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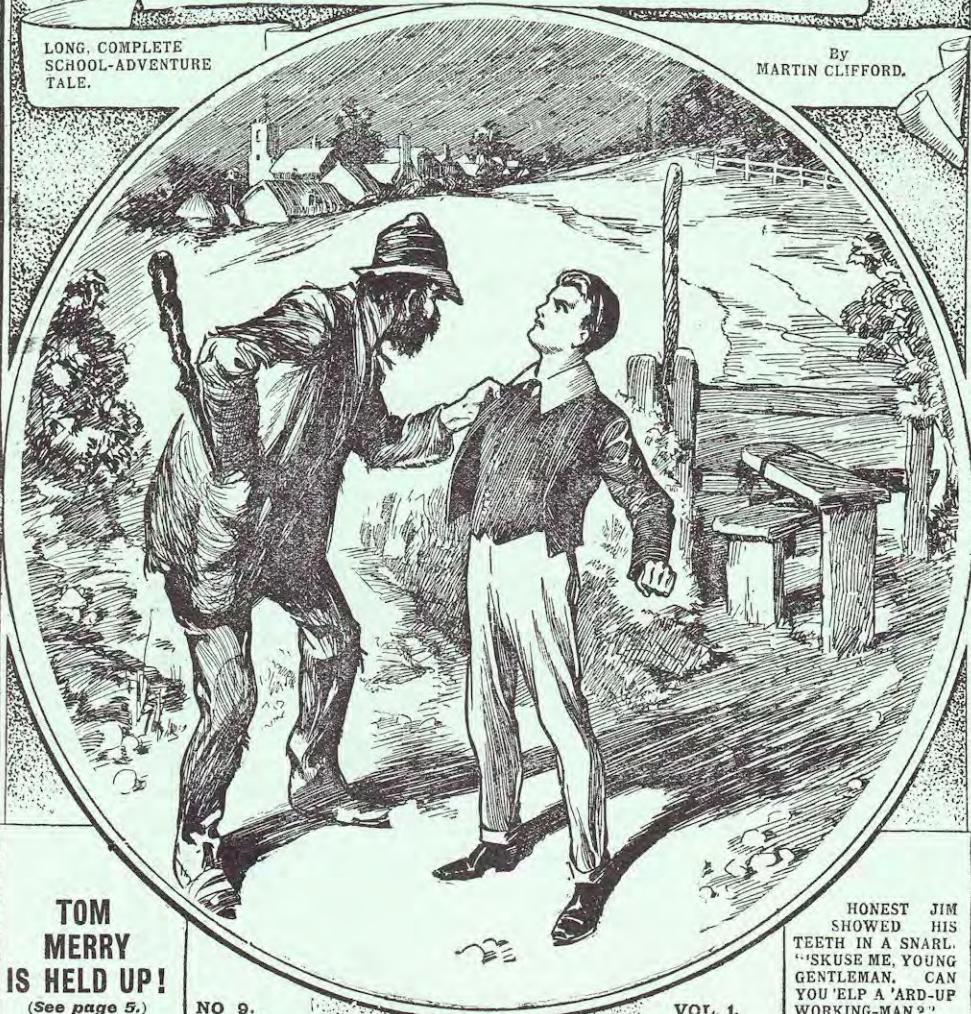
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TOM MERRY ON THE WARPATH.

LONG, COMPLETE
SCHOOL-ADVENTURE
TALE.

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.



**TOM
MERRY
IS HELD UP!**

(See page 5.)

NO 9.

VOL. 1

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TEETH IN A SNARL.
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GENTLEMAN. CAN
YOU 'ELP A 'ARD-UP
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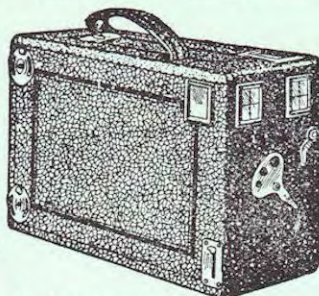
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No. 9.

Vol. I.



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TOM MERRY ON THE WARPATH

A TALE OF
SCHOOL LIFE
AND
ADVENTURE.



By
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

Tom Merry's Innings.

"WELL hit!"

"Oh, well hit, Tom!"

It was a ringing shout from fifty throats. Half Clavering had gathered round the school cricket-ground to watch Tom Merry at the wicket. The Shell were playing the Lower Fifth, and the match was turning out to be one of unusual keenness and interest, for the Shell, although the lower Form of the two, was getting decidedly the best of the game, much to the surprise of the Fifth Form.

The Lower Fifth were all down for ninety-six—a sufficiently respectable score—and they expected the Shell, who went in second, to make about forty or fifty. It was a single-inning's match, and the heroes of the Lower Fifth expected it to end long before the limit of the time appointed for drawing the stumps.

The Shell were five down for eighteen when Tom Merry went on to bat, with Monty Lowther at the other end. The Fifth watched that innings with indulgent smiles at first; but gradually the smiles disappeared, and the faces lengthened, for Tom Merry was batting in a quite unexpected manner.

By the time he had knocked up thirty-five off his own bat the Lower Fifth fellows were looking dubiously at one another, and the Shell were cheering wildly; and now, as a tremendous drive sent the leather whizzing right over the

pavilion, the cheers from Tom's supporters grew louder than ever.

"Well hit, Tom!"

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry stood with his bat on the crease, and a cheerful smile upon his pleasant, frank face. There was no need to run out that hit, for it was a boundary.

"Hurrah!" shouted Manners, from the pavilion, waving his cap.

Manners, the Shell captain, was down on the list to go in next, but he was in no hurry. He had donned pads and gloves ready, but it looked as if he had been a little too previous. Monty Lowther was keeping up his end like a Trojan, and Tom Merry was making all the running.

"Oh, rats!" said Gore, growling. Gore was out for a duck's-egg, so naturally he wasn't in the best of humours. "I never saw such flukes in my life as that chap's batting!"

Manners grinned.

"If you could have made a few flukes in the same way, Gore, you wouldn't have been out with a big, round mought," he remarked. "But you're talking rot, and you know it. Tom Merry is the best batsman in the Shell—yes, or in any Form at Clavering, except the Sixth itself."

Gore sneered.

"You'd better challenge the Upper Fifth next!" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "With such a wonder as Tom Merry in the team, the Lower Fifth are too small game for you!"

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"My hat!" said Manners. "I'll do it, too. That's a good idea of yours, Gore. Devigne and his lot are rather given to crowing over us, and, with Tom Merry in our team, I really believe we could settle their hash."

"Oh, what rot!" said Gore, in disgust. "The fuss you make of that chap is sickening!"

But Manners was no longer listening. The ball had come in, and Tom Merry was batting again. The best bowler in the Lower Fifth had been put on against his wicket, but hitherto without any very glorious results. The over had given Tom twelve, so far. The bowler sent down the last ball of it with all the skill he had.

Clack! The quick, staccato sound of wood meeting leather, and the ball went whizzing away, away, and away, deep into the long-field, and Tom and Monty Lowther were running.

Once, twice—yes, thrice! How they scudded! Three times across the pitch, like streaks of white crossing the level green; and Monty Lowther was for running again, but Tom Merry waved his hand warningly, and shook his head.

"No, Monty!" he shouted.

And Monty clumped his bat on the crease again. Tom was right. The ball came hurtling in to the wicket-keeper, who, with rather an injured look on his face, tossed it to the bowler. He had badly wanted Tom Merry to attempt that fourth run, when he would have stumped him to a certainty.

But Tom knew a little too much for that. Tom had never played cricket before he came to Clavering, but he had learned rapidly there, and he was besides a born cricketer. Manners was certainly right when he declared that, outside the Sixth Form, Clavering had not a batsman to equal Tom Merry.

With the hitting of a young Jessop, the pace of a Fry, and the grace and style of a Palaret, Tom Merry was certainly the finest cricketer outside the Sixth.

The field crossed over, and as the last hit had been for three, Tom Merry still had the bowling; and Tom Merry was now getting nicely set. He cut away the first ball of the next over for two, and the second gave him a boundary. The third and fourth he stopped dead, the fifth gave him two, and the last ball three; and not once had his wicket been in danger.

The score of the Shell was now seventy-one, of which number fifty-three belonged to Tom Merry individually, and he still seemed as fresh as paint.

The ball coming next gave him three more, and then Lowther had the bowling. Alas for Monty! The bowler saw his chance at last, and a curling yorker left Monty Lowther's wicket a wreck, and Monty carried out his bat for eight.

Six wickets down for seventy-four!

Manners picked up his bat, and passed Monty Lowther coming in. He grinned cheerfully at Tom Merry as he took his place at the vacant wicket.

Manners survived three overs, making ten runs before his wicket fell. Meanwhile, Tom was batting strongly, and his score was going up. The figure for the Shell stood at ninety when Manners carried out his bat.

Gilbert Wingate, captain of Clavering, strolled up as Manners went back to the pavilion. The captain had come to look on at the match, and he was as surprised as the rest by the discovery of a budding W. G. Grace in the Shell.

"You've got a good man there, Manners!" Wingate remarked. "A sort of dark horse, eh, that you've been keeping in hand to surprise the Lower Fifth?"

Manners laughed.

"Well, he has surprised them, Wingate."

"Yes, by Jove, and me, too! I wonder if I've found the batsman I wait for the First Eleven?" murmured Wingate, speaking to himself.

But Manners caught the words, and his eyes blazed with excitement.

"Wingate, you couldn't do better! Tom Merry is the finest cricketer at Clavering outside the top Form. You've got a man from the Upper Fifth, why shouldn't you have one from the Shell? And Tom's a cough-drop, Wingate, I tell you."

"I can see that for myself," said Wingate, with a good-humoured smile. "His form is a bit unexpected, but if it isn't simply a fluke—"

"Of course it isn't. He's—"

"Well, we shall see."

"Next man in!" said Manners. "That's you, Jimron."

"Right-ho!" said Jimson. "I'll see Merry not out, if you like."

And he joined Tom at the wickets. Wingate watched with keen interest as the next over started. The captain of Clavering was considerably troubled in his mind about the constitution of the Clavering First. The college team was by no means as strong as he would have liked to see it, and

some of the opening fixtures of the season had found it wanting. Clavering had been beaten by two different schools, and had drawn in the match with High Clavering Town, but not a single victory had yet given them any laurels to boast of.

And so the cricket captain had made some changes in the First Eleven, and with an unsparing hand. As he said, he didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but he meant Clavering to do something better than get licked all through the summer. Some of the weak players had gone, but exactly how to fill all the vacant places Wingate had not yet decided.

Devigne, of the Upper Fifth, had a claim to be considered, for there was no material in the Sixth for Wingate to choose from; and now, for the first time, it occurred to the captain that he might find what he wanted lower down in the school than the Fifth Form, and so he watched Tom Merry with keen interest.

The Shell were seven down for ninety, and it certainly looked as if the lower of the contending Forms would win the match, and with a margin of wickets to spare, and that unusual result would be the outcome of Tom Merry's form at the wicket. Tom would probably finish not out.

Jimson took a single, which gave Tom the bowling again. The bowler knew how much depended upon that over, and he put his best into it. Away went the ball from the swiping bat, away into the long-field, and the fieldsmen were running frantically; and the batsmen were running, too—once, twice, thrice—yes, four!

But the ball was whizzing in. Tom Merry, with the batsman's true instinct, knew the danger, and put on a spurt, and the willow clumped on the crease in the nick of time. There was a crash of falling bails; but the umpire shook his head.

"Not out!"

It had been a narrow shave, but a miss was as good as a mile. Tom breathed again, and Wingate gave a nod to himself.

Ninety-five for the Shell! One more to equalise, two more to win! Down comes the ball again, and with a beautiful, late cut Tom Merry sends it on its journey—away, and away!

The fieldsmen are still panting after the elusive leather, when a mighty shout from the Shell tells them that the necessary couple have been run, and that the game is won, with three wickets to spare. The level green was black with boys the next moment.

"Hurrah for Tom Merry!"

"Hurrah for the Shell!"

"Hurrah!"

And Tom was slapped on the back and clumped in the ribs till he was more breathless than if he had run out half a dozen fours; and as he came off the ground in the midst of an enthusiastic crowd, Wingate met him at the pavilion, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"I've had my eye on you, Merry. I shall want to see you bat again, and if you keep up that form, I may find you room in the First."

And Tom flushed with pleasure. To play in Clavering First was the dream of every Upper Form boy, and for that honour to fall to a boy in the Shell was almost unheard-of.

"Do you mean it, Wingate?" he gasped.

"Rather!"

And Edgar Devigne, standing by, gritted his teeth. For he knew that if the batsman of the Shell found a place in the First Eleven, there would be no room for a batsman from the Upper Fifth.

Several times before he had come into hostile contact with Tom Merry, and it seemed that Tom was destined to be his rival again.

CHAPTER 2.

The Challenge to the Upper Fifth.

"LET us eat, drink, and be giddy!" exclaimed Manners.

They were at home again in the study. They had changed their crickoting flannels for ordinary attire, and were feeling as hungry as hunters. Tea in the study was always a cosy meal, the only unpleasant element being Gore. Gore always went out of his way to make himself disagreeable to Tom Merry.

Tom was looking very pleased with himself and things generally. He had won the match with the Lower Fifth for his Form, and the school captain's words after it were very gratifying. His chums were equally pleased. To have a boy out of the Shell in the First Eleven was an honour the whole Form could appreciate. It would also be one "in the

eye" for Devigne and the Upper Fifth generally, who were inclined to look down upon the heroes of the middle school, and treat them as if they were still juniors, which, of course, was a deadly insult to the Shell.

"Let us eat, drink, and—pass the sardines," said Manners. "Two lumps in my tea, Monty. Tom, old son, you've done us proud to-day."

"It was a jolly good game," said Tom Merry, between two mouthfuls. "Do you think what the skipper said is likely to come to anything?"

"Very likely. Wingate never talks out of his hat, and, besides, you know you bat better than Devigne, any day in the week."

"Oh, rot!" said Gore.

"Oh, pig!" said Manners. "You shut up! Scoff your sardines, and give us a rest. Besides," went on Manners, with a grin, "I've got an idea."

"Where did you pinch it?" sneered Gore.

"My dear kid, I got it from you. Yes, chaps, it was Gore's notion. We're going to challenge the Upper Fifth."

Tom Merry whistled.

"I say, Manners, that's rather a big order."

"We can carry it out, my son," said Manners, with a wave of the hand. "Don't you fash your little self. I tell you we're going to challenge the Upper Fifth to deadly strife, on the cricket pitch, and beat them, too!"

"Why don't you challenge the Sixth while you're about it?" sneered Gore.

"Because that would be too big a lump for us to chew," said Manners, "and we've nothing to gain by licking them if we could. But if we beat Devigne and his lot, it will put it beyond all question that Tom Merry ought to go into Clavering First, and not Devigne."

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther.

"Rot, rot!" said Gore.

"Didn't you say it was Gore's idea, Manners?" asked Tom.

"Yes, so it is."

"I was only joking!" snarled Gore. "Of course, I didn't think Manners would be such a silly idiot as to take my advice."

"Well, as a rule, a chap would be a silly idiot to take your advice," agreed Manners. "I'm not denying that, of course. But sometimes, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings—"

"Oh, dry up!"

"Anyway, we're going to do it!" said Manners, "and when we've finished tea, I'm going to write out the challenge."

"Devigne won't accept it," said Tom Merry, with a shake of the head. "He'll say that it's beneath the dignity of his Form to meet a lot of kids. They call us kids in the Upper Fifth. Kids!"

"Then we'll chip him into doing it," declared Manners. "We'll let all Clavering know that he's afraid to meet an eleven out of the Shell."

"Well, that ought to bring him up to time."

"You bet your Sunday boots it will!" chuckled Manners. "Why, we'll get Wingate on his track if he tries to get out of it. We'll make his giddy life a burden till he agrees to come up to the scratch. And then we'll lick him."

"I can fancy I see you doing it!" jeered Gore.

"Well, I hope you can't fancy yourself in the eleven that will be doing it," replied Manners, "because you'll be disappointed."

"Do you mean to say you'd leave me out?" demanded Gore with a scowl.

"Yes, rather! We don't want any more ducks' eggs."

"Well, I think it's a jolly good idea," said Tom Merry.

"What, to leave Gore out of the team?"

"No," said Tom, laughing; "to challenge the Upper Fifth, I mean. As for playing Gore or not, that's for you to settle, as captain of the Form. Let's get the challenge written. Who'll take it to the Fifth Form room?"

"You'd better take it yourself, and get your head knocked off," said Gore.

"I'll take it willingly enough," said Tom instantly.

"We'll all take it," said Manners. "Don't you remember the time when the Upper Fifth sent us a deputation, when you were setting up to be elected captain of Clavering, Tom? Well, we'll go in a giddy deputation to them now, to return the compliment. Any more sardines there? No! All right, now we'll write the challenge."

The study table was cleared. Manners produced pens, ink, and paper. The chums put their heads together over the concoction of the challenge to the Upper Fifth Form. As Manners said, such a challenge wasn't sent every day, and it had to be done in proper style.

"How's this?" said the captain of the Shell thoughtfully.

"The Shell present their compliments to the Upper Fifth, and would be pleased to lick them on the cricket-field—"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Too cocky," he said. "They might lick us."

"Not likely."

"Well, they might, you know, and then we should look asses if we crowed too much beforehand. Nothing like being modest about it."

"Well, I'll put in 'meet,' instead of 'lick,'" said Manners, admitting the force of Tom's argument. "'Would be pleased to meet them on the cricket-field, and decide, by playing the game, which Form knows the most about cricket.' That all right?"

"Good!"

"The Shell are ready and willing to arrange such meeting for any half-holiday the Upper Fifth like to name," went on Manners, penning as he spoke. "'They trust that the Upper Fifth will see their way—see their way sounds awfully business-like—will see their way to accept this challenge, as otherwise the school may think that they are afraid—'"

"Who are afraid?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Who? The Upper Fifth, of course."

Manners went on.

"They trust that the Upper Fifth may see their way to accept this challenge, as otherwise the school may think they are afraid to meet them, and if their challenge is declined, they will know that they can't play cricket for nuts."

"Who's 'they'?" asked Monty, with a helpless look. "I'm not finding fault, Manners, but ain't there too many pronouns in that?"

"Well, I'll cross some of them out," said Manners obligingly. "'It doesn't seem to read very well without them, though,'" he went on. "Look here, if you can't understand plain English, Monty—"

"Is that plain English, Manners?"

"Of course it is, you silly cuckoo!" said Manners crossly.

"Well, what would you call mixed, then? There's too many 'theys.' I appeal to Merry."

"It does seem a bit tangled," said Tom thoughtfully. "Lend me your pencil."

He made a few alterations.

Manners read out the amended document.

"The Shell present their compliments to the Upper Fifth, and would be pleased to meet them on the cricket-field, and decide, by playing the game, which Form knows the most about cricket. The Shell are ready and willing to arrange such meeting for any half-holiday the Upper Fifth like to name, and they trust that the Upper Fifth will see their way to accept the challenge. Otherwise, the school may think that the Upper Fifth are afraid. If this challenge is declined, the Shell will know that the Upper Fifth can't play cricket for toffee."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Manners. "I can't see that it's much improved, but it'll do. Anything for a quiet life. Now to interview the Upper Fifth."

A fair copy of the amended document was carefully written out, and the chums rose.

"Are you coming, Gore?" asked Manners.

Gore had watched the whole proceeding with a sneer upon his face.

"No, I'm not," snapped Gore. "You can go and make silly asses of yourselves without my assistance."

"I don't know; that sort of thing is more in your line," said Manners. "However, stay here if you like. Your room's better than your company, any day. Come on, chaps."

Tom Merry carried the precious document, and with his chums on either side, he marched off cheerfully to the Fifth Form room.

CHAPTER 3.

How the Upper Fifth Received the Challenge.

EDGAR DEVIGNE, captain of the Upper Fifth Form at Clavering, was deep in a discussion with his chum Cary. Devigne was looking sombre and ill-tempered.

"It's a rotten shame," he said; "the fuss they make of that chap Merry, is sickening. They came near electing him captain of Clavering—him, a kid in the Shell! I don't quite know why he didn't get in, but I believe he could have if he had liked."

"I believe so, too," agreed Cary. "He's very popular. There would have been a row, though. The Fifth would never have stood it."

"And are we going to stand the latest?" demanded Devigne.

"What's the latest?"

"You heard what Wingate said about shoving that fellow into the First?"

"Yes, it's sickening," said Cary. "I suppose Wingate feels that he owes him something, for he would never have got in as captain if Merry hadn't stood out of it of his own accord. Perhaps he's going to make it up to him by sticking him in the First Eleven."

"You know what it means, Cary? If he were a bowler, I wouldn't care. But he's a batsman, and so am I. If he goes in, I shall have to stand out."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Cary. "Fancy a fellow in the Shell being chosen before a senior of the Upper Fifth!"

"But there's no arguing with Wingate when he's made up his mind."

"We won't stand it, all the same. We'll get up a row about it. Mr. Railton ought to forbid anything of the kind. I have an idea that he stopped Merry from becoming captain. Perhaps he'll step in here."

Devigne shook his head.

"This is a different kind of matter," he said gloomily. "He couldn't interfere. It's for the cricket captain to decide. But—"

The Upper Fifth captain ground his teeth. "I'm not going to stand it, Cary. If they decide to put Merry in, I'll keep him out somehow, by fair means or foul."

"Sh!" said Cary warningly. "Here comes the bounder!" The three chums of the Shell had entered, and were coming towards them.

Devigne looked at them, and then at the written paper in Tom Merry's hand, with a scowl, wondering what they wanted, but prepared to give them a hostile reception, whatever it was.

"Hallo," growled Cary, "what are you kids doing here?"

"Kid yourself!" said Monty. "Lantern-jawed ass, I call you!"

Cary jumped up, with a threatening look.

"Say that again, Lowther!"

"Lantern-jawed—" began Monty, willing to oblige; but Tom Merry interrupted him.

"Shut up, Monty! We didn't come here to row."

"Well, he asked me—"

"Chuck it! Cary, keep your wool on. We're on a mission of peace."

"What do you want, Spooney?"

It was the old name that had been bestowed upon Tom Merry when he first came to Clavering, and at one time it would have ruffled his equanimity, but now he only smiled.

"We've come to give you this challenge."

"That—that what?"

"Challenge," said Tom cheerfully. "You'll understand when you read it."

He handed it to Devigne, who, in his astonishment, took it mechanically. A number of Fifth Form fellows, who had heard Tom's words, were gathering round, wondering what it all meant. Devigne read the challenge, and his brow grew very black.

Tom Merry waited, with a smile upon his face, for Devigne to finish.

The captain of the Upper Fifth crumpled the paper in his hand, and lifted his eyes to Tom's cheerful face, with a black frown.

"So this is some more of your cheek, Merry?"

"Cheek!" said Tom. "I don't see where the cheek comes in. What's your answer?"

Devigne calmly took the paper and tore it across; then placed the pieces together and tore them across again. Then he flung the pieces into the grate.

"That's my answer," he said.

Tom watched his proceedings with an air of genial interest. "Thanks!" he said. "It's awfully interesting. But I'm not good at guessing the meaning of dumb show. That's all very well for a living picture, but what does it mean?"

Devigne flushed red as some of his Form-fellows giggled. "It means that fellows of our position don't play games with kids!" he exclaimed scornfully. "That's what it means, so get out!"

"You refuse the challenge?"

"Yes," snapped Devigne; "I've said so. Now clear!"

"What's it all about?" demanded Saunders. "What does he want, Devigne?"

"Oh, it's only some more of his rotten cheek!" said Devigne.

But Tom Merry did not intend that the Upper Fifth should be left in ignorance of his challenge. He cast a glance round at the interested faces.

"You see," he remarked, "we fellows of the Shell rather fancy our cricket, and, as we feel pretty certain that we could lick the Upper Fifth in a fair fight—"

"What!" was the general yell.

"That we could lick the Upper Fifth in a fair fight," went on Tom imperturbably, "we have challenged your captain to meet us in a match on the cricket ground."

"Likely! A lot of kids!"

"I'm sorry to see that you're afraid," said Tom. "It's rather a come-down for Clavering, to have a Fifth Form without the pluck of a giddy mouse."

"Who's afraid?" roared twenty voices.

"Well, Devigne is, for one; and so are you all, if you let him sneak out of the match," said Tom Merry calmly. "But I hope you'll think better of it."

"We'll make you think better of coming here to check us!" exclaimed Cary, jumping up again. "Collar them, chaps, and chuck them out!"

"Here, hands off!" cried Tom. "It's pax. We came here peacefully—"

"Pax be blowed! There wasn't anything of the kind agreed on. You came here to check the Fifth, and this is where the chucking-out begins."

"Hands off, you bounders, or we'll—"

"Out you go!"

The Fifth-formers, laughing and jeering, made a rush at the three, and the latter were, of course, swept off their feet, and hurried forth from the room in a considerably rumpled and ruffled condition. They sprawled on the floor out in the corridor, and the Fifth-formers stood crowding in the doorway, laughing loudly.

Tom was the first upon his feet. He had struggled, vainly but heroically, and his collar was torn out, his jacket split down the back, and his waistcoat half buttonless.

"Ha, ha!" howled the Fifth-formers. "Got any more challenges to bring, Merry?"

"Wait a bit, you horrid bounders!" gasped Tom. "We'll make you sit up for it yet. Come on, Chappies!"

He helped the dazed and dizzy Manners and Monty to their feet; and the three, looking decidedly the worse for wear, went down the passage, followed by the derisive laughter and hooting of the Fifth Form.

"Never mind," said Tom, when they reached their study. "That's only the preliminary canter. Devigne won't find it such a beastly funny laughing matter soon."

His chums looked at themselves ruefully in the glass.

"I dare say you're right, Tom," said Manners, with a grimace. "But, so far, I must confess that Devigne and his lot have the grin of us."

"It looks to me like that," agreed Monty Lowther. "No more giddy ambassadorial functions for me. We'll give the Fifth Form room a wide berth."

"We'll make the Fifth Form sit up," said Tom determinedly. "Anybody got any money?"

"What do you want money for?"

"To carry out an idea. Don't ask questions, but hand over all the tin you've got."

Manners turned out three shillings, Monty Lowther seven-and-sixpence. Tom searched through his pockets and found a sovereign and nearly a pound in odd silver. Tom Merry generally had plenty of pocket-money.

"That will do, I reckon," he said reflectively. "Now, I'm off!"

"Where are you going?"

"To High Clavering," said Tom, putting on his cap as he turned to the door. He had made his appearance a little more respectable.

"What are you going to do in the village?"

"No time to stop now, or the shop will be closed. Ta-ta!"

And Tom Merry hurried off, leaving his friends considerably mystified.

"What the dickens is the silly chap up to?" exclaimed Manners. "What's he going to do?"

Monty Lowther made an expressive grimace.

"He's going to blow our tin," he replied. "We can be sure of that; and, as for the rest, I suppose he'll tell us when he comes back. Hallo! There's Devigne!"

The captain of the Upper Fifth looked into the study as he passed. He had his hat on, as if he were just going out.

"Hallo!" he said. "Got any more challenges to give away?"

"Oh, go and eat pancakes!" said Manners.

And Devigne grinned and passed on.

CHAPTER 4.

An Old Acquaintance.

TOM MERRY was none too soon in passing out of the gates of Clavering. It was dusk, and close upon locking-up time. It was extremely probable that Tom would not be back in time for calling-over, but he had to risk that.

He went down the road towards the village at a brisk pace.

He was soon out of sight of the school, in a part of the road where huge pine-trees shadowed it on either side. Even in the daytime this spot was shadowy, and now in the dusk of evening it was very dark.

Tom gave quite a jump as a ragged figure detached itself from a low rail along the lane at this point and stepped into his path.

"Skuse me, young gentleman, can you 'elp a 'ard-working man?"

The voice was half wheedling and half threatening.

There was a familiar note in it to Tom's ears, and he looked curiously at the man, noting the liquor-reddened face, the bleared eyes, the dirty, unkempt beard.

"Honest Jim!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

Back to his memory had come a day long before, when he had first come to Clavering, and had lost his way. He had sought information of a tramp. The latter had obligingly led him into the heart of a wood, and tried to rob him there.

The man had called himself Honest Jim, and it was this identical Honest Jim who had now placed himself in the boy's path.

He recognised Tom at the same moment, although the athletic young fellow in Etons was very much changed from the lad who had fallen into his clutches that day.

"So it's you, young shaver, is it?"

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"Yes," he said shortly, "it is I. You'd better clear out of this place, my man, if you don't want the police set on your track!"

Honest Jim showed his dirty yellow teeth in a snarl.

"You'll set 'em on my track, will you?" he said. "You will, will you?"

"Yes, I will, if you don't clear out, you hulking brute!"

exclaimed Tom. "Let me pass."

The man came a step closer to him.

"You got away from me before," he said. "You won't find it so easy this time, young shaver. 'And over your watch and your tin now—quick!"

Tom Merry sprang back. He had no intention whatever of allowing the ruffian to rob him; but he saw that Honest Jim was ready for any deed of violence, and he knew that he was in a tight place.

The ruffian, with a muttered curse, rushed straight at him, whirling aloft his cudgel. A desperate look came into Tom's eyes. There was no escaping the attack; he had one chance, and he took it. Lowering his head, he rushed to meet the ruffian, and in a flash they met, with a stunning shock.

Tom could not have escaped the slash of the cudgel, but by his prompt action he had taken the ruffian quite by surprise. Honest Jim's arm descended, but the cudgel was past Tom, and only his elbow came with a clump on the back of the boy's neck. And Tom's head went like a battering-ram at the ruffian's chest. Honest Jim was bowled over like a nine-pin. Down into the road he went with a crash, and his cudgel flew from his hand into the grass. Tom reeled back, sick and faint with the concussion. The ruffian, cursing savagely, was scrambling up. Tom turned to fly, dazed and dizzy, and ran back the way he had come. He heard the ruffian's steps pounding behind him, and ran his hardest, but the shock had unsteadied him, and he was not in his best form. He burst out of the shadow of the trees into the more open road, where the twilight was yet clear. There was a sudden sharp exclamation.

"Where are you running to?"

Tom gasped with relief when he recognised Devigne.

"There's a bound of a tramp after me," he panted.

"Stand by me, Devigne! There he is!"

Honest Jim came running up.

Devigne clenched his fists and faced him; and the ruffian, seeing that he had two 'ees to tackle, paused irresolutely.

"Hallo!" said the Fifth-former. "What do you want, my man?"

The ruffian gave him a sullen look.

"I want that young 'ound!" he said, between his teeth.

"I'll find a time yet."

Devigne looked at him curiously.

"You'd better get back to the school, Merry," he said abruptly.

"I'm going to the village," Tom replied. "You have no right to give me orders."

"I am a senior," said Devigne harshly. "You've no right to be out. Go back to Clavering at once, or it will be the worse for you!"

"I won't!"

Devigne's eyes blazed.

"You impertinent little rascal, are you going back or not?"

"No, I'm not. I've as much right to stay out as you have, if it comes to that, and you're not a prefect," said Tom, with spirit.

The Fifth-former looked for a moment as if he would spring upon him. But he restrained himself, giving the boy a very dark look.

"Very well," he said, between his teeth—"very well. I'll remember that, Merry!"

Tom made a gesture of indifference, and, keeping a wary eye upon Honest Jim, passed the latter and hurried on towards the village. The tramp scowled at him, but made no motion to molest him again.

Honest Jim had been watching Devigne curiously. Now Tom was gone, the captain of the Upper Fifth fixed his eyes upon the tramp with a peculiar expression.

"You can keep your distance," he said, as Honest Jim made a movement as if to approach him. "It seems that you have met Tom Merry before to-day?"

"Yes, I 'ave," growled the ruffian, "and I'll meet him ag'in yet!"

"What do you hate him for?"

"Because I do!" snarled Honest Jim. "Ain't that enough, mister? I fancy you don't love him any too much yourself."

Devigne laughed slightly.

"I suppose you found me very much in your way just now?" he remarked. "It stopped your little game, which, I suppose, was robbery with violence? I am half sorry that I came along. You are right in thinking that I don't like the fellow. Suppose—"

He paused, and looked long and very earnestly into the rugged, brutal face of the tramp.

Honest Jim nodded intelligently.

"Give me a chance," he said, "and I'll do for you what you'd like to do, but daren't. Yes, I know what you are thinking of."

Devigne changed colour slightly.

"He may be in my way," he said slowly, and in a low voice. "Mind, he is not now, but he may be, and if that comes about—never mind now. Can I see you again if I want to? Are you staying round here?"

"Yes, mister. If you come to the ruined barn in the Green Acres, you'll find me 'most any night. That there's my hotel just at present." And the ruffian grinned.

Devigne nodded.

"I'll remember. I may want to see you again. I don't know. There's half-a-crown for you, anyway."

He tossed the coin to the tramp, and Honest Jim's grimy paw closed upon it.

"I'll remember, mister."

Devigne strode on towards the village. He had started out to order a new cricket bat there, but he was not now thinking of that.

From the expression on his face his thoughts did not appear to be pleasant or charitable ones. Devigne was a fellow who was passably well liked in his Form, but it was well known that he was spiteful and unforgiving, and a bad enemy to have. There was much of latent evil in his nature, which circumstances might easily develop. And it looked very much as if it were being developed now by his dislike and jealousy of Tom Merry.

He entered the village, and the object of his visit there recurring to his mind, he went into the shop which supplied Clavering with most of its athletic goods. Somewhat to his surprise, he found Tom Merry there. He had expected Tom to be bound for the tack-shop. Tom nodded to him cheerfully, and Devigne scowled.

"What are you doing here, Merry?"

"Buying things," said Tom. "Nice assortment, ain't it?"

Devigne looked in amazement at the pile of Tom's purchases on the counter. They were chiefly, it seemed, musical instruments—tin whistles and mouth-organs, a small kettle-drum and sticks, and a cheap concertina, and half a dozen sets of castanets.

"I think that's about all, Mr. Goode," said Tom. "You won't forget to send them up to the school in the morning?"

"Certainly not, Master Merry," said Mr. Goode, who was lost in wonder as much as Devigne, but very pleased nevertheless to find so excellent a customer. "You shall have them by the first delivery of goods in the morning."

"And you'll return half the purchase-money on all goods brought back undamaged?"

"That's the agreement, sir."

"Well, there's the tin," said Tom.

The proprietor of the shop counted out the change.

"What the dickens do you want with all those things, Merry?" demanded the mystified Devigne. "Have you gone right off your rocker?"

"Not quite," said Tom Merry pleasantly. "You'll learn if you live long enough, Devigne, and I dare say you will, as it will be in full swing to-morrow."

"What will be in full swing?"

"You'll see to-morrow. Good-night, Mr. Goode!"

And Tom sauntered out of the shop. He returned to the

school by a different route, to keep out of the way of Honest Jim, and did not encounter the tramp. But he found the school gates closed, and when he was admitted he had to encounter Herr Schneider. And the German master gave him three on each hand for being late for calling-over, and when Tom went to his study his hands were tucked away under his arms, and he was making a wry face. Still, he seemed to be in a satisfied mood.

CHAPTER 5.

Facing the Music.

"**H**ALLU, what on earth's that?"

"Sounds like a German band."

"It can't be."

"What on earth is it?"

"What a thundering row!"

These exclamations, and a great many more of the same kind, might have been heard—and, as a matter of fact, were heard—in the Fifth Form room at Clavering College, after school upon the following day.

There were a goodly number of Fifth-formers in the room, some of them playing chess or draughts, some of them chatting, some of them playing their cricket bats, or otherwise occupied. From the quadrangle had come a sudden blare of noise.

The windows of the Fifth Form room overlooked the quad, and in the pleasant evening of early summer they were open, so the Fifth-formers had the full benefit of the terrific disturbance that had just broken out.

And a terrific disturbance it truly was. The sounds of many musical instruments were blended together, dominated by the aggressive rattle of a kettle-drum, and, as Cary suggested, it sounded like a German band, with all the performers in an advanced state of intoxication.

There was a wondering rush of the Fifth-formers to the window to see what on earth was the matter. Then new exclamations of amazement burst forth.

The sight in the close was astounding. Under the windows a band was gathered, composed of boys out of the Shell. Monty Lowther, Manners, Jimson, French, and Harris, and a good many more, were there as large as life, armed with various instruments, and all playing away furiously. Tom Merry, with a cricket stump in his hand, by way of baton, was conducting.

Tom Merry was grinning hugely, and some of the performers were grinning too, so much that they found difficulty in producing music.

The cricket stump waved rhythmically, somewhat to the danger of bystanders when they came too close.

"Louder!" exclaimed the conductor. "Faster! You're not making noise enough. The Upper Fifth will never hear you!"

"They must be as deaf as adders, then," giggled Monty Lowther.

"Don't talk; keep on with the music."

"The music! Oh, my only Panama hat!"

"Shut up! Get on, I tell you!"

And the conductor gave the recalcitrant Monty a dig in the ribs with the pointed end of the stump, which made him gasp.

Devigne leaned out of the window above. His sour face was dark with anger.

"What does this mean?" he bawled. "What are you up to, Merry? How dare you come and make that thundering row under our window?"

"Keep it up, chaps! Louder!"

Manners rattled away on the kettle-drum for all he was worth. Mouth-organs, tin whistles, castanets, and cymbals—the latter consisting mainly of saucepan-lids—backed him up, and the din was positively terrific.

"Tom Merry!" yelled Devigne.

Tom turned his head.

"Hallo! Did you speak? How do you like 'em done? Coats on, or coats off?"

"What are you making that noise for?" howled the Fifth-former.

"What noise?"

"That thundering row!"

"Oh, this isn't a noise or a row, it's music!"

"If you don't take it away at once, we'll come out to you!"

"Don't you like music?" asked Tom innocently.

Devigne raved.

The fearful noise was ear-splitting, and it could be heard all over Clavering. Fellows were coming from all parts to see what was the matter, and windows were opening everywhere. Many of the onlookers stuffed their fingers into their ears.

"He's gone mad," gasped Cary. "That's what it is. He's mad."

"What is the game, anyway, Merry?" bawled Saunders.

Tom looked up at the window again.

"We've got an announcement to make," he replied; "we want all Clavering to hear it, and this is the most striking way I could think of to gather 'em round."

"What do you want to do it under our blessed window for?"

"Why, it concerns you, you know."

"Get away!" roared Devigne, as the music burst out more ferociously than ever. "We'll come out to you, Merry, and wipe up the ground with you!"

Tom took no notice.

The band blared forth furiously, and Devigne hurried to the door of the Fifth Form room.

"Come on, chaps!" he exclaimed. "Let's go out and smash the brutes, and trample on their beastly instruments of torture! I'll make Manners eat his drumsticks, and shove a mouth-organ down Tom Merry's throat."

The Fifth crowded after him.

Devigne dragged at the door, but it would not open.

"Hallo, what's the matter with this beastly door?" he exclaimed. "It won't open! Who's locked it?"

"It isn't locked," said Cary. "Why, there's the key in the lock!"

"Well, it won't open, then!"

"Let me try."

"I tell you it won't open!" snapped Devigne.

Cary tried, and pulled with all his might, but the door refused to budge. It gave about half an inch, and then remained immovable.

The truth dawned upon the imprisoned Fifth-formers all at once.

"Tom Merry's fastened it."

Devigne gritted his teeth. It was evidently true. Tom Merry had contrived to fasten the door on the outside before the band started under the window. A rope tied across from the handle to the handle of a door opposite had probably done it.

"We're giddy prisoners!" exclaimed Saunders, who seemed inclined to take the affair humorously. "There's no getting out of this."

Devigne hurried back to the window.

The band was still in full blast, and the noise was simply deafening.

"Hallo!" said Tom, as Devigne's head was put out again. "Coming to face the music? You'll get to like it in the long run."

"I'll break your neck for you! Go and unfasten our door!"

"Oh, you've discovered that, have you? No, we can't do it. You'd very likely come and bother us, and put us off our time."

"Shut up that ghastly row, you set of silly lunatics!"

Tom Merry glanced round. Almost all Clavering had crowded to the spot—seniors and juniors—and Tom thought it time to get down to business before a master came upon the scene with a cane. He held up his baton.

"Halt!" he exclaimed. "I mean, take a rest. This is where the speechifying begins."

The band clattered and squeaked into silence.

"Take notice," bawled Tom Merry, "Clavering chaps, and all whom it may concern, that the Shell have challenged the Upper Fifth to a cricket match, and that the Upper Fifth are afraid to come up to the scratch."

There was a yell of rage from the Fifth Form window, and a shout of laughter in the close.

"Oyez, oyez, oyez!" bawled Tom. "Take notice, everybody! The Upper Fifth have flunked meeting the Shell on the cricket-field, and they can't play the game for toffee. Oyez, oyez, oyez!"

Devigne was gasping with rage. He swarmed out of the window, and at the risk of a bump dropped down to the ground. He wanted to get to close quarters with Tom Merry without delay.

He dropped on his feet, but fell over, and the Shell did not give him a chance to get up again. Jimson and Harris promptly sat upon him, and pinned him down, and Manners gave him a playful tap on the nose with a drum-stick.

"Let me get up!" roared Devigne.

"Rats!" said Tom. "You look very pretty where you are. Give him another tap if he wriggles, Manners. Teach him manners! Ha, ha!"

Devigne was struggling furiously, and the drum-stick beat a tattoo upon his features, which drove him into a state bordering on frenzy. The crowd watching this peculiar scene were in a state of hysteria from laughing.

Some Fifth-formers who happened to be in the close came up to the rescue, but the Shell closed up to meet them, and they were in greater force.

"Rescue! Help!" spluttered Devigne.

But the Upper Fifth were following him now from the window. They came dropping down, and they lost no time in coming to fistcuffs with the Shell. Devigne was released from his uncomfortable position, and he rushed at Tom Merry. In a moment they were locked in a deadly embrace.

Alas for the band, and for the cash that was to be returned to Tom Merry for all musical instruments taken back undamaged!

In the wild scramble that ensued the instruments went to the ground, and were trampled underfoot by the combatants. They were flattened into all sorts of shapes, and the kettle-drum was stamped out of all semblance to one. The drum-sticks, however, in the hands of Manners, still did some execution.

The uproar was at its height when Wingate came hurrying upon the scene.

"What's all this fearful row?" cried the captain of Clavering. "Stop it, you lunatics! Mr. Railton is coming."

The name of the Head of Clavering was enough to make the combatants desist—all but Devigne and Tom Merry. They were tightly gripped, and feeling to and fro, knocking aside everybody that came in their way. Wingate made a sign to North, of the Sixth, and the two big seniors gripped the rivals, and with a tremendous jerk tore them apart.

"Now, what's this all about?" demanded Wingate, shaking Tom Merry.

"Lem-lem-lemme get my breath!" gasped Tom. "It's all right. We were only making an announcement to the school, when Devigne had to interfere."

"Let me get at him!" roared Devigne.

"Keep that ass quiet, North!" said Wingate.

"Right-ho!" said the Sixth-former; and he held Devigne fast, in spite of his struggling. "Shut up, Devigne, you ass! I'm not going to let you go."

Tom Merry quickly recovered his coolness, and he smiled sweetly at his enemy.

"Keep your wool on, Devigne!" he exclaimed, in his genial way. "I know it's a bit of a rotten come-down to have to own up before all Clavering that you're afraid of a junior Form, but the truth is the giddy truth, you know."

Wingate gave Tom a shake.

"What are you talking about, Merry?"

"Why, we're challenged the Upper Fifth to a cricket match, Wingate, and they funk it, so we're showing them up, that's all."

"It's a crammer!" yelled Saunders. "We don't funk it!"

"We're not going to play with a lot of kids!" cried Cary. "No, you're afraid of getting licked!" howled the Shell, with one voice.

The uproar was starting again, but Wingate shouted for silence.

"Well, you shouldn't have made such a ghastly row, Merry!" he said. "All the same, it's not sportsmanlike to refuse a challenge."

"We're not going to play a lot of kids out of a lower Form!"

"Yah! Afraid!" howled the Shell.

"Hallo! Here's the Head!"

The athletic form of Mr. Railton, the young Head of Clavering, was approaching with rapid strides. There was a general exodus at the sight of him.

When Mr. Railton reached the spot he found only the non-combatants there, and the field of battle strewn with trampled musical instruments.

The Shell were gone, in various directions. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther foregathered in the study. Tom's face showed very visible signs of his encounter with Devigne, but he was as cheerful and as merry as ever.

"We've let all Clavering know how the case stands," he grinned. "There's nothing else likely to be talked about for some time, I fancy. If the Upper Fifth don't meet us on the cricket-field now they'll be the joke of the school."

CHAPTER 6.

The Shell on the Warpath.

CLAVERING, as a matter of fact, was convulsed by Tom Merry's latest device, and all the Forms except the Upper Fifth chuckled over it again and again. Devigne and his Form, however, took it very badly.

Fellows made anxious inquiries of them whether they were going to meet the Shell eleven, and whether they had been funkng any matches lately, till they were quite wild on the subject, and it was dangerous to mention it.

A feeling was growing in the Upper Fifth that the challenge should be accepted, if only to put an end to the jeering and joking of the other Forms. Some of the fellows

consulted together, and put it plainly to Devigne; but the captain of the Form eleven shook his head.

"We can't play a set of kids!" he said decisively. "It's infra dig. We can't do it. Of course, we should lick them easily. It would be simply a walk-over for us; but what a set of silly guys we should look, playing a lot of boys!"

"They're not bad cricketers," said Saunders; "and Wingate is talking about putting Merry into the First Eleven."

Devigne scowled blackly. That was a sore subject with him.

"I can't help it if Wingate's a silly ass!" he said.

"Well, Wingate knows a lot more about cricket than you do, anyway."

"Bah! He has to do something for Tom Merry, of course."

"What do you mean? I don't see why he has to."

"Merry could have got in as captain at the election if he had liked. He stood out, and let Wingate get it. What did he do for it?"

"Blessed if I know. What are you getting at?"

"Well, Wingate's talking about playing him in the First Eleven now."

Saunders whistled.

"Hang it all, Devigne, do you mean that Wingate would put him in if he wasn't First Eleven form to make it up to him for standing out of the election?"

Devigne bit his lip. He felt that he had allowed his passion to hurry him too far, but he could not very well retract his insinuation.

"I don't say so," he exclaimed "but a chap can't help putting two and two together. Is it common-sense to take a fellow from the Shell for the First Eleven, when there's better batsmen in the Upper Fifth?"

"No, that's true enough; but I can't believe that Wingate

"I don't say anything for certain," said Devigne hastily.

"Let it drop. I only say that Tom Merry is not the form one might think from his name being mentioned for the First, that's all. And the rest of that team are simply kids. We can't play the Shell. We're not going to play them."

"The fellows will say we're afraid of getting licked."

"They're already saying it," said another.

"Let them say what they like," said Devigne impatiently.

"This is only a freak of Tom Merry's, and we're not going to rise to the bait. It'll blow over as soon as that youngster starts some fresh trick."

"They seem to me to be in deadly earnest. They mean to force us to play, or show us up to all Clavering as a set of funks!" growled Saunders.

"Well, they're not going to force us to play."

The remonstrators withdrew, in no good humour at Devigne's obstinacy, and the captain of the Upper Fifth was left alone in his study with Cary. Cary looked at him curiously when the door closed.

"I say, Devigne, this is getting serious. It looks to me as if we shall have to play the Shell, whether we like it or not."

"Not so long as I'm captain!" snapped the other.

Cary gave an expressive whistle.

"It may mean mutiny in the Form!"

"Do you mean that they may throw me over, and get another captain to meet the Shell?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"I don't think it's likely. They wouldn't have much chance without me in their ranks."

"No, that's true; but I'm beginning to think that even with you, Edgar, we shouldn't have much chance."

"What do you mean?" growled Devigne uneasily.

"Now we're quite by ourselves, we may as well be frank about it," said Cary, with a grin. "The Upper Fifth Eleven can't play the Shell. They would lick us."

"What rot! A set of kids!"

"Keep that for the others," grinned Cary. "Better talk plain English with me, Devigne. I'm with you through a thick and thin, as you know. Tom Merry is simply a wonder with the bat, and if we met the Shell in a fair match he would win it for them. He would knock up twice as many runs as you could, Devigne, to be quite frank."

"I don't believe it for a moment."

"I do, then. His score would be so much larger than yours that Wingate couldn't have a single doubt left as to which of you to put into Clavering First."

Devigne's face was very dark, but his expression showed that he felt the truth of the words uttered by his chum. His talk about dignity of the Form was mainly humbug. It was a defeat he was afraid of.

"They could lick us," said Cary, in his brutally candid way; "and as we're not going to be licked by a lower Form, we shall have to talk big about our dignity, and refuse to meet them. Better have it out plain between ourselves."

"Well, suppose I admit it," growled Devigne, "that brute

Merry has got us in a cleft stick. He's going to drive us into accepting his challenge if he can. Then, if we win, there's no elat in beating a Form so much lower than our own; while, if we lose, we couldn't hold up our heads again. He wins all along the line."

"Yes; and if he beats us he gets into Clavering First."

"Confound it, yes! What do you keep harping on that for?" Devigne gritted his teeth spitefully. "I suppose it's pretty certain that Wingate will put him in the First Eleven if he beats us. But even supposing we are driven to play the Shell, Tom Merry may not be in his usual form for batting."

Cary laughed.

"I suppose you're not thinking of damaging him and putting him off his form?"

"Who said I was?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, the thought crossed my mind," said Cary. "Suppose you accepted his challenge, and then picked a quarrel with him, and gave him a thundering good hiding the day before the match? He wouldn't bat very well with an ache in every bone in his body, and we should walk over them easily."

"Jolly good idea, only the whole school would know what I had pitched into him for," growled Devigne. "If you can't think of a better idea than that you'd better give it up."

"Have you got a better one?"

"Never mind. I sha'n't play the Shell if I can help it. If I'm forced to, Tom Merry sha'n't be fit to play much of a game against us. That's all I've got to say."

And in spite of Cary's efforts to draw him further, Devigne refused to say a word more about his secret intentions.

That the Upper Fifth would be forced to play the test match was becoming very probable. For Tom Merry, having drawn the attention of all Clavering to the dispute, and to the fact that the Upper Fifth were funky, was not inclined to let it rest.

The morning after the adventure of the band in the Close, the Upper Fifth, on coming out of their class-room, found a giggling crowd collected before the notice-board in the hall. Naturally they wanted to know what was the matter, and they came crowding up curiously. Their curiosity changed to rage as they saw what it was, that had gathered the gigglers in front of the notice-board.

Among the various notices pinned there was a black-edged card, got up very neatly in the deepest mourning style. It was inscribed as follows:

"In affectionate Remembrance of the
Upper Fifth Form at Clavering,
Which died of Fright on being
Challenged
to meet the Middle School
on the
Cricket Field.
R.I.P."

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the readers of this precious mourning card, and the hall rang with their laughter. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Silly rot!" growled Devigne.

"Hallo!" cried Jimson. "Here are some of the corpses!"

"Died of fright," sobbed Monty Lowther, taking out his handkerchief. "The poor little things couldn't stand the shock. Boo-oo-oo!"

"They're dead," murmured French; "but they won't lie down. Died of fright! Boo-oo! Boo-hoo-hoo!"

Devigne stalked off in a rage.

All Clavering giggled over the mourning card, till it was torn down by an angry Upper Fifth-former and rent into little pieces.

But that did not do much good, for after afternoon school there was another notice on the board in the handwriting of Tom Merry. A furious crowd of Fifth-formers read it.

And this was the notice:

"Take Notice, all whom it may concern!
The Upper Fifth Form
have given up
CRICKET
and taken to playing marbles instead.
The Fifth Form ground
is to BE LET, as it will not be wanted
any more.
Anyone willing to take bats, balls, stumps and nets,
in exchange for
TOPS and MARBLES,
should apply at
The Fifth Form Room

BY ORDER.

The Fifth-formers looked at each other sheepishly.

Fellows of the Sixth were laughing themselves giddy over it, and the Fourth Form howled till the hall rang again.

Some of the masters who came that way read the notice and exploded over it, and even Herr Schneider cackled till he was red in the face.

Naturally, Mr. Railton was not long in hearing of it. Mr. Quelch, the master of the Shell, had told him about the mourning card, and when he heard that there was a fresh notice on the board Mr. Railton came along to look at it.

The boys fell back respectfully at sight of the Head; but they could hardly stop laughing, in spite of his presence. Mr. Railton stopped before the notice-board, and read Tom Merry's precious effusion and tried to frown. But he could not. The frown relaxed, and a smile took its place. The smile broadened to a laugh, the laugh to a roar.

And the boys, encouraged by seeing the Head laugh, joined in with gusto, and again the hall rang with merriment.

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Railton at last, with the tears running down his cheeks. "This is most ridiculous and absurd. What does it mean?"

Tom Merry was there, and Mr. Railton had fixed his eyes upon him, easily guessing who had written that precious notice, even if he had not known Tom's writing. The hero of the Shell looked very demure.

"I believe that was written by a fellow in our Form, sir," he said, as the Head was looking straight at him, and evidently expecting him to reply.

"Indeed! I dare say you have reason to believe that, Merry," said Mr. Railton drily.

"Yes, sir, I have reason to believe it."

"And what is the cause of this absurd prank?"

"I think the Shell have challenged the Upper Fifth to a cricket match, sir."

"And have the Upper Fifth refused to meet them?"

"I heard so, sir. You see, sir, we licked the Lower Fifth, and we want to give the Upper Fifth a turn, so as to be fair all round. But Devigne and his lot are not taking any—I mean, they have declined the challenge."

"Ah, I see, Merry! I am afraid I cannot allow such a notice as this to remain on the board," said Mr. Railton, taking it down. "Wingate, I should like to speak to you in my study, if you will kindly follow me there."

"Certainly, sir."

And the captain of Clavering accompanied the Head to his study.

"Well, I think it's working!" exclaimed Tom. "If the Upper Fifth won't meet us, kids, we'll make their giddy existence a burden, and no mistake!"

And, indeed, Tom's prediction seemed likely to be realised. For a little later some of the challenged Form found a little heap of coloured tops and a bag of marbles in their room, with a note appended: "A present from the Fourth Form."

Devigne hurled the bag of marbles against the wall in a rage, and it burst and sent the contents all over the room, with a clatter.

"This is getting sickening!" exclaimed Saunders wrathfully. "Look here, Devigne, how long do you think this is going to last?"

"How the dickens should I know?" growled Edgar Devigne.

"We shall get chipped to death. I think we ought to meet the Shell."

"Who's captain of this Form, Saunders?"

"You are, I suppose, or were. You're not much of a captain now, letting us get chipped like this by a set of youngsters!"

"We're not going to play a junior Form."

"Better that than we should be set down for a lot of funks. Look here, if you won't play the game, Devigne, I shall see what the fellows say to playing it without you."

"You can do as you like, if you think you could beat the Shell without my assistance."

"Do you mean that you wouldn't play in the team?"

"I certainly wouldn't."

And Devigne thrust his hands into his pockets and walked away. He went to his room for his cricket bat, with the intention of going down to the Fifth Form ground to practice. A general shout of inquiry greeted him in the Close.

"Hallo, Devigne! What are you going to do with that bat?"

"You don't play cricket?"

"What you want is a humming-top!"

Devigne gritted his teeth as he walked on, pretending not to hear. It began to be borne in upon his mind that he would have to play the Shell.

DAILY MAIL.



When Mr. Railton reached the spot he found only the non-combatants there, and the field of battle strewn with trampled musical instruments. (See page 7.)

CHAPTER 7.

The Challenge Accepted.

MR. RAILTON at that very time was talking the matter over very seriously with Wingate. Mr. Railton was a splendid athlete and an old Blue, and he took the deepest interest in the athletic side of life at Clavering. He was almost as keen as Wingate to see the college beat the record in the summer fixtures.

"What is all this about the Shell and the Upper Fifth, Wingate?" he said. "There seems to have been a quarrel of some kind. What does it all mean?"

The captain of Clavering smiled ruefully.

"Young Merry is at the bottom of it, of course," he said. "Of course, you would guess that, Mr. Railton."

The Head smiled, too.

"Yes, I have learned to think of Merry at once when there is a departure from the normal in anything," he replied. "He is on the war-path against the Upper Fifth, it seems."

"Yes. It began with the usual match the other day between the Shell and the Lower Fifth. In the ordinary course of events the Lower Fifth would of course have beaten the Shell, as a lower Form. Owing to Merry's remarkable batting the Shell won the match, beating the Lower Fifth hollow, with three wickets to spare."

"Yes, I heard about that, and I am sorry I did not see the match."

"Then the Shell challenged the Upper Fifth."

"Like Alexander, they sought fresh worlds to conquer," smiled the Head.

"Yes, sir, that's about it," said Wingate, laughing. "Of course, such a challenge would in ordinary circumstances have been an awful cheek in a Form so much lower in the school, but the circumstances were exceptional. The Shell had beaten the Lower Fifth easily. They naturally thought they had a good chance against the next Form higher, and I must say that I think so, too. Devigne and his men were angry at being challenged—I can understand that, too—but I can't help thinking that fear of defeat has as much to do with it as offended dignity."

The Head nodded slowly.

"Such a match would do no harm," he remarked, "if it were undertaken in a friendly spirit. But Devigne appears to have definitely refused."

"Yes; and ever since the Shell have been chipping the Upper Fifth about funkung the match. It is evidently Merry's intention to drive Devigne into meeting him."

"Of course, he could be stopped."

The captain of Clavering looked doubtful.

"I don't quite see how, sir," he replied. "He could be stopped putting notices on the board, certainly, and playing like a German band in the Close. But he would find some way a master could not take hold of. Besides, the whole

school's taken it up now. The Fourth Form have entered into it as the joke of the season. Tom Merry has a big following among the juniors."

"I am not surprised at that, for it must be admitted that he owes it to his good qualities," said the Head. "I really want your advice on this matter, Wingate. The present state of affairs is far from satisfactory. You think that Devigne should accept the challenge?"

"I think that would clear the air a bit, sir. And there is another reason why the two Forms should meet."

"What is the reason?"

"I have been thinking of putting Tom Merry in the First Eleven. His only possible rival outside the Sixth is Devigne, of the Upper Fifth. Devigne would have had the place, for he is a good and reliable bat, but Merry has shown such extremely good form that I am hesitating now."

"A match between the Forms would set the matter at rest. You could easily judge, then, which of the two was the more fit to play for the college in the summer fixtures."

"That's what I am thinking, sir."

"You know I never interfere with you in these matters, Wingate," said the Head. "I believe in leaving them to the discretion of the school captain. But I should certainly like, on this occasion, to advise you to exert your authority as captain of the sports, and insist upon the Upper Fifth meeting the Shell on the cricket field."

"I am glad to hear you say so, sir," said Wingate gratefully. "It's what I was thinking myself, but I did not like to act so decidedly on my own initiative. There are two good reasons for playing the match, and none really against it. The dignity of the Upper Fifth is all rot—I beg your pardon, sir, it's all nonsense. If they can beat the Shell, they'll put Merry and his team in their place; and if they can't, why, their dignity isn't hurt by playing a better eleven than themselves, that's certain."

"Suppose you put it to Devigne like that, Wingate?"

"I will do so, sir."

And the captain of Clavering quitted the Head's study with his mind made up. When Edgar Devigne came in from the cricket field, Wingate was waiting for him.

Devigne came off the ground through a crowd of Shell fellows, who greeted him with derisive grins and remarks. The captain of the Upper Fifth glared at them savagely. He placed himself at his enemy's mercy by his hasty temper, and the jokers were not slow to take advantage of his passionate outbursts.

"Have some marbles, Devigne?" asked Jimson sweetly, as he tossed one at Devigne, catching him on the nose with it.

Devigne rushed at Jimson like a mad bull. But Tom Merry caught him by the shoulders and pulled him back. Devigne gave him a thump on the chest, and he sat down, and the angry Fifth-former strode away.

An almost hysterical yell of laughter followed him. For Tom, in pulling him off Jimson, had silly pinned a paper on the back of his shirt, and half Clavering read the following from behind Devigne as he stalked away.

"ARE WE DOWNHEARTED?"

RATHER!"

Devigne looked back in amazement at the yell of laughter that followed him. He saw Tom Merry doubled up, and for a moment imagined that he must have really hurt him by that thump on the chest. But he soon saw that the hero of the Shell was doubled up with mirth. Everybody was shrieking, even fellows of Devigne's own Form. He strode away furiously. He passed Herr Schneider, and the German burst into a guffaw.

"Mein gootness! Ha, ha, ha! Ach! Mein gootness!"

Devigne scowled at him.

"What are all those silly geese cackling at, Wingate?" he asked, as he reached the spot where the captain of Clavering was standing.

"Blessed if I know," said Wingate, who was as mystified as Devigne, not being able to see the back of him. "What's that they're saying?"

"Are we downhearted?" roared the boys of the Shell.

And an answering roar rang across the Close.

"Rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, there's something on your back!" said Cary, coming up.

"On my back! What the deuce do you mean?"

"Look here."

Cary detached the paper, and held it up for Devigne and Wingate to see. The captain of Clavering burst into a roar. Devigne's face went as black as night.

"Are we downhearted?" giggled Cary. "Rather! Oh, crumbs!"

"Shut up, you silly ass! There's nothing to laugh at!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can't see anything funny in that."

"I can! Ha, ha, ha! He, he, he!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Wingate. "Yes, it's funny!" Devigne tore the paper into fragments. He strode furiously away. Wingate followed him quickly.

"I want to speak to you about this affair, Devigne," he said. "I'll come to your study."

"You can come if you like," said Devigne ungraciously.

The captain of Clavering followed him into his study. Devigne, who suspected that something unpleasant was coming, turned and looked at him with a sour expression.

"It's about the challenge from the Shell, Devigne," said Wingate quietly. "Merry and his Form have challenged you to a cricket match."

"Yes, like cheeky young rascals, as they are."

"Well, I think you ought to meet them."

Devigne gave a bitter sneer.

"Would you meet them if they challenged the Sixth?" he asked.

"They wouldn't," said Wingate. "Merry wouldn't have the cheek."

"He's got cheek and nerve enough for anything, in my opinion. And I can't see much difference between challenging the Upper Fifth and the Sixth."

"Well, I can, if you can't," said Wingate. "Besides, if they could put into the field anything like a team fit to meet the Sixth, I would meet them. Yes, I'd do it willingly. But, of course, they can't; it's not in the nature of things."

"And it is in the nature of things, I suppose, for them to be able to meet the next Form below the Sixth," said Devigne sarcastically.

"No, not exactly; but as they've licked the Lower Fifth, there's no reason why they should not have a chance against the Upper."

"It would be a ridiculous match."

"To speak plainly, Devigne, I believe the Shell have quite as good a chance as you have."

Devigne shrugged his shoulders.

"You're welcome to your opinion, Wingate. It isn't mine."

"I want you to meet them. I want to compare your form with Merry, to make up my mind about selecting one of you for playing in Clavering First."

"I'm sorry, Wingate, but I can't recede from the position I've taken up."

Wingate's eyes flashed.

"You seem to forget that I am captain of Clavering, and that you are under my orders in all matters connected with the sports!" he exclaimed.

Devigne's face set in sullen obstinacy.

"However, I won't go into that now," said Wingate.

"I've only this to say at present: I believe all this talk about the dignity of a senior Form is all gas, and that if you don't meet the Shell, it will be because you're afraid of getting licked. That's plain English!"

Edgar Devigne turned scarlet.

"Then I shall know how to act," resumed the captain of Clavering. "If you dare not meet the Shell, it's because you're not up to Tom Merry's form, and I shall know which of you to choose for Clavering First Eleven."

"You mean that if I don't meet Merry in this match, I shall be definitely passed over for the first team?" said Devigne, biting his lips with anger.

"Yes," rapped out Wingate, "I mean exactly that."

There was a sudden roar under the study window.

"Are we downhearted?"

Back came the answering yell.

"Rather!"

Devigne's eyes blazed, and Wingate smiled grimly.

"You see how it is," he remarked. "They'll give you no peace till you meet them on the cricket field. As a matter of plain truth, Devigne, you've brought this on yourself by your cocky manner towards the Shell. Now you've got Tom Merry's back up, he's fairly on the war-path, and you've simply got to meet him, or be chipped to death."

"We'll meet him, then," said Devigne sullenly. "It's only a question of the dignity of the Form. Of course, we shall win, hands down."

"If you do, and if you make a better show than Merry, you will have your cap for Clavering First, I promise you that," said Wingate. "Now you've made up your mind, I'll put a notice on the board, and perhaps the Shell will let us have a little quiet."

And the captain quitted the room, leaving Devigne a prey to a cold, silent rage far more dangerous to the boy he hated than any passionate outburst of temper.

"Yes, then I'll meet them," said Devigne, between his set teeth, when he was alone. "I'll meet them; but Tom Merry will not be able to knock up many runs for the Shell, if he is able to play at all."

And there was a deadly light in Devigne's eyes that would

have startled Wingate had he been still there to see it. But the Clavering captain was down in the hall, pinning a pencilled note upon the board:

"The Upper Fifth will meet the Shell in a cricket match on Saturday.—G. Wingate."

The news was not long in spreading. Gore came into the study of the chums with it. They were at tea.

"You've got your wish at last!" sneered Gore. "Now you're going to get the licking you have been asking for."

"What do you mean, ass?" asked Manners politely.

"There's a notice on the board—"

Before he could finish, he was bundled aside by a rush of the chums to get out of the study, to ascertain whether the news was true. Tom was the first to reach it, and he found a crowd there. He read Wingate's notice.

"It's true!" he exclaimed. "Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" echoed Manners and Monty Lowther. "Are we downhearted?"

"No!"

"Then you will be on Saturday," said Cary. And he went off to find Devigne, to make sure that it was correct. Devigne was putting his hat on.

"Hallo, going out?" said Cary, looking at him.

"Yes," said Devigne shortly.

"Wait a minute till I get my cap, and I'll come, too."

"Sorry, it's private business, or I'd be glad to have you," said Devigne. "I shall be back by calling-over, I expect."

"There's a notice on the board in Wingate's writing. Is it authorised?"

"How the dickens should I know, when I haven't seen it?"

"You know what I mean. Wingate says we are going to play the Shell on Saturday. Is it true? Have you agreed?"

"Yes. Now, so long! I must be off."

And Devigne hurried away, leaving his friend in a state of considerable surprise. Not even to Cary, who shared most of his secrets, did Devigne intend to confide his present mission, or the scheme that was working in his brain to defeat Tom Merry. He did not intend a soul at Clavering, friend or foe, to know that he was going out to meet Honest Jim, the tramp and ruffian, in the old barn near the school.

CHAPTER 8.

A Dastardly Compact.

"HALLO, there!"

The dusk of evening was on the fields and on the old half-ruined barn lying in the shadow of the trees. A man sleeping in a pile of foul straw raised his head at the sound of a step, awakened by the sound, slight as it was. He peered through the gloom at the dim figure that stood in the aperture where a door once had been.

Edgar Devigne started at the sound of the growling voice from the darkness within. For a moment his heart misgave him; he wished he had not come there to see the brutal tramp in his den. But it was only for a moment. Then, with a firm step, he advanced into the barn.

"Honest Jim?"

There was a chuckle.

"That's me. So it is you, young gentleman?"

"Yes. I have come, you see."

Honest Jim rose from his couch of dirty straw and rubbed his bleared eyes. He came into view in the glimmering twilight at the door.

"Here I am, young gentleman. You've come at the right time."

"I'm glad to find you here," said Devigne. "I was afraid that perhaps I should miss you, and have to come again to-morrow night. That would have been awkward. However, here you are. You remember what I said to you the other day?"

"I ain't likely to forget."

"Are you still of the same mind—with regard to Tom Merry, I mean?"

The ruffian ground his yellow teeth.

"Try me and see, young gentleman."

"Now, listen to me," said Devigne, in a low voice. "I told you that Tom Merry might be in my way. Well, he is now. I want you to do what you promised you would if I helped you. I'm willing to pay for it, too, if you do exactly as I wish, but not otherwise."

"That depends on what you wish, sir."

The tramp's manner became instantly more respectful at the mention of money.

"Suppose," said Devigne cautiously—"suppose I told you where you could meet him—on a lonely path—alone—would you do it?"

"Rather!" said Honest Jim. "Just try me, that's all!"

"But I don't want him hurt much. Mind, if he's hurt

much I don't give you a shilling. If you do as I want I'll make it a sovereign for you."

"I'm your man, sir. But what do you want?"

"Could you tackle him, and—and hurt him a little, so that he couldn't play cricket for some weeks," said Devigne eagerly. "Give him a crack on his right arm, or something, so as to prevent him from handling a bat."

Honest Jim looked at him curiously.

"Course I could, sir, and would. But that ain't much. I'd rather give him a crack over his head!"

"That's not what I want; and mind, unless you promise only to do what I say, I won't help you. Besides, you want revenge on Tom Merry, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, sir."

"Well, you can't do better than spoil his form for cricket. His heart is set on winning a certain match for his Form at Clavering, and he can't be more bitterly hurt than by losing it. He'll feel that more than a crack on the head, I assure you. You can't get a more complete revenge than by spoiling his cricket form, and it's not so—not so dangerous."

Honest Jim chuckled.

"I think I understand, sir, and I'll do exactly as you wish."

"Do so, and I'll meet you here the following evening and hand you the sov.," said Devigne. "I can rely upon you?"

"Yes," said the tramp, feeling his cudgel. "I won't fail you, sir. You don't know how much I want to get at that nice young gentleman!"

"Then it's settled. Now, to-morrow's Friday, and I happen to know that Tom Merry is going down to the village after dark. Never mind how I know. As a matter of fact, there's a chap in his Form who is jealous of him, and tells me things— But that doesn't interest you. I'm sure of it, and that's enough. He's going down to High Clavering, and he'll go by the lane in the usual way, undoubtedly."

"Will he be alone, sir."

"I believe so. But if there were a lad with him, that wouldn't trouble a fellow of your size much."

"Not a bit; only another crack of the cudgel."

"You'll meet him in the shadow of the pine-trees by the lane, where I met you going for him the other day," said Devigne. "Mind, you're not to really hurt him. Only a crack on his right arm, to stop his batting on Saturday."

"I'll remember. What time will he be there?"

"It might be any time after seven, so you'd better be on the watch."

"Good! I'll be there."

"Now, I'd better go," said Devigne. "I rely on you. There's half-a-crown, and it will be a sovereign on Saturday night if all goes well. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, sir, and rely on Honest Jim!"

Devigne took his departure. The tramp curled himself up in the straw again, and indulged in many a hoarse chuckle before he went to sleep.

Devigne strode back across the fields towards Clavering School. He knew that he had made a dastardly compact with the ruffian, and that he was not fit to look his school-fellows in the face again. And there was a feeling of shame and half regret in his breast. But mingled with that was a far stronger feeling—jealousy, and the determination that Tom Merry should not triumph in the Form match on Saturday. His old dislike of Tom had grown to absolute hatred in the last week or two. His own conduct towards Tom and the Shell had first brought about the friction, and led to the challenge which he had not wished to accept. Besides that, the Form match was the most sportsmanlike way of settling to whom the cap for the First Eleven should belong. But Devigne cared nothing for all that. He only saw himself in danger of being outshone and outdone by a boy he disliked, and that was sufficient to arouse all the evil in his nature.

He was late getting in at the school. He met Tom Merry as he was going in, and would have passed him without a glance or word, and gone on to his room. But Tom came up to him with his most engaging smile.

"I say, Devigne, I wanted to speak to you."

"Well, I don't want to speak to you," said Devigne.

"Get out!"

Tom flushed.

"You need not take it like that!" he exclaimed. "I only wanted to say that I'm glad the match is coming off, and that I hope you don't bear any malice for a little fun."

Devigne scowled.

"I don't want to have anything to say to you, Merry," he replied; and he turned his back on Tom and walked away.

Tom Merry gave an expressive whistle.

"Well, of all the pigs!" he ejaculated. "I didn't think Devigne was such an out-and-out hog, Monty. Never mind."

Monty Lowther linked his arm in Tom's.

"Never mind," he said. "Come along. He knows he's going to be licked on Saturday, that's all, and that's what's the matter with him."

"I suppose that's it; and we will lick him, by Jupiter!" exclaimed Tom emphatically.

"Yes, and have a glorious feed in the study afterwards."

CHAPTER 9.

Foul Play—A Narrow Escape.

THE next day the Shell team practised hard every moment that they could get upon the cricket field. They had succeeded in their object, and compelled the Upper Fifth to accept their challenge. It would be too bad to receive a licking for their pains, and so the cricketers of the Middle School were determined to put their best foot foremost, and leave no stone unturned to snatch a victory.

The Upper Fifth were equally busy on their side. Edgar Devigne did not believe that Tom Merry would be in batting form, but he left nothing to chance. The Upper Fifth eleven was in pretty good form, and pretty confident of victory. Wingate, looking on at the Upper Fifth practising, felt that Devigne's form did not come up to Tom Merry's; but he did not intend to make his final decision till after the Form match. That match would decide for good and all whether Tom Merry or Edgar Devigne should have the cap for the Clavering First.

After school, Manners and his team played a scratch match with a team picked out of the Shell and the Lower Fourth. Manners was the Shell captain, although Tom Merry could easily have had that position if he had chosen. But Tom, though he was very often coming before the public eye in a more or less startling manner, was really a modest lad, and not at all given to pushing himself forward. He was quite content to follow the leadership of Manners.

The cricketers played on as long as the light lasted, and then returned in good humour to their quarters. Manners was quite satisfied with his team. He knew that there was a hard tussle before the Shell on the morrow, but he felt that his men were equal to it, and had more than a sporting chance of beating the senior Form.

"Just time to cut down to the village," said Tom cheerfully, after tea in the study. "That pass from Daly covers to-day, you know. Unluckily, it's only for one."

"Never mind. If you go on your bike it won't be a long run," said Monty Lowther; "and, as you've got a pass, you will be able to take the jigger out."

"Yes, that's a bit of luck."

And Tom, having lighted his lamp, wheeled his bike out of the Close, mounted in the road, and pedalled off towards High Clavering.

The country road was very dusky, and in the place where Tom had met Honest Jim, under the shadow of the pine-trees, it was black as the inside of a hat.

As Tom neared that spot he remembered his meeting with the tramp, and cast a glance to right and left as he pedalled on. He had been coming uphill, and just past that black shadow was a slope, somewhat steep, down which the Clavering lads loved to free-wheel; though after dark this was not exactly a safe practice, for the road was frequently blocked by huge market carts.

The glare of Tom's lamp went ahead through the blackness like a knife, and, of course, prevented him from seeing round him by the contrast. But he was in a wary mood, for, although he had not the faintest suspicion of the plot against him, he knew that Honest Jim might still be lurking in the vicinity. Suddenly a burly figure loomed up in the lamp-light.

"So it is you!"

It was the voice of Honest Jim.

A slashing cudgel swept the air, and Tom only eluded it by bending low and throwing himself sideways, and, of course, he went over with a crash, the bicycle clanging down on its side. The lamp went out.

Tom Merry was on his feet in a flash. He had escaped that terrible blow, but he knew that another was coming. Honest Jim was making for him. There was a clatter and a curse. In the darkness the scoundrel had stumbled over the fallen bicycle.

Tom heard the heavy fall of the ruffian, and his gasp of pain as his shin came in violent contact with a pedal. And Tom acted quickly. He was shaken and hurt by the shock of his fall, but his brain was clear and rapid. He did not attempt to run; he knew it would be useless. The sounds showed him where the ruffian had fallen, and in a twinkling Tom had flung himself upon him.

Honest Jim gave a yell. His position was an awkward one, sprawled across the fallen machine, with one of his

hands through the spokes of the front wheel, and Tom's suddenly plumping on top of him crushed him down on the bicycle and hurt him considerably.

The cudgel had flown from his hand into the darkness. Tom was upon him like a tiger, and his knees were planted in the ruffian's back, and his hands felt for and gripped Honest Jim's collar behind.

Honest Jim's nose was ground into the dust of the road with terrific force, and he gasped for breath and with pain. He made a tremendous effort to free himself, but Tom, though he was almost heaved into the air, stuck fast, and came down again heavily, with his knees in the ruffian's back. The villain gasped faintly. His spinal column must have suffered from the crash of Tom's knees upon it, and for a few moments he was overcome.

"You—you beast!" gasped Tom. "Are you going to give in?"

"Lemme get at you!"

"Thanks, I'd rather not! Are you giving in?"

For reply, the ruffian began to struggle furiously. Tom dashed his face down in the road again, and Honest Jim gasped. Then the boy felt over the machine for the pump, and jerked it off.

"Now, you bound—"

Honest Jim made another tremendous upheaval. Crash! The bicycle-pump descended upon the top of his head with stunning force.

The pump was bent with the blow, and Honest Jim dropped flat. Tom, in his excitement, gave him another, which almost made the pump straight again. Honest Jim lay still.

"Now then, you beast!"

The ruffian moaned faintly, but did not struggle. He was not stunned, but very near it, and Tom realised that he was helpless—at least, for a time.

He rose, and dragged the ruffian off his bike. Could he get away before Honest Jim was able to recover sufficiently to attack him again? As he lifted the machine upright he heard Honest Jim muttering a curse.

The machine had not been improved by the crash into the road, and it seemed rather shaky, but it was still in a condition for riding. Tom did not think about the lamp. He was only anxious to mount and get away.

Honest Jim staggered to his feet, his hand pressed to his head. Tom was in the saddle, and the pedals were going. The ruffian heard the sound, and realised that his prey was escaping him. He leaped blindly forward, clutching at Tom. Tom, leaning over the handles, pedalled like lightning.

He was only just in time, for Honest Jim barely missed him, and, falling forward as his clutch swept the empty air, went down into the road again, his hands knocking upon Tom's rear mud-guard as he fell.

Forward went Tom. He had felt the touch on the mud guard, and it acted like a spur to a horse. Right on he went.

There was a growl of rage behind him, a pounding of pursuing feet; then a clack from his machine under him, and a horrid jamming. The fall had injured the bike, and something was wrong with the chain. Tom's heart turned cold for a moment.

The ruffian was close behind; but the bicycle was on the slope now, and it was not necessary to pedal. As Tom's feet ceased to revolve, the pace slackened, and the ruffian came closer; but just as success seemed within his grasp the bicycle gathered speed on the slope, and shot forward like an arrow.

Tom, bending low over the handles, went shooting forward into the darkness. The sound of the ruffian's footsteps died away behind him.

For some minutes Tom thought of nothing but of escaping. He went on as fast as the machine could go, but he soon realised that he was safe—safer from the pursuer than from any country cart that might be plodding on ahead.

He put on the brake, and stopped. He was nearly at the bottom of the hill now, and the lights of the village were clear ahead of him.

He tried to light the lamp, but failed, and wheeled the bicycle into High Clavering, where he left it at a shop to be repaired and sent back to the school.

In spite of his perilous adventure and his narrow escape, he had not forgotten his mission, and as soon as he had disposed of the injured "jigger" he made his way to the village tuck-shop.

There he made his purchases, and filled the cricket-bag he had brought with the good things destined to regale the cricketers of the Shell after the glorious victory they intended to win on the morrow.

Before leaving High Clavering he dropped in at the police-station, and gave an account of the happening on the road, and the inspector promised that Honest Jim should be looked for.

Tom was careful to make his way back to Clavering by a devious route, but the hour was very late when he arrived at the school. His pass from a prefect secured him, but his chums were getting anxious about him, and Monty and Manners were waiting for him in the Close, and met him as soon as he was inside the gate.

"Hallo, you image! Where have you been all this time?" exclaimed Manners. "It's only ten minutes to bed-time."

"And where's your bike?" asked Lowther.

Tom Merry explained. "My hat!" exclaimed Manners. "That fellow ought to be in prison, and no mistake. I hope the police will catch him, though I don't suppose they will for a moment. Lucky he didn't hurt you much, Tom, or you wouldn't have been able to play the Upper Fifth to-morrow."

"Yes, it was a narrow shave," said Tom. "As it was, I think he got the worst of it. Let's get this stuff put out of sight, and get to bed. We've got to be up bright and early for a final practice."

And the heroes of the Shell were soon in bed. Meanwhile, Edgar Devigne was in his study, in a very dubious and anxious mood. He had marked Tom's departure, and knew about the time he ought to have returned, and when he did not come in Devigne had little doubt that he had fallen a victim to the brutality of the savage tramp.

Yet, as the evening advanced he was rather surprised that there was nothing said about Tom Merry—either his absence, or his returning injured. For fear of exciting suspicion, Devigne dared not leave his study to see what had happened.

As a matter of fact, no one was likely to suspect him, but a guilty conscience knows no quiet or ease. He felt that if he mentioned the name of Tom Merry he would betray in his face that he had had a hand in the dastardly attack upon him.

When the Shell went up to bed he wondered what had transpired. Presently Cary came into his room to say good-night.

"Hallo!" said Devigne, with assumed carelessness. "Any news?"

Cary stared at him.

"No. What news should there be? I say, you're not well, Edgar."

"I'm well enough."

"You're rather white. I hope you're not going to crack up for the match to-morrow."

"It shall be all right," said Devigne savagely, wondering what had happened to Tom Merry, and whether anything had happened at all. "We shall win. Of course, Manners is counting on licking us. Seen him lately?"

"No. I believe he's been out with a permit."

"Hasn't he come in yet?"

"I suppose so, as the Shell's gone to bed. What's the matter with you, Devigne? You're mighty curious about Tom Merry."

Devigne turned red.

"Well, I was wondering whether he's in good form for to-morrow, that's all, Cary."

"Oh, depend upon it, he's in good form," said Cary. "He means to beat us if he can."

It was evident that if anything had happened to Tom it was not known over the school. Cary had clearly heard nothing.

"Well, good-night, Devigne!" he said, and left his chum in a very dubious frame of mind.

Had the plot succeeded? Had Honest Jim failed? Edgar Devigne went to bed in a worried mood, and it was long before he slept—a very bad preparation for a hard match on the morrow!

CHAPTER 10.

The Form Match, and a Glorious Victory.

THE next day dawned bright and warm and clear, much to the satisfaction of the young cricketers of Clavering College. It was fine cricketers' weather, and just the day Tom Merry had hoped for for the Form match with the Upper Fifth.

The Shell were out early on their ground for a last bit of practice before school, and Manners, the skipper, was perfectly satisfied with his team. When they came in to breakfast a welcome bit of news awaited them.

In order to allow good time for the match to be played out to a satisfactory conclusion, Mr. Railton, at Wingate's suggestion, had announced that lessons would cease at an earlier hour than was customary on Saturday mornings, allowing the stumps to be pitched at half-past eleven o'clock.

"Good!" said Manners, rubbing his hands. "Railton's a jolly good sort. He's an old sport, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, and don't you forget it. When

it comes to being a real sportsman, I put my twopence on Railton every time."

"Thank you, Manners!" said a quiet voice at the exuberant cricketer's elbow. "That's very complimentary of you, I'm sure!"

Manners's jaw dropped as he heard the Head's voice. He stared at Mr. Railton in dismay, not finding a word to say. The Head of Clavering smiled.

"I am much obliged for your good opinion, Manners," he said; "but don't you think you could express it a little more elegantly if you tried?"

Manners was scarlet.

"Yes, sir," he stammered.

"Very good."

And, with a nod, Mr. Railton walked away.

"Well," said Manners, with a deep breath, "some masters would have given me fifty lines for that. He's a jolly good sort!"

Shortened as the morning's lessons were, they seemed all too long to the heroes of the Shell, who were anxious to get to business on the cricket-pitch.

More than once during the German lesson Tom Merry brought down upon himself the wrath of Herr Schneider, and accumulated enough lines to take one's breath away; but he did not care, so long as he wasn't wanted to do them that afternoon.

Herr Schneider would have been quite willing to detain him that afternoon, as a matter of fact, but he felt that it wouldn't do. Wingate would have appealed to Mr. Railton, who would have put his foot down hard.

Lessons were over at last, and the boys were free. The stumps were pitched, and the umpires went over the ground. As Tom came out of the class-room he met Edgar Devigne face to face.

Devigne was strangely pale, and he looked at Tom with burning eyes. All through the morning he had been in an unenviable frame of mind. He had seen Tom at practice with the Shell before breakfast, and so he now knew for certain that Honest Jim had failed.

Then he had learned the story of Tom's adventure from Gore. Honest Jim had done his best, but Tom's luck had been true to him. He had escaped injury, where almost anybody else would have fallen a victim.

The plot which had seemed to promise Devigne an absolute certainty of victory had been an utter failure. Tom was bruised a little, but otherwise not hurt, and his form for the cricket match was in no way impaired.

He was looking as fresh as paint, as fit as a fiddle, as he met Devigne; and in the Fifth-former's heart was a sickening presentiment of coming defeat. It was not only that Tom was in fine form, but he himself was decidedly off colour, for worry and anxiety, jealousy and remorse, disappointment and envy are feelings that are not compatible with a perfect physical condition.

Devigne felt disturbed, nervous, unstrung. To add to his discomfort, he realised that if he had played a manly and straightforward part—if he had sought only to win by fair play and good cricket, he would be feeling much more fresh and fit now than the hour of trial had come.

If he had played the game! He wished now that he had done so; but it was too late!

Tom Merry was rather surprised by the expression upon Devigne's face, but his own was perfectly cordial and good-tempered.

"Jolly good weather for the match," he said cheerily. "It will be a good game."

"I hope so," said Devigne. "You sha'n't get the cap for the First Eleven if I can help it."

Tom bit his lip. "He wanted to be on good and cordial terms with everybody; but it was very hard indeed to get along comfortably with a fellow like Edgar Devigne."

"I wish you wouldn't look at it like that," he said. "I suppose you want the best man to go into Clavering First, don't you? And this seems to me to be the really best way of settling the point."

"Humbug!" said Devigne.

And he walked on with a sneer on his face.

"That chap will make me ill," murmured Tom to himself. "I'm blessed if I shall try to be civil to him any more. He looks in pretty rotten form for a hard tussle. However, that's his business."

"Come on, Tom!" called out Monty Lowther. "Come and get into your flannels!"

"Right-ho!" said Tom cheerily.

And Tom Merry was soon arrayed in spotless white, save for his cap, which had the colours of his Form. He walked down to the ground with Monty with his bat under his arm. The pavilion was pretty well filled, for nearly all the masters at Clavering were curious to see the match. Round the ropes two-thirds of the school were gathered.

The Fifth were there to cheer their champions, and the Shell for a like purpose. The rest of the school were ready to applaud any good play on either side.

The two captains tossed, and Devigne correctly named the coin, and elected to bat. This brought a gleam of satisfaction to Devigne's face. To go in first, when the pitch was in first-class condition, was an advantage to start with, and would discount Tom Merry's superiority in batting.

The Upper Fifth opened their innings with Devigne and Cary.

Manners sent Monty Lowther on to bowl the first over.

Mr. Railton was seated in the pavilion, and Wingate was standing by his side. Both were watching the opening of the game with keen interest. Herr Schneider was standing near, looking on. The German took not the slightest interest in cricket, but it was a lovely day, so he thought he might as well be there as anywhere else. He had a camp-stool, and he wore his spectacles and a big white hat.

Manners had placed his men to field, himself as wicket-keeper. Monty Lowther sent down the first ball to Edgar Devigne, and the great game had fairly started.

Devigne made a good start. He was certainly not in his best form, but against average bowling he was able to keep his end up, and he did it.

The Fifth Form cheered him lustily as he cut the balls over the field, and he had seven to his credit when the field crossed over, and still had the bowling.

French delivered the second over, still to Devigne, from the other end. French was a fair bowler of the slow variety, and it was soon pretty evident that his bowling would never touch Devigne's wicket. After a couple of times Devigne realised it, and he began to let himself go a little. The third ball he swiped away to the boundary and took four without the trouble of running.

The fourth ball he intended to treat in the same way. The clack of wood meeting leather was followed by the whizzing flight of the ball, and the Fifth Form shouted; but then the Shell began to shout, too!

For Tom Merry, at cover point, was running, swerving, backing, twisting, as it looked, like a snake, to get under that ball, which was coming down from the air fairly to his hands; and the shout of the Shell became a joyous roar. "Caught!"

"Oh, well caught!"

The leather was in the palms of Tom Merry, and the captain of the Upper Fifth was out!

The umpire grained as Devigne turned a savagely questioning look upon him.

"How's that?" roared the Shell.

And the umpire's reply was brief, but very much to the point:

"Out!"

Devigne gripped the cane handle of his bat, as if he would have liked to knock Tom Merry down with it, as, indeed, was quite the case at that moment. Then he slowly walked away towards the pavilion. Mr. Railton turned to Wingate with a smile.

"Merry seems to be an extremely good field," he remarked. "That was a fine catch."

"Yes, sir, and hard luck on Devigne."

"The fortune of the game," smiled the Head.

Saunders was next man in. French was better able to deal with him than with Devigne, and Saunders retired gracefully with a big round O to his credit.

The innings went on, the wickets falling for a fair average of runs, Cary going out presently with twenty-five, the largest score made by any of his side.

By a smart return from the country, Tom accounted for Cary's wicket as he was making one more, and Devigne's friend joined his captain in the pavilion. Both of them were looking rather glum.

"Merry is certainly a demon at cricket," Cary remarked frankly. "You see that he's a dangerous beast in the field, and when he starts batting—"

"Oh, don't talk about it!" growled Devigne.

"Well, we shall see it soon; this innings won't last over lunch," said Cary. "You said Merry wouldn't be in form to-day, Edgar, but you were off the mark. I've never seen him so fit in my life."

"Accidents will happen!" snapped Devigne. "I've been unlucky."

Cary whistled. "You don't mean to say you had anything to do with that tramp?" He paused.

"I don't mean to say anything. Hallo, there's Merry going on to bowl! I fancy he can't do much with the leather."

Tom Merry had taken the ball to deliver an over. There was a deafening roar from the crowd when the first ball had gone down.

"Well bowled!" Tom had taken a wicket with his first ball. Wingate's eyes listened.

"Mr. hat! I think that's our man, sir! He's on the warpath!"

And the Head of Clavering nodded assent.

The Fifth Form were mostly silent now. The innings was drawing to a close, and a quarter of an hour before the time fixed

for lunch it ended, with a total of exactly one hundred runs for the side.

"Not at all bad," commented Wingate. "But I am very much mistaken if the Shell do not beat it. Unless Devigne picks up in his second innings, he's done in."

Lunch over, the ground was crowded for the Shell innings. Manners had put Tom down first with Monty Lowther, and the two were greeted with cheers as they came out of the pavilion. Devigne placed his men to field, and went on to bowl himself. He tried his own powers against Tom Merry's wicket, but in vain. Tom was splendidly fit. He cut the leather all over the field, and piled up twelve for the over.

That innings was a blaze of glory for the Shell, and like a nightmare to their opponents. For none of the Upper Fifth bowlers could touch Tom Merry. Whatever they sent down to him he sent back, and the runs mounted up.

The Shell's score was at forty, of which thirty-two belonged to Tom Merry, when Monty Lowther's wicket fell to a yorker from Devigne.

Manners came in and joined him. He lived through

NEXT THURSDAY'S COVER!



POWERFUL!

MYSTERIOUS!

Here is a small reproduction of the cover of "The Gem" Library next Thursday, which will contain an extra long, complete tale of mystery and adventure by Lewis Bird.

several overs, and added fifteen to the score before he was caught out by Saunders in the slips.

French came in. French was a good batsman of the stone-wall variety, and just the partner a brilliant scorer like Tom Merry wanted. He backed up Tom splendidly and unselfishly, not troubling much about making runs himself, but helping Tom all he could.

Tom had most of the bowling, and there was none of it that he could not handle to his own perfect satisfaction.

The Upper Fifth had enough of leather-hunting to last them the rest of their lives, as it seemed to the red-faced fieldsmen panting after the elusive ball.

The cheers of the crowd for each successive hit were continuous.

Tom's figure was at eighty, and he was still batting splendidly, when French left him, and Jimson came in. Jimson had bad luck, being caught at point by Devigne with only a single run to his credit. It began to look as if Tom Merry would be "not out" as well as first in. Nothing seemed able to touch him.

"Bravo!" cried Wingate, clapping his hands, as Tom and Harris ran out a four. "Bravo!"

And Mr. Railton joined in the cheer.

Herr Schneider looked up with an irritable expression. He was there in his big hat and his camp-stool, and had taken out a book to read, and the cheering disturbed him.

"Mein goodness!" he murmured. "I will go mit meinselt to some quieter place, ain't it? Dis is a pratal noise!"

And he rose and picked up his camp-stool. The next moment he gave a fiendish yell.

Tom Merry had received another ball from Devigne, and sent it on its journey with a mighty swipe of the gleaming bat. Where had it gone?

The yell of the unfortunate German master told, Herr Schneider was staggering forward, with his white hat turned into a concertina.

"Mein grashus! Mein hat! Mein grashus!"

"Chuck that ball back!" cried Devigne. A junior picked it up and returned it, while the German master, saying things in his own language that he would not have dared to say in English, stalked away in a fury, followed by a shout of laughter.

The afternoon was wearing away, and Tom was still batting. It began to look as if the Upper Fifth would have no chance of retrieving their fortunes by a second innings. But Manners had already decided about that.

"We'll let Tom get his century, and then declare," he said to Monty Lowther. And a little later a tremendous roar announced that the champion of the Shell had completed his century.

The score was now at 170, and Manners declared. It was

not in very high spirits that Devigne and his men went in for their second innings. They had gloomy forebodings as to how it would result, and their forebodings were more than justified.

The Shell were out for scalps, with a vengeance! Devigne's wicket fell for twenty-six, but no other batsman of the Upper Fifth came anywhere near that score. For Tom Merry was bowling almost as well as he had been batting, and with three successive balls he laid three of the Upper Fifth wickets in ruins.

And a deafening shout greeted his performance of the "bat trick."

The Upper Fifth went on to bat now with desperate faces. And they came out almost as fast as they went in. The whole innings was over in an hour.

There was still plenty of light, but there was no need for the Shell to begin a second innings, for the total of the Upper Fifth for their second trial at the wickets was only fifty, which, added to their former score, made one hundred and fifty.

And the Shell's first innings had beaten that by twenty runs.

The Shell were victorious! Not only victorious, but completely and overwhelmingly so, with a whole innings to spare!

Tom and his chums had hoped for the victory, but they had never anticipated so sweeping a one, and they were highly delighted.

Tom, the hero of the hour, was carried off the field on the shoulders of his comrades when the last wicket fell, and they bore him up to the pavilion. There Mr. Railton shook hands with him, with a smile and a few cordial words of congratulation, and Wingate slapped him on the shoulder with a word that pleased him still more.

"We shall want you, Merry!" exclaimed the captain of Clavering. "You're just the fellow we want in the First Eleven."

"You mean it, Wingate?"

Tom's eyes were dancing with delight.

"Rather! From this day you're a member of Clavering First!"

And the whole Shell burst into a deafening cheer.

"Hurrah for Tom Merry! Hurrah!"

And with that ovation, and Tom Merry's triumph, we close our story!

THE END.

(Another Tale dealing with Tom Merry soon. Meanwhile, please note that next Thursday's GEM will contain a splendid extra long, complete Adventure Story by Lewis Bird.)



READ
THIS
FIRST.

Stormpoint

A School Tale. By MAURICE MERRIMAN.

Rex Allingham kicks the winning goal for Stormpoint College in an important match, and so gets in favour of Hal Trehearn, the captain of the school. But Jardon, a Fifth Former, bullies Rex. Rex, with his two chums, Jim and Bob, are punished by Mr. Salmon, who locks them in a room while the other boys go skating. Porker, the school porter, is told to guard them. However, the boys break away, and go skating on a small pond. After this they go into the school stove-hole and cook some sausages. They are surprised by Jardon and Symes who immediately attack them. They are eventually stopped by the Head and taken into the Hall. "You say these lads stole your provisions, Jardon?" demanded Dr. Andale. (Now go on with the story.)

Jordan Brings Forth a False Charge.

"Yes, sir," said Jardon. "They entered my study in my absence, and stole everything they could lay their hands on."

"It's lucky there weren't any half-sovereigns knocking about!" growled Bob, and that caused another roar of laughter.

It was rather hard on Jardon, because his crime was a thing of the long past, but he was not likely to hear the last of it.

"Silence, Bouncer!" commanded the doctor. "I consider your remark in very bad taste. Of course, I know

that boys do not consider the fact of taking others' provisions in the light of a theft; nevertheless, it is one. Do you admit that you took his provisions?"

"We never touched them, sir," said Bob. "I'd have to be jolly hungry before I'd eat anything belonging to him. I borrowed his crockery, but he would have got that back if he had not been so impulsive. I never remember having stolen half-a-sovereign or anything like that since I have been—"

"Will you be silent, Bouncer?" cried the doctor. "I dare say there are certain incidents in your life that you

NEXT THURSDAY: A Tale of Thrilling and Fascinating Adventure. "TREASURE TROVE!"

By Lewis Bird.

STORMPOINT (continued).

would not like to have dragged up against you years after they had occurred."

"Quite right, sir. For instance, if I had robbed another fellow of half-a-sovereign, I wouldn't like to have it brought up against me, but you can bet your old boots I should get it."

The idea of the doctor betting his old boots caused more laughter; in fact, Bob generally did make the boys laugh when he spoke; he said such extraordinary things so solemnly.

"If a boy committed a fault, and it is forgiven—"

"Oh, I forgive him, right enough, sir. It wasn't my half-sovereign, you see."

"Silence, boy! How dare you interrupt me? I say that fault should be forgiven, and then it should never be brought up against that boy again. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir; but, if it's all the same to you, I'll keep a sharp look-out on my half-sovereigns when I get anywhere near Jardon. I don't want any of his little kleptomaniac tricks on my spondulicks. Oh, it's all very well for you fellows to laugh, but I haven't got as much money to lose as you. I dare say it wouldn't matter if Jardon came and kleptomaniac some of your rhino, but it would with me, 'cos I don't get so jolly much."

"How did that boy scalded like that, Jardon?"

"That—that boy turned on the steam-gauge, and did it deliberately."

"What were you doing to him?"

"I was going to punish him for having stolen my property. He did steal my provisions, for all he may say to the contrary."

"They broke bounds, too, sir!" declared Porker.

"Is that so, Bouncer?"

"No, sir. We only broke crockery and your gauge-glass."

"Who turned off the steam-cocks?"

"I did, sir," answered Jim.

"Why did you break the glass, Bouncer?"

"I was struggling to get away from the furnace door, because I found it too hot. Jardon found it hot, too."

"Were you burnt?"

"It felt remarkably like it, sir."

The doctor turned him round, then there was a fresh roar of laughter, for there was not a doubt that Bob had been burnt pretty considerably.

"Jardon!" cried the doctor, in a voice that made the bully cringe. "Did you do that?"

"Certainly not, sir; he must have stumbled against the furnace door."

"Nonsense! It is my belief that the boy has been forced against the door and held there. Had he stumbled against it, as you say, his clothing could not have been burnt like that. Come here, Allingham. What is the matter, my lad? Ah, your head is bleeding! Did you strike him like that, Jardon?"

"Certainly not, sir!" exclaimed Jardon, in a firm voice.

"No, sir, Symes?"

"No, sir; he must have cut his head in falling."

"Did you take a stick into the place, Symes?"

"No, sir!"

"Did you, Jardon?"

"Yes, sir; but I dropped it immediately I entered the place."

"Where is that stick?"

"I will go and fetch it, sir."

"No; where is that stick?"

"I presume it is in the stockhole, sir."

"Mr. Salmon, will you oblige me?"

Then the doctor added something in a voice too low to reach the boys, and Mr. Salmon nodded as he hurried away.

"Did you injure your head in falling, Allingham?" demanded the doctor.

"Please, sir, I hope you won't press me to answer

any questions. It was a fight, and, after all, we certainly took Jardon's things—that is, borrowed his crockery and that; we never touched his food. Bob bought that."

"You say you did not break bounds, Bouncer?"

"That's right, sir. I wouldn't bother about it if I were you, but—"

"I am not in need of your advice. How and when did you get the provisions?"

"I sent Freddy Hart for them. He wasn't gated, you know, sir; so he had a right to go out."

"We got the list here, sir," said a little boy named Freddy Hart, stepping forward. "Sausages, bread, butter, tea, sugar, condensed milk—it's all here, sir. Bob asked me to go, and told me to buy a quarter of a pound of sweets for myself."

"Considering your stepfather has stopped your pocket-money, Bouncer," exclaimed the doctor, "you appear to me to be spending a good deal of money. I hope you are not borrowing it from your friends?"

"No, sir; it's quite honest."

"I do not doubt that, my lad. I thought you might be borrowing money."

"Not I; Rex and Jim have often wanted me to do so when I wouldn't take it as a gift, but I went without instead."

"All of you come into my study!" ordered the doctor. And there they found Mr. Salmon with the stick.

Dr. Andale got out his microscope, and placed the head of the stick beneath it.

"Come here, Allingham!" he ordered, taking a pair of nail-scissors from his pocket, and cutting off a small piece of his hair, which he placed beneath the glass.

"That will do," he exclaimed. "Go and sit in that easy chair, Allingham. Parker, go to Dr. Jenkins, and ask him to be good enough to call at the college to-night."

"Oh, I say, sir!" gasped Rex. "I'm perfectly right, and—"

"Silence, my lad! Do as I direct, Parker!"

"It won't take you long, Parker!" growled Bouncer. "It's not much more than two miles."

"I shall be compelled to punish you severely directly, Bouncer!" said the doctor.

"Beg pardon, sir; I was only cheering him up. He doesn't like walking, because he's afraid of getting too thin. I'd lend him my bike, only it won't bear anything above eighteen stone."

The doctor knit his brows, and glanced at Mr. Salmon. Neither of them smiled, but they looked far from serious. Parker left the room, shutting the door hard, while they heard a fearful slam of the outer door a moment later.

"Jardon and Symes!" cried the doctor—and there was no laughing light in his eyes now. "The blow on that lad's head was dealt with this stick. It was a vicious blow, and how a young man could have been so cowardly and sinful as to have struck it is incomprehensible to me. Such a blow might cause concussion of the brain—it might have caused death! Do you understand what that means? No matter what provocation you had, the young man—it is one of you—is an arrant coward!"

"I never struck him, sir!" cried Jardon passionately.

"Neither did I, sir."

"Did Parker strike that blow, Allingham?"

"No, sir."

"I do not wish to try to force the lad to incriminate either of you young men."

"Sir, indeed, I'm not hurt," said Rex. "We did hit Jardon pretty hard by collaring his things. I hope you will let it drop. We started it, you know. If we've got to be licked, or, what's worse, gated—why—"

"Rex Allingham, I think you're one of the most troublesome boys in this college, and your particular friends are about as bad; but there is one thing that I have been able to tell your mother in my reports, and that is you are absolutely truthful."

(To be continued in next Thursday's "Gem," Order it in advance.)



How do you do?

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Under this title my readers will find in next Thursday's "Gem" Library a most original and powerful tale by Lewis Bird, author of "Scuttled" and "A Secret Quest."

By the way, please let me know how you like "Tom Merry," and kindly speak a good word to your friends on behalf of our little story paper.

THE EDITOR.

**NEXT
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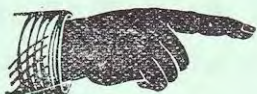
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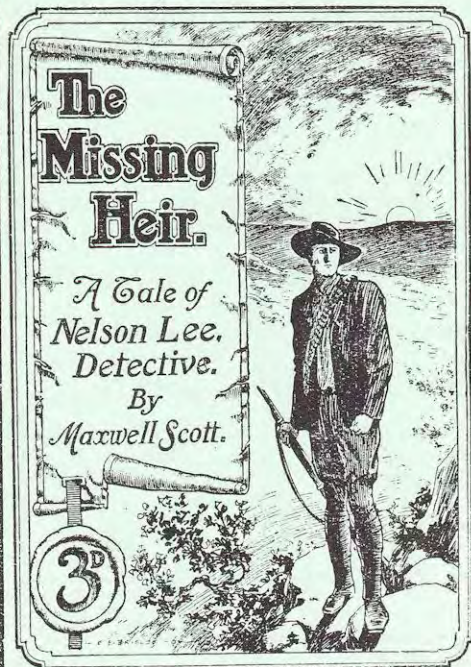
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