RIVAL FORMS!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

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RACKE VERSUS MELLISH.

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RIVAL FORMS!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry and Co. at St. Jim's.

BY

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.
The Beginning of It.

"WHAT'S the difference between the Shell and the Fourth, anyway?" asked Jack Blake warmly.

"Oh, if you come to that, there isn't a great deal," Tom Merry replied, quite good-temperedly. "Of course, being on the average a trifle older, we're also a trifle heftier all round——"

Blake snorted.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I fail to see——"

"That," put in Monty Lowther blandly, "is not our fault. In the Shell we are not afflicted with myopia."

"Your whatter?" asked Robert Arthur Digby, looking puzzled.

"My nothing, Dig, dear boy. I said myopia. Don't you follow me?"

"Blessed if I do!"

"Let me elucidate. Myopia is shortness of sight. Got that? Gustavus says he fails to see. You heard that, I think? Failure to see——"

"Look here, Tom——"

"Excuse me, Figgins. I am talking!"

"You always are, Lowther! If a chap had to wait till you'd done he would have grown whiskers before he got a chance of saying a word."

"Come to that, Tommy was using his jawing tackle when Gustavus rudely——"

"Weally, Mannahs! I twust I am nevah guilty of wudeness. I should not dweam of bein' wude to Tom Mewwy, for whom I have the gweatest wespect. I——"

"If someone would only put Gussy and Lowther outside, we might have a chance of getting on with the argument!" snapped Blake.

"I am dumb, deah boy!" said Gussy.

"In addition to being nearly blind!" gibed Lowther. "And this is the most cherished ornament of the Fourth!"

"He's not," contradicted Blake. "You don't want to judge the Form by Gussy, who is only the Form's tame ass, you know."

"Blake, I wegard you with the gweatest despisewy—I mean contempt!"

"Go on, Tommy! Explain the superiority of the Shell; and when you've quite finished—being a truthful chap, you can't go on long on that subject—we'll proceed to knock all your arguments out of time," said Kerr, grinning.

Tom Merry had had a parcel from Huckleberry Heath. Not a hamper—the days of hampers were days of the past. It was an astonishing thing that the two pounds of butter that parcel contained had got past the eagle eyes of the Post Office searchers; but somehow it had. Worthy Miss Priscilla Fawcett, who was all for law and order, could not have known that sending butter was one of the many new crimes invented by the Department of Food Control. She would not have been guilty knowingly of an offence—unless she had believed that her beloved Tommy was pining for butter. Believing that, she might have been guilty of almost anything, for she had all a mother's affection for Tom; and there are not many things a mother will not risk.

Anyway, the two pounds of butter, with a few other things, had got through. One pound, cut into quarters, had gone to gladden the hearts of four families at Rylcombe whom war prosperity had given a miss. The remaining pound formed the basis of a feast, to which the Terrible Three had invited the chums of Study No. 6 on the Fourth Form passage—Jack Blake, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, George Herries, and Robert Arthur Digby, to wit—with Talbot of the Shell, Roylance of the Fourth, and three Fourth-Formers from the New House—George Figgins, George Francis Kerr, and David Llewellyn Wynn, more generally known as Fatty Wynn.

There were limits as to how far a pound of butter could be made to go—having already gone farther than could have been expected in getting to St. Jim's at all. Otherwise more fellows might have been asked. As it was, the two Forms concerning which argument had arisen were well represented in the dozen present, although there were eight of the Fourth as against only four of the Shell.

But, just as Tom Merry had insisted upon Talbot's presence, so Manners had said firmly that Roylance could not be left out. And, of course, Jack Blake & Co. could not be omitted.

"It was jolly good butter," remarked Fatty Wynn. "I only wish we got some like that every day! It's rummy to think that there was a time when bread-and-butter didn't count. It's a treat now—a real treat! Not that I despise margarine. The only thing that's wrong about the stuff is that there's so little of it. I suppose the war really will be over some day; but there ain't a fat lot of comfort in that, if you're to believe these chaps who say that we're going to be short of grub for years afterwards. Think of it! And I suppose by the time there is plenty again we shall all be too old to care what we eat. It's terrible!"

"We were talking about the two Forms, Fatty, you old gormandiser!" said Herries.

"I know. It don't matter much, does it? Talk ain't very filling, anyway."

"Aren't you full, Fatty?" asked Figgins, winking at Tom.

"No; of course I'm not! I'm grateful to Tom Merry, no end; it was just like him to whack it out with us. But if I had put away the whole lot to my own cheek I shouldn't be over-full. I know you can't do that sort of thing decently these days; and I wouldn't do it. But it's no good pretending."

Fatty sighed a deep, deep sigh. He felt the better for the luxuries he had shared, and he would have shared them with equal goodwill had they been his own to dispose of; but it really was no use trying to persuade himself that they left no room for more. Kerr said that Fatty ought to hang out a sign on his ample waistcoat—"Food storage to let." But jokes like that only made poor Fatty feel sadder than ever.

"Go on, Tommy!" said Kerr encouragingly.

"I forget what I was saying now," said Tom, smiling. "It's some time ago since I started to say it, you know."

"What you said was that the Shell, being a trifle older than the Fourth, was naturally a trifle heftier all round," Talbot reminded him. "Then Blake snorted disbelievingly, and Gussy butted in."

"Weally, Talbot——"

"Dare say I did," said Blake. "I don't believe it. 'Cause why? 'Cause I know it isn't right. But go on, Tommy! We've eaten your grub, and we don't mind listening to your rot. It won't be quite so bad as old Grundy's, anyway. And we know you didn't lure us here just to get on your hind-legs and talk our nappers off, as Grundy has done above once or twice."

"Well, if you really want it. I should say that, while there wasn't much difference between the two Forms on the whole, we are just a bit ahead in everything that matters. You haven't an all-round sportsman quite up to Talbot's mark——"

"Which is below yours, Tom," said Talbot quietly.

"Not likely! There's Noble, too. He's a bit ahead of any of you. And there are three or four fellows in this Form who can lick any chap in the Fourth, you must admit that!"

"Names?" snapped Blake.

"Oh, well, if you must have it—Talbot, Noble, Grundy——"

"Rats!" yelled Digby. "I don't know about Talbot or Kangaroo; but Blake or Figgy or Roylance could take on old ass Grundy and give him beans. I'll bet! You didn't mention yourself, either; but you know you're better than Grundy."

"Not a lot," Tom answered. "And I can't see any of your fellows having much of a chance with him. It's been tried before now. Grundy's heavier and stronger and longer in the reach than any of you, so it's not surprising, especially as, though he's a duffer at most things, he can use his fists."

"Go on!" said Blake. "When you've finished I've got something to suggest."

"Well, we're ahead in footer, cricket, boxing, and in general intelligence," said Tom, with a cheerful grin. "Is there really anything else that matters much? We could lick you on the river or in it, I think; and we're top dogs in running—long distance or sprints. You might win a three-legged race or a tug-of-war or a sack race against us; but they don't count for much, and there's no certainty you'd win them even."

He paused. Tom was not taking the matter very seriously. But Blake was, as the gleam in his eyes told.

"Go on!" he said. "Finish your brag, and let me have my say."

"I wasn't exactly bragging," Tom

replied. "But if it's to be a case of calling as high as poss, why I may as well remark that the Fourth has no humorist like Lowther!"

"And a jolly good job for the Fourth!" said Dig emphatically.

"If it comes to talking piffle—and that's all Lowther ever does—we've Cardew," Blake answered. "I defy anyone—even Lowther—to talk bigger piffle than Cardew does sometimes."

"Take up the gage, Monty!" said Manners. "You can do it, old sport! For Cardew generally means something, even if it's hard to tell what; and nine times out of ten there ain't any meaning at all in your jokes."

Lowther did not look quite delighted at this unsolicited testimonial.

"I'll admit," Tom said, "that there is no one in the Shell who possesses the wonderful tact and judgment for which Gustavus is noted."

Arthur Augustus, more easily flattered than Lowther, beamed on the speaker.

"Weally, that is a vewy handsome thing to say, Tom Mewwy!" he said.

"Ass! He only means you're a cheap idiot, who goes about making out he's no end brainy," said Blake witheringly. "Have you finished, Tom?"

"Well, there's lots more I could say, of course. I haven't referred to Glyn, a real inventive genius——"

"Or to Skimpole, a dotty ass!" put in Herries. "And if Gussy is a burbling chump, which he is, as we must admit, what about Grundy?"

Tom waved his hand.

"I say no more," he answered. "Not even for the credit of my Form—the Form that braved a thousand years, or something to that effect—will I start in to attempt proof that the great George Alfred is a Solomon. J'ai fini! Your turn, Blake!"

CHAPTER 2.
A Challenge.

"FIGGY," said Blake, turning to the great war-chief of the New House juniors, "you and I may fairly reckon ourselves the leaders of the Fourth, I take it?"

Long-legged George Figgins beamed upon Blake. Figgy would have been ready to stick to it that he himself had claims to the full leadership of the Form had Blake claimed it. But he was quite willing to admit Blake's claim when it extended to no more than sharing the honour.

"The two kings of Sparta," murmured Lowther.

But Tom Merry and Talbot guessed, if no one else did, that Blake's speech portended something serious.

House rivalry was far more acute at St. Jim's than Form rivalry. When School House and New House joined issue, no one thought about Forms. The Fourth-Formers followed Tom Merry's lead as loyally as the Shell, and the School House juniors were as one man against the New House. Just in the same way, Figgins, though of the Fourth, claimed and received the allegiance and support of the few Shellites in his House.

But there was always some amount of Form rivalry also, and this suggested alliance of Blake and Figgins pointed to its coming to a head.

"That's so," said Figgins. "Go on, Blake, old scout!"

"We're a bigger Form than the Shell," continued Blake. "But that's no odds. Some of our chaps are awful sitters—Mellish and Baggy and Chowle, f'rinstance. But so are some of theirs—Racke and Crooke and Scrope and Clampe."

"Are we talking about a competition in villainy, Blake?" asked Lowther, in his blandest tones. "Even there, I think we score. I am prepared to back Racke and Crooke against any three of yours, now that Levison has become a walker in straight paths."

"You leave Levison alone!" growled Blake. "Levison's all right, and one of our best all round men. I was only going over the whole thing thoroughly."

Lowther looked at his watch.

"You've half an hour yet before prep. Go on!" he said, in tones of resignation.

But if Lowther was not interested, he was the only fellow present who was not. Blake had captured the attention of the rest.

"We've about ten more chaps in the Form than you have in yours," he said. "Rather more than half of both Forms aren't good for anything much in the way of sports. But they all ought to be in it. That's the fairest way of testing the two Forms."

"In what?" inquired Manners.

"Oh, dry up! I'm coming to that presently."

"It would make your conversation a trifle more interesting and a trifle less puzzling if you came to it now, Blake," said Talbot.

"Well, then, I will. My notion is to have a real test of what the two Forms can do. Sports of every sort—other things, too. Chess, if you like. Even class-work, if Linton can be persuaded to examine us together."

"My hat!" gasped Manners. "Old Blake's got the competitive craze pretty badly if he wants it to extend to class-work!"

"Oh, leave classes out of it, Blake!" said Figgins. "We all bar that!"

"Well, I ain't keen on it myself," admitted Blake frankly. "All I mean is that we don't funk meeting them at anything, and I mentioned class-work because, as they're supposed to be the senior Form of the two——"

"As we are the senior Form, you mean, Blake," put in Tom mildly.

"Have it that way if you like. I only thought that you might be expected to have a pull there. Manners would come in; he's better at maths than anyone in the Fourth, unless it's Roylance. But we'll cut that out. I only want to make the thing as wide as poss—not just sports, but other things as well. S'pose f'rinstance, some new giddy mystery turned up. Well, we'd back Kerr and Roylance and Levison to find it out before any of your lot did. Hanged if I know who you could get in the Shell to start on it. There ain't a wealth of detective ability among you, I must say!"

"The proposed competition promises to be a trifle intricate," said Lowther. "Who is to judge and award points? Do you take on that as well as everything else, Blake? Oh, I forgot! Figgy is also a king of Sparta—otherwise the Fourth Form. But Figgy seems to be little more than a sleeping-partner at present."

Blake scowled at the jocose Lowther. Blake was very much in earnest, and he wanted the others to take his scheme seriously.

"I've been thinking this dodge out," he said. "You fellows haven't. It's new to you. I don't want everything just my way. I'm only making suggestions. I don't mind argument or contradiction; but I do bar cheap wit—if you can call it wit!"

"I am silenced!" said Lowther, with pretended meekness.

"Not you!" said Digby.

"It's a jolly good notion," said George Figgins. "It does Blake credit. He's got brains. But then he's Fourth, and we have brains in the Fourth! Look at old Kerr!"

"Don't, Figgy, please! You make me blush," Kerr said.

"All the brains in the Fourth aren't enough for anyone to blush for," said Tom. "That's not rude, Blake, so don't get on your ear. There's no reason why anyone should blush for having brains."

"There ain't much reason why the Shell should, anyway!" Blake growled. "Well, Talbot's got some, I'll own; and you aren't a duffer, Tommy; and Manners has his points; and there's Glyn. But look at chaps like Skimmy and Grundy and Lowther!"

Lowther arose, and began to turn back his cuffs.

"What's up, Monty?" chuckled Tom.

"This Form rivalry bizney is going to begin right here and now!" announced Lowther. "The first round will be between me and Blake, and if the score isn't to the Shell I'm a giddy Dutchman, that's all!"

"Better take a passage to Amsterdam at once," replied Blake, grinning. "You couldn't lick me in a hundred years! What's the good of getting your wool off, ass? You've been crabbing my scheme all along. I think it was about time I got home on you."

"My dear, good idiot, I haven't crabbed your scheme! I don't know what your scheme is. You've never said that, though you've talked all round and round it!" snapped Lowther, still nettled.

"Something like that House competition we had a little while back, isn't it, Blake—with Forms instead of Houses?" said Talbot.

Blake nodded.

"That—and a bit more," he said. "That was just sport, nothing else. And the best were picked for everything. What I propose would take in everybody in both Forms. I don't mean everybody competing in every event, of course!"

"You'll never get the slackers in," said Tom doubtfully.

"I think we can get our slackers in, don't you, Figgy?" Blake said. "You may have more trouble in the Shell. More of that sort, and harder nuts to crack. But that would all be part of the game. My notion is that the Form that fails to bring every chap in it up to the scratch for at least one event shall lose a certain number of points for each failure. Say we couldn't get Chowle to do anything——"

"But we would!" struck in Figgins with immense determination.

"Oh, we would all right. But there's no harm in supposing. That would count ten points against us. Well, suppose you couldn't get Racke and Crooke and Clampe and Skimmy, that would count forty against you, and you would be thirty down on that."

"H'm! Sounds as if you'd got it all nicely fixed up beforehand, I must say," said Manners.

"Well, I do believe that we can do more with our rotters than you can with yours!" Blake returned. "Look at the Cadet bizney! We made them come in then."

"It wasn't a howling success, though, old scout!" Talbot said.

"Er—well, no, it wasn't. But this is different. Masters don't come into this at all."

"Well, we accept that—provisionally," Tom said. "The other chaps may not agree, but I think they will. Go on, Blake! I begin quite to like this scheme of yours. It's just the thing for the end of this term, when fellows are apt to get slack."

"I thought you'd say so," said Blake. "But there's more yet. If chess and draughts——"

"Also bridge and banker! No difficulty about getting in the slackers then!" gibed Lowther.

"If chess and draughts——"

"And good behaviour and tunefulness on the comb and early rising," chipped in the irrepressible one.

"Oh, sit on that ass, somebody, do! If chess and draughts and such things are to count, why shouldn't japes? Say we bring off a jape that takes in the whole Shell——"

"Say you bring off a giddy miracle, and go the entire animal while you're about it!" said Tom.

"Or that you fellows work off something that makes asses of the whole Fourth——"

"That's more like it!" remarked Talbot.

"Not at all," Lowther said. "We couldn't do it!"

Eleven pairs of eyes were turned upon Lowther.

"Couldn't be did," he said, shaking his head solemnly. "It's already been done—by Nature!"

"Oh, weally, Lowthah, I considah——"

"My dear Gussy, I appeal to you. Could anyone living make an ass of you?"

"I twust not, Lowthah, although——"

"They couldn't. Impossible—quite impossible! You are already the finished article!"

"I considah that wemark in the vewy height of bad taste, Lowthah!"

"What we want to consider is Blake's proposition, Gussy," said Kerr.

"Yes. Ring off, Gussy! This ain't one of your jawbone solos, you know!" said Blake.

It certainly was not. Arthur Augustus, quite taken by Blake's scheme, had sat for fully ten minutes without speaking a word—which was something like a record for the swell of the Fourth. And it was rather hard to be accused of talking too much after such a suppression of his natural instincts.

But he nobly stifled his indignation, and Blake once more took up the parable.

"A jape ought to count," said Blake. "We've had japes before, but there will be a lot more in them if they count for the Form—see? My notion is that a real, first-class, all-wool jape ought to score as many points as winning a Marathon or a cricket-match."

"I never suspected you of having an original mind before, Blake; but you are coming out strongly now," Tom said. "What do you think of it all, Roylance? You haven't contributed a word to the discussion yet."

"I didn't know the discussion had begun," the New Zealand junior replied. "I was listening to Blake—when Lowther would let me! But if you ask me, I think it's a ripping good idea!"

"Japes and all?" asked Lowther.

"Oh, yes! Why not?"

"But it's difficult to award points for humour—especially when real humour isn't appreciated," objected Lowther. "What would a really good pun count in your scheme, Blake?"

"A pun isn't a jape. It's simply a sign of pottiness!" replied Blake.

"Besides, if there can be a good pun—which is doubtful—that doesn't affect Lowther. I never heard him make a good one," added Figgins.

"I think a pun ought to count a bumping for the ass that makes it, and five points against the side he belongs to," said Dig.

"In fact, you would make a point—five points, indeed—of punishing the punster. Ha, ha, ha!"

Eleven blank and smileless faces were turned upon Lowther.

"He's got 'em again!" murmured burly George Herries. "Poor chap!"

"Don't you see, you cheap idiots?" roared Lowther.

"See what?" asked Talbot.

"The joke, you crass ass!"

"Can't say I do."

Blake looked under Roylance's chair. He could not look under his own, because he was sitting on the coal-scuttle.

"'Tain't there," he said. "Perhaps there wasn't one, after all. I vote we let him off this time. These poor potty chaps can't help their delusions."

"Well, about this scheme of yours, Blake," said Tom. "We can't settle things off-hand, of course. Other chaps must be consulted. But I take it that you're issuing a challenge in the name of the Fourth to the Shell for an all-in contest, in as many branches as poss—full particulars to be scheduled later—is that it?"

"He may take it that way, I think, Figgy?" said Blake.

"He may, old scout," replied Figgins.

"Behold how the lion and the lamb lie down together!" said Lowther. "House rivalry hath gone to pot! Henceforth we talk and think in Forms—like a blessed Government Department! Oh, I beg their pardon! Who ever heard of a Government Department doing any thinking?"

"It's a pity," murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, old butter-tub, they'll be taking him away to the foolish house soon!" said Kerr consolingly.

"I don't mean about Lowther. I never take any notice of Lowther. I mean it's a pity we can't have an eating event! My hat! Wouldn't Baggy and I walk round any two in the Shell, just about!"

"But you wouldn't like to have Baggy as a partner, would you, old sport?" asked Figgy.

"I wouldn't mind much, if only the grub could be got," answered Fatty wistfully.

CHAPTER 3.
Spreading the News.

"SNEERING beasts!" said Baggy Trimble to himself, as he waddled away from the door of Study No. 10, having heard sounds inside that seemed to indicate an early break-up of the meeting just after Fatty's contribution to the discussion.

Baggy was by far the fattest and greediest and laziest junior in the Fourth. He was also the dirtiest, beyond all question. Not even Mellish and Chowle, who were regarded with contempt by the Form generally, competed with him for this distinction. They washed their necks even on cold mornings.

In meanness and in a certain disposition to dingy blackguardism both Mellish and Chowle might be reckoned at least Trimble's equals, however.

These were the three with whom the "two kings of Sparta," as Lowther had called Figgy and Blake, were likely to have most trouble. They were hopeless at games and hated exertion.

The Shell—a smaller Form, numerically—had a larger share of black sheep.

George Gore and Ernest Levison—the one belonging to the Shell, the other to the Fourth—were no longer to be counted among the black sheep at all.

Levison had so thoroughly changed that he was now popular with both Forms, and quite one of the best all-round sportsmen in the School House. It can hardly be said that Gore had lived down his past to the same extent as Levison. He was not, and possibly never would be, generally popular. But he had kept straight for quite a long time now; and, if he remained rough and bad-tempered, with more than a slight tendency to the heavy hand with fellows not his equal in size and strength, keeping straight made some amends for faults of that sort. And Talbot believed in him. That counted.

Gore's defection from their ranks had left four undoubted black sheep in the Shell. There might be two or three others who were not greatly liked; but there was no one else who could be classed with Aubrey Racke, George Gerald Crooke, Luke Scrope, and Leslie Clampe.

They hung together, these four. Chowle hardly belonged to the set; and Mellish and Trimble and Piggott, the bad egg of the Third, were mere hangers-on.

If the Shell accepted Blake's proposed conditions, as it seemed likely the Shell would, Racke & Co. might prove a big handicap to them.

For Racke & Co. were not in the very least likely to do anything because Tom Merry wanted them to, or because the Form expected it of them.

They hated Tom Merry, and they took a pride in flouting public opinion.

Some thought of this may have been in the mind of Baggy Trimble as he waddled down to the Common-room, to make public the news which he had gathered by diligent application of his fat ear to the keyhole of Study No. 10.

That application had not given Baggy an earache, though it might have done that for anyone else except Mellish. But it had almost given him a headache. For Baggy's brains were not of the quickest; and, although he had a general idea what the scheme Blake had mooted was, he had been a good deal muddled by the way in which some of the speakers had rambled from the point.

"He, he, he!" he cackled, as he made his entry into the Common-room, with much self-importance.

When Baggy had news to tell he always felt important; and he always failed to remember that everyone knew his methods, and that few approved of them.

"What are you letting the steam escape for, Baggy?" asked Kangaroo, otherwise Harry Noble, of the Shell, who stood in front of the fire, with Dane, Glyn, Hammond, Julian, Levison, Clive, and two or three others.

Ralph Reckness Cardew, who seldom stood when there was a seat available, had bagged the easiest chair in the room. Reilly and Kerruish were playing chess at a table a few yards away. Grundy was laying down the law on a football question to a bored audience of two—Gunn and Wilkins. They were the only fellows who would listen to him, though his loud and penetrating voice could be heard in every corner.

Buck Finn was demonstrating to Gibbons, Walkley, Mulvaney minor, and Tompkins the exact method of constructing a workable lariat, or lasso. Bates was playing draughts with Boulton; and Lennox, Frere, Lucas, and Gore were talking about the last cinema show they had visited.

Racke, Crooke, and Scrope had their heads together in a corner. They were probably discussing gee-gees; but no one knew, and no one cared.

Practically all the Shell and Fourth-Form fellows in the School House, with the exceptions of Skimpole and the twelve who had taken tea in No. 10, were present. There could have been no better opportunity for Baggy to retail the news he had obtained by his eavesdropping methods.

"Oh, gad! Don't stop him at that, Noble!" drawled Cardew. "That's the safety-valve, y'know, dear boy. If Baggy didn't let off steam like that he'd burst a boiler—bound to!"

"He, he, he! Perhaps you will be

bursting a boiler some time before long, Cardew!" said Baggy cryptically.

"I think not, by gad! Apart from the fact that I'm constructed on different lines from the Trimble tribe, I'm not much in the way of riskin' it, y'know."

"He, he, he! But all that's going to changed. Everyone's going to be made to buck up and do things. That won't suit you, Cardew!"

Everybody was looking at Baggy. It was not so much the words he spoke as the manner in which he spoke them that commanded attention.

It was not usual at St. Jim's to believe things simply because Baggy said them. But it was not to be denied that Baggy often did have advance information. How he got it was no secret; but even those who most despised his prying ways could not always refuse to lend ear to his news.

"What is it? Been listening at Railton's door and heard him telling Lathom that there's to be another compulsory footer to-day, eh?" said Kangaroo. "None of us will mind that much—at least, none of us that matter."

Racke & Co. would have minded very much indeed; but Kangaroo did not consider that Racke & Co. mattered, and did not, in the very least, mind their knowing that he didn't.

"Oh, by gad! I shall. though!" said Cardew. "I don't bar footer so much on other days; but it's a weariness to the flesh when it's compulsory."

"Well, you don't matter," said Noble.

"Do you good, old scout!" added Clive.

"It's nothing of the sort," said Baggy. "Noble ought to know that I should scorn to listen at Railton's door! The last time I did—I mean when the unjust beast thought I did—he lammed into me with a cane!"

"Well, if it's anybody but Railton or the old man himself who says I've got to be energetic, I shall simply decline," yawned Cardew. "An', after resistin' all the well-meant but mistaken efforts of Clive an' Levison to make me buck up, I consider I'm entitled to prophesy that I shall decline with success."

"It ain't only you. It's Racke and all the other rott—er—that is, Racke and——"

"The other gentlemen of the gay dog an' sportin' persuasion! We quite understand, Baggy. Proceed! But keep your frankness within bounds! Already you have driven the sunny smile from the face of Racke, caused Crooke's classic features to assume an air of gloom, an' chastened the happiness of the dear Scrope. Break it to us gently, Baggy, for we are but fragile vessels—we have not the aboundin', exuberant energy of such as Noble an' Grundy an' my pals, Clive an' Levison. We——"

"Oh, stow all that silly rot, Cardew!" snarled Racke. "We don't want to be classed with you."

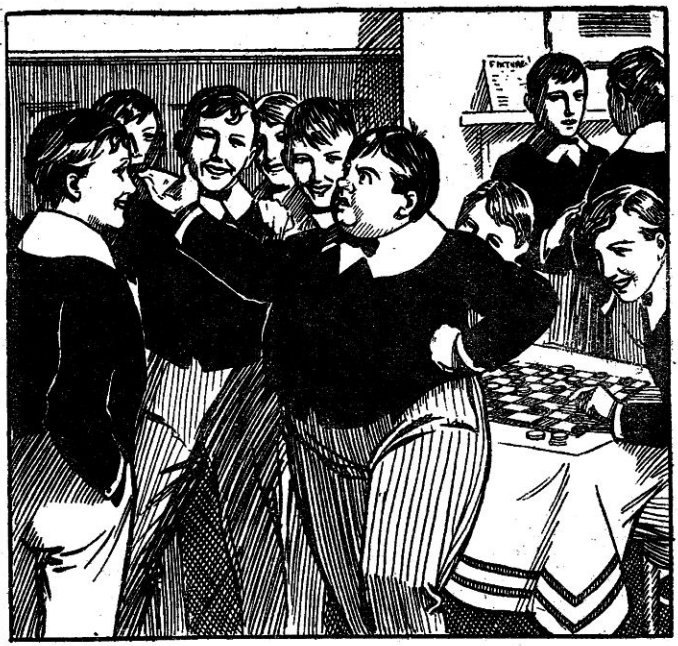
"My dear man, I'd not be seen dead with—— Eh, Noble, what's that? Baggy has the floor, you say? Quite so! Proceed, oh, Bagley de Trimble, but beware of treadin' upon corns!"

"It's all fixed up, and you've all got to come into it, whether you like it or not," said Baggy.

"What's all fixed up, you fat ass?" snapped Levison.

"Ain't I telling you as fast as ever I can? It's Fourth against Shell—everybody in both Forms, you know—and there's to be points lost for anybody they can't get in. I don't know that I shall come in—not without being jolly well paid, anyway. Unless there's a gorging—I mean an eating competition. But Wynn didn't seem to think that there was any chance of that. It's a pity!"

And Baggy heaved a deep sigh. He would have felt quite keen if that item had been included in the projected list of events.



Trimble *Has* Tidings to Tell.
(See Chapter 8.)

"What is the fat duffer burbling about?" asked Clive, much puzzled.

"He's been dreaming," said Levison.

"It can't be footer," remarked Clifton Dane. "Of course, matches have been played with ever so many a side; and, of course, it wouldn't matter that the Fourth have more men than we have. We could lick them, anyway!"

"Oh, could you?" said Julian. "Not so sure of that, my boy!"

"But it can't be footer. We should settle that in a decent way, eleven a side, as usual. We shouldn't go fooling round dragging chaps like Racke and Mellish and Skimmy into it, for the fellows who can play to fall over," said Kangaroo.

"No, it ain't footer," said Baggy. "At least, I mean to say—yes, it is footer, but it's lots of other things, too. Playing tunes on the comb, and swimming——"

"An' guessin' the number of hairs on a cow's tail, an' squarin' the circle, an' fryin' fish," said Cardew sacrastically.

"I didn't hear anything about that. But I know Lowther's to be bumped five times for every pun he makes, and it's to score for his side—no, I think it's for the other side." Baggy was getting mixed.

"What on earth have Lowther's rotten puns to do with the Shell playing the Fourth at footer or anything else?" asked Glyn.

"I dunno. How should I? But it's all in, some way or another; and I'm quite certain that Racke and all that ga—that Racke and—— Oh, other chaps, you know, are to be made to play, like the Cadets, when they made me and Clampe and Mellish and Chowle join up, you know. And if a Form works a jape off on another that's to count, too. I don't know how, so it's no good asking me. All I know is that I sha'n't have anything to do with it unless I'm asked civilly. I don't know about holding out for payment—that might make me a professional. But, of course, it wouldn't count if it was grub instead of cash, and I think I shall take it out that way."

Baggy paused for breath, his hands clasping his fat waistcoat. It would, no doubt, require a lot of grub to bribe Baggy to show his form between the goal-posts again. Whether anyone was likely to want to bribe him was another question.

"Where did your bootlace come undone, Baggy?" asked Ernest Levison quietly.

"Outside No. 10—I mean, nothing of the sort, Levison! My bootlace didn't come undone at all, and I scorn to listen to what is not intended for my ears! My high principles wouldn't allow me to! What are you holding your nose for, Cardew, you ass?"

"Your principles niff, Baggy, that's all! Take 'em away an' bury 'em!"

"Now we know," said Levison. "There was a bit of a tea-party in Tom Merry's study to-night. Talbot and Roylance went, I know, and I saw Figgins & Co. come over. They've thought out some wheeze to liven things up for the end of term. It's generally pretty slow about the time footer's dying. Good egg, I say!"

"They may have thought out any dashed wheeze they like; but I'm hanged if they're goin' to drag me into it!" said Racke, in his most unpleasant manner.

"Well, I shouldn't think they'll want you," said Sidney Clive frankly. "All the same, it wouldn't be a bad move to work a series of contests in which everybody had to compete."

"A dashed good one!" said Cardew. "I'll represent the Fourth against the Shell in the merry card games. Marked cards barred, an' sleeves carefully examined for aces before the game begins. With that done, I'd take on Racke—for the honour of the Form, y'know!"

"But it wouldn't be for the honour of the Form!" objected Lorne.

"Eh! An' why wouldn't it?"

"Because card games wouldn't——"

"Baggy says it's everythin' in, down to Lowther's jokes. Even cards ain't quite——"

"Hallo! Here they come!" said Dane.

CHAPTER 4.

Mr. Selby Lets Himself Go.

TOM MERRY and the rest—except for the three New House juniors, who had to return to their own quarters—came into the Common-room at this moment.

"What's this new scheme of yours, Tommy?" asked Kangaroo.

"My hat! How in the world can you know anything about it?"

"Look around you, Thomas, an' perchance your eyes may alight upon a fragile, fairy figure——"

"Oh, shut up, Cardew, you ass! We've had enough of your jaw!" said Levison, with friendly rudeness.

Tom looked around him. But he failed to spot Baggy, who had modestly retired to the rear of the crowd.

"We were just coming along to tell you chaps about it, and to see what you thought of it," Tom said. "But it's not my scheme. It's Blake's, really. I think it's jolly good, though I'm in doubt about some of the details."

"You may well be, if it's true that ——"

"Hallo, Racke!" said Blake. "Didn't see you. Dry up, you chaps, and let Racke spout his objections to a wheeze that he knows nothing in the wide, wide world about! They ought to be jolly interesting!"

"I may know more about it than you think!" sneered Racke.

"He might, Blake," said Lowther blandly. "I heard a bit of a noise outside the door just as we'd finished talking—I mean, listening to your eloquence. I thought it might be Baggy, tying up his button-boots, or the festive Percy, acquiring a cheap earache. But if Racke ——"

"I've been here ever since tea," said Percy Mellish, in injured tones.

"Then it couldn't have been you this time," admitted Lowther. "Is an apology due?"

"I consider an apology is dashed well due to me!" snarled Racke.

"There is much due to you that you are not getting, Racke!" retorted Lowther. "I don't think you'll get this. I may be wrong, but I can't quite see myself apologising to you for hinting that you might possibly have done a mean thing, when everyone knows that you haven't let slip many chances of doing 'em ever since you've been here!"

"Somebody's been listening, and telling these chaps all he heard," said Digby. "Must have been Baggy, if it wasn't Mellish or Racke. Hallo, there! Gone away! Stop him! Head him off!"

Baggy, edging round the outskirts of the crowd, had almost gained the door when Dig spotted him.

Almost, but not quite! He tried a frantic bolt, but Smith minor and Contarini, coming in, checked his progress.

"Gerrout of my way, you beastly ice-cream merchant!" howled Baggy, as the Italian junior seized him. "Lemme go, Smith, you rotter!"

"Gently Trimble mio, gently! It is not of the true politeness to call such names!" said Giacomo Contarini.

"I've got him, you fellows! announced Smith minor, gripping Baggy by the collar.

"No you ain't, then!" howled Baggy.

And he tore himself free, and bolted down the corridor.

Smith minor and Contarini, Gore and Reilly and Kerruish, were all after him at once.

Baggy rushed on with his head down, puffing like a grampus.

"Cave!" hissed Kerruish. "Oh, look out where you're going, Baggy, you potty ass!"

The warning came too late.

Right into Mr. Selby, the master of the Third, who was promenading down the passage with his nose high in air, barged the luckless Baggy.

Mr. Selby was taken amidships, and went down on his back with a mighty thwack. He lay there gazing into the frightened face of Baggy, who had fallen on top of him.

Not until then did Mr. Selby know what it was that had struck him.

"Trimble! How dare you?" he panted. "This is the very height——"

"Please, sir, it wasn't me! I—I mean I—I never meant to knock you over, sir! Sus-sus-somebody must have pushed me, sir!"

It was quite evident that that was untrue. No one was near enough to have pushed Baggy. The five who had chased him were still in sight; but so were a score of others. The doorway of the Common-room was crowded.

No one moved forward to pick Mr. Selby up. No one felt at all inclined to go to his assistance. The tyrant of the Third was almost as cordially detested by the rest of St. Jim's as by his own Form.

"Get off, you preposterously clumsy and abominably untruthful young ruffian!" snapped Mr. Selby.

Baggy rolled off, groaning. Mr. Selby scrambled up.

He glared at the crowd. If anyone had laughed he would have had an opening. It was hard to keep from laughing; but they saved it up, and every face was solemn.

Mr. Selby glared down at Baggy.

"Get up!" he snapped.

"I—I can't, sir!" moaned Baggy. "I'm hurt—dreadfully hurt, sir! I think my backbone's busted, and I know some of my ribs are—— Yarooogh! Wharrer doin'?"

Mr. Selby was bound to take it out of somebody. Baggy was nearest; and Baggy got it. On the whole, Baggy deserved what he got; but it was rather an unseemly exhibition for a master of grave middle-age to give.

For Mr. Selby dragged Baggy to his feet. His right hand smote the left ear of Baggy with a smack that sent him reeling to the right. Then Mr. Selby's left hand came into action, and Baggy swayed to the left before another swinging blow.

"Ow-yow! That hurts!" wailed Baggy.

Mr. Selby gave the grim ghost of a satisfied smile. It would almost appear that Mr. Selby had meant it to hurt. Even Baggy, who was more than a trifle obtuse, might have suspected that.

"If this unseemly conduct is repeated I shall request Dr. Holmes to shut up the Common-room entirely!" snapped the master. "The place was intended for quiet and orderly recreation. You turn it into a bear-garden!"

With that he went.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"He, he, he!"

Laughter in many keys followed him along the passage.

He halted, and half turned, as if to come back and scarify them for their impudence.

Baggy, getting heavily to his feet, with one hand to his doubtfully-injured backbone, did not perceive that he had stopped.

"Old beast!" he said viciously. "Shouldn't I just like to have him turned over a desk and lay into him with one of his own canes!"

"Trimble!"

The awful voice made Baggy shake in his shoes. Mr. Selby had heard every word, and to say that Mr. Selby was scandalised is to do less than bare justice to his feelings.

The mental picture of Mr. Selby face downwards over a desk, with Baggy plying the cane upon him, might—and did—tickle the imaginations of the juniors. But to Mr. Selby it seemed the very limit in atrocity.

"I—I——"

"Was it of me—me that you dared to speak in that manner, Trimble?" roared the irate master.

"Nun-no, sir! Really, sir, it wasn't! I have the very highest respect for you, sir! I think you must know that! I—I was talking about—about Tom Merry!"

"That is untrue, Trimble! Merry is not an old beast. I am the only—er—that is to say——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was impossible to restrain the merriment aroused by Mr. Selby's slip. He had not meant that he was a beast, of course, though the juniors had no doubt about that. He had only meant that he was the only person present who could be described as "an old beast."

The laughter doubled his fury. He turned and rushed at Baggy.

Baggy scuttled, and the crowd at the door made way for him. They were not minded to stop Baggy for Mr. Selby.

But before the heir of the house of Trimble could reach the door the master's long arm shot out, and his collar was clutched.

"Yarooogh! Lemme be!" howled Baggy.

Probably Mr. Selby did not mean to use his fist. It is even possible that his hand only seemed to be clenched. But it looked to Tom Merry and to the others like a fist, and Baggy went down under it as if it had been a blow from a fist.

"Here, I say, that's too thick!" cried Tom indignantly.

"Ow-yow!" roared Baggy.

"What do you say, Merry?" thundered Mr. Selby.

"I said it was too thick, sir, and so it is. Whatever Trimble did to annoy you, you had no right to strike him in that savage way!"

"You dare—you dare——"

"Come to that, I dare, too!" spoke the voice of George Alfred Grundy. "There's a limit, you know, and you've gone right beyond it!"

And Grundy stooped to help the hapless Baggy up.

"You—you—— Am I to be talked to in this manner by a couple of unruly juniors?" spluttered Mr. Selby. "I shall exact——"

"It isn't a couple only," said Kangaroo coolly. "Here's a third, anyway. That was a cowardly blow!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Any man who would stwike a poor, innocent kid——"

"Oh, draw it mild, Gustavus! Baggy as a poor, innocent kid, ain't quite in drawing," objected Digby. "All the same, a whack like that is off."

"Dead off!" said Julian.

"Sure, an' 'twas no class at all," chimed in Reilly.

Other voices were heard—Talbot's, Cardew's, Levison's, Roylance's, Lowther's, Manners', Clive's, Dane's, and many more. Some kept silence because they feared trouble, and others because

they would not have protested at seeing Baggy—or anyone else but their dear selves—half killed. But every fellow who counted for much in the two Forms was ranged solidly behind Tom Merry.

Mr. Selby stood and glared speechlessly. He had gone too far, and he knew it.

Even if that blow had been struck with the flat of his hand there was no adequate excuse for it. He might have caned Baggy, or given him lines, or taken him off to Mr. Railton, or even to the Head. The thing he had done was just the very thing he ought not to have done, howsoever great his provocation.

But he was not prepared to admit that he was wrong.

"Every boy who spoke then will come to my study after morning classes to-morrow!" he said venomously. "By then I shall have decided whether to report you to the Head, or to deal with your insufferable impertinence myself!"

Then he whisked away, his gown rustling.

CHAPTER 5.

Five Score to the Fourth!

"ROTTEN old beast!" said Baggy. "I'm glad that some of you fellows had the decency to speak up and tell him what you thought of him. I'll do as much for you one of these days."

And Baggy beamed around, as if conferring honour upon those of whom he approved.

"Not on your life you won't—not for me!" snapped Lowther.

"If Baggy did that for me, there would be a dead Baggy very shortly afterwards," said Cardew.

"Well, I like that, blessed if I don't! You needn't expect me to feel grateful after that, you know. I'm going!"

"You're not—not just yet!" said Digby, clutching Baggy by the arm.

"I should say not! You've been listening at keyholes again, you fat lout!" snapped Herries.

"Deserves all he got. But it's a bit off when a master takes to knocking chaps down with his fist," remarked Levison.

"Besides which, havin' started in on Baggy, he may go on to play such pleasant games on human bein's, an' find himself danglin' at the end of a rope as the merry result," drawled Cardew.

"Oh, come now, Cardew, you must allow that Twimble, though a vewy objectionable person, is a human bein', weally!" protested Gussy.

"Hanged if I do! I've never seen any signs of it in him," Cardew replied.

Now Tom Merry spoke. He and Blake had been conferring apart.

"Let the fat image go!" he said. "What Selby gave him can stand for the bumping he was going to get. It doesn't really matter a great deal that you heard about the scheme a few minutes sooner than you would have done, through his prying. But he'll have to learn that that sort of thing won't do."

"You're a dashed sanguine chap, Tommy, if you think Baggy will ever learn that," said Cardew, grinning.

"Well, I suppose he won't. But he'll get bumped every time we catch him at it. See here, you fellows, we shall have to go to that old Hun to-morrow, I suppose?"

"I don't see why we should," replied Levison. "He won't dare to carry the affair any farther if we stay away."

"Not so sure of that," said Tom, shaking his head. "I think he would. I wouldn't trust Selby to tell the truth in a matter like this, and he was in such a wax that I doubt whether he knows how he hit Baggy. He won't be able to deny that he did hit him; but is anyone quite sure that he punched him?"

"Baggy ought to be," said Kangaroo, after a pause of a second or two.

It was plain that no one was quite sure, though the impression that those nearest had received was that the master's hand was clenched.

A good deal turned upon that. If he had merely slapped Baggy's head, it was an undignified action, but it fell short by far of the gross cowardice of a blow with the fist.

"Baggy can't be trusted an inch," objected Blake.

Anyway, Baggy's testimony was not available. For Baggy had mizzled.

"I think we shall have to go," Tom said. "I won't say I'm not game to defy the old Hun if there's a majority for that; but we had better realise that if we do it may turn out a serious thing."

"Oh, we'll go!" answered a dozen voices.

"Of course we'll go," Cardew said. "For my part, I only gave the dear Selby a small instalment of my views—kind of to be continued in our next, y'know. If he's yearnin' for more to-morrow, I shall be happy to oblige."

"We'll go!" growled Grundy. "I shall go if no one else does. I'm not going to have Selby thinking that I funk him!"

"Then we'd better find out who's due to go, and who isn't," said Tom. "Will those chaps in the Shell who are due to beard Selby in his den to-morrow kindly step to this side?"

"And will those in the Fourth who are ditto, ditto step to this side?" said Jack Blake.

Some of the fellows stared. This hardly seemed necessary. It was not to be supposed that anyone who had protested would back out now; and, for that matter, it would be of no great consequence to those who were staunch if one or two of the half hearted did. They wanted no unwilling support.

"There's something more in this than shows on the face of it," said Levison, as he stepped over to the left.

"Tommy, is this the first contest?" asked Lowther.

Tom did not answer; but Lowther knew that he had guessed aright by Blake's face.

There lined up with Tom on the right thirteen of the Shell out of twenty—besides the skipper—who were present.

Racke and Crooke and Scrope hung back, of course. Gore growled that anybody might bash Baggy, for all he cared; it did the fat lout good. After that he expressed a desire to stand in with the rest, but was told that he could not be accepted. Others who appeared to be of Gore's mind in the matter were Gibbons, Boulton, and Buck Finn.

There followed Blake to the left sixteen of the twenty Fourth Formers present. The exceptions were Bates, Tompkins, and Jones minor.

"We win, Tommy! Seventeen to fourteen!" cried Blake. "First blood to the Fourth!"

"It ought to be decided by proportion," said Lowther. "The Fourth, though inferior in every other respect, has a superiority in point of numbers over the Shell."

But Harry Manners shook his head.

"It's chiefly in the New House," he said. "We're twenty-one to their twenty here, and no argument will make fourteen a bigger proportion of twenty-one than seventeen of twenty."

"Well, I'm sorry if I've let the Form down!" mumbled Gore shamefacedly. "But as I didn't know what it was all about, and don't know now, I don't see that it's my fault. I'm not fond of Baggy, and I don't believe anybody who says he is!"

"Look here, it needn't stand if they think it oughtn't to when they've heard what it's all about, Tom!" said Blake. "You explain, and we'll see what they say."

"I think it ought to stand, old scout," answered Tom. "I agreed to it."

"If you fellows aren't the most dashed, irritatin' set of freaks I ever clapped eyes on!" said Cardew. "Here we are, burnin' with curiosity—positively burnin', by gad!—an' there you stand, talkin' about whether somethin' else ought to stand! Let it sit if it's too tired; but do relieve our anxious suspense!"

"Thought Baggy had let it all out!" growled Blake.

"Do you mean that this pollin' of noble protesters against the tyranny of Selby is the first act in the great drama of 'The Rival Forms; or War to the Knife, But With All Politeness'?" asked Cardew.

"Something like that," said Blake, with a touch of awkwardness. "It may seem smug, looked at one way; but I don't think it is, really."

"I don't, either," said Tom. "After all, it was up to a decent chap to say what he thought when Selby let himself go like that. Of course, some mayn't have seen what happened. Gore didn't, I fancy——"

"Well, then, I didn't. But I don't know that I'd have said anything if I had. Sorry I didn't count one for the Form, though!" said Gore.

It was a good deal for him to say, and it showed that he was a different fellow from the George Gore of a term or two earlier.

Gibbons and Boulton both looked as if they shared Gore's views. Buck Finn asked whether it was too late to count him in; he didn't care a continental for Selby, anyway, he said. But, of course, it was too late. And if those four had been allowed to count for the Shell, Bates and Jones minor and Clarence York Tompkins would all have insisted upon coming in on the side of the Fourth. Mellish had followed Baggy out.

That would have kept the result the same, and would have made the party to visit Mr Selby the next day still more numerous. And, even as it was, something in the way of a queue seemed inevitable, for the study which the master of the Third occupied was only of moderate size.

It was really Racke & Co. who had decided the issue against their Form. Tom Merry felt a sudden acute dislike of the three, as they whispered and sniggered away in glee. He never liked them, at best; but he could not help thinking how much pleasanter the Shell would be without them.

Those fellows were going to be a dead-weight to the Shell in the new contest, that was plain.

There were black sheep and slackers in the Fourth; but they were not as stiff in the back as Racke & Co. Mellish and Trimble and Chowle could be made to toe the line by proper pressure, or by improper pressure. That all depended upon the way one looked at it. But anything which made the slackers take more exercise could not be very far wrong.

But it would need more than pressure to bring in Racke and Crooke. Anything which would tend to spoil Tom Merry's game would delight them. They were ready enough to make that clear.

"Do I understand, Merry," sneered Racke, "that there's some sort of dashed

Form competition on between you an' the kids in the Fourth——"

"Bai Jove! Do you heah that, Blake, deah boy? Weally, Wacke——"

"Oh, who cares about what that rotter says!" growled Blake.

"An' that everyone is expected to join in?" finished Racke, heedless of both Gussy and Blake.

"It's impossible for me to say what you understand, Racke, as I don't profess to be able to be able to follow the workings of your mind——"

"Tortuous windings, Tommy! Much more expressive!" put in Lowther.

"But you've got it about right."

"Oh, have I? An' do you happen to have thought out how you're goin' to bring in chaps who don't take their orders from you?"

"I haven't, Racke. But you needn't worry. That subject will be given due attention a little later."

"Well, I'll tell you, here an' now, that I'll have nothin' to do with your pifflin' competition, an' that Crooke won't either, or Clampe, or Scrope——"

"Don't go on, Racke! We know all the bad eggs!" said Cardew.

"And you may possibly make a mistake if you include any of the Fourth in your list!" added Levison.

"A blessed competition that includes seein' which Form has the most chaps in it who dare cheek old Selby!" jeered Crooke. "My aunt! We'd cheek the old Hun fast enough if it suited us. But we're not doin' it to please you rotters!"

"It wasn't exactly cheeking Selby," answered Tom quietly. "I'm not sure the thing was worth including. But I don't value your opinion on the subject, anyway!"

"Has it occurred to you, Thomas, or to General Blake, that there may be a certain amount of difficulty about allocatin' points for this initial event?" inquired Cardew, as Tom turned his back on Racke & Co.

"My hat! I hadn't thought of that!" replied Blake, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Leave it to the umpires!" said Tom.

"But who are the umpires?" asked Gore.

"Don't know yet. We haven't really made a start. But all that can be fixed up all right to-morrow. I'm ready to admit that the Fourth have made the first score. It will be for the umpires to say what it's worth."

Everyone but the few malcontents agreed to that. And no one but those few appeared to consider that there was anything silly about the first contest, informal and unusual as it was.

Indeed, those who had not lined up seemed a trifle sick with themselves for being out of it, although they had no love for Baggy, and no particular longing for an interview with Mr. Selby.

The general keenness promised well. And Blake was much bucked by the warm approval which Figgins & Co. expressed when they heard next morning of how their Form had drawn first blood.

"Shows there's some use in everything—even worms, like Baggy; and hyenas, like old Selby!" was the comment made by that eminent Scottish philosopher, George Francis Kerr.

CHAPTER 6.

High Honour for the Third.

PREP that evening was scamped by most fellows in both Houses. Almost everyone was busy drawing up lists of events, ranging from footer to halma, from pillow-fighting to spelling-bees.

Perhaps no one expected to have his list accepted just as it stood, though everyone felt that it was very unlikely anyone would have compiled a better one. Certainly, if all the suggested events were brought off, the competition looked like lasting long enough to include cricket, although the summer was still a long way ahead.

Footer, cricket, running, jumping, rowing, swimming, wrestling—these appeared on almost every list. Chess and draughts were down on many, chiefly those of the less athletic fellows.

Gunn thought there might be a general information contest. William Cuthbert Gunn, who read a good deal, was full to the brim of miscellaneous information, most of it perfectly useless. But Wilkins pointed out to him that Baggy Trimble's bootlaces would give the Fourth an undue advantage in that line; and the fact that the rival Form also numbered Percy Mellish in its ranks, would weigh down the scales altogether too heavily. And when Gunn said that that was not at all the kind of general information he meant, Grundy told him that he didn't know what he did mean, and he had better dry up!

After prep there was another eager discussion in the Common-room.

"We must have umpires, but where are we to get them from?" said Clifton Dane.

"What's the matter with two or three of the prefects?" asked Talbot. "We've got heaps of confidence in Kildare, and Darrel and Baker and Monteith would be good men, too."

"Can't see Kildare adjudicatin' seriously on the merry Selby contest, or decidin' how many points the winners in a pillow-fight should score," remarked Cardew.

It certainly was a difficulty. For the ordinary events prefects might be asked to officiate as judges; but this competition was to be something quite out of the ordinary in its scope, and it was tolerably certain that no prefect would consent to sit upon a committee to award points in an event like that already decided. It would be becoming an accessory after the fact in an affair which involved flat defiance to a master.

"There's Lefevre of the Fifth," said Glyn. "He's a broad-minded chap, with a sense of humour, and quite impartial."

"He'd do all serene," agreed Tom. "But I can't think of anyone else in the Fifth I'd care to ask, and we must have more than one. As for the Sixth, a fellow who's there, and is not a prefect is rather a back-seater, and prefects are barred."

"We shall have to go to the Third," said Lowther jestingly.

"Why not?" rejoined Cardew. "Might do worse. Levison minor is just the chap for the job. Got more sense than half the Sixth an' Fifth, by gad!"

"Do you mean it, Cardew?" asked Roylance.

"Quite, dear boy! This bizney is nothin' if it's not original, an' what could be more original than callin' in the greybeards of the Third to settle things for us?"

"What's your opinion, Levison?" inquired Manners.

"I'm not going to give one, though I must say Franky really is a level-headed kid."

"There's Gussy's minor, too," remarked Blake. He appeared to be giving the matter his earnest consideration.

"And Manners has a minor," said Monty Lowther. "Don't forget the dear Reggie! 'The three minors in judgment.' Ahem!"

"Leave Reggie out!" said Manners. "I'm not going to pretend that he's any use for such a job, though he isn't a bad kid. Young Levison and Wally are better, though I don't quite see letting the Third settle things for us."

"Wouldn't there be a suspicion of Fourth Form bias about D'Arcy minor and Levison minor, considering where their majors are?" asked Kangaroo.

He also seemed to be taking Cardew's astonishing proposal with some seriousness.

"I don't think Frank would lean to either side purposely," Levison said. "But he certainly would want my Form to win—as, of course, we shall!"

"But Wally wouldn't," put in Arthur Augustus. "I wegwet to say that my minah has much more wespect for Tom Mewwy than he has for me."

"He's a queer way of showing it, then," said Tom. "I didn't know Wally had any respect for anybody or anything."

"Don't wun him down, deah boy. He has weally a vewy high wegard for you, bai Jove!"

"It having been clearly shown that Levison minor will incline to the Fourth without knowing it, and that D'Arcy minor will incline to the Fifth on account of his profound respect for Sir Thomas here—which he is apt to show in a very doubtful manner, but for which, nevertheless, we must accept Gussy's assurance—it is hereby proposed and put to the meeting——"

"What's that you're putting to the meeting, Lowther?" demanded Grundy, coming in with Wilkins and Gunn at that moment. "I didn't know there was a meeting. If you have passed any resolutions they'll have to be put over again, you know. I can't have things settled behind my back!"

"My hat!" gasped Lowther. "Have you been away settling them all on your own, Grundy? It wasn't necessary to have Gunn and Wilkins, was it? But perhaps you have employed them as secretaries, to take down your august decisions? You might let us know what you have already made up your mind to before we waste time in discussing what is already settled."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gunn and Wilkins grinned. But Grundy replied in all seriousness.

"I haven't actually settled anything yet——"

"'For this relief, much thanks!'" murmured the humorist of the Shell.

"Though I've given several points careful consideration," went on the magnificent George Alfred. "Yes, there is one thing I have made up my mind about, though. Trimble said that there was some notion of some sort of kind of piffling joke contest—points for puns, or some such rot. Well, I'm not going to have that!"

"You'll let us play footer, Grundy?"

asked Tom Merry, with deceptive meekness.

"Of course! Don't be a silly ass!"

"And we can have races, and the long and high jump, and swimming matches, and a boatrace?"

"I can't think what you are driving at, Merry! Of course, all those events will be included. I am going into strict training at once, so as to be quite fit for them all."

"My only aunt!" said Manners, looking curiously at Grundy.

"Then you think you'll be chosen for everything?" inquired Lowther blandly.

Grundy snorted.

"I don't propose to allow myself to be left out of anything I choose to enter for!" he said loftily. "There's been too much jealousy and crass incompetence in the past. But I take it that we really do want to beat the Fourth all ends up, and I am not going to hold back because I have been wrongfully passed over before. That 's not me. I'm not sulky!"

And Grundy certainly wasn't. He never allowed rebuffs to make any difference. There was no choking Grundy off once for all. Tom Merry wished there had been.

CHAPTER 7.
Grundy's Idea.

"WELL, when you came in we were just talking over the question of umpires, Grundy," said Kangaroo.

Grundy snorted again.

"Umpires? There won't be any need for umpires," he said. "If any dispute should arise, I feel myself quite competent to settle it!"

"Weally, Gwunday——"

"Oh, dry up, D'Arcy! You talk too much! You're never happy unless you're jawing. Give it a rest! I suppose you don't mean to insinuate that I should be impartial?"

Grundy had made a slip there. Probably it was only a slip of the tongue; but there were some among those who heard who were quite ready to believe that Grundy did not know what "impartial" meant.

"We don't," said Blake, grinning. "Being in the Shell, you'd be sure not to be."

"Well, then——"

"But we want somebody who will be impartial," said Clive.

"Of course! That's me! Didn't I say ——"

"You said you wouldn't be," Digby said.

"Rot! What I meant was——"

"It's no go, Grundy," said Clifton Dane. "You must see for yourself that the Fourth couldn't possibly have doubtful points settled by any chap in the Shell."

"Unless he agreed to stand out of the competition," added Tom, struck by a bright idea.

"And not then!" growled Blake.

Tom gave him a positively appealing look. It would save simply no end of trouble, he thought, if Grundy could be given a job as arbiter, and be satisfied not to take part in the events.

"I never heard such rot in my life, Merry!" said the magnificent one. "It's simply childish! Do you want the Shell to lose?"

"Not exactly," answered Tom.

"Well, then! But I see your point about the umpiring bizney. Perhaps it would be best that a fellow who is bound to play something like a leading part in the competition should keep off that. Couldn't we get someone from the Fifth to take on the job? I don't think much of the Fifth. I could whop most of them with one hand behind my back. But I suppose they ain't all brainless idiots."

Figgins in Front.
(See Chapter 11.)

"We thought Lefevre might do," said Tom mildly. Grundy's notion that he was bound to be in the front row all the time was annoying as well as amusing. But old Grundy was at least keen. He would do his best, however bad that best might be.

"Well, yes. I haven't any objection to Lefevre. He isn't the sort of potty ass who wants to boss everyone. I rather bar any of the Sixth. If you ask me, the Sixth at this school think a bit too much of themselves. Why, at Redclyffe I was almost like one of the Sixth—not quite, you know, being only in the Shell, same as here—but almost."

"How nice that must have been for the Sixth!" said Lowther, with a bland smile.

"If we can't have the Sixth, there's really only the Third," Cardew said, winking at Levison. "Of course, it's absurd to think of lettin' kids like that——"

"Weally, Cardew, I must wemark that you are vewy inconsistent! It was you who——"

"Didn't I tell you to dry up, D'Arcy?" roared Grundy. "I'm under the impression that it's my opinion everybody wants to hear, not yours!"

"He's always under that impression," murmured Wilkins to Gunn.

"Born with it, I should say," replied Gunn.

"For my part, I can see some merit in the idea," went on Grundy, as much out of opposition to Cardew as for any other reason. "Years aren't of so much importance. Why, look at me! I'm only about three months older than Gunn there——"

"Never mind, Grundy. 'Tain't your fault that you are so far behind him," said Lowther soothingly. "Nobody blames you for having such a thick head that no idea can get into it from outside, and such a void within it that ideas——"

"Behind him, you potty ass?" howled Grundy. "Why, you'll be claiming next that your brains are equal to mine!"

"I shouldn't dream for a moment of suggesting any equality between us in the matter of brains," answered Lowther.

"I should say not! Nor in looks or muscles or manners or anything else, I hope! There's no one more modest than I am; but I must say that it would be jolly near an insult if you really meant to compare yourself with me, Lowther!"

"Does it occur to you at all, Grundy, that that wasn't exactly what we were discussing?" said Talbot quietly.

Grundy grunted. But he was always rather more civil to Talbot than to anyone else, though it was not because he feared him in the least. Grundy feared no one.

"About having some of the Third-Form kids in as umpires, wasn't it?" he said. "But when I suggest an idea, Talbot, I don't care to have fellows saying it's absurd. I'm not easily put out; but I own that puts me out. Yes, I do seriously mean that I think a couple of the Third might do at a pinch. Of course, it's no use taking just anyone; I must choose my men carefully. I have several of them in my Cadet section, you know, and I must say they do me credit. Lemme see—there's D'Arcy minor; he's got ten times the sense of his brother, and——"

"Bai Jove, Gwunday——"

"Will you let me get a word in edgewise, D'Arcy?" howled Grundy. "I never saw such a potty, gabby ass as you are! You ought to be one of those Pacifist Labour johnnies! I say that D'Arcy minor is quite a sensible kid since I've had the training of him, and I consider he might do very well. Then there's Levison minor. I have quite a good opinion of him—a very nice and respectful youngster, I must say!"

"Does my minor respect you, Grundy?" asked Levison major.

"Eh? Of course he does!"

"It's bad news—very bad. But it's the first case of insanity we've had in our family," Levison replied.

"Oh, you're an ass! Yes, Merry, I think on the whole those two might do, with Lefevre. I shall give them a hint or two, of course, and see that they take their duties in a proper spirit."

"I think that settles it, then," Tom said, winking the eye farthest from Grundy at the assembly in general. "What do you fellows say?"

The general opinion seemed to be that it would do. It was a distinct novelty; but most of the two Forms felt that they would rather have a couple of fags to settle knotty points than have seniors meddling too much with the series of contests. The fags could be dismissed from their posts if they wanted to be too arbitrary; but it would not have been so easy to get rid of seniors, once they were appointed.

"What should we do without your shining wisdom and your tremendous ability for the settlement of difficult problems, Grundy?" murmured Lowther.

Grundy looked at him rather doubtfully.

"I'm glad you're coming to see that," he said. "But you were singing a different tune a few minutes ago."

Wally and Frank Levison accepted the honour proffered them with considerable enthusiasm, though Wally did his best to disguise the keenness he felt.

"Best thing you youngsters could have done, to come to us," he said. "I'll put you right, and Franky here is just the man to act as secretary and record my decisions. I don't see what you want to drag Lefevre in for, though!"

"Oh, just to give the thing a tone, you you, Wally," said Tom, with a wink at Blake.

"Rats! Don't we give it tone enough? Still, I've no great objection to Lefevre. Yes, we'll take it on, Tom Merry."

CHAPTER 8.

Racke's Intervention.

"KIM along!" said Tom Merry cheerily.

Classes for the morning were over on the day following that on which Blake had made public his great scheme, and the time for the interview with Mr. Selby had come. The Shell and Fourth had met in the passage as they came out of their Form-rooms, and those who were due to wait upon the tyrant of the Third had sorted themselves out.

All the New House fellows were out of it, of course. Trimble and Mellish were also out of it, and Racke and Crooke and Scrope, and some seven or so more of the School House.

But there were thirty-one who had protested against tyranny, and were now to face the tyrant after he had had a chance of sleeping on the matter.

Nobody felt much worried. It was not likely that Mr. Selby would take them before the Head. They could appeal to Dr. Holmes if he talked of caning them; but they did not intend to do that. Better to get it over!

"Line up two by two!" cried Tom. "You and I, Blake. Then a Shell chap and another Fourth-Former, and so on."

And so it was done. Tom Merry and Blake were followed by Talbot and Gussy. Grundy growled as he found that Cardew, out of pure whimsical malice, had elected to pair off with him. Lowther and Digby were the fourth pair. Then came Gunn and Clive, and there followed Manners and Julian, Noble and Levison, Lennox and Hammond, Wilkins and Herries, Dane and Lumley-Lumley, Lucas and Kerruish, Frere and Lorne, Glyn and Contarini, and Walkley and Macdonald.

This left three of the Fourth. Reilly and Mulvaney minor looked at one another somewhat after the manner of the Kilkenny cats, and then Mulvaney nobly offered to let Reilly have Smith minor as a partner. He couldn't think of walking with an Ulster man himself, bedad, and he never had thought much of Smith minor anyway. Both Smith minor and Reilly grinned, and Mick Mulvaney brought up the rear solus, humming "The Wearing of the Green."

As they marched off, with the easy swing that Cadet route-marching had helped to make habit, Fatty Wynn's tuneful voice struck up a new version of an old chant:

"The protesters marched off two by two,
Because old Selby was cross!
Blake and Tommy and all the crew,
Because old Selby was cross!
One more whopping—
All on account of Baggy—
One more whopping,
Because old Selby was cross!"

A score of voices joined in. It didn't matter much about the words they sang, and everybody knew the old tune.

"The Levison-bird and the Kangaroo,"

sang somebody.

"Grundy the ass and that pup Cardew,"

was somebody else's contribution. But they all had one line right. They all sang:

"Because old Selby was cross!"

And the Third, swarming up, joined in the song con amore, more especially that particular line.

It was just as well, perhaps, that Mr. Selby did not hear!

Mr. Selby didn't. The master of the Third had not forgotten the appointment he had made. But he had lost all desire to keep it. On the whole, he would very much have preferred that the matter should be allowed to drop into the limbo of oblivion.

None of the juniors belonged to his Form. They had a right of appeal to the Head against any punishment he dealt out to them.

It would be uncommonly awkward for Mr. Selby if they exercised that right; and he rather fancied they would.

He was not quite sure that his conscience would allow him to deny absolutely that his hand had been clenched when he struck Baggy. He was pretty certain that Baggy had fallen purposely; the blow had not been heavy enough to tumble him over.

But it was an unpleasant subject for argument before the Head.

Not to put too fine a point upon it, the attitude of Mr. Selby was one of funk.

Directly classes were over he put on his hat and overcoat, and by the time the thirty-one had lined up he had reached the gates.

He was going to forget that appointment. Forgetfulness seemed the easiest way out.

"I don't believe they'll see old Selby," sounded the voice of Wally of the Third, shrill above the singing.

"Shurrup, you noisy asses!" roared Figgins, who had been chanting as loudly as anyone, though less tunefully than Fatty and some others.

"Why don't you believe they will, young D'Arcy?" the New House chieftain demanded, when the rest would allow him to make himself heard.

"'Cause he mizzled out the moment he'd dismissed us," replied Wally. "I saw the old Hun go. So did Franky. Didn't you, kid?"

"So did I!" yelled Manners minor. "You and young Levison ain't the only chaps that have got eyes, Wally!"

Reggie Manners was badly disgruntled. He took the honour accorded to Wally and Frank as a slight upon him.

Of course, he said that only a couple of potty asses would let themselves be mixed up with a rotten Shell versus Fourth bizney. He wouldn't have let himself in for a fagging job like that at any price.

But Reggie's contempt was about as convincing as that of the minor politician who scans with a jaundiced eye the list of honours in which his own name does not figure.

"Oh, you've got eyes!" returned Wally. "Such as they are—plenty of green in 'em! But what you haven't got is the brains to see what things mean."

"Which way did he go?" asked someone.

It really did not matter; but, as it chanced, the answer made a difference to the course of events.

"Not to Rylcombe," replied Wally. "That's all I know. He turned the other way at the gates. Might have been going to Jericho for what I care. Hope he was."

Racke dug his elbow into Crooke's ribs, and Crooke understood.

Crooke also grunted, for Racke had a bony elbow. But, understanding, Crooke made no protest.

They slipped out of the throng unnoticed by anyone but Frank Levison. They trotted to the bike-shed.

"This is where we come in!" chortled Racke. "You can see old Selby's game? He don't quite fancy it. And he's suffering a dashed convenient loss of memory!"

"That's it!" grinned Crooke. "He ought to be jolly grateful to us for remindin' him—eh, old sport? I don't fancy he will be. But he can't take it out of us while there are all that crowd waitin' for execution."

The two cads wheeled their bikes to the gates, mounted, and rode after Mr. Selby.

Two or three minutes later Wally and Frank Levison followed them.

Frank had got Wally out of the crowd, and had whispered his suspicions.

"I'm on it!" said Wally. "Come to think of it, we couldn't be off it, considering that those kids in the Shell and Fourth have shown sense for once, and trusted the management of their affairs to us. We'll show them what their uncles are good for!"

Frank grinned, and pedalled his hardest.

They rounded a bend in the road just in time to see Mr. Selby turn from Racke and Crooke, and, with a face that did not look expressive of intense gratitude for their kindly and polite attention, start back to the school.

The two Shell fellows rode on. So did Wally and Frank. They capped Mr. Selby as they passed him, and Mr. Selby scowled.

"Merry old Hun, ain't he, Franky?" grinned Wally. "Let's get off now. We don't want those two rotters to twig us!"

Meanwhile, the band of juniors awaited Mr. Selby's coming.

To start with, Tom Merry had naturally tapped at the door of the master's sanctum.

No answer came. Two or three more taps had the same result.

Then Tom looked in. The room was empty. He was not surprised at that.

"Let's clear!" said Gunn. "If the old Hun don't want to see us, I'm jolly sure we don't want to see him."

"Oh, don't we?" snapped Grundy. "I'm going to have this thing out with Selby, whether he likes it or not. So

put that in your pipe and smoke it, William Gunn!"

"Be merciful with him, Grundy!" pleaded Monty Lowther. "After all, he must have been young once—even such a bright, promising youth as yourself, perhaps. And, though a master, he is still a human being!"

More than half the crowd thought that to go was the best thing. They had kept the appointment. Selby had not. There was an end of it, they held.

But there were quite a number who shared Grundy's feeling of obstinacy. It would be a score over the tyrant if, meaning to elude any further mention of the matter, he came back to find them waiting for him, they held.

"It won't be much of a score if we're all caned," grumbled Smith minor, who agreed with Gunn.

"Arrah, then, it's funking it ye arre, Frank Smith!" said Mulvaney minor derisively.

"See that?" retorted Smith, putting a fist within an inch of Mulvaney's nose. "I funk old Selby about as much as I funk you, and that will show you how jolly well afraid of you I am!"

"Molto, molto!" said Contarini, willing to make peace.

"I'll give him molto, the spalpeen!" yelled Mulvaney. "'Tare an' ouns, I'll——"

He flung himself upon Smith.

They were rolling together on the floor when Mr. Railton appeared.

"Cave, you asses!" hissed Reilly.

"Take that, ye Saxon omadhaun!" howled Mulvaney.

"Gerroff me, you Irish lunatic!" gasped Smith.

"What does this mean?" snapped Mr. Railton.

"We're waiting for Mr. Selby, sir!" replied Tom.

"Indeed! Is this squabble designed to lighten the tedium of your waiting?" asked the Housemaster, with a touch of sarcasm.

No one answered that. The two combatants struggled to their feet, looking rather the worse for wear.

"Take a hundred lines each!" Mr. Railton said.

His glance swept down the line, and it was plain that he felt some natural curiosity as to the reason for their presence in such numbers.

But he did not ask it. Mr. Selby had really very little to do with the Shell and Fourth; but it was not the Housemaster's way to intervene in a matter between another master and any of the boys unless he was appealed to.

He passed on. Grundy growled at Smith and Mulvaney; and Tom Merry straightened the broken ranks.

"We want to look as if we were on parade when old Selby comes," he said.

"I don't believe the old dodger will ever come!" said Clive.

But they had not much longer to wait. Within a few minutes Mr. Selby came upon the scene.

His sour face grew even more sour when he saw the long double file down the passage. He was ready to look upon it as a piece of impertinence. But he could not well complain that the crowd he had summoned to wait his pleasure had not awaited it as a mere disorderly mob.

CHAPTER 9.
A Score for the Shell!

"WHAT are you doing here?" snapped Mr. Selby.

Tom looked at him in sur-
se.

"Y s to come, sir!" he said.

"D So I did! I remember now, f you were guilty of the grossest disrespect to me last night. It was inevitable that you should be called upon to pay the penalty. But why such a crowd?"

"You talk to him, Tom!" whispered Blake.

Tom was quite ready. He had changed his mind now. Mr. Selby had shown the white feather. It was not worth while to be caned, if it could be avoided without any real risk of having the Head brought into the matter, and Tom felt that the risk of that had passed.

"If any of us were guilty of disrespect to you, we all were," said Tom, in steady tones. "There are thirty-one of us here, sir, and we all feel the same about it. We don't think that any master has the right to knock a boy down, and we consider we were fully jusified in making a protest."

"Are you talking to me, Merry? Do you dare——"

"It was you who knocked Trimble down, sir!"

With a snort of rage, Mr. Selby threw open the door of his study, bounced in, flung off his hat and overcoat, and took up a cane.

"I shall cane every one of you!" he thundered. "You first, Merry. Hold out your hand!"

"I appeal to the Head, sir!"

Something like a thrill swept down the waiting ranks. All there had agreed that it was better to be caned than to go before the Head, and yet all felt now that Tom was right, if only it worked out as they knew he meant it to. If not—well, then he would be blamed for going outside the agreement.

"Very well. Stand aside, Merry! Blake, hold out——"

"I appeal to the Head, sir!"

Mr. Selby struck the table a resounding blow with his cane.

"Talbot!" he roared.

"I also appeal, sir," said Talbot.

"D'Arcy major!"

"I cannot agwee that you are in the wight, sir. I appeal——"

"Grundy!"

"I certainly shall not think of allowing myself to be punished unjustly. If you will think it over coolly, sir, I feel sure you'll see that you put yourself in the wrong. I——"

"Do you also appeal to the Head, Grundy?"

"Of course I do, sir. Wasn't I saying——"

"Silence! Cardew!"

"Yaas, sir?"

"Hold out your hand!"

"What for, sir?"

"What for! Is the boy an idiot? That I may cane you, of course!"

"Thanks, but I'm not takin' any, sir. I appeal to the Head."

Kangaroo's voice struck in:

"It's no good asking us one by one, sir. We are all appealing."

Mr. Selby's face was livid. If he had dared he would have used the cane about Tom Merry's shoulders. More, if he had dared he would have gone for the whole band, slashing right and left.

But it would not have been at all a safe thing to try, and he saw that. The cane in his hand was tapping nervously on the table.

Then Mr. Railton appeared again.

He halted as he reached the door of the study. No Housemaster with his sense of duty could have passed on without a word after seeing Mr. Selby's face.

"Is there anything I——" he began.

"There is nothing, Mr. Railton. I have had to reprimand these boys for gross rudeness to me. I will let them go with a reprimand. I am not in good health, and I do not feel equal to the exertion involved in caning them all, though it had been my intention to punish the ringleaders in that manner."

Mr. Selby paused. He may have nursed a hope that Mr. Railton, who was younger than he and far more active and vigorous, in spite of his crocked arm, would volunteer to act as executioner.

But if he had that hope it was doomed to disappointment.

"Oh, very well, Mr. Selby! I regret to hear that you have cause for complaint; but as you have dealt with the matter, it is plainly not for me to interfere. You will excuse my question I am sure."

"Certainly!" grunted Mr. Selby. "You boys can go."

It was on the tip of Tom's tongue to ask whether they were not, after all, to be taken before the Head. But such a query would have been dangerous in Mr. Railton's presence, and it would, moreover, have been a little like crowing over the defeated master.

Someone—the voice sounded like Grundy's—did begin to ask that question as soon as Mr. Railton had passed on. But the voice only began, so perhaps the voice did not belong to Grundy. It was not like the great George Alfred to be easily choked off.

Tom turned. He gave the word to march, and Mulvaney minor led, doing the goose-step. They filed off after him, and the scowl on Mr. Selby's face as he heard the measured tread of marching feet pass down the corridor was as black as a thunder-cloud. The master of the Third was still up in arms against the Cadet activities, and he perceived in that orderly retreat an additional smack at him.

Clear of the masters' quarters, Blake gave Tom a hearty slap on the back.

"It was great, Tommy! he cried. "I couldn't have begun to do it as well—not half as well. You were so jolly cool, and you went back on what we'd agreed, and brought us all out without a cut amongst us, though you know we should have ragged you bald-headed if we had been taken to the Head."

"Just luck, old scout," replied Tom. "Railton turned up at precisely the right moment, and that did it."

"It wasn't luck; it was leadership," said Blake. "Tell you what, this ought to count as a score to the Shell. I don't mind owning that I don't believe we've a chap in the Fourth who could have carried it off as Tommy did. Do you all agree?"

There was a ready chorus of assent from the other Fourth-Formers.

"I'll tell you what, then, Blake," said Tom. "Let us count even for points with last night's score for you, and cancel it. After all, we can't decently ask Wally and Frank Levison to adjudicate upon points in a matter in which their Formmaster was concerned. They're ready enough to buck against the old Hun as it is, and we mustn't encourage them."

"Right-ho!" said Blake cheerily. "I must ask Figgy, of course; but it's really only a matter of form. He will agree, I know."

The New House leader agreed quite readily, and so the Shell and Fourth started level again, and neither the numbering of heads in the Common-room, nor Tom's successful conduct of the joint case of the two Forms v. Mr. Selby, was inserted in the records of the Shell v. Fourth competition.

CHAPTER 10.
In Committee.

"GOOD-AFTERNOON, gentlemen!" said Lefevre, of the Fifth, entering Study No. 10, with Tom Merry and Talbot. He spoke to Wally and Frank, who were

already there, sitting at the table, and looking no end important.

It was likely that till now Lefevre had taken the whole thing as a joke, for he had not make the slightest objection to accepting two Third-Formers as his colleagues, as Tom had rather expected he would. But there was no silly pomposity about Lefevre, anyway, and he was not in the least likely to turn it up when he found that it was in earnest.

Blake and Figgins arrived together a minute later. The two Fourth-Form leaders and Tom and Talbot had been elected to form, with the three umpires, a committee for settling preliminaries. Grundy had grumbled at being left out in the cold; but he had admitted that next to him—at a long distance, of course—Talbot was the best man for the job. In fact, he said, he considered that he and Talbot should have had it. Tom Merry already possessed too many of the privileges of leadership, Grundy held.

Frank and Wally had risen and bowed politely to Lefevre. Frank had told Wally beforehand that that was what they ought to do when Lefevre came in and spoke to them; but Wally had replied that it all depended on whether what the chap said was civil. As it was civil, Wally had behaved civilly, though he confessed later that it had made him feel rather an ass.

"I'm not going to bow to Blake and Figgy, so you needn't think it!" he whispered in Frank's ear.

"No need," answered Levison minor. "They only grinned at us. But I thought Lefevre would be civil; he's that sort."

The Fifth-Former smiled as he took his seat. But he did not smile in derision. He saw that the juniors were in earnest, and was prepared to take his part seriously.

"I suppose you don't want too much of the board-meeting flummery?" he said. "It only means waste of time, and we're at war now, as you may know, and time's precious. I take it that you are fully empowered to arrange matters on behalf of your Forms, without referring back for the consent of the rest."

"That's so, Lefevre," replied Tom.

"Good! It all saves time and trouble. You've made up a list of events, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Blake. "But not a full list. We couldn't do that straight away, You see—— Oh, you explain, Tommy!"

Tom explained. This series of contests was not to be limited to games and athletics, he said. He did not quote pillow-fights or japes as examples of the other events that might be included; but he made Lefevre understand that the contest was to be as comprehensive as possible.

"Quite an original idea," said the Fifth-Former. "I see no objection to it, except on the score of counting points. We can settle now what points a win at footer or on the river shall carry, and what shall be given for the hundred or the quarter. But it won't be so easy to deal with events that are not on the programme. Do you see?"

"That's all right," Figgins said. "That's just where you and these two kids——"

Wally was on his feet in a moment.

"That ain't any sort of way to talk!" he said wrathfully. "If we're umpires we're not kids, and if we're kids we can't be proper umpires!"

"The objection seems to me a fair one," said Lefevre judicially. "My junior colleagues have a claim to be treated with respect while acting on this committee."

"Oh, all serene!" said Figgy. "It slipped out, you know. Besides, after all, they are ki—— Oh, dry up, Blake! I don't want your silly elbow in my ribs!"

"We shall want you three to settle what points anything like that may be worth," said Blake.

"After it's over?" asked Lefevre.

"That's the idea."

"Then there may be disputed claims as to whether the particular contest shall rank at all?" said the chairman of committee.

"Well, yes, there may. But if that happens you will have to settle the claim as well as the points," Tom answered.

"Has it struck you fellows that Messrs. Ratcliff and Selby are not precisely the most likely persons to give members of their Forms leave of absence three or four days a week on committee business?" asked Lefevre, smiling.

"Yes; has that struck you, Tom Merry?" asked D'Arcy minor, not smiling at all.

Wally and Frank both liked what Lefevre had said. It was truly polite, for he had spoken of them as though they were his equals. They were quite prepared to maintain that they were his equals on this committee; but they thought it decent of him to put it like that.

"Oh, I really don't think it will give you all that trouble," said Tom. "Most of the things will be easy enough to judge, with three such mighty brains judging them, you know."

"And it will help no end, you know," added Talbot. "A few of us have talked over the question of how to get the slackers in, and we think the only way is by stratagem."

"I don't quite follow you," said Lefevre.

Talbot explained the notion of scoring points against either Form for any member of it who failed to be brought up to the scratch for at least one event. The Fifth-Former said he thought it an excellent idea, but he foresaw some trouble with a few members of both Forms.

"We'll get round them without their knowing it," Tom said. "Take this as an instance. Scrope of the Shell and Chowle of the Fourth are both among the likely kickers. Suppose they can be persuaded to have on the gloves together? Suppose Blake and I, or Figgins and Talbot—we might add two or three more of each Form to those allowed to decide such matters—agree that their bout shall count for points? Then the chap who wins will score points for his Form without knowing he's doing it, and it will be for you three to say afterwards how many points the event's worth. See?"

The three umpires quite saw. The notion of setting Scrope and Chowle to do battle for their Forms unwittingly appealed more to Wally and Frank than it did to Lefevre; but the Fifth-Former said drily that, from what he knew of the slackers of the two Forms, there were too many unconscientious objectors among them to make an epidemic of bouts with the gloves likely in consequence of the strategic efforts of the rest.

Other business was done by the committee; in fact, they got on like a house on fire, as Figgy said. Lefevre was worked up to real keenness before they had finished, for he was himself an all-round athlete of considerable ability, and he was not insensible of the honour done him. As for Wally and Frank, they had been keen enough for the outset; and when they left the meeting together, and were out of hearing of their seniors, Wally said enthusiastically:

"It's a great wheeze, Franky! Of course, we don't crib other chaps' ideas; but after this bizney is over we'll have a blessed competition on our own!"

"But who with?" asked Frank doubtfully. "We could walk all over the Second. They ain't much better than babies in arms."

"Rats to the Second! We wouldn't be bothered walking over them. No, my son, we'll challenge the winners in this competition—that's what we'll do!"

CHAPTER 11.

Figgins Scores for the Fourth—Racke for the Shell.

"BUCK up, Fourth!"

"Mind you win, Figgy!"

"It's up to you, Tommy!"

There was quite a crowd on Little Side, where the first athletic event of the Form competition was about to be brought off.

It had been arranged that these events should be worked off singly, or in twos and threes, and that no attempt should be made to crowd them into a single afternoon. The first events on the programme was the hundred yards for fellows who had previously distinguished themselves by winning prizes in races at that distance. There was also to be a hundred yards race for those who had entered but never won anything; and there was talk of a third for such as had never entered a race at all. But at present that was only talk, for there were shy birds among those who had never tried.

Five from each Form had lined up now. Tom Merry, Talbot, Clifton Dane, Noble, and Jimson, of the New House, represented the Shell. The runners from the Fourth were Figgins, Blake, Redfern, Dick Brooke, the day-boy, and Julian.

"I wathah think Blake will win," said Arthur Augustus, standing close to Kildare, who, with Lefevre, held the tape.

"Rats! Figgy can lick Blake any day at the distance," said Kerr. "He can give me five yards, and I'd have a good chance with a start of two from Blake."

"Why did you not entah, Kerr? I considah you are bettah than Jimson."

"Jimmy wouldn't be pleased to hear it, Gussy! He reckons the hundred is his distance. It's not mine—Figgy can beat me every time in a sprint. Plenty more chances for me, and it's no good crowding the lists."

"I am vewy pleased to find that you are not a slackah, Kerr!"

"Thank you for nothing, old scout! By the way, what's this yarn about Racke and Crooke fetching old Selby back yesterday? It wasn't their fault that you weren't all caned, if there is any truth in it."

"I wegwet to say, Kerr, that it is quite twue. As to that I have the evidence of my minah an' Levison's young bwothah, who saw them fetch him back."

"Our giddy umpires, eh? Those kids don't half fancy their job, do they? But they're quite all right at it."

"Yaas, I think so. I am hopin' that it will have a sobahwin' effect upon Wally, who is weally too fwivolous. About Wacke, Kerr, I shall certainly give the fellow a piece of my mind!"

"Don't, Gussy! You might miss it, not having——"

"They're off!" cried Fatty Wynn, from behind Kerr.

The crack of the pistol which Baker, as starter, had fired told that to all before Fatty had finished.

Almost as one man the ten got off the mark. No one made a bad start.

But in the first second or two, though none could tell who would win, it could see who would not—nine were barred.

Jimson might think the hundred his distance; but he was out of his class among the present company. And Noble, Julian, and Brooke fell into the ruck. First place, or second, or third, would not fall to any one of these four to-day.

At fifty yards, however, the other six were so closely bunched that a blanket might almost have covered them. Redfern looked full of running; Tom Merry and Talbot were neck and neck with Figgy; Blake and Clifton Dane were but a foot or two behind the leaders.

"Ah!"

There came a sharp exclamation from the watching crowd. Dane had somehow stumbled and fallen. And as he fell he had thrown himself sideways that he might not hamper Blake.

Then, for one brief second, Blake showed ahead of all the rest. He shot forward. The others seemed to fall back.

"Hooway! Come on, Blake!" yelled Gussy.

"Oh, good, Blake! Come on! Come on, Figgy!" yelled Kerr.

"Buck up, Tommy!" sounded Lowther's voice.

Tom Merry shot to the front, passing Blake. But Figgins was hard at the heels of Tom, and Talbot and Redfern were only just behind Figgins.

With but the last ten yards left to go, the five were still all in the race. Tom and Figgins and Blake were neck and neck, the other two just behind them. It would need a good effort to give victory to Talbot or Redfern; but the merest chance might decide among the other three.

So, at least, it seemed. But it was no chance that gave victory, after all. It was that last desperate dash of Figgy's. A spurt, one could not call it, for there can hardly be a spurt in a race run all through at top speed. But in the last five yards Figgy hurled himself at the tape, like a stone from a catapault, and won by a clear yard, with Tom Merry second, only inches ahead of Blake.

Then did the Fourth fairly let themselves go. No win could have been more popular with the Form, not even Blake's, for most had tipped Figgy, and it is pleasant to be able to pose in the prophetic role.

"Fourth for ever! Bravo, Figgins!" roared Kerr and Owen and Lawrence, Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, and a score more, whose lungs seemed of leather.

Blake came in for cheers, too. Figgins' win gave the Fourth seven points. Blake's third place was worth another two. Tom scored four for the Shell by coming in second. Seven, four, and two had been the points settled by the committee for all the Class A footraces.

The crowd soon dispersed. The Fourth were full of elation; but the Shell saw no reason to be depressed.

Arthur Augustus had a visit to pay to the tuckshop. It was a fruitless visit, for, after waiting some time before he could attract the attention of Dame Taggles, he had to come away without anything. He was sorry, for he had desired to celebrate the victory of the Fourth by providing something extra for tea in No. 6. But he was too patriotic to grouse.

A sudden gleam came into his eyes as he saw three fellows going out of gates. He glanced round, in the hope of seeing some of his chums on hand. But Trimble was the only fellow visible in the quad.

Without hesitation, Gussy started after the trio, for they were Racke, Crooke, and Mellish, and to two of them Arthur Augustus had a word in season that simply demanded to be spoken. He caught them up in Rylcombe Lane.

"Hallo! Here's Beau Brummel!" sneered Racke, as he drew alongside.

"I wish to speak to you, Wacke, an' to you, also, Cwooke. To Mellish I have nothing to say!"

"Thanks be!" said Mellish, with a grin. "Shall I turn back?"

"No. D'Arcy had better, though, if he has any regard for his own skin!" snapped Racke.

"Oh, weally, Wacke! If you suppose for one solitawy moment that I have any feah of anythin' you an' these othah wottahs can do, you are labouhwin' undah a vewy gwoss misappwehension!"

"You'll be labourin' in the dashed ditch if you're not careful!" said Racke viciously.

"Wats! I wish to say to you, Wacke, an' to you, Cwooke, that you behaved like uttah cads in goin' aftah Mr. Selby yestahday! As it happened, your base designs failed uttahly, an' we scored. But no one but an uttahly tweachewous wascal——"

"Oh, go for him!" howled Racke.

They were three to one. No one else was near. All of them had had to submit to tongue-lashings from D'Arcy in the past, and all of them cherished resentment against the swell of the Fourth. Racke's rancour was greater than Crooke's, and Crooke's, in turn, was greater than that of Mellish. But all were of one mind, and such a chance as this might be long before it came again.

So they went for Gussy. He hit out; but he could not long withstand the onslaught of the three. Crooke went down, his nose running red. But Gussy was down, too, and Racke was pommelling him fiercely, while Mellish sat on his legs.

"My hat! Oh, the rotters!"

It was Jack Blake who exclaimed. He had just come round the corner with three companions—Tom Merry, George Herries, and Herries' bulldog, Towser.

"Oh, go for them, Towser!" yelled Herries, in great wrath.

The sight of Gussy on his back in the road, the victim of those three cowardly black sheep, was too much for the patience of George Herries.

Racke and Mellish scrambled up, and bolted for all they were worth. Crooke rolled into the ditch, groaning dismally.

Towser gave one sniff at the prostrate Gussy, then went in pursuit of Racke and Mellish.

"Oh, call him back, Hewwies!" cried Gussy. "I feah that he will do those wottahs some sewious damage!"

"Hope he does!" snapped Herries. "You can call him back if you like; I sha'n't. And he jolly well won't take any notice of you!"

Herries knew that Towser was not likely to do the two any serious damage. But Gussy did not know that. And Racke and Mellish did not know it. They were in mortal fear. It did not occur to them that a bulldog is not a very speedy animal, and that even they, poor runners as they were, might hope to outdistance Towser.

Nor did they look such poor runners at that moment. They made the pace hot. They dared not even turn their heads to see how near Towser was. For all they knew he might have stopped. They were taking no chances.

"Great Christopher Columbus! Who'd have thought that these two could lick it like that?" said Blake, in wonder.

Tom caught him by the arm.

"Here's my chance!" said the captain of the Shell. "I claim this as an event in the contest—Racke v. Mellish; Shell v. Fourth—and the chap leading at the next corner wins points for his Form!"

"Right-ho! I agree, Tommy!" said Blake readily. "You've seized your chance. You may never get Racke in again. Oh, by Jove, old Towser's turning it up!"

"But Wacke and Mellish aren't!" cried Gussy, on his feet again, rather rumpled and dusty. "Go it, Mellish! Fourth wins again!"

"No; Shell wins!" roared Tom, as Racke shot clear ahead of Mellish. "He's round the corner, and Mellish is still in sight!"

But even as he spoke Mellish also rounded the bend.

Towser came waddling back with his pink tongue hanging out. He looked up in his master's face for approval.

"It's all right, old man!" said Herries, stooping to pat him. "You aren't to blame for losing the Fourth ten points on Racke, for you never would have got that rotter in, Tommy, if you'd missed this chance!"

"And points on top of that for his win," added Blake. "Still it was a fair thing, and we've settled Mellish for our share of it. He won't let us down ten points now, however much he'd like to!"

They turned away, forgetting Crooke, who still lay in the ditch. Crooke did not mind being forgotten. It was safest so.

He had news for his dear pal Racke. Racke had sworn that neither by persuasion nor by guile should Tom Merry wangle him into the series of contests. If his standing out cost his Form points, so much the better.

And now, with the competition only just started, Racke had won points for the Shell. Crooke grinned sardonically as he thought of how Racke would receive the news.

"But the crafty bounders won't get me in!" muttered Crooke.

That, however, remained to be seen. The competition was but just begun, and much was to happen before it ended.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"SHELL v. FOURTH!" by Martin Clifford.)

NOTICES.

Correspondence Wanted.

By Miss Muriel V. Smith, 7, Delamere Road, Wimbledon—with girl readers in Inverness-shire, Edinburgh, Hobart, Australia, New Zealand, and America.

By L. Cohen, 56, Lister Street, Hull—with boy reader near Hull interested in stamp-collecting.

By Leslie Graham, c/o Miss Mountain, Padget's Terrace, York Street, Wakefield—with boy readers, 17-18, near Wakefield.

By Allan MacDonald, 29, High Street, Robertson's Buildings, Oban—with boy readers in Australia and Canada.

By Eric Hogg, 66, Sydney Road, Brunswick, Melbourne, Australia—with boy readers, 16-18, in the United Kingdom.

By W. Caw, 535, Katherine Road, Forest Gate, London, E. 7—with boy readers, 14-15, in England.

By M. Marshall, 47, Charles Street, Kilsyth, Stirling—with French boy—object mutual improvement in languages.

By Harry Kellett, 11, Raymond Street, Timaru, New Zealand—with boy reader, 16-17, anywhere in British Empire.

THE TWINS FROM TASMANIA.

FOR NEW READERS.

The twins are Philip Derwent, of Highcliffe, and his sister Philippa, of Cliff House. They have a cockatoo, named Cocky, which has been until recently with Flip (Philip) at Highcliffe, but is now at Cliff House. Flip has made an enemy of Gadsby, who is plotting against him with Vavasour. His best chums, Merton and Tunstall, are away from the school for a time, owing to a serious accident to one of Merton's eyes in a fight with Ponsonby. In their absence Flip gets too friendly with Pon and the rest of the nuts, and, without any real taste for it at the outset, takes to gambling. He is made reckless by failing to hear from his chums, who seem to have thrown him over. As a matter of fact, Gadsby and Vavasour have intercepted and kept back a letter from Tunstall to him. There is also a coolness between Flip and his sister; the Cliff House girls consider that Flip did not back up Merton staunchly. They are gated owing to an anonymous letter, and thus no full explanation is possible between the twins. Flip goes with the nuts to a gambling den at Courtfield, quarrels with Pon, and is knocked senseless just as the warning "Police!" is heard. Flip comes to himself in a cellar, bound hand and foot. He is let out, however.

Miss Gittins Takes a Hand.

"IF I was you," said Miss Gittins, "I'd just make a clean breast of it, whatever it was, an' face the music. Cough it up, old chap. You'll feel a heap better, and I can't see that you're likely to catch it hotter."

She was not a refined girl; but Flip felt more and more certain that she was a really good sort. Her blue eyes had a way of looking one straight in the face; and when she spoke seriously, as she did now, she was much more likeable than when she giggled and flirted with Vavasour.

But Flip did not know very much about the flirtation. He did know, however, and he remembered now, that this was the fair damsel who had set Vav and Billy Bunter by the ears.

"It isn't quite so simple as you think," he said.

"The more mixed-up it is the better you'll find it pay to tell the truth an' shame the—oh, never mind that! I know. I did start tellin' lies once on a time, when I was a kid at school. It looked the easiest way out. Well, it wasn't! Got contradicting myself, you know, old chap, an' before I rightly knew where I was I had tangled myself up to that extent that the only thing to do was to blurt out the truth, own myself a nasty little liar, and take the consequences. I took them. I've told the truth since then, you bet!"

"I'm not going to tell lies," said Flip quietly. "But to tell the whole truth would drag other fellows in, so that can't be done."

"Was it anything to do with the business next door?" asked Miss Gittins, lowering her voice.

"What do you know about that?"

"A jolly sight more than they think I do! I'm not giving it away, but I shall be glad when someone else does, I can tell you. An' you went there to gamble? Naughty—naughty!"

Flip could not help grinning.

"Don't you laugh at me!" said Miss Gittins sharply. "You ought to have more sense. Some day the police will——"

"But the police did, last night! At least, your uncle said they did; and there was certainly a warning."

"My uncle's a liar, then, an' the warning was a do! I should have known all right if there had been a raid. But you ought to know. Didn't you see the bluebottles?"

"No. But someone slogged me on the napper just as the warning was given."

"My eye! This is interesting—like a tale in a book! You've got enemies, young feller! Look here, what are you going to do? About the school, I mean."

"I thought of hanging round till I could see one of the fellows, and find out how the land lay."

"Best go back straight away!"

Flip shook his head.

"Well, if you won't do that, perhaps I can help you. Do you trust me?"

Flip had not a moment's hesitation in answering the abrupt query.

"Of course I do!" he said.

"Right-ho! Then if you'll tell me a bit more I can find things out at Highcliffe for you, I think. I expect I shall see that puppy of a Vavasour when I go that way to deliver the letters!"

For a moment Flip hesitated.

"It's asking you to do rather a lot," he said doubtfully.

"You didn't ask me, did you? I'm willing, and I'll do it!"

Gadsby Guesses Right.

"I'LL come along, Vav."

It was Gadsby who made that offer. He and Vavasour stood at the gates of Highcliffe after morning classes on the day following that of the Courtfield expedition.

Gadsby had been standing there for some minutes. Vavasour had only just come up. He had arrived at the gates in a hurry, but on seeing Gadsby had feigned to have no object in view but to lounge there and gaze down the sunny road.

But Gadsby had stuck, and finally Vav had been obliged to give up his pretence of having nothing particular in hand. He moved off with a muttered:

"So-long, Gaddy!"

Then it was that Gadsby made his offer.

"Look here, Gaddy, I don't want your company!"

Not often did Adolphus Theodore Vavasour speak out as plainly as that.

Gadsby stared at him.

"I'm dashed if that's very civil!" he said.

"Oh, well, it's too thick, absolutely! You were on to it that I'd an appointment to keep, though I didn't say so. It was pretty plain."

"Goin' to meet the pretty plain post-girl—eh?" sneered Gadsby

"That's no dashed bizney of yours!"

Vav was showing quite unusual spirit.

Gadsby shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, go along, Romeo!" he said. "But be careful what you say to Juliet—she's a sister or somethin' of that cad Chiker, ain't she?"

"Niece," replied Vavasour. "Not that I can see that matters a scrap."

"Too wooden-headed!" gibed Gadsby.

Vav's intelligence was not quite of the highest order. But the real reason why he could not guess how much anything he might say to Miss Gittins mattered was his lack of full knowledge of Gadsby's plot. He knew vaguely that Gadsby had been up to something; he might guess that Chiker had had a hand in it, though it is not certain that he did; but he was far from realising how deep in it all his chum was.

He went off in dudgeon. But his face brightened as soon as he turned the corner of the road which was visible from the Highcliffe gates, and saw Miss Gittins striding along with the mail-bag over her shoulder.

Adolphus Theodore had not much cause to flatter himself yet as to the impression he had made upon the post-girl. She accepted his chocolates, and boxed his ears playfully when he grew too demonstratively affectionate. But she might have gone as far as that with Bunter, though it is likely that Bunter's fat ears might have been boxed more forcibly.

In point of fact, Miss Gittins did not care two straws about Vav. She liked flattery and chocolates, but was not keen on spooning. To Flip she had taken a liking at once. His frankness and coolness appealed to her. Vavasour would have been all a-twitter with nervousness and venomous with anger after a night's imprisonment, she was sure. This other fellow had taken it coolly. Of course, he had not liked it; but he had not raved, and it was plain that he had not been frightened.

So the fair Gwendoline was ready to do her best for Flip. But it was rather a difficult task she had undertaken, as she discovered when she started on it.

Gadsby stared hard up the road after Vav had gone. But he was not looking at anything he saw. He was thinking.

This was not a pleasant time for Gadsby. He would have liked to go to sleep, and stay asleep till the whole affair lapsed into the past.

There were hopes of success. He had learned from Mr. Mobbs that, on the advice of the master of the Fourth, Dr. Voysey, the Head of Highcliffe, had not instituted any search for the missing juninor. The Head, as usual, was feeling rather unwell; he was one of those people who never do feel well—especially when anything troublesome has to be faced.

Mr. Mobbs, who could always persuade himself that anyone he disliked was a vicious scoundrel, had expressed his conviction that Derwent had got into trouble and run away. He would return, Mr. Mobbs was sure. The Head said grimly that if he returned he would not stay long, and Mr. Mobbs went off in high feather.

That suited Gadsby, of course. It was in order to get Flip into trouble that could hardly have any other outcome but expulsion—if he came back—that Gadsby had bribed Chiker to make a prisoner of him.

Gadsby did not think he would come back. Pon felt sure that if he did he would not give them away.

So there were hopes of success. Indeed, everything seemed to be working out quite nicely for Gadsby.

But he felt very nervous; and the thought of what Vav might possibly learn from the post-girl—or she from him—was worrying him just now.

He came to a sudden resolution. Within a couple of minutes of Vavasour's departure Gadsby followed.

But he did not go by the road. He cut along by the hedges, keeping in cover. By the time that the first chaffing talk had been exchanged between Adolphus Theodore and the fair Gwendoline he was crouching in the shelter of a hedge, near enough to hear every word they spoke.

"Young monkeys like you ought to be well slapped and put to bed at eight o'clock, and you would be if your masters had any sense!"

Those were the first words that reached Gadsby's ears. He breathed more freely when he heard them. It hardly seemed likely that anything which could matter much had gone before them.

"Oh, really, Gwennie! That's too strong, absolutely!" replied Vav, with a sickly grin.

"Silly kids like you going to a low gambling place!" said the girl, in huge contempt. And one of you gone and got into a rare mess over it, too! I never heard the like of it in all my puff!"

"Well, a fellow must have a little amusement, y'know, dear gal," smirked the foolish Vav.

"Call that amusement? I call it rot! Is it true that one of your pals is missing?"

Gadsby set his lips as he heard that. Would Vav be ass enough to tell this girl all? She already knew something, it was evident. He had guessed right about that.

But Vavasour's natural timidity helped him to be prudent.

"Oh, begad, we're not talkin' about that, y'know. Nothin's been said outside the school yet at all. He's sure to turn up again."

"And what's going to happen to him if he does?" asked Miss Gittins sharply.

Vav shook his head sadly.

"It's all U P with him!" he said. "He'll get the boot, sure as eggs are eggs. Rough on the chap, I must say. I'm sorry, because, as you say, he was a pal of ours, an' if I could help him I would. That's more than some of his old pals would after the way he's behaved."

"And the rest of you—are you going to get off scot-free?"

"We weren't caught, dear gal. We got back all right, y'know."

"And left him in the lurch? Oh, you are cowards! I don't think you will ever catch

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me speaking to you again, Mr. Vavasour! As for your chocolates, you may find someone else to give them to—I don't want any more of them!"

She threw down the box Vav had brought her that morning, and stamped on it. There was good stuff in Miss Gwendoline, and she was very honestly indignant. The tears stood in her blue eyes, and her face was scarlet.

Vav could not understand. But the currish element in his nature was quick to assert itself.

"I dare say I can do that easily enough, by gad!" he said. "An' as for speakin' to you again, I ain't at all sure that I want to. It's dashed cheek of you to think you can tongue-lash me!"

"Oh, go!" cried the girl, stamping her foot again. "You cad—you coward!"

Vavasour slunk off, away from the school. The girl went on towards it. Within half a minute she heard footsteps behind her.

She turned her head away as the fellow in the rear drew alongside. She did not expect him to speak to her, and certainly did not want him to.

"Excuse me!" said Gadsby politely. "I happened to overhear what you said to Vavasour just now—part of it at least."

Miss Gittins tossed her head.

"Listening!" she said scornfully. "If you Highcliffe boys ain't a nice lot!"

"It was quite by accident," answered Gadsby smoothly. "Matter of fact, I was settin' a rabbit-snare in the hedge at the moment."

"Poachers, too!" exclaimed the girl. "Well, I never did!"

"I don't see why you shouldn't start if you feel like it," returned Gadsby. "Poachin' ain't a crime, y'know."

"If you're asking me to come poaching with you——"

"Well, it would be a pleasure an' an honour," said Gadsby. "But I wasn't. Look here, straight now, do you know anythin' about where my pal Derwent is?"

"Your pal, is he? Vavasour called him his. I think nothing at all of pals of his sort, though."

"I'm not that sort."

"What's your name?"

There was a risk, and Gadsby took it. She might already know it, and the question might be a test one, to see if he were to be trusted. She would know it if he gave it, he was sure. If he gave another, she might know that, and know its owner. But Gadsby thought that Smithson was a very unlikely fellow to have been running after the post-girl, and a very likely one for Flip to believe in as being well-disposed to him, in spite of all that had happened—in case this girl were in communication with Flip—and he risked it.

"Smithson," he answered. "You've delivered letters for me before now, of course. I haven't seen a lot of Derwent lately. He was in with a crowd that didn't suit me. But I always liked the chap, and I'm sorry he's come a cropper."

The girl looked at him keenly.

"Is the cropper a very bad one?" she asked.

Gadsby shook his head in sad solemnity.

"It could hardly be worse," he answered. "It's no joke for a chap to stay away like this. Safe to be the sack for him if he comes back. But if I were in his shoes I should do a bunk."

"Suppose he couldn't help staying away? Suppose someone had—had collared him and shut him up?"

"Sounds an awfully thin yarn," replied Gadsby, shaking his head again. "But if it were true, and he could prove it—well, it would be a police bizney. Derwent might be cleared, though he'd have a lot to explain. But it would be warm for the merchant who kidnapped him. A dose of prison, for a dead cert!"

The girl's lips trembled. She had no love for her brutal uncle, but she hated the thought of getting him into trouble.

"And if he did come back, and cleared that up," Gadsby went on, "he'd find that he couldn't stick it. The fellows are frightfully down on him for what he did to Pon. He will find that most of them believe the tale Gadsby and Vavasour have been telling—that he knocked Pon senseless, and then kicked him. I don't myself; but there are only two or three of us who don't. I'm afraid that there will be a heap of trouble for poor old Derwent to face if he should come back. As far as I can make out, he can't confess without letting on about the other three. They won't tell us a word about where they were, but we have our suspicions. An' if he does drag them in, after maulin' old Pon like that—well, sneak's the name that will stick to him if he stays on! He won't stay on, though. All four of them will get the boot!"

"My word! It sounds an awful tangle!" said Miss Gittins, all her gaiety quenched. "And I don't believe even this is the whole yarn. I'm pretty sure there's more behind."

"May very well be!" Gadsby said. "They're a deep lot, the gang Derwent had got so pally with. Shall you see him?"

"What makes you think I shall see him?" snapped Miss Gittins.

"Oh, I don't know! But you seemed to have an idea where he was. Look here, you tell him from me, Smithson, that things are in an awful muddle. I dare say he can straighten them out a bit if he chooses to come back and tell his yarn. But he'll get the sack in any case, and three more will get it, too. Not that he need mind that, perhaps."

It was a very bold game that Gadsby was playing. But it succeeded. He had guessed right. And the girl, believing him to be Smithson, had no reason for doubting his story. If a suspicion crossed her mind it was soon dismissed. Gadsby looked like one of the nuts; but he had been very careful to avoid the characteristic nutty speech after the first moment or two. Smithson did not drop his "g's," or constantly use "dashed" and "by gad!" He had played up to the part of Smithson.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," Miss Gittins said. "I don't know whether any of you Highcliffe boys are to be trusted any farther than you could throw an elephant by the tail!"

"I don't care whether you tell me anything or not," Gadsby answered meekly. "But if you get a chance to let old Derwent know how matters really stand, it will be doing him a good turn. I'll hop off now. There would be a row if I was seen walking with you, you know."

And he went. Miss Gittins, with a very troubled face, walked slowly on to the Highcliffe gates.

The Wrong Turning.

"WELL, did you find out anything?" asked Flip.

He had not stayed on to enjoy the doubtful hospitality of Mr. Chiker, of course. One night of that had been quite enough.

When Mr. Chiker came back from his work on munitions he would find the bird flown. It was no certainty, however, that the bird's flight would greatly distress Mr. Chiker. He might even regard it as quite an easy way out of what had proved an awkward situation. For he believed that he held Gadsby in the hollow of his hand in any case.

It was a fine, bright day, though the season was winter, and Flip found it no great hardship to spend an hour or two waiting for Miss Gittins in a spinney off the road between Courtfield and Highcliffe.

But a dozen times during that period of waiting he came to the conclusion that the one straight and manly way was to go to Highcliffe and face the music. Then doubts would assail him again. It would mean one of two things. He must refuse to explain at all, or he must tell everything. To go back without an explanation to offer seemed merely silly. To tell everything meant to drag in the three fellows who had been with him. And that he felt he could not do.

He began to consider what resources he had in the event of making up his mind to a bolt.

There ought to have been lots of silver in his pockets. There was only a solitary shilling. Chiker and his confederates must have overlooked that.

His bike was in the cloak-room at Courtfield station. To get that would be a big help. But if he was being hunted for the station people would have been warned about him. If he went there he risked capture.

He had not made up his mind to go to his aunt. It was by no means certain that she would sympathise with him. When she knew the whole story, indeed, it was tolerably certain she would not. But he had no definite notion where else he could go, or what he could do.

In fact, he had no definite notion about anything—save for the one determination that he would not drag those three in. They might deserve nothing better at his hands. That did not matter. He would not sneak!

Miss Gittins found him with his mind still in a shifting state. But he greeted her cheerily enough. In his blunt question there was a genuine ring of good-comradeship that the girl liked.

"I found out a good deal," she answered. "I don't know that any of it will please you much, though."

"What did Vavasour say?"

"It wasn't him. He never got the chance to say a lot, because I started in jolly soon to tell him what I thought of him. We sha'n't be on speaking terms after that, I reckon."

"Poor old Vav!" said Flip, with the ghost of a grin.

"You needn't pity him!" sniffed Miss Gittins. "He's a rank outsider, with the pluck of a mouse and the heart of a rabbit!"

"Well, I won't say you're far wrong there. But who told you anything if Vav didn't?"

"Chap named Smithson."

"Smithson—eh? Well, he'd tell you a straight yarn. Didn't know you knew him."

"I didn't know him," said the girl. "He spoke to me, having heard by accident something I said to that puppy Vavasour."

"What did he tell you?"

"Let me try to remember it all properly, because you're in a nasty mess, and you'd better know exactly how things stand. Here goes, then!"

Miss Gittins evidently had a pretty good memory. Not much that Gadsby, posing as Smithson, had told her failed to reach Flip.

It made him look still more serious. There was just one mistake Gadsby had made. The story that Highcliffe generally believed that Flip had dealt unfairly by Pon roused the fugitive's intense indignation. It was almost enough to send him back post-haste to deny it, at any cost.

But when he came to think it over that hardly seemed worth while. What did it matter what lies were told about him? He had no chum left at Highcliffe. He had missed his chance of making friends with the fellows of his own sort; and Merton and Tunstall had gone. Smithson, and a few more, might still have a half-hearted belief in him, but they did not count for much. And he could not make things clear without telling the whole story.

"You've been jolly decent to me!" he said warmly, when the girl had finished her narrative. "And you've got your head screwed on the right way; there's no possible doubt about that. I'm ever so much obliged for what you've done!"

"That was nothing," answered the girl. "I'd do more than that!"

"Well, do, then! Give me your advice now. What had I better do?"

The fair Gwendoline knitted her brows. She felt her responsibility, and was anxious to advise for the best.

"Is there any chance that you may get off if you go back?" she asked.

"Can't see any," replied Flip.

"What shall you do if you don't go back?"

"Hanged if I know!"

"Do you mind much about being expelled? That's what you call it, isn't it?"

"I mind a good deal. But it's too late to think about that now."

"If you were expelled you'd be sent back home. Why not go back home now and tell them all about it?"

"Rather difficult. My home is thousands of miles away, and I've only an aunt in England. She's not a bad sort, but I don't reckon her place is home. And I guess she wouldn't welcome me like this."

"I'd try her, if I were you."

"Well, I may."

"Not that you need, if you don't feel like it. There are plenty of jobs you could get these days."

"Do you think so? By Jupiter, that's an idea! Really, I hadn't thought of that!"

"If you'd done a bit more thinking," said the girl drily, "you wouldn't have got yourself into this silly mess!"

"I dare say that's true," Flip replied. "But I'm in it."

"Look here, I can't advise you properly—I can't! I've tried to put out of my head altogether about Bert Chiker, but it won't be driven out. I don't know that I care about him, though I don't want to see him in trouble; but everybody knows he's my uncle, and I couldn't stand it if he had to go to the jug."

"But why should he have to go?" asked Flip. "Of course, I don't believe his yarn about tying me up for my own good; but ——"

"He'd have to go if you told the whole story, for sure."

"I'm not going to tell it—simply can't, you know. It wouldn't help me, and it would mean big trouble for other chaps besides that pleasant uncle of yours. No, I've made up my mind now. I'll clear out, and try to

get a job somewhere—not too near here, of course."

"Got any money?" asked Miss Gittins.

"A bob."

"My eye! A bob! How much had you when you went to that place?"

"Three or four quid, I suppose."

"And you lost all that?"

"No. I won!"

The girl stared at him in surprise.

"But——" she began.

"No good going into that. Someone rifled my pockets in the dark, I reckon.

"I've got a pound note in my pocket. Take that!"

"Can't be did!" answered Flip.

"It's got to be! You can't kid me that you haven't any idea who bagged your chink. I know! And you needn't mind taking the quid. I'll make him shell out that!"

She looked no end determined, and Flip believed her.

"He's rather a brute, though," he said doubtfully. "Suppose——"

"Suppose nothin'! He knows me too well to get trying any of his rough games with me. I'll get that quid from him all serene. Take it!"

She forced the note into Flip's hand.

"Give me your address," he said, "and as soon as I've made enough I'll pay you back—in case you don't get it."

"I shall get it. But you can have my address; and I shall be glad to hear how you're getting on. You're the right sort—a girl could feel that you were a good pal without any nonsense."

"You've been a jolly good pal to me!" Flip said gratefully. "I'll write as soon as ever I can."

He took down the address the girl gave. Then she held out her hand.

"Ta-ta, and best of luck!" she said, speaking far more lightly than she felt. "I shouldn't show myself on the high-roads in daylight yet if I were you. You've got no cap, but anyone could see that you're a schoolboy. And I expect there will be a hue an' cry after you."

"I'll be careful. Good-bye, and thanks ever so much!"

Just a second the girl lingered after that. She did not expect ever to see Flip again, and she would have liked him to kiss her just once. But, though he saw her trembling lips and the tears in her eyes, he did not think of that—till she held up her face to him.

Then he did kiss her—as he might have kissed Flap, only more awkwardly.

"Don't you worry," he said. "I shall be all right."

Then she went.

She wondered whether Flip was doing the right thing. She did not understand the way things were done at such a school as Highcliffe. He did, and he ought to be able to judge. And he was so plucky and cheery, in spite of the load of trouble upon him, that she felt sure he must win through all right in the long run. Yet she was worried.

As for Flip, having quite made up his mind, he found himself much lighter-hearted. He must see Flap before he went, and explain things to her. After that he would tramp forty or fifty miles, and try for a job.

He had taken the wrong turning. At any cost he should have gone back to Highcliffe. But he did not realise that yet. It was possible that he might never fully realise it.

For that resolution of his, mistaken and wrong as it was, was yet to be in the end the means of saving a weaker and less courageous fellow from disaster.

Flip stayed in the spinney till the short winter day had come to its end, and he felt it safe to move under a cover of darkness.

Then he made his way towards Cliff House. He had no definite plan for contriving an interview with Flap. He trusted to luck. Except that he was hungry, and must wait until he got farther away from Highcliffe before he could risk buying any food, time was of no great consequence.

It was very dark, but as he drew near the girls' school he became conscious that someone was before him on the road—someone who moved in an uncertain, nervous way that suggested he wanted to avoid observation.

Flip quickened his steps. The fellow in front began to run. Flip ran, too. Some instinct seemed to tell him that he must find out who this was—that much hung upon his finding out.

A gasping cry sounded as the fellow in front stumbled and fell. He could not regain his feet before Flip had reached him. But he struggled madly as the Highcliffe junior tried to help him up.

"Leave me alone!" he snarled.

"My hat!" cried Flip. "If it isn't Hazel!"

(To be continued next week.)

Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"SHELL v. FOURTH!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next week's story tells more about the great contest, the beginning of which has been told of this week.

You will read how the stalwarts of the Shell and Fourth struggled against one another in friendly competition, and how the slackers made vows to keep out, and with how much success their efforts met!

Blake's notion of bringing in everybody in both Forms gives an added zest to what would be exciting enough in any case; and the stratagems employed by the leaders of the rival Forms to rope in the lazy and the unwilling will provide good reading.

Racke, who has already figured as winning points for the Shell, though without knowing that he was doing so, strives for all he is worth to keep Crooke and Clampe and Scrope out of it.

The jape business comes in, too; and the Fourth are first to score in this way.

I think you will all like these stories. The sort of rivalry that has no ill-feeling in it, yet is very real and very keen, appeals to the instincts of every healthy, manly boy.

THE EDITOR WANTS BACK NUMBERS.

I am much obliged to the score or so of readers who sent me copies of No. 520 of the GEM; but I did not want that number, and I fear that they read the paragraph in my Chat very carelessly. It began thus: "A paragraph appearing in No. 520——" There was surely no suggestion here that it was No. 520 that I needed; and quite certainly there was no such suggestion in what followed. I have not room for a lecture, but really it would be a good thing if the rising generation would read with their brains as well as their eyes.

The numbers I want are these: 282 to 307 of the GEM, and also 125 to 151. I also want Nos. 204 to 229 of the "Magnet." I shall be glad to hear from readers who have any of these in good condition for sale.

Your Editor

Cadet Notes.

OUT of the hundreds of readers of the GEM Library who have responded to the invitation to apply for particulars of their local Cadet Corps, everyone has had a reply to his inquiry by now, and a large number have joined up. We receive many appreciative letters about this, both from the lads themselves and from the officers of the corps to whom we have referred them. The following is a sample of the latter:

"The Hon. Sec., Cadet Department.

"Your letter of the 21st instant to the lad ——, with introduction to the colonel of our battalion, has been passed on to me as the commanding officer of the local unit.

"Kindly accept my best thanks. I have enrolled the lad, and feel sure he will be a credit to my company as he is a likely lad."

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Readers who have not yet applied should note this, and send in their applications to the Central Association of Volunteer Regiments, Judges' Quadrangle, Royal Courts of Justice, Strand, London, W.C. 2.

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A great many of our readers who respond to this invitation want to take steps either to get into the Royal Flying Corps or to obtain a commission in the Regular Forces eventually. To all of these the answer is that a year in a good Cadet Corps will certainly improve their chances of getting what they want later on, when the time comes to join the Army. With regard to the Royal Flying Corps, it is necessary that candidates should be physically fit in every respect, and they must also possess certain other qualifications. We will do our best to answer any inquiries on this subject if sent to the Central Association of Volunteer Regiments Headquarters, as noted above.

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We have mentioned before in these notes the very large and successful Junior Training Corps connected with the Leicester Volunteers. Here is a story which was told the other night by Captain Crumbie, the adjutant of the corps, to illustrate the kind of feeling existing between Major Barlow, the commanding officer, and the boys of the corps. One evening, after drill, as he and the commandant were leaving the hall, a youngster came up to them, and said: "Can I speak to you, Mr. Barlow?" "Certainly, my lad!" replied the commandant encouragingly. "Well, sir, I think you gave that there order wrong!" observed the boy, with all the audacity of youth. A spirited argument ensued, in which the commandant had all his work cut out to hold his own. "I do not know much about drill," confessed Captain Crumbie, "and I don't know which was right; but I think it was the boy."

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The annual social evening of the Southfields Company of the South-West London Cadet Battalion was held on a recent Saturday evening, when there was a large gathering of members and their friends, together with members of the other companies in the battalion. A splendid programme of games, songs, sketches, etc., was provided and highly appreciated by the large number of boys who were present. During an interval refreshments were handed round, and later on there were the usual votes of thanks and short speeches. The company is flourishing, and recruits are coming in freely; and our readers in the South-West quarter of London would do well to get into touch with such a live and active corps.

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The Earl of Scarbrough, Director-General of Territorial and Volunteer Forces, opened a three days' fair at Ilford Town Hall recently in aid of the funds of the 3rd Cadet Battalion of the Essex Regiment. The Duke of Connaught had sent a letter of regret at his inability to attend, and wished the undertaking every success. Lord Scarbrough congratulated the County of Essex upon the success of its Cadet movement, and said he would like to see a scheme making it essential for every boy to undergo Cadet training. After the war we should in future require a higher standard of citizenship, physically and educationally, from our lads. Our readers residing in Ilford ought to take these words to heart and rally to the support of the efforts being made to increase the strength of the Ilford Battalion.

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The Cadet Section of the Malton Volunteer Battalion, which has grown so quickly since it was started a few months ago, spent a very enjoyable social evening with their friends at the headquarters recently. The commanding officer, 2nd Lieutenant S. Hilton, and Mrs. Hilton were the hosts of the evening, and there was a capital musical programme and games, etc., and refreshments were provided. The boys had a jolly good time. There is still room for more recruits.

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We are pleased to notice that at a recent inspection of the Sussex Volunteers at Brighton, General the Earl of Albemarle, K.C.V.O., C.B., who was the inspecting officer, paid special attention to the newly-formed Cadet Company. The lads are not yet in uniform, but they possess rifles, and made a smart appearance on parade.