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(NEW SERIES.)

KING OF THE CASTLE.

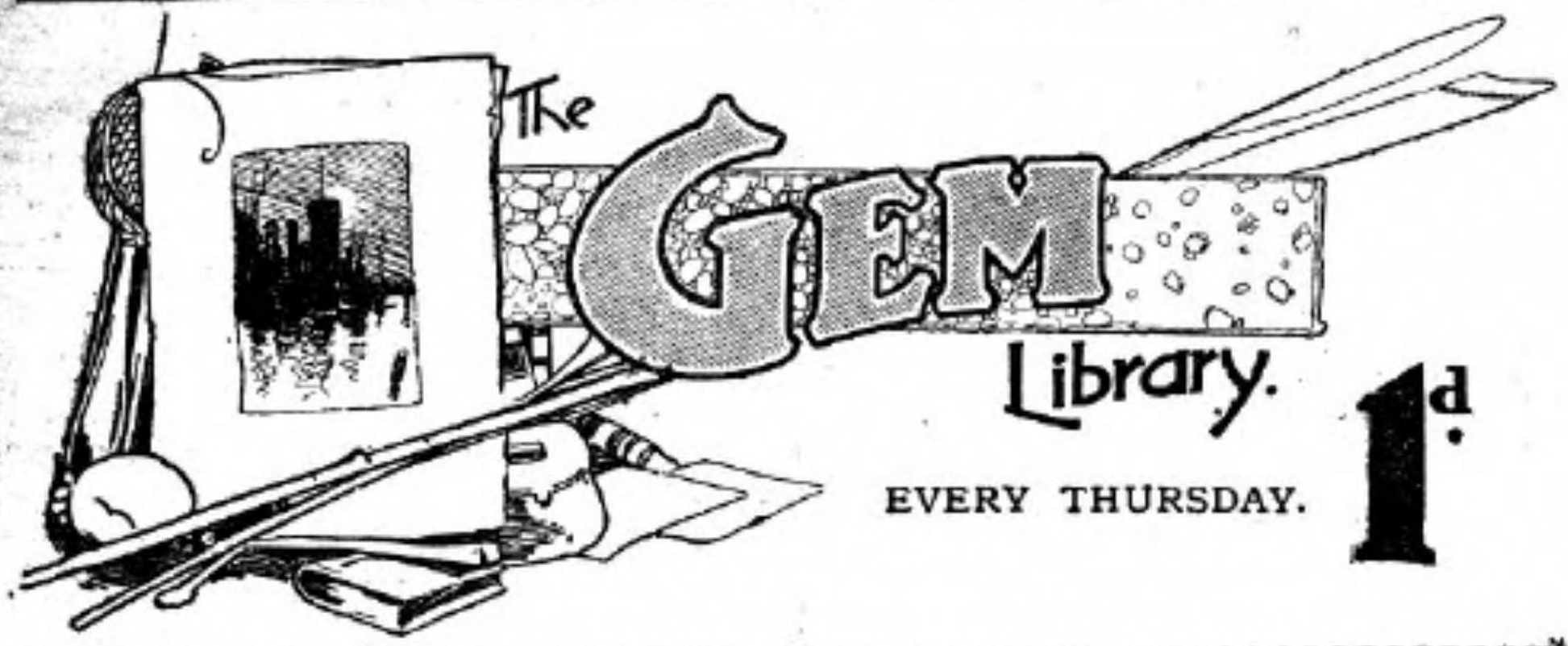
DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY

BY MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NO. 3.

A CLOSE FINISH!

VOL. 1.



A Complete Story for Everyone, and Every Story a Gem!

King of the Castle.

A Splendid Double-Length Tale of Tom Merry & Co.,

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

—o—

CHAPTER 1.
Tom Merry is Chosen.

"TOM MERRY!"

"Yes; Tom Merry!"

"Oh, rats!"

It was Sefton, of the New House, who said "Rats!" Kildare, of the School House at St Jim's, and captain of the school, looked at Sefton with a gleam in his quiet eyes.

"If you know more about it than I do, Sefton——"

"Oh, I don't say that! But Tom Merry——"

"I have said that Tom Merry has offered, and that I think he will do. If the committee are against it, I shall not insist; but, in my opinion, Merry is up to the work."

"He is a junior."

"Well, he is in the Shell, which is the top of the junior Forms; and he is certainly the fastest sprinter and the best stayer in the Lower School. You've all seen him run, and you all know that. As a matter of fact, there are very few fellows in the Fifth who could touch him on the cinder-path, and not many in the Sixth, either."

Sefton shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, have your way!" he exclaimed. "You are always sugaring Tom Merry!"

"I like the lad," said Kildare. "He is one of the best. And when he gets into the Sixth he will bring more credit on the school than some of the fellows who are already there. But I leave it to the majority."

It was a meeting of the St. Jim's Harriers. It was Monday, and on Saturday afternoon the Sixth-Form paper-chase was to take place. The seniors had met in the captain's study to settle whom the hares were to be, and Kildare had surprised most of them by proposing Tom Merry, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, as one of them.

Kildare, as captain of St. Jim's, and the finest all-round sportsman in the school, was looked up to by the fellows of both houses, rivals as they were in many respects.

Although his suggestion surprised the meeting, few were inclined to gainsay his judgment, and, in fact, Sefton was the only one to oppose. And Sefton, of the New House, opposed Kildare whenever he could, on any and every occasion, and so his opinion on the present matter did not carry much weight.

"It's all right," said Monteith, the head prefect of the New House. "No need to put it to the vote, Kildare. If you think that Tom Merry will do, we'll put his name down, and that settles it."

"Good!" said five or six voices.

Sefton gave his head prefect a bitter glance. Time had been when Monteith, too, was glad of any chance of heckling the captain of St. Jim's, and when he would have backed up Sefton with all his heart. But that time no longer was. Monteith and Kildare were now the best of friends, and Sefton had no choice but to scowl and drop his opposition, finding himself in a minority of one.

"That's settled, then?" said Kildare, looking round. "I may say that I shouldn't have proposed Tom Merry if I hadn't been certain that he was in good form. He's a sticker, and he'll do his best, especially as I shall be with him. Nothing more to be said, I suppose? I'll go along to Tom Merry's study and tell him he will be wanted in the paper-chase on Saturday."

And the meeting broke up.

Kildare went along the passage towards the Shell studies. The light was gleaming out from the half-open door of Study X., the apartment in the School House at St. Jim's where dwelt the Terrible Three—Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther. And as the captain came up to the open door, he could hear the voices of the chums of the Shell.

"That's all right!" said the cheery, pleasant voice of Tom Merry. "I think that will do, kids!"

"Good!" said Monty Lowther. "I say, Blake and his lot haven't brought in their contributions yet."

"Neither have Figgins & Co.," said Manners. "If they don't buck up, we shall have to weed out the editorial staff, that's all."

Kildare smiled as he heard it. He knew that the juniors were busy upon the production of a new number of the junior magazine, known as "Tom Merry's Weekly."

The appearance of the Lower School magazine had been somewhat irregular hitherto, but whenever a new number was coming out, Tom Merry's study—turned for the nonce into an editorial office—was the scene of almost breathless industry.

Kildare looked into the room, and saw the three chums hard at work. Tom Merry was finishing the title-page of the magazine, and Kildare's glance took it in as he looked in.

"TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY."

A Journal devoted to the Amusement of the Juniors and the Improvement of the Seniors at St. Jim's.

Published by Tom Merry & Co., in the School House.

Price Nix.

Edited by T. Merry. Sub-editors—Lowther, Manners, Blake, Herries, Digby, D'Arcy, Figgins, Wynn, Kerr, and Smythe.

Kildare coughed and entered the study, and the chums of the Shell looked up. The captain of St. Jim's nodded, with a smile.

"I see you're very busy," he remarked.

"Fearfully!" said Tom Merry, drawing his hand across his brow with a dramatic gesture, and leaving a smear there from an inky finger. "The labours of an editor who is really conscientious are infinite."

"I suppose so."

"To keep the journal up to the mark, and exclude all the piffle the contributors want to shove into it, would make a thirteenth job for Hercules, if he wanted one," said Tom Merry. "What with Figgins's serials, and D'Arcy's fashion columns, it's enough to turn a harmless and necessary editor's hair grey."

"Oh, ring off, Tom!" said Lowther. "If you wanted to resign the editorship, there are ten fellows ready to relieve you of the job."

"I know there are; but what would become of the magazine?"

"That depends. If I had it——"

"If you had it, Lowther, old man, it would die a natural death. No; I am going to do my duty!" said Tom Merry heroically. "England expects every man to do his duty——"

"England expects a thundering lot, then," said Lowther, "and I shouldn't wonder if she were disappointed!"

"Cheese it!" said Manners. "Here's Kildare waiting with his contribution in his pocket, and you haven't even asked to see it!"

Tom Merry jumped up from the editorial chair.

"My dear Kildare——"

"Respected Captain——" said Monty Lowther.

"Hand over the contribution——"

"Anything that you write will go in whole."

Kildare laughed.

"I haven't come here with a contribution," he said. "Manners is mistaken. I have not yet taken to writing for the papers."

"I say, I wish you would," said Tom Merry. "If you'd do us a football article, it would go down rippingly, and the name of Kildare among the contributors would give the paper a tone."

"I'm afraid it's a bit above my weight, Merry."

"Or an article on the off-side rule," said Tom Merry persuasively.

Kildare shook his head.

"Or a poem," went on the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly." "As an Irishman, you ought to be able to write poetry. Give us something in rhyme about Erin's green isle."

"I'm afraid your readers would not like my poetry, Merry," said Kildare, laughing. "But I came here to speak to you about the paper-chase on Saturday."

"Will you want me?"

"Yes."

Tom Merry's eyes danced. Lowther and Manners stared at their chum in amazement.

"What's this?" exclaimed Lowther. "I didn't know juniors were running in the Sixth-Form paper-chase. Of course, we're always willing to give the seniors a leg-up."

"Merry is going to run as a hare with me," said Kildare. "I don't think we shall require assistance from the Lower Forms in any other way, Lowther."

"Merry is going to run with you?"

"Yes; as a hare."

"I'll be ready, Kildare," said Tom Merry, "and I'm jolly glad you think me good enough! You sha'n't be sorry for choosing me, if I can help it."

"I am sure of that."

And, with a nod and a smile, the captain of St. Jim's quitted the study. He left silence there as he closed the door. Manners and Lowther, without speaking a word, were staring at Tom Merry as though they wished to stare holes into him.

CHAPTER 2.

The Editorial Office of "Tom Merry's Weekly."

TOM MERRY turned to the "Weekly" again, affecting not to notice the expressive stare fixed upon him. Manners and Lowther did not speak. They continued to stare steadily, and by the sheer force of staring made Tom Merry look up at last from his work.

"Well?" said Tom Merry, meeting their eyes.

"Well?" said Manners.

"Well?" repeated Monty Lowther.

"What the dickens are you staring at me like a pair of silly owls for?" demanded Tom Merry. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing!" said Lowther. "The question is, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, ass!"

"Sure?" asked Lowther, with much solicitude.

"Confound! Yes, of course I'm sure!"

"Not feeling at all weak in the head?"

"Look here——"

"I'm looking—at a duffer! If you're not weak in the head, or going off your silly rocker, what do you mean by it?"

"Yes; that's the question!" said Manners. "What do you mean by it, Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry coloured a little.

"Mean by what?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh, you know very well!" said Lowther. "You've offered yourself, it seems, as hare in the Sixth-Form paper-chase."

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"There are lots of reasons, I think. Enough reasons to fill a sack. Do you think you can run against a Sixth-Former?"

"Yes; I know I can. I ran against Darrel the other day when I was turning the corner of the chapel wall."

"This is no time to be funny, Thomas Merry. Do you think you can run against the Sixth—fellows three or four years older than yourself?"

"Well, Kildare thinks I can."

Monty Lowther scratched his nose thoughtfully.

"Well, I admit there's something in that," he said.

"And, besides," went on Tom Merry, "can't you see what an honour it is for the Shell for a member of it to run in the Sixth-Form harriers? A Shell boy to run as hare with Kildare, the captain of the school! Why, it will make the Fourth Form turn green from end to end."

"Yes; only if you get caught in the first half-mile, what then?" asked Manners.

"Oh, I know!" said Lowther. "It will make the Shell turn pink."

"But I sha'n't get caught in the first half-mile. I hope I sha'n't be caught at all; but, in any case, I shall give them a good run for their money."

"You won't have much chance against runners like Darrel, Monteith, Baker——"

"Oh, I don't know!"

"Well, I do!" said Lowther emphatically. "The fact is, Tom, that you've bitten off more than you can chew this time."

"But I say——"

"Rats! You've taken on a job too heavy for you, and you will fail, my son, and the Fourth Form will cackle at the Shell like a lot of giddy geese."

"But——"

"And the New House fellows will cackle at us, too," said Manners. "I can imagine how Figgins & Co. will grin

Please fill in the Order Form in this issue.

Four very businesslike juniors presented themselves at the door of Tom Merry's editorial office.

when Tom Merry is caught by Darrel or Monteith in the first hundred yards."

"Yes; we shall never hear the end of it."

"Look here!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "You're a pair of rotten croakers, that's what you are! You know I can run, and I don't see why I shouldn't make a good hare for the run on Saturday. I am going to practise and get into the best possible form."

"You won't be able to stick it out."

"I shall do my best, and if I give a good show, it will be one up for the Shell, and one up for the School House. If I get caught, that's the luck of the thing. Anyway, it's no good starting in the line of Job's comforters now. Shut up, and let's get on with the 'Weekly.'"

"Hallo, here comes Study No. 6!"

Four juniors presented themselves at the door of the editorial office. They looked very businesslike. Blake and Herries carried open manuscripts in their hands. D'Arcy, the swell of the School House, had an enormous roll under his arm. Herries' breast-pocket was bulging suspiciously.

"Oh, here you are!" said Tom Merry. "I've written down here that the 'Weekly' is published by Tom Merry & Co.; but it seems to me that we shall have all the work, and the Co. don't do much."

"Well, we write the best contributions," said Blake. "I don't see that you can expect more than that."

"The best, eh? Why——"

"That's all right, kid," said Blake, with a wave of his hand. "We've brought you along some stuff that will make your contributions look sick."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I have here a stowy that will fill about half this numbah of the mag——"

The Terrible Three grinned at one another.

"Have you?" said Tom Merry. "Then you had better look out for a waste-paper merchant, and sell it cheap."

The swell of St. Jim's screwed his monocle into his right eye, and stared at Tom Merry with a decidedly disdainful expression.

"Pway excuse me, Tom Mewwy; I do not quite compwehend. May I beg you to wepeat that wemark?"

"Certainly," said Tom Merry politely. "I said that if you've got a story that will half fill the magazine, you'd better look out for a waste-paper merchant, and sell it cheap."

"I wefuse to look out for a waste-papah merchant. I uttahly wefuse to sell it cheap," said D'Arcy. "I have witten this stowy for the 'Weekly'——"

"Well, chop out three-quarters of it."

"I decline to chop out thwee-quartahs of it."

"My dear ass——"

"I object to bein' chawactewised as an ass," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "Eithah my stowy goes in whole, or I shall wefuse to let you use it at all."

Tom Merry looked crushed.

"Oh, Gussy! Don't do that! Don't be so cruel to the readers!"

"It is not my wish to be cwuel. But I must, as a mattah of personal dig., uttahly wefuse to allow my stowy to be bwutally mutilated."

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Monty Lowther.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave him a freezing glance.

"I weally do not see what there is to cackle at in my wemark, Lowthah."

"You wouldn't," said Lowther.

"If that wemark is intended to convey a weflection upon my intelligence, I——"

"It's a serious question," said Tom Merry, nursing his

chin with his hand, and wrinkling his brows in a very thoughtful way. "I don't know what the readers will do if they miss Gussy's story But we can't fill up the whole of the magazine with it."

"I shall wequire only half——"

"I admit that that's remarkably moderate—for you——"

"Weally, my aim is to be modewate."

"Exactly. Perhaps you could manage to be a little more moderate still. Lemme see. Roughly, how many words does your story contain?"

"Weally, I have not counted them; but I should say about five thousand."

"Ah! Now, if you could reduce it, say, to fifty——"

"Eh?"

"If you could reduce it to fifty words——"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"We could then shove it in," said the editor. "Otherwise, I am afraid the readers will have to get on the best they can without it."

"That will be vewy wuff on them."

"Yes, rather; but they'll have to stand it."

"Well, they have to stand a lot already, with you three writing in every number of the magazine," said Blake. "I dare say they're getting hardened now. But it's right about Gussy's story. I told him it couldn't all go in."

"Yaas, wathah; but weally——"

"The best thing you can do, if you can't find a waste-paper merchant, is to bury it," Tom Merry advised. "Bury it deep, and don't dig it up again."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Good idea!" said Blake heartily. "Bury it, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to buwy it!"

"Then eat it! Anything you like, only carry it away. What have you got there, Dig.?"

"Article on New House curiosities," said Digby, laying his paper on the table. "Curious habits of New House rotters."

"That's all right. I expect Figgins will give us something back about the School House, but that will only make things lively. What's yours, Blake?"

"Another instalment of my poetic serial," said Blake. "I'll read it out to you if you like."

"Oh, don't bother!"

"I'll read it out to you," repeated Blake, with emphasis.

"I say, isn't it about time that serial came to an end?" asked Monty Lowther. "It's been running some time now."

"The fact is," said Blake frankly, "I don't quite know how to end it. I'm running it on till an idea strikes me. I believe lots of serials are written that way. I'll read it out to you."

"My dear chap——"

"I shove in a synopsis of previous instalments every time, for the benefit of fresh subscribers," said Blake. "What more can you want? I don't see why the serial shouldn't run on as long as the magazine does. But listen——"

"My dear fellow——"

"Oh, it's no good arguing now. I'll read you out this instalment."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Now, don't you start, Gussy! You know I've told you before that you're too numerous and too often," said Blake severely. "Listen, then, kids, as you want me to read it out."

And Blake proceeded with the treat.

"'Sir Fatted and His Fayre Ladye. A Poetical Romance of the Middle Ages.'"

"Is that correct, though?" asked Lowther, with a serious look.

"Is what correct?"

"Were Sir Fatted and his fayre ladye middle-aged people?"

"Ass! Of course not! They were young lovers!"

"But you say it's a romance of the Middle Ages."

Blake looked daggers at the humorous Monty, and went on reading his poem.

"'Sir Fatted and His Fayre Ladye. A Poetical Romance of the Middle Ages. By J.'——"

"Just a second," said Monty Lowther, holding up his hand. "You have left out the indefinite article, I think."

Blake looked puzzled.

"I've left out what?"

"The indefinite article. A Romance of the Middle Ages by jay doesn't sound right. You should say: 'A Romance of the Middle Ages, by a Jay.'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop that cackling!" said Blake. "Lowther, you're too funny to live! If you want to know, I shall begin at the beginning again every time I'm interrupted."

"My word!" said Digby. "Don't interrupt him again, please."

"Yaas, wathah! It is simply pwolongin' the agony, deah boys."

Blake went on unheeding.

"'Sir Fatted and His Fayre Ladye. A Romance of the Middle Ages. By J. Blake. For new readers: Sir Fatted de Fitzbooters loves the Lady Flora, and her governor, the bold baron, catches him serenading at the foot of the tower. Read on from this point:

"'When Sir Fatted heard him coming, very quickly ceased he strumming,
Every thought of sweet yum-yumming disappearing from his mind,
Ceased he quick his song romantic, ceased he every love-lorn antic;
And he bunked with speed most frantic, with the baron close behind.
In his haste and hurry caring, little whither he was tearing,
While the horrid baron, swearing, chased with stick up-raised to whack,
His expressions can't be printed—they were strong, as we have hinted—
Which he uttered as he sprinted on our poor Sir Fatted's track.'"

Blake ceased, and the silence of the study was broken by a bitter sob. Monty Lowther had fallen upon a chair, and was weeping violently.

"Oh, how touching it is!" sobbed Lowther. "The author himself must have been touched, I think."

"Ha, ha, ha! A little touched, I think!" roared Manners.

And Tom Merry grinned assent.

Blake gave the Terrible Three an indignant glance.

"Lot of good reading poetry to you three pifflers," he said disdainfully.

"Yaas, wathah! They are thwee silly pifflahs, deah boys, and though they are quite wight in thinkin' Blake must have been touched when he wote a poem like that, still——"

"Oh, dry up, Gussy!" growled Blake.

"I wefuse to dwy up! I say what I think——"

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "How nice that would be!"

"How nice what would be, Tom Mewwy?"

"If you would only say what you think. What a glorious silence there would be!" said Tom Merry.

"If you mean to imply by that wemark that I nevah think, Tom Mewwy, I hurl the wemark back in your thwoat!"

"My word, he's getting dangerous!" said Digby. "Shut up, Gussy, and let's get to work. Here come Figgins & Co. Hallo, Figgy, better late than never!"

"Come in," said Tom Merry.

And Figgins & Co., the famous quartette from the New House, came into the editorial office, with important looks on their faces, and bundles of foolscap under their arms.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry & Co. at Work.

FIGGINS & Co. had evidently come prepared for business, and the whole of the editorial staff being now in the office, they were soon at work.

The rivalry between School House and New House at St. Jim's was always allowed tacitly to fall into abeyance when it was a question of producing a new number of "Tom Merry's Weekly," the production being the joint work of the juniors of both houses.

Once or twice, indeed, Figgins & Co., outnumbered in the editorial office by the School House boys, had talked of starting an opposition paper in the New House, but it had never come to anything.

"The Weekly," which was now printed at the local paper office in Rylcombe, was really a production to be proud of, and proud of it the juniors accordingly were.

It could not be called a paying concern, as the copies were given away to the readers, and the cost of printing and publishing had to be borne by the staff, consisting of one editor and ten sub-editors.

But, as Monty Lowther remarked, any fellow who paid for a copy would immediately want to run the paper, and precious few would pay, anyway, and so there was no other possible system than the one adopted.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, with the latest addition to the Co., Marmaduke Smythe, set to work in good earnest, and the Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6 followed suit, and ceased their mutual ragging. There was none too much room in Tom Merry's study for eleven juniors to sit and work, though it was the roomiest of all the studies allotted to the Shell. But the juniors were not disposed to grumble. They sat on chairs, or boxes, or the window-sill, or the floor, contentedly, and gave all their attention to their work.

"I say," said Arthur Augustus, looking up from his seat on the coal locker.

Nobody took any notice.

Ten pens were scritching away, and D'Arcy's remark was addressed to the desert air.

"I say," repeated D'Arcy, "who's goin' to do the beastly weport for the debatin' society to-mowwow?"

Tom Merry looked up from his work.

"I forgot that," he said. "Thank you for reminding me, Gussy!"

"Yaas, wathah! I'd like to know how things would get done in this editowial office if I did not wemind you boundahs sometimes."

"Lemme see," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I suppose I shall have to take the report. It's settled that it's going into this number, isn't it?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Certainly!" said Blake, looking up. "The debating society is an important body, Tom Merry, and if it's proceedings were left unreported there would be ructions."

"Well, I don't know about the importance——"

"Yaas, wathah! It's vewy important. You see, I belong to it——"

"Oh, of course, that makes all the difference. I suppose a full report had better go in," said Tom Merry, with a nod. "I had better be the reporter, as I know shorthand, and can take it all down if the speakers are too quick for you fellows."

"That's all right; but if you have a report in the mag. covering about two or three pages, you can't expect to shove in any of your poetry as well," said Figgins.

"I don't know."

"But I do. I appeal to the staff."

"Right-ho!" said the staff, with one voice.

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "And I weally considah that a vote of thanks should be passed to the debatin' society, if they are the means of keepin' some of Tom Mewwy's poetwy out of the mag., dear boys."

"Ha, ha! Gussy's right!"

Tom Merry laughed good-naturedly.

"Have it your way, kids," he replied. "My poems are too good for this sort of a magazine, anyway, and they certainly do make Fourth Form poetry look rather rotten by comparison, and that's rough on the kids."

"On the what?" demanded eight voices, with singular unanimity.

"Pardon!" said Tom Merry gracefully. "I meant cads. Hallo, there's somebody knocking at the door. He can't come in now and bother us, whoever he is, so don't take any notice."

And eleven pens scratched away.

The knock was loudly repeated, and then a hand tried the door. But one of the staff had thoughtfully locked it, and it did not open.

"I say in there!" shouted a voice in the passage.

"Who is it?" rapped out Tom Merry impatiently.

"Gore. I want to speak to you."

"Go and eat coke."

"But I want——"

"Run away and play!"

There was a loud kick on the door. Several blots dropped in the editorial office, and there were wrathful exclamations. Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"Get away, Gore!" he called out.

"Rats! Open the beastly door!"

"We're busy!"

"What are you up to? Smoking, I suppose. Ha, ha! I've bowled you out, have I, Tom Merry? My word! Fancy smoking in——"

Tom Merry gave a growl.

"We'd better open the door," he said, "or that rotter will spread a yarn all over the School House that we're smoking in this study."

And he turned the key and threw open the door. Gore of the Shell looked into the study. Mellish of the Fourth was with him.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Not smoking, hey? What are you so busy about—that rotten old magazine? I——"

"What do you want, Gore?"

"Only to ask you a question. I've just heard something about you——"

"That's it," said Mellish. "Walsh says——"

"That Lawson said——"

"That he heard Kildare say——"

"To Rushden——"

"That you were going to run as a hare in the paper-chase on Saturday."

"Got it all out?" asked Tom Merry politely. "My word! You two would make a good double turn in a variety show, and no mistake."

"But is it true?" asked Gore.

"Yes, it's true."

"You're going to run on Saturday?"

"Yes, and you're going to run now, unless you want to study the weight of my boot," said Tom Merry.

"Well, of all the cheek!" said Gore, retreating a little. "I always knew you were gassy enough, Tom Merry, but I never thought you would have the nerve to try and run with the Sixth. Nice sort of an ass you will look!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Mellish. "Why, it's to be a six-mile run, and you couldn't stay half the distance!"

"Are you going?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, yes, we're going. We're going to tell the house what an ass you're making of yourself," said Gore. "You'll make them cackle at the Shell, and I suppose that's your object, to bring the Form into ridicule. I think you ought to be stopped!"

"Oh, he will be stopped on Saturday, before he's done a dozen yards," said Mellish. "Of course, he's bitten off more than he can chew, and he will look an ass!"

Tom Merry picked up an inkpot from the study table. The look in his eyes was enough for Gore and Mellish. They went rather hurriedly down the passage. Tom Merry closed the door of the editorial office, and took up his pen again. But most of the other pens were idle now, and their owners were staring at the hero of the Shell.

"So Goah was speakin' the twuth, Tom Merry?" said D'Arcy slowly.

"Yes, for once in his life," said Tom Merry. "Sort of accident, I suppose. You know, accidents will happen!"

"You are weally goin' to wun in the Sixth Form hawwiahs?"

"Yes, I am, Gussy. What about it?"

"What about it?" said D'Arcy. "Why, I wegard you as an ass, that's all!"

"So do I," said Blake. "An arrant ass! I know you run very well for a junior—pretty nearly as well as I do, to be quite candid—but in a Sixth Form run——"

Tom Merry turned red.

"My aunt! Are you going to start now?" he exclaimed. "I've had it already from Manners and Lowther! Why shouldn't I run for the Sixth, if I like. If they choose to have me, I suppose it won't hurt anybody else."

"Yaas, wathah! It will hurt the dig. of the Lowah School. You will bwing widicule upon the juniahs by twyin' to wun in such a wace," said D'Arcy. "You will be caught in the first lap, and then——"

"Then you School House boundahs can sing small," said Figgins. "You fellows on this side are always going to do wonderful things, and never doing them. You are always biting off more than you can chew, and then singing small. It won't be any change for you. My hat, though! I'll make up a poem on the subject for this number of the 'Weekly.'"

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Kerr, the Scottish partner in the Co. "Something in the limerick style. It might run like this:

"A fellow—I needn't say who,
Once bit off more than he could chew——"

Manners and Lowther sniffed. They had ragged Tom on the subject themselves, like true chums; but they were not going to let anyone else rag him.

"No, you needn't say who!" grunted Manners. "If your Form master heard you using grammar like that, he'd give you fifty lines, I should think. You'd better say whom."

Kerr turned red. He rather prided himself upon his exactness in the grammatical line, and, as a matter of fact, he had only made the sacrifice for the sake of a rhyme.

"Ass!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I don't know that it ought to be the accusative——"

"I don't know what you know, and I don't care," said Manners. "I only know what you say. You said you needn't say who, and I said——"

"Oh, don't tell us over again what you said!" implored Fatty Wynn, the Welsh partner in the famous firm of Figgins & Co. "It's bad enough to have to listen once——"

"Correct!" said Figgins. "This is where Manners dries up."

"It's nothing of the kind——"

"Get on with the limerick, Kerr," said Marmaduke Smythe encouragingly. And Kerr went on:

"A fellow—I needn't say who—
Once bit off more than he could chew.
He thought he'd make one
In the Sixth Formers' run,
But he found the idea wouldn't do."

"Good!" said Figgins.

"Oh, jolly good!" said Tom Merry. "But limericks are out of date, and pretty nearly as dead as missing words; so we shall have to bar it in the mag."

"I don't see——"

"Then I should advise you to consult an oculist. Hallo,

there's another rotter at the door! Come in, whoever you are, and get it over!"

The door opened, and a large head was introduced into the study. It was followed by a body small in proportion to the head, supported upon legs small in proportion to the body. A good-natured, knobbly face, with an enormous forehead and tufts of scraggy hair projecting over it, looked at the editorial staff.

"Hallo, Skimpole!" said Tom Merry resignedly. "What do you want?"

Skimpole was the brainy man of the Shell. He took up the deepest subjects, and never kept at any of them for long. His latest idea was Socialism, and his efforts for that great cause have been related in an earlier story. Socialism was still teeming in the brain of Skimpole, and to judge by the size of his head, there was plenty of room for it there.

"I've just been speaking to Gore," he began.

"Well, there's no law against that, that I know of; and, as a matter of fact, we'd all be pleased if you'd go and continue your conversation with him," said Tom Merry. "Shut the door after you, there's a good fellow!"

"But I've come here——"

"Yes, I can see you have; and now I want to see you go."

"I've got something to say——"

"Say it on the other side of the door, please, and in a low voice, so as not to disturb us. Now be an obliging fellow, Skimmy, and do as I say."

"I've got something to say, Merry," said Skimpole, unheeding. "I've just been speaking to Gore, and he tells me you are bringing out a new number of the 'Weekly.'"

"Wonders will never cease," said Tom Merry; "Gore has told the truth twice in the same day. Go on, if you must!"

"Well, I offered you an article for your last number, and you refused it with—I may say with contumely."

"You may if you like. You may go, too."

"I was driven to an artifice for getting that article published——"

"Yes; you sneaked it into the copy and it was printed with the rest!" said the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly" wrathfully. "You came near having the hiding of your life for that!"

"I have here another article——"

"Take it away and bury it!"

"I have endeavoured to make it as simple as possible, so that even your youthful intellects cannot fail to grasp the great truths I have expressed," said Skimpole, taking a manuscript from his pocket. "I have even stooped my genius so far as to write it in verse, as I know you like poetry for your magazine."

"You've taken a lot of trouble, old fellow. I'm sorry it was all for nothing. Oh, I say, we're awfully busy——"

"I will read you the poem——"

"How long is it?"

"Oh, not more than five hundred lines——"

The editorial staff of "Tom Merry's Weekly" jumped up as if they were all suddenly moved by the same spring.

"You're not going to read out five hundred lines here!" bawled Blake. "Get out!"

"Yaas, wathah! Twavel, deah boy!"

"Bunk!" shouted Figgins, seizing the poker. "By Jove, I can see us suspending the editorial labours to listen to a poem on Socialism!"

But Skimpole, with the determination of a slave of a fixed idea, faced the staff of the "Weekly" with perfect calmness.

"My dear brothers," he exclaimed, "pray be patient! I hope to open all your minds and cause you to use your intelligence for the first time, and surely that is a boon you can appreciate——"

"Get out!"

"This is how the poem begins," said Skimpole, opening the manuscript: "Toiling——"

"Bunk!"

But Skimpole the Socialist went on obstinately:

"Toiling millions who know no rest,
Untaught, uncared-for, and unfed;
While rolls the sun from east to west,
In weary toil your hours are sped.
The child cries from the mother's breast,
In cold and famine——"

"Shut up!" roared eleven voices, in a formidable chorus. "Shut up!"

"I sha'n't shut up! In cold and famine——"

"You'll give us the horrid creeps!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Do you think we could shove a thing like that into the 'Weekly'? Why, it's enough to give the whole school the doleful dumps. You'd better send it to 'The Times.'"

"Or 'Punch,'" said Lowther.

"In cold and famine——"

"We've had enough of your cold and famine. Travel!"

"I should resent your rude address," said Skimpole, "but as a true Socialist, I am bound to forgive injuries, and to spread the light in spite of opposition. I know that your obstinacy is not your fault, but owing to your ill-training. Base and sordid surroundings in early youth account for the——"

"What?"

"Training at the hands of vicious and self-indulgent parents causes children to grow up base and obstinate and stupid, and so I am far from condemning you——"

"You—you giddy parrot! You get all that stuff out of books by the yard——"

"And chatter it off without knowing what it means——"

"Yaas, wathah! If I did not wegard Skimpole as a harmless ass, I should considah his wemarks as a weflection upon my wespected pawents, and should wegard it as impewative to administah to him a weally feahful thwashin'."

"You bloated aristocrat!" said Skimpole, turning his eyes upon D'Arcy. "You are one of the bloated capitalist class——"

"I must wefuse to allow these dispawagin' wemarks. I do not mind bein' called a capitalist or an awistocwat, but I object to bein' chawactewised as bloated——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Go for him, D'Arcy!" encouraged Figgins. "Kick him out!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"As a true Socialist, I am compelled to refrain from violence," said Skimpole, skipping out of the study; "otherwise I should certainly wipe up the floor with D'Arcy."

"Bai Jove, I should weally like to see you twy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, looking decidedly warlike. "Come on, you howwid boundah——"

But Skimpole was gone.

"Thank goodness he's gone!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You can sit down, Gussy. The revolution is postponed for a bit, and we can get on with our work."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the editorial staff recommenced, and now, fortunately, there were no more interuptions, and the work went ahead at a good speed.

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CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry's Resolve.

KILDARE came out of the gymnasium and crossed towards the School House with his firm, stalwart step. It was dark in the quadrangle, save where shafts of light fell into the gloom from the study windows. A form clad in light running-garb loomed up and stopped at sight of Kildare in the dusk of the old elms.

"Hallo! Is that you, Kildare?"

"Yes, Merry," said the captain of St. Jim's, stopping. "I see you're out for exercise. Good lad!"

"I'm just out for a little sprint round the quad," said Tom Merry. "Can I speak to you for a minute, Kildare?"

"As many minutes as you like, so long as you don't stand still and catch cold," smiled the captain of St. Jim's. "Trot along with me."

Tom Merry fell into pace beside the stalwart Sixth-Former.

"Well, what is it?" asked Kildare, glancing at him in the dusk as the hero of the Shell did not speak.

Tom Merry's cheeks were rather red.

"It's about the run on Saturday," said Tom abruptly. "Since you told me I should do for a hare in the run, I've been chipped to death by the Form. I say, Kildare, you—you really think that I am good enough to run with you?"

"Certainly. I should hardly choose you otherwise, Tom. I don't want the Sixth-Form run to end in a fiasco."

"No, of course not. I needn't have asked the question. But the fellows think I have taken on more than I can accomplish, and they fancy that the Lower School will get laughed at on my account."

"I don't think that that's likely to happen, Tom," said the captain of St. Jim's quietly. "I have some judgment in the matter, and I think you are up to the mark. Mind, it depends a good deal on your getting into your very best form and keeping fit and ready for Saturday."

"I shall do that," said Tom Merry. "You have decided to keep to the same course as usual, I believe?"

"Very little difference. The run will be roughly six miles, but the hares can make it longer by winding, if they choose. We cross the Ryll by the bridge, go round the ruins of the old castle—or, rather, through them, leaving a

The man was evidently entering the school grounds for the purpose of robbery, or worse, and Tom Merry knew what he had to do.

trail of paper over the old place. That will be rather rough going for the hounds. Then we get off towards Wayland, and round by the chalk-pits and the pine-wood home."

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's a good run, Kildare. But I think I can do it. It was something you said about my running that made me make the offer, but if you think it was cheek on my part, I shouldn't mind you turning me out now."

Kildare laughed.

"My dear kid, I'm going to have you with me because I want you," he said. "I believe you are all right!"

"But as a junior——"

"I may be jolly glad you are a junior at the finish," said Kildare. "In the last run I had Darrel with me, and he hurt his foot, and I had to carry him on my shoulders the last quarter of a mile. If anything of that kind happened—well, you know the difference between your weight and Darrel's."

"Then you really want me?"

"Of course. Only keep yourself in good form, and you'll do!"

And Kildare, having by this time reached the door of the School House, passed in, and Tom Merry turned to resume his run round the shadowy quad. There was a determined expression upon the face of the hero of the Shell. Kildare's words had greatly encouraged him.

"If the skipper thinks I can do it, I can, and that's flat," he muttered. "But—but I shouldn't like to crack up and get Kildare ragged by the Sixth in consequence. That would be rotten. I'll go over the course first and see."

His brow wrinkled in thought as he ran lightly under the elms. To go over the course was easy to say, but it was a long task to do. There would be no opportunity except upon the only half-holiday before Saturday—Wednesday. And on Wednesday afternoon Tom was playing in a football match, and as captain of the St. Jim's juniors he could not very well stand out.

But his eyes glimmered as a new idea struck him.

"By Jove! Why shouldn't I go at night—after lights out? I should have to go alone—none of the fellows could stick the distance. But I know the ground like a book, and there's nothing to be afraid of. I can get out easily enough, and—— By Jove, I'll do it!"

He glanced up at the sky. The moon was peeping from behind the clock-tower of St. Jim's and the sky was clear, of a steely-blue. There would be plenty of light for the run. A few feathery flakes of snow were falling, but the fall was not likely to be heavy before morning; and long before morning Tom Merry would be safe in the Shell dormitory in the School House of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry had made up his mind.

He went into the School House and changed out of his

running garb, and came into the common-room with a glow of health in his cheeks.

A general exclamation from the School House juniors who were in the room greeted the appearance of the hero of the Shell.

"See the conquering hero comes!" sang out Gore.

And Blake struck up the well-known air from his mouth-organ.

Tom Merry laughed, but there was something like a gleam in his eyes. He was getting "fed up," so to speak, with the general chipping on this subject.

"Oh, shut up that terrific row, Blake!" exclaimed Manners, stopping his ears.

Blake left off for a moment to fix a glare upon Manners.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"I said shut up that terrific row!"

"You dummy! What do you know about music?"

"More than you do, I fancy, if you think that awful instrument is musical. My dear kid, why don't you get a tin-can and a cricket-stump? They're more musical!"

"Or a tom-tom," said Monty Lowther, "or a rattle."

"I'll give you a selection——"

"No, you won't!"

"Yes, I will. Stand by, kids, while I give the rotters a regular selection on the mouth-organ!" exclaimed Blake excitedly. "We'll teach 'em!"

But for once the chums of Study No. 6 failed to rally at the call of their leader. Blake looked round in surprise. Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy showed no sign of coming forward. Blake stared at them.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Put it away, kid!" he exclaimed. "If you start playing it again we'll scrag you, I give you my word."

"My word, rather!" exclaimed Manners.

Blake's eyes flashed defiance.

"By Jove, we'll see whether you Shell bounders are cocks of the walk in the common-room!" he exclaimed. "Stand by me, chaps! Why the dickens don't you line up?"

"Well, you see——" began Herries.

"It's like this——" said Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "That's how the case stands, deah boy. Ask us anythin' else, and we'll back you up like anythin'——"

"That's it," said Digby. "We'll follow you to raid the New House——"

"Right-ho—or to kick these Shell bounders out of the room!" said Herries. "But when it comes to standing near you while you play the mouth-organ——"

"It's asking too much," said Digby.

"Yaas, wathah! Ask anything in reason, deah boy, and we will wally wound you like anythin'; but, weally——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three; and the yell was joined in by twenty juniors.

Blake turned red, and thrust the mouth-organ into his pocket.

"Lot of unmusical asses!" he exclaimed. "I could do you the Grand March from 'Tannhauser' so that you'd think it was a giddy orchestra, or Mendelssohn's Wedding March——"

"The Dead March in 'Saul' would be nearer your mark," said Lowther. "We should all be dead by the time you'd finished, you see."

"Yaas, wathah! It is vewy seldom I wefuse to back up a comwade in anythin', but, weally, there are some things a fellow couldn't do; and when it comes to listenin' to Blake's mouth-organ, or Hewwies's cornet——"

"Hallo! What 's that about my cornet?" exclaimed Herries.

"I say your cornet is as wotten as Blake's mouth-organ, and the only thing that's worse than eithah is Dig's violin——"

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Gussy?" exclaimed Digby, who rather prided himself on his powers as a youthful Kubelik.

"Certainly not, Digby. I wegard that as a widiculous question. Goah, I wish you would not speak while I am speakin'; you interwupt me."

"Go hon!" said Gore. "Somebody's bound to interrupt you sometimes, Gussy, or else everything that was said in this school would be in the form of a solo. I say, Tom Merry, I was speaking to you."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! Go and eat beastly coke, Goah!"

"I say, Merry, I've got a bet on with Mellish that you will run twenty yards before you are caught on Saturday. Mellish thinks you'll be caught in the first ten——"

"Wrong!" said Walsh. "The hares have five minutes' start, and so Tom Merry won't be caught for something like six minutes from the start."

"Ha, ha, ha! Would you like me to pace you over the ground on Wednesday afternoon, Merry? You can cut the Grammar School match. It wouldn't take more than five or six hours, you know——"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"He's losing his ickle temper," giggled Gore. "I say, Merry——"

Tom Merry walked out of the room. Monty Lowther and Manners had joined in the laughter, but they quickly followed their chum as he went out.

"I say, old Tom, you don't mind a bit of chipping?" said Manners, laying his hand on Tom Merry's shoulder.

Tom Merry looked at him with a rather uncertain smile.

"Oh, no; of course not," he replied. "But a fellow can get fed up with it, you know. You don't think I shall pull it off on Saturday, either of you?"

It was a direct question.

"Well, perhaps not," said Lowther hesitatingly. "I know you'll give them a good run, though, and you may not be caught on the way out."

"You may get half-way home," said Manners. "I hope so."

Tom Merry set his teeth.

"Well, I'm going to make the run," he exclaimed, "and I'm going to get in to the school after it, with Kildare, without being caught, and that's flat! You know I'm not a boaster, as a rule."

"You've taken on too big a thing, Tom."

And Manners shook his head.

"It's not good enough."

"We'll see! I think I can do it, and Kildare thinks so, too, and that's good enough for me. We shall see!"

"Yes, we shall see, I suppose. You can't very well back out now, anyway. It would cause more chipping than the worst of failures, if you backed out."

"I've never thought of backing out. I'm going to run, and I'll show the School House that I can do it, too!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

And when Tom Merry spoke in that tone he usually meant what he said.

CHAPTER 5.
A Startling Encounter.

BOOM!

Sharp and clear the stroke from the clock-tower at St. Jim's rang through the frosty air. Ten more strokes followed it, slow and heavy. It was eleven o'clock!

In the Shell dormitory in the School House at St. Jim's quiet and slumber reigned. The moonlight glimmered in at the windows set high in the whitewashed walls. The shimmering light made the long, lofty room strangely weird and ghostly to the eyes of Tom Merry as he sat up in bed.

The night was bitterly cold. There was frost on the window-panes, and in the quadrangle there was a feathery sprinkling of snow. Tom Merry shivered as he threw back the bedclothes.

But he was not one to fail in any task he had undertaken. Without making a sound to awaken the boys of the Shell, he stepped quietly out of bed and donned his clothes—warm woollens, which he had placed ready over-night.

He had not told any of his chums of his intention. Lowther and Manners, in the first place, would have disapproved of the project. In the second place, finding him determined, they would have wanted to go with him.

And Tom Merry was not inclined to give up the idea, and he did not want to deprive his chums of their night's rest, and take them out for so hard and long a run in the cold February night.

He left the dormitory, closing the door silently behind him, and stole downstairs. By a window the juniors had used on more than one occasion before, Tom Merry left the school, and faced the bitter wintry wind in the quadrangle.

The ground was lightly powdered with a slight fall of snow, but no more was falling now. It looked little more than a sprinkling of flour on the ground. Tom Merry crossed the quadrangle swiftly.

From two or three windows lights still gleamed, but the greater part of the buildings were in darkness. Tom Merry stopped at the familiar spot on the school wall, and swung himself up the ivy.

It was wet and clammy, and a shower of tiny flakes scattered over him; but he did not care. Up he went, and sat astride of the wall, and looked over into Rylcombe Lane before he dropped.

It was well that he did so.

As he sat on the wall, hidden in the shadow of a big tree, and scanned the road, a dark figure loomed up out of the shadows of the night. It was wrapped in an overcoat, and a fur cap was pulled down about its ears; but there seemed to Tom Merry's eyes something familiar in the figure.

Where had he seen it before?

Had the stranger passed on his way, Tom Merry would

have thought nothing of the matter, for the man might simply have been a late traveller on the road. But the figure stopped near the wall of the school, and stood there staring upward.

For a moment Tom Merry's heart beat high with the thought that he was seen, and that the mysterious stranger was watching. But the man's manner did not show it. He was staring straight at Tom, but the black shadow of the tree hid the boy too completely for him to be seen.

The fact that the stranger, after staring up, advanced closer to the wall, showed that he had not seen Tom Merry.

The junior caught his breath sharply. He knew that the man was about to climb the wall, and the fact that he knew the wall was accessible at that spot showed that he was familiar with St. Jim's. There were certain irregularities in the stonework of the wall which gave a foothold, but these were hidden from view by stragglings of ivy. On the outside of the wall the ivy was not strong enough to bear a child, being merely straggling tendrils from within. Who was this who knew in what exact spot the school wall could be climbed? Only someone who was familiar with the school, and with some of the secrets of the juniors.

A grasp was laid on the rough stone, and the man began to climb. He came up swiftly, and Tom Merry had little time to think.

The man was evidently entering the school grounds for the purpose of robbery, or worse, and Tom knew what he had to do. He waited till the man came well up the wall, and then drew back his fist for a blow.

Had those powerful arms had a chance to close upon him the boy knew that he would have no chance against the man. But his position, and the fact that he was unseen, gave the lad an advantage now irresistible.

He heard the man's panting breath as he climbed. Even in the dusk he caught a glimpse of a white, hard face, and knew the man.

"Bullivant!"

He muttered the name aloud in his amazement.

Back to his mind flashed the recollection of a strange adventure—of the man who had cunningly obtained a post at the school as a groundman, with the intention of robbing St. Jim's of the historic school silver. Tom Merry had been the means of baffling him and handing him over to Ferrers Locke, the detective. Bullivant—known among his criminal associates by another name—had been sent for trial, and Tom Merry had imagined him to be in prison by this time. His presence here showed that he had escaped from the hands of justice.

Tom felt a tremor at his heart for a moment. The ruffian might be making another desperate attempt to obtain the school silver-plate; but it was more likely that he was actuated, at least partly, by motives of revenge upon the lad who had caused his arrest.

Startled by the recognition, the name passed Tom Merry's lips before he had time to think. He heard the hiss of a deep-drawn breath, and knew that the ruffian had heard him.

The upward climb ceased. For a moment the ruffian hung there, motionless, silent, with his hands on the coping, listening intensely. Tom Merry's teeth shut hard, and swift as a lightning flash his right arm shot out.

The hard-clenched fist struck the ruffian fairly between the eyes with terrific force.

A low grunt escaped Bullivant. His hands slid from the wall, and he dropped heavily back into the road, and lay there for some moments, quite dazed.

It was on Tom Merry's lips to shout for help, and wake the school, to secure the ruffian. But he restrained the impulse. Long before help could come the rascal would have made good his escape, and he would have betrayed himself for nothing.

He was glad the next minute that he had had the caution to remain silent, for it was only for a few moments that Bullivant lay on the frosty ground. Then he sprang up, and, without even a glance at the wall whence he had been hurled, he darted off. His heavy footstep rang for a few moments in the darkness, and then died away faint and distant.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

The ruffian was gone! Silence settled down again upon the lane, save for the moan of the cold wind in the branches of the trees. The quarter chimed out from the school tower.

Tom Merry dropped lightly into the road. It was certain that, after such a surprise, the ruffian would abandon his attempt for that night at least. There was little chance that Bullivant would return. As for the risk of meeting him in the lanes, that was slight, as he had torn off towards the village, and Tom's way lay through the wood.

The hero of the Shell looked about him, and then crossed the lane, and plunged through the trees into the field. A cut across the field brought him to the common where the paper-chase was to be started on the following Saturday afternoon.

A dark, silent expanse of grass dotted with bracken, lonely and weird in the glimmering moonlight! Tom Merry halted at the starting-point, and looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes past eleven.

"Well, now I'm off," he murmured, as he replaced the watch in his pocket.

And he turned his face in the direction of the bridge over the Ryll, and set off at an easy, swinging pace.

CHAPTER 6.

The Rescue of Ferrers Locke.

TOM MERRY kept up a steady pace, and, in spite of the cold of the February night, he was soon in a pleasant, warm glow from the exercise. The common, glimmering in the moon's rays, was behind him, and he cut through a straggling patch of wood, and came out upon the path leading up from Rylcombe Wood to the ruined castle.

Up the path he went at a slacker pace, as the ground rose more steeply before him, and came in sight of the ancient building which had been the scene of many a strange adventure.

The remains of the old stone gateway rose before him, and he passed through, and threaded his way among the ruins.

Here, with the ground cumbered with broken fragments of masonry, the going was hard, and here the hounds were likely to find their difficulties begin on Saturday. Tom Merry passed out of the old castle by a gap in the time-broken wall, and down the slope towards the Wayland high-road.

The high-road was hard and frosty, powdered with snow. With a steady pit-pat, pit-pat, the junior trotted on under the gleaming moon, now high in the heavens and streaming down in silver light upon the country-side.

Some distance short of the town of Wayland, Tom Merry halted, and turned off to the left by the path leading through the chalk-pits. To one who did not know the ground this was a dangerous path to take at night, but Tom Merry knew every foot of the country round St. Jim's.

Many a wayfarer, it was said, had found his death in those old, disused pits, left open and unenclosed since the working of them had been stopped years before. Here and there on a dangerous verge ran a fence, but the fences were mostly weather-worn and broken.

In many places a single false step meant destruction; but so long as the path was followed, the wayfarer was safe enough.

Leaving the road, Tom faced the moor. Here, over the chalk-pits, the wind blew harder and colder, and, in spite of the warm exercise, Tom Merry felt the chill of it.

But for the moon, there was no light on this lonely path. Lonely, indeed, it was, with no habitation within miles, and at such an hour of the night there was not likely to be any pedestrian beside the adventurous junior from St. Jim's.

Deep, yawning gulfs of blackness on either hand told Tom Merry when he was near the chalk-pits. Suddenly the silence of the lonely moor was broken by a strange sound. Tom Merry halted, the blood pumping through his body.

What had he heard? It was not the cry of a wild bird; but what human voice could be calling in such a place at such an hour?

The boy bent his head and listened. The cry sounded again, distant and faint, and if it shaped a word it was too far off for him to distinguish it.

Tom Merry hesitated. The sound came from the direction of the excavations at some distance from the path, and it was a dangerous spot to investigate; but it was not of the danger that Tom Merry thought. He was thinking of the run he was making, which he had intended to time from start to finish.

But the thought that a human being might be in distress in that lonely spot, far from aid, banished every other consideration. Tom Merry put his hands to his mouth, and shouted.

"Halloo-o-o-ooo!"

The prolonged cry rang across the lonely waste, ringing far down the wind. Tom Merry listened intently for a reply.

It came—a distant cry. But this time the boy thought he could shape a word in the sound. He thought he heard the word "Help!" He hesitated no longer. Leaving the path, he hurried in the direction of the cry.

It was fortunate that he knew the ground well, for it was rugged and broken, and yawned with cavities. Here and there his way took him along the unguarded verge of some

abandoned pit a hundred feet deep; but Tom Merry's nerve was steady, and he ran on without a halt.

"Help!"

The cry rang again, quite clear this time. It was a man's voice that was calling for help, and from the way it sounded to his ears, Tom Merry knew that it came from below the level of the ground.

There was no further doubt as to what had happened. Some unwary traveller, unacquainted with the ground, had fallen into one of the disused pits.

Tom Merry was glad enough, as he realised that he had left St. Jim's for that solitary run in the midnight. It was in all probability the means of saving a human life.

"Help!"

Tom Merry halted, and shouted back.

"Hallo! Halloo-o-o-o-o!"

A joyful cry answered him.

"Help! Thank Heaven, I have been heard at last! But take care, or you will follow me into the pit."

The voice was quite near. Tom Merry made his way carefully towards the gulf of blackness which marked a deep pit, from which the voice came weirdly.

He stopped on the verge. Stare down as he might, he could make nothing out. The moonlight glimmered at the upper part of the pit, but further down it was in dense darkness. Somewhere down there in impenetrable gloom was the man who had cried for help.

"You are there?" shouted Tom.

"Yes," came back the voice of the unseen man. "I have been here since daylight."

Tom Merry shivered. Shut up in that inaccessible pit for long hours, almost hopeless of rescue, he could imagine what the feelings of the unfortunate man had been.

"Thank Heaven you have come!" went on the voice. "I had almost given up hope."

There was a curious expression upon Tom Merry's face.

"Will you tell me who you are?" he called out. "I am certain that I know your voice, and yet——"

"And yours seems familiar to me," came the reply. "Is it possible that I am speaking to Tom Merry, of St. Jim's?"

"By Jove, then, you are Ferrers Locke!"

"I am. You are Tom Merry?"

"Yes."

Tom Merry's face was full of excitement now. It was the strangest meeting of his experience. Ferrers Locke, the famous London detective whom he had helped in the case of the rascally Bullivant, was shut up in the chalk-pit at his feet!

Scarce an hour after seeing Bullivant he had come upon the detective. But it at once occurred to his mind that Bullivant's presence in the neighbourhood was the cause of Ferrers Locke coming there.

"How can I help you, sir?" called out Tom Merry. "I know this pit, and it is at least twenty feet deep. You cannot climb out."

There was a grim chuckle from below.

"I know that, Tom. I have tried for hours."

"But are you hurt, sir? A fall like that——"

"No, I rolled down the slope when I was pushed in, and that saved my bones, though I have a fine assortment of bruises all over my body," the detective replied, with a grim humour. "The slope, unfortunately, is too steep for me to climb out, and it is slippery. I have been shouting for help at intervals since sunset."

"You were pushed in?" exclaimed Tom Merry, horrified.

"Yes. I caught a Tartar, you see, and instead of arresting my man, here I am, while he has escaped. But you can help me out, Tom. I have a rope here. I brought it with me in case of accidents when I came over the moor; but, unfortunately, I have not been able to use it in this case. If there had been a tree or a bush near the top of the pit I should have been all right; but there was nothing for the noose to catch when I threw it up. But now——"

"Now I can catch it."

"Exactly."

"Throw the rope, sir. I'm looking out."

"I will throw up the whole coil, and you can let it down to me," said Ferrers Locke.

There was a whiz in the air, and a coil of rope dropped a few feet from the waiting junior. Tom Merry picked it up and uncoiled it. There were thirty feet of strong rope, fully strong enough to bear the weight of a man. Tom Merry looked round for some projection to fasten the end to; but the sides of the pit were bare; rough as the ground was, there was nothing to which the rope could be attached.

"Can you fasten it?"

"No, sir. There is nothing here; but I can hold it," said Tom Merry.

"My dear lad, my weight will pull you into the pit."

"Not at all. I shall fasten it round my body, and then brace myself against a big stone there is here. I shall be safe enough."

"But——"

"I shall be all right, sir. If I go for help, you will be left for hours in the pit, and you will be frozen to death."

"If you are sure, Tom——"

"I am quite sure, sir. If I feel myself going, I'll call out, and you can drop off the rope if you like. But I shall be all right."

"Very well, then."

Tom fastened the rope carefully round his shoulders. He threw the loose end into the chalk-pit, and he heard the detective groping for it in the darkness below.

"Got it, sir?" he called out.

"Yes, I have the rope. Tell me when you are ready."

"Just a minute!"

Tom Merry lay down, and braced his feet against a huge stone that cropped up out of the ground near the verge of the pit. Then his hands grasped and firmly fixed upon the rope.

"Ready, sir!" he called out.

"Right!"

And a strain came upon the rope. Tom Merry set his teeth hard, bracing himself to bear the strain. Harder it grew, as the whole weight of the detective was thrown upon the rope; but the boy was strong and steady.

The rope seemed to bite into his shoulders, but he bore the pain of it with set teeth. A head loomed up from the darkness of the pit.

Ferrers Locke grasped the earth with his hands, and the strain was off the rope. Tom Merry, with a gasp of relief, rose to his feet. The detective stepped beside him, not needing the hand outstretched to aid.

"Tom, you have saved my life, lad!"

And Ferrers Locke grasped the hand of the hero of St. Jim's, and gave it a grip which told how much he felt at that moment.

CHAPTER 7.

The Shadow of Danger.

TOM MERRY was breathing hard. The strain had been a telling one. Ferrers Locke coiled up the rope and looped it over his arm. He was looking curiously at the junior from St. Jim's.

"It seems an ungrateful question, Tom," he said slowly, "as you have just saved my life, in all probability, but what are you doing in such a place as this at this time of the night?"

Tom Merry coloured.

"I suppose you are surprised, sir, but I think you know me well enough to be assured that I should not break bounds at night for any ill purpose."

"I am sure of that, Tom."

"Of course, I should get into a row if it were known at St. Jim's," said Tom. "You will keep it dark, of course, if you come to the school?"

The detective nodded.

"Of course! Besides, it will suit my purpose very well for the scoundrel who pushed me into that pit to imagine that I am still there." The detective chuckled grimly. "He will learn in good time that Ferrers Locke is still alive."

"Was it Bullivant, sir?"

Locke gave a start.

"How did you guess, Tom?"

"Because I have seen him to-night."

"You have seen the man who was known at St. Jim's as Bullivant? You have seen him to-night?" ejaculated the detective.

"Yes, as I left the school."

"Was he near St. Jim's?"

"He was trying to enter."

"Then my suspicion was correct; I was right," exclaimed the detective. "But come, Tom, you will be frozen. Come along, and keep up a good pace, and we can talk as we go."

"Yes, by Jove, it is cold here!"

Tom Merry was glad to get into motion again. They turned towards the path, Ferrers Locke, who knew little of the place, trusting to Tom Merry's guidance.

Tom explained concisely how he had come to leave St. Jim's at that hour of the night, and how he had met Bullivant at the school wall. The detective laughed as he heard how the ruffian had been received on the wall.

"I don't suppose he'd try again to-night," Ferrers Locke remarked, "but he certainly will make another attempt ere long. Here is the path. Which way are you going, Tom?"

"I am going over the course of the paper-chase, sir—round by the chalk-pits, and home to the school through the pine-wood. It's three miles."

"I will come with you. A run will do me good after being frozen for hours; and besides, I cannot let you go alone on such a route at such a time."

Tom Merry looked at him in surprise.

"But there is no danger, sir."

"There is, Tom—great and terrible danger, which you know nothing about, so far. But get into your pace; you will not find me lacking. I have spent enough time on the cinder-path to be equal to a little run like this, and, as I have said, it will do me good."

"Very well, sir."

And Tom Merry broke into a trot. The detective, in spite of his late terrible experience, seemed to be in good form. He kept pace beside the champion runner of the Lower Forms at St. Jim's.

"You remember the adventure with this man Bullivant, Tom?" said Ferrers Locke, breaking silence after some minutes. "You remember that he had a post at the school as groundman or instructor on the football ground?"

"Yes, sir, and he played well—wonderfully well for such a rotter as he was."

"And you were the means, Tom, of bringing about his arrest, after his attempted robbery of the school?"

"I did all I could, certainly."

"The scoundrel was committed for trial, Tom, and would have had a long sentence, but he broke prison and escaped. While in custody, however, he had used such threats against you for the part you had taken in his arrest that I knew you would not be safe if he became free again."

Tom Merry's face became grave. He understood now.

"When he escaped," continued the detective, "I guessed that he would, as soon as he was able, make for the school; not in the hope of obtaining the loot he had formerly attempted to obtain, but for revenge upon the boy who had baffled him—upon you, Tom."

"I'm not afraid of him, sir."

"I know you are not. But you must know your danger in order to guard against it. The ruffian was trying to enter the school to-night. He may have had purposes of robbery in his mind; doubtless he had, but one purpose he certainly had, and that was revenge."

Tom Merry was silent. He was brave, and his nerve had never failed him. But this was something new in his life—this glimpse of the terrible world of crime. The thought of being the object of such a vendetta was disquieting enough.

"As soon as I knew that he had escaped, I knew you were in danger," said Ferrers Locke. "I came down here at once. I heard in Wayland of a man having been robbed by some ruffian on the moor, and from the description I guessed that it was probably the man I sought. In the hope of getting on the track of Bullivant, I went out on the moor this afternoon. I found him, but not as I had hoped. I should rather say that he found me. I was near the pit when he attacked me; recognising me, and knowing that I must be there in quest of him. I was taken at a disadvantage, and hurled into the chalk-pit. I should probably have perished there but for you. It was only by constant motion that I saved myself from freezing; and if I had once allowed myself to sleep, I should never have awakened again. But that is over now, thanks to you. But you realise now, Tom, the danger you are in until Bullivant is arrested."

"Yes, I realise it, Mr. Locke," Tom said quietly.

"I was going to send you a warning, Tom; this meeting will serve the purpose. I shall send a message to Dr. Holmes on the subject. You will take care?"

"Certainly, sir."

"No more of these lonely runs at night, Tom—at least, until after the ruffian is arrested, which I hope will be soon."

Tom Merry hesitated. He had intended to go over the course at least once again before Saturday, and as for the danger, though he knew it was real enough, it did not scare him, and would have made no difference to his plans.

The detective's face became very earnest.

"Tom, I know you are no coward, but you must not run into this terrible peril. What do you think my feelings would be if you were hurt? It would be my fault for having allowed you to assist me in the case."

"I will do exactly as you like, sir," said Tom instantly.

"That is right, Tom, lad. I should feel terribly anxious about you unless you gave me your word not to leave St. Jim's alone after dark till Bullivant is safe under lock and key."

"I give you my word, sir."

"Thank you, Tom. I hope this state of affairs will not last long. The ruffian cannot evade me for many days, especially as he will deem me safely out of the way and himself secure."

They were passing through the pine-wood now, and later they came out into a lane, and skirting Rylcombe came in sight of St. Jim's.

The detective accompanied Tom Merry to the wall, and gave him a helping hand to the top. Then Tom Merry leaned down and shook hands with him cordially.

"Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night, Tom, and remember."

And Ferrers Locke disappeared into the night. Tom Merry dropped down on the inner side of the wall, and crossed the dusky quad towards the School House. The moon was behind the trees, and the light was growing dimmer. Tom Merry's feet crumbled the powdery snow as he hurried to the window by which he had left the house, and he found it just as he had left it.

In a couple of minutes he was inside, the window was refastened, and he was hurrying silently upstairs to the Shell dormitory.

He entered and closed the door. The next moment he gave a jump, as a pillow sailed through the air and smote him on the chest.

The shock was sudden, and with the thought of the ruffian Bullivant in his mind, Tom Merry could not help giving a sharp cry. A chuckle from Lowther's bed answered him.

"When you've done with that pillow, Tom, you can let me have it back."

Tom Merry drew a deep, quick breath.

"What the dickens did you do that for, Monty?" he exclaimed, picking up the pillow. "You made me jump."

"Serve you right!" said Lowther.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"What do you mean by going out for hours in the middle of the night, without telling a chum where you were going?" demanded Lowther. "I think it's like your cheek."

"You see——"

"Bosh! Why didn't you wake me? I woke up and saw the moonlight on your bed, and saw it was empty, and when you didn't come back it made me quite nervous. I thought something must have happened to you. Of course," went on Monty reflectively, "if anything happened to you it wouldn't matter much, but——"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I've been over the course for Saturday, Monty."

"Oh, that's the little game, is it?"

"Yes. Of course, I didn't put on the pace, but I've done it in good time, and I feel pretty fit after it."

"You'll find it different on Saturday, with twenty Sixth-Formers on your track," said Lowther. "Why didn't you take me with you? You had no business to go alone."

"I've had an adventure."

"You can tell me about it in the morning," yawned Lowther; "I'm going to sleep now. You can give me my pillow, please."

"Certainly; there it is." And Tom Merry hurled the pillow, and it came back to Lowther with as much force behind it as when he had sent it.

Monty gave a yelp.

"Yoo, ass! You made me jump!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"One good turn deserves another," he remarked. "An eye for an eye, and a jump for a jump, you know. Good-night, kid!"

"Good-night, fathead!"

And the chums of the Shell were soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER 8.

The Mysterious Footprints.

CLANG! Clang!

The rising-bell broke upon the slumbers of the Shell, and Manners sat up and yawned.

Clang! Clang!

Monty Lowther was the next to sit up.

"Ow! It's jolly cold!"

"Goo-gerroo-gerrooh!" said Manners emphatically, as he shivered out of bed. "It's—it's beastly! Water frozen as usual."

One by one the Shell boys tumbled out of bed, but Tom Merry did not stir. Usually the first up in the dormitory, Tom Merry was showing an unusual sleepiness this morning. While the Shell performed their ablutions with many a shiver, Tom Merry slept on quietly and serenely.

Manners glanced at him curiously.

"Tom's extra fatheaded this morning," he remarked. "What's the matter with him? Yank the clothes off him, Monty!"

Lowther shook his head.

"Let him snooze a bit longer; he needs it."

"What the dickens for?"

"Oh, he was out on the tiles last night!" grinned Lowther. "Keep it dark, though. I woke up and found him gone, and pillowed him as he came in. If you didn't sleep like a rhinoceros, you would have heard us talking."

Gore came along the dormitory with a wet sponge in his hand.

"Hallo, here's Tom Merry oversleeping himself!" grinned

the cad of the Shell. "We must not let Tom Merry get into a row for being late."

"Stop that, Gore!"

"Rats! I'm going to do Tom Merry a real service."

Before Lowther could interfere the cold, wet sponge squelched down upon the sleeping face of the hero of the Shell. Tom Merry gasped and shivered and awoke.

"Wh—wh—wh—what!" he gasped.

Gore chuckled.

"Thought I'd wake you," he explained. "I was afraid you were oversleeping yourself, and would get into a row. Have some more?"

"No, you beast! Get away!"

Tom Merry scrambled out of bed. He was sleepy still, and his eyes were heavy. When it came to getting up in the morning early without having had sufficient sleep, the idea of a midnight run did not seem so good.

"Ya—aw!" yawned Tom Merry. "I'm sleepy! By Jove, it's late! I shall have to buck up!"

And he moved like lightning, and was down the last of the Shell, not much behind the others. The boys poured out into the quadrangle for a run before breakfast, and Tom Merry espied Figgins & Co. standing near a window of the School House, discussing something in low tones and with grave faces.

"Hallo, there's something on!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Come along, kids!"

And the Terrible Three hastened towards Figgins & Co.

"Hallo, you bounders, what are you doing on our side?" demanded Tom Merry. "You know that the presence of a New House kid is an abomination——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Figgins. "There's something been going on here during the night, you kids; and if there hasn't been a burglary, it's because the burglar saw some of your faces, I expect, and was frightened away."

Tom Merry started.

"What are you driving at, Figgy?"

"Look there!" said Figgins, waving his hand towards the ground under the window-sill. The thin sheet of snow from the previous evening was frozen there, and in it were plainly to be seen the prints of feet, going right up to the window.

"It was Mrs. Mimms who spotted it," went on Figgins. "It seems that she found traces of snow in the room inside, and was alarmed, and she came out and found these footprints. She called us to look after them, and keep them from being obliterated by any of your clumsy hoofs, till she fetched Mr. Railton."

"My word," said Manners, "somebody's been here in the night, that's clear! The snow didn't fall till after we were all in last night; and, besides, no fellow here would want to come up to that window."

"Of course not!" said Figgins. "Any ass could see that! I saw it at once!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What I mean to say is——"

"My dear Figgins, you've made it quite clear, so leave it where it is," said Tom Merry. "They are certainly footprints there, and it looks as if somebody must have made them. Perhaps it was Fatty Wynn, nosing about for a chance to get into the pantry."

Fatty Wynn turned red.

"Very likely," said Lowther gravely. "Mrs. Mimms always has a good supply in the pantry, and Fatty Wynn meant to commit a jam burglary."

"Or a cake raid," said Manners.

"Oh, stop rotting!" said Fatty Wynn. "I wouldn't touch your measly School House grub with a hop-pole. I dare say it was one of you kids at the bottom of this going out for something after hours."

"Quite likely," said Kerr. "Perhaps Knox, the prefect, going out to visit his select and refined friends at the Golden Pig, in Rylcombe."

"Nothing of that sort in our house," said Marmaduke. "We——"

"What about Sefton?" asked Lowther, a bit warmly. "I admit that Knox is a bit thick, but your Sefton is a regular rotter; and as for going down to the Golden Pig——"

"He goes with Knox," said Tom Merry. "They're a pair. Hallo, here's Study No, 6! Let's bring Gussy's brain to bear on the subject."

The chums of Study No. 6 had scented something up, and were hurrying to the spot. They stared at the footprints and at the juniors collected there, with equal interest.

"Hallo, something wrong?" said Blake inquiringly.

"Looks like an attempted burglary," said Figgins. "We're keeping guard over the clue, so keep off the grass, you kids."

"What do you think is the meaning of that, Gussy?" asked Monty Lowther, with an air of respectful deference which flattered the swell of the School House.

D'Arcy fixed his monocle carefully in his eye, and surveyed the footprints.

"Pway stand back, deah boys!" he said. You must give me woom to see the pwints in the beastly snow, you know."

"Good old Sherlock Holmes!" said Figgins. "I suppose those footprints couldn't have been left by the house cat, could they, Gussy?"

"That is an extwemely fwivolous wemark, Figgins. The footpwints are evidently made by a human bein', or else a burglar."

"Ha, ha! Isn't a burglar a human being?"

"Yaas, wathah; but what I mean is——"

"Never mind what you mean. Go on with the investigation before Mr. Railton arrives and clears you off. Mrs. Mimms has gone for him."

D'Arcy examined the tracks carefully by the aid of his eyeglass. Tom Merry, who, of course, knew very well that the mysterious footprints had been thoughtlessly left there by himself, waited curiously for the result.

"Bai Jove," said D'Arcy, "I think I have discovahed somethin', deah boys! I have often thought that I should be able to do somethin' in the Ferrers Locke line, if I bwought my bwain to bear on the subject. Of course, when a bwain like mine weally gets to work——"

"Something is bound to happen," said Figgins.

"Pway dwy up, Figgins! If you intewwupt me, you bweak my thwead of weflection. Yaas, I think I should make a weally good detective, you know. These twacks are not vewy clear, the snow bein' so slight, but I think they were made by a fellow with big, clumsy feet——"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry.

"Pway what do you know about it, Tom Mewwy?"

"Oh, nothing, of course!"

"Then do not intewwupt. These twacks," repeated D'Arcy, with emphasis, "were made by a fellow with big, clumsy feet, who was lame in one leg——"

Tom Merry chuckled.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon the hero of the Shell with a freezing stare.

"You are pleased to be amused, Tom Mewwy. If you know more about this mattah than I do, pway make the investigation instead of me."

"Not at all, Gussy. You're getting on swimmingly."

D'Arcy examined the footprints again.

"Only I'd like to know how you make out that the villain was lame," said Tom Merry, subduing his strong inclination to laugh.

"The left-hand twack is a little fainter than the wight-hand twack, which shows that he was lame on that side," said D'Arcy, with the air of an experienced Scotland Yard official.

"Excuse me," said Monty Lowther, looking puzzled, "you spoke of the right-hand track and the left-hand track."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But these are not hand-tracks at all; they have been made by feet."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

D'Arcy gave Lowther a withering look.

"I wepeat," he said, with more emphasis than ever, "that these twacks were made by a wuffian who had big, clumsy feet, and was lame on the left side, and——"

"You'd better tell Mr. Railton that," said Kerr. "He'll be able to put the police on the track of the lame rotter."

"It would be bettah for the case to be left in my hands," said D'Arcy. "Mr. Wailton is a very good housemastah, but in a case of this kind you wequire a fellow of judgment, and in this line I must say that I considah my bwain powah much supewior to Mr. Wailton's."

"Thank you, D'Arcy!" said a quiet voice.

The juniors started. D'Arcy turned round like a top, and his eyeglass fell with a jerk to the end of its cord as he found himself looking at the housemaster of the School House.

"Weally, Mr. Wailton——"

"I hope you have not disturbed the footprints," said the housemaster. "No; I see you have not. This is very curious! Ah, I do not think these prints were made by a burglar!"

"Will you allow me to wemark——"

"Certainly not!"

"But, weally——"

"That will do, D'Arcy! There is no need for alarm, my boys," went on the housemaster. "These tracks were evidently left by a boy. The size of the footprints proves that. I should say that a junior of the School House left by this window last night, and came in again by the same way."

He glanced round at the group of juniors. Tom Merry seemed to be intently studying the tracks, and so did not have to meet the eyes of the housemaster. If he had met them, he knew that he would have coloured, and given himself away by doing so.

"I hope I shall find out which boy did this, and I shall give him a severe lesson," Mr. Railton remarked. And he walked away.

Mrs. Mimms, the housedame, met him as he re-entered the School House. The plump, ruddy face of the housedame showed great uneasiness.

"Have you sent for the police, sir?" she asked tremulously.

Mr. Railton smiled.

"No, Mrs. Mimms. I have examined the footprints, and find that they were made by some lad who went out of the School House last night."

Mrs. Mimms shook her head. She was a lady of a very decided opinion of her own, and when she had once formed an opinion, she was slow to change it.

"No, Mr. Railton; don't say that to make me feel easy."

"But it is a fact, my dear madam."

"It is a great mercy, Mr. Railton, that we were not all murdered in our beds," said Mrs. Mimms. "Won't you send for the police at once?"

"My dear Mrs. Mimms——"

"I know what I know, Mr. Railton. I shall not sleep sound to-night if the police are not sent for."

"Well, well, I will think about it," said the housemaster. And he passed on, leaving Mrs. Mimms shaking her head in a very foreboding way.

Meanwhile, the juniors were chuckling over D'Arcy's little mistake. But the swell of the School House was not in the least abashed.

"I wegard Wailton as an ass," he said. "I do not like to speak diswespectfully of a mastah, but weally I have no alternative but to wegard him as an ass. He did not even notice that the left-hand pwint——"

"The left footpwint, you mean," interjected Monty Lowther.

"Pway don't interwupt me, Lowthah! He did not even notice that the left pwint was faintah than the wight, pwovin' that the burglah was lame on the left side. There is nobody in the School House lame on the left side, which pwoves that the fellow did not belong to our House."

"Hear, hear!" said Figgins & Co.

"Therefore," pursued D'Arcy, "as he did not belong to the House, he was a stwangah, and a stwangah could have no business here, unless he was a beastly wottah of a burglah!"

"Splendid!" said Tom Merry.

"I have convinced you then, Tom Mewwy?"

"Well, yes; I should be quite convinced, only——"

"Only what, deah boy? If there is any point that is not quite clear to your bwain, I shall be vewy happy to explain it."

"Well, there's just one weak spot in your theory, Gussy."

"Pway what is that?"

"Why, I left those tracks there myself last night, after going out for a sprint!" said Tom Merry calmly.

And he walked away, leaving D'Arcy staring after him, with his mouth wide open in astonishment.

A roar of laughter broke from the juniors.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!" muttered D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha! Good old Ferrers Locke!"

"I am afwaid," said D'Arcy, looking round, "that Tom Mewwy is jokin', and has allowed himself to depart fwom the twuth for the sake of gettin' at me and pullin' my beastly leg, you know!"

But it was no use. All the juniors knew that Tom Merry had stated the facts, because he would never have stated anything else, and D'Arcy could not save his beautiful theory. A yell of laughter drowned his attempts to explain further, and the swell of the School House walked away indignantly under a torrent of chaff.

CHAPTER 9

The Debating Society Meets.

THE February dusk was deepening over St. Jim's when the Fourth Form came out of their class-room after last lesson. Blake, Herries, and Digby made for the door, but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy lingered in the passage.

"I say, aren't you coming out, Gussy?" asked Blake, stopping and looking back at the swell of St. Jim's.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"Not just now, Blake. You youngstahs can go for a wun, and I will be in the study when you come in to tea."

"What are you hanging about here for?"

"I want to speak to Tom Mewwy when the Shell comes out."

"Come out, Blake!" called out Figgins. "Come and have a game at leap-frog before it's quite dark."

"Right-ho!" shouted Blake. "Come on, kids!"

"Don't forget the meetin' of the Debatin' Society at seven!" said D'Arcy, as the chums of the Fourth Form rushed off.

The Shell came out of their room a few minutes after the Fourth. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were the first out, and D'Arcy left his position where he was gracefully reclining against the wall, and stepped out to meet them.

"Here's the one and only one!" exclaimed Lowther. "What's the latest thing in fancy waistcoats, Gussy?"

"How are they tying their neckties in St. James's Street now?" inquired Manners.

"Anything new in silk-hats?" Tom Merry wanted to know. "Are they going to make brims a little more curly?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Got anything to say, old kid?" asked Tom Merry, passing his arm through Gussy's. "Come on out, and say it then."

D'Arcy walked along with the chums of the Shell.

"I want to speak to you, Tom Mewwy."

"Go ahead, kid!"

"The Debatin' Society meets at seven——"

"Yes; and I am going to report the proceedings for the 'Weekly.'"

"Yaas, wathah; and that's what I want to speak about. It has occurred to me that to do the debates of the society weal justice, the weports ought to be w'itten out in the best possible mannah, and so I thought that upon the whole you'd wathah leave it to me."

"Go hon!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "Modesty, thy name is Gussy! Did you think anything else, Adolphus, or did that effort exhaust your mighty brain?"

"Pway don't wot! I am speakin' sewiously. I am the last fellow in the world to put myself forward in any way, but undah the circs. I weally think that I had bettah weport the debates."

"My deah Adolphus——"

"I have wemarked before, Tom Mewwy, that my name is not Adolphus!"

"My mistake—I mean, Aubrey Algernon! You see, Aubrey Algernon, the debates may go on at top speed, and you won't get half of them down, and so that's where I come in with my knowledge of shorthand."

"Yaas, but——"

"But I don't particularly want the job," said Tom Merry. "If you like to learn shorthand while you're having your tea, that will be all right."

Lowther and Manners grinned. D'Arcy, who had begun to turn over in his mind whether he would have time to learn shorthand during tea, saw their grins, and knew that Tom Merry was indulging in a little joke.

"I am afwaid that would be quite imposs., Tom Mewwy," he said, with dignity; "and I weally wish you fellows would be sewious when I am speakin' to you on a sewious mattah. If you like to leave the weportin' to me——"

"Can't be done, kid! I've undertaken to put in a full, complete, unabridged report, and there you are! Can't be did!"

"Vewy well, I will leave the mattah in your hands, and I weally hope it will turn out all wight; but I have vewy stwong doubts about it."

And D'Arcy walked away, shaking his head doubtfully.

After tea there was a general movement of the Junior Debating Society towards the common-room. In this room the meetings were held, none of the studies being large enough. There were twenty or more members in the debating society, some of them belonging to the New House, among the latter being Figgins & Co.

"Good meeting," said Tom Merry, as he came in with Manners and Lowther. "Who's chairman this evening?"

"Blake," said Lowther; "and I see the subject for discussion is already up."

"What are those Fourth Form bounders giggling about?" asked Manners. "There's Blake giggling, and Herries and Digby, and Figgins is as red as a peony."

"There's something up, I suppose, among those kids."

"They're grinning at us," said Lowther. "See how the whole shoot started giggling as soon as we came in."

"I suppose Blake's got something on."

"Well, he'd hardly go about in this weather without anything on!"

"Cheese it! Let's go and look at the subject up for debate."

The Terrible Three walked on with an apparent unconsciousness of the glances cast at them, and the giggles that broke irresistibly from the debating society.

Tom Merry looked at the paper, and turned red.

The question marked for discussion was, as follows:

"That, in the opinion of this society, Thomas Merry, Esquire, has made an ass of himself in offering to run in the Sixth-Form paper-chase!"

"Look here!" exclaimed Tom Merry wrathfully.

"Hallo! What's the matter with you?" asked Blake.

"That is not a proper subject for discussion!"

"What isn't?"

"What you have down on the paper."

"What's down on the paper?"

"Hang! You know as well as I do."

"What I know is not evidence!" said Blake severely. "I shall refuse to take any notice of your objection, unless you can specify something to which proper exception can be taken. I think I know the duties of a chairman."

"Hear, hear!" said Figgins.

"Read out anything you don't like, Merry!"

"It's the whole question," exclaimed Tom Merry—"whether Tom Merry has made an ass of himself in offering torun in the Sixth-Form paper-chase!"

The debating society giggled joyously.

"Well, what's wrong with that?" demanded the chairman. "You know the society was founded to discuss subjects of interest to the House and the school generally. That's a question of interest to the House."

"I agree with Blake," said Kerr. "It's a question of interest to the school generally. In the New House we all think that Tom Merry has bitten off more than he can masticate!"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "In the New House you don't think at all! I say that isn't a proper question!"

"Do you mean to hint," demanded Blake majestically, "that it is an improper one?"

"Rats, I say! What I say is——"

"Stuff! It's not really necessary for you to say anything; you're only here as reporter!"

"Do you think I'm going to report a debate on a subject like that, Blake?" exclaimed Tom Merry wrathfully.

"You've promised to," said Blake coolly.

"Why, you—you rotter——"

"It is against the rules of the society to call the chairman names when you are dissatisfied with his ruling. You are fined half the amount of your term's subscription, to be paid into the coffers of the society for the general benefit," said Blake, with great severity.

"I protest——"

"A reporter's protest does not count at a meeting of the debating society. Just sit down and take your notebook and pencil, and make a clear and comprehensive report, according to your voluntary undertaking."

Tom Merry sat down.

The debating society evidently meant to carry on the joke, and there was nothing for the hero of the Shell to do but to grin and bear it.

Even Manners and Lowther were chuckling.

Tom Merry's chums, as a matter of fact—and they had told him plainly enough themselves—were inclined to agree with the view that he had, as the juniors expressed it, bitten off more than he could chew, and they were rather inclined to enter into the joke.

Blake looked round him.

"Ahem!" he said, clearing his throat. "We are all here, even to the reporter, who is to take down the discussion for a full report in 'Tom Merry's Weekly.' I will now read out the question to be raised. Whether, in the opinion of this society, Thomas Merry, Esquire, has made an ass of himself in offering to run in the Sixth-Form paper-chase? The opinions of the honourable members upon this important point are invited."

And Blake sat down.

A chuckle ran through the debating society, and Tom Merry, as red as a carnation, sat, pencil in hand, to take notes.

CHAPTER 10.

The Resolution.

"PWAY, Mr. Chairman——"

"Sit down, D'Arcy!"

"I wefuse to sit down!"

"Shut up!"

"I distinctly decline to shut up! I have a wemark to make——"

Herries and Digby seized the swell of the School House by either arm, and jerked him back into his seat.

"Welease me—I insist upon bein' immediately weleased!"

"Dry up!"

D'Arcy wriggled, but Herries and Digby held him fast, and he could not rise to his feet again. He relapsed into indignant silence, waiting his opportunity.

"Figgins will favour us with his views on the subject under discussion," said Blake, with a severe frown at D'Arcy. "Any interruptions will be followed by the ejectment of the interrupter. Figgins!"

Figgins rose to his feet. Blake glanced towards the hero of the Shell.

"Are you ready, reporter?"

"Yes!" growled the reporter.

"Mr. Chairman and gentlemen——" said Figgins.

Herries and Digby's attention was for the moment taken from D'Arcy. The swell of the School House saw his opportunity, and popped up like a jack-in-the-box.

"P'way, Mr. Chairman——"

"Order!"

"I wish to wemark——"

"Sit down!"

"As one gentleman to anothah——"

"Kick him out!"

"I distinctly and uttahly wefuse to be kicked out!"

"Scrag him!"

"If any gentleman pwesent twies to scwag me, I shall administah to him——"

"Shut up!"

"A feahful thwashin'!"

"Sit down!"

Herries and Digby were pulling at D'Arcy's arms, but the swell of St. Jim's stood fast. He had something to say, and he meant to say it.

"Mr. Chairman, I claim the wight to make a wemark!"

"Oh, let him make it!" said Figgins. "We sha'n't get any peace till he does. Make your remark, you ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"Get on, fathead!"

"I object to the term fathead!"

"My word!" said Digby. "Job himself would have got fagged out if he had had to deal with Adolphus D'Arcy!"

"Sit down!"

"Get on, or else shut up!"

"Are you going to come to the point?"

"Yaas, wathah! I am comin' to it as fast as I can, but I am distinctly incommoded by these two boundahs dwaggin' on me, and I cannot help wealisin' that they are simply spoilin' the shape of my sleeves!"

"Get on! What's the remark?"

"Yaas, the wemark—that's what I'm comin' to. I object to the form of the question on the paper this evenin'!"

"What's the matter with it?"

"You have waised the question as to whethah Tom Mewwy is an ass."

"Well, what about it?" demanded Blake.

"I have only one wemark to make, and that is, that I object to the expwession bein' applied to any gentleman."

"Oh, ring off!"

"I wefuse to wing off till I have stated my objection, when I am willin' to leave it to the gentlemanly feelin' of

"I am compelled to refrain from violence," said Skimpole as he skipped out of the study. "otherwise I should certainly wipe the floor with that bloated aristocrat D'Arcy."

the honowable meetin'. I object to the expwession on pwinciple. The term has often been applied to me——"

"Hear, hear!"

"I am glad to see that the meetin' agrees with me."

"No, we don't!" said Figgins. "We're agreeing with those who applied that term to you, Gussy."

"I wegard that wemark as distinctly wude, Figgins. But to resume. I object to the term on pwinciple. It has often been applied to me, and I have sometimes had to administah a feahful thwashin' to the person. Undah the circs., I considah it not a pwopah expwession to apply to Tom Mewwy."

"Bravo, Gussy!" exclaimed Lowther and Manners.

"It would be much more appwopwiately applied to eithah Lowther or Mannahs——"

"Well, you ungrateful young villain!"

"But, even applied to them, I wegard it as a dispawagin' expwession that should be barred. Tom Mewwy, to weturn to the subject under discussion, certainly has many asinine qualities."

"Hear, hear!"

"He belongs to a Form composed mostly of asinine persons."

"Hear, hear!" yelled the Fourth-Formers.

"But, all the same, I wegard the expwession as distinctly objectionable. Therefore, I move that it be expunged."

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

"That it be immediately and pwomptly expunged fwom the papah."

"Any seconders?" asked Blake.

"No!" said a dozen voices. "Shut up, D'Arcy!"

"I wefuse to shut up!"

"You've said your say; now ring off."

"I have not finished yet. Pway be patient! I shall not detain you more than a quartah of an hour."

"Ha, ha! Drag him down!"

Kerr and Marmaduke lent a hand to Herries and Digby, and the swell of the School House was crammed back into his chair.

"I pwotest!" he shouted. "I distinctly pwotest!"

"You'll distinctly go along the passage at the end of my boot if you don't shut up!" growled Blake. "Now, Figgins, old kid, we'll have your little bit."

"Pway welease me, deah boys! You are thwottlin' me! And, besides, you are soilin' my collah with your distinctly unpleasant paws!"

"Will you keep quiet, then?"

"Yaas; but undah pwotest!"

"Under protest," said Blake, "or under the table, if you like. Anything for a quiet life. Now, Figgins."

Figgins proceeded to air his views.

"In my opinion," stated the chief of the New House

juniors, "the question on the paper should be answered in the affirmative."

"Hear, hear!"

"Having undertaken a job bigger than he can accomplish, Tom Merry has evidently acted like an ass! To act like an ass is equivalent to making an ass of himself. I therefore hold that Tom Merry has made an ass of himself, and that the question is answered in the affirmative."

"Good! Got that down, reporter?"

"Yes!" growled the reporter.

"Sure you've left nothing out?"

"Yes; confound your cheek!"

"Ha, ha! Lowther, are you going to give an opinion?"

"Certainly," said Lowther. "I take the opposite side."

"State your reasons."

"My reasons are that, Tom Merry, belonging to the Shell at St. Jim's, is a member of the Form which possesses the most intellect——"

"Rats!"

"The most knowledge——"

"Cheese it!"

"And the most general superiority in the school! Therefore, he is incapable of making an ass of himself!"

"Rotten!" said Blake.

"Yaas, I must say that I wegard Lowthah's wemarks as wotten!"

"Shut up! Kerr——"

"I take the same side as Lowther, but for a different reason," said Kerr. "I hold that Tom Merry has not made an ass of himself. That which is made cannot be made again. Nature made an ass of him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Got that down, reporter?"

"Yes; confound you!"

"Nature made an ass of him!" resumed Kerr. "Therefore, as the thing could not be done twice over, it is clear that he did not make an ass of himself. My reply to the question, therefore, is, that Tom Merry did not make an ass of himself, being an ass to start with!"

"Hear, hear!"

A good many other members of the debating society expressed various opinions, more or less complimentary to Tom Merry, and at last Blake put the resolution to the meeting.

Lowther and Manners declined to vote, and, with these exceptions, the resolution was carried unanimously, and duly noted down by the reporter:

"That Tom Merry, in offering to run in the Sixth Form paper-chase, had not made an ass of himself, having been born one, and therefore being an ass already!"

"Got it all down?" asked Blake.

"Yes, ass!"

"Mind it all goes verbatim into the 'Weekly.'"

The reporter growled and withdrew. And then the meeting of the debating society broke up, D'Arcy in vain trying to move an amendment that "duffer" should be substituted for "ass," the latter not being, in his opinion, a pwopah expwession.

CHAPTER 11.
A Surprising Capture.

"NO more runs across country to-night, I suppose?" Monty Lowther remarked, as he and Tom Merry put away their chess, to prepare for bed.

Tom Merry had told his two chums of the adventure of the previous night, but it was known to no others. Some of the juniors knew that Tom had been out of bounds, but no more than that.

The hero of the Shell shook his head, with a smile.

"No," he replied. "I don't think much of the danger, as a matter of fact, but I have promised Ferrers Locke."

"Well, you're safer inside the walls than outside," Lowther remarked. "But suppose the scoundrel makes another attempt to get in? There mayn't be anybody on the wall this time to dot him on the proboscis!"

"Ferrers Locke has warned the Head, and I expect Dr. Holmes has taken his precautions," said Tom Merry lightly. "I don't suppose the rotter will be able to get in. I'm not going to worry about it, anyway. I think I shall have a spin round the quad. before bed, just to keep it up."

"And I'll have a spin before the fire," yawned Manners, "and roast some chestnuts. You've got to be in the dormitory in a quarter of an hour, Tom."

"That's all right."

"I'll come with you," said Lowther; and the chums were soon ready for the spin, and sallied out of the School House into the dark quadrangle.

Dark and gloomy indeed was the quad., with the huge, heavy trees shadowing it, and shutting off the moonlight. The chums of the Shell broke into a trot, making little or no sound in their running-shoes. As they went down the track inside the school-wall at a good pace, Lowther suddenly gave a start and halted. His grip on Tom Merry's arm brought his chum to a halt at the same moment.

"What's the matter?"

Tom Merry asked the question in a low, cautious voice, realising that something had alarmed Lowther, and that it was a time for caution.

"I heard a stone fall," whispered Lowther breathlessly. "There's somebody climbing the wall, Tom!"

Tom Merry felt a thrill. The chums had been passing the familiar spot he knew so well, where, on the previous night, he had crossed the school-wall, and surprised Bullivant in the act of attempting to enter the college grounds.

The chums of the Shell listened intently, standing quite still in the darkness under the looming elms. A distinct sound came to their ears—a scraping of a boot on the rough stone of the wall, and a rustling of the ivy growing there over the stone.

There was no further doubt upon the subject. Someone was climbing the school wall from Rylcombe Lane, and the fact of his climbing it proved that he knew all about the facilities that spot offered to a climber—that he was, in fact, quite familiar with St. Jim's.

"Bullivant!" muttered Tom Merry, with bated breath.

"He's come again," assented Lowther.

"But so early!"

"Very likely he means to get inside before the doors and windows are fastened," said Lowther sagely, "and hide himself in some corner till we're gone to bed, and then——"

Tom Merry shuddered.

It was only too probable, and the thought of what might have happened but for this accidental discovery was not pleasant.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "We'll make it warm for him this time! Don't make a sound; let the brute get in. He sha'n't get out again so easily!"

"That's the idea! We'll lay him by the heels this time!"

The chums of the Shell drew further back from the wall. The shadow of the nearest elm fell so thickly there that they could see nothing; but the faint sounds in the darkness warned them that the climber had reached the top of the wall, and was coming over, clutching on the ivy.

"Don't touch him yet!" muttered Tom Merry, in Lowther's ear. "We two are not enough. He may have a bludgeon or a revolver, and we want to make sure of him. We'll follow him to the School House, and wait till we're near help before we give him the alarm."

"Right-ho!"

There was a patter of feet as the new-comer dropped down within the wall. The chums, almost holding their breath, heard a sound of deep breathing close at hand, and a dark figure almost brushed past them.

They caught only a glimpse of it—a figure in a thick overcoat, with a cap pulled down over the ears, a thick muffler round the neck.

The figure passed swiftly on, and fast on its track went the chums of the Shell. In the moonlight in the quad. they caught sight of it again, and then Tom Merry grasped Lowther by the arm.

"He is not going to the School House, Monty; he is making for the New House."

Lowther nodded.

"He's going to hide there," he muttered. "All the better! You can see that Figgins's window is open, and he'll hear us call, and he'll be on the scene in a jiffy. I'll chuck something up into the window to attract their attention."

The overcoated figure had disappeared into the shadow of the New House. The chums followed, and then Lowther jerked up his hand, and his cap flew into the open window of Figgins's study.

The next moment the lighted window was crammed with four juniors, staring out in amazement into the dark quad.

"It's a School House cap," said the voice of Figgins. "This is some little joke, I suppose. Hallo, down there!"

There was a sharp exclamation in the gloom. The mysterious intruder, who was skirting along the New House, had heard Figgy's call, and evidently taken the alarm.

"Come on!" muttered Tom Merry. "He'll get away!"

"Right-ho! Collar him at once!"

And the chums of the Shell dashed on. In the darkness they stumbled right against the intruder, and grasped him in a moment. Taken quite by surprise, he was dragged to the ground.

"Help!" yelled Lowther.

"Hallo, there!" came from Figgins's window.

"Help, Figgy! Burglars!"

"My hat! I'm coming!"

The juniors disappeared from the window. In a second Figgins & Co. were tearing down the stairs of the New

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House, and out into the quad, regardless of looks of amazement that followed their excited rush. Mr. Ratcliff, the housemaster of the New House, was in the hall, and he called to them angrily. But Figgins & Co. took no notice. They dashed out into the night.

Meanwhile, the mysterious stranger was struggling desperately in the grip of Tom Merry and Monty Lowther.

The two juniors had hurled him to the ground, in the advantage of the surprise, and now their object was to keep him pinned there till help could come.

Tom Merry was sprawling over the fellow's chest, his whole weight on the man under him, and grasping both his wrists at the same time, so that he could not draw a weapon.

Lowther was clutching at his throat, and punching furiously at his head whenever he tried to raise it.

The stranger's efforts seemed to be solely directed towards getting away, and the two juniors had their work all cut out to hold him fast.

"Give in, you beast!" gasped Lowther. "You'll—you'll get hurt, you silly villain! I'll jam your head on the ground if you don't keep still!"

"You infernal young scoundrels!"

As they heard the gasping voice, Lowther and Tom Merry nearly let go the stranger in their amazement.

"Sefton!"

They knew the voice. It was not Bullivant; it was Sefton, the "sporting" senior of the New House!

"My only pyjama hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Great Columbus!" ejaculated Lowther.

As their grip relaxed, the unfortunate prisoner staggered to his feet. But a great bar of light was falling into the quadrangle now from the open door of the New House, and Figgins & Co. were tearing up.

Figgins saw Tom Merry and Lowther receding, and the overcoated figure free. Figgins did not stop to ask questions—he only thought that the burglar had got loose, and was escaping.

With a howl, Figgins hurled himself upon the supposed ruffian, and Sefton went heavily to the ground again, sprawling there with the stalwart Figgins on his chest, and the next moment the Co. were piling all over him.

CHAPTER 12.
A Little Mistake.

"GOT him!" roared Figgins.

Figgins & Co. had certainly "got him!"

The marvel was that Sefton was not squashed and suffocated under the energetic Co., as they sprawled all over him and flattened him on the ground.

Faint gasps came from beneath Figgins & Co., and murmured words which, had they been audible, would, perhaps, not have been suitable for youthful ears to hear.

Tom Merry and Manners were yelling with laughter, rocking to and fro too helplessly to be able to interfere on behalf of the unfortunate Sefton.

It was all plain enough to Tom Merry now.

Sefton, the "sport" of the New House, had evidently been out of bounds after dark to pay one of his visits to the Golden Pig in Rylcombe, where he frequently met a set of rascally betting men, with whom he played cards and made bets on the races. He had been returning from this little excursion, and trying to get unseen into his quarters, when Tom Merry and Lowther pounced upon him.

Tom Merry's mistake had been natural enough. Nobody had any right to be entering St. Jim's at that hour, in such a surreptitious manner, and the result was all Sefton's own fault.

The mistake, now that Tom Merry could see it, was ludicrous; but it was probable that the comical aspect of it was quite lost upon Sefton.

He was struggling and gasping underneath four stalwart juniors. Fatty Wynn was on his head, and Fatty Wynn's weight was something more than a joke. Tom Merry and Lowther laughed till they cried. But the alarm had been given now, and fellows were coming out of the New House, and the sour face of Mr. Ratcliff was staring from the lighted doorway into the dusky quad.

Tom Merry caught Figgins by the shoulder.

"Figgy——"

"It's all right!" panted Figgins. "He can't get away!"

"No; but——"

"Go and get a rope, and we'll tie him up! We've got him safe enough at present. Have you any idea whom it is?"

"Ha, ha! Yes! It's Sefton!"

"What!"

"It's Sefton! He's been out of bounds, and we saw him coming in; and—and it's all a mistake!"

"Well, you giddy ass! Sefton! My word!"

Figgins scrambled up.

"Let him go, kids! It's a mistake! It's Sefton!"

The Co. rather reluctantly scrambled off their prisoner.

"Sefton!" ejaculated three voices.

"Yes," said Tom Merry, "it's a mistake."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Co. chuckled gleefully. The mistake was, after all, not one to be sorry for. Sefton was a bully and a brute, and most of the juniors of the New House had a long score up against him.

Figgins & Co., among the rest, had a long account against Sefton, and they had quite unconsciously paid him something off it, through Tom Merry's little mistake.

Sefton, released now, was too exhausted and breathless to make a move to rise. He lay wriggling and gasping, trying to get his breath back.

"What does all this mean?"

It was Mr. Ratcliff's sharp voice. The housemaster of the New House was on the scene now, his gimlet eyes looking down angrily upon the gasping Sefton.

"If you please, sir——" began Tom Merry.

The New House master's eye turned coldly upon the hero of the Shell.

"I did not speak to you, Merry!"

Tom Merry coloured. It was not the first time he had felt the keen edge of the New House master's spiteful tongue. They had had skirmishes before.

"You will explain, Figgins."

"I really don't know what it means, sir," said Figgins, with half-veiled impertinence. "Tom Merry knows more about it than I do, sir."

The New House master bit his lip, and turned to Tom Merry again.

"If you know about this, Merry, explain, as Sefton does not seem to be in a condition to speak."

Sefton was sitting up, gasping. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, had come out with the housemaster, and he gave the sportsman a helping hand to rise.

"It was all a mistake, sir," said Tom Merry quietly. "We—we saw Sefton——"

He broke off abruptly. He could not say that he had seen Sefton entering the school over the wall after being out of bounds, without getting the New House sportsman into a terrible difficulty. And much as Tom Merry despised the sporting instincts of the New House senior, he was not the one to betray him.

Mr. Ratcliff looked at Tom sharply.

"Go on, Merry!"

"That—that's all, sir," said Tom Merry awkwardly. "We—we saw Sefton in the dark, sir, and somehow took him for a burglar!"

"It's a lie!" hissed Sefton furiously. "It's a lie! You jumped on me on purpose, knowing perfectly well who I was!"

Tom Merry set his lips hard.

"It was a singular mistake to make," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Do you seriously mean to tell me, Merry, that you saw Sefton walking in the quadrangle, and took him for a burglar!"

Tom Merry was silent.

Put that way it looked absurd, and he could not explain how it was that the mistake had come about. He looked at Sefton, but the New House senior was too enraged to see that his interest lay in backing up Tom's explanation.

"It was nothing of the kind, sir!" he exclaimed. "They made the mistake on purpose. They knew very well that it was I."

"Is that true, Merry?"

"No, sir; it is not true."

"Then what peculiar circumstance led you to take Sefton for a burglar? I suppose if you met me walking in the quadrangle in the evening you would not take me for a burglar?" said Mr. Ratcliff, with cold sarcasm.

"Oh, no, sir."

"Then what should cause such a mistake on this occasion?"

Figgins nudged Sefton.

"You'd better own up!" he muttered.

The New House senior gave him a savage glance, and then he changed colour. It dawned upon him that Tom Merry must have seen him getting over the wall, and that hence the mistake had arisen; and if Tom chose to speak——

"If you please, sir——" he began.

The housemaster's gimlet eyes fixed upon him.

"Well, Sefton, what have you to say?"

"Now I think about it, sir, I dare say Tom Merry did really make that mistake. You see, I was muffled up, and in the dark he couldn't tell——"

"You seem to have changed your opinion very suddenly, Sefton," said the New House master, suspiciously.

Sefton turned red.

"Yes, sir; but, you see, I was excited——"

"Ahem! Well, if you have no complaint to make against Merry for your usage at his hands——" said Mr. Ratcliff slowly.

"None at all, sir!"

The housemaster gave him a sharp, suspicious glance.

"There is more in this than you have explained," he said coldly. "I cannot help thinking that you are deceiving me, but I am not surprised at this from Tom Merry."

Tom Merry's face flushed, and his eyes sparkled. Deception was the very last fault of which he could be justly accused, but any weapon was good enough for Mr. Ratcliff to use against the boy he disliked.

"I am not deceiving you, sir!" Tom Merry broke out hotly.

"Silence, Merry!"

"It is not fair to accuse me of——"

"If you dare to say another word, Merry, I will report you to your housemaster for insolence," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Go to your own house at once, and take care that you do not make any more mistakes like this. Go, I say!"

Hot words were on Tom Merry's lips, but Lowther grasped his arm and dragged him away. Tom's eyes were flashing as he half reluctantly allowed his chum to draw him away towards the School House.

"The rotten cad!" he muttered.

"Quite right!" said Lowther.

"I don't see why I shouldn't speak out to him, and tell him that he's a cad to accuse me of deception."

"I do!" said Lowther promptly. "Shut up, you ass, or he'll hear you!"

"I don't care if he does! He's a——"

"Of course he is, but a junior is rather at a disadvantage in rowing with a housemaster!" grinned Lowther. "Come away, you ass!"

"Yes; but——"

"My dear fellow, come along; it's bed-time!"

"Oh, all right; but——"

"Blessed if you don't run on like a gramophone or Arthur Augustus D'Arcy! Come along, I say, and let's get to the dormitory!"

And they entered the School House.

CHAPTER 13.

D'Arcy is Wrong Again.

"OH, dear—oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"Why, what's the matter, Mrs. Mimms?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The morning sun was glimmering on the wide quadrangle at St. Jim's, and on the wet leaves of the elms. There had been rain in the night, and the quad. was wet, the trees still dripping, though the sun was shining brightly now. Tom Merry was just coming out of the School House, when he heard the dismayed exclamations of the housedame.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"But what——"

"We shall all be murdered in our beds, I know!"

"What is the——"

"And Mr. Railton would not send for the police."

"But——"

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

Tom Merry, finding it impossible to obtain an explanation from the housedame, looked round for the reason of her evident agitation. He was not long in finding it. On the white steps of the School House appeared the plain traces of wet boots, distinctly marked on the stone under the shelter of the porch.

The muddy traces were unmistakable, and Tom Merry started as he saw them. Who had been prowling round the School House in the night?

"Oh, dear—oh, dear! We shall all be murdered in our beds!"

"Hallo, what's the row?" exclaimed Blake, coming out. "More footprints! Here you are, D'Arcy, bring your mighty brain to bear again. Tell us whether the kid who made those hoofmarks was lame in the left ear, or blind in the right leg?"

"Pway don't be fwivolous, Blake, when you see that Mrs. Mimms is in a state of gweat alarm!" said D'Arcy, adjusting his eyeglass. "Ah, I see that these twaces of boots were made by the same person as those the night before last."

Tom Merry grinned. Mrs. Mimms hurried into the house to find Mr. Railton, and the chums gathered round the footprints, and stared at them with great interest.

"Upon weflection, I believe your statement that you made those footpwints the othah night, Tom Mewwy," said D'Arcy. "I was doubtful at first, as it seemed imposs. for my theowy to be w'ong; but as a gentleman I cannot bwing myself to doubt anothah gentleman's word, and so I admit that it was the twuth. Of course, it is quite easy for one who has studied the methods of gweat detectives to see that these twaces were made by the same feet."

"I'd like to know how you make that out."

"You see that the pwint of the left foot is lightah than the pwint of the wight foot, deah boy."

"I don't see it at all."

"Well, take my word for it, then, if your sight is not quite so good as mine," said D'Arcy. "The pwints are a twifle largah, but a change of boots would account for that. Aftah your expewience the othah night, Mewwy, I weally think it was weckless of you to leave such plain twaces of havin' been out."

"Well, rather!" said Blake. "You ought to have been more careful, Merry. Mrs. Mimms will bother Railton about this till he makes an inquiry, and worms out the whole business."

Tom Merry laughed.

"He won't worm out anything about me," he replied. "In spite of Gussy's wonderful detective instinct, I didn't make those footprints there."

"Now, Mewwy, pway don't wot——"

"It's a fact, Gussy! I had a run out with Lowther just before bedtime, but that was before it rained. I went up to the dormitory at the usual time, and never left it again till this morning."

D'Arcy looked rather crestfallen.

He knew that Tom Merry was telling the truth, and he had made his second "blooner" as an amateur detective. It was discouraging.

"I suppose it is so if you say so, Mewwy," he remarked. "But the similawity of the twaces is wemarkable."

"I admit that I don't see it, as the feet are about twice as big as mine. Here's Mr. Railton."

The housemaster of the School House, looking very worried, came out into the porch with Mrs. Mimms; but he started, and looked very alert, as he saw the footprints on the stone. He knew at once that they must have been left there by a man, and one who had approached the door of the School House at a very late hour in the night.

"There, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Mimms triumphantly.

"Ahem! You are right this time, Mrs. Mimms. Someone has evidently been prowling round the house in the night," said Mr. Railton. "I will certainly see that the proper steps are taken."

The juniors looked at one another. If Mr. Railton took this serious view of the matter, it was evidently serious enough. Undoubtedly a burglar had paid a visit to the house the previous night; but the question was—why had he not entered? The door doubtless baffled him, but he might have found a window to yield.

"Oh, dear!" murmured Mrs. Mimms, encouraged in her alarm by the grave expression of the housemaster's face. "We shall all be murdered in our beds!"

"Nonsense, Mrs. Mimms! As a matter of fact, we had received warning that a rascally character was in the neighbourhood, and proper precautions were taken last night. Ah, here is Taggles! Taggles!"

The school porter was coming up to the School House. He had something in his hand, which looked like a fragment of cloth. A savage-looking bulldog was at his heels.

"You see, Mrs. Mimms, there was nothing to be alarmed about! Taggles's bulldog was turned loose in the quadrangle at ten o'clock last night, and this precaution served its purpose. Were you alarmed in the night, Taggles?"

"No, sir. I 'eard Grip a-growlin', sir, but I didn't get up," said Taggles. "But I found this 'ere on my doorstep this morning, sir."

He held out the fragment of cloth to the housemaster.

Mr. Railton took it, and examined it curiously, the juniors looking on with great interest. It was a fragment of a coarse, dirty cloth, and it bore the marks of the bulldog's teeth in it still. A smile broke over the housemaster's face.

"Ah, this belonged to the burglar, I suppose!"

Taggles nodded and grinned.

"Yes, sir! You see, there's red on it! Grip must a'

The whole weight of the detective was thrown upon the rope, which bit into Tom Merry's shoulders; but he bore the pain with set teeth.

sound 'im trying to get in, and got a good bite. He brought this 'ere to my door to show what he 'ad done, sir. Good dog!' said Taggles, patting his head of his savage-looking favourite.

"My word!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I don't envy that burglar, bolting for the wall with Grip after him. He must have had a high old time."

"We will send this to the police. It may furnish a clue to the rascal," said Mr. Railton. "I have no doubt he will be arrested soon. You see, Mrs. Mimms, there is no real cause for alarm."

But the housedame only shook her head. She knew what she knew, as she would have expressed it, and the prospect of being murdered in her bed seemed to be rather fascinating, for she alluded to it again and again whenever she could find a listener.

Tom Merry walked away with Lowther and Manners, and the faces of the chums of the Shell were very grave indeed.

"It was Bullivant, of course!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

"I suppose so."

"And he came here for——"

Tom shivered a little.

"To rob the School House, of course; and perhaps——"

He did not finish, but the colour wavered in his cheek for a moment, as he thought of what might have been.

"The scoundrel!" muttered Manners. "I sha'n't sleep easy again until Ferrers Locke has him safe under lock and key."

"It's—it's rotten!" muttered Tom Merry. Then a smile broke over his face. "But, by Jove, he must have had a rough run last night! Grip must have got his teeth fairly into him. Taggles took jolly good care not to get up, or we might have laid the ruffian by the heels. Never mind! He's had his lesson, and so long as Grip is turned loose of a night, I don't think he'll ever get into the School House."

"Probably not," agreed Manners. "By Jove, if he has had Grip's teeth in him, I should think he would keep on the other side of the school wall in future. Let's go and have a look at the spot where he must have got in."

"We shall find traces of him there, I expect."

The chums of the Shell made their way to the wall bordering on Rylcombe Lane. It was easy to see the traces left by the burglar. It was in the same spot that Sefton had climbed over the previous evening. But Sefton had done no more than shake the ivy. Now, tendrils of it were torn out, whole masses displaced, testifying to the frantic haste with which the intruder had scrambled up the wall, escaping from the teeth of the bulldog. Bullivant—if it had been he—must have had a hard run to escape the teeth of Grip, and had evidently clambered up the wall with the bulldog hanging to him.

Tom Merry laughed lightly.

"I don't think he'll come over that wall again," he remarked.

"I should say not. But if he's determined to get his own back, Tom, he'll look out for you when you're outside the walls of St. Jim's."

"Well, I shall look out for him, too," said Tom Merry carelessly.

"Yes, but you sha'n't go out again after dark till he's safe under lock and key," said Lowther. "Not alone, at any rate. We're not going to have you knocked on the head. We might get somebody even worse in the study if you were done in——"

"Exactly," said Manners. "For the general comfort of Study X, Tom must be taken care of. I say, you'll be having a long run on Saturday, Tom——"

"Keep an eye open for him!" exclaimed Lowther. "That would be just his chance if he spotted you in the castle ruins, or among the chalk-pits, or in some lonely place like that."

"Kildare will be with me——"

"A blow from behind isn't easy to guard against," said Lowther, with a shake of the head. "I'm beginning to think you're a bigger ass than ever for taking on that run for the Sixth Form, Tom."

"Just so," said Manners. "The verdict of the debating society was absolutely correct. I didn't vote, but I agreed with 'em."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom. "Can't you let that rest? Let's get in to breakfast."

The chums of Study No. 6 met them as they came in. Blake tapped Merry on the shoulder and stopped him.

"Have you got that report written out?" he asked.

"No!" growled Tom Merry.

"Now, don't you neglect it, kid," said Blake, wagging a warning forefinger at the hero of the Shell. "Mind, we're not going to have a reporter that doesn't know his business. That report has got to go verbatim in the 'Weekly.'"

"I'll have it ready," said Tom Merry. "Never fear! I didn't have time to do it last night——"

"If you like, Tom Mewwy, I will knock it into shape for you," said D'Arcy. "As a most important article, it ought to be written in the best possible style, and a weport is nothin' if it isn't turned out well."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Blake. "The joke of the thing is in Tom Merry writing it out himself. But you never had a sense of humour Gussy, or you wouldn't go out with that face of yours."

"I wegard that wemark as——"

But Blake did not stop to hear how D'Arcy regarded the remark. He followed the chums of the Shell in to breakfast and left the swell of the School House to continue his observations with no audience but the pigeons in the quadrangle.

CHAPTER 14.
Ferrers Locke on the Track.

"TOM MERRY!"

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

"Goal—goal! Hurrah!"

It was the afternoon, and it being Wednesday, school was over for the day at St. Jim's. On the junior football ground St. Jim's juniors were meeting their old foes of the Grammar School. The ground was pretty well crowded. Many seniors, curious to note Tom Merry's form in view of the paper-chase to come off on Saturday, were standing round the ground, looking on with great interest.

The Lower Forms of St. Jim's had of course turned up to a man—or, rather, to a boy. They shouted themselves hoarse at every bit of good play, whether upon the home or the Grammarian side.

D'Arcy, with his monocle in his eye, stood looking on. He usually played with St. Jim's juniors, but on the present occasion he was standing out, and French, a Shell boy belonging to the New House, was playing in his place. D'Arcy watched the game with great interest, and cheered as loudly as any.

The first half had resulted in a score of a goal each for the opposing teams, and now St. Jim's were facing the wind, which was blowing keenly from the moors. But in the teeth of the wind Tom Merry had made a fine run down the field, resulting in a goal for St. Jim's in spite of the Grammarian opposition and the great efforts of Lane in goal.

Hence the ringing cheers coupled with the name of Tom Merry.

"Lot of silly fuss to make over that chap," Mellish growled to Gore. "Anybody could do as much, given a chance."

"Of course they could," said Gore.

D'Arcy turned round and gazed at the two with great scorn. His very eyeglass seemed to gleam with indignation.

"Dwy up!" he exclaimed. "I wegard you as a pair of uttah wottahs! Tom Mewwy has just kicked a splendid goal."

"Oh, rats to you!" growled Gore.

"I despise you fearfully," said D'Arcy witheringly. "If I were not so intewested in the beastly match, I should certainly wegard it as impewative to administah a fearful thwashin' to the pair of you on the spot."

And the swell of St. Jim's turned to the game again with a sniff of indignant scorn.

"Quite right, D'Arcy!" broke in Kildare, whom Gore had not perceived standing near them. "When you can play football as well as Tom Merry, Gore, it will be time for you to criticise. Until then you had better shut up!"

Gore scowled and was silent. It would have taken a bolder junior than George Gore to answer back to the captain of St. Jim's. D'Arcy was pleased to give Kildare a glance of approval.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!" he said. "I wegard your wemark as most sensible, Kildare——"

"Thank you!" said Kildare drily.

"Oh, I mean it, deah boy! I have a gweat we-pect for your judgment——"

Kildare walked on. D'Arcy looked after him in some surprise.

"Weally, it almost seems as if Kildare was bored with my wemarks," he murmured. "But of course that's impos. Ah, there goes Fwank Monk!"

The Grammar School skipper was away with the ball. Tom Merry, rolled over by a charge from Carboy, was on his back on the grass, and Frank Monk was speeding down the wing with the ball at his feet. A roar greeted a splendid shot which beat Fatty Wynn all the way and scored the equalising goal.

"Bwavo!" shouted D'Arcy, waving his eyeglass. "Bwavo, Fwank Monk! I wegard that as a vewy cweditable kick!"

The whistle went a few minutes later, and the footballers, tired but cheerful, came off the field after a rather hard game.

The score was level, and, as a matter of fact, that was as it should have been, for the two junior teams were very much on a par. D'Arcy slapped Frank Monk on the back. The Grammarian captain gave the swell of St. Jim's a good-humoured grin.

"Hallo, D'Arcy! Been in love lately?"

D'Arcy turned crimson.

"I was about to congwatulate you on that weally cweditable performance," he said stiffly.

"Oh, that's all right, go ahead! I'm open to receive any congratulations, especially in the graceful way you know how to give 'em," said Monk solemnly.

Arthur Augustus beamed at once.

"Well, that is a vewy graceful wemark, Fwank Monk, and shows judgment on your part," he said. "I was goin' to say that you Gwammah cads—I mean Gwammah fellows—played up weally well, considewin', and that you deserve gweat cwedit."

"Go hon!" said Frank. "Of course, it would have been different if you had been in the team, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah! If I had been playin', I weally don't think you would have managed to equalise, you know, deah boy!"

"Oh, I don't mean it that way! I was thinking that if you had been playing for St. Jim's your side wouldn't have been able to equalise."

"Weally, Fwank Monk——"

But Frank Monk, grinning, passed on with the rest into the pavilion. The match was over, amid good feeling on both sides, and the Grammarians stayed to tea; and when they went home the Terrible Three accompanied them in their brake to the gate of the Grammar School.

At the Grammar School the rivals parted with many expressions of mutual goodwill, and the chums of the Shell walked back towards St. Jim's in the gathering dusk of the February evening.

It was dark as they drew near St. Jim's again, and the thought of Bullivant naturally came into their minds, and the chums kept a wary eye open on either side as they tramped along the solitary lane. A sound in the grass beside the road as they drew near the school made them start, and they stopped and drew together in the middle of the lane as a dark figure appeared from the shadow of the trees.

"Tom Merry!"

The hero of the Shell started at hearing his name called in a husky voice that was not familiar to his ear. He stepped forward.

"I am Tom Merry!"

The dark, ill-clad, rough-looking figure came nearer.

"Keep your distance!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "Wait till we know who you are——"

There was a slight laugh in the dusk.

"I think you know me, my lads!"

It was a very different voice now. Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"Ferrers Locke!"

"Yes, Ferrers Locke!" said the detective, coming nearer.

The amazed juniors looked more closely at him. His disguise was perfect. Not one of them but would have taken him for a tramp, with his ill-fitting, dirty clothing and his rough, unkempt beard, and the inflamed hue of his nose and cheeks.

"I should never have known you, sir," said Tom Merry, in wonder.

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"I should be a poor hand at a disguise if you did!" he remarked. "I want to speak to you, Tom. Step into the shadow here."

"We'll walk on," said Manners, moving.

The detective made a gesture.

"Not at all, remain. I have no objection to Tom Merry's chums knowing as much of this affair as himself. I saw you playing in the football match, Tom, and I saw you go in the Grammar School brake. I want to know exactly what happened at St. Jim's last night. As you know, I sent Dr.

Holmes a warning, and to-day I have had a letter from him referring to the matter of the footprints. I do not want to come up to the school, and thus attract attention, and I have been looking for an opportunity of speaking to you outside the walls. When I saw you pass in the brake I guessed that you would walk home, and so waited here for you."

"I did not know your voice at first——"

The detective laughed again.

"I could not be quite sure of you in the dusk," he said; "therefore I disguised my voice until I was sure it was you. Now, give me a full account of that affair of the footprints."

Tom Merry explained all he knew. The detective listened carefully, evidently making mental notes of what he heard.

"There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that it was Bullivant," he said; "and, in my opinion, he visited the school more for revenge than for robbery, though undoubtedly he would have robbed the doctor if he had gained an entry. I know you have courage, Tom, and so I do not hesitate to tell you that you are in serious danger until that rascal is safe under lock and key."

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"I am not afraid, sir."

"I know you are not, Tom. I almost wish you were, and then you would keep safe indoors until you could go abroad without danger."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"You wouldn't ask me to skulk in a corner, sir, for fear of that despicable scoundrel?" he exclaimed. "I couldn't do that, sir."

"I know you couldn't, Tom, so I won't ask it. But I will ask you to take care. Listen. I am certain now that I am upon the track of that scoundrel. I am almost sure that he has a hiding-place in the pine-wood we passed through the other night."

Tom Merry started.

"The pine-wood!" said Monty Lowther, in a low voice. "You will have to pass through it on Saturday afternoon, Tom."

"Kildare will be with me," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, but——"

"I don't like it," said Manners.

"Neither do I," said Ferrers Locke. "Of course, I may be mistaken; but I have found traces in the pine-wood which lead me to believe that the villain is in some den there, or else near it. As the wood is miles in extent, it is, of course, impossible to run him down there by open search. I depend upon strategy. In a few days I am almost certain that he will be my prisoner. But if he is not captured before Saturday, Tom——"

Ferrers Locke paused. Tom Merry waited for him to finish.

"If he is not captured before Saturday, Tom, would it be too much to ask if I asked you to give up running in this paper-chase?"

"I couldn't, sir. You don't understand; but it would be impossible. Manners and Lowther could tell you so."

"But surely a paper-chase——"

"It's not an ordinary run, Mr. Locke. It's the Sixth Form run, and I offered Kildare to run as a hare with him, as he seemed to think me good enough. Ever since then I've been chipped to death by all the Shell, and the Fourth, and the Remove. They're all saying that I can't do it, and some of them say that I shall find an excuse at the last moment for getting out of it. You see how the case stands, sir."

Ferrers Locke's brow wrinkled slightly. That a paper-chase was a matter of small importance in comparison with danger to Tom Merry's life was certain; but the detective had a sympathetic remembrance of his own boyhood, and he knew exactly how the case appeared to Tom Merry. Danger or no danger, Tom Merry would have risked his life a dozen times rather than have appeared an empty boaster in the eyes of his schoolfellows.

"Then you won't give it up, Tom?"

"I couldn't, sir."

"Very well; I won't attempt to persuade you. But if Bullivant has not been arrested before then, I shall be in the pine-wood on Saturday afternoon. Take this whistle, Tom. If you should by chance see the scoundrel, a single blast will reach my ears, and I shall know that you want help."

"Thank you, Mr. Locke!" Tom slipped the whistle into his pocket. "But surely the man won't dare to show himself with a fellow like Kildare along with me?"

"There is no telling what he may do; and even a fine lad like Kildare could not do much against a bludgeon wielded in a desperate hand."

"I had better warn Kildare——"

"Certainly; but warn him at the same time to keep the secret. If the attack should be made in the pine-wood, I shall be there." The detective broke off, and held out his hand. "Well, good-bye, Tom! I must go."

And they parted. Tom Merry's brow was very thoughtful as he walked on to St. Jim's with his chums. They found the gates still open, and they were soon in the School House.

"Hand over that whistle," said Monty Lowther, as they entered their study.

Tom Merry looked at him.

"What do you want it for?"

"To practise," said Lowther. "Manners and I want to know exactly what it sounds like, you see."

And Monty blew a blast upon the whistle that rang through the School House.

"But what for?" demanded Tom.

"So that we shall know it again. You see, we shall be in the pine-wood on Saturday afternoon, as well as Ferrers Locke," said Monty Lowther coolly.

"Good idea!" said Manners.

And Monty Lowther performed ear-splitting variations on the whistle till an enraged prefect came tearing up the stairs and put a stop to it.

CHAPTER 15.

The Start.

TOM MERRY was the object of much curiosity among the juniors of St. Jim's during the next few days. That he was up to the form required for the Saturday's run few of the juniors believed, and even Lowther and Manners had their doubts. That he would keep his word, and run his best, they knew; but what they feared was that he would fail, and become an object of the ridicule of the Lower Forms.

Gore and Mellish and their set openly declared that they did not believe that Tom Merry would run as a hare in the paper-chase at all.

"He'll have some jolly good reason for not running," Gore confided to his cronies—"a sprain in practice, or a twist on the footer field, or something."

"That's the idea," said Mellish. "Anyway, you mark my words, he won't run; and if there's any excuse given, depend upon it that it will be a fib."

Mellish and Gore may or may not have believed what

they said, but a good many of the juniors were inclined to do so, and there was great curiosity in the Lower Forms as to whether Tom Merry would run or not.

Had Tom ever thought of giving up the run, as Ferrers Locke wished, this would have decided him against such a step.

Whatever his reason might have been, it would certainly not have been believed in by the majority of the juniors of St. Jim's, and the hero of the Shell would have been set down, in plain words, as a "funk."

Tom Merry's cheek reddened at the mere idea. The thought of staying behind, then, did not dwell in his mind for a moment. If he had known for certain that Bullivant was waiting in the wood with bludgeon ready for a savage assault, it would have made no difference to him. Unless he was physically incapacitated, he would run.

And there was no likelihood of that. Never had Tom Merry been in such fine form as he now was, and even his detractors admitted that if any junior in the school was fit to make the run, Tom Merry was the fellow.

On Saturday morning curiosity in the junior Forms was at its height, and Tom Merry was asked plain questions by youths thirsting for information. He returned answers curt enough to all inquirers.

"You are weally wunnin' this aftahnoon, then?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, meeting Tom as the Shell came out of their class-room after morning school that historic day.

"Yes, ass!" said Tom Merry politely.

"Pway modewate your expwessions, my dear boy! I objeot to bein' called an ass!"

"Well, then, the best thing you can do is to stop being asinine!" said Tom Merry, walking on, and leaving D'Arcy addressing space.

"I say, you're really going?" asked Digby, meeting Tom before he had taken a dozen steps from the indignant D'Arcy.

"Of course I am, fathead!"

"If you call me a fathead——"

"Oh, rats!"

Tom Merry passed out of the School House, and Blake and Herries, who were standing on the steps, at once turned towards him.

"Given up the idea of running this afternoon?" asked Blake.

"No, duffer!" said Tom Merry, going down the steps.

"If you call me a duffer——"

But Tom Merry was gone. A minute later Mellish and Gore stopped him in the quadrangle, each with an ill-natured grin on his face.

"I hear that you're not running, after all," said Mellish. "I thought you'd drop it, you know."

"I don't see how you could have heard anything of the sort," said Tom Merry. "I'm afraid you're departing from the truth, Mellish."

"Are you going to run with the Sixth, then?"

"I have said so."

"Yes, but I said all along it was only your gas. Hands off. Ow!"

Mellish sat down suddenly, as Tom Merry's knuckles biffed upon his nose.

"What did you do that for?" he howled.

"There's some more for you, if you're not careful of your words!" said Tom Merry disdainfully. "You'd better hunt up a little pluck from somewhere before you start ragging me again, Mellish."

And he walked away, leaving Mellish rubbing his nose ruefully.

"Why didn't you go for him?" exclaimed Gore. "My word! I never saw such a neat dot on the boko in my life! You went down like a ninepin. Why didn't you go for him?"

"Why didn't you?" snarled Mellish.

"He never touched me."

"He would fast enough if you had said what I said, only you hadn't the pluck," said Mellish savagely. "The fact is, you're a cur—— Ow!"

Mellish sat down again, with Gore's fist on his nose this time. Gore might be afraid of Tom Merry, but he was not afraid of Mellish—an important fact which the cad of the Fourth had overlooked.

Gore walked away laughing, and Mellish sat rubbing his nose and staring after him. D'Arcy had seen his mishap, and generously came to give him a hand up.

"Bai Jove," Arthur Augustus remarked, "that was a postman's knock, and no mistake! Which hurt you most of the two, Mellish—Tom Merry or Gore?"

"Mind your own business!" snapped Mellish.

"Bai Jove, that's beastly ungwateful, you know, when I've just come to help you!" said D'Arcy. "I know you were always a wottah, but weally——"

"Oh, shut up!"

And Mellish walked away.

"Beastly cad!" muttered D'Arcy.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry had met Kildare, whose greeting was very different from the previous ones he had received. The captain of St. Jim's clapped him heartily upon the shoulder.

"Feeling fit, Merry?"

Tom Merry looked up brightly.

"Fit as a fiddle, Kildare."

"That's right! You look first-rate. Mind you keep close to me in the run, and if we should come upon that rascal you told me about the other night, I think he'd hesitate to bother the two of us," said Kildare. "If you like, of course, you can stand out of the run even now."

"I don't want anything of the sort!" exclaimed Tom Merry hastily.

The captain laughed.

"Very well. Don't forget to be at the starting-place with your bag of scent at two sharp, my lad."

"I shall be there."

And at the time appointed for the start Tom Merry was early on the ground. Kildare arrived a few minutes later. The two hares were in their running-clothes, and muffled in coats till the moment to start.

Mr. Railton, the School House master, was to time the start, and he was ready. Half St. Jim's had gathered to see the chase off. The hounds were twenty in number, nearly all the Sixth Form Harriers being in. Sefton wore a sneer upon his face, as he looked at Tom Merry, and the lad, catching it, felt his inward determination strengthened. He resolved that Sefton, at least, should never catch him, if the winning of the run were to cost him his life.

"Three minutes to the start yet," Lowther remarked, looking at his watch. "Give us one more blow on that whistle, Tom, in case of accidents."

"Oh, what rot!" said Tom.

"Do as you're told, kid," said Lowther. "Little boys should obey orders, and not argue with their superiors." He lowered his voice. "Lend me the whistle a tick."

"But——"

"Lend me the whistle, ass!"

Tom Merry handed it over. Lowther turned with a grin towards Arthur Augustus, who was there to see the start and was laying down the law on the subject of paper-chases to Blake, Herries, and Digby. Lowther was behind him, and he quietly stepped close to the swell of the School House, and put the whistle to his lips to blow.

Tom Merry placed the whistle to his lips and blew a blast upon it that rang and echoed far through the sombre wood.

"You see, deah boys——" D'Arcy was saying, when a sudden, terrific blast on the whistle just behind his ear made him jump clear of the ground.

"Wh-wh-wh-what——!" gasped D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

D'Arcy turned upon Monty Lowther, and gave him a glance of the most withering indignation.

"Lowthah, I wegard that as a weally beastly twick!"

"Ready, Merry?" said Kildare

"Quite. Give me the whistle, Lowther!"

Tom Merry took the whistle. Blake glanced at him curiously, and looked at Lowther.

"What the dickens is that for?" he asked. "Monteith has got a bugle for calling on the hounds, but what does Tom Merry want with a whistle?"

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you," said Lowther, after a moment's hesitation. "You see, I can't explain all without giving away a secret; but Tom Merry may be in danger to-day—you needn't stare, it's a dead certain fact—and we're going to be in the pine-wood, on the home stretch, and if he wants us he's going to blow that whistle. You kids can come along if you like."

"Who are you calling kids?"

"Ready!" said Mr. Railton, looking at his watch.

"Hallo, they're starting!"

The hares, with their bags of torn paper slung over their shoulders, set off at a swinging trot across the common.

As they were to be allowed five minutes' start, the hounds still stood in a cluster round Mr. Railton, waiting for the word to be given.

The hares disappeared behind a clump of bracken, Tom Merry running well by the side of the captain of St. Jim's. But when Kildare put on speed later, then it was a question how the hero of the Shell would keep up with him.

"I say, Lowther, is that fact, or were you only rotting?" asked Blake, turning again to Tom Merry's chum.

"Fact, kid."

"Then we'll come along with you," said Blake emphatically. "You needn't tell me any of the particulars; I don't want to know 'em; but if anything is going to happen to Tom Merry, we're going to be on the spot!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let's get Figgins & Co. along, too," suggested Digby. "There's Figgins yonder, Herries. Buzz off and tell him to come here, old fellow!"

"Right-ho!" said Herries.

Figgins came up. He looked a little incredulous at first, evidently suspecting a School House "plant," but they soon convinced him that they were not romancing. And then Figgins emphatically declared his intention of being in the pine-wood with the Co. by the time Tom Merry entered it on the homeward run.

"We'll scatter up and down the footpath," said Figgins. "It runs about a mile through the pine-wood, and we'll be at different points, so that at least one or two of us will be near Tom Merry if anything should happen."

"Good!" said Lowther heartily

"They're off!" exclaimed Kerr.

The word had been given, and the hounds were streaming away over the common, lighting up the expanse of green with a blaze of scarlet shirts. Mr. Railton put away his watch and walked back to the school, and the crowd dispersed. But there were ten juniors of St. Jim's who did not join in the usual occupations of a fine half-holiday.

The Terrible Two, Study No. 6, and Figgins & Co., had more serious business in hand, as the solemn expression on their faces would have shown, had anyone been particularly observing them.

But no one was, as it happened, and there was no remark made when, at a certain appointed time in the afternoon, the juniors left St. Jim's and made their way towards the pine-wood through which the home run of the hares lay.

CHAPTER 16.

The Paper-Chase—In Deadly Peril—Tom Merry Wins.

OVER the bridge of the Ryll went the two hares, and a ringing note of a bugle from the bracken behind showed that they had been sighted by the hounds.

Kildare quickened his pace, and glanced at his companion. Tom Merry was running well and freely. He kept pace with Kildare apparently without an effort, and the captain's eyes glistened with approval.

"You'll do, youngster!"

They passed the bridge and ran on along the woodland path to the ruined castle. The trail of torn paper fluttered behind, white on the green grass.

Up the steep hill-path, till the ruins rose before them, in at the broken gateway, and then winding among the shattered masonry, went the hares at a rapid pace.

The bugle-note rang on the hill and then was silent. Leaving the ruins behind, the hares left the trail of paper down the declivity, and came out into the Wayland Road. There Kildare stopped, to jump upon a fence and look back.

Tom Merry stood in the road breathing hard.

A third of the distance had been run, at a good pace, and the junior was feeling the strain of it, but he had not felt any symptoms of weakening.

His whole body was glowing with the exercise, and his heart was inspired by an elated confidence that he was equal to the task he had undertaken.

Kildare's eyes swept the hill behind, and the scarlet shirts of the hounds came into view on the slope, bursting from the ruins of the grey, old castle.

Monteith was in the lead, and after him came Darrel, Rushden, Drake, Baker, with others further back, and the last to appear from the ruins was Sefton. The New House "sportsman" was the worst runner in the pack.

Kildare jumped down into the road.

"How are you feeling, youngster?"

"Fit as a fiddle."

"Good! We'll stop for a breather at the chalk pits; that is the turning-point. It will be easier going from here to there."

Kildare was right. They left the high road a little further on, and wound through country lanes towards the moor. The ground was level, and the going easy. Tom Merry stood it out well. The ground gleaming in masses of white through the green showed when they were coming to the chalklands. Kildare halted, not a score of yards from the abandoned pit from which Tom Merry had rescued Ferrers Locke on the occasion of his adventurous midnight run.

The hounds were not in sight. Well behind, the pack were still following the scent of torn paper, and the hares were justified in taking a short rest.

Kildare sat on a chalky hillock, and Tom Merry dropped beside him, breathing heavily. For a lad of Tom Merry's age the race had been hard and fast, but he showed little trace of fatigue. Kildare, it is true, had not yet put forth his full speed. He had not had occasion so far to do so.

The captain of St. Jim's handed the junior a sandwich. The keen, wintry air sharpened the appetite, and Tom Merry was quite ready for it.

"By Jove, we've beaten the hounds so far!" Kildare remarked, standing up and sweeping the back track with his glance. "I can't see a spot of red anywhere!"

Tom Merry followed his glance.

"There's Monteith."

The slim, athletic figure of the New House prefect was breaking from the bushes at a great distance. Kildare looked again and nodded.

"You've got good eyes, youngster! We may as well be moving, but we'll take it easy at first."

Away among the chalk pits they went, at an easy, swinging pace. A bugle-note rang out over the moor. It showed that Monteith had sighted the quarry again.

"Put it on, Merry!"

"Right-ho!"

Kildare quickened his pace. It was now that Tom Merry was put to the real test. Some distance behind, Monteith, Darrel, and Baker were in the lead, and were putting on a spurt of magnificent speed. Several of the hounds had dropped out of the run, which was too fast and hard for them, the first to fail being Sefton.

Three Sixth-Formers were coming on gallantly, decreasing the distance between them and the hares, whom they could easily see, every moment.

It was time for an effort, and Kildare's glance was anxious for a moment as he turned it upon his companion. It was not only the loss of the race, but his judgment would be held at fault if Tom Merry failed him now.

But Tom Merry did not look like failing!

Like a racer at the flick of the whip he responded nobly to Kildare's call. Away went the hares, Tom Merry not an inch behind.

"Can you do more than that, Merry?"

"I think so."

"Make the pace, then," said Kildare.

Tom Merry shot ahead. Kildare quickened and kept pace, and the hares flew on at a speed that would have roused loud cheers on the cinder-path.

Darrel and Baker dropped behind. The pace was too good for them. Monteith, running like a stag, was the only one of the pack to stick hard on the traces of the hares. And he knew that it could not last.

The pine-wood was looming up before the hares now. In the excitement and exertion of the race, Tom Merry had completely forgotten all about the ruffian whom Ferrers Locke believed to be lurking in the recesses of the pine-wood; he had forgotten Ferrers Locke himself. He remembered nothing, he thought of nothing, save his determination to be in at the gate of St. Jim's before he could be overtaken by the hounds.

Kildare looked back, and gave a cry of triumph.

"They're winded!"

Tom Merry followed his glance. Monteith had put on a splendid burst, but it was over now. The New House prefect had dropped into a trot, and was falling yards behind at every minute. Darrel and Baker were already so far behind as to be out of sight.

Tom Merry laughed breathlessly.

"We've done them, Kildare!"

"By Jove, yes! We've only got to keep up a moderate pace to the school, and we're the winners! Monteith ran well, but he hasn't another spurt like that left in him! I fancy we're all right now; and you've run like a hero, Merry!"

Tom Merry coloured with pleasure. Praise from Kildare was worth having. They plunged into the deep shade of the pine-wood, following the tangled track. White on the track lay the trail of torn paper, leading through the heart of the wood.

As they entered the trees, Monteith disappeared from sight. Before the hares lay the winding path through the heart of the pine-wood, dim even in the sun of noonday; doubly dim now that the February afternoon was growing old.

Something in the dim and sombre silence of the pine-wood struck upon Tom Merry with a strange chill. Back to his mind came the thought of Bullivant—of the ruffian who might be lurking among the thick tree-trunks, who might see him and attempt to execute the savage purpose which had brought him to the neighbourhood of St. Jim's.

A rustle in the trees made him start; but it was only a bird rising. He coloured at his momentary nervousness, and, banishing the thought of Bullivant resolutely from his mind, he ran on beside Kildare.

A rustle again, and Tom Merry caught a glimpse of a St. Jim's cap in the wood. The face of Figgins was under it. He waved his hand and ran on, with a lighter heart. The wood was not so lonely, after all. In case of danger, he had friends at hand.

And the danger, though he knew it not, was terribly near.

A sudden whiz sounded in the stillness of the wood, and an object flew from the trees, and Kildare suddenly stopped and pitched headlong to the ground.

Tom Merry halted, with a cry of dismay.

It was a bludgeon that had hurtled from the shadows of the pines, and it had struck the captain of St. Jim's upon the head, and felled him like a log.

Kildare lay where he had fallen, without motion.

For a moment wild horror and fear tugged at the heart of Tom Merry. He knew that the danger had come, that it was upon him, and that his only comrade had been struck down ere he was attacked, in order that he should have no aid.

But it was only for one moment that that sudden feeling of terror thrilled through the veins of the brave lad. He remembered the whistle, and in a flash it was in his hand, placed to his lips, and he blew a blast upon it that rang and echoed far through the sombre wood. He had no time for another.

A savage grip was laid upon him ere that shrill blast had died away, echoing among the trees, and he was dragged to the ground.

Strong as Tom Merry was, he was but a child in the hands of the powerful ruffian, who had sprung down upon him like a tiger from the wood. Down he went, crushed to earth

under the weight of Bullivant, and the savage face he well remembered glared down into his.

The hands of the ruffian were on the boy's throat, his knee on the heaving chest, and in his eyes was a blaze of hate and revenge.

"I've got you now!"

Tom Merry could not speak. He could only gaze upward with dilated eyes at the savage face of the ruffian, and pray silently that his whistle might have been heard, and that help might be at hand ere death claimed him, for there was no mistaking the purpose of the savage ruffian.

He grinned down hideously at the white face of the boy. Kildare, like a log in the grass, neither spoke nor stirred.

"So I have you at last! I swore that I would! I have waited for this! I heard someone running in the wood. I didn't dream it was you till I saw you. Then——" He broke off, with a chuckle. "You know what to expect. By all the——"

His grip was like a vice on the boy's throat. As he spat out a brutal oath his grasp tightened, and the boy's senses began to swim.

There was a crash in the thicket.

"Bai Jove, I thought so! It's Tom Merwy!"

A gloved fist smote the ruffian under the ear. He reeled aside, and his grip upon Tom Merry's throat relaxed. The junior gulped in a deep breath of air.

"You howwid wuffian!" exclaimed D'Arcy, for it was the swell of St. Jim's who had appeared first on the scene in answer to the whistle. "Bai Jove——"

He had not time for more. Bullivant sprang at him and sent him flying with a furious blow. The swell of St. Jim's went, with a bump and a gasp, to the ground, and the brute would have been trampling savagely over him the next moment, but Lowther and Manners came tearing up and leaped upon him like hounds upon a stag; and like a stag, with the teeth of the hounds in him, the ruffian went down beneath their weight.

From different quarters the other juniors came tearing up now. Figgins and Blake arrived together, and flung themselves upon the ruffian. He had just shaken loose the chums of the Shell, but the fresh attack pinned him to the ground again. Before he could deal with Blake and Figgins, Wynn and Kerr dashed up and joined in the fray. Marmaduke was only a moment behind, and then came Herries and Digby.

A whole crowd of juniors were now swarming over the ruffian, like ants upon a beetle. They did not spare him, either, but hit hard as he struggled, and a shower of blows kept him down when he seemed likely to shake off their weight. Grasped on every limb by one or more pair of strong hands, with Fatty Wynn sitting on his chest, and Marmaduke on his head, even the powerful ruffian was overcome.

Tom Merry ran to Kildare. The captain of St. Jim's was sitting up in the grass, looking dazed, and rubbing the side of his head, where a huge bump had formed.

"Kildare, I feared——"

The captain of St. Jim's understood. He smiled faintly as he staggered to his feet.

"I'm all right, Merry!"

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"That knock must have stunned me. Scott, how my head aches! Hold that brute fast, youngsters!"

"We've got him, Kildare!" chuckled Figgins. "He can't get away without carrying ten of us with him."

"Yaas, wathah! The howwid beast had the feahful cheek to stwike me, you know, and I shall certainly not allow him to escape, deah boy!"

"I will take care of him!"

It was a quiet voice, as a man stepped from the trees. In spite of his disguise, still as a tramp, Tom Merry knew him.

"Mr. Locke!"

"Ferrers Locke!" exclaimed Kildare, in amazement.

The detective nodded.

"Yes. I happened to be far away when I heard the whistle, and so I am the last to arrive. I will take charge of that scoundrel, lads, and thank you for capturing him."

The handcuffs clicked upon the wrists of Bullivant.

"My prisoner!" said Ferrers Locke, looking down at him.

There was a cowering fear in the face of the ruffian.

"I—I thought you—you——"

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"You thought me dead, and it is no fault of yours that I am not. But I am not dead, you see. I am alive to deliver you up to justice." The detective turned to Tom Merry. "You are safe now, Tom. I shall see that this rascal has no opportunity of escaping again; and the authorities will take care of him for the next seven years, at least. Meanwhile, the pack are coming on, and if you are to win in the paper-chase you will have to buck up."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed D'Arcy excitedly. "Wun, Tom Mewwy! Buck up, old boy, and wun like anythin'."

Tom looked anxiously at Kildare.

"You are not fit——"

"I shall finish the run," said Kildare quietly. "I have to get to the school, anyway. Come on, Tom! We'll stick this out together."

And the hares ran on. Kildare's strength was returning, and his pace was good, though not nearly what it had been. Tom Merry was the more fit of the two, and it was he who had to accommodate his pace to the slower stride of the captain.

The juniors gave them a cheer as they disappeared along the winding path, Tom Merry scattering the trail behind. A minute later, Monteith came panting up. Behind him Darrel and Baker were coming on.

Monteith looked round in amazement, but did not stop to ask questions. He knew that he was close behind his quarry now. The hares had reached the border of the pine-wood now, and were clear of the trees. Up Rylcombe Lane they went at a spanking pace.

As they passed the familiar stile Tom Merry glanced back. Monteith was in full sight, and away behind him was Darrel. Baker could not be seen. And even as Tom looked back Darrel gave it up, and slackened down from the killing pace.

"Only Monteith left!" gasped Tom Merry.

Kildare's teeth were hard set. His head was aching and swimming, and lights danced before his eyes. But he set his teeth and ran on. His hand was on Tom Merry's arm now; without that guidance he could not have run.

High before them rose the gateway of St. Jim's, and in it were a crowd of fellows, waiting to greet the home-coming hares.

A loud cheer welcomed them, and the fellows made room for them to pass. A dozen yards from the gate Kildare reeled.

"One spurt more!" cried Tom Merry, gripping him hard by the arm.

And Kildare made the spurt.

Monteith's outstretched hand was only a foot behind the captain of St. Jim's as, with Tom Merry still grasping his arm, he staggered through the gateway of St. Jim's, and fell there in a dead faint.

Monteith had missed his quarry by a hairsbreadth; but a miss was as good as a mile. Loud cheers rang out as Kildare was picked up and carried into the house. Tom Merry was seized by a crowd of Lower Form fellows and carried shoulder-high after him. Even Gore and Mellish were silenced now. Tom Merry had made the run, and by winning in the paper-chase he had proved that he could do it, and even his detractors had to admit that he came out of the test on top.

A few hours' rest were enough for Kildare, and Tom Merry was relieved to see him about again, looking a little pale, but otherwise no worse. Blake, Figgins, and the rest of the juniors came in, full of importance, from the adventure in the pine-wood, with the news that Bullivant was safe under lock and key. Tom Merry was the hero of the Lower Forms, and at a feed given in the School House that evening, in honour of the occasion, Figgins, in a neat speech, declared that Tom Merry had deserved well of St. Jim's, that he had proved himself as good as his words, and that the affair ended with Tom Merry, as D'Arcy put it, "King of the Castle"—a pronouncement which was heartily endorsed by every gentleman present.

THE END.

☞ The ONLY NEW AND ORIGINAL SCHOOL TALE by this famous author.

TEMPEST HEADLAND

A SPLENDID NEW SCHOOL TALE.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

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 notes 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. Billy Barnes and Cyril Conway decide to name their new schoolmate Snowy White Adonis Venus. He is taken as a fag by Graft, a bully.

Mopps, the porter, persuades a number of the boys to go in for a raffle; the prize to be a loaded hamper. Cyril and Venus have two chances, and arrange a little plot between themselves to forestall Mopps, as they were well aware that Mopps will arrange matters to assure his winning the prize. The two chums and Mopps get leave to have the day off, and start very early in the morning for the river. Mopps, however, is not satisfied, and grumbles because he has to leave his breakfast.

(Now go on with the story.)

Mopps' Prize.

"It wil do you all the good in the world to go without your breakfast," declared Cyril. "You must know that you are a lot too fat. Very well, going without a few meals will bring down your blubber, and make you look almost like a respectable porter. Come along! We have no time to waste!"

Mopps had to go, and the worst of it was that they would insist on running the whole way. He came after them, puffing and blowing in the most extraordinary manner; and when they told him there was no need to hurry, he hurried all the more. He was under the erroneous impression that they did not want him to come, and that made him all the more determined to do so.

By the time that they reached the boathouse Mopps was so breathless that he could scarcely speak; he was in a frightfully bad temper, too, nor was this improved by their having to wait over half an hour before the boatman arrived.

On the chance of getting off, Cyril had made all arrangements with him, and Mopps raised objections as to the lightness of the boat.

"Why can't you take one of them big ones?" he growled. "They would be a sight safer."

"Yes; but think of the weight we should have to row!" exclaimed Cyril. "It will be quite bad enough with you in the boat. We have got a tow-line, however, so that will be all right after we have passed the first lock. Let her go, Bill!"

Bill was the boatman, and he did let her go.

"Do you think she's safe, Bill?" bawled Mopps, as there was a good deal of rocking.

"Well, she's safe enough, mate. I wouldn't like to say that young gent with the meek look is as safe as they make 'em. Still, he looks safe, and that's suthing towards it. We ain't had a death by drowning for ever so long."

"Well, don't get boasting about that, you silly water-rat! You ought to know as well as me that it's dangerous to boast about them serious matters!"

"Oh, I'm all right, mate! I sha'n't get too close to the water; besides, I can swim!"

"Did you put the cork in the boat, Bill?" inquired Cyril.

"I don't quite recollect; but you will soon be able to tell. If the water comes rushing through, it ain't in, and if it don't, it is!"

Mopps groaned, and tried to look between his legs to see if the cork was in. He did not see any water, but he felt a heavy bang on the top of the head from the handle of Cyril's oar.

"Do keep your head out of the way!" exclaimed Cyril. "How do you expect me to row, when you go shoving your head in the way of my oar?"

"Good-bye, all!" shouted Bill. "If there should be an accident, I've got some drags! It will most likely be at the bottom of one of the weirs."

"Here, you put back!" groaned Mopps. "I'm not coming!"

"Look here, Mopps," exclaimed Cyril, "we are going to do nothing of the sort! You have started, and you will have to finish. We are not at all likely to get drowned, and even if we do—why, Bill says he will drag for us!"

"Bust you! I don't want to be dragged for! Put back, I tell you!"

"Yah, yah, yah! De man is getting frightened. Was tinking, Cyril, weder it would be legal to drown him! You know, he gibs us a lot ob trouble wid his reports. I tink we should be more comfortable at de college widout a porter, den we could come in what time we like."

"You would be hung!" groaned Mopps, clinging to the sides of the boat.

"Not if we upsilt de boat by accident," observed Venus. "We could easy swim ashore, den de dragging part ob de business would be rader interesting. Yah, yah, yah! Would remind you ob fishing for porpoises."

By the time they reached the first lock Mopps had overcome some of his fear, and after that all went on in the most satisfactory manner till they reached the little riverside inn named the Swan.

Job, the landlord, expected them. Cyril had made all his arrangements days previously. Job was a tall, thin man, with a very sad face. He never smiled, but there was no man fonder of a practical joke than Job.

"Morning, gents! I congratulate you, Mopps! That first prize is worth having, so I can tell you."

"Bring us something hot to drink, Job!" groaned Mopps. "I'm too froze to talk to you yet. A little rum, boiling hot, will suit me. Two lumps of sugar, and a piece of lemon. Master Cyril will pay for it, seeing he has done me out of my breakfast!"

Cyril raised no objection, and the drink was brought; then Mopps wanted a dry biscuit, and anxiously inquired at what time dinner would be ready.

"One o'clock to a minute!" answered Job.

"Well, that will do me, and directly we have had it we will take that 'ere hamper back in the boat. Do you think she will carry it, Job?"

"Yes; she would do all that. You can generally put a bit more in a boat. But I've sent your hamper on, and there will be seven-and-sixpence to pay for cartage!"

"What," howled Mopps—"sent it on? Who gave you permission to send it on? I ain't paying no seven-and-sixpence!"

"Well, I naturally thought you would want it at the college."

"I don't want no such thing—least, not when I'm not there."

"Didn't I say in my letter as I had sent it on?"

"You know thundering well you didn't!"

"Well, that must have been an oversight. You see, I ain't used to writing letters, and I never make 'em go over more than the first page. If there's anything more I want to say, I leave it till the next letter. All the same, your hamper is gorn, and you can't alter that fact!"

"I never came across such a silly, empty-headed chap as you are in all my life!" growled Mopps. "Here them young varmints will get opening the hamper to a certainty, and if they do that there won't be so much left for me. I believe these two knew as it was going to be sent, and that's why they have kept me up all night, and brought me here in the cold. A pretty sort of birthday this is, I must confess!"

"Is it your birthday, mate?"

"Of course, it is!"

"Well it is the custom at this part for a man as has a birthday to stand drink all round the house. I'll jest mention it to a few of the customers as they come in, and we shall do a roaring trade!"

"I'm not standing so much as a penny bottle of ginger-pop, and so I tell you! If you dare to mention a word about the matter, I'll report you to the doctor for serving Graft with intoxicants!"

"Well, he was in your company; but that don't matter."

"See here, we will have dinner at twelve, and go back immediately afterwards!" said Mopps. "Jest make up the fire, and bring me another glass of rum hot. I must get rid of this 'ere chill somehow."

"It's all right, Job!" exclaimed Cyril. "We are going out for a bit of fun. Don't serve dinner up till we return."

Job nodded, and slightly winked his eye, then he went and told his wife that they would probably not be back till two.

As a matter of fact, they did not come back till nearly three, and then Mopps was like a raging lion, whose keeper has forgotten to feed him. He had tried to induce Job to serve up the dinner, but that worthy knew from whom he would receive payment, and he was not going to do anything so silly as to serve it up before Cyril returned.

"Golly! Dis dinner just suits me!" exclaimed Venus. "Roast-duck goes down all right. You will notice dat when I get de start."

"Which do you prefer, Venus," inquired Cyril—"wing or leg?"

"I seem to hab de greatest affection for de limb dat has got de most meat on it!"

"Greedy young varmint!" growled Mopps, licking his lips. "Serve him last!"

"Oh, no; he has got to be served first!" answered Cyril. "I don't know which has the most meat on it, so I will give you both, and then you can decide."

"There won't be enough to go round if you get feeding the nigger like that!" grumbled Mopps.

"A pair of ducks ought to be enough for us all," retorted Cyril; "besides, if there is not enough, I can help you to a very small portion! We are sure to be able to make it enough, seeing that I am carving—at least, I am supposed to be carving. I don't know much about it, but——"

"Let me jest show you how it ought to be done!" cried Mopps eagerly.

"No, my dear Mopps," answered Cyril. "You might make a mistake about economising with the food, and try the economy on me or Venus."

All the same, Mopps got an excellent dinner. They had a large plum-pudding to follow the ducks; but when Mopps had eaten as much as he could possibly consume, he commenced to grumble at their having kept him waiting so long.

He wanted to return at once, because he was anxious about his hamper; but the chums insisted on having tea at the inn, and the consequence was that they did not start till it was dark.

If the voyage up the river had been alarming to Mopps, the return one in the darkness was doubly so, and although they landed in safety, the anxiety had so upset his temper that he would not speak a civil word.

As they neared the college, Venus seemed to be inclined to laugh, while Cyril, who was perfectly serious, kept shaking his fist at him.

They all entered the lodge, and there, sure enough, was Mopps's large hamper. Cyril locked the door, and slipped the key into Mopps's side-pocket.

"Well, this 'ere is all right!" murmured Mopps. "Fust prize—eh? Well, I happen to know it's worth having. Here, I don't want a parcel of boys in my room! Here goes!"

He cut the strings, raised the lid; then there was a rushing sound, and Mopps was bowled head over heels, while a huge white swan, that had flown from the hamper, flapped its wings in his face.

Mopps's howls rose even above Venus's roars of laughter, although they were loud enough. The swan went round the room like a giddy daddy-long-legs, and in its gyrations it smashed a fearful lot of Mopps's crockery. Then the frightened bird tried to get up the chimney, and it was just as well that the fire was out. It succeeded in making itself all over soot, and then it came and flapped round Mopps's face again, making him in an awful mess.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Venus. "Mind you don't hurt dat goose, Mopps! Ain't it doing a mighty lot ob damage!"

"Take it horf!" howled Mopps. "Take it away!"

"Yah, yah, yah! I ain't interfering wid dat fowl's harmless pleasure. It's a lot too vigorous for me to touch. If Cyril likes, he can; but I ain't interfering in de matter. Yah, yah, yah! I wonder what de second first prize is like, if dis is de best first one?"

Here the swan smashed half a dozen more plates, fluttered into Mopps's bed-room, and smashed his jug and basin, and then it escaped through the open window. It had only come from as far as the boathouse, so that it would have no difficulty in finding its way home. The fact is, Cyril had arranged the little plot with Job, and the pair of them, aided by Venus and Bill, had carried it out to their entire satisfaction.

"Oh, you varmints!" howled Mopps, gazing at the wreckage. "Won't I make you pay dear for this! Where's my 'amper?"

"There's your 'amper, Mopps! Can't you see?"

"Where's my fust prize?"

"I really don't know, but you have had your first surprise. I don't suppose for a moment that you won the first prize. It is not at all likely that you did so if Job had the drawing of the tickets. You would not believe what a beastly mess that bird has made you in. But look here, we can't fool about here all night; we are off!"

And so they were. They followed the swan's example, and escaped by the window, leaving Mopps to get out by the door as best he could; but quite an hour had elapsed before he thought of feeling in his own pocket for the key, and by that time the chums had driven the swan down to the water again.

Mopps's first intention was to go to the doctor, and tell how he had been treated; but then he remembered that it would all come out about the raffle, which were things the doctor set his face against. In fact, Mopps had reported boys for going in for them on several occasions.

He at last came to the conclusion that it would be better to let the matter drop, and to wait his opportunity to report the chums for something more serious, which he felt quite sure would happen.

The Amateur Rat Hunters.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Venus. And when he laughed like that, he not only made a great noise, but you could tell something funny was going to happen.

"Do you take yourself for an excited hyena?" inquired Cyril Conway, who was not much given to laughing, despite the fact that he was a great lover of practical jokes.

"Nunno, Cyril," answered Venus; "but Billy Barnes is 'nuff to make—— Yah, yah, yah!"

"So vat is tis noise?" demanded Herr Ludvig, entering the class-room at that moment. "Von vould tink I had to teach German to a lot of vild beasts! I am not at all sure dat a parrot vould not learn it quicker. Silence! I order it. You boy Venus, if you guffaw like tat again, you vill make anoter sort of noise, und so I tell you!"

"If you please, sir," exclaimed Snigg, "may I sit next to some other boy than Billy Barnes? He's as sloppy as oysters, and he smells like a dirty duckpond!"

"Prut! I vill not have tis behaviour!" groaned Herr Ludvig. "Silence mit tat laughter! Ven a boy talks like an utter idiot, you all seem to tink it funny!"

"He smells funny, at any rate, sir! He looks as if he's been groping for halfpence in a mud-yard, and he smells worse than dirty ducks!"

"Ach! You come and stand next to me, my lad!"

"If you please, sir, I would rather sit next to Billy; though he's bad enough! He's put a dab of black slop all down my light trousers!"

"Ten just you behave yourself, or perhaps you vill prefer to stand. Silence!"

Herr Ludvig got it, of a sort; then he got some German, of a sort! Cyril was the only one in the class who knew anything of the language; but then he was by far the cleverest boy there, and he had had facilities for learning the language. As for the other boys, they made their master mop his brow; and at last he turned to Cyril in

(Continued).

TEMPEST HEADLAND

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despair, while the other boys amused themselves by talking about everything but German.

"If you please, sir," exclaimed Snigg; "I object to sitting next to a boy who has dangerous explosives in his desk! It is against my principles. I would not like a master to be hurled to perdition at a moment's notice, and I consider it my duty to society to inform you that at any moment you may be hurled into futurity through that window; besides, you would break the doctor's roses if you dropped on them, and that would annoy him. I don't like my headmaster to be annoyed in that manner!"

"Frequently I vonder if tat boy Snigg is right in his head!" observed Herr Ludvig.

"He isn't at all right, sir," growled Billy; "he's as mad as a lunatic hatter!"

"Vat have you been doing to get into tat disgraceful state, boy?" demanded Herr Ludvig, approaching him, and gazing at the miry-looking object.

"If you please, sir, I have been down by the river, and it is muddy!"

"Ten I don't please for you to come into te class in tat state!"

"I should have been late, sir, if I had waited to change my clothes; but I will run and change them now!"

"You vill do no such ting," cried Herr Ludvig, who knew perfectly well that Billy would not have returned till the class was over. "I shall consider stopping your next half-holiday!"

Billy did not mind this threat, because he knew that the kind-hearted German master invariably relented, and he would never stop a boy's pleasure if he could possibly help it. All the same, Billy pretended to look very sorry and miserable.

"Have you explosives in your desk?"

"No, sir; I haven't got anything of the sort!"

"And they pretend to think that I am untruthful!" exclaimed Snigg, turning up his eyes.

"So you are," said Cyril; "and you are the worst sneak in the college, and as contemptible as that brutal bully, Graft!"

"Tat is not te vay to speak, Convay!" exclaimed Herr Ludvig. "I hope te boy is not untruthful?"

"Yes, sir," exclaimed the meek-looking Cyril, "we all hope that; but, all the same, we all know that he is!"

"Who is sneaking now?" cried Snigg.

"Well, that is rather amusing!" exclaimed Cyril. "I might as well tell Herr Ludvig that you were an idiot. He knows both facts already. A boy can't be a liar without his masters knowing it. They don't want any telling."

"I appeal to you, sir!" cried Snigg. "He called me a liar in class!"

"Prut; te boy vas speaking generally!"

"He generally does in class, and never gets punished! You like him because he can speak a bit of German; but it's not to his credit, seeing that his mother taught him, and she learnt it because she kept a beer shop in the country. Woohooh! He has struck me, sir!"

"Ach; he has struck you for lying! I shall not blame a boy for striking anoter, who speaks disparagingly of his mother. I have te honour of Mrs. Convay's friendship. If she vere poor, und needed to earn her living, tat is not te vay tat lady vould earn it. As it is, te lady is very rich, so your remark is as foolish as it is untruthful."

"I shall appeal to the Head!"

"Und so you shall. Now Barnes, did you tell tat boy you had explosives in your desk?"

"He did," cried Snigg; "I vow he did!"

"But I vill get at te rights of tis, und I shall punish te boy who is speaking falsely! Vhy are all your books on te floor, Barnes?"

"If you please, sir, there's no room for them in my desk!"

"Ten you have someting else in your desk?"

"Well, I certainly have; but I haven't any explosives."

"You said you had something in your desk that would go off!" declared Snigg.

"Well, lots of things go off that are not explosives," observed Billy. "A gun goes off, but you would not call it an explosive. So does a train go off; then a hat goes off in a heavy wind, and a boat goes off in a light one, and—Hi, steady, sir! Hellup! Murder! You have let the cat out of the bag!"

Herr Ludvig had wrenched open the top of Billy's desk, and four enormous rats leapt out of it. They scattered all over the class-room, and they scattered the boys.

Some of the boys did not like rats, so scattered out of their way. Others appeared to like them very much, and they scattered after them; while their yells, and Herr Ludvig's roars for silence, made the most awful din ever heard in a class-room. Cyril was one of the rat-hunters, Venus was another. Herr Ludvig used his cane, but it only added to the noise; it did not stop the hunt.

This lasted for about three minutes, and looked like lasting longer; when the door was flung open, and Dr. Buchanan stood in the doorway.

He never uttered a word, but with one accord the boys rushed to their places, and all appeared to be intent on their books. Cyril and Venus were the only two who had not seen him.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Venus. "Head him back, Cyril! Catch hold ob his tail!"

Then the sudden silence caused the amateur rat-hunters to look up, and they were dumb. Dr. Buchanan's steady gaze was too much even for Cyril.

"Are you the culprit, Conway?" demanded the doctor, after a painful pause.

"No, sir," growled Billy; "I am!"

"What has happened?"

"Rats."

"Boy!" cried the doctor. "You dare to answer me like that!"

"I didn't know you were up in slang, sir. I meant it literally, not what-you-may-call-itly."

At that moment the doctor bent forward, then he scrambled with his gown. His cap fell off, and, as he leapt into the air, he trod on the mortar-board. The fact is, one of the escaped rats had tried to seek refuge beneath the doctor's gown, and it had badly startled him. He got rid of it all right, and then he closed the door, not wishing to have a second class upset by Billy's rats.

"It has bitten me!" exclaimed the doctor, glancing at his hand.

"You are not the only one, sir; he's bitten me three times!" growled Billy. "They are the most vindictive creatures on the face of this earth!"

"Who brought them into the class-room?" demanded the doctor, glancing round to make sure a second rat was not trying to seek refuge.

"If you please, sir," murmured Billy, "I did."

"Yah, yah, yah! I tought dere would be trouble ober dose rats!" cried Venus.

"Silence, boy!" cried the doctor. "How many rats did you bring into the room, Barnes?"

"Only four, sir."

"Only four! Only—How dare you behave in this manner?"

"Well, sir, they would have been all right, if it hadn't been for Snigg. He will shove his nose into everybody's business but his own."

(Another long instalment of this splendid school tale next Thursday.)

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THE EDITOR.

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