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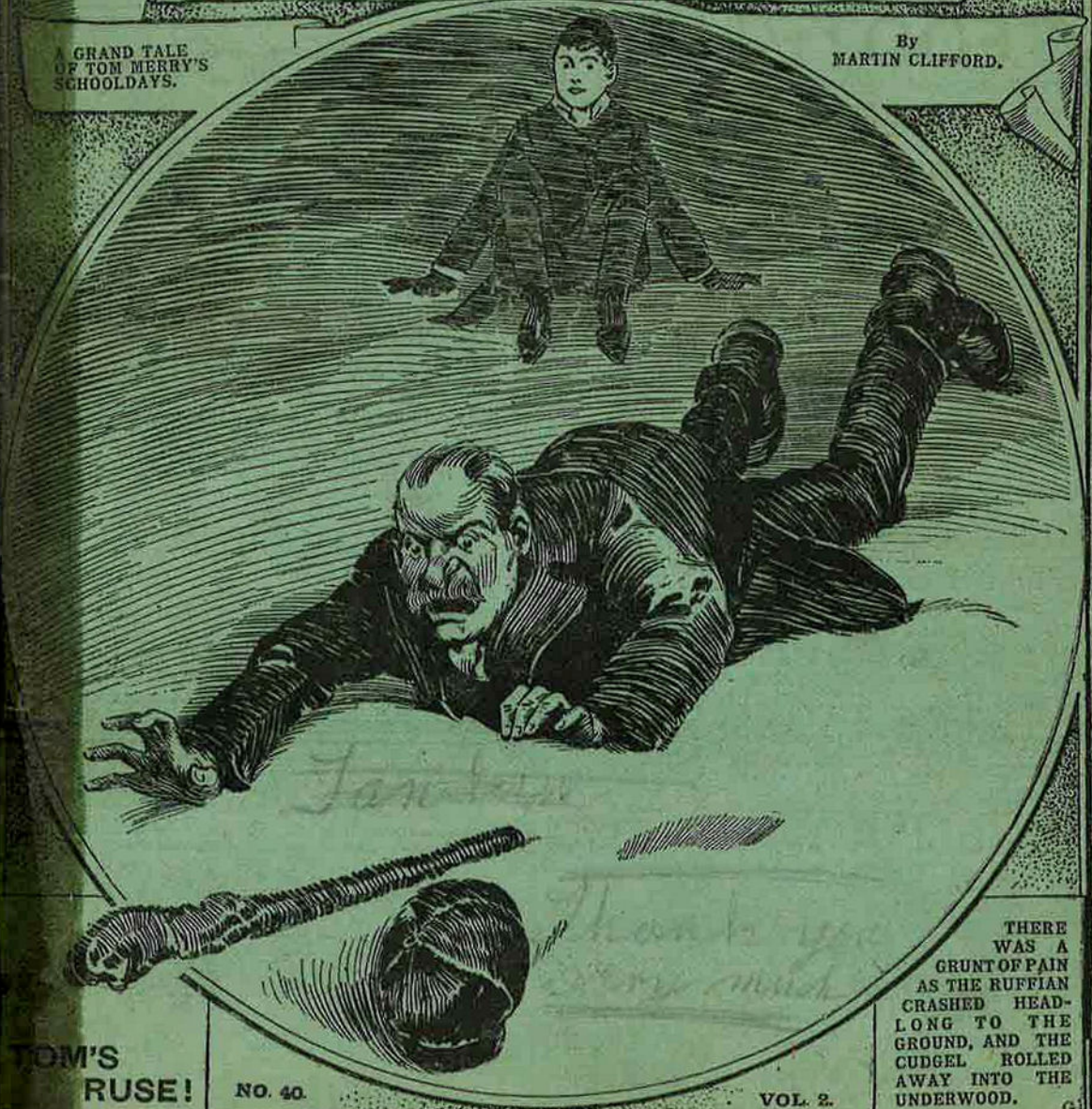
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STONY BROKE!

A GRAND TALE OF TOM MERRY'S SCHOOLDAYS.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



THERE WAS A GRUNT OF PAIN AS THE RUFFIAN CRASHED HEAD-LONG TO THE GROUND, AND THE CUDGEL ROLLED AWAY INTO THE UNDERWOOD.

TOM'S RUSE!

NO. 40.

VOL. 2.

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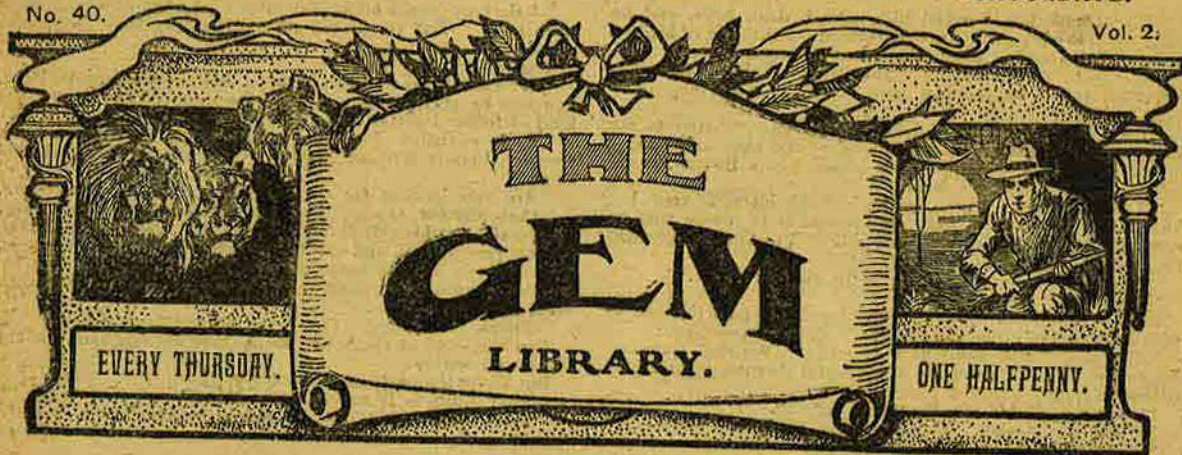
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STONY BROKE.

A Splendid Complete Tale of Tom Merry's Schooldays.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

No Cash!

"IT'S rotten!" Tom Merry remarked thoughtfully.

"Beastly!" said Manners.

"Disgusting!" agreed Monty Lowther.

"My dear fellows, it is simply intolerable," exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Unless my wogistated lettah comes, I weally do not know what we shall do."

"And I don't, either," said Jack Blake. "I blued my last coins on that new diabolo set."

"Ditto!" said Herries.

"It's really too bad," said Tom Merry. "It's really all D'Arcy's fault."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Yes it is. You're always rolling in giddy wealth, and you have no right to be stony broke like the rest of us at such a critical moment."

"Weally, I am extremely sorry I am stony broke, deah boys."

"It's all your own fault," said Blake severely. "You had a fiver from your governor last week, and you went and blued it all on buying diabolo sets for the kids in the Third Form."

"Reckless extravagance!" exclaimed Herries.

"But weally, deah boys, the poor little beggahs wanted to play the new game as much as the rest of us," protested D'Arcy; it seemed wotten that they shouldn't have—"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Gussy, you're a good little ass. But—"

"I object to bein' chawawotised as an ass—"

"But the fact remains that we are stony," said Tom Merry seriously; "and Gussy having failed us in the hour of need—"

"Oh, weally—"

"I really don't know how we are going to raise the wind,"

Tom Merry went on. "We called you kids in to a consultation—"

"Who are you calling kids?"

"Oh, rats! The consultation doesn't seem to have helped us much. We're all broke. I have a threepenny bit with a hole in it, which has been refused at the tuck shop. That's all the wealth that Manners, Lowther, and myself can raise amongst us."

And the Terrible Three looked doleful.

"And we have absolutely nothing in the world," said Blake.

"Herries is stony, I am stony, and even Gussy is stony, through his reckless extravagance."

"Oh, weally, Blake—"

"So the great question arises, what's going to be done?"

Tom Merry ran his fingers through his curly hair.

"There's three ways of raising money," he remarked: "You can beg, borrow, or steal. Now, there's nobody to beg of, nobody to borrow of, and stealing's barred."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"So I don't know what's to be done, unless we go down to Rylombe and pawn Gussy's gold watch."

"Oh, weally, Tom Mewwy!"

The juniors looked at one another disconsolately. It was really a most distressing state of affairs. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, the chums of the Shell, were usually at loggerheads with the three Fourth-Formers, but a common distress had drawn them together now. There was a famine in the financial line. The Terrible Three were stony, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were stony. And the prospect of raising the wind seemed to be absolutely nil.

"There's Figgins & Co., over in the New House," Blake remarked reflectively. "We've had so many rows with them that they'd come to our help like a shot if they could, but I happen to know that Figgins is in the same fix."

"Yaas, wathah! I asked him myself, deah boys, and he had only a French penny, and I wufused to wob him of his last coin. They wouldn't have taken it at the tuck shop."

"Ha, ha! The worst of it is that we've all drawn upon our respected pater to the last limit. We can't get any more from home."

"I am not sure of that, deah boy. I have witten to my govannah, explainin' the painful cires, of the case, and I think it wprob that he may come to the wesous like a Bwiton."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I know your governor's rolling in filthy lucre, D'Arcy, but he sent you a fiver last week, and it stands to reason that he won't snell out again yet," he replied. "I'm afraid that must be left out of account."

"I may get a wregistrah lettah by the next post."

"Ten to one you don't."

D'Arcy glanced at his watch—the handsome gold timekeeper which Tom Merry had humorously suggested pawning.

"The post is now due," he remarked. "We shall soon see. I wprose that we postpone this painful discussion, and play diabol to till the postman comes."

Blake slapped him on the back heartily.

"Good idea, Gussy. You have good ide's sometimes—"

"Yaas, wathah! but I weally wish you would not be so wuff, Blake. You have caused me considerable pain in my shouladah, and diswanged my necktie. I weally—"

"Hallo," exclaimed Lowther, who was looking out of the study window, "here comes the postman; and, by jove, he's got a registered envelope in his hand."

"Hurrah!"

The six juniors shouted out together in their relief. They fell upon Gussy and hugged him. It was a demonstration of affection, but Arthur Augustus struggled furiously to get away from it. It disturbed his aristocratic calm; for D'Arcy was very strong upon the repose which stamps the caste of Vere do Vere.

"Pway wlease me, deah boys!" he gasped. "You are wuffin' my hair, and it takes me ten minutes to brush it to my satisfaction. You are twaddin' on my boots and deatwoyin' the polish. You are wumplin' my waistcoat—"

They let the swell of the School House escape at last. Tom Merry ran to the window to look at the postman. The quadrangle was white with a late fall of snow, and the Rylcorne postman was picking his way very carefully along the gravel path. He had his bag on his shoulder, but as Lowther had stated, there was a registered envelope in his hand. It was perfectly plain from the window, though of course the superscription could not be read.

"It is a stroke of luck," D'Arcy remarked, setting his collar to rights. "I was weally awfraid this time that the govannah would send me a lecture instead of a fivah. But he has turned up tumps after all."

"Let's go down and meet Blagg," said Tom Merry, opening the door of the study.

"Lead on, Macduff," said Blake.

And the six juniors descended the stairs, and waited for the postman at the door of the School House. Several other fellows were waiting there, among them Gore of the Shell, the special enemy of the Terrible Three and Study No. 6.

Gore had a rather unusually important air about him. He strutted with his hands in his pockets, and two or three juniors were showing him great respect. The chums observed it, and wondered what was in the wind.

"I suppose Gore is expecting a postal order by this post," Lowther remarked. "See how Mellish and Rogers are sucking up to the cad."

Gore glanced at the chums with an air of superiority.

"Hullo, I hear you're broke, you kids," he remarked.

"Stony," said Tom Merry, with his usual frankness.

"Ha, ha! Perhaps I shall treat you when I get my remittance—if you're civil."

"Oh, you're expecting a remittance, are you?"

"Oh, just a tenner," said Gore, with assumed carelessness.

Tom Merry stared, and so did his chums.

"Eb, you're expecting ten pounds!"

"Yes. Nothing wonderful in that, is there?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "It is a great deal for a juniah to have. My govannah sometimes sends me fivahs, but I have vevy seldom had as much as a tenmah at once, except on my birthday. I weally think it is weckless of your patah to send you so much."

"More likely it's a yarn," Lowther remarked. "We all know Gore."

The cad of the Shell sneered.

"Do you?" he said. "Well, as it happens, it's not from my pater, but my uncle in India, who's sent it home for me. I was named after him, and he's sent it as a birthday present, only it's got here a month after my birthday. I expect it by this post. They told me it was coming in my last letter from home."

"My hat!" said Manners. "I wish I had a few uncles like that."

"I darsay you'll all be fearfully civil now, you lot," Gore remarked. "But you won't get anything by it, I can assure you."

Tom Merry's lip curled.

"We sha'n't come on to you for a share of your funds, Gore, you can be pretty sure of that," he said. "You're not the kind of fellow I could chum with any time."

"Yaas, wathah! I could not bowwow of a chap I did not respect, and it is quite impos. to respect an outsiders like Goah."

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Gussy?" asked Gore.

"Certainly not, Goah. I am simply statin' the plain twuth. As a mattah of fact, deah boy, I am gettin' a wregistrah lettah by this post myself, and so we shall be in funds as well as you, and shall not need to bowwow any of your beastly tennah."

The postman was coming up the steps now. Arthur Augustus stepped towards him.

"Thank you, Blagg. That's for me, my deah fellow."

And the swell of the School House held out his hand for the registered letter.

But Blagg the postman shook his head.

"Your name is D'Arcy, I think, sir?"

"Yaas, wathah! Arthaw Augustus D'Arcy."

"Then this is not for you, sir; it's for Master George Gore."

"Weally, that is vevy wotten."

George Gore grinned as he took the letter.

"Of course it's for me," he said. "This is my tenner."

"Congratulations, dear boy," said Mellish, the meanest boy in the School House, in his blandest tone. "Congratulations. Leave those outsiders to do as they like, Gore; you've got your own chums to stand by you."

"As long as the tenner lasts, at any rate," said Blake, with a sniff.

"Oh, you dry up, Blake. You're jealous of Gore; but I don't see why he should take any notice of you."

"I don't intend to," said Gore, loftily. "I know how to treat my own friends. That rotten gang can go and eat coko. I wonder where I can go and get the tenner changed."

He had signed for the letter, and he now proceeded to tear it open.

Sure enough there was a crisp ten-pound note inside, as well as a long letter, which the Indian uncle had doubtless sent home to be sent on to Gore along with the tenner. Gore thrust the letter carelessly into his jacket pocket, and unfolded the bank-note.

There were exclamations of admiration from the boys standing round. Some of them had never seen a ten-pound note before, and very few had ever possessed one. To boys whose pocket-money ranged from a shilling to half a crown a week as a rule, a ten-pound note seemed fabulous wealth. Gore had jumped all of a sudden into high respect and popularity. Even boys who did not expect to get any of the cash showed him a respect they had never shown before. Such is the power of wealth.

But Tom Merry and his party were not of the number. Sycophancy was not a fault that could be attributed to any of them. Besides, they were busy.

The disappointment had been keen. The sight of the registered letter in the postman's hand had made them jump to the conclusion that Gussy's "govannah" had come up to the scratch. But it was a delusion. A letter with a crest upon it was fished out of the bag, but it wasn't registered, and D'Arcy guessed only too well that it contained nothing but paternal advice.

The face of the swell of St. Jim's fell as he received it.

"My word!" murmured D'Arcy. "This is weally a fealful disappointment, and I am howwidly sowwy, deah boys!"

"Anything for us, Blagg?" asked Blake, in the faint hope that some forgotten relation might have written and enclosed some contribution to the famished exchequer.

"One for Master Merry," said the postman.

Tom Merry brightened up as the postman groped in his bag.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I didn't like to write to my old govannah and ask her for anything, as I've had so much lately. But I darsay she's guessed that I was hard up, like a thoughtful old soul. Hand over the letter, Blaggy!"

"It's not a letter, sir, it's a postcard."

"Ow!" said Tom Merry expressively.

And six faces fell.

The postcard, whether it was from Miss Priscilla Fawcett or not, certainly couldn't contain any cash, and Tom's interest in the communication diminished.

Blagg handed it over, and Tom Merry glanced at it.

Then the interest grew in his face again.

ANSWERS

"Can you meet me at Wayland Junction at five? Important!—F. L."

"F. L.!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You know who that is, you chaps?"

"Ferrals Locke!" exclaimed Blake.

"Yes, the detective."

The chums looked interested at once. The postcard was written in pencil, and had evidently been dashed off in a hurry. The name of Ferrers Locke was well known to the juniors of St. Jim's. Only a short time before a rascal, whom the famous detective was tracking, had obtained the entry to the school, and had been captured through Tom Merry and his chums. The prospect of another adventure, and lending his aid to the famous detective, was naturally very attractive to a boy of Tom Merry's disposition.

"Nothing else, Blagg?" asked Manners, with a lingering hope.

"Nothing, sir."

The six juniors returned to Tom Merry's study. Gore had gone off with a crowd of fellows to change his ten-pound note. But the funds had not come in for the six, and they were in as close a strait as ever. The question still was, what was to be done?

CHAPTER 2.

Raising the Wind.

TOM MERRY ran his fingers distractedly through his curly hair.

"What the dickens is to be done, kids?"

He looked round at five faces as serious as his own.

"Gussy has failed us again," he went on.

"Oh, weally, Tom Merwy!"

"We don't blame him, though. It can't be helped. His governor has refused to come up to the scratch. When Gussy writes to him again, I hope he will explain that he regards—and we all regard—the noble earl's conduct as unsportsmanlike. But that doesn't settle the question. Now, you kids, you've seen my postcard. I've got to meet Ferrers Locke at Wayland Junction at five. Locke knows that it's a half-holiday to day at St. Jim's, so I can get off and see him. It hasn't occurred to him that there may be a scarcity in the exchequer, and that I mayn't be able to raise the one and ninepence for the return ticket to Wayland from Rylcombe."

"Thoughtless of him," said Blake severely. "Hasn't he ever been a boy himself, I wonder? If he had, he'd know how the beastly money goes."

"The fact is, we've been careless—"

"Admitted, and Gussy especially has been recklessly extravagant—"

"Oh, weally, Blake—"

"But it's no good going over old ground. We've got to face the facts," Tom Merry remarked. "We're all together in this, chaps! I know you fellows of Study No. 6 would do anything you could on an occasion like the present—"

"Yess, wathah!"

"Certainly," said Blake heartily. "If it comes to the pinch, we'll come down to Rylcombe with you to see you off by train, and pawn Gussy's watch en route—"

"I should weally be most happy to come to the wescuo in that mannah," said D'Arcy modestly. "I wegard all my property as bein' at the disposal of my friends."

"My hat, that chap's a communist!" said Lowther. "I'll have your latest fancy waistcoat, Gussy, please."

The swell of St. Jim's shook his head promptly.

"With the exception of personal attire, of course," he remarked. "I—"

"But it may not be necessary to pop the ticker," said Tom Merry. "That is the correct expression, I believe. I know Figgins & Co. are broke, but they may be able to raise the one and nine, and I know they would if they could. I think I'll run over to the New House and see. You can play diabolo while you wait, but have mercy on the clock."

"But I say," Blake remarked, "if Figgins gets on the track, he may want to take a hand in the game. You remember the last time Ferrers Locke wrote to you, Figgins & Co. caught on, and they nearly made a hash of the thing."

Tom Merry grinned. He remembered very well the adventures of Figgins & Co. as amateur detectives.

"Oh, that's all right," he said confidently. "I shall tell Figgins, and put him on his honour, and then he won't be able to take a hand."

"Good! Then buzz off, we'll wait here. Chuck us over that devil, D'Arcy!"

Diabolo still reigned at St. Jim's. The juniors were playing busily before Tom Merry was fairly out of the study, and the "devils" were spinning to and fro.

Tom Merry went out into the quadrangle, and trudged through the snow over to the New House. Several New House boys saw him coming, and a snowball caught him behind the ear, but he went on his way imperturbably.

"Yah! School House cad!"

"Give him socks!"

The warfare between the rival houses at St. Jim's seldom slept. Sometimes, however, Tom Merry and Blake made "pax" with Figgins & Co., and the followers had to obey the behests of the leaders. Tom Merry entered the New House, brushed the snow off his collar, and went up the stairs to the well-known study of Figgins & Co.

"Come in, fathead!" called out the voice of Figgins, as Tom Merry tapped on the door.

The leader of the School House juniors entered the study.

"Look out!" yelled Figgins.

Tom Merry dodged just in time, and a "devil" cracked against the study door. Figgins & Co. were playing diabolo, but they were not experts yet.

"Sorry," said Figgins, "that was a close shave."

"Sorry it missed, you mean," said Kerr, the Scottish partner in the famous firm of Figgins & Co.

"No," said Figgins, laughing. The long-limbed chief of the New House faction looked curiously at Tom Merry. "What do you want here, though, you School House boulder?"

"Friendly visit," grinned Tom Merry. "We're all broke on our side!"

"Same here," said Figgins ruefully. "Broke to the weary wide! We haven't had ten in the study for two days past."

And Fatty Wynn, the Welsh partner in the Co., made a dismal grimace.

"I am growing thin," he said dolefully. "I feel that I shall go into a decline if things don't look up a bit. Can you notice that my face is growing wasted?"

"No, blessed if I can," said Tom Merry, surveying the chubby countenance of the Falstaff of the New House. "It seems to me that if you laid up for the winter like a Polar bear, Wynn, you'd have plenty of fat to live on for six months or so."

"If you've come here in search of a black eye, Tom Merry, you've come to the right spot!" said Fatty Wynn, looking warlike. "I can take a joke with any fellow, but on a serious subject like this—"

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Figgins. "Grab is always a serious subject to Fatty. You've stabbed him in the very tenderest spot. But I say, Merry, about the tin. How much do you want?"

"Look at that."

Tom Merry handed over the postcard to Figgins & Co.

"I want my return fare to Wayland, if I can get it," he said.

"Ferrers Locke seems to be coming down by the London train to the junction, and he hasn't time to come on in the local to Rylcombe. I must be there to meet him."

"Some chaps have all the luck," said Figgins, with good humoured envy. "How do you know we sha'n't chip in here and—"

"Because you're on your honour now I've shown you the postcard!" grinned Tom Merry. "You can't, you see!"

"I admit it. But—well, never mind. How much have you got, Kerr?"

"Fourpence."

"And you, Wynn?"

"Sevenpence."

"That's elevenpence," said Figgins thoughtfully. "If we could get another brown, we should have your single fare to Wayland, Merry, and you could walk back, or else borrow it of Ferrers Locke."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I shouldn't like to do that. I don't want him to know how we're fixed. I can walk back all right. I'd walk there, only I should never be able to do it by five. And I couldn't get through on a bike, with the snow so thick on the road."

"Well, we'll manage the single fare," said Figgins encouragingly. "I dropped a penny here this morning, when I was looking for my devil, and I daresay we could find it if we hunted for it. That will make up the bob."

"That's jolly good of you, Figgins."

"Rot!" said the long-limbed junior cheerfully. "Let's hunt for that brown."

They hunted for the "brown." It was a long hunt, but finally Fatty Wynn gave a whoop of triumph. He had discovered the missing penny, under the edge of the square of carpet which adorned the floor of Figgins's study.

"There you are, Tom Merry!"

Tom caught the penny deftly enough as it was tossed to him. Kerr handed over his fourpence, and Wynn his sevenpence.

"Good!" said Tom. "I'm awfully obliged to you fellows, and I'll let you have this back as soon as I can. Though," he went on ruefully, "that won't be for some time, I'm afraid. By jove, I wish I could think of some way of earning an honest penny!"

"I say, Merry," exclaimed Figgins, "as you're going in for some fresh affair with the detective, and we're left out of it, you might manage to let us into the thing if you can, you know—we'll go Co., you know, and leave rows over for a bit, if there's anything we can do."

"Right!" said Tom Merry, with a wave of the hand. "I'll do the best I can for you, Figgy. So long, and thanks awfully!"

And Tom Merry tramped back to the School House. Two or three New House snowballs lodged in the back of his neck as he went. He rejoined his waiting friends in the study.

"Got it?" was the general inquiry.

Tom Merry displayed sixpence and six coppers.

"Then you'll have to walk back?" said Manners.

"Yes. That won't hurt me."

"You'll have to take care of the time, to do it before locking-up," Monty Lowther remarked. "We'll come down the Wayland Road and meet you."

"Good," said Blake, "and we'll see you off at the station now."

And it was done. The six juniors put on their coats and caps, and walked down to Rylcombe Station, and Tom Merry bought his ticket and took the train to Wayland. And as he sat in the railway carriage, scudding between snow-sheeted embankments towards Wayland Junction, the hero of the Shell wondered what it was that Ferrers Locke wanted, and whether it would mean another adventure.

CHAPTER 3.

A Curious Case.

FERRERS LOCKE stepped from the train that had stopped snorting and puffing, in Wayland Junction Station. Very fit and very well the famous detective looked, with his well-knit, athletic frame, his keen face and penetrating eyes. He gave a glance up and down the platform, and at once spotted Tom Merry.

Tom Merry had been on the platform a quarter of an hour. He at once saw the detective as he alighted, and came towards him. Ferrers Locke shook hands with the hero of the Shell, and seemed glad to see him.

"I thought you would be here, Tom," he said, "and I am glad. I want you to help me again, if you are willing."

"No 'if' about it, sir," said Tom Merry brightly. "I'm willing, of course."

"Yes, I was sure of that, Tom. But I don't want you alone, as it happens; I want your friends to help me as well. Will you answer for them?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Rather, Mr. Locke. They'd jump at the chance of taking a hand. But—"

"Come into the waiting-room," said the detective. "I have very little time to spare, and we must speak quickly. That is why I asked you to come over here, instead of coming to Rylcombe, or up to the school, myself."

They went along the passage to the little waiting-room. A fire was burning there, and Tom Merry poked it into a cheerful blaze. The afternoon was cold and misty.

"You are returning to London, then, sir?" he asked.

The detective shook his head.

"No, I shall be busy down here for some days to come, I expect. I am going to Wayland Manor from here. I am going to stay there until this matter is settled." The detective's brow wrinkled thoughtfully, as he stretched out his hands to the blaze. "How many real chums have you, Tom, upon whom you can absolutely rely?"

"There are Manners and Lowther, sir, my own chums, then there are the fellows in Study No. 6, Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy, they'd be only too glad to join in," said Tom Merry. "And Figgins & Co, would jump at the chance, and they are true blue, three of the best. What do you think of nine of us, sir?"

"A very good number, and quite sufficient for my purpose."

"We're all ready and willing, Mr. Locke," said Tom Merry eagerly, "and there isn't one you couldn't trust with your life."

"I am sure of it," said the detective, smiling. "Now, Saturday is another half-holiday at St. Jim's, is it not?"

"Yes, we have Wednesday afternoon and Saturday afternoon."

"Saturday afternoon will suit my purpose very well. You are acquainted with the country round St. Jim's, of course."

"I know pretty nearly every inch of it, sir."

"You know the old hut in the wood near the ruined castle?"

Tom Merry laughed. Ferrers Locke looked at him curiously.

"I camped out there once, sir, when I ran away from St. Jim's," said Tom Merry. "I should know the place if anybody does."

"Ah, yes, I remember your telling me." The detective nodded. "Well, I want a watch kept upon that old hut and its vicinity. It is a curious case that brings me down here, and there is a mystery connected with that ruined hut which it is my business to solve. You may have heard that there have been robberies committed in the neighbourhood of Wayland lately, the past two or three weeks."

"Yes, I heard some folk in Rylcombe saying so, Mr. Locke, and a countryman was robbed in Rylcombe Lane the other day."

"I have reason to suspect," resumed Ferrers Locke, "that the scoundrel is a certain character upon whom I have had my eye for some time, but who has lately disappeared from his usual haunts. I have traced him as far as Wayland, some weeks ago, and there lost the trail. I had given the matter up, when I received the report of these robberies, which are evidently committed by someone with more cunning and resource than a common country footpad. The Squire of Wayland has set his keepers hunting for the rascal, whom he believed to have a lurking-place somewhere in the woods, and they found traces of a fire and food in the old hut in the castle wood."

Tom Merry's eyes were gleaming with interest now.

The idea of a hunt for a desperate character through the dark and snowy wood was very attractive to the adventurous lad. And the ruffianly and brutal character of the hunted man prevented Tom from having any sympathy for him. The unknown scoundrel had been guilty of several robberies with violence, one of his victims being a boy belonging to the Grammar School near St. Jim's, who had been badly knocked about.

"The Squire's keepers kept a watch near the hut after that," resumed Ferrers Locke; "and on one occasion they found a dark figure stealing towards it at night. They followed, and according to their declaration, the figure disappeared into the hut, and remained there, and yet when they searched the hut it was quite empty."

Tom Merry smiled.

"That sounds rather a tall story, Mr. Locke."

"Yet it is quite possible, if some secret hiding-place exists in the old hut," Ferrers Locke observed. "It is built on the ruins of the old priory that once stood in the castle wood. There is hardly a trace of the ruins left, but there may be some secret hidden in these recesses of which the knowledge has been lost."

"It is possible, sir."

"Now you know what I want you to do. The rascal is on the watch against the squire's keepers, but schoolboys can wander anywhere in the wood without exciting suspicion. If he saw boys from St. Jim's wandering in or near the old hut, he would not imagine that they were looking for him."

"That's very true, sir."

"And so you and your chums will be able to help me in a way that men could not do. The only doubt in my mind is about the danger—"

"Oh, that's nothing, sir. You won't find any of us nervous, I assure you."

The detective laughed.

"I know that, Merry, and I know that you are not likely to err on the side of temerity," he said. "But I could not allow you to run into danger. I should be responsible to Dr. Holmes, and the parents of the boys. But so long as you keep at least three together there will be no danger. You must promise me to go nowhere in the wood separately."

Willingly, sir."

"Now, under these conditions, I should like you to keep watch upon the vicinity of the old hut as well as you can, Tom, in all your leisure hours, but if nothing is discovered by Saturday, then I shall encroach upon your half-holiday."

"It's quite at your service, Mr. Locke."

"Good. I am remaining in the neighbourhood myself, and I shall search the vicinity of the hut, but it is quite possible that I may discover nothing. But the scoundrel has become a danger to the roads in this district, and he must be run down. If nothing is discovered by Saturday, the Squire's keepers, and my own men, will beat the woods for him, and have a regular hunt. At that time I want the old hut to be watched carefully, so that if he returns to it for shelter, it may be discovered in what den he hides himself."

"We'll watch it, sir," said Tom Merry, gleefully. "We'll nab the bounder."

"And then there is another matter," the detective remarked. "I don't want you to do this work for me for nothing—"

Tom Merry turned red.

"Now, listen patiently, my lad," said Ferrers Locke, smiling.

"I am not thinking of paying you out of my own pocket, which would bar friendship in the case. But I shall receive a certain reward in case of success, and of this I intend to hand over a certain proportion to my assistants."

"I see, sir."

"And so, if the rascal is run down, I shall hand over one guinea to each of the nine shadowers," said Ferrers Locke.

"I—I don't know whether we could take it, sir. But I'll talk it over with the others, and see. It's very kind of you, Mr. Locke."

The detective smiled, and rose to his feet.

"I must be off," he said, looking at his watch. "The trap from the manor is waiting for me outside the station. You will catch the next train back to Rylcombe."

Tom Merry did not reply.

Whether or not he accepted the reward for his detective work, he didn't mean to borrow of Ferrers Locke now, and it never occurred to the detective that Tom had not a return ticket.

Tom Merry accompanied Ferrers Locke to the station entrance, where a groom was slowly driving a trap to and fro to keep the

horse warn. Tom shook hands with the detective, and waved his hand as the trap drove away in the dim winter mist. He waited till the vehicle had disappeared before he walked out of the station, and took the road to Rylcombe.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry Meets the Enemy.

TOM MERRY trudged cheerily on through the thickening mists of the winter afternoon, following the high road till he arrived at the stile, whence the footpath ran through the wood to Rylcombe Lane. It was a short cut for foot-passengers, saving a couple of miles, and it was by this way that Tom Merry's chums were coming from the school to meet him returning.

Although Tom had heard, before seeing Ferrers Locke, of the rascal who had committed robberies in the neighbourhood, he had thought nothing of him when he had told his chums that he would walk home through the Castle Wood. But now, as he quitted the high road and plunged into the dim shadows of the leafless trees, the thought of the unknown rascal came clearly into his mind.

It was quite possible that he might meet him. A boy from the Grammar School had fallen in with him a few days previously and suffered at his hands. Tom Merry had promised the detective that he would not start the hunt for the rascal without at least two of his chums with him, and that promise he meant to keep. But it was quite as risky, now that he came to think of it, to walk through the wood alone in the winter mist. But it was too late to think of that now, and in any case, he had to get back to St. Jim's somehow.

He kept a wary eye open as he entered the dark shadows of the wood, and tramped on up the snow-powdered footpath. The path was cumbered with boughs and twigs that had been brought thickly down by the winter wind, and masses of rotten leaves left from the autumn. Tom Merry's thick boots wren crunch, crunch, squash, squash, as he strode along the dim path.

He gave a sudden start, and the blood thrilled in his veins, as he heard a sudden rustle in the trees on his right. But it was only the shooting of a pile of snow from an overweighed bough, which had at last bent under the weight of it. He laughed at his alarm, and tramped on.

The path grew darker in the thickening mist as he tramped on, and by the time he had reached the middle of the wood he could hardly see the path, and was only sure of his way by watching the grim gaunt trunks that rose at his sides.

"My hat!" murmured Tom Merry: "this is cheerful, and no mistake. I should think it pretty nearly time I heard something of the fellows."

He gave the long, warbling whistle that was a well-known signal among the boys of St. Jim's. There was no reply; however, save the weird echoes of the whistle from the dim depths of the wood.

Rustle! rustle!
Tom heard the sound, and smiled as he thought of his former alarm. But a minute later the smile left his face, and his heart beat thick and fast, as a figure sprang out of the trees into the footpath.

Tom Merry halted.
The figure was big and burly, and wrapped to the neck in a thick coat, with a muffler round the top, and a fur cap drawn down over his ears. Only a prominent red nose and a bristling moustache, damp with frost, and a pair of glittering eyes, were visible of the man's face.

Whether to go on unconcernedly, or to turn back, or to dart into the wood, Tom Merry did not know. He had little time to think. The burly figure came striding towards him.

"Stop there!"
"Well," said Tom Merry, and, in spite of his courage, there was a slight tremor in his voice, "I am stopping."

"Hand over your money, your watch, and everything of value you have about you."

The voice was hard, and rasping, and savage.
Tom Merry could not help grinning at the idea of being asked for money in his present state of impecuniosity. The man in his path was evidently the lurking thief of whom Ferrers Locke was in search. Tom Merry had met him, but not in the way he had hoped. The hero of the Shell was more like the hunted man than the hunter just now!

"Do you hear me? Do you want me to hurt you?"
"I haven't any money," said Tom Merry coolly. "I have a watch, but as I require it as a timekeeper, I haven't any intention of making you a present of it."

The man muttered a savage curse.
"Once more, will you—"

Tom Merry did not wait to hear him. He turned and ran swiftly back along the dim path. The ruffian, with a furious oath, sprang in pursuit, gripping a short thick cudgel in his right hand.

"Stop! I'll brain you! I'll—"
The heavy footsteps behind him told Tom Merry that he had no chance of outrunning the scoundrel. He could not put on his

best speed for fear of dashing into the trees in the blinding mist. But he did not depend upon his running for escape. He had a stratagem in his mind, an old trick, but one that might save him.

He dropped suddenly to the ground, and threw himself back towards the running man. The device succeeded, aided by the dimness of the mist. The man's legs came crashing against Tom Merry, and he fell headlong over the boy. There was a grunt of pain as he crashed headlong to the ground, and the cudgel rolled away into the underwood.

Tom Merry was on his feet in a flash.
There was a pain in his back, where the ruffian's knees had struck him heavily, and his head was a little dizzy. But it was no time to give way. He turned in the direction of St. Jim's, and dashed down the path.

Twice he fell over fallen boughs and fell, and jumped up again and raced on. Tramp, tramp, tramp! He heard the pounding feet of the pursuer behind.

Crash!
Something or somebody reeled back in the middle of the footpath as Tom Merry dashed blindly into it. There was a gasping voice in the mist.

"My word! I am knocked weakly beguathless! What fearful wuffian is it that has wun into me in this howlid mannah?"

Tom Merry could have given a shriek of delight at hearing the well-known tones of the swell of St. Jim's.

"Gussy!" he gasped. "Thank goodness! Where are the others?"

"We're all here," said Blake, as he loomed up in the mist. "What on earth's the matter? You must be a giddy ox to be sprinting like that in such a mist!"

"He's after me—"
"He! Whom? One of the Grammar School chaps, or a village bounder?"

"No, no. The ruffian—the footpad!"
The pounding feet of the ruffian were quite close now, though the mist was too thick for him to be seen.

Blake understood at once. His eyes gleamed with the light of battle.

"Line up, chaps!" he whispered. "We're just in time to give Bill Sikes a warm reception. Get out of the way, Gussy! You're no good here! We'll capture the scoundrel and carry him off to the police-station in Rylcombe, by George!"

"I wufuse to get out of the way, Blake!"
"Ass! He'll hear you and sheer off!"

"That will be your fault. I regard the suggestion that I should clear out of the way as an insult and I distinctly wufuse to do anythin' of the kind."

"Shut up, Gussy!"
"I wufuse to shut up! I am quite as able as any gentleman present to deal with this despicable chawatch, and I wufuse eithal to shut up or to get get out of the way."

"Here he is!" roared Lowther. "Come on!"

A burly form had loomed up out of the mist, and had halted, evidently having heard D'Arcy's voice, and learned that there was more than one foe to be dealt with. But the juniors gave him no time to run.

They piled on him in a moment, and he was borne back with a crash against a tree, snarling and fighting like a wild cat.

"Collar him!" shouted Tom Merry. "He's the brute who knocked the Grammar School chap about. Collar him! It doesn't matter if you hurt him!"

With a tremendous effort the ruffian tore himself loose.
"Collar him!"

But it was too late. With a crash, the scoundrel broke through a frozen bush, and vanished into the dim wood. The juniors ran a few paces in pursuit, but the hopelessness of the chase soon occurred to them.

"Chuck it!" growled Blake, as he came back to the path. "We could never run him down. Never mind, we gave him a jolly good mauling! It was Gussy's fault he got away!"

"I wufuse to look at it in that light! If you had not been wude and disrespectful I should not have been driven to wemonstrate!"

"Oh, ring off! Let's get back to the school. I'm getting fed up with this mist."

It was certainly not pleasant in the misty wood. The juniors tramped off to St. Jim's, and reached the school just before looking-up, much to their relief.

CHAPTER 5.

Tea in Tom Merry's Study.

"F IGGINS!"
"Hallo, kid!"

Curly Gibson, of the Third Form at St. Jim's, put his head into Figgins's study. Figgins & Co. were playing diabolo, as usual.

"Tom Merry wants to see you three over in the School House," said Curly, and went his way whistling.

Figgins dropped his devil and threw the sticks upon the table.

"It's news from Ferrers Locke!" he exclaimed. "Tom Merry promised to let us into it if he could. Come along! Get your caps! It's snowing again."

"Perhaps it's a feed in Tom Merry's study!" said Fatty Wynn hopefully. "If I don't get a feed again soon something serious will happen. The grub they provide in this school isn't enough for a rabbit."

"Not for a Welsh rabbit, perhaps," grinned Kerr. "I find it enough."

"Well, you're a skinny Scotchman!"

"Now, then, no personalities!" said Figgins. "I don't think there's likely to be a feed in the School House, kids, unless Gore gives it. He's been awfully flush with money to-day. I hear that he had a ten-pound note from an uncle in India or China, or somewhere."

"It's a fact!" said Kerr. "I was in the tuck-shop when he asked Dame Taggles if she could change it, and I saw it, and it was genuine enough. He went down to Rylcombe with it, as Dame Taggles couldn't manage it. The old soul has never been asked to change a tenner before, I imagine."

"I say, Gore isn't half a bad fellow, you know!" said Fatty Wynn thoughtfully. "And grub is grub, you know, wherever it comes from. There's a good many things about Gore that I've always liked, and—"

Figgins seized Fatty Wynn by his plump throat and jammed him against the wall. Fatty writhed and wriggled like an eel.

"Lemme alone!" he gurgled. "You're thr—thr—throting me, Figgy! What the dickens are you up to? Are you off your silly rocker?"

"No," said Figgins. "I'm upholding the honour of the study. If you should ever allow your ghastly appetite to make you low-toned to a rotten cad like Gore for the sake of a treat, we'll expel you from the study, you fat cannibal!"

"Oh, Figgy!"

"We'll boil you down into tallow, you plump oyster!" said Kerr. "You—you fat Falstaff! You ghastly gormandiser!"

"Oh, I say, shut up!" remonstrated Fatty Wynn. "I'm not thinking of shunning up with Gore, because he can stand feeds, you know. You couldn't think that of me!"

Figgins released him, and Fatty Wynn rubbed his fat neck. Figgins's grip had not been a gentle one. Figgins was emphatic.

"Well, we won't think it of you," said Figgins. "But the thought crossed your fat mind, you fat animal, so don't say it didn't!"

"Well, I like to look on the bright side of things," said Fatty Wynn. "There's good in everybody, you know, as Shakespeare says, and there may be good in Gore for all we know. A little kindness might bring it to light."

"Possibly. And you can be as kind as you like to him some time when he's stony," said Figgins. "I'll remind you next time you're flush, if Gore happens to be broke."

"H'm!" said Fatty, and he did not pursue the subject.

"Let's get off!" said Kerr. "If Tom Merry hasn't any grub in his study, we shall have to get back to the New House to tea, so there's no time to waste."

"Come along then, kids!"

Figgins & Co. quitted the New House. A few flakes of snow were whirling on the wintry wind in the wide quadrangle. The New House juniors crossed to the rival house, and soon found themselves at the door of Tom Merry's study, which was opened at once when Figgins knocked, by the hero of the Shell himself.

"Come in, kids!" said Tom Merry hospitably. "There's not much besides a welcome, but there's lots of that."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Tom Merry has found out a way of turnin' an honest penny, Figgins, and you're wanted to join."

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were all three in Tom Merry's study. The fire was burning cheerfully in the grate, Tom Merry having borrowed some coal of the house-dame. The gas burned brightly, the light being supplied by the school, and so not being affected by the shortness of cash in the study. The tea-table was spread, and the cloth was nice and clean and white, but it had to be admitted that the show made by the provisions thereon was a poor one.

Figgins & Co. glanced at it, and Tom Merry nodded his head disparagingly.

"Rotten, isn't it?" he remarked. "I know it is rather a mouldy turn-out, Figgy. It's the best we can scure up, and if you've got anything better at home in the New House, don't mind saying so, and we'll excuse you."

Figgins laughed.

"That's all right, old son," he said. "We've got an absolutely bare cupboard at home, and we should have had tea in the hall, and you know what tea is like if you don't add anything to the school fare yourself. This is all right, but it's a bit rough to invade you when supplies are running so short."

"Oh, it's always a pleasure to see you, Figgins!"

"My hat! That's worth ninepence," said Figgins. "If you've done making pretty speeches, kid, we'll sit down."

"Pway do, dear boys, and do the best you can," said D'Arcy.

"We have all clubbed together with our supplies to make up

this feed, and it's a weally wotten one aftah all. But you must take the will for the deed, you know."

"I believe a will is a deed, in a legal sense," said Monty Lowther, who was given to punning. "You see—"

"No, we don't," said Tom Merry. "We never see your rotten puns, Monty. Sit down, Figgy, and make yourself at home. Try the sardines; they're jolly good, and there's nine of them, which will be one each all round. That's a start, anyway."

"First rate," said Figgins. "Nothing could be better."

"Nothing," said Kerr heartily.

Fatty Wynn would have said the same from native politeness, but he simply could not. The sight of a poorly-provided table always seemed a touching one to Fatty Wynn; and when he happened to be hungry, it grew tragic. It occurred to him to cut across to the New House, and get the school tea, before tackling the feed in Tom Merry's study. But he reflected that when he got back the table would certainly be bare, and so he remained where he was, but he was not happy.

Tom Merry poured out the tea. There was plenty of that, for Tom had borrowed it of Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, the most good-natured fellow in the school. There was plenty of sugar, too, a supply of that having been raised from Darrell and Bushden, two Sixth-Formers with whom Tom was on good terms. But the milk was not plentiful, the juniors having only a little left in the bottom of a condensed-milk tin. But everyone present suddenly discovered that he really didn't care much for milk, anyway, and so apparently it did not matter much.

The nine sardines quickly disappeared. One was a very small one, which Tom Merry magnanimously placed upon his own plate. There was a whole loaf of bread, generously provided by the house-dame, and, as Blake pointed out, by careful husbandry of the combined supplies of butter, marmalade, and jam, there would be enough of something or other to stick on all they wanted to eat.

"Can't expect luxuries in times like these," said Blake.

"After all, we've a lot to be thankful for. There's fellows who have to live on bread and water, you know, and you never know what you may come to. I've heard of fellows keeping wives and families on a pound a week—"

"Pway excuse me," said D'Arcy. "But I must remark that that is quite impos—"

Blake. Suppose the fellow you are speakin' of only gave—say, a guinea for a silk top-hat, that would be a week's cash gone. Then if he got a fancy waistcoat for twenty-five bob, it would take up more than a week's money. He would have to live without grub for a fortnight or more to provide just those two vewy necessawary articles, and I put it to all the gentlemen present, if a man could possibly appear in public with nothin' but a silk hat and a waistcoat? He would have to spend—"

"Ha, ha! If D'Arcy were wrecked on a desert island," said Figgins, "I believe he would be happy so long as he saved a silk hat and a fancy waistcoat from the wreck. Pass the jam, Manners, I see there's a flavour left. This is really ripping!"

The juniors all made a very good show of enjoying a good meal, but it was ended at last. They shoved the table away, and pulled their chairs nearer the fire. It was a bit of a crush, but, as Blake contentedly remarked, that made it all the more cosy. A fellow can always be happy if he is determined to be.

"And now," said Figgins, "we'll hear this great and ripping plan of making money."

"Right!" said Tom Merry. And he proceeded to relate the particulars of his meeting with Ferrers Locke at Wayland Junction, and the arrangement he had made with the detective. And he went on to tell of his adventure on the way home through the Castle Wood.

Figgins gave a prolonged whistle.

"My hat! Some fellows have all the luck!" he exclaimed. "Still, as we're going to be in it, we can't grumble. And you think it was really the cad Locke is after, Merry, whom you met in the wood?"

"Certain of it."

"Fity you couldn't collar him. But, of course, you couldn't expect to—a lot of School House kids! If some of us had been there—"



POLLIE GREEN

IS IN

This Week's

"Girls' Friend."

PRICE ONE PENNY.

"You'd have made a bigger muck of it," remarked Blake. "Nice way you extinguished—I mean, distinguished yourself last time when you hunted a burglar—"

"Let's get on with the washing," said Figgins hastily. "We're in this, of course? As for Ferrers Locke's offer of a guinea each for the job, I don't see why we shouldn't take it. It won't bring us under the rules governing professionals—"

"Ha, ha! But—"

"If it came out of Locke's own pocket, we couldn't take it, and he wouldn't insult us by offering it," said Figgins. "But as a part of the reward which he receives for getting hold of the rascal, why I think we're really entitled to it, if the detective chap likes to share out. It's only fair, if we help to capture the scoundrel."

"That's how I look at it," said Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! We pweeserve our status as amateurs, deah boys, as we can regard that payment simply as expenses, as they do in county cricket," said D'Arcy.

"Good idea!" was the general verdict.

"The plan of campaign arranged, then," Tom Merry remarked thoughtfully. "We're going to do as Ferrers Locke directs. In all the spare time we can get we'll watch for that rascal, and we'll see if we can spot his hiding-place in the wood. I never noticed any secret den that time I camped in the old hut, but it may have been there all the time. Part of the floor, I know, was the old stonework of the priory. Are all you kids agreed upon giving up the football on Saturday afternoon too?"

"Certainly," said Figgins heroically. "You can't expect to effect anything without making sacrifices, you know. We'll give up the footer, and welcome."

"Good! It's a bit of a wrench to give up a Saturday afternoon, I know, at a time of the year when it's too dark to play after afternoon school," said Tom Merry; "but it's for the good of the cause. That scoundrel in the wood is a dangerous villain, and he may do ever so much harm to innocent people if he's not caught."

And the juniors discussed the matter in all its bearings round the study fire, roasting and eating chestnuts while, the said chestnuts being a present from Tom Merry's governess at Laurel Villa, and very welcome to the youngsters in their present state of need. During the discussion, a noise in the adjoining study had been growing ever louder; and once or twice Tom Merry had tapped on the wall as a hint to the revellers next door to keep quieter. But the row continued.

"I say," exclaimed Figgins suddenly, "that's Gore's study next to yours, isn't it, Tom Merry?"

The hero of the Shell nodded.

"He's keeping it up on that tenner," said Figgins, grinning. "It's about time we broke up, I think. Let's have a look in at Gore before we go."

An idea that was greeted with general approval. The nine juniors crowded out of the study, and Tom Merry knocked at the next door down the corridor, opened it, and entered.

CHAPTER 6.

Gore Gives a Feed.

GORE and his friends were certainly "keeping it up," as Figgins expressively put it. Gore's study was a good-sized one, almost as large as Tom Merry's, and it was crammed with juniors who had shown a marvellous friendship for Gore since the arrival of the munificent gift from the Indian uncle.

The table had been augmented in size by several boards laid from it to Gore's writing-desk, and two or three forms had been smuggled into the room to seat the numerous guests. Gore sat at the head of the table, as befitted. There was just room for him there, with his back to the window, which was open on account of the heat. The evening was cold, but there was a fire in the study, and the heat from that, and from twelve cramm'd juniors, made the company glad to have the window open.

The table and its extension were groaning under the good things, to use a novelistic expression. Certainly Gore, if he meant to purchase popularity by the expenditure of his sudden wealth, had gone very wisely to work. The "grab" was good, and there was plenty of it. A couple of pounds carefully laid out will go very far in providing a "feed," and Gore had certainly expended as much as that in this entertainment.

The juniors crowded round the table were eating heartily, and they only paused between the mouthfuls to make complimentary remarks to Gore. Gore seemed to be feeling extremely well pleased with himself. He had none of the qualities which make a fellow liked, nor did he ever seek popularity by any kind of unselfishness or good nature. But he liked it all the same, and it was cheaply bought with mere money. As long as his cash lasted George Gore was likely to be popular with the meaner sort of juniors in the School House. When it was gone, it was extremely doubtful if his sudden popularity would not go with it.

"My hat! This is jolly!" Mellish remarked. "I always

said that Gore was a jolly generous fellow, and I say it again." "So he is," said Walsh. "He'd make a far better leader for the School House juniors than that chap Merry."

"True enough. Why shouldn't Gore be house-captain?" Gore's eyes sparkled. He had always aimed at supplanting Tom Merry, and he was not keen enough to see that he lacked the qualities of a leader, especially courage and ready wit. He was about to speak when the door opened, and Tom Merry & Co., crowding and looking over one another's shoulders, stared into the study. Gore gave them a far from amiable glance.

"There's nothing for you," he said rudely. "You needn't come crawling round in the hope of being asked to the feed, because you're not wanted."

Tom Merry's eyes burned, but Blake only grinned. He had too hearty a contempt for Gore to allow anything the cad of the Shell said to annoy him.

"My dear kid, we haven't come to the feast," he said. "Figgins, our honoured guest from the New House, had a curiosity to see the animals feed, and we brought him here to show him."

"That's the idea," said Monty Lowther. "You must look upon us simply as keepers showing a party of visitors round the Zoo at feeding-time."

Gore scowled. He always felt at a loss in a waf of words with Tom Merry & Co.

"Oh, get out, you fellows!" said Mellish. "We know very well that you came on the chance of what you could get."

"Of course they did," said Barker. "Look at Fatty Wynn, how he's eyeing that ham. He looks as if he'd give his little finger for a good bite at it."

There was a howl of laughter in the room, and Fatty Wynn turned red and disappeared from view. It was true that he had been fixing an unconsciously longing look upon that ham.

"You can travel," said Gore. "What are you poking into my study for? You'll soon be pulled down off your perch, Tom Merry. The School House juniors are thinking of getting a new leader."

Tom Merry laughed.

"And his name is Gore, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Gore defiantly. "Why not, if the majority choose?"

"My dear kid, before you've worked up your majority your ten-pound note will be all blue, and then the chance will be gone," said Tom Merry good naturedly. "You can't keep this sort of thing up long, and when you can't feed these chaps—"

"Oh, get out!" said Mellish, who did not relish Tom Merry's frankness. "You're bothering us. I tell you we're not going to ask you in."

"Oh, let's go," said Figgins. "If we had that lot in the New House we'd kill 'em and bury 'em under the coal-cellar. Come along!"

A loud jeer followed the sightseers as they withdrew. An over-ripe banana whirled out of the study as Figgins closed the door, and burst on his nose. The New House leader gave a yell and threw the door wide open again, but Kerr caught him by the arm and pulled him back.

"No rows now, Figgys. They're not worth it."

"That's all very well," growled Figgins, wiping his face with his pocket-handkerchief. "My face is beastly sticky!"

Kerr closed the door, and Figgins rather unwillingly left the spot. Tom Merry and his friends accompanied the visitors to the door of the School House, and saw them out into the quadrangle. Figgins & Co. went out into the misty night, and looked up at the lighted window of Gore's study as they passed under it.

"There's the great feast-giver," chuckled Kerr, pointing up. Gore's back end head could be clearly seen at the open window. A gleam of mischief darted into the eyes of Figgins.

"Wait a minute, kids!" he muttered.

"What's the game?" asked Fatty Wynn, as Figgins stood with his head thrown back, gazing up at the lighted study window, as if making a mental calculation.

"Cut over to the New House and bring me my diablo set, Kerr, will you?" said Figgins, without replying to Fatty Wynn's question.

"What on earth for?" asked the astonished Kerr.

"Don't ask questions; do as I tell you."

Kerr, who never disputed the behests of his chief, obeyed. He returned in a few minutes with the diablo set, and then the Co. watched Figgins's proceedings curiously.

Figgins soon had the devil spinning on the string, and he sent it up several times and caught it again to test his skill. Until he became accustomed to the dimness he made several misses, but soon he caught it skilfully enough. Each time the whirling devil went higher, till it rose to a level with Gore's study window.

Figgins's eyes gleamed. He had got his distance now correctly. A voice could be heard from the study—it was Mellish's—making a speech thanking the founder of the feast. Gore rose to reply, and now his whole broad back was exposed at the open window.

And then Figgins made the cast he had been planning and the "devil" flew with deadly aim from the string.

"Gentlemen," said Gore, "I rise to reply—I rise to—oh, ow! Gerrooooooh!"

Something—he did not know what—had hit him in the back of the neck, and with considerable force, too. He was totally unprepared for such a shock, and he fell forward, and plunged wildly upon the table. His arms came down upon the crockery with a crash, and his nose was buried in a dish of butter.

But that was not the extent of his misfortunes. It happened that the flimsy extension of the table was at the end where Gore sat, and it wasn't built to stand the weight of a well-grown junior suddenly plunging upon it. There was an ominous creak, a lurch, and just as Gore was rising from his unexpected face-wash of butter, the structure collapsed. There was a terrific smash of crockery, a crash of falling dishes and their contents, and in the midst of the ruins Gore plunged wildly.

Figgins & Co. heard the smash, and chuckled grimly.

"That's one better than his rotten banana," Figgins remarked; and then he hailed the window. "Good-night, Gore. I hope you will be able to sort yourself out."

Wrathful faces crowded the window, among them Gore's, red with rage, and with a mass of butter still adhering to it. Missiles showered out into the night. But Figgins & Co. had beaten a swift retreat, and the missiles whirled harmlessly among the falling snowflakes.

CHAPTER 7.

The Track in the Snow.

TOM MERRY and his chums lost no time in carrying out the directions of Ferrers Locke. On the following day, after morning school, they strolled down the lane to the wood. The ground was impossible for the usual football practice, and, as Blake remarked, this new "wheez" had come in good time to keep them busy. It was quite as good fun as punting a ball about in the gym., or sliding on the frozen Ryll.

The Castle Wood did not look inviting. There were drifts of heavy snow in the glades, and the trees, gaunt and leafless, rustled drearily in a bitter wind. The boys' boots sank deep in the snow, and light flakes were still fluttering down.

They followed the footpath to the spot where Tom Merry had encountered the enemy the previous night. Tom looked back and gave a whistle as he saw the deep tracks nine pairs of boots had left in the snow on the path.

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, following his glance. "No good trying to do this thing secretly, kids. Ferrers Locke was quite right, you see; he must have thought of this. If the squire's keepers start hunting for the rascal while the snow is on the ground, or the local police either, their tracks would soon warn the fellow where to look out for them."

"That's so," agreed Tom Merry. "But the tracks of a party of schoolboys couldn't alarm him. Ferrers Locke thinks of everything."

He quitted the path and they followed him, plunging into the wood. As near as possible Tom entered the trees at the spot where the ruffian had taken to flight the previous evening. But the fall of snow during the night had completely obliterated his tracks, and amid the frozen bushes there was nothing to indicate that human feet had passed that way.

The juniors, eager in the hunt, pressed on without much regard to the passage of time. One o'clock boomed out over the woods from the village church, but they hardly noticed it. They pressed on, eager to find traces of the scoundrel who haunted the wood, and the direction they took led them towards the ruined hut in the heart of the wood—the hut where Tom Merry had "camped out" on a memorable occasion.

Suddenly Tom Merry uttered an exclamation. They crowded up at once.

"What is it, Merry?"

"Look!" said Tom, laconically, pointing to the ground.

"Footprints, by George!"

They were unmistakably footprints, deeply indented in the soft snow. The fresh flakes falling had partly covered them, but the fact that they were not entirely obliterated showed that the man who had left them had recently passed that way.

Tom Merry bent down and examined the tracks with the air of an Indian hunter.

"Jolly big boots that chisp wore," he said; "and he trod heavily, too, as if he were carrying something. See how deep the marks go."

"Good old Frank Dudley!" said Figgins admiringly. "Can you tell us the colour of his eyebrows from the size of his feet?"

"No," said Tom Merry, laughing; "I can't. But I think we had better follow this chap. He may be only a keeper, of course, but he may very likely be the man we're hunting for."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Figgins, as the chime of the village clock floated through the frosty air, "That's half-past one!"

The juniors looked at one another. Half-past one was the dinner-time at St. Jim's for the boys, and they were not allowed

to miss that meal. Tea was the only meal that could be taken at choice in their studies. Dinner was an important function it was impossible to miss. But it was manifestly impossible to get back to St. Jim's in time now.

"Can't be helped," said Tom Merry. "If we buzzed off now we should be too late. It will only mean lines, so long as we turn up in time for afternoon school at half-past two. We shall have to miss our dinner. I begged a bundle of sandwiches from the house-dame in case of accidents, and here they are. Lowther has a pocketful of chestnuts, too."

"Good!" said Figgins. "Hand out the grub, and let's feed as we go along. We can't leave the trail at a point like this. Come on, and let's run the giddy pirate to his lair."

"Yaas, wathah! I think if we explain the circus of the case to Mr. Wailton, he will not be angry," said D'Arcy. "When he knows that we were hunting a beastly burglar fellow, of course, he will see—"

"Ass!" said Blake. "If you say a word, I'll drown you in a hip-bath. You want drowning twice a day, at least."

"But, my dear boy, Ferrers Locke would not ask us to do anything that the mestabs at the coll. would object to, I am sure—"

"I know that, fathhead. He has probably written to the Head about it. Still, masters are kittle cattle, and you can't be too careful. Don't be an ass. If we get an impot, we'll take it and say nothing. It's all in the day's work. Besides, Ferrers Locke thinks we're only going to do the watching business. As a matter of fact, if we come upon the rascal we shall lay him by the heels. See?"

"Yaas, wathah; but—"

"Shut up!" said Tom Merry. "Don't talk; voices carry a long way in this air. Buck up!"

In silence the band of juniors followed the trail. The footprints led them steadily on, still in the direction of the old hut. Tom Merry came to a sudden halt. The old hut lay before them, visible through the bare, frosty trunks. It did not look like a refuge for such weather. The walls were tottering, the windows open to the wind, and the roof partly gone. Snow was piled thickly upon it and around it. The tracks in the snow led right up to the gaping doorway.

Tom Merry gave a suppressed exclamation.

"Look!"

There was no need for him to speak, however. All the juniors saw the dim form moving in the hut—a burly figure in a thick coat and heavy boots, visible for a moment through the opening of the doorway.

Tom Merry turned to his companions with gleaming eyes.

"That's no keeper, kids. I know him again," he whispered.

"It's the scoundrel who attacked me last night—the brute who knocked the Grammar School kid about."

There was a hiss of deep-drawn breath. The same thought was working in nine brains at the same time.

"We've run him down," said Figgins. "We've cornered him. We're going to rope him in!"

"Good!" said Blake. "We've all got weapons of some kind, and nine of us ought to be enough to handle the hooliganest hooligan that ever hooliganed!"

"Yaas, wathah! If he resists we shall stwike him to the gground."

"The thing's settled, then," said Tom Merry. "Come on. Follow me, and weapons ready. If he resists, hit him hard, that's all."

"Righto."

Each of the juniors was armed in some way—cudgel or stick. They had not come unprepared. Tom Merry quitted the cover of the trees and ran swiftly and silently over the soundless snow towards the hut. Fast on his track came the rest of the juniors.

It took Tom Merry less than a minute to reach the hut. No sound had come from within, and whether the ruffian was aware of his approach or not he could not tell. He paused one moment at the open doorway, and then sprang into the hut. He was ready for a savage blow, but it did not come. He gazed around him in amazement. There was no one in the hut.

He stepped right in, and the juniors crowded after him. Exclamations of surprise fell from all lips, but Tom Merry motioned them to be silent.

"Gone!" muttered Lowther. "But where on earth has he gone to?"

"Goodness only knows."

They stared round in amazement. There was nowhere in the hut for a man to hide. That the ruffian had been there they knew, for they had seen him plainly for one moment through the doorway. That was less than two minutes ago. Yet now he was gone, without leaving a trace behind.

"He must have seen us coming, and cut out at the back," whispered Figgins.

Tom Merry shook his head.

There were two or three gaps in the rear wall of the hut, through which a man might easily have passed. But the snow without was white and untrodden. It could not have failed to leave unmistakable traces if the ruffian had passed that way.



"Of course it's for me," said Gore. "This is my tenner." "Congratulations, dear boy," said Mellish, the meanest boy in the School House, in his blandest tone. "Congratulations. Leave those outsiders to do as they like, Gore; you've got your own chums to stand by you."

"I suppose the wuffian can't be on the woff," suggested D'Arcy, looking upward.

"Ass!" said Blake. "It wouldn't bear his weight."

"But where can he be, then, deah boy?"

"May as well have a look," Kerr remarked; and he climbed on Figgins's shoulders and put his head out of the gap in the roof of the hut.

The roof was white with snow, and quite untenanted. The snow there had not been disturbed. Kerr dropped back to the ground and shook his head.

"My word!" said Tom Merry, "this is a bit above my comprehension. We know he was here—and besides, there are his footmarks leading right up to the doorway, and there are none leading away from the hut."

"Then he is still here," D'Arcy remarked. "It is excessively remarkable that we cannot see him, if he is here, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry was examining the hut with keen glances.

He bent and carefully scanned the floor. It was of bare earth and stone, the hut having been built over the ancient ruins of the priory that had once existed there. Tom Merry tapped with his foot on the grimy, moss-grown stone beneath him. Was it possible that some opening existed there?

It seemed to be the only feasible theory. Nine keen pairs of eyes scanned the stone in the hope of discovering some traces of an opening.

The result was—nil!

Figgins suddenly looked at his watch. He gave an exclamation of dismay.

"I say, it's ten past two. If we don't cut back at top speed we shall be late."

It was evident that nothing more could be done. The juniors gave up the task, and set off for the footpath. Then they started at a run for St. Jim's.

Tom Merry's brow was wrinkled in thought.

"Well, we've discovered something, at all events," he exclaimed at last. "We know for certain now that, as Ferrers Locke surmised, the old hut is the ruffian's lurking-place, and that there is some secret den there where he hides. We've only to discover where it is, and we shall have him."

"Only!" said Blake, with a grimace.

"Oh, we shall do it," said Tom Merry confidently. "Here's St. Jim's."

They went in, and separated in the hall, hurrying off to their respective class-rooms. They were just in time to take their places with the rest. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, looked severely at the Terrible Three.

"You were not in to dinner, Merry, Lowther, and Manners," he said. "You need not trouble to make excuses. You will take one hundred lines of Virgil apiece."

"Yes, sir," said the Terrible Three, with one voice, meekly enough.

Mr. Lathom was not quite so hard on the Fourth-Formers. Twenty lines apiece fell to the six youngsters, and they took them cheerfully.

CHAPTER 8.

The Opposition.

AT tea-time the amateur detectives turned up in the hall. If they had gone to their studies for that meal, they would have been in the sad case of Mother Hubbard, who found the cupboard bare. The Terrible Three exchanged sympathetic glances with Study No. 6, as the two parties came in to tea.

"Hard cheese," Tom Merry remarked. "But we'll have a ripping spread, to make up for it, when we get that guinea each on Saturday."

"Yaas, watah! It is weally too bad," D'Arcy went on,

as he walked to the Fourth-Form table with Blake and Herries. "My governor has sent me absolutely nothin' but good advice! Wotten, isn't it? I've written to him again, you know, and he hasn't answered yet, though he weally has had plenty of time. I wegard it as neglectful."

"Horrid," said Blake solemnly. "Are you sure that you have brought up your governor carefully, Gussy—that you didn't neglect him in his tender youth, or allow him to get into selfish ways for want of a little kind care at the right moment?"

"Oh, don't wot, Blake. This is a weally sewious mattah." "Awfully serious, when we have to eat these slabs of bread-and-butter, instead of having tea in the study," agreed Blake. "Never mind, we shall be wealthy on Saturday. I notice that Gore isn't patronising the school tea. Another feed in his study, I suppose."

"Yaas, wathah! I saw Gore and Mellish coming out of Dame Faggles's shop with packages undah their arms, you know, and they gwinned at me. I suppose they thought I wanted some of their beastly gwub, which was quite an ewror on their part. I left them gwinnin' like a pair of beastly hyenas, you know."

"I hear that Gore is going to take his set down to the tuck-shop in Rylcombe and treat them," Herries remarked. "He's getting awfully popular. They're talking of making him junior captain—electing him, you know—and all that. All the measly rotters in the house are tagging after his ten-pound note."

"It won't last long at that rate," said Blake, with a grin. "Gore's gone up like a rocket, and he'll come down like the blessed stick. There'll be a fall for him soon."

"Silence, there!" Tea was soon over. It did not tempt the boys to linger, and the amateur detectives were soon out. But there was no leaving the school to renew the hunt. On account of the fall of snow, looking up was earlier, and besides, there were the lines to do. Figgins, always daring, suggested breaking bounds, but Tom Merry shook his head.

"We might get gated for Saturday," he said, "and then all the fat would be in the fire. No, it's not much of a time for tracking the enemy, anyway. Let's get the lines done, and play diabolo."

It was a good suggestion, and it was adopted. The School House six played the game in Tom Merry's study, while Figgins & Co. were similarly occupied in the New House. While Tom Merry and his friends were "diaboloing" they could hear the noise from Gore's room, which told that the newly-rich junior was entertaining again. Gore's study was crammed, his popularity rising ereacendo, so to speak, as the reports of his last study feed were spread through the house. Even a few New House boys had come over to tandy to the ead of the Shell for the sake of the feed.

The next day the weathar was finer, though there was still a thick white crust of snow on the ground. Tom Merry was not slow to notice a certain change that had come about in his position among the juniors of the School House. All the "wasters," as Blake described them, had gathered round Gore, and the ead of the Shell was fast forming a party of his own, and evidently intended to dispute the leadership of the juniors with Tom Merry. That leadership had always been in dispute between Tom Merry and Blake, but Gore was a new rival in the field.

Some of the fellows were toadies, and some did not care a rap who was the leader, as they had no chance of the distinction themselves. And there were a good many members of the old "Smart Set" who still resented the drastic way in which Tom Merry and his chums had smashed up their honourable society. Consequently, Gore did not find it hard to make an opposition party—though whether it would hold together when there were no more treats was a question, and one he did not think of answering.

Tom Merry took it all coolly enough. If he had allowed himself to be disturbed, that would have been a triumph for the opposition, and very encouraging to Gore. But his absolute indifference rather disconcerted them.

Gore decided to bring matters to a head, and after school on Friday he came up to Tom Merry in the quadrangle, with a party of his followers at his heels.

"I want to speak to you, Merry," he exclaimed, with an air of truculence, emboldened by the dozen or so backers behind him.

Tom glanced at him carelessly. "Fire away, then," he said.

"You call yourself leader of the School House juniors," said Gore aggressively. "So does Blake, for that matter, and you've never been able to settle the point between you. But, as a matter of fact, the fellows have had enough of you both. They want a new leader, and a considerable number have asked me to take the post."

"Take it, then," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Do you mean to say that you don't object?"

"Certainly not. If anybody wants you for a leader, he can have you, and welcome. If the School House juniors elect

you, why—there you are! I sha'n't interfere. My dear children, you can play at any game you like without worrying your little heads about me. I'm quite content to stand aside."

"And you'll follow my lead with the rest?"

"Oh, no!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "That's asking a little too much. When it comes to a tussle with the New House again, I expect Figgins & Co. will wipe up the ground with you. There won't be any more house rows till after Saturday, as Figgys and I have made a truce. But I expect you'll have a warm time next week, if your leadership lasts as long as that. I don't mind."

"Look here, Tom Merry, if I'm made house leader, and you don't obey orders, you'll get a licking, and that's what you've wanted for a long time, too."

"Better give me one, while you're on the job," suggested Tom, pushing back his cuffs. "Come on, Gore, old chap, and Mellish can help you if he likes."

"Fair play's a jewel," said Mellish, who had faced Tom's fists once, and never meant to do it again if he could help it. "Man to man is fair."

"Oh, I shouldn't mind. Are you coming on, Gore?"

"No," said Gore uneasily. "It's not a question between us two. You'll get a dormitory licking if you don't follow your leader."

"Righto, I'll risk it," said Tom Merry, and he walked away whistling.

Gore felt rather uneasy. The leader of a set like the School House juniors required first of all plenty of grit, and in that quality Gore was sadly lacking. He had seen several of his own followers winking at one another when he refused Tom Merry's challenge. He realised upon how unstable a foundation he was building his hopes. Tom Merry was a leader because he won the hearts of those who followed. Gore appealed solely to their stomachs, and so his power was extremely insecure.

"Who's coming down to Mother Murphy's?" asked Gore, looking round.

Instantly there was a chorus of approval, and Gore regained all the ground he had lost—if it was worth regaining. The party went down to the gates, which were not yet locked. They tramped out cheerfully enough into the snowy lane in the dusk.

It was a short walk into the village by the short cut. But the short cut was very gloomy and sombre under the wintry trees. Some of the juniors looked about them uneasily into the shadows.

"I say, have you heard about that awful ruffian who has been hanging about this wood," Mellish remarked presently. "He half-killed a boy from the Grammar School, I hear."

"Oh, rats!" said Gore uneasily. "We sha'n't meet him."

"We might. This is just the place—"

"Well, I suppose there are enough of us to tackle him," said Gore valiantly. "A dozen of us are not going to run from one man, I suppose."

"Oh, he's an awful ruffian. He carries a cudgel, and he might break your cocoonut with a blow. No good—Oh, dear, what's that?"

It was a rustle in the frozen thickets.

The party stopped still, and knees began to knock together. If Tom Merry had been there, he would have inspired the rest with his own courage. But Gore was not the kind of leader to do that. His teeth were chattering like castanets.

"W-w-w-w-w-wh-wh-wh-what is it?" he stammered.

"W-w-w-w-w-wh-wh-wh—"

A burly figure leaped out into the footpath.

"Stop! Run, and I'll brain you! Hold on there!"

It was a hoarse, savage voice. The juniors stood shivering with terror. Mellish and two or three others, who were in the rear, started off at a pace they had never shown on the cinder-path, helter-skelter back towards the road. Gore would have run with the rest, but in his terror his foot caught in a root, and he sprawled on the ground. He was too terrified to rise, and he lay there palpitating, in horrid anticipation of the crashing blow of the bludgeon.

He shrieked with fear as a rough hand grasped him and dragged him to his feet. His terrified eyes fell upon the burly ruffian, and no one else. The rest of the juniors were scampering down the path like frightened hares. Gore was alone with the terror of the countryside.

The evil face under the close-drawn fur cap was grinning with contemptuous amusement. Gore was evidently a victim of a very different calibre from that of Tom Merry! The ruffian shook him till his teeth knocked together.

"Hand me over your money, quick, afore I brain yer!"

Gore trembled.

"I—I haven't any! I—I—" The lie leaped to his lips by instinct; with cowardice the instinct to lie is usually found.

"I—I haven't a shilling!"

He had nearly seven pounds in his pockets, and the thought of losing it made him almost desperate. But he did not dare to struggle. The heavy bludgeon in the ruffian's hand scared him too much for that. If a lie could save his money—

But it could not. The ruffian did not speak again, but threw the junior to the ground, and went through his pockets with grim thoroughness. Probably Gore's manner had betrayed the fact that he had money about him. The boy gave a groan as he heard the rascal utter an exclamation of satisfaction. Gold glittered on the snow as the robber turned the cash out of his victim's pockets.

Six sovereigns, a half-sovereign, and some silver rewarded the ruffian. He must have been amazed to find so much money in the possession of a boy of Gore's age, but how Gore had come by it mattered little to him. He thrust it into an inside pocket of his coat, and Gore's watch and chain followed it. Then the ruffian rose.

He seemed inclined to kick the shivering junior out of sheer brutality, but perhaps his unexpected haul had mollified his savage temper somewhat. He stood glaring down at him for a moment, and then turned away and plunged into the wood.

Not until the crackling of branches had died away in the underwood, and silence reigned once more, did Gore venture to move. Then he slowly rose to his feet, and with a fearful glance round him, set off as fast as his legs could carry him.

The gloom, the loneliness of the wood, added to his terror. In every rustle he heard the returning footsteps of the ruffian, in every moving shadow he saw the upraised bludgeon. He was panting with exhaustion and fear as he reached the stile at last, and clambered over it into Rylcombe Lane. Dim forms loomed up before him and round him then, and to his tormented imagination they seemed all savage foes. He fell on his knees in the snow.

"Mersey! mersey! I—"

"My hat!" said a well-known voice, "it's Gore!"

It was the voice of Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 9.

The Fall of the Ambitious!

TOM MERRY stared at the form before him in amazement. Gore staggered to his feet, red with shame. Tom Merry & Co. were before him in the dim and misty lane, and the ruffian of the wood was probably a mile away.

"What on earth's the matter, Gore?" asked Tom Merry. "Have you gone right off your rocker, or is this a little joke?"

"I—I have been robbed!"

The chums were all interest at once. "Who's robbed you?" asked Figgins quickly—"and where? Get it out, man, and we may be able to nab the scoundrel!"

"It's the ruffian who's been lurking about the wood for weeks, I believe," stammered Gore, his terror not quite gone yet. "He attacked us in the wood as we were taking the short cut to Rylcombe. I stood up to him, while the others ran away."

There was a general cackle from nine.

"Yaas, wathiah! I think I can see you doin' that, Gore, dear boy," Arthur Augustus remarked. "I know it is not polite to doubt a gentleman's word, my dear fellow, but weally you must not put so great a strain on our credulity."

"Come, let's have the facts, Gore," said Tom Merry. "We'll go after the rascal, and we may be able to collar him."

"He had hold of me," said Gore sullenly; "I couldn't get away. He knocked me about something awful, and took all my money!"

"You don't seem much hurt, and you were running pretty hard, too," remarked Blake. "I fear that you are erring on the side of exaggeration again, Gore. Take warning in time, and—"

"Oh, shut up! I tell you he's got all my money—over seven pounds—and I've got nothing left," said Gore savagely.

"Hard cheese," agreed Blake. "We'll see if we can get it back for you. I suppose he's still in the wood?"

"He went into the wood after robbing me."

"Come on, kids!" said Tom Merry briskly. "This is the chance we want. Will you show us to where you last saw him, Gore?"

Gore hesitated.

"Come, you won't get hurt, with nine of us to protect you!" exclaimed Monty Lowther contemptuously. "My word! and that's the chap who wants to be leader of the School House!"

"I'll come," said Gore.

And the juniors crossed the stile and penetrated into the darkness of the wood.

Tom Merry was in high hopes. It could not have been more than a few minutes since the robbery had taken place, and there was plenty of snow on the ground to retain tracks. The difficulty was the darkness. Tom had a lantern with him, but if he lighted it the glimmer of its light through the wood would be a warning to the outcast.

"Here you are," said Gore, shivering a little as he halted under the trees where the ruffian had appeared. "This is the place."

"Which way did he go?"

Gore pointed it out. Tom Merry anxiously scanned the ground for tracks.

"You can cut off to the school, Gore," said Figgins, with a wave of the hand. "You're too brave for this sort of thing. You'd put us all into the shade if danger arose."

"Oh, I'm going," said Gore. "I'll bet you would cut and run sharp enough if you saw the fellow, anyway. There were twelve of us—"

"Yes, but they were mostly rotters, like your noble self," Lowther observed. "We'll get back your money if we can. My hat! I wonder how long it will take you to tumble off your perch if you don't get it back!"

Gore was wondering, too. He scowled and set off towards the school. The juniors hunted for tracks under the snowy bushes, but the light was too dim.

"Better have the lantern," said Manners. "No good groping round here in the dark like this, you know. It's like being in a giddy dark room, without the red lamp."

Tom Merry lighted the lantern. Eagerly the juniors scanned the snow in the glimmering rays. The tracks were found, and the hunters followed them like hounds on the scent. They led towards the heart of the wood, and it was soon evident that the ruffian had returned to the old hut.

Tom Merry halted, and blew out the lantern.

"Hallo, what does that mean, Merry?" asked Blake. "We were getting along nicely."

"We've found out enough," said Tom Merry. "We know that the rascal has gone back to the old hut now, and it's no good going there and finding what we've found before—that he's disappeared without leaving a trace behind. You see, if he's on the watch, as he may be, and spots us tracking him with a lantern, it may spoil our chance to-morrow afternoon, when the hunt begins."

"That's true enough," agreed Blake.

"We shall have a better chance of discovering the truth to-morrow in the daylight. We don't want to put him on his guard. He evidently lives in that secret den of his, wherever it is, and goes out when he thinks it safe, to steal food and drink, and to rob people in the lanes. But if he got a scare he might clear out of the district all of a sudden, and we should have our hunt for our pains."

"My dear kid, you talk like a picture-book. Let's hurry back to school."

"Yaas, wathiah! It has just occurred to me that we shall be locked out if we do not return to St. Jim's immediately, dear boys."

And the juniors took the homeward route.

Tom Merry's reasoning was good; they had discovered enough to confirm their previous theory, and it was not wise to spoil the chance of success by undue haste.

They arrived at St. Jim's just in time to escape being locked out, and separated to go to their respective houses. As the School House boys came in, they met Gore, who was looking very white and worried.

He came up to them eagerly.

"Have you found my money?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I knew you wouldn't!" exclaimed Gore savagely. "I knew you were only gassing. I knew you'd come back and say you couldn't do it."

"My dear chap, I know it's a bad loss, but the money may turn up. We're going to have another try to-morrow."

"Oh, rats! No more gas, please!"

Tom Merry's good right hand half rose, but he let it fall to his side again. He was patient, and Gore had really ceased to be exasperated by the loss of so much money, and with it his prestige at St. Jim's.

The chums walked on, and Gore was left standing alone. Mellish sidled up to him, with a curious expression upon his face.

"I say, Gore, is it true about—"

The bully of the Shell turned upon him savagely.

"Is it true about what?"

"About your losing your money," said Mellish, receding a pace. "I hear that you've lost all your tin—all the rest of that ten-pound note."

"Yes, so I have. All through you cowards running away and leaving me to tackle that beastly ruffian alone."

"Oh, I don't suppose you stayed of your own accord," said Mellish. "We couldn't be expected to stick there and get brained, could we? I say, I'm sorry. Did he take all your money?"

"Yes, and my watch and chain, too."

"Then you're stony?"

"Simply on the rocks, unless my money turns up again."

Mellish chuckled softly.

"That's not likely to happen, if the local police have to deal with the matter. They couldn't catch a tame mouse. I'm afraid you'll never see your tin again, Gore."

Gore was sullenly silent. He was afraid so, too.

"But, I say, what about that feed?" said Mellish. "We came back to the school without it, you know. It's rather rough on us."

"What's rather rough on you?" asked Gore, clenching his right fist. Mellish kept a wary eye on that fist as he went on talking.

"Why, you see, you asked us all to a feed, and it hasn't come off. It's rather rough on us to have to miss it, that's all, after being invited."

"How can I stand a feed if I'm broke?" scowled Gore.

"I don't know. That's not my business. I know that you asked us all, and that it hasn't come off. I daresay you could get tick in the tuck-shop. Dame Taggles knows you had a ten-pound note this week, so she'll trust you soon enough, if you yarn something about leaving your money in your locker, or something of that sort. She doesn't know anything about the robbery. She'd let it go to a pound or two."

Gore gritted his teeth.

"And you think I'm going to run into debt and tell lies to Dame Taggles for the sake of feeding you, after you ran away and left me in the lurch?" he demanded.

"Oh, you can put it like that if you like. You ought to keep your word. You won't get much of a following in the School House if you don't."

Gore had known upon how insecure a foundation his new popularity rested. But it wasn't pleasant to be reminded of it, especially at such a moment.

His right hand came up. Mellish, who was on the look-out, dodged, but Gore was too quick for him. His right-hander caught Mellish in the eye, and the Fourth-Former went rolling along the floor.

"There's something for you, anyway," said Gore, and he stalked away.

Mellish sat up, rubbing his eye ruefully. Blake, who was glancing down the stairs, gave a chuckle.

"Trouble in the camp already," he remarked. "I thought that Gore & Co. would last just as long as Gore's ten-pound note, and I was right, as usual."

CHAPTER 10.

Gore Gets Into Debt.

GORE had certainly gone up like a rocket and come down like the stick. Mellish was not the only one of his followers to show up in his true colours in the hour of adversity. Gore found that most of the others were the same.

It was rather a blow to Gore. He had spent a portion of his famous ten-pound note in treating his party, and he had lost the rest through taking them out for a feed. It was rather hard that he should fall from his high estate in consequence.

The smiles of the Terrible Three and Study No. 5 irritated him most of all.

He knew that the chums had anticipated his fall, and Gore, feeling very small indeed, turned over desperately in his mind devices for regaining his lost position.

His followers had not actually admitted that they were done with him because his money had run out. People, of whatever age, seldom deal so frankly with their consciences. Gore's followers took up the position that they had been invited to a feed, and had not received that feed. Gore had broken his word, and they were done with him.

If only for the sake of keeping up a show in the eyes of the chums, Gore would have done anything to regain his position. And in this spirit, Mellish's suggestion appealed to him. Dame Taggles knew nothing about the robbery. The Head had been told, and he had telephoned to the police, that was all. Mrs. Taggles would not hesitate to trust a customer whom she had so recently seen in possession of a ten-pound note. It would be easy for Gore to run up a bill if he chose. As for paying it—well, his money might be recovered, or something might turn up. Gore, in the mood of a drowning man catching at straws, decided to try it on.

"I say, Walsh," he remarked, meeting that young gentleman in the passage later on. "I—"

That morning Walsh had been overpoweringly civil to Gore. Now he looked at him coolly, and said:

"Rats!"

Gore controlled his temper with difficulty. He caught Blake's eye on him from a distance, and he could not afford to quarrel with Walsh.

"I say, Walsh, will you come into the tuck-shop?"

Walsh gave a start.

"Eh, what's that?" he asked, with renewed interest.

"It's that feed, you know," said Gore carelessly. "It hasn't come off yet."

"I thought it wasn't coming off at all," said Walsh suspiciously.

"Did you? What rot! Fetch the other chaps, and join me in Dame Taggles's shop, and I'll soon show you," said Gore. "You can leave Mellish out. I've had enough of him."

"I say, it's all right—no rotting?"

"Yes, of course," said Gore irritably.

"But I thought you had been robbed. Mellish said you were absolutely stony."

"Mellish says all sorts of things. If you believe them all—"

"Oh, I don't!" said Walsh, convinced at last. "I'll come, with pleasure. I'll join you in a jiffy."

Gore walked away to Dame Taggles's little shop, which was kept within the precincts of St. Jim's. The good dame came to serve him, beaming with smiles. Gore had wasted a great deal of money there already on more or less wholesome diet, and the dame thought there were yet more harvests to reap.

"I've got a little party coming in for a feed, Mrs. Taggles," said Gore airily, feeling in his pockets. "Set out the best you've got. I say, did I leave a fiver here to-day?"

"No, Master Gore."

"H'm! I've left it somewhere. Never mind, you know I've got the money, don't you? And you can trust me till presently?" said Gore, laughing.

"Certainly, Master Gore," said Dame Taggles, who knew that there must be a considerable portion of the ten-pound note left. "With pleasure, Master Gore."

The fellows came in, curious to know what was going to happen. The feed was there right enough, and they were soon enjoying themselves. Gore jumped back into popularity at a bound. He liked being toadied to, and he had his fill of it now.

Tom Merry happened to look into the tuck-shop later, and he was surprised by what he saw. A dozen or fifteen juniors, all looking extremely well fed, were toasting Gore with ginger-pop.

"Here's to the new junior captain of the School House!" exclaimed Walsh.

And the toast was drunk with enthusiasm.

"My hat! Gore seems to be going up again," Tom Merry remarked. "I wonder what's in the wind now. Perhaps those fellows are a bit better than we thought them."

"Perhaps," said Monty Lowther, "and perhaps not. I think I know a rotten toady when I see the critter. I dare say Gore's running up a bill. They're not treating him, I'll bet Manners' camera on that."

Gore caught sight of Tom Merry and his chums looking in. He called out to them in his usual insolent manner:

"I say, you fellows! You can come in and have a tart or two if you like. And some ginger-pop if you like to drink to the new School House junior captain."

"Rats!" said the Terrible Three with one voice, and they walked away.

"Oh, let them go!" said Walsh, with a sniff. "Tom Merry's no good. He seems to be in a perpetual state of stony-brake now. I stick to Gore."

"So do we all."

"He's a jolly good fellow."

"And so say all of us."

And George Gore beamed upon his faithful followers, and tasted the joys of being an important personage once more. All the time, however, an uneasy feeling was troubling him inwardly as he saw Dame Taggles's little bill mounting up. Unless his money were recovered from the thief he would certainly never be able to pay it, and what likelihood was there of the cash being returned? Very little!

So Gore's triumph was not a happy one. Meanwhile, the Terrible Three had more important things to think about than the amount of "side" that George Gore chose to put on. They had preparations to make for the morrow.

Not a word had been said in the school so far of the projected hunt. The nine juniors looked eagerly forward to the Saturday. It dawned at last, a wet, thawing morning, with the snow melting in the quadrangle, and dripping down from roof and gutter, and the trees and bushes weeping. Tom Merry made a grimace as he looked out of the dormitory window to see what kind of a morning it was.

"What's it like?" asked Manners sleepily.

"Rotting!" said Tom cheerfully. "Wet as the bottom of a river. There won't be any tracking in the beastly snow to-day. Never mind. I suppose we were bound to have a thaw sooner or later, and I dare say it won't last."

Morning lessons were a bore to the juniors. They were over at last, and the nine amateur detectives were free to leave the school.

They strolled out of St. Jim's. In the state the ground was in, football was impossible, and so their going excited no particular remark. As they strolled down Rycombe Lane a man in a keeper's rough jacket and gaiters came towards them, and signed them to stop. Tom Merry politely stopped to speak to him, and uttered an exclamation of amazement. Under the keeper's cap the face of Ferrers Locke was looking at him.

"Mr. Locke!"

The detective smiled at his astonishment.

"Yes, I knew you would come this way. The hunt will be commencing in another hour. You know what to do. You are to keep a watch upon the hut, but mind, without tackling the ruffian if you see him."

Tom Merry did not reply to that remark. He had written the previous evening to Ferrers Locke detailing the extent of the discoveries already made.

"What you told me in your letter has confirmed my theory," went on the detective. "The rascal has some secret den under the old hut, but the strictest search has failed to reveal it. It can only be discovered by watching him in the act of using it. That is what I want you to do."

"We'll do our best, sir."

"I know you will. Good luck, and mind that you keep out of danger. In case of accidents take this whistle. A blast upon it will bring help to the spot, and there will be a score of keepers in the wood in the next hour."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom Merry, taking the whistle.

The detective nodded, and entered the wood again.

The juniors tramped on down the slushy lane towards the stile.

"It promises to be exciting," said Figgins gleefully. "We don't want to disregard orders, of course, but really I think there are enough of us to collar the brute if we came upon him, cudgel or no cudgel."

"Yaas, wathah! Aftah his brutal conduct we shall be fully justified in tweatin' him with wuffness, and although I depwate violence as a wule, I considah that that wascal deserves to have a feashful thwashin'."

"And he'll get it if he resists us," declared Blake, giving his stick a twirl. "He had better look out, that's all."

The juniors reached the stile and entered the footpath. They turned off through the wood towards the old hut, and now they proceeded with great caution. As Tom Merry had said, there would be no tracking in the snow that day. The snow was thawing everywhere, and the branches and twigs were dripping with water.

Arthur Augustus wriggled painfully as a spatter of water from a shaken branch found its way down the back of his neck. But he bore it manfully. His clothes were getting terribly ruffled and soiled, but he bore that too without complaint.

Tom Merry halted at last. The old hut was visible among the trees, and in the daylight it was easy to see into it through the apertures, and he saw it was empty. After making sure of that, the juniors advanced again, and stopped within the walls of the ancient building, where—somewhere beyond their ken—lay the mysterious hiding-place of the rascal they sought.

CHAPTER 11.

The Capture.

TOM MERRY was looking very reflective. He had signed to the juniors to tread lightly, and they had not made a sound in the old hut.

"What's the game, Tom?" Monty Lowther asked, in a whisper.

"We've got to watch the hut. The hiding-place may be inside it or close to it. But I fancy the rascal has some means of telling whether the hut is occupied before he ventures out, for he has been watched for here. You fellows had better hide in the trees, in a cordon round the hut."

"And you?" asked Blake.

"I was thinking of getting on the roof here," said Tom Merry, nodding towards the gap overhead. "You see that tree hides it, and I should be pretty safe there."

"You'd find it jolly cold."

"Can't be helped."

"Will it bear your weight, do you think?" Lowther asked, looking very doubtfully at the flimsy structure.

"Yes, I think so. It wouldn't bear a man, but I'm not a heavyweight, you know."

"It's a good idea, if you can stick it out," said Blake. "But you may be there for hours, and then—"

"Oh, I shall stick it out all right!"

"Then it's a go."

Lowther and Manners hoisted Tom Merry up, and he was soon crawling out upon the broken, tottering roof of the hut.

It shook a little as he moved, but it held, and Tom thought that it would bear him.

The branches of the overhanging tree drooped round him, and, though they were bare of foliage, they afforded a pretty effectual cover.

"All right, Tommy?"

"All right," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Get into cover, kids, it's near the time Ferrers Locke will begin."

The talk had been in low whispers. The juniors left the hut as silently as they had entered it, and soon found cover in the weeping bushes. It was uncomfortable work, but there was nothing "soft" about the juniors of St. Jim's. They had been through worse experiences than that.

Tom Merry remained on the watch. He soon found it extremely cold on his perch. The snow had melted off the sloping roof; but it had left it damp and chilly, and the bare branches round him were dripping with moisture. He shivered several times, but he did not think of giving in.

Again and again the chime of the village clock floated to his ears over the wintry woods. An hour, and then another half!

He was chilly and cramped, but his pluck was as good as ever. He waited and watched, his eyes on the gap which gave a view of the hut below.

Suddenly he started. The roof shook as he did so, and, warned by that, he remained quite still. But his heart was beating hard.

There was a sound in the deserted hut below him.

He strained his eyes into the shadows below. They nearly started from his head as he saw a huge flagstone in the floor rise, apparently of its own accord, and stand on end. The stone was of huge dimensions, and, as the end turned up, Tom noticed that the other end sank down. It evidently moved upon a pivot. The stone was more than a foot thick, and partly narrowed at the end to allow its free play.

Tom Merry's heart beat. He understood now. This was some secret of the old priory which had once stood upon the spot.

The ruffian of Rylecombe Wood had probably discovered it by chance, or he might have been a native of the neighbourhood at one time, and learned it long ago, and now remembered it and put it to use.

The stone rose on end, and an evil, unshaven face, with a dirty fur cap over it, rose into view.

Tom Merry drew his head quickly back from the gap. He had seen enough, and he did not wish to risk betraying his presence.

He heard footfalls below. The ruffian left the hut, and plunged into the wood. Tom Merry saw that he had a large can in his hand, and he guessed that he was going to the spring for water. The spring was a good quarter of a mile from the old hut. The rascal disappeared, and Tom Merry dropped from the roof into the hut.

His face was blazing with excitement now.

He had discovered the secret. He bent and examined the stone. It did not move to his touch, and evidently there was some way of blocking it which the ruffian knew.

Tom Merry stepped to the door of the hut, and waved his hand.

The juniors were watching keenly. Figgins came into view, and then the others one by one, and in a few minutes they were gathered in the hut.

"Keep out of sight," whispered Tom Merry. "You saw him go, I suppose?"

Blake and Figgins had seen the ruffian. The rest had been watching different points.

"They were all eager to know what the hero of the Shell had learned."

Tom Merry quickly explained.

"My hat!" said Blake. "Who'd have thought it?"

"I did," said Figgins. "You remember I said—"

"My dear Figgy, if I remembered all you have said I should have a brain-box full of silly rot—"

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry. "Is this a time for ragging?"

"Wathah not!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "This is a time for prompt action!"

"Look here," said Tom Merry quickly. "Ferrers Locke and his men are beating the woods for that rascal, and they're pretty certain to fall in with him, or at all events to frighten him back to his lair."

"That's certain."

"He'll come bungling back to his hiding-place as soon as he sees he's being hunted for. He'll find us all here ready to pounce upon him. That's my idea."

"And a jolly good idea too," said Blake heartily.

"You see, if he gets down under that pivoting stone he may be able to fix it from below, and there's pretty certain to be other outlets somewhere to the vaults underneath," said Tom Merry. "He musn't pass the stone, that's all."

"Good enough! I darsay Ferrers Locke will agree that it was the only thing to be done if he were here," said Lowther. "As he isn't, we must act upon our own judgment."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then get back into the shadows here. He won't see us. He's bound to rush right in, and go for the revolving stone, and then we can pile on him—"

"And collar him beautifully. Good! Hallo! Hark!"

There was a sound of a distant shout ringing through the wintry woods.

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"They're after him already!"

Another shout, and the ringing blast of a whistle.

"That's Ferrers Locke!"

The juniors of St. Jim's listened with almost painful eagerness. The crashing of thickets before a hurried runner came to their ears, and then the pounding of heavy footsteps.

CHAPTER 12.

Just Like Tom.

The footsteps, swift and sharp, were coming right towards the old hut.

"He's coming!"

"Ready!"

The juniors crouched back into the dim shadows of the hut on either side of the doorway.

Nearer and nearer came the heavy footfalls, and now they could hear the laboured breathing of the runner.

From the distance another shout rang.

A burly form, an evil face under a fur cap, boomed in the doorway of the hut. The ruffian, panting, dashed in, and threw himself towards the revolving stone.

"Collar him!"

A yell and a rush of feet. The ruffian tripped over an outstretched foot and fell headlong, and as he fell nine juniors sprawled all over him.

With a terrible curse he strove to rise.

Tom Merry grasped him and held him down, and the juniors in spite of his struggles, seized him by the limbs and clothing, and he was pinned down fast.

"Got him!"

"Let me go!—Let me—let me go!"

"Not half!"

Tom Merry released one hand, and put the whistle to his lips. He blew a loud and clear blast, which rang far through the woods.

It was answered by the detective's whistle and a ringing shout.

"They're coming!"

The ruffian heard the words, and he renewed his struggles. Although the odds were so heavily against him, he was so powerful and so desperate that he nearly succeeded in getting loose. But the juniors were on their noble too, and they piled on him, and bore him down again by sheer weight.

He gasped and collapsed, and after that his struggling was feeble, though it still continued.

The sound of footsteps could now be heard approaching the hut, and Tom Merry looked up to the door.

Ferrers Locke locked in.

"Ah, I see you have him!"

"Nothing else to be done, sir," said Tom Merry. "It was that, or let him escape. There's a secret-way down here under the flags."

The detective nodded.

"I'm afraid I should have been angry if any of you had been hurt," he said. "However, all's well that ends well!"

He stooped, and clinked the handcuffs on the wrists of the vainly writhing ruffian. He looked at the bearded face, and gave a nod.

"I thought so. Ben the Puncher. I thought as much."

"You'd—you'd never have caught me," gasped the prisoner. "It was these imps—"

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"Yes, I owe a great deal to them," he remarked. "But you won't trouble the world again for some time to come, friend Ben. And now we have you, you may as well show us the way into that den of yours, as we want the loot too."

"Find it!"

"We shall soon do that," said Ferrers Locke cheerfully.

He turned to the keepers, who were gleefully crowding into the hut.

"Take him away, my good fellows. He's the right man."

The ruffian disappeared in the grip of three or four sturdy fellows. There was no more hope for him. The prison he richly deserved awaited him. He would not, as the detective said, trouble the world again for some years to come.

Ferrers Locke shook hands with Tom Merry.

"You've done well, Merry!" he exclaimed. "And so have the rest. You have succeeded, though you have done more than I bargained for. I am getting a very decent reward for the part I have taken in this case, though I shall not receive it just yet, but that is no reason why I shouldn't hand over your share at once."

The juniors looked at one another.

"You understand," said Ferrers Locke, "that this does not come from me. I should not insult you by offering to pay for friendly help. It is simply your share of the reward, to which you are more than entitled. You need have no scruples whatever about taking it. I give you my word about that."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom Merry, speaking for the rest. "We know we can trust to you, and, as a matter of fact," he went on frankly, "the tin will come in very useful, as we're all stony broke."

The detective smiled.

"I'm glad that you will be benefited by it, at all events," he said.

And he counted out nine sovereigns and nine shillings, and each of the juniors found himself richer by a guinea.

TOM MERRY and his friends returned to St. Jim's a little later in high spirits. They were laughing and talking gaily as they came into the ancient gateway of the college. After the long period of famine it was a pleasure to be in funds again. After being "stony," without either cash or credit, it was enjoyable to feel that they could order what they liked in the tuck-shop, and give free rein to their hospitable inclinations in standing feeds in the studies.

"We'll have a real ripping time now to make up for furnishing so long," said Tom Merry. "We'll stand the first feed."

"And we'll stand the second," said Figgins.

"Right!" grinned Blake, "and we'll stand the third. Then we'll start again from the beginning. I can see Fatty Wynn's eyes beginning to glitter already."

"Well, I've been starved lately," said Fatty Wynn. "I admit it's a splendid prospect, and I tell you, Merry, I shall do justice to that feed. Usual time, I suppose?"

"Yes, rather. Time to get cleaned before tea. Hallo! Hallo! Gore, old chap! What's the matter with you?"

Gore was passing them, with a face set as white as chalk.

Figgins and Co. looked at him curiously as they walked off towards the New House.

Tom did not like Gore, and had not been well treated by him. But his heart was touched now. Tom would have stood by his bitterest enemy in the hour of need.

Gore gave him a savage look, and strode on.

Tom looked after him.

"Keep on, you fellows," he whispered, "I want to speak to Gore."

"Better let the sulky brute alone," said Monty Lawther.

But he obeyed, and the juniors went off to clear away the many traces of the hunt through the wet and muddy woods, while Tom Merry hurried after his old enemy.

"I say, Gore," he said, tapping him on the shoulder, "is anything the matter?"

Gore stopped, and snapped his teeth.

"Yes, confound you, and it's all your fault. I hate you."

"What have I done?"

"Nothing. What are you following me for? I'm in trouble, so I suppose you want to gloat over it."

Tom turned red.

"I think you might know me better than that, Gore. I don't know how I could have got you into any sort of trouble, but anyway I'd be glad to help you."

"You can't! You're stony broke, same as I am," added Gore, with a savage laugh.

"Is it money, then?" asked Tom, his fingers touching the sovereign and the shilling that lay under his hand in his pocket.

"Yes, I—I—but what's the good of telling you? You wouldn't help me if you could."

"Tell me, and see."

"Bah! I've been a fool. You know I was robbed yesterday—"

"The man has been captured to-day."

Gore's face brightened with a gleam of hope.

"That's good news. Was my money found? Tell me quick."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No, the detective found a lot of loot, but the money was hidden somewhere, and the rascal refused to speak. It can't be found."

Gore gave a groan.

"I might have known it. I am ruined." Then the tale came out in an outburst. "They were twitting me with not standing a feed when I promised, and I stood it last night and ran up an account with Dame Taggles. It comes to over a pound. She didn't know I had been robbed, you see. She never runs accounts, and she thought I had left the money in my room. But she heard to-day that I had lost all the money, and she is frantic. She says she's going to the Head unless I pay up before five o'clock."

"And you can't?"

"Can't! Of course I can't! I'm stony! And all those odds. I've been treating, too, won't lend me anything. I've asked them. Some of them are broke, some have only a little and won't part up with it. I know Mellish has a sovereign he had from his father, and he hasn't changed it yet, but he won't lend it to me. The rotten odds."

Tom Merry could not help smiling slightly. Gore's ambition to shine as a leader in the School House had not prospered. He was a heavy fall after his absurd airs and insolence.

"I suppose it seems very funny to you," said Gore, grinding his teeth, as he caught the smile. "I might have known—"

"Sorry," said Tom Merry, "I did not mean to smile. How much do you owe Dame Taggles?"

"One pound and ninepence-halfpenny."

Tom's hand came out of his pocket with two coins in it. It was a wrench. The money had been hardy and fairly earned.

and it was all that stood between him and the state of "stoning" for some time to come. But Tom was generous to a fault.

"There you are," he said, thrusting the coins hastily into the hand of the astonished Gore. "That's all right."

"I—I say, Merry—I—I can't—"

"Yes, you can. That's all right."

And Tom Merry darted off. Gore stood looking almost stupidly at the coins in his palm, and as he realised what they meant to him, the weight lifted from his heart. And as he looked after Tom Merry, it is probable that the end of the Shell felt more ashamed of himself than he had ever felt in his life before.

He stood for some minutes after Tom Merry had vanished into the School House. Then he made his way to the tuck-shop.

Tom Merry entered his study.

"Oh, here you are," exclaimed Lowther. "Cash up, we're going to dub up five bob each and have a good spread, to make up for lost time. What's the matter?"

"You'll have to stand it, kids," said Tom Merry, colouring. "I'll make it up later, of course. I—I'm stony again."

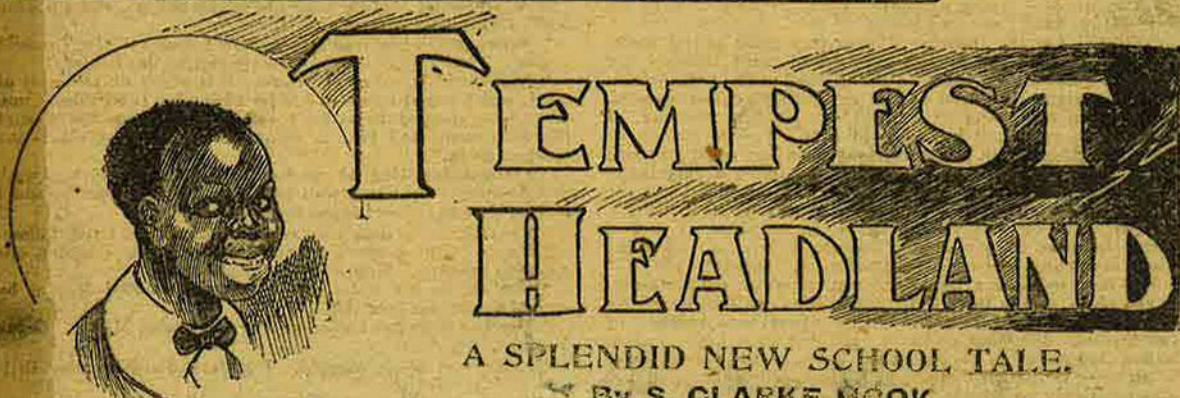
His chums did not ask any questions. They exchanged a grimace, pretty well guessing how the matter stood, as much as to say that it was just like Tom Merry. And the subject dropped.

Dame Taggles, who had just been greatly relieved by the settlement of her account by Gore, was still further delighted by the inroad the chums of the Shell made upon her stores. Prompt to time came Blake, Herries and D'Arcy to Tom Merry's study, and they found a ripping tea all ready. A minute later Figgins & Co. came in, and the cheerful glow of the fire, the gleam of the white cloth and crockery, and the fragrant smell of the newly made tea, brought smiles to their faces, especially to the plump visage of Fatty Wynn. Tea that evening in Tom Merry's study was first-rate, and all the more enjoyable because it marked the end of the painful experience the juniors had had of being "Stony Broke."

THE END.

(Another tale dealing with Tom Merry next Thursday. Order your copies in advance. Price One Halfpenny.)

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READ THIS FIRST!

Tempest Headland is a large school standing in an exposed position of Britain's coast.

A fearful storm is raging outside, when Cyril Conway tells Herr Ludvig, who is taking the class for German, that he can see from the window a ship being driven ashore. Dr. Buchanan, the headmaster, Herr Ludvig, and the boys immediately make their way to the cliff, but on reaching there they find that the ship has sunk. However, the Head is instrumental in saving a little black boy. He is taken to the school, and money to the amount of £1,000, with a request that it may be used for his up-bringing, is found on him. A medical man examines the nigger, and he finds the boy has had such a shock to his system as to affect all memory of the past. He does not even remember his name, so the Head leaves it to the boys to re-christen him. After a lengthy discussion, Billy Barnes and Cyril decide on naming their new schoolmate Snowy White Adonis Venus. He is taken as a fag by Graft, a bully.

One night Venus and Cyril make their way to Graft's study, intending to play a trick on him. They crept noiselessly into the passage, and then Cyril lighted his lantern, and led the way to the small room which Graft had to himself.

Cautiously opening the door, he stole into the room, and in a short time returned with a gold watch and an alarm clock.

(Now go on with the story.)

Graft Gets an Unpleasant Surprise.

"You see, Venus, my child," murmured Cyril. "Graft must not know the time to-morrow. We take the liberty of setting this alarm to a quarter to five instead of a quarter to six. Then we will put the hands on an hour. You have to be careful how you do it, or the giddy thing will go off, and that would wake the sleeping beauty."

Cyril succeeded all right, then he put Graft's watch an hour fast, so that it should agree with the clock. Next he crept back into the room, and replaced the watch and clock, and succeeded in closing the door without awaking the sleeper.

"It's all right, my Snowy White Adonis Venus; the plot is laid! Leave the rest to me. And just you remember this. If you wake anything like early, wake me. I'll do the same by you, but I'm not always certain. However, when I have

anything like the present on my mind, I can generally wake."

"If you were to sleep without any clothes over you it might help, especially if it freezes in de morning."

"A good idea; all the same, I would rather not try it. It is the sort of case where Nature must take its course."

As a matter of fact, Cyril woke at half-past four, and with a considerable amount of difficulty he aroused Venus.

"Don't see much sense in de trick!" growled that worthy.

"Tink I'd rather play it to-morrow or some oder morning."

"Just as you please!" exclaimed Cyril. "I have got everything nicely planned for this morning."

"It's so sold."

"You will find it warm enough when the doctor gets hold of you. I shall be able to find the water-jug in the dark. You will notice that if you are not out of bed in six seconds!"

Venus only waited till he heard the rattle of the crockery, and then he was out of bed in an instant, while he dressed as hurriedly as he possibly could.

"This way, you shivering beauty!" exclaimed Cyril, leading him from the dormitory. "I never knew such a chap as you are for feeling the cold. Graft will feel it directly. Now, fire away at his door! Thunder at it till he comes out to punch your head, and when he goes in again restart the thundering. Dodge him when he comes out, then follow him to the bath-room. Understand?"

"Yes. I wish dis climate was made hotter! It ain't at all suitable to my constitution!"

"He will warm you up, if you let him catch you!" observed Cyril.

But Venus was not so simple as that. He kicked at the door until he heard Graft rattle the handle, and then he bolted, and bawled out that it was time to get up.

The door was shut with a slam, and then Venus kicked at it again.

"Get up, dere! Time to get up! Hi, golly! I'm off once more!"

Muttering things, Graft came out in his pyjamas, and made his way to the bath-room. As he shut and locked the door, Cyril emerged from the clothes cupboard, and fastened a piece of cord from the handle of the bath-room door to that opposite.

"You see now what the cord is for," whispered Cyril.

"Hark at him filling his bath. I would not mind betting that he has not the slightest intention of getting into it."

Now, you observe, I place these steps in front of the door—so! That will enable me to see through that little square opening above the door. I think it is for ventilation, or else to make sure that no one is being drowned. Now, this is the fire-hose, and when I hold up my hand you turn this little wheel round as far as it will go. The effect of that will be that a mighty torrent of water will come along the hose, and if I aim anything like straight—why, Graft is likely to get wet. Do you think you understand that little lot?"

"But won't do floor ob de barf-room get wet?"
"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it does; but, then, that is always the case when we have a bath. You see, it is built on the lines of getting wet, so there will be no damage to speak of. I shall let Graft know that I am the director of the hose. He has got the gas alight, so we shall see him nicely. Be ready now. I will talk to him a little before I squirt at him."

Cyril ascended the steps, and gazed at the bather through the opening.

"I say, Graft," he exclaimed, "you are an awful humbug, you know! You are not having a cold bath. Why, you are washing your face in the warm water!"

"You insolent young scoundrel, I will make you sorry for this! How dare you come here?"

"There's not the slightest danger, my good young man! You see, I have fastened you in. You can't possibly get out. You have often bragged that a cold bath in the winter is most invigorating, and that it is a thing you never miss. Now, I am not going to let you miss it this morning. I intend that you shall have a cold bath. I want you to be invigorated, and I'm going to invigorate you until you will think you are another person, which would be a very lucky thing for all concerned. You will notice that I have the fire-hose here. Well, I am going to squirt at you. I tell you this so that you may not be taken by surprise. You had better hold on to something, because I have an idea the water is coming with a pretty good rush. Ready? Go!"

The next moment a mighty torrent of water caught Graft in the chest with a force that pinned him against the end of the bath-room; then the wild yell he uttered was drowned by the torrent. He went down on the floor in a heap, and as he crawled about on his hands and knees in his vain attempt to escape the fearful torrent, Cyril followed him up. There was positively no escape.

"I think that will do!" exclaimed Cyril. "Do stop that noise, Graft! I am only invigorating you! What—drowning you? Not a bit of it! It is doing you all the good in the world. I'll warrant this is the first cold bath you have taken this season. I say, aren't you turning off that water?"

"Don't seem to be able to manage it!" muttered Venus.

"I think it has got stuck!"

"Why, you silly coon, you are turning it on! Turn it the other way!"

"Oh, is dat how it goes? All right! Now, we'm getting better!"

"Yes; that's all right! Ta-ta, Graft! I will let someone else set you at liberty. You might be cross, you know, and there would be no sense in letting you lose your temper. Have a good rub down; you need it! I'll come and give you another bath to-morrow morning. I'm determined that you shall be properly invigorated!"

Then Cyril hurried down, coiled up the hose, removed the steps, and bolted; while Graft raved at the top of his voice to be let out.

Now, the only party at all likely to trouble to let him out in that part of the building was Herr Ludwig. He slept in the room exactly opposite, but as the handle of his door was fastened to that of the bath-room, he was quite unable to go to the rescue.

He shouted to be let out nearly as loudly as Graft did, then the worthy German became disgusted with the matter. He tumbled into bed again, covered his head over with the bed-clothes, and went to sleep.

Mopps Comes to the Rescue.

"This way, my dear Snowy White Adonis Venus," murmured Cyril. "We can watch proceedings nicely from this clothes' cupboard!"

"Was tinking weder it would not be better to hab some hiding-place where dere's a sort ob retreat," observed Venus, shaking his woolly pate. "You see, if Graft happens to look in here, he's likely to see us, and dere won't be any retreat, 'cept in a forward direction."

"Well, he will be so jolly cold that he won't want to fool about looking for us. You can bet he has had the best cold bath that he has ever taken in his little life. The water came out of that fire-hose with force, I can tell you, and he would be able to tell you the same. Hark at him wrenching at the door. I shouldn't wonder if he breaks the cord directly—at least, if he doesn't break that he is likely to break the handle of the door. He's smashed something now. It's the cord—and here he comes!"

Graft strode up to the cupboard, the door of which was not quite closed. He must have seen those two worthies inside, but he never uttered a word. He merely glared at them for a few moments, and then he entered his room.

"Ah, he's going to make it hot for us!" murmured Cyril. "Well, you must pay for your fun in this college, and a licking doesn't hurt very much!"

"Spent it will hurt rader more dan I shall care for," mused Venus; "but I don't see de sense ob getting dat licking."

"Neither do I," observed Cyril. "It won't do me a bit of good, and I would much rather be without it; but, don't you see, I have slopped about forty gallons of water on the floor of the bath-room, and that is almost bound to show when the masters go in."

"I tink de best ting we can do is to hab dat slop cleared up," said Venus. "Just you wait here for two-free minutes, and I will see if I can induce Mopps to clear it up."

"I would like to hear your conversation," said Cyril, following Venus to the porter's lodge. "It will be interesting, one way and another. Mopps is sure to like the job."

"Get out of my room, you vermin!" howled Mopps, by way of a morning greeting.

"Dere's a little job I want you to undertake, Mopps," began Venus.

"Clear, you black maggot. I ain't undertaking any little jobs!"

"But dere's some money attached to dis job."

"Well, of course, that makes a difference," said Mopps.

"I'm not too proud to undertake work, so long as it's honest, and well paid for."

"You must know perfectly well dat when boys go into de barf-room dere must be one or two splashes wid de water. Water will splash, 'cos it's its nature—de same as it is de nature ob boys to make it splash. Now, I hab five shillings here which I ain't got any particular use for, and I was going to suggest dat you had better mop up de splashes, and take de five shillings."

"All right. Give me the five shillings now, and I will go and clear up the mess as soon as I've had my breakfast."

"Can't quite make dat calculation," growled Venus. "Want de job done straight away, and don't want to pay for it till I

hab seen it done to my satisfaction."

"I shall report you."

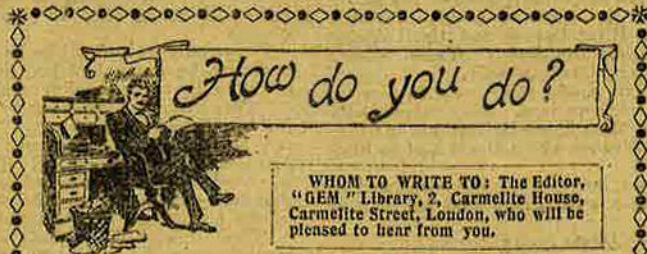
"Den de job ain't going to be done at all; 'cos if we'm going to get a licking, we may as well hab it widout de labour ob clearing up de splashes. All you want is a pail and a sort ob flannel, or something like dat. After all, a few splashes don't count much."

"Well, I'll do it if you promise to pay the five bob."

"You shall get dat all right if you clear it up properly."

Mopps fixed his eyes on Venus for a moment, and then he went down to get the necessary articles, and the chums led him to the bath-room.

(Another long instalment of this splendid school story in next Thursday's number. Please order your copy of the GEM in advance.)



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"SKIMPOLE'S LITTLE SCHEME."

Skimpole, one of Tom Merry's schoolmates, gets the idea that he should reform matters in general, and the Prefects and Masters of St. Jim's College in particular. He is an enthusiastic chap is Skimpole, and you will laugh at his endeavours to carry out his theories. Among other little things Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is designated as "A Bloated Aristocrat!"
Dreadful!

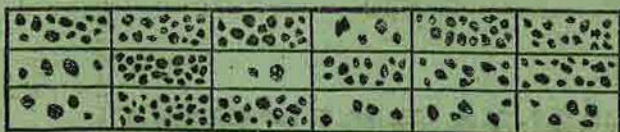
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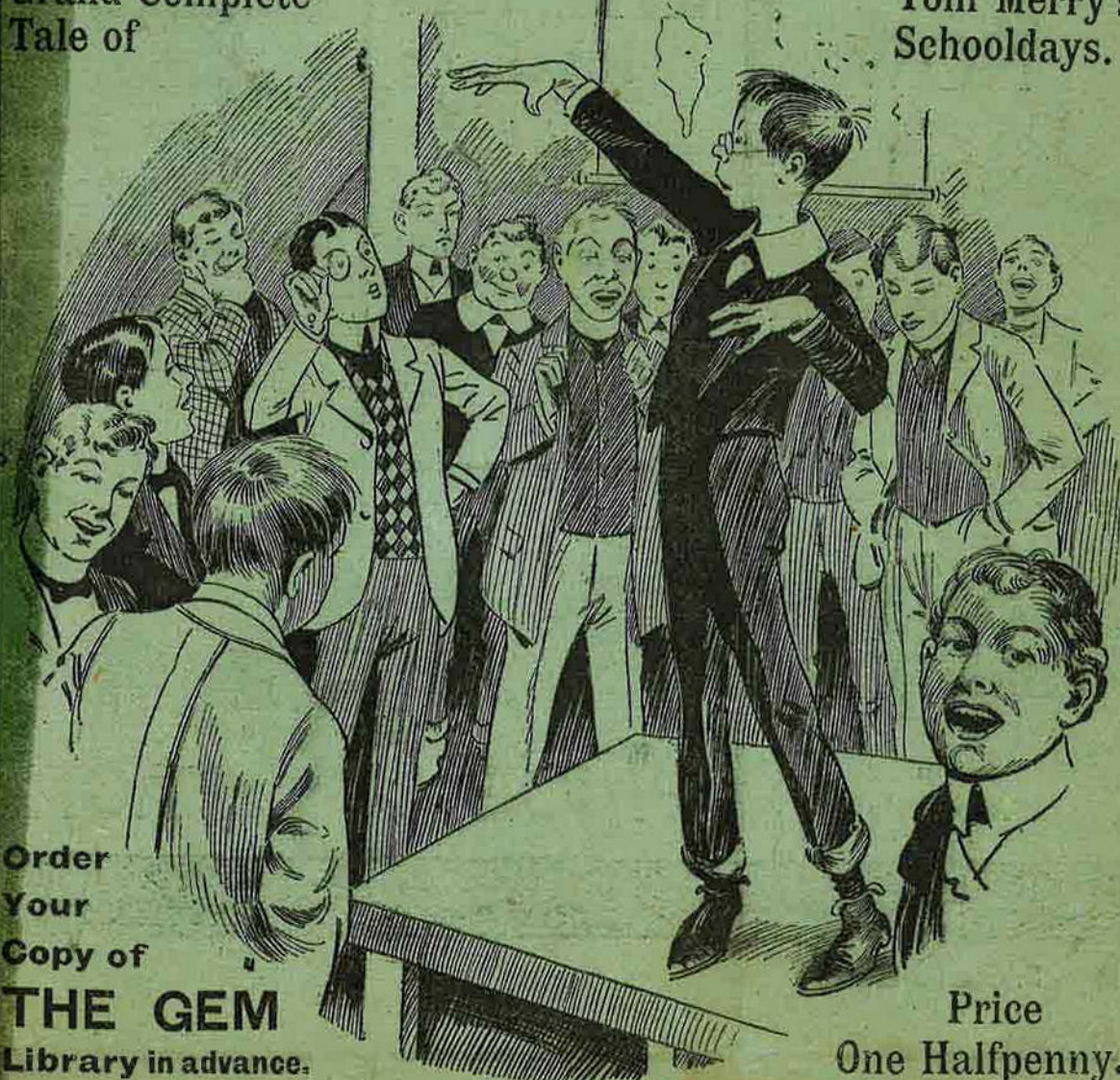


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