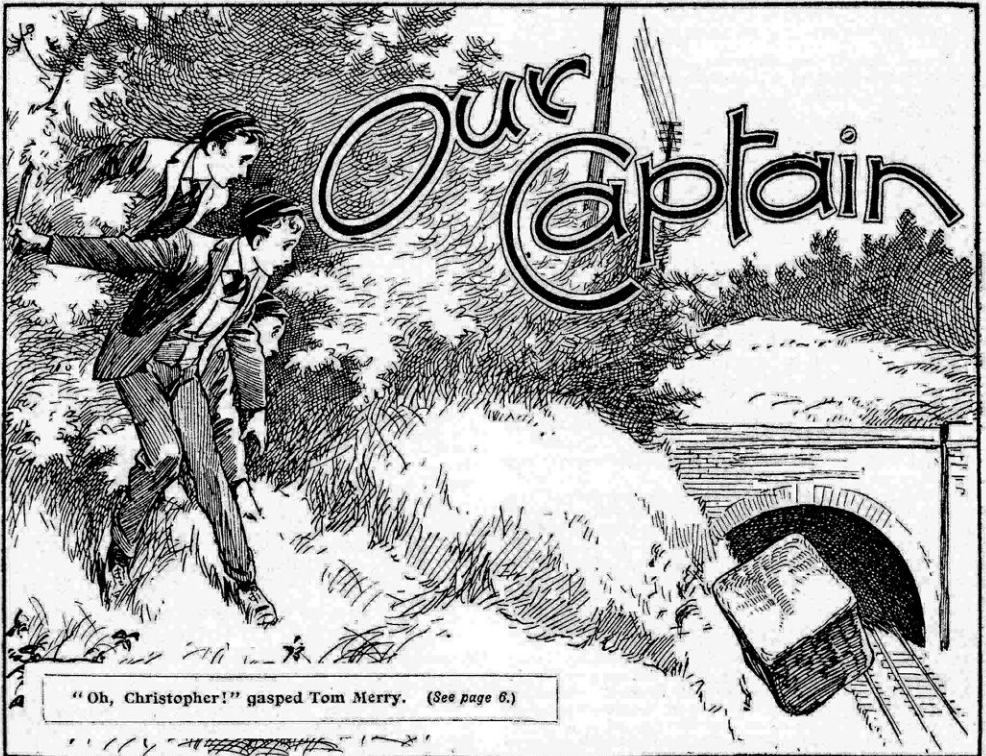
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A COMPLETE STORY FOR EVERYONE, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!



A Tale of Tom Merry's Schooldays.

BY MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

An Audacious Proposition.

"SILENCE!"

"Silence for the chairman!"

"Who's the giddy chairman?"

"Tom Merry, of course."

"Oh, all right! Get ahead, Mr. Chairman!"

Tom Merry rose to his feet. He rapped upon the study table with a ruler, and looked round the crowded apartment.

The study was crowded, not to say crammed. Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Gore, who shared that study, never found it any too spacy for them. But now some fifteen members of the Shell had contrived, by hook or by crook, to squeeze themselves into it. For it was a meeting of the Form, and a most important one—at least, in the eyes of those immediately concerned.

The door was locked, showing that the proceedings of the Shell were to be conducted in secret, safe from prying eyes and ears. Outside the door were gathered a number of

Lower Form boys, intensely, curious to know what the Shell were up to. Now and then a murmur of voices, or a rap of Tom Merry's ruler, reached their ears, but that was all.

The study window was wide open. The afternoon was a warm one in the spring, and the room was uncomfortably hot. Little recked the lads of the Shell of that. They had business in hand; most important business. Indeed, to judge by the solemnity of some of the faces, the fate of the school might have hung upon that meeting in Tom Merry's study.

Jimson, the joker of the Form, was the only one who ventured to take the proceedings in anything approaching a flippant spirit. Jimson was seated upon the window-sill, with only his legs inside the room; under the circumstances the most comfortable place in the study. Monty Lowther and Manners sat upon a box in the fireplace. Gore and a couple more found room on the coal locker. The four chairs belonging to the study were occupied, and the table accommodated three boys, leaving only just room for Tom Merry to rap with his ruler. Phillips, who was nearest to the chairman, kept a rather nervous eye on that ruler.

Rap, rap!

"Silence for the chair!"

Something like silence fell upon the meeting. Fifteen pairs of eyes were fixed upon Tom Merry, as he stood up, his handsome, frank face very serious.

"Gentlemen of the Shell—" began Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear!" said Jimson.

"Silence!"

"Order!"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, all right!" said Jimson. "I'll go on with these nuts, while the chairman gets on with his speech. Go ahead, Merry!"

Rap, rap!

Jimson commenced cracking nuts with his teeth. Tom Merry gave him a severe glance, and rapped on the table again.

"Gentlemen of the Shell, we are met together upon an occasion of unusual solemnity and immense importance. It is not too much to say that this is an epoch-making meeting; a meeting the result of which will go down in the history of Clavering College, and—and will—will make things hum generally!"

This was rather a weak ending, but Tom had forgotten the latter part of his carefully prepared speech, which he had written out carefully and learned by heart to open the meeting.

However, the Shell were satisfied, and they burst into a loud cheer.

"Right-ho, Tom Merry! Bravo! Hurrah!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Jimson, unbuckled this time.

Nevertheless, some of the boys looked surprised.

The meeting was certainly an important one, from their point of view, but they had not expected that it would make history in the way indicated by Tom Merry.

Had the chairman something up his sleeve, as it were, with which they were not yet acquainted?

It looked like it, and interest was keener than ever as Tom resumed. The expression upon the faces of Manners and Monty Lowther hinted that they were already in the secret.

"Gentlemen," Tom Merry went on, when the cheering had subsided, "you are aware of the position of affairs now at Clavering. The late captain of the school has left us, regretted by all—"

"Hear, hear!"

"An election for a new captain of Clavering is impending—"

"Good old Wingate!"

Tom rapped sharply on the table with his ruler.

It was evident that the cheer for Wingate, the Sixth Former who had put up for election as the new captain of Clavering, was not pleasing to Tom Merry.

This fact was evident, and it added to the mystification of the Shell.

For Wingate was a fine fellow, a splendid cricketer and athlete, and popular both in his own Form and in the Lower Forms at Clavering.

Moreover, Tom Merry was known to like him well, and Wingate always had a pleasant nod for the scamp of Clavering School.

"Silence for the chair!" bawled Monty Lowther.

Rap, rap!

Silence was restored.

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, "an election for a new captain of Clavering is impending. Wingate, of the Sixth, has put up, and as he was the only candidate from the Sixth, everybody expected at first that the election would be a walk-over for him."

"Good old Wingate!"

"Order!"

Rap, rap!

"Look out!" yelled Phillips, squirming away from the chairman's ruler. "You nearly had my knee that time!"

"Order!"

"It has always been a tradition at Clavering," resumed Tom Merry, taking no notice of Phillips, "that the captain of the school should be elected from the ranks of the Sixth. Within the memory of the oldest inhabitant of these ancient walls—ahem!—the captain has always been a Sixth Former."

"Hear, hear!"

"Shut up! I mean order! But on this point there is no law but that of custom, and it has occurred to the Fifth Form that it was time that the custom wasn't a particularly good one, so they've put up a candidate of their own."

"Down with the Fifth!"

"Three groans for Devigne!"

"Order!"

"Now we're coming to the point," cried Tom—

"Time, too!" interjected Jimson.

"Chuck that fellow out of the window if he won't shut up!"

"All right," said Jimson hastily. "I'll be as mum as a baby oyster."

"Now we're coming to the point," resumed Tom Merry. "The Fifth Form have put up a candidate for the election. We all said it was like their cheek."

"So it was."

"Well, perhaps it was. We all thought that the tradition ought to be carried on, and that the captain of the school ought to come out of the top Form."

"That's right!"

"I don't know. Anyway, all the Fifth, Upper and Lower, plump for Devigne, their candidate, and they're going to get him in if they can. Now, we of the Shell, are not going to be domineered over by any giddy captain picked out of the Form next above us."

"Hear, hear!"

"Of course we're not!"

"We could stand a captain out of the Sixth, but a captain out of the Fifth Form isn't good enough. We bar him!"

"That's the wheeze!"

"Good old Wingate!"

"So most of us made up our minds to vote for Wingate," said Tom Merry. "And if the Shell plumped for Wingate, I fancy we could get him in."

"We'll get him in."

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the Fifth!"

"But it has occurred to some of us," said Tom Merry, "that there's a third course we could take."

There was a silence of surprise in the study. Even Jimson left off cracking nuts, and looked at Tom Merry.

"We don't want any Fifth Former lording it over us," said Tom, "and we're not going to have it, either."

"Rather not!"

"Hear, hear!"

"But I for one don't see what we want with a Sixth Former either. The Fifth have put up a candidate, and busted up the traditions of the school. What I want to know is, why can't the Shell do the same?"

There was a general gasp.

The audacity of the proposition took the breath away from most of the listeners.

The Shell gave a captain to Clavering!

It was audacious, unheard of; but all the more fascinating on that account.

For a few moments the silence of astonishment reigned. Then the study rang with cheering.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Tommy!"

"Hurrah!"

Tom Merry looked round him with a pleased expression. He had expected his proposition to jump into popularity at once, but this hurricane of cheering was very gratifying indeed.

It showed that the Shell were prepared to back him up in his novel idea, and to stand by him as one man to bring glory upon the Form.

"Order!"

"Silence for the chair!"

Rap, rap!

"What do you say?" cried Tom. "Is it a go?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Rather!"

"After all," said Tom, "the Shell is the most important Form in the school."

There was a general grin at that. The Shell thought no small beer of themselves certainly. But their estimation of their importance hardly went so far.

"I mean it," said Tom Merry seriously. "You know what Goldsmith said—was it Goldsmith, or somebody else? Anyway, that doesn't matter; it's what he said that's to the point. He said that the middle class was the backbone of

the country, and were, in fact, the people—the giddy people. Well, we're the middle school, ain't we? We're not silly kids like the youngsters in the Fourth Form; and we're not strutting jackanapes like the chops in the Fifth, in their first tail-coats; and we're not solemn old buffers like the Sixth!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We're the middle class—that is to say, the people," said Tom Merry, warming to the subject. "We're the Shell, which I maintain to be the most important Form in this or any other school."

"Right-ho!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That being the case—and nobody can deny that it is the case—"

"Nobody in the Shell, anyway," giggled Jimson.

"That being the case," went on Tom Merry, unheeding, "it's only right and proper that the Shell should give a captain to Clavering."

"Quite right!"

"Perfectly proper!"

"Hurrah for the Shell!"

"So the question remains to be settled—the only question, chaps—who shall be captain of Clavering—who, belonging to the Shell?"

And Tom rapped the table again for order. Phillips gave a fiendish yell.

"Ow! You've nearly broken my beastly leg!"

"Keep your beastly legs out of the way, then!" said Tom Merry severely. "Your legs have got nothing to do with the question!"

"Ow—ow!"

"Don't make that row! Gentlemen——"

Crash! There was a sound of scuffling feet in the corridor outside, and then a fearful thump on the locked door.

"Open tat door!" came a deep, furious voice. "Open tat door, ain't it?"

"Crumbs!" muttered Monty Lowther. "It's old Schneider! I forgot all about his study being underneath."

"Open mit you!"

Grey turned towards the door.

"Rap-rap!"

"Don't open the door, Grey!"

"But it's the German master knocking."

"Let him knock! We're not going to have this meeting broken up till we've settled the point we met to decide!"

"But——"

"Who's chairman of this meeting?"

"You are, but——"

"Then dry up! Gentlemen, which of the honourable members of the Shell is our candidate for the honour of being captain of Clavering?"

"Open tat door at vunce after!"

"Kick up a row," said Manners; "then we can't hear him. We can't be expected to open the door if we can't hear him, can we?"

"Of course not. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear—hurrah!"

The boys began cheering wildly and stamping their feet.

"Now, chaps," said Tom, shouting at the top of his voice to make himself heard above the din, "who's our candidate?"

Monty Lowther jumped up.

"I beg to propose Tom Merry!" he shouted.

Grey was on his feet in an instant.

"I beg to oppose!" he bawled.

"Rats! You shut up!"

"Sha'n't! I'd make a better captain of the school any day than that spooney!"

"That's spooney's licked you, anyway."

"We don't want him in as captain!"

"Yes, we do. Hands up for Tom Merry."

A dozen hands went up.

"Hands down. Now up again against him."

Three hands rose in the air.

"Passed," cried Monty Lowther—"passed unanimously, or as near as a touch! Tom Merry for captain of Clavering!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Tommy!"

Bump on the door!

"Open tat door, ain't it?" came a yell from the passage.

The Shell cheered and stamped, and took no notice. Tom Merry stood up on the table to make his acknowledgments.

"Believe me, gentlemen," he said, with his most graceful bow, which would have delighted the heart of Miss Priscilla Fawcett if she could have seen it—"believe me, I am honoured. Believe me also when I state that, in proposing a member of the Shell as captain of this ancient college, I had no thought whatever of my own advancement."

"Rats!" interjected Gore.

Tom fixed a withering glance upon him.

"Did you say rats, Gore?"

"Yes, I said rats, and I thought rats!" said Gore.

"Does that imply a doubt of my statement?"

"It implies a jolly big doubt of your statement. You were aiming at getting yourself elected all along."

"Open tat door after!"

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, "a member of this meeting has impugned the veracity of the chairman." The Shell gasped; those words were really impressive. "As chairman, I cannot condescend to punch his head. He must be chucked out—I mean, ejected!"

"That's the cheese!"

"Chuck him out!"

"Here, let me alone!" exclaimed Gore. And Lowther and Manners seized him, backed up by two or three more. "Let me alone, will you?"

"Chuck him out!"

"I'll break all your necks——"

"Chuck him out!"

Tom Merry jumped down from the table, and silently unlocked the door. The German master, in a state of boundless rage, was still thumping on the panels.

"I say, there's Herr Schneider there," muttered Grey.

"What does that matter?" asked Tom.

"Oh, nothing, only——"

"If he gets in the way when we're chucking out an outsider, he must expect a collision on the line," said Tom coolly.

"Let him go with a swing when I open the door!"

"Right you are!"

"Now—one, two, three!"

Four lads held the helpless, struggling Gore, ready to hurl him forth. Tom Merry threw the door open.

"Go!"

With a swing Gore was hurled forth from the study.

"Mein Gott!"

Herr Schneider's hand was raised to hammer the door again as it was flung suddenly open, and he stood, with raised hand, as Gore came hurtling out. Gore crashed into the German master, and knocked him across the passage. He brought up against the opposite wall, gasping like a newly-landed fish.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!"

Gore crashed down at his feet. And then the meeting of the Shell broke up. It broke up hurriedly. The boys realised that it would not be wise to wait for the Herr to recover himself sufficiently to deal with them.

The meeting slithered off down the passage like lightning before the Herr had time to grasp the situation—or them! Only Gore remained, staggering to his feet just as the German recovered his breath sufficiently to lay hold of him. Gore gave a yell as the master seized him by the collar.

"Here, let me go! It wasn't me!"

"Rascal!" hissed Herr Schneider. "Such impudence never was after. You vas run into me to let to oders get away, ain't it?"

"I didn't—I—I didn't——" gasped Gore, truthfully enough; for, indeed, that would have been the very last thought to enter his mind.

"You vas tel a pig lie, ain't it?" exclaimed Herr Schneider, satisfied that he had hit upon the truth. "I teaches you, mein poy!"

"I was chucked out! I—I——"

"Come along mit me!"

Gore had no choice about that, for the incensed German was dragging him along by the collar. Gore was looking very rumpled when he was bundled into the German's study. Herr Schneider took up a cane.

"You vas all in tat pizness," he said; "but you vas the ringleader, Gore, and I bunishes you because you vas to vorst of to lot of dem!"

"I wasn't—I didn't—I never——"

"Dey vas all pad, very pad, but de paddest of dem would not haf had to impudence to throw himself at de master and knock him ofer mit himself mitout to breath in his body!"

"I didn't. It was Tom Merry——"

"Hold out your hand!"

"If you don't believe me you can ask——"

Swish! The stinging cane caught Gore round the legs, and he gave a terrific whoop. After that he thought it better to hold out his hand as he was told, and he received six on each palm, and he went out of the German's study wriggling like an eel.

DAILY MAIL

CHAPTER 2.

Three Candidates.

THE meeting in Tom Merry's study had been a huge success. Gore, it is true, was dissatisfied with the way it had ended, but, then, there are always some dissatisfied people, and Gore was one of them. The rest were quite contented and delighted with the new prospect that had opened out before the young gentlemen of the Shell. The news was not long in spreading over the school.

There had been wondering and shaking of heads when Devigne, of the Upper Fifth, put up for the captaincy; but that was nothing to the wonder excited by the news that the next lower Form had put up a candidate, too.

The captaincy had always been regarded as belonging to the Sixth by right; yet, as Devigne had pointed out, and as Tom Merry pointed out in turn, there was no law in the school upon the subject, and though a tradition might be all right in its way, things were often all the better for a little change.

The Sixth had received the news of Devigne's candidature with indignation and disdain. Both the Sixth and Fifth felt indignant and disdainful at the news of the presumption of the Shell.

Little cared Tom Merry for that. Tom Merry had made a sensation when he first came to Clavering, and his Form-fellows said that he was always doing something a bit out of the common. You could never expect anything but the unexpected from Tom. On this occasion he had certainly lived up to his reputation.

After escaping the angry German master, Tom Merry proceeded to the notice-board in the hall, where the notices affecting the business of the school were always posted up.

There were notices up in the handwriting of the Head, and of some of the masters, and amid them Tom pinned up a paper in his own handwriting.

The Shell stood round admiringly. The notice in the Head's handwriting ran as follows:

"The post of captain of the school having fallen vacant, an election will be held on the 22nd in the great hall, for the purpose of filling the vacancy."

Underneath that notice was another written by Hawke, the head boy of the Sixth.

"Gilbert Wingate has been nominated by his Form as candidate for the vacant post of captain of Clavering. Voting in the great hall at 7 p.m., 22nd."

"By Order."

Underneath that again, a third paper on the same subject had been pinned; a paper that had roused dire indignation in the breasts of the Sixth. It was in the handwriting of Devigne of the Upper Fifth. It ran as follows:

"The Upper Fifth, having decided in committee that a change will be beneficial for the college as a whole, have nominated Edgar Devigne as candidate for the vacant post of captain of Clavering. Lower Form fellows who think it is time they had a look in the management of the affairs of the school, are requested to roll up and vote for Devigne, the people's candidate."

"By Order."

Tom Merry's notice made a fourth, relating to the same subject:

"Notice. To all whom it may concern. The Shell have decided, after a meeting of the Form, that neither the Fifth nor the Sixth truly represent the real interests of Clavering College. The middle school are the backbone of Clavering. The Shell therefore put forward a candidate, for whom all good men and true are requested to vote. Hurrah for the Lower Forms and freedom!"

Tom surveyed his handiwork with a great deal of satisfaction.

"I think that reads all right," he remarked. "It puts the case in a nutshell."

"Better fill in the name of the candidate," said Lowther.

"Right!"

Tom took out a pencil and added a line on the lower margin of the paper.

"The candidate is Tom Merry. Roll up and vote."

Then the Shell walked away. And then, the news having got about, there was a constant procession passing and repassing the notice-board, to read the audacious announcement of the Shell.

First came Fifth boys, Devigne having quickly heard that there was a rival in the field. Devigne's brows grew dark as he read the notice. There was no love lost between him and Tom Merry already.

"Thundering cheek!" he exclaimed. "What right has he to stick a notice on the board, I'd like to know. Somebody ought to take it down!"

"I don't know," said Devigne's chum, Cary. "If we take down his notice he'll take down ours, so it's broad as it is long."

"The young cub wants a hiding."

"Yes, he does badly. Perhaps he'll get one soon."

"It's beneath a fellow's dignity to fight with a kid in the Shell," said Devigne; "and he's an insubordinate young rascal; he wouldn't take a licking quietly."

"No, he's an obnoxious little brute altogether."

"Of course he's got no chance whatever of getting in as captain of Clavering. Fancy a captain out of the Shell! We'll have some kid of the Fourth Form putting up his name next!" exclaimed Devigne.

"Rotten, and no mistake!"

"Come along; don't let them see us reading it, or they'll plume themselves that they've made a big impression," said Devigne loftily.

And the Fifth Form candidate walked away.

Fellows belonging to the Sixth came along and read the notice with varying feelings. Some were angry, some indignant, some amused.

Wingate stared when a Sixth Former who had seen it burst into his study with the news.

"Have you heard, Wingate?" demanded North, rushing in and startling the candidate for captaincy out of the middle of a mathematical problem.

Wingate jumped up.

"What's on, North? What on earth's the matter?"

"There's a new candidate for the captaincy!"

"Another Fifth Former?" asked Wingate laughing.

"No, a kid in the Shell."

"You're joking?"

"Come and look at the notice-board then."

And North marched the amazed Wingate off to look at the board.

Wingate did not disbelieve the evidence of his eyes. He read the notice, and wrinkled his brows for a moment, and then burst into a laugh.

"Well, of all the cheek!" he exclaimed.

"I think I'd better take the notice down," suggested North.

Wingate stopped him.

"Don't do anything of the kind, old fellow. I don't know that we've got any right to interfere with Tom Merry's notice."

"But we can't let the thing go on!" exclaimed North.

"I don't see how we're to stop it. Devigne started the ball rolling, you know, and if we had wanted to make a stand for the exclusive rights of the Sixth, we ought to have done it then," said Wingate seriously.

"Having allowed that to pass, we haven't any right to stop Merry if he chooses to offer himself as a candidate."

"But it's too ridiculous."

Wingate laughed.

"Well, it would be a bit queer to have a captain chosen out of the Shell."

"Hang it, Wingate, you don't think it's possible he might get elected!" exclaimed North, aghast at the bare idea.

"I don't know. The lower Forms outnumber the higher ones, of course, and if they took it into their heads to vote for a Lower Form candidate, I don't see what we could do."

"The doctor would interfere."

"He might; but it would cause a frightful lot of dissatisfaction," said Wingate, with a shake of the head.

"Anyway, we can't ask him to. We must call a meeting of the Form and see what's to be done."

And the two Sixth Formers walked away.

Later, when the excitement had worn off a little, the Head of Clavering came to take a look at the notice-board.

Mr. Railton, the Head of the school, was a young man, and an athlete, and the best-tempered master in Clavering.

He liked Tom Merry, but a slight frown came over his face as he read the paper which had caused such a furore. Then he smiled.

"Upon my word," he murmured; "I wonder what that boy will do next? Of course, it would never do—it would never do—but how am I going to stop it? That's a difficult question—it would be rank injustice to bar a Shell candidate after admitting the justice of the Fifth Form claim—and I really don't see what I can do."

And the Head walked away in a very thoughtful mood. That evening he asked Wingate to tea with him. The Sixth Former came, and over the teacups Mr. Railton broached the subject.

"I hear there is a new candidate for the captaincy, Wingate," he remarked with a smile.

Wingate smiled too.

"Yes, sir; a fellow in the Shell."

"I saw his notice up on the board. What do you think of his chances of getting elected, if he is allowed to proceed, Wingate?"

"I don't know, sir," said the senior honestly. "I've been thinking it over. Of course, the Sixth will vote for their own Form as one man."

"Of course, that is to be expected."
 "But I am afraid we must expect the same of the Fifths, sir—Lower and Upper will combine to get Devigne in."
 "I suppose so."

"That wouldn't be nearly so bad, because Devigne is near his remove, and a term or two will see him in the Sixth."

"But about Merry—"

"As a matter of fact, sir, we were depending upon the vote of the Lower Forms to keep Devigne out. The Shell and the Fourth would never submit to a captain from the Fifth Form if they could help it, and so naturally, I expected to see them plump for me, as the only alternative."
 "And they would probably have done so but for this freak of Merry's?"

"Yes, I think that's certain. But now I am afraid they will be a little intoxicated with the thought of getting a Lower Form fellow in as captain, and besides, Merry is very popular in the Lower and Middle school," said Wingate rather ruefully.

"Yes, and I believe he deserves his popularity."
 "That is quite true; he is head of the Shell now, and he puts down bullying in his own Form and in the lower ones also, and the fags adore him."

"And will vote for him on election day?"
 "I am afraid so."

"It won't do," said Mr. Railton, drumming on the table with his knuckles thoughtfully. "But unless you can come to terms with Devigne, Wingate, I don't see what's to be done. It would be hardly fair for me to interfere with authority under the circumstances."

"That's what I was thinking, sir."
 "Could you get to an accommodation with Devigne, do you think?"

"I could try," said Wingate not very hopefully. He knew better than Mr. Railton, the hard, obstinate nature of Edgar Devigne of the Upper Fifth.

"Failing that," said Mr. Railton, "perhaps you could persuade Merry to withdraw his candidature."

Wingate looked very doubtful.
 "I could try that, too," he said. "I will certainly do my best, sir."

"Then we will hope for the best, too," said Mr. Railton smiling. "This position of affairs was never foreseen, and I will see that provision is made for such a contingency in the future; but, if possible, I desire to avoid appearing to act harshly or unjustly towards a Lower Form. Favouritism is an ugly word."

And Wingate left the headmaster of Clavering, hoping for the best, but very doubtful as to the result of his interview with Devigne—and still more doubtful as to his prospects of persuading the Shell candidate to withdraw.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry's Electioneering.

TOM MERRY laid down his pen and pushed his books away.

"That's done," he said cheerfully. "Now let's talk business."

"Right-ho!" said Lowther and Manners together. "About the election, you mean?"

"Yes, of course. That's the most important business in hand."

"Oh, rats to that!" said Gore getting up. "If you're going to start that eternal topic again, I'm off!"

"I think you are," said Monty Lowther—"off your chump! Haven't you got any patriotism, you outsider? Don't you want a chap of your own Form in as captain?"

"No, I don't; a Sixth Former is good enough for me."

"Wingate may not get in, and then we shall have a Fifth fellow lording it over us if we don't put up a candidate ourselves."

"Well, I'd rather have Edgar Devigne than a chap who came to Clavering only a short time ago dressed in baby clothes," said Gore with a sneer.

"Oh, let that rest!" said Tom Merry. "That's ancient history. What do you want to dig that up again for? Do you mean that you won't vote for me at the election?"

"That I won't," said Gore emphatically. "I'm going to vote for Wingate."

"Well, who wants your measly vote, anyway? Get along with you!"

"I'll stay here as long as I like."

"Stay, then, and be hanged to you!" said Tom Merry politely. "Let's get to business, chaps, and never mind that grumpy pig. Now the first thing to do to win an election, I believe, is to start electioneering."

Gore went out of the study and slammed the door.

"That's so," agreed Monty Lowther. "We're all ready

to electioneer if we knew how. No need of it in the Shell, of course. The Form will vote for you as one man."

"Yes, but outside the Shell we shall have to fight for support."

"It will be a ticklish business," Manners remarked, tapping his chin thoughtfully with his forefinger. "The Sixth will vote solid for Wingate. That's only to be expected. The Fifths will plump for Devigne. The Shell will all go for you, with the exception of that Little Englander, Gore. Unfortunately, the Shell numbers least of the three lots. The crux—"

"Well, that's a jolly good word, anyway," said Monty Lowther.

"Shut up! The crux of the matter is how the Lower Forms will vote. Now, you are a popular kind of chap in the Fourths."

"Yes, I believe the juniors like me pretty well, and I shall scoop in a lot of votes there."

"Right; only we mustn't forget that the Fourth Formers are fagged by the Sixth, and the Sixth may make things hot for their fags who vote for you."

"That would be mean."

"Very likely; but it's human nature, and it's no good forgetting it," said the practical Manners. "So you must count on that. It's pretty clear that the whole thing hangs on the Fourth Form. Luckily, kids in lower Forms than the Fourth are not allowed to vote. That takes all the giddy infants off our hands."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I had thought that out already," he said. "It all hangs on the vote of the Fourth Form really, and the electioneering has got to begin with them."

"How are you going to begin?"

"Well, what do you say to standing a big feed for a start?"

Manners slapped him on the shoulder.

"Merry, you're a howling genius, and no mistake."

"You think it's a good idea?" asked Tom modestly.

"The best idea I've heard for a long time."

"Ripping," said Monty Lowther. "Why a good feed will get you the votes of half the Fourth Form. Little brutes, they live only to eat, and they'll worship anybody who stands them a feed, and they'll worship anybody who stands a feed, is there?"

"Of course, I don't want to get anything near bribery or corruption," said Tom. "No reason why a chap shouldn't stand a feed, is there?"

"Not a bit. As for bribery and corruption, I know that a good many of the Sixth have promised their fags a hiding if they vote for you or Devigne," said Monty Lowther. "I've heard the fags discussing it."

"There, you see!" exclaimed Manners. "If the Sixth use intimidation, I don't see why you shouldn't use bribery if you want to. Besides, it ain't bribery. It will do those hungry little wretches good to give 'em a square meal."

"Then it's settled?"

"Certainly. Now the question is, about the arrangements?"

"I was thinking of asking the whole Form into our dormitory after lights out. We shall want a big room, of course, and we shall have to keep it dark. There'll be plenty of room in the dormitory, and we want to ask the whole of the Lower and Upper Fourth."

"It will run into a pretty penny to get in the grub, old fellow."

"That's all right. My old nurse sent me a tenner yesterday."

"Good! We'll blow the tenner and do the thing in style. It won't be easy to get it in, though, without some beastly prefect nosing it all out."

"That's where we shall have to be careful. It will have to be sneaked in after dark some night."

"Which means that we shall have to break bounds to get it."

"Well," said Tom Merry, "haven't we ever broken bounds before?"

"Ye-es; once or twice, I think."

"And there never was a more important occasion."

"Quite right. We'll do the trick."

"My idea was to cycle down to High Clavering and get the grub—we can do that in the daylight, you know, before the locking-up—and then put it somewhere near the school, so that when we go out for it we sha'n't have far to go. We can't go down to the village in the middle of the night, and we knock up the tuck-shop."

"No, that wouldn't do. But we shall have to find an awfully safe place to deposit the tommy," said Manners doubtfully. "It would be too awful if somebody happened to find it, and scooped it before we could get it into the school."

"You're right, but there won't be any danger of that; I've thought of a stunning place," said Tom, with a confident smile.

"Where?"

"The High Clavering railway tunnel."

Monty Lowther whistled.

"Well, that would be a safe place certainly," he assented. "and it's near the school. But it's a beastly dark hole of a place to get into at night, Tom."

"I was in it once in the daylight," said Tom coolly. "I went through to see what it was like. There's plenty of room to walk beside the lines, and to let the trains go by if any should come."

Manners shivered.

"Fancy standing in a tunnel at night while a train went by!" he ejaculated. "You would want a little bit more nerve than I've got, Tom."

"Well, there's no need for us to go right in the tunnel," said Tom. "There's a recess about a dozen yards in, in the brickwork, which I noticed, which would do awfully nicely to hide the grub in. We could put it there after dusk, and to-night we could nip in, and get it out in a couple of minutes. You could keep watch for trains while I did it."

"Oh, I shouldn't funk it if you didn't. What do you think of the idea, Monty?"

"Jolly good," said Monty Lowther.

"Then, as we've done work, let's get our bikes out and go down to the tuck-shop," said Manners. "We shall be late back for calling-over if we stay till after dusk, but we can stand fifty lines apiece for the good of the cause."

The chums left the study, and proceeded to the bicycle shed. Many curious glances were cast at Tom Merry. His cool, unequalled "cheek" in coming forward as a candidate for the vacant captaincy made him just then the most talked of boy at Clavering.

Tom, however, was not in the least disturbed by the general attention which he found bestowed upon him.

He nodded coolly to Wingate when he passed him in the close, and the Sixth Form candidate laughed and nodded in return.

The trio soon had their machines out, and were pedalling away down the road to High Clavering.

In the sunset they arrived in the village, and stood their bicycles up outside the tuck-shop. Tom Merry was a well-known customer there, and Dame Morgan was all eagerness to attend to his wants.

The good dame was accustomed to extensive purchases by Tom Merry, who had an almost unlimited supply of pocket-money from Miss Fawcett, but his present outlay made her open her eyes.

Tom was the proud possessor of a "tenner," and he meant to make the feast a huge success.

Dame Morgan kept a goodly supply of all things dear to the heart of boyhood, but even the resources of her tuck-shop were strained to meet the demand.

Tom rattled off his orders with the air of a prince, and the dame looked more and more astonished.

"How much does that come to, please?" asked Tom.

Dame Morgan was casting up the figures.

"Nine pounds ten shillings and threepence-halfpenny, Master Merry."

Tom laid the ten-pound note on the counter.

"There you are, Mrs. Morgan."

The dame counted out the change.

"But you will never be able to carry all these things, Master Merry."

"No," said Tom, surveying the tremendous pile. "You'll have to lend us a hamper, Mrs. Morgan. Have you one big enough?"

"Oh, yes, I've got a hamper, and I'll be pleased to lend it to you, Master Merry; but how will you carry it?"

"That's easy enough. Bunk off to Simpson's, Monty, and get one of his traliers."

"Good wheeze," said Monty, and he was off like a shot.

"That's a jolly good idea," said Manners admiringly. "You think of everything, Tom. We can easily shove the hamper on a trailer, and whisk it off behind a bike."

Monty soon came back with the trailer, which was attached to Tom Merry's bicycle.

Then the hamper, which Mrs. Morgan had carefully packed with the good things destined for the delectation of the Fourth Form at Clavering, was carried out and put on the trailer, and secured there with a cord.

"We'll let you have the hamper back some other time, Mrs. Morgan," said Tom, "or if we don't we'll pay for it."

"Oh, don't worry yourself, Master Merry," said the dame delightedly. "I can spare the hamper, and you're very welcome to it, I'm sure. I wish I had a few more customers like you."

The chums left the tuck-shop, and mounted their machines. They started off, and followed the road half way to Clavering School, and then turned off into a lane which led to the railway cutting.

The dusk of evening was already gathering over the fields, when the boys halted and dismounted at a spot where the lane bordered the cutting, only a high, thick hedge separating them.

The spot was a very lonely one, and there was but little danger of being observed. The bikes were laid against the hedge, and the hamper taken off the trailer. Tom knew of a weak spot in the hedge where it was possible to squeeze through.

"By Jove, it weighs something!" said Monty Lowther. "If we get it down that slope all right, Merry, we sha'n't find it easy to get it up again."

"We sha'n't want to get it up again," said Tom.

"Not going to leave it there for good, I suppose?" queried Monty.

"My dear chap, we've got to get the tommy into Clavering after dark, but we can't lift a hamper like that over the wall. We shall have to fetch the grub in parcels, and leave the hamper. We can make more than one trip."

"Oh, I see! Well, get on, kids."

They shoved the hamper through the gap in the hedge. Unfortunately, they shoved it a little too vigorously, and it escaped their hands and went rolling down the slope.

"Oh, Christopher!" gasped Tom.

"I heard something go," said Manners. A bottle of currant wine, I suppose."

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"That will improve the rabbit pies if it soaks into them," he remarked.

"Oh, never mind!" said Tom. "There's plenty, and we can afford it. Let's go down after the hamper."

"Not in the same way, though," grunted Monty.

The boys squeezed through the hedge, and picked their way carefully down the slope. The hamper was reposing in the brambles at the bottom. There was a goodly space between the bottom of the slope and the permanent way.

Now to the left yawned the dark tunnel—black as ink to their gaze. The glimmering metals ran into the opening and vanished into the blackness. Tom Merry looked at the tunnel, and then at the signal-box some distance away over the trees. There was no danger of observation. He bent over the hamper, and grasped the handle at one end.

"Come on," he said. "No time to waste. We don't want any giddy tramp to come and pinch our bikes while we're down here."

The suggestion spurred them on. They carried the hamper to the black opening of the tunnel, and stumbled into it. As Tom said, there was a recess in the brickwork a short distance inside, in which the hamper was placed, and which held it comfortably.

There was no danger of its being found there by chance, unless workmen should come along the line. That was not likely to happen before the morrow. And that night the contents of the hamper were to be carried off by the heroes of the Shell.

Having disposed of it safely, the chums scuttled out of the tunnel, and in a few seconds were through the hedge and in the lane again.

"Well, that's done," said Manners, with a great deal of satisfaction. "It's gone off easily enough, and it will be as easy as winking to fetch the stuff away to-night."

"Rather," said Tom. "Now let's take the trailer back to Simpson's, and get back to the school. They've finished calling-over now, so we're sure of a row; but we can stand it."

It did not take long to scorch back to High Clavering, and return the borrowed trailer, and then to cycle home to the school.

The gates were, of course, closed when they arrived.

Tom Merry dismounted from his bike and rang a loud peal on the bell.

He grinned a little as he did so. It reminded him of the occasion when he had first arrived at Clavering College—when he had turned up in the middle of the night and rung up the porter, and found Mr. Raiton and Miss Priscilla sitting up for him.

After a few minutes' delay, the round, red face of Tibbs peered through the upper bars of the gate.

"Hallo, Tibby!" said Tom cheerily. "Sorry to disturb you, old fellow, but we want to come in."

Tibbs slowly unlocked the gate.

"Nice blooming row waiting for you, and no mistake!" he said hoarsely.

"And a nice blooming Job's comforter you are, Tibbs," said Tom Merry, as he wheeled his bike in. "Come on chaps!"

They put away their bikes, and then went in, prepared to face the wrath to come.

CHAPTER 4.

The Deputation of the Upper Fifth.

MR. QUELCH, the master of the Shell, had taken the roll-call that evening, and he had, of course, missed Tom Merry and his comrades. He was waiting for them when they came in.

"Ah, so you have returned!" he said grimly. "Where have you been, Merry?"

"On my bicycle, sir," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Ah! And Lowther and Manners. have they been with you?"

"Yes, sir!"

The master's face relaxed.

"Well, well, it has been a fine evening for a spin," he said, "and if you overshoot the mark by accident, I don't want to be hard on you. I suppose you didn't notice how the time was passing? That being the case, I will excuse you, but it must not occur again."

Tom turned very red.

"I—I—excuse me, sir," he stammered.

Mr. Quelch, who was turning away, turned back.

"What do you wish to say, Merry?"

"It's very kind of you to let us off, sir, but—"

"But what?"

"I don't want to tell a lie, sir. We—were not late by accident."

Mr. Quelch stared at him.

"Do you mean to say you were late on purpose, Merry?"

"No, sir; I mean that we could have got in."

"I don't quite understand you. Are you being unusually truthful, or is this intended for impertinence?"

Tom's blush deepened.

"I don't mean to be impertinent, sir. Certainly not; but you said you would let us off because we didn't notice how the time was passing, and I thought it would be mean to let you think so."

"Oh, I see! You want to be punished?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

Mr. Quelch looked at Tom Merry very curiously.

"Well, Merry, I am glad to find you so scrupulous in your sense of honour, and I shall let you off all the same. You may go."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom gratefully.

The three youngsters marched off. Monty Lowther and Manners had been looking nervous, but now they were grinning.

"Well, you giddy George Washington," giggled Manners, "where's your little hatchet?"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Tom. "I couldn't tell him a lie, could I?"

"Of course not; but it's lucky it's turned out so well. We've got plenty of time for tea in the study now, and I'm as hungry as a hunter. Come on."

Gore was in the study shared by the four, sitting in the only armchair, with his feet on the fender, reading. He scowled at the chums.

"Hallo, I thought I was rid of you lot for the evening! What do you want to come and disturb a fellow for?"

"Oh, don't be a pig!" said Tom Merry, seizing the chair by the back and jerking it forward, so that Gore was deposited in the fender. "Hallo, what are you doing in the grate? If you don't want to stay there, you might get out of the way, as I want to boil the kettle."

Gore jumped up in a rage.

"If you interfere with me, I'll break your neck!"

"Oh, I don't want to interfere with you!" said Tom. "Keep your wool on! Manners, old son, go and fill the kettle please; and you can poke the fire, Monty, while I get the sausages ready, and clean the teapot."

The chums were hungry after their ride, and they were soon busy. Gore growled, but nobody took any notice of Gore. He had not been of much account in the study since Tom Merry had arrived at Clavering. His chief object in life now seemed to be to make himself objectionable to the chums.

Manners returned with the kettle full, and Monty having poked up the fire, the kettle was planted upon the glowing coals. Gore himself sat down in the armchair, and put his feet on the fender again and glowered round him. The kettle was singing cheerfully by the time Tom Merry had prepared the sausages and cleaned and greased the frying-pan. He came to the grate with the pan in his hand.

"Got on one side, Gore!" he said.

"Sha'n't!"

"But you're in the way."

"Well, I'm going to stop in the way, then!"

"I might spill some water over your legs in moving the kettle."

"You'd better not!"

"Rats!"

The kettle had to be moved to make room for the frying-

pan. Tom moved it, and a spurt of nearly boiling water came from the spout. Gore gave a frantic howl. Some of the water had gone upon his ankle, and he jumped up on one leg, clapping the scalded ankle in both hands, and dancing about wildly with the pain.

"Oh! Ow! Ow! Ooh!" he roared.

Tom Merry looked at him sympathetically.

"I'm really sorry, Gore, but I told you it might happen if you wouldn't get out of the way."

"Ow! I'll break your neck!"

And Gore rushed furiously at Tom. Tom caught up the kettle of water, and whisked it in the air.

"Want some more?" he asked pleasantly. "All right; here you are!"

Gore jumped away with really surprising activity.

"Stop it, you mad idiot! Stop it, I say!" he howled.

Tom Merry was following him, jerking spouts of water from the kettle. He didn't let the water touch Gore, but the latter was in terror of being scalded every moment.

"Keep off, you howling maniac!"

"Not at all, old chap!" replied Tom. "You want some more, and you shall have it! Here you are—a little on the other ankle!"

Gore hopped frantically to escape the jet of water, and made a bolt for the door.

"You mad idiot, I'll—"

Tom rushed after him with the whisking kettle. Gore bolted out and slammed the door behind him. The chums, shrieking with laughter, heard his rapid footsteps die away down the corridor. Tom sank into a chair and laughed himself breathless.

"I dare say I shall get on better with Gore some day," he remarked. "A little attention at times is bound to please him, isn't it? There's enough water left for the tea, Monty, so you can make it, while I fry the sausages."

The grateful odour of frying sausages—grateful and comforting to three hungry boys—soon pervaded the apartment. Tom Merry could do a great many things, and do them well, and he excelled as a chef. His friends said that his cooking was a marvel, and they certainly ought to have known, for they had plenty of it. Tom was very careful with those sausages, and they were done to a turn when he rolled them out.

Tea, bread-and-butter, and deliciously-fried sausages made a tempting meal. The heroes of the Shell were soon at work upon the good things, and in high good humour. Just as the meal started, however, there came a knock at the door of the study.

"Hallo, who's that?" said Monty. "It can't be Gore come back. He wouldn't knock."

Rap!

"Come in!" called out Manners.

The door opened. It was not a boy belonging to the Shell who had knocked. Tom Merry rose to his feet in amazement. A fellow of the Upper Fifth, named Saunders, stood in the doorway, and behind him was a crowd of others of the same Form.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry. "You've made a mistake. This isn't the Fifth Form classroom."

"That's all right," said Saunders affably. "We want to speak to you."

"How many of you?"

"All of us!"

"Sorry," said Tom politely, "I've only got two ears, and I can't listen to you all at once. Two of you had better go it at a time."

"Look here, Merry—"

"I'm looking; but I can't keep it up long. Your face gives me a pain!"

"If you want a thick ear, Merry, you've only got to say so!" shouted Saunders.

"Well, I don't, so you can keep it to match your thick head."

"Shut up, Saunders," said a voice behind; "we've come on a peaceful errand."

"Well, let him shut up, then."

"Keep your temper. If you can't, I'll do the talking."

"You can do it, Cary, and be banged to you!"

"All right," said Cary.

Cary was Devigne's chum, and Tom had seen him behind Saunders; and though he did not know what the Fifth Formers wanted, he suspected hostile intentions. And he wanted to show the Fifth that he wasn't in the least intimidated.

Cary walked into the study. Saunders came in with him, and four other Fifth Formers followed. It was rather a squeeze, as the table was in the middle of the room, and the chums were seated round it.

Tom Merry sat down again.

"Oh, come in!" he said. "Don't mind us. Sorry we can't ask you to tea, but you should have sent us notice of the

honour you intended, and we'd have had the table laid for twenty. Let me see, are there twenty of you?"

"There are six of us," said Cary, turning red, "and we've come to talk business."

"Go ahead!" said Tom. "You don't mind us going on with the feed, do you?"

"Look here—"

"Pass the salt, Monty."

"Here you are, my son."

"Are you going to listen to us, Tom Merry?"

"Rather! I wouldn't miss the sound of your sweet voice for worlds! Shove the sugar this way, Manners; you're always trying to collar the lot!"

"I've sugared your tea, Tom."

"Give me your spoon, then. Now, Cary, go ahead—proceed!"

"We're a deputation—"

"A what?" inquired Tom Merry politely, stopping his fork half-way to his mouth.

"A deputation from the Upper Fifth."

Tom Merry waved his hand.

"Proceed, deputation of the Upper Fifth."

Cary nearly choked in his wrath.

"Look here, Merry, we're not going to stand—"

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Cary. There's only four chairs in the room, and—"

"I didn't mean that; I meant—"

"There's one cane chair unoccupied, and the armchair. The cane chair has a leg that has seen better days, so you must be careful how you sit on it."

"I don't want—"

"The easy-chair will accommodate three, or four, if one sits on the back. What the rest of you will do, I really don't know; but if you're not going to stand, you'd better sit on the floor. It's a really comfy floor, if you can make up your mind to it, and I can recommend it."

Manners and Lowther giggled joyously. It was pretty plain that Tom Merry was able to "keep his end up," and was not likely to allow himself to be sat upon by the haughty "Pooh-Bahs," of the Upper Fifth.

Cary gritted his teeth, but he realised that it was of no use arguing with Tom Merry; so he controlled his temper and went on.

"We're a deputation of the Upper Fifth. We've talked the matter over, and thought we'd better come and see you about the election."

"Good!" said Tom. "You've come to promise me your support? Thanks! I was afraid all the Fifth would vote for Devigne, and I'm really glad to see that you chaps have got more sense than to do a silly thing like that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners.

Cary gasped with rage. He made a step towards Tom Merry.

"We're not going to vote for you," he bawled; "and for two pins I'd take you by the scruff of your neck and—"

"Take it calmly," said Tom, in a soothing tone. And Saunders grinned:

"Who's losing his temper now, Cary—hey? You'd better have left the talking to me."

"Oh, you shut up!" snapped Cary ungraciously.

"I'll shut up, if you'll get to business; but if you want us to stay here all night while you quarrel with Merry, why I'm off, for one!" said Saunders.

Cary calmed himself with a tremendous effort. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther went on with their tea, and Tom started on his second sausage as the leader of the deputation came to the point.

CHAPTER 5.

Not a Success.

"T'S about the election," said Cary.

"I think you've said that before," Tom remarked.

"Still, no harm in your saying it again. You can say it a third time if you like."

Cary snapped his teeth, and Saunders grinned.

"Look here, Cary, get ahead!" he exclaimed. "We can't stay here all night!"

"Has that only just occurred to you?" asked Tom sweetly, starting on his third sausage. "I really thought you had overlooked that important fact."

"It's about the election," repeated Cary breathing hard.

"There are two candidates up—one out of the Sixth, and one out of the Upper Fifth."

"You are mistaken; there are three, you've forgotten the Shell candidate."

"That's what I'm coming to. The Fifth have had a meeting, and it's agreed that it's ridiculous for a Lower

Form to put up a candidate for the captaincy. The result is, that we've come in a deputation to put the matter to you sensibly."

"When are you going to start?"

"Why, ain't I doing it now?"

"Oh, I thought you said you were going to put it sensibly! If that's what you call sensible, what would you call silly?" demanded Tom.

"You cheeky little rat—"

"Keep to the point, Cary," came from Saunders, who, after being so summarily deposed from the position of chairman of the deputation, did not mean to be lenient with his successor.

"I don't see why you can't shut up, Saunders. If you keep on interrupting me, how am I to explain to Merry?"

"And if you don't get to the point how are we to get finished to-night?"

"I don't see what you Fifth chaps want to come and squabble in our study for," said Tom Merry. "For goodness' sake, wash your dirty linen at home!"

"Quite right," said Hedge, another of the deputation.

"My idea is that Saunders and Cary are a pair of silly cuckoos, and I'd better take the matter in hand. Now, Merry—"

"Dry up!" growled Cary. "What do you want to come shoving your spoke in for? Merry, we're, a deputation of the Upper Fifth, come to put it to you plainly. You ought to withdraw your candidature for the captaincy."

"Why ought I to withdraw?" demanded Tom.

"Why, because you—you ought, you know."

"That's a matter of opinion. Now, my opinion is that it's high time to choose a captain of Clavering out of the Shell. We're the middle classes, the backbone of the nation—I mean the school. We're neither the scum at the top nor the dregs at the bottom. We're the most respectable and important—"

"Look here, if you think you're going to work off your second-hand speeches out of the newspapers on us, you're mistaken."

"Rather!" said Saunders. "Why, I read all that myself in—"

"Can't you keep quiet for a bit, Saunders? Now, Merry, the question is, are you going to withdraw?"

"And the answer is, No," said Tom promptly.

"Mind, we haven't come here from interested motives," said Cary. "It's the good of the school we're thinking of. By a Lower Form fellow setting up as a candidate, ridicule is brought upon the captaincy itself."

"Did you think of that when Devigne set up?"

"Well, you see, the Upper Fifth is so near the Sixth that there's really no difference."

"Well, and the Shell is so near the Fifth that there's no difference there."

"Oh, it's no good arguing about it—"

"Who started the argument?"

"You know very well that you ought to stand out."

"I don't know anything of the kind. Of course, I should be glad to come to an accommodation, if possible. You know I'm the most peaceable and obliging chap in Clavering, and I don't want to be nasty."

"Yes, that's it," said Cary eagerly. "We want to come to an accommodation, Merry. What have you got to propose?"

"Why, if Devigne really wishes the friction to come to an end—"

"He does! I can answer for that."

"If he's really got the good of the school at heart—"

"He has; we all have."

"If he wants to make the election a square one between two candidates, and eliminate the disturbing presence of a third party—"

"That's his aim all along."

"Then, of course, I can have no objection to offer to a reasonable accommodation."

"Ah! You are willing—"

"Yes, I'm willing for Devigne to withdraw."

"What?" yelled Cary.

"You heard what I said. However, if you're deaf, I have no objection to repeating my remark. I am quite willing for Devigne to withdraw."

"I've had enough of this!" exclaimed Cary furiously.

"Look here, Merry, give me a plain yes or no. Are you going to stand out of the election?"

"Hardly."

"You refuse to withdraw?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Is that plain enough for you? I don't mind repeating it, if you haven't fully grasped it yet. Yes, yes, yes. YES! YES! YES!"

It was too much for Cary to stand. He bolted at Tom Merry like a wild bull. Fortunately, Tom was on the



"We're a deputation—" "A what?" inquired Tom Merry politely, stopping his fork half-way to his mouth.
(See page 8.)

alert. He jumped up, knocking his chair over backwards, and caught up the cup of tea Manners had just refilled for him. As Cary landed out, Tom jerked the contents of the teacup in his face, and Cary's blow went wide, and the unfortunate leader of the deputation gave a howl. The tea splashed all over his face and ran down his shirt.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners. "Give 'em some more!" And he sent the contents of his own cup to follow Tom's, and Cary caught it with his neck. Monty Lowther, not to be outdone, used the remainder of a pat of butter as a missile, and it flattened on Cary's nose.

The deputation, instead of backing up their leader, were howling with laughter. Saunders seemed especially to be amused. Cary staggered blindly, and either by accident or design drove his fist into Saunders's face instead of Tom Merry's. Saunders gave a yell.

"You silly ass, what are you up to?"

"Hallo, is that you!" growled Cary, wiping the tea out of his eyes. "What did you want to stick your silly head in the way for?"

That remark, which was really adding insult to injury, was a little too much for Saunders, already smarting. He jumped at Cary and returned the blow with one that came on his nose like the rap of a hammer.

"There, take that, you silly ass, and—"

Cary went for Saunders like a wild cat. He was too furious to care much whom he hit, so long as he hit somebody. They closed, and began to struggle.

"Hurray!" shouted Tom Merry. "Two to one on Saunders! Go it, kids!"

Edgar Devigne looked into the study with an expression of amazement on his face.

"What on earth are you chaps up to?" he cried.

"Oh, it's all right, Devigne!" said Tom Merry. "They're a giddy deputation, come to explain things sensibly to me, and that's the way they do it. Looks sensible, doesn't it?"

"Oh, chuck it, you silly owls!" growled Devigne. "Come away. You've done precious little good coming here, and it's as much as I expected."

The deputation succeeded in separating their two leaders and hustled them out of the study. Both Cary and Saunders were looking much the worse for their encounter. The merry laughter of the chums followed them, and Hedge slammed the door.

"Well," said Tom looking round, "they've upset our study a bit, but it was worth seeing. I don't fancy the Upper Fifth will send any more deputations."

And he was right; they never did.

CHAPTER 6.

At the Risk of His Life.

HERE was an unusual air of suppressed excitement about the Fourth Form at Clavering when those young gentlemen went up to their sleeping quarters. For the word had gone forth of the feast that was toward in Dormitory D.

Tom Merry was already popular in the Lower Forms, but when it was known that he was going to stand a feed to the whole of the Fourth, Lower and Upper, and a really first-rate one at that, his popularity went up like a rocket.

Details of the coming feast were whispered from one junior to another with bated breath. Tom Merry always did things in style, but it was confidently anticipated that upon this occasion he would surpass himself.

A feed to the whole Fourth Form would cost him a great deal, but it was known that he had had a "tenner" from Miss Fawcett, and had "blued" the whole of it for the great occasion, and such munificence took the juniors' breath away. The whole Form accepted the invitation as one man, and agreed to come into Dormitory D, the quarters of the Shell, at half-past ten, when there would be little or no danger of discovery by master or prefect.

"I hope nothing will happen about getting the grub in," Manners remarked rather nervously. "If anything happened to spoil the feed, Tom, it would be a finisher. If those hungry bounders were disappointed, they'd go and vote for Wingate or Devigne out of revenge."

"Yes, and I know a lot of them missed their supper on purpose, so as to have plenty of room left for the dormitory brew!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"I don't see what can happen to prevent it coming off," said Tom. "Of course, I know a disappointment would ruin everything. But we'll take care that the Fourth Form are not disappointed."

"How many of us are going for the grub?"

"Well, we don't want an army," said Tom thoughtfully.

"How many cricket-bags would it take to hold the stuff?"

"Four would do it."

"Then four of us will be enough—us and Jimson."

"Good! And we'll get going as soon as Daly has seen lights out."

So it was settled. When the Shell went to bed, and Daly, the prefect, looked into the dormitory to see that all was right, he saw nothing suspicious. He said good-night to the boys and went his way, and, as soon as the door had closed, Tom Merry sat up in bed.

"Now then, kids!" he exclaimed. "Up with you!"

He was out of bed in a twinkling, and Manners, Lowther, and Jimson followed. They had only partly undressed, like most boys of the Shell, and it did not take them long to don boots and jackets. Tom Merry unlocked his locker, and drew out a coil of stout rope, knotted at intervals in its length. He had prepared it for the occasion. By standing on a washstand he was able to reach a window, and he attached one end of the rope to the bar which crossed the casement.

"When we're down, you'll pull up the rope, Harris," he said. "Mind you let it down again when you hear a pebble on the window."

"Right-ho!" said Harris.

The rope was dropped out, and the four boys slid down to the ground one after another. Then Harris drew up the rope and closed the window. Tom Merry led the way.

Skirting the shadowy close, the boys reached the doctor's private garden, across which lay the easiest way out of the school precincts. At one place the garden wall was covered with masses of strong, tough ivy, and at this spot the Clavering boys had more than once broken bounds.

In a few minutes they were standing in the lane, which at this spot bordered the walls of Clavering.

"Now, follow your leader," said Tom Merry.

By road the High Clavering tunnel was about two miles from the school. By cutting across the fields it was not more than a quarter of a mile. Tom Merry jumped a ditch and plunged through a hedge and led the way, the others close at his heels. It did not take them long to reach the cutting. The night was very dark, and the spot lonely, and the only point of light in the surrounding gloom came from the signal-box at some distance over the trees.

The gloom and silence had a depressing effect upon the lads, and but for Tom Merry's high spirits they might have hesitated to carry out the enterprise. But Tom seemed proof against the depressing influence of his surroundings, and, dark and gloomy as the tunnel looked, the aspect of it had no effect whatever upon Tom; at all events, none that he allowed his looks to betray.

The four boys stole through the hedge, and picked their way cautiously down the slope. The metals glimmered dimly in the gloom. There was a sound from the tunnel.

"Hallo, a train's coming!" muttered Jimson, scuttling back into the brambles.

Boom—boom, came from the cavity in the earth.

A deafening sound swelled from the opening of the tunnel, and lights appeared like two wild eyes staring fiercely from the darkness. The train came booming on, and the boys crouched in the brambles besides the track, and with a scream and a roar it rushed by. The boys caught a glimpse of lighted windows and people's faces within, and then the train was gone, its tail-light glimmering away down the line.

"My hat!" muttered Jimson, between his chattering teeth. "Suppose we had been on the line—in the tunnel—"

"It's a rotten, risky business," said Lowther. "I think we're silly asses, and no mistake."

Tom had to admit that the business wasn't so simple and easy in the middle of the night as it seemed in the afternoon. But he was not in the least daunted.

"You see, it's wide in the tunnel, and there's plenty of room to stand aside for the train to pass," he said.

"Yes, but the wind of it might catch you."

"Well, it's gone now, anyway."

"How do you know there won't be another?" asked Jimson.

"Oh, I know that, and so would you if you thought for a minute. The down trains go every half-hour at night, and that was a down train. There won't be another on the metals this side of the track for a half-hour."

"I'd forgotten that," said Manners. "You've got a head, Tom. You ought to be a giddy general. But the London train goes up on the other side, you know, so we shall have to keep off the grass. And I believe it passes somewhere about this time."

"Well, a train on the other side of the track won't hurt us," said Tom. "Now—sh! Shut up! Don't move!"

"What's the matter?" muttered Lowther, in the breathless silence that followed Tom's sudden startling whisper, as they crouched back in the brambles.

"I saw a light in the tunnel," whispered Tom; "a light that moved, I mean."

"Stuff! There can't be anybody there."

"I am certain I saw it."

"What kind of a light?"

"A white light, like a lantern."

The boys stared towards the gloomy tunnel, straining their eyes through the blackness. They could see no trace of the light Tom Merry had caught a momentary glimpse of.

"You must have been mistaken," muttered Jimson at last. "It was your imagination, Merry."

"It wasn't. I know that I saw a light."

"You don't think there's anybody there, do you?"

"There must be."

"But whom could it be? There wouldn't be platelayers or anything this time of night; besides, if there were, they'd burn a steady light."

"I know; but somebody's there."

"Somebody after our grub," said Manners, in a horrified whisper.

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's what I was thinking. Perhaps we were seen putting it there."

"But a chap who watched you would have got it away before this," objected Jimson.

"He may not have had a chance. Anyway, somebody's there, and we've got to find out what's up before we show ourselves."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to scout in the tunnel. Give me that lantern. Might have brought a dark one."

"Look here," muttered Manners; "you're not going alone."

"Yes I am. If there's anything up we may have to keep dark, and one will be enough, anyway, to see what's going on there. If I call you can come."

"I wish you'd—"

"I shall be all right. Mind you stay here and keep quiet till I come back."

And Tom Merry, with the big lantern in his hand, as yet unlighted, of course, stole away with the stealthy tread of a cat towards the opening of the tunnel. He left his chums with beating hearts, anxiously waiting for what might happen.

Tom carefully picked his way among the sleepers, followed the down line into the tunnel, and blackness seemed to swallow him up. In the dead stillness of the night the tunnel seemed full of strange noises, which echoed in his straining ears with a weird effect.

He reached the spot where the hamper had been deposited in the recess between two supporting buttresses. In the

dark, and without making a sound, he felt for it, and he found it there. It had not been moved or opened.

The hamper was safe! Then what was the meaning of the light he had seen? Who was skulking there in the darkness of the tunnel?

Grim, fearful thoughts came into Tom's mind as he stood straining his eyes in vain to pierce the blackness, and straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. He had heard of train-wreckers; but the thought seemed too terrible. Suddenly a sound came from the silence that made his pulses leap wildly. It was a human voice, whispering; and it came from the other side of the tunnel.

"How long now, do you think, Lumden?"

"Can't be more than a few minutes."

The voices were low, husky; the voices of men oppressed with a heavy suspense.

Tom knew, as well as if he had been told, that they were speaking of the London train, which was almost due to pass through the tunnel. His heart thumped so wildly that he feared they would hear it.

What did it mean? Why were they here? What was their intention? The boy stood as still as a statue.

"Show a glim, Lumden, and let's see the time."

"Don't be an idiot; you can wait. It might give the whole game away."

"It's getting on my nerves, waiting here like this."

"It's getting on mine, too, Jex. But the game is worth it. If all goes well, we shall clear five thousand pounds by this job."

"Sure we're safe just here, Lumden? It would be no joke to get caught in our own trap."

"Of course I am, you shivering fool!" growled the other. "I'm as fond of my skin as you are of yours. The train will have all passed us before it tumbles into the pile on the line and leaves the metals. We're safe."

"I wish it would come."

"So do I, hang it! Hark! Can't you hear a rumble?"

"No," was the reply, after a pause.

"Put your ear to the metals, and then you'll hear it."

Another pause, as if the unseen man was obeying the instructions. Then his voice was audible again.

"I can hear her humming now."

"Good! She'll be here in a couple of minutes or less."

Tom Merry was standing transfixed in the blackness. He was within six or seven paces of the talkers, and he dared not move in case they should hear him. He knew now that he had to deal with a couple of desperate train-wreckers; remorseless scoundrels, who, for the sake of plunder, were about to derail a train, at any risk to the lives of the passengers. He knew instinctively that if they had guessed that he was there they would have thought no more of striking him down than of crushing a fly. But it was not his own danger that occupied his mind.

He was thinking of the train, laden with passengers, rushing on through the night, the driver assured by the signals on the line and never thinking of the obstruction piled on the way in the depths of the tunnel.

Tom's heart was beating like a hammer, but his head had never failed him yet. He must save the train—at any risk, at any cost, he must and would prevent this dastardly outrage! He crept away towards the mouth of the tunnel again. He reached the open air and breathed more freely when he saw the stars of Heaven above him. After the blackness of the tunnel, the night, dark as it was, seemed light. There was a sound in the gloom behind him.

"Did you hear that, Lumden?"

"No, what?"

"There it is again!"

"Fury! It's somebody on the line—we're discovered!"

Tom Merry heard no more. He scratched a match and lighted the big lantern. He fled up the line as fast as he could, throwing the light of the lantern before him. The light gleamed out through the night as he ran. Ahead of him sounded an ominous rumble. The train was coming!

From the bushes where he had left his chums came a voice calling in amazement. He neither heard nor heeded. Behind him were the train-wreckers, whether pursuing him or not he did not know. Before him was the train, coming on headlong to destruction. The lights gleamed out of the black night. Green and white, and dazzling to his eyes.

Boom, boom! There was the train in full view, rushing upon him like some mighty monster eager to seize him for its prey. Of his own terrible danger the boy did not think. He ran on towards the train, waving the light above his head and shouting at the top of his voice!

"Stop! Stop!"

The train came booming on.

"Stop! Danger!"

Would not the driver hear him?

Bang! A deafening report echoed from the tunnel, and something whizzed by Tom's head. He knew that he had

been fired at, and he felt the wind of the bullet, but in his excitement he hardly realised it, and cared nothing.

"Stop! Stop!"

He rushed on waving the lantern frantically. He was not aware that in the roar of the train the engine-driver could not possibly hear his voice. But the light—surely he would see that!

Boom, boom! Clatter!

"Stop!"

Right in the path of the train stood the gallant lad, the lantern held high in his right hand, his left waving excitedly.

"Stop!"

A red face was peering past the engine, and there was a jamming of brakes.

Clatter—boom—clank—clatter!

The train was slowing down. Tom turned sick with relief. He waved the lantern again and shouted.

"Danger! Stop for your life!"

Slower and slower, and slower still, till the great locomotive stopped, not a dozen feet from Tom Merry.

The engine-driver sprang to the ground.

"Who are you? What's the matter here?"

"The line's blocked!" gasped Tom Merry. "Train-wreckers!"

And then the brave lad, sick and giddy with the reaction, reeled, and the lantern went with a crash to the ground. The engine-driver caught him as he staggered blindly.

Excited voices were inquiring from the windows the cause of the sudden stoppage. Faces were craning out to look.

"A block on the line," said the engine-driver briefly, "and this boy has saved our lives."

A minute more, and Tom Merry was surrounded by a crowd of excited passengers.

CHAPTER 7.

An Interrupted Feast.

TOM MERRY was not long in recovering himself. The driver and the fireman had taken lanterns and rushed into the tunnel. There was no sign of the train-wreckers; they had fled as soon as they saw that they were baffled, but the huge pile of stones and wooden sleepers on the line told its own tale.

Had the train dashed into that pile at full speed, nothing could have saved it from complete destruction. A dozen lives might have paid for the villainy of two greedy rascals, who thought more of the consignment of gold the train was carrying, than of the lives of their fellow-creatures. The signalman was quickly warned of the happening on the line, and the telegraph flashed the news up and down.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry was the hero of the hour.

Women passengers kissed him and wept over him, men shook him by the hand till his arm ached, and called him all sorts of complimentary names. In the excitement and relief at having escaped so fearful a peril, no one seemed to think of asking Tom how he had come to be there. He had risked his life to save them, and that was enough for the moment.

Manners, Lowther, and Jimson, as soon as they were aware of what had happened, joined Tom, and they, too, slapped him on the back, looking extremely proud of their chum who had so splendidly distinguished himself. But now that the strain was over, Tom was thinking of the hamper hidden in the tunnel.

"I say, we shall be out all night at this rate," he whispered to Monty Lowther. "You chaps cut into the tunnel and fill the bags with the grub, while I keep attention off you. When you've got it up in the road, whistle, and I'll cut and join you."

Recalled to the object of their night expedition, the three hastened to obey Tom, and as Tom Merry was the centre of attraction, they were able to carry out their work unnoticed. The driver and his mate were busy, and the passengers surrounded Tom. The latter waited anxiously for the signal from his chums.

"Hallo, I must be off!" he exclaimed. "Good-night, ladies and gentlemen!"

"You must not go—"

"You must tell us—"

"You must be rewarded—"

"A subscription—"

"A gold watch—"

"The police will want—"

"Stop—"

The passengers were speaking all at once. Without stopping to argue the point, Tom Merry scuttled off, and though several hands were put out to detain him, he dodged them with the skillfulness of a Rugby three-quarter making a

break for the goal-line, and reached the side of the cutting. He scrambled up the steep slope, and plunged through the hedge.

"Got it all right?" he gasped.

"Yes," said Manners. "Here it is, crammed into four bags. I don't know whether we left anything behind, but there's enough, in all conscience."

"Come along, then. We shall get mobbed if we stay here. Those people are cackling like a lot of geese, as if nobody ever stopped a train before."

"Now, that's ungrateful; you're a giddy hero, and—"

"Dry up, and come along. What I'm afraid of is, that they'll want us to give information to the police, and if we don't get off sharp, we may be detained. A nice row we should get into at Clavering then!"

"My hat, yes! We shall have to keep this awfully dark." The chums hurried away, burdened as they were by the crammed bags. They cut across the dark fields, and reached the college, and helped each other over the wall with their burdens. A few minutes later a pebble rattled on the dormitory window, and the wakeful Harris let the rope down. The bags were drawn up one after another, and then the four lads climbed in.

"You've been a thundering long time," said Harris.

"That's all right," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Any of the guests arrived yet?"

"No; but it's just on time."

"Then let's get the feast ready."

The blinds were carefully drawn, and a bicycle lantern lighted. The Shell were all out of bed, and they looked on eagerly as Tom opened the bags and turned out the good things. The Shell, of course, were to join in the feast in which the Fourth Form were to be the honoured guests.

"My only panama!" ejaculated Harris. "That's all right! You must have bought up half the giddy tuck-shop, Merry. There's enough to go round, and no mistake!"

A faint tap came at the door.

"Hallo, there's the guests!"

Tom Merry instantly extinguished the light.

The door opened, and a figure in shirt and trousers loomed up. There were a crowd of others behind it. Tom Merry stepped quickly towards the door.

"Is it all right?" came a hoarse whisper. "Is that you, Merry?"

"It's all right. Are you all there?"

"Yes, rather! What about the feed?"

"It's ready. Excuse us receiving you in the dark, people, because we mustn't show a glim till the door's closed. Come in."

"Right you are."

The Fourth Form filed in. Some of them were dressed, some were half dressed, some were in pyjamas, and some in nightshirts. Lower and Upper Fourth had accepted the invitation to the last boy, and the file seemed endless.

At last they were all in the dormitory. Tom Merry closed the door quietly, and laid a folded blanket along the bottom of it, to keep any gleam of light from escaping into the corridor, and stuck a cap over the keyhole.

Then the lantern was lighted again, and several candle-ends to augment the illumination. The eyes of the Fourth-Formers glistened at the sight of the good things spread out upon newspaper-sheets on the floor. They had been warned to bring their own cutlery, and every boy had a knife or a fork, sometimes both, and some had spoons, while a few lucky ones had articles of crockery in addition. Pocket-knives helped to make up the deficiency, and soap-dishes served as plates for those who had none.

"Well, this is a bit of all right," said Higgins, of the Fourth. "You are a jolly good sort, Tom Merry, and a chap who can stand a feed like this ought to be captain of Clavering, in my opinion."

"What-ho!" chorused the Fourth.

"I dare say," continued Higgins, "that you'll stand another feed like this after the election, if you get in."

"Rather," said Tom hospitably. "But tuck in, chaps; we never can tell if any beastly prefect is going to nose in at any minute."

The hint was sufficient. The Fourth Form and the Shell were quickly at work. Everyone helped himself to whatever he fancied, and as Harris had remarked, there was enough of everything to go round.

Only one fellow refused to join in the feast, and that was Gore. He remained in bed, and watched the feasters with a sneer on his ill-natured face.

"I say, Gore, aren't you going to join us?" asked Tom Merry, whose hospitality was boundless.

"No, I'm not."

"Gore, Gore, don't show ill-feeling at a time like this," said Manners. "There never was such a feed given in Dormitory D."

"I'm not taking any, thank you."

"Look here, Gore, what's the matter?" demanded Monty Lowther. "You're not the chap to turn up your nose at a feed like this. What have you got on your mind?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if some prefect comes in and catches you," said Gore. "I'm not going to run the risk, anyway."

"Pooh! What chance is there of that? They've no suspicion of—"

Monty Lowther paused in the middle of his remark.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor without. A chilly hush fell upon the feasters. Were Gore's words to prove prophetic? Tom Merry was the only one to show a quick presence of mind.

"Douse the lights, quick!" he whispered hurriedly.

He turned the lantern out. The candles were extinguished in a twinkling. Darkness reigned in the dormitory. The boys listened breathlessly. The footsteps had stopped at the door. If it were a master, and he looked into the dormitory and was satisfied to find it dark, all would be well. But if he had a light—

It was impossible to hide either the feast or the guests in time. The boys could only wait breathlessly to know their fate.

The door opened!

CHAPTER 8.

Devigne's Counter-Move.

"WHAT'S that, Devigne?"

Edgar Devigne, the Upper Fifth Form candidate for the captaincy of Clavering School, looked inquiringly at his friend. It was half-past ten o'clock, and Devigne and Cary had just come up to go to bed. Cary had stopped in Devigne's room to speak for a few minutes before going to his own, and as Devigne lighted the gas he uttered the exclamation.

Devigne looked at him, and then his eye followed the direction of Cary's pointing finger. Upon the table was a sheet of foolscap, placed in a prominent position, evidently to catch the eye as soon as Devigne should enter his room. Upon it a sentence was scrawled in letters sloping backwards, plainly for purposes of disguise.

"Hallo," said Devigne. "Some cheek of the juniors, I suppose."

"I don't think so, Edgar," said Cary quickly, bending forward to look at the paper. "Read what it says, old man."

Devigne read the scrawl on the paper, and his eyes flashed. It ran as follows:

"If you want to spoil a rival candidate's little game, keep an eye on Dormitory D at half-past ten to-night."

The message was signed "A Secret Supporter."

Devigne and Cary stared at one another in surprise and keen interest.

"What the dickens does that mean?" said Devigne. "Dormitory D is where Tom Merry has his quarters, with the kids of the Shell, so he must be the rival candidate referred to. It can't be Wingate."

"No, it's Tom Merry plainly enough. But the Shell have gone to bed long ago, and I really don't see what electioneering trick Tom Merry can be up to at this time of night," said Cary, in a thoughtful way. "Have you a supporter in the Shell, do you think, who might feel inclined to give his game away, or is this a hoax?"

"There's Gore," said Devigne. "He hates Merry, and would rather get anybody in as captain, I believe, than Tom Merry."

"Ah, Gore, of course! Depend upon it, he's sent this warning."

"You think there's something in it, then?"

"Well, there may, or may not be; but under the circumstances, I think I should look into it. The election is certain to be a close one between you and Merry, even if Wingate is out of it; and you can't afford to miss any chances."

"I don't see what Merry can be up to," said Devigne musingly. "Still, as you say, it won't do any harm to look into it. Suppose you go quietly along to the dormitory and see if there's anything unusual going on. Then, if it's a hoax, we can burn this paper—we'll do that, anyway—and say nothing."

"All right; wait for me."

Cary went out, and Devigne waited impatiently for his return. Tom Merry was the candidate he feared at the election, because of his following in the Lower Forms. And he knew he could never count upon what Tom was going to do next.

His suspense did not last long. In a couple of minutes Cary came back, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"What's on?" asked Devigne quickly.

CHAPTER 9.

The Hero of the Hour.

TOM MERRY'S electioneering had not fared well. In the morning every member of the Fourth Form was cased by Mr. Tring, the Form-master, and given an imposition of fifty lines. It was a severe price to pay for a barely-tasted feast, and, naturally enough, Tom Merry had to bear the brunt of the dissatisfaction.

He had certainly not been to blame, but he had, just as certainly, got the Fourth into this fearful row, and a chap who was so unlucky did not appeal to them as a captain. Instead of helping on his cause by that famous dormitory feed, Tom had ruined it, and he and his chums were fully conscious of the fact.

"It was a ghastly frost, and no mistake," Manners remarked. "I wonder how old Schneider got on the track? Not that it matters now. Two hundred lines apiece for all the Shell, and gated this afternoon. A caning and fifty apiece for the Fourth Form! Hew! It's enough to spoil the rosiest prospects, Tom, my boy."

"I think the Shell will stick to their guns, and vote for me," said Tom Merry. "But the Fourth will go over to Wingate, I expect. They feel a bit too sore now to vote for me, and there's not much time for them to get over it. They've lost a half-holiday to-day, and the election's to-morrow."

"Yes, it's rotten, and no mistake. Nothing we can do now will recover our lost ground."

"I can't think of anything," confessed Tom. "We must chance our luck. We may pull it off by the skin of our teeth after all. Anyway, we'll try."

Such electioneering as was possible the chums did, but they had to admit that the prospect was not rosy. They stuck to their guns, but with big doubts in their minds as to the morrow's election.

Probably the only boy in the Shell in a satisfied mood that day was Gore. He had effected his purpose, and he felt pretty sure now that Tom Merry would never be elected. After school that day, while Tom and his friends were busy, Gore happened to be standing at the school gates, looking idly down the road, when a man in the uniform of a police-inspector stopped at the gates.

"This is Clavering School, isn't it?" he asked, looking at Gore.

"Yes. Do you want anybody?"

"Yes, I do," said the inspector. "Perhaps you can tell me, young sir, if a boy whose description I've got here belongs to this school, and save me bothering the head-master."

"Go ahead," said Gore, with interest, wondering what was up.

The inspector read out from his notebook:

"Boy about fifteen or a little over, with curly hair and blue eyes. Christian name Tom."

Gore gave a jump.

"Aha!" exclaimed the inspector quickly. "I see you know him, my lad!"

"I expect it's Tom Merry you want," said Gore. "What's he been doing?"

The inspector laughed.

"Do you happen to know whether he was out of the school last night, any time after ten o'clock, young gentleman?"

"Yes, rather," said Gore eagerly. "He was, and there were three other chaps with him. What have they been getting up to? I thought they were gone a long time."

"Three?" said the inspector, consulting his notebook. "Yes, that's right; there were three, and they addressed him in speaking as Tom. Surname unknown."

"It's Tom Merry right enough," said Gore. "That's the boy you want. I'll show you where he is, if you like."

"Thanks; I wish you would."

Gore, in high glee, led the inspector in. He was quite convinced that Tom Merry had been guilty of some offence or other against the law while absent the previous night, and that the inspector had come to Clavering to arrest him.

Tom came out of the gym., as it happened, with Monty Lowther and Manners. The three stopped and stared towards Gore and the inspector.

"There he is, sir," said Gore quickly. "There's the chap you want."

He pointed Tom out, and the inspector walked quickly towards him. Tom stood his ground, wondering what was wanted. Boys were gathering from all sides, curious to know what was up, and a score or more gathered round Gore to ask for information.

The inspector tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder.

"Look!" exclaimed Gore. "He's going to arrest him, for something he did last night when he was gone to fetch the grub. I wonder what it was?"

"Hallo!" said Tom coolly, looking up confidently at the

"About the whole of the Fourth Form are going into Dormitory D. It's a dormitory feed, from what they were nuttering. Tom Merry's feeding the whole giddy Fourth, as a bid for their votes, I suppose."

"By Jove!" said Devigne. "That's a clever move of his, but I fancy we'll checkmate him this time, thanks to Gore's warning—if it was Gore. That doesn't matter, anyway. The juniors may be jolly pleased at getting a big feed, but they'll be jolly wild at being disappointed at the last moment, and getting cased all round in the morning. All's fair in war; and the masters have got to come on in this scene."

"But you mustn't appear in it," said Cary quickly. "If the kids knew you had been the spoil-sport, you wouldn't catch many votes in the Fourth."

"How shall we work it, then?"

Cary reflected for a few moments.

"I know! Herr Schneider's down on Merry, and always likes to keep on at him. If he knew, it would make him jump with joy. I'll put him up to it, and you can go to bed and know nothing at all about it till to-morrow."

"Right you are," said Devigne, laughing. "I'll keep that up."

Cary hurried away to the German's study. He had passed it coming up, and knew by the light under the door that Herr Schneider had not gone to bed. He tapped, and the deep voice of Otto Friedrich Schneider bade him enter.

"Vat is it tat you vant after?" asked Herr Schneider, laying down his German newspaper and looking inquiringly at Cary through his spectacles.

"If you please, sir, there's something goin' on that ought to be taken notice of by a master," said Cary diffidently.

"Just as I was going up to bed, I saw the Fourth Form going into the Shell's room, sir. I hope you don't think that I ought not to mention it."

Herr Schneider rose to his feet.

"It was fery right of you to tell me tat, Cary. I tink tat tat Tom Merry is at te bottom of dis, ain't it?"

"I shouldn't wonder, Herr Schneider."

The German waved his fat hand.

"You can go to bed, Cary; I will deal mit tis matter."

"You won't mention that I spoke to you, sir?" said Cary nervously.

"Certainly not."

Cary departed, well satisfied with himself. The German master, with an expression upon his face which would have made an uncharitable person suppose that he was really pleased to find out Tom Merry in a fault, left his study and proceeded upstairs.

He opened the door of Dormitory D, and, as we have related, found all dark within.

From the collected feasters came not a sound.

They were holding their breath in agonised suspense.

The German master stared into the dark room, seeing nothing and hearing nothing, and a suspicion crossed his mind that he had been made a fool of.

"Boys!"

He spoke in a subdued voice, and received no reply. The listeners trembled with anxiety. Would the obnoxious master go away without striking a light?

Alas for their hopes! There was a scratch in the darkness, and a flare. In the light of a match the German looked into the dormitory.

Then he gave a gasp. Feeble as the light was, it was sufficient to show him the state of affairs. He smiled grimly and advanced into the room, and lighted the gas.

Then he grimly surveyed the scene.

"Ah, tat is vat," he said. "I see tat you amuse yourselves ven you vasters suppose tat you are in bed. Vat are you Fourth Form boys doing in dis room?"

The unhappy Fourth Formers made no reply.

They sat in a state of dumb misery, waiting for the wrath to come.

"Merry, I suppose tat you are at te bottom of dis, as usual?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom cheerfully. He had quickly recovered himself. "I'm standing the feed."

"I tought so. Ve vill see vat te headmaster haf to say apout it to-morrow. Boys of te Fourth, you vill return to your own quarters, and report yourselves to Mr. Tring in te morning. I shall acquaint him mit vat has happen."

The wretched Fourth Formers filed out of the dormitory. Then the German pointed to the scarcely-tasted feast.

"You vill collect all tat unwholesome food up, and carry it to my study. Den you vill go pack to bed, Merry and te rest."

It was done. It was the bitterest pill of all to swallow, but it was done. The great feast was conveyed in sulky, almost mutinous silence to the German master's room by a file of lads, and deposited there. Then the Shell went to bed, in a frame of mind to which words were not forcible enough to give expression.

inspector. "What's the little game? Do you want to speak to me?"

"Yes," said the officer, with a smile. "Are you Tom Merry?"

"Yes, old dear."

"Were you at the High Clavering tunnel last night at the time of the stoppage of the London train?"

Tom hesitated.

"Come, my lad, you may as well own up," said the inspector good-humouredly. "I have your description, and there are a dozen people to identify you if necessary."

"Well, I was there," said Tom ruefully. "But if you give me away to the Head, I shall get a fearful licking."

"I don't think the Head will lick you when he hears the whole story," said the inspector, smiling, and patting Tom on the shoulder.

Gore looked puzzled. Things were not working out as he had expected.

"But I say, what has he done, sir?" cried a dozen inquiring voices.

"He has done a deed that ought to make you proud of him," said the inspector, looking round. "He risked his life, and must have nearly lost it, to save a train that was on the point of being wrecked. He saved a dozen lives at least, perhaps fifty; and then scuttled off without saying a word to anybody."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Tom. "Back-pedal, old fellow, and spare my giddy blushes."

The boys of Clavering gazed at each other in wonder for a moment. Then a ringing cheer burst forth, and so loud was it that it rang through the school, and brought a crowd of inquirers rushing to the spot. Mr. Railton, who had already caught sight of the inspector in the close, came out to inquire the cause of his visit.

The officer quickly explained.

"The boy is wanted to give any information he can as to the identity of the rascals who nearly wrecked the train," he explained. "Under the circumstances, sir, may I venture to express the hope that he will not be punished."

"He has done wrong—very grave wrong, in leaving the school at night," said Mr. Railton. "But I am sure that his object was not a bad one, however irregular. I shall certainly not punish a boy who risked his life for the sake of others."

A cheer followed the Head's words.

Then the boys made a rush for Tom Merry.

"Good old Tom!"

"Hurrah!"

He was seized and carried off, shoulder-high, round the Close—as once before he had been carried—in triumph. The boys fell into procession behind him, cheering and waving their caps. Mr. Railton looked on with a smile. And Wingate, of the Sixth, and Devigne, of the Upper Fifth, met each other's eyes, and read there the same thought.

Tom Merry was sure of election now!

For the lower Forms of Clavering, now following him and cheering themselves hoarse, would be certain to plump for the hero of the hour at the morrow's election.

The captaincy of Clavering was in Tom Merry's hands, if he chose to take it.

CHAPTER 10.

Tom's Grit—The New Captain.

MORNING dawned—the morning of the election day. All Clavering was thrilling with suppressed excitement. Those of the Clavering boys who made bets were willing to offer three to one that Tom Merry would be elected captain of Clavering in the hall that evening, but they could find no takers.

For to all it seemed that Tom's chances amounted practically to a certainty.

The Sixth would go solid for Wingate. The Fifth would vote for Devigne to the last man. The Shell would vote in a body for Tom Merry. The Fourth Form remained. And the Fourth Form seemed to be suffering from the severest attack of hero-worship they had ever experienced, and Tom Merry was their hero. The Fourth Form made no secret of their intention of marching into the hall in a body and voting for Tom Merry.

The Fourth Form held the balance, and Tom Merry could reckon upon nearly every vote in the Form. On the morrow, the captain of Clavering would be named Tom Merry—there were few in the school who doubted that.

And Mr. Railton was not easy in his mind. Tom was certainly within his rights in putting up for the captaincy, and the boys were within their rights in voting for him; but the master realised, what neither Tom nor his supporters

thought about, that it would not be for the good of the school for a boy out of the Shell to get in as captain.

Tom Merry was one of the finest lads in Clavering, but he had neither the age nor the experience to fill the post to satisfaction. Then it was certain that the Sixth would kick, that the Upper Fifth would kick, and the Lower Fifth would kick at being ruled by a lower Form boy. Endless trouble was in prospect, if Tom Merry were elected—and his election was no longer a chance, but a certainty.

Mr. Railton thought the matter over again and again, viewing it from every aspect. He came to a decision at last, and after morning school he sent for Tom Merry.

Tom came promptly enough to the Head's study. He thought it was something more to do with the affair of the train-wreckers. He had told the inspector all he knew, which was little enough, but the police hoped to catch the rascals.

"Come in!" said Mr. Railton, as Tom tapped at the door. "You may sit down, Merry. I want to speak very seriously to you."

Tom sat down, wondering what was wanted. He ran hurriedly over his latest escapades in his mind, trying to think which one of them could have got to Mr. Railton's ears.

"Merry," said the Head seriously, "I am about to speak to you, not as a master to a pupil, but as a man to a boy, whom he respects, and of whom he therefore expects more than he would ask of any other boy."

"Yes, sir," said Tom, his wonder increasing.

"You have stood forward as a candidate for the captaincy, Merry. You have now every chance of being elected, I believe."

"I hope so, sir."

"What would you say if I were to ask you to withdraw?"

Tom jumped.

"Withdraw, sir? Oh, sir!"

"What would you say, Merry?" asked Mr. Railton, with his eyes fixed on the boy's dismayed face.

"I—I— You could order me to withdraw, sir, if you liked," said Tom, with a gulp.

"Yes," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I could order you to withdraw, Merry, but that would be neither right nor just. I cannot feel that I should be acting fairly in doing so. That is why I prefer to appeal to your right feeling—and I am sure that I shall not appeal to it in vain."

"You wish me to withdraw, sir?"

"Yes, Merry."

Tom's face showed what his feelings were; but for the moment he could not speak. The headmaster's hand dropped gently upon his shoulder.

"Merry, listen to me. You have put up as a candidate, without much thought as to what would follow if you were elected—is it not so?"

"Yes, I suppose so, sir," Tom confessed. "I don't see why I shouldn't make a pretty good captain."

"If you were old enough, and in the Sixth, certainly. But think! If you are elected—you know how necessary it is for a captain to have authority—do you think the Sixth will submit?"

"I—I don't know. They'd have to."

"And if they had to, what feeling would there be about it? You do not want to have a whole Form against you, Merry—all with bitterness rankling in their breasts?"

"Oh, no, sir! That would be rotten—I—I mean, I shouldn't like that at all."

"Then the Fifth would feel the same. If a Sixth fellow became elected, they would take it with resignation, but the election of a Shell boy would make them indignant and resentful. You would have the Fifth Form against you, too."

Tom made a long face. He had certainly not calculated upon all this, being as thoughtless as most boys of his age, and not in the habit of looking a long way ahead.

"Now, confess," said Mr. Railton, with a smile. "You thought only of winning the election, and nothing of what would follow. But now that I have put it to you you can see that it would not be a good thing for you to be elected captain of Clavering."

Tom nodded slowly.

"Yes, I suppose so, sir."

"Then if I asked you to withdraw—"

"I would do so, sir, if you wished." There was a big gulp in Tom's throat as he said this, but he got the words out bravely. "I will withdraw, sir, if you like."

"I thought you would say that, Merry," said Mr. Railton heartily. "I am greatly obliged to you for acting in a generous and manly way."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Tom, blushing. "Of course, I know you know better than I do, and—"

"Quite right. I can depend upon you.
"But what you said about my candidature, sir, applies equally to Devigne's," said Tom quickly.
Mr. Railton smiled.

"I do not think Devigne will get in if the Shell votes against him," he said.

Tom understood.
"Right, sir. We shall plump for Wingate."

And he left the Head's study. His chums were waiting for him outside, and in a few words Tom acquainted them with what had passed at the interview.

They both drew long faces.

"Well, it's rotten," said Manners; "but I suppose the Head knows best!"

"Mr. Railton is right," said Monty Lowther. "Anyway, you couldn't refuse him. But it's rotten — distinctly rotten!"

Tom made his way to the notice-board. Five minutes later all Clavering was discussing an amendment which had appeared upon his notice there.

"Upon second thoughts, Tom Merry withdraws his candidature, and decides to vote for Wingate. All his friends are requested to do the same."

There was a huge

meeting in the great hall of Clavering that evening. From the first it was known how the voting would go, now that it was between two candidates. For the Shell backed up Tom Merry, and his enthusiastic admirers in the Fourth Form were prepared to follow his lead anywhere—

either to elect him or to elect anybody else. Only the Fifth backed up Devigne, and the votes of the Fifth were lost in the mass of voting for Wingate. The Sixth, Shell, and Fourth, plumped for the latter.

A hurricane of cheers made the hall shake as the result was made known — Wingate, one hundred and fifty votes; Devigne, fifty-seven. Gilbert Wingate was captain of Clavering!

In the midst of the cheering, Wingate crossed over to Tom and shook hands with him.

"I understand, Merry," he said — "I understand. And I know how to appreciate your conduct. You're a jolly good fellow, and I think the time will come when you will be captain of Clavering — when you're in the Sixth."

And Tom Merry — merry as ever — looked as satisfied as anybody in the hall, though he had not become — what he could have become — captain of Clavering.
THE END.

NEXT THURSDAY'S COVER!



THRILLING!

ABSORBING!

Here is a small reproduction of the cover of "The Gem," No. 8, which will contain an extra long, complete tale of the thrilling adventures of Buffalo Bill, by Mark Glover.

Porker Gets a Dousing.

Jim skated gracefully to the side of the pond, and having collected a double handful of snow, formed it into a snowball, and landed it beautifully in Porker's mouth.

"I think it is commencing to snow, my dear man," said Rex, in his stow manner. "You had better get back to your sty!"

"You varmint!" howled Porker, making a rush on the ice.

It was a remarkably silly thing to do, because he had very little chance of catching the skaters; besides, the ice was slippery, a thing he appeared to have forgotten in his excitement and fury.

He reached the middle of the pond all right, then down he went with a fearful impact; and he had no sooner sat on the ice than it burst asunder, while all that remained visible of Porker were his legs and upper portion of his body.

The water was not much more than a foot deep, although he now sat in about another foot of mud. It would have been better far for him had the whole of the ice broken away, because then he would have been able to get out. As it was, he was firmly stuck, and as he made futile struggles to get out the comrades roared with laughter at him.

"I say, Porker," exclaimed Rex, "aren't you frightened

YOU CAN START THIS STORY TO-DAY.



Stompoint

A SCHOOL TALE.
By Maurice Merriman.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Rex Allingham kicks the winning goal for Stompoint College in an important match, and so gets in favour of Hal Trehear, the captain of the school. But Jardon, a Fifth Former, bullies Rex, Rex, with his two chums, Jim and Bob, are punished by Mr. Salmon, who locks them in a room while the other boys go skating. Porker, the school porter, is told to guard them. However, the boys break away, and go skating on a small pond. Porker finds them, but is frightened to go on the ice. (Now go on with the story.)

The unfortunate Porker got out at last by smashing his legs through the ice. Of course, he got extremely wet, and he was frightfully muddy at the back, and as he came floundering to the side the chums did not improve his temper by howling with laughter at him.

"Oh, I'll make you sorry for this, you utter varmints!" he hooted.

"My dear fellow, keep cool!" said Rex.
"I'll warrant he will do that!" said Jim. "Ha, ha, ha! You had better go straight to the doctor; only I wouldn't advise you to sit down on one of his drawing-room chairs, because it might make it dirty. You see, Porker, you

of catching cold, sitting in the water like that? You know, when you want to have a bathe you ought to put your head in first. You have gone in the wrong end."

"Whoo! Help! I'm a-drowning!"

"My dear man, you are doing nothing of the sort. Your head is above the water, and you are not in the slightest danger. All you have got to do is to wait until the ice melts, and then you will get out easily. We are going to take off our skates, because you have broken the ice, and spoilt our skating. Still, you are affording us a considerable amount of fun, so we will forgive you."

STORMPOINT (Continued).

are muddy at the back. You are muddier than the dirtiest sow that ever wallowed in a mud-pool!"

"It will be all right directly," said Rex. "You see, it is freezing hard, and the frost is bound to dry the mud. Ha, ha, ha! I must say your back elevation is most picturesque."

Porker raved out the most insulting things he could think of; but, needless to say, they had no effect on the chums, who chaffed him the whole way to his lodge; then another misfortune awaited him.

"Bust it!" he roared, fumbling in his pockets.

Porker generally locked his door when the chums were roaming about; past experience had taught him that it was far safer. Rex knew this, and as Porker continued to fumble in his pockets, he at once guessed that he had lost or mislaid the key.

"I say, Porker," cried Rex, "you had really better go in and change your clothes. You know, you will catch cold; besides, you can't feel so remarkably comfortable. Take my advice, my dear fellow, and change at once."

"Bust it! I'll be the death of you! Where's the key?"

"Why, you must have dropped it into the pond when you sat in the water; but it is of no consequence. It is not lost, because you know where it is."

"Bust it!" hooted Porker, hurling himself against the door, which was far to strong to yield.

"Of course, you can bust it, my good man," said Rex; "only if you really want to do that, I would advise you to use your back as a battering-ram. You see, that will keep you nice and warm—that is to say, if you are not warm enough already. You are making a jolly mess on the floor, too. Ha, ha, ha! It's no good grumbling at the door. You should not have been so careless as to lose the key."

"I'll get through the window," muttered Porker. "I know I left that unfastened—leastwise, the bed-room window I did."

"Get your skate-straps ready!" whispered Rex. "We will warm him. He has got us many a licking; he shall have one now. There he goes. Be ready!"

Porker raised the sash, and commenced to climb through; but directly he was half-way, Rex ran that sash down on his back, rendering the unfortunate Porker as helpless as a beetle beneath a boot.

"Dear Porker," exclaimed Rex, holding the sash in position, "we are going to warm you. We don't want you to take cold, so we are going to give you a counter-irritant. Fire away, old chaps! The man needs strap-oil!"

Porker got it, and his howls and threats were extraordinary. It was a lucky thing for the chums that no masters were in the house. They had Porker all to themselves, and those straps cracked.

"Ha, ha, ha! I think that is about enough for him!" roared Rex at last. "You are a free man, Porker. Let this be a lesson to you not to sit in duck-ponds, and mind you don't do it again."

Porker rolled through the window on his bed, which was immediately beneath it; and as he sat on the counterpane, preparatory to stepping on the floor, he left a black mark about three feet square.

"Oh, you varmint!" he hooted. "Only wait till I get at you!"

"Come this way!" growled Bob. "What we need is warmth and comfort. We are going to have 'em."

"But I'm so jolly hungry!" exclaimed Jim.

"Come this way!" repeated Bob. "I had an idea we should get hungry, and I've taken precautions against it. We are going into the stovehole."

Now, the stovehole was a favourite hiding-place of the chums. It was really the furnace which gave

heat to the college and conservatory. There was a good-sized boiler there, and a fine furnace for baking potatoes; while the temperature was nice and comfortable in the winter-time; but as the chums descended the steps into the stovehole an agreeable surprise met them.

Bob had sent out for a couple of pounds of prime sausages, a number of potatoes, and a couple of loaves of new bread; then he had bought a tin of cocoa, and another of condensed milk, to say nothing of sugar and butter.

"What do you think of that little lot, my boys?" he exclaimed. "I've borrowed Jardon's kettle, also plates, knives, forks, cups, and that. I had to sneak them from his study."

"Ha, ha, ha! He will be pleased!" exclaimed Jim.

"Well, you see," exclaimed Bob, "I sha'n't tell him that I borrowed them. I shall just leave them here, and let him find them. After all, he can easily wash them. Here's his frying-pan, all nice and clean. He makes his wretched fag do that. Now let's enjoy ourselves, and I'm inclined to think we shall have as much fun as those fellows on the lake."

The sausages were soon frizzling in the pan and smelling remarkably nice; while even before they were done the water was boiling in Jardon's kettle. What the bully would say when his property was returned never troubled Bob. He had made up his mind to have a sumptuous feast, and did not worry about the future.

"Now then, old chaps," exclaimed Bob at last, "the spuds are just nicely done; so are the sausages. Wire in!" They needed no second invitation, for they were really very hungry.

"They are prime!" exclaimed Jim. "I'm particularly fond of sausages, when you know they are made all right."

"Put a bit of butter in your baked potato," said Bob.

"It improves its flavour a lot. Well, all I can say is that if those fellows are enjoying themselves more than we are, they are having a jolly good time of it."

"The only thing is, what will Jardon do when he finds we have borrowed his things?" observed Rex. "He is bound to guess it is us, because we are the only fellows in the college; besides, he must know by this time that we should be the likeliest chaps to borrow them. We should be all right if he tackled us alone; but he is sure to have that hulking brute Symes with him, and those two would be too many for us."

"Oh, we will just shove the things back," said Bob; "and if he gets on to us we will hammer him when we get him alone, to teach him better manners! It doesn't make much difference whether we annoy him or not, because he is bound to bully, and he always hurts you as much as he can. Last time I went into his study he got me by the back of the neck, shoved my face into his easy-chair, and lashed me with a thick stick. I couldn't possibly escape, and the brute was nearly smothering me! Well, help yourselves to more sausages. We have got an awful lot to eat yet. Where was I?"

"With your face rammed into his chair."

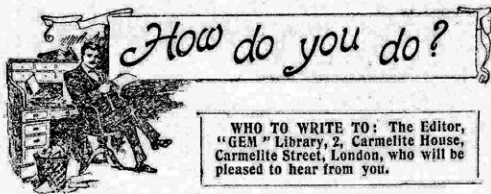
"Well, I pulled a pin from my waistcoat, and I jabbed it into his leg a treat. Ha, ha, ha! You should have heard him howl!"

"What did he do?" inquired Rex.

"Released me mighty sharp; and before he could catch me again I was out of the room. I haven't seen him since, and don't want to; but I'm always going to keep a pin in readiness, and I would advise you to do the same. He doesn't like pins—at least, he doesn't if you ram them in far enough; and you can bet that one went in. It's my belief—"

"So I've caught you at last, you young varmint!" cried Porker, opening the trapdoor at the top of the steps that led to the stovehole.

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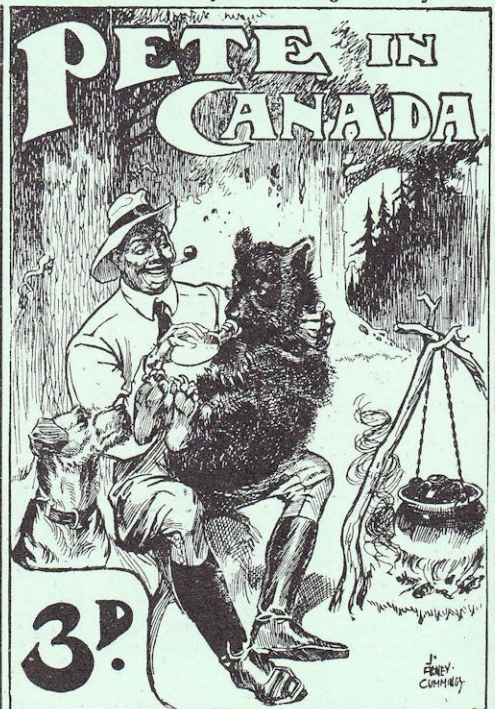
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