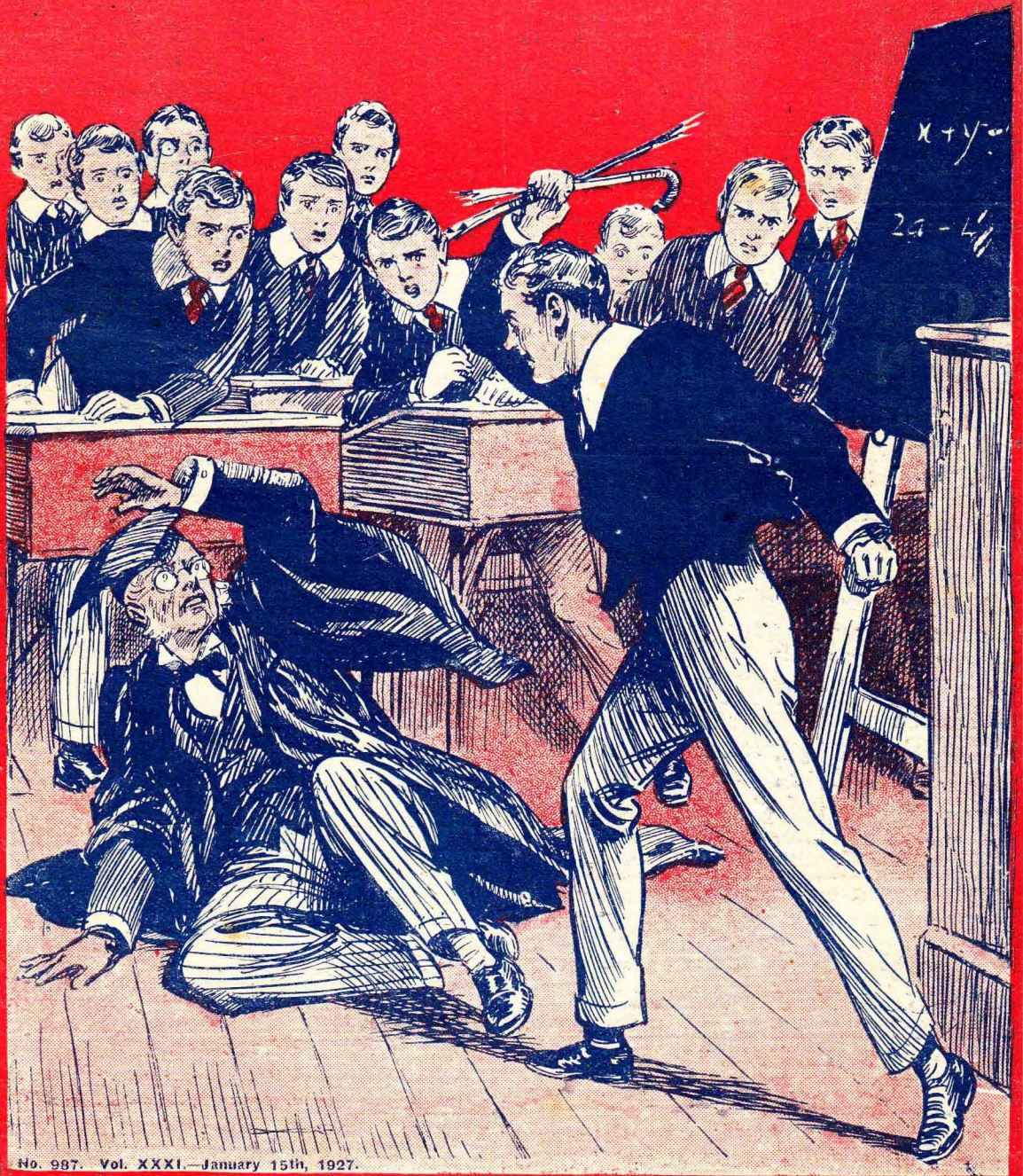


"CAPTAIN AND CAD!" THIS WEEK'S MAGNIFICENT SCHOOL STORY OF THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S

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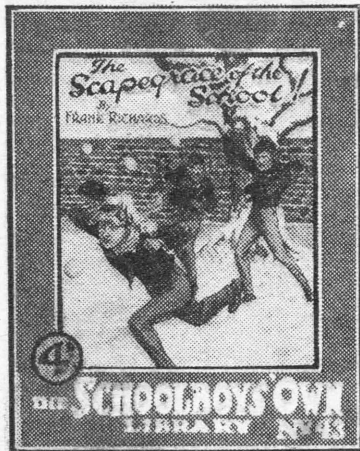


No. 987. Vol. XXXI.—January 15th, 1927.

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GIVING UP HIS JOB!

A LOYAL reader from Glasgow wants to know if I consider it worth while for him to give up his job in order to join the Royal Navy. I'm afraid I can't advise him on that subject as he fails to give me any particulars of his job. But he can obtain all the information he requires about the Royal Navy by applying at the Recruiting Office, 13-15, Crown Terrace, Glasgow. Then he will be able to weigh up all the prospects and see which "job" offers him the most advantages.

HE CAN'T USE THE PHONE!

From Southampton comes a letter in praise of the "good old GEM." The writer is an old reader, and he has just started in a business office. Now, this correspondent is real worried because he cannot get the "hang" of the phone. He tells me that he gets flustered as soon as he hears the bell ringing; then when he takes up the receiver everything seems to "go round" in his napper. He hears the person talking, but cannot for the life of him remember what has been said when he has replaced the receiver. What is he to do about it? he asks. Well, it seems to me, my chum, that you are so keen to do your job properly that you get excited and nervous. Now, try and forget that you are only a young man in the business world when next you receive a phone call. Don't get hot and bothered. Just listen calmly and put other matters out of your head. If you cannot hear the speaker from the other end of the "wire" plainly enough, say so and ask for a repetition of the message. If he talks too fast say so. Far better than replacing the receiver without knowing what has been said to you. Still, those early business "nerves" of yours will speedily disappear as you get accustomed to using the telephone, and I expect by the time you see this par in print the terrors of answering a telephone will have gone for keeps. Good luck in your new venture, my chum!

SMOKING!

"A. T." of Cornwall, wants to know if I think smoking injurious to his chances of developing into a "first-class" athlete. Now, "A. T." doesn't tell me his age, but, apart from that question, I think my little bit of advice will be on the bullseye. How many first-class athletes do smoke? Very few, believe me. And those that do smoke the fragrant weed only indulge very moderately. If this habit of smoking hasn't got a grip of you, my chum, I would say leave it alone entirely. A good wind is essential to the athlete—and it's a good athlete you want to be, isn't it?

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"THE BLACK SHEEP OF ST. JIM'S!"

By Martin Clifford.

For weeks past readers have been asking for a "Talbot" series. Well, your favourite author has obliged. Next week's yarn sets the ball rolling for a Talbot series of St. Jim's yarns—but I'm not meaning to imply that Talbot is the Black Sheep. Not a bit of it! Don't miss this grand yarn.

"WHITE EAGLE!"

There will be another instalment of this adventure yarn, chums. Look out for it. Look out, too, for

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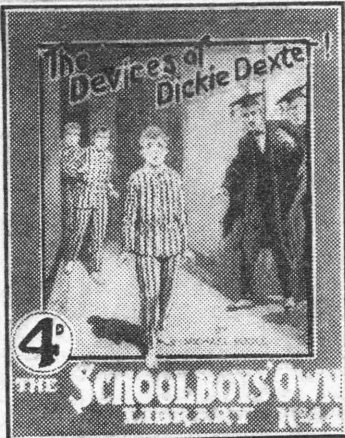
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A BAD EGG! At one time the Shell and Fourth Forms at St. Jim's were yelling for Percy Knox as their junior captain, and they weren't satisfied until they got him! Now they want their old skipper back again for Kne., has worn out his popularity!

CAPTAIN AND CAD!



CHAPTER 1. Not Guilty!

"SHUSH!"
"What the dickens—"
"Bai Jove! What—"
"Shush!"

"But what—"

"Shush!" repeated Jack Blake. "Hold on a sec!"

As he murmured the warning Jack Blake held out his hand to keep his chums back. Then he peered round the corner of the Shell passage with a broad grin on his face.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, George Herries, and Digby stopped obediently and blinked at their leader. The famous chums of the Fourth at St. Jim's were quite mystified as to why their leader had pulled them up and warned them to "Shush!" in such a mysterious manner.

"What's the matter, Blake?" demanded Herries.

"Yaas; what is the mattah, deah boy?"

Blake chuckled without looking round.

"Trimble!" he whispered. "Hold on! I want to see what the fat worm is up to."

But Blake's study-mates were just as curious now to see Trimble and to learn what he was up to—if anything. They joined their chum and peeped round the corner of the passage.

Then, like Jack Blake, they grinned broadly.

Baggy Trimble, the fattest and laziest, and most inquisitive junior in St. Jim's, was certainly "up to" something. He was hovering round one of the study doors in the Shell passage, with a very guilty and nervous look on his podgy face. In his hand he held a large sheet of cardboard.

From his hesitating attitude it was obvious that he wished to do something with the sheet of cardboard, but could not apparently screw up sufficient courage to do it—whatever it was.

He blinked this way and that way, up and down the passage, quite failing to see Blake & Co., and then quite suddenly he seemed to make his wobbling mind up.

Holding the sheet of cardboard up against the study door, he pinned it on the panel with desperate haste. Then he blinked round again and came scudding along the passage in great haste.

Neither Blake nor his chums quite expected him to come so suddenly as he did. He was upon them almost before they knew it, and the next

A Dramatic Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., the Chums of St. Jim's, and Percy Knox, the new Junior Captain of the School.

BY
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

moment Blake & Co. were scattered to right and left as Baggy Trimble charged into them.
Crash!

"Yawwooooh!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came off the worst in the collision. Trimble's head took him full in the ribs with all the fat youth's weight behind the charge. Arthur Augustus collapsed with a wild, strangled howl.

Trimble sprawled over him with another howl—more of fear than pain, and then sounded a bump as D'Arcy struck the linoleum with Trimble's weight to keep him down.

"Trimble, you fat rotter!"

"You raving, blundering idiot!"

"Collar him!"

"Scrag him!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Trimble scrambled to his feet hurriedly, more alarmed and apprehensive than hurt. Arthur Augustus scrambled up, breathing hard, and grabbed the fat youth just as he jumped to escape.

Thud, thud, thud!

"Yooooooop!" roared Trimble.

He squirmed and struggled frantically as the irate Arthur Augustus planted an elegant shoe behind his fat person again and again.

"There, you fat wotiah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, desisting at length. "That will teach you not to come bargin' into fellows like that again, bai Jove!"

"Yarooooogh!"

"What's the little worm been up to, anyway?" demanded Digby, glancing along the passage. "He was doing something to that study door."

"Tom Merry's study, I think," said Blake frowning. "Bring him along and see!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look here!" gasped Trimble, in great alarm. "Leggo! I tell you—"

"Yank him along!"

Trimble was "yanked" along, struggling desperately. Apparently he did not wish them to discover what he had been "up to." As Blake opined, it proved to be Tom Merry's study door—the door of Study No. 10.

With the trembling Trimble in their midst, Blake & Co. stood in front of the door and stared at the sheet of cardboard that Trimble had pinned to it so stealthily.

On the white cardboard was a pen-and-ink drawing, with some printed words underneath. It was quite a clever

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drawing, showing no little skill and ability. It showed a schoolboy with fists up, guarding an ugly-looking bulldog from the attack of three roughly-dressed, hulking louts. It also showed another schoolboy-bolting for his life and turning a terror-stricken face over his shoulder as he ran. The scene was on the towing-path of a river, and above were the words in printed capitals: "Urgent Business Elsewhere!"

Digby grinned as he looked at it, but Blake, D'Arcy, and Herries frowned.

They understood only too well what it was intended to convey. The face of the schoolboy guarding the dog was the face of George Herries, and the dog was undoubtedly his pet bulldog, Towser. And the face of the fleeing schoolboy was the face of Tom Merry of the Shell. The louts were Ginger Burke and his friends from Wayland—bitter enemies of the St. Jim's fellows.

It was rather surprising that Herries, at least, frowned as he glared at the drawing, for he was no longer on good terms with Tom Merry. He had every good reason to be pleased at the drawing, for it was obviously intended to "show up" Tom Merry.

And Blake & Co. felt that Tom Merry deserved to be thus shown up, for the sketch only portrayed what had actually happened quite recently.

While strolling along the towing-path with Towser, Tom Merry and Herries had been attacked by Burke & Co. But instead of standing by Herries and his pet, Tom Merry had turned tail and bolted for his life from the scene, leaving his chum and Towser to the tender mercies of the bullying louts.

It had been an amazing thing for Tom Merry to do, and it had not only brought down on his head the scorn and contempt of his schoolfellows in general, but it had brought to a sudden end the friendship between the Terrible Three and Jack Blake & Co.

Yet, notwithstanding this and the fact that the old friends were not now on speaking terms, Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were not pleased as they looked at the drawing. Herries especially was displeased—not because of the general theme of the sketch, however, but because the caricaturist had given him an enormous pair of feet.

The size of Herries' pedal extremities was a standing joke in the Fourth, and this fact was naturally a sore point with Herries. Hence his wrath as he glared at the drawing now.

Blake and D'Arcy were displeased for another reason, however. Tom Merry had lost the junior captaincy, and he was an object of scorn and contempt in the Lower School. But they could not forget that he had once been their chum, and they did not believe in kicking a fellow when he was down. The drawing had obviously been done out of spite and malice, and they did not approve of it.

"That's a bit of Knox minor's work!" said Blake, setting his lips. "No other fellow in the Lower School can draw like that. I thought the cad would leave Tom Merry alone now he's booted him out of the captaincy; but it seems he's still bent on downing him more. Tear the rotten thing down!"

"It's a clever drawing, though," grinned Digby. "You can't mistake Herries, anyway; just look at the feet!"

"The—cheeky cad!" gasped Herries. "My feet aren't as big as that! I'll smash Knox!"

"Better leave Knox alone!" said Blake grimly. "The cad's already licked Tom Merry and half the fellows in the Lower School. And he's junior captain now, remember. We're not leaving this here, though. Did Knox tell you to shove this up here, Trimble?"

"Ow! Yes!" mumbled Trimble. "I say, lemme go, chaps! If Tom Merry comes along he'll smash me!"

"And you deserve to be smashed, you fat cad!" said Blake. "Tom Merry played the coward, right enough; but there's no need to rub it in like this. Take that thing down again or I'll boot you along the passage, you fat frog!"

"Oh crumbs! I daren't!" groaned Trimble. "Lemme go! I told Knox that Tom Merry would half-kill me, and he said he'd kill me if I didn't shove it up. The beast's a rotten bully; he's made me and Tompkins fag for him."

"What?"

"It's a fact!" snorted Trimble, blinking in indignation at the juniors. "He says he's going to make things hum now he's captain, and he says he's going to have the time of his life. He's told that rotter Racke that he can, too—under his protection, you know!"

"So that's how things are going to go!" said Blake grimly. "Now the rotter's got in as captain he's going to rule the roost and do as he likes, eh?"

"He says so—the bully!" said Trimble. "Fancy making me and Tompkins his fags! He says the Fourth ought to fag for the Shell, the beast!"

"Oh, does he?" said Blake, his eyes gleaming. "You say he's been fagging you, Trimble?"

"Of course he has!" said Trimble indignantly. "He

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makes me wait on him hand and foot; and he kicks me all the time. He's leading me and Tompkins a dog's life! I shall jolly well tell Kildare if it goes on much longer—only, only he'll lambast me if I do, the awful rotter!"

Blake's brow darkened.

He was not so much concerned on Trimble's behalf; but he was very much concerned at the fact that Knox, a Shell "fish," had dared to fag a Fourth-Former, and that he had stated that the Fourth ought to fag for the Shell. Being the acknowledged leader of the Fourth in the School House, Jack Blake naturally felt very wrathful at that.

Moreover, Jack Blake disliked Percy Knox intensely—he disliked him not only for his swank and bragging manner, but because of his shady ways and trickery. True, Percy Knox was a fellow who could do things, and he was a fellow by no means to be despised. In the short time he had been at St. Jim's, the new fellow had proved himself a strong character in more ways than one. He had "licked" Tom Merry—the best boxer in the Lower School—and he had vanquished Ginger Burke, the bullying lout who had been terrorising the neighbourhood for weeks.

Nor was that all. Knox—unlike his cousin in the Sixth—had proved himself a good man at games. He had shown brilliant form as a footballer, and had practically won the match against Greyfriars.

Naturally, his prowess on the playing-fields and elsewhere, and his forceful personality had soon made him popular with the majority in the Lower School. They forgot his brag and swank, and the fact that he was related to Knox, the most unpopular prefect at St. Jim's. And his last exploit in saving Herries and Towser from the village roughs—while Tom Merry had "run away" from them—had made him as popular as it had made Tom Merry unpopular—to use a very mild term.

In fact it had resulted in Tom Merry resigning from his positions of House captain and junior captain, and in the election that had followed Percy Knox had won with an overwhelming majority behind him.

Yet Jack Blake neither admired nor respected the new captain. He knew it was not only personal ambition, but bitter hatred of Tom Merry that had prompted Percy Knox in his campaign to oust Tom from the captaincy and to get himself elected. His underhand methods and trickery did not appeal to the blunt and sturdy Yorkshire junior.

"So that's the game, is it?" snapped Blake, exchanging a grim glance with his chums. "Well, we'll see if the cheeky cad's going to fag Fourth-Formers! The Fourth will have something to say about that! Take that drawing down, Trimble!"

"I—I say, you fellows, I daren't!" mumbled Trimble. "If Knox got to know—"

"Blow Knox!" snapped Herries wrathfully. "Here, I'll jolly soon take the rotten thing down! Poke fun at my feet, eh—the cheeky rotter!"

And George Herries raised his hand to take the drawing down from the door. But even as his fingers tugged at the drawing-pin a hand clutched his shoulder and he was whirled round from the door.

"Hold on!" snapped a hard voice.

It was Tom Merry, who had just come along the passage unheard and unobserved.

Herries flushed crimson as he met the scornful look of the ex-junior captain.

"Hold on!" repeated Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "Let's see what you're pimming up, Herries!"

As he spoke Tom Merry looked up at the drawing. As his eyes took it in his face went a dull crimson. Then with a quick movement he tore the drawing down, and, bending it into a bundle of twisted cardboard, he flung it into the face of George Herries.

"You cad!" he said thickly. "Now put your fists up!"

CHAPTER 2.

The Scarred Hands!

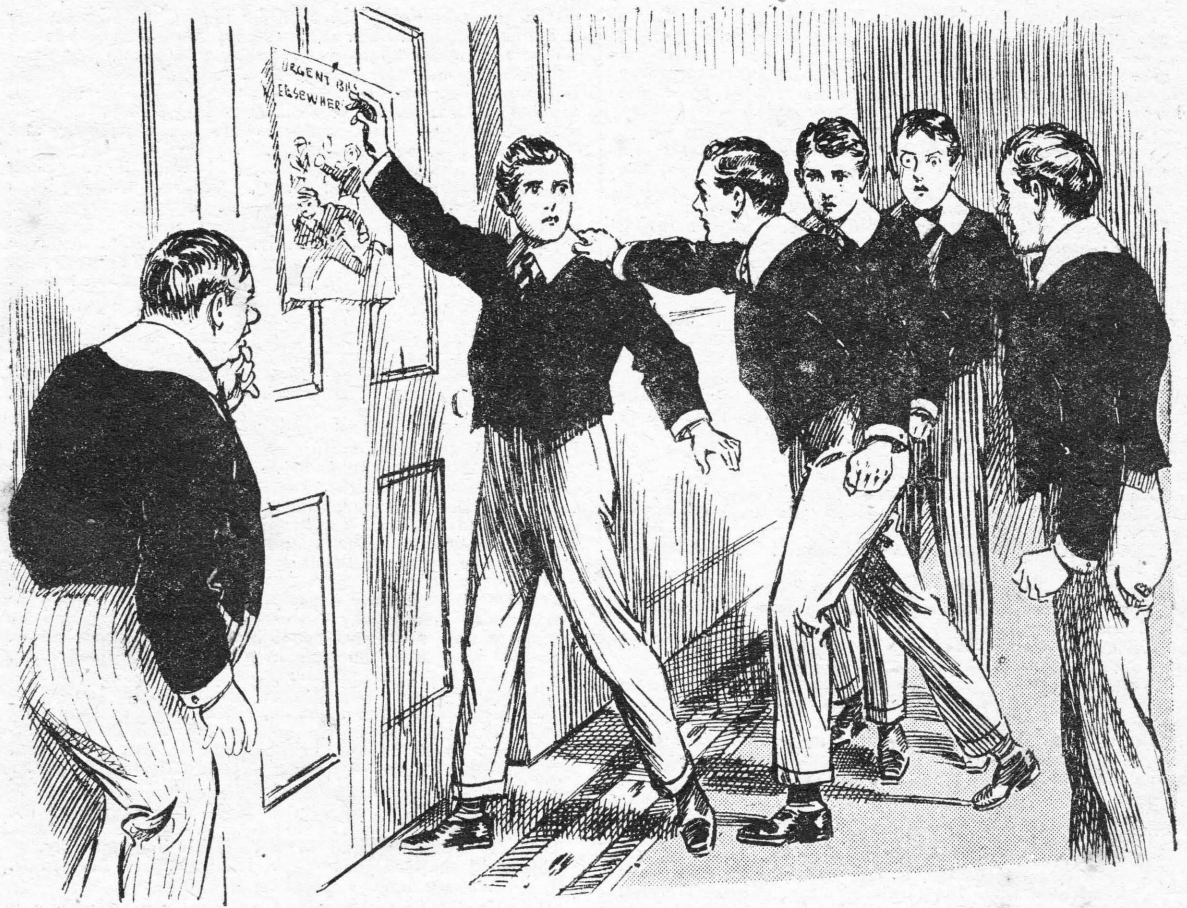
THERE was a dead silence. Lowther and Manners, who had come up behind Tom Merry, looked grim and angry. To Blake & Co. it was very clear—only too clear—that, like Tom Merry, they imagined George Herries had pinned up the drawing.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in great alarm. "Tom Mewwy, pway listen!"

"You dry up, Gussy!" said Blake, pushing D'Arcy aside. "Look here, Merry, if you think—"

"I'm speaking to Herries!" snapped Tom Merry, his eyes blazing as he looked at the flushing Herries steadily. "I caught him in the act, and it's Herries I want to settle with—not you! If Herries wants to fight it out—"

"I'll fight it out quickly enough!" said Herries fiercely. "But you're jumping at conclusions just a bit too fast, Tom Merry. I suppose you think I pinned that drawing up?"



George Herries raised his hand to take the drawing down from the door. But even as he did so, a hand clutched his shoulder and he was whirled round from the door. "Hold on!" snapped Tom Merry in a hard voice. "Let's see what you're pinning up, Herries!" (See Chapter 1.)

"Of-course you did!" said Tom Merry angrily. "I caught you in the act, you cad! I suppose it doesn't satisfy you," he went on bitterly, "that I should be called a coward by nearly every fellow in the school over what happened by the river; you've seen me disgraced; but you want to rub it in and hold me up as a public show for the fellows to sneer at and ridicule?"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Look here, Merry——"

"You fellows dry up!" snapped Herries, shoving D'Arcy and Blake roughly aside. "Merry wants to settle with me—and he can. I'm not likely to be afraid of a fellow who bolts to save his own skin, leaving a pal in the lurch to face the music alone. That isn't all. A fellow who would run away and leave a dog to be kicked and bullied by brutal louts is a fellow who needs a hiding, and I'm going to give him one!"

"Tom Merry didn't run away!" said Lowther angrily. "Tom, you idiot," said Lowther, turning to his chum appealingly, "why don't you explain?"

"I've explained all I'm going to explain!" snapped Tom Merry, his jaw setting squarely. "I've told these cads that I didn't funk, and if they choose to disbelieve me, they can do the other, and be hanged to them!"

"But you've admitted yourself that you ran away," said Blake, his lip curling. "Yet you expect——"

"I do admit it!" said Tom Merry, only his blue eyes showing his fury. "I admit I ran away and left Herries to face the music, as he calls it; but I had a reason."

"Then why don't you tell it?" snapped Digby.

"Yaas, wathah! Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Because I don't choose to tell it," said Tom Merry. "You fellows know my record, and if you're such rotters as to believe me capable of funking, then you can go on believing it, and be hanged to you! I've flung that precious drawing into Herries' teeth, and I'm waiting for the hiding he's going to give me."

Herries' eyes glittered, but he succeeded in keeping himself in hand for a bit longer.

"You still think I pinned that drawing up, then?"

"Yes, of course I do!" said Tom, his lip curling.

"You won't believe me if I tell you I didn't?"

"Not when I saw you with my own eyes!" answered Tom.

"I'm a liar, then?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry deliberately. "A liar and a howling cad!"

Smack!

Herries' open palm swept across Tom Merry's face.

"Now get on with your settling up!" hissed Herries.

Tom Merry staggered back, his cheek burning where Herries' flat hand had smacked it. For a moment he stood motionless, his hand to his cheek, and then he went for Herries with a rush, his blue eyes blazing.

But Lowther and Manners were too quick for him. They had expected the rush, and they had their own reasons for not letting their chum fight if they could help it. In a flash they had leapt after him and grasped him fast. At the same moment Blake and D'Arcy grabbed Herries and held him.

"Hold on!" said Blake, glaring at Tom Merry. "You shall fight Merry all serene, Herries, but not here, you ass! You'll have a master or prefect here in a crack! What about the study, Lowther?"

"Nothing about the study!" snapped Monty Lowther, holding back his chum with an effort. "Merry isn't going to fight yet if we can help it!"

"No fear!" said Manners grimly. "Stand back, Herries!"

Tom Merry struggled furiously with his chums.

"Let me go, you silly fools!" he shouted.

"Not much!" said Manners, his face showing determination. "You've acted the giddy goat long enough, Tommy. You've fought and been licked enough lately through not being fit. You can fight Herries when your hands are better, my pippin!"

"Here, hold on, Lowther—and you, Manners!" said Blake hotly. "Let that rotter face Herries! He's asked for it, and—"

Blake broke off abruptly, for at that moment Tom Merry gave a furious wrench and broke from the grasp of his chums.

"Look out, Herries!"

Blake and D'Arcy released Herries in a flash, and Herries sprang back, his fists up. Tom Merry struck at him, but Herries easily guarded the blow.

"Go for the rotter, Herries!" said Digby. "Now!"

But Herries did not attempt to hit back. He was staring in some amazement at Tom Merry. The blow Tom had aimed at him was feeble in the extreme. Moreover, Tom had not tried to repeat it. His face was white and drawn, and there was an agonised expression in his eyes. He swayed as he stood before Herries, his fists closing and opening curiously.

"Tom!" called Lowther. "Stop!"

Like Herries, Monty Lowther had not failed to see that something was wrong—that his chum seemed to be on the verge of fainting. He sprang to the side of Tom Merry and pushed Herries back, his eyes gleaming.

"Stand back, Herries!" he snapped. "Stand back, or you'll have me to deal with! Can't you see—"

"And you'll have me to deal with if you chip in, Lowther!" said Blake, squaring his jaw as he jumped forward.

"Yaas, wathah! Stand back, Lowthah! I wathah— Bai Jove!"

Once again Tom Merry caused the interruption. He flung off Lowther's detaining hand and faced Herries, his teeth clenched.

"Put up your hands, Herries!" he articulated. "Don't you chip in, Lowther! I can manage this cad!"

"No, you can't!" said Herries quietly, dropping his hands. "I'm not fighting a fellow who isn't fit! If you're seedy—"

"I'm not, too seedy to lick you, you rotter!" said Tom Merry, his voice husky with rage. "You can't smack a fellow's face and get away with it like that, Herries. You'll fight me—now!"

"I shall not!"

"Then perhaps this will make you!"

And Tom smacked Herries across the face in his turn.

Herries staggered back, his face ablaze. To hold back after that was a little too much even for George Herries. He growled and struck out at Tom Merry, ready enough to fight now.

It was a hefty blow, but it reached Lowther's chest and not Tom Merry's, for Lowther had leaped in between like lightning.

"Out of the way, Lowther!"

It was a yell from Tom Merry and from Blake. Instead of obeying, however, Lowther struck back at Herries. What happened next was somewhat confusing, but only what might have been expected.

In less than a second Blake and Manners had joined in, and then Digby and D'Arcy joined the melee as Tom Merry found himself free to attend to Herries, Blake having tackled Lowther.

"Mum-my hat!" gasped Trimble.

He scuttled out of the way, his face wearing a delighted grin now. For days past Blake & Co. and the Terrible Three had not been on speaking terms, but this was something more than just a quarrel. All seven were fighting tooth and nail, as it were, and the uproar was tremendous.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Trimble. "Just look at 'em, you fellows! Fancy those chaps scrapping! Go it, Blake!"

Several fellows had already been drawn to the scene by the sound of angry voices; but now the uproar brought fellows swarming to the spot from all quarters. They looked on at the unusual scene in startled wonder.

"Great pip!" grinned Gore of the Shell. "I knew those chaps would be scrapping before many days were out! Go it, you cripples!"

The fighting juniors were "going it" in real earnest. Blake & Co. were in the majority, and they were easily getting the better of their old chums—Tom Merry, usually a host in himself, being practically at the mercy of Herries.

"Stop it, you footling asses!" called Talbot, hurrying up. "Stop the idiots, chaps! They'll have the beaks— Oh, my hat!"

Talbot's warning was already too late, for even as he spoke there came the rustle of a gown and Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, came bustling up, his mild face showing his horror at the disturbance.

"Stop!" he called in a scandalised voice. "Boys! How dare you? Stop that disgraceful fighting this instant! Do you hear me?"

The combatants could scarcely have failed to hear the master of the Shell. His well-known voice was almost a

shriek. The battle ceased as if by magic, and the juniors scrambled up, breathless and panting. Tom Merry was the last to rise, and his face was as white as a sheet.

"Merry!" said Mr. Linton in a terrible voice. "What is the meaning of this? How dare you fight in a public passage? How dare you fight in public at all?"

Tom Merry did not answer. He stood panting and swaying, his features like chalk.

"This is disgraceful—abominable!" stormed the Shell master, glowing at Tom Merry. "Merry, I insist upon an explanation of this disgraceful disturbance! Who started it to begin with?"

Tom Merry's lip curled bitterly. In his present mood he felt that everyone's hand was against him. The very fact that Mr. Linton looked to him for an explanation seemed to him unfair, and made him bitterly reckless and defiant.

"I started it!" he said, almost insolently. "I called Herries a liar to his face, and I threw something in his face, too. It was all my fault, of course!"

"And I smacked Merry's face and started the fighting," said Herries coolly. "It was as much my fault as his, sir."

"Oh, indeed!" said the master grimly. "Very well. I suppose it is useless asking what is at the bottom of the trouble. You appear to be equally to blame on your own showing, however. Merry, Lowther, and Manners, I shall cane you here and now, and you will also each do me two hundred lines of Virgil. I shall report you Fourth Form boys to Mr. Latham, and request him to deal with you in a like manner. Trimble, kindly fetch me my cane!"

"Oh yes, sir!" Trimble hurried away eagerly and willingly enough. He had already made away with the fatal drawing, and he felt quite safe now, and he enjoyed seeing others suffer. He came back with the cane in a remarkably short time, and handed it to the master.

"Hold out your hand, Merry!" snapped Mr. Linton.

Tom Merry hesitated a moment and then he slowly held out a trembling hand. He held it out shakily and nervously just as funks like Trimble and Mellish were wont to do in the Form-room when faced with punishment.

Mr. Linton raised his cane aloft. But in the act of bringing it down he paused, then he bent down sharply and gazed at Tom Merry's hand.

Tom Merry flushed and drew back his hand quickly. "Merry!" snapped the master, looking up at the junior. "Hold out your hand again!"

Hesitatingly, Tom Merry held out his hand. Mr. Linton bent down and gazed at it short-sightedly. The juniors looked on in blank amazement. Then Blake, who happened to be nearest, suddenly realised what the master was looking at as he saw Tom Merry's palm.

It was blackened and scarred and blistered. Blake whistled in blank amazement and alarm at sight of it.

"Phew!" he breathed. He understood now why Tom Merry had funk'd holding out his hand for the cane.

"Merry!" exclaimed Mr. Linton in some horror, looking up at last. "What ever is the matter with your hand, boy? Good heavens! Your hand is in a terrible state, my boy—blackened and burned! Let me see your other hand!"

Tom Merry hesitated, his face crimsoning now. Very slowly he showed his other palm. It was worse, if anything, than the first. Several of the juniors saw it now, and they were looking at Tom Merry strangely.

"And I was about to cane you, Merry!" said Mr. Linton. "Why did you not tell me your hands were in that terrible state, my boy?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"How did they get into such a state, Merry?" went on Mr. Linton. "Good gracious! You must have been suffering agonies, my poor boy! The scars seem to be almost healed, and it is obvious to me that the injuries were caused some days ago. Yet I have heard nothing of them, though I have noticed in the Form-room that your handwriting was wretched of late. I do not wonder at it now. To use a pen when your hand was in such a state, must have caused you torture. Why on earth did you not tell me, boy?"

No answer. "Have you reported the matter at all to anyone in authority?" demanded Mr. Linton.

Tom Merry spoke at length, his voice little more than a whisper.

"No, sir. It—it's nothing to make a fuss about!" he muttered, his white face crimsoning again. "They—they're nearly better now, at any rate. I—I think I can stand being caned, sir!"

This last was uttered bitterly and defiantly. But the master did not seem to notice it.

"I shall most certainly not cane you, Merry!" he said, almost gently. "You are a very foolish boy, however, to keep such a state of affairs a secret, as you seem to have done. I cannot imagine why you should do so. I will ask

you again. How did you come to get your hands burned?"

No answer.

"You still refuse to tell me, Merry?"

"I'd rather not explain that, sir!" said Tom steadily.

"Very well!" said Mr. Linton, his voice taking on a sterner note. "I can only suppose that you came by your injuries in an unlawful manner then, Merry. In the circumstances, I will not insist upon an explanation, however. You must go at once to the matron and get your hands seen to without delay. I shall not expect you to use them in the Form-room until they are quite better."

"Very well, sir!"

Tom Merry turned and walked slowly away, going towards the matron's quarters. Mr. Linton nodded a dismissal to the juniors, and followed Tom Merry.

There was a buzz of voices as he disappeared.

"Well, I'm blowed!" breathed Jack Blake. "Did you fellows see his hands?"

"Yaas, wathah! It was weally howwible!" said Arthur Augustus, who was intensely distressed. "No wondah the poor chap's looked feahfully wocky lately!"

"He was just getting over a cold," said Talbot. "I noticed he looked pretty seedy, and I thought it was just that. I never dreamed—"

"Nor did any of us!" said Herries gruffly. "And I was going to fight him! I knew he was seedy, though."

Blake looked at Manners and Lowther, who were looking very disturbed and gloomy.

"So that was why you didn't want Merry to fight?" said Blake curtly. "You knew his hands were bad, Lowther?"

"Yes, we did!" snapped Lowther.

"He's kept it pretty secret!" said Blake. "We shouldn't have dreamed of a scrap if we'd known, of course. How did he get them hurt like that, Lowther?"

"Find out!" said Lowther thickly. "You fellows weren't on speaking terms before; all we want is for you to keep it up. You can speak to us when you start speaking to Tom Merry again. You've treated him dashed badly, and you know it. You've dropped him—the best junior captain St. Jim's ever had—for a rotten, smoking upstart who's not fit to clean his boots!"

"You wouldn't say that if Knox were here now!" sneered Racke.

"I'd say it to his face as I've said it before!" snapped Lowther. "Knox has gained the captaincy by trickery and rotten, sneaky tricks. He kept Tom Merry out of the Greyfriars match by locking him up in the vaults to begin with. Since then he's been blackening his character with lies and dirty trickery."

"Knox licked him on the footer field and in fair fight," sneered Aubrey Racke.

"That's true enough!" said Gore.

"It's true enough," said Manners angrily. "But Tom Merry was ill—he had a very bad cold—a cold caused chiefly by being locked up by that blackguard Knox in the vaults! He was seedy when he fought Knox; it was no wonder he was licked. But let me tell you fellows this: Tom Merry is down now, but he'll come up again. Knox is top-dog now, but Tom Merry's time will come. He's got a good few scores to settle with that cad Knox, and he'll settle them, never fear!"

"Like he settled Ginger Burke," grinned Croke, "by running away!"

"No," said Lowther, keeping calm with an obvious effort. "Tom Merry had a good reason for running away, as you call it—a reason you may hear some day."

"Why doesn't he tell it, then?" said Blake, staring curiously at Lowther and Manners. "Do you know the reason—if there is one?"

"Yes, we know it," assented Manners.

"Why doesn't Merry tell it, then, to us all and clear himself?"

"For the same reason he won't tell how he got his hands burned," said Lowther. "I'll tell you that; and I'll tell you this also—he got his hands burned the same afternoon he ran away from Ginger Burke."

"Oh!"

"So put that in your pipes and smoke it!" snapped Lowther. "You know Tom Merry was never a funk, and you're a lot of cads for not taking his word—and bigger cads for backing up that sweep Knox against him! You can go and eat coke, the lot of you!"

And with that Lowther led his chum Manners into Study No. 10, and closed the door with a slam in the faces of the crowd.

But Blake's face was very thoughtful and worried-looking as he led his own chums back to Study No. 6—indeed, all the four Fourth Form chums were thoughtful and worried-looking.

"I—I suppose Lowther was right," said Blake slowly. "We ought to have taken Tom Merry's word, knowing him as we did."

"Rot!" said Herries—though even his tone was uncertain. "If he had a decent excuse why he played the funk he would have told it us."

"I don't know, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head seriously. "Aftah all, it was only natuwal that Mewwy should get his back up and wefuse to explain when we wefused to take his word, you know. Pwidge makes fellows do that. I should perhaps have done the same myself. It is weally wotten!"

"But how the thump did he get his hands injured?" said Digby. "From the way Lowther hinted, it looks to me as if it's something to do with why he ran away and left you in the lurch, Herries!"

"Yaas, wathah! It stuwck me like that, too," said Arthur Augustus. "It is feahfully wotten, deah boys. I—I cannot help wishin' that we had accepted his word and twusted him, bai Jove!"

"Rot!" said Herries again, flushing. "What about poor old Towser?" At the thought Herries set his jaw squarely. "It's no good talking, you chaps—Merry funk'd it right enough!" he went on doggedly. "And when his hands are better I'm going to settle up with the cad!"

And with that George Herries got out his books and settled down to prep. His chums did likewise. But they looked very uneasy and uncomfortable indeed. For, unlike George Herries, they could not help feeling that they had

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made a big mistake; that they had done Tom Merry an injustice, and that they ought to have accepted his word that he had not funk'd—whether the evidence showed that he had or not!

CHAPTER 3.

Too Good for Practice!

"KNOX! Where's Knox?"

Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, asked the question. It was the following afternoon, and the juniors of the Lower School had assembled on Little Side for footer practice.

As nobody answered the question Kildare asked it again, his handsome face wearing a frown.

"Anybody know why Knox hasn't turned up?" he demanded, rather a grim note in his voice.

The juniors looked at each other—some of them with grins, and some with frowns as grim as Kildare's own. As a matter of fact, they had just been discussing the absence from practice of Percy Knox, their new skipper. The more thoughtless juniors looked upon his absence as rather a lark—expecting entertainment now Kildare was on the war-path. The rest did not; in their view, as captain of footer, Percy Knox should have been on the ground, especially as it was compulsory footer that afternoon.

"I—I think Knox is in his study," ventured Talbot. "He says he's rather seedy to-day, and he's left me to see to things."

"Oh, has he?" snapped Kildare. "I notice Racke, Croke, Mellish, and Scrope are also absent," he went on, glancing round him. "Are they seedy, too, Talbot?"

There was deep sarcasm in Kildare's tone, and Talbot coloured.

"I believe Knox has given them permission to be absent," he said briefly.

"He was entitled to do that, of course, as junior skipper," agreed Kildare. "It won't do for me, though, Talbot. Knox was also absent from the last practice, and so were Racke, Croke, and Scrope. It seems that Mellish has now contracted the same complaint. I suppose their excuse is that they're seedy, too?"

"They say so, I believe," said Talbot.

"Right!" said Kildare, his brow grim. "If this is how Knox proposes to continue his duties as junior captain,

we'll soon be requiring another change, I fancy. I'm dashed if I know why you young fools wanted a change of skippers at all! Anyway, I'll soon cure the complaint of Knox and his friends. Talbot, you'll run along and tell Knox that I expect him to be here under five minutes' time. Merry, Blake, and Lowther can go with you to root out the other slackers and bring them here. Understand?"

"Yes, Kildare."

Talbot, Merry, Blake, and Lowther left the ground—Blake, Talbot, and Lowther smiling slightly now. They saw that Kildare had very little faith in the new skipper, and that he intended to stand no nonsense from him. Tom Merry would have preferred to have been left out of the matter entirely.

None the less, he could not help feeling a certain amount of inward satisfaction. Knox, in his role of Cock-of-the-Walk, looked like over-reaching himself already—in so far as Kildare was concerned, at all events. Indeed, it rather amazed Tom Merry that the new skipper had started such reckless games so soon. Without counting upon Kildare, Knox minor might have realised he would be putting the backs of his team up by treating his duties so lightly.

"I rather expected this sort of thing, though not quite so soon!" exclaimed Blake, as they walked schoolwards. "The fellows were fools to shove that cad in for the captaincy at all; they knew he was a smoky rotter, and a leopard can't change his giddy spots in a hurry. He started well enough, but I knew he couldn't keep it up."

"He was banking on Kildare leaving him on his own," said Talbot quietly. "I fancy Kildare isn't at all satisfied with the way things are going."

"Most of the fellows are beginning to find him out, too," said Blake. "They won't put up with this sort of thing long. He'll find that the ability to play footer isn't all that's required of a footer captain, if he thinks it is—and he seems to."

"He certainly isn't keen on the duties of his job," admitted Talbot. "Give him enough rope, though, and he'll hang himself!"

"But he may muck up the footer before he does that!" snorted Monty Lowther. "The fellow's a rank outsider, and the sooner he's booted out of the job the better. He ought never to have been elected at all. All he's really keen on his betting and playing banker and smoking. I bet that's just what he's doing now—with Racke and that crowd!"

"We'll soon see!" said Blake grimly.

It was in a very grim mood that the juniors hurried along to Knox minor's study on the Shell passage. Knowingly or unknowingly, Kildare had chosen just the fellows who intensely disliked the new captain to take his message and to root out the slackers. Tom Merry had not spoken yet, nor did he intend to take any active part in the affair if he could help it.

It was Talbot who rapped on the door of Study No. 7. From within the room had sounded the mumble of voices—sounds which ceased abruptly at the sharp rap.

There was a silence, and then came Knox's sharp voice from within.

"Who's that?"

"Talbot!"

"Why aren't you on the footer field, Talbot?" came the cool retort.

"Kildare sent me," said Talbot, setting his lips. "He says you're to be on the ground in five minutes, Knox!"

There was a muttered exclamation, and then the door was unlocked and opened. The juniors crowded into the room. As they fully expected, they found a haze of tobacco smoke in the room, while Racke and Crooke were just shoving a packet—the juniors did not need to guess that it contained cigarettes—into a drawer. Only Knox appeared to be actually smoking, however.

"Hallo! Quite a deputation!" he said coolly, his eyes resting for a moment on Tom Merry. "What's that you say about Kildare?"

"He's sent me to tell you you're to be on the field within five minutes," said Talbot briefly. "Better come along, Knox."

"Think so?" said Knox. "Your mistake, old chap! I'm seedy. Didn't you tell him that, you fool?"

"Yes, I told him. He didn't seem to swallow it, though," said Talbot grimly. "You can't get across a fellow like Kildare with those yarns more than once, Knox. I'd advise you to obey him."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," sneered Knox. "I'm not coming. I'm seedy—suffering agonies with the toothache, you know. I mentioned the matter to my cousin in the Sixth, and he says it's all right to let footer slide for once. I'm going to!"

"You're a fool, then! Your cousin may be a prefect, but he's no power to support you against Kildare—certainly not

where sports are concerned!" said Talbot. "What's the good of acting the goat, Knox? You're skipper now, and it's up to you to see to your job."

"If you don't," remarked Blake grimly, "you'll jolly soon find yourself out of the job. You're none too secure as it is. Kildare seems to have his peepers on you already."

Percy Knox gritted his teeth. His careless manner suddenly vanished and his eyes glittered as they rested on Tom Merry.

"Yes, I've no doubt!" he snapped, pointing at Tom Merry. "And it's entirely owing to that sneaking rotter there if it is so! I suppose he's been sneaking with tales to Kildare. That's why Kildare's sent you now."

"Not at all!" said Talbot calmly. "Kildare only sees what's plain for anyone to see, Knox. Merry isn't the sort to carry tales to anyone. You've been elected skipper, and if you fail to look after the job it'll be your own fault if you come up against trouble."

"Trouble!" hissed Percy Knox viciously. "I'll see that worm Merry gets plenty of trouble before I'm through with him. Like his confounded cheek to come buttin' in this study now, by gad! I've a thundering good mind to hoof the cad out as it is!"

"Try it on!" said Tom Merry. His voice was quiet, but there was a dangerous gleam in the ex-captain's blue eyes. "I'm here at Kildare's orders, Knox! I'll go when these fellows go!"

"Will you?" hissed Knox. "We'll see about that!"

Without warning, he made a furious rush at Tom Merry. But Lowther jumped before his chum like a flash, and the next moment Talbot, Blake, and Lowther had the junior skipper fast.

"None of that!" It was Blake who spoke, and Blake's voice was hard. Though on unfriendly terms still with Tom Merry, Blake would have backed him up in any circumstances against the overbearing and bullying Knox. "None of your swashbuckling games now, Knox, my pippin! You may be a mighty man with your fists; but there's such a thing as playing the game! Merry's not fit for a scrap, and you jolly well know it! And we've not come here for scrapping, anyway!"

Knox stood back, breathing hard.

"What? You backing up that sweep after the way he let Herries down?" he sneered. "You've jolly soon forgotten—"

"I've forgotten nothing!" snapped Blake, flushing. "Merry isn't a friend of mine, and it's Kildare I'm backing up now. Are you going to obey Kildare or not, Knox?"

"I'll be hanged if I will!"

"Right—please yourself!" said Blake, his lip curling. "But we're here for something else. Kildare ordered us to bring Racke, Crooke, Scrope, and Mellish back with us. We're going to do it!"

"They're staying with me!" snapped Knox, his eyes glittering. "They've my permission to cut footer this afternoon."

"Kildare's order over-rides yours," said Talbot calmly. "If Racke and his precious pals don't come we'll yank them by the heels. We've come for the rotten slackers, and we're not going back without them!"

"Rather not!"

"You—you—"

"Hold on!" put in Racke, in alarm. "We'd better go, Percy—no good going against Kildare!"

"No fear!" muttered Crooke. "We'll come, Talbot!"

"No, you won't!" shouted Knox, in a rage. "Here—what—"

Without ceremony, Blake grabbed Mellish by the collar, placed a footer boot behind him, and Mellish fairly flew through the doorway. As Blake took a step towards him, Scrope flew after Mellish.

"Stop!" shouted Knox. "Crooke, you fool—"

But like Scrope, Crooke preferred to disappoint Knox rather than disappoint Kildare, the captain of the school. He sneaked out after Scrope and Mellish, and after a moment's hesitation, Aubrey Racke glanced at Knox, and then he followed. Percy Knox stood staring after them, breathing hard.

"If you've a scrap of sense you'll do the same, Knox!" said Talbot quietly. "We'll leave it to you, anyhow."

And followed by Blake, Merry, and Lowther, Talbot left the study and followed Racke & Co. down to Little Side.

Percy Knox stood in the middle of the floor biting his nails in savage, helpless rage. Actually he knew perfectly well that he was being a fool—that to kick against an order of Kildare's was rank folly. And he bitterly regretted his line of action now. It was sheer swank and self-pride that had made him defy the bearers of Kildare's message. He would look a perfect fool now if he went.

Yet he knew he would have to go—or be fetched by Kildare! Even to face the grins of the juniors was better than that.

Seething with helpless rage, Percy Knox left his study and followed the others. But he did not change. He met Kildare just leaving the ground, and he guessed the captain was about to go up to the school for him.

"Oh, here you are, Knox!" snapped Kildare. "Why aren't you changed?"

"I'm seedy, Kildare!" said Knox sullenly. "I've got a beastly headache!"

"You told Talbot and the others you had a toothache," said Kildare curtly. "That won't wash with me, Knox! I'd advise you to be careful! If you go on acting the goat and neglecting your duties like this I shall feel obliged to ask Mr. Railton to appoint a new skipper in your place. Got that?"

Knox nodded sulkily.

"Right! Go and change, then—sharp!"

And Knox went to change. But when he returned his face was dark with rage, and he gave Tom Merry a bitter, vengeful look.

"All right, you sneaking sweep!" he hissed. "I'll make you smart for this—you see if I don't!"

a brief second, and then, as Knox's deft boot hooked in to lift the ball, Tom swiftly tricked him and swung round.

"Good man, Tommy!" yelled Lowther.

Knox was by no means beaten, however—yet. Like Tom, he was a first-class man, and even as Tom's boot controlled the ball again he was whirling round and tackling desperately. He knew only too well with what breathless interest the crowd was watching that battle of skill between the two enemies.

There followed a bewildering display of tricky footwork, and then a yell went up as Tom Merry was seen to break away with the ball under perfect control at his toes.

He went away with it at a fine turn of speed, and after him went Percy Knox. But the latter's face was black with rage now. Tom Merry had beaten him, and the knowledge added fresh fuel to his smouldering hate and fury.

His very attitude as he went after Tom showed what was in his mind, and Talbot called a warning.

"Look out, Merry—over here!"

Tom Merry suddenly slowed down and steadied himself to kick—not because he heard Knox's pounding feet behind, but



CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE.

VISITING THE DENTIST!

To Mr. Wrench, of Wayland Town,
We go with trepidation;
He is a dentist of renown,
Mighty of reputation,
And when our tusks begin to ache
Through chewing sweets excessively,
To Mr. Wrench our way we take—
He rouns at us impressively!

Into the massive chair we climb,
And there we sit and languish,
Awaiting the unhappy time
When we shall groan in anguish!
For though the dentist guarantees
Extractions are delightful,
The victim wobbles at the knees,
And feels that they are frightful!

"Ha, you've been eating sweets again!"
Says Mr. Wrench sedately;
"But I will quickly cure your pain—
I feel in fine form lately!
Will you have gas, my little man,
Or a cocaine injection?"
We stipulate the latter plan,
Then wait, in deep dejection!

Like an Inquisitor of old
With rack and thumbscrew handy,
The dentist nears; and we turn cold,
And think of sugar candy,
And all the penalties and pains
That follow its digestion;
Our pluck at zero now remains—
We're scared, beyond all question!

One jerk of Mr. Wrench's wrist,
One sudden, sharp deflection;
And now another molar's missed
From our unique collection!
One yell of anguish rents the air,
And shatters all the silence;
And Mr. Wrench is standing there,
Still panting from his violence!

Gladly we leave the dentist's lair
For scenes more bright and jolly;
Those moments in the fateful chair
Fill us with melancholy.
Beware of aching molars, boys,
They mean there's trouble brewing;
Stop chewing sweets; such dubious joys
You're better for eschewing!



Tom did not deign to answer, and a few minutes later the whistle went and the practice game started. Tom Merry had been picked and placed at inside-right on Talbot's side—the other side being skippered by Knox minor himself. And in the rush of the struggle Tom very soon forgot Knox's threat. His cold was better now, and though his hands were still very painful, they did not prevent him playing up in his old dashing style.

But very soon Tom had good reason to remember Knox and his vengeful threat.

Talbot had the ball and was tearing down the field with it when Knox tackled him with one of his brilliant rushes. But Talbot eluded him and sent the ball whizzing over to Tom Merry.

Tom had anticipated the pass, and in a flash he neatly trapped the spinning sphere. But Knox had likewise anticipated the pass, and he came speeding up like the wind.

Tom Merry heard him, and was on his mettle. He waited

because Talbot was his skipper, and he was never the fellow to disobey under any circumstances. Moreover, a glance showed him that the opposing halves and two backs were pressing in dangerously. His best policy was to get rid of the ball—especially as Talbot was unmarked at the moment.

So Tom steadied himself to pass, and as he did so Knox came up behind like a whirlwind.

What happened next was clear enough to almost every fellow on the ground. It was an unmistakable case of playing the man and not the ball.

Even as Tom Merry kicked, Knox's left foot lashed round, and the next instant Tom, with a sharp cry, went crashing down, to roll over-and-over in the mud.

Phoop!

"Foul!"

"Dirty!"

"You howling cad, Knox!" yelled Monty Lowther.

He came speeding up, and knelt over Tom, who was writhing on the ground clutching his ankle with both hands. Kildare came rushing up, his eyes blazing with anger, and the players followed him from every point. Knox's face paled, and he fairly cringed before the scornful, angry glances.

"Ankle, Merry?" demanded Kildare, joining Lowther and Talbot as they knelt by Tom Merry.

Tom had stopped writhing now. He sat up and rubbed at his leg, just above the ankle.

"Just above the ankle!" he gasped. "It—it's all right, Kildare—be all right in a few secs."

As he spoke Tom staggered to his feet, with the help of Talbot and Lowther. Kildare turned and looked at Percy Knox, who was standing alone a few yards away.

"You rotten young sweep!" he said. "That was as deliberate a foul as any I've seen—though, thank goodness, I've not seen many in school football!"

"It was an accident!" said Knox thickly. "It was a miss-kick—I aimed at the ball!"

"Miss-kicked—when you hacked his foot?" echoed the captain scornfully. "Don't be a young liar! It was a rotten foul! That sort of play won't do for St. Jim's, Knox—we aren't used to it! Get off the field!"

"Wha-at?"

"Get off the field!" shouted Kildare, pointing. "Sharp!" Percy Knox stood for a brief instant undecided, and then as he met the angry looks of the footballers on every side he turned and walked slowly off the field, his face white and savage.

Bitterly he regretted his folly now; that last act of un-governable temper had done more than anything Tom Merry could possibly have done to put paid to his brief popularity—he realised that only too well. That foul kick had injured Tom Merry; but it had injured Percy Knox still more in another way.

He walked towards the changing-room, biting his fingernails in helpless mortification.

"You'd better have your foot attended to, Merry!" snapped Kildare. "Can you walk on it?"

"Yes. It'll be all right presently, I think," said Tom, limping about, though his strained face told of the pain he was suffering. "I'll go and rest a bit in the pavilion, I think."

With Lowther's help, Tom left the field, and the game went on. But before it ended Tom was back on the field again, showing no other signs of the "tap," save a slight limp. And just before the game ended he managed to send the leather past Fatty Wynn in the opposing goal from an unexpected pass from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

But though it proved to be the only goal of the practice match it met with little applause, and as the players swarmed off the field the faces of Lowther and Manners were glum.

"It's no good, Tommy!" said Lowther, wiping a perspiring brow. "Knox has cooked his own goose this time, but the fellows are still up against you over that Herries business. Why the thump don't you tell the facts and clear yourself?"

"You could get your job back any day if only you would!" grunted Manners. "Dash it all, if you don't I'm blown if I don't break my word and tell the yarn myself!"

"You won't do that!" said Tom, smiling grimly. "You've promised me you won't tell the fellows, and I'm keeping you to it."

"But—"

"There's no good talking about it," said Tom Merry, his lips setting doggedly. "If Blake and the rest won't accept my word that I didn't funk, then they can go to pot! That's final! And, for goodness' sake, stop worrying me about it!"

"But you'll never get your job back and lick that sweep Knox!"

"I don't mind. You two and Talbot, and perhaps Cardew seem to have taken my word for it, and if the rest won't, they can go and eat coke! They've shoved Knox in as captain, and they are welcome to him!"

"You'll fight the sweep, though?" asked Lowther anxiously. "You'll fight him and lick him? If you jolly well don't I'm blown if I don't tackle him myself, strong as he is."

Tom Merry's blue eyes gleamed, and he looked at his scarred hands.

"Yes," he said grimly. "My cold's gone now, and when my hands are better I'm going to fight him—and I'm going to lick him! He's licked me once, and he thinks and the fellows think he's my master. But I'm only waiting my chance; I'm not risking defeat again. When I'm ready—well, Percy Knox will know about it!"

And Lowther and Manners looked a bit more satisfied after that. They knew that when Tom Merry looked like that and spoke like that he meant what he said, and they felt that the all-conquering Knox might meet his Waterloo yet.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry Agrees!

"MAY I come in?"

Reginald Talbot asked the question as he looked in at the doorway of Study No. 7 on the Shell passage a couple of days later. There was a grim expression on Talbot's handsome face; but his tone was quiet and polite—Talbot was invariably polite even to fellows whom he disliked.

Percy Knox, to whom he spoke, was standing before the fire with his hands behind him. He nodded coolly to Talbot.

"Yes, trickle in, old bean!" he said. "What's the trouble—come to see me about the match—what?"

Talbot nodded. Talbot was vice-captain of the junior footer, but he had found no pleasure in his post since Knox junior had been captain; on the contrary, being still a great chum of Tom Merry's, he had found it distinctly unpleasant and distasteful.

"Yes; I was wondering if you had forgotten about the Rylcombe match this afternoon altogether, Knox?" he said shortly. "The list isn't even on the notice-board yet, and the fellows are getting impatient."

"Let 'em!" remarked Knox carelessly.

"But this won't do, Knox!" said Talbot sharply. "You can't keep fellows on tenterhooks until the last minute like this; we want to know who's playing and who isn't."

"Let 'em wait and see!" smiled Knox.

"They won't do much more waiting!" said Talbot, in a significant tone. "What happened at the practice match the other day hasn't done you any good, Knox. It's no business of mine, but they won't stand much more of it!"

Knox set his lips.

"They'll have to, my pippin!" he said, shoving out his square jaw. "I'm skipper, and I'm going to let 'em know it. I've been pretty easy all round to start with; but let there be any nonsense, and I'll show 'em who rules the roost. I'm ready to give a record hiding to the first fellow who starts showing dissatisfaction with me as skipper. Got that?"

"I understand," said Talbot, showing no signs of the disgust he felt. "But those methods of ruling won't do at St. Jim's you know. You can't lick the whole Lower School, Knox!"

"I've already licked the best man in the Lower School, and that's just as good!" grinned Knox, showing his big fists. "Why don't they come to me if they're dissatisfied? They know better!"

Talbot shrugged. He could not help contrasting in his mind the difference between the new skipper's brag and swagger with the quiet, modest, yet efficient manner in which Tom Merry had wielded power and authority.

"You're quite mistaken if you think the chaps are afraid of you, Knox!" said Talbot steadily. "But I've come about the match. Have you made the list out yet?"

Knox nodded towards the table, on which was a slip of paper.

"There it is," he smiled. "I was just about to take it along, as a matter of fact. Just run your peepers over it, and see if you approve."

Talbot scanned the list, and as he did so he gave an exclamation.

"What's this mean, Knox?" he said blankly. "You're not playing twelve men, remember!"

"Hardly!" agreed Knox. "What's the matter with it? Your name's down all right."

"My name's down, right enough. But yours is not!" said Talbot, looking at him.

"I know," drawled Knox carelessly. "I'm not playing; you see—got another engagement."

Talbot frowned, and looked at the captain in amazement.

"You're not playing?" he gasped. "But—but, hang it all, you're skipper! The fellows will be wild!"

"My dear man, does that matter? I've just had an urgent wire from an uncle of mine. He's passing through Wayland, and he wants me to meet him at Wayland Junction," explained Knox, smiling. "He's rather an important old Johnny, and I simply can't refuse—even at the risk of letting the team down."

Talbot gazed at Percy Knox hard. That iron-nerved youth gazed back at him calmly; and then, as if he read his thoughts, he took a telegram-form from his pocket and passed it over.

Talbot read it. It was a genuine telegraph-form, and the message had been handed in at Wayland General Post Office. There was no doubting that it was genuine. It read as follows:

"Meet me at Grand Hotel, Wayland, at three.—UNCLE JACK."

The telegram was addressed to Percy Knox, at St. Jim's, and Talbot's frown vanished as he read the message.



Ahead of Cardew and Manners were Racke & Co., and carefully keeping out of sight of their quarry, the "investigators" watched Racke & Co. stop at a spot just near the Green Man. Then they vanished. "Gone through the garden!" drawled Cardew. "It means a long wait until they come out!" Manners nodded. (See Chapter 6.)

"Can't be helped, then, Knox!" he said glumly. "No getting out of it, I suppose?"

"Not a bit! My uncle wrote days ago saying he might be passing through Wayland, and would expect me. He's rather a special uncle, you know—got heaps of tin. So—"

"I understand," said Talbot, nodding glumly. He did not doubt that the telegram was genuine—as it certainly was. Nor did he suspect that there was trickery behind it, as he would possibly have done had he seen the wink that Knox exchanged with Racke across the table. "That's rather rotten luck altogether."

"It scarcely matters at all," said Knox. "It isn't an important fixture, I understand—in fact, I'm blessed if I can understand a decent school playing footer with a lot of beastly, scrubby village louts!"

"Grimes and his pals aren't louts!" said Talbot coldly. "They're decent kids, and we're proud to meet them and play them. They play the game, and they play clean!"

Knox's eyes glittered, but he affected not to notice the obvious meaning in Talbot's retort; yet his foul at the practice match was too recent for him to miss seeing the hint.

"Well, I shall not have the pleasure of meeting them, at all events," he sneered. "You've run down the list?"

"Yes. It won't do, Knox!"

"You don't approve of it?"

"Certainly not! You've left out at least three of our best men—Merry, Blake, and Figgins, to begin with! If we go over to Rylcombe with that team we shall be asking for a record licking. Those village kids can play, I might tell you!"

"Rot! That list is going to stand!"

"You won't change it?"

"No!" said Knox, showing his teeth.

"Very well," said Talbot, quietly but firmly. "You can cross my name out also, Knox. I refuse to take a team like that over when better men are available."

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Knox bit his lip hard.

Despite his careless words and manner, he knew very well that it behoved him to go warily in his handling of his job. To be absent himself, and for his vice-captain to be absent also would mean only one thing—defeat; and that would spell trouble for him, he knew.

"Oh, all right!" he said, pretending to treat the matter lightly. "Please yourself. I give you a free hand. There's the list, anyway. Do what the thump you like with it!"

"I will!" said Talbot.

He drew out a pencil, and crossing out at least five of the names on the list, he wrote five other names over them. Knox watched him with glinting eyes and a black brow. Then, without another word, Talbot left the study, taking the list with him.

Racke chuckled when he had gone.

"I knew he wouldn't stand for that list, Percy," he grinned. "You were an ass to expect it."

"Hang him!" gritted Knox. "As I wasn't playing myself I wanted the dashed school to be hopelessly licked. If Merry plays—"

"He won't!" said Croke. "You needn't worry about that, old man. Merry had to turn up at practice, but he'll refuse to play as all the fellows are up against him."

Knox's brow cleared a little at that.

"Well, the cad didn't suspect anything, anyway!" he grunted, picking up the telegram. "This giddy wire did it. I'd better let as many see it as possible, I think."

"If it comes out that you sent that wire to yourself?" grinned Racke.

"It won't come out," smiled Knox grimly. "Who the thump's likely to inquire at the post-office whether I sent it myself or not? Rot! Anyway, I'm going to win Lacy's fiver this afternoon."

"You're the limit, Percy!" said Croke. "But, by jingo, you're booked if it comes out that you've cut a match just to play a game of billiards at the Green Man with a

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Grammar School chap. You were an ass to take Lacy on to-day!"

"I'd forgotten the match when I took Lacy on," admitted Knox. "But that telegram will put things right with the chaps. Anyway, so long as that cad Merry doesn't play I don't care a hang about the thumping match."

"He won't!" said Crooke.

But Crooke was wrong there—as he often was.

After leaving the study Talbot went straight along to Study No. 10 to see Tom Merry. He doubted himself whether Tom would play, and he meant to make sure before posting up the list. He found the Terrible Three at home together.

"Knox isn't playing this afternoon, Tom," said Talbot, coming straight to the point. "He's got to meet an uncle in Wayland."

"What a yarn!" said Lowther, with a sniff. "The rotten slacker's starting well, by jingo! It's spoof!"

"It's right enough as it happens," said Talbot, smiling. "I've seen the telegram his uncle sent. It's quite genuine, though I doubted myself until I saw it. Anyway, I'm taking the team over, and I'm choosing my own men. I shall want you, Tom, if you'll play—and Lowther."

"I'd rather not play," said Tom.

"If Tom doesn't I won't," said Lowther briefly.

Talbot frowned.

"You don't feel up to playing?" he asked.

"I'm fit enough," said Tom. "It isn't that. You know well enough why I'd rather not."

"I'm asking you to back me up, and for the sake of the school," said Talbot quietly. "And I'm also asking you for your own sake, Tom Merry. You know well enough what my views are. You said you had not funk'd the other day, and I believed you, whether the evidence points the other way or not. I know you couldn't funk if you tried. I fancy you had a good reason for what you did."

"I did," said Tom.

"That's enough about that, then. Now look here, Tommy, if this sweep Knox is in charge much longer the footer will go to pot. The sooner he's booted out of his job and the sooner you're back in it, the better for St. Jim's. It's up to you to make a better fight—not only for your own sake, but for the school's sake. If you play this afternoon we'll win. I'm asking you to forget the way the fellows have treated you, and to play up for St. Jim's. You'll be putting a spoke in that swanking, swashbuckling sweep's wheel, too. Shall I put you down?"

Tom was silent for a moment, and then he nodded.

"Right!" he said quietly. "You're right, Talbot, old man. I'll play! Put me down!"

"Good man!"

And Talbot put him down, and went out smiling.

CHAPTER 5.

The Challenge!

"TALBOT, deah boy!"

Reginald Talbot stopped as Arthur Augustus called out to him after dinner that day.

"Well, Gussy?" he asked cheerfully. "What's the trouble this time?"

Arthur Augustus joined Talbot, his slender, aristocratic fingers toying with the monocle jammed in his eye. D'Arcy's expression was very grave, and he was obviously nervous and ill at ease.

"I—I—the fact is, deah boy—" Arthur Augustus faltered, and paused. Whatever the fact was, it was evidently very serious, and that Arthur Augustus hesitated about divulging it. "The—the fact is—"

"Go on, old chap!" said Talbot encouragingly. "It's a

half to-day, so you've plenty of time; but allow me to remind you that the match starts at three—"

"Pway don't wot, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "The mattah is wathah sewious. I am afwaid I have wathah bad news—"

"Not a death in the family, I hope?" said Talbot, becoming serious.

"Nunno. The fact is—"

"Hat-makers gone on strike?" asked Talbot, with grave interest. "Or is it only a rise in the price of neckties?"

"Bai Jove, no! I am afwaid you are twyin' to pull my leg, Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus reprovingly. "The fact is, I have wathah disappointin' news for you, deah boy—especially as I know you are vevy keen indeed upon winnin' the match this aftahnoon. Howevah, it cannot possibly be helped, and—"

"Oh, it's about the match, is it?" said Talbot.

"Yaas! I have just discovahed that you have put me down to play, deah boy."

"That's so," said Talbot, smiling. "But if you really feel I'm risking the match by putting you down to play—"

"Bai Jove! Not at all, Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus, giving him a sharp look. "Quite the contwawy, in fact. I am vevy wowwid indeed at the decision I am obliged to come to in wegard to that. Like you, I was vevy anxious that we should win this aftahnoon. Now, howevah, I fear that is out of the question, and I feel I shall be wathah lettin' the school down, bai Jove! I am vevy, vevy sowwy, deah boy, but I feah I shall be quite unable to play for St. Jim's this aftahnoon."

It was out now, and Arthur Augustus looked very anxiously at Talbot. Apparently he expected Talbot to look aghast—possibly he expected him to tear his hair in grief and dismay. But Talbot did neither; he just grinned.

"That's all right, Gussy!" he said cheerily. "I can easily get another chap to fill your place—I've at least a dozen to choose from."

"Bai Jove!"

Talbot was rather exaggerating there; Arthur Augustus was speedy, a sure shot, and a very useful man indeed at footer, and there were very few fellows in the Lower School indeed to come up to him. Naturally, Arthur Augustus was not pleased.

"Weally, Talbot," he said stiffly. "Then I twust you will find one easily, bai Jove! I was not aware that I could be so easily weplaced! Howevah, the fact remains that I cannot play, and I shall be obliged if you will ewoss my name off your list."

"Sorry, Gussy!" said Talbot, laughing. "I was only pulling your leg, fathead. We shall miss you, of course, and it won't be easy to replace you. But if you mean it—"

"I am afwaid it is necessawy, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, unbending a little. "You see, I have an appointment with my tailor in Wayland this aftahnoon."

"Oh!" remarked Talbot solemnly. "If it is so very important as that—"

"It is wathah important, isn't it?" said Gussy innocently. "I have already been obliged to cancel the appointment once, and I feel it would be vevy wude and ill-mannahed to cancel it again. Mr. Twufit's time must be vevy valuable, you know. I made the appointment for this aftahnoon, feelin' vevy certain that Knox would not put me down to play. As you know vevy well, the wottah has stated that he would not play either me or Blake—simply because he knows we do not like him, I pwesume. As he has changed his mind, howevah—"

"He hasn't changed his mind!" chuckled Talbot. "I changed it for him. Well, that's all right, Gussy, old chap. You trot off to see your tailor, and I'll shove old Reddy in. All serene!"

And Talbot walked away, smiling.

Arthur Augustus walked slowly in the other direction, shaking his head gravely. He did not feel at all that it was "All serene!" He could only hope for the best, however. But, after all, a footer match was really not so important as a solemn conference with one's tailor, he reflected.

"Well?" demanded Blake, as Arthur Augustus entered Study No. 6. "Did Talbot let you off, Gussy?"

"Yaas; it is quite all wight, but—"

"He didn't tear his hair and gnash his teeth, or go on bended knees and beg you to reconsider your decision, Gussy?" asked Digby in pretended astonishment.

"Pway do not be wedic," said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "It is wathah wemarkable, howevah; Talbot did not seem at all disturbed when I told him I could not play."

"Go hon!"

"I am afwaid he is not takin' his duties sewiously enough for once," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "He did not even beg me to weconsidah my decision. Howevah, as I told him, we must hope for the best."

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"We must!" agreed Blake, with a chuckle.
 "And I weally hope," said Arthur Augustus firmly, "that you fellows will play up for all you are worth, bai Jove! You must show that unspeakable person, Knox, that we can win matches without his aid. Yaas, wathah!"
 "What's the matter with Knox?" grunted Herries, flushing. "He played the cad on the field at practice, I'll admit; but he's not a funk, anyway, and he saved me and Towser when a pal—or a fellow who called himself a pal—let us down."

"Well, that is quite twue, I suppose," admitted Arthur Augustus, glancing uneasily at Herries. "None the less, I do not considah that Knox makes a good captain from any point of view. He is a wank outsiders! It would be bettah for St. Jim's and the footah if Tom Mewwy were back in his job. Do you not think so, Blake?"

Blake hesitated, with one eye on Herries' flushed face. As a matter of fact, D'Arcy had only said what both he and Digby believed. But he knew that such an opinion only irritated George Herries—there had already been discord in Study No. 6, owing to disagreements on that point. Whether Herries really believed Knox made a better captain than Tom Merry they doubted exceedingly. They realised that he felt bound to support Percy Knox in gratitude for his action in saving him from the hands of Ginger Burke.

"Oh, what's the good of talking about it?" growled Blake. "It's a rotten business altogether, and I wish to goodness Knox had never come to the school—been nothing but trouble since he came. As for Tom Merry—"

"Tom Merry's a bigger cad than ever Knox is!" snapped Herries.

"I wish I felt certain about that, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, shaking his head again. "The more I think about the wotten affaih, the more I wondah if we are not makin' a vewy big mistake in condemnin' Tom Mewwy!"

"Don't talk rot!" said Herries, his face angry. "Facts are facts! Tom Merry played the coward—he ran away and left me and Towser to face the music. He's a cowardly cad!"

"He may have some good weason—"
 "What reason could he have?" shouted Herries, his face red. "I tell you he funk'd, and I'm going to fight the sweep as soon as his hands are better. My only dashed fear is that he'll funk that—"

"Wubbish! Hewwies, deah boy—"

"Oh, drop it, for goodness' sake!" said Blake glumly. Arthur Augustus was not the only one in Study No. 6 who wondered if they were not making a big mistake in condemning Tom Merry. Blake and Digby, like Gussy, had felt bound to support Herries, and they had, at first, been angry and disgusted with Tom, and had refused to speak to him. But since, having had more time to think things over, they were beginning to wonder if there might not be something else behind it all. Yet Blake did not wish to quarrel with Herries. They could scarcely blame Herries for his attitude in the matter in any case. "Drop the whole subject! And there's no need to fight, as far as I can see," added Blake rather lamely.

"No need—when the sweep struck me—smacked my face before a crowd?" articulated Herries angrily.

"Well, you smacked his chivvy first, after all," said Digby mildly. "Why not let it go at that, old fellow—no need causing more trouble."

"I'm fighting him!" snapped Herries doggedly. "What about that drawing? He called me a liar over that. Wasn't I entitled to hit the cad? I tell you I'm—"

Herries broke off just then as the door opened, and Curly Gibson of the Third stepped into the room and threw an envelope across the table towards Herries.

"From Merry of the Shell!" he said briefly. "Any answer?"

Herries tore open the envelope, and, as he read the contents his jaw set grimly, and he tossed the note across to Blake.

"That settles it!" he said.
 Blake read the note, guessing beforehand what it contained. It read as follows:

"To George Herries,—We can settle our affair immediately after the match this afternoon, if it suits you. As we're both playing we shall be in the same boat physically. What about the old hut in Rylcombe Woods?"

"TOM MERRY."
 "That tears it!" groaned Blake. "I suppose his hands are better—though I'm blessed if I can see how they could be!"

He handed the note to Digby and D'Arcy, who likewise groaned.

"Wotten!" was D'Arcy's comment. "I was hopin' that fight would nevah come off, bai Jove!"

"I knew Tom Merry wasn't the fellow to hang back for long," grunted Digby, "hands or no hands! Going to meet him, Herries?"

Herries nodded slowly.
 "If his hands are really better I certainly am!" he snapped. "What do you take me for? We'll both be in the same boat after the match, as he says, so that doesn't matter."

He tore a leaf from an exercise book and scribbled on it. Then he handed the folded note to the grinning Curly Gibson.

"That's the answer, kid!" he snapped.
 "Right-ho!"

Curly Gibson departed, grinning. From what had been said the fag realised it was a fight, and he made a mental note to be on the spot when it came off. He hurried to Study No. 10, and handed the note to Tom Merry himself. Then he scudded off to tell the news to his fellow fags. There was likely to be an attendance of fags at the fight, at all events!

Tom Merry soon read the note, and, as he did so, Lowther and Manners eyed him anxiously.

"Well?" demanded Lowther.
 "It's all right!" said Tom grimly. "He says he's on if my hands are quite better. It's a go, then—after the match, by the old woodman's hut!"

"But your hands aren't better!" said Manners bluntly.
 "You're an ass, Tommy!"

"Yes, rather!" agreed Lowther gloomily. "Don't do it, I tell you."

"I'm going through with it!" said Tom Merry doggedly. "My hands are fit enough to lick Herries, and I'm not putting it off any longer. The fellows are already sneering and saying I funk Herries!"

"Cads like Racke and Crooke, you mean!"
 "Yes—well, it makes no difference. I'm feeling fit enough, and I'm going to give Herries the licking of his

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life," said Tom Merry, his blue eyes gleaming with determination. "I'll teach the sweep to hit me, and to shove beastly cartoons up about me. And after I've licked him I'm going to take on a bigger job; I'm going to lick that cad Knox—or have a jolly good try. Now, what about getting ready to start for Rylcombe?"

"But, old chap—"
 "That's enough!" snapped Tom. "Nothing will make me change my mind!"

Lowther and Manners said no more. The thought of the coming fight between two such old friends as Tom and Herries made them feel miserable—just as it did Herries' own personal chums. But both principals were determined upon it, and it seemed useless to try to stop the fight.

CHAPTER 6.

Cardew Amuses Himself!

"WELL, cheerio, old chan!"
 "Cheerio!" answered Harry Manners grimly.
 "Mind you fellows play up—especially you, Tommy! Let that swanking cad Knox know he's not the only fellow who can play footer! Put your beef into it to-day!"

"I mean to!" said Tom Merry quietly. "Sure you won't come along and see the game, Manners?"

"Yes, blow your giddy camera!" snorted Lowther.
 "Come along!"

Manners grinned and shook his head.
 "I'm making the most of this bit of sunshine—we have little enough these days, goodness knows!" he said. "I can see a bit of footer any old time, and I haven't been able to get a snap for ages. I'll turn up in time for the scrap, though, never fear!"

"Fathead!" said Lowther.

And Lowther and Tom Merry parted from their chum and walked on towards the village. Manners slung his camera over his shoulder and made for the stile that gave admittance on to the footpath through Rylcombe Woods.

He had almost reached it when he jumped as he heard his name called. He recognised the drawing voice, but it was only after looking about him blankly for a few seconds that he saw the owner.

It was Ralph Reckness Cardew of the Fourth, and he was seated on an old fence just beyond the stile.

"Oh, you!" said Manners, jumping the stile. "You gave me a start, you silly ass! What the thump are you sitting there for?"

"I'm just amusin' myself," said Cardew airily, "in my own simple way. Goin' snappin', I see?"

"Yes."

"Why this thussness?" asked Cardew. "Why forsake the footer and the fight, may I ask—especially as dear old Tommy—"

"I'm not forsaking the fight, anyway," grunted Manners, "but I'm giving the footer a miss. I want to get a few snaps in this afternoon."

"Amusin' your giddy self in your own way, like me, what?" said Cardew. "I'm just detectin', you know. Care to join me?" he added, looking reflectively at Manners' camera.

"Detectin'! What the thump—"

"That's the word!" said Cardew. "It's another word for mindin' another chap's business, you know. That camera may come in useful."

Manners stared at the elegant Fourth-Former. At the best of times it was rather difficult to understand Cardew.

"What's the giddy game?" asked Manners.

"I'm interested in a certain fellow—that's all!" drawled Cardew. "Our mutual friend Percy states that he is going to meet his dear nunky this afternoon. I've got an idea that he isn't!"

"Oh, you mean Knox!"

"The very man!" smiled Cardew. "I'm rather interested in Knox, you know. An' I'm goin' to find out whether he really does go to meet nunky. I can't help feelin' it's all spoof!"

"But he had a telegram!" said Manners, eyeing Cardew fixedly. "Lots of fellows have seen it!"

"Quite so!" agreed Cardew blandly. "But some fellows send telegrams to themselves; it's rather convenient at times—especially when a fellow prefers billiards in a pub to his irksome duties as footer skipper. Get me, dear man?"

"Oh!" said Manners. He had never thought of that.

"I'm rather keen to find out if the dear man is spoofin'!" drawled Cardew. "Bein' a new fellow, I feel it my duty to find out and to point out to him the error of his ways. Besides," went on Cardew, stroking his nose thoughtfully, "friend Knox punched my nose yesterday. I let it go at that for the moment. The blighter is just a little above my weight. But—"

Cardew paused meaningly, and Manners chuckled. He understood. There were a goodly number of fellows at St. Jim's who had had their noses punched by Percy Knox. And though not usually a vindictive fellow, Ralph Reckness Cardew evidently had not forgotten or forgiven—if other fellows had.

"You don't love Percy, then?" asked Manners, grinning. "He's a poisonous blighter in my humble opinion!" remarked Cardew. "I don't pose as a shining model of virtue—like dear old Thomas, frinstance—but I do think that the sooner friend Knox is shifted off his giddy perch the better it will be for St. Jim's, morally and sportively, so to speak. And then there's dear Thomas—"

"What about Tom Merry?"

"I don't wholly approve of Thomas as captain," said Cardew, shaking his head. "He's a bit too strenuous—makes a fellow work when he'd rather not, you know. Still, I fancy he's the best man for the job, an' I'm goin' to do my humble little bit to shift Percy and leave the way open for Thomas!"

"You don't bar Merry like the rest of the rotters, then?" muttered Manners, eyeing him suspiciously. "Looks to me as if you know something—"

"My dear man, I know nothin'—but I suspect a lot!" said Cardew, smiling. "When dear Thomas himself tells me he funk'd I'll swallow it—not before! When I've finished detectin' friend Knox I propose to turn my abilities to discoverin' just why Thomas had urgent business elsewhere when friend Ginger turned up. But the most urgent task is to bowl out friend Knox, and the question is, are you goin' to back me up, dear man?"

"But—but what's the good—"

"Lots of good! The fellows are already fed up with Knox—they'll go off at the deep end when they discover he's cut the match to go off on the giddy loose. It will give Knoxy the knock-out, I fancy!"

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"It—it seems like spying on a chap!" said Manners. "Detectin', I call it—not such an unpleasant word!" said Cardew, dropping his half-joking, half-mocking manner. "It's like this, Manners—in my humble view, the end more than justifies the means. Unless he's stopped, Knox will about muck up the footer for the season, and he'll also bring the giddy tone of the school down. He's a strong chap, with personality; and his giddy influence isn't for the good of St. Jim's. An' then, as I say, there's dear old Thomas—"

"You're right, Cardew!" said Manners, setting his lips. "I'm on!"

"Then fall in an' follow me—when the time comes," smiled Cardew. "I'm just waitin' to discover— Hallo! Here's the one and only Gussy!"

From where they sat, though well screened from the lane themselves, the two juniors had a good view of anyone



Even as Tom Merry kicked the ball, Knox minor's foot lashed crashing down, to roll over and over in the mud. Pheeeep from the play

approaching from the school. Along the lane now an elegant figure was sauntering gracefully. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and, as usual, he was a beautiful picture from the crown of his glimmering silk hat to the toes of his natty, shining shoes that peeped from a pair of natty spats.

With a chuckle, Cardew dislodged himself from the fence and strolled to the stile. As Arthur Augustus came abreast he called out to him.

"Cheerio, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus stopped, and, jamming his monocle farther into his eye, he glanced round him. Then he suddenly saw Cardew and frowned.

"Weally, Cardew, deah boy," he remarked mildly, "you have put me into quite a fluttah, bai Jove! I wondahed if—"

"Never mind what you wondered, old chap!" said Cardew. "I hear you're bound for Wayland, Gussy. The tallman—what?"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"Care to get somethin' for me?"

"I shall be vewy pleased to oblige you, Cardew," said Arthur Augustus doubtfully. "But I weally twust you will not ask me to cawvy back any twonblesome parcels—"

"Not at all. What I want you to get me is a bit of information, Gussy. Will you do that, old chap?"

"I shall be vewy pleased to do that, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, smiling.

"Right! There's a fellow who's supposed to have an appointment in Wayland this afternoon—like you, Gussy," said Cardew calmly. "I'm rather keen to know if that fellow keeps his appointment."



and the next instant Tom Merry, with a sharp cry, went foul!" "The cad!" There was a chorus of indignation (See Chapter 3.)

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, staring curiously at Cardew. "You mean Knox, deah boy?"

"The very man!" smiled Cardew. "I'll be no end obliged if you'll keep your optics open this afternoon, Gussy. I'd like to know if Knox is on the train you go by; if you happen to see him in Wayland; and if he returns by the train you do. I fancy you won't see him at all, but you never know. Well, is it a go, Gussy?"

"Weally, Cardew, I do not quite like—"

"My dear man, what's the odds? Knox amuses me, and it'll be very entertainin' to know if he goes. No reason why I shouldn't amuse myself, dear man—"

"Yaas, but—"

"That's settled, then!" said Cardew blandly. "Thanks so much, Gussy! I'll expect the information when you return, old chap. Cheerio! Better buzz off, or you'll miss your train."

"Bai Jove!"

Leaving Arthur Augustus staring, Cardew dropped from the stile and returned to Manners, smiling. Arthur Augustus turned and trudged away, frowning. He was quite mystified as to why Cardew wanted the information.

"Cardew is weally a most remarkable fellow!" he murmured as he trudged on. "Howevah, I see no reason why I should not oblige him—though I wish he had stated his reason for desiwinn' the information."

And, shaking his head doubtfully, Arthur Augustus walked on to the station.

Manners had not shown himself—not being on good terms with Arthur Augustus. He grunted as Cardew joined him.

"Blessed if I can see why you asked D'Arcy to do it," he said. "Knox may cycle, for that matter."

"I just wanted to make sure he doesn't go by this train," said Cardew. "I know he didn't catch the earlier one. If he fails to catch this, he'll miss his appointment. See?"

"Yes, but—"

"I was goin' to wait here and see if he does—follow him, you know," smiled Cardew. "But now Gussy will do that for me, and we can carry our giddy investigations elsewhere. You see, I happen to know that Knox is booked to play a game of billiards with Lacy of the Grammar School for a fiver. Where, or when, I don't know. But I fancy it's this afternoon, and I've a good idea it'll be at the Green Man. That's where we're goin' now. See?"

"Oh!"

"Come on!" smiled Cardew.

He led the way along the woodland path, and Manners followed promptly enough now. They reached the spot where the footpath through the woods branched off from the short cut to the village, and, after walking for some minutes, they came out on to the towing-path of the Rhyll.

They were just about to climb the stile to reach the towing-path, when voices sounded, and Cardew dragged Manners back into the shelter of the hedge. The next moment several forms passed the gap above the stile.

Cardew chuckled as he recognised them.

"Racke, Crooke, Lacy, and dear old Knox!" he murmured. "So that settles it! Hold on a sec."

The two juniors waited until the footsteps ceased, and then they slipped over the stile on to the towing-path.

Ahead of them were Racke & Co.; and, carefully keeping out of sight, the two "investigators" watched Racke & Co. suddenly stop at the Green Man Inn. Then, after looking stealthily about them for some moments, the little party of juniors vanished.

"Gone through the garden," drawled Cardew. "Rather a pity; I wanted to get there first, before they turned up. It means that we'll have a long wait, old bean."

"But why?" grunted Manners. "What's the idea, Cardew?"

"Can't you guess?" grinned Cardew. "We've got to wait until they finish their little game, and then I want you to snap them as they come out. That's where your giddy camera comes in."

"Oh!" said Manners, understanding. "But they may be hours—"

"That is the trouble," admitted Cardew. "It's one of the drawbacks to detectin', and it's rather a fag. But it's worth it. An' we can be studiyin' Nature until the time comes for you to make a camera study of the distressin' follies of human nature. Come on!"

Ralph Rockness Cardew started off for the Green Man Inn, and Manners laughed and followed him, hugging his precious camera. After all, it was scarcely wasting the afternoon, and he would be sure of one interesting snap, at any rate.

CHAPTER 7. Gussy's Discovery.

BAI JOVE!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave vent to that startled exclamation, and then, as if it were scarcely strong enough to express his astonishment, he gave vent to another:

"Gweat Scott!"

The swell of the Fourth was seated in the waiting-room at Wayland Junction, waiting for the train to take him back to Rylcombe. Arthur Augustus had spent a delightful hour or so at his tailor's, discussing men's fashions as they affected him personally with Mr. Truefit. He had then sauntered gracefully back to the station. There was heaps of time before the local train was due out, and Arthur Augustus took things very easily.

But, despite this, he had found himself at the station with ten minutes at least on his hands. And, though it was a bright, sunny afternoon, there was a keen nip in the

air, and on the station platform it was very unpleasant and draughty.

So Arthur Augustus had sauntered gracefully into the waiting-room and seated himself. He had then picked up, quite carelessly, a copy of the "Wayland Observer" that happened to be lying on one of the chairs.

It was the previous week's issue; but as Arthur Augustus rarely looked at a newspaper of any kind, it was none the less interesting.

And while glancing casually down the columns the noble eye of Arthur Augustus had alighted upon a paragraph—a paragraph that had made him give vent to those exclamations of astonishment.

It was of local interest, and it ran:

"PLUCKY RESCUE FROM FIRE.

"Yesterday afternoon Albert Rance, aged 8, of Riverside Cottages, Rylcombe, had a narrow escape from almost certain death by fire; but was saved by the pluck and prompt action of an unknown schoolboy, whose age is believed to be fifteen, or thereabouts. The child had evidently fallen into the fireplace, and, with his clothes ablaze, had rushed, screaming into the yard at the back of the cottage. At the time the child's mother was visiting a neighbour; but, hearing screams, she rushed out, to find the plucky unknown rescuer rolling the child in his overcoat and beating out the flames with his bare hands. Fortunately, the child was not severely burned, and, after carrying him to the surgery of Dr. Short, the rescuer disappeared without giving the agitated mother an opportunity of thanking him, or of ascertaining his name. A neighbour states, however, that he was a well-dressed boy, and that he wore the school cap of St. James' College, Rylcombe."

Arthur Augustus read the paragraph again, jamming his monocle more firmly into place, as if to aid him in taking it in.

But he did take it in! Arthur Augustus was not noted for quickness of perception as a general rule—quite the contrary, in fact. But he would have been very dull indeed had he failed to note the significance of that paragraph.

So that was how Tom Merry had got his hands burned!

Hadn't Lowther told Blake & Co. that Tom Merry had got his hands burned on the same afternoon, and hadn't he also told them that that was the reason he refused to tell them why he had run away from Ginger Burke? Moreover, George Herries had pointed out to his chums the very spot where Burke & Co. had attacked them, and it was, Arthur Augustus knew, within sight and sound of Riverside Cottages.

And wasn't Tom Merry the last fellow in the world to wish to make a song about a plucky action on his part? To be anxious to keep the matter a secret was just the thing Tom Merry would do, being a fellow who hated publicity and fuss! And, naturally enough, the fact that old friends had refused to accept his word that he had not faked had, in the circumstances, made him bitter and stubborn.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy saw it all now.

He did not for one moment doubt that the "unknown rescuer" was Tom Merry. He had seen the scarred and burned hands of Tom Merry himself, and, like many others, he had wondered how the ex-skipper had come by such wounds. It had happened that very afternoon, and Tom Merry had been on the spot at the time. No wonder he had left Herries and Towser in the lurch! He had seen and heard what Herries had obviously failed to see and hear, and he had made his decision swiftly and dashed off on his life and death mission.

And they had called him coward and cad—practically the whole school had called him coward and cad!

"Oh, bai Jove!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "What a wotten shame! Poor old Tommy! And Hewwies is goin' to fight him this aftahnoon!"

The thought made Arthur Augustus jump up and glance at his watch anxiously. The train was due in two more minutes.

"Oh, good!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I must be in time to prevent that fight at all costs! Yaas, wathah! What a weally wippin' stwoke of luck! It is vewy, vewy fortunate indeed that I was obliged to visit my tailor's this aftahnoon, bai Jove!"

And Arthur Augustus hurried out of the waiting-room to make sure of catching the local train whatever else happened. His face was beaming now. The split between the Terrible Three and Blake & Co. had been little less than a tragedy to the good-hearted and peace-loving Gussy. He had had his doubts in regard to Tom Merry's innocence—as had Blake and Digby. Possibly Herries himself—though he would not admit it—had his doubts also. But, like

Blake and Digby, Arthur Augustus had felt bound to support his own personal chum, Herries.

But all was clear now. If only he could get back before the fight started it would never take place. His good tidings would very swiftly heal the breach, and all would be merry and bright again.

Arthur Augustus felt quite certain of that, and he fairly trembled with impatience as he waited for the local. It came in at last, and Arthur Augustus made a rush for it. He tumbled in, and after what seemed an endless wait, the train started off for Rylcombe.

On the way to Wayland Arthur Augustus had duly noted that Percy Knox had not boarded the train, nor had he seen that youth in Wayland, though he had kept a look-out for him. But Arthur Augustus forgot Cardew's request now, and the moment the train rumbled to a stop at Rylcombe Station he jumped out and, throwing his ticket to a porter, rushed from the station.

In the High Street, however, Arthur Augustus paused, a sudden thought striking him.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured, shaking his head reflectively. "I think I had better make quite sure first. Tom Mewwy may pwobably wefuse to admit that he was the fellow who saved that youngstah. I had better get weal pwoof. Yaas, wathah!"

So, instead of keeping to the High Street, Arthur Augustus branched off down the narrow lane leading to the river. He emerged on to the towing-path scarcely twenty yards from Riverside Cottages.

Without hesitation, Arthur Augustus walked up to the first cottage and knocked on the door. A tired-looking woman answered his knock, and she stared and smiled at Arthur Augustus.

The swell of the Fourth raised his hat and bowed in his best Chesterfieldian manner.

"I am desivous of speakin' to a lady named Mrs. Wance," exclaimed the swell of the Fourth politely. "I wondah if you would be so kind as to tell me which cottage—"

"Mrs. Wance—oh, Mrs. Rance!" said the woman, smiling. "Yes, I am Mrs. Rance."

"Oh, good!" said Arthur Augustus, beaming. "I undahstand that your little boy had a vewy nawwow escape from a dweadful—"

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Rance, her eyes shining as she stared at Gussy. "You—you're not the young gentleman who—"

"Bai Jove! Nunno!" Arthur Augustus hastened to explain. "I fancy I know the fellow, though. I wondah if you will be so good as to desewibe him to me, ma'am?"

"I was too upset to notice what he was like myself," said the woman regretfully, "except that he was a schoolboy of about your own size and age, sir. But Mrs. Cragg, next door, saw him, and she says he was a nice lad—sturdy, with a pleasant face, blue eyes, and curly hair. She says she'd know him again anywhere."

"Bai Jove! That is Tom Mewwy, without a doubt!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Thank you vewy much, ma'am! You must excuse me bothahin' you like this; but I was vewy anxious for a vewy good weason, to discovah who the fellow was."

"Did you say his name was Tom Merry?" exclaimed Mrs. Rance eagerly. "If you could tell me where we could find him we should be ever so glad. My husband's been thinking of going up to the school and inquiring there. But there's so many boys there, and he thought it would be no good not knowing his name, like. We want to thank him—I ought never to have let him go without thanking him at the time. Only I was so—"

"I quite undahstand that, ma'am," said Arthur Augustus, smiling. "I am vewy pleased to tell you that his name is Tom Mewwy, and he is in the Shell Form at St. Jim's. At least, I have ewevy weason to believe it was Tom Mewwy, for his hands were burned that aftahnoon. Also he answers to your description, and I happen to know he was wou'd heah that aftahnoon."

"Then—then the young gentleman was hurt—"

"His hands were wathah badly burned, ma'am; but I undahstand they are almost better now," said Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, I am weally much obliged, Mrs. Wance. I must wush off now, as I have a vewy urgent mattah to attend to. Good aftahnoon!"

And, raising his hat gracefully, Arthur Augustus hurried away. For once the swell of the Fourth risked being thought impolite in his anxiety to reach the woodman's hut before the fight started. But his heart was thumping with excitement as he trotted along the towing-path. He had little doubt before—he had less now as to the identity of the fellow who had rescued Mrs. Rance's youngster.

"I feah Tom Mewwy will be watty with me for havin' given him away to Mrs. Wance," he chuckled. "But I am wathah glad I did. Howevah— Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus broke off as he heard his name called out. He almost jumped as he realised the fact that the

voice came from the garden of the Green Man Inn which he happened to be passing at that moment.

As he stopped short and blinked at the hedge two juniors slipped out and showed themselves. Arthur Augustus grunted again as he recognised Cardew and Manners.

"Gweat Scott!" he gasped, aghast. "Whatevah are you sillay asses doin' in that place? Are you pottay?"

"Not at all, dear man!" chuckled Cardew. "Merely detectin', old nut!"

"What? Bai Jove! Weally, I do not undahstand—"

"Don't try, old chap," advised Cardew solemnly. "You'll bust somethin' if you do. Well, did you see anythin' of dear old Knoxy, Gussy?"

"I did not see him—he was certainly not on the twain goin', deah boy. But—"

"Somehow I thought he wouldn't be," chuckled Cardew. "Hurryin' to be in time for the fight, what?"

"Yaas—at least—"

"Then ask Tom Merry to give that fathead Herries a good punch from me," said Cardew seriously.

"Bai Jove! I shall do nothin' of the kind, Cardew!" said Arthur Augustus. "On the contwawy, Cardew, I am wushin' like anythin' for the sole purpose of stoppin' the fight."

"What?"

"I have made a vewy important discovevwy, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, smiling at Manners, to that youth's surprise. "I have discovahed the weal weason why Tom Mewwy wan away the othah day. As I suspect that you know it alweady, Mannahs, I will show this to Cardew."

And, taking the folded "Observer" from his pocket, Arthur Augustus showed the paragraph to Cardew. Cardew whistled as he read it, and then a bland smile came over his face.

"So that's it!" he said.

"Yaas, that's it, deah boy. I have just been to see Mrs. Wance, and she has confirmed my belief that the fellow referred to there is Tom Mewwy."

"You—you've been to Mrs. Rance?" gasped Manners.

"Told her it was Tom Merry?"

"Netuwallly!"

"Oh, my hat!" choked Manners. "Tom Merry will bust you, Gussy!"

"I see no weason why he should," said Arthur Augustus.

"I twust now that all will be mewwy and bwight, and that Tom Mewwy will forgive us for our wotten tweatment, and will shake hands and forget. And I twust," said Arthur Augustus, holding out his hand frankly to Manners, "that our wecent diffevances will now be ended, Mannahs!"

Harry Manners took the hand and chuckled.

"That's all right, Gussy!" he grinned. "But, don't be too sure that Tom Merry will forget and forgive! Hadn't you better rush off and try to stop the fight, though? You've none too much time."

"Gweat Scott! Yaas, wathah! Pway excuse me, deah boys!"

Arthur Augustus grabbed the paper from Cardew, and started off at top speed along the towing-path.

"What a life!" groaned Cardew, staring after him in mock disappointment. "Stumped, by gad! An' I was lookin' forward no end to solvin' the giddy mystery. An' now Gussy's done me brown. Never mind; we'll have the giddy glory of bowlin' out friend Knox, Manners. We'd better seek our little hiding-place again, old chap!"

And Cardew slipped back into the shelter of the hedge, and Manners grunted and followed him. He would much rather have followed D'Arcy; but he had agreed to help Cardew, and he wasn't backing out now within sight of success.

CHAPTER 8.
Settling Up!

PHEEP! It was the whistle that ended the match between Rylcombe Village and St. Jim's. As it shrilled out a roar of cheering came from the swarms of St. Jim's fellows round the ropes.

"Hurrah!"

"St. Jim's win!"

And St. Jim's had won after a gruelling tussle between the old friends and rivals of school and village. Grimes & Co. were gallant fighters, and they had played up well as they usually did.

But the Saints had played up better—Talbot had led his men to victory, as he had expected to do. It would certainly have been otherwise had Talbot taken the field with the team chosen for him by Percy Knox.

The St. Jim's eleven had been practically as usual, and they had played up to a man. But the most brilliant player on the field had been undoubtedly Tom Merry of the Shell. Tom Merry had been determined to play well, and he had given of his best. The game had ended with the score at four goals to two, and three out of the four had been scored by Tom Merry, the Fourth having been netted by Talbot himself.

Yet, despite that fact, and the brilliance of his play, Tom had missed the roars of applause that he was wont to get from the crowd. It was only too clear that the fellows could not forget his recent disgrace. What little applause that had escaped them was half hearted and grudging.

It was dispiriting and disheartening, and Tom's face was hard as he trotted off the field at the close of the match.

"You played the game of your life, Tommy," panted Talbot as he trotted alongside his chum. "Never mind those silly asses. They'll be sorry some day for being such sulky idiots!"

Tom Merry said nothing, and it was not until he came out of the dressing-room with Lowther and Talbot that he spoke again.

"I wish this rotten fight wasn't booked to come off, Tommy," said Talbot bluntly. "It's a dashed pity!"

"And a footling game altogether!" growled Lowther. "Fancy a hefty scrap after a gruelling footer match! You were a born idiot, Tommy, to challenge him for this afternoon!"

"I'm feeling none the worse!" said Tom grimly. "No need to worry about me, anyway! I've had to keep Herries waiting; but I'm keeping him waiting no longer!"

"Look here, Tom," pleaded Lowther. "There's still time to call it off—"

"I'm not calling it off!" snapped Tom Merry, his jaw setting. "I'm going to see it through if Herries is. Besides," added Tom, glancing round him with a harsh laugh, "think of the disappointment to all the fellows. They're hoping to see me licked to the wide this afternoon. Looks as if half the dashed school will be there!"

It certainly did look like it. Instead of going schoolwards by Rylcombe Lane, the crowd of St. Jim's fellows—fags as well as juniors—were taking the footpath across the fields, obviously making for the woods.

"Blake's lot must have let it out," grunted Lowther, "or else that young imp Curley Gibson tumbled to it. I noticed the little beggar was grinning when he came back after taking your note. Anyway, it scarcely matters."

"Plenty of support for Herries, anyway," said Tom Merry bitterly.

"It was all over the school before dinner," said Talbot quietly. "I heard Trimble spreading the news. Never mind, Tom; you played well without applause this afternoon, and you can fight well without applause now. I wish it wasn't coming off, as I say; but if it has to, then go in and win!"

"I mean to," said Tom Merry. "It's jolly decent of you, Talbot, to back me up when you don't know the facts!"

"I know you—and that's enough for me!" said Talbot quietly.

Tom looked at him, but said nothing more. They tramped on into the wintry woods, the frosty grass and ferns crackling beneath their boots and the boots of the fellows swarming in front and behind them on the wood-

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land pathway. Just in front of them were Blake, Digby, and Herries with several other Fourth-Formers. Blake and Digby were looking far from happy, but Herries merely looked dogged and determined.

The old woodman's hut came in sight through the leafless trees at length, and the crowd crossed the grass towards it, making a circle round Blake & Co. and Tom Merry and his two chums. Tom Merry looked round him, fully expecting Manners to be there, and his face clouded as he failed to see him.

Despite his words to Talbot, he would have been glad enough of another friendly face there, in addition to Lowther and Talbot. Figgins & Co. were there, and they nodded to him; but Tom Merry could not fail to see that even their nods were cool.

Herries was already taking off his coat and muffler, and Tom Merry swiftly followed his example, and made ready for the fray. Blake was acting as second for his chum, and Lowther for Tom Merry.

Levison of the Fourth had agreed to act as timekeeper—though it was plain enough he did not relish his job.

Swiftly the preliminaries were gone through, and then the two faced each other with the gloves on, while Levison stood aside, watch in hand.

The buzz of excited voices died down and a breathless silence came as the two touched gloves and sprang away.

"Time!"

It was Levison's calm voice; but even as it rang out another well-known voice rang out also—excited and impelling.

"Stop!"

There was a murmur of astonishment, and the crowd turned. Herries, who had been about to advance on Tom Merry, his gloves ready, stopped abruptly, and his glance went towards the fringe of the clearing.

As he did so, a familiar form burst through the wintry trees, and his voice rang out again:

"Stop! Bai Jove! Stop them, you fellows!"

"What the thump—"

"It's old Gussy!"

"D'Arcy, you idiot—"

Arthur Augustus came up, panting, and pushed his way unceremoniously through the crowd of startled fellows. Then he sprang between Herries and Tom Merry, his hands outstretched.

"Pway don't start until you have heard me!" he panted. "Hewwies—"

"You silly chump!" roared Jack Blake. "What the thump does this mean? Are you potty?"

"Not at all, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, breathlessly. "I am quite suah that Hewwies, at least, will not wish to cawwy on with the fight when he has heard me, bai Jove! I have made a suppvishin' discovevwy, and when—"

"You silly ass!" bawled Blake. "What do you mean by barging in like this, Gussy? Explain yourself, you silly ass!"

"Pway do not woah at me, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus coldly. "You are well awaiiah that I stwongly object to being woahed at."

"You—you—"

"Kick the silly ass out!"

"Out of the way, D'Arcy!"

There was a roar of voices; but Arthur Augustus ignored them. He waited calmly until they had ceased.

"Hold on!" grinned Levison. "Let's hear what the ass has got to say. What's the matter, Gussy?"

Tom Merry stood back, his face expressionless. Lowther grinned a little—he fancied he could guess what was coming, though how Gussy could have stumbled on the truth he could not imagine. Herries was looking at his chum in amazement and anger.

"Befoah you stwike a blow at Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, taking a folded newspaper from his pocket, "I wish you to wead that pawgawaph, Hewwies. It will explain the weal weason why Tom Mewwy wan away the othah day. If that doesn't furnish enough pwoof, then I can pwove it in anoathah way. Yaas, wathah!"

Herries hesitated, and then he took the paper, and glanced at the paragraph. The crowd looked on, curious and breathless. Tom Merry's face was flushed curiously now. He stepped forward as if to snatch the paper from Herries' hand; but just as quickly he drew back again.

Herries read the paper slowly, his face changing in expression as he did so.

He finished reading it at last, and his face crimsoned as his eyes met Tom Merry's cold glance.

"So—so that's it," he breathed. "I—I'm sorry, Merry! Why didn't you explain? This would never have happened if you'd only explained."

"Why don't they get on with it instead of gassing?" roared Grundy excitedly from the fringe of the crowd. "What the dickens is the matter, anyway?"

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"Dry up, Grundy!"

Tom Merry's face was white now. "I don't know what you mean?" he snapped, in answer to Herries. "At least, I don't know what's in that paper, and I don't want to know. I'm ready to get on with the job if you are, Herries!"

"Well, I'm not!" said Herries calmly, handing over the paper.

He tore off his gloves and tossed them away. Tom Merry, after a moment's hesitation, had taken the paper and was reading it. The crowd looked on blankly, mystified and not a little exasperated.

"Is this a dashed conference or a fight?" snorted Grundy.

"Dry up, you burbling ass!"

Several fellows roared at Grundy—fellows who were more anxious to know what was "on" now than to see the fight start. Tom Merry's face had gone crimson now—he very soon realised what the paragraph was.

"I—I can't see what difference that makes to our affair, Herries!" he said thickly. "You refused to take my word—"

"Who wouldn't under the circumstances," said Herries quietly. "It was not of myself I was thinking, Tom Merry, but of poor old Towser; it was on his account that the affair upset me so. And—and—well, to be frank, Tom Merry, I felt all along that—that it was a mistake somehow. I wish to goodness I had believed you! Anyway, I'm not fighting you now."

"You smacked my face—"

"I had good reason to do that," said Herries quietly. "You called me a liar to my face. You said it was I who had pinned that rotten drawing up—"

"Well, didn't you?"

"I told you I didn't, and you should have believed me—just as I should have believed you. We've both made the same mistake, Tom Merry. It was Knox who drew that cartoon, and it was Trimble who stuck it up on your door. I was just taking it down when you came along."

Tom Merry's face slowly changed, and the hard, bitter look went from his eyes.

"Is that the truth, Herries?"

"I've told you it is! Blake and Digby will bear me out. You know we're not liars, Merry. And we can soon get Trimble to admit it if necessary!"

"It's quite true," said Blake gruffly; and Digby nodded.

"I—I'm sorry I did not believe you, Herries," said Tom Merry, after a pause. "It seems that we've both blundered badly."

"And I'm dashed sorry I refused to take your word over the other matter," said Herries impulsively. "If you care to shake and forget it, Merry—"

He held out his hand, and Tom Merry threw away his gloves, and after the briefest hesitation, the ex-skipper took it. The crowd watched in blank amazement.

"Good!" said Arthur Augustus, fairly beaming. "Good man, Hewwies—good man, Tom Mewwy! That's all wight now, bai Jove!"

"But what the thump does it mean?" almost yelled Blake. "Gussy, you ass—Herries—"

"I'll jolly soon tell you what it means," said Herries.

"It means that we've all misjudged Tom Merry—we've treated him rottenly. He no more funk'd those louts than did old Towser. He left us in the lurch, yes; but it was to do a thing a jolly sight more plucky and useful than stopping to back me up. And, whether Tom Merry likes it or not, I'm going to see that everybody knows."

And with that, Herries suddenly reached forward and snatched the folded paper from Tom Merry's hand.

"Hold him a sec, Blake," he snapped, with a grim laugh.

"Listen to this, you fellows!"

Tom Merry, with a very red face, sprang forward; but just as quickly Blake, Lowther, and Digby grabbed him and held him, despite his struggles, whilst Herries read aloud the paragraph to the staring crowd. He read it in loud tones, and when he had finished there was a deep murmur.

"So that was the thumping truth of it, was it?" said Grundy. "Well, my hat! I knew there was something like that behind it."

"Why didn't you say so at the time, then?" remarked Wilkins.

"You shut up, George Wilkins! Well, I'm blowed! And we've been calling Tom Merry a blessed funk! Good man, Merry!"

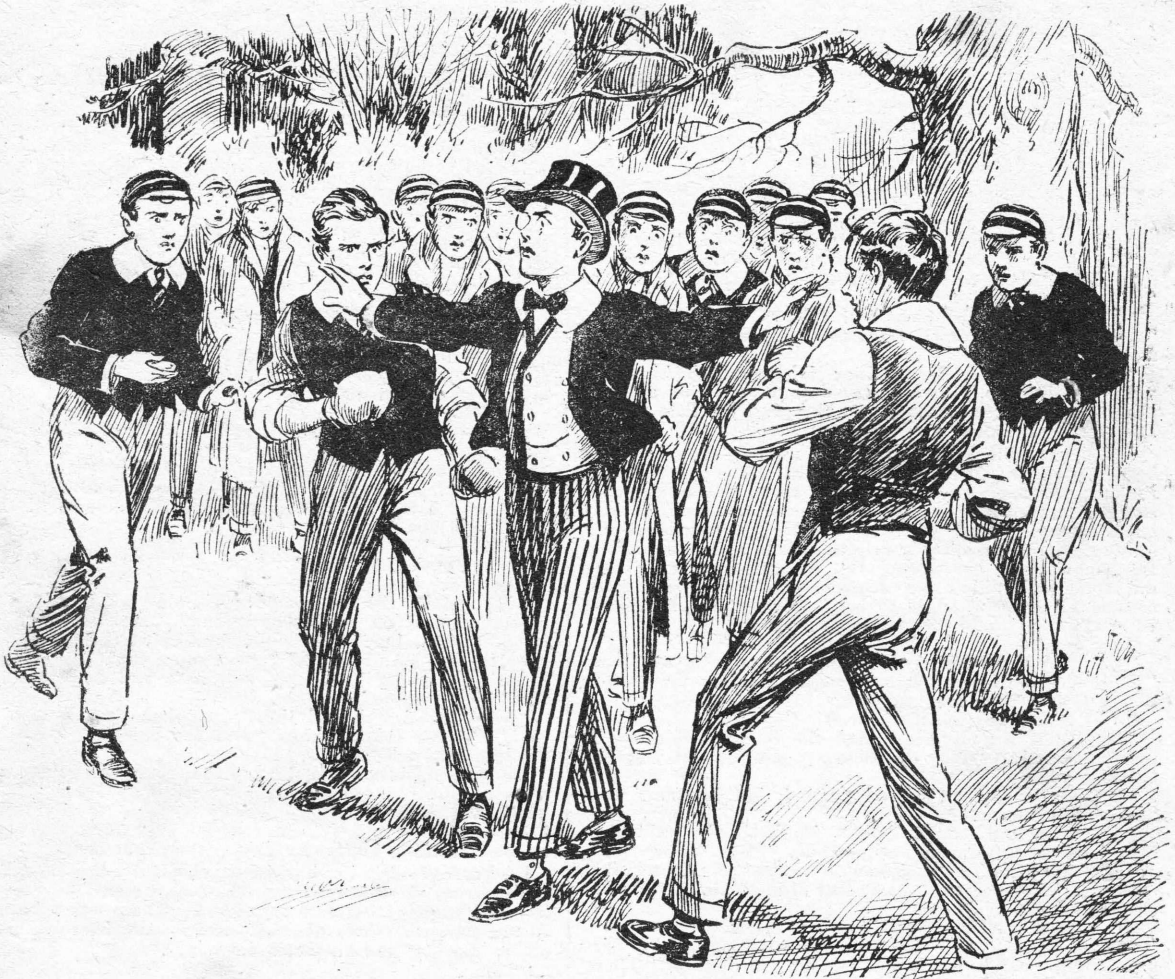
"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for Tom Merry!" roared young Curly Gibson. "Hip, pip—"

"Hurrah!"

It was a cheer given with a will. St. Jim's fellows were often very quick to condemn a fellow; but they were just as quick to cheer him when they deemed it necessary.

They deemed it necessary now—they did not doubt for one moment that the paragraph was indeed the secret of Tom Merry's strange silence. Indeed, Tom Merry's blushing



"Stop!" There was a murmur of astonishment from the crowd as Arthur Augustus came up, panting, and sprang between Herries and Tom Merry. "Stop!" he gasped. "Stop the fight, you fellows!" (See Chapter 8.)

face alone was clear proof that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had, indeed, stumbled on the truth. And as they had been swift to misjudge their old skipper, so now they were eager to acclaim him and to make amends for their error.

Blake was the first to step forward with outstretched hand, and Tom Merry took it frankly enough. He was smiling now; he could not help smiling, and his eyes were shining strangely. The truth was out now, and nothing he could do or say would help it spreading over St. Jim's. It was scarcely a happy thought to a modest fellow like Tom; yet he could not help feeling strangely relieved and elated. His bitterness fell from him like magic—he was never a fellow to bear ill-will for things that were past. He was ready enough now to forgive and forget. After all, it was his own fault mainly—his own stubborn pride. But after a dozen fellows had shaken his hand he went on strike.

"That's enough," he laughed. "I'm sorry I've disappointed you chaps—sorry I brought you here for nothing. You came to see me licked. But if you like I'll don the gloves and you shall see me give a well-deserved hiding to another chap."

"Bai Jove! Who is that, Tom Mewwy?" asked Arthur Augustus, looking round.

"You, you silly chump!" said Tom Merry. "Stand aside, you fellows."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry made a rush at the swell of the Fourth, and that astounded junior gasped and fled. There was a roar of laughter. It ceased suddenly, however, as a shout came from the fringe of the crowd. Then sounded the crashing of hurried footsteps in the frozen woods. And as the crowd stared, three figures came bursting out of the clearing.

First came Harry Manners, panting and breathless, and hugging his precious camera; second came Cardew, like-

wise panting and breathless, and also grinning. And, after them a moment later dashed none other than Percy Knox, the new junior captain of St. Jim's.

Manners dashed up to the centre of the crowd, followed by the chuckling Cardew. Knox stopped dead on the fringe of the clearing, his red face startled and full of baffled rage.

"What the merry thump——" gasped Blake.

CHAPTER 9.

More Settling Up!

THE crowd stared wonderingly at Cardew and Manners, and then they looked at Knox. That individual was certainly worth looking at. His eyes fairly glittered with rage and baffled fury.

It was very clear that the sight of the crowd gathered there came as a complete surprise to him. He stared at them blankly at first, and then with growing rage and fear. As a matter of fact, Knox had known, of course, of the impending fight at the old woodman's hut in Rylcombe Woods, but being a new fellow he had not known where that was. He had certainly traversed the woodland path several times, but he had never seen the hut before.

He understood now, however, as his glinting eyes met the questioning glances of the crowd. He had been chasing Cardew and Manners, and he realised now that they had purposely led him to this spot, and he had good reason to guess why.

For a moment Knox seemed to contemplate a retreat back into the trees, and then just as suddenly he seemed to change his mind. The next moment he was making a rush for Manners, his eyes gleaming with savage desperation.

"Back up!" roared Manners, clashing his camera to him in alarm. "He wants to smash my camera! Stop him, for goodness' sake! Tom—Lowther——"

But it was Cardew who acted first. He stepped swiftly forward, and his foot shot out deftly in the nick of time. Knox blundered headlong over it and went crashing down on his face. He was up the next moment, however, blazing with passion.

"You—you howling sweeps!" he panted. "I'll smash you for that afterwards, Cardew!"

And leaving Cardew for the moment he made another savage rush at Manners.

But Tom Merry and Lowther jumped before him, while Blake & Co. also lined up. Once again the two "clans" stood up together against the common enemy.

"Hold on!" snapped Tom Merry. "Hold on, Knox!"

"Let me go!" snarled Knox, struggling furiously.

"What's this mean, Cardew?" demanded Levison.

"What's the game, anyway?"

"Perhaps our friend Knox will tell you," yawned Cardew.

"And perhaps he won't. Hark to his language! Naughty, naughty!"

"You—you—" Percy Knox fairly gritted his teeth with baffled rage. But he made no attempt to explain, though he struggled furiously in the grasp of Tom Merry, Lowther, and Blake.

"Well, I shall have to explain myself, though it's a beastly bore," remarked Cardew coolly. "It's like this, you fellows: Manners and I have been spendin' the afternoon studyin' Nature with the aid of Manners' camera. We only got one snap, though; we saw some giddy gay birds enter a giddy nest, and we spent nearly the whole afternoon waitin' for 'em to come out again. But we got them when they did come out—didn't we, Knox? One of the gay birds seemed to object strongly to bein' snapped, an' he chased us—wantin' to smash the camera, I fancy."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, staring at Knox. "So that was why you fellows were hiding in the garden of the Gween Man Inn, was it?"

"Just that," assented Cardew.

"Blessed if I understand what the thump this means!" snorted Grundy. "Why the dickens don't you talk English, Cardew, you fool?"

Most of the fellows looked puzzled, but Manners soon made matters clear.

"I'll soon tell you in plain English," he said, his eyes fixed scornfully on Percy Knox. "You fellows have heard from Knox why he couldn't be at the match this afternoon. He claimed that he had to meet his uncle at the Grand Hotel in Wayland."

"It—it was true, hang you!" gritted Knox.

"It was spoof!" said Manners calmly. "You had a telegram right enough, but it was sent by you yourself. There was no uncle at all. It was just a rotten excuse to give you the chance to go playing billiards at the Green Man Inn."

"Bai Jove!"

There was a murmur. All eyes turned to Percy Knox, who ground his teeth with fury.

"It's a rotten lie!" he hissed. "My uncle sent the telegram, and I did go to Wayland. I went by the two-thirty train!"

"That is a wotten untwuth, Knox!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy coldly. "I went by that twain myself, and Cardew asked me particularly to make sure if you went by it and to look out for you. You were not on the twain at all, nor did I see you in Wayland."

"I did, I tell you! I—I—"

"Can't you see he's lying?" said Manners, his lip curling. "I was there when Cardew asked D'Arcy. And Cardew told me he suspected what Knox was really up to. Cardew had heard that Knox was booked to play Lacy from the Grammar School at billiards for a fiver. He guessed it was to come off at the Green Man, and he got me to go with him there this afternoon. It was about two-thirty, or barely that, then. We saw Knox with Racke, Lacy, and Crooke enter the Green Man from the towing-path. And we waited all the afternoon until ten minutes ago, when they came out."

"Oh!"

"That's the truth!" said Manners. "Let the sweep deny it if he can! He saw me taking the snap—caught me in the act—and he chased us here. I suppose he didn't dream we were leading him purposely to you chaps. Anyway, here he is, and I've got the proof in this."

And Manners tapped his camera.

"And that's the sort of chap we've got for a captain!" snorted George Alfred Grundy in intense disgust. "Cutting matches to play dashed billiards in a filthy pub, the smoky cad!"

"And lying about it like the blackguard he is!" snapped Blake. "Somehow I thought it queer about that telegram!"

"Smash him!" roared Grundy excitedly. "Let him see we don't intend to be spoofed and tricked like that! Kick him out of his job! What about that rotten foul at the

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practice match? Hacked Tom Merry's ankle like a blessed hooligan! Bah! The fellow makes me sick!"

"All right, Grundy!" hissed Knox, his eyes glinting with spite and vengeful hate. "I've licked you twice; I'll make you a dashed hospital case next time. I'll make you all sit up for this, you see if I don't. I'm skipper yet, and I'll make some of you squirm before I've finished. I've licked the best man in the Lower School—or the chap who was supposed to be best man," he added, his lip curling as he glared at Tom Merry. "And I'll dashed well show the lot of you who rules the roost!"

"Will you?" bawled Grundy valiantly. "Out of the way, you fellows! Let the cad go! I'm going to have another go at him! He's licked me twice, but I'm going to keep at the brute until I lick him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean it!" bellowed Grundy, turning back his cuffs. "Out of the way there!"

And Grundy was about to rush at Knox, when Tom Merry stepped forward between them. Tom Merry's face was set and his eyes were gleaming.

"No, you don't, Grundy!" he said calmly. "I'm the man who's going to tackle Knox if anyone is. You fellows have come here to see a fight, and you're not going to be disappointed after all. If Knox is quite willing I'm ready to take him on here and now. He took me at a disadvantage last time. I was seedy, and he made the most of it. I'm fit enough now."

"Tom—"

"Stand back, Lowther!"

"But your hands, Tom—"

"My hands will see me through all right," said Tom Merry, ripping off his jacket again. "Make a ring, you fellows! This brute has bullied and ruled the roost quite long enough. And he and I have more than one score to settle. I'm going to do my best here and now to settle them."

"You'll need a dashed sight more than your best to do that," sneered Percy Knox. "But I'm on—there's nothing I'd like better, Tom Merry!"

He tore off his coat—Blake and the others had reluctantly released him now—and the juniors willingly made a ring. They had looked forward keenly enough to a "mill" between Herries and Tom Merry; but they knew they were to see something better—or worse—than that now.

Levison agreed to be timekeeper, cheerfully this time, and Gore agreed to second Knox. The crowd closed in, breathless with anticipation and excitement. There was a sudden silence as, with gloves donned, the two enemies faced each other. Levison had his watch out now.

"Time!"

It came at last, and as it rang out Knox gave a growl and came on with a rush.

"Look out, Tommy!"

It seemed as if Tom Merry would be overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught. But Tom was on his guard, cool and steady as a rock. He knew he had no light task before him—his former fight with Percy Knox had taught him that only too well. He was determined, at all costs this time, to keep cool and take no risks. His chance had come at last—the chance he had longed and waited for to "settle" matters between his enemy and himself.

CHAPTER 10:

Tom Merry's Triumph!

CRASH! Percy Knox was down—he had fairly rushed into a straight punch to the jaw that rattled him from head to foot and deposited him on his back in the frosty grass. Too eager, the new captain had fairly asked for a fall, and got it.

"Good man, Tommy!"

"Go it, Merry!"

"Smash the cad!"

"Let him have a few more like that!"

Almost every shout was for Tom Merry, and the junior smiled grimly as he reflected how quickly the fellows had changed their tune. Only an hour or more ago they would have greeted that momentary success with icy silence.

But the scene was changed now. Used as he was to popularity, Tom Merry could not help feeling a thrill of happiness as he heard the cries.

Yet Tom kept his head—he knew only too well that Knox would not act so rashly again. That punch had certainly shaken him up; but it would also undoubtedly bring him to his senses and make him take more care.

"One—two—three—"

Knox was up at the count of three, and his eyes were gleaming as he slid back a step, his guard up. Tom did not follow up his advantage, however—he waited, and Knox growled and came on again.

This time, more warily, however! But it was a hot attack for all that, and Tom Merry retreated, fighting steadily, giving hard-fought ground.

But suddenly Tom stopped him with a terrific drive at the deadly solar plexus that Knox only just managed to smother. "Time!"

It was clear that Knox was only too thankful for the call of "Time!" His chest was heaving, and though he had done most of the attacking, he had very plainly suffered the most of the two.

"I'm worrying about Tom's hands," grunted Manners. "They haven't warmed up to it yet, though!"

"Tom's round!" murmured Lowther, with satisfaction. "Dash it all, they must hurt him!"

But if they did Tom Merry showed no signs of the fact. His face was flushed and his eyes bright. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Towels and everything necessary for the fight had been brought in readiness, and Lowther and Gore were soon busy on their principals.

"Time!"
Levison's voice brought Tom Merry and Knox out into the ring, stepping lightly. Knox was looking grim now. He had discovered that this was not the same Tom Merry who had faced him before and whom he had so easily licked. He was looking a trifle anxious as well as grim. He knew only too well now that Tom Merry was the cleverer boxer of the two. Certainly Knox was taller and stronger. And it remained to be seen who had the better staying power.

On the previous occasion Tom had fought like a tired fellow, lacking fire and agility. He certainly lacked neither now, as Knox had already found to his cost.

But the battle had scarcely started yet.
Again, Percy Knox opened the round with a fierce attack. He forced Tom to retreat, his gloves flashing to face and body; but each time the blow was parried, or allowed to slip harmlessly by. Then, with a smart counter to the head, Knox succeeded in forcing open Tom's guard, and planted a hefty jab in the region of the heart.

But a swift spring backwards saved Tom from the full force of the blow, and, leaping in again, Tom got home a stinging right on the bridge of his opponent's nose.

It brought a thin stream of red trickling from the junior captain's nasal organ, and it brought a roar from the crowd.

"Good for you, Tommy!"

"First blood to Merry!"

Knox shook his head, and his eyes glittered vengefully as he followed Tom up. That blow had rattled him obviously. He drove hard at Tom Merry, and despite Tom's defence, he inflicted heavy punishment. It was Tom's turn to be relieved when that second round ended.

"Don't worry, old chap," smiled Lowther, as he wafted his towel vigorously. "Let him go it as much as he likes—only mind those dashed straight lefts of his. The chap's got a punch like the kick of a mule."

"Don't I know it!" murmured Tom.

"Make the most of your footwork," advised Manners.

And when the third round opened Tom Merry found he needed to make all he could of his footwork. It was clear that, knowing he would be out-boxed, Knox was determined to finish the fight as soon as he could by a knock-out—if he could be lucky enough to get it.

Tom Merry, however, saw to it that he got no chance of that. He kept himself well covered, and he kept his head finely. He realised that Knox's aim was to bewilder him by a succession of rushes and fierce onslaughts that would open up the way for a finishing blow.

Again and again the heavier fellow rushed in, impatient to "mix it"; but Tom was always well inside the "mix," his right and left working, guarding, now and again getting home stinging upper-cuts and half-arm jabs.

Tom was cool as an iceberg, and his guard was unerring. In a swift exchange of blows, sparkling to watch, Knox got home three times in swift succession with punishing body blows that shook Tom up not a little; but not once did he lose control of himself, and he fought on coolly.

The end of the third round found both panting and gasping. If anything, Tom Merry was the most exhausted of the two; but Knox was the worst off in another way. A last, stinging right from Tom had caught him full in the mouth, and beside losing a tooth, Knox had lost something more important—his temper. That last blow had upset his fighting completely. His eyes glinted savagely as he came up to scratch for the fourth round.

Tom smiled as he noticed the obvious signs.

To begin with, the camera affair had brought Knox on the scene in a savage, vengeful mood, and he was far from having recovered from it. There were many in the breathless crowd that noted the signs also, and there was a tense feeling of excitement in the air as Knox jumped from his corner.

They were not disappointed in what they expected to see.

Knox came on like a cyclone with a furious left and right that would have put paid to Tom's account then and there had either reached its mark.

But Tom was not there to receive them. With a dazzling display of swift footwork and side-stepping he eluded Knox like a will-o'-the-wisp. Then, springing forward, he brought his left across with a wicked hook that spun and dazed the furious junior skipper.

"Tom's got him!" murmured Blake, with a chuckle. "Now for fireworks!"

And the fireworks came soon enough. Tom Merry had very plainly got his enemy "weighed up," and he proceeded to show that he had come to the conclusion it was time for him to do a bit of hitting.

Not only was Knox dazed, but the sheer fury of his attack had spent and exhausted him. Undoubtedly he had a splendid physique; but just now when he needed every ounce of vitality and scrap of wind, Knox found both failed him. Surreptitious smoking of cigarettes and carelessness in general were exacting their toll. It was the beginning of the end for Knox, and the captain of the Lower School of St. Jim's realised it, and strove desperately to stave off defeat by desperate defence until the round ended.

But the round was not nearly ended yet, and Tom Merry gave him no rest. Despite his strenuous efforts that afternoon on the footer field, Tom was feeling fine—he was only just warming up to the battle. His exercise in the open air on the footer field seemed to have added to his energy; but Knox's afternoon, spent in the smoky, unhealthy atmosphere of the Green Man billiards-room had had just the reverse effect on him. The end of the round just then might have saved him; but Tom Merry saw to it that it did not.

Following that wicked punch, Tom Merry sailed in in real earnest. There was a roar of voices in the wintry clearing as Knox retreated before that damaging whirlwind, vainly trying to cover himself under a rain of blows to face, ribs, and head, all of them registered with deadly force and skill.

Tom Merry—usually the most merciful of fighters—showed his opponent little mercy now. He had suffered more than enough at Knox's hands since that youth had come to St. Jim's. From the very beginning the new fellow had shown unreasonable enmity and hatred, and

(Continued overleaf.)

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Tom remembered his wrongs now—he also remembered how Knox had shown no mercy to the fellows whom he had bullied and thrashed in the Fourth and Shell.

Tom meant to make a thorough job of it this time—to point out quite clearly to the overbearing bully just how and where he would stand in the general scheme of things at St. Jim's.

Another of those devastating left hooks struck the be-mused and panting junior skipper clean under the chin. Crash!

Knox was down—flat on his back on the frosty trampled grass. There was a gasp—a quick indrawing of breath from round the ring. Tom Merry waited, his chest heaving, his face hard and set; but his enemy failed to rise.

"Time!"

Levison snapped his watch shut. A roar went up from the crowd.

"Tom Merry has it!"

"Good man!"

"Licked, by jingo!" gasped Blake, rubbing his eyes. "Well, I'm blowed! I never expected it—and I never expected the fight to end so soon, either!"

Nor did the others. Knowing Tom Merry as they did, the crowd had hardly expected him to lick the redoubtable Percy Knox. They were staggered—but they were overjoyed. Knox's brilliance on the footer field, his undoubted pluck and success with his fists, his strength and strong personality, had taken the popular fancy—for a time. But they all realised now that in Tom Merry he had met more than his match. In that moment of victory, with Tom's recent vindication fresh in their memories, they realised what fools they had been to exchange his steadfast honesty and straightforwardness for the trickery and crookedness of the bullying Knox.

"Three cheers for Tom Merry!" bawled Grundy. "Now, chaps, let him have it hot and strong!"

And as Tom Merry was helped into his clothes by his relieved chums, the cheers rang out through the frosty woods again and again.

It was a bitter moment for Percy Knox as he lay gasping and panting on the grass, and his eyes glinted with helpless malice and chagrin as he eyed Tom Merry's battered but cheery face. But nobody took much notice of Knox—only Core remaining with him as the fellows swarmed from the clearing, discussing the fight excitedly.

As Tom Merry walked back to St. Jim's surrounded by his old friends, his face was bright—despite the ugly bruises and marks of battle. He was aching in every limb and muscle, and he felt as if he had been under a steam hammer. But he was happy. Percy Knox was still captain; but Tom was not troubling about that. He had got back his old chums, and his name was cleared. Moreover, though his enemy still had the power of his lofty position—for what it was worth to him now—Tom knew he had the popularity, and for the time being he was willing to let it go at that.

But others were by no means willing. That evening the Lower School at St. Jim's was in a buzz of excitement. Things could not be allowed to remain as they were in the view of both Fourth and Shell. After prep that night an overflow meeting of the Lower School was held in the junior Common-room. Knox was absent, and Tom Merry was absent. But Tom Merry very soon knew what had happened at the meeting when a swarm of fellows invaded Study No. 10, and demanded that he should put up for the captaincy of the Lower School again.

"But, my dear men," Tom Merry blandly pointed out. "You've already got a skipper. Knox is our skipper, and you'll have to make the best of it. I'm afraid."

"Will we?" bawled George Alfred Grundy. "You'll jolly soon see if we will, Tom Merry. We're fed-up with that cad—fed up to the back teeth, and more. He's going to be booted out of his job—jolly quickly, too!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We want you back as skipper, Tom Merry!" yelled Herries.

"That's it!" said Levison grimly. "Knox is a sweep—a howling slacker and bullying cad! We've finished with him for good and all. We want you back, Tom Merry, before the footer and everything else goes to pot. We'll see you get in all right."

"What about it?" demanded Blake. "If you refuse, Tom Merry, we're going to scrag you bald-headed until you agree."

"Well," smiled Tom Merry, "in that case I think I'd better agree. If you can get a new election arranged, I'll stand. That's all. Now kindly clear out—my head's buzzing like a beehive, and I can't stand much more row."

"Good man!" grinned Lowther. "I knew he'd agree, chaps. Now come along and see old Kildare."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the deputation went along to see Kildare. That great

man stared blankly as the swarm of juniors invaded his den. He set his lips grimly and picked up an ashplant from the bookshelves. His intention was obvious, and Blake held up his hand.

"Hold on, Kildare—it's important!" he gasped quickly. "We're a deputation."

"Oh, are you?" said Kildare, lowering his cane. "Well, let's hear the trouble—sharp."

"It's about the junior captaincy," said Blake. "We're fed-up with Knox—fed-up to the chin, Kildare. He's proved himself unfit for his job, and we all want Tom Merry back."

"Oh!" said Kildare, smiling grimly. "I wondered how long you kids would put up with the existing state of affairs. I've heard quite a lot about your new skipper. However, as it happens, you need not have troubled to come to me at all. There is to be a new election on Saturday evening."

"Oh!"

"G'wreat Scott!"

"What happened on the footer field at practice the other afternoon was more than enough for me," said Kildare. "And I've only this evening heard something quite by chance that settled the matter as far as I was concerned. I've seen Mr. Railton and assured him that Knox is unfit for his position. Mr. Railton has accepted my assurance, and has deprived Knox of the captaincy. As I say, there is to be a new election on Saturday evening. I'm just going to shove a notice on the board to that effect."

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!"

"And if you young idiots will take a tip from me," said Kildare bluntly, "you'll vote for your former captain. You won't find a better man for the job. Now, get out!"

The deputation got out hurriedly. But they did not need Eric Kildare's advice in regard to Tom Merry, and before departing they told him so.

CHAPTER 11.

Knox Loses His Temper!

"BOYS!"

There was a shuffling of feet on the Form-room floor, and the members of the Shell Form at St. Jim's stood up to a man—or, rather, to a boy.

They were surprised—very much surprised. It was rather unusual for Mr. Railton to enter their Form-room at that time of the morning, and it was certainly unusual for him to bring in a visitor.

Yet he had brought one now, and even Mr. Linton peered through his spectacles in surprise.

The visitor was a somewhat unusual visitor, too. He was rather a shabby little man, although clean and tidy, and with a kindly face. He looked exceedingly self-conscious as he found scores of curious and youthful eyes upon him, and he twirled his cap nervously in his hand.

"You may be seated again, boys," said Mr. Railton quietly—"all, that is, with the exception of Merry. You will kindly come out into the front of the Form, Merry."

"Ye-e-es, sir!" gasped Tom.

He left his seat, and staggered rather than walked between the lines of desks, his face going curiously white. Somehow he had a dreadful suspicion as to whom the stranger was and what his business was.

He was not the only fellow, either, who had a suspicion of that. Manners chuckled softly and murmured to Lowther.

"Oh crumbs!" he breathed. "I bet my last coughdrop it's the giddy pater of that youngster Tommy saved! Oh, my hat!"

"Silence!"

Mr. Railton coughed and then spoke to Mr. Linton, who nodded and smiled. The Housemaster also smiled very kindly at Tom Merry. It served to increase Tom's dreadful foreboding. He would have been delighted to see Mr. Railton scowl at him just then.

But the Housemaster smiled.

"A few days ago, Merry," he began, "Mr. Linton reported to me that your hands were scarred and blackened, evidently by fire. I instructed him to order you to go to the matron for treatment. Mr. Linton also reported that you refused stubbornly to explain how you came to have such injuries, and I decided not to press the matter, believing it had been caused by some reckless and unlawful experiment. This morning, however, I have learned what I believe to be the truth of the matter."

Tom Merry looked uncomfortable. The whole class was grinning now. They could understand just how Tom Merry was feeling.

"Why," went on the Housemaster gently, "did you not explain the facts, Merry?"

No answer.

"I have good reason to believe," said Mr. Railton, glancing



"Hold on, Tommy! We'll soon have you out of that, old chap!" "Stick it, old chap!" A long, strong ladder was stretched across the ice; willing hands went out to Percy Knox and to Tom Merry and his unconscious burden, then in turn they were hauled to safety. (See Chapter 12.)

round the Form, "that you did not explain to your schoolfellows, either, Merry. And that is my main reason for making the truth public now."

"Oh dear!" groaned Tom inwardly.

"I have noticed for some days," resumed the Housemaster, "that there has been unpleasantness between Merry and other juniors, and a curious story has come to my ears to explain the meaning of it. I will not repeat it here and now, as I am quite sure every boy here is familiar with it. This morning, however, this gentleman called, in order to see you, Merry, and he related to me another story—a story which I am quite convinced will prove Merry to be not the coward he has been called recently by thoughtless juniors and others. On the contrary, it will prove him to be plucky and resourceful to a degree."

Tom Merry's face crimsoned.

"Under the circumstances, I feel it my duty," resumed Mr. Railton, his eyes roaming over the class, "to relate the story fully, as I have no doubt your Form-fellows are quite ignorant of the truth. Modesty is praiseworthy at times; but, in my view, you have carried it too far, Merry, my boy."

"It's all right, sir!" gasped Tom Merry, in an agonised attempt to prevent the sad story being detailed again. "It's all right! The fellows already know all about it. They discovered it yesterday afternoon."

There was a chuckle, and Mr. Railton smiled.

"They know that your hands were burned while rescuing Mr. Rance's son from almost certain death, Merry, and it was to effect that rescue that you left a chum to fight an unequal battle alone against odds?" said Mr. Railton.

"Ye-e-es, sir. It—it's quite all serene; they understand now!" gasped the hapless hero.

"Yes, sir, we know all about it now," called Grundy. "We know Tom Merry didn't play the funk."

Mr. Railton coughed and smiled grimly.

"I am exceedingly glad to hear it!" he said. "All that remains now, then, is for Mr. Rance to speak to Tom Merry personally—for which purpose he came here this morning. I hope, however," said Mr. Railton, glancing round the Form, "that you boys fully appreciate what Merry has done. Apart from his plucky action, he has shown remarkable

courage and fortitude. Though he must have been suffering agonies of pain from his burned hands, he steadfastly refused to make a fuss and thus claim credit for what he had done, preferring to suffer in silence. It was foolish, no doubt; but, none the less, it shows fine spirit, and I am proud to have such a boy in my House!"

"Hear, hear!" came Grundy's voice; and it was Grundy who led the ripple of clapping that went round the room.

"That is all!" said Mr. Railton.

And after Mr. Rance had shaken hands with the blushing Tom Merry and thanked him gratefully, the Housemaster led the visitor out.

Mr. Linton shook hands warmly with Tom Merry as the door closed.

"I will not add to your embarrassment, my boy," he murmured kindly. "You may go to your place now. I consider, however, that you are a credit to my Form!"

"Rot!"

Mr. Linton jumped. The smile left his face as if by magic. He wheeled round abruptly and glared with scandalised eyes over the class.

"Who dared to say that?" he thundered, his face going crimson with wrath. "Stand forward the boy who spoke!"

There was a dead silence. With the exception of one or two fellows, every face in the room was angry and disgusted. They knew who had called out if the master of the Shell did not.

But they did not wish to sneak—though a goodly number felt like sneaking just then. It was evidently just what the fellow who had called out was relying upon. He did not move in his place.

The master of the Shell was not deceived, however. He had not failed to note the angry glances that were shot towards Percy Knox, who was seated on the rear form, his face showing ugly bruises, and wearing a still uglier scowl. Moreover, Mr. Linton knew much more than the fellows could guess of what went on in his Form outside lesson-time. He had already heard much, and the state of Tom Merry's features and the features of Percy Knox told him more.

"Knox!" he snapped, a dangerous note in his voice. "Stand out before the Form!"

Knox hesitated, and then he stepped out and strolled insolently to the front of the Form. From the juniors came a low hiss.

"Knox!" thundered Mr. Linton. "I have very good reason to believe that it was you who was responsible for that insolent and contemptible exclamation just now. I presume you will not have the temerity to deny it, wretched boy?"

Knox looked round him, with a sneering leer. Since the previous afternoon scarcely a fellow, excepting his own pals, had taken notice of him, and he was full of seething rage and bitter hatred in consequence.

That it had been entirely owing to his own reckless folly and caddishness he was far from admitting to himself, however.

"I don't deny it," he said, after a pause, his voice vengeful and malicious. "It is rot—spooof from beginning to end!"

"Knox!"

"I don't care!" said Knox defiantly, his lip curling. "I don't believe a word of that yarn about Tom Merry saving a kid. It's spooof—a plot worked by Merry himself to save his face! He's paid that low bouncer of a workman to come here with the yarn!"

"Knox, how dare you?" thundered Mr. Linton, his eyes gleaming angrily behind his glasses. "How dare you, I say, make such a contemptible and uncharitable charge against Merry?"

"I don't care!" said Knox doggedly, his face sulky. "I know what I think about it, anyway. These fools can believe it if they like. It was only a few days ago they were praising me for having saved Herries from those village louts!" he added, with a bitter sneer. "Now Merry comes along with his rotten lies and spooof, and they swallow it and chuck me over!"

There was a deep murmur, and Mr. Linton almost exploded with righteous wrath and indignation.

"Knox!" he gasped. "Did I not believe that you are not yourself this morning, I would take you before Mr. Railton, and request him to report you to Dr. Holmes. As it is, I will deal with you myself. I shall cane you most severely for this impudence! Hold out your hand!"

"I won't be caned!" said Knox thickly.

"Wha-at?"

Mr. Linton blinked at the burly junior in utter and amazed wrath.

"He's off his chump!" breathed Lowther. "His giddy fall from power has turned his brain. Now for fireworks!"

The fireworks were not long in coming—though in a way the juniors were far from expecting. Mr. Linton stood for a moment in shocked indecision, and then he snatched up his cane. The next moment it was lashing across the burly shoulders of the ex-captain of the Lower School at St. Jim's.

Lash, lash, lash!

Three times the cane rose and fell—but no more than three. For suddenly an unlooked-for and startling thing happened.

With a low growl, Percy Knox suddenly seemed to lose control of himself in his blind passion, and with a jump he snatched at the cane in the master's hand.

He grasped it, and there was a brief, amazing struggle for possession of it. Then—how it happened nobody saw clearly—Mr. Linton seemed to stumble suddenly and went down with a heavy thump on the Form-room floor.

"Good heavens!"

Snap!

Percy Knox had snapped the cane clean in two, and in a blind fury had thrown the two pieces at his prostrate Form master.

"You howling cad!"

There was a roar in the room—a roar of anger—and even as it rang out something like a thunderbolt struck Percy Knox.

It was Tom Merry—he was out of his place like an avenging sword, and his fist connected with a sharp crack just under the point of the young ruffian's chin.

Percy Knox crashed to the floor like a log.

"Good man, Merry!"

It was a chorus of approval from the whole Form. Half a dozen fellows leaped out to help raise Mr. Linton to his feet.

And at that moment Mr. Railton bustled into the room. He stopped dead as his eyes beheld the amazing scene.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, his brow going like a thundercloud. "What—what—"

He was just in time to aid in lifting the dazed Shell master to his feet. Tom Merry was still standing over the prostrate Knox, his fists clenched, his eyes blazing.

"Mr. Linton!" ejaculated the Housemaster. "What ever can have happened? Are you hurt?"

Mr. Linton felt his head dazedly. Then he gasped and pointed a shaking forefinger at Knox, who was just staggering to his feet, hugging his aching jaw.

"That—that boy!" he articulated huskily. "That young hooligan has dared to attack me, his Form master! He refused to be caned, and he pushed—actually struck at me!" went on the master, trembling with righteous indignation. "And then—then, even as I lay prostrate on the floor, he broke my cane and threw the pieces at me!"

"Mr. Linton—"

"These boys," gasped the Shell master, "are witnesses of that young ruffian's behaviour! They have shown their indignation of Knox's insubordination and rascality in an unmistakable manner."

"I can see that, Mr. Linton," said Mr. Railton grimly, his eyes on Tom Merry. "This—is unheard of! I have been of the opinion for some days that Knox is no fit person for this school. Dr. Holmes will know how to

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A Grand

Highwayman

Tale.



deal with him. If you would care to lie down for an hour or so, Mr. Linton, I will send Kildare to take charge here."

"Very good! I—I think I had better!" mumbled the Shell master.

He left the room slowly, without a glance at the sullen Knox. Such a fall to a man of Mr. Linton's years was not a light matter, though the fact that one of his pupils had attacked him was a matter that hurt him far more than physical pain or distress.

There was a short silence in the room. Mr. Railton looked at the sullen, defiant Percy Knox, with stern, hard eyes.

"Merry and the rest of you boys will return to your places," he said quietly. "I will send Kildare here presently. Knox, you are aware, I presume, of the enormity of your offence? You have not only refused to obey your master, but you have actually assaulted him, wretched boy! No words of mine can express my scorn! The least you can expect as punishment for your offence is expulsion. You will accompany me to the detention-room. Come!"

Knox scowled; but he did not move. Mr. Railton's brow grew thunderous, and he took a quick step towards the mutinous young rascal. Even as he did so Percy Knox jumped back. Then, glancing round him like a hunted animal, he made a spring for the door.

"Knox! Come back at once!" shouted Mr. Railton. "Merry, Lowther, Talbot, Levison—go in pursuit of Knox! Bring him back! Good gracious! I believe it is the wretched boy's intention to leave the school precincts. Hurry, boys!"

"Yes, sir."

And, with a mad rush, Tom Merry, Lowther, Talbot, and Levison darted away from the room and raced in pursuit of the runaway—if runaway he was. They were seething with angry disgust at the cowardly attack on their Form master, and they were only too eager to do their very utmost to carry out the Housemaster's order to the letter—if they could!

CHAPTER 12. The Unexpected!

MR. RAILTON'S fear that Percy Knox was making out-of-doors was very soon clear to Tom Merry and the juniors racing at his heels. In a matter of moments they were tearing across the quad. On reaching the School House steps Tom Merry had just been in time to see the racing form of their quarry vanish through the gates.

"Come on!" snapped Tom. "Put your beef into it, chaps! We mean to collar that sweep!"

"Yes, rather!"

At top speed the juniors tore off along the Rylcombe Lane. Ahead of them they saw Knox speeding on, his boots clumping clearly on the frosted surface of the lane. It was an icy morning, with white frost on hedge, and road, and trees. But the juniors did not feel the cold, hatless as they were. They were too excited for one thing, and for another the exercise warmed them quickly enough.

Knox was going out—he had long ago realised he was being pursued. What his object was in running away they could only surmise. Possibly he had completely lost his head at the thought of the dreaded punishment to come.

"Hallo! Oh, blow!" snapped Tom suddenly. "He's taking to the woods! We'll miss him!"

But though Percy Knox had certainly taken to the woods it was not with the intention of taking hiding there—that much was soon clear! For he kept doggedly to the foot-path, branching on to the bypath that led to the river.

A sudden fear clutched at Tom Merry, but just as suddenly he banished it as the reflection came to him that Knox, more likely than not, was making for the Green Man, to seek sanctuary there—if he could. Such friends as Knox had made there were not the sort to turn to in times of trouble—quite the reverse!

The speeding form of Knox vanished over the stile on to the towing-path at last, and a few seconds later Tom Merry also leaped the stile, dropping lightly on the cindered path.

He glanced swiftly about him, expecting to see his quarry vanish into the Green Man Inn. But as he looked in that direction he gave a sudden cry—a cry of startled horror and alarm.

Knox was not on the towing-path at all. He was stepping slowly and gingerly across the ice over the frozen river—scarcely twenty yards from them.

"Good heavens!" panted Tom. "Look, you fellows! He must be mad—the ice can't be safe yet! I'll—Oh!"

Quite abruptly Tom saw something else—something that made him catch his breath sharply.

For Knox was not attempting to escape across the ice—he was not even attempting to escape at all. As he

stepped gingerly across the treacherous ice his eyes were fixed with desperate determination on a black, gaping hole in the ice half-way across the wide river. From the gap black, ugly water swelled in swirling circles over the ice that still held good. And in the centre of the yawning gap showed a head and a frantic arm clutching vainly at floating chunks of thin ice.

"It's Burke—Ginger Burke!" yelled Talbot.

"So it is!" gasped Tom, sighting the well-known and hated red head of the village youth. "And—and Knox is going in to save him! Well—well—"

Tom was almost overcome with the startling and utterly unexpected sight. But he was not too overcome to act on the instant. He was down on the ice, yelling to his chums behind, even as a heavy splash told him that Knox was in.

"Quick! Fetch ladders—fences—anything!" he roared. "I'm going!"

And Tom was off like a flash, sliding recklessly over the frozen surface. Even in that exciting and perilous moment he found himself reflecting on the strangeness of the situation. Knox, the bully, the trickster, and blackguard—the fellow who had savagely attacked a master—who had shown himself little better than a hooligan—had gone to the rescue of his enemy; for Ginger Burke was still his enemy.

Ready as he had been to lie and slander and show himself a blackguard—he was just as ready now to give his life for his enemy.

Splash!

Tom was under, and the icy chill that shot through his very vitals soon swept his reflections away.

It was the time for action—a desperate fight for life in the black, surging water that bit into one like an icy knife.

"Hold on, Knox!"

Knox was holding on—holding on to Ginger Burke whose head was drooping. He trod water desperately, the heavy village youth a fearful drag and burden. His face was white and drawn—white as a sheet, save for a thin streak of red that trickled down from a cut in his forehead.

A few powerful strokes took Tom to him, and he nodded.

"Leave him to me, Knox. I've got him. Save yourself, old chap!"

Knox obeyed as if mechanically. There was a strange, dazed look in his eyes, and it was clear that his head had been hurt—possibly by a jagged piece of ice.

Tom took the burden in his strong young arms; but even so the weight all but dragged him under. He got a good grip, however, and just at that moment there sounded above him an encouraging cry:

"Hold on, Tommy! Stick it, old chap! We'll soon have you out of that!"

A long, strong ladder seemed to leap over Tom's head. Willing arms reached down and drew the unconscious Burke from the water, and willing hands passed him along the long ladder to those behind.

It was Knox's turn next—though it was a terribly close thing. He was on the verge of collapse when hands grabbed him, and then Tom himself was pulled out. What happened after that Tom Merry did not know—he was unconscious—as deeply unconscious as were Ginger Burke and Percy Knox.

Tom Merry woke up in the school sanatorium, and in the next bed he found Percy Knox. But he was a changed Percy Knox, in many more ways than one. He was thin and drawn and haggard—the bandage over his temple making him look much worse than he really was.

And he was changed in other ways. He shook hands with Tom, and he begged forgiveness—which Tom gladly gave. Ginger Burke was the first to get better of the three who had gone through the terrible experience. Tom Merry was fit in a few days, and his reinstatement as junior captain came as a matter of course, for at the election no other name was given in.

Percy Knox, however, was in the school sanatorium for three weeks, and at the end of that time he quietly vanished from St. Jim's. Expulsion—after that last gallant act—had been out of the question, of course; but his people saw it was better for him to leave St. Jim's, and he went, Tom Merry & Co. being the fellows who escorted him to the station.

Percy Knox parted on the best of terms with his one-time enemies, and as the train carrying him drew out of the station the juniors felt genuinely sorry that he had gone.

THE END.

(There will be another magnificent yarn of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's GEM. Note the title, chums: "THE BLACK SHEEP OF ST. JIM'S!" It is one of Martin Clifford's masterpieces—miss it, and you miss a treat!)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 987.

A FIRM HAND! A Redskin with "firewater" in him is a dangerous customer to handle, but young Tom Holt won't stand any nonsense! Not for nothing have the Redskins made him a Chief of the Apache Nation!



WHITE EAGLE!

A Grand Story of a young Britisher's Adventures with a Tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

Told By

ARTHUR PATTERSON.

Tom Makes His Decision!

WHITE CAT gave a great sigh. He did not say anything at once, for it is a deadly breach of Indian etiquette to catch up a previous speaker quickly; but when he once began, his words tumbled over one another in his earnestness.

"My heart is Tom's," he said simply. "So is my life. If he go, I go with him. If he stay, I fight all time for him. I have something to tell. You, my father, say the little piece is only twenty warriors. I know it numbers fifty now. Yes; for each of us here have said things. Two hundred warriors know of Mick Mander. Two thousand have heard of Hunks. News in the nation spreads like prairie fire. Every camp is full of talk of White Eagle. All watch and wait—for Tom. I have spoken."

He pulled up abruptly, and became again as still as when Black Hawk opened the subject. Both now sat silent, and Tom knew that he must make his decision and express it in clear terms. The first was not difficult. He had not seriously intended to retreat, though it was a pretty severe shock to feel that he was treading on a smouldering fire, and that all the glib courtesy of the chiefs in council had been eye-wash; that, in cold fact, his only friends in the nation were just the handful he had known at the beginning. Yet the resolute spirit of adventure in his blood had risen at once to meet the issue. He had never turned back in face of danger, and had not the least intention of doing so now. But it was another matter to say so. Still more to know what he could do. He felt it all so keenly, and, as usual, what he felt most he found it hardest to say. But as he sat facing his two friends the right words came—a sign that Tom, the boy, was passing, and Tom, the man, coming into his own.

"Black Hawk," he began. "I told you I came here because I thought I was loved. You have opened my eyes. I was a fool. But I shall stay, and work for justice to the nation, whether it loves me or not. If the big piece wins, and fights white men, the nation will be wiped out of existence. You know that. Badger Head knows it, but does not care. You do care. Make all warriors understand that I am their friend and that Colonel Chapin is their friend. I am very young, as you said. I may do nothing; but I will do my best."

"As for you, you kitten"—Tom's voice was husky now, and his hand closed upon the boy's shoulder and shook it affectionately—"you are neither red nor white, but everything to me. In fight and play, in the mountains, and the street at Servita, and everywhere else, you and I have stood by one another. Do you think I should desert you now? If you do, just get out your knife, and I will hammer you as I did on that first day of all, you idiot! Why? We are brothers, and Black Hawk is our father. And that is all I have to say to either of you."

He sprang to his feet with the lithe, swift movement White Cat had taught him long ago, and strode off a pace or two into the darkness, while Hunks rose slowly, and,

after looking at him a moment, turned and rubbed his head reassuringly against White Cat's knee.

"The word has been spoken," Black Hawk said quietly. "It is peace, my son—then war!"

The Man in Charge!

THE Great White Agent holding the Reservations in his hands, was a well-dressed and extremely courteous little gentleman, who, after he had read Colonel Chapin's letter of introduction, received Tom with open arms.

"Why, Mr. Holt, this is an honour! It is more—it is an event. I shall mention it to the President himself when I go to Washington next week. That a young man, domiciled—I guess that is the right word—domiciled with my friend Colonel Joseph Chapin, of Calumet Ranch, should come all this distance to stay around in Reservations in winter time out of a philanthropic interest in Indian races is—well, sir, it is amazing! I can't just strike a better word for the moment, though I hope to presently. But you are an Englishman, I see, and men of your country don't put your money into words. Ha, ha! Now that's a compliment!"

Mr. Myra S. Crombolt, himself, Tom found to be nothing but words. He talked and he talked. Indians? Did he know them? There was nothing about them he did not know. He began upon their history at the time of Columbus. He went on to describe their tribal customs and wars during the last two hundred years. He ended by emphasising their savagery and their ignorance; the darkness of their souls and the filthiness of their bodies; the emptiness of their minds; the abysmal brutality of their natures, and the inhuman gratitude shown by them in return for the kindness of the U.S. Government. Then he significantly looked at his watch.

"Sir, it has been a privilege to meet you. I guess I have answered all your questions"—Tom had not been able to get in one—"now I must get down to my business. I regret we shall not meet again. I go East in a very short spell. The charge of the Reservations in winter lies with the sub-agent, Mr. Solomon Gunther Slack. He shall inform you of the arrangements for feeding and caring for these people in winter time. We are under Government, sir, and government departments are strict. Mr. Slack is very strict. He would not be alive to-day if he were anything else. But he has a big heart in a big body. Yes, sir! He is a big man all through! You may stake your pile on Solomon Slack. I have staked mine. As the poet says—one of yours, I guess—his only 'cruel to be kind'; and that is what you have to be with Apaches. Not that they have any use for kindness, but it's there in Solomon Slack, don't forget!—And now, my dear friend, I wish you God-speed and good-bye!"

Trantville, the centre of the Reservations, was a place of some dimensions, and Tom, before he went to see Mr. Slack, made a careful inspection of it.

"We provide here," Mr. Myra Crombolt had said, "everything an Indian can require—spiritual, educational, medicinal and material."

They did; but when Tom counted up the items he became very thoughtful. There was one church, one school-house, one mission-hall, and six drinking saloons. In addition, one large building, the government store, where articles of every kind were sold at monopoly prices to

Indians who could pay for them, and from which, in winter, necessities were distributed to Indians at the discretion of Mr. Solomon Slack.

Tom made his headquarters at a house recommended by Mr. Crombolt, kept by an American from the State of Maine. He was a tall, saturnine person with a sandy goatee, an enormous nose, and humorous grey eyes, and always had a large piece of tobacco lodged like a bullseye in one cheek.

"I swear!" he remarked dryly, when Tom, Hunks, and Malinka presented themselves at his door. "So yew be the boy? Waal, I'll take ye. My name is Jeremiah Ezekiel Mush, and I keep the hotel of this metropolis. Say, you've a dandy little pussy-charmer here," paying a large, fearless hand upon Hunks' head. "Reckon this one-hoss town could do with a regiment of waggle-tails like him. Why? Wait till you've sampled the Apache cats. The Toms, I mean, not the squaws. That mare of yours is a broncho, and will want a little shebang of her own. She's the kind of pony you'll cal'c'late to kick a stable to bits if she don't like its smell. Yep, I know hosses! Fallen off more than you've ever rode. But come right in, sonny! Choose your rooms and make yourself at home."

Then he shook hands, and Tom knew that he had made a friend.

He needed one. The interview with the sub-agent was to take place the next day, and to gain experience Tom put in his time that evening at the various saloons. He conjectured that here he would find the bulk of any members of the nation who had money to spend, and that as they had been hunting all summer there would be some in their pockets. He found this to be the case. Hundreds of warriors were drinking freely. Many were gambling, not with cards, but at games of pitch-and-toss, with dice, odd coins, and even bits of queerly-shaped stones.

Few white men were in these places, and they kept entirely to themselves. When Tom entered, the saloon-keepers in each case came up and in quite a civil way warned him that for his own safety he had better not stay too late, and that he was strictly forbidden to join any game played by Indians, or to stand them drinks. When Tom asked why, they said it was a Government order.

The idea seemed good, but as the hours passed and the drink began to go to the heads of the Indians, and the gambling gains and losses accumulated, Tom saw that it did not go far, and that there was something sinister behind it all. In one place quarrels broke out, and at last one Indian was stunned by a blow from a bottle, and a general fight began. No one took any notice.

The barkeepers and three white customers retired behind a palisade erected round one side of the bar. The proprietor or manager took down a heavy double-barrelled shot-gun from the wall and held it carelessly on his knee, making a sign to Tom to join him. It was evident that as far as the saloon staff were concerned the Indians might kill one another off like Kilkenny cats if they chose.

But Tom did not choose. With a word to Hunks he sprang into the middle of the fray and handed the Apache with the bottle, who had struck down the man, a blow under the chin which sent him backwards over a table!

At the same moment Hunks overthrew two more, with a yell so savage and blood-curdling that the rest shrank back, cowed. Then Tom, to the speechless astonishment of the saloon-keeper and the equal surprise of the Indians, addressed them all in very virile terms in their own language; and, when one Apache truculently objected, gave his own name and rank in the tribe.

The effect was electrical. In a moment the tumult ceased, and the saloon keeper, with bulging eyeballs, witnessed the spectacle of wild Indian bucks well filled with liquor, obeying the sharply-given commands of a white boy, and, after some parley, preparing to file out into the street. But this was against all Trantville rule and precedent and the interests of business. At a word a bar-keeper flew to the door and locked it, while the boss advanced threateningly upon Tom.

"What's your blamed idea, you interferin' coyote?" he roared. "Goin' to run my business? This saloon is licensed by Government for them boys to play in, swaller liquor in,

and fight in if they so please. None gits out till closin'-time but you. Shut it an' quit—before I bust ye in!"

He was a big man, and a bruiser, too. Tom could tell that from the way he held his hands. It was hard not to draw upon him, and Tom's fingers itched to fly to his pistol. But this would be fatal policy before Apaches. Taking no notice of the man, he turned calmly to the Indians.

"Shall he touch a chief?" he said.

He had not the least idea what they would do. The man nearest to him was the one he had knocked down. It was a good chance for him to get his own back, and he was decidedly the worse for drink. The buck spun round as the saloon-keeper approached. Whatever the condition of his head may have been, he was as quick on his feet as a cat. He grinned, stooped, and, running forward, caught the saloon-keeper round the waist, with an evil little grunt. This was a rallying cry, and before the white man could rid himself of the muscular red arms which clasped him he was embraced by half a dozen more, lifted off his feet, and borne, kicking and swearing and foaming at the mouth with rage, back to the bar, and dumped none too gently on the floor behind the counter.

The Apaches carried out this proceeding in complete silence. The only sound was the profanity of the helpless saloon-keeper and the bump of his body on the ground. This made the incident particularly impressive, and Tom found a very frightened group of bar-keepers huddled behind the counter, while about them, squatting among bottles and glasses, some on the top of the barrier and some on the floor, were a swarm of Apache bucks, broadly a-grin, and obviously waiting for further orders.

This spectacle had an instantaneous effect upon the saloon-keeper himself. He was no fool, and had seen too much of Apaches not to know his own danger if they once got going. Struggling actively to his feet, he stretched a big hand out to Tom, with a pale and sickly grin.

"Take it back, chief!" he muttered, with a growl he endeavoured to make jocular. "Did not recognise your colour by this light."

Tom was under no delusion as to the saloon-keeper's real sentiments. Enmity fairly bristled in the man's dull, squinting eyes and the set of his coarse mouth. In both was a silent declaration of war. But this was no time to catch up that challenge openly. Tom accepted the fat hands and grinned back.

"My colour's all right, boss. Hope you are not too much shaken up. But we'll have no more drinks to-night. Warriors!" He looked round upon the Apaches, and gravely and steadily spoke in Indian again. "That was well done. Badger Head and the council shall know. But no more play to-night, and no more fire-water. Take me to your camp. I would see it."

A chorus of assenting grunts followed. Little red figures dropped off counter and barrier and trooped to the door, which, at a sign from the saloon-keeper, was hurriedly unlocked; and in five minutes the place was empty.

It was about noon the next day that Tom entered the Government depot and informed an anæmic specimen of a store assistant at the counter that he had come to see Mr. Solomon Slack. The reply he received was terse and to the point.

"The boss don't see no one unless he thinks he will. Who are you, anyway?"

The clerk spoke in a grating tone and loudly, so that all in the store at the time turned to listen; but there was a slightly strained look on his white face. He was not talking in this way for fun. He had evidently been instructed to be as rude as possible. So Tom kept his temper.

"Name, Tom Holt!" he answered crisply. "Address, Calumet Ranch, Servita! Business, introduction from Mr. Crombolt! Take it along! Be smart!"

His right hand now moved as if by accident impatiently towards his right hip, and the clerk fled. Tom had not long to wait after that.

Mr. Solomon Slack was certainly a big man. He was so fat that his private room, into which Tom was shown by the clerk—who winked a farewell at the door—being very small,

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY.

TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen who has lived for a time amongst a tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

BADGER HEAD, supreme head of the nation.

BLACK HAWK a chief.

WHITE CAT, his son.

COLONEL CHAPIN, a wealthy rancher.

SADIE, his daughter.

HUNKS and **MALINKA** Tom's dog and horse respectively.

Tom makes friends with Colonel Chapin and his daughter, Sadie, and for the time being Calumet Ranch becomes his home. Later, Badger Head is caught prowling about the colonel's ranch by Hunks.

The sagacious animal pins the trespasser to the ground. Enraged beyond measure Badger Head is about to shoot the dog when White Cat intercedes. For daring to disobey his chief White Cat is sentenced to the "fire." Tom gets to hear of this terrible punishment and offers to accompany the tribe to the Reservations for the winter—a request with which he has previously refused to comply—providing Badger Head will rescind his sentence. The bargain is made. Thereafter Tom is known as White Eagle—one of the chiefs of the tribe. Black Hawk in a spirit of friendliness unburdens his heart and tells Tom that Badger Head hopes to make use of him in the dastardly plan he has in mind of wiping out the White Settlements the following spring. Tom listens aghast and then White Cat is asked to speak out.

(Now read on.)

it seemed doubtful whether there was any room for Tom to remain in it, unless he sat upon Mr. Slack's knee. But Tom made room somehow, and after Mr. Slack, without shaking hands, had lifted two fat legs on to a table and taken out a gigantic toothpick, with which he began to excavate his back teeth, he pointed to a small chair in a corner.

"Set!" he said. "Myra Crombolt is away. You find me in charge—sole and complete."

Tom bowed. The implication of the words was clear. So was the expression of Mr. Slack's face, closed fist, and square fat shoulders. A thick man, with heavy forehead bulging over the eyes; his eyes themselves rather prominent, very round, and rather dull, reminding Tom of those of a bull with an uncertain temper; a nose like an enormous seagull, high at the bridge and sharply curved at the end; lips fleshy and clean-shaven, and an immense double chin. The rest of him was in keeping; he had sleek, black hair and a flat head.

"I am happy to meet you, Mr. Slack!" Tom began politely. But the other caught him up.

"You are, are you? Well, I ain't happy to meet you! And the sooner you understand that, the better I'll be pleased, Tom, White Eagle, Holt—or whatever your name may be!"

"I understand," said Tom, nodding. "But I doubt whether you do."

The fat man showed his teeth, and his nose curved downwards until Tom thought it would touch his chin.

"Don't I? Let's see! You, a Britisher, and not twenty years old, after joinin' up with them Red rats and playin' blue peter in Servita—I know all about that—gits hold of a rich man—Chapin—and after some bamboozlement of them poor Indians asks them to elect you a chief. Knowin' no better, they do. So you comes here, all dolled up in your pride, and thinks to put the whole worl' straight, accordin' to your notions. How's that, Mr. Chiefy?"

Tom smiled affably.

"Quite good for a start. But you are wrong about my notions. I have none. I am looking round."

Mr. Slack became apoplectic.

"Spyin'! Spyin' on the United States Government! Do you think I will allow that?"

Tom leaned forward.

"Do those saloons, then, which I saw last night belong to the Government?"

Mr. Slack's great mouth closed with a snap, and he made a noise in his throat like a man who has swallowed a fly.

"You're tellin' a lie!"

"I asked a question," Tom rejoined smoothly. "Do they belong to you?"

"No, Mr. White Eagle," said Mr. Slack, "they don't belong to me, seein' as I'm an official of the Government."

He spoke pompously, and began to frown again; but Tom, watching him very closely, saw that there were drops of perspiration on his fat forehead, and swiftly drew his own conclusions.

"That's good news!" he said gravely. "What I saw last night would not please the Government."

The man's eyes twitched again, and he became more and more polite.

"Just tell me what you saw, now," he said softly.

Tom told him in blunt words, watching every line of the fat face as he did so. He was sure the man knew about it already, and was drawing him in for a purpose.

"Well, now, that's astonishin'!" was Mr. Slack's comment, but there was no surprise in his voice. "Don't it teach you somethin'?" He asked the question patronisingly.

"Yes!" Tom replied quietly. "It teaches me no end of things." But he did not say what they were, and Mr. Slack did not ask him. Instead, he removed his fat legs from the table and drummed his fingers upon it.

"Stayin' around here for long, Mr. Holt?"

His voice had changed again, and was curt, cold, and business-like.

"With your permission," Tom said slowly, "I shall remain all winter."

The man threw back his head, for all the world, Tom thought, like a bull about to bellow.

"An' supposin' I don't permit?" Mr. Slack boomed in a big voice. "I am in control. Don't forget."

He leaned upon the table now, and lowered his head, looking upwards into Tom's face with heavy, threatening eyes.

"He's about to push," Tom said to himself, and bit his lips thoughtfully.

It was clear as daylight that this man was an enemy. It was equally clear that what he said now was true; and though Tom knew very little about Government Departments, he had heard enough from the colonel to know that in the Reservations Solomon Slack's word would be law. Something must be done to make his position more secure, or he would be putty in those fat hands.

"If you don't permit," Tom said quietly, "then I send my wire."

"What wire?"

"Indian Bureau, Washington."

The man sat up straight in his chair.

"They don't know you."

"They will—if I wire. I have the private code."

There was a dead silence. Then Mr. Slack gave a hoarse, wavering laugh.

"Hands up to ye, Britisher! You've the bulge on me!"

This meant surrender, and Tom saw he had won out. But he was not inclined to self-complacency; when, after arranging to receive authority from Mr. Slack to visit the places where the Apaches lived with their families, and to meet the missionary in charge of church and school, he rose to say good-bye, he felt like a man walking over the crust of a volcano, with the earth hot beneath his feet.

"You'll call in as you go along," Mr. Slack said in a casual tone. "I dessay?"

"I will report," Tom answered formally, "anything I think you ought to know."

The sub-agent smiled graciously.

"Now, that's well spoke. I'll do the same to you now."

He coughed, as if the fly which had got into his throat some time ago had just come out.

"See, friend, I'm with you, 'cos I understand. But there's many won't. D'ye carry a gun?"

"Two!"

Mr. Slack coughed again.

"Oh! Well, then, if anythin' should happen, it will be your own funeral march!"

"Beg pardon!" Tom said gently. "I think you mean the other man's!"

And then he walked out into the open air.

(Tom has set the ball rolling. Look out for some startling developments in next week's instalment of this exciting serial).

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