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A TALE OF TOM MERRY'S SCHOOLDAYS.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD



THE STUDY DUEL!

(See page 2.)

NO. 16.

VOL. 1.

"ARE YOU DEAD NOW?" DEMANDED BLAKE. "YES," GASPED HERRIES, "I'M DEAD! YOU'VE PUNCTURED ME ALL OVER. CHUCK IT!"

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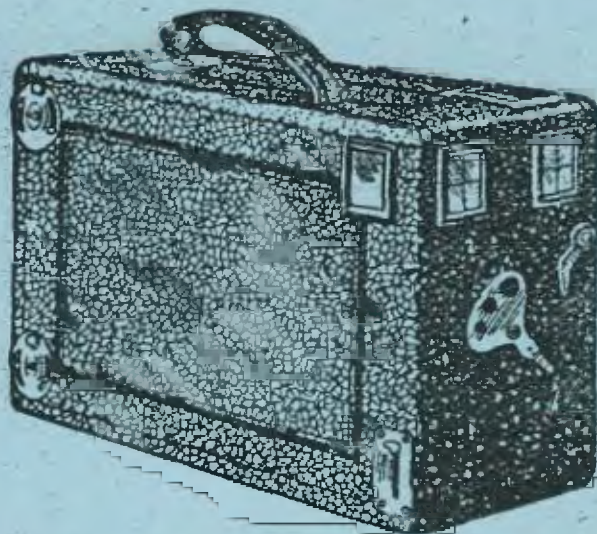
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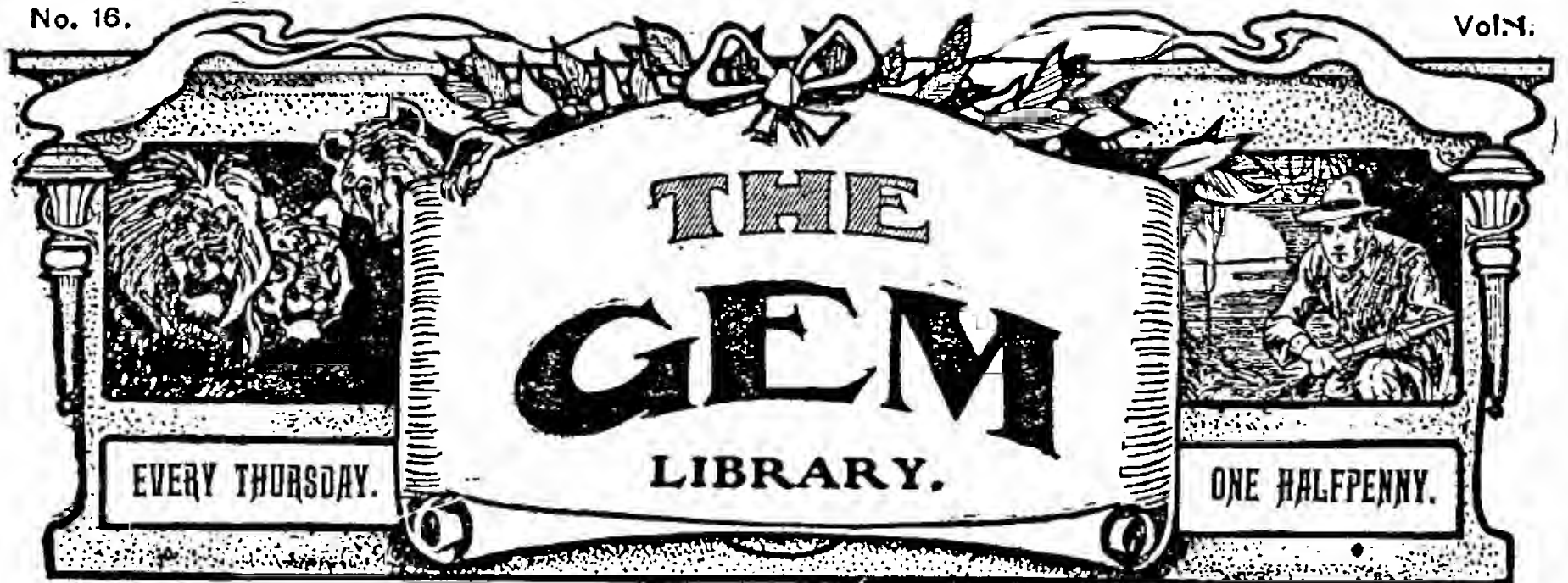
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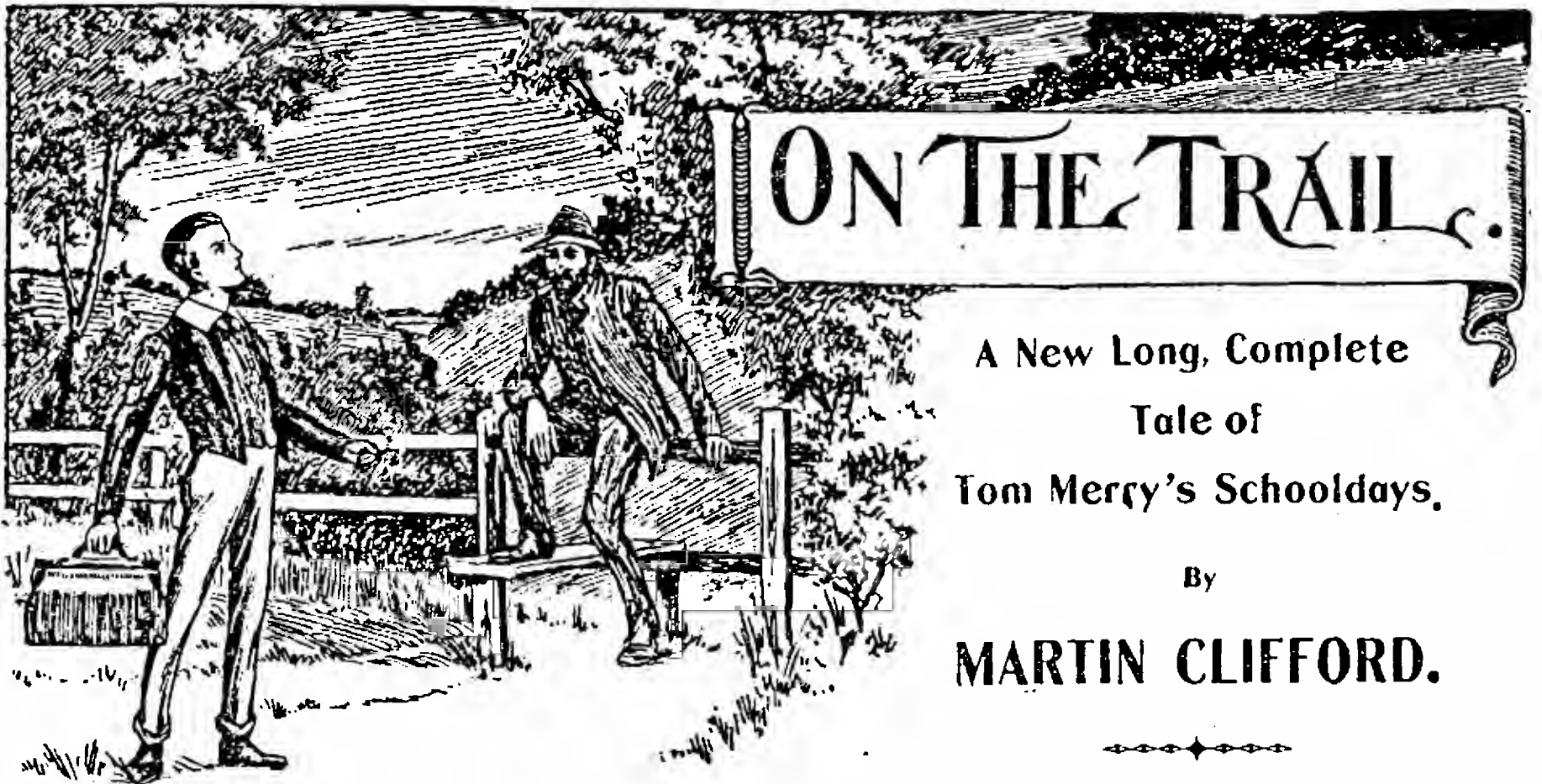
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Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays,
By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

A Borrowing Expedition.

"WHAT'S the state of the exchequer?" asked Manners.

"The state of the exchequer," said Tom Merry, "is rotten—simply rotten!"

The two chums looked at each other seriously. Tom Merry was seated in the window of Study No. 10 in the School House at St. Jim's, with one leg within the room, and the other dangling out over the ivy. Manners was sitting on the table thoughtfully jabbing a pen into Tom Merry's Latin grammar.

"Then I don't see what's to be done," said Manners. "How much have you got?"

"Tenpence."

"Which is exactly ninepence-halfpenny more than I've got," said Manners.

Tom kicked the ivy thoughtfully with his off leg.

"What rotten luck," he exclaimed, "that we should be stony now, and upon such an important occasion!"

"And the occasion is important," said Manners. "It's beastly!" And he jabbed the pen into the Latin grammar so wrathfully that the nib broke off short with a snap.

"Important! Well, I should say so!" Tom Merry exclaimed. "We don't get a new housemaster every day, do we? Mr. Kidd has departed, and Mr. Railton becomes housemaster of the School House to-day. It stands to reason that we must celebrate the occasion."

"Of course it does!" agreed Manners. "And the best way of celebrating anything is to have a ripping feed. There's no getting out of that!"

"Exactly. We're all sorry that Mr. Kidd is gone, and glad that Mr. Railton is to be our new housemaster. We ought to show our grief and joy in a fitting manner. A study feed is just the thing. And now, on this extraordinary and important occasion, we find ourselves in a state of financial famine—broke to the wide! It's rotten!"

"Horrid rotten!" said Manners. "But I don't see what's to be done. If we combine resources, we shall raise the exact sum of tenpence-halfpenny, and the most economical management couldn't raise much of a feed on that."

Tom Merry nodded. It was certainly a difficult situation. "So we shall have to give it up," said Manners, with a sigh. "There's nothing else to be done, Tom."

Tom Merry shook his head decidedly.

"My dear kid, did you ever know your Uncle Merry give up anything he had set his mind on?" he exclaimed. "We're going to give that feed, and it's going to be a ripping one! Now, there are three ways of raising the wind—three good old ways—we can beg, borrow, or steal!"

Manners laughed. "Stealing is barred," said Tom thoughtfully, "and begging isn't exactly the thing. So it's as clear as daylight that we shall have to borrow."

"All right," said Manners; "I'm ready to join you in a borrowing expedition through the School House, if you like. It's a chance."

Tom drew his leg in at the window.

"But I say," said Manners suddenly, "what about your old governess, Miss Fawcett? She shells out like a princess. Couldn't you—?"

"No time," said Tom. "This has been sprung on us suddenly. It was very thoughtless of the Head not to give us

more notice; but then, he doesn't know anything about study feeds. The ignorance of some schoolmasters is astounding."

"There's no time to write, I know," said Manners. "But a wire—"

"A wire at Huckleberry Heath," said Tom, "is as disturbing as an earthquake anywhere else. I wouldn't startle Miss Fawcett out of her wits for worlds. No, old chap; on this important occasion we've got to depend upon ourselves, and upon ourselves alone. Come on!"

Manners slid off the table.

"I'm ready."

And the chums of the Shell left the study. In the passage Tom Merry paused to reflect for a moment.

"Where shall we go first?" said Manners.

"Well, we can't do better than Study No. 6," said Tom. "Blake and his lot are generally flush, and Arthur Augustus simply rolls in filthy lucre. And we have so many rows with them that they're bound to feel kindly towards us in the hour of distress."

"Ha, ha! Come on, then!"

The heroes of the Shell soon reached the famous Study No. 6, occupied by Jack Blake and his chums of the Fourth Form.

As it was the hour supposed to be devoted to preparation by the juniors of St. Jim's, they were pretty certain of finding the Fourth-Formers at home.

"Hallo, they seem to be busy!" exclaimed Tom, as a terrific burst of noise came from the study. "This is how the kids do their prep."

There was evidently something going on in Study No. 6. A loud crashing, as of wood meeting wood, was punctuated by the trampling of feet and the gasping of breath.

Tom Merry threw open the door. Then he saw what was the cause of the uproar.

Jack Blake and Herries were hard at it with basket-hilted foils, fencing away like a couple of maniacs. The table had been pushed into a corner, and the furniture of the study shoved out of the way, to leave room for the fencing. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the only other occupant of the study, was having quite as warm a time of it as either Blake or Herries.

The fencers were tramping and plunging to and fro all over the place, and the unfortunate swell of the School House was skipping and dodging like a frightened rabbit to keep out of the way of the sticks.

"Oh, weally, Blake!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Oh, weally, Herries! Don't be so wuff and so beastly howwid! Leave off! Oh crumbs!"

Blake was triumphantly driving Herries back into the corner, and Arthur Augustus was in the way. Herries plunged against D'Arcy, and sent him flying against the table.

"Keep out of the way!" howled Herries, as Jack Blake's point came with a poke on his chest—"keep out of the beastly way, D'Arcy!"

"I'm twying to!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, almost tearfully—"I'm twying to; but weally there is no woom for such wuff play in this study!"

"You're dead, Herries!" exclaimed Blake. "I had you right on the chest, and you're run through the heart. You're dead!"

"I'm not!" howled Herries. "It was all that silly ass's fault, getting in the way! I'm not dead!"

"You are!"

"I'm not! I'll show you, you bounder!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry at the door. "He ought to know whether he's dead or not, Blake, old son!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "I don't see why I should have to kill a chap twice! But here goes! Look out, Herries!"

"I'm looking out!"

Crash, crash, crash! There wasn't much science in that fencing, but there was plenty of noise, and lots of energy. Blake drove his adversary round the study. D'Arcy skipped out of the way, and in despair dodged behind the table in the corner.

Back went Herries against the table, and it jammed Arthur Augustus against the wall like a rat in a trap.

"Oh, oh," yelled D'Arcy, "I am cwushed to death!"

Blake was poking the helpless Herries all over with his foil, as if he wanted to poke him full of holes.

"Are you dead now?" he demanded.

"Yes," gasped Herries, "I'm dead! Keep that beastly thing to yourself! You've punctured me all over. Chuck it!"

"Right-ho! I only wanted to make you own up, you know."

"He's dead," grinned Tom Merry, "and so is Gussy. Ain't you, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus gave a doleful gasp.

"Yaas; watah!" he said. "Blake, you are a wuff beast!"

Herries, you are anothead! I shall change into some othead study."

Blake pulled the table out and released the swell of the School House.

"This will do you good, Adolphus!" he exclaimed. "A lot of good you are to umpire at a fencing-match, when you're afraid of getting a crack or two. I'm ashamed of you! I say, you Shell kids, what do you want?"

And Blake turned his attention towards the visitors. Tom Merry and Manners came into the study now that there was room.

"The fact is—" said Tom.

He paused. Manners took up the tale.

"The fact is—" said Manners.

Then he, too, paused.

"You're a long time coming to the facts," said Blake.

"You see—" explained Tom Merry.

"Exactly," said Manners, with a nod. "You see—"

"Yes, I see," said Blake. "It's as clear as mud. Go on!"

"The fact is—"

"The fact is—"

"Look here, Manners, who's going to talk, you or I?"

"Why, I was only trying to help you out."

"Well, then, the fact is, Blake, that we've got a new housemaster, as you know."

"Ye-es," said Blake; "I think I've heard some rumours of it. As a matter of fact, it was I who told you the news."

"Yes, my word, so it was."

"Never mind. One good turn deserves another," said Blake. "I told you, and now you've told me, and we're quits. Anything else to say?"

"Well, yes. We were thinking of giving a study feed to celebrate the occasion. We don't get new housemasters every day, you know."

"Now, you're talking!" said Blake emphatically. "You've come to ask us to a feed. My boy, we'll come with pleasure, and I only wish there were more of us."

"Ye-es, just so; but as I was saying—"

"The fact is—" said Manners.

"Right you are!" said Blake heartily. "I'm only sorry old Dig is away. Still, there are three of us, and we'll do our level best to walk into the grub. We promise you that."

"That we will!" said Herries. "We'll miss our tea on purpose. There!"

"Yaas, watah!" said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry and Manners looked at each other queerly.

It was evidently easier to collect guests than subscriptions for that feed.

"And now," said Blake, "if you'll excuse us, we'll get on with our prep. We've left it over for that fencing, and Herries stuck it out so long after he was really dead."

And Blake dragged out the table and started hunting for his books.

"Er—yes," said Tom Merry. "We shall be delighted if you chaps come, and we were going to ask you; but there's another little matter—"

"Couldn't that stand over till presently?" asked Blake.

"The Lathom-bird has his eye on us lately, and there'll be a row if prep. isn't done. He says we're lazy."

"Well, it's rather important," said Tom Merry.

"The fact is—" said Manners.

"You see, the occasion has come suddenly," said Tom cheerfully, as Blake patiently laid down his books, "and it has found us in a state of unpreparedness."

"The fact is—" said Manners.

"We are broke."

"Stony."

"Bust."

"Cleaned out."

"So, you see," said Tom, "we're on a borrowing expedition. My old governess is sending me a pound next week, and I want to raise that amount till it comes."

Blake laughed.

"My dear kid, you're welcome to all I have in my pockets."

"Now, that's really decent of you, Blake!" exclaimed Tom. "You shall have the postal order the moment it arrives."

Blake cheerfully turned out his pockets.

He had said that Tom Merry was welcome to all he had in them, and he meant it; but when the contents of those pockets were turned out, the collection brought to light didn't seem to promise much towards the feed.

First came a pocket-knife and a ball of string, and then a piece of sealing-wax and a fag-end of a candle. Then some toffee, to which lovingly clung some birdseed and fluff. Then a French coin, and a couple of halfpennies.

Blake blushed a little. He went diving into his other pockets, and brought out some peas—"ammunition for his shooter"—some more string, a fragment of cobbler's wax,

some marbles, and part of a broken clasp. Last, a three-penny-bit, and a bad shilling.

"There you are," said Blake generously.

Tom Merry surveyed the little pile.

"I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth," he said, "but I want to ask you, fair and square, how far that little lot will go towards a study feed."

"What have you got, Herries?"

Herries promptly turned out his pockets.

He had a varied collection of odds and ends, but he was better off in a financial sense, turning out three shillings and some odd coppers on the table.

"There you are!" he said.

"When I want to start an old curiosity shop," said Tom Merry, "I shall know where to come to buy my stock. At present I want cash."

"Perhaps Gussy can shell out," said Blake. "His pater is always sending him tin. Gussy, old kid, shell out."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

Arthur Augustus was always rolling in wealth. He felt in his pockets, and a handful of silver and a couple of sovereigns came to light.

"My hat!" said Manners. "It must be useful to have a giddy Carnegie kept tame in your study. There you are, Tom."

"I've got a fivah somewhere," said D'Arcy languidly. "Will that do, or shall I look for the fivah? It's wathah a bore."

"That will do," said Tom, laughing. "I'll take one sov., and thanks. You shall have it back on Tuesday, Gussy."

"Oh, that's all wight, dear boy!"

Tom put the sovereign in his pocket.

"Now I'm off," he said. "Manners is going to do my prep. for me while I go to Rylcombe. The feed's coming off to-night. Don't forget to miss your tea, you kids. There's to be a jolly spread, and all guests are requested to come hungry."

"Right-ho. We'll make a point of it."

And Study No. 6 settled down to their preparation, and Tom Merry and Manners left the study. They went back to their own quarters, and Tom put his cap on his curly head.

"Mind those New House bounders don't get wind of it," said Manners anxiously. "The other day Figgins & Co. lifted a feed from Blake."

Tom laughed.

"I'll keep a good look-out!" he exclaimed.

And he left the School House. Figgins & Co., the heroes of the New House, happened to spot him in the quad.

"Hallo, Merry!" said the great Figgins. "What's going on?"

"I am," said Tom.

And he went on, leaving Figgins & Co. staring after him.

CHAPTER 2.

Tom Merry Meets with an Adventure.

TOM MERRY lost no time in getting to Rylcombe. He went straight to the tuck-shop to "blow" the sovereign he had raised in Study No. 6.

The tuck-shop was kept by an old lady who knew Tom Merry well. He was one of her best customers. But as Tom entered the shop, he saw that the old soul was not there as usual. A grey-whiskered man came out of the little parlour to serve him.

"Hallo, Gaffer Jones!" said Tom cheerily. "Where's Mother Murphy?"

"She's took with the rheumatiz," said Gaffer Jones sourly. He did not like Tom Merry. The last occasion of their meeting was fresh in his memory, and it wasn't a pleasant recollection. Gaffer Jones had partaken of the ale at the Green Dragon not wisely, but too well, and he had gone to sleep off the effects of it under a hedge. He had awakened to find Tom Merry and Manners looking at him, and they had gone on their way grinning. But it was not till afterwards that Gaffer Jones discovered that Tom had chalked his face a ghastly white. A giggling crowd in the village street had brought the fact to his notice, and he had owed Tom Merry a grudge ever since.

Tom seemed to have forgotten all about that occurrence now.

"So you're in charge here, Gaffer?" he asked.

"Yes," said Gaffer, "I are."

"All right. I want some things. Of course, you'll be only too anxious to let me have them on tick?"

The Gaffer brought a horny fist down on the counter.

"Cash or nothing!" he exclaimed. "If you haven't got any money, the sooner you clear out, Master Merry, the quicker you'll please me."

"Gaffer, you ought to take a prize for politeness. You would make Chesterfield green with envy. A fellow like you is wasted here."

The Gaffer scowled.

"If you don't want to buy anything, Master Merry——"

"But I do." Tom laid the sovereign on the counter.

"Feast your eyes on that, old dear."

The Gaffer became a little more civil.

Tom began to select his purchases, and he did not leave off until he had a heap piled on the counter to the full value of the golden coin.

The Gaffer took the latter, and Tom began to cram his purchases into his bag. The bag was a large one, but its capacity was taxed to bulging point. However, the good things all went in, and Tom managed to fasten it.

"Good-bye, Gaffer," he said. "By the way, how did you find the face cure?"

"Tho what?"

"The chalk, you know. I thought your complexion was a little top ruddy. Did you like it?"

"Get houter this shop!" roared the Gaffer, turning purple.

"But I want to know. If you like the treatment, I'll repeat it some time, when you're at leisure—some time when you've been to the Green Dragon. I——"

The Gaffer came round from behind the counter, and Tom Merry beat a hasty retreat.

The sun was sinking behind Castle Hill as he turned his steps in the direction of St. Jim's, and the dusk of evening was falling over the country lanes.

Tom, with his bag on his shoulder—first on one and then on the other—tramped cheerily on towards the school.

About half-way to St. Jim's was the stile, giving admittance to the footpath through the wood which led to the old castle. Upon the stile a dilapidated figure was seated. It looked at first like a bundle of rags, but by degrees Tom made out a dirty face and little, deep-set, gleaming eyes, and a bristly mouth from which a foul, black pipe protruded. And Tom felt a slight tremor.

He knew the tramp who was resting on the stile. More than once before Tom had come in contact with him, when he was at his former school, at Clavering. It was Honest Jim, the tramp and footpad and ruffian. Tom knew that copper-complexioned face at once.

The tramp saw Tom Merry, and recognised him at the same moment.

He grinned evilly as he slid off the stile.

"So it's you! Funny how I run up agin you!" he exclaimed. "Clad to see an old friend, ain't you, young shaver? Glad to see old Honest Jim?"

Tom Merry set his teeth.

He saw that the ruffian meant mischief, and the lane was too lonely for help to be at hand. With the heavy bag he was carrying it was impossible to run. But to run without it, and abandon those precious provisions, was not to be thought of.

"You'd better keep your distance," said Tom. He noted with relief that the ruffian had no cudgel in his hand, as he had had at their last meeting. "I don't want anything to say to you. Let me pass."

Honest Jim grinned.

"What have you got in that there bag?"

"Nothing to do with you."

"Lemme see it."

"Go and eat coke!"

The ruffian, with an evil look, sprang towards him. Tom dropped the bag and put up his fists. Tom was a plucky lad, and a fine boxer, but he was no match for the ruffian. Honest Jim's rush swept him off his feet and hurled him upon the grassy bank beside the lane, half dazed.

The tramp seized the bag. He gave a chuckle as he opened it and saw the contents.

"My heye! 'Ere's a feed for me—for Honest Jim! Ha, ha! Kid, you can go home and say you've given the grub to an old friend. Ha, ha!"

"You beast!" gasped Tom, staggering to his feet. "Let my grub alone!"

"Yes, I'll let it alone," said Honest Jim, grinning. He snapped the bag shut, and picked it up. "This will make me a supper, and I was wonderin' where it was to come from. Now, then, cut off with you afore I hit you!"

But Tom, desperate, made a reckless rush at the ruffian, to make an attempt to get the bag back again. Honest Jim staggered as the boy's fists came crashing upon his coppery face. He snarled out an oath, and turned on the boy like a tiger. A savage blow sent poor Tom to the ground, and he was too dazed to rise till the ruffian had disappeared into the wood with his booty.

Tom rose slowly and painfully to his feet. The bag was gone, and the feed in Study No. 10 was destined not to come off after all.

"The beast!" muttered Tom. "The rotten brute! I can't go back to the school without the grub, especially after inviting Study No. 6, and telling them to miss their tea." He grinned a little at the thought of what Blake would say in that case. "I shall have to get some more grub somehow. I wonder if—"

He thought of Gaffer Jones, and shook his head. Mother Murphy would have trusted Tom Merry to any extent, but Gaffer Jones was different. But Tom soon realised that his only chance of bringing off the feed after all was to persuade the Gaffer to trust him to the extent of a fresh supply of provisions.

And so Tom turned back towards the village.

The Gaffer was in the little shop when he reached it. A customer was there, sitting at one of the little tables at tea, and reading a newspaper. He was an athletic, keen-faced young man. He gave Tom a glance as the boy entered and went up to the counter.

The Gaffer looked at him far from amiably.

"I say, Gaffer," said Tom politely, "I've lost that grub."

The Gaffer stared at him chillingly.

"Have you?" was all he said.

"Yes, and I'm broke to the wide," said Tom confidentially. "I want you to let me have the same again, on tick, you know, till next week."

The Gaffer's reply was short, if not sweet.

It consisted of one word.

"Walker."

Tom grinned rather nervously. The Gaffer did not look as if he would be persuaded. But Tom still hoped. The feed had to come off somehow.

"I say, Gaffer, honest Injun. A rotten brute of a tramp collared the bag, and bunked with it. I can't go back to the school without the grub. The chaps are expecting it. Mother Murphy would trust me in a minute to the tune of a quid. Now, don't be a cad, Gaffer."

"Get out!" said the Gaffer.

"I tell you—"

"Stuff! You've hidden it somewhere, and come back with this tale to get some more on tick," said the Gaffer. "I know you dratted boys. Hoff with you!"

Tom flushed indignantly.

"Do you think I would tell you a lie, you red-nosed old ruffian!" he exclaimed.

"Get hout!" roared the Gaffer.

"Look here, you brute! I tell you, a beastly rotter with a complexion like yours collared the tommy, and I want more. Do you hear? Now, don't be a pig, Gaffer, if you can help it. I want more."

The Gaffer seized a knobby stick, and made as if to come round the counter.

"Then, you won't let me have it?"

"No, I won't!"

Tom picked an egg out of a box on the counter.

"Put that egg down!" cried the Gaffer.

"Here you are," said Tom.

The next moment the egg cracked on the Gaffer's nose. He gave a fearful yell, and Tom bolted out of the shop. He left the Gaffer trying to rub the stickiness off his red face. Safe outside, Tom paused to chuckle.

The Gaffer had deserved that punishment, and it was some satisfaction to give it to him, but it left the question where it was. How was Tom to renew that supply of provisions? There was another tuck-shop further up the street, but Tom was not known there, and he could not hope to obtain credit to the extent of a sovereign.

Tom stood still, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his brows wrinkled in thought. It was seldom that Tom Merry was at a loss, but he was at a loss now.

"Well, this is simply rotten!" he exclaimed, aloud. "What's to be done?"

He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned quickly, and saw the stranger he had noticed in the Gaffer's shop. The young man was looking down at him with a smile. His grey eyes were very keen in their glance, but good-humoured and kindly.

"Hallo!" said Tom.

"Hallo!" said the stranger. "I want to speak to you, my lad."

"Go ahead! No law against that, that I know of."

The stranger laughed. Something about Tom Merry seemed to amuse him.

"I heard what you said to the old fellow just now," he explained. "You have been robbed by a tramp in the lane, you said."

"Yes," said Tom. "The horrid bounder collared my bag, and the grub was all in it!"

"Do you know whom the man was?"

"I've seen him before. He calls himself Honest Jim."

The stranger looked reflective.

"I don't know the name," he said, after a moment.

"But such a man might have many. You said something about his having a complexion like the Gaffer's."

Tom grinned.

"Yes, it's the same style of beauty, only more so," he explained. "His chivvy looks like polished copper. Do you know the brute?"

"From your description, I think I do," replied the stranger. "I should very much like to meet him."

And a rather grim look came over the keen face.

"Well, he went into the wood," said Tom. "I don't know the name of his hotel, or I'd tell you. I should like to see him sent to prison. It's simply fearful to think of all my lovely grub being scooped by a waster like that."

The stranger laughed again.

"If you could help me to find that chap," he said, "it would be worth a lot to me." He looked at Tom keenly, as if he would read the character of the boy in his face. The most casual observer might have seen that Tom Merry was brave and true and trustworthy, and the young man appeared to be satisfied. "Perhaps you could help me," he went on.

Tom looked at him inquiringly.

"I don't quite understand. What do you want to find him for?"

"You can keep a secret, my lad?"

"I don't like keeping secrets," said Tom; "but I suppose I could if it were necessary."

"Would you like to make yourself useful—to help the law to get its due, and to free the neighbourhood of a gang of scoundrels?" said the other.

Tom's eyes sparkled. This sounded a good deal like an adventure, and an adventure always appealed to Tom Merry.

"Rather!" he exclaimed.

"Then, I will tell you who I am. My name is Ferrers Locke; I am a detective."

Tom's eyes opened wide. He was duly impressed.

"A detective?" he exclaimed.

"Exactly. I am down here looking for a gang of rascals, who have been committing burglaries all over the county, and who are now believed to be commencing operations in the neighbourhood of Rylcombe," explained the stranger. "From your description, I believe the man you have met to be a rascal who acts as a spy for them."

Tom drew a deep breath. It was very probable; it was just what he might have guessed Honest Jim to be.

"If I could lay my finger on him," continued Ferrers Locke, "I believe I could trace the gang through him. If you could help me—"

"I'll be glad to do all I can!" exclaimed Tom eagerly.

"My hat! It would make the New House bounders green with envy!"

"But not a word till after I give you permission," said the detective.

"Not a word, sir. I understand."

"I shall see you again," said Mr. Locke. He looked at his watch. "Your name is—"

"Tom Merry, sir."

"Good! I like your face, my lad, and I know I can trust you. Now, you are in a little difficulty at present. I want you to accept a little loan."

A sovereign glistened in the detective's hand. Tom Merry drew back, flushing a little.

"I—I couldn't take it, sir."

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Simply as a loan, Merry. You can repay me when you are able."

Tom hesitated. He did not like accepting money from a stranger; yet Mr. Locke's manner was so good-natured and kindly that he could hardly decline the loan. And he remembered his chums waiting for the feed. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy had missed their tea, and by this time they would be famished.

"You are very kind, sir," said Tom. "I shall be able to repay you on Tuesday."

"That's all right. Now get your provisions and scuttle, or you'll be late for calling-over." The detective evidently knew all about it. "I suppose you lock up at dark; and it's nearly dark now, Tom."

"Thank you, sir!"

And Tom accepted the golden coin.

"But I should advise you not to go to the Gaffer," smiled the detective. "I left him vowing vengeance."

Tom laughed heartily.

"I won't, sir. I'll go to the other shop. Good-bye, sir!"

"Good-bye, Tom!"

The detective shook hands with the boy, and Tom hurried to the tuck-shop up the street. With the ready money in hand, it did not take him long to complete his purchases, and he borrowed a basket of the proprietor of the shop to carry the things in to the school. The dusk was deepening



into night as he left the village for the second time, but there was little likelihood of meeting the tramp again. Honest Jim was doubtless engaged in sampling the captured provisions in the shadows of the Castle Wood.

Tom hurried on as fast as he could with his burden, and came in sight of the school gates. Taggles, the porter, was just about to close them. As a matter of fact, he was a little late with locking-up that night, which was lucky for Tom Merry.

"G-r-er-rooh!" gasped Taggles, as a figure darted by him in the gloom. "Wh-what was that?"

There was no reply. The figure vanished into the shades of the quadrangle, and Taggles locked up the big bronze gates. Tom Merry hurried on towards the School House. He passed under the elms, and the next minute he was lying on his back on the ground, with three youthful figures sprawling over him.

Tom was taken quite by surprise by the sudden attack, and he could only gasp under the weight of his assailants. He wondered what had happened, but the voice of the great Figgins through the gloom enlightened him.

"Got him!" said Figgins.

And three distinct chuckles followed.

CHAPTER 3.

The Feast that Didn't Come Off.

TOM MERRY had fallen into the clutches of the New House juniors. Figgins & Co. had evidently suspected something, and they had lain in wait for him in the shadows of the elms, and he had run right into the ambush without suspecting its existence.

"Got him!" said Figgins.

"He, he, he!" giggled Fatty Wynn.

"Ho, ho, ho!" chuckled Kerr.

"Got him!"

A muffled voice came from beneath the three sprawling juniors.

"Lemme gerrup!"

Figgins giggled.

"Yes, we'll let you gerrup," he said, "when we've finished. Don't wriggle, you boulder! We've got you fast. Where's the grub?"

"The what?"

"The grub. Don't pretend you don't understand. You were carrying a bag when you went out."

"Was I?"

"Yes, you were. Where is it now?"

"Find out!"

"I mean to. Look for the bag, Kerr, while Fatty and I squash this boulder!"

With the lanky Figgins and the plump Wynn on top of him, poor Tom was indeed very nearly squashed. He wriggled in vain; his captors held him fast, while Kerr looked in the darkness for the basket Tom had dropped when he was seized.

"Here's a giddy basket!" exclaimed Kerr, as he found it. "It weighs something, too. I suppose this is what we want."

"He was carrying a bag," said Figgins.

"Well, this must be it. Yes, this is it. I suppose the bag wouldn't hold all the tommy—eh, Merry?"

"Gerrooh!" said Tom. He was gasping for breath.

"Well, if we've got it safe, we can let him go," said Figgins. "You'll give my kindest regards to Manners, and to Study No. 6, won't you, Merry? I'm sorry if we're depriving them of a feed, but such is life. Now you can gerrup!"

Figgins and Wynn allowed Tom to rise. He regained his feet, very dusty and rumpled and breathless. Figgins & Co., carrying the basket between them, were darting off through the gloom towards the New House.

Tom took a few steps in pursuit, and then stopped. It was useless for one to pursue three, especially as the New House juniors would probably be ready to sally out and help Figgins & Co. Tom turned towards the School House again. For the second time the tommy was gone, and though the second raid had been made in open and honourable warfare, and Tom, of course, owed no grudge for it, yet the fact remained indisputable that the grub was gone.

Empty-handed he was fated to return to the School House, and he thought of the invited guests, and of the tea they had missed on purpose for this feed that wouldn't come off.

He entered the house very slowly. He was in time to answer to his name when it was called over by Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's. Manners gave him an expressive glance. He naturally thought that Tom had left the bag in some safe place, to be brought into the School House when no prying eyes were about.

Most of the juniors at St. Jim's were in the habit of having

tea in their studies, and were allowed to miss the meal in the hall if they liked. Manners had done so, and so had Blake and his chums. The latter had intended to have the meal in their own quarters after prep, but Tom's invitation had come in the meantime. And Blake had therefore not procured the necessary provisions from the school shop. In Study No. 6 the larder was bare, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were cultivating a healthy appetite for the feed with Tom Merry.

Tom went up to his study with Manners. The latter was eager. He lighted the gas in the study and fixed a questioning glance on Tom.

"Where's the bag?" he asked.

"The bag?" said Tom.

"Yes. Where's the grub?"

Tom made a grimace.

"It's according to which lot you mean," he said. "There were two lots. One is being gorged by a tramp, and the other by Figgins & Co."

"What are you talking about?"

Tom explained.

Manners' face fell as he learned how the first supply had been captured in the lane by Honest Jim. He brightened a little at the story of the borrowed sovereign and the second supply. But the recounting of the raid by Figgins & Co. cast a gloom once more upon his classic features. He looked very expressively at Tom Merry.

"Rotten, isn't it?" said Tom feelingly.

"I should say so!" said Manners emphatically. "Very rotten! I think it's about time you retired from business as a giddy chief, and no mistake. First you let a beastly tramp collar the grub; then you have a stroke of luck, and then you let Figgins & Co. wolf the second lot. Oh, my hat! What sort of a silly cuckoo do you call yourself, Tom Merry?"

Tom looked very crestfallen.

"I know it's awfully rotten!" he said. "The feed is off, and what are we going to say to Blake and Herries and D'Arcy?"

Manners looked grim.

"Blessed if I know! They're due here now. I think I can hear them coming up the passage."

There was a sound of footsteps without, and a tap at the door.

"Come in!" said Tom Merry desperately.

The door opened, and Study No. 6 presented themselves. Blake came in first, with his most agreeable evening-party smile on. Then came Herries and D'Arcy, both looking very friendly and anticipative.

The glances of the visitors went first to the table, and they seemed slightly surprised to observe that it was bare.

"Hallo!" said Tom. "Glad to see you, Blake!"

"Awfully good of you to come!" said Manners.

Blake made his best bow.

"My dear chaps, it's a real pleasure!" he exclaimed. "Considering the various rows we've had, it's jolly decent of you to invite us to this feed."

"Jolly decent," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!" added Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, that's all right!" said Tom. "We're glad to have you. It's been a fine day, hasn't it, Blake, old man?"

"Yes; pretty good," assented Blake.

"What do you think of the cricket prospects?" said Manners.

"The cricket prospects?" repeated Blake.

"Yes. I mean our match with the New House."

"Oh, we shall beat them!" said Blake.

"Oh, wathah!" said D'Arcy.

"Figgins is going to captain the New House juniors," Tom Merry remarked.

"That's old news," said Blake. He looked more and more surprised. There was no sign of a feed anywhere in the study. "I say, you chaps, we shall have to go to bed some time to-night, so if it wouldn't be asking too much—"

"Just so," said Herries. "We missed our tea on purpose, Merry."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry and Manners exchanged a glance.

"Certainly," said Tom. "But, you see, the fact is—"

"The fact is—" said Manners.

Blake looked from one to the other. They looked very red and uncomfortable. In a moment the terrible truth dawned upon Jack Blake.

"You don't mean to say," he remarked, with emphasis, "that there isn't going to be a feed?"

"You see—" began Tom Merry.

"You see—" began Manners.

"Yes; I see a pair of silly cuckoos!" assented Blake.

"Out with it! Is there going to be a feed, or is there not going to be a feed?"

"That's it!" said Herries. "Is there going to be a feed, or is there not going to be a feed?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Is there going to be a feed, deah boys, or is there not going to be a feed?"

"I'm afraid there is not," said Tom meekly. "It's awfully unfortunate—"

"Extremely rotten!" said Manners. "But—"

"But it can't be helped."

"You see—"

"It's Figgins."

"Figgins has collared the grub!"

"We're awfully sorry!"

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy listened to these halting explanations in chilling silence.

"And we," said Blake, when Tom and Manners had finished—"we have missed our tea on purpose. We haven't anything in the larder at home. Chaps, what are we going to do?"

"Better go for 'em," said Herries thoughtfully.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "The least we can do, deah boy, undah the circumstances, is to w'eck the study!"

"I suppose so," said Blake. "Fortunately, we are three to two, the other silly cuckoo who used to be here being away."

Tom Merry and Manners stood shoulder to shoulder.

"Now, look here, kids!" said Tom, in a tone of expostulation.

"Kids!" exclaimed Blake. The word "kids" from the heroes of the Shell, applied to the Fourth Form, always caused ructions. "I'll give you kids, you horrid bounder!"

It looked like war, but just then there came an interruption. There was a tap, and the door opened to admit Percy Mellish and Walsh. Percy looked round with his most agreeable smile.

"Thought we might be too late," he remarked. "I see, you haven't started yet. Any more guests coming, Merry?" Tom Merry groaned under his breath. In the generosity of his heart he had issued invitations right and left for that feed, and now the guests were coming in, unsuspecting of the catastrophe that had taken place.

"We're sorry—" began Tom.

"You see—" said Manners.

"There's nothing gone wrong with the feed, I hope?" said Percy Mellish.

"It's coming off, I suppose?" exclaimed Walsh.

"You see—"

"The fact is—"

The door opened again, and Harris and Crane walked in. They belonged to the Shell, Tom's own Form. They nodded affably round to the assembled company.

"I see you haven't started yet," said Crane. "Waited for us, I suppose? That's jolly good of you—all of you. Couldn't get here before."

"But now we're here," said Harris, "we're quite ready."

"I'm sorry—" said Tom.

"You see—" said poor Manners.

Again the door opened, and three fellows belonging to the Lower Fifth came in. The study was pretty well crowded by this time.

"Not started yet!" said one of the Fifth-formers cheerfully. "Waited for us—eh? Never mind; better late than never! Where's the feed?"

The others took up the demand

"Where's the feed?"

"Where's the giddy feed?"

"You see," said Tom Merry desperately, "Figgins has collared the grub, and so the feed can't come off! We're sorry; and another time—"

There was a general howl.

"Not coming off?"

"Yah!"

"We've missed our tea on purpose!"

"Yah!"

"We're hungry as hunters!"

"Yah!"

"No blessed feed?" said Percy Mellish wrathfully. "Then we'll teach you to make fools of us, you horrid, unreliable bounders! Who says wreck the giddy show?"

"I do!" "And I!" "And I!"

Every voice shouted a hearty response. In a moment pandemonium was reigning in the study.

Tom Merry and Manners never had a very clear idea afterwards of what exactly happened. But after about five minutes of terrific uproar the disappointed guests marched out of the room, leaving it a wreck.

Tom Merry sat up from the grate, and pushed the fender off him. Manners extricated his head from the waste-paper basket, and shoved the overturned table off his chest. They sat up and looked at one another over the wreckage of upset furniture, scattered paper and books, and utensils. The study was a wreck!

"My only aunt Sempronia Matilda Ann!" murmured Manners. "Was that an earthquake?"

Tom grinned ruefully.

"The next time we give a feed," he exclaimed, "we'll have the grub here safe under lock and key before we issue the giddy invitations! We'll make that a rule!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Detective at St. Jim's.

TOM MERRY and Manners were feeling a little off colour the next morning. When they encountered the guests of the previous evening they were greeted with a good deal of chipping about the feast that hadn't come off, and Blake asked with much solicitude whether they had got their study in order again yet.

"It's a rotten frost!" said Tom to his chum. "I owe Gussy a pound, and another to the chap I met in Rylcombe. And there wasn't any feed! It's beastly!"

"So it is!" agreed Manners. "And as you're going to have only one pound come on Tuesday, how are you going to pay off both those debts?"

Tom smiled.

"I've written to Miss Fawcett," he said. "She'll turn up trumps, I expect. I'm expecting a letter from her to-day."

"Good!" said Manners. "I wish I had a tame old governess like that."

But the topic of the feast that didn't come off was soon banished by another of a more interesting and rather startling kind.

Rumours leaked out in the school during the morning, and after school it was known for certain, that there had been a burglary at St. Jim's overnight.

The Head's study had been broken into, and a considerable sum in gold and notes taken from his desk.

The police had come from Rylcombe, and Inspector Skeet had looked very wise over the matter, and gone away again.

Tom Merry was deeply interested in the news. There had been an attempted burglary at St. Jim's only a short time before, and Tom had encountered the burglar and helped to capture him, having left his dormitory in the middle of the night to raid Blake in the Fourth Form quarters.

"What a pity we weren't on the war-path last night, Manners!" exclaimed Tom. "You remember that burglar chap we collared in the School House that time? We might have made a capture."

"Well, this was in the principal's house," said Manners, "so it was rather off our beat. But, I say, it's not only that ass of a fat inspector who's going to see into this; there's a real live detective coming."

Tom looked interested.

"How do you know?"

"I heard Kildare tell Darrel so. His name's Ferrers Locke, and he's a real live detective from London," announced Manners.

Tom gave a jump.

"Ferrers Locke!"

"Yes, and I expect that's the chap!" exclaimed Manners, pointing towards an athletic young man who had just ascended the steps of the principal's house.

Tom glanced at the stranger, and recognised his acquaintance of the previous day. Ferrers Locke caught sight of him, and nodded pleasantly.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Manners, mystified. "What's that mean, Tom? You don't happen to know the detective chap, do you?"

Tom looked rather important.

"He's the chap who lent me a sovereign in Rylcombe yesterday," he replied.

"No, is he? By Jove, then you know him!" said Manners. "You'll have to introduce me. I've never met a detective, and I want to know what it's like."

Blake came up to the chums of the Shell.

"I say, kids, there's a detective chap in the school," he exclaimed; "a real live detective from London. I don't know whether it's Stanley Dare or Frank Ferrett."

"His name's Ferrers Locke," said Tom.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I happen to know the chap," said Tom, in a careless way.

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Blake. "Then point him out to me. We all want to see him. Where is the giddy detective?"

"He's gone into the principal's house. Hallo, Figgy, you beastly highway robber!"

Figgins came up grinning hugely.

"Thanks for that feed," he exclaimed. "It was simply ripping. We had half the New House to it, and it was prime. We were all pleased."

"Were you?" said Tom grimly, and he exchanged a look with Manners. "And now—"

Figgins retreated a step.

"Pax," he exclaimed. "I haven't come here for a row. The chaps are saying that there's a giddy detective come to the school. I want to see him."

"Oh, all right!" said Tom. "Come along, and I'll show him to you."

The juniors went into the School House, and Tom led the way along the corridor which led into the principal's house adjoining. That corridor opened on the wide passage in which was the door of the principal's study.

Tom halted at the corner.

"He's in there," he said, pointing down the passage to the principal's door. "He's gone in to see the Head. You'll see him as he comes out."

"Good!" said Figgins.

It was ten minutes before the door of Dr. Holmes's study opened. Then Mr. Ferrers Locke came out, the Head with him.

The detective started a little as he saw four heads craned round a corner looking at him.

"Hallo, he can see us!" murmured Tom Merry.

He popped back. Unfortunately Blake, Manners, and Figgins were all popping back at the same moment. Tom's head came with a crack against Blake's, and Blake's went against the wall.

"Oh, crumbs!" roared Blake.

He shoved Tom off so suddenly that Tom, who was a little dazed by the crack on the head, went reeling out into the passage, in full view of the detective and the Head, and plumped down on the floor almost at their feet.

"My hat!" gasped Blake. "Who'd have thought that?"

The Head stared at Tom through his pince-nez.

"Merry, what does this mean?"

Tom sat up.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir."

"Is there anybody else there?" The Head stepped quickly along the passage and glanced round the corner.

He was just in time to see three pairs of legs vanishing in the distance round the first corner. He smiled slightly as he turned back.

"Now, Merry, what does this mean?"

Tom had jumped up. He looked appealingly at Ferrers Locke, and the detective came to the rescue good-naturedly.

"I think Merry came here to see me," he remarked; "I happen to have the honour of his acquaintance."

The Head looked rather surprised.

"Indeed! Then I will excuse you, Merry." He shook hands with the detective. "Then I shall hope to hear from you soon, Mr. Locke?"

"Certainly!" said the detective. "I am assured that I know to whom to attribute last night's affair, and I am hourly in hope of getting on their track. Good-morning, sir."

Ferrers Locke made Tom a sign to accompany him as he left the house. Tom, who was quite aware of the eclat that would fall to him from being seen in company with the detective, gladly walked by his side. As they went out into the quadrangle a hundred envious eyes were fixed upon Tom Merry.

"How that chap falls on his feet!" exclaimed Figgins, who was there with the Co. "Anybody else would have got flayed. Look here, you chaps, what does he know of this giddy detective? What's the meaning of that—eh?"

"Give it up," said Kerr.

"Ask me another?" said Fatty Wynn.

"I don't like it," said Figgins. "Fancy the bouncer marching about with the detective, as if he'd known him all his life! There's something or other going on, kids, and are we going to be left out of it?"

"Not if we can help it," said Kerr emphatically.

"Not if we know it," said Fatty Wynn.

"Tom Merry rather fancies himself at catching burglars," went on Figgins. "You remember that French chap who was collared in the School House one night? We heard a fearful lot about that. Is it possible that Merry is on the track this time, and that something's going to happen to make those School House rotters put on more side than ever?"

The Co. looked properly concerned.

"Well," said Figgins resolutely, "we're not going to be left out of this, whatever it is. Come on!"

Tom Merry and the detective were walking down to the gates. Figgins & Co. followed them. Mr. Locke shook hands with Tom at the gate.

"In a quarter of an hour," he said.

"I'll be there, sir," said Tom.

Figgins caught the words. He seized the Co. and marched them off as Tom turned round.

"What's the row?" said Kerr. "What are you getting excited about?"

"We don't want the bouncer to know we're watching him."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you hear what he said?"

"Yes. What about it?"

Figgins looked at him pityingly.

"I've heard," he said, "that you want a hammer and a chisel to get anything into a Scotsman's head, and I'm beginning to believe it, Kerr, since I've known you."

"You let my head alone," said Kerr, "or you'll get a Scotsman's fist on your nose, and you won't like it."

"Can't you explain, Figgy?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

"What have you got in your noddle?"

"Why, it's as plain as anything that Tom Merry and the detective have got some giddy secret between them," said Figgins impressively. "They can't talk about it here, because there's so many eyes upon them. And so Merry is going to meet the detective somewhere or other in a quarter of an hour. See?"

Kerr and Wynn looked admiringly at the great Figgins.

"I believe you've hit it, Figgy."

"Of course I have," said Figgy; "I've hit it right on the head. Now, are we going to be left out of this, kids?"

"No!" said the Co. together.

"No, I should say not," said Figgins. "We're going to do some detective business ourselves. When Tom Merry goes out, we follow."

Kerr looked slightly uneasy.

"I say, Figgy, is that exactly playing the game?"

Figgins gave him a withering look.

"Don't you think I'm a good judge of that?" he exclaimed. "I know as well as you do that following a chap and listening to his jaw is mean—rotten mean—and only a cad would do it. But in a state of war it's different, ain't it? A scout goes into the enemy's country and finds out all he can. We're giddy scouts, and we're in a state of war, ain't we, with that rotten old casual ward they call a School House?"

"Just so," said Fatty Wynn.

"All right," said Kerr; "it's the way you look at it. Of course, we're in a state of war. Let's get on the track by all means."

Tom Merry remained looking out at the gate for some time. Then he glanced at his watch and walked away. Figgins & Co. exchanged glances, and followed him.

They looked down the lane and saw Tom disappear into the Castle Wood.

"I knew it was a rendezvous!" exclaimed Figgins.

In a few minutes Figgins & Co. were also in the wood. They entered it where they had seen Tom Merry enter it, and a minute later they heard the sound of voices ahead through the thick undergrowth.

Figgins nudged his companions, and they stopped. For the voices they could hear were those of Tom Merry and a man—undoubtedly the detective from London.

"Good wheeze," murmured Figgins; "we shall score this time. Not a sound!"

CHAPTER 5.

Figgins Has an Idea.

FERRERS LOCKE was waiting for Tom under the old beeches.

"You are prompt to time, my boy," the detective remarked, with a smile. "Now, I want a little talk with you about the matter we were arranging yesterday. You said you were willing to help me to lay those rascals by the heels."

"Rather!" said Tom. "I suppose the burglary at the school last night was by the same gang, sir?"

The detective nodded.

"I have no doubt of it. They work in the same way always, and they are cunning rascals; they never give an alarm or leave a clue behind—or hardly ever. I have been hunting them for a long time, but I cannot get on their track. You see, I am speaking quite frankly to you, Tom."

"You can rely upon me, sir."

"I know I can, Tom, or I shouldn't speak like this. Now, I have reason to believe—every reason—that these rascals who work in the dark have a spy who noses out things for them—suitable cribs to crack, and so on—and keeps them posted in various ways—a spy who goes round the countryside as a tramp—in short, your old friend Honest Jim."

"He's just the kind of rascal," said Tom.

"Honest Jim will find himself in prison one of these days," went on Ferrers Locke. "But I am not so anxious to find him as to find the more dangerous scoundrels whose confederate he is. I hope through him to run them down. That is why I have not arrested Honest Jim. I got a sight of him yesterday; and from what I can gather, he seems to haunt the Castle Wood. I have an idea that his associates

come here at times to get information from him. I should imagine that they dare not show themselves, and Honest Jim is their means of keeping in touch with the outside world while they're in hiding in this neighbourhood."

"I see!" said Tom, deeply interested.

"On a previous occasion," continued Ferrers Locke, "I gained some information as to their movements by chance, in this way. They used a cleft in a bank as a 'post-office'—you understand, a note would be left there by one, to be fetched by another at a time when it was convenient, so that it was not necessary for them to run the risk of holding meetings together—a necessary precaution when they were closely hunted by the police. One of these notes came into my hands. Now, I have an idea that the same device may be used in the present instance, and that such a 'post-office' may be in existence in this wood."

"Some hollow tree, of course," exclaimed Tom. "I know a good many in the wood."

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"That's it, Tom. Now, I have not the slightest doubt that Honest Jim, not knowing that he is suspected, will watch to learn what steps the police are taking with regard to the burglary last night at the school, and if this post-office exists, as I believe, he will certainly be using it soon. You understand?"

"Quite, sir."

"You know this wood from one end to the other, of course?"

"Rather, sir!"

"Then you see where you can help me? If you could find the place, it would very likely put the rascals right into my hands."

Tom's eyes sparkled.

"It's a half-holiday at the school to-day, sir. I'll go through the wood; I know it like a book. If you'd let me tell Manners, he'd help me. He's a chap you can trust, sir; he'd keep a secret like a tombstone."

"Very well, you may let Manners into it," said Ferrers Locke; "but, mind, not another soul."

"Not a soul, sir."

"If you get on the track of the post-office," continued Mr. Locke, "come at once to tell me. Don't interfere with it yourself, after ascertaining that it is really the place you want. There may be some clue, which I may be able to detect, which would be destroyed otherwise. If you spot the place, just come and tell me about it. You'll find me at the Green Dragon in Rylcombe; or, if I'm not there, I'll leave word where you can come."

"Right-ho, sir," said Tom gleefully; "trust me! If there's a single nook in the wood that the rascals are using, it won't be long before old Manners and I have routed it out; and we won't touch it. Once we've found it, I'll be off to tell you like a shot."

"Thank you, Tom!" said Ferrers Locke. And he shook hands with the boy, and they parted.

The detective walked away up the lane to Rylcombe, and Tom hastened back to the school to find Manners.

When the sound of footsteps had died away, Figgins rose from a mass of brambles, feeling rather cramped, but grinning gleefully.

"Oh, we shall smile!" murmured Figgins. "Fancy Tom Merry as a giddy detective! Tom Merry on the trail! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed the Co.

"My children," said Figgins, "I have an idea. Our good friends of the School House are going to search the wood for a hollow tree with something in it."

"They are?" said Kerr.

"It would be too cruel if they didn't find it," said Figgins.

"Too, too cruelly cruel!" agreed the dutiful Co.

"So why shouldn't we, like good and kind schoolfellows and dear playmates, rig up something for them to find in a hollow tree?" demanded Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled the Co.

"When they fetch their champion blughound, and he finds what we leave there for him, it will be a sight worth seeing," said Figgins.

"Ha, ha; but how shall we fix it?"

"That will want thinking out; but the idea's great, and we shall work it. Now, trot along with your uncle, and, mind, not a word, not a whisper!"

"Not a word!" agreed the Co.

And the three juniors of the New House quitted the wood, and returned chuckling to the school.

Tom Merry was already at St. Jim's, and he had found Manners on the cricket field. Manners was eager enough to join in the quest as soon as he heard what was on, and cricket was given up for the afternoon.

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Manners, as he changed out of

his flannels. "If we can help to lay that lot of rascals by the heels, it will make Figgins & Co. look sick, and it will be one up against Study No. 6, too. But I say, Tom, old kid, have you heard from your dearly-beloved governess yet?"

"No," said Tom.

"You see, if that remittance came, and it was big enough, you could settle the two debts, and blow the rest in the village this afternoon," said Manners thoughtfully. "It will be thirsty work hunting through the wood, and ginger-pop at Mother Murphy's is prime; and I am absolutely stony!"

"So am I," said Tom. "I wrote last night to Miss Fawcett, and I'm sure she would send at once. I told her I was feeling a bit knocked up for want of a good feed—there's nothing like telling the exact truth when you're dealing with a lady. I was a bit knocked up by Blake and all those rotters in the study last night, and it was for want of a good feed."

"Ha, ha—yes! I say, something may have arrived, you know. Let's drop in on Taggles as we go out, and see if there's anything there."

"Right you are!"

And the chums of the Shell dropped into the porter's lodge to inquire. Taggles scowled at them, as he always did; but Tom Merry was affability itself.

"Anything come for me, Taggs, old son?" he asked.

"There's a parcel," said Taggles coldly. "It's marked 'Hurgent.'"

He kicked out a little parcel, which was very carefully wrapped and sealed, and addressed to Master Thomas Merry, at the School House, St. James's Collegiate School. Tom gave a chirp of delight. The handwriting was Miss Priscilla's. It was marked "Urgent."

"Here we are!" he exclaimed. "This is jolly! Taggles, you rascal, why didn't you let me have this before, when it was marked, as you said yourself, 'Hurgent.'"

"Tain't my business to carry parcels around for rips of boys," said Taggles darkly; "and I dessay it contains some sort of nasty sweetstuff you oughtn't to 'ave, and—"

Tom didn't wait for the grumpy porter to finish. He picked up his little parcel, and left the lodge with Manners.

"I say, what do you think is in it?" asked Manners, as Tom set down the parcel on a seat under one of the elm trees near the School House.

"The cash, I expect," said Tom, "and some nice little cake, which will be just the thing to take into the wood with us. We shall get hungry—as hungry as Blake was last night. Ha, ha, Miss Fawcett's cook at Laurel Lodge makes ripping cakes!"

"Good!" said Manners.

Tom opened the parcel. Manners looked on eagerly. There was a letter inside, and Tom opened it and glanced over it.

Then his face was a study.

"What's the matter?" asked Manners anxiously.

Tom grunted.

"This is from my old governess. It's a reply to my letter. Oh, Columbus, listen! Oh, my hat, is life worth living?"

And Tom read out the letter from Miss Priscilla Fawcett.

"My dearest Tommy,—I was very much alarmed by your letter. I presume by 'knocked up' that you mean that you have met with an accident. Is it that dreadful football again?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Manners. "Football in June!"

"I suppose it is," went on the letter. "Dear Tommy, if you must play those fearful games, why will you not be content with moderation? Do not try to take so many runs when you play football—"

Manners shrieked.

"—you will exhaust yourself. You know you are delicate. And when you are playing that other desperate game, cricket, I wish you would try to keep out of the scrum-mages."

Manners fell on the seat.

"Don't, Tom, don't!" he murmured. "You are killing me!"

Tom could not help grinning. Miss Fawcett evidently drew a very hazy distinction between cricket and Rugby football; they were all dreadful games to her, equally terrible and equally incomprehensible.

"I hope your injuries are not serious," the letter went on. "If they are, wire to me, and I will come down at once."

"Yes; I can see you wiring for a treat like that," murmured Manners.

"But I judge from the cheerful tone of your letter," Miss Priscilla went on, "that you are not in a bad way. But I am alarmed, my dear boy, for your safety. Meanwhile, I send you some liniment for your injuries. Rub it on the injured limbs for three-quarters of an hour before going to bed."



The next article the detective brought to light was another bottle marked "Cod-liver Oil." (See page 11.)

and for a quarter of an hour after getting up in the morning."

Manners yelled.

"I also enclose a bottle of Dr. Bones's Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers, which you will take morning, noon, and night, in doses of two large tablespoonfuls at a time. You will also find a large bottle of cod-liver oil. This is to be taken at all times. Whenever you feel a little run down, take a spoonful."

"He, he, he!" giggled Manners.

"I will send you a remittance on Saturday," went on the letter, "in your present weak state of health you must not eat pastries or anything of that sort. Believe me, my boy, that I know what is best for you. Take plenty of the Marvellous Mixture, and of the cod-liver oil, and rub your injuries with the liniment. Then write and tell me how you improve.—Your affectionate nurse, PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

"Well, of all the beastly rotten frosts," said Manners, "that is the beastly rottenest!"

Tom put the letter in his pocket.

The parcel lay on the seat, with its tempting array of cod-liver oil, marvellous mixture, and unequalled liniment.

"Can't be helped," said Tom, with a nod of his curly head. "It's a frost, I know; but she's a dear old soul. What are we going to do with this ghastly stuff?"

Manners reflected.

"Sure you don't feel inclined to scoff them?" he asked.

"Don't be an ass, old chap!"

"Well, then, suppose you send 'em to Figgins!" suggested Manners.

Tom Merry grinned.

"Just the idea!"

He soon had the parcel wrapped up again, with the paper turned inside out. Then he wrote on it in indelible pencil:

"G. Figgins, Esq., New House, St. James's Collegiate School."

"Buttons will take it," he said. "Let's get a move on."

Buttons was soon found, and he agreed to deliver the parcel in the New House. He promised to take it up to Figgins's study. Then Tom Merry went down to the gate. They met Figgins & Co. coming in.

"Hallo," said Figgins affably, "going for a little run?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"Like us to come with you?"

"Thanks," said Tom, "you're awfully kind; but suppose we were to meet somebody respectable! Good-bye!"

Tom and Manners strolled on. Figgins & Co. grinned as they looked after them.

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the great Figgins. "They don't know that we know that they're going to hunt for a giddy post-office. Let 'em wait."

Figgins & Co. went to their quarters in the New House.

"The question is," said Figgins, "what are we going to leave in the hollow tree for them to find. We've already decided how we're going to work the wheeze; but what are they to find in the hollow tree, that's the question? Hallo, what's this on the table?"

"Looks like a parcel," said Kerr; "addressed to you, too, Figgy."

"Let's hope there's some grub in it," said Fatty Wynn. "Open it, Figgy."

Figgins was not long in opening the parcel.

"Hallo," he ejaculated, "what on earth's this? Somebody having a little joke with us? Marvellous mixture, unequalled liniment, cod-liver oil—my hat!"

The three chums stared at the contents of the parcel in wrathful surprise.

"It's a little joke from the School House, I suppose," said Figgins, at last. "Pitch the silly rot out of the window."

Kerr took up the parcel to obey.

"I say!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn. "I say! Wait a tick!"

Kerr stopped. Both looked inquiringly at Fatty.

"Well?" said Figgins. "You don't want to drink this stuff, do you? I should think that even you would draw a line at that."

"No," giggled Fatty. "But you were wondering what to put in the hollow tree for Tom Merry and the detective to find, and I thought—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Figgins. "The very thing!"

And Figgins & Co. laughed loud and long.

CHAPTER 6.

"From Information Received"—A Valuable Find.

"**R**OTTEN!"

"Beastly!"

"A horrid frost!"

"A giddy sell!"

Tom Merry and Manners were comparing notes at the end of a long afternoon's hunt through the Castle Wood.

Many a secret nook the boys knew in that wood—many a hollow tree; but they had searched for hours without discovering the "post-office" used by the thieves, if the suspicions of the London detective were correct.

Right up and down through the Castle Wood they had gone, penetrating to hitherto untrodden recesses, routing out all kinds of corners, diving into the hollow trunks of ancient elms, fishing in all sorts of likeli and unlikely places for the suspected post-office.

They had covered themselves with dust and grime and mud, and they were heated and fatigued; but no other result had as yet accrued from their efforts.

"Rotten!" said Tom Merry. "It's no good keeping it up. We've only just time to cut back before tea, and I'm as hungry as a hunter!"

"So am I," said Manners feelingly. "I haven't been so hungry for a long time. And I'm tired. And I should like to kick somebody."

"Oh, come on!" said Tom. "It's no good sticking it out longer. It keeps light pretty late now, and we might have another little run after tea."

"We might," said Manners, but very dubiously.

They set out for school. The golden evening sunlight was falling upon St. Jim's, and the cricketers were going in to tea.

Figgins & Co. apparently had not been playing cricket.

The great Figgins stood in the ancient gateway of the school, talking to Kerr. Wynn was not to be seen.

"Yes, I couldn't help wondering," Figgins said. He had his back to the returning juniors, and apparently was quite unaware of their approach. "You see, I knew the man by sight. I'd seen him about the lanes—a horrid-looking tramp, with a face coloured like copper."

"But what did he do?" asked Kerr.

"Why, he went sneaking into the wood, as if he thought somebody would be watching him, and stuck something into the hollow tree—you know, that old elm near the stile?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Well, it's hollow, and that tramp bounder stuck something into it—what it was, I couldn't see; but it was a packet of some kind."

"Phew! What do you think it was?"

"Stolen goods, I should say," replied Figgins sagely. "He'd been lifting something somewhere, and wanted to hide it from the police."

"Then we ought to tell about it."

"Oh, I don't know! It may have been only a note he was leaving for somebody."

"Still, you know, the man looks like a thief, and—Hallo, Merry! Been for a walk?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry, keeping a straight face, and pretending to have heard nothing of the talk at the gate, though in reality he had not missed a word of it as he came up. "Tea bell hasn't gone yet, has it?"

"No, it won't go for ten minutes yet," said Figgins. "Not going to have tea in your study?"

"No," said Tom. "Stony."

"Then I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Figgins hospitably. "Come and have tea with us in the New House. We owe you a spread."

Tom looked rather confused.

At any other time he would have accepted Figgy's invitation with alacrity; but at present he was eager to act upon the information he had unexpectedly gained.

"Thanks, Figgy," he said. "Another time, old chap."

"Got an engagement?"

"Yes, that's it. So long!"

Tom Merry and Manners walked on to the School House. Figgins and Kerr looked perfectly grave till they were out of sight. Then, in the cover of the big gateway, Figgins fell upon his chum's neck and hugged him.

"Did you see it?" he gasped. "Didn't he swallow it whole, like Jonah swallowed the whale—I mean, like the whale swallowed Jonah?"

"He did, did, did!" ejaculated Kerr. "It was lovely."

"Gorgeous."

"My hat! Didn't he bolt it like a giddy gudgeon?" chuckled Figgins.

Tom Merry and Manners walked on excitedly to the School House. In the porch, out of sight of Figgins & Co., Tom stopped, and clapped Manners on the shoulder.

"You heard all that, Manners?"

"Rather, Tom."

"You know what it means?"

Manners nodded.

"Yes. It's the giddy clue."

"That's it. What a little bit of luck! The hollow elm near the stile. And we never thought of looking there, because it was so near the road, we didn't think they'd use that! It shows that you can't be too careful."

"That's so. Figgy would be wild if he knew what he'd missed. How are we going to tell Ferrers Locke?"

"I'm going to cut off and tell him at once—as soon as I can get out without Figgy noticing. We don't want those New House wasters to smell a rat."

"But what about tea?"

"Tea!" exclaimed Tom scornfully. "Who thinks of tea at such a time as this? Talk about Nero fiddling while Rome was burning."

"That's all very well," said the practical Manners. "But I'm jolly hungry, you see. Figgins and Kerr seem to have taken root over there, so we might as well have a snack. We don't want them to spot us going out."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Tom. "But we shall have to buck up. We want to get in again before calling over."

They went in and had a snack. When they came out again, feeling a good deal better for it, Figgins and Kerr were no longer adorning the gateway with their persons.

Tom and his chum passed out, and started down the lane towards Rylcombe.

They lost no time, and it did not take them long to reach the Green Dragon. Fortunately, too, Mr. Locke was there, having just come in.

The landlady said that Mr. Locke was in his room, and the boys went up to see him. Tom knocked at the door.

"Come in," said the detective's deep voice.

They entered. Ferrers Locke was seated at the window, examining some papers that were spread upon a table before him. He rose as the boys entered.

"Hallo! So it's you, Merry!"

"Yes, sir," said Tom. "We've got news, sir. This is old Manners—one of the best, Mr. Locke."

Ferrers Locke's eyes sparkled. He nodded cordially to Manners.

"You don't mean to say that you've found the post-office, Merry?"

"I believe so, sir."

"You see—" began Manners.

Tom trod on his toe, and he ceased abruptly. He had just been going to explain how they had overheard the information from Figgins & Co., but Tom saw no reason why they should explain away their glory in that fashion.

"You know the stile in the lane to the school, sir?" said Tom.

"Yes," said Mr. Locke.

"There's a big elm near it."

"I have noticed that," the detective said, with a nod.

"It's hollow," said Tom triumphantly.

"I should not be surprised. It's a very old tree."

"And that's where Honest Jim shoves the letters, sir!"

DAILY MAIL

ORDER NOW.  "HIGH JINKS AT ST. JIM'S."  NEXT THURSDAY.

exclaimed Tom. "We haven't touched 'em, just as you directed. I came at once for you."

Mr. Locke looked very thoughtful.

"That tree is in a very prominent position to be used for such a purpose!" he exclaimed. "You are sure of what you say, Merry?"

"It's a fact, sir," said Tom confidently. "You see, that shows his artfulness. He selects a tree in a prominent position, because he knows you'd expect him to select one hidden away somewhere. That's how Dr. Nevada would work it out, sir."

The detective smiled slightly.

"Unfortunately, Dr. Nevada's methods are hardly applicable to real life," he replied. "This tramp has not sufficient intelligence, I believe, to draw such deductions, and, besides, he does not know that I have any suspicion of the existence of his post-office. He does not even know that I am on the case, or in the neighbourhood at all."

Tom looked rather crestfallen.

"Nunno, I suppose not," he said. "Still, I'm sure this is the place, sir."

"Did you actually see the rascal at the tree?"

"Not exactly," said Tom; "but another fellow did. We're acting on—on information received, Mr. Locke."

"You are sure this other fellow saw what you say?"

"Yes, sir; I heard him saying so, and he wondered what the tramp was up to."

Mr. Locke looked convinced at last.

"Well, that seems pretty clear," he remarked. "You say you haven't touched the post-office?"

"Not a bit, sir. We came straight to you."

"That's right."

The detective put on his hat.

"The sooner we get there the better!" he exclaimed. "If there is a letter for the thieves, we must have it before they have time to take it away."

They left the inn together. They hurried to the stile through the wood, by the footpath, in order not to attract attention. The dusk of evening was falling as they arrived at the hollow elm.

Ferrers Locke glanced along the footpath, and then up and down the lane. No one was in sight. The thick undergrowth near at hand might have concealed a dozen watchers, but if any were there they made no sound.

Ferrers Locke stepped to the hollow tree. There was a wide gash in the trunk about the height of his shoulder from the ground. He dropped a stone into it, and the sound within showed that the hollow went down four or five feet.

Tom and Manners watched the detective's next proceedings with interest. It was impossible to extend the arm very far within the hollow, and they wondered how he was going to get at the packet—how, in fact, Honest Jim's friends would have done it.

Mr. Locke's proceedings were very simple.

He took a coil of stout wire from his pocket, and unfolded it. There was a hook at one end. This end he inserted into the hollow, and then felt about with the stiff wire as with a stick. A gleam came into his eyes.

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"There's something there, sir?"

"Yes," said the detective laconically.

The boys were growing excited. They watched eagerly as the detective continued his fishing. He began to draw the wire from the hollow.

Then he inserted his hand, and grasped the article he had caught on the hook, and drew it out into the light. His eyes were sparkling now.

Up to the last moment he had had doubts as to the accuracy of Tom Merry's information, but now that the packet had come to light he could hardly doubt further.

"That's the packet!" exclaimed Tom unguardedly.

"That's what Figgy saw him put into the tree. You're going to open it here, sir?"

He asked the question anxiously. It would have been too bad if the detective had walked the packet off without letting his youthful assistants know what it contained.

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Yes, I will open it here, Tom."

The parcel was wrapped carefully in brown paper, and tied with string. Locke snipped off the string, and began to unfold the wrapping. The boys watched him eagerly.

"It's stolen goods, of course," said Tom. "Something left there for the thieves to take away, just as Figgy said."

"Shouldn't wonder if it contained diamonds," said Manners, in an awed voice. "Very likely a lot of gold and precious stones."

"Or banknotes."

"Perhaps the tin that was taken from the Head's study."

"My hat! That looks like a bottle!"

The detective's eager expression was changing to one of

amazement as he unfolded the contents of the mysterious packet. It was certainly a bottle that he now held in his hand, wrapped in tissue-paper. His face was a study as he tore the paper off. Then three pairs of eyes looked in dismay at the bottle and the inscription upon it:

"Dr. Bones's Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers. To be taken immediately after rising, just before lunch, and just before going to bed. In doses of two large tablespoonfuls for children, and three for adults."

"My only Aunt Jemima Jane!" gasped Manners.

Tom looked astounded. It was the bottle of "Marvellous Mixture" that Miss Priscilla had sent him early on that same day! How in the name of wonder had it got into the parcel deposited by Honest Jim in the hollow tree, to be taken by his companions in crime? That was an utter mystery.

The detective looked at the bottle of marvellous mixture and then at Tom Merry. Then he laid the bottle down, and quietly proceeded to turn out the rest of the contents of the little packet. The next article to come to light was another bottle. It was marked,

COD-LIVER OIL.

And there was an inscription in Miss Priscilla Fawcett's own hand,

"A spoonful may be taken at any time when desired."

There was one more article. Tom Merry did not need telling that it was the bottle of "Unequaled Liniment." Ferrers Locke rose quietly from the examination of the packet.

"This is a very good joke of yours, Master Merry," he said. "I hardly expected it of you, though, considering—"

Tom turned scarlet.

"It isn't a joke of mine, sir!" he exclaimed. "I—I—I can't understand it. These silly things were sent to me to-day, and I shoved 'em off on Figgins & Co." As he spoke the name it brought a flash of illumination into his mind. "It was Figgins who was yarning about seeing the tramp shove the packet into the tree!" he exclaimed.

"Done!"

"Done again!" gasped Manners. "It was all a wheeze."

"But how could Figgins know—"

"The bounder! The brute!"

"We'll slay him!"

Mr. Locke's face relaxed into a smile.

"Done!" howled Tom wrathfully. "Oh, don't I wish Figgins were here!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a roar of laughter from an adjacent thicket. The detective and his two companions turned quickly towards it. From the brambles three heads emerged; three faces convulsed with laughter. Figgins & Co. had been watching them all the time.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Kerr.

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?" shouted Figgins.

And his comrades chorussed:

"We are! We are!"

"Who's diddled and done?"

"Tom Merry's diddled and done. Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom made a rush towards the jokers. Figgins & Co. retreated into the thickets, and the sound of their laughter came echoing back from afar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 7.

Tom on the Trail.

"I'm sorry," said Tom—"awfully sorry, Mr. Locke!"
The detective smiled. He had a sense of humour, and, in spite of his keen disappointment, he could see the funny side of the little joke played by Figgins & Co.

"Never mind," he said. "I know it wasn't your fault; and boys will be boys."

"I hadn't any idea the bounders knew anything about it," said Tom Merry. "I don't know now how Figgins tumbled to it. I never said a word, and neither did Manners."

"Not a syllable," said Manners solemnly.

"Figgy is as sharp as a needle, but how he tumbled is a mystery," said Tom. "What had we better do about it, sir?"

"Well, as the three of them seem to be in the secret," said the detective thoughtfully, "the best thing would be to take them into the matter, and put them on their honour."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Tom. "If we took Figgins & Co. in, they'd not breathe a word, and they'd help us to unearth that giddy post-office. Figgins knows this wood even better than I do, as he's been longer at St. Jim's."

"Good!" said Ferrers Locke. "Then see Master Figgins as soon as you can, Tom, before he tells the joke to the whole school. If you have anything to tell me you'll find me at the Green Dragon as before, or else a note from me. Thank you very much for the trouble you have taken."

And the detective shook hands with the boys, and strode away towards Rylcombe.

"What are you going to do with that stuff?" asked Manners, pointing to the three bottles lying in the grass.

"Oh, leave it there!" said Tom. "The first-comer is welcome to it. If anybody wants a good, steady drink of cod-liver oil, now's his chance. Come on, let's get after Figgy!"

They hurried towards St. Jim's, and soon came in sight of Figgins & Co. The New House juniors were strolling towards the school, arm in arm, and strutting along with all the pride of victory, emitting frequent chuckles and giggles as they strutted.

"There they are!" said Tom. "Buck up!"

Figgins & Co. turned at the sound of hurrying footsteps.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Figgins. "What have you done with your find?"

"Where's the mysterious packet?" demanded Kerr.

"Have you guzzled up all that cod-liver oil and marvellous mixture?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

Tom Merry grinned. He could take a joke against himself, and he never bore malice.

"That's all right," he said. "It was a good wheeze, and it is over and done with. Let it die a natural death. Don't keep on cackling over it."

"Ha, ha, ha! Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?"

"We are!" said Manners indignantly. "If you think a mouldy old wheeze like that is—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, look here," said Tom. "You cackled enough over that wheeze. I want to speak to you, old Figgy. We're not on the warpath now."

"Not much good your going on the warpath," said Figgins. "We wipe up the ground with you every time—don't we, kids?"

"We do, we does!" said the Co.

"When you've done crowing," said Tom patiently, "I've got something to say."

"Oh, get it off your chest!" said Figgins.

"You found out somehow about my arrangement with the detective—"

"Yes, funny how we find out things, ain't it? You're not the only amateur 'tec at St. Jim's, you see."

"Now, Figgy, be serious. We're on the track of a gang of giddy criminals, and I want to know if you three will lend us a hand. Mr. Locke told us to ask you."

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Figgins. "What do you want us to do?"

"Keep mum, in the first place, and in the second place, help us to discover the secret post-office in the Castle Wood."

"Done!" said Figgins heartily. "We come in on equal terms, mind. We're not following the lead of you School House wasters."

"Liberty, equality, and fraternity is our motto," said Tom. "Everybody as good as everybody else, if not a little better. Is it a go?"

"It's a go!"

"Good! You've had your tea, I suppose?"

"Yes, we've had it."

"Then let's go and have a hunt for that confounded post-office. Manners and I have been up and down through the wood all the afternoon, but we haven't found anything."

"You couldn't expect to," said Figgins. "What you want is a New House chap on the job. I dare say we shall be able to show you a thing or two."

"Yes, you will show us a lot, I dare say," sniffed Manners.

"Oh, don't row!" exclaimed Tom. "Come along, all of you."

And the five juniors set out on the quest.

"We'd better separate," said Figgins, as they entered the wood. "There's not much more daylight, and we want to save time. We'll go different ways, and if any of us finds anything he can whistle to the rest."

"Agreed!" said Tom.

"I'll show you where to start, as I'm leader," went on Figgins.

"Eh?" said Manners.

"I say, as I'm leader—"

"Rats! And rats! And more rats!"

"Look here, Manners, if—"

"Shut up, both of you!" interrupted Tom. "Let's separate, for goodness' sake, or we shall be rowing all the time! As I'm leader—"

"Ha, ha! Jolly leader you would make. You can unearth bottles of cod-liver oil in hollow trees, and that's about all you can do."

"If you want a thick ear, Figgins, you've only got to say so."

"I want all the thick ears you can give me!" said Figgins defiantly.

"Oh, shut up!" said Kerr crossly. "What does it matter who's leader, if we're going to separate and go alone?"

This view had not struck the disputants.

"Well, that's so," said Figgins. "Nothing like taking counsel with a canny Scot. Take your face away somewhere, Tom Merry, and let's get to business."

And so the five juniors, having agreed upon a signal whistle, separated, and went their various ways through the mazes of the thick wood.

Tom Merry and Manners had gone up and down through the wood all the afternoon, but they had not gone over a tenth part of its extent, for the Castle Wood was a very extensive tract.

There was plenty of new ground to be broken up, and Tom, when he parted with his companions, made his way into a thick plantation in the direction of the ruined castle. The dusk of evening was on the country lanes, and in the wood, of course, it was darker. The red sunset showed here and there between the thick branches overhead.

Tom intended to go right through the wood to its border near the old castle, and then turn back by a different route. He soon lost sight and sound of his companions, and tramped on alone through the ancient recesses of the wood.

He kept his eyes and ears alert; and suddenly he stopped, sniffing. He had seen nothing, and heard nothing; but a scent had come to his nostrils, borne by the breeze through the thickets—the scent of a strong, coarse tobacco, of a cheap and common kind—and Tom had smelt it before.

Well he remembered when, for it was only the day before, when Honest Jim had stopped him in the lane and robbed him of the bag of provisions.

The smell of that tobacco at once brought Tom Merry to his mind. He stopped, his eyes gleaming, his heart beating hard.

Was it possible that he had got on the track of Honest Jim? After all, this was just the lonely part of the wood where the suspected "post-office" might exist, and just the solitary hour when the ruffian might safely come to visit it.

Of course, that tobacco might be smoked by anybody. Still, the scent of it was proof positive that someone was close at hand in the wood, and that it behoved Tom Merry to be very cautious.

He sniffed silently, and calculated the direction of the smoker. Then, with stealthy steps, he advanced in that direction. In a minute more he stood on the edge of a narrow glade overshadowed by branches. Through the openings above came a glimmer of the setting sun. In that light Tom Merry caught sight of a well-known figure—that of the disreputable tramp, Honest Jim.

The boy set his teeth hard, and remained quite silent, watching. The tramp evidently had not the slightest suspicion that anyone was near. He was leaning against a big elm, and Tom soon saw that his right arm was within the trunk, evidently groping in a hollow. The boy's heart beat.

Ferrers Locke had been right. The "post-office" existed, and Tom Merry had discovered the tramp in the act of taking a letter from it, or putting one there.

Honest Jim had the same foul, black pipe between his teeth. He little dreamed how the smell of it had given him away.

He gave a grunt, and drew his arm from the hollow tree. There was a paper in his grimy fingers, and he held it up to the light and read it over. Then he grunted again, and drew a stub of pencil from his rags, and, placing the paper on his knee, began to write on the back of it.

Tom watched him breathlessly, keeping out of sight himself in the bushes. The tramp wrote only a few words, and then he straightened up again, folded the paper, and thrust it into the hollow tree.

Then he stood for a moment or two, blowing out black smoke, and then turned to leave the glade, and walked right through the bushes where Tom Merry had taken cover. Tom had no time to act, or even to think. In a second the tramp was upon him.

"You! You again!"

Honest Jim snarled out the words as he caught sight of Tom Merry. His brutal, coppery face was darker than ever with rage, as it struck him that the boy had perhaps seen him putting the note in the hollow tree.

"You—you whelp!"

His fingers were twitching murderously, his bleared eyes on fire. Tom's heart gave a painful throb, but he did not lose his presence of mind. Loud and clear from his lips

burst the whistle that was the signal to Manners and Figgins & Co. Loud and clear, ringing through the dim recesses of the wood.

He had no time for more. The ruffian sprang upon him, and in a powerful grip he was whirled off his feet and sent with a crash to the ground.

Down he went in the thick grass on his back, and Honest Jim's heavy knee was planted on his chest, and the tramp's fingers clutched at his throat.

"Help!" screamed Tom.

The grip of Honest Jim's fingers choked him into silence. What did the villain intend? Tom struggled desperately. For the first time it struck him that his life might be in danger; that the scoundrel might regard his life as a cheap price to pay for safety.

He fought like a tiger to throw off the ruffian's grip. But he was a boy against a strong man. Without aid he knew that he was helpless. His strength would soon be spent.

But aid was at hand. Sharp and clear through the wood rang a whistle. It was an answer to his signal. It was repeated from another direction. Tom managed to tear his throat free for a moment.

"Help!"

The ruffian pinned him again the next moment. His eyes were blazing murderously down upon Tom Merry, his teeth set savagely.

"You whelp!"

There was a crash in the thicket, and Figgins came upon the scene with a long jump, and he alighted with both feet fairly in the ruffian's back as he held down Tom Merry.

Honest Jim gave an agonised grunt and flattened down on Tom. Figgins's feet were not of a small size, and he had come down heavily. Honest Jim felt as if his back were broken, and he fell on Tom and squirmed on him like an eel; and Figgins gripped him and shouted for help.

CHAPTER 8.

Tom and Figgins are Not Left Out.

HONEST JIM had hardly a struggle left in him. Figgins's big feet, coming down together in his back, had knocked all the wind and all the pluck out of him, and he could only gasp as Figgins gripped him. Tom Merry wriggled out from underneath the scoundrel. Kerr, Wynn, and Manners were quickly on the spot.

Honest Jim found himself held by five foes, and he was not feeling fit just then to struggle with one of them.

"Got the beast!" said Figgins. "I told you you needed a New House chap on this job, Tom Merry. Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry gasped.

"The brute nearly throttled me. I believe he meant to murder me."

"I didn't," panted Honest Jim. "I was—was only joking."

"A jolly serious joke for you, old dear!" said Figgins. "Is this the giddy go-between Mr. Locke was talking about, Tom Merry?"

"Yes, that's the rascal."

"Then we've captured a prize-packet!"

"Rather!" said Manners. "Look here, you kids, tie him up to a tree while I cut off and fetch Mr. Locke. He'll know best what to do with him."

"That's right!" said Tom. "Tell Mr. Locke we'll keep the brute safe till he comes!"

"Right-ho!"

And Manners was off like a shot. Honest Jim began to wriggle and whine.

"Don't keep me 'ere, young gentlemen—please don't! I'm an honest man, I am. They call me Honest Jim, just because I'm so—"

"What have you done with my grub?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"I—I've eaten it!" stammered Honest Jim. "It was only—only a joke!"

"And the time you attacked me at Clavering, and nearly brained me with a stick, was that only a joke, too?" demanded Tom.

"I—I—it was—"

"If so, you're the kind of joker that wants shutting up in prison, where you won't be able to be quite so humorous!" said Tom. "I'm a bit of a joker myself, but your jokes are rather too practical. I've got a bit of cord we can tie

his hands with, chaps. Tie them to this bough, and then he'll be nicely fixed."

A hanging bough was dragged down a little lower by Tom Merry, and Honest Jim's hands were placed one on either side of it, and his wrists fastened to the bough.

He then sat in the grass, with his arms raised, his hands secured fast, and about as helpless as a man could possibly be. The juniors stood round him, watching him as a pack of hounds might watch a tiger, ready to jump on him if he tried to get loose.

But Honest Jim was completely cowed, and made no attempt to escape. While the juniors waited for the arrival of the detective, Honest Jim sat still, only his tongue active. He tried by every means he could think of to induce his captors to let him go, and when he found that it was in vain he started cursing.

Figgins soon put a stop to that, gently tapping him on the mouth with his boot till he fell into silence. There was a rustling in the foliage. Manners burst gleefully upon the scene.

"He's coming!" he announced. "He's only just behind me!"

It was true. A minute later Ferrers Locke stepped into the glade. The detective looked as quiet and cool as ever, but there was a gleam of satisfaction in his keen eyes. He looked down grimly at Honest Jim.

"We've got him, sir!" said Tom Merry. "Tracked him down like a giddy real 'tec., sir!"

The detective smiled.

"It was the clue of the tobacco smoke, sir," Tom Merry went on. "As soon as I smelt that horrible pipe of his I knew I was on the track."

"Good!" said Ferrers Locke. "You are in a bad box, Honest Jim—if that's what you call yourself now. And now, where's that post-office?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" mumbled the ruffian. "I ain't done nothin'. I wasn't goin' to 'urt the young 'ound!"

"You can tell that to the magistrates, Jim," smiled Ferrers Locke. "You see, I happen to know you are in collusion with the gang of criminals who have been robbing right and left in this district during the past few weeks. You communicate with them—"

"I don't do nothin' of the kind. I don't know nothin' about any post-office—"

"Then I can tell you something, Honest Jim," said Tom Merry.

The detective's eyes became eager.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, sir. I watched him take a note from that hollow tree, and write something on the back of it, and put it back again!" exclaimed Tom triumphantly.

The ruffian ground his teeth. In a moment Ferrers Locke was at the hollow elm and groping in its recesses. His hand came out with the paper in it. His eyes blazed as he unfolded it and read it.

"Jingo!"

"Can we read it, sir?" asked Tom.

"Certainly; that is only right. Listen!"

Ferrers Locke read out one side of the paper, evidently that which Honest Jim had read when he took the note from the tree.

"Have heard that Locke has been sent down from London. Have you seen anything of him?"

There was no signature. Then the detective turned the paper over and read out the scrawled reply of Honest Jim:

"Mister Locke is stayin' in Rillcom. I 'ave seed 'im ther'."

"By Jove," exclaimed Tom Merry, "if the rascals had received that note, then, they would have known that you were hunting them, sir!"

The detective nodded.

"Undoubtedly. Unfortunately for the rascals, I have received it instead of them, and they will not know I am hunting them until I have hunted them to a finish."

"Someone will be coming here for the letter, sir, and then—"

"Yes," said the detective tranquilly; "someone will come here for the letter, and then I shall have him. He will walk straight into the trap."

The detective put the note back into the hollow tree.

"Now, Honest Jim, I'll trouble you to come with me."

"Shall we stay and watch for the chap, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"No, Merry; I think it is pretty certain that the man, whoever he is, will not come till well after dark, and when he does come, my boy, he must find someone waiting for him who will be able to deal with an armed ruffian. I shall take this rascal to the lock-up in Rylcombe, and come back with a couple of policemen."

ANSWERS

"Very good, sir; we'll help you march him off, anyway."

And the five juniors accompanied the detective and his prisoner as far as the lane, where Ferrers Locke, heartily repeating his thanks, left them, and the juniors returned to the school.

"This has been a good day out," said Figgins affably, as they went in at the gates only just in time to escape being shut out. "We've done ourselves proud this journey, kids; but I tell you what—I'm not going to be left out of it at the finish."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Just what I was thinking," he said.

"And I," said Manners. "We've captured the tramp, and I fancy we can try our hand at capturing burglars. We did catch one once, didn't we, Tom?"

"Rather; and we're on this scene!" exclaimed Merry emphatically. "Ferrers Locke says the bounder will come for the letter at night. Who's game to get out of bounds after lights out, and take a hand in the little game?"

"All of us," exclaimed Figgins. "We must see that nothing goes wrong. Ferrers Locke seems to be a clever sort of chap; but, still, there's nothing like keeping an eye on him. Something may be wrong, and we may be needed."

"Ha, ha; well, will you meet us at the same old spot, Figgy—you know, where we get over the ivy on the wall?"

"Rather! At ten o'clock?"

"At ten. You won't fail to turn up?"

"Of course I won't. Au revoir!"

And the juniors separated to go to their houses. Tom Merry and Manners said nothing as yet of their adventures in the School House. There was plenty of time to tell the story when the detective had safely made his capture.

During the evening the chums of the Shell kept somewhat apart, discussing the matter between them. Both were somewhat fatigued by the exertions of the afternoon, but Tom was as keen as ever when bedtime came. Not so Manners.

When the Shell went up to bed, Manners dropped off to sleep like a top. As soon as the room was silent, Tom Merry skipped out of bed and shook his chum by the shoulder.

"Up with you, Manners, old man!"

Manners snored.

"I say, old chap, we've got to be off. Wake up!"

"Groo—geroo—groo!" said Manners.

"Aren't you coming?"

"Lemme alone; 'tain't rising-bell yet! Groo!"

Tom gave it up. He felt rather sleepy himself, but the thought of Figgins waiting was enough to make him determined. If he failed to turn up, the New House juniors would crow. He was soon out of the house, by way of a lower window, and cutting across the quad to the ivy-clad wall that bordered the lane.

A dim, lanky figure loomed up in the gloom. The clock from the school tower struck, and ten chimes floated far through the still night.

"Is that you, Figgy?"

"Yes," came the voice of Figgins, in a hoarse whisper.

"That you, Tom Merry?"

"Yes; here I am."

"Where's Manners?"

"In bed; he wouldn't get up. Where's Kerr and Wynn?"

Figgins chuckled.

"In bed, too; they wouldn't get up."

"Ha, ha! Never mind; we'll go it together, Figgy," said Tom.

"Right-ho! Give us a bunk up."

Tom Merry gave Figgins the required "bunk up," and Figgins, clambering over the ivy, reached the top of the wall. Then he leant down and gave Tom his hand, and Tom Merry was soon on the wall beside him. To drop down into the lane was the work of a moment.

"Come on," said Tom.

They were wakeful enough in the keen, night air. They cut along the lane at a good pace. The moon was up over the wood, and the lane was almost as light as by day. They turned into the wood at the stile, and pressed on silently towards the glade where the thieves' "post-office" stood.

"I say," whispered Figgins, as they drew near the glade where the struggle with Honest Jim had taken place, "I can't hear a sound."

"And I can't either, Figgy."

"Very likely the fellow has been and gone long ago."

"In that case Ferrers Locke has got him."

"Yes; and we've come for nothing. It will be no joke sticking up in this rotten wood waiting for something to happen that came off long ago."

Tom Merry chuckled.

"It's a bit late to think of that, Figgy. Now we're here we're going to see it through. It's awfully dark under these beastly trees. Never mind; come on."

"All right; I'm coming. Keep your peepers open. If Ferrers and the police are lying in ambush there, we don't want to tread on their toes."

"No; and we don't want to be seized by mistake for the chap coming for the letter," said Tom, this new danger coming into his mind for the first time. "We had better keep off the grass a bit—I mean, keep our distance. Hallo, what's that?"

A sudden shout rang through the dead silence of the wood. Then the sound of rapid footsteps. Footsteps coming straight towards the two juniors as they stood, halted and amazed, in the darkness under the trees.

CHAPTER 9.

Capturing the Cracksman.

WHILE Tom Merry and Figgins were making their way through the wood, Ferrers Locke was patiently on the watch beside the hollow elm in the glade. The detective, with two constables from Rylcombe, had returned to the glade immediately after disposing of Honest Jim in the lock-up, and ever since he had been tirelessly waiting.

In the dark glade, to which few of the moonbeams penetrated, the detective and the two policemen lay in cover amid the overhanging foliage, and not by a sound did they betray their presence to anyone who should penetrate to the spot. Ten chimed over the wood from the distant church of Rylcombe, and still the silence of the wood was unbroken by a footstep.

Still the detective was patient. The two constables were nodding in the bracken; but Ferrers Locke was as wide awake as when he had commenced the long vigil.

At last came a faint sound through the gloom. Ferrers Locke nudged his two companions, and they started into watchfulness. A dim figure loomed up through the glade. Straight on it came for the hollow tree. Ferrers Locke's teeth came together hard. It was the reward of his long vigil at last. The man he had watched and waited for had arrived.

The dim figure stopped at the elm and bent down. An arm was thrust into the cavity in the tree, and there was a faint, muttered word which told that the groping fingers had found the hidden paper.

The next moment there was a startled oath. Ferrers Locke had sprung upon the dim form, and pinned it against the tree.

"You are my prisoner!"

A yell of sudden fright and rage burst from the man. He turned on the detective like a wild-cat, and Ferrers Locke reeled back. His foot caught in a root, and he stumbled. The man was as quick as an eel. He gave the detective no time to recover. Springing forward, he struck the staggering detective a heavy blow in the face, and Ferrers Locke went with a thump to the ground.

Then the figure sprang away in the gloom. The two clumsy constables sprang at him in vain. He eluded them and dashed away into the gloom of the wood.

Ferrers Locke staggered to his feet.

"After him! Don't let him escape!"

The fugitive did not look back. Straight on he went, running fleetly as a deer. Suddenly he gave a terrific yell, and went down heavily to the grass. A foot had been thrust out from the darkness, and he had tripped blindly over it. He fell upon his face, with almost all the breath knocked out of his body.

Two forms piled themselves upon him the next moment. He struggled like a madman.

"Quiet," said the voice of Tom Merry—"quiet, ass! You'll get hurt!"

"Hold him!" gasped Figgins.

Tom Merry had a grip on the back of the ruffian's collar, and was kneeling on his back. Figgins seized his ankles and dragged them into the air; so, of course, the man's attempts to rise were extremely futile. He gasped out a curse.

"Let me go—let me go!"

Tom Merry grinned in the darkness.

"Yes; I can see us doing that, when we've only just caught you," he said. "Hallo, hallo! Are you there, Mr. Locke?"

The detective's deep voice came back over the sound of running feet.

"I am here."

"We've got him."

"Show a light here."

One of the constables came panting up and turned on the light of his lantern. The rays glimmered on the grass, and on the prostrate form of the ruffian half-buried in it, with the two boys of St. Jim's on top of him, pinning him down. A

savage, evil-looking face was turned up towards the detective.

"You've got me!" gasped the prisoner. "Hang you, Ferrers, you've got me!"

The detective looked at him scrutinisingly in the light.

"Yes; I've got you, Ned the Cracksman," he said quietly. "I suspected that you were in this business. That job at the school was just in your line. I suppose Flash George and the Badger are with you in this, as usual?"

"Find out!" retorted the prisoner.

"That will not take me long now."

Ned the Cracksman ground his teeth.

"I suppose Jim gave us away?" he cried savagely.

"Not intentionally," replied the detective, "but by chance. If you want to know, Jim is in the lock-up; and it came about—and this followed—through his robbing this lad of a bag of provisions in Rylcombe Lane."

"The fool! I might have known he would make a mess of the thing when I let him into it! The fool!" snarled the prisoner.

"Too late to think of that now, I'm afraid," smiled the detective, as he snapped the handcuffs on the cracksman's wrists. "You're wanted, and for a long time to come, I fancy, Ned. Come along!"

The prisoner, handcuffed, was removed by the two constables. The detective walked with the juniors back to the lane.

"I don't know how you came here, my lads," he said; "but I am glad you were on the scene. I would never have consented to expose you to such peril, but, as it has turned out, there is nothing to regret. I am very much obliged to both of you!"

"Oh, not at all, sir!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "We wanted to be in at the death, didn't we, old Figgy?"

"Rather!" said Figgy. "We thought we might come in useful, sir."

"Well, you did," smiled Ferrers Locke; "but for you I am afraid that we should have lost our man. Good-night!"

He shook hands with the juniors, and followed the policeman and their prisoner. Tom Merry and Figgy walked away towards St. Jim's feeling extremely pleased with themselves.

The next day Ferrers Locke called at the school with news. The arrest of the chief rascal had been speedily followed by that of the rest of the gang, and a large amount of stolen property had been recovered. Among it the detective had found the Head's banknotes, which the thieves had not yet ventured to attempt to pass.

Ferrers Locke had something to say to Tom Merry before he took his leave.

"You've been a lot of help to me in this case, Tom," he said. "I am deeply obliged to you, and I sha'n't forget it. I don't know what you will be when you leave school, my boy; but if you wanted to start in life as a detective, there'd be a place for you as assistant to Ferrers Locke. You can bear that in mind. Good-bye!"

And the detective went, leaving Tom Merry thinking over what he had said.

THE END.

(Another Tale dealing with Tom Merry next Thursday. Please order in advance, and also introduce Tom to your friends.)



Stompoint

A School Tale. By MAURICE MERRIMAN.

READ
THIS
FIRST

Rex Allingham, Jim Fisher, and Bob Bouncer are three well-known chums at Stompoint College. Hal Trehearn, the captain of the school, favours them; but they are bullied by Jardon and Symes, two Fifth-Formers, who play many spiteful tricks upon them. Bob and his comrades intend to stay at an old loft for a time, to hide from the bullies, and Bob gets in a large stock of provisions, which must have cost him a lot of money. Bob states that if ever they want any money he can always let them have it straight away. All goes well until Jardon, Symes, and Perkins, a friend of the bullies, enter the barn and light a fire, and through their carelessness the whole barn catches on fire. They then grow nervous as to the safety of Rex and his chums, and make their way to Jardon's study. A knock comes at the door, and Parker, the school porter, enters, and asks them if they have seen anything of Rex and his comrades. "What, Rex and his gang? No, I haven't seen them, for the simple reason that we have been here all the afternoon and evening," replied Jardon.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Chums Escape.

"Yus. I know that," said Parker, who knew nothing of the sort, because he had been dozing the best part of the afternoon. "But I thought p'raps they might have come here to play up some larks, thinking you was out. I believe the young varmint has collared my oil-stove."

"Very likely. They would collar anything. You might put a cord to that picture, Perkins. You are making the place look—"

"Parker—Parker! Oh, here you are!" cried Dr. Andale, hurrying into the study. "The barn is on fire!"

"No!"

Parker did not mean to insinuate that the doctor was speaking falsely. It was only his way of expressing his surprise.

"The barn on fire, sir!" exclaimed Jardon. "Why, it will burn your house down, or, at any rate, the stables."

"No. It is the lower barn—the old one."

"Well, that's better, sir. Can we be of any service?"

"I think not. It is a mass of flames, and must burn out. There is one thing, it can set fire to nothing else. I wonder how it could have occurred. There was nothing there inflammable was there, Parker?"

"Well, now, let me see. There was a tin pail, and a pitchfork, but I don't suppose they was of much inflammable."

"He, he, he! He thinks inflammable means valuable!"

cried Perkins, who recovered his spirits when he saw how unsuspecting the doctor was. "Inflammable means a thing that is likely to catch alight. It's spelt influmable."

"Is it indeed!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Stop a bit!" exclaimed Parker. "Jest you stop, sir. Don't you go forming no hasty conclusions. How is it that I've missed my oil-stove? How is it I've missed the varmint—the three young gents who are chums, to my sorrow? They hadn't got anything to do this afternoon. Well, what was to prevent 'em going to the barn, and having one of their feeds, and taking my stove for the purpose? What was—"

That was all the doctor heard. The loss of his barn was as nothing to him. He found Mr. Salmon in his study, and a few moments later those two gentlemen rushed towards the barn. It was now a raging fire.

What happened had not been so very serious. The chums found the smoke extremely uncomfortable, and Bob suggested that they should shift a few tiles, squeeze through the joists, and drop to the ground, which is exactly what they did. But as they crossed the doctor's lawn—a near cut to the college—they met Mrs. Andale and her daughter Lily returning home, and that lady naturally inquired what they were doing there.

"Sorry, madam!" exclaimed Rex. "We have been having a little—ahem!—refreshment in the barn. Nice quiet place. Rather jolly—"

"But, my lads, you surely have enough to eat in the college?"

"Heaps! As much as we want. Only I expect Lily likes gru—likes provisions from the tuck—from the pastrycook's, by way of a change. I'll bet—that is, I feel sure Lil buys tarts and things."

"Well, come this way," exclaimed Mrs. Andale, smiling, "and perhaps we shall be able to find something that we shall all like; only I am not at all sure that the doctor would like you spending the afternoon in that dirty old barn."

Lily and her mother had supper with the three worthies, and they knew nothing about the burning barn, until Dr. Andale, with a deathly-white face, rushed into the room.

For a moment he gazed at the extraordinary scene; then he sank into a chair, and his lips moved, though the astonished spectators did not hear the words he uttered. He had been making inquiries, and until he entered that room he never doubted that Rex, Bob, and Jim had been burnt to death.

"My lads," exclaimed the doctor, "I am indeed thankful that your lives have been spared."

"Well, they were never in danger, sir," observed Rex calmly. "We haven't been in any sort of danger."

"You might have been burnt to death."

"That's an exceedingly unlikely thing to occur, sir. Of course, if it was the fifth of November, or anything like that—well, there is a bit of a risk; but there has not been the slightest risk of fire in what we have been doing this afternoon."

"You might have been burnt in the barn; indeed, I thought that this had happened."

"Not the slightest chance of it, sir. We only had a small oil-stove up there, and those are as safe as houses."

"You know that you have burnt the barn to the ground?"

"No! But that couldn't be. I put the light out before we left. Stop! Is the barn really burnt down, sir?"

"Certainly!"

"Then we didn't do it, sir. It was nothing to do with us. We certainly went into the loft, but we never set the barn on fire."

"How was it done, then?"

"A fire was lighted below."

"What!" exclaimed the doctor. "Do you mean to tell me that anyone in this college attempted to burn you?"

"Oh, no, sir! They tried to smoke us out, and make us come down, but we sort of escaped through the roof. Ha, ha, ha! If those fellows think we are burnt they will be pretty frightened."

"Suppose we keep out of the way for a bit, sir?" suggested Bob. "I'll find the money to build up the barn again, and—"

"How can you find all the money that would cost?" demanded the doctor, glancing at his wife.

"Money is no object to me, sir. I don't suppose the barn would cost much more than fifty pounds; but even if it does, I can easily find it. Now, I was thinking, sir, that those fellows ought to be punished, and I feel sure you would wish this. We couldn't possibly sneak of them, because that would be dishonest; but we could keep out of the way for a fortnight—you could give us a fortnight's holiday, and we would go roaming about the country, letting them think we were dead, and—"

"Absurd! I shall do nothing of the sort. Come into my study."

"I would much rather you punished them than us, sir," growled Bob.

"I dare say you would. However, on this occasion I am not going to punish you. You have told me the truth, and although you should not have been in the barn, that is not a serious matter."

The doctor led the way to his study, and then he rang the bell for Parker. It had seemed strange to the doctor that Perkins should have been in Jardon's study, for they were the last two boys to be on friendly terms, and so the doctor stepped into the passage and gave his message outside to the porter; then, returning to the

room, he waited for Jardon, Symes, and Perkins to enter. It had not escaped his notice that the three had appeared very ill at ease, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that they believed they had caused the death of the three chums.

"Oh, I say!" gasped Perkins, the moment he caught sight of the chums.

"What is the matter, my lad?" demanded the doctor.

Here Perkins caught Jardon's eye.

"Nothing, sir. Oh, there's nothing at all the matter with me!" exclaimed Perkins. "I never felt better in—"

"Do you know anything about the barn being burnt down?"

"The barn, sir? Burnt down? Well, you did mention it—of course I heard that."

"Do you know who burnt it down?"

"Well, sir, Parker did mention that three certain boys had taken his oil-stove, and if those boys were put in the barn-loft with an oil-stove, I wouldn't be a bit surprised at any thing getting burnt down."

"Did you go to the barn?"

"I have been there on one or two occasions. I remember once when you—"

"Who was with you?"

"No one, sir," declared Perkins, glancing at Jardon.

"Do you mean to tell me that Jardon and Symes were not with you?"

"Well, it's not my fault. I told you he would bowl me out, Jardon. He always does."

"It is a lamentable thing, Perkins, that you have no regard for the truth. To screen yourself or others you think nothing of speaking falsely."

"Well, sir, I naturally thought that Rex was too honourable to tell that it was us who were there, and—"

"That has nothing to do with what I said, except that it proves my words are correct. You would not have hesitated to tell me a falsehood had you not believed that I knew you were there. As a matter of fact, I did not know it. No one ever mentioned your name."

"Oh, I say! Fancy making me give the show away like that!" exclaimed Perkins.

"What have you to say concerning the matter, Jardon?" demanded the doctor.

"I certainly went to the barn, sir, and found Perkins lighting a fire. I told him it was dangerous, and—"

"Oh, I say, Jardon, that's a whopper! You will tell him next that it was me poured the turpentine over it."

"The young rascal knows perfectly well that it was him," said Jardon.

"I say, Jardon," exclaimed Rex, "that grammar is a bit off for a Sixth Form fellow. You mean to say 'That it was he.' You must not put the pronoun in the objective case after the verb to be. If you come to my study after the doctor has done with you, I will explain it more fully to you."

"Silence, Allingham!" ordered the doctor. "It makes little difference who lighted the fire. When I mentioned

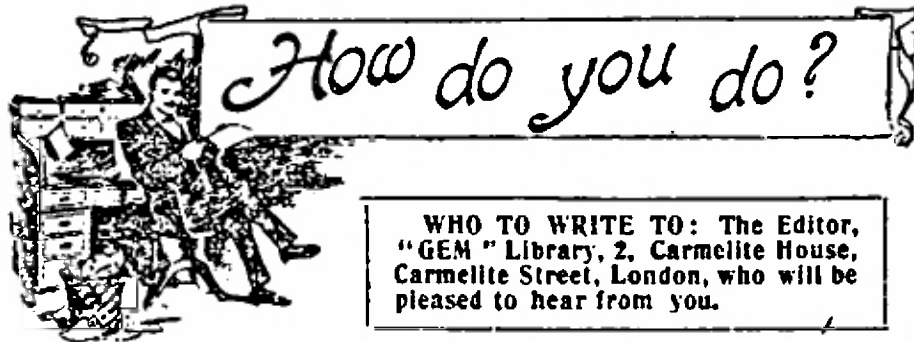
that the barn was on fire, you pretended to think I meant the other barn, Jardon. That was acting a lie, and you are not speaking truthfully now. I am perfectly convinced that you were a party to the fire being lighted. You tried to deceive me, and you have incited that boy to tell me a deliberate falsehood. You ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself for your misconduct. I scarcely know how to deal with you."

"Give him a jolly good flogging, sir," said Bob.

"We'll hold him for you."

"Silence, Bouncer! How dare you speak like that? Now, Perkins, tell me why that fire was lighted; and I warn you that it will be far better for you if you tell me the truth, for I intend to find it out."

(Another long instalment of this splendid school story next Thursday. Order your GEM in advance.)



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