

A Red-Hot Long Complete School & Detective Yarn—Within!

The GEM 2^D



No. 1,228. Vol. XL.

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

August 29th, 1931.

Published by Howard Baker Press Ltd, 27a Arterberry Road, Wimbledon, London, S. W. 20.



THE SCHOOLBOY



CHAPTER 1.

A Borrowing Expedition!

"WHAT'S the state of the exchequer?" asked Manners.

"The state of the exchequer," said Tom Merry, "is rotten—simply rotten!"

The two chums looked at each other seriously. Tom Merry was seated at the window of Study No. 10 in the School House of St. Jim's, with one leg within the room and the other dangling out over the ivy. Manners was sitting on the table, thoughtfully jabbing a pen into Tom Merry's Latin grammar.

"Then I don't see what's to be done," said Manners. "How much have you got?"

"Tenpence."

"Which is exactly ninepence-halfpenny more than I've got," said Manners.

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Tom kicked the ivy thoughtfully with his off leg.

"What rotten luck," he exclaimed, "that we should be stony now and upon such an important occasion!"

"And the occasion is important," said Manners. "It's beastly!" And he jabbed the pen into the Latin grammar so wrathfully that the nib broke off short with a snap.

"Important! Well, I should say so!" Tom Merry exclaimed. "We don't get a new Housemaster every day, do we? Mr. Kidd has departed, and Mr. Railton becomes Housemaster of the School House to-day. It stands to reason that we must celebrate the occasion."

"Of course it does!" agreed Manners. "And the best way of celebrating anything is to have a ripping feed. There's no getting out of that!"

"Exactly. We're all sorry that Mr. Kidd has gone, and glad that Mr. Railton is to be our new Housemaster. We ought to show our grief and joy in a fitting manner. A study feed is just the thing. And now, on this extraordinary and important occasion, we find ourselves in a state of financial famine—broke to the wide! It's rotten!"

"Horrid rotten!" said Manners. "But I don't see what's to be done. If we combine resources, we shall raise the exact sum of tenpence-halfpenny, and the most economical management couldn't raise much of a feed on that!"

Tom Merry nodded. It was certainly a difficult situation.

"So we shall have to give it up," said Manners, with a sigh. "There's nothing else to be done, Tom!"

Tom Merry shook his head decidedly.

"My dear kid, did you ever know your Uncle Tom give up anything he had set his mind on?" he exclaimed. "We're going to give that feed, and it's going to be a ripping one! Now, there are three ways of raising the wind—three good old ways—we can beg, borrow, or steal!"

Manners laughed.

"Stealing is barred," said Tom thoughtfully, "and begging isn't exactly the thing. So it's as clear as daylight that we shall have to borrow!"

"All right," said Manners; "I'm ready to join you in a borrowing expedition through the School House, if you like. It's a chance!"

Tom drew his leg in at the window.

"But I say!" said Manners suddenly. "What about your old governess, Miss Fawcett? She shells out like a princess. Couldn't you—"

"No time," said Tom. "This has been sprung on us suddenly. It was very thoughtless of the Head not to

TECS!

by
MARTIN CLIFFORD



give us more notice. But, then, he doesn't know anything about study feeds. The ignorance of some schoolmasters is astounding!"

"There's no time to write, I know," said Manners. "But a wire—"

"A wire at Huckleberry Heath," said Tom, "is as disturbing as an earthquake anywhere else. I wouldn't startle Miss Fawcett out of her wits for worlds. No, old chap! On this important occasion we've got to depend on ourselves, and upon ourselves alone. Come on!"

Manners slid off the table.

"I'm ready!"

And the chums of the Shell left the study. In the passage Tom Merry paused to reflect for a moment.

"Well, we can't do better than Study No. 6," said Tom. "Blake and his lot are generally flush, and Arthur Augustus simply rolls in filthy lucre. And we have so many rows with them that they're bound to feel kindly towards us in the hour of distress!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Come on, then!"

The heroes of the Shell soon reached the famous Study No. 6, occupied by Jack Blake and his chums of the Fourth Form.

As it was the hour supposed to be devoted to preparation by the juniors of St. Jim's, they were pretty certain of finding the Fourth-Formers at home.

"Hallo, they seem to be busy!" exclaimed Tom, as a terrific burst of noise came from the study. "This is how the kids do their prep!"

There was evidently something going on in Study No. 6. A loud crashing, as of wood meeting wood, was punctuated by the trampling of feet and the gasping for breath.

Tom Merry threw open the door. Then he saw what was the cause of the uproar.

Jack Blake and Herries were hard at it with basket-

hilted foils, fencing away like a couple of maniacs. The table had been pushed into a corner, and the furniture of the study shoved out of the way, to leave room for the fencing. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the only other occupant of the study, was having quite as warm a time of it as either Blake or Herries.

The fencers were tramping and plunging to and fro all over the place, and the unfortunate swell of the School House was skipping and dodging like a frightened rabbit to keep out of the way of the sticks.

"Oh, weally, Blake!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Oh, weally, Hewwies! Don't be so wuff and howwid! Leave off! Oh cwumbs!"

Blake was triumphantly driving Herries back into the corner, and Arthur Augustus was in the way. Herries plunged against D'Arcy, and sent him flying against the table.

"Keep out of the way!" howled Herries, as Jack Blake's point came with a poke in his chest. "Keep out of the beastly way, D'Arcy!"

"I'm twyin' to!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, almost tearfully. "I'm twyin' to! But weally there is no woom for such wuff play in this study!"

"You're dead, Herries!" exclaimed Blake. "I had you right on the chest, and you're run through the heart. You're dead!"

"I'm not!" howled Herries. "It was all that silly ass's fault getting in the way! I'm not dead!"

"You are!"

"I'm not! I'll show you, you bounder!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry at the door. "He ought to know whether he's dead or not, Blake, old son!"

"Rats!" said Blake. "I don't see why I should have to kill a chap twice! But here goes! Look out, Herries!"

"I'm looking out!"

Crash, crash, crash!

There wasn't much science in that fencing, but there was plenty of noise, and lots of energy. Blake drove his adversary round the study. D'Arcy skipped out of the way, and in despair dodged behind the table in the corner.

Back went Herries against the table, and it jammed Arthur Augustus against the wall like a rat in a trap.

"Oh, oh!" yelled D'Arcy. "I am cwushed to death!"

Blake was poking the helpless Herries all over with his foil, as if he wanted to poke him full of holes.

"Are you dead now?" he demanded.

"Yes!" gasped Herries. "I'm dead! Keep that beastly thing to yourself. You've punctured me all over. Chuck it!"

"Right-ho! I only wanted to make you own up, you know!"

"He's dead," grinned Tom Merry, "and so is Gussy! Aren't you, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus gave a doleful gasp.

"Yaas, wathah!" he said. "Blake, you are a wuff beast! Hewwies, you are another! I shall change into some othah study!"

TOM MERRY FINDS A THIEF'S CACHE!
There's something in it! There is . . .
A bottle of medicine, a bottle of
liniment, and a bottle of cod-liver
oil!

Blake pulled the table out and released the swell of the School House.

"This will do you good, Adolphus!" he exclaimed. "A lot of good you are to umpire at a fencing match, when you're afraid of getting a crack or two. I'm ashamed of you! I say, you Shell kids, what do you want?"

And Blake turned his attention towards the visitors. Tom Merry and Manners came into the study now that there was room.

"The fact is—" began Tom.

He paused. Manners took up the tale.

"The fact is—" said Manners.

Then he, too, paused.

"You're a long time coming to the facts," said Blake.

"You see—" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Exactly!" said Manners, with a nod. "You see—"

"Yes, I see," said Blake. "It's as clear as mud. Go on!"

"Well, then, the fact is, Blake, that we've got a new Housemaster, as you know."

"Ye-es," said Blake. "I think I've heard some rumours of it. As a matter of fact, it was I who told you the news."

"Yes, my word, so it was!"

"Never mind. One good turn deserves another," said Blake. "I told you, and now you've told me, and we're quits. Anything else to say?"

"Well, yes. We were thinking of giving a study feed to celebrate the occasion. We don't get new Housemasters every day, you know."

"Now, you're talking," said Blake emphatically. "You've come to ask us to a feed. My boy, we'll come with pleasure, and I only wish there were more of us."

"Ye-es, just so. But as I was saying—"

"The fact is—" said Manners.

"Right you are!" said Blake heartily. "I'm only sorry old Dig is away. Still, there are three of us, and we'll do our level best to walk into the grub. We promise you that."

"That we will!" said Herries. "We'll miss our tea on purpose. There!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry and Manners looked at each other queerly.

It was evidently easier to collect guests than subscriptions for that feed.

"And now," said Blake, "if you'll excuse us, we'll get on with our prep. We've left it over for that fencing, and Herries stuck it out so long after he was really dead."

And Blake dragged out the table and started hunting for his books.

"Er—yes," said Tom Merry. "We shall be delighted if you chaps come, and we were going to ask you. But there's another little matter—"

"Couldn't that stand over till presently?" asked Blake. "The Lathom bird has his eye on us lately, and there'll be a row if prep isn't done. He says we're lazy."

"Well, it's rather important," said Tom Merry.

"The fact is—" said Manners.

"We are broke."

"Stony?"

"Bust!"

"Cleaned out!"

"So, you see," said Tom, "we're on a borrowing expedition. My old governess is sending me a pound next week, and I want to raise that amount till it comes."

Blake laughed.

"My dear kid, you're welcome to all I have in my pockets."

"Now, that's really decent of you, Blake!" exclaimed Tom. "You shall have the postal-order the moment it arrives."

Blake cheerfully turned out his pockets.

He had said that Tom Merry was welcome to all he had in them, and he meant it; but when the contents of those pockets were turned out, the collection brought to light didn't seem to promise much towards the feed.

First came a pocket-knife and a ball of string, and then a piece of sealing-wax and a fag-end of a candle. Then some toffee, to which lovingly clung some bird seed and fluff. Then a French coin, and a couple of halfpennies.

Blake blushed a little. He went diving into his other pockets, and brought out some peas—ammunition for his shooter—some more string, a fragment of cobbler's wax, some marbles, and part of a broken clasp. Last, a three-penny-bit and a bad shilling.

"There you are!" said Blake generously.

Tom surveyed the little pile.

"I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth," he said, "but I want to ask you, fair and square, how far that little lot will go towards a study feed."

"What have you got, Herries?"

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Herries promptly turned out his pockets.

He had a varied collection of odds and ends, but he was better off in a financial sense, turning out three shillings and some odd coppers on the table.

"There you are!" he said.

"When I want to start an old curiosity shop," said Tom Merry, "I shall know where to come to buy my stock. At present I want cash."

"Perhaps Gussy can shell out," said Blake. "His pater is always sending him tin. Gussy, old kid, shell out!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

Arthur Augustus was always rolling in wealth. He felt in his pockets, and a handful of silver and a couple of pound notes came to light.

"My hat!" said Manners. "It must be useful to have a giddy millionaire kept tame in your study. There you are, Tom!"

"I've got a fiver somewhere," said D'Arcy languidly. "Will that do, or shall I look for the fiver? It's wathah a bore."

"That will do," said Tom, laughing. "I'll take one note—and thanks! You shall have it back on Tuesday, Gussy."

"Oh, that's all wight, deah boy!"

Tom put the pound note in his pocket.

"Now I'm off," he said. "Manners is going to do my prep for me while I go to Rylcombe. The feed's coming off to-night. Don't forget to miss your tea, you kids. There's to be a jolly spread, and all guests are requested to come hungry."

"Right-ho! We'll make a point of it."

And Study No. 6 settled down to their preparation, and Tom Merry and Manners left the study. They went back to their own quarters, and Tom put his cap on his curly head.

"Mind those New House bounders don't get wind of it!" said Manners anxiously. "The other day Figgins & Co. lifted a feed from Blake."

Tom laughed.

"I'll keep a good look-out!" he exclaimed.

And he left the School House. Figgins & Co., the heroes of the New House, happened to spot him in the quad.

"Hallo, Merry!" said the great Figgins. "What's going on?"

"I am," said Tom.

And he went on, leaving Figgins & Co. staring after him.

CHAPTER 2.

Tom Merry Meets with an Adventure.

TOM MERRY lost no time in getting to Rylcombe. He went straight to the tuckshop to "blow" the pound he had raised in Study No. 6.

The tuckshop was kept by an old lady who knew Tom Merry well. He was one of the best customers. But as Tom entered the shop he saw that the old soul was not there as usual. A grey-whiskered man came out of the little parlour to serve him.

"Hallo, Gaffer Jones!" said Tom cheerily. "Where's Mother Murphy?"

"She's took with rheumatism," said Gaffer Jones sourly.

He did not like Tom Merry. The last occasion of their meeting was fresh in his memory, and it wasn't a pleasant recollection.

Gaffer Jones had partaken of the ale at the Green Dragon not wisely but too well, and he had gone to sleep off the effects of it under a hedge. He had awakened to find Tom Merry and Manners looking at him, and they had gone on their way grinning. But it was not till afterwards that Gaffer Jones discovered that Tom had chalked his face a ghastly white. A giggling crowd in the village street had brought the fact to his notice, and he had owed Tom Merry a grudge ever since.

Tom seemed to have forgotten all about that occurrence now.

"So you're in charge here, Gaffer?" he asked.

"Yes," said Gaffer, "I are."

"All right. I want some things. Of course, you'll be only too anxious to let me have them on tick?"

Gaffer brought a horny fist down on the counter.

"Cash or nothing!" he exclaimed. "If you haven't got any money, the sooner you clear out, Master Merry, the quicker you'll please me!"

"Gaffer, you ought to take a prize for politeness. You would make Chesterfield green with envy. A fellow like you is wasted here!"

Gaffer scowled.

"If you don't want to buy anything, Master Merry—"

"But I do!" Tom laid the pound note on the counter, "Feast your eyes on that, old dear!"

Gaffer became a little more civil.

Tom began to select his purchases, and he did not leave off until he had a heap piled on the counter to the full value of the crisp note.

Gaffer took the latter, and Tom began to cram his purchases into his bag. The bag was a large one, but its capacity was packed to bulging-point. However, the good things all went in, and Tom managed to fasten it.

"Good-bye, Gaffer!" he said. "By the way, how did you find the face cure?"

"The what?"
"The chalk, you know. I thought your complexion was a little too ruddy. Did you like it?"

"Get houter this shop!" roared Gaffer, turning purple.
"But I want to know. If you like the treatment, I'll repeat it some time when you're at leisure—some time when you've been to the Green Dragon."

Gaffer came round from behind the counter, and Tom beat a hasty retreat.

The sun was sinking behind Castle Hill as he turned his steps in the direction of St. Jim's, and the dusk of evening was falling over the country lanes.

Tom, with his bag on his shoulder—first on one and then on the other—tramped cheerily on towards the school.

About half-way to St. Jim's was the stile giving admittance to the footpath through the wood which led to the old castle. Upon the stile a dilapidated figure was seated. It looked at first like a bundle of rags, but by degrees Tom made out a dirty face and little, deep-set, gleaming eyes, and a bristly mouth, from which a foul black pipe protruded. And Tom felt a slight tremor.

He knew the tramp who was resting on the stile. More than once before Tom had come in contact with him when he was at his former school at Clavering. It was Honest Jim, the tramp and footpad and ruffian. Tom knew that copper-complexioned face at once.

The tramp saw Tom Merry, and recognised him at the same moment.

He grinned evilly as he slid off the stile.

"So it's you! Funny how I run up agin you!" he exclaimed.
"Glad to see an old friend, ain't you, young shaver? Glad to see old Honest Jim?"

Tom Merry set his teeth.
He saw that the ruffian meant mischief, and the lane was too lonely for help to be at hand. With the heavy bag he was carrying it was impossible to run. But to run without it and abandon those precious provisions was not to be thought of.

"You'd better keep your distance!" said Tom. He noted, with relief, that the ruffian had no cudgel in his hand, as he had had at their last meeting. "I don't want anything to say to you. Let me pass!"

Honest Jim grinned.
"What have you got in that there bag?"
"Nothing to do with you!"
"Lemme see it."
"Go and eat coke!"

The ruffian, with an evil look, sprang towards him. Tom dropped the bag and put up his fists. Tom was a plucky lad and a fine boxer, but he was no match for the ruffian. Honest Jim's rush swept him off his feet and hurled him upon the grassy bank beside the lane, half dazed.

The tramp seized the bag. He gave a chuckle as he opened it and saw the contents.

"My heye! 'Ere's a feed for me—for Honest Jim! Ha, ha, ha! Kid, you can go home and say you've given the grub to an old friend. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You beast!" gasped Tom, staggering to his feet. "Let my grub alone!"

"Yes, I'll let it alone!" said Honest Jim, grinning. He

snapped the bag shut, and picked it up. "This will make me a supper, and I was wonderin' where it was to come from. Now, then, cut off with you afore I hit you!"

But Tom, desperate, made a reckless dash at the ruffian to make an attempt to get the bag back. Honest Jim staggered as the boy's fists came crashing upon his coppery face. He snarled out an oath, and turned on the boy like a tiger. A savage blow sent poor Tom to the ground, and he was too dazed to rise till the ruffian had disappeared into the wood with his booty.

Tom rose slowly and painfully to his feet. The bag was gone, and the feed in Study No. 10 was destined not to come off, after all.

"The beast!" muttered Tom. "The rotten brute! I can't go back to the school without the grub, especially after inviting Study No. 6 and telling them to miss their tea." He grinned a little at the thought of what Blake would say in that case. "I shall have to get some more grub somehow. I wonder if—"

He thought of Gaffer Jones, and shook his head. Mother Murphy would have trusted Tom Merry to any extent, but Gaffer Jones was different. But Tom soon realised that his only chance of bringing off the feed after all was to persuade Gaffer to trust him to the extent of a fresh supply of provisions.

And so Tom turned back towards the village.



"Put that egg down!" yelled Gaffer. "Here you are!" called Tom. The next moment the egg burst right on the end of Gaffer's nose!

Gaffer was in the little shop when he reached it. A customer was there, sitting at one of the little tables at tea, and reading a newspaper. He was an athletic, keen-faced young man. He gave Tom a glance as the boy entered and went up to the counter.

Gaffer looked at him, far from amiable.
"I say, Gaffer," said Tom politely, "I've lost that grub." Gaffer looked at him chillingly.
"Have you?" was all he said.

"Yes, and I'm broke to the wide," said Tom confidentially.
"I want you to let me have the same again—on tick, you know, till next week."

Gaffer's reply was short, if not sweet. It consisted of one word:
"Walker!"

Tom grinned rather nervously. Gaffer did not look as if he would be persuaded. But Tom still hoped. The feed had to come off somehow.

"I say, Gaffer, honest Injun! A rotten brute of a tramp collared the bag and bunked with it. I can't go back to the school without the grub. The chaps are expecting it. Mother Murphy would trust me in a minute to the tune of a quid. Now, don't be a cad, Gaffer!"

"Get out!" said Gaffer.

"I tell you—"

"Stuff! You've hidden it somewhere, and come back

with this tale to get some more on tick," said the Gaffer. "I know you dratted boys! Hoff with you!"

Tom flushed indignantly.

"Do you think I would tell you a lie, you red-nosed old ruffian?" he exclaimed.

"Get hout!" roared Gaffer.

"Look here, you brute! I tell you, a rötter with a complexion like yours collared the tommy, and I want more. Do you hear? Now, don't be a pig, Gaffer, if you can help it. I want more."

Gaffer seized a knobby-stick, and made as if to come round the counter.

"Then you won't let me have it?"

"No."

Tom picked up an egg out of a box on the counter.

"Put that egg down!" cried Gaffer.

"Here you are," said Tom.

The next moment the egg cracked on Gaffer's nose. He gave a fearful yell, and Tom bolted out of the shop. He left Gaffer trying to rub the stickiness off his red nose. Safe outside, Tom paused to chuckle.

Gaffer had deserved that punishment, and it was some satisfaction to give it to him, but it left the question where it was. How was Tom to renew that supply of provisions? There was another tuckshop farther up the street, but Tom was not known there, and he could not hope to obtain credit to the extend of a pound.

Tom stood still, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his brows wrinkled in thought. It was seldom that Tom Merry was at a loss, but he was at a loss now.

"Well, this is simply rotten!" he exclaimed aloud. "What's to be done?"

He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned quickly, and saw the stranger he had noticed in Gaffer's shop. The young man was looking down at him with a smile. His

grey eyes were very keen in their glance, but good-humoured and kindly.

"Hallo!" said Tom.

"Hallo!" said the stranger. "I want to speak to you, my lad."

"Go ahead! No law against that, that I know of."

The stranger laughed. Something about Tom Merry seemed to amuse him.

"I heard what you said to the old fellow just now," he explained. "You have been robbed by a tramp in the lane, you said."

"Yes," said Tom. "The horrid bounder collared my bag, and the grub was all in it."

"Do you know who the man was?"

"I've seen him before. He calls himself Honest Jim."

The stranger reflected.

"I don't know the name," he said, after a moment. "But such a man might have many. You said something about his having a complexion like Gaffer's."

Tom grinned.

"Yes. It's the same style of beauty, only more so," he explained. "His chivvy looks like polished copper. Do you know the brute?"

"From your description, I think I do," replied the stranger. "I should very much like to meet him."

And a rather grim look came over the keen face.

"Well, he went into the wood," said Tom. "It's simply fearful to think of all my lovely grub being scooped by a waster like that."

The stranger laughed again.

"If you could help me to find that chap," he said, "it would be worth a lot to me." He looked at Tom keenly, as if he would read the character of the boy in his face.

The most casual observer might have seen that Tom Merry was true and trustworthy, and the young man appeared to be satisfied. "Perhaps you could help me," he went on. Tom looked at him inquiringly.

"I don't quite understand. What do you want to find him for?"

"You can keep a secret, my lad?"

"I don't like keeping secrets," said Tom; "but I suppose I could if it were necessary."

"Would you like to make yourself useful—to help the law to get its due, and to free the neighbourhood of a gang of scoundrels?" said the other.

Tom's eyes sparkled. This sounded a good deal like an adventure, and an adventure always appealed to Tom Merry.

"Rather!" he explained.

"Then I will tell you who I am. My name is Ferrers Locke. I am a detective."

Tom's eyes opened wide. He was duly impressed.

"A detective?" he exclaimed.

"Exactly! I am down here looking for a gang of rascals who have been committing burglaries all over the country, and who are now believed to be commencing operations in the neighbourhood of Rylcombe," explained the stranger. "From your description, I believe the man you have met to be a rascal who acts as a spy for them."

Tom drew a deep breath. It was very probable; it was just what he might have guessed Honest Jim to be.

"If I could lay my finger on him," continued Ferrers Locke, "I believe I could trace the gang through him. If you could help me—"

"I'll be glad to do all I can!" exclaimed Tom eagerly. "My hat! It would make the New House bounders green with envy."

"But not a word till after I give you permission," said the detective.

"Not a word, sir. I understand."

"I shall see you again," said Mr. Locke. He looked at his watch. "Your name is—"

"Tom Merry, sir."

"Good! I like your face, my lad, and I know I can trust you. Now, you are in a little difficulty at present. I want you to accept a little loan."

A note crackled in the detective's hand. Tom Merry drew back, flushing a little.

"I—I couldn't take it, sir."

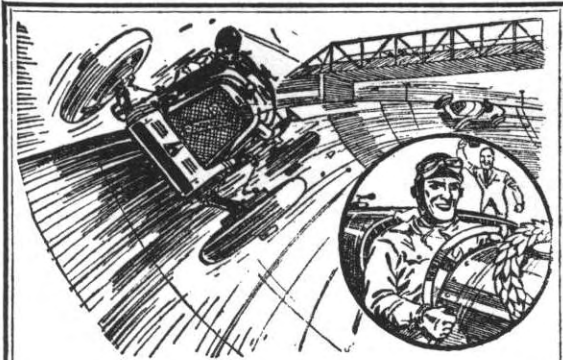
Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Simply as a loan, Merry. You can repay me when you are able."

Tom hesitated. He did not like accepting money from a stranger, yet Mr. Locke's manner was so good-natured and kindly that he could hardly decline the loan. And he remembered his chums waiting for the feed. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy had missed their tea, and by this time they would be famished.

"You are very kind, sir," said Tom. "I shall be able to repay you on Tuesday."

"That's all right. Now get your provisions, and scuttle, or you'll be late for calling-over." The detective evidently



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knew all about it. "I suppose you lock up at eight; and it's nearly eight now, Tom."

"Thank you, sir!"

And Tom accepted the crisp note.

"But I should advise you not to go to Gaffer," smiled the detective. "I left him vowing vengeance."

Tom laughed heartily.

"I won't, sir. I'll go to the other shop. Good-bye, sir!"

"Good-bye, Tom!"

The detective shook hands with the boy, and Tom hurried to the tuckshop up the street. With the ready money in hand it did not take him long to complete his purchases, and he borrowed a basket of the proprietor of the shop to carry the things in to the school. The dusk was deepening into night as he left the village for the second time; but there was little likelihood of meeting the tramp again. Honest Jim was doubtless engaged in sampling the captured provisions in the shadows of the Castle Wood.

Tom hurried on as fast as he could with his burden, and came in sight of the school gates. Taggles, the porter, was just about to close them. As a matter of fact, he was a little late with locking-up that night, which was lucky for Tom Merry.

"Gr-r-rrrooh!" gasped Taggles, as a figure darted by him in the gloom. "Wh-what was that?"

There was no reply. The figure vanished into the shades in the quadrangle, and Taggles locked up the big bronze gates. Tom Merry hurried on towards the School House. He passed under the elms, and the next minute he was lying on his back on the ground, with three youthful figures sprawling over him.

Tom was taken quite by surprise by the sudden attack, and he could only gasp under the weight of his assailants. He wondered what had happened, but the voice of the great Figgins through the gloom enlightened him.

"Got him!" said Figgins.

And three distinct chuckles followed.

CHAPTER 3.

The Feast that Didn't Come Off!

TOM MERRY had fallen into the clutches of the New House juniors. Figgins & Co. had evidently suspected something, and they had lain in wait for him in the shadows of the elms, and he had run right into the ambush without suspecting its existence.

"Got him!" said Figgins.

"He, he, he!" giggled Fatty Wynn.

"Ho, ho, ho!" chuckled Kerr.

"Got him!"

A muffled voice came from beneath the three sprawling juniors.

"Lemme gerrup!"

"Yes, we'll let you gerrup," Figgins said, "when we've finished. Don't wriggle, you bounder! We've got you fast. Where's that grub?"

"The what?"

"The grub. Don't pretend you don't understand. You were carrying a bag when you went out."

"Was I?"

"Yes, you were. Where is it now?"

"Find out!"

"I mean to. Look for the bag, Kerr, while Fatty and I squash this bounder!"

With the lanky Figgins and the plump Wynn on top of him, Tom Merry was indeed very nearly squashed. He wriggled in vain; his captors held him fast, whilst Kerr looked in the darkness for the basket Tom had dropped when he was seized.

"Here's a giddy basket!" exclaimed Kerr, as he found it. "It weighs something, too. I suppose this is what we want."

"He was carrying a bag," said Figgins.

"Well, this must be it. Yes, this is it. I suppose the bag wouldn't hold all the tommy—eh, Merry?"

"Grooh!" said Tom. He was gasping for breath.

"Well, if we've got it safe, we can let him go," said Figgins. "You'll give my kindest regards to Manners and to Study No. 6, won't you, Merry? I'm sorry if we're depriving them of a feed, but such is life. Now you can gerrup!"

Figgins and Wynn allowed Tom to rise. He regained his feet, very dusty and rumpled and breathless. Figgins & Co., carrying the basket between them, were darting off through the gloom towards the New House.

Tom took a few steps in pursuit, and then stopped. It was useless for one to pursue three, especially as the New House juniors would probably be ready to sally out to help Figgins & Co. Tom turned towards the School House

again. For the second time the tommy was gone, and though the second raid had been made in open and honourable warfare, and Tom, of course, owed no grudge for it, yet the fact remained indisputable that the grub was gone.

Empty-handed he was fated to return to the School House, and he thought of the invited guests, and of the tea they had missed on purpose for this feed that wouldn't come off.

He entered the House very slowly. He was in time to answer to his name when it was called over by Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's. Manners gave him an expressive glance. He naturally thought that Tom had left the bag in some safe place, to be brought into the School House when no prying eyes were about.

Most of the juniors at St. Jim's were in the habit of having tea in their studies, and were allowed to miss the meal in Hall if they liked. Manners had done so, and so had Blake and his chums. The latter had intended to have the meal in their own quarters after prep, but Tom's invitation had come in the meantime. And Blake had therefore not procured the necessary provisions from the school shop.

In Study No. 6 the larder was bare. And Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were cultivating a healthy appetite for the feed with Tom Merry.

Tom went up to his study with Manners. The latter was eager. He lighted the gas in the study and fixed a questioning glance on Tom.

"Where's the bag?" he asked.

"The bag?" said Tom.

"Yes. Where's the grub?"

Tom made a grimace.

"It's according to which lot you mean," he said. "There were two lots. One is being gorged by a tramp and the other by Figgins & Co."

"What are you talking about?"

Tom explained.

Manners's face fell as he learned how the first supply had been captured in the lane by Honest Jim. He brightened a little at the story of the borrowed pound note and the second supply. But the recounting of the raid by Figgins & Co. cast a gloom once more upon his classic features. He looked very expressively at Tom Merry.

"Rotten, isn't it?" said Tom feelingly.

"I should say so!" said Manners emphatically. "Very rotten! I think it's about time you retired from business as a giddy chief, and no mistake. First you let a beastly tramp collar the grub, then you have a stroke of luck, and then you let Figgins & Co. wolf the second lot. Oh, my hat! What sort of a silly cuckoo do you call yourself, Tom Merry?"

Tom looked very crestfallen.

"I know it's awfully rotten!" he said. "The feed is off, and what are we going to say to Blake and Herries and D'Arcy?"

Manners looked grim.

"Blessed if I know! They're due here now. I think I can hear them coming up the passage."

There was a sound of footsteps without, and a tap at the door.

"Come in!" said Tom Merry desperately.

The door opened, and Study No. 6 presented themselves. Blake came in first, with his most agreeable evening-party smile on. Then came Herries and D'Arcy, both looking very friendly and anticipative.

The glances of the visitors went first to the table, and they seemed slightly surprised to observe that it was bare.

"Hallo!" said Tom. "Glad to see you, Blake!"

"Awfully good of you to come!" said Manners.

Blake made his best bow.

"My dear chaps, it's a real pleasure!" he exclaimed. "Considering the various rows we've had, it's jolly decent of you to invite us to this feed."

"Jolly decent!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!" added Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, that's all right!" said Tom. "We're glad to have you. It's been a fine day, hasn't it, Blake, old man?"

"Yes, pretty good," assented Blake.

"What do you think of the cricket prospects?" said Manners.

"The cricket prospects?" repeated Blake.

"Yes. I mean our match with the New House."

"Oh, we shall beat them!" said Blake.

"Oh, wathah!" said D'Arcy.

"Figgins is going to captain the New House juniors," Tom Merry remarked.

"That's old news," said Blake. He looked more and more surprised. There was no sign of a feed anywhere in the study. "I say, you chaps, we shall have to go to bed some time to-night, so if it wouldn't be asking you too much—"

"Just so," said Herries. "We missed our tea on purpose, Merry."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Is there going to be a feed?"

Tom Merry and Manners exchanged a glance.

"Certainly," said Tom. "But, you see, the fact is——"

"The fact is——" said Manners.

Blake looked from one to the other. They looked very red and uncomfortable. In a moment the terrible truth dawned upon Jack Blake.

"You don't mean to say," he remarked, with emphasis, "that there isn't going to be a feed?"

"You see——" began Tom Merry.

"You see——" began Manners.

"Yes; I see a pair of silly cuckoos!" assented Blake.

"Out with it! Is there going to be a feed, or is there not going to be a feed?"

"That's it," said Herries. "Is there going to be a feed, or is there not going to be a feed?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Is there going to be a feed, deah boys, or is there not going to be a feed?"

"I'm afraid there is not," said Tom meekly. "It's awfully unfortunate!"

"Extremely rotten!" said Manners. "But——"

"But it can't be helped."

"You see——"

"It's Figgins."

"Figgins has collared the grub!"

"We're awfully sorry!"

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy listened to the halting explanations in chilling silence.

"And we," said Blake, when Tom and Manners had finished, "we have missed our tea on purpose. We haven't anything in the larder at home. Chaps, what are we going to do?"

"Better go for 'em," said Herries thoughtfully.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "The least we can do, deah boy, under the circumstances, is to w'eck the study."

"I suppose so," said Blake. "Fortunately, we are three to two, the other silly cuckoo who used to be here being away."

Tom Merry and Manners stood shoulder to shoulder.

"Now, look here, kids!" said Tom in a tone of exostulation.

"Kids!" exclaimed Blake. The words "kids" from the heroes of the Shell, applied to the Fourth Form, always caused ructions. "I'll give you kids, you horrid bounder!"

It looked like war. But just then there came an interruption. There was a tap, and the door opened to admit Percy Mellish and Walsh. Percy looked round with his most agreeable smile.

"Thought we might be too late," he remarked. "I see you haven't started yet. Any more guests coming, Merry?"

Tom Merry groaned under his breath. In the generosity of his heart he had issued invitations right and left for that feed, and now the guests were coming in, unsuspecting of the catastrophe that had taken place.

"We're sorry——" began Tom.

"You see——" said Manners.

"There's nothing gone wrong with the feed, I hope?" said Percy Mellish.

"It's coming off, I suppose?" exclaimed Walsh.

"You see——"

"The fact is——"

The door opened again, and Harris and Crane walked in. They belonged to the Shell, Tom's own Form. They nodded affably round to the assembled company.

"I see you haven't started yet," said Crane. "Waited for us, I suppose? That's jolly good of you—all of you. Couldn't get here before."

"But now we're here," said Harris, "we're quite ready."

"I'm sorry——" said Tom.

"You see——" said Manners.

Again the door opened, and three fellows belonging to the Lower Fifth came in. The study was pretty well crowded by this time.

"Not started yet!" said one of the Fifth-Formers cheerfully. "Waited for us, eh? Never mind, better late than never. Where's the feed?"

The others took up the demand.

"Where's the feed?"

"Where's the giddy feed?"

"You see," said Tom Merry desperately, "Figgins has collared the grub, and so the feed can't come off. We're sorry! And another time——"

There was a general howl.

"Not coming off?"

"Yah!"

"We've missed our tea on purpose!"

"Yah!"

"We're hungry as hunters!"

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"Yah!"

"No blessed feed?" said Percy Mellish wrathfully. "Then we'll teach you to make fools of us, you horrid, unreliable bounders! Who says wreck the giddy show?"

"I do!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

Every voice shouted a hearty response. In a moment pandemonium was reigning in the study.

Tom Merry and Manners never had a very clear idea afterwards of what exactly happened. But after about five minutes of terrific uproar the disappointed guests marched out of the room, leaving it a wreck.

Tom Merry sat up from the grate and pushed the fender off him. Manners extricated his head from the waste-paper basket, and shoved the overturned table off his chest. They sat up and looked at one another over the wreckage of upset furniture, scattered paper, and books and utensils. The study was a wreck.

"My only Aunt Matilda!" murmured Manners. "Was that an earthquake?"

Tom grinned ruefully.

"The next time we give a feed," he exclaimed, "we'll have the grub here safe under lock and key before we issue the giddy invitations. We'll make that rule!"

CHAPTER 4.

A Detective at St. Jim's!

TOM MERRY and Manners were feeling a little off colour the next morning. When they encountered the guests of the previous evening they were greeted with a good deal of chipping about the feast that hadn't come off, and Blake asked with much solicitude whether they had got their study in order again yet.

"It's a rotten frost!" said Tom to his chum. "I owe Gussy a pound, and another to the chap I met at Rylcombe, and there wasn't any feed. It's beastly!"

"So it is!" agreed Manners. "And as you're going to have only one pound come on Tuesday, how are you going to pay off both these debts?"

Tom smiled.

"I've written to Miss Fawcett," he said. "She'll turn up trumps, I expect. I'm expecting a letter from her to-day."

"Good!" said Manners. "I wish I had a tame old governess like that."

But the topic of the feast that didn't come off was soon banished by another of a more interesting and rather startling kind.

Rumours leaked out in the school during the morning, and after school it was known for certain that there had been a burglary at St. Jim's over night.

The Head's study had been broken into, and a considerable sum of money taken from his desk.

The police had come from Rylcombe, and Inspector Skeet had looked very wise over the matter, and gone away again.

Tom Merry was deeply interested in the news. There had been an attempted burglary at St. Jim's only a short time before, and Tom had encountered the burglar and helped to capture him, having left his dormitory in the middle of the night to raid Blake in the Fourth Form quarters.

"What a pity we weren't on the warpath last night, Manners!" exclaimed Tom. "You remember that burglar chap we collared in the School House that time? We might have made a capture."

"Well, this was in the Head's house," said Manners, "so it was rather off our beat. But, I say, it's not only that ass of an inspector who's going to see into this; there's a real live detective coming."

Tom looked interested.

"How do you know?"

"I heard Kildare tell Darrell so. His name's Ferrers Locke, and he's a real live detective from London," announced Manners.

Tom gave a jump.

"Ferrers Locke!"

"Yes, and I expect that's the chap!" exclaimed Manners, pointing towards an athletic young man who had just ascended the steps of the Head's house.

Tom glanced at the stranger, and recognised his acquaintance of the previous day. Ferrers Locke caught sight of him, and nodded pleasantly.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Manners mystified. "What's that mean, Tom? You don't happen to know the detective chap, do you?"

Tom looked rather important.

"He's the chap who lent me a pound in Rylcombe yesterday," he replied.

"No; is he? By Jove, then you know him!" said Manners. "You'll have to introduce me. I've never met a detective, and I want to know what it's like."

Blake came up to the chums of the Shell.

"I say, kids, there's a detective chap in the school," he exclaimed; "a real live detective from London. I don't know whether it's Sexton Blake or not."

"His name is Ferrers Locke," said Tom.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I happen to know the chap!" said Tom, in a careless way.

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Blake. "Then point him out to me. We all want to see him. Where is the giddy detective?"

"He's gone in the Head's house. Hallo, Figgy, you beastly highway robber!"

Figgins came up grinning hugely.

"Thanks for that feed!" he exclaimed. "It was simply ripping. We had half the New House to it and it was prime. We were all pleased!"

"Were you?" said Tom grimly, and he exchanged a look with Manners. "And now—"

Figgins retreated a step.

"Pax!" he exclaimed. "I haven't come here for a row. The chaps are saying that there's a giddy detective come to the school. I want to see him."

"Oh, all right!" said Tom. "Come along, and I'll show him to you!"

Juniors went into the School House and Tom led the way along the corridor which led into the Head's house adjoining. That corridor opened on the wide passage in which was the door of the Head's study.

Tom halted at the corner.

"He's in there," he said, pointing down the passage to the Head's door. "He's gone in to see the Head. You'll see him as he comes out."

"Good!" said Figgins.

It was ten minutes before the door of Dr. Holmes' study opened. Then Mr. Ferrers Locke came out, the Head with him.

The detective started as he saw four heads craned round a corner looking at him.

"Hallo, he can see us!" murmured Tom Merry.

He popped back. Unfortunately, Blake, Manners, and Figgins were all popping back at the same moment. Tom's head came with a crack against Blake's, and Blake's went against the wall.

"Oh crumbs!" roared Blake.

He shoved Tom off so suddenly that Tom, who was a little dazed by the crack on the head, went reeling out into the passage, in full view of the detective and the Head, and plonked down on the floor almost at their feet.

"My hat!" gasped Blake. "Who'd have thought that?"

The Head stared at Tom through his pince-nez.

"Merry, what does this mean?"

Tom sat up.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir."

"Is there anybody else there?" The Head stepped quickly along the passage and glanced round the corner.

He was just in time to see three pairs of legs vanishing in the distance round the first corner. He smiled slightly as he turned back.

"Now, Merry, what does this mean?"

Tom had jumped up. He looked appealingly at Ferrers Locke, and the detective came to the rescue good-naturedly.

"I think Merry came here to see me," he remarked. "I happen to have the honour of his acquaintance."

The Head looked rather surprised.

"Indeed! Then I will excuse you, Merry." He shook hands with the detective. "Then I shall hope to hear from you soon, Mr. Locke?"

"Certainly!" said the detective. "I am assured that I know to whom to attribute last night's affair, and I am hourly in hope of getting on their track. Good-morning, sir."

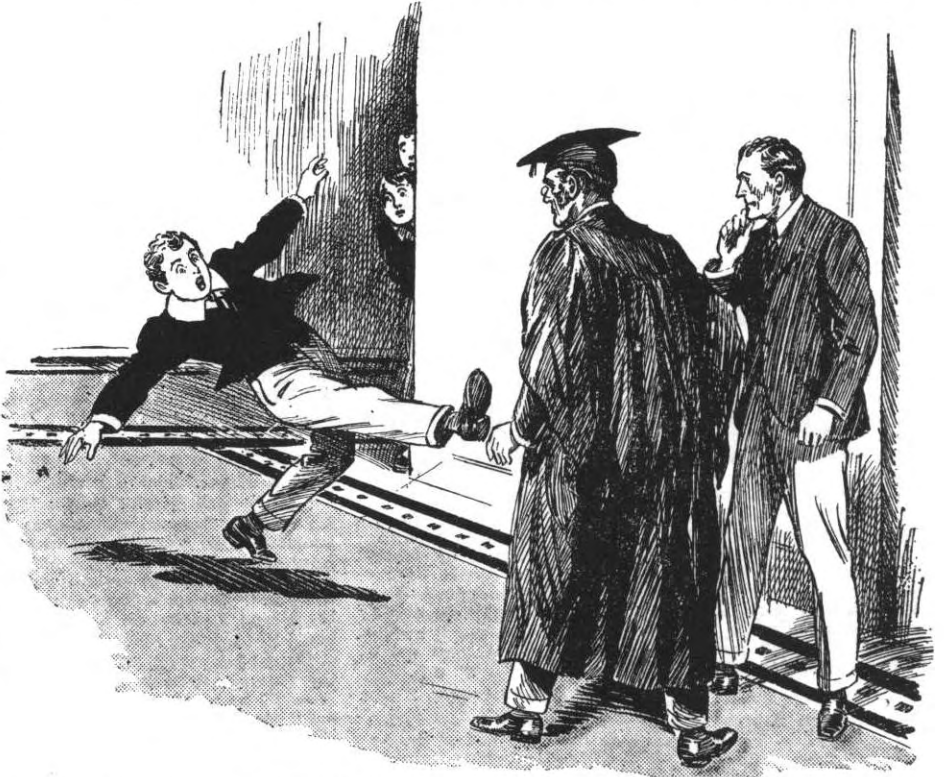
Ferrers Locke made Tom a sign to accompany him as he left the house. Tom, who was quite aware of the honour that would fall to him from being seen in company with the detective, gladly walked by his side. As they went out into the quadrangle a hundred envious eyes were fixed upon Tom Merry.

"How that chap falls on his feet!" exclaimed Figgins, who was there with the Co. "Anybody else would have got flayed. Look here, you chaps, what does he know of this giddy detective? What's the meaning of that—eh?"

"Give it up," said Kerr.

"Ask me another!" said Fatty Wynn.

"I don't like it," said Figgins. "Fancy the bouncer marching about with the detective as if he'd known him all



Blake shoved Tom so suddenly, that he went reeling out into the passage, straight in the way of the Head and the detective, to plonk down almost at their feet!

his life! There's something or other going on, kids, and are we going to be left out of it?"

"Not if we can help it," said Kerr emphatically.

"Not if we know it," said Fatty Wynn.

"Tom Merry rather fancies himself at catching burglars," went on Figgins. "You remember that French chap who was collared in the School House one night? We heard a fearful lot about that. Is it possible that Merry is on the track this time, and that something's going to happen to make those School House rotters put on more side than ever?"

The Co. looked properly concerned.

"Well," said Figgins resolutely, "we're not going to be left out of this, whatever it is. Come on!"

Tom Merry and the detective were walking down to the gates. Figgins & Co. followed them. Mr. Locke shook hands with Tom at the gate.

"In a quarter of an hour," he said.

"I'll be there, sir!" said Tom.

Figgins caught the words. He seized the Co. and marched them off as Tom turned round.

"What's the row?" said Kerr. "What are you getting excited about?"

"We don't want the bouncer to know we're watching him."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you hear what he said?"

"Yes. What about it?"

Figgins looked at him pityingly.

"I've heard," he said, "that you want a hammer and a chisel to get anything into a Scotsman's head, and I'm beginning to believe it, Kerr, since I've known you!"

"You let my head alone," said Kerr, "or you'll get a Scotsman's fist on your nose, and you won't like it!"

"Can't you explain, Figgy?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

"What have you got in your noddle?"

"Why, it's as plain as anything that Tom Merry and the detective have got some giddy secret between them!" said Figgins impressively. "They won't talk about it here, because there's so many eyes upon them. And so Merry is going to meet the detective somewhere or other in a quarter of an hour. See?"

Kerr and Wynn looked admiringly at the great Figgins.

"I believe you've hit it, Figgy!"

"Of course I have," said Figgy. "I've hit it right on the head. Now, are we going to be left out of this, kids?"

"No!" said the Co. together.

"No, I should say not," said Figgins. "We're going to do some detective business ourselves. When Tom Merry goes out, we follow."

Kerr looked slightly uneasy.

"I say, Figgy, is that exactly playing the game?"

Figgins gave him a withering look.

"Don't you think I'm a good judge of that?" he exclaimed. "I know as well as you do that following a chap and listening to his jaw is mean—rotten mean—and only a cad would do it. But in a state of war it's different, isn't it? A scout goes into the enemy's country and finds out all he can. We're giddy Scouts, and we're in a state of war, aren't we, with that rotten old casual ward they call the School House?"

"Just so," said Fatty Wynn.

"All right," said Kerr; "it's the way you look at it. Of course, we're in a state of war. Let's get on the track, by all means."

Tom Merry remained looking out at the gate for some time, then he glanced at his watch and walked away. Figgins & Co. exchanged glances and followed him.

They looked down the lane and saw Tom disappear into the Castle Wood.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Figgins.

In a few minutes Figgins & Co. were also in the wood. They entered it where they had seen Tom Merry enter it, and, a minute later, they heard the sound of voices ahead through the thick undergrowth.

Figgins nudged his companions, and they stopped. For the voices they could hear were those of Tom Merry and a man—undoubtedly the detective from London.

"Good wheeze!" murmured Figgins. "We shall score this time. Not a sound!"

CHAPTER 5.

Figgins Has an Idea!

FERRERS LOCKE was waiting for Tom under the old beeches.

"You are prompt to time, my boy," the detective remarked, with a smile. "Now, I want a little talk with you about the matter we were arranging yesterday. You said you were willing to help me to lay those rascals by the heels."

"Rather!" said Tom. "I suppose the burglary at the school last night was by the same gang, sir?"

The detective nodded.

"I have no doubt of it. They work in the same way always, and they are cunning rascals; they never give an alarm or leave a clue behind—or hardly ever. I have been hunting them for a long time, but I cannot get on their track. You see, I am speaking quite frankly to you, Tom."

"You can rely upon me, sir."

"I know I can, Tom, or I shouldn't speak like this. Now, I have reason to believe—every reason—that these rascals who work in the dark have a spy who noses out things for them—suitable cribs to crack, and so on—and keeps them posted in various ways, a spy who goes round the countryside as a tramp; in short, your old friend Honest Jim."

"He's just the kind of rascal," said Tom.

"Honest Jim will find himself in prison one of these days," went on Ferrers Locke. "But I am not so anxious

to find him as to find the more dangerous rascals whose confederate he is. I hope through him to run them down. That is why I have not arrested Honest Jim. I got a sight of him yesterday; and, from what I can gather, he seems to haunt the Castle Wood. I have an idea that his associates come here at times to get information from him. I should imagine that they dare not show themselves, and Honest Jim is their means of keeping in touch with the outside world, while they're in hiding in this neighbourhood."

"I see!" said Tom, deeply interested.

"On a previous occasion," continued Ferrers Locke, "I gained some information as to their movements by chance, in this way. They used a cleft in a bank as a 'post office'—you understand, a note would be left there by one, to be fetched by another at a time when it was convenient, so that it was not necessary for them to run the risk of holding meetings together—a necessary precaution when they were closely hunted by the police. One of these notes came into my hands. Now, I have an idea that the same device may be used in the present instance, and that such a post office may be in existence in this wood."

"Some hollow tree, of course!" exclaimed Tom. "I know a good many in this wood!"

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"That's it, Tom. Now, I have not the slightest doubt that Honest Jim, not knowing that he is suspected, will watch to learn what steps the police are taking with regard to the burglary last night at the school, and if this post office exists, as I believe, he will certainly be using it soon. You understand?"

"Quite, sir."

"You know this wood from one end to another, of course?"

"Rather, sir!"

"Then you see where you can help me? If you could find the place it would very likely put the rascals right into my hands."

Tom's eyes sparkled.

"It's a half-holiday at the school to-day, sir. I'll go through the wood; I know it like a book. If you'd let me tell Manners, he'd help me. He's a chap you can trust, sir; he'd keep a secret like a tombstone."

"Very well, you may let Manners into it," said Ferrers Locke; "but, mind, not another soul."

"Not a soul, sir."

"If you get on the track of the post office," continued Mr. Locke, "come and tell me. Don't interfere with it yourself, after ascertaining that it is really the place you want. There may be some clue, which I may be able to detect, which would be destroyed otherwise. If you spot the place, just come and tell me about it. You'll find me at the Green Dragon, in Rylcombe, or, if I'm not there, I'll leave word where you can come."

"Right-ho, sir!" said Tom gleefully. "Trust me! If there's a single nook in the wood that the rascals are using, it won't be long before old Manners and I have routed it out! And we won't touch it. Once we've found it I'll be off to tell you, like a shot!"

"Thank you, Tom!" said Ferrers Locke. And he shook hands with the boy, and they parted.

The detective walked away up the lane to Rylcombe, and Tom hastened back to the school to find Manners.

When the sound of footsteps had died away Figgins rose from a mass of brambles, feeling rather cramped, but grinning gleefully.

"Oh, we shall smile!" murmured Figgins. "Fancy Tom Merry as a giddy detective! Tom Merry on the trail! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed the Co.

"My children," said Figgins, "I have an idea. Our good friends of the School House are going to search the woods for a hollow tree with something in it."

"They are!" said Kerr.

"It would be too cruel if they didn't find it," said Figgins.

"Too cruelly cruel!" agreed the dutiful Co.

"So why shouldn't we, like good and kind schoolfellows and dear playmates, rig up something for them to find in a hollow tree?" demanded Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled the Co.

"When they fetch their champion bloodhound, and he finds what we leave there for him, it will be a sight worth seeing," said Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha! But how shall we fix it?"

"That will want thinking out. But the idea's great, and we shall work it. Now trot along with your uncle. And, mind, not a word, not a whisper!"

"Not a word!" agreed the Co.

'And the three juniors of the New House quitted the wood and returned, chuckling, to the school.

Tom Merry was already at St. Jim's, and he had found Manners on the cricket field. Manners was eager enough to join in the quest as soon as he heard what was on, and cricket was given up for the afternoon.

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Manners, as he changed out of his flannels. "If we can help to lay that lot of rascals by the heels, it will make Figgins & Co. look sick, and it will be one up against Study No. 6, too. But, I say, Tom, old kid, have you heard from your dearly beloved governess yet?"

"No," said Tom.

"You see, if that remittance came, and it was big enough, you could settle the two debts, and blow the rest in the village this afternoon," said Manners thoughtfully. "It will be thirsty work hunting through the wood, and the ginger-pop at Mother Murphy's is prime, and I'm absolutely stony!"

"So am I," said Tom. "I wrote yesterday to Miss Fawcett, and I'm sure she would send at once. I told her I was feeling a bit knocked up for want of a good feed. There's nothing like telling the exact truth when you're dealing with a lady. I was a bit knocked up by Blake and all those rotters in the study last night, and it was for want of a good feed."

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes! I say, something may have arrived, you know. Let's drop in on Taggles as we go out, and see if there's anything there."

"Right you are!"

And the chums of the Shell dropped into the porter's lodge to inquire. Taggles scowled at them, as he always did; but Tom Merry was affability itself.

"Anything come for me, Taggles, old son?" he asked.

"There's a parcel," said Taggles coldly. "It's marked 'Hurgent.'"

He kicked out a little parcel which was very carefully wrapped and sealed and addressed to Master Tom Merry at the School House, St. James' Collegiate School. Tom gave a chirp of delight. The handwriting was Miss Priscilla's. It was marked "Urgent."

"Here we are!" he exclaimed. "This is jolly! Taggles, old man, why didn't you let me have this before, when it was marked, as you said yourself, 'Hurgent'?"

"Tain't my business to carry parcels around for rips of boys," said Taggles darkly. "And I dessay it contains some sort of nasty sweetstuff you oughtn't to 'ave, and—"

Tom didn't wait for the grumpy old porter to finish. He picked up his little parcel and left the lodge with Manners.

"I say, what do you think is in it?" asked Manners, as Tom set down the parcel under a seat of one of the elm-trees near the School House.

"The cash, I expect," said Tom, "and some nice little cakes, which will be just the thing to take into the wood with us. We shall get hungry—as hungry as Blake was last night. Ha, ha! Miss Fawcett's cook at Laurel Villa makes ripping cakes!"

"Good!" said Manners.

Tom opened the parcel. Manners looked on eagerly. There was a letter inside, and Tom opened it and glanced over it.

Then his face was a study.

"What's the matter?" asked Manners anxiously.

Tom grunted.

"This is from my old governess. It's a reply to my letter. Oh, Columbus, listen! Oh, my hat! Is life worth living?"

And Tom read out the letter from Miss Priscilla Fawcett:

"My dearest Tommy,—I was very much alarmed by your letter. I presume by 'knocked up' that you mean that you have met with an accident. It is that dreadful football again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Manners. "Football in the summer term!"

"I suppose it is," went on Tom, reading from the letter. "Dear Tommy, if you must play those fearful games, why will you not be content with moderation? Do not try to make so many runs when you play football—"

Manners shrieked.

"You will exhaust yourself. You know you are delicate, and when you are playing that other desperate game, cricket, I wish you would try to keep out of the scrummages."

Manners fell on the seat.

"Don't, Tom, don't!" he murmured. "You are killing me!"

Tom could not help grinning. Miss Fawcett evidently drew a very hazy distinction between cricket and Rugby football. They were all dreadful games to her, equally terrible and equally incomprehensible.

"I hope your injuries are not serious," the letter went on. "If they are, wire to me, and I will come down at once."

"Yes, I can see you wiring!" murmured Manners.

"But I judge from the cheerful tone of your letter," Miss Priscilla went on—"that you are not in a bad way. But I am alarmed, my dear boy, for your safety. Meanwhile, I send you some liniment for your injuries. Rub it on the injured limbs for three-quarters of an hour before going to bed, and for a quarter of an hour after getting up in the morning."

Manners yelled.

"I also enclose a bottle of Dr. Bones' Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers, which you will take morning, noon, and night in doses of two large table-spoonfuls at a time. You will also find a large bottle of cod-liver oil. This is to be taken at all times. Whenever you feel a little run down, take a spoonful."

"He, he, he!" giggled Manners.

"I will send you a remittance on Saturday," went on the letter. "In your present weak state of health you must not eat pastries or anything of that sort. Believe me, my dear boy, that I know what is best for you. Take plenty of the Marvellous Mixture and of the cod-liver oil, and rub your injuries with the liniment. Then write and tell me how you improve."

"Your affectionate nurse,
"PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

"Well, of all the rotten frosts," said Manners, "this is the rottenest!"

Tom put the letter in his pocket.

The parcel lay on the seat, with its tempting array of cod-liver oil, Marvellous Mixture, and unequalled liniment.

"Can't be helped," said Tom, with a nod of his curly head. "It's a frost, I know. But she's a dear old soul. What are we going to do with this ghastly stuff?"

Manners reflected.

"Sure you don't feel inclined to scoff it?" he asked.

"Don't be an ass, old chap!"

"Well, suppose you send 'em to Figgins?" suggested Manners.

Tom Merry grinned.

"Just the idea!"

He soon had the parcel wrapped up again, with the paper turned inside out. Then he wrote on it in indelible pencil:

"G. Figgins, Esq., New House, St. James' Collegiate School."

"Buttons will take it," he said. "Let's get a move on."

Buttons was soon found, and he agreed to deliver the parcel in the New House. He promised to take it up to Figgins' study. Then Tom Merry went down to the gate. They met Figgins & Co. coming in.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "Going for a little run?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"Like us to come with you?"

"Thanks," said Tom. "You're awfully kind; but suppose we were to meet somebody respectable—good-bye!"

Tom and Manners strode on. Figgins & Co. grinned as they watched them go.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled the great Figgins. "They don't know that we know that they're going to hunt for a giddy post office. Let 'em wait."

Figgins & Co. went to their quarters in the New House.

"The question is," said Figgins, "what are we going to leave in the hollow tree for them to find? We've already decided how we're going to work the wheeze; but what are they to find in the hollow tree, that's the question? Hallo, what's this on the table?"

"Looks like a parcel" said Kerr; "addressed to you, too, Figgy."

"Let's hope there's some grub in it," said Fatty Wynn. "Open it, Figgy."

Figgins was not long in opening the parcel.

"Hallo," he ejaculated, "what on earth's this? Somebody having a little joke on us? Marvellous Mixture, unequalled liniment, cod-liver oil—my hat!"

The three chums stared at the contents of the parcel in wrathful surprise.

"It's a little joke from the School House, I suppose," said Figgins at last. "Pitch the silly rot out of the window."

Kerr took up the parcel to obey.

"I say!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn. "I say! Wait a tick!" Kerr stopped. Both looked inquiringly at Fatty.

"Well?" said Figgins. "You don't want to drink this stuff, do you? I should think that even you would draw a line at that."

"No," giggled Fatty. "But you were wondering what to put in the hollow tree for Tom Merry and the detective to find, and I thought—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Figgins. "The very thing!" And Figgins & Co. laughed loud and long.

CHAPTER 6.

From Information Received.

"ROTTEN!"

"Beastly!"
"A horrid frost!"
"A giddy sell!"

Tom Merry and Manners were comparing notes at the end of a long afternoon's hunt through the Castle Wood.

Many a secret nook the boys knew in the wood—many a hollow tree; but they had searched for hours without discovering the post office used by the thieves, if the suspicions of the London detective were correct.

Right up and down through the Castle Wood they had gone, penetrating to hitherto untrodden recesses, routing out all kinds of corners, diving into the hollow trunks of ancient elms, fishing in all sorts of likely and unlikely places for the suspected post office.

They had covered themselves with dust and grime and mud, and they were heated and fatigued; but no other result had as yet accrued from their efforts.

"Rotten!" said Tom Merry. "It's no good keeping it up. We've only just time to cut back before tea, and I'm as hungry as a hunter!"

"So am I," said Manners feelingly. "I haven't been so hungry for a long time. And I'm tired. And I should like to kick somebody."

"Oh, come on!" said Tom. "It's no good sticking it out longer. It keeps light pretty late now, and we might have another little run after tea."

"We might," said Manners, but very dubiously.

They set out for school. The golden evening sunlight was falling upon St. Jim's, and the cricketers were going in to tea.

Figgins & Co. apparently had not been playing cricket.

The great Figgins stood in the ancient gateway of the school talking to Kerr. Wynn was not to be seen.

"Yes, I couldn't help wondering," Figgins said. He had his back to the returning juniors, and apparently was quite unaware of their approach. "You see, I knew the man by sight. I'd seen him about the lanes—a horrid-looking tramp, with a face coloured like copper."

"But what did he do?" asked Kerr.

"Why, he went sneaking into the wood, as if he thought somebody would be watching him, and stuck something into the hollow tree—you know, that old elm near the stile."

"Yes, rather!"

"Well, it's hollow, and that tramp bounder stuck something into it—what it was, I couldn't see; but it was a packet of some kind."

"Phew! What do you think it was?"

"Stolen goods, I should say," replied Figgins sagely. "He'd been lifting something somewhere, and wanted to hide it from the police."

"Then we ought to tell about it."

"Oh, I don't know! It may have been only a note he was leaving for someone."

"Still, you know, the man looks like a thief, and—Hallo, Merry! Been for a walk?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry, keeping a straight face, and pretending to have heard nothing of the talk at the gate, though in reality he had not missed a word of it as he came up. "Tea bell hasn't gone yet, has it?"

"No, it won't go for ten minutes yet," said Figgins. "Not going to have tea in your study?"

"No," said Tom. "Stony!"

"Then I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Figgins hospitably. "Come and have tea with us in the New House. We owe you a spread."

Tom looked rather confused.

At any other time he would have accepted Figgins' invitation with alacrity; but at present he was eager to act upon the information he had unexpectedly gained.

"Thanks, Figgy!" he said. "Another time, old chap!"

"Got an engagement?"

"Yes, that's it. So-long!"

Tom Merry and Manners walked on to the School House. Figgins and Kerr looked perfectly grave till they were out of sight. Then, in the cover of the big gateway, Figgins fell upon his chum's neck and hugged him.

"Did you see it?" he gasped. "Didn't he swallow it whole, like Jonah swallowed the whale—I mean, like the whale swallowed Jonah?"

"He did—he did!" ejaculated Kerr. "It was lovely!"

"Gorgeous!"

"My hat! Didn't he bolt it like a giddy gudgeon?" chuckled Figgins.

Tom Merry and Manners walked on excitedly to the School House. In the porch, out of sight of Figgins & Co., Tom stopped, and clasped Manners on the shoulder.

"You heard all that, Manners?"

"Rather, Tom!"

"You know what it means?"

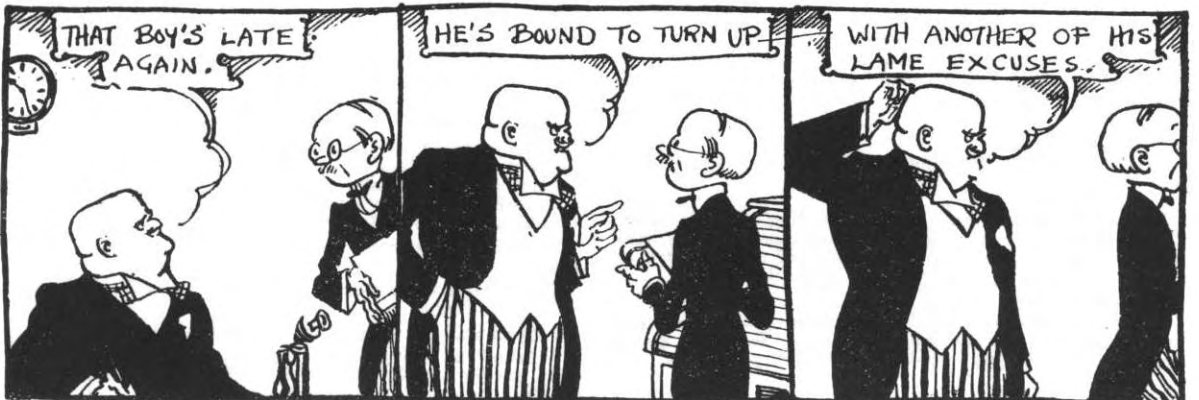
Manners nodded.

"Yes; it's the giddy clue."

"That's it. What a little bit of luck! The hollow elm near the stile. And we never thought of looking there,



Potts, the Office-Boy.



because it was so near the road we didn't think they'd use that. It shows that you can't be too careful."

"That's so. Figgy would be wild if he knew what he'd missed. How are we going to tell Ferrers Locke?"

"I'm going to cut off and tell him at once—as soon as I can get out without Figgy noticing. We don't want those New House wasters to smell a rat."

"But what about tea?"

"Tea!" exclaimed Tom scornfully. "Who thinks of tea at such a time as this? Talk about Nero fiddling while Rome was burning!"

"That's all very well," said the practical Manners. "But I'm jolly hungry, you see. Figgins & Co. seem to have taken root over there, so we might as well have a snack. We don't want them to spot us going out."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Tom. "But we shall have to buck up. We want to get in again before calling-over."

They went in and had a snack. When they came out again, feeling a good deal better for it, Figgins and Kerr were no longer adorning the gateway with their persons.

Tom and his chum passed out, and started down the lane towards Rylcombe.

They lost no time, and it did not take them long to reach the Green Dragon. Fortunately, too, Mr. Locke was there, having just come in.

The landlady said that Mr. Locke was in his room, and the boys went up to see him. Tom knocked at the door.

"Come in!" said the detective's deep voice.

They entered. Ferrers Locke was seated at the table, examining some papers before him. He rose as the boys entered.

"Hallo! So it's you, Merry!"

"Yes, sir," said Tom. "We've got news, sir. This is old Manners—one of the best, Mr. Locke."

Ferrers Locke's eyes sparkled. He nodded cordially to Manners.

"You don't mean to say that you've found the post office, Merry?"

"I believe so, sir."

"You see——" began Manners.

Tom trod on his toe, and he ceased abruptly. He had just been going to explain how they had overheard the information from Figgins & Co.; but Tom saw no reason why they should explain away their glory in that fashion.

"You know the stile in the lane to the school, sir?" said Tom.

"Yes," said Mr. Locke.

"There's a big elm near it."

"I have noticed that," the detective said, with a nod.

"It's hollow," said Tom triumphantly.

"I should not be surprised. It's a very old tree."

"And that's where Honest Jim shoves his letters, sir!" exclaimed Tom. "We haven't touched them, just as you directed. I came at once for you."

Mr. Locke looked convinced at last.

"That tree is in a very prominent position to be used for that purpose!" he exclaimed. "You are sure of what you say, Merry?"

"It's a fact, sir," said Tom confidently. "You see, that

shows his artfulness. He selects a tree in a prominent position, because he knows you'd expect him to select one hidden away somewhere. That's how Sherlock Holmes would work it out, sir."

The detective smiled slightly.

"Unfortunately, Sherlock Holmes' methods are not always applicable to real life," he replied. "This tramp has not sufficient intelligence, I believe, to draw such deductions, and, besides, he does not know that I have any suspicion of the existence of his post office. He does not even know that I am on the case, or in the neighbourhood at all."

Tom looked rather crestfallen.

"Nunno, I suppose not," he said. "Still, I'm sure this is the place, sir."

"Did you actually see the rascal at the tree?"

"Not exactly," said Tom; "but another fellow did. We're acting on—on information received, Mr. Locke."

"You are sure this other fellow saw what you say?"

"Yes, sir. I heard him saying so, and he wondered what the tramp was up to."

Mr. Locke looked convinced at last.

"Well, that seems pretty clear," he remarked. "You say you haven't touched the post office?"

"Not a bit of it, sir. We came straight to you."

"That's right."

The detective put on his hat.

"The sooner we get there the better!" he exclaimed. "If there is a letter for the thieves we must have it before they have time to take it way."

They left the inn together. They hurried to the stile through the wood by the footpath, in order not to attract attention. The dusk of evening was falling as they arrived at the hollow elm.

Ferrers Locke glanced along the footpath, and then up and down the lane. No one was in sight. The thick undergrowth near at hand might have concealed a dozen watchers, but if any were there they made no sound.

Ferrers Locke stepped to the hollow tree. There was a gash in the trunk about the height of his shoulder from the ground. He dropped a stone into it, and the sound within showed that the hollow went down four or five feet.

Tom and Manners watched the detective's next proceedings with interest. It was impossible to extend the arm very far within the hollow, and they wondered how he was going to get at the packet—how, in fact, Honest Jim's friends would have done it. Mr. Locke's proceedings were very simple.

He took a coil of stout wire from his pocket and uncoiled it. There was a hook at one end. This end he inserted into the hollow, and he felt about with the stiff wire as with a stick. A gleam came into his eyes.

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"There's something there, sir!"

"Yes," said the detective laconically.

The boys were growing excited. They watched eagerly as the detective continued his fishing. He began to draw the wire from the hollow.

Then he inserted his hand, and grasped the article he had



Very Lame!



caught on the hook, and drew it into the light. His eyes were sparkling now.

Up to the last moment he had had doubts as to the accuracy of Tom Merry's information, but now that the packet had come to light he could hardly doubt further.

"That's the packet!" exclaimed Tom unguardedly. "That's what Figgy saw him put into the tree. You're going to open it here, sir?"

He asked the question anxiously. It would have been too bad if the detective had walked the packet off without letting his youthful assistants know what it contained.

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Yes, I will open it here, Tom."

The parcel was wrapped carefully in brown paper, and tied with string. Locke snipped off the string, and began to unfold the wrapping. The boys watched him eagerly.

"It's stolen goods, of course," said Tom. "Something left there for the thieves to take away, just as Figgy said."

"Shouldn't wonder if it contained diamonds," said Manners, in an awed voice. "Very likely a lot of gold and precious stones."

"Or banknotes."

"Perhaps the tin that was taken from the Head's study."

"My hat! That looks like a bottle!"

The detective's eager expression was changing to one of amazement as he unfolded the contents of the mysterious packet. It was certainly a bottle that he now held in his hand wrapped in tissue-paper. His face was a study as he tore the paper off. Then three pairs of eyes looked in dismay at the bottle and the inscription upon it:

"Dr. Bones' Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers.

"To be taken immediately after rising, just before lunch, and just before going to bed. In doses of two large table-spoonfuls for children, and three for adults."

"My only Aunt Matilda!" gasped Manners.

Tom looked astounded. It was the bottle of Marvellous Mixture that Miss Priscilla had sent him early on that same day. How in the name of wonder had it got into the parcel deposited by Honest Jim in the hollow tree, to be taken by his companions in crime? That was an utter mystery.

The detective looked at the bottle of Marvellous Mixture and then at Tom Merry. Then he laid the bottle down, and quietly proceeded to turn out the rest of the contents of the little packet. The next article to come to light was another bottle. It was marked:

"COD-LIVER OIL,"

and there was an inscription in Miss Priscilla Fawcett's own hand.

"A spoonful may be taken at any time when desired."

There was one more article. Tom Merry did not need telling that it was the bottle of unequalled liniment. Ferrers Locke rose quietly from the examination of the packet.

"This is a very good joke of yours, Master Merry," he said. "I hardly expected it of you, though considering—"

Tom turned scarlet.

"It isn't a joke of mine, sir!" he exclaimed. "I—I—I can't understand it. These silly things were sent to me to-day, and I shoved them off on Figgins & Co." As he spoke it brought a flash of illumination into his mind. "It was Figgins who was yarning about seeing the tramp shove the packet into the tree!" he exclaimed. "Done!"

"Done again!" gasped Manners. "It was all a wheeze. But how could Figgins know—"

"The bounder! The brute!"

"We'll slay him!"

Ferrers Locke's face relaxed into a smile.

"Done!" howled Tom wrathfully. "Oh, don't I wish Figgins was here!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a roar of laughter from an adjacent thicket. The detective and his two companions turned quickly towards it. From the brambles three heads emerged; three faces convulsed with laughter. Figgins & Co. had been watching them all the time.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Kerr.

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who's Cock House at St. Jim's?" shouted Figgins.

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And his comrades chorused:

"We are! We are!"

"Who's diddled and done?"

"Tom Merry's diddled and done. Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom made a rush towards the jokers. Figgins & Co. retreated into the thicket, and the sound of their laughter came echoing back from afar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 7.

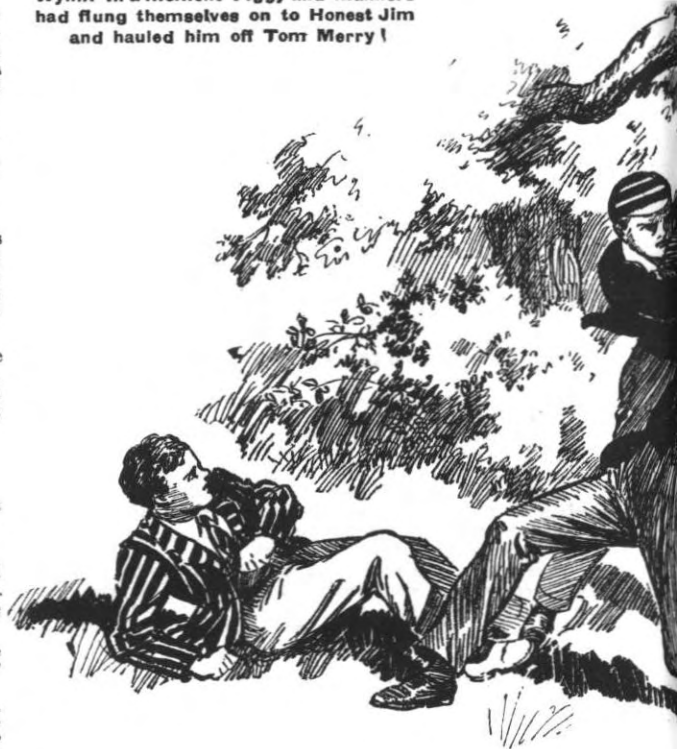
Tom on the Trail!

"I'M sorry," said Tom—"awfully sorry, Mr. Locke!" The detective smiled. He had a sense of humour, and, in spite of his keen disappointment, he could see the funny side of the little joke played by Figgins & Co.

"Never mind," he said. "I know it wasn't your fault. And boys will be boys."

"I hadn't any idea the bounders knew anything about it," said Tom Merry. "I don't know now how Figgins

Figgy dashed to the scene, closely followed by Manners, Kerr and Fatty Wynn. In a moment Figgy and Manners had flung themselves on to Honest Jim and hauled him off Tom Merry!



tumbled to it. I never said a word, and neither did Manners."

"Not a syllable," said Manners solemnly.

"Figgy is as sharp as a needle, but how he tumbled to it is a mystery," said Tom. "What had we better do about it, sir?"

"Well, as the three of them seem to be in the secret," said the detective thoughtfully, "the best thing would be to take them into the matter, and put them on their honour."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Tom. "If we took Figgins & Co. in they'd not breathe a word, and they'd help us to unearth that giddy post office. Figgins knows this wood even better than I do, as he's been longer at St. Jim's."

"Good!" said Ferrers Locke. "Then see Master Figgins as soon as you can, Tom, before he tells the joke to the whole school. If you have anything to tell me you'll find me at the Green Dragon as before, or else a note from me. Thank you very much for the trouble you have taken."

And the detective shook hands with the boys, and strode away towards Rylcombe.

"What are you going to do with that stuff?" asked Manners, pointing to the three bottles lying on the grass.
 "Oh, leave it there!" said Tom. "The first comer is welcome to it. If anybody wants a good, steady drink of cod-liver oil, now's his chance. Come on, let's get after Figgy!"

They hurried towards St. Jim's, and soon came in sight of Figgins & Co. The New House juniors were strolling towards the school, arm-in-arm, and strutting along with all the pride of victory, emitting frequent chuckles and giggles as they strutted.

"There they are!" said Tom. "Buck up!"

Figgins & Co. turned at the sound of hurrying footsteps.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Figgins. "What have you done with your find?"

"Where's the mysterious packet?" demanded Kerr.

"Have you guzzled up all that cod-liver oil and Marvelous Mixture?" exclaimed Fatty Wynn.

Tom grinned. He could take a joke against himself, and he never bore malice.

"That's all right," he said. "It was a good wheeze, and



it is over and done with. Let it die a natural death. Don't keep on cackling over it."

"Ha, ha, ha! Who's Cook House at St. Jim's?"

"We are!" said Manners indignantly. "If you think a mouldy old wheeze like that is—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear us smile!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, look here," said Tom, "you've cackled enough over that wheeze. I want to speak to you, old Figgy. We're not on the warpath now."

"Not much good your going on the warpath," said Figgins. "We wipe up the ground with you every time—don't we, kids?"

"We do, we does!" said the Co.

"When you've done crowing," said Tom patiently, "I've got something to say."

"Oh, get it off your chest!" said Figgins.

"You found out somehow about my arrangement with the detective—"

"Yes; funny how we find out things, isn't it? You're not the only amateur 'tec at St. Jim's, you see."

"Now, Figgy, be serious. We're on the track of a gang of giddy criminals, and I want to know if you three will lend us a hand. Mr. Locke told us to ask you."

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Figgins. "What do you want us to do?"

"Keep mum, in the first place, and in the second place help us to discover the secret post office in the Castle Wood."

"Done!" said Figgins heartily. "We come in on equal terms, mind. We're not following the lead of you School House wasters."

"Liberty, equality, and fraternity is our motto!" said Tom. "Everybody as good as everybody else, if not a little better. Is it a go?"

"It's a go!"

"Good! You've had your tea, I suppose?"

"Yes, we've had it."

"Then let's go and have a hunt for that confounded post office. Manners and I have been up and down through the wood all the afternoon, but we haven't found anything."

"You couldn't expect to," said Figgins. "What you want is a New House chap on the job. I dare say we shall be able to show you a thing or two."

"Yes, you will show us a lot, I dare say!" sniffed Manners.

"Oh, don't row!" exclaimed Tom. "Come along, all of you!"

And the five juniors set out on the quest.

"We'd better separate," said Figgins, as they entered the wood. "There's not much more daylight, and we want to save time. We'll go different ways, and if any of us find anything he can whistle to the rest."

"Agreed!" said Tom.

"I'll show you where to start, as I am leader," went on Figgins.

"Eh?" said Manners.

"I say, as I'm leader—"

"Rats! And many of 'em!"

"Look here, Manners, if—"

"Shut up, both of you!" interrupted Tom. "Let's separate, for goodness' sake, or we shall be rowing all the time! As I'm leader—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Jolly leader you would make. You can unearth bottles of cod-liver oil in hollow trees, and that's about all you can do."

"If you want a thick ear, Figgins, you've only got to say so!"

"I want all the thick ears you can give me!" said Figgins defiantly.

"Oh, shut up!" said Kerr crossly. "What does it matter who's leader if we're going to separate and go alone?"

This view had not struck the disputants.

"Well, that's so!" said Figgins. "Nothing like taking counsel with a canny Scot. Take your face away somewhere, Tom Merry, and let's get to business."

And so the five juniors, having agreed upon a signal whistle, separated, and went their various ways into the mazes of the thick wood.

Tom Merry and Manners had gone up and down through the wood all the afternoon; but they had not gone over a tenth part of its extent, for the Castle Wood was very extensive.

There was plenty of new ground to be searched through; and Tom, when he parted from his companions, made his way into a thick plantation in the direction of the ruined castle. The dusk of evening was on the country lanes, and in the wood, of course, it was darker. The red sunset showed here and there between the thick branches overhead.

Tom intended to go right through the wood to its border near the old castle, and then turn back by a different route. He soon lost sight and sound of his companions, and tramped on alone through the ancient recesses of the wood.

He kept his eyes and ears alert; and suddenly he stopped, sniffing. He had seen nothing and heard nothing; but a scent had come to his nostrils, borne by the breeze through the thickets—the scent of a strong, coarse tobacco, of a cheap and common kind—and Tom had smelt it before.

Well he remembered when, for it was only the day before, when Honest Jim had stopped him in the lane and robbed him of the bag of provisions.

The smell of that tobacco at once brought Honest Jim to his mind. He stopped, his eyes gleaming, his heart beating hard.

Was it possible that he had got on the track of Honest Jim? After all, this was just the lonely part of the wood where the suspected post office might exist, and just the solitary hour when the ruffian might safely come to visit it.

Of course, that tobacco might be smoked by anybody. Still, the scent of it was proof positive that someone was close at hand in the wood, and that it behoved Tom Merry to be very cautious.

He sniffed silently, and calculated the direction of the smoker. Then, with stealthy steps, he advanced in that direction. In a minute more he stood on the edge of a narrow glade overshadowed by branches. Through the opening above came a glimmer of the setting sun. In that light Tom Merry caught sight of a well-known figure—that of the disreputable tramp, Honest Jim.

The boy set his teeth hard, and remained quite silent, watching. The tramp evidently had not the slightest suspicion that anyone was near. He was leaning against a big elm, and Tom soon saw that his right arm was within the trunk, evidently groping in a hollow. The boy's heart beat.

Ferrers Locke had been right. The post office existed, and Tom Merry had discovered the tramp in the act of taking a letter from it, or putting one there.

Honest Jim had the same foul, black pipe between his lips. He little dreamed how the smell of it had given him away.

He gave a grunt, and drew his arm from the hollow tree. There was a paper in his grimy fingers, and he held it up to the light and read it over. Then he grunted again, and drew a stub of pencil from his pocket; and, placing the paper on his knee, began to write on the back of it.

Tom watched him breathlessly, keeping out of sight himself, in the bushes. The tramp wrote only a few words, and then he straightened up again, folded the paper, and thrust it into the hollow tree.

Then he stood for a moment or two blowing out smoke, and then turned to leave the glade, and walked right through the bushes where Tom Merry had taken cover. Tom had no time to act, or even think. In a second the tramp was upon him.

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"You! You again!"

Honest Jim snarled out the words as he caught sight of Tom Merry. His brutal, coppery face was darker than ever with rage, as it struck him that the boy had perhaps seen him putting the note in the hollow tree.

"You—you whelp!"

His fingers were twitching murderously, his bleared eyes on fire. Tom's heart gave a painful throb, but he did not lose his presence of mind. Loud and clear from his lips burst the whistle that was the signal to Manners and Figgins & Co.—loud and clear, ringing through the dim recesses of the woods.

He had no time for more. The ruffian sprang upon him, and in a powerful grip he was whirled off his feet and sent with a crash to the ground.

Down he went in the thick grass on his back, and Honest Jim's heavy knee was planted on his chest, and the tramp's fingers clutched at his throat.

"Help!" screamed Tom.

The grip of Honest Jim's fingers choked him into silence. What did the villain intend? Tom struggled desperately. For the first time it struck him that his life might be in danger, that the scoundrel might regard his life as a cheap price to pay for safety.

He fought like a tiger to throw off the ruffian's grip. But he was a boy against a strong man. Without aid, he knew that he was helpless. His strength would soon be spent.

But aid was at hand. Sharp and clear through the wood rang a whistle. It was an answer to his signal. It was repeated from another direction. Tom managed to tear his throat free for a moment.

"Help!"

The ruffian pinned him again the next moment. His eyes were blazing murderously down upon Tom Merry, his teeth set savagely.

"You whelp!"

There was a crash in the thicket, and Figgins came upon the scene with a rush. Manners, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn were hot on his heels. In a moment Figgy and Manners had flung themselves upon Honest Jim and hauled him off Tom Merry.

But the ruffian was strong and wrenched himself free, only to stumble forward and crash on top of Tom Merry. Without hesitation Figgins took a flying leap and landed with both feet right in the middle of the scoundrel's back, completely winding him!

CHAPTER 8.

Not Left Out!

HONEST JIM had hardly a struggle left in him. Figgins' big feet, coming down together in his back, had knocked all the wind and all the pluck out of him, and he could only gasp as Figgins gripped him. Tom Merry wriggled out from underneath the scoundrel. Kerr, Wynn, and Manners were quickly on the spot.

Honest Jim found himself held by five foes, and he was not feeling fit just then to struggle with one of them.

"Got the beast!" said Figgins. "I told you you needed a New House chap on this job, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry gasped.

"The brute nearly throttled me. I believe he meant to murder me."

"I didn't," panted Honest Jim. "I was—was only joking!"

"A jolly serious joke for you, old dear," said Figgins. "Is this the giddy go-between Mr. Locke was talking about, Tom Merry?"

"Yes, that's the rascal."

"Then we've captured a surprise-packet!"

"Rather!" said Manners. "Look here, you kids, tie him up to a tree while I cut off and fetch Mr. Locke. He'll know best what to do with him."

"That's right!" said Tom. "Tell Mr. Locke we'll keep the brute safe till he comes!"

"Right-ho!"

And Manners was off like a shot. Honest Jim began to wriggle and whine.

"Don't keep me 'ere, young gentlemen—please don't! I'm an honest man, I am. They called me Honest Jim, just because I'm so—"

"What have you done with my grub?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"I—I've eaten it!" stammered Honest Jim. "It was only—a joke!"

"And the time you attacked me at Clavering, and nearly

brained me with a stick, was that only a joke, too?" demanded Tom.

"I—I—it was—"

"If so, you're the kind of joker that wants shutting up in prison, where you won't be able to be quite so humorous!" said Tom. "I'm a bit of a joker myself, but your jokes are rather too practical. I've got a bit of cord we can tie his hands with, chaps. Tie them to this bough, and then he'll be nicely fixed."

A hanging bough was dragged down a little lower by Tom Merry, and Honest Jim's hands were placed one on either side of it, and his wrists fastened to the bough.

He then sat on the grass, with his arms raised, his hands secured fast, and about as helpless as a man could possibly be. The juniors stood round him, watching him as a pack of hounds might watch a tiger, ready to jump on him if he tried to get loose.

But Honest Jim was completely cowed, and made no attempt to escape. While the juniors waited for the arrival of the detective, Honest Jim sat still, only his tongue active. He tried by every means he could think of to induce his captors to let him go, and when he found that it was in vain he started cursing.

Figgins soon put a stop to that, gently tapping him on the mouth with his boot till he fell into silence. There was a rustling in the foliage. Manners burst gleefully upon the scene.

"He's coming!" he announced. "He's only just behind me!"

It was true. A minute later Ferrers Locke stepped into the glade. The detective looked as quiet and cool as ever, but there was a gleam of satisfaction in his keen eyes. He looked down grimly at Honest Jim.

"We've got him, sir!" said Tom Merry. "Tracked him down like a giddy real 'tec, sir!"

The detective smiled.

"It was the clue of the tobacco-smoke, sir," Tom Merry went on. "As soon as I smelt that horrible pipe of his I knew I was on the track."

"Good!" said Ferrers Locke. "You are in a bad box, Honest Jim—if that's what you call yourself. And now, where's that post office?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" mumbled the ruffian. "I ain't done nothin'. I wasn't goin' to 'urt the young 'ound!"

"You can tell that to the magistrates, Jim," smiled Ferrers Locke. "You see, I happen to know you are in collusion with the gang of criminals who have been robbing right and left in this district during the past few weeks. You communicate with them—"

"I don't do nothin' of the kind. I don't know nothin' about any post office—"

"Then I can tell you something, Honest Jim," said Tom Merry.

The detective's eyes became eager.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, sir. I watched him take a note from that hollow tree, write something on the back of it, and put it back again!" exclaimed Tom triumphantly.

The ruffian clenched his teeth. In a moment Ferrers Locke was at the hollow elm and groping in its recesses. His hand came out with the paper in it. His eyes blazed as he unfolded it and read it.

"Jingo!"

"Can we read it, sir?" said Tom.

"Certainly! That is only right. Listen!"

Ferrers Locke read out one side of the paper, evidently that which Honest Jim had read when he took the note from the tree.

"Have you heard that Locke has been sent down from London? Have you seen anything of him?"

There was no signature. Then the detective turned the paper over and read out the scrawled reply of Honest Jim:

"Mister Locke is stayin in Rillcom. I ave seed im ther."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "If the rascals had received that note, then, they would have known that you were hunting them, sir!"

The detective nodded.

"Undoubtedly. Unfortunately for the rascals, I have received it instead of them, and they will not know I am hunting them until I have hunted them to a finish."

"Someone will be coming here for the letter, sir, and then—"

"Yes," said the detective tranquilly. "Someone will come here for the letter, and then I shall have him. He will walk straight into the trap."

The detective put the note back into the hollow tree.

"Now, Honest Jim, I'll trouble you to come with me."

"Shall we stay and watch for the chap, sir?" said Tom Merry.

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"No, Merry; I think it is pretty certain that the man, whoever he is, will not come till well after dark, and when he does come, my boy, he must find someone waiting for him who will be able to deal with an armed ruffian. I shall take this rascal to the lock-up in Rylcombe, and come back with a couple of policemen."

"Very good, sir; we'll help you march him off, anyway."

And the five juniors accompanied the detective and his prisoner as far as the lane, where Ferrers Locke, heartily repeating his thanks, left them, and the juniors returned to the school.

"This has been a good day out," said Figgins affably, as they went in at the gates only just in time to escape being shut out. "We've done ourselves proud this journey, kids; but I tell you what—I'm not going to be left out of it at the finish."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Just what I was thinking," he said.

"And I," said Manners. "We've captured the tramp, and I fancy we can try our hand at capturing burglars. We did catch one once, didn't we, Tom?"

"Rather; and we're on in this scene!" exclaimed Merry emphatically. "Ferrers Locke says the boulder will come for the letter at night. Who's game to get out of bounds after lights out and take a hand in the little game?"

"All of us!" exclaimed Figgins. "We must see that nothing goes wrong. Ferrers Locke seems to be a clever sort of chap; but, still, there's nothing like keeping an eye on him. Something may be wrong, and we may be needed."

"Ha, ha, ha! Well, will you meet us at the same old spot, Figgy—you know, where we get over the ivy on the wall?"

"Rather! At ten o'clock?"

"At ten. You won't fail to turn up?"

"Of course I won't. Au revoir!"

And the juniors separated to go to their Houses. Tom Merry and Manners said nothing as yet of their adventures in the School House. There was plenty of time to tell the story when the detective had safely made his capture.

During the evening the chums of the Shell kept somewhat apart, discussing the matter between them. Both were somewhat fatigued by the exertions of the afternoon, but Tom was as keen as ever when bed-time came. Not so Manners.

When the Shell went up to bed, Manners dropped off to sleep like a top. As soon as the room was silent Tom Merry slipped out of bed and shook his chum by the shoulder.

"Up with you, Manners, old man!"

Manners snored.

"I say, old chap, we've got to be off. Wake up!"

"Groo-gerro-grooh!" said Manners. "Lemme alone! 'Tain't rising-bell yet! Grooh!"

Tom gave it up. He felt rather sleepy himself, but the thought of Figgins waiting was enough to make him determined. If he failed to turn up, the New House juniors would crow. He was soon out of the House, by way of a lower window, and cutting across the quad to the ivy-clad wall that bordered the lane.

A dim, lanky figure loomed up in the gloom. The clock from the school tower struck, and ten chimes floated far through the still night.

"Is that you, Figgy?"

"Yes," came the voice of Figgins, in a hoarse whisper. "That you, Tom Merry?"

"Yes; here I am."

"Where's Manners?"

"In bed. He wouldn't get up. Where's Kerr and Wynn?"

Figgins chuckled.

"In bed, too. They wouldn't get up."

"Ha, ha! Never mind; we'll go together, Figgy," said Tom.

"Right-ho! Give us a bunk up."

Tom Merry gave Figgins the required "bunk up," and Figgins, clambering over the ivy, reached the top of the wall. Then he leant down and gave Tom his hand, and Tom Merry was soon on the wall beside him. To drop down into the lane was the work of a moment.

"Come on!" said Tom.

They were wakeful enough in the keen night air. They cut along the lane at a good pace. The moon was up over the wood, and the lane was almost as light as by day. They turned into the wood at the stile and pressed on silently towards the glade where the thieves' post office stood.

"I say," whispered Figgins, as they drew near the glade where the struggle with Honest Jim had taken place, "I can't hear a sound."

"And I can't, either, Figgy."

"Very likely the fellow has been and gone long ago."

"In that case Ferrers Locke has got him."

"Yes; and we've come for nothing. It will be no joke sticking up in this rotten wood waiting for something to happen that came off long ago!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"It's a bit late to think of that, Figgy. Now we're here we're going to see it through. It's awfully dark under these beastly trees. Never mind; come on."

"All right; I'm coming. Keep your peepers open. If Ferrers Locke and the police are lying in ambush there we don't want to tread on their toes."

"No; and we don't want to be seized by mistake for the chap coming for the letter," said Tom, this new danger coming into his mind for the first time. "We had better keep off the grass a bit—I mean, keep our distance. Hallo! What's that?"

A sudden shout rang through the dead silence of the wood.

Then the sound of rapid footsteps—footsteps coming straight towards the two juniors as they stood, halted and amazed, in the darkness under the trees!

CHAPTER 9.

Capturing the Cracksmen!

WHILE Tom Merry and Figgins were making their way through the wood, Ferrers Locke was patiently on the watch beside the hollow elm in the glade.

The detective, with two constables from Rylcombe, had returned to the glade immediately after disposing of Honest Jim in the lock-up, and ever since he had been tirelessly waiting.

In the dark glade, to which few of the moonbeams penetrated, the detective and the two policemen lay in cover amid the overhanging foliage, and not by a sound did they betray their presence to anyone who should penetrate to the spot.

Ten chimed over the wood from the distant church of Rylcombe, and still the silence of the wood was unbroken by a footstep.

Still the detective was patient. The two constables were nodding in the bracken; but Ferrers Locke was as wide awake as when he had commenced the long vigil.

At last came a faint sound through the gloom. Ferrers Locke nudged his two companions, and they started into watchfulness. A dim figure loomed up through the glade.

The dim figure stopped at the elm and bent down. An arm was thrust into the cavity in the tree, and there was a faint, muttered word which told that the groping fingers had found the hidden paper.

The next moment there was a startled oath. Ferrers Locke had sprung upon the dim form, and pinned it against the tree.

"You are my prisoner!"

A yell of sudden fright and rage burst from the man. He turned on the detective like a wild-cat, and Ferrers Locke wheeled back. He caught his foot in a root and stumbled. The man was as quick as an eel. He gave the detective no time to recover. Springing forward, he struck the staggering detective a heavy blow in the face, and Ferrers Locke went with a thump to the ground.

Then the figure sprang away in the gloom. The two constables sprang at him in vain. He eluded them and dashed away into the gloom of the wood.

Ferrers Locke staggered to his feet.

"After him! Don't let him escape!"

The fugitive did not look back. Straight on he went, running fleetly as a deer. Suddenly he gave a terrific yell, and went down heavily to the grass. A foot had been thrust out from the darkness, and he had tripped blindly over it. He fell upon his face, with almost all the breath knocked out of his body.

Two forms piled themselves upon him the next moment. He struggled like a madman.

"Quiet!" said the voice of Tom Merry. "Quiet, ass! You'll get hurt!"

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"Hold him!" gasped Figgins.

Tom Merry had a grip on the back of the ruffian's collar, and was kneeling on his back. Figgins had seized his ankles and dragged them into the air; so, of course, the man's attempts to rise were futile. He gasped out a curse.

"Let me go—let me get up!"

Tom Merry grinned in the darkness.

"Yes; I can see us doing that, when we've only just caught you," he said. "Hallo, hallo! Are you there, Mr. Locke?"

The detective's deep voice came back over the sound of running feet.

"I'm here."

"We've got him!"

"Show a light here."

One of the constables came panting up and turned on the light of his lantern. The rays glimmered on the grass, and on the prostrate form of the ruffian half buried in it, with the two boys of St. Jim's on top of him, pinning him down. A savage, evil-looking face was turned up towards the detective.

"You've got me!" gasped the prisoner. "Hang you, Locke, you've got me!"

The detective looked at him scrutinisingly in the light.

"Yes, I've got you, Ned the Cracksmen," he said quietly. "I suspected that you were in this business. That job at the school was just in your line. I suppose Flash George and the Badger are with you in this, as usual?"

"Find out!" retorted the prisoner.

"That will not take me long now!"

Ned the Cracksmen ground his teeth.

"I suppose Jim gave us away?" he said savagely.

"Not intentionally," replied the detective, "but by chance. If you want to know, Jim is in the lock-up, and it came about—and this followed—through his robbing this lad of a bag of provisions in Rylcombe Lane."

"The fool! I might have known he would make a mess of the thing when I let him into it! The fool!" snarled the prisoner.

"Too late to think of that now, I'm afraid," smiled the detective, as he snapped the handcuffs on the cracksmen's wrists. "You're wanted, and for a long time to come, I fancy, Ned. Come along!"

The prisoner, handcuffed, was removed by the two constables. The detective walked with the juniors back to the lane.

"I don't know how you came here, my lads," he said; "but I am glad you were on the scene. I would never have consented to expose you to such peril, but, as it has turned out, there is nothing to regret. I am very much obliged to both of you!"

"Oh, not at all, sir!" said Tom cheerfully. "We wanted to be in at the death, didn't we, Figgy?"

"Rather!" said Figgins. "We thought we might come in useful, sir."

"Well, you did," smiled Ferrers Locke; "but for the St. Jim's detectives I am afraid that we should have lost our man! Good-night!"

He shook hands with the juniors, and followed the policemen and their prisoner. Tom Merry and Figgins walked away towards St. Jim's feeling extremely pleased with themselves.

The next day Ferrers Locke called at the school with news. The arrest of the chief rascal had been speedily followed by that of the rest of the gang, and a large amount of stolen property had been recovered. Among it the detective had found the Head's banknotes, which the thieves had not yet ventured to pass.

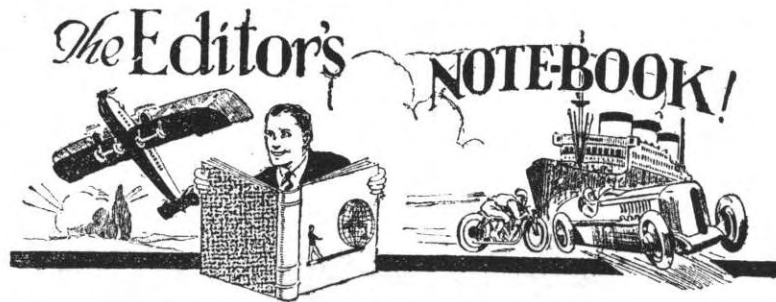
Ferrers Locke had something to say to Tom Merry before he took his leave.

"You've been a lot of help to me in this case, Tom," he said. "I am deeply obliged to you, and I shan't forget it. I don't know what you will be when you leave school, my boy; but if you ever want to start life as a detective, there will be a place for just such an assistant to Ferrers Locke! You can bear that in mind. Good-bye!"

THE END.

(Tom Merry and Figgins certainly did well that time, after they had joined forces. But they're not so friendly in next week's side-splitting yarn, "THE ST. JIM'S MENAGERIE!")

WRITE TO YOUR EDITOR—HE LIKES TO HEAR FROM YOU!



Address all letters *The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.*

WHAT'S next week's GEM like? What's it like? Why, chums, it's the greatest collection of stories you've ever been offered. Martin Clifford is in great form with

"THE ST. JIM'S MENAGERIE!"

Laughs, thrills, and adventures will carry you through to a smashing climax. Tom Merry & Co., Jack Blake & Co., are all in it—to say nothing of the "menagerie." Don't miss it, boys! Keep an eye open, too, for

"TUBBY MUFFIN'S DOUBLE!"

By Owen Conquest.

Jimmy Silver & Co. are chums after your own hearts. Rookwood without Uncle James and his merry men is unthinkable! Their latest escapade is right on the wicket. So, too, in more senses than one, is the next stirring instalment of

"THE CRICKETER CRACKSMAN!"

which brings it to its climax. Yes, next week's GEM lives up to its name. Even Potts, the office-boy—he appears again next week—agrees with that! See that you order your copy in good time.

TO MARS AND BACK.

"Mars, sir? This way, please!" If the theory of an American scientist develops on practical lines, the day may come when there will be a regular passenger service between this fair earth and Mars. The beginning of the theory will be tested shortly with a very special type of rocket that will hurtle through space for a distance of fifty miles. Very special is this rocket, for it will contain a parachute, to which will be attached various scientific gadgets whose job is to record the atmospheric conditions through which the rocket passes, and to bring back by means of the parachute samples of gases as well. The possibility of the parachute bringing back a very surprised Martian doubtless has not been overlooked. From a point in Northern Africa the experiment will be carried out, the rocket, which will be propelled by gas, being dispatched on its quest for information from the muzzle of a giant gun.

BOW-WOW!

Every dog has his day, but a very unusual type of dog had as many as 9,500 days! In other words, this dog set a new longevity record for his species by living for twenty-six years and three days. He died in 1920, so report has it, at Cleveland, in the United States of America.

THE CANNIBAL ARRIVES!

"Rats," said the frog scornfully, "why, I eat 'em!" But it wasn't an English frog. It's one of a very special brand from Brazil, and its body is as big as a large-size in closed fists. It's got a jaw-breaking name, too, which spells Escuerzos. Two hefty horns set in an ugly head and a triangular mouth like a piece of elastic complete the shuddering make-up of the Brazilian frog which has just arrived at the London Zoo. A rat doesn't stand much chance with the Escuerzos, for his elastic mouth will stretch quite comfortably over the largest rat who is rash enough to get to close quarters. Whether a stay in England will "civilise" the Brazilian horned frog is something that only the future can tell; but at the moment he is a cannibal, quite content to jog along on a daily menu of frogs, preferably those smaller than himself.

HEARD THIS ONE?

Mr. Jones (sternly to his young hopeful): "My boy, you've been fighting again. I see you've lost three of your front teeth."

Young Jones: "No, I haven't, dad; I've got 'em in my pocket!"

SILENT SPEED!

This is a speed age right enough, yet speed without comfort doesn't appeal to the majority. But long-suffering train travellers will have their hopes revived, if the invention of pneumatic tyres for trains, which has recently been tested and found practical, is universally adopted. With this new device smooth running is assured, so that passengers can converse without having to shout at each other even when the train is travelling at top speed. The metal wheels are encased with ordinary pneumatic tyres which have a special wooden hoop inside them. The hoop serves the purpose of stopping the tyre from falling out should it be punctured. The big idea behind this invention, the work incidentally of a group of French engineers employed in the Michelin Works, besides extra comfort for the passengers, is to lessen the running costs of the railway. On its experimental run, a train fitted with these pneumatic tyres developed a speed of eighty miles an hour. At the dangerous speed of fifty miles an hour, one of the tyres was deliberately punctured. Nothing happened, but your Editor feels glad that he wasn't on that train! The last time he had a puncture, he was in his car, ambling along at fifteen to twenty miles an hour. Something happened, then—

he still has a bruise to show in evidence!

'WAR' QUAKES!

Ting-aling-aling!
"Drat that telephone-bell!" says the overworked boss, in his office in Argentina. "But it isn't the telephone-bell," explains his alert clerk. "It's merely the 'Earthquake Warner.'" (That's a new device which has just been patented to give fair warning of an approaching earth quiver.) If its claims are successful, the adoption of the earthquake warner will find as much favour in the average home as the much-abused telephone.

WORCESTER'S CAPTURE!

Frank Woolley, the famous England and Kent cricketer, must feel a modest glow of satisfaction creep over him when he sees the youthful Naveab of Pataudi at the wickets, for Frank coached the famous Indian player, who looks like developing into a phenomenal run-getter. The Naveab, who has taken up residence in Worcester, will turn out for the county side next season, and the addition of this all-round-the-wicket batsman will give a fillip to a team badly in need of batting strength. The Naveab's brilliant innings of 238 not out, when he played for Oxford in this year's Varsity match, is still discussed in cricket circles, and all eyes, figuratively speaking, will be on Worcester's "capture," when he takes the field next season.

WATCH YOUR CLOCK!

"Your call, sir! The line is clear for New Zealand!" In a quite ordinary voice the telephone operator went about his work, while two people, 13,500 miles apart, carried on a conversation by means of the public wireless telephone call. That's another of the present-day marvels which was once upon a time openly jeered at by science's unbelievers. There's just one snag about it, however—if the fellow in New Zealand should phone you at twelve o'clock by New Zealand time. You would have to leave your very snug bed in England in the region of one a.m. to answer the call, which would doubtless temper your pleasure at hearing from a pal "down under." With the difference in time between the two countries, a 13,500 miles public telephone service might prove a mixed blessing. But it's a step in the right direction.

THEN AND NOW!

Mary Pickford, or the "World's Sweetheart," has accumulated both fame and fortune on the screen to a marked degree. Yet time was when Mary, together with her mother, sister, and brother, drew the meagre sum of £4 for their combined services to the film world. That was in 1909, when Mary Pickford's mother was the wardrobe mistress for D. W. Griffith. The children used to accompany her to work, and for want of a better place to go to they used to stay in the studio. From small beginnings come great things. The Pickford family played all sorts of small parts and joined in in the crowd work. To-day the celebrated Mary draws an enormous crowd wherever she goes or wherever her latest film is shown, whilst the fortunes she has both taken out of pictures and put into the making of them, would multiply the original weekly wage of £4 thousands of times over.

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ANOTHER TOPPING NEW COMPLETE ROOKWOOD YARN!

STICKING UP FOR DALTON!

By
OWEN CONQUEST.



CHAPTER 1. Dalton's Visitor!

"NOT a penny!"
"Mithter Dalton—"
"I tell you you're not going to have another penny from me!"

Jimmy Silver of the Fourth at Rookwood stopped with a jerk. Lovell and Newcome and Raby, the other three members of the Fistical Four, followed suit.

The Fistical Four had been about to deliver impots to Mr. Dalton, their Form master. They had not anticipated that Mr. Dalton had a visitor; and, anyway, that circumstance would not have mattered in the usual way.

But the sound of the hisping voice that was raised in argument with Mr. Dalton as they reached the Form master's study made them pause.

They recognised that voice. It was the voice of Mr. Solomon Josephs, a well-known, though not very highly respected, resident of Coombe.

Mr. Josephs occupied a new, big red brick house in Coombe, and owned a big new motor-car, which was often to be seen racing past the gates of Rookwood. He was said to be a financier in the town of Southampton. Rookwood men who knew what was what didn't hesitate to say that he was, in everyday parlance, a moneylender.

The Fistical Four would have been surprised even to know that a man of Mr. Josephs' somewhat unsavoury reputation had business with anybody at Rookwood. To find him in Mr. Dalton's study arguing about money matters, therefore, gave them quite a shock.

"Well, my hat!" said Jimmy Silver. "Hear that, you men?"

"Couldn't help it!" said Arthur Edward Lovell. "It's that greasy old Shylock, Josephs."

"Dunning Dalton for cash, too!" remarked Newcome. "Ye gods!"

"Mithter Dalton," came Josephs' oily voice from within the study, "I don't want to be hard on you. Pay me ten pounds now and—"

"I have already paid you ten pounds more than you should have had!" the juniors heard Mr. Dalton say angrily. "I prefer to face any consequences rather than give you more!"

"Phew!" whistled Raby. "I say, you chaps—"

"Better clear off," said Jimmy Silver, with a frown.

"No bizney of ours, I suppose."

"Just what I was going to say," nodded Raby. "Kim on!"

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"And that's that!" remarked Newcome, as they pocketed their lines and marched off again. "Who'd have thought it of Dalton?"

"Last man in the world!" said Jimmy Silver, with a sad shake of his head. "Only shows how you can be mistaken. I'd have said old Dalton hadn't anything like money troubles."

"Same here! Must have, though," said Lovell. "Living above his income, I suppose. He runs a car, of course."

"Why not, anyway?" demanded Raby. "Chap must get a fair salary, and he's not extravagant; never appeared to be, anyway."

"Poor old Dalton!" murmured Jimmy Silver. "Silly ass to get in that rotter's clutches, of course. But it'll be the end of him at Rookwood if the Head gets to know."

"Nothing we can do—that I see, anyway," said Lovell. "Let's forget it and have a little fielding practice till tea-time."

Lovell's suggestion seemed to fill the bill, and the Fistical Four got out a ball and went down to the quad.

The juniors felt quite disturbed over what they had heard. In the vigorous exercise of throwing the ball about, they naturally were soon in quite good spirits again. But they couldn't altogether forget their start-

ling discovery that Dalton was involved in money difficulties with Solly Josephs.

As it happened, they were not to be allowed to forget the matter.

Mr. Manders, the sour-tempered Housemaster of the Modern House at Rookwood, brought it back to their minds.

A few minutes after they had begun their practice Roger Manders came striding across the quad in the direction of the Classical House.

There was a glint in Mr. Manders' little eyes, which were fixed on the main doorway of the House. He did not notice the Fistical Four. Nor, for a time, did the Fistical Four notice him.

The two parties' mutual lack of observation soon had unfortunate results.

Raby, not knowing that anyone was in the line of fire, threw a hard catch to Jimmy.

Mr. Manders, not knowing of the existence of such a thing as a line of fire, did not even look round till the ball was upon him, and then it was too late.

Thud!

The ball landed dead in the middle of Mr. Manders' scraggy neck. Mr. Manders, with a fiendish yell, fairly hurtled to the ground.

"I fear poor Dalton's in the soup!"

Said Jimmy to his crew.

"It's up to us to rally round
And see what we can do!"

"Ow! Ah! Ow!" roared the Housemaster of the Modern House, and the Fistical Four at last realised that he was there. Looking rather scared at what they had done, they rushed to his assistance.

"Oh crickey! Sorry, sir!" gasped Raby, who was first on the scene.

"Quite an accident, of course!" said Jimmy Silver, taking Mr. Manders' other arm and helping him up.

"Oh! Oh dear! I am under no illusions whatever as to what you were doing!" gasped Mr. Manders furiously. "Really the behaviour of you reckless young hooligans of the Classical House becomes more execrable every day! Follow me!"

"Wh-where are you going, sir?"

"To your Form master!" snorted Mr. Manders, somewhat to the relief of the Fistical Four, who had thought their destination might be the Head's study. "This will form the subject of a second matter to bring to my notice. The first may be even more important." He glared at the Fistical Four. "Are you boys aware that a—a person who has the reputation of being a moneylender is at present in the school?"

"Hem! Is that why you've come over, sir?" asked Jimmy Silver cautiously.

Mr. Manders' glare became even more pronounced.

"I am asking you a question, Silver. I believe I saw a Mr. Josephs crossing the quad some little time ago. Are you aware of the presence of this individual in the school at present?"

"Well, sir, he may be here, of course—"

Jimmy Silver stopped. He had just spotted the fat figure of the moneylender coming out of the doorway of the House.

Mr. Manders followed his glance and directed a wolfish look at Solly Josephs.

"Disgraceful!" he said.

The visitor apparently heard, for he stopped for a moment.

"Are you address me, mithter?" he asked.

Mr. Manders, however, was not a man of valour, and he shook his head. Mr. Josephs, with a suspicious look, nodded and went his way.

"Utterly disgraceful!" snapped Mr. Manders, when he had got out of earshot. "I shall ask Mr. Dalton to make the fullest inquiry into the visit of this man. I understand a boy named Peele in your Form to have had dealings with moneylenders on one occasion. I shall recommend Mr. Dalton to cross-examine Peele very carefully. Follow me!"

The Fistical Four followed. For once, they were quite ready to do so. They felt deeply interested in seeing how Mr. Dalton would react to a direct demand for an inquiry into the visit of the moneylender whom Mr. Dalton himself had been entertaining.

CHAPTER 2.

Rally Round Dalton!

MR. DALTON was frowning when the juniors followed Mr. Manders into the Form master's study. His frown did not relax at the sight of the Housemaster of the Modern House. The good-humoured, rather easy-going master of the Fourth found little in common with the sour, dyspeptic Housemaster of the Modern House. The two never had "hit it."

"You wish to see me, Mr. Manders?" asked Richard Dalton rather superfluously.

Mr. Manders nodded grimly.

"I do. I have to bring to your notice an assault on the part of one or all of these juniors. I need hardly say that this has occurred before."

"Quite a number of times, I believe," remarked Mr. Dalton, with an unusual trace of sarcasm in his voice. "What is it this time?"

"I have been knocked over, sir—knocked over and brought within measurable distance of serious injury—by a blow from a ball which these utterly reckless juniors were throwing. I ask you to punish them and take steps to see that I am not similarly endangered in future."

"Who was responsible?" asked Mr. Dalton, turning to the Fistical Four.

"I, sir," replied Raby promptly. "It was an accident."

"Exactly. I did not think otherwise for a moment," said Mr. Dalton, with a nod. "You will write me two hundred lines, Raby."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"And in future, boys, you must take more care," added the master of the Fourth. "A repetition of this offence may result in your leave to play in the quad being withdrawn."

"Oh, sir!"

"We'll take more care!"

"You consider the punishment and precautions adequate?" asked Mr. Manders, almost savagely.

Mr. Dalton nodded.

"In all the circumstances, yes. You may go, boys!"

"One moment!" said Roger Manders, in a grinding voice. "There is one other matter in which I may require these boys to support what I saw. A reprehensible person called Josephs, I believe—a moneylender—has just paid a visit to somebody in this building."

Mr. Dalton started.

"Indeed!"

"These boys will testify to seeing him leave the House, in case you imagine me to have been mistaken," said Mr. Manders. "You saw him, Silver, did you not?"

"Ye-es, sir!"

"I mention the matter to you, sir," said Mr. Manders, "for the reason that a junior in your Form—Peele—on one occasion attained notoriety through his dealings with a firm of moneylenders. You will doubtless wish to investigate the matter."

Mr. Dalton was silent. The Fistical Four eyed him curiously.

"If you'd like us to go, sir—" began Jimmy Silver.

"Since a boy belonging to the Fourth has been mentioned by name, Silver, it would be as well if you remained for a moment," said Mr. Dalton. "I may say at once, Mr. Manders, that there is no reason whatever to suppose that Peele has had dealings with this Mr. Josephs."

"You were aware, then, of the presence of the individual?" asked Mr. Manders, with a start. "In that case, of course—"

"Mr. Josephs, in point of fact, came to the school for the purpose of seeing me!"

Mr. Manders' little eyes almost bulged out of their sockets.

"Indeed, sir! Naturally that possibility did not strike me."

"Naturally!" said Mr. Dalton dryly.

"In the circumstances, I withdraw, with apologies," said Mr. Manders, whose thin lips had begun to twist into an unpleasant smile. "It is just as well, perhaps, that I did not go straight to the Head."

"Please yourself entirely about that, Mr. Manders!"

"I should not dream of interfering!" said Mr. Manders, looking as though the one thing in the world he really wanted to do was to interfere. "Nor would I think of prying into your private affairs, Mr. Dalton!"

Mr. Dalton opened his mouth as though he felt half inclined to unburden himself to the Housemaster of the Modern House. Then he caught the sneering expression on Mr. Manders' face and changed his mind.

"I am quite sure you wouldn't," he said, with a faint smile. "The matter may then be considered at an end. You may go, boys!"

"Thank you, sir!"

And the Fistical Four departed, Mr. Manders following them out soon after.

"One in the eye for Manders!" remarked Newcome, when they got back to the privacy of the end study in the Fourth passage. "It was quite a tonic to hear the Dalton-bird quietly ticking him off! Wherefore the troubled brow, Uncle James?"

Jimmy Silver's ready smile for once was not forthcoming. He sat on the edge of the table and stared through the open window very thoughtfully.

"I don't quite like this bizney, you chaps," he said. "Old Dalton was very close about the reason for Solly What's-his-name's call."

"Don't blame him!"

"Well, no, if he's got anything to hide. I rather hoped he'd nothing to hide—that there might be some simple explanation."

Jimmy Silver's followers stared.

"Dashed if I know what simple explanation there could be!" declared Arthur Edward Lovell. "I'm all for Dalton, of course; but after what we heard, I'm not trying to blink at facts. He's in the soup right enough!"

Jimmy Silver frowned.

"It does look like it, certainly. Otherwise, why shouldn't he have put Manders wise? S'pose he must be, when you come to think of it. The thing is—what's to be done?"

"Well, what can we do?" asked Newcome. "Have a whip-round for him?"

"Fathead! This is serious! Here is our Form master in the clutches of a giddy Shylock!" said Jimmy Silver dramatically. "Mean to say we're going to stand by with folded arms, while he's hounded to his doom?"

"Oh, my giddy aunt!"

"Not as bad as that, is it?"

"It jolly well soon will be, unless something's done! Josephs'll try to get at the Head soon—bound to. If I know anything of Manders, he'll do all he can to get the rotter into the Head's study. Once he does, it'll be all U P with Dalton."

"Well, dash it a-f, it's his own look-out!" remarked Raby warmly. "He's more capable of looking after his own affairs than we are, I suppose?"

"Just where you're wrong, old bean!" said Jimmy Silver calmly. "Most beaks are frightfully unbusinesslike; not a bit capable of looking after their affairs! I used to fancy Dalton was an exception, but it's obvious now that he can't be. Ergo—"

"Therefore—" said Lovell.

"Exactly! Ergo, it's up to us to keep a fatherly eye on him, and see that he doesn't make a mess of things!"

"Great pip!"

"And how the thump are we to do that?"

"Well, it's a little difficult. We can't very well take complete charge of his affairs."

"He might not like it!" grinned Newcome.

Jimmy Silver nodded gravely.

"Just that! But we can do our best within our limits. I suggest in the first place that it would be helpful of us to be kind and considerate to Dalton till this trouble blows over."

"My hat!"

"No more rags, plenty of hard grind in the Form-room—anything that'll make things easier for him," explained the leader of the Fistical Four. "That'll be all to the good. Secondly—and even more important—we can keep that bounder Josephs out of the way."

"How?"

"By just keeping him out of the way!" said Jimmy Silver simply. "As soon as he pops his head round the gates we can swoop down on him and rush him off the premises. Then he won't be able to see the Head."

"Oh!"

"Be a bit of a lark, you know! None of us like old Josephs, and we'd all enjoy bumping him. And besides, it's up to us to see Dalton righted. Rally round Dalton!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Then that's agreed?" asked the leader of the Fourth.

"Anything for a quiet life!" grinned Arthur Edward Lovell. "We'll look after him!"

And thus it was agreed that the Fistical Four should rally round Dalton.

CHAPTER 3.

Desperate Remedies!

"NON ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco," said Mr. Dalton, quoting a celebrated remark from P. Vergilius Maro. "Now, Raby, what does that mean?"

The master of the Fourth looked towards Raby not very hopefully. Raby was not very strong where Virgil was concerned. But this time he was evidently in form, for without the slightest hesitation, he replied:

"Being not unacquainted with grief, I learn to help the unfortunate."

"Excellent!" said Mr. Dalton. He looked round his Form rather thoughtfully. "Some of you appear to have done last night's prep. with quite unusual thoroughness. You, Silver, rendered a passage almost brilliantly. You, Newcome and Lovell, did remarkably well."

"Yes, sir!" murmured Newcome and Lovell, bearing their honours with becoming modesty.

"It is not my wish to remind you of occasions when I could not have said that about you," said the master of the Fourth. "But, really, your improvement is quite phenomenal. I hope there are no ulterior motives behind this phenomenal change!"

"Oh, sir!"

"Beware of the Greeks when they bring gifts in their hands!" said Putty Grace of the Classical House, in a stage whisper, and there was a chuckle from the Fourth.

Mr. Dalton smiled, and rose from his desk as the tolling of the school bell announced the end of morning classes.

"I can only hope that this quite remarkable improvement is maintained," he said. "The class is now dismissed!"

The Fourth rose and filed out.

The Fistical Four lingered behind for a few moments. It was unusual for them to be last out of class, but that was evidently their intention on this occasion.

Mr. Dalton looked across to them from the desk which he had stopped to tidy up. The master of the Fourth was a little puzzled.

"Reluctant to leave to-day, boys?"

"Nunno!" said Jimmy Silver hastily. "We were just wondering, sir, whether there's anything we can do for you this afternoon."

Mr. Dalton's puzzlement increased.

"I can't say that there is, Silver. You are aware, of course, that to-day is Wednesday—a half-holiday?"

"Oh, yes, sir! But we've nothing special on, and we just wondered—"

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Well, I'm afraid there's nothing you can do for me, though it's very kind of you to ask."

"You wouldn't like us to keep an eye out for callers, sir?" suggested Raby, getting closer to the point. "If there's someone special you'd like us to look after—"

"I am not expecting any visitors, Raby. In any case, I should not require you to look after them."

Jimmy Silver and his chums looked at each other a little uncomfortably. Either Mr. Dalton was very dense, or he was deliberately shutting his eyes to their meaning.

In any case, there was obviously nothing more to be discussed.

"Well, we'd better go, you chaps," said Jimmy Silver. "Sorry we can't help you, sir!"

And the leader of the Fistical Four led his men out of the Fourth Form room, leaving Mr. Dalton staring after them rather blankly—though whether that blank stare was as genuine as it looked was very questionable to Jimmy Silver & Co.

"Fat lot of gratitude we got, you see!" remarked Raby, with a sniff, when they got outside the Form-room.

"Strikes me Dalton was politely telling us to mind our own bizney," was Newcome's opinion. "P'r'aps he's right, too. Best thing we can do is to chuck it."

"Rats!" said Jimmy Silver promptly. "If Dalton's declining our help it's because he thinks we can't do anything. In that case, it's up to us to show him he's wrong."

"Hem!"

"Whether Dalton likes it or not, we're going to look after him," went on Jimmy. "We spend this afternoon patrolling the quad, anyway. And if Solly Josephs comes to Rookwood with the idea of handing out the dope about Dalton to the Head, he does it over our dead bodies!"

"Oh crickey!"

"Dalton may yet come to us with tears in his eyes and thank us for all that we've done for him," said Jimmy Silver daskly. "Don't be shirkers, you men; be true blue—like your Uncle James!"

"Fathead!" grinned Lovell. "But we'll see it through, of course."

"Oh, rather!"

And the Fistical Four duly saw it through.

Mr. Dalton left Rookwood for an excursion in his little two-seater soon after dinner. He was entirely unaware when he left that four doughty supporters were remaining behind to watch over his interests during his absence. But such was the case.

The Fistical Four exercised the privilege they still had of throwing a ball about in the quad, so that the afternoon would not in any case be entirely unprofitable. While they did so, they kept a wary eye on the gates.

As the afternoon wore on, it began to seem likely that no profit was to result, apart from the exercise involved in their game.

Then, all of a sudden, Newcome let the ball pass him and pointed towards the gates.

"There he is!"

he exclaimed excitedly.

The rest stopped the game and stared. Simultaneously they saw the ungainly figure of Mr. Solomon Josephs passing the porter's lodge on his way up the main drive towards the House.

"Who said we were in the wrong?" asked Jimmy Silver jubilantly. "Told you old Dalton would live to thank us! This way, you men!"

"He broke into a run."

"What's the move?" queried Raby, as he sprinted beside his leader. "Do we just kidnap him and carry off the body in the bag?"

"Fathead! How can we do that in broad daylight? What we've got to do is to lure him down to the little gate near the footer field, where nobody's likely to see us, and then run him down the road till we tire him out!"

"Oh!"

"Hope it keeps fine for us!" grinned Newcome.

They slowed down as they neared Mr. Josephs, and doffed their caps with an air of great respect as they reached him.

"Looking for someone, sir?" inquired Jimmy Silver.

The financier showed several gold teeth in a smile.

"Yeth. I am looking for your headmathter—Dr. Chisholm, I believe!"

"This way, sir!"

The Fistical Four took up strategic positions round Mr. Josephs, and marched off towards the footer-field.

Then Arthur Edward Lovell uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Manders!"

It was indeed the Housemaster of the Modern House. He was standing directly between them and their objective, and the Fistical Four could see at once that he had spotted them.

"Double back!"

said Jimmy Silver, sotto voce; while to

Mr. Josephs he said: "I fancy we're going in the wrong direction, though, sir. Come to think of it, the Head's more likely to be in the House this afternoon!"

Mr. Josephs paused and frowned. "Vat do you 'tink you are doing to me? If you are playing a joke—"

"This way, sir!" said Jimmy Silver hurriedly.

He signed to the rest. They fairly fell upon the visitor.

A cyclone seemed to descend on Solomon Josephs, of Coombe. He felt himself seized at all points of the compass and rushed along at tremendous speed.

Panting with surprise and indignation and breathlessness, his little fat legs working like clockwork, Mr. Josephs rushed towards the school buildings. Four determined juniors saw to it that he did so!

They rushed him across the quad, rushed him up the steps, rushed him through the Hall, upstairs to the Fourth quarters, and along to the end of the study.

Finally they rushed him into the armchair, where Mr. Josephs collapsed, gasping like a newly-landed fish.

"Where's Manders?" asked Jimmy Silver, looking out of the window.

"Not a sign! Perhaps he didn't spot us," said Newcome hopefully. "Perhaps—"

"P'r'aps nothing!" finished Lovell, from the doorway. "He's just coming up the stairs!"

"Lock the door!" snapped Jimmy Silver.

But Lovell was too late. Even as he jumped into the room a hurried footstep was heard along the passage, and Roger Manders, breathing hard from his unaccustomed exertions, burst in.

"Just in time, apparently!" he said, and the juniors couldn't help noticing the ill-concealed note of triumph in his harsh voice. "Now, perhaps you will explain what you are doing!"

CHAPTER 4.
All In Order!

THE Fistical Four could only stare sheepishly at Mr. Manders for a few moments. Mr. Manders' eye, meanwhile, wandered to the still breathless Mr. Josephs.

"I am waiting for an answer," said Mr. Manders, at length. "I demand to know the meaning of your extraordinary behaviour before taking you to the Head. What were you doing?"

Jimmy Silver rubbed his chin in perplexity.

"Well, nothing—"

"Not'ing! And that's vat you call not'ing—making me run like I was running for a vager!" gasped Solly Josephs, shaking his fist in the air in his excitement. "I will have the law on you. It's all a plot on the part of that villain Mithter Dalton!"

Mr. Manders smiled.

"So you believe that a master belonging to this school is in some way involved in the affair? That is a serious accusation, my dear sir!"

"Vell, vat else should it be? I don't know these boys—"

"Such an accusation cannot pass unchallenged!" declared Mr. Manders, with a shake of his head. "The only course open to me in the circumstances is to take you to the headmaster. Mr. Dalton may then have an opportunity of refuting the charge!"

"Oh dear! Don't you think it best to leave things as they stand till Mr. Dalton gets back?" asked Jimmy Silver, in dismay.

"On the contrary, Silver, I consider that the Head should be made acquainted with this person's allegation—ridiculous as it is, of course," said Mr. Manders, with an unpleasant smile—"at the earliest possible moment. You are willing to accompany me to the headmaster, sir?"

"More than villing! He ith the very perthon I came to see!"

"Very well. Kindly step this way."

The fat little financier, mopping the perspiration which still exuded from him, got up from the armchair and quitted the study with Mr. Manders. Jimmy Silver and his chums brought up the rear, their faces very glum now. It was rough luck, indeed, after watching over Dalton's interests

so carefully all the afternoon, to have Manders destroying all their work like this.

It was evident that the task of taking the matter to the Head for judgment was by no means uncongenial to Mr. Manders. Doubtless the Housemaster of the Modern House had one or two old scores to settle with Dalton. Whatever number were still outstanding looked like being settled up now, and Mr. Manders was looking quite cheerful as he led the way.

The Head looked up in surprise as the little procession trooped into his study. He started at the sight of Mr. Josephs.

"Mr. Manders! What—"

"I regret to report most extraordinary conduct on the part of these juniors, sir," said Mr. Manders smoothly. "Possibly you know this gentleman—Mr. Josephs?"

"I—I believe I have seen him before!" said the Head, looking askance at the little moneylender. "But what—"

"Mr. Josephs called here this afternoon. His visit was the



A cyclone seemed to descend upon Solomon Josephs, of Coombe. He felt himself seized at all points of the compass and rushed along at tremendous speed!

signal for an extraordinary attack on him by these boys, whose object was apparently to hide him from the sight of the authorities."

"Goodness gracious!"

"That assault," said Mr. Manders, "has resulted in an accusation being made against a master belonging to the school—an accusation which I cannot believe to have any foundation, but which I felt it my duty to bring to your notice. He accuses Mr. Dalton of inspiring these boys to attack him!"

"Bless my soul!"

The Fistical Four groaned inwardly. It was all coming out now! Mr. Dalton, it seemed, was booked for the long jump—despite their efforts.

Then they became aware that a newcomer had arrived in the Head's study.

Richard Dalton himself strolled serenely in.

His arrival might have been expected to increase the tenseness of the situation. But there was something about Mr. Dalton's demeanour which relieved it instead.

Mr. Dalton was smiling.

"Pardon me, sir. I knocked and entered before I realised that you had visitors," he said. "I happened to overhear Mr. Manders' last remark. I think I can explain matters."

"Dear me! I hope so, indeed!" gasped Dr. Chisholm.

"I had no idea that these boys would have received the false impression they evidently have received, or I would have corrected it before it led to such unfortunate results," said Mr. Dalton. "I can only assume that they were under the impression that I was involved in some moneylending transaction with Mr. Josephs, and that their assault was made with the intention of helping me. Is that so, boys?"

"I—I—"

"We—we—"

"That's it, sir!" gasped Jimmy Silver, blushing to the roots of his hair at the ordeal of having to answer such a direct question on the subject. "It was just that!"

Dr. Chisholm uttered an exclamation.

"Bless my soul! Why should they imagine such a fantastic thing?"

"I'm afraid I am partly to blame for not explaining why Mr. Josephs has been calling on me," said Mr. Dalton. And then he told of the visit of Mr. Manders and the Fistical Four to his study on the previous day.

The Head listened in bewilderment.

"Goodness gracious! Then Silver and his friends concluded that you were in the hands of a moneylender—this gentleman—and determined to keep him off the school premises! Extraordinary!"

"Amazing!" murmured Mr. Manders. "But I cannot help thinking that their assumption was, in the circumstances, not unnatural!"

"What, then, if I may ask the question, was your business with Mr.—er—Josephs?" asked the Head.

Mr. Dalton smiled.

"Our business relations are concerned entirely with a small motor accident in the lane last week, in the course of which I slightly damaged Mr. Josephs' car!"

"Oh!"

"Oh crikey!"

"Dear me!"

"Mr. Josephs made a claim on me for the damage caused by my car. I considered, and still consider, that claim to be exorbitant, and I paid him what I considered to be a fair amount in compensation. Mr. Josephs, however, is pressing for more. That, sir, is all."

"And quite enough!" remarked Mr. Josephs. "And now that you've heard about it, Mithter Headmathter, I'll put my side—"

But the Head held up his hand.

"I am afraid that the matter is not one in which I can interfere," he said coldly. "I decline to discuss with you, sir. Furthermore, I forbid you to call here again!"

"Look here, Mithter Headmathter—"

"Enough!" said Dr. Chisholm.

And he said it in tones that could not be gainsaid. Mr. Josephs decided not to argue it out with the Head of Rookwood, after all.

"Then there is nothing more to be said," remarked Mr. Manders, whose face had turned an art shade of green on finding his dreadful indictment of his rival collapse so unexpectedly. "I didn't, of course, for one moment believe that the facts were as the circumstances seemed to indicate. I merely brought the case to you from a sense of duty."

"Oh—er—quite!" said the Head.

And that was all the change Mr. Manders got out of that deal. Once more the Housemaster of the Modern House had pried into matters that did not concern him, only to succeed in finding a mare's nest!

Certainly Mr. Dalton seemed cheerful enough as he walked away from the Head's study with them.

"You're a bunch of young idiots, and you shouldn't have done it!" were his last words. "But thank you, all the same!"

And the Fistical Four felt that there had, after all, been justification for Sticking Up For Dalton!

THE END.

(Jimmy Silver's idea was not quite so bright as usual! Don't miss the fun in "Tubby Muffin's Double!" next week! Order your GEM to-day.)

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THE HIGHEST SCORE OF THE WEEK!

THE NUMBER OF GOOD THINGS IN NEXT WEEK'S "GEM"!

Have a squint at next week's cover, boys; it's alongside.

Poor Old Fatty Wynn! It certainly looks as though someone was out! To start with, the goat's out—of his cage! And he's not the only one, as you'll learn when you read Martin Clifford's side-splitting story of Tom Merry & Co.

"THE ST. JIM'S MENAGERIE!"

Following that, there will be another ripping new Rookwood yarn out next Wednesday. Tubby Muffin thinks of a really good scheme for once, but—you must wait! Owen Conquest's yarn is called:

"TUBBY MUFFIN'S DOUBLE!"

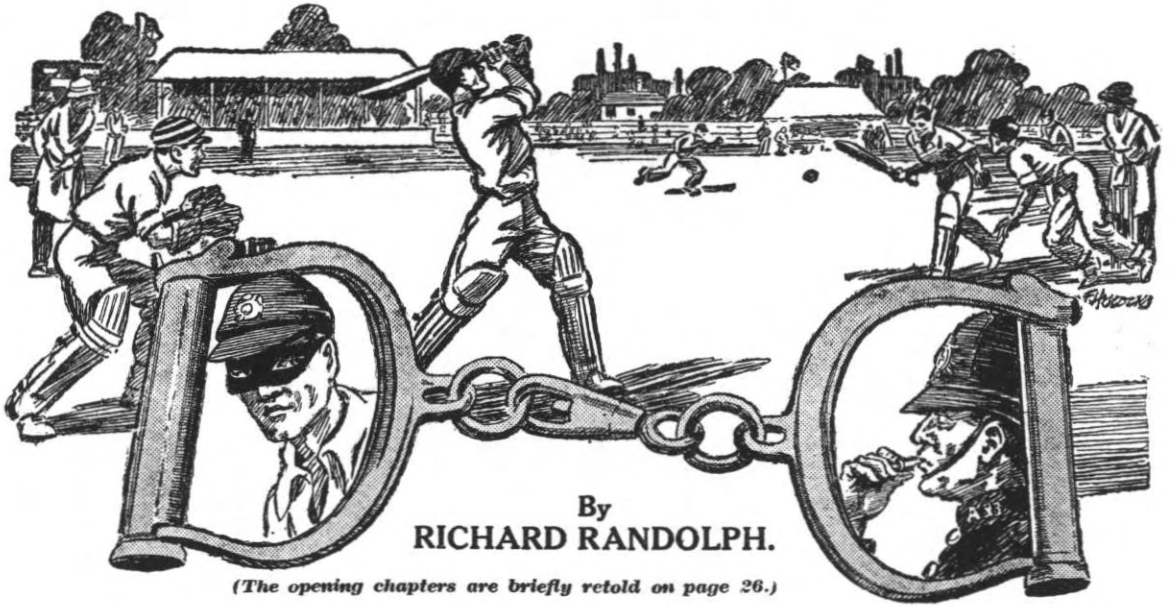
An astonishing development takes place in the concluding instalment of our gripping serial,

"The Cricketer Cracksman!"

And there will be the usual bright GEM features.

ANOTHER THRILLING INSTALMENT!

THE CRICKETER CRACKSMAN!



By
RICHARD RANDOLPH.

(The opening chapters are briefly retold on page 26.)

Trapped!

NO more than Joel Geering was Rod keen on what he had to do. There was no reason why he should do a thing for Ralph's sake. But the rotter's father and mother had been good to him.

He was within two yards of the door when strong arms were flung around him and a hand was clapped over his mouth.

In the gloom Beal and Ginger hardly saw anything of that attack. But they had arrived just in time. They saw the door open, and a light from somewhere at the back of the hall gave them a glimpse before it closed on Rod struggling in the grasp of two men.

Geering's back was to the door, but there was something that looked familiar to Ginger in the set of his square shoulders. The other man's face showed; Ginger fancied he knew that face, but could not put a name to it.

Then the door was slammed to.

"What are we to do?" asked Beal.

He was no duffer, no faint-heart; but his brains were less quick than Ginger's.

"Wait a moment!" replied Ginger.

"But they might murder him!"

"Not they! It's not that they're after, though I can't make out what it is. Only a minute or two, Beal; then if you want to rush the giddy place, I'm on. But I'm going to put out our lights, and we'd better be careful not to show ourselves till we're dead sure there's something to be done."

Beal would have preferred a rush to the rescue, but felt that Ginger knew best. They put out the lights. Those of Rod's machine still showed, but only for another minute or two. Then two men came down the garden path together, and one of them extinguished Rod's lights, while he spoke in low tones to the other.

Of the two in hiding Ginger was the nearer, and he had the keener ears.

When they had parted—Geering back to the house, the other fellow along the road—Beal asked, almost plaintively:

"What was it all about? I can't begin to make head or tail of it."

"I can!" answered Ginger. "I can begin, though I may not have got it all yet. That chap's gone to fetch the copper. They say they've caught a burglar—that's Rod!"

"But— Oh, what silly rot! Rodney's no burglar!"

"I should say not, pard. But this is a frame-up, and if we hadn't been just behind Rod it might have come off!

Don't see how it can now; we're a bit in their way, I reckon!"

"Let's have him out of it!"

"No. We might only make trouble for ourselves; not that I'd mind much about that, and I know you wouldn't. But if we butt in now we may spoil everything. I know one of those blighters, and that helps. I'm beginning to see through this."

"Hanged if I am!" returned Beal.

Ginger did not see it necessary that Beal should—at present. And he certainly did not mean to explain there and then. But in the tangle of intrigue that he sought to unravel he could discern the figures of Hyde and Ralph Redgrave.

At that moment a big car paused before the gates of Charlton House.

Beal and Ginger were hidden in the shadows; the lights of the car did not show them up. But the flare of a patent lighter held by the man in the driver's seat to the end of

a cigar showed to them both the faces of Alured Hyde and Ralph Redgrave!

"They've brought it off! There's the O.K. signal," said Hyde to his henchman.

Ginger heard, but did not comprehend till the big car had swept on again, and he saw that in the window

above the door of Charlton House there gleamed a faint green light.

"They've brought it off!" repeated Hyde exultingly.

"You mean they've made a start," replied Ralph, his voice shaky. "It's not just catching him—it's proving it."

"Wrong there! He won't go to the jug—I wish there was a chance of that—but there will be suspicion enough to make things dashed awkward for him. I'm not sure that he won't be quodded on remand; can't see him being convicted, though. There it is—the Norlandshire committee will have done with him!"

But Ralph could not feel sure even of that. There was in him no repentance; but there was no triumph. He had a foreboding that their schemes were doomed to disaster—no such foreboding as to the thing that was to happen within an hour or two, however.

They drove on through the night, but did not keep to the main road. Hyde had known all along that he did a risky thing in driving out to make sure that Rod had fallen into the trap. He had been too impatient to wait, but he was not adding to his risk without need now. So, though they

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ROD RODNEY CAPTAINS NORLANDSHIRE! Young pro. leads County side against Surrey!

made south, they travelled by less frequented roads than the great highway that led direct to Norchester. The greater distance to be covered was of little importance. Yet if they had kept to the highway, that which happened could hardly have come about.

Only once in the next half-hour was there any talk between them. Then Hyde asked:

"Did you plant those pearls on him?"

"Yes; wish I hadn't now! After all, I share the dashed room with him, and anyone might say that I could have hidden them where I did, under his mattress."

"My good ass, you haven't been arrested for an attempt at burglary! The dear Rodney has. He may be able to prove an alibi for the night we lifted the things, but the chances are he won't be able."

That was all. It left Ralph still in a turmoil of doubt and fear. This scheme looked to have succeeded; but if it failed the pearls would not count as evidence against Rod any more than against him—not so much—if the slightest suspicion of the truth started. And there was that letter; he could not feel easy as to that. And Yankee and young Green, even Geering, who was playing a part that might bring him into trouble—they were all possible stumbling-blocks.

He wished he could be as cool about it all as Alured was.

But Hyde was very far, indeed, from being altogether easy in mind.

He wished ardently now that he had never started in on the criminal racket. He never would have done it had he foreseen that Arthur Hereward would so soon be dead, and the county captaincy his for the taking. He had come to see that he could not run the two leaderships together. But the gang must be dissolved, and he must eat humble pie to his father; and, with Rodney once well out of the way, he might yet make his peace with the players, though he detested the whole crowd of them.

And so he drove on through the night.

Meanwhile, at the house they had left behind them, Ginger and Conrad Beal waited.

Beal was on the fidget. But Ginger, though his nerves were taut enough, remained apparently calm.

The one just wanted to get Rod out of that; but the other, seeing farther, wanted to do much more—to expose the whole plot. He could piece out most of it now; the rest would come sooner or later—easily enough if Harry Hiam would give all the help he could. But Harry had his old man to consider, and Ginger could not regard that loyalty lightly.

Poor old Harry! Wanting to go straight, but mixed up through no fault of his own with a criminal crowd. Ginger's heart was sore for his old schoolfellow. He hoped that when all this had finished it would be possible to get Harry a fresh start.

Voices—the gleam of a bullseye lantern. Geering's messenger had brought the constable.

Ginger clutched Beal by the sleeve.

"Nothing doing yet!" he whispered.

The two men passed into the house. The next ten minutes seemed like as many hours to Ginger and Beal.

To the village constable there seemed no doubt at all about the case. The lad did not look like a burglar, and said he was Rodney, the county cricketer; but he had been caught red-handed, with his kit upon him, by the respectable Mr. Huffward and the two friends who had been playing cards with him in the back room. There were the cards on the table, bottle of whisky, and siphons of soda. There was the window at which, it was alleged, Rodney had tried to make entry, and Geering took care that under that window were footprints enough to render it impossible for anyone to say whether Rod's were among them or under them.

Oh, a clear case! P.-c. Roberts wished that he could have had a bigger hand in it; but even as it was he thought it might help him to promotion.

He drank one stiff whisky-and-soda, refused the offer of another, and brought out the bracelets.

"Hold out your hands, young feller!" he said.

It was of no use to refuse. There were four to one against Rod.

"Oh, you are a fat-headed chump!" he said, as he obeyed. "I'm no more a burglar than you are."

"We'll see about that in the morning," the policeman answered with dignity.

He led Rod out, and Geering and the other two went as far as the gate with them.

Ginger had much ado to restrain Beal now; somehow

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he induced him to stand by in the dark and let captive and warder go.

Then he had his reward.

"I'll run this bike of his in," said Geering. "It's gone off slick enough—better than I'd hoped. He'll be brought before a country beak in the morning. Likely we shan't even be wanted then; just a remand till they round up more beaks. But you chaps must keep your nerve if your evidence is wanted."

The other two granted in token of agreement. They also were pleased to think it had all gone off so very nicely. Not one of the three had any notion that what Geering said had been overheard. It was very dark under the trees by the paling, and Rod's chums kept still.

"And we're going to let Rodney spend the night in a police cell!" said Beal reproachfully, when the three had gone in.

"Don't suppose the bobby's got such a thing to his name," Ginger replied cheerfully. "Space bed-room's nearer the mark. Door locked, and bobby doing sentry-go outside window. That's more like it. Rod won't take any harm, old file!"

"What are we going to do?" asked Beal.

"Good and plenty! One of us—better be me, I guess—no, both of us, for I can't drive your jigger, and you wouldn't cotton to the job I must do, will have to rush back to Norchester."

"And leave him here!"

"Bless you, I tell you he won't take any hurt!"

"And what are we going to do when we get to Norchester?"

"You can go to bye-bye, if you like. I'm going to rouse the county secretary and three or four of the committee. I don't care if they are all in bed. They've got to shun up and listen to little old Ginger! I won't go to Mr. Hyde or Mr. Redgrave. Rough on them. Time enough to let them know when they must. But I'll tell my tale, and you can prove that every word of it is true, and no beak is going to keep Rod locked up after he's heard it. I'll get my Uncle Rod, too, and old Rogers; they'd like to be in it, and might be useful."

"My word, you've a head on you, Ginger! But how are you going to explain how we came to follow Red?"

"May not be asked. If I am, I can't give away the fellow who warned me, and you can't, because you don't know who he is, and wouldn't tell if you did, I'm jolly sure! Just you remember that we're not on our trial, Beal."

So they rushed back to Norchester, and got there while Hyde and Ralph Redgrave were still on the way. Beal put his machine along at a reckless pace. He still could not see it all quite clearly. But the speed only seemed to act as a stimulant to Ginger's wits. He had his case ready to state before he alighted.

They went first to the house of the county secretary, which was not far from the ground. Ginger thought that to convince him was half the battle. He would be a big help with the gentlemen of the committee.

The story he told—far-fetched as it might seem—convinced the secretary. Beal's machine was left at his house, and the three went on together. Conrad had not the least use for bed that night—at least, till he was sure that everything was in order.

It was already broad daylight before the rescue party had been gathered. There were eight of them in all, old Rogers and Red Harman of the number, and they set out early in two cars, leaving nothing to chance.

Ginger's story, though he had not told all that he suspected, had been a shock to the secretary and the committee men, in spite of the fact that none of them liked or trusted Hyde. But neither Ginger's uncle nor Rogers felt it as a shock. Red was exultant, indeed. Other county captains have made themselves disliked by their men, but none had ever been quite so whole-heartedly detested as was Hyde by the Northlandshire team.

"I'd go and see him gaoled!" said Red to Roger.

"Shouldn't like to see any man gaoled!" Roger answered.

"But I wouldn't mind hearing that he'd been sentenced!"

At a place where a road from the west joined the main

highway, the passengers in the two cars passed the wreckage of two other cars. Obviously, there had been a collision during the night. No stop was made to inquire about it of the policeman who stood by the heap of ruin. The casualties must have been dealt with some time ago, and those who sped north were on urgent affairs.

But they would have

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

ROD RODNEY, an orphan, who is living at Norchester with relations, falls foul of RALPH REDGRAVE and ALURED HYDE, captain of Northlandshire Cricket Team, at a boxing saloon kept by HARRY HIAM and his son Harry. Later, Rod is asked to play for Northlandshire against Yorkshire, and in the match Hyde purposely runs him out. By stealing a letter Ralph learns that Rod has been left twenty thousand pounds. In a conspiracy with Hyde, Ralph decides to frame him up in order to get him out of the way. Harry Hiam learns of the plot and turns a friend of Rod's, named Ginger. A few evenings later Rod gets a letter from Ralph, asking him to go to a house ten miles from Norchester, as he is in trouble. Suspecting treachery, Ginger and a man named Beal follow him to the house. Rod arrives there first.

(Now read on.)

stopped if they had had the least inkling of the truth.

Rod did not sleep too badly. Constable Roberts, once alone with the boy, found his identity weakening, and even began to have doubts about Mr. Huffward and his friends, though those doubts were vague. It was the spare bed-room Rod had; and the constable did a very unofficial thing when, anxious to get to bed, having been up most of the night before, he accepted the prisoner's parole.

"What should I want to bunk for?" asked Rod. "I only want this silly business cleared up, and it's bound to be to-morrow."

"Don't you be too sure of that, my lad. But breakfast will be at seven, and at eight you'll be before the magistrate. Mr. Runnacles lives close by, and he's always up at six in the summer."

So Rod was eating eggs and bacon with the constable and the constable's wife when the two cars pulled up at the door of the little police station.

"Why, Ginger, Conrad—what's this mean?" he exclaimed. "And you, sir, and——" He looked from the secretary to the three big men of the committee. "Why, it's like a rescue party! And Red and Roger, too! I ought to be safe enough now, though I didn't really feel that I was in danger before. It's a charge of burglary I'm here for."

"We know," answered the secretary gravely. "You'll have to go before a magistrate not only to clear yourself, but because there's so much more hanging to it. But for that matter, Mr. Yarnold here is a county as well as a borough magistrate, and could deal with the case. What do you say, constable?"

Constable Roberts scratched his head.

"There's Mr. Runnacles within a stone's throw, sir," he said. "And it's in his jurisdiction, as you might say. If you wouldn't mind, we could all go along to him."

The secretary looked at Rod.

"That's all right," Rod said. "The constable has been no end decent to me. It must have been a put-up job, but he couldn't know that."

"You'd better fetch those fellows at Charlton House to appear and give their lying evidence, constable!" said Mr. Yarnold sharply. "I know Mr. Runnacles well. We shall probably find him in the garden."

"Sure to, sir, on a morning like this. I'll go and fetch them."

He went, but he did not bring them. The only person he could find at the place was an old and deaf housekeeper. Whether the trio of conspirators there had succumbed to funk, or whether they had seen who were the occupants of the cars which had passed Charlton House a little before, and had concluded that going while the going was good was best for them, was a problem never settled. The likelihood is that they saw and guessed in part, at least, for Geering was no funk, whatever his companions may have been.

So, in the event, there was really no case against Rod to be considered. But for all that there was much questioning of Ginger and Beal, since if Rod must be held guiltless—and neither magistrate had any doubt of that—a case for conspiracy lay against the three men at Charlton House, and against Alured Hyde and Ralph Redgrave. In the upshot Messrs. Yarnold and Runnacles issued warrants against Hyde, Redgrave, and Geering—of the other two nothing definite was known.

Then Mr. Runnacles, who knew cricket only as a harmless amusement for people with nothing better to do, went



Rod was scarcely inside the gate, when suddenly hands seized him on either side, and before he could cry out or resist he was overpowered!

back to his beloved roses, and Constable Roberts, who played the game himself and followed it closely, to his station, and the nine others concerned, to whom cricket was one of the great things of life, to Norchester and the continuation of the match against Surrey.

"I hope this won't upset you for the game, Rodney," said Mr. Yarnold kindly.

"I don't think it will, sir," Rod answered. "I never felt really nervous about it, though I can see now that I might have been in a nasty hole but for two first-rate chums. The only thing that bothers me is about Redgrave's father and mother."

"Ah! They will suffer. Joseph Hyde, too; he's an old friend of mine, though I never liked his son. I feel for him. But we must think of Norlandshire, Rodney. Hereward told us all to keep the flag flying, didn't he?"

It occurred to Rod that this grave man of affairs, one of the magnates of the county, must be a good fellow to speak to him in so friendly and uppatronising a tone; but he never guessed what was in the mind of Jarvis Yarnold.

Already that long-sighted gentleman saw in the boy by his side a possible worthy successor to Hereward. Young—very young—a pro, but with a good education. Oh, there might be difficulties, but none past overcoming, Mr. Yarnold thought! Not at once, maybe; but when the time came he would speak up for Rodney with no feeble voice; and his vote carried lots of weight.

A cricketer from the top of his head to the soles of his feet—cool and plucky—a favourite already with the other players—Rodney was the man for the job!

Hyde could not carry on. Even if the charge of conspiracy against him failed for want of sufficient evidence—and the evidence was slender at present—he would be asked to resign and could not refuse.

But there was to be no question as to whether Alured Hyde should be called upon to resign. He could never play cricket again!

Captaining the County.

THEY heard the news when they reached the ground. Hyde's car had crashed with another at the junction of the Wenwoe road and the northern highway. As far as could be gathered, the collision had been more the fault of the driver of the other car than of Hyde. But that driver and his companion were both dead, killed on the instant; and Ralph Redgrave was hardly expected to pull through, it was said. He had several bones broken and had sustained internal injuries. Hyde's right leg was fractured in two places; otherwise he was little hurt.

But he was out of the match, and out of the team for the rest of the season—so much was certain.

Mr. Yarnold, having been home, hurried to the ground. There were things to be done, things to be hushed up. The charge against Rod no longer mattered in the very least; it had been made, if it could be said to have been made at all, in private, so to speak. It must come out when the conspiracy charge was brought against Hyde and Redgrave; but now it seemed that to serve warrants upon those two was hardly worth the doing. The warrants might be kept back anyway. Mr. Yarnold put into motion the necessary machinery for delay. For Joseph Hyde's sake he was glad to do that. Perhaps, after all, his old friend's pride might not be lowered to the dust.

But that was for the future. The match was what mattered most at the moment.

He found more than half a dozen of the committee in anxious consultation, the secretary attending but saying nothing.

The young amateur included in the team had been sent for. He had just arrived.

He refused point blank to take on the captaincy. "I never skippered a team in my life," he said. "At my school they'd simply have howled down anyone who suggested me as captain. I can field as well as most, and get some runs at times; but— Oh, hang it all, gentlemen, don't set me up against Percy Fender! It's like asking a kid to fight Carnera!"

"What are we to do?" inquired one of the troubled conclave.

"There's Harman," agreed Mr. White, though doubtfully.

"I'll tell him you'd like to see him," said the young man, making his departure in a hurry.

Red Harman came. He guessed what was wanted, and he came frowning.

"Can't do it, gentlemen!" he said bluntly. "Not used to it. Haven't the brains for it. If you can force me to it—but it will want some force—I shall let you down. Get never a run, and make no end of mistakes."

Coote, Deeks, Stanton, Willey—these were all out of the question, except as mere figureheads.

"Would Rogers take it on?" Mr. White asked.

"Not he," replied Red. "Do you want me to say what I think?"

Yarnold nodded.

"Well, there's Beal, and I'm sure he wouldn't. And there's that young nephew of mine who might, but couldn't do the job, though, he's no fool, mind you. And there's Rodney; and I wouldn't look farther than him."

"A mere boy!" said Mr. White, though not contemptuously.

"A fine cricketer, and one that knows the game," replied Red.

Again Jarvis Yarnold nodded. It had come sooner than he expected; but he welcomed it.

"If he were playing as an amateur," objected Mr. White. "But on the face of it we shall be handing over an important job to one who is only a pro colt."

"Pretty sly colt," spoke Red. "As for his being a pro, so am I, and so is Rogers. And the boy's got a better head for the game than either of us. What's his age matter?"

Mr. White—outside the committee-room Norchester's leading solicitor—did not quite like that speech. But no one else seemed to mind it.

"Harman, will there be any trouble at all with the men if young Rodney is given the post?" asked Mr. Yarnold.

"For the rest of the season, you mean, sir, Hyde being out of it? 'Not a bit! I don't believe there's one of them but would be glad. We like the boy well, and we have faith in him. He's going to play for England yet."

That had not been quite what Mr. Yarnold had meant, yet his face showed pleasure when he heard it.

"What do you say, gentlemen all?" he asked, looking round. "I can see no possible harm in giving Rodney his chance in this match, in spite of his youth."

They were all agreed, even Mr. White. And when Red went out he sent Rod in, without a word as to what he was wanted for.

When Rod heard he flushed. He had not expected this. But his voice did not falter when he said:

"I'll take it on, of course, as you wish it, and I'll do my level best."

So it was that when Surrey went out to field that day they had at their head the most astute of cricket captains, while in the pavilion there sat the Norlandshire skipper—pro tem—who had not been born when Fender first played county cricket!

No great responsibility rested upon Rod as yet. Beal was out, and Norlandshire had not yet pulled quite level. If they could put up a decent score in quick time they had a chance to win, though it might be but a slender one. Anyway, being behind on the first innings, they could only hope for points worth having by a forcing game. Rod did not tell the men so. They were all older than he, except Ginger, who did not count much in this. They knew, and he was sure they would play the game. His faith in them was as firm as was theirs in him.

(How will Rod get on as Captain of Norlandshire? He's got a big job to do. Don't miss next week's great instalment!)

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Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription rates: Inland 1d Abroad, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd., and for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd.—Saturday, August 29th, 1951.

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