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TOM MERRY'S CAMP.

LONG, COMPLETE
TALE OF
TOM MERRY.

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD



FATTY
COMES DOWN
IN THE WORLD.

NO. 25.

VOL. 1.

"OOCH!" GASPED
FATTY WYNN, AS
HIS END OF THE
FORM CAME VIO-
LENTLY TO THE
GROUND.

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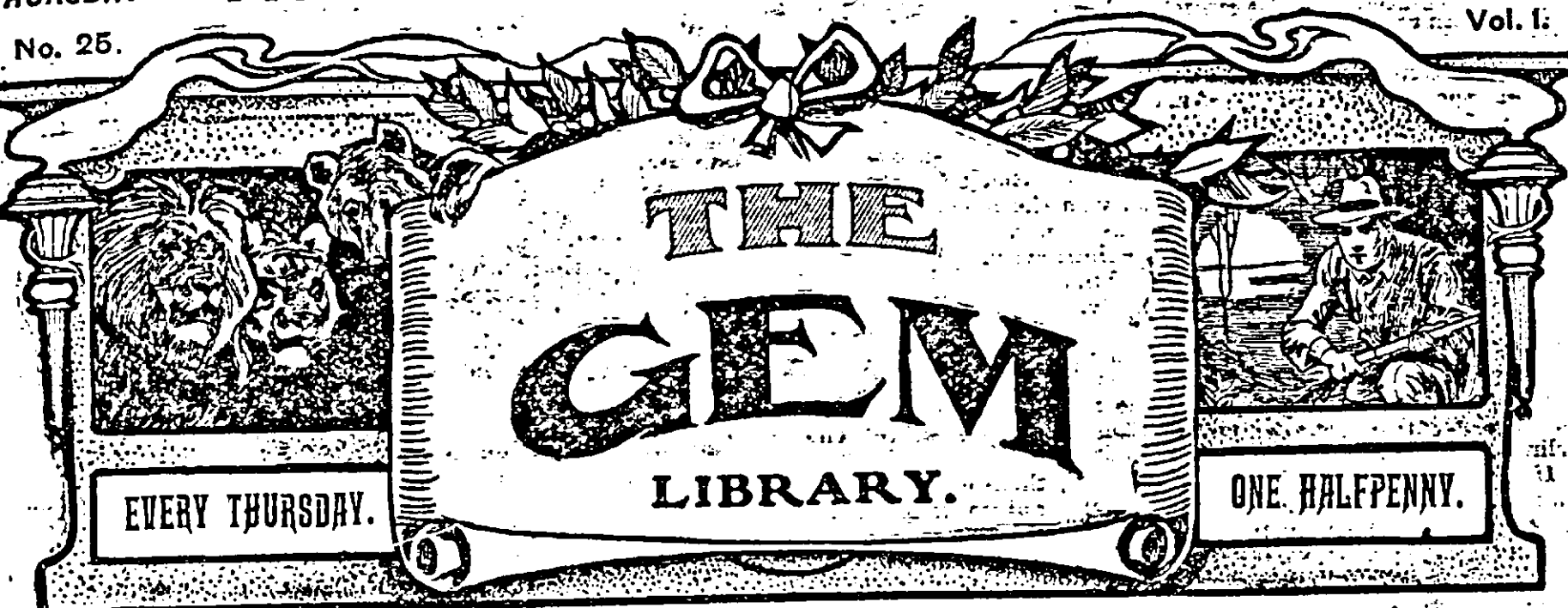
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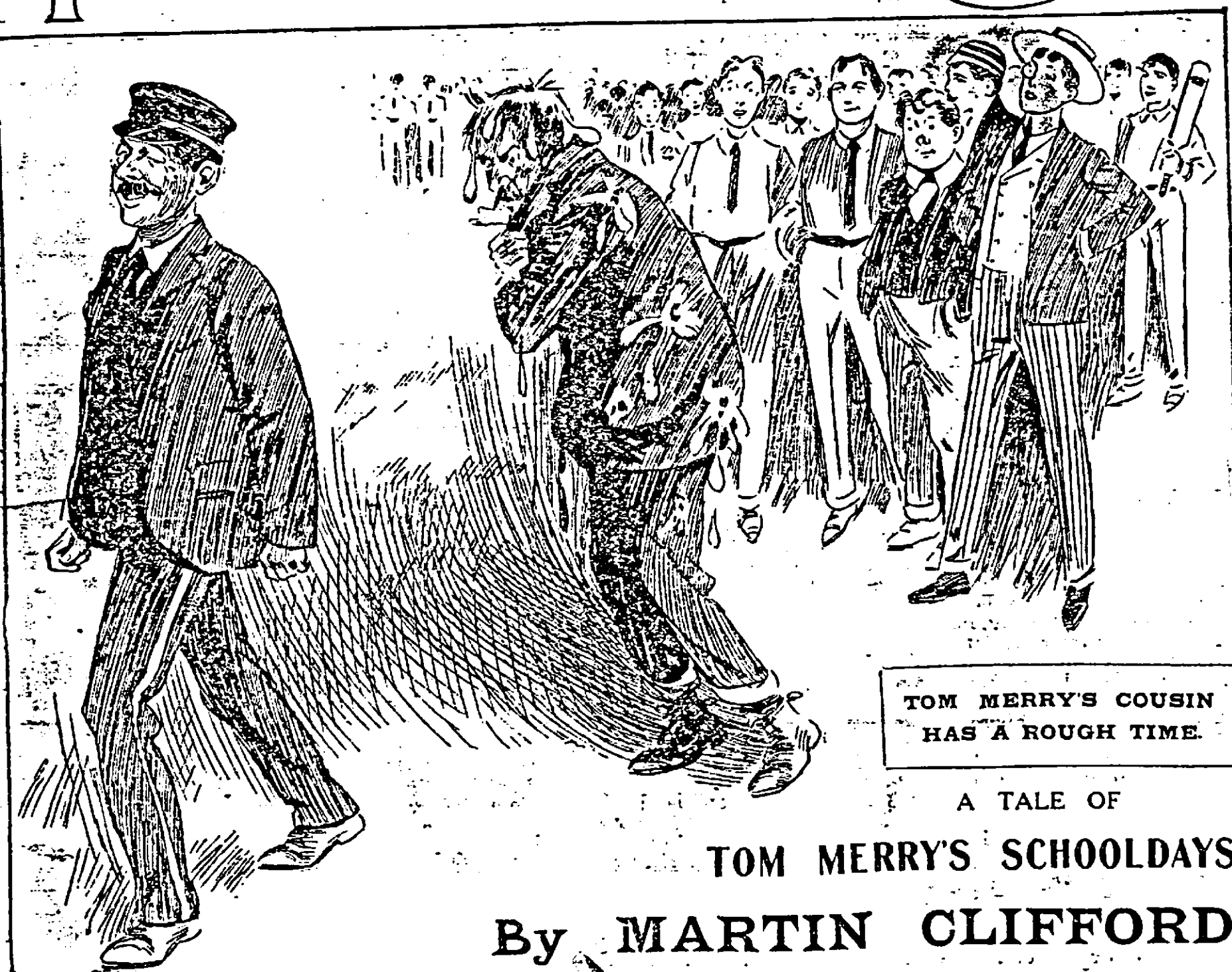
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TOM MERRY'S COUSIN
HAS A ROUGH TIME.

A TALE OF

TOM MERRY'S SCHOOLDAYS.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Expelled From the School.

ST. JIM'S was in a state of excitement. The whole school was in a buzz of discussion from end to end, and wherever two or three met together there was only one topic that they discussed. One topic only had interest for the boys of St. Jim's—juniors and seniors, School House and New House alike.

School House and New House were usually at daggers drawn, but now the boys of the rival houses met in amity to discuss the startling happening which had thrown the whole school into a furore.

Tom Merry had been expelled!

Tom Merry, the hero of the Shell, the most popular boy in the School House at St. Jim's, and the formidable rival of Figgins and Co. of the New House, had stood that day before the Head in the crowded hall, and listened to the sentence of expulsion.

It was amazing, but it was true.

That day the two junior house teams had met on the cricket-field, and victory had rested with the School House, because Figgins, the New House champion cricketer, had been kidnapped and kept away from the match.

And Tom Merry's guilt had been proved to the satisfaction of most of the "Saints." He had bribed Black George, the poacher, to kidnap Figgins. He had won the house match by foul play—at least, so all St. Jim's was saying.

True, Tom Merry still protested his innocence.

But he found few, if any, to believe him.

The evidence seemed to be complete, and Tom Merry had been condemned, and the doctor, in raised tones of anger, had sentenced him to be expelled from St. Jim's.

Expelled!

It was a terrible sentence, and the Saints discussed it with bated breath; but the general opinion was that it served the delinquent right.

If he had done what he was accused of, there was no doubt that he deserved his punishment, and his guilt was generally regarded as conclusively proved.

A few who remembered how brave and true Tom Merry had always been hesitated to condemn him, but the great majority were against the unfortunate lad.

His closest chum, Manners, had been seen to shrink from his side when Black George, the poacher, pointed him out as the boy who had employed him to kidnap Figgins.

Tom Merry and Manners—known at St. Jim's as the "Terrible Two"—were the best of chums, and if Manners doubted, the truth was clear enough. Even Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy, the chums of Study No. 6, who might have been expected to stand up for the boy they knew so well, were silent. They were staggered, if not convinced.

The Fourth Form-room was in a buzz of discussion.

"Oh, it's no good talking!" exclaimed Blake, at last. "Let's give the subject a rest."

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I was thinking, chappies, as we're not being bothered by mastahs or pweffects just now, it would be a good ideah to wig up a see-saw—"

"To what?" demanded Figgins.

"To wig up a see-saw," said D'Arcy. "You know how to wig one up, I pwesume. You pile the forms up here, and stick anothah acwoss here, and the twick is done."

"Oh, you mean rig one up!" said Figgins. "Let's see."

The Fourth Form had met in the class-room to discuss the situation, and as masters and prefects were elsewhere occupied, there was no reason why D'Arcy's plan should not be carried out.

The see-saw was soon going strong.

"I think if Fatty Wynn got on this end," said D'Arcy, "and half a dozen of us on the othah end, the thing would be about equally balanced, don't you know?"

Fatty Wynn flared up. He did not like references to his stoutness. But Figgins, the chief of the New House "Co.," backed up the swell of St. Jim's.

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "Roll on, Fatty!"

"Look here, Figgy—"

"Oh, dry up, and roll on!"

"Yaas, dwy up and woll on!" said Arthur Augustus.

The see-saw was balanced. Three juniors were on one end, when Fatty Wynn plumped his weight on the other. Blake, Herries, and Kerr were the three.

"Look out!" yelled Figgins.

The warning came too late.

As the see-saw see-sawed, Blake and Herries slid helplessly along and then Fatty Wynn's weight plumped his end violently down to the floor.

"My hat!" gasped Figgins.

Fatty was slipping off the lowered end, trying wildly to clutch hold and keep on. Down the inclined form came three youthful figures, slipping and grabbing frantically.

"Hold on!" shouted D'Arcy. "Get a good gwip and hold on!"

Blake had got a good grip, but it was on Kerr's hair, not on the form. Down he went, Kerr after him, and Herries rolling helplessly on top.

"Ooch!" gasped Fatty Wynn, as he finally slid off, and three juniors piled themselves above him. "Oh! Ow! Ooch! Drag 'em off."

"Yaas, dwag 'em off!" cried D'Arcy excitedly. "They will cwush him!"

The juniors were dragged off. Fatty Wynn lay gasping like a newly-landed fish. The juniors were looking considerable rumbled.

Fatty Wynn staggered to his feet.

"Let me get at him!" he said wildly.

"Who?"

"The ass who proposed a see-saw."

And he rushed at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Weally, my good fwiend—" began D'Arcy.

He was interrupted by a thump on the chest that made him sit down in a hurry.

"Here, hold on!" said Figgins. "You're getting dangerous, Fatty. We shall have to see him home, Kerr. Come on."

And Figgins and Kerr gripped Fatty Wynn by the arms and ran him, struggling wildly, out of the room. Arthur Augustus jumped up, and stuck his eye-glass into his eye.

"Where is that howwid boundah?"

"Gone," said Jack Blake, "and it's time we were gone, too. Come on."

And they left the class-room, and made their way to Study No. 6, where—far from the madding crowd, as Blake put it—they discussed the late happenings, and the sentence passed upon Tom Merry.

And where was Tom Merry now?

He sat alone in his study, that study which had been the scene of many a feed and frolic, which he now looked upon for the last time.

In the morning he was to leave St. Jim's—for ever.

The rows with Study No. 6, and the contests with Figgins & Co. of the New House, the fun and frolic of his life at St. Jim's, were over. He was to leave the old school he loved so well, and to leave it with a stain upon his name.

No wonder the boy sat silent and stricken in the growing dusk in his room, thinking miserably of what was past, and of what was to come.

He had been expelled, and since he had heard his sentence, a sentence from which there was no appeal, he had seen only averted looks or glances of scorn among the schoolfellows to whom he had been a leader and a true comrade.

He was alone. Even his own chum seemed to have forsaken him, and to have followed the example of all the rest of the school.

And that thought brought the moisture to the eyes of Tom Merry.

"All of them believe me guilty!"

He muttered the words aloud.

"Blake, Figgins, Manners—all of them! Oh, what shall I do?"

He covered his face with his hands.

The study door opened.

Tom Merry looked up dully. In the thickening gloom of the study he could not see who it was that entered.

A dim form came towards him, and he heard a choking breath.

"Tom! Tom, old fellow!"

It was Manners.

Tom Merry gave a start.

"I am here," he said, in a low voice.

"Tom, old chap, I—I beg your pardon. I—I half believed it for a minute when that brute Black George pointed you out. But now—"

Tom's heart gave a bound.

"Do you believe in me still, Manners?"

"Yes! Yes! A thousand times ~~yes!~~" cried Manners vehemently. "I was a silly ass to doubt for a moment; but it seemed so—so—you understand? Why should Black George say you did it, if you didn't?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I have never done anything to him that I know of, and I cannot guess why he should lie to ruin me. But he lied."

"I know he did, Tom. He lied, like the villain he is," said Manners, pressing Tom's hand. "I know you are innocent. I know you never played that trick on Figgins."

"Thank you, old chap," said Tom, with a break in his voice. "It's horrible to leave St. Jim's like this, but it's a comfort to know that you believe me innocent."

"Leave St. Jim's?"

"Of course, I'm expelled!"

"You can't—you sha'n't go! Why, the old school won't be the same without you. If you go, I go, too! I won't stay!"

Tap!

It was a gentle knock at the door.

Neither of the chums noticed it. Their thoughts were elsewhere.

"I won't stay without you," went on Manners. "Perhaps the Head will relent. Perhaps we shall be able to get at the truth somehow."

The door opened.

"Hallo! Who's there?"

"Only us," said the familiar voice of Jack Blake. "I see you're all in the dark. Can we come in. I don't want to bother you."

"Oh, come in!"

Study No. 6 came in, the three chums of the Fourth—Blake, Herries, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They groped their way in.

"We've come to speak to you, Merry," said Blake. "We want to say we don't believe this thing about you."

Tom could not speak. His voice choked in his throat.

"We believe in you, kid," said Blake emphatically. "I admit that at first I was staggered. The way that poacher chap rolled out lies was enough to stagger humanity."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"But we've thought it over, and put our heads together, and come to the conclusion that we were silly asses to think for a moment that you could do such a thing."

"And now we want to assure you on that point. We know you're innocent, that's all."

"Thanks, chappies," said Tom Merry, in a suspiciously trembling voice. "I might have known you would stand by me. The rest of the School House have made up their minds, though, and the New House are all down on me."

"Oh, the New House," said Blake, with a sniff. "Those silly asses don't know enough to go in when it rains. As for the School House, I admit that's rotten. You see, the evidence was pretty strong, and they don't all know you as well as we do. But when one has been having rows with a chap as often as we have with you one gets to know him."

Tom smiled faintly.

"And we have already decided how to deal with the matter," went on Blake. "We have decided to knock down on the spot every kid who says anything against you whatever. After a time this is bound to have some effect."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Crash!

It was a terrific kick at the door. The door flew open, and half a dozen heads looked into the study.

"Yah!"

"Boo!"

"Who kidnapped Figgins?"

"Who disgraced his house?"

"Who's going to be kicked out?"

"Yah!"

A crowd of School House juniors were at the door, hurling these remarks and others of the same kind at Tom Merry. They did not know that Study No. 6 were there, and it was too dark to see them.

Gore, Tom Merry's old enemy, was at the head of the visitors. The situation was an enjoyable one to Gore.

"Better get your traps packed up, Tom Merry. You're going to be kicked out in the morning, you know," he said pleasantly.

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were gliding along the wall towards the door on tiptoe, invisible in the darkness.

"You can hear me, I suppose?" said Gore, his eyes fixed on the dim form sitting by the window, and quite unconscious of the vengeance about to fall upon him. "You can hear me, Tom Merry? We're going to see the last of you in the morning, and a jolly good thing, too. Yah! Who's disgraced his house—eh? Woorooh!"

In a twinkling Gore was struggling in the grip of Blake and Herries.

"Go for 'em!" yelled Blake.

"Give 'em socks!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Lemme go!" yelled Gore, as he was plumped down, and somebody sat on his chest. "Leggo! Gerrup!"

"Sit on him, D'Arcy."

"I am sittin' on him at the pwsent moment, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Gore, my deah fellah, if you stwuggle I shall pwobably hurt you."

"Lemme gerrup!"

"I am afraid that I cannot just at pwsent, deah boy."

Blake and Herries had rushed into Gore's followers, hitting out right and left, and the juniors were scattered with howls of rage.

They were soon driven down the corridor, and Blake came into the study again, flushed and breathless, but victorious.

"Got that beastly boulder safe, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Leggo! Lemme get up!"

"Wait a bit. We're going to talk to you first. You came here to talk, didn't you?"

"I came here to—wooroo!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Some silly ass has trodden on my foot!"

"Keep your feet out of the way, then," said Herries. "How can you expect me to see your old feet sprawling all over the place in the dark, I'd like to know?"

"Now, Gore, don't talk about your silly feet," said Blake. "There's more important matters to discuss. In the first place, you've got to beg pardon for coming here."

"Sha'n't!"

"Sure?"

"Yes; hang you! Gr-r-r—woohoo!"

"What's the matter?"

"Some silly owl has stuck a pin in me."

"Yes, I think it was this pin you felt—does that feel the same?"

"Woo—hoo—hoo!"

"Don't you like it?"

"Ow—no—no—ow!"

"You've got a lot more of it to come, though, unless you apologise in a handsome way to Tom Merry and the company generally."

"I won't! I— Hoo—hoo—woo—hoo!"

"Are you talking in Chinese?"

"Wooroo!"

"The apology must be in English. Are you ready?"

"No! Yes! I'll apologise! I'm sorry!"

"How sorry?"

"I'm—hang you—very sorry!"

"Immensely sorry?"

"No—yes—yes!"

"Will you ever do anything of the kind again?"

"Yes—no!"

"You'll try and behave yourself, and act as if you were a decent civilised chap, and not yourself at all?"

"Ye-e-es!"

"Good. I think we can let him go with a kicking, chaps."

"Right-ho!"

"Yaas, wathah."

They dragged Gore to his feet.

"Lemme go."

"Wait a tick. You haven't been kicked yet. One each, chaps, in the softest place you can find. You first, Gussy."

D'Arcy solemnly planted a kick behind Gore.

"Will that do, Blake?" asked the swell of the School House, as Gore wriggled and gave a yell.

"Ha, ha! I think so."

"It wasn't a very hard kick, and if Gore isn't satisfied I don't mind twying again!"

"Are you satisfied, Gore?"

"Yes," roared the unhappy Gore; "I'm quite satisfied."

"You wouldn't like Aubrey to try again?"

"No! Nunno! No!"

"Hold his arm, Aubrey, while I give him one. You wouldn't like to miss mine, would you, Gore? A good kicking is a jolly good thing for a cad like you, you know!"

Gore wriggled under the second kick.

"Now you, Herries."

"Right-ho! You chaps don't kick! Just you see me give him one," said Herries. "I'll get a goal this time, or bust something!"

Gore tore himself away from Blake and D'Arcy, and fled. Herries launched out his foot at the same moment, and it swept the empty air, and the kicker lost his balance. He went down with a crash on his back.

"Oh!"

"Well," said Blake, "if that's the way you get a goal, Herries, you wouldn't be much good on the football field. I never saw a chap take a goal like that before."

Herries picked himself up.

"Oh, don't rot," he said; "I'm hurt."

"Naturally, that's to be expected, when you score goals in that fashion," said Blake. "And there's Gore got away that one kick short. What the dickens did you let him go for, Aubrey?"

"It was you who let him go, I think, deah boy. I was holdin' to him like anythin'; and he jerked himself away. Why didn't you hold him?"

"That's a silly question to ask," said Blake, turning the subject. "He's gone anyway. I never saw such a cuckoo as Gussy for doing things."

"Blake, I must wequest you to withdwaw that wemark. It is quite contwawy to my sense of self-wespect to allow any person to chawactewise me as a cuckoo."

"Oh, go and eat coke."

"I wefuse to go and eat coke. I insist—"

"Oh, cheese it," said Blake, going into the study again. "Hallo, Tom Merry! You see how we're going to stand up for you, don't you?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"We'll soon put those silly kids in their places. Gore will be a changed character if we keep on at him like that. I say, don't take this too much to heart, old fellow," said Blake, becoming very serious. "Here's four of us ready to stick to you through thick and thin, and four of the best."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Foah of the vewy best, and all weady to stick to Tom Mewwy to the last shot in the lockah."

"You forget that I've got to leave St. Jim's," said Tom Merry quietly. "I'm awfully obliged to you chaps. But I've got to go."

"It can't be done," said Blake. "We're going to stop that, somehow."

"Yaas, wathah. We shall do something."

"What's your idea, Gussy?"
 "Oh, I haven't any, you know. But I weally think we ought to do somethin', somehow. We weally must make up our minds, you know, and see that somethin' is done," said D'Arcy. "Then, of course, the mattah will be all wight."
 "Ha, ha! There'll be a lot done if we leave it to Gussy," said Blake. "Of all the owls——"
 "If you chawactewise me as an owl, Blake, I shall be we-luctantly compelled to chastise you with extweme sevewity," said Arthur Augustus. "I have overlooked your wude wemark about a cuckoo, but I wefuse to be called an owl. I distinctly wefuse."
 "You—— Hallo, here's some more visitors."
 A voice was heard in the passage.
 "Here's the study. There's no light. I suppose he's here, though."
 It was a well-known voice.
 Blake dropped his voice to a whisper.
 "It's Figgins & Co.! Stand ready! Give 'em the kybosh the moment they get in."

CHAPTER 2.

Figgy's Great Idea—The Combine.

FIGGINS & Co. were coming along the dusky corridor towards Tom Merry's study in the School House.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, the leaders of the juniors of the New House, were the deadly foes of the School House chums, and any visit they paid to the rival house was naturally expected to be in the nature of a hostile raid.

Besides the semi-serious rivalry between the two houses at St. Jim's, Figgins & Co. had just now plenty of reason for going on the war-path.

In the annual junior cricket match, played that afternoon, the School House had beaten the New House. The New House, to a man, believed that it was because Figgins, their captain, had been kidnapped and kept away from the match.

And practically the whole of St. Jim's had firmly made up its mind that Tom Merry was responsible for that outrage.

"Here you are," said the great Figgins, stopping at the open door, and looking in.

Blake drew a deep breath.

That the New House all believed Tom Merry guilty, he knew, and he naturally supposed that Figgins & Co. shared the opinion of the rest of the house.

He jumped to the conclusion that the three had come over to the School House to give voice to their opinion on the subject, and so he was ready to give them a warm reception.

"Ready, kids?" breathed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

Blake was on one side of the door, Herries and D'Arcy on the other. Tom Merry and Manners were still at the window.

Figgins & Co. came unsuspectingly in.

"Charge!" roared Blake.

Study No. 6 charged!

Figgins went down with a crash, with Blake on top of him, Fatty Wynn collapsed with a gasp under the weight of Herries, and Kerr went staggering across the study with Arthur Augustus clinging to him.

"What the—who the—how the——" spluttered Figgins.

"Who the—what the——" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"What's the game?" roared Kerr, getting a grip on poor Arthur Augustus, and jamming him up against the table. Gussy had caught a Tartar, in fact. "What's the giddy game, hey?"

"You're bweakin' my back," gasped D'Arcy, struggling vainly in the grip of the athletic young Scotsman. "You are weally causin' me the most excwuciatin' pain, deah boy."

"Jolly good thing, too."

"Weally, I wish you would not pwess me so hard against the table."

"Rats!"

"Hold 'em!" shouted Blake, successfully pinning down the great Figgins, who was struggling wildly. "Got that bounder, Herries?"

"I've got him!"

"Have you got your man, Gussy?"

"No," gasped Gussy. "He's got me!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Hold him tight!"

"He's holding me tight!"

"Dot him on the boko!"

"I can't!"

"Manners, you bounder, come and lend Gussy a hand."

"Here, fair play," exclaimed Kerr, as Manners obediently came on the scene. "Fair play's a jewel. Hands off!"

"Weally, I insist upon Mannahs lendin' me some assistance," said D'Arcy. "You are bweakin' my back in a weally cwuel way, and besides, this is not a fight, this is a punishment for your beastly cheek, don't you know."

Kerr went over with Manners' grip upon his collar.

"Sit on him, Gussy."

"All wight."

And Arthur Augustus dropped his nine stone odd on Kerr's chest, and Kerr gasped.

"Gerrof me chest."

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the kind. You have nearly bwoken my back in the most bwutal way, and I wefuse to get off your chest, deah boy."

"That's right," said Jack Blake, "keep him safe. We're going to put these bounders up to a wrinkle about coming into people's studies to chip them. Rather! Manners, I'll trouble you for a shovelful of soot from the chimney."

"Right you are!" answered the obliging Manners.

"Hold on!" gasped Figgins. "What are you up to?"

"Going to improve your complexion, old chap!"

"Look here——"

"I'm looking."

"We didn't come to——"

"Thank you, Manners, I think that will do. Plop it on his physiognomy!"

"Stop!" yelled Figgins. "We came here to—— Gr-r-r-r—wooroooh—gr-r-r-r!"

There was soot on his face, and some had found its way into his mouth as he opened it in protest.

"Gr-r-r-r-r!"

"Now for Fatty!" said Blake. "Serve 'em all alike, and they'll benefit by this little lesson a lot. Don't gruggle like that, Figgy! You make me feel ill!"

"Gr-r-r! We came here to—gr-r-r-r!—to tell Tom Merry that we didn't believe what they're—gr-r-r-r!—saying about him, and to assure him that we'd—gr-r-r-r!—stand by him!" gasped Figgins.

Blake gave a jump.

"Eh, what's that? Say that again, Figgy."

"We came here as friends!" roared Figgins. "You set of silly asses!"

"Is that a giddy fact?" demanded Blake. "You're not rotting?"

"No," yelled the hapless Figgins, "I'm not! Why couldn't you stop to ask a question before you started, you silly owl?"

"Why didn't you explain before I shoved the soot on your dial?"

"Didn't I try to?"

"You didn't make it clear, anyway."

"That's because you're a silly ass!" howled Figgins.

"You can slang me as much as you like, Figgy," said Blake penitently. "I admit that we may have been a little too hasty."

"I should say so."

"There's a lot of rats been here to chip us, you see, and we thought you had come on the same tack!" explained Blake.

"We're sorry!"

"Awfully sorry!" said Herries, releasing Fatty Wynn, who got up, breathing like a stranded grampus.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus politely, allowing Kerr to rise, and lending him a helping hand. "Yaas, wathah, dear boys! We are awfully beastly sowwy, don't you know, and we weally and twuly apologise!"

Figgins rose to his feet.

"Turn on some beastly light, you owls!" he said. "Nice sort of a reception to give a chap who comes with friendly intentions!"

Blake lit the gas. At the sight of Figgy's face, which looked as if it had been specially made up to resemble a nigger minstrel, there was a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha!" howled Blake. "We're sorry, you know—really sorry! But you do look funny, Figgy!"

Figgy gave a growl. He jerked Blake's pocket-handkerchief from his jacket, and began to rub the soot from his countenance as well as he could.

But when he had done his best he still bore a striking resemblance to a Hottentot.

"Never mind," said Figgins cheerfully, at last. "I can clean that off presently. I suppose this silly game means that you are standing by Tom Merry, Blake?"

"Through thick and thin," said Blake.

"Right-ho!" chimed in Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good!" said Figgins. "We came over to say the same. Merry, old man, we don't believe a word of it! I was the chap who was kidnapped, and our house lost the match through it, and I say that I believe you are innocent. There's my fist on it!"

Figgins held out his hand. The tears started to Tom Merry's eyes as he grasped it.

"Thank you, Figgy."

Figgins looked round.

"Now, I have an idea," he said. "I thought we might make a committee to inquire into the matter, and bring the truth to light. If you chaps are willing——"

"Bravo!" shouted Blake. "Ripping, good idea of yours Figgy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins seemed to grow an inch taller on the spot.

"Well, I thought it a good idea," he said modestly. "You see, most of the fellows have made up their minds that Tom Merry is guilty; but we know him better, don't we, chaps?"

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

"That's it! We know he didn't put that brute Black George up to kidnapping me!" said Figgy. "But we know, too, that somebody did! The fellow didn't do it all on his lonesome! We are going to discover the right party, kids!"

"My hat!" said Blake. "Of course! Somebody's guilty! All we've got to do is to find that somebody. It's simple enough!"

"H'm! Easier to say than to do, I fancy," said Manners. "But it's a jolly good idea to have a try, you know!"

Something of the colour and the old look came back to Tom Merry's face. When he had heard the terrible sentence pronounced in Hall he had felt himself alone, deserted, in despair. Now he found that, though all the rest of the school was against him, he had friends left in Study No. 6 and Figgins & Co. Seven loyal friends were still there to rally round him. That meant very much to him, even if he had to leave St. Jim's in disgrace.

"I say, Figgy, this is jolly good of you!" said Tom gratefully. "Considering that we are rivals, and that your side lost the match through that kidnapping business—"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Figgins. "Of course, it's our business to row each other, but in time of trouble we stand shoulder to shoulder."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

"We're all in this," said Figgins, looking round. "House rows are put off till this matter's cleared up."

"Hear, hear!"

"My idea is to form a combine—"

"A what?"

"A combine," said Figgins. "You know what that is? It's the American idea, you know. When a lot of rival firms decide to amalgamate and pull together, so as to make things hum, they call it a combine. That's what we're going to do. We're rivals, and we're going to join forces to look into this matter. We're a combine."

"Hear, hear!"

"I think it's a ripping idea, though I say it who shouldn't," said Figgins. "Starting from the fact that Tom Merry is innocent, the puzzle is to find the guilty party. That's what we're going to do."

"We are."

"It's jolly good of you!" said Tom Merry. "But have you forgotten that I am to leave St. Jim's in the morning? As a matter of fact, I may as well tell you that I'm not going to wait till the morning. I'm going to-night."

"I've thought of that," said Figgins, with a nod of the head. "You're to leave the school, and we can't keep you here against the Head's wishes. But you're not going home. We've formed a plan, which I really think is a nobby one."

"What is it?"

"You know I was shoved into the old woodman's hut in the Castle Wood when I was kidnapped by that poacher beast?"

"Yes."

"It's a lonely place, right off the track, and anybody could live there for months without a soul being the wiser. You've got to leave St. Jim's, but there's no need for you to go far away. Why shouldn't you camp out in that old hut while the combine is at work proving your innocence?"

Tom Merry started. He had thought of running away from the school, to escape the shame and humiliation of being sent home in disgrace.

Figgins's idea was certainly a good one. The idea of camping out in a wood naturally appealed to a boy of an adventurous disposition. And he would be at hand if anything came to light to establish his innocence.

Blake gave Figgins a slap on the back that made him stagger.

"Why, what the—"

"Ripping wheeze!" exclaimed Blake. "Figgy, old son, I'm proud of you!"

"Well, you needn't dislocate my beastly spinal column!" growled Figgins. "What do you say, Merry, old chap? Are you game?"

"Rather! It's jolly clever of you to think of these things, Figgy! I sha'n't forget all this, if this affair turns out all right."

"It's bound to turn out all right if the combine set to work in earnest," said Figgins. "This evening the whole lot of us are going to break bounds and escort you to the hut, and we'd better all go, to carry the things you'll want for camping out there. Each of us will contribute something."

"Good idea!"

"You won't be afraid of sticking there alone, Tom?" asked Manners.

Tom smiled.

"I don't think so, old fellow!"

"It will be beastly lonely at night," said Herries. "In the daytime we can come and see you sometimes, and report progress. But at night—"

"I can stand it. It's better than going home in disgrace."

"I say, you can have my bulldog if you like," said Herries. "He'll keep you company, and it'll be safer, too. Towser likes you."

"Thanks, old chap. I'll be glad to have him."

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in!" said Tom Merry.

The door opened, and Mr. Railton, the housemaster of the School House, entered the study.

CHAPTER 3.

The Combine Gets at the Truth.

MR. RAILTON looked surprised as he saw the crowded state of Tom Merry's study. He glanced at the juniors, and then at Tom Merry.

Tom was pale, but his eyes met the housemaster's steadily. Mr. Railton's look was cold and severe. He had been Tom's headmaster at a school before either of them came to St. Jim's, and he had always liked Tom Merry, but now it was clear that he believed the charge against him, and that liking had been replaced by contempt.

"I came here to speak to you, Merry," he said. "I did not expect to find so many here. What are you New House boys doing on this side?"

"We came to tell Tom Merry that we're standing by him," said Figgins.

"That you're what?"

"Standing by him, sir. We know he's innocent."

Mr. Railton stared. Perhaps Figgins's complexion surprised him as much as Figgy's words.

"You think Tom Merry is innocent of the charge brought against him, Figgins?"

"We are quite sure about it, sir."

"Indeed! The proof to me seems complete, and I am amazed at Merry's effrontery in still protesting his innocence," said the housemaster coldly.

Tom Merry's face flushed.

"I shall never leave off protesting my innocence!" he exclaimed. "I am innocent, sir!"

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Merry, for it convinces me more than ever that I was mistaken in the estimate I once formed of your character."

"So you believe me guilty, sir?"

"Unquestionably."

"Oh, what rot!" said Blake involuntarily.

The house master turned upon him.

"What did you say, Blake?"

Blake turned as red as fire.

"I—I—I—"

"You will take fifty lines for your remark," said Mr. Railton.

"I like to see loyalty among boys; but I think you are mistaken, and that Merry is imposing upon your credulity. Merry, I came here to tell you that you must pack your box to-night, as you will leave by the first train in the morning. There is an early Sunday local to Wayland Junction, where you can take a train for Huckleberry Heath."

Tom Merry did not reply.

"You hear me, Merry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well." Mr. Railton glanced at the juniors again. "You New House boys had better return to your own house."

He quitted the study, and closed the door.

The juniors looked at one another rather uncomfortably. They had been enthusiastic in the task they had set themselves, and the words of the housemaster had come like a cold douche upon their enthusiasm.

Tom Merry's face was white and hard. He felt that the tears would come to his eyes; but he was determined not to let them come, and his teeth were tight on his underlip.

"Hang it!" said Figgins, breaking the silence at last. "That's rotten of Railton. I should have thought he would have more sense."

"Oh, he's taken in like all the rest!" said Blake. "He'll look a pretty ass when the Combine gets to work, and brings the truth out." He slapped Tom on the shoulder. "Buck up, Tommy! It ain't like you to be downhearted."

Tom Merry smiled faintly. He had never felt so downhearted in his life as he did at that moment. Under ordinary circumstances, there was no lad who could have faced a difficult situation more coolly or courageously. But the suspicion of having acted in a cowardly and treacherous manner overcame even Tom Merry's fortitude.

"Keep your pecker up, old kid!" said Figgins. "We're

NEXT THURSDAY. "THE SMART SET AT ST. JIM'S." A Tale of Tom Merry's Schooldays. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

going to see you through. Suppose we run over the points of the case, and see just how it stands. Now, in the first place, I was kidnapped and shoved into the old hut by Black George the poacher. We may take it for granted that he didn't risk being sent to prison just for fun, and so he was put up to doing what he did."

"That's certain."

"He says Tom Merry put him up to it, and gave him a fiver for his trouble. Now, we all believe that Tom Merry did nothing of the kind. Now, you see what follows? I wasn't kidnapped to be kept away from the cricket match at all."

There was a buzz of surprise.

"No, I wasn't," said Figgins firmly. "I was kidnapped, kids, so that that poacher brute could tell that lie about Tom Merry, and make out that Tom had served me that trick. If you think over it, you'll see it."

"My only pyjama hat!" said Blake, with a deep breath. "Bless me if old Figgy hasn't hit on the every exact truth. Black George could have had no motive for accusing Tom Merry, unless he was put up to it by someone who wanted Tom expelled from the school. It's some enemy of Tom's who's at the bottom of the whole business."

Tom Merry started violently.

"That's it," said Figgins; "I believe that's the true theory. But the difficulty is to think of any fellow at St. Jim's that could be mean beast enough to play a game like that to get Merry expelled. Frankly, I can't think of a chap who would do it."

"There's Monteith, your head prefect, over in the New House," said Blake musingly. "He's a mean beast, and he never liked Tom Merry."

"Look here, Blake—"

"I was only making a suggestion. I don't think Monteith would be mean enough, especially as he seems to have turned over a new leaf lately, and has been behaving for weeks in a quite civilised manner."

"You can leave Monteith out of it. I wish I could think of somebody, but I can't. What do you think yourself, Tom Merry?"

"I have thought of someone," said Tom, with a deep breath.

"His name?"

"It's not a fellow at St. Jim's at all."

"Then who is it?"

"My cousin, Philip Phipps."

There was a general exclamation of amazement.

"I say, Tom, that's pretty strong," said Manners.

"I feel certain of it," said Tom Merry, with conviction. "Listen! I'm going to tell you chaps a secret. You remember the master of the Shell, who was here a few weeks ago? Amos Keene he called himself then, who went to prison afterwards."

"Rather! He was a cad!"

"Well, my cousin wrote to him at least once from India. Keene was mixed up with a burglar, and had to leave the school. The Head could have sent him to prison if he had liked, but he saved himself from that by making a confession. He confessed that he had been sent to St. Jim's by Philip Phipps, to plot against me, and get me expelled in disgrace from the school."

"Great Christopher Columbus!"

"I didn't know what to believe, and when my cousin came here I tried to be civil to him, though I never trusted him. I thought it wasn't fair to condemn him simply on the word of a rascal like Keene. But now—"

"My word!" ejaculated Manners. "It's a fact! Why, you know that the note by which Figgins was lured into leaving the school before the match was written on paper belonging to Tom Merry? That's a strong point in the evidence. The Head thinks that if Black George was lying, how did he get hold of that notepaper? He's never been inside St. Jim's. Why, of course, that brute Phipps picked it up to use for the purpose, when we had him in the study here giving him a feed. That was his gratitude for a jolly good feed."

Figgins made a grimace. The provisions for that feed had been raided from the New House juniors, and so Figgy had good reason to remember the occasion.

"And you remember the keen interest Phipps took in the house-match," said Blake. "Of course, he was spying out the lay of the land. He knew how suspicion was certain to fall on Tom Merry if anything happened to Figgy."

"And he started it, too," said Kerr. "Don't you remember how the first suspicion was caused by Phipps repeating to Monteith some joke of Merry's about knocking Figgy on the head before the match?"

"By Jupiter, yes! Kids, we're on the track. This Combine is going to be a howling success," said Figgins. "Mind, we won't say a word to a soul. When the truth comes out, it's going to be a surprise all round; and it will make those silly kippers sing small, and no mistake."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake. "But I say, Merry, what do

you imagine your cousin's motive to be for playing a mean game like this?"

"Oh, that's plain enough! Keene confessed it all before he left St. Jim's," said Tom. "My uncle, General Merry, in India, is awfully rich, and at present he intends me to be his heir. But he is an awfully stiff and rigid old fellow, and the least suspicion of blackguardism would be enough to get me cut out of his will. If Phipps could disgrace me, so that I could never get my name cleared, it would be worth a quarter of a million pounds to him in the end."

"Phew!"

The Combine had no further doubts.

"You see how things get cleared up when we put our heads together and talk 'em over," said Figgins. "Of course, we've got to get the proof. We've got to fix it on the scoundrel. We'll find a way of doing that."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Philip Phipps is staying in Rylcombe now," Tom Merry remarked. "Of course, he's staying till he's quite sure the plot has worked out all right. He won't go till I'm expelled from St. Jim's. He left soon after the match to-day, so as not to get mixed up in the matter more than he could help, I suppose."

"We're on his track," said Figgins. "We'll have the truth out somehow. That poacher brute will have to be made to confess, too."

"Yes. We might get him in the study here somehow," suggested Herries, "and put him to the torture, or something, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I don't know about that!" grinned Figgins. "Still, we'll work it somehow. See how much we've done already. We know the whole game from start to finish, and now we've spotted the scoundrel we've only to prove it. But before that, kids, we've got to get Tom Merry fixed up in his camp in the Castle Wood."

"Right-ho!"

"Then I vote that this meeting break up, and that we proceed to get together the things we are going to take, and fasten 'em up in bundles," said Figgins. "Then we shall be all ready to start. We'll stick the things somewhere handy, and at eleven o'clock we'll rendezvous at the same old spot under the elms where we get over the wall—I mean where naughty boys, not like us, break bounds sometimes."

"Ha, ha! That's settled."

So the first meeting of the Combine forthwith broke up.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry Camps Out.

BOOM!

The stroke from the clock-tower of St. Jim's echoed in a hollow way through the dim, silent night.

Boom! again till eleven strokes had been told off.

All was dark and silent in the great school. From a few study windows a light still gleamed, where late students still hung over their books; but they were few and far between. St. Jim's was wrapped in silence.

It wanted but an hour to midnight and Morpheus reigned in the long dark dormitories in the two houses of St. Jim's. Just as the last stroke of the hour died away several dark figures might have been seen—to borrow an expression from the novelists—stealing away from the School House, each with an enormous bundle under his arm, and one of them leading a big bulldog.

They made their way direct to a certain spot in the wall overlooking Rylcombe Lane, where the thick clinging ivy offered a secure hold for the climber.

As they reached it several other dark figures came into view, each similarly equipped with a bundle of gigantic dimensions. There was a whispered greeting.

"That you, Figgy?"

"Yes, here we are—the three of us—before you."

"We're on time," said Jack Blake. "It's only just eleven."

"All right. I see you've got your bundles," said Figgins with a chuckle. "Feeling pretty fit, Tom Merry?"

"Pretty good!" said Tom. "Can't expect to be very cheerful under the circumstances."

"Not funky?"

Tom laughed.

"Oh, no!"

"Don't be downhearted, Merry," said Figgins; "we're going to see you through. This Combine of ours is going to stagger humanity at St. Jim's, I tell you. Give me a bunk up, and I'll go over the wall first. Then you can sit on it and hand down the parcels into the road."

"Good!"

Figgins was very quickly over the wall. Tom Merry followed

him to the top and sat astride of the wall, and Blake handed him up the bundles one by one. Tom Merry slung them over to Figgins, who caught them and placed them in a row along the wall.

"Eight," said Tom Merry; "that's the lot! Towser comes last. Quiet, old boy, I'm not going to hurt you. Stroke the brute, Herries. That's right! There you are, Figgy! Now I'm coming."

Tom Merry dropped into the road. Manners followed, then Study No. 6 and the Co.

The eight juniors picked up their parcels again, and, led by Tom Merry and Figgins, they started down the lane towards the village of Rylcombe, Herries leading the bulldog.

It was a clear, starry night, and there was plenty of light in the lane. It was as lonely as a churchyard, and not a soul passed them. They crossed the stile into the wood and followed the footpath half-way to the ruined castle. Then they turned off into the wild wood in the direction of the deserted woodman's hut.

"Jolly lonely, ain't it?" said Figgins, starting as a wakened bird brushed by in the thicket. "You won't like it, Tom Merry."

"I shall be all right."

"I say!" It was a thrilling whisper from Blake, from behind.

Tom Merry turned his head.

"What's the matter, Blake?"

"There's somebody in the wood. I'm sure I heard a foot-step. Lay low!"

The eight juniors stopped at once. The wood at that hour was so dark and silent and weird that the least happening was sufficient to set their hearts palpitating.

Herries put his hand over the bulldog's muzzle to stop him from growling. Any other hand there would probably have received a bite. The juniors listened intently.

A smell of strong tobacco was wafted through the wood and a gleam of red became visible in the darkness.

A burly, dark figure crossed an open patch where the starlight fell, and the juniors recognised Black George, the poacher.

Tom Merry gritted his teeth. There was the scoundrel who had slandered him, who, for a few paltry sovereigns, had lied away his honour and happiness. He clenched his fists and made a step forward.

Figgins hastily grasped his arm.

"Hold on, Tom!" he whispered. "We don't want to give ourselves away. Keep quiet!"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath and nodded.

But the poacher had heard some slight sound, for he turned his head and stared directly towards the spot where the boys stood in the dense shadow of the trees. He stopped instead of passing on his way, and in the moonlight they saw his eyes glimmer with suspicion.

"He knows there's something up," murmured Figgins. "He mustn't see us, though. How the——"

Blake tapped his arm.

"It's all right. There's Towser."

Figgins chuckled silently.

"Good! Tell Herries."

He drew Tom Merry aside to allow a clear path for the bulldog.

The poacher heard the rustle, and his suspicions strengthened, and he came quickly towards the spot, his hand tightening on the cudgel he carried.

Blake whispered to Herries. The latter grinned.

"Right-ho!"

A word to Towser was sufficient.

"Seize him! Worry him!"

Like an arrow from a bow the bulldog shot forward.

Black George started back in amazement and alarm as a big bulldog came tearing out of the darkness under the trees with flaming eyes and open jaws. Towser's hostile intentions were evident to the dullest glance. He meant business, deadly business.

Black George gave him one startled, terrified glance, and then turned and bolted at top speed, crashing through the thickets with the bulldog in hot pursuit.

"Grr-r-r-r!" That was all Towser said; but a moment later a fearful fiendish yell was heard from Black George.

Herries gave a whoop.

"Good old Towser! Towser's got him!"

Towser certainly had him! Black George went tearing on madly through the wood with the bulldog hanging on to him, and both disappeared from the keen sight of the juniors.

Blake laid down in the grass and kicked. Tom Merry staggered against a tree, laughing till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"My hat!" gurgled Figgins. "That is about the biggest surprise Black George ever went in for, I imagine."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

It was some minutes before the juniors recovered their gravity sufficiently to resume their way. The bulldog was gone; but, Herries said that he would find them again. The party marched

on through the gloomy wood. The tension had been broken by that comical incident, and they chatted freely and easily now in spite of the darkness and the eerie silence of the wood.

"Here we are!" said Figgins at last.

He halted in a narrow glade shut in by overhanging trees. Under one of the big trees stood the old hut which had once been occupied by a woodman. It must have been many years before, for the hut had fallen into utter ruin. The walls were shaky and dilapidated, the roof was almost entirely gone, and there was no vestige of door or window. Weeds and grasses had grown up all over the floor and the walls were thick with clinging creepers and half hidden by shrubbery.

"Jolly little place," said Tom Merry, entering and lighting a bicycle lantern, which he flashed round the interior of the hut. "I shall like this all right."

"You'll find it a bit lonely."

"Well, there's the bulldog," said Tom Merry; "I'll teach him tricks—that is, if he turns up again."

"Oh, he's sure to!" said Herries confidently. "The sense that dog has got is astonishing. You can teach him anything but Greek. Why, here he is!"

Towser was rubbing his nose against his master's shin.

"Hallo! You've come back then?" said Herries, stooping to pat the head of his pet. "What's that you've got in your teeth?"

"Ha, ha!" cried Tom Merry. "It's a patch from Black George's trousers."

Towser gave up his capture and on examination it proved to be a patch of corded cloth such as the poacher's nether garments were made of.

"My hat!" grinned Blake. "Black George will feel a pain for some time when he sits down, I fancy. Good old Towser!"

Towser wagged his head. He evidently considered that he had done pretty well and deserved commendation.

Figgins was unfastening the bundles. The contents, as they were turned out, were many and varied. The juniors had not spared the property of the ancient foundation of St. Jim's.

There were blankets galore, and washing utensils, and others for cooking, and a camp-stool, a waterproof-coat, books and papers, and, in fact, all sorts and conditions of things. There were three bicycle lanterns, one of them of the acetylator variety, so Tom Merry was certain to have plenty of light in the dark hours. There were cans of oil and carbide of calcium for reloading the lamps.

Then there were the provisions. Extensive purchases had been made in the school tuck-shop. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had generously contributed a "fivah," as he called it, to the fund, and the juniors had done the thing well. If Tom Merry stayed a week at the woodman's hut he was not likely to consume all that had been brought there, unless he assumed the proportions of a Falstaff.

There was a spirit-stove and a big bottle of methylated spirit, and a kettle and a saucepan, teapot and crockery, and cutlery.

The various articles were deposited in the hut, and the juniors surveyed them with eyes of pride.

"I say, this looks jolly!" said Tom Merry. "I always had a fancy for leading a Robinson Crusoe life, you know, and this will be something like it."

"Wish we were going to stay with you," said Figgins. "It wouldn't do, though. If only you are missing they'll think you've bolted, and won't imagine you're hanging round here; but any of us they would be after like a shot. They know we shouldn't cut it."

"Don't worry about me," said Tom cheerfully; "I shall be all right. Only come to see me as often as you can."

"Rather!" said Figgins. "We'll run in one at a time, you know, so as not to rouse suspicion. If they suspected you were here they'd soon have you out. Now, are you all right?"

"Perfectly!"

"If it rains there's the waterproof-coat. But I don't think it will. We've got some summer at last, and I think it's going to stay with us a week or two. So long as it's fine this is a jolly place enough."

They did everything they could to make the youthful hermit comfortable. Then at last they solemnly shook hands with him all round, and parted.

As a matter of fact all of them were very sleepy. The juniors retraced their steps through the wood, and Tom curled himself up in his blankets, with the bulldog curled up by his side and was fast asleep long before his chums had arrived at St. Jim's again.

ANSWERS

CHAPTER 5. Facing the Music.

SUNDAY morning was usually very quiet and peaceful at St. Jim's. After early chapel the boys were mostly free to do as they liked with the morning, but it was not "the thing" to row or to indulge in any relaxations of a noisy nature. An interval of quiet restfulness probably did them good, for at St. Jim's they worked hard and played hard.

But on this particular morning St. Jim's was in a buzz. The sentence of expulsion pronounced upon Tom Merry the day before in the crowded hall was sufficient to keep the boys excited for days to come; but it was not only that which was now the topic of eager discussion.

Tom Merry was to have left the school by the early Sunday train. A crowd of fellows had assembled to see him drive off in the trap with Mr. Railton, and to give him a parting storm of hisses and "booes" as he went. But they had been disappointed.

The crowd had waited near the gates till long past the hour upon which the train left Rylcombe, but neither Mr. Railton nor Tom Merry had appeared. It was impossible that the sentence had been rescinded, and the boys were left to wonder in amazement why Tom Merry's departure was postponed.

Slowly the truth leaked out. Tom Merry was already gone! Instead of waiting to be taken away in shame and humiliation, the sentenced lad had taken French leave, and left the school under cover of darkness.

The news was soon confirmed. Manners was expected to know more of his chum's movements than anybody else, and a number of curious inquirers sought out Manners.

"I say, Manners, old fellow," said Gore persuasively, "where's Tom Merry?"

"Go and eat coke!" said Manners.

"Has he left St. Jim's?"

"Find out!"

"Did you help him go?"

Manners turned his back.

This was extremely unsatisfactory from the inquirer's point of view. Gore was inclined to go for Manners on the spot, and was restrained only by the remembrance that it was Sunday morning, and fighting was barred, and by the knowledge that Manners would probably have knocked him into a cocked hat.

"Let's go and ask Blake," said Mellish. "He's always thick with Tom Merry, when he's not rowing with him, and he's saying out plain that he believes Merry is innocent, so very likely he knows all about it."

Search was made for Study No. 6. They were found in a corner of the quadrangle sitting on a rail and talking. They gave the band of bold inquirers a far from amiable or friendly greeting.

"Well, what do you silly cuckoos want?" asked Blake.

"Explain, if you've got sense enough, and then clear!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Where's Tom Merry?"

"Do you want to know where he is?"

"Yes," said Gore eagerly.

"You want to know very badly?"

"Yes, yes!"

"You're awfully eager to know?"

"Yes, of course—yes!"

"Then you'd better go and find out," said Blake. "Good-bye!"

"Look here, Blake——"

"You'll have to get a screen rigged up in front of your face first. You've no right to ask a chap to look at that. It's downright cruelty to animals."

"I'm not going——"

"Yes you are!" said Blake, getting off the rail. "You're going, or else you'll get the end of my boot! Now then!"

Gore looked at him, and thought he had better go.

The unsuccessful inquirers meandered away disconsolately. They felt sure that Blake knew something, but it was equally certain that he wouldn't tell them. As they walked away they met Figgins & Co., nicely clad in their Sunday clothes.

"Hallo!" said Gore eagerly. "Have you heard the news, Figgins?"

"What news?"

"Tom Merry has left St. Jim's."

"Has he?"

"Yes, he has."

"Well; I might have guessed that, without your telling me," said Figgins gravely, cocking his eye up at the towering mass of building which constituted St. Jim's. "He would have found St. Jim's rather an armful to carry away with him."

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

"Eh?" said Gore, who was rather slow of comprehension.

"I tell you Tom Merry has left St. Jim's."

"Of course he's left it, as it's still here," said Figgins. "Did you expect him to take it away in his trousers-pocket?"

"I mean——"

"I haven't time to hear you explain what you mean, Gore. You're too long-winded. Come on, kids. We can't stand here and let people see us talking to the School House fellows. I'm not proud, but something's due to the dignity of our house."

And Figgins & Co. walked on.

"Hang them!" said Gore viciously. "I believe they know something about it. Anyway, Tom Merry's gone, and a jolly good riddance, too!"

Figgins & Co. strolled on to the identical corner of the shady old quad where Study No. 6 were seated in a row on the low railing. Manners arrived there from a different direction at the same time. It was a rendezvous of the Combine.

"They're all awfully curious about it," said Figgins, with a nod to his old enemies now his friends for the nonce. "Everybody knows that Tom Merry is gone, but they don't know what we know. Ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "We must keep the secwet locked up in our own bweasts, deah boys, and not let on a word to a soul."

"What did Railton say this morning when he found out?" asked Figgins.

Manners chuckled.

"He came into the Shell dormitory to call Tom Merry," he replied. "He was fairly flabbergasted when he found he was gone. He didn't say a word, but went out."

"I expect there will be some inquiries made," said Figgins. "Mind, we don't know anything, any of us. We're all as innocent as lambs."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I expect they'll ask me questions," said Manners, shaking his head. "They'll guess that Tom wouldn't go without saying good-bye to me, at any rate, and that very likely I helped him off when he cleared out."

"If they question you, old chap, you must keep mum. Not a word, mind. I don't say you're to tell any whoppers. We all bar that. I'd rather take a flogging any day than tell lies to the doctor. He's not to know the facts, though."

"Oh, I can stand it!" said Manners. "I don't care what they do; they won't get a word out of me."

"Bwavo, Manners!" said D'Arcy. "That is weally bwave of you, don't you know, deah boy. I weally admire your couwage, Mannahs!"

"Go hon!" said Manners.

"Hallo," said Figgins, "here's Buttons! What do you want, Buttons?"

The page of the School House came up breathless.

"Master Manners is wanted in the doctor's study," he said.

Manners made a grimace.

"I'm in for it," he said.

"Buck up!" said Figgins encouragingly. "Don't say a word!"

"Not a giddy word," said Blake. "Let 'em do what they like; they can only lick you."

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Kerr. "Lickings and impositions don't amount to much. Just be as firm as a rock, Manners."

"If I were in your place, Mannahs," said Arthur Augustus. "I should stwike an impwessive attitude, and defy them to extwact a word fwom me."

"If you were in my place," said Manners, "you'd act the giddy ox, I expect. I'm coming, Buttons!"

"But, weally, Mannahs, I should——"

"Oh, rats!" said Manners, who did not seem at all grateful for the excellent and courageous advice showered upon him, or the hardy indifference to a mere flogging which the juniors showed—that flogging being only likely to fall to Manners' share. "Oh, rats!" repeated Manners emphatically.

Arthur Augustus slid off the rail, screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and surveyed the Shell lad with scornful inquiry.

"Did you say wats to me, Mannahs?"

"No, I didn't," said Manners.

"Ah, then I excuse you——"

"I didn't say wats to anybody," said Manners. "I said rats, and I said rats to you, Arthur Augustus Aubrey Adolphus Algernon Plantagenet."

"Then I can only remark that you are extwemely wude," said D'Arcy, "and if it were not Sunday I should feel compelled to inflict a severe chastisement upon you, Mannahs."

"Oh, rats!" said Manners.

And he walked off in the wake of Buttons.

Manners was, in truth, feeling a little nervous. He did not know how he was to elude a severe questioning under the severe eye of the doctor, and at the same time he was determined not to say a word to betray the real facts as to Tom Merry's flight. If Tom Merry's hiding-place were known, he would be fetched away from his camp in the wood, and the whole plan of the Combine would be spoiled.

He found Mr. Railton and the doctor in the latter's study. Both were looking extremely troubled, but they looked at Manners in quite a kindly way, which encouraged him a little.



Phipps, blind with rage and eggs, rushed to and fro like a lunatic. "Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Hear me smile, Phippy old dear!" "Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Figgins.

"Manners," said Dr. Holmes quietly, "we have learned that Tom Merry has undoubtedly left St. Jim's during the night, and has, in fact, run away from school."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"I know he is gone, sir."

"I mean, did he confide his intentions to you beforehand? I need not say that anything you tell me now will not be used against you. I have no desire to punish anyone if it can be helped."

Manners was silent.

"Come, answer my question, Manners."

"Tom told me he was going away last night," said Manners slowly.

"When did he go?"

"About eleven o'clock, sir."

"You helped him?"

"Yes, sir," said Manners steadily.

"And where is he gone?"

Manners' lips closed tightly. Both the Head and the housemaster noted it, and they knew that they were to have some difficulties here.

"Come, Manners," said the Head gently, "it is for the unfortunate lad's own sake that I wish you to answer this question. He cannot be left to wander out into the world alone."

"You were going to send him away from the school, sir."

"That is different. I was going to send him back to his home at Huckleberry Heath, to the charge of his guardian, Miss Fawcett. Now he is gone no one knows whither, and may come to harm. Come, Manners, I must insist upon your telling me where Tom Merry is, for your friend's own sake."

Manners was silent.

"Manners." The Head raised his voice a little, "I hope you will not refuse to answer me, and put me to the unpleasantness of punishing you."

"I haven't anything to say, sir."

"You know where Tom Merry has gone?"

"Yes, sir," said Manners, reluctantly.

"Then tell me."

Manners did not speak.

Mr. Railton spoke in a low tone to the Head. Dr. Holmes nodded assent to what he said, and the housemaster left the room. Manners waited in silence, feeling very hot and uncomfortable in the stillness of the study, with the Head's steady eye upon him.

Mr. Railton returned in a few minutes. He was not alone. The chums of Study No. 6 followed him into the study.

They exchanged sympathetic glances with Manners. The astute housemaster had guessed that Blake and his friends probably knew as much about the matter as Manners did, and among them he hoped to get at the truth.

"My boys," said Dr. Holmes gravely, "Do any of you know where Tom Merry has gone?"

It was a direct question that could be dealt with in only two ways, by prevarication or a refusal to reply, and prevarication never recommended itself to the chums of Study No. 6.

"Yes, sir," said Blake simply. "We know."

"Yaas, wathah," said D'Arcy. "But we have promised not to tell, sir."

"You must tell me at once."

"We are sorry, sir," said Blake, "but we have promised not to. You wouldn't order us to break a promise, sir."

The Head coloured with annoyance.

The way Blake put it made matters very difficult for him. "Of course not, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Doctah Holmes is a gentleman whom we all wespect; and he is the soul of honah. He wouldn't think of askin' us to bweak a pwomise."

"Under the circumstances," said the Head, "as Tom Merry may come to great harm, I think I may by my authority as your headmaster release you from that promise. Now, tell me at once where Tom Merry is."

The chains were silent.
 "Do you hear me?" said the doctor, raising his voice.
 "Yes, sir."
 "Then answer me."
 "We—we can't, sir."
 "Quite impos—," murmured D'Arcy. "Quite against our sonch, sir."
 Dr. Holmes flushed.
 "Boys! This is direct insubordination! I hardly know how to deal with you. It would be very painful to me to flog you—"
 "And to us, sir," murmured Blake.
 "Silence! I will consider this matter. For the present you may go."
 "Thank you, sir."
 "I will ask Mr. Phipps to call in the morning, Mr. Railton," said the Head, as the juniors went out. "He may be able to give me some information which may lead to finding that unhappy boy. Meanwhile—"
 The door closed on the juniors.
 Blake's face was blazing with excitement.
 "Did you hear that?" he whispered.
 "Hear what?"
 "About Phipps! Come on, and let's see Figgins."
 They hurried back to the railed grass-plot in the quad. Figgins and Co. were awaiting them there. They were full of curiosity to know how the interview had gone.
 "It's all right," said Blake. "We didn't say a word. But we have learned something."
 "What's that?"
 "That howling rotter, Phipps, is coming to the school tomorrow morning."
 Figgy's eyes flashed.
 "My hat!" he ejaculated. "We'll be ready for him. We'll give him something to make him sorry for himself, kids."
 "That's what I was thinking," said Blake. "Just a little reception, you know, to make him aware that the St. Jim's Combine is on the warpath."
 And the Combine fell to eagerly discussing the details of the scheme, with the result that there was a pooling of pocket-money, a visit to the school shop, and an extensive purchase of eggs, for what purpose our next chapter will reveal.

CHAPTER 6.

Philip Phipps is Shown Up.

MONDAY morning dawned upon the school, and the round of the week's work commenced; but in corridors and class-rooms the boys were still discussing the strange departure of Tom Merry.
 Nothing had been heard of the missing lad.
 During the Sunday, several members of the Combine had stealthily paid visits to the hut in the Castle Wood, to take to the youthful Crusoe various necessities that had been overlooked in the first journey, and to talk to him and cheer him up.
 But they were extremely careful not to be watched or followed, and they did not breathe a hint at St. Jim's of the true state of affairs.
 The general impression was that Tom Merry had bolted, and that he was by this time far away from the school.
 That impression suited the plans of the Combine, and they said nothing to remove it.
 Inquiries had been made for the missing lad at the railway station, but he had not been seen there, of course.
 The Head could only conclude that he had gone from the school on tramp, and he hesitated to call in the police to assist in the search.
 It was quite possible, he thought, that Tom Merry was making for his home at Huckleberry Heath, and that he would arrive there, only later than had been intended.
 So the doctor satisfied himself with writing a full account of the matter to Miss Priscilla Fawcett, and hoped for the best.
 It had been arranged for Mr. Railton to take Tom home, and explain matters to his old governess, but the housemaster was not sorry to be relieved of the task.
 He had had some previous experience of Miss Priscilla.
 And to face her and tell her that her beloved ward had been expelled from St. Jim's was a task the boldest might have shrunk from.
 The Head had sent a message to Philip Phipps, who was staying in Rylcombe, and after morning school that gentleman appeared at St. Jim's, and entered the Principal's house.
 Philip Phipps, in the course of two or three visits to the Head, had succeeded in removing the bad impression Dr. Holmes had had of him.
 As an old St. Jim's boy, with an affectionate regard for his old school, he had known how to reach the soft spot in the doctor's heart.
 Dr. Holmes shook hands with him now quite cordially.
 "This is a bad business, Mr. Phipps," he said.
 "Very bad," said Philip Phipps. "And—you will excuse

me, doctor, but I find it very hard to believe that my young cousin is guilty of the conduct ascribed to him. I know you would not expel him without good reason, but at the same time, I cannot help hoping that some terrible mistake has been made."

"That is a natural feeling, and I respect you for it," said the unsuspecting doctor. "But unfortunately, there is no hope that a mistake has been made. I will tell you the whole of the circumstances."

Philip Phipps listened intently while the doctor recapitulated the evidence against Tom Merry, upon the strength of which the hero of the Shell had been condemned.

At the end of the recital he bowed his head as if in unwilling acquiescence.

"You are convinced?" asked the doctor.

"I confess that I am," said Phipps, sadly. "This is a blow to me, doctor. I should never have suspected the lad of anything of the kind. No wonder he has bolted from the school. I should have been astonished if he had stayed to face his schoolfellows a moment longer than he could help."

"You are right. I am sorry to have to dispel your faith in your cousin, Mr. Phipps, but the truth is the truth. I am only concerned now to know what has become of the unhappy boy. He has run away from St. Jim's, where I do not know."

"Doubtless he will make his way back to Huckleberry Heath, sir."

"You think so?" said the doctor. "I am glad to hear it. I should feel sure of it, only several juniors here who helped him to escape refuse to tell me where he is gone, and if he were gone home they could have no reason for reticence."

"I have no doubt of it, nevertheless, for Miss Priscilla Fawcett is certain to take his part in the matter, and to believe his version of the story," said Philip Phipps. "He will find a backer in her, and he will not listen to reason, doctor. She will accuse you of injustice."

The doctor coloured slightly.

Phipps's words were cunningly calculated to get the Head's "back up," as the saying is, and rouse the obstinacy in his nature.

"I hope not," said Dr. Holmes. "I have written to Miss Fawcett fully explaining the matter, and stating the evidence, and I can do no more."

"I should not be surprised, nevertheless, if Miss Fawcett were to come here—"

The Head started.

"Come here!"

"Certainly, to point out to you the impossibility of Tom Merry having done what you have expelled him for doing."

"Dear me," said the Head nervously. "I really—I—ah—really—"

"I hope you will be able to pacify her," said Philip Phipps with a smile. "She is an old lady who can be very insistent."

Phipps took his leave, leaving the Head of St. Jim's in a very perturbed state.

Miss Fawcett was a somewhat terrifying old lady to the doctor, and the prospect of an interview with an angry and exasperated female was alarming.

Phipps walked out of the Principal's house with a smile upon his face.

Success was in his grasp; he had planned, and his plans had succeeded almost without an effort on his part.

It only remained for him now to reap the reward of his rascality. Rosy anticipations of the future filled the mind of the scoundrel who had ruined an innocent lad for the sake of money.

But Phipps was about to reap a part of his reward that he had not calculated upon.

Jack Blake was standing outside the Principal's house, watching the pigeons, but with a corner of one eye on the door.

He spotted Phipps as soon as the man from India came out, and gave a low whistle.

Philip Phipps nodded to him in passing.

Blake gave him a frigid stare.

Phipps was a little surprised, as he had been on cordial terms with all the juniors on the Saturday of the house-match, but he walked on.

The next moment he gave a fiendish yell. Blake's hand had come round from behind him, and there was an egg in it. That egg shot from the junior's fingers true to its mark.

Squelch!

The smashing of an egg on the back of Philip Phipps' neck was sufficient to make him yell. He whirled round in amazement and rage. Blake was looking at the pigeons again, as innocent in appearance as a junior could possibly be.

"You young imp!" roared Phipps. "How dare you!"

He was trying to wipe the sticky mass from the back of his neck with his handkerchief. Blake stared at him.

"Hallo! what's the matter with you?" he asked, in surprise.

"You threw that egg at me!"

"Did I, really?"

"I'll break your neck for it, you young whelp!"

Phipps rushed furiously at Blake.
Squelch!

An egg from a different direction, from the hand of Herries, smashed on his left ear. The next second one broke on his right ear, deftly hurled by Figgins. Blake's whistle had brought the whole Combine to the scene.

They were there in force, each armed with half-a-dozen eggs, some of which had seen their youth a long time before, and had reached an odorous old age.

"Go it!" yelled Figgins, excitedly.

"Yaas, go it, deah boys, wathah!"

Squelch! squelch!

Phipps stopped his wild rush at Blake, as the attack came from all sides. His face was in a fearful state. He turned upon Figgins, and Figgins retreated, while the rest of the Combine rushed forward to pelt Phipps from behind.

Then he furiously turned towards them, and they scattered, and still the eggs came whizzing to the target. Phipps was yelling like a maniac, and bolting blindly hither and thither in pursuit of first one and then another of the elusive juniors.

The extraordinary scene, of course, attracted a crowd in next to no time, and howls of laughter greeted the appearance of Phipps, who was certainly very comical to look at, though he felt anything but amused himself.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Hear me smile, Phippy old dear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Figgins. "Pelt the rotter!"

Phipps, blind with rage and eggs, ushered to and fro like a lunatic. As ill-luck would have it he managed to get hold of Arthur Augustus D'Acy, who was not quick enough in dodging. He had paused for a moment to adjust his eyeglass, and in that moment Phipps had him.

Arthur Augustus gave a whoop as the infuriated man seized him and began to thrash him.

"Wescue, wescue!" roared D'Acy, struggling in Phipps' grasp. "Help, help, deah boys. He is hurting me. The howwid wuff boundah is hurtin' me extwemely!"

"Take that—and that!" panted Phipps, cuffing poor Gussy right and left, satisfied at having somebody upon whom to wreak his rage.

D'Acy took them; he couldn't help it. He squirmed and yelled:

"Wescue! Wescue!"

The juniors were not long in coming to the rescue. Philip Phipps looked rather dangerous at close quarters, but they were not the fellows to leave D'Acy at the mercy of the foe.

"Line up!" shouted Blake. "All together! To the rescue!"

The Combine charged in line. They tumbled upon Phipps like so many cats, and had him on the ground in a twinkling, and the few remaining eggs were smashed upon his features.

Phipps was yelling with rage, and using language that was more suitable for Billingsgate Market than the classic precincts of St. Jim's.

The uproar had reached the doctor's ears, and he had looked out of his window, and the sight he saw almost petrified him. He came out of his house with unusual haste.

"Boys!"

The deep voice startled the juniors, and, to tell the truth, scared them a little. In their excitement they had quite forgotten the very existence of the Head.

"Yes, sir?" said Figgins.

"How dare you! I—I—" Dr. Holmes stopped.

Phipps, who had almost lost his senses with fury, was screaming out a stream of flowery language which would have shocked a hoeligan. The true character of the man came out as he lost his usual cunning guard over himself in that moment of blind rage. Anybody would have been exasperated by the treatment he had had, but only a blackguard would have used bad language, especially as bad as that Phipps was indulging in.

The doctor's brow grew very stern.

"Mr. Phipps! Silence! How dare you use such words in the presence of boys! Silence, sir, or you will tempt me to strike you, sir."

Phipps wriggled to his feet. He was too furious to care for the Head or anybody else, or to remember his plans, or anything but his desire to be revenged on the juniors.

"Why don't you keep your brats in better order, you old fool!" he yelled. "I'll break their infernal necks for them!"

He clutched at Blake, and caught him, but Figgins tripped him up, and he sat down in a hurry, and the Combine laid hold of him again.

Dr. Holmes was red with anger. He had never been addressed like that before, and the provocation Philip Phipps had had was no excuse.

"Boys, release him instantly. Every lad concerned in this shocking outrage shall be severely punished, and the leaders shall be expelled from the school!"

"Oh, sir!"

"Mr. Phipps, you had better go into the house and clean yourself. I am sorry this has happened, but nothing, sir, can excuse your rudeness to me, or the vile language you have used

in the presence of lads. Not a word. Say a word more—one single coarse expression, sir—and I will have you flung out into the road in your present state!"

That threat was sufficient to quieten Phipps, and now something of his cunning was coming back to him, and he realised what a terrible blunder he had made.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Holmes—"

"You need say no more."

"I am really sorry."

"I hope you are. It would show that you have some fragment of self-respect left," said the doctor majestically. "But nothing can excuse you. You are a blackguard, sir."

"I—"

"Say no more. The sooner you get off these grounds the better I shall be pleased, and I shall take it as a favour if you will not call again. Taggles, you will show this—this person where he can clean himself. Not a word, sir. Boys, all of you who have been concerned in this outrage, follow me."

And the Head stalked into his house again.

Phipps went away with the grinning Taggles, to improve his appearance a little, and the juniors followed the Head to his study—not without trepidation.

Phipps left the house a little later, cleaner, but still bearing many traces of his experience at the hands of the juniors of St. Jim's. His face wore a savage scowl as he strode towards the gates. He had made a bad blunder, and set the doctor against him—the last thing in the world that he wished to do.

Still, after all, his work at the school was done. Whatever the Head thought of him would have no effect upon his plot, though it was a point lost in the game to lose the esteem of Dr. Holmes.

He strode from the gates, a good many curious glances following him. A rough-looking fellow with a black beard came slouching towards him. It was Black George, the poacher.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Phipps."

"Fool!" hissed Phipps. "Dolt! I warned you not to speak to me in public—and here, of all places!"

"I want—"

"Fool, I will see you later!" whispered Phipps. "This evening, at the old hut in the wood. Leave me now!"

"Well, mind you come, or—"

"Idiot! I will come. Go, I tell you. No, I have nothing to give you, my man," went on Philip Phipps, raising his voice, for the benefit of the boys near the gate who were watching him curiously. "I never give to beggars. Get along."

He walked on savagely. Black George grinned and slouched away.

CHAPTER 7.

Miss Priscilla on the Warpath.

DR. HOLMES had never looked sterner than he did as he stood in his study, a cane in his hand, and faced the great St. Jim's Combine.

The juniors were looking extremely uneasy. In their conviction that Philip Phipps had plotted against Tom Merry they had "gone for" the plotter, without taking into consideration the probable consequences of their action. Now was the hour of reckoning.

"Boys, I have never known lads belonging to this school to be guilty of such ruffianism," said the Head, after a long pause. "The fact that the man you ill-used is a blackguard does not condone your offence. I cannot conceive your motive for acting as you have done. Have you any explanation to offer?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Certainly, sir," said Figgins. "The man is a howling rotter."

"How can you possibly know anything about him?"

"We—you see, sir, we—"

"I must request you to be a little more lucid, Figgins."

"You see, sir, knowing that Tom Merry was innocent—"

"You know nothing of the kind."

"Excuse me, sir," said Figgins, with firmness, "we do. We know old Tom is innocent, and as the chap who was kidnapped, I ought to know something about it, sir. We know that Philip Phipps plotted against him once before, so as to disgrace him with his uncle—"

The Head started violently.

"How can you know that, Figgins?"

"Tom Merry told us, sir. You see, knowing Tom to be innocent, we have formed a Combine—"

"A what?"

"A Combine, sir."

"What do you mean, Figgins? What is a Combine?"

DAILY MAIL.

NEXT THURSDAY. "THE SMART SET AT ST. JIM'S." A Tale of Tom Merry's Schooldays. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"It's a Combine, sir—a—a sort of amalgamation of different parties for a common end. It's an American word, sir."

"Ah—h'm! And so you have formed a Combine in the school?" asked the Head, not knowing whether to be angry or amused.

"Yes, sir. We've combined to prove Tom Merry innocent. You see, sir," said Figgins obstinately, "you see, sir, we know he's innocent. He told us how that chap Keene who used to be here was sent here to ruin him by Philip Phipps, and we've got the case up against Phipps in a way that would make Stanley Dare or Frank Ferrett green with envy. We know that he got all this up against Tom Merry, sir."

The Head looked thoughtful. Half an hour ago he would probably have caned Figgins for the suggestion, but since the behaviour of Philip Phipps in the quad his views had changed. The man was a blackguard.

That much was certain, and so the old impression which had been made upon the doctor by Amos Keene's confession revived in full force.

He had not thought before of connecting that with the present affair.

Now he thought of it, and the result was that his eyes seemed to open.

Tom Merry, as he had known all along, was the last lad in the world to be guilty of this treachery, unless he had succeeded in deceiving everyone as to his true character.

Was it possible that it was a plot against Tom?

Dr. Holmes stroked his chin in a reflecting way.

"Go on, Figgins," he said quietly. "Tell me what you believe about Phipps."

Figgins, delighted to have made an impression, related the whole case against Philip Phipps as the Combine had worked it out.

The Head listened attentively.

"And that is why you attacked Phipps in the quadrangle?"

"Yes sir. We're on his track, sir."

"And did you hope to bring the truth to light by pelting him with eggs?" asked the Head.

"Well, not exactly," stammered Figgins.

"No, not exactly, sir," said Blake. "You see, we——"

"We thought he wanted a lesson, you know, sir," said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah."

"He's been asking for it, sir," ventured Kerr. "He's a beast, sir!"

"Awful wottah!" said D'Arcy.

"H'm! As a matter of fact, you acted without thinking at all, I suppose, but under the belief that Phipps had been plotting against his cousin?"

"Ye—e—es, sir," admitted Figgins.

"In that case, I shall allow this matter to stand over for the present," said the doctor. "I do not believe that this is a plot of Mr. Phipps, but I admit that there is a possibility of it, especially after his conduct to-day——"

"Yes, sir. We showed him up, sir. If it hadn't been for the Combine, you'd never have known what a horrid blackguard he is, sir."

"Yaas, wathah."

Dr. Holmes smiled slightly.

"That is true, Figgins. I shall examine into this matter very carefully. Now——"

The door was suddenly opened.

"It is useless for you to tell me the doctor is engaged, young man," said a shrill voice. "I insist upon seeing him. I insist upon seeing Dr. Holmes."

"My hat!" gurgled Blake. "It's Tom's old governess!"

"Miss Priscilla!" murmured the Combine in a breath.

An old lady marched determinedly into the room.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett was under ordinary circumstances the quietest, and gentlest, and sweetest old lady in the world.

But even a timid hen will become warlike in defence of her chicks. And the aspersion cast upon Tom Merry had evidently brought Miss Fawcett post-haste from Huckleberry Heath to St. Jim's in a warlike mood.

Her kind old face was flushed, and her eyes sparkled behind her glasses. She carried an ancient and large umbrella in her hand, a good deal as if it were a bludgeon, and indeed she looked strongly inclined to use it as one.

"Dr. Holmes!"

"Madam——"

"Don't madam me! Where is my dear boy?"

"Miss Fawcett—I——"

"Don't prevaricate, sir. What have you done with my darling Tommy? Have you murdered him, as well as taken his character away? You might as well, sir. At your age, too!" concluded Miss Priscilla, as if the doctor's years made his offence much more heinous in her eyes.

"Boys, you may——"

"Where is my darling Tommy?" demanded Miss Priscilla, bringing her umbrella down with a crash upon the doctor's

desk, and nearly making the poor doctor jump out of his skin.

"What have you done with my sweet Tommy?"

"The boy in question has——"

"Give him to me."

"——has left St. Jim's——"

"Produce him."

"——and I do not know——"

"I have come to fetch him away."

"——where he is."

"I want to take him away immediately, and I insist upon doing so. He shall not remain here to be slandered by a man old enough to be his grandfather!"

The unhappy doctor squirmed.

"Madam, this language—these expressions——"

"Where is my darling boy?"

"He has run away from school, and——"

"Don't prevaricate, sir. I insist upon your producing Thomas Merry immediately, unless you have made away with him, sir."

"Don't be absurd——"

"Very well, since you are determined to prevaricate, I will remain here until my darling child is given to me," said Miss Priscilla, plumping herself down in a chair with an air of the greatest determination. "I promised his poor dear mother to be a mother to him, and I will be, sir. You shall not prevent me, Dr. Holmes. I say that you shall not prevent me, sir!"

"My dear madam, I have no wish to prevent——"

"Where is my sweet Tommy?"

"Boys," said the Head, frowning at the giggling Combine, "you may go!"

"Wait a moment," said Miss Priscilla. "I recognise these nice lads as friends of my dear Tommy. I wish to speak to them. You are Master Wiggins, are you not, and you Master Cake! And Banners, too!" Miss Priscilla never could remember names. "My dear boys, you do not believe my dear Tommy guilty of what is imputed to him?"

"Certainly not," said Blake.

"Rather not!" exclaimed Figgins. "Why, we've formed a Combine——"

"You may go, boys!" rapped out the doctor.

The Combine unwillingly left the study.

"I say," whispered Figgins. "Isn't she a jolly old sort?"

"Yaas, wathah. Simply wippin'."

"Ripping's the word," chuckled Blake. "The doctor will have to let her rip. She doesn't mean to shift till they've produced her darling Tommy, and he's a good step from here!"

"He'll never convince her that Tom Merry is guilty," grinned Manners. "Good old soul! I like her sticking up for him; but the Head won't enjoy himself this journey."

Certainly the Head was not enjoying himself. He tried argument with Miss Priscilla. He tried persuasion. He tried anger and pleading in turns. He might as well have talked to a stone or a brick wall.

Miss Priscilla refused to budge.

"I do not leave this chair until you have restored my darling Tommy to me," she said firmly.

The Head wiped his fevered brow.

Miss Priscilla evidently meant what she said, and it was impossible to call in Taggles and order him to remove an old lady by force.

What was to be done the Head did not know. He finally left the study, leaving Miss Priscilla in triumphant if solitary possession, waiting patiently for the restoration of her darling Tommy.

The Head proceeded to Mr. Railton's study in the School House to ask advice. He always turned to Mr. Railton in an emergency. The housemaster was in his study, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was with him.

"Miss Fawcett has arrived," said the Head helplessly. "She has sat down in my study and refuses to move until Tom Merry is produced. She will not listen to a word."

Mr. Railton smiled.

"I have just been hearing from Kildare on this subject; the subject of Tom Merry, I mean," he said. "I think he can throw some light on it."

Dr. Holmes turned inquiringly to the captain of the school.

"I think that Tom Merry is probably not very far away from the school, sir," said Kildare.

"Indeed, what makes you think so, Kildare?"

"Perhaps you have heard, sir, of an absurd 'Combine,' as he calls it, which Figgins has formed for the purpose of investigating this matter?"

Dr. Holmes smiled.

"Yes, I have heard of that."

"Well, sir, the house-dame in this house has missed all sorts of articles which appear to have been taken away from their proper places by the School House members of the Combine, and I hear from Monteith that the same has happened in the New House. The things taken are blankets, cooking utensils, and so forth; the things, in fact, that anybody would want for camping out."

The Head started.

"Dear me!"

"So I cannot help thinking that Tom Merry has not run away at all, sir, but is camping out somewhere in the neighbourhood," said Kildare. "It is useless to try to get any information from the juniors, though. They won't say a word."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"The youngster may come to some harm," said Kildare. "He ought to be found, of course, and brought back to St. Jim's, before anything happens to him. I was just consulting with Mr. Railton about it, sir."

"You are right, Kildare. Miss Fawcett's presence here shows that Tom Merry has not gone to Huckleberry Heath, as I hoped, and he has had plenty of time to do so. I hope that it will turn out that it is near at hand, and can be found. But, as you say, it is useless to question the juniors. Without punishment they will not speak, and I am very reluctant to punish them for what is really loyalty to their friend."

"Quite so, sir. But I have discovered that the members of this ridiculous Combine have been disappearing at intervals ever since Sunday morning, and I have no doubt that their absences have been for the purpose of visiting Tom Merry in his hiding-place."

"It is very probable."

"I was thinking, sir, that I would keep an eye on Blake or Figgins, the next time one of them leaves the school, and see where they went," said the captain of St. Jim's. "Under ordinary circumstances it would be mean to follow anybody, but the case is a peculiar one, and Tom Merry certainly ought to be found."

"I think you are right, Kildare. Pray do so," said the Head. "Especially as I have now grave doubts in my mind as to Tom Merry's guilt. The whole matter shall be investigated again from the beginning."

And the Head revisited his study to explain to Miss Fawcett that Tom Merry was probably near at hand, and that she would see him soon in all probability.

It was useless.

"I do not leave this chair," said Miss Priscilla, "until my darling Tommy is restored to me. Where is my darling Tommy?"

And the Head beat a retreat in despair.

CHAPTER 8.

The Success of the Combine.

DUSK was falling on St. Jim's and the woods and meadows surrounding the old school when Jack Blake came down to the gates looking very much on the alert.

Figgins came out from the shadow of a tree and joined him.

"The coast's clear," he whispered, "come on!"

"Right you are!"

The two juniors scuttled out of the gates of St. Jim's. It was close upon locking-up time, and they would be shut out long before they could return, but neither cared for that. It was their first chance since dinner of getting away unobserved, and they could not miss paying another visit to Tom Merry.

They had news for him now; they had the progress of the combine to report and the punishment of Philip Phipps to relate. There was much to say to the Crusoe of the Castle Wood, and, besides, it was certain that Tom Merry would feel very lonely unless he had another visit.

An imposition more or less did not count for much with the juniors. Blake and Figgins set off at a trot, caring nothing for "impots."

Once or twice they glanced back, from the habit of caution, but in the dusk it was not easy to distinguish anything. They entered the wood and passed along the footpath and turned off towards the old woodman's hut. The darkness was thick under the trees. A gleam of light from the hut warned them when they were near it. Figgins glanced in.

Tom Merry was seated on a log reading the latest number of "Pluck" by the light of a bicycle lamp, and Towser was curled up at his feet. Tom was not looking any the worse for a couple of days in the open air.

"Hallo!" said Figgins.

Tom Merry looked up.

"Hallo, chaps," he said, "I'm jolly glad to see you! It's lonely here. But, I say, you'll get into a row for being out after locking-up!"

"That's all right," said Figgins, "we were bound to give you a look up. We've got news for you, too. Miss Fawcett is at St. Jim's."

Tom Merry's face clouded.

"Poor old gov.! This will be a blow to her!"

"Not much. She doesn't believe a word of it."

"Ah! I knew she wouldn't!"

"She's giving the Head a high old time!" chuckled Figgins.

"You should have heard her slang him! It was a treat!"

"Ripping!" said Blake. "But that's not all! We're on the giddy track, Tom, my son, and I know we've raised doubts in the Head's mind, as well as given your beautiful cousin a high old time!"

And between them Figgins and Blake related the adventure of Philip Phipps, punctuating the narration with many a chuckle.

Tom grinned.

"Serve the cad right!" he said. "I say, it's jolly of you fellows to stick to me like this! Do you think anybody at St. Jim's has any suspicion that I'm still near the school?"

"Not a soul," said Figgins confidently. "They think you've mizzled right off. Hallo, what's that dog got the matter with him?"

Towser was starting and sniffing suspiciously.

"There's somebody coming!" muttered Blake. "Douse the glim, Tom!"

Tom Merry extinguished the lantern in a twinkling.

Black darkness settled on the old hut. The three juniors looked from the gaping window through the clinging creepers with uneasy glances. It would be too bad to be discovered. Near the old hut a patch of starlight fell into the glade. An athletic figure crossed it, and the juniors recognised Kildare.

"My hat!" muttered Blake. "Kildare!"

The captain of St. Jim's was coming straight towards the hut. It was clear that he had seen the light and knew that the boys were there.

"He's shadowed us from the school, the horrid bounder!" muttered Blake. "He guessed, then! He's not going to collar Tom Merry!"

Tom gritted his teeth.

"I'm not going back to the school."

"Not much," said Figgins. "You'll have to hook it—but we'll see that Kildare doesn't collar you! Stand ready, and nail him the moment he puts his nose into the door!"

"Right-ho!"

The juniors were in deadly earnest.

"Now, then, you youngsters," said Kildare, looking into the darkness of the hut, "I know you're here, I saw your light!"

There was no reply. Kildare stepped inside, and felt for a match. The next moment he was on the ground with three juniors sprawling over him.

"What the——"

"Quick! The rope!" panted Blake.

"Blake——"

"Quick!"

The captain of St. Jim's was taken at a disadvantage, and they were three to one. He struggled, but it was futile. A rope was knotted round his ankles and his wrists, and a pocket-handkerchief was stuffed into his mouth and tied there with a string.

"We're sorry," murmured Blake, "I know you'll give us a fearful licking for this to-morrow, Kildare, old chap, but it can't be helped! The Combine is bound to stand by Tom Merry!"

Kildare muttered something indistinctly.

"Can't let you talk!" said Blake. "I've no doubt there's some more of you looking for us! Can't let you utter a single yelp, old chap! Don't worry; you'll take it out of us to-morrow, you know!"

"Won't he just!" muttered Figgins. "Never mind; it's all in the day's work!"

Tom Merry rose from the captured captain of St. Jim's.

"I shall have to cut it!" he said, in a low voice. "I must go after all!"

"Wait a bit!" whispered Figgins. "We must see if the coast is clear. It's very likely that Monteith or Darrel was with Kildare."

"We must find out before you go," said Blake.

The three juniors crept to the door and looked out. No one was visible in the starlight, but the shadows of the trees might have concealed a score of forms. A faint rustle in the wood caught Tom Merry's ear.

"Somebody's coming!" he muttered.

"Quiet!" whispered Blake. "Keep that dog still."

Tom Merry put his hand on Towser's collar to keep him quiet. The bulldog understood, and made no sound.

With keen, anxious eyes the juniors watched from the ruined hut, and they saw a tall, burly form appear from the trees into the starlight.

Tom Merry gave a start.

"Black George!"

It was the poacher. Black George came towards the hut as if he intended to enter it, and stopped five or six paces from the door and looked round him. His manner clearly indicated that he expected to meet someone on that spot. It was a rendezvous.

The juniors remained as still as mice.

What Black George wanted there they did not know, but he was their enemy, and it would not be prudent to make

their presence known, especially after the adventure of the bulldog in which the poacher had figured so painfully for himself.

The poacher lighted his pipe, and the familiar smell of tobacco came to the concealed juniors. Ten minutes or more elapsed, during which the ruffian many times muttered to himself and stared about him impatiently.

There was a rustle in the wood. Another figure appeared in the starlight and joined the poacher. It was all the juniors could do to restrain an exclamation. For the new-comer was Philip Phipps.

In a moment it flashed into their minds that, at this lonely spot in the heart of the wood, the two rascals had met for a consultation, little dreaming that anyone could be concealed at that moment in the tumbledown hut.

"I've been waiting for yer!" said Black George sullenly.

"Indeed!" Phipps stopped before the ruffian and looked at him fixedly. "Well, I am here! And now I am here, what do you want?"

"I want ten pounds to start with."

"You won't get a penny out of me!" said Phipps coldly. "You had five pounds for your work, and you were extremely well paid, for that matter! You will get nothing more."

Every word was clear and distinct to the occupants of the hut. There was a faint movement; it was made by Kildare. The captain of St. Jim's could not speak, but he could hear. He recognised the voices of Black George and Philip Phipps, of course, and now he knew all.

The poacher muttered an oath.

"I mean to have more, anyhow!" he exclaimed. "I dessay you make a lot by getting your cousin kicked out of the school. You wouldn't take all this trouble for nothing."

"That's no business of yours!"

"I want a bigger share, and I'm going to have it! If you don't hand it over, I'll see what Dr. Holmes will give me for telling the truth."

"He would give you in charge of the police," said Phipps, with a sneer. "He might make use of your information, but you would get nothing out of him for it."

"It would put a spoke in your wheel, anyway!"

"You had better take care," said Phipps, in a low, menacing voice. "You spoke to me to-day before people. You have forced me to come here and talk to you. It is for the last time. I am not a man to be trifled with. I could send you to prison if I chose, Black George——" He broke off suddenly. "Are we alone here?"

"Yes," said the poacher contemptuously. "Are you afraid of the dark?"

"I heard something in the hut."

"Bah! there was nothing!"

"You hound! Have you played me false—have you friends in the hut there to hear me give myself away—by Heaven, if it is so, I will put a bullet through your heart!"

"I tell ye——"

Phipps did not stay to listen. He rushed into the hut, and stumbled over Blake, and went to the floor, and the next moment Blake was sitting on his chest. Figgins promptly seized his wrists, and dragged them up over his head, and held them fast. Philip Phipps struggled desperately, but in vain.

Tom Merry swiftly lighted the lamp. Further concealment was, of course, impossible. Tom picked up a stick as the amazed face of Black George looked into the hut.

"Stand back, you scoundrel!"

"Help me!" gasped Phipps. "Fool! Coward! Help me!"

The poacher looked irresolute. Tom Merry did not seem safe to tackle with his cudgel. Figgins, leaving Blake to pin Phipps down, ran to Kildare and rapidly untied him. The strong arm of the captain of St. Jim's was needed just then.

"Come on, Black George, if you like!" said Tom Merry, his eyes flashing. "Come on, you scoundrel!"

Kildare sprang to his feet.

That decided Black George. He turned and bolted, leaving Phipps to get out of his difficulty as best he could. Phipps was struggling and cursing furiously, and his face was white with rage in the gleam of the lamp. But Blake had the advantage, and he kept him pinned down.

"Sorry," said Blake, "but I really can't let you go, you know: I'm really too fond of you. Now don't be naughty, or I shall be compelled to jam your head against the ground." He suited the action to the word.

Kildare grinned.

"Let him get up, Blake."

"Oh, I say, Kildare! I wanted to take him a prisoner to St. Jim's, and make him own up before the whole school," protested Blake.

"That's not necessary, Blake. I have heard all that the scoundrels have said," replied Kildare. "I have only to speak to the Head. Let him get up."

Blake reluctantly released his prisoner.

Philip Phipps rose to his feet, looking very ruffled. Kildare regarded him with a look of contemptuous scorn.

"You cur!" he said. "I know all now; and the Head will soon know it. You plotted with that ruffian against Tom Merry. Merry is innocent! You scoundrel!"

Phipps muttered an oath. He knew that the game was up now, that the wrong would be righted, and that his deep-laid scheme had gone all to pieces.

"Hang you!" he snarled. "Hang you! I could——"

"What could you do?" asked Kildare scornfully. "You had better start. I find it very hard to keep my hands off you."

Phipps looked at the athletic captain of St. Jim's, and then turned away. Without a word he slunk out of the hut and disappeared.

Kildare glanced at the juniors. They were eyeing him in a very peculiar way, evidently not exactly knowing how he would take the late happening.

"I say, Kildare," ventured Blake, "you ain't wild, are you? We had to stand by Tom Merry, you know; it was the rule of the Combine."

Kildare laughed.

"You young rascals! I had made up my mind to give you each the hiding of his life, but as the matter has turned out——"

"That's a decent chap."

"I shall look over it. Merry, you had better come back to St. Jim's at once. Your innocence will be publicly acknowledged now."

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There were tears in Tom Merry's eyes.

"I owe it all to you chaps," he said, as he followed Kildare, with Blake and Figgins, from the hut. "I shall never forget it."

"Oh, that's all right," said Figgins. "The Combine has been a howling success, after all, and that's all I care about. By Jove, won't we make those silly asses sit up who wouldn't believe that you were innocent! And won't Miss Fawcett be glad to hear the truth. The Combine is in for a high old time, and no mistake."

Figgins was right: there was a "high old time" in store for the Combine. They swaggered about St. Jim's after their great success, putting on airs that the rest of the juniors pronounced to be insufferable.

After what Kildare reported to the doctor, of course, there could be no doubt as to Tom Merry's innocence.

To make assurance doubly sure, Black George was searched for and arrested, and in the dock he confessed to the truth, and was sent to prison for three months for kidnapping Figgins. His confession had mitigated his sentence. Philip Phipps had disappeared, but he had a narrow escape of standing in the dock beside Black George.

Dr. Holmes wrote a full and detailed account of the whole plot to General Merry in India, a letter that was sufficient to dash for ever Philip Phipps' hopes in that quarter, and to render it futile for him to continue his machinations against Tom Merry.

Miss Fawcett had stated that she would not stir from the chair in the Head's study until her darling Tommy was restored to her. She did not exactly adhere to that determination, but she was still at St. Jim's when Tom Merry returned.

She hugged him before the whole school, and Tom did not mind in the least. And when she learned that his innocence was proved, and that it was mainly the work of Figgins's Combine, her gratitude knew no bounds.

Dr. Holmes made a speech in Hall the same evening, completely exculpating Tom Merry, and explaining the true facts, and the Hall rang with cheers for the boy who had lately been almost unanimously condemned.

Then the Head, in the name of St. Jim's, tendered an apology to Tom Merry for the unjust suspicions which had been entertained towards him. When he went on to mention that the clearing of Tom Merry's name was to a large extent due to the loyalty of his schoolfellows, the members of the Combine blushed consciously, and all of them seemed to grow an inch taller on the spot. And after that speech in Hall came a celebration in Tom Merry's study.

Miss Priscilla was so delighted by the turn affairs had taken that she was in a more generous mood than ever, and under the skilful guidance of Tom Merry, she made purchases in the school shop that made Dame Taggles open her eyes.

That feed in Tom Merry's study was a feed to be remembered. Miss Priscilla presided, and the members of the Combine feasted right royally, and finished up by singing "She's a jolly good fellow!" to Miss Priscilla.

The next day School House and New House were "rowing" each other as of yore, but Tom Merry never forgot the loyalty and true comradeship of Figgins's Combine.

THE END.

(Another grand complete tale of Tom Merry next week. Please order your "Gem" in advance.)



Stormpoint

A School Tale. By MAURICE MERRIMAN.

READ
THIS
FIRST

Rex Allingham, Jim Fisher, and Bob Bouncer are three well-known chums at Stormpoint College. Hal Trehearn, the captain of the school, favours them; but they are bullied by Jardon and Symes, two Fifth-Formers, who play many spiteful tricks upon them. A new boy named Alburton comes to Stormpoint, and the chums object to his swaggering disposition, so nickname him "Swipes." Bob is instrumental in getting the school a holiday, as it is Mr. Salmon's—Bob's Form-master—birthday. The three chums, although they come into contact with the bullies, have a good but costly day's outing, and arrive back at the school just as the gates are being closed. (Now go on with the story.)

Perkins's Explosion.

Bob was in the study hard at work the morning after the great picnic. He had no need to be at work, because it was in playtime, and he scrambled his work away in a very suspicious manner as the sneak Perkins entered the little room.

"Go away!" growled Bob. "I'm swatting!"

"Rats! You never worked in your life, except to swindle money out of people and spend it on picnics. You are a bounder and a cad!"

"Go away, you beastly little sneak! I haven't got time to punch your head!"

"I'll have my vengeance on you for making me walk all those miles home, when you might have given me a lift. Mind you this, Bob Bouncer, I'm reckless. You shall suffer."

"So shall you, if you don't clear. Scoot! I'm busy!"

"You liar! You were never busy in your life. You don't learn a single lesson, and— Vengeance—vengeance—vengeance!"

As Perkins uttered his last terrible threat he was bolting from the study, because Bob was after him.

"Isn't it beastly awful?" growled Bob. "How can I work it when those little beasts keep putting my mind off the thing? I haven't got much mind to go on it, and it's a beastly shame that I should have the little I've got upset in this outrageous manner! Still, he's gone, and now I shall have a quiet half-hour. Bother! Let's see! Well, we—"

"Hallo, Bob!" exclaimed Rex, rushing into the study, accompanied by Jim. "Perkins is going to give you beans!"

"Oh, go away!" howled Bob. "I'm working against time!"

"I knew that, dear boy!" said Rex. "No one could have doubted it when you told Seaslug that the German Ocean was to the east of Germany. It was obvious that you had been working."

"Go away! Seaslug ought to know where the German Ocean is without asking me. Go away!"

"Bob, I love you, and will never leave you!"

"I wish you would start hating me for half an hour. It's all the time I've got."

"Let's drag him out, Jim. Come on! It's not fair that he should slave while we are having a jolly time of it."

"Well, let me get my papers!" growled Bob, who saw that resistance would be in vain.

He had to go, and so he went, but he was missing from Mr. Salmon's class, and that gentleman noticed it. Perkins muttered what he would do. He hinted that he would frighten Bob, and he really meant to do it. As a matter of fact, it took a great deal to frighten Bob. Still, Perkins thought he could do it, so he tried.

Being a brainy sort of chap, according to his own ideas, Perkins decided on an explosion beneath Bob's bed; but his knowledge of chemistry was limited, and so he went into the laboratory to test the best way to make an explosion. Well, perhaps this was a good idea, but the worst of it was that Perkins never could keep a secret to himself. He mentioned the matter to Freddy Hart, who immediately told the chums, and they naturally went to learn how Perkins was going to make an explosion.

By climbing on the roof of Stormpoint College any boy

NEXT THURSDAY. "THE SMART SET AT ST. JIM'S." A Tale of Tom Merry's Schooldays. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

STORMPOINT (continued).

who has been there will know that you can gain the roof of the laboratory, over which there is a skylight. While Perkins was making his experiments, Rex, Bob, and Jim were watching him through the aforesaid skylight. But the worst of it was that Freddy thought matters might become serious, and so he casually mentioned to the porter that Perkins had explosives in his little brain, and Porker decided that if the chums were blown up it would be a sort of mercy to the college. He left matters to take their own course, feeling assured that there was no boy more competent to blow up the chums than Perkins when he got amongst chemicals.

At any rate, the chums got there first, and they watched Perkins through the skylight. He was talking to himself, and his words were audible to them. Perkins had a habit of talking to himself, and once it had got him a caning. At any rate, he always did it; it was his nature, and he could not help it.

"I'll mix a few; just little lots. I don't know what they are, but if I don't startle that beast Bob it will be funny!"

"So it will," murmured Rex, "if he gets mixing chemicals in that reckless fashion. The stupid brute has got sulphuric acid there!"

"It's quite harmless," murmured Bob, who was a very interested spectator.

"So it may be alone," observed Rex; "but when that silly idiot gets mixing it with other chemicals, in what he calls small quantities, why— Hang it all, he has poured out half a pint of sulphuric acid!"

"Perhaps he is going to make acidulated drops," suggested Jim. "He's taking the thing sort of promiscuous."

"Woohoo!" yelled Perkins, as Porker entered the room.

"Oh, I say, Porker, you quite startled me! I'm going to startle Bob Bouncer, don't you know. You hate him, I'm sure. No one could do anything else with the worm! Well, I'm going to give him the worst fright he has ever had in his life. I'm going to explode this under his bed. See?"

"I've got my duty to perform, and you ain't got any right to be here."

"I'll give you twopence not to tell, Porker."

"Make it thruppence, and I might see as my dooty lay in another direction."

"Well, look here, I'll make it twopence-halfpenny. It's all the money I have got, strike me silly if it isn't!"

"Well, I don't want to be hard on a young gent; all the same, I think as you ought to owe me a halfpenny, seeing the risk of dooty I'm performing."

"Well, I will owe you a halfpenny, Porker," said Perkins. "Mind, I don't say that you are doing your duty in taking it, but we won't quarrel over a sum of money like that. Now, you see, I thoroughly understand chemicals, and all I want to do is to make an explosion that will startle that beast Bob Bouncer! He treated me in the most shameful manner. Made me walk miles and miles, when he could just as well have given me a lift. You see, Porker, we have to do our duty. Yours is to report Bob every time you get the chance, and mine is to startle him. Now, there is no fellow in this college who knows more about chemicals than I do. You may ask me why I am experimenting. Well, it is because that I want to get the biggest bang you can without hurting the fellow. A bang like I am going to get will not hurt him at all, but it is

bound to frighten him if it goes off beneath his bed in the dead of night."

"I see all that, but I must say as I think you ought to pay that odd halfpenny cash down."

"Bother it! You know my word is perfectly good for a halfpenny!"

"I'd rather have the halfpenny—I would, straight!"

"Well, will you take a bent one with a hole through it?"

"Yus! I'd a sight rather have that than your word!"

"Look here, Porker, that is insulting, you know. I am a gentleman, and—"

"Yus; I know all about that. Jardon is always telling me he is a gentleman, but he never does anything to make me believe him. I'll take the bent halfpenny, and I dessay that I shall be able to straighten it and stuff the hole up, so as they won't notice it. I'm a honest man, I am, and I never profess to be a gentleman, though I have occasion to believe as my ancestors came over with William the Conqueror."

"Oh, well, we ain't going to talk about our ancestors, 'cos mine were the most wonderful men you've ever seen!"

"Was they sort of good-looking?" inquired Porker.

"I should think they were."

"Then I tell you what it is, young gent, you ain't legitimate!"

"Fellow, what do you mean by that observation? Remember, I have placed in your hands a sum of money!"

"So you have. A penny, halfpenny, and a bent halfpenny! And you expect me to swerve from my dooty for that. I can tell you this, that I consider sixpence is the proper price. However, I have given you my promise on this occasion, and, like the honest man I am, I will keep my word!"

"Well, I'll show you a bit about chemistry," observed Perkins.

And then he took out bottles, as he had seen his chemistry master do it. But Perkins poured out the contents in a most reckless manner. He did not know the effect. He was merely trying to find out.

It is silly to try to find out with chemicals. If any man, woman, or child wants to create an explosion, they had much better ask a man who is competent to make one.

In the present case Perkins kept pouring in various articles, and, to do him credit, he took the name of each, so that he might know what to pour in next time, but the worst of it was that he did not pour in small quantities. He fondly imagined that he was not pouring in much; but then, his ideas of what was much were not in accordance with those of a chemist.

He slopped in something out of a bottle, and then there was a mighty explosion. Perkins was blown into Porker's waistcoat, and Porker was blown into bottles—all sorts and sizes. There was a most fearful mix up. Porker lay on his back on the floor, and his one aim in life seemed to be to spurt chemicals out of his mouth. Perkins was considerably alarmed—in fact, he howled for help at the top of his voice. As for the laboratory—well, it was nothing more than a wreck. Broken bottles lay all over the place, and seething chemicals lay on the floor. The smell was something fearful.

At that critical moment Mr. Salmon, who had heard the explosion, rushed into the laboratory, and he was nearly knocked backwards by the effluvium.

"Boy, what have you done?" gasped the master.

"If you please, sir, these chemicals ain't safe!" groaned Perkins, who knew that he would have to make some sort of an excuse. "They are deadly dangerous, and I don't think masters ought to be allowed by law to keep such dangerous chemicals."

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