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THE FINAL EVENT!

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

THE WINNER OF THE MARATHON!

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THE FINAL EVENT!

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

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Making Sure of a Finish!

"THAT'S the dodge," said Tom Merry. "You two think out a scheme—see? Manners is the best chap in the Shell at maths, and you fellows in the Fourth reckon Kerr is your top-notcher in that department. So if those two can't do it, nobody can. I should say."

"Hear, hear!" chorused Figgins and Fatty Wynn, who had come over with Kerr and Redfern and half a dozen more New House juniors to share in the discussion which was taking place in the Common-room of the School House.

"Weally, Figgy—weally, Tom Mewwy—I simply wefuse to admit the supewiowity of Kerr in the mattah of mathematics! I——"

"D'Arcy is the genius who knows how many blue beans make five, by gad, an' don't you forget it!" drawled Ralph Reckness Cardew, who seldom lost an opportunity of chipping his noble kinsman.

"Wats to you, Cardew! I——"

"Shurrup, Gustavus!" snapped Jack Blake. "Kerr can cack your silly head off at maths any day in the giddy week. I quite agree to Tommy's proposition. It's time we cleared up this competition bizney. We've got no end of value out of it, but it can't run on for ever. Now that we've a whole holiday to dispose of, we can work off the Marathon. And that certainly ought to be the final event. A dead-heat when that's over would be rather a—a—what d'ye call it?"

"Wash-out," suggested Digby.

"No, ass! You know the word I mean, Talbot."

"Anti-climax, perhaps, old chap."

"That's it! Jolly good word, too—just what I meant. If we finished up all square, with the Marathon wiped off the slate, we couldn't leave it like that. We should have to arrange another event to settle things, and no one would feel that that event was as important as the Marathon, by long odds."

As to that, everyone who mattered at all seemed agreed. Aubrey Racke and George Gerald Crooke might sneer; Trimble of the Fourth might snigger; cads like Mellish and Chowle and Clampe and Scrope might sniff their pretended contempt of the whole affair. But the great majority of both Forms had taken the competition very seriously indeed.

Fellows who had never been known to buck up before had bucked up quite strenuously. Honours had been won by some from whom little had been hoped—George Alfred Grundy and George Gore and Ralph Cardew among them. Racke and Crooke and their pals, who had sworn to stand outside it all, had been forced into some contest or other in some way or other; and neither Form now stood to lose any points by reason of having failed to bring everyone in it up to the scratch. There had been an agreement that points should be allowed for the rival Form in the event of any such failure; but there was no occasion to enforce it.

The competition had been a long-drawn-out one. It had included not only athletic events, but also a number of contests which could not be classed under that head. But it had been agreed upon some time since that there had been enough of these, and now only the Marathon remained for decision. For that a whole-day holiday was needed, and at one time it had looked as though the term might wear through to its end without that whole day being obtained.

But at last Mr. Railton had used his influence with the Head, and the required day had been granted. The whole school shared in the boon, and even the lordly Sixth blessed the Shell versus Fourth struggle.

The competition had been a ding-dong one, too. Early in its progress, it is true, the Fourth had gone well ahead, and at one stage had led by as many as 27 points.

But later the score had been 124 points all, and for a time neither Form had gained much of a lead.

Then the Shell had come strongly, and, with 54 points ahead of their rivals, had looked to be easily in a winning position.

But the Fourth had stuck pluckily to their guns, and Cardew and Herries—but chiefly Cardew—had done big things for their Form in the wrestling bouts.

The lead of the Shell was reduced thus to 15; and two successes for the Fourth in non-athletic events, each counting 20, had put the junior Form ahead once more by as many as 25 points.

The swimming contests, of which there were several, had gone in favour of the Shell, on the whole, thanks largely to the prowess of Tom Merry, Talbot, Kangaroo, and Clifton Dane. Then the hurdles had also helped the Shell score up a little. Long-legged George Figgins had won the Class A event over the sticks; but Lowther and Gore had scored for Shell in Class B; and Gunn had romped home in Class C, with Gibbons of the Shell third.

Thus, with the Marathon only left, the Fourth held the narrow lead of three points, and all depended upon the long-distance race.

Should the Shell score only three points more than the Fourth in that event the result would be a draw, and the general feeling, well expressed by Blake, was that a draw thus brought about would be very unsatisfactory. Something in the nature of a fiasco, indeed.

Kerr and Manners grinned amicably at one another.

Each of them was capable of working out in his head problems which would have puzzled many of their Form-fellows with pen and paper before them. They saw no difficulty at all in making sure of what was wanted. Tom Merry would not have seen any had he thought the matter out; Talbot did not as it was, nor did Roylance, nor Levison major.

"While we're about it," said Manners, "I think we had better draw up a complete scheme for the points in the race."

"Oh, yes, of course! That's the idea," Tom Merry replied.

"Of course, the scheme will have to be submitted to the Sports Committee," remarked Figgins.

Figgins was himself a member of that committee. But perhaps that need hardly be stated.

"Oh, rot!" snapped Manners. "Hanged if I am going to take a lot of trouble, to have my scheme turned down by the potty committee when it's all worked out!"

"Don't worry, old bean!" said Kerr. "If you and I between us can't produce such a gilt-edged, copper-bottomed, A1, slap-up, and straight-down scheme that the dear old committee will fall upon our necks and fairly weep for joy, never call me uncle again!"

"Cut off and see about it, then!" said Tom. "You can have No. 10 to yourselves to think it out in, and meanwhile I'll be seeing about getting the committee together to meet you there, and consider your great scheme. How long is it going to exercise your mighty brains?"

"Say about half an hour," answered Manners.

"Make it somewhere nearer half a minute," said Kerr.

"We'll give you ten minutes!" said Tom.

Harry Manners and George Francis Kerr went off cheerily together to Study No. 10 in the Shell passage, which Manners shared with Tom Merry and Monty Lowther.

CHAPTER 2.
The Committee Sit and Grundy is Bumped.

"ON the whole, Manners," said Kerr, "we don't exactly harbour a crowd of mathematical geniuses in the Shell and Fourth at St. Jim's. It's plain with half an eye that, if the points are multiples of any number except three, the thing they are afraid of simply can't happen."

Manners, grinning, nodded assent. He had seen that at once. And, indeed, it is quite easy to be seen by anyone who will take the trouble.

"Let's start with five, and make it five, ten, and fifteen for third, second, and first places," suggested Kerr.

"No, old chap," said Manners. "It was agreed upon from the first that the first place should count more than second and third together. We had seven, four, and two points in the Class A events, you know."

"Well, what's the matter with fourteen, eight, and five for this?"

Manners shook his head.

"Seems to me," he said slowly and thoughtfully, "as it's the final event, and quite one of the most important ones, we might have something different. Why shouldn't the first six home all score points? That would make it far more interesting and exciting, too."

In jest, George Francis Kerr was apt to pour contempt on any idea originated in the Shell.

But Kerr was not jesting now, and he had only Manners, whom he liked, to deal with.

"Jolly good notion!" he said heartily. "Give you and me a chance to do something, perhaps. Neither of us will be likely to get into the first three. We might be in the first six."

"You might—not me," replied

Manners modestly. "Long-distance running isn't exactly my strong suit."

"Six places, with a start of five points," Kerr said. "That would be 30, 25, 20, 15, 10, and five. No need to bother about that old rule in a case like this. Different from any other race, eh?"

"I think first place should give a bit more pull than that," Manners answered. "Make it 35 for first. Even then second and third combined would top it. Tommy's going to be first, I fancy."

"And I think Figgy is, so I quite agree to the 35 dodge," said Kerr. "What about a dead-heat for any place? Are the chaps who run level to share the points for that one place?"

"Won't do," Manners replied. "That might make first place worth less than second."

"You're right! They must share points for two places."

"That's it! S'pose Tommy and Talbot dead-heat for first——"

"Or Figgy and Roylance. Roylance runs jolly well. There's Levison, too, and Redfern. I can't see two Shell bounders romping home first, old top!"

"Well, I can, and I shouldn't wonder if you jolly well win. First place a dead-heat by two fellow from one Form would mean 30 points each, and make it a dead cert for that Form to win!"

"And first place dead-heated by two fellows from different Forms would mean practically wiping out the first and second place points, and leaving it to the other four to settle it, which would keep up the excitement," replied Kerr. "That's all right, I think, Manners. We can hardly do better if we try for a week, I fancy!"

"Better write it all down, hadn't we?" asked Manners.

"You do that. I'll go and tell the august committee we'll be ready for their honourable worships in the shake of a cow's tail or thereabouts. But remember, Manners, old scout, that queerer things than two Fourth-Formers getting home first together have happened in the days of Pharaoh, king of Egypt."

"But not since!" gibed Manners.

He set to work with pen and ink, and Kerr went off.

Within five minutes the Sports Committee had assembled. It consisted of the three umpires—Lefevre of the Fifth, and Wally D'Arcy and Frank Levison of the Third—with Tom Merry and Talbot to represent the Shell, and Jack Blake and Figgins as leaders of the Fourth.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind the committee as they trooped along the Shell corridor.

Tom Merry glanced round.

"Hallo, Grundy!" he said. "Do you happen to want anything?"

"Yes," replied George Alfred Grundy in his loftiest manner. "I want—I may say that I insist—upon being present! I ought by rights——"

"To be in Colney Hatch!" said Blake. "No need to tell us that, Grundy."

"I ought by rights to have been on the committee all along," went on Grundy, completely ignoring Blake. "Well, I haven't been. I've submitted to that——"

"Had to!" snorted Figgins.

"I've submitted to that, I say. I haven't let it affect my loyalty to the Form. I've done as much as anybody to keep the Shell flag flying."

"Didn't know the Shell had a flag," said Tom Merry. "Still, if we can't wave the flag we'll waive the point. You've done good service, Grundy; but the fact remains that you ain't on the committee."

"Excuse me," said Grundy politely, "but you're mistaken. I am!"

"Who appointed you?" snapped Blake.

"I appointed myself! I owe it to my position in the Form——"

"Ode to Grundy, by George Alfred of that ilk!" spoke a voice in the rear—the mocking voice of Monty Lowther, who had been absent from the Common-room.

"Oh, you're there, are you?" snorted Grundy. "Well, there's one ass the more, that's all!"

"But not on the committee!" said Tom Merry firmly.

"Of course not! Plenty of asses there already!" retorted Grundy. "Lowther never was on the committee, and I don't propose to allow him to join it now. Clear off, Lowther! Haven't you got sense enough to see you aren't wanted?"

"Look here, Merry, I'm not going to wait here all the evening while you argue with that silly chump!" said Lefevre from No. 10. "I've other things to do besides listening to the hee-haws of Grundy!"

"Do you happen to know, Lefevre," said Grundy darkly, "that I got the sack from Redclyffe for whopping a prefect?"

"Eh?" cried the Fifth-Former, pretending not to hear properly.

"For—whopping—a prefect," repeated the great George Alfred, very slowly and distinctly.

"What did you get for it?" inquired Lefevre.

"The sack, you silly chump!" howled Grundy.

"Well, I really don't see that that's anything to brag about."

"You don't seem to understand what I mean."

"What do you mean—if you mean anything at all?"

"Really, Lefevre, you're most extraordinarily dense for a chap in the Fifth! I mean that I'm jolly well not going to put up with any cheek from you, so put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"Come out and be 'butchered to make a Roman holiday,' Lefevre!" chortled Lowther.

"I don't think I'll do that, thanks. But if you fellows don't come in—and shut Grundy out—I shall certainly come out and walk away!"

"Scat, Grundy!" said Wally D'Arcy. "You ain't wanted!"

"Go and look after my major!" gibed Frank Levison.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a perfect howl at that. Frank had hit home. Grundy had been actuated by quite good motives—apart from his fatal craze for minding other people's business—in his efforts to look after Ernest Levison. But he had had to endure rebuffs which still rankled a little in his mind, though he never really bore malice.

"I can't make out what you silly asses can see to cackle at!" said Grundy crossly.

"We're laughing about your bumping, Grundy," replied Tom Merry.

"But I haven't been bumped, fathead!"

"No. You're going to be, though!"

"Not jolly well likely. 'Merry—— Here, stoppit! Hands off! Yaroooooh!"

Grundy was seized and lifted. Grundy was dropped and lifted again.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Yoooop! Oh, you rotters! I'll whop you all for this—every blessed one of you!" hooted Grundy.

"They're not prefects, Grundy," remarked Lefevre mildly.

"Let them look out for themselves, that's all!"

"And a very little all, too," said Lowther. "A cobbler's awl, perhaps, since we trust it will be your 'last' threat."

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Blake. "If it's a question whether Grundy or Lowther is let in, I vote for Grundy! He's a silly ass, but he doesn't make jokes that give you pains inside."

"I won't come in now if you beg me to!" retorted Grundy disdainfully. "I'll leave you to muck-up everything without me, as you always do. And you needn't expect me to win the Marathon for the Shell, because I'm jolly well not going to do it!"

"Nobody thought you would," said Figgins.

"I sha'n't run!" snapped Grundy.

"You can't!" said Blake.

But everyone knew that Blake was not correct, he himself as well as anyone, for Grundy could run. He was hopeless in a sprint, but his strength and stamina made him quite a formidable opponent in a long-distance race.

Grundy stalked off in high disdain.

"Good-bye, Lowther!" said Blake pointedly.

"Oh, I'm coming in," replied Lowther coolly. "This is my study, I believe."

He came in. No one raised any real objection. The meetings of the Sports Committee had not always been attended solely by the appointed members of the body in question.

"Hurry up!" said Lefevre. "Grundy's better than a pantomime when he gets fairly going, but one can have too much even of Grundy. Let's get to business."

"We've got out a scheme," said Kerr.

"Manners will read it to you."

Manners proceeded to do so.

"Jolly good!" said Tom Merry heartily when he had finished.

"So I think," remarked Kerr modestly.

"Not half bad for a New House bounder and a Shell-fish!" Blake allowed.

"A jolly sight better than any School House ass——"

"But Manners was in it, Figgy," said Tom mildly.

"Oh, well, I don't mind admitting that Manners is a School House ass all right," answered the broad-minded Figgins.

"Thank you for nothing!" snapped Manners.

"I think it's too beastly long and mixed-up," complained Wally.

"It's as clear as mud," remarked Lowther. "You have the family denseness, D'Arcy minor, I fear."

"Well, I don't think you'll better it," said Lefevre. "I must say Manners and Kerr seem to have thought it out well. I'd advise you to accept it."

"I wouldn't," Wally put in.

"Then we will," said Tom.

"Look here, Tom Merry, I don't see any use my being on the committee if you're going to pass anything just because I object to it!" protested the leader of the Third.

"My good kid, it wasn't for any reason of the sort," said Tom. "I didn't even consider your opinion as mattering at all."

Wally did not look at all mollified. But when the scheme was put to the meeting he did not vote against it.

"It ain't bad, really," he said. "At least, not what I understand of it."

"But that's really so little that it hardly counts," remarked Lowther.

"How do you know, clever? I'm on the committee, anyway, and you ain't, so you've no right to say anything. But I agree to the scheme. All that's the matter with it is that old Manners has used too long words and too many of them."

"But the scheme," said Lowther blandly, "is for two of the middle Forms, not for the kindergarten section. Words of two syllables are therefore quite allowable."

"Carried nem. con., as far as I can see," said Lefevre, while Wally almost exploded with wrath.

The necessary details were carefully copied by Levison minor into his book of records for future reference if necessary, and a copy of the scheme was also posted on the school notice-board; and, on the whole, Shell and Fourth alike were agreed that the scheme was a ripping good one, and that Manners and Kerr deserved credit for working it out.

CHAPTER 3.
Cousins, and Enemies!

"ANYTHING wrong, Talbot?" asked Gore.

And Herbert Skimpole looked up anxiously from the pages of a ponderous tome by that mighty, all-round genius, Professor Balmycrumpet.

The three fellows who shared No. 9 of the Shell studies were an oddly-assorted lot. Gore and Skimpole differed on almost every possible subject. But about one thing they thought alike. Both were honestly devoted to Reginald Talbot.

And Talbot deserved their devotion. He had been a good friend to them both, and was so still. He had stood by Gore in a very tight place, and he had owed Gore nothing but dislike then. He had stood between Skimmy and many a buffet, from Gore and from others; and Skimmy had never done anything in particular for Talbot, though his will to do it was good enough, given the chance.

Reggie Talbot's brow was clouded on that bright, hot July morning of the day after the committee meeting. There was an open letter in his hand, and it was easy to guess that its contents had something to do with his worry.

A less thick-skinned fellow than Gore might have hesitated to ask questions, seeing that. But perhaps Gore had not seen it, and if he was not specially sensitive, he was at least honest in his concern, which counted for more.

"Oh, nothing much," replied Talbot. "No, that isn't quite true. It is serious, in a way, but it's nothing I can talk about."

"That rotter Crooke again!" growled Gore, as he went out.

After what Talbot had said that was scarcely in good taste. But Gore had seen the envelope, and had recognised the handwriting of Colonel Lyndon. And Gore was rather in the way of saying things that some fellows would merely have thought.

Colonel Lyndon was the uncle of both Reginald Talbot and George Gerald Crooke. There had been a time when Crooke had looked upon himself as certain to be the inheritor of his uncle's very considerable wealth. This was before he had known that Talbot and he were cousins—before anyone had known it, indeed.

When Colonel Lyndon had last visited St. Jim's, Crooke, full of bitter jealousy at the very idea of having Talbot—whom he hated—as a fellow-sharer of the colonel's fortune, had so disgraced himself by his vile attempt to blacken his cousin's character that he seemed to have settled once for all his own chance of ever being named in his uncle's will.

Reginald Talbot had never exulted over that. It was not Talbot's fault that Crooke was his sworn enemy. It was Crooke who refused to recognise the tie of kinship.

Talbot had done his best to be friendly with his cousin, though it was quite impossible for those two to get on well together while Crooke remained the utter cad and wastrel he was. And Crooke pretended reconciliation, but only with design to trap his cousin.

And now Talbot was asked to try again.

Colonel Lyndon had been wounded very nearly unto death. He was recovering now; and, reading between the lines, Talbot could guess that during those hours when his feet had seemed to be treading the Valley of the Shadow of Death the gallant soldier's thoughts had been much upon his sister's son, black sheep though he was.

"Make another effort, my boy," he wrote. "I know that I am asking much of you. I should not ask it but that I have high faith in your generosity. What a decent fellow will not be to your pecuniary advantage. I state that frankly. Some part of what would otherwise have been entirely yours, when my time comes to go out—and I had thought that time surely come but a few weeks ago—will then fall to Gerald. But I know that you are above being moved by greed; and I trust you to do your best, as I should trust you were you my own son, and Gerald your brother."

To do his best! Ay, Talbot would do that.

But of what use would it be?

As soon might one make ropes out of sand, change the spots of the leopard, or bleach the Ethiopian white, as reform Crooke by persuasion.

No one could ever do that, Talbot believed. He had hoped in the past. Now he knew that hope vain.

And, if anyone could do it, he was not that one. Crooke hated him too poisonously. Crooke was full of lies and deceit; and, though he knew Talbot utterly honest, and generous almost to a fault, he hated him only the more bitterly for those traits.

"My dear Talbot——"

Talbot looked up with a start. His eyes had been upon the sunlit quad, but he did not really see what was before them. Before his mental vision had floated the picture of a hospital over there in France, and the gallant, generous veteran who was dear to him lying on a bed of pain. The vision faded as he said, rather dully:

"Yes, Skimmy?"

"May I inquire, without impropriety, whether Gore's conclusion, briefly indicated as he left the room, was correct?"

Talbot looked at the plain face with the bumpy brow, and smiled. He was very seldom impatient with Skimmy, never rough on him.

"Well, then, it was, old chap. But, as I have already said, I'm not keen on talking about it."

"I deprecate extremely anything in the way of intrusion, Talbot; but I should like to express, for your guidance, my opinion that Crooke is positively as near to being completely hopeless, from the moral point of view, as any individual well could be. I feel the most absolute assurance that any effort on your part to improve Crooke will be an absolute failure."

"So do I," said Talbot, a trifle bitterly.

"Therefore, my dear Talbot——"

"I've simply got to do it, Skimmy."

"I fear your logic is faulty, my dear fellow."

"Oh, no! It wasn't your 'ergo' I had in mind, old scout. All I meant was I owe it to my uncle to do as he asks."

Skimmy mused upon that for a moment or two, wrinkling more than ever his massive brow. Talbot relapsed into thought.

"My dear Talbot——"

"Yes, Skimmy?"

"Crooke is not a person with whom I care, in the ordinary way, to hold any intercourse whatever. But circumstances alter cases—a quotation trite indeed, but to the present purpose."

"Don't quite see it, old top. You're not asked to look after Crooke, you know."

"I was about to propose, my dear fellow, that you should allow me to make a strong effort on your behalf. Crooke would doubtless meet my arguments with contumely at the outset——"

"And with a cricket-stump or his boot at the finish. No, old thing, you're no end good; but I can't ask you to take on that job for me."

Skimmy dried up at that. Perhaps he thought it would hardly be delicate to press his offer further. Skimmy had finer feelings than Gore about some things.

But he did not give up his project.

CHAPTER 4.
The Schemers.

"I SAY, D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, Twimble? If you have anythin' to say to me, I beg that you will be bwief, for I am in a huwwy, as you see."

Probably Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth, considered that Trimble should be able to deduce the haste he was in from his being robed in spotless flannels and carrying a bat under his arm. But he certainly had not been bustling himself, and his chums, Blake, Herries, and Digby, had gone on ahead ten minutes ago, in despair at the time he had occupied in choosing a tie to go with his soft collar and cricket-shirt.

"You always are in a hurry when I want to speak to you," whined Baggy.

"That is pwob, Twimble. I nevah wish to hurt anyone's feelin's, but I must confess that you vewy seldom have anythin' to say that I have the slightest desiah to heah."

"Oh, do be decent to a chap!"

"I twust that I am invawiably decent to evewybody, Twimble!" replied Gussy, eyeing Baggy severely through his celebrated monocle.

"Not to me you're not. I've always looked upon you as a pal, but you——"

"I must weally beg, Twimble, that you

will cease to look upon me in that light. It is quite imposs that I should evah considah you as a pal."

"There you go! Call that being decent to a fellow, do you?"

Baggy seemed so utterly woebegone that the tender heart of Arthur Augustus smote him.

"What did you wish to speak to me about, Twimble?" he inquired.

"I'm hungry!"

"That is scarcely twue, Twimble, I am suah, as I observed you eatin' vowaciously in Hall not so vewy long ago."

"I'm starving, I tell you!"

"I wefuse to listen to what I know to be untwuths, Twimble!"

"They ain't, then! What's the good of the dinner they give us in Hall to a chap with my appetite? It doesn't half fill me—not a quarter!"

To judge by Trimble's appearance, one might have thought that he was filled—or, at least, sufficiently nourished—at regular and frequent intervals. There was certainly no sign of wasting away about Baggy.

"I— Oh, weally Twimble, I cannot afford to waste any more time upon you!"

"Look here, lend me half-a-quid, Gussy, old pal!"

"I wefuse eithah to lend you half-a-quid or to allow you to addwess me in that peculiahly offensive an' familiah mannah!"

"Oh, well, then, make it half-a-dollar, and I'll call you anything you like!"

Arthur Augustus gave Trimble a withering look. Then he gave him half-a-crown. It was giving, for no one who knew Baggy ever expected him to pay back a loan.

It is hardly probable that the names which Baggy called Arthur Augustus as he rolled away with the coin pressed in his hot, podgy hand would have been at all to the liking of the swell of the Fourth had he heard them. They did not suggest gratitude on Baggy's part.

But Arthur Augustus did not hear. He went on his course to Little Side at a quickened pace.

Baggy rolled away to the tuckshop, and flattened his snub nose for a minute or two against its panes. But he had his own reasons for not venturing into the domain of Dame Taggles. He had been peremptorily ordered out on the last visit he had paid there, and if he overlooked that Dame Taggles would not.

So Baggy sighed as he rolled towards the gates, and felt that it was cruel of D'Arcy to force him to travel all the way to Rylcombe for the spending of a mere half-crown. Baggy hated exertion at any time, but more particularly in hot weather.

"Mean beast!" he muttered. "I can't think what the country's coming to, if he's a specimen of our aristocracy, that some people brag so much about! Hallo! What are Racke and Crooke after, I wonder?"

The two blackest sheep of the Shell were a hundred yards or so ahead, talking together earnestly. They never once looked round, and Baggy followed them unseen.

"They're after grub," he muttered. "Sure to be! I'll bet Racke's got another place for that man of his by this time, and they're going food-hogging. I don't see how they can keep me out of it if that's so."

But Racke and Crooke were not on a food-hogging expedition that afternoon. They were not even thinking of food. The faces of both were troubled as they talked.

"I shall be twenty quid down if the Shell wins to-morrow," said Crooke dolefully. "I'm not a blessed pauper; but twenty quid's a whack of money, especially at the end of term, an' I don't mind admittin' that I shall have a difficulty in raisin' it."

"I stand to lose three times that," answered Racke morosely.

"My hat! You must have been plungin', old top!"

Racke nodded.

"I gave Cutts longish odds against a fiver he wanted to risk," he said. "Then there were Gilmore an' St. Leger an' Knox. The Fourth looked safe as houses to finish ahead then, but I was a fool to plunge so deep. Chances are those cads wouldn't have paid up if they'd lost."

"All the same, you'll dashed well have to pay if they win," said Crooke. "An' so shall I—hang it all!"

"Don't I know it!" snarled Racke.

"If it hadn't been for that sweep Talbot I shouldn't be so hard up," said Crooke viciously. "He gets all old Lynton's tips now. The old fool's as much my uncle as his, an' I'm dashed if I see that it's fair."

"An' now he's going to do you down another way," Racke answered, with an evil gleam in his eyes. "He or Merry, that is. As far as I can make out, it's a dead cert that one or the other of those two swankin' hounds will win the Marathon."

"It won't be my precious an' beloved cousin," said Crooke. "It will be Merry."

"You've been studyin' them pretty closely, old top," remarked Racke.

"I have. There's a lot hangin' to it, for me. I didn't give long odds, as you did; most of my bets were at evens. So it makes a difference of forty pounds to me whether the Shell score enough points to pull their total up over the Fourth's. An' I believe they're going to do it. They will if a Shell chap gets first place."

"That doesn't follow, dear boy. There are five other places with points hangin' to them."

"Well, you don't expect the Fourth to fill all five, do you?" snapped Crooke. "Who's good enough to work that for them?"

What Does Trimble Hear?
(See Chapter 5.)

"Oh, I don't know. Figgins, Kerr, Roylance, Levison, Blake, Clive, Redfern—they're all pretty useful, I suppose. An' there are others!"

"Yes!" snorted Crooke. "There are Talbot and Dane and Noble and Grundy. I can't see your Fourth Form choices beatin' them all, Racke."

"They might. But I don't feel too easy about it," admitted the heir of the war profits of Messrs. Racke & Hacke.

"If the Shell bag first and second places they're all right," said Crooke. "So they are if they get first and third and sixth. There's a hundred and ten points to be divided, an' if they get sixty of them they're on top. The three points the Fourth lead by now would be more than wiped off."

Again Racke stared. Mathematical exercises of any sort were not very much in Crooke's usual line.

Behind them Baggy, perspiring and panting, yet felt quite hopeful. He was sure that they must be talking of grub—they seemed so very much in earnest.

"Didn't know you'd figured it all out like that," Racke remarked.

"There's such a dashed lot hangin' to it, for me," replied Crooke morosely. "I haven't had so much from home lately—may be war-time economy, or may be that my people are mad with me about gettin' out of old Lyndon's good books. He very nearly pegged out lately, an' I don't suppose a blessed bob would have come my way if he had. It would all have gone to that rotter Talbot!"

"Then if the Shell win you'll be——"

"In Queer Street—yes, by gad! I've two or three accounts to settle as it is. Another twenty quid on top of them would about finish it for me. Of course, a chap might default; but it rather cooks things up when he wants another flutter. There would be trouble with some of them, too."

"Sorry I can't give you a helpin' hand, dear boy," said Racke.

Crooke laughed harshly.

"I haven't asked you to," he said. "I know how much good that would be."

"Well, you see, I shall be dashed hard hit myself if——"

"Oh, don't trouble to make excuses! I've a better dodge than that!"

"A dodge?" said Racke, as if failing to understand. Possibly he did not quite understand. It was usually he who thought out the dodges.

Crooke nodded meaningly.

"The thing is," he said, "to settle the chances of Merry and Talbot—one or both. As I work it out, those two are pretty safe to be in the first six, an' one or other of them to be actually first. If they are in the first four we are done!"

Racke stopped. Baggy, who was just rounding a bend in the road, saw, and drew back in time to avoid being seen. He crushed his fat body into a leafy hedge, and stood there involuntarily holding his breath.

Baggy did not want to risk losing his share of one of Racke's food-hog banquets, and he knew that his only chance of sharing was to appear at the critical moment, which was certainly not yet.

CHAPTER 5.
No Banquet for Baggy.

RACKE looked up the road, and down the road, and saw no one. Baggy's flushed and podgy face was hidden from him by the low branches of a big tree, and Baggy's fat body was concealed by a hedge.

"I'm game for anythin' that's safe," said Racke. "Apart from the oof I stand to lose. I hate the dashed thought of that bounder Merry's winnin' the race, an' gettin' the Shell home in the competition!"

"Dare say you do. Of the two I'd rather he should do it than Talbot, though I hate Merry as much as ever you do. I'm pretty certain Merry's the most dangerous; but that doesn't wipe Talbot off the slate. But knock out one of those two—the one that looks like being first when they're near the finish—an' the Fourth ought to romp home!"

"Safer to knock out both, if possible," Racke replied, his eyes gleaming, and his hands clenching and unclenching nervously.

It was the kind of scheme likely to appeal to Aubrey Racke. To make his bets safe, to ensure defeat for the fellows he hated—it would be like killing two birds with one stone. Racke had nothing but dislike for any of the leading spirits of the Fourth. But he had been betting all along against his own Form, and because of the money he had at stake he would be very pleased to see Figgins or Kerr, Roylance or Redfern, Levison or Clive, Blake or Herries, romp home a winner. If the whole of the six places which were to score points fell to the Fourth he would rejoice.

But, given fair play for everyone, there was not the least likelihood of that. The Fourth had rather more really good long-distance runners than the Shell, perhaps. But Tom Merry, Talbot, Grundy, Dane, and Noble were at least equal to any five of the Fourth's best.

"Can't be done, not my way," said Crooke.

"What's your way, old top?"

"Well, it may sound a bit clumsy, because it's so simple. But I've thought it all out. I only want to find someone to do it for us. There's another thing that's necessary, though—the chap it's to be done to must be leading by quite a good stretch. I won't say there mustn't be anyone else in sight, though that would be best; but——"

"See here, Crooke, if it's knockin' anyone on the napper, I'm not in it! I'd be dasher glad to have either of those bounders tumbled over that way; but I won't take the risk of bein' mixed up in it."

"It's not that," replied Crooke impatiently. "I thought of that; but I could see for myself it was no dashed go. You can't get a fellow tumbled over like that on a public road, with another score of fellows peltin' behind him within a mile or so, some of them close enough to see, very likely."

"How, then?"

"A rope across the road!"

"But they'd see to that, dash it all!"

"Not if they were far enough behind. Some of them might see the leader topple over; but they couldn't see what did it, an' the rope could be hauled away before any of them got up."

"But the fellow himself—Merry or Talbot—would spot it, for a cert," objected Racke.

"Not he! A chap who's run over a dozen miles on a hot day, with his eyes half-bunged-up with sweat an' dust, wouldn't notice it at all. A rope's pretty much the same colour as a dusty road. At a dozen yards or so you can't be sure of it if you're on the watch for it, an' know it's there. I've tried, so I'm not talkin' about what I don't know."

"I take it you were schemin' all this out while I was away last week-end," said Racke.

"There wasn't much else to do, by gad!" growled Crooke.

He had expected an invitation to go with Racke on that week-end trip, and was still sore that he had not been given it.

"But a rope on the road wouldn't floor anyone," objected Racke.

"It would if it was tied to a tree on one side, an' there was a chap on the other ready to pull it tight at the precise jiffy," replied Crooke.

"H'm! Yes, it might."

"Might? Oh, rats! It dashed well would; it couldn't be off it. An' the chap who tumbled over it wouldn't win any Marathon that day, you bet—not if the next man was a mile behind when he fell!"

"No, I shouldn't think he's stand much chance of pullin' it off. Are you goin' to be the chap at the end of the rope, Crooke, old top?"

"Me? No dashed fear! Didn't I say I wasn't?"

"Well, you hardly expect me to take on the job, I suppose?" sneered Racke.

"I don't. You haven't pluck enough!" snarled Crooke.

"As much as you have, I think. But that's no odds. It wouldn't do for either of us. There are points about your scheme, I'll own. But who's goin' to work it for us?"

"There's that rotter of yours," replied Crooke. "He's a regular gaolbird sort of sweep—game for anythin', from pitch-'n'-toss to manslaughter. I should say. We're goin' to see him about those bets he was puttin' on for us, an' we could easily get him to take on this little job. It would be a lark to him."

"A lark that he'd want at least a fiver for," said Racke thoughtfully.

He did not repulse the idea of getting the scoundrelly Scaife, whom he had hired to assist in his food-hogging and gambling activities, to carry out Crooke's scheme; but, for all his lavishness when he wanted to make a display, for all his willingness to risk money in any form of gambling, Aubrey Racke was essentially mean, as his dear pals, one and all, had learned long before this.

"Well, what's a fiver to you?" growled Crooke. "Come to that, I'll put up a quid of it."

"You'll put up half, if the thing's to be done, by gad!" snapped Racke.

They had stood talking for fully a quarter of an hour in Rylcombe Lane, and during all that time Baggy had panted and perspired in the hedge fifty yards behind them. No one had passed at all in either direction.

And it was through Rylcombe Lane that the last stage of the Marathon would be run. No more suitable spot for the dastardly dodge Crooke had planned could have been found. In places the woods bordered the lane closely, and all along there were trees. It would be the easiest thing in the world for anyone to tie a rope to a tree on one side, and find cover for himself on the other.

Now Baggy breathed a heavy sigh of relief, for Racke and Crooke were moving on. He ambled after them, taking more risk now of being spotted. His eagerness had only been whetted by the delay.

But they did not look back. They were still talking very earnestly.

"You've overlooked one thing, Scaife doesn't know all our chaps," said Racke. "How is he to tell whether it's a Shell fellow or a Fourth-Former leadin'?"

"Nothin' easier, chump! Have you forgotten that the Shell are to run in white shirts an' the Fourth in red?"

"Didn't know it, so I couldn't well forget. That certainly makes it plain sailin'. Well, it's a better scheme than I should have expected you to hatch out, Crooke, though there are possible holes in it. Suppose some other Shell fellow's in the lead—Dane or Noble, say?"

"Treat him the same, of course!" growled Crooke. "I don't love either of those chaps; do you? I'm dashed nearly certain it will be Merry or Talbot, though. If it ain't, I hope it will be that fatheaded ass Grundy; an' I sha'n't mind if he breaks his silly neck!"

Conversation slackened as they reached Rylcombe and passed through the village street. Baggy still rolled after them. Crooke happened to look round and see him now; but at that moment the lure of the tuckshop had drawn Baggy aside to the pavement, and he was gazing into the window with wistful eyes.

"There's that rotter Trimble!" remarked Crooke.

"Where?" asked Racke, looking round.

"Pressin' his ugly nose against a blessed window down the street. Can't you see him?"

"Oh, I see him now! He hasn't spotted us, though. Round this corner, quick, before he does!"

But Baggy saw them turn the corner, and Baggy was a sleuth-hound on the trail of grub—even imaginary grub.

A quarter of an hour later the two black sheep and Scaife, alias Luke Clancy, were talking together in a room fronting on the garden of a secluded cottage, tenanted by a maiden lady who had now betaken herself into Wales on account of the air-raids.

And, crouching by the French window, Baggy was straining his ears to catch every word spoken. The three had no suspicion that anyone was near. Scaife had been alone in the house, and there was no other dwelling near. They did not trouble to lower their voices, and Baggy could hear all without difficulty.

His rosy dreams of a banquet faded into thin air. Grub was not even mentioned. Baggy felt bitterly resentful that he should have come so far, and should have to face the prospect of returning empty; and as the two unfolded that rascally scheme to the willing ears of Scaife—for whom it would have been hard to find anything too rascally—thrills of virtuous indignation stirred Baggy.

He heard them to the end, and then he stole away unsuspected. He had not made up his mind what to do. There were big

possibilities in the knowledge he had gained by his pet method of eavesdropping.

There was the possibility of revenge. Racke and Crooke had often treated Baggy roughly, though he toadied to them.

There was the possibility of blackmail. Towards this Baggy rather inclined.

But of the expected banquet there was no possibility. And because of that it was a rueful and disappointed Baggy who trudged heavily back to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 6.
Visitors to Study No. 7.

"COME in!" growled Crooke, as a modest tap sounded at the door of Study No. 7 on the Shell passage, which Racke and Crooke shared.

The door opened, and the mild, bespectacled visage of Herbert Skimpole appeared.

"I am glad to find you alone, Crooke, my dear fellow!" said Skimmy, in his most propitiatory tones.

"Oh, are you?" returned Crooke, in tones anything but propitiatory.

"Certainly I am! My mission is to you, and not to Racke!"

"So you've a mission, have you?" snarled Crooke.

"Undoubtedly, my dear fellow. Otherwise I should not——"

"Then take it away an' bury it! Bury yourself, an' put up a dashed tombstone to say that the biggest fool at St. Jim's lies underneath. Go and fry your silly face!" hooted Crooke.

Skimmy stared. Skimmy had a logical mind, and he did not see how, after being buried, he could be expected to fry his face. Even putting up the tombstone might present difficulties.

But after a moment's reflection he decided that Crooke's abuse was not worthy of being taken seriously, and certainly not worth wasting logic upon. And as he had not expected quite a nice reception, he was not disappointed on that score.

"I am sorry that you should address me in that manner, Crooke," he said, "especially as I have come here with the best of intentions."

"Bury them, too!" snapped Crooke.

"Really, I fear that your temper this evening is scarcely amiable, my dear fellow!"

"It's not, by gad! An' you'll dashed well feel that it's not if you don't clear, you owl-faced catamaran!"

Crooke did not really know what a catamaran was, but it sounded abusive. Skimmy, who probably knew, but had almost certainly forgotten, let the epithet pass. He was not to be turned from his purpose by harsh words.

"I have come here, Crooke, to point out to you the error of your ways. Talbot——"

"Has that rotter sent you here?" roared Crooke, rising in a threatening fashion.

But Skimmy did not give ground. His mild face showed no fear.

"I have every desire to converse with you on a temperate and amicable footing, Crooke!" he said firmly; "but I cannot do so if you persist in that reprehensible tone. To abuse of myself personally I am quite indifferent, regarding it with a philosophical mind. But Talbot, although he has the misfortune to be your cousin——"

Crooke gasped. Skimpole was certainly not minding his words.

"Is a person for whom I entertain so very high a respect that I cannot tolerate the application of injurious epithets to him."

"Get out, then!" snapped Crooke. "You won't hear anything that's likely to please you about Talbot here, I promise you that!"

"I refuse to go with my mission unaccomplished! Talbot did not request me to come hither; I am acting entirely upon my own volition. I desire to point out to you, Crooke, that there are ties of blood between you and Talbot——"

"Worse luck, dash it!" struck in Crooke. "If——"

"And that your attitude of enmity towards your cousin must have given extreme pain to your gallant and revered common relative, Colonel Lyndon."

"I hope so, by gad!" snarled Crooke. "The old brute's cut me out of his will. I owe that to your dashed, sneakin' pal, Mr. Reginald Talbot. It's very likely I should love him—I don't think!"

At this moment the door opened and Racke entered.

Racke was in no more pleasant mood than Crooke. The nerves of both were on edge. The result of the Marathon race on the morrow meant much to them—more than they cared to think about. And though their scheme was cut and dried, and Scaife had agreed to play the part assigned to him, they knew that very little might upset the whole plot. Two or three runners bunched together near the finish—a Fourth-Former leading at the critical moment, but failing to stay the course—these, or any one of half a dozen other combinations of circumstances, might foil them.

"What's this fathcaded ass want here?" demanded Racke morosely.

"As far as I can make out," snorted Crooke, "the cheap idiot's come along to ask me to fall on Talbot's neck an' hug him, to please dear old Uncle Lyndon—hang him!"

Skimmy had advanced well into the study. Racke stood between him and the door.

There was an evil grin of triumph on Racke's face. Aubrey Racke never forgot or forgave, and he had an old score against Skimmy to pay off.

"Last time you came here, you pasty-faced lunatic," he said, "there was trouble. There's goin' to be trouble this time, my pippin, an' you're goin' to get it! Collar him, Crooke, an' keep him away from the fireirons, for goodness' sake!"

Before Skimmy could move Crooke had twisted his arms behind him and was holding him in a spiteful grip. Skimmy struggled for a second or two, but found the result painful. He might have kicked, but to have kicked would have been below the dignity of a philosopher—at any rate, until more had been done to him.

But it was soon made evident that more was going to be done to him.

Racke snatched up the tongs.

"Yoooop!" howled Skimmy. "Don't! Stoppit, Racke!"

"Right-ho; I'm not goin' to stop it!" answered Racke, grinning fiendishly.

He seized Skimmy's nose with the tongs and squeezed hard.

It was more even than a philosopher could be expected to endure patiently. Anyway, it was quite too much for Herbert Skimpole to stand.

His right heel smote Crooke's shin hard. He tore his arms from Crooke's grasp, and he hit out straight at Racke.

Skimmy had learned from Talbot how to use a straight left, and he put the lessons he had had into practice now. Skimmy's biceps were not formidable, but his knuckles were bony, and their impact upon Racke's mouth was distinctly painful to Racke.

"Yarooooh! Confound you!" he howled.

"Curse you!" snarled Crooke. "Kick, will you?"

And both hit out.

The combined force of the two vicious punches sent Skimmy reeling. He toppled over, and his head struck the fender.

He lay on the hearthrug, inert and silent, with a thin stream of blood trickling from his right temple.

"My hat! You've done it now!" panted Crooke, white with fear.

"I've done it? You've done it, you mean, confound you!" hissed Racke, turning almost pea-green.

Tap, tap!

The two looked at one another with wild eyes and haggard faces.

It was a very bad moment for a visitor—for any visitor. Neither actually believed that they had killed Skimmy between them. But he had unquestionably been knocked senseless, and they did not want anyone to see him in that condition. It was bound to mean trouble.

Crooke darted to the door. Racke snatched down a rain-coat from a peg and flung it over Skimmy, hiding him completely.

The intention of Crooke was to lock the door, but he was too late. Before he could grip the key it opened in his face, and Baggy Trimble appeared, an affable grin on his podgy countenance.

"Scat!" said Crooke politely.

The affable grin faded from the fat countenance of Baggy, and an injured look replaced it.

"I don't call that making a chap very welcome, Crooke!" he said pathetically.

"Fat louts ain't welcome here!" rapped out Crooke.

"So just clear, you bloated toad, an' come again when we send for you!" added Racke.

"I'm not going until I choose!" replied Baggy defiantly. "I've something to talk to you fellows about, and you've jolly well got to listen, I know that! I say, though, what have you got hidden under that coat—grub, hey?"

"That's no dashed bizney of yours!" answered Racke. Both he and Crooke were between Baggy and what the coat covered, but they could not hide it entirely.

"Oh, isn't it? I'm jolly well going to have my whack, so don't you make any mistake about that!" squeaked Baggy.

Again the two looked at one another. Baggy on the supposed track of grub was dangerous. If he were put out he would squeal, and others might come along to see what was the matter.

Baggy did not realise that he already held the whip-hand. Before either of the two black sheep spoke again he said:

"Look here, if you don't whack out I shall tell Tom Merry and Talbot about Scaife!"

"What d'ye mean, you fat cad?" snapped Crooke.

Racke gave him a warning glance. Roughness to Baggy would hardly serve their turn.

"I know what I know. Other people might like to know it; but that's not saying that they will be told—as long as I'm treated civilly and decently," replied Baggy. "I'm not going to stand being called a fat cad, for one thing! And, for another, I'm going to have my whack of what you've got hidden there! I know jolly well it is grub!"

"It isn't! On my honour it isn't!" Racke said earnestly.

Baggy winked.

"Think I don't know how much your word of honour's worth, Racke?" he said.

"Don't be a silly ass!" Crooke snorted. "It's not grub, or anything like it.

Cadet Notes.

Arrangements have now been made for the admittance of members of Cadet units into the Royal Air Force for training as pilots and observers, a step which will prove the most popular means of recruiting the Cadet Movement that could have been taken. An Army Council Instruction issued recently provides that members of Cadet corps who are desirous of joining the R.F.A. (Pilots and Observers Section), may, on attaining the age of 17 years and 10 months, apply to the officer commanding their Cadet unit, who, if he considers the candidate suitable, may send him to the nearest Reception Depot of the R.A.F., with a written recommendation under this Instruction.

Of course, there are a number of other provisions in the Order, and a number of details to be attended to; but copies of the Order are sent to officers commanding all the Cadet units, so that they should be familiar with its terms and the steps they must take to assist their members to enter the R.A.F. when they reach the required age. During the past six months some hundreds of boys have applied to the Central Association Volunteer Regiments for information and advice about how to get into the Air Force. Here is a door open for them, and all they have to do is to join their nearest Cadet corps, and wait until they reach the proper age for securing admission to the Air Force. As hitherto, full particulars, address of local corps, etc., will be supplied to any recruits who will write to the Central Association Volunteer Regiments, Judges' Quadrangle, Royal Courts of Justice, W.C. 2.

Look here, you think you know somethin'——"

"I don't think; I jolly well know!" chuckled Baggy. "And other chaps are going to know if——"

"If we don't pay you to keep it dark, I suppose?" said Racke, putting a hand to his breast-pocket. "Will a quid do it, Baggy, old pal?"

"A quid and my share of the grub you've got there!" replied the youthful blackmailer.

"We haven't got any grub there! Don't I keep on tellin' you so?" hissed Crooke.

"Well, let me see what it is, then. That's only fair. You say it's not grub, but you're both such liars that nobody can believe you!"

Baggy's head was in danger then. He took a pace or two back as he saw Crooke's fist uplifted.

The rain-coat stirred slightly, but none of the three saw the movement, and their ears failed to catch the low groan that came from under it.

Skimmy had recovered consciousness, but had not yet realised where he was or what had happened to him.

The first words that fell upon his ears came from Racke.

"See here, Baggy, I'll make it thirty bob. That ought to satisfy you; for, of course, you'll be a gainer by my havin' my man about. Keep your mouth shut about him, that's all, an' I'll make it worth your while."

Baggy grinned as he stretched out his podgy hand. He was distinctly in clover. Thirty bob for a mere minor secret, and the big one still kept in reserve for future blackmailing operations!

He went without any further reference to the supposed grub under the rain-coat.

Hardly had the door closed behind him when Crooke turned upon Racke.

"Is that all he's got on to?" he hissed.

"About Scaife bein' at Larch Cottage, I mean?"

"Why, what else should he know?" inquired Racke.

Scaife was Racke's special secret. The plot against Tom Merry and Talbot was really more Crooke's than Racke's. Each felt his own burden of secrecy more than he felt the other's, though neither stood clear of guilt as to either affair.

"If he's heard about the plan to settle Merry's chance in the Marathon, or Talbot's, whichever it may be——"

"But he can't have heard! Don't be a fool, Gerry!"

"I don't see how he could have been near without us twiggin' him!" said Crooke doubtfully. "But——"

"Rot! He couldn't possibly! Besides, he would have blabbed it all out if he had. Did you ever know him to keep in anythin' like that when he saw a chance of makin' his profit? He's got hold of somethin' in the village, that's all."

"I hope it is all," said Crooke, still a trifle doubtful. "Perhaps it is, but—— I say, Skimmy's stirrin'!"

Racke snatched away the rain-coat, and Skimmy opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he gasped.

Herbert Skimpole was far from being a born actor; but he really did not play his part so badly then. Whatever doubts Crooke might still have as to Baggy, neither Crooke nor Racke suspected that Skimmy left No. 7 with any knowledge of their rascally plot!

CHAPTER 7.
A Clear Call to Talbot!

"GORE, my dear fellow, have you seen Talbot?" asked Skimpole anxiously.

"Lots of times, fathead!" replied George Gore, with cheery politeness.

"That is understood. What I would ask is whether you have seen him quite recently?"

"I saw him at dinner."

Skimpole sighed, and pressed a hand to his massive brow. The action drew Gore's attention to the fact that his eccentric study-mate's right temple was bleeding slightly.

"Who's been giving you that?" he asked sharply.

"I fear I do not quite follow you, Gore. I regret to say that you have a habit of wandering from the point at issue, which is due, I cannot but conclude, to an inferior and illogical mind."

"Ass! Who's been lamming you?" snorted Gore.

"Oh, you mean this?" Skimmy touched his temple gingerly with his fore-finger, and looked at the reddened digit with mild curiosity. "Racke and Crooke did that. But it is really of no consequence."

"Isn't it, though? We'll see about that, old idiot! Talbot and I aren't going to have our tame ass knocked about by those cads!"

Now and then Gore had a way of showing that, if he despised Skimmy as a moonstruck ass, he did not wholly dislike him. These manifestations always took the genius of the Shell by surprise.

"Where are you going, Gore?" he asked.

"I'm going to see Racke and Crooke!" snapped Gore.

"I would very much prefer that you should do me the favour of discovering the whereabouts of Talbot, and conveying to him the information that I desire to see him on urgent business."

"Think I'm going to run your errands for you? You're jolly well off it if you do!"

"Or, if you chance to see Trimble, you might tell him that his presence in this study is requested immediately," went on Skimmy mildly.

"Anybody else you want finding? Don't forget to mention it before I go, for goodness' sake!" said Gore sarcastically.

"There is no one else, thank you, Gore, my dear fellow, unless—but no, on the whole I think I will see Kerr myself."

"Oh, will you? You don't happen to want Railton or Kildare or the Head or Mellish or Piggot, I suppose?"

"Thank you, Gore, no."

Gore glared at him speechlessly, went out, and slammed the door. It appeared to be a waste of time to sling sarcasm at Skimmy.

But Gore went along to No. 7, spent a whirling five minutes there, and came out with a bruise or two, but with quite a cheerful expression. George Gore was up against Racke and Crooke; and, being no longer the weedy waster of former days, he was quite capable of tackling those two unheroic youths together, though they were rather a handful for him thus.

So cheery did he feel that, happening to see Baggy Trimble, he gave that podgy junior Skimmy's message.

"What's he want me for?" asked Baggy suspiciously.

"Not sure. But I fancy it would be to your advantage to go. Skimmy had a remittance this morning, I know that."

Baggy rolled off. It was not at all likely that Herbert Skimpole's remittance would be used to benit the obtuse and obese Baggy, but in matters of that kind Baggy believed in letting no chance slip.

Hardly had he got well inside No. 9 when Talbot entered.

"Talbot, my dear fellow, I think it would be as well that you should shut the door," said Skimmy, whose wits seemed to have been sharpened by what had happened to him in No. 7. "Trimble has a narrative to relate which——"

"Rats!" struck in Baggy rudely. "I didn't come here to relate any narrative. I came because Gore said——Here, stoppit, Talbot! I'm not going to—— Stoppit, I say!"

Talbot had shut the door, and put himself against it. He was surprised, but he

saw that there was method in Skimmy's apparent madness.

"Better be quiet, Trimble!" he said coolly. "You're not going to be hurt, so there's no necessity to kick up a silly fuss in anticipation. What is it, Skimmy, old top?"

"I have studies to pursue that are of the utmost importance, Talbot, so possibly you may excuse brevity on my part. I will therefore simply say that I consider it necessary that Trimble should tell you all he knows concerning a nefarious plot between Racke and Crooke on the one hand, and an individual named Scaife, resident at a house called Larch Villa, and connected in some manner with Racke, on the other."

And with that Skimpole opened a volume of the great Professor Balmycrumpet, found his place, and started to read as though no one else were present. It said something for Skimmy's powers of concentration that he could do this.

To anyone but Talbot it might have suggested absolute indifference on Skimmy's part to the nefarious plot. But Talbot knew Skimmy better than that. He was not really indifferent; he had not the time to spare, that was all.

Talbot saw Baggy go pale, and blink. Baggy's face gave him away. It was evidence in itself of the fact that there was something in what Skimmy had said.

"Now, then, Trimble, out with it!"

There was plenty of charity in Talbot. He had more than once seen good in fellows whom others thought wholly evil. But Baggy Trimble was outside the pale of Talbot's sympathy. Bare justice was all he could give the fat Fourth-Former, and bare justice was the last thing Baggy ever wanted.

"I—I—I don't know what the silly ass is talking about!" howled Baggy. "You can't keep me here, Talbot. I'm not going to stand it!"

"Don't lie to me! However Skimpole may have got hold of this yarn, there's something in it. The wretched funk you're in tells that."

"There ain't a word of truth in it, and I'm not in a funk. Yarcooh! Don't you start knocking me about, Talbot, or——"

Baggy's further utterance was cut short by one of the severest shakings he had ever had. Something seemed to have disturbed Talbot's temper, usually kept well in hand. He shook Baggy until that wretched fat youth's teeth clattered like castanets.

Then he pushed him, shaking and gurgling, into a chair.

"That's nothing to what you'll get if you don't tell all you know!" he snapped.

Baggy, though well known to be a leaky vessel, was not wholly devoid of the capacity to keep a secret which seemed to him likely to be profitable.

But he had already made his profit out of this one, and he feared Talbot intensely. Talbot's eyes were blazing. He looked quite fierce. Baggy remembered what the handsome junior had once been, and wondered whether in his days as a cracksman he had ever killed anyone. He looked savage enough for that or anything now.

Crooke again, and Crooke at a time like this, when Colonel Lyndon's charge had to be carried out! That was what Reginal Talbot was thinking. That was what made him so furious. Baggy was not responsible for Crooke's misdeeds, but Baggy seemed to be mixed up somehow in this one, and perhaps it was not to be wondered at that Crooke's cousin should vent some of his wrath upon the podgy junior.

"I—I—— Look here, Talbot, if I tell you all about it——"

"There's no 'if' to it. Trimble! You're going to tell me all about it before you go out of this study!"

Not a Success!
(See Chapter 10.)

And Trimble told! To the best of his memory he related all that had passed between the Shell fellows and Racke's rascally man. He had not forgotten much that mattered. The place and the manner of the foul trick he knew, and those two things were almost enough in themselves.

When Baggy had finished he was kicked out of the study without delay or ceremony. He fled, howling. Talbot sank into the armchair, and gave vent to something like a groan.

"Is anything the matter, my dear fellow?" asked Skimmy, looking up from the enthralling pages of Balmycrumpet.

"Didn't you hear?"

"I caught a word here and there, but I cannot say that I followed attentively the drift of Trimble's conversation. My experience of it is that it consists mainly of vain repetitions. Trimble, if he can be averred to possess a mind at all, has one for which I can only feel contempt."

"Oh, get out, Skimmy, and let me do some thinking!" snapped Talbot.

Skimmy went meekly, without even a reproachful look. A minute or two later Talbot saw him crossing the quad to the New House, and wondered what could be taking him there. But he forgot all about Skimmy in a few seconds.

He paced up and down the small study, thinking hard.

A clear call had come to him. To answer it he must put aside all hope of winning the Marathon himself, and he had hoped to win it for the sake of the Form and for the personal glory, though he fancied Tom Merry's chance better than his own, and would not grudge victory to Tom.

All that was at an end. He might start, but he would never complete the course. His presence would be required elsewhere.

The plot must be thwarted, alike for the sake of the Shell and for Crooke's sake.

There was the alternative of letting Crooke and Racke know that they were found out. They would hardly dare to carry through the plot after that.

But everything was arranged. It might not be in their power to stop it. And if they did stop it they might try something else—something not so easily frustrated as this could be, now that it was known. They must be desperate. Mere spite against their own Form would not have led them to this.

And it would give Talbot a grip on Crooke—such a grip as might enable him to do more to carry out the colonel's wishes than any appeal to his better nature would be likely to do.

Talbot had made up his mind. He ceased to pace up and down the study. He sat down again, and thought it all out calmly.

The clear call had come to him, and he would answer it!

CHAPTER 8.
The Start.

"PHEW! Isn't it hot?" said Sidney Clive.

"You don't mean to tell me that, havin' been born an' brought up in tropical South Africa, you find this hot, old bean?" returned Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"South Africa's not in the tropics, fathead! It is hot there sometimes, I know, but not much hotter than this."

Cardew, Clive, and Levison were lined up side by side, ready for the start of the Marathon.

Nearly fifty fellows were starting, though it was quite certain that many of them would not finish. Cardew would not do that, for one. Clive and Levison had persuaded him to enter, but they had little hope that he would stay in to the end.

The Fourth Form competitors outnumbered the Shell entrants by some thing like two to one. The Fourth was

the bigger Form, and had fewer slackers than the Shell.

Blake & Co. were there, of course. The noble Arthur Augustus had high hopes of finishing well to the front; but no one else expected that of him. Figgins and Kerr were there; but Fatty Wynn stood outside the throng, in every-day garments. Not all that Figgy and Kerr could do had availed to induce Fatty even to start—not in weather like this, he said.

The New House juniors were there—Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence, Clarke, Koumi Rao, and Robinson minor. The quartette from Study No. 5 in the School House Fourth Form passage—Julian, Kerruish, Hammond, and Reilly—were all there. Durrance—who had come to the school as Paul Laurenz, but now bore his right name—stood with the three from Study No. 9, and was likely to go farther in the race than his lackadaisical cousin, Cardew.

Dick Roylance, the New Zealander, was there—one of the hopes of his Form. Jerrold Lumley-Lumley, Brooke, the day-boy, Mulvaney minor, and the ineffable Clarence York Tompkins, Smith minor, Contarini, the little Italian, Jones minor, Lorne, and Macdonald, were all there. The Fourth at least showed willing, as Jack Blake remarked to George Herries.

More of the Shell were standing down. The Terrible Three were there, of course, and Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn. Gibbons and Gore and Frere and Walkley were in the ranks; and Thompson and French and Jimson represented the New House. George Wilkins was present, looking anxiously round; but neither Grundy nor Gunn showed up. Gunn, who was not starting, had rushed off to find Grundy.

"But he won't come," said Wilkins dolefully. "'Tain't often the old ass gets his back up and keeps it up like this. But he's waxy still about you chaps turnin' him out of the committee meeting and bumping him. He says he said then he wouldn't run, and he's sticking to it. Gunny and I talked to him like Dutch uncles; but it was no go."

"Never mind about Grundy," said Gore impatiently. "We can do without that silly chump! But where's old Talbot?"

It was curious that until then no one had noticed Talbot's absence.

The Shell fellows looked round anxiously. The race was timed to start at half-past nine. Kildare, captain of St. Jim's, held his watch in his hand, and that watch showed twenty-seven minutes past.

"My hat! Where can old Talbot have got to?" said Tom Merry, in dismay.

"And Grundy; that ass ought to be made to run!" chimed in Kangaroo. "All very well for Gore to say we can do without him. I'm not so sure of that."

"Old Grundy's a pretty big all-round duffer, but he can run, and he can keep on moving," said Wilkins. "Hallo! There's Gunny!"

William Cuthbert Gunn came racing up.

"It's all right," he panted. "Talbot's got round him somehow. They're coming! I say, Kildare, Talbot says will you give them a minute or two's grace? Grundy hadn't got his togs on."

Two minutes; not a second longer!" snapped Kildare.

"Here they come!" cried Thompson.

Grundy looked a trifle sheepish, but still of importance. Talbot's face was serious. Persuading Grundy did not appear to have amused him at all.

"Fall into line!" ordered the captain of St. Jim's.

"Just one moment, Kildare," pleaded Grundy. "Look here, you fellows, I haven't been treated with proper respect, and I didn't mean to run at all. But——"

"Do you hear me?" rapped out Kildare.

"But as Talbot says he won't——"

Talbot's elbow took Grundy under the fifth rib.

"Are you coming, Grundy?" roared Kildare.

Grundy fell in by Talbot's side, his lips still working. He felt that he ought to have been given a chance to explain the lofty position he had taken up, and the motives which had induced him to abandon it.

But Talbot did not desire that explanation at all. In order to overcome Grundy's reluctance he had been obliged to tell George Alfred that he himself was a non-starter. And it was so far true that Grundy really was the one fellow not intending to start, who had the slightest chance of scoring points. Whether Grundy could do that remained to be seen. But at worst there was a chance of his doing it; and points mattered very much.

Talbot, in fact, did not feel quite easy as to what his chums would say afterwards about his dropping out of the race in order to defeat the plots of Racke and Crooke. But the thing had to be done, he felt. For good or ill, his resolve was taken.

"Ready?" asked Kildare.

A hum of assent answered him.

"Off!" he said sharply, and nearly fifty fellows were off at the word.

The competitors who had to be taken seriously hung back a bit, for the most part. It is not the start that tells in a long-distance race.

To the front went nearly a score of runners who would be nowhere near the front at the finish—if the finish ever saw them at all.

Walkley and Gibbons, Kerruish and Hammond, Wilkins and Lorne, and Pratt, Koumi Rao, and Contarini, Smith minor and Jones minor, and Robinson minor, Tomkins and Mulvaney minor, Macdonald and Jimson, Frere and Clarke were all in that leading contingent, and among them also showed the pink-flushed face and the celebrated monocle of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Gussy's chums had warned him not to be in a hurry. But, as he had confided to them, he "weally felt extwaordinawily fit." No doubt he had visions of the scratch pack in which he ran falling away one by one, while he sped on triumphantly, and kept ahead for the whole fifteen miles, and came in a victor, hands down, without a struggle.

But it was hardly likely to work out quite that way.

Among those behind there was a general tendency at present for chums to hang together. The trio from Study No. 9 and Durrance made one little pack. Lowther and Manners ran by Tom Merry's side now; they would hardly be doing that when ten miles had been covered.

Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn were together as yet. Blake and Herries and Digby cantered along side by side. Just behind them came Redfern and Owen and Lawrence. The last pack of all was a mixed one. Figgins and Kerr were there, with Julian and Reilly, and Talbot and Gore, and Lumley-Lumley and Roylance. Brooke and Grundy, French and Thompson, were a little ahead of these eight.

CHAPTER 9.
An Ally from the Fourth.

GEORGE GORE seemed disposed to stick to Talbot, which was not at all according to Talbot's programme.

The handsome Shell fellow wanted to drop out of the race quite early without attracting notice. That was why he had taken care not to join the Terrible Three. He was giving them a chance to forget him for the time being.

But he had no intention of being the first to fall out. He felt pretty certain that within the next three miles or so some of the runners would have reached their limit.

And now the packs were stringing out, and by twos and threes and fours they dotted the white road over Wayland Moor. The torrid sun poured down upon them, and, lightly clad as they were, many of them began to feel their clothes burdensome. The air fairly throbbed with heat; the breeze of morning had dropped; and overhead the arch of the sky was fleckless blue.

It was a day to test endurance, and there were fellows among the forty odd who were not disposed to put their endurance to too severe a test.

Tompkins and Frere were the first to chuck it. Tompkins threw himself panting upon the crisp turf of the moor, and Frere stopped and looked down at him.

"Come on, ye omadhaun!" cried Mulvaney minor to Clarence York.

"Had enough!" panted that hero.

Frere sat down by him without a word. He was not much of a talker at any time. But it did not need words just then to show that he also had had enough.

Cardew halted as he came up.

"Done to the wide, Tompkins, old bird?" he inquired sweetly.

"Oh, don't stop, Cardew, you slacker!" yelled Clive.

"Must, dear boy! Tompkins isn't very well, I'm sure; an common humanity dictates. Good-bye, if you must go! Mind you pull it off between you, for the honour and glory of Number Nine!"

Levison grunted, and Clive grimaced. No use to argue! They swept on.

Cardew sat down, smiling.

"Weally, Cardew, you slacker!" puffed Gussy as he went past.

"Save your breath, noble kinsman! You'll need it if you're going to win," replied Cardew coolly.

Past the three swept Tom Merry and his chums, and Kangaroo and Co., and Blake and Harris, and Digby, and many more. Figgins passed, with Brooke and Grundy. Kerr had halted down the road to do something to one of his shoes. Talbot and Gore went past together.

Cardew threw himself down on his back. Clarence York was lying on his stomach, groaning a little. He felt as though breakfast had been a mistake. Frere sat up and chewed a blade of grass in meditative fashion.

Kerr was the last of all to pass the three on the grass. He glanced at them and smiled.

"Cheerio, Kerr!" said Cardew pleasantly.

In a few minutes the runners were mere dots of red or white to the three. But there were fewer such dots than one might have expected. Half a score more had dropped out and thrown themselves down.

Talbot began to wonder whether he would have a chance, after all, to give up unnoticed. Gore was still with him, and Kerr padded behind, and at intervals of a hundred yards or so he came upon fellows who had retired early from the burden and heat of the day—Jimson,

Walkley, Hammond, Pratt, Jones minor, Contarini, and Frank Smith, Lorne, Koumi Rao, Robinson minor.

And there were others who would drop out soon. Arthur Augustus was palpably flagging; Gibbons and French had not another mile in them; Thompson and Macdonald were in little better case. If any of them reached Wayland it would be about as far as he would get.

"I say, old man, let's pull up a bit closer to the leaders," said Gore to Talbot.

"You go on, Gore," answered Talbot. "Don't wait for me. I've something in my right shoe."

His foot was in it, that was all. But Gore, though he had rather a suspicious mind, did not dream that Talbot would employ such an evasion as that.

"You can catch me up," he said.

And he ran on, and joined Grundy and Brooke and Figgins. Figgy looked round as he breasted a rise, and waved his hand. He probably took Talbot for Kerr in that rapid glance, his vision obscured by the perspiration that streamed down his face and into his eyes. For Kerr was not visible just then.

Talbot made sure of that—or thought he had made sure—before he threw himself down, and dodged behind a clump of gorse.

He lay there, not by any means tired, not even breathing hard, but glad enough to rest for a minute or two.

He quite expected to see Kerr trot past. But the Fourth-Former failed to show up on the road.

"Hallo, Talbot!" said a voice in the rear.

Talbot sat up suddenly. It was Kerr who had spoken.

"Why—what——"

"Oh, it's all serene!" said Kerr coolly. "I'm in this with you, that's all."

Talbot stared.

"Now, don't say 'In what?'" Kerr said, sitting down by him. "I know all about it, old top."

"Who told you?" snapped Talbot.

"Skimmy, dear boy. Skimmy did me the high honour of picking me out from the two Forms to be your ally in overturning the sweet little plot of Messrs. Racke and Hacke—I mean, Racke and Crooke, of course."

"What on earth——"

"Don't be so blessed unflattering, Talbot! Skimmy approves of me. What more do you ask? The old dear considers that I handled the case of the missing manuscript quite well; he says so. He even said that I had brains. Not his class of brains, of course, but still——"

"You mean to say Skimmy told you the yarn and asked you specially to help me?" gasped Talbot.

He remembered now that he had seen Skimpole go across to the New House the preceding evening. But he had never imagined the eccentric genius of the Shell doing anything like this.

As he looked at Kerr, however, he could not feel annoyed, either with Kerr or with Skimmy.

There were few fellows in either Form whom he would sooner have had as an ally than Kerr, cool and brainy, active and hefty. Tom Merry or Figgins, Blake or Levison, Kangaroo or Dane—any one of them would have been welcome. But they were all among the score or so who might really be counted in the race.

So was Kerr, for that matter. But Kerr was here, smiling, nonchalant, seeming quite cheery about throwing away his chance.

"What about the race?" asked Talbot sharply.

"Same to you!" replied Kerr.

"But you're Fourth!"

"And you're Shell, Talbot. That makes it fair, except that you're chucking away a far bigger chance than I ever had."

"What will Figgy and the rest say to you?"

"Come to that, the Shell-fish may say things to you, you know."

"I felt it was up to me, Kerr, old man."

"So did I, Talbot. Skimmy saw it, too. How could a chap refuse to see it after Skimmy had seen it? To be chosen by Skimmy——"

"Don't rot!" snapped Talbot. "Old Skimmy meant well, but—— Don't you see, Kerr? They're Shell rotters who are at the bottom of this dirty game, and I'm Shell, too. It's a heap more my bizney than yours."

"Not at all," replied Kerr calmly. "Just as much the bizney of the Fourth. You don't suppose any of us would care to win because some Shell blackguards have been betting against their own side, do you?"

"Of course I don't! But——"

"The honour of the Fourth is at stake, dear man. We want to win the competition, but we want a clean win on our merits—see? It might have been fairer to your Form if it had been Blake, or Figgy, or Levison, or Roylance rather than me. You and I don't quite cancel out in the equation. But Skimmy chose me, and who shall naysay Skimmy?"

"You're jolly good in a long race, Kerr. As far as that goes, we cancel out all right. Both of us had a chance of scoring points. We've both lost it now, I guess, so we needn't argue any longer."

"Plenty of time," said Kerr, picking at the wild thyme among the grass. "Go on arguing for half an hour; we can still be at the chosen spot without hurrying. But I may as well warn you that if you argue yourself black in the dial it will make no odds—not a scrap!"

Talbot held out his hand impulsively.

"I always knew you were a good chap, Kerr!" he said. "But I don't think I realised till now half how good a chap you are!"

"That's all right," said Kerr, gripping the proffered hand. "Plenty more in the Fourth who will have done it. I happen to be the elect of Skimmy, that's all. Figgy and Fatty were wrathy with me for talking secrets with the old ass; but it couldn't be helped. They'll understand later."

"Do you know of a way to dodge Cardew and those other fellows behind, and get to Rylcombe Lane without being twigged?" asked Talbot. He knew that no one at St. Jim's was a better hand at that sort of thing than Kerr.

"Do I know of a dozen—and then some?" retorted Kerr. "Come on, dear man! I can be useful there, anyway!"

CHAPTER 10.
A Plot Defeated.

"NOT chuckin' it, Gustavus?" called Jack Blake.

"Yaas—I'm done, Blake! I weally feah that I made the pace too hot at the start!" panted Arthur Augustus.

Blake grinned. Herries grinned. But Digby halted, and said breathlessly:

"Think I'll—chuck it—too!"

They threw themselves down by the side of the road, out beyond Wayland, and watched those who still held on go past them.

Tom Merry and Kangaroo and Dane were all ahead. So were Clive and Levison, Durrance and Roylance, Redfern and Figgins, and Brooke. But among those who passed Gussy and Dig were the great Grundy, plodding along well within himself, fit for much more yet; Gore, not so fit as Grundy; Julian and Reilly, holding on pluckily but not easily; Lowther and Manners, debating with one another as to whether enough had been done for honour, glory being beside the mark for them; Owen and Lawrence, side by side, with Lumley-Lumley tailing after them.

"Don't seem to be any more coming, Gustavus," said Digby. "That's about twenty still in, and most of 'em Fourth."

"Haven't seen Kerr, deah boy!" gasped D'Arcy.

"He's ahead with Figgy, of course!"

"No, deah boy, he's not. I'm quite suah of that!"

"Well, if you're sure, I suppose it's so, as you never make mistakes—ahem! I say, though, where's Talbot? He wasn't ahead."

"No, deah boy. Where evah can he be?"

"Never mind. That's the Shell's funeral, not ours. I say, Gustavus, if we hurry back a bit to Wayland we can catch a train to Rylcombe, and have our togs off and a bath, and be in time to see the finish. Kim on!"

Gussy groaned, but obeyed. He wanted to see the finish; but, without Dig, he would hardly have nerved himself to more haste that day.

They picked up Glyn and Wilkins on the way. The rest had all dropped out, it appeared.

And more were dropping out now. Only one here and there, for those left in were the pick of the two Forms. But even for them the long run in the torrid heat was an ordeal.

Brooke had stopped before the ten-mile mark was passed. Manners and Lowther gave in there. Lawrence went only a little farther, and Reilly halted when Lawrence did; but Owen and Julian struggled on together.

The ten-mile mark was not so very far from St. Jim's, for the course after that took a bend away from the school. It was all mapped out by road and path, with no cross-country work; and at various points along it Fifth and Sixth Formers had taken up their places as wardens of the course, having ridden over on bikes.

Those who dropped out mostly made tracks for the school at once, intent on seeing the finish. One or two might not have energy enough left; but the majority of them could still walk, at least.

Lefevre of the Fifth was the last of the seniors to be passed, and with him stood Wally D'Arcy and Frank Levison, his fellow-umpires.

Wally and Frank cheered as Tom Merry ran past them alone, and Lefevre gave the Shell skipper a word of hearty encouragement.

Tom looked like winning, and Tom's win would be popular. But Frank Levison cheered more loudly still when Tom's nearest rivals appeared in view.

Five of them, all bunched together, and Fourth-Formers all! Levison major, Roylance, Blake, Figgins, Redfern! Clive and Durrance were somewhere behind, holding on still, but practically out of the race. It hardly seemed as though they would be needed, however. Tom Merry might—probably would—finish first; but it was quite on the cards that the other five places would all fall to the Fourth—that no Shell runner would be anywhere near.

Unless it was Grundy—or Dane!

These two appeared now, running side by side, but in very different styles. It was as though a buffalo-bull kept pace with a deer. Grundy thundered along, his broad chest panting; Dane ran lightly, and, as it seemed, easily, though perhaps not as easily as it seemed.

They were at least a couple of hundred yards behind the five Fourth-Formers, who were rather more than that in rear of Tom Merry.

But fully a couple of miles still remained to go, and in that distance there

is plenty of opportunity for changes to take place.

No one else came along for fully ten minutes. Then Kangaroo appeared, sticking to it gamely, though he knew he was out of the running, bar accidents.

A hundred yards behind Kangaroo struggled Herries, head down, chest heaving, holding on only by pluck and tenacity. Then came Clive, in somewhat better case than Herries; and a little behind Clive came Durrance and Julian and Gore, not one of them with a spurt left in him, but all keen on finishing.

"Queer thing old Talbot hasn't shown up, Franky," said D'Arcy minor. "There's Kerr, too. Might have expected him to be nearer the front than this."

"They'll show up soon," replied Frank Levison.

"Here comes someone," said Lefevre. "It isn't Talbot; may be Kerr. No, it's not, though. He had put his field-glasses to his eyes. "It's young Owen; and there's nobody else along the road for a mile, at least. I can't see anyone at all."

"If we're to see the finish——"

"Right-ho, D'Arcy minor! May as well mount and ride, I think."

The Fifth-Former and his two youthful companions got on their bikes and rode away. But they did not go through Rylcombe Lane.

They would not have seen Talbot and Kerr if they had. But Talbot and Kerr were there.

And now they were quite sure that their sacrifice had not been in vain. Securely hidden in the undergrowth of a spinney they had watched the rascal whom Racke and Crooke had suborned to do their dirty work at his task.

If this was Racke's man, then Racke's man was a villainous-looking scoundrel, they thought. The fellowed looked the tramp all over.

It was actually Scaife, but Scaife had disguised himself.

The two hidden juniors watched his preparations. They were quite simple, and took but a minute or two.

He tied his rope to a stout sapling on the other side of the road, walked across with the loose end, and hid himself opposite. He had but to give an upward tug to the rope at the critical instant, and any runner who had not chanced to see it, and pull up, must infallibly be pitched forward on his face. And it was very unlikely that anyone would see the rope in time. In the dust of the road it hardly showed at all.

Talbot and Kerr had so placed themselves that they had a view of the road, as well as of the rascal who held the rope. Talbot watched the road, while Kerr kept his eyes on Scaife.

They had seen Cussy and Digby, Glynn and Wilkins, pass on their way from Rylcombe Station. Had they felt that they needed help they would have called upon those four. But they preferred to carry through their task without aid. It might not have been easy to hide half a dozen fellows; and Talbot was keen on frustrating the attempt at the last moment, rather than scaring off the scoundrel who was to make it. Kerr understood. There were several reasons why that course was best.

"Somebody's coming!" whispered Talbot in Kerr's ear. "It's a chap in a white shirt; it looks like Tom Merry. It is Tom, by Jove!"

"Any red shirts in the offing?" whispered back Kerr.

"No, old man. Tom's going to win this race as Eclipse won a Derby once—the rest nowhere!"

"Not if we don't do our little bit," replied Kerr. "Time to act!"

Very cautiously they stole upon the

rascal with the rope. He was coming forward eagerly to watch for the coming of the white-shirted runner. Things looked to be panning out nicely for Mr. Scaife!

Tom drew near. They could hear the thudding of his feet and the thumping of their own hearts. There was risk. Let them be but a second too late, and Tom might be hurled to the ground, hopelessly out of the race.

He was running well still, but the strain had told on him at last. Talbot and Kerr, both of whom knew that strain, could perceive that. With the sweat and dust clogging his eyes, he would never see that rope.

No one else showed along the white road. Tom had a long lead.

"Now!" hissed Talbot, and together he and Kerr sprang upon Scaife from behind.

With a strong arm flung around his neck, half-throttling him, the rascal went down at once, and almost without a sound.

And Tom Merry ran on, seeing nothing, hearing nothing; a certain winner now.

CHAPTER 11.
The End of the Race.

TOM ran on. Talbot and Kerr sat upon Scaife's prostrate body, and saw red shirts down the road.

"Can you keep the rotter on the floor, old scout?" asked Kerr. "Only for a moment, you know."

"I fancy so," replied Talbot grimly; and he clutched Scaife by the throat again.

"Gurrroog!" gasped the scoundrel.

Kerr flitted out of the spinney with the rope, flung it across clear into the opposite ditch, and flitted back, to take a seat upon Scaife again.

Then, strung out a little now, but with barely twenty yards between leader and rear man, the five Fourth-Formers passed—first Figgins, then Levison, then Roylance, with Redfern just ahead of Blake.

"Good old Figgy!" breathed Kerr.

But as the words left his lips Figgy slackened in his stride, and Roylance drew up to Levison, and both passed the leader of the New House juniors.

And now, side by side, Grundy and Dane ran past. They had gained on the red-shirted runners within the last mile. The Shell had still a chance.

"Not all over yet, Kerr!" said Talbot quietly.

Both leaned forward to watch. Scaife saw his chance, and took it. He gave a sudden plunge, rolled from beneath them, lashed out with both feet, taking Talbot on the thigh and Kerr in the stomach, jumped up, plunged into the undergrowth, and was gone!

"Oh, hang it all!" gasped Kerr.

"Let him go," said Talbot quietly. "I shall know him again if I see him, and if he's Racke's rascal we can find him.

"Well, if there's nothing to keep us we might cut across the fields and see the finish yet," said Kerr.

Tom Merry was within sight of the waiting crowd at the gates, and cheers were ringing out as the crowd recognised him, when Talbot and Kerr dashed up from a direction which made it plain that they were not in the race. But few heeded them; all eyes were on Tom—until seven moving forms appeared behind him round a bend, and then attention was diverted to them.

Tom would finish first; nothing could be much more certain than that. His victory would mean thirty-five points to the Shell. But there were seventy-five points to be shared among the next six, and it was now plain that among the seven who came there were five red shirts and only two white!

The odds were heavily on the Fourth.

"There's Figgy!" howled Fatty Wynn.

"An' Woylance!" cried Arthur Augustus, dropping his monocle in his excitement. "Bwavo, Woylance!"

"My major's in front!" yelled Frank Levison.

"There's old Grundy! Good old Grundy!" hooted Gunn and Wilkins together.

"An' Blakey, bai Jove! But I feah Blake——"

"It's Dane in the other white shirt!" roared Bernard Glyn.

"And Reddy's there!" sang out Pratt.

Levison was just ahead now, with Roylance a few yards behind him. But Grundy made a desperate effort, drew up to them, and even got ahead for a few yards.

Tom Merry ran in an easy winner amidst a din of voices. But it was not his name they shouted now. That name had rung out loudly enough a few moments earlier, but now the Shell contingent cheered for Grundy and for Dane; and the Fourth, who had cheered Tom then, roared encouragement to Roylance and Levison, to Blake and Figgins and Redfern.

But now it was plain to be seen that Figgy would hardly finish among the first six. His bolt was shot; he could only stagger in. And Grundy had faltered in his stride, and his big head hung heavily; and Roylance and Levison swept past him, with not a yard between them; and Blake and Dane were within a man's length of him.

Levison, Roylance, Grundy, Blake, Dane, Redfern, Figgins—so it was within fifty yards of home. Then Blake made a plucky effort, and passed Grundy; and the Fourth yelled like madmen, for if their men secured second, third, and fourth places victory for them was certain! They would have sixty points out of the hundred and ten at stake, and would be safe even without their lead of those points at the start.

"Bravo, Reddy! He's caught up Dane!" roared Kerr.

But Dane spurted, and Redfern fell back from him. Dane drew up to Grundy, but not past him, for Grundy tossed his big head and put his last ounce into it; and the Shell cheered frantically as he forged ahead of Blake and drew nearer to Levison and Roylance.

"Oh, come on, deah boys—come on!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Stick to it, Grundy!" shouted Talbot.

And Grundy stuck to it like a hero. He was hard on the heels of the two red-shirted leaders; with twenty yards still to go he looked like passing them. But they were game, too, and each had something in hand for the finish. Neck and neck they raced on; a gap increased between them and Grundy. Redfern was out of it now, but Blake and Dane were almost on Grundy's heels.

Then, for an instant, Blake had a clear lead of Dane, and was level with Grundy. Next moment Roylance and Levison breasted the tape together, and Blake staggered, and Grundy threw himself forward in the nick of time. Then Dane shot up from the rear and reached Blake's side in the very last second.

It was a rare finish. Grundy's fall had broken the tape; but it was plain to all that Blake and Dane had dead-heated for fifth place, just as Roylance and Levison had for second!

The dead-heat of the two Fourth-Formers made no real difference at all; their Form scored second and third place points. But the dead-heat of Blake and

Dane made all the difference. Had Dane not reached Blake's side in that last second the points would have been equally divided for the race, and the Fourth's previous lead of three would have given them victory.

No one quite realised it at once, when Kildare's voice rang out:

"Merry first; Roylance and Levison, level, second; Grundy fourth; Blake and Dane, level, fifth; that's right, I think, sir?"

"Quite right, Kildare!" said Mr. Railton, who was sharing the office of judge with the St. Jim's skipper.

"Hurrah! Shell wins!" shouted Talbot.

"How do you make that out, deah boy? We——"

"Tommy takes thirty-five, Grundy fifteen, Dane seven and a half," counted Manners. "That's fifty-seven and a half, which leaves fifty-two and a half to the Fourth. Five behind, and we only wanted four to win! Get Gussy a slate and pencil someone, and let him sit down and figure it out. He'll get the result before to-morrow morning—perhaps!"

But even Gussy saw now. The Shell had won the great sports competition by two points!

"Here, drop it!" yelled Tom Merry. "None of that!"

But it was to no avail that he protested and struggled. The Shell crowd snatched him up and lifted him to their shoulders; they carried him in triumph across the quad, while they roared like madmen.

Grundy and Clifton Dane had done nobly; but, after all, it was Tom Merry, the Shell's skipper and the Shell's idol, who had done most for the Shell's great victory. And neither Grundy nor Dane —though George Alfred would dearly have liked to be chaired—grudged him his honours.

But Grundy and Dane were not forgotten.

"Now, old Grundy!" yelled Wilkins, rushing back as Tom struggled down.

"And Dane!" shouted Glyn. "Don't forget Dane!"

But the Canadian junior dodged. Grundy didn't dodge. He didn't even pretend to. Hould beamed upon the crowd as he was snatched up and lifted to their shoulders. It was a proud moment for Grundy.

Talbot slapped him on the back as his feet touched earth again.

"Bravo, old fellow!" he said in Grundy's ear. "You did what I asked of you; but don't tell anyone I asked it, there's a good chap!"

. . . . . .

"Kerr," said Talbot, a few minutes later, "can you keep a secret?"

"I rather fancy so. But you don't mean to say you want to let these two rotters off?"

"Well, not exactly. But I'd rather the bizney wasn't talked of yet. I've my reasons."

"I shall have to tell Figgy and Fatty," said Kerr. "Life won't be worth living for me if I don't explain!"

"I don't mean that; they're safe enough. And I must tell Tom Merry; but no one else, unless he wants Lowther and Manners to know."

"H'm! A secret among seven ain't much of a secret. Depends a good deal upon the chaps, though; and they're all staunch. But you've forgotten Skimmy and Baggy!"

"Skimmy will keep it dark if I ask him to. As for Trimble—no, I don't think he'll talk unless he sees profit in talking. And I fancy he'll see more in keeping silence."

"Talbot, old man, we'll leave Racke out of consideration. I know you're not worrying about Racke. But Crooke isn't worth worry about, either!"

"That's true, Kerr," said Talbot quietly. "But the rotter's my cousin; and there's my uncle, you know! It's up to me to do my best. Perhaps I can give Crooke a fright that will do him good."

Kerr shook his head.

"I think it's hopeless," he said. "But have it your own way—try!"

"I'm going to! Thanks no end, Kerr!"

But how Talbot tried, and what came of his attempt, another story must tell.

THE END.

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

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"DOING HIS BEST!"

By Martin Clifford.

This week's story tells of the hard task imposed upon Reginald Talbot by his uncle, Colonel Lyndon; and how, at the moment when he had made up his mind to do his best to carry it out, a fresh piece of rascality on the part of his cousin, George Gerald Crooke, the black sheep whose whole career at St. Jim's has been marked by blackguardism, made it impossible to do anything in that way until the plot had been foiled.

But Talbot is not the fellow to give up easily, even when he regards the task set him as above his weight. He could lead a forlorn hope with courage equal to that of the bravest. It is no better than a forlorn hope, this attempt to set the feet of Crooke in the right path.

Yet for a brief space Talbot seems to be winning some success in it, as you will learn next week. It is not giving too much away to say now that the success is but apparent. But the story must be left to tell how and why Crooke flattered Talbot's unselfish hopes, and how he gave himself away in the long run.

NEW READERS WANTED.

Now that I have finished the list of Tom Merry stories I shall have room now and then for a paragraph or two of the old-time style of Chat. There is little room to spare this week; but I want to ask you to do what many of you have done before—show the paper to your chums who don't already read it, and so get new readers. The thing is not difficult, and I don't think you will neglect this request. The letters I get tell me that the stories are as popular as ever, and there are many thousands of boys and girls all over the country who would be as keen on them as you are if they only knew of them.

Let them know, will you, please?

Thanks in advance! Nothing like being in good time!

LIST OF TOM MERRY STORIES IN THE "GEM"—*conclusion*.

I am not sure whether the list of stories has given general satisfaction; but I know there were many readers who wanted it, and they, at least, should be satisfied, while I don't think the others can have missed greatly my usual Chat pars. The end of the list appears hereunder; and in future notices for back numbers I hope that numbers, not names of stories, will be given. That practice would save quite a lot of room. But I cannot accept any more back number notices at all for a few weeks yet. I have made up my mind to clear off those which I have in hand first.

529.—"A Stern Chase."
530.—"A Drawn Game."
531.—"The Three Minors."
532.—"Who Shall be Captain?"
533.—"Spoofing the Shell."
534.—"The Shell Scores."
535.—"Racke's Man."
536.—"The Skipper of the Shell Second."
537.—"Friends, though Divided."
538.—"The Champion of the Shell."
539.—"Against All Comers."
540.—"Six on the Scent."
541.—"Herries' Special Turn."
542.—"The Hidden Hoard."
543.—"The Sneeze that Went Wrong."
544.—"The Plunger."
545.—"Lacy's Loss."
546.—"The Triumph of Tompkins."
547.—"Schoolboy Hun."
548.—"Cardew's Chum."
549.—"The Son of a Sailor."
550.—"Looking After Levison."

Any of the last dozen numbers wanted can probably be had from the publishers—address, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4—at twopence each, including postage.

CORRESPONDENCE WANTED BY.

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Frank West, 3, Richmond Terrace, Lowtown, Pudsey, Yorks, with readers aged 17.

L. Hyde, 439, Dudley Road, Birmingham, with boy readers in Africa, the Americas, India, and Australia.

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Your Editor

THE TWINS FROM TASMANIA.

FOR NEW READERS.

The twins are Philip Derwent, of Highcliffe, and his sister Phillippa, 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 Yavasour. 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 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. He makes up his mind that the only thing for him to do is to run away, as returning to Highcliffe means certain expulsion. Then he meets Peter Hazeldene, who has run away from Greyfriars. Goggs of Franklingham comes to Highcliffe. Flip and Hazel go to London, and make for Wayland. They tramp for some time, and eventually lose their way. Suddenly Hazel disappears from view, and Flip pulls himself up in the nick of time on the edge of a steep downfall. By a trick Pon, Gadsby, and Yavasour are sent to the Head, and Yavasour confesses. Flip and Hazel are found in an exhausted state by St. Jim's fellows. Ponsonby stops Flap and Marjorie, and is insulting. Goggs fights and thrashes Pon before the girls and several Highcliffe and Greyfriars Juniors. Flip is gradually recovering, though at one time it was thought he would die.

Back at Highcliffe (continued).

Smithson and Yates and Benson had come into No. 6, obviously with a purpose. They were made welcome there. They had shown themselves Flip's friends, and that was good enough for Merton and Tunstall.

"He'll try to get even with you some other way," said Smithson. "I know the rotter! He's always down on us."

"Let him try!" snapped Tunstall. "I can stand it, unless he goes too far.—He needn't think he'll get me sacked by makin' a row with me in the Form-room, by Jupiter! But he'd better be careful that he doesn't start punishin' till there's somethin' to punish for, as there's sure to be before long."

"Look here, Goggs——"

"I am looking, Nobby. Your rugged and homely, but eminently pleasant features——"

"Oh, blow the Nebby, and bust all that rot! Why won't you be serious?"

"It was my impression, Nebuchadnezzar, that I was quite the most serious—not to say preternaturally solemn—fellow at Highcliffe. But it is possible that I am wrong. My silly mistake—I'm always making them."

Goggs had taken off his glasses, and the blue eyes that they usually concealed were full of fun.

"You are wrong, and you jolly well know it!" Smithson said, with conviction. "You're as full of tricks as a monkey. Now, look here! A few days ago you more than half promised that you'd think of a plan for puttin' Mobby through it."

"He did a bit of that the other night, by Jupiter!" said Tunstall.

"Oh, that was all right; but it was really an accident. Mobby hadn't any blessed right spying at the door of our dorm. He was asking for it. We want him made a complete ass of some way or another, and Goggs is the man to do it!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Benson and Yates, looking quite appealingly at Johnny Goggs.

That youth rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he said, "unaccustomed as I am to public speaking——"

"Ass!" snapped Smithson. "This ain't public."

"Gettin' so!" said Tunstall, with a grin, as Frank Courtenay and the Caterpillar walked in. "It's all right, you chaps; but you're interruptin' Goggs or Smithson or somebody."

"You, as far as my judgment goes," murmured the Caterpillar.

"Well, that's so. But Goggs has the floor."

"Proceed, Goggs, dear boy!" said Rupert de Courcy politely.

The Return of Cocky.

"GENTLEMEN," repeated Goggs solemnly, "unaccustomed as I am to public speaking——"

"You said that before!" broke in Benson testily.

"In that I am not singular," replied Goggs blandly. "It has been said before by many people."

"Let him get on with the washin', dear boy!" said the Caterpillar.

"Er—to resume the laundry operations," Goggs spoke. "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking——"

"My hat! Shall we ever get to the point?" groaned Smithson.

But Goggs, in his most freakish mood, persisted.

"Gentlemen, unaccustomed as I am to public speaking——"

"That's the fourth time!" complained Yates.

"Shurrup!" snapped Tunstall. "Let the bounder do it his own way. He will, whether you like it or lump it. It's the only way he ever does things."

"Gentlemen, unaccustomed as I am to public speaking," repeated Goggs, "I am not going to make a speech now."

And he sat down, with a face as solemn as an owl's.

"What on earth does the old maniac mean?" asked Yates.

Smithson & Co. were looking at one another in utter bewilderment. The rest might understand; they were better used to Goggs' whimsies. But the three from No. 7 were quite at a loss.

"I rather fancy he means that it will be all right, dear boys," said the Caterpillar, smiling.

"Well, why can't he say so?" growled Smithson.

"Are you going to put Mobby through it?" inquired Benson anxiously.

"Wait and——"

"Oh, do chuck that rot! We want to know!"

"You will know in due course, Yates. Meanwhile, I will go so far as to confide to you the fact that I do not love Mr. Mobbs. I have grave doubts as to whether he is a truly nice man."

"Have you?" said Courtenay. "Now, I haven't any doubt whatever about that."

"Nobody has!" said Smithson, with conviction.

"Tell us what you mean to do, there's a good chap!" coaxed Yates.

But Goggs would tell nothing. Perhaps he had not made up his mind what he would do.

That he would do something to make Mr. Mobbs feel uncomfortable before he left Highcliffe was tolerably certain, however. It was a trait of Johnny Goggs that, sooner or later, he always got even with people who were rude to him; and Mr. Mobbs had been worse than rude. Goggs was not malicious or revengeful; but he did like getting his own back.

Smithson & Co. took some consolation from the evident certainty Merton and Tunstall and De Courcy felt that there was something in store for Mobby. But, though they discussed the subject at great length after their return to No. 7, they were unable even to guess what plan Goggs had in mind.

"He'll use his ventriloquism, I fancy," said Benson.

Goggs' ventriloquial powers were no longer quite a secret. A dozen or more fellows knew of them. But those who knew were all staunch.

And, of course, Goggs' time at Highcliffe was drawing to an end. His stay there had been but an interlude in his Franklingham school life. Whether he stayed on till the end of term was doubtful; but that was now only a matter of a fortnight or so.

He had come to help Flip Derwent, and he had done much to help him. Possibly Flip might have been allowed to return without what Goggs had accomplished for him; but he would not have returned practically cleared. Everyone knew now that, though Flip had been foolish and reckless, he had not been the most guilty of the four who had gone to the Courtfield gambling-den. Pon had persuaded him there, pretending friendship. Gadsby had plotted his ruin. If Dr. Voysey did not know all that, the Fourth knew it.

Nothing happened during classes the next morning, and Goggs was quite on his best behaviour, except that he appeared more tantalisingly deaf than ever—to Mr. Mobbs. All the Form knew by this time that he was not really deaf at all. Probably Mr. Mobbs also knew it, for it would have been like the nuts to let him know. But he could not prove it—which did not make it any the less annoying.

But Goggs' pretended deafness was an old wheeze. Smithson & Co. expected something much more sensational than that. They waxed very impatient. But the Caterpillar and Merton and Tunstall merely grinned when they voiced their impatience.

"No use tryin' to hurry Goggs, dear boys," said Rupert De Courcy.

"I shall try to buck him up if I can get hold of him, for all you say!" replied Smithson doggedly.

But he found it impossible to get hold of Goggs. Goggs could be very elusive when he chose. He disappeared directly classes were over, and was no more seen till the dinner-bell rang. Then he showed up, neat and precise as ever, coming, as it seemed, from nowhere in particular. But, as a matter of fact, he had just come from Cliff House.

After dinner Merton and Tunstall went straight to No. 6 together. As Merton pushed open the door a voice from within said:

"Hallo, there! Does your mother know you're out?"

"My hat! If it isn't old Cocky!" gasped Merton. "I'd clean forgotten all about the old sinner; but I'm dashed glad to see him again!"

"Same to you, and many of them! Hallo, Tun!" said Cocky, rising on his perch and ruffling his wings.

The cage stood just where it had always stood in Flip's time, and Cocky looked the same as ever—with his sly old head on one side and his beady eyes opened widely.

"Seems almost to bring old Flippy back," said Tunstall.

"Where's Flip?" crooned Cocky dolefully.

"Don't you worry, old boy; Flippy's all right," replied Merton, failing at once into the old way all three had had of answering the bird as if he could understand—and, indeed, he seemed to understand.

"Good—oh, good!" chortled Cocky, in Flip's voice.

"How on earth did he get here?" asked Merton.

"Goggs, of course!"

"But he was at Cliff House, y'know, an' I don't fancy Flap would have let him come back here until Flip was back for anythin' you or I could say, old top."

"P'raps not. She might not think we could be trusted to look after him properly. But everyone knows that old Goggs can be trusted all the way in anythin', an' Flap knows it better than most."

"Cocky wants a peanut!" said the bird shrilly.

"He's a wonder!" remarked Merton.

"Oh, that's an old dodge—the peanut wheeze. He's learned more than that at Cliff House, I'll bet!"

As if he understood, Cocky said, exactly in Miss Primrose's tones:

"My dear girls, I must really ask you to restrain yourselves! You are making more noise than young ladies should make!"

"Ass! I didn't mean Cocky. I meant Goggs."

"Oh! Well, I'm not contradictin' you, by Jupiter! What do you think of the marvellous Goggs, Cocky, old man?"

"Merton, Cocky wants a peanut! Tun, Cocky wants——"

"Oh, here you are! But I should think you

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might answer a civil question when you hear it!"

Cocky had just seized the peanut—which may have been rather stale, if peanuts get stale, for Merton raked it out of the pocket of a blazer of Flip's on the wall—when Goggs entered.

The peanut disappeared in record time, and Cocky cried:

"Hooray! Here he comes!"

"How did you work this, Goggs?" asked Tunstall.

"It was in no way difficult," replied Goggs mildly. "I asked Miss Derwent if I might take charge of him for a while, and she most kindly agreed."

"What do you want him for—company?" inquired Merton.

"Not entirely, though I consider him excellent company."

"Kiss me, and call me Albert!" shrilled Cocky.

"But that," said Goggs, with his head on one side and the gravest possible face, "is not your name, my friend."

"Rats!" said the crude Cocky.

Goggs put two fingers between the bars, and gently rubbed the bird's head.

Footsteps sounded in the passage—the footsteps of Mr. Mobbs.

"Kiss me, and call me Albert!"

It was not Cocky who said that—it was Goggs. But it sounded precisely like Cocky.

The handle rattled, and Mr. Mobbs looked in without the polite formality of knocking.

"That wretched bird here again, then?" snapped Mr. Mobbs, as he entered.

"He is here, as you see, sir," replied Goggs suavely. "But I really do not think that he can fairly be called wretched. He appears to me to be in the best of health and spirits."

"You are well aware what I mean, Goggs, and your answer is sheer impertinence! It is a curious thing that you should have heard what I said so well when you have such extreme difficulty in hearing in class—a very curious thing indeed!"

"Not at all, sir. You were kind enough to speak in quite a loud voice. I naturally had no difficulty in hearing when that is done."

"Do I not speak in a loud voice in the Form-room?"

"Very much so indeed, sir, at times. But not always."

Mr. Mobbs was almost foaming at the mouth. He regarded both Goggs and Cocky with eyes that had an expression little short of murderous; and when he turned his baleful gaze upon Merton and Tunstall there was no softening in it.

"I have stood more consummate insolence from you three boys than ever I endured in my life before!" he raged.

"Oh, sir! I'm sure it's very forgiving of you to put up with it!" murmured Goggs.

Merton and Tunstall grinned. Mr. Mobbs did not look at all forgiving, and nothing was much more certain than that he forgot not and forgave not. But their feeling just then was that he was welcome to do his worst.

"Do not imagine that you can treat me thus with impunity! I shall keep an eye on you, and I am confident that it will not be long before I catch you in further transgressions. Look out for yourselves then!"

Merton's lip curled, and the face of Goggs wore a sorrowful look. It was Tunstall who spoke.

"I should think it would be a straighter way to get even with us for what you consider we've done already, not wait till we've done somethin' else an' try to take it out of us for everythin' at once!" he said contemptuously.

"I decline to bandy words with you, Tunstall! Your behaviour to me at St. James' was grossly impertinent that——"

"Don't you think we'd better go to the Head an' settle that bizney once for all?" drawled Tunstall. "I don't mind goin', y'know."

"It is for me to say whether that shall be done, Tunstall!"

"Yaas. I know. But you're such a dashed long time makin' up your mind. An' I don't care for these threats of what you mean to do. I'm not sure that I shouldn't take punishment quite nicely while they were hangin' over me."

It looks could have killed, Tunstall would have expired on the spot. His tone was all wrong, of course. Discipline becomes impossible when a boy talks to a master in this strain. But there was some excuse for Tunstall, too. Mr. Mobbs was farther in the wrong than he was, and Mr. Mobbs' notions of discipline were quite as far astray as his.

"I am not sure that it is not my duty to insist upon that bird being removed!" snapped the master, turning his back upon Tunstall.

"Of course, if you insist, sir——"

"I do insist, Goggs!"

"Very well, sir. Where shall he be put?"

"I do not care in the least where you put him! Put him anywhere you like, except here. Wring his neck, for all that I care!"

"I do not think that would quite meet the case, sir. Neither Derwent nor Miss Derwent would like that, and the bird is their joint property."

"G'way!" shrilled Cocky, ruffling his feathers, and looking up into Mr. Mobbs' face. "G'way! Your face ain't nice, an' I should hate to catch it!"

Mr. Mobbs' arm went up, as if he intended to sweep the cage off the table. But Goggs moved a foot or so, and got between.

Behind the snobbish little master Tunstall's hands were clenched, and Merton took a stride forward. If Mr. Mobbs had attempted anything against Cocky then, he would have had the three of them upon him.

He did not attempt anything. His arm dropped, and he swung round without another word.

"Kiss me, and call me Albert!" shrilled Cocky.

Mr. Mobbs' face as he retreated was as the face of a baffled demon—a very respectable demon, of course, but also a very angry one. Mr. Mobbs' name happened to be Albert. But how could Cocky be supposed to know that?

Cocky in the Cupboard.

"ARE you ever going to do anything, Goggs?" demanded Smithson, ranging alongside Goggs as they went in to classes that afternoon.

"Lots of things, I hope, Nebby, my dear fellow, given time," answered Goggs blandly. "I have my plans for the future, I assure you. They may err on the side of ambition; but you may possibly be aware of the maxim of Jonas, the famous American philosopher: 'Hitch your waggon to a star.' As you are not a person of quick imagination, Nebby, perhaps you will not mind my explaining——"

"Cut it out!" said Smithson sharply. "I like you all right, old ass; but I do bar your talking to me as if I was a blessed idiot!"

"My dear Nebby——"

"Not so much of it! You make me tired! What I want to know is what you're going to do about that worm Mobby?"

"I am going to show up the lines he so graciously gave me," Goggs said meekly.

"Oh, dear!" groaned Smithson.

But by this time he knew Goggs well enough to be aware that his meekness was deceptive. Goggs was most dangerous when he adopted meekest.

The Fourth settled down into their places. Mr. Mobbs stood behind his desk, looking even more sour than usual, which was highly superfluous. He had not even a friendly and ingratiating smile for those highly connected young gentlemen, Messrs. Ponsonby, Gadsby, and Vavasour.

No sooner had the bustle of settling down ceased than Goggs arose, left his place, and approached the master.

"What do you want, Goggs?" snapped Mr. Mobbs.

"Nothing, sir," replied Goggs softly.

"Then why do you leave your place without permission?"

"May I leave my place, sir?"

Broad grins were on the faces of most of the Fourth by this time.

"You have already left it!"

"Yes, sir, that is so. But I do not wish to omit any necessary formality. Please accept my apology for not asking sooner, and may I hope that you will be so good, whether I have your permission to approach you now, or whether I must return to my seat."

Goggs stood stock-still as he spoke, and upon his face there was no shadow of guile. Mr. Mobbs was puzzled. Goggs had puzzled him from the first. Even now he was never quite sure when the boy was really polite and when his politeness was mere pretence. There was never any evidence of the theory of pretence, thanks to Goggs' complete control over his simple-looking face.

"You said that you wanted nothing of me!" rapped out the master.

"No, sir. But you want something of me I believe."

"I do not want impudence!"

"Oh, no, sir! I am sure of that."

"What do you imagine I want of you?"

"Lines, sir."

Somebody sniggered, and Mr. Mobbs looked daggers at the offender.

"Have I asked you for your lines?" snapped the master.

"No, sir. I should term it a demand rather than a request, since a request supposes some freedom of action on the part of the person to whom it is addressed. You ordered me to write five hundred lines for being out of my study during the hour of preparation some nights ago, and I have them here, that is all."

Goggs still remained as if rooted to the floor, too timid to approach until given leave, as it seemed.

"Bring them here!" shouted Mr. Mobbs.

Then Goggs stepped forward, and, with a slight bow, placed in his hand twenty-five neatly written sheets, numbered at the corners, and with every line on each sheet also numbered.

Mr. Mobbs turned over the sheets one by one, examining them closely, while Goggs stood meekly before him with folded hands, and the Fourth generally struggled with a strong temptation to cackle.

It would have given Mr. Mobbs great satisfaction to find some flaw in that imposition. But he could find none. Every word was legible, and the full tale of five hundred was unquestionably there.

He tore the sheets across savagely, and threw them into the wastepaper-basket by his side.

Smithson arose. He had hoped for something better than this from Goggs, but he was willing to play up.

"You can return to your seat, Goggs!" snapped the master.

"Thank you, sir," breathed Goggs, as if in awe.

As he sat down Smithson came forward.

"What do you want, Smithson?" roared Mr. Mobbs.

Dearly would Smithson have liked to say that it was Mr. Mobbs' want that was in question, not his. But it would have been too plainly a plagiarism of Goggs, and his heart failed him.

Not entirely, though. It did not fail him to such an extent as to send him back to his seat.

"Please, sir, here are my lines," he said.

It was tame after Goggs, but it seemed to annoy Mr. Mobbs quite effectively. He glared at Smithson as he took the sheets. Then he looked at them critically.

Smithson's lines were not so completely beyond the reach of cavil as Goggs'; but the whole five hundred were there, and if they could not all be read with ease, Mr. Mobbs did not want to read them, and was quite used to taking none too legible lines. He hesitated a moment. But any blame of Smithson would have been an implied praise of Goggs.

So the master tore the sheets across, and flung them also in the wastepaper-basket.

"Go to your seat, Smithson!" he rasped.

Smithson went as he sat down Yates jumped up on his left.

"What is it, Yates?" thundered Mr. Mobbs.

"My lines, sir," replied Yates.

Mr. Mobbs fairly gritted his teeth as Yates came forward. But he could not refuse to accept the lines, and he could not punish anyone for showing them up.

"Very badly written, Yates!" he snarled, as he threw them after the rest.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid that my writing is rather bad. I get so many lines, you see," answered Yates, with deceitful humility.

"Go back to your seat!"

Yates returned. On the right of Smithson another junior stood up—Benson.

The thing looked like a concerted plot. It was not; the three were simply following the lead given them by Goggs. But Mr. Mobbs could not know that, and his was a suspicious mind.

Yet what could he do? Almost the whole Form sniggered, and the few who kept grave faces annoyed Mr. Mobbs even more than the sniggerers. Courtenay disguised his amusement, and the Caterpillar looked bored, and yawned; but their Form-master only believed them in the plot.

"So you have lines to show up, Benson?" rasped Mr. Mobbs.

"Yes, sir. I got them at the same time as the others. Here they are. There's fifty to a page; my writing's rather small."

"And very bad!" snapped the master.

"Yes, sir. I suppose so. I think I get a touch of writer's cramp now and then through having so many lines to do."

"You are impudent, Benson! Return to your place at once!"

"Kiss me, and call me Albert!" crooned a voice.

"Was that you, Benson?" roared the master.

"Was what me, sir?" gasped Benson.

"Did you dare to make that vulgar remark?"

"Oh, no, sir! I shouldn't think of such cheek as calling you by your Christian name, or talking about kissing in the Form-room."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fourth could no longer restrain their mirth. Benson was playing up in great style. Of course, it had not been Benson who had spoken those words, so familiar to them from Cocky. But nearly everyone supposed that the reply to the master was Benson's.

They might have suspected otherwise had they seen his face. For Benson looked almost dumbfounded for an instant.

Then his countenance cleared. He knew that it was Goggs; and he did not resent in the least the fact that Goggs was running him into peril. For that matter, Goggs had felt sure he would not. Benson was too keen on taking Mobby down for that.

The whole Form was keen on taking Mobby down—with the possible exception of the nuts, that is—and even they were not likely to waste much sympathy on him.

"Go, or I shall not be able to restrain myself!" hooted the master.

"That would be a pity!" spoke a clear, cool voice.

"If I have any more of this sort of thing I shall detain the whole Form, and use the cane."

"What an angry face! Ain't he just snorting mad!"

Mr. Mobbs spluttered with wrath at that. Whence the words came he could not tell at all; and the faces before him gave no clue.

"Flip! Where's Flip?"

"It is that wretched bird!" thundered the irate master. "Where is he?"

"Just what I want to know! Where's old Flip?" asked the voice.

"Where is that abominable bird?" roared Mr. Mobbs, quivering with rage. "I will not brook this impudence! Unless——"

"Oh, keep cool!"

"Where is that bird?"

The Caterpillar arose languidly.

"I assure you, sir, that he is not in my pocket!" he said politely. "Perhaps you would like to institute a search?"

"Sit down!" snapped Mr. Mobbs.

"Certainly, sir!" replied the Caterpillar urbanely.

But before sitting down he looked round at his seat, as though he were afraid of sitting upon Cocky.

"Goggs!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Have you that bird in your possession?"

"Oh, no, sir; I assure you!" answered Goggs, with a pained look.

"Here's a how-d'ye-do about nothing at all!" spoke the voice of Cocky.

"Somebody has brought that abominable bird into the Form-room!" hooted the angry master.

Goggs arose.

"Have you any objection to that, sir?" he asked meekly.

"Any objection? Are you raving, or is this more of your consummate impudence?"

"I am not raving, sir. I believe that my mind, though, no doubt, it has its defects, is a well-balanced and unexcitable one. I asked that question because——"

"Silence!"

"Certainly, sir!"

Goggs remained standing.

"Mind your eye! He, he, he! Ain't he funny?" came from somewhere.

Mr. Mobbs glared round him wildly. There was no sign of the bird. And yet the bird it must surely be!

"Why did you ask that question, Goggs?"

"May I answer you, sir?"

"I expect you to answer me, naturally! What do you mean by such an idiotic question?"

"You told me to be silent, sir; and I cannot both be silent and answer. Unless you happen to know the deaf-and-dumb alphabet," added Goggs, as if struck by a happy thought.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Mobbs looked as if he were about to burst a bloodvessel.

"I know it, sir. But, of course, if you do not——"

"Cease this perverse and impertinent jocosity! I asked you why you asked that question."

"Which one, sir? I fear that I am getting somewhat muddled. I have no doubt whatever that you are perfectly clear to yourself, so that I must attribute it to my own defective understanding."

"I asked you what you meant by inquiring whether I had any objection to the presence of that most repulsive bird in the Form-room!"

"Oh, I see now, sir! But if you will cast your mind back a few hours——"

"That is not an answer! I demand an answer at once!"

"In a sense, I think it may be regarded as an answer, sir. But if it is necessary that I should refresh your memory——"

"Nothing of the sort is needed! I only demand that you should give a reply to a perfectly straightforward question!"

"I will endeavour to do so, sir. Some hours ago you said that you would not tolerate the presence of Derwent's cockatoo in our study."

"That is so. But I most certainly did not say that I wished the wretched creature brought hither!"

"Not in those words, sir; but you used words that implied permission to bring him here."

"How dare you utter such a bare-faced lie, Goggs!" roared the furious Form-master.

Tunstall jumped up, his face flaming. Goggs' face had changed colour also, and for a moment it seemed that he had lost control of his temper.

"You've no right to accuse Goggs of lyin'!" cried Tunstall. "He speaks the truth, as Merton and I can bear witness! An', anyway, one gentleman doesn't call another a liar!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured the Caterpillar. "But hardly to the point, dear boy. Could anyone ever mistake Mobby for a gentleman?"

Mr. Mobbs did not hear that. He stood, with mouth wide open, glaring at Tunstall and Merton. For Merton was on his feet by the side of his chum.

"What Tunstall says is correct," said Merton quietly.

"You must surely all be mad!" gritted Mr. Mobbs.

"Excuse me, sir, but I consider that unjustifiably offensive, though less so than the accusation of lying," said Goggs, regaining his temper. "You said in the hearing of all three of us that you did not care in the least where we put the cockatoo—we might put him anywhere we like as long as we removed him from our study. So I put him——"

"Where?" roared Mr. Mobbs.

"In the cupboard near you, sir. It is not an ideal place, I admit. I do not think the unfortunate bird would care for a lengthy sojourn there. But——"

"You dared to——"

"I considered that I had permission, sir."

"You know—you must have known—perfectly well that I did not mean anything of the sort!"

"I really fail to perceive how I could have been expected to know that, sir. I still consider that your words warranted me in doing what I did."

"You—you—oh, good gracious, the boy must be insane—absolutely insane!"

Mr. Mobbs might think so, though it is doubtful whether he really did; but the Fourth did not. The Fourth were almost hysterical. Goggs' face, as Smithson remarked, was worth a guinea a box. Simplicity sat throned upon it, and now and then there flitted across it an expression as of pain that Mr. Mobbs should be so utterly wrong-headed and obtuse.

The master rushed to the cupboard and flung it open. There, on an otherwise empty shelf, stood a draped cage. Mr. Mobbs tore off the covering, and revealed Cocky.

Something like a muffled cheer went up from the ranks of the Fourth.

Cocky blinked a bleary eye up at Mr. Mobbs, and crooned:

"Hallo, old top! Does it hurt to have a face like that? Why not try a mask?"

Mr. Mobbs' hand was outstretched, and several fellows were moving from their places, for they had no mind to see Flip Derwent's bird fall a victim to the wrath of Mobby. But at that moment there came a loud tap at the door.

(To be continued.)

NOTICES.

Correspondence Wanted.

Miss M. Mastrocinque, 27, Llanbleddian Gardens, Cardiff, with girl readers, 13-17.

G. H. H. Eaton, c/o 15, Oversetts Road, Newhall, near Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire, wants the address of Harold H. Dunkerton, of Melbourne, Australia.

A. Davis, P.O. Box 160, Johannesburg, South Africa, with readers anywhere interested in stamps.

Joseph Marineff, 320, East 103rd Street, New York City, U.S.A., would be glad to hear from Joseph Kramer, with whose he used to live. Marineff went to the Jewish Free School, and was in the Jewish Boys' Brigade.

P. Wilford, 116, Robin Hood Chase, Nottingham, with boy readers, 12-14 in the United Kingdom.

H. C. Cunnings, Dedgin Street, Wynyard, Tasmania, Australia, with boys interested in stamp-collecting—anywhere—any age.

P. Colban, 16, Silwood Street, Brighton, Sussex, with readers anywhere interested in stamp-collecting.

G. H. Blewitt, Millertown, Newfoundland, would like to correspond with MAGNET readers in the United Kingdom or Colonies.

Sim Alexander, P.O. Box 6, Klerksdorp, Transvaal, South Africa, with readers, aged 17, in Great Britain or Australia.

Reginald Miller, Sourabaya, 10, Camera Street, Manly, New South Wales, Australia, with boy readers in British Isles, 15-16.

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J. Cunnings, 19, Inverway Road, Launceston, Tasmania, Australia, with Scottish or Canadian readers.

F. De Wet, 55, Roberts Road, Woodstock, Cape Town, South Africa, wants members for correspondence readers.

G. Cleaver, 27, Westville Road, London, W. 12, with readers interested in music. Advertiser plays banjo, and wishes to join pierrot troupe.

Abie Sherkend, 121, Sir Lewry Road, Cape Town, South Africa, with readers, 14-17, in any British Colony.

L. Jordan, 1, King's Road, London, N.W. 10, with readers interested in stamp-collecting.

Miss Nellie Connor, Buchan, East Gippsland, Victoria, Australia, with girl readers, aged 14, of the MAGNET in England.

P. Sandell, 3/26, Great Sandell Street, Hockley, Birmingham, with boy readers anywhere.

Miss Myfanwy Williams, 6, Blaencleydach Street, Grangetown, Cardiff, wishes to correspond with girl readers interested in stamp-collecting, especially in China, Japan, and South Africa.

Miss P. L. Marsland, 274, Nantwich Road, Crewe, with girl readers anywhere interested in cigarette cards and stamps.

A. E. Pranger, P.O. Box 206, Port Elizabeth, South Africa, with readers anywhere.

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