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THE NINE DETECTIVES.

LONG, COMPLETE
SCHOOL TALE OF
TOM MERRY.

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD



**TOM
MERRY'S
AMBUSH !**

NO. 31.

VOL. 2.

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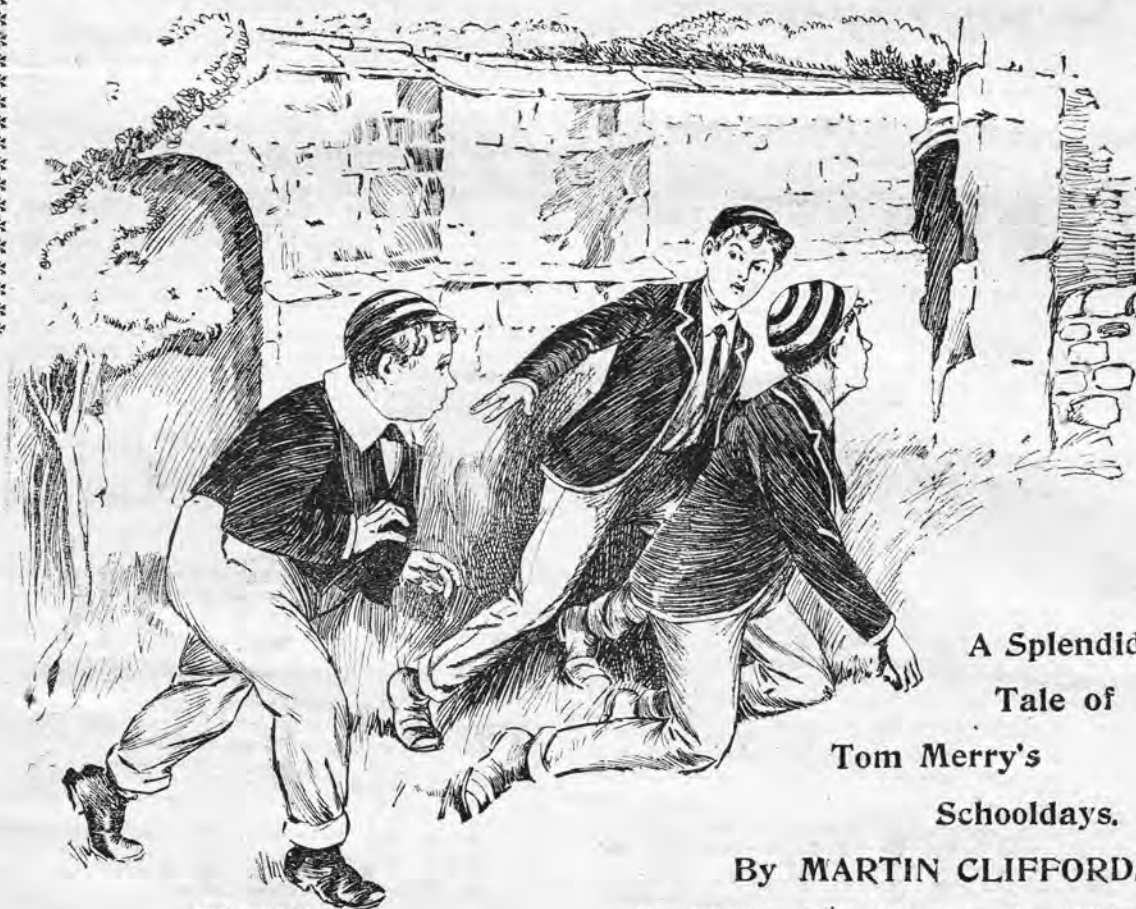
No. 31.

Vol. 2.



A COMPLETE STORY FOR EVERYONE, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

THE NINE DETECTIVES.



A Splendid
Tale of

Tom Merry's

Schooldays.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

A Mysterious Letter.

TOM MERRY was standing at the gate of St Jim's, talking to Manners and Lowther, when the postman came up the road from Rylcombe. Tom gave him a welcoming nod.

"Hallo, Blagg! I was waiting for you. Anything for me?" Blagg, the postman, grinned amiably. Like nearly everybody else in Rylcombe, he knew and liked Tom Merry.

"Yes; I think so, Master Merry!" he said. "I'll look!" Tom Merry turned to his chums with a smile of satisfaction.

"It's all right!" he announced. "It's from my old governess, as sure as a gun. There will be a postal-order inside, and we'll go down to Rylcombe this afternoon and cash it; and everything in the garden will be lovely."

"Good!" said Manners. "Jolly good sort, your old governess, Tom. Wish I had a few like her."

"Yes; she turns up trumps every time!" Monty Lowther

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remarked: "It was only yesterday you wrote to her, Tom. Now, I wrote to my uncle three days ago for some tin, and he hasn't answered the letter yet. When he does answer it, it's more likely to contain a sermon than a postal-order. I'd change him for your old governess any day you feel inclined for a swap."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Miss Fawcett is a jolly good sort," he agreed. "If this letter is from her—and I hope it is—it's pretty quick work. Haven't you found it yet, Blagg?"

"Here you are, Master Merry!"

Blagg held out the letter. Tom Merry took it, and gave a grunt of disappointment. It was directed in a man's hand, and bore the postmark of London, instead of that of Huckleberry Heath, where Miss Priscilla Fawcett dwelt. It was not the letter he wished for.

"I say, aren't there any more, Blagg?"

"No; that's the only one, young gentleman."

"Oh, hang! What do you mean by bringing me this when I wanted one with a postal-order in it?" demanded Tom Merry. "I shall report you, Blagg!"

Blagg grinned, and shouldered his bag.

"Here, I say, any for us?" demanded three voices in unison, as Figgins & Co. came hurrying up. "Hand 'em over, Blagg!"

The postman shook his head.

"None for you, young gentlemen!"

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn growled as the postman went on through the gateway. The three juniors of the New House at St. Jim's looked enviously at Tom Merry. Tom had the unopened letter still in his hand.

"That's rotten!" said Figgins. "None for us! You'd better read out your letter to all of us, Tom Merry. That's only fair!"

The hero of the School House smiled and shook his head.

"Oh, come!" urged Figgins. "Don't be mean, you know!"

"Can't be did!" said Tom Merry loftily. "This is a private communication of the first importance. You little boys run along!"

Figgins & Co. bristled with wrath. The ancient rivalry between the School House and the New House at St. Jim's never slept for long, and a breath was sufficient to fan it into flame.

"If you want a thick ear, Tom Merry—"

"Oh, rats, buzz off while I read my letter! I say, Manners, I know this writing. It's Ferrers Locke's!"

Manners and Lowther gave a simultaneous whistle.

"The detective!"

"Yes! Wonder what he's got to say. Now, do buzz off, you kids!"

That was the finishing touch. Tom Merry and his chums being in the Shell, and Figgins & Co. in the Fourth Form, the Terrible Three assumed the right to refer to them as "kids"—an insult which the Fourth Formers could never forgive under any circumstances.

"I'll 'kids' you, you horrid bouncer!" exclaimed Figgins. "Go for 'em, chaps!"

The New House trio made a sudden rush.

"Boys!"

It was the deep voice of Mr. Railton, the master of the School House. He was coming in at the gate. Figgins & Co. halted suddenly.

"Yes, sir!" said Figgins, who never lost his coolness. "Did you speak to me, sir?"

"What were you going to do, Figgins?"

"I was going to—going to explain something to Tom Merry, sir."

"You had better defer the explanation to a more suitable time and place, I think," said the housemaster drily, as he walked on.

Figgins & Co. moved off, and the promised row was averted. Tom Merry laughed as he put his letter into his pocket.

"I say, aren't you going to open it?" asked Manners.

"Yes; but come into the study first. It may be important."

The Terrible Three strolled across to the School House, and went up to their study. There Tom Merry slit open the envelope, and took out the letter. Manners and Lowther looked out of the window.

It was possible that the letter was intended for Tom Merry's eye only, and though the Terrible Three had few secrets from each other, it was for Tom to decide whether he would read the letter out or not. And so Manners and Lowther became intensely interested in watching the pigeons in the quadrangle, while Tom Merry read the letter. A look of surprise dawned in Tom Merry's face as he read.

It was some time since he had seen Ferrers Locke, the London detective. Twice the leader of the School House at St. Jim's had been useful to the detective, and he was very keen to help him again if the time should ever come.

Tom Merry had not thought it likely that it would ever come. But the letter in his hand told him differently.

"Dear Tom"—ran Ferrers Locke's letter—"I hope you have not forgotten me, and a promise you made me once. I believe you can help me in a certain way if you still wish to do so. The matter, however, will have to be kept a great secret. You may tell your two chums, as I believe you never keep secrets from them, and I know they are to be trusted. But no one else must know a word about it. Meet me this afternoon, at four—or as near as possible—at the old castle, near the school. As it is a half-holiday with you, I suppose you will have no difficulty in getting away? Come alone.—Your sincere friend,

"FERRERS LOCKE."

Tom Merry gave a whistle.

"Listen here, you chaps!" Manners and Lowther turned from the window. Tom Merry read the letter through to them. "What do you think of that?"

"I think you're a lucky beggar," said Manners. "All the good things come to you. Why the detective hasn't written to me instead of to you I can't imagine."

Tom Merry laughed.

"I must go," he said. "I'm sorry to leave you two fellows out of it, but I must do as Ferrers Locke asks. He's an awfully decent chap, and this may be another adventure."

"Looks to me something mysterious about it," remarked Monty Lowther. "When Locke wanted you before he wrote to the Head in a straightforward way, asking permission. This is rather queer, this meeting you secretly at the old castle."

Tom nodded.

"Yes, it's queer; but I suppose Ferrers Locke has his reasons. Of course, you chaps will keep it dark? You remember the happening last time, how Study No. 6 got on the track, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy tried to take a hand in the game?"

The chums of the Shell laughed at the recollection.

"Rather!" said Manners. "We'll be careful. But, I say, old Figgins must have heard you say that it was Ferrers Locke's writing on the envelope."

Tom Merry looked very grave.

"I suppose so! That's unlucky! I thought that it was just a friendly letter from Locke, you see, and didn't really think there was anything important in it, till I had time to think about it. I wish I hadn't spoken before Figgins now. Those New House bouncers will put their foot in it if they get half a chance."

"Yes; it was a feather in the cap for the School House, that affair last time," Monty Lowther remarked, "and Figgins has never quite got over it."

"What are you chaps going to do this afternoon, while I'm gone?" asked Tom.

"I was thinking of getting a look at the Sixth Form football match," said Manners. "You know the First Eleven is playing a match with a scratch team, and I fancy it will be a rather interesting match to watch."

"Think I might as well do the same," said Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"The football can stand over for a bit," he said. "Never mind that, for once. Keep an eye on Figgins & Co., and see that they don't get up to any mischief. It would be just like old Figgins to take a hand in this matter, not knowing how serious it was."

"We'll do it!" said Manners at once. "We'll dog Figgins & Co. like their giddy shadows, and if they try to shadow you, we'll come down on their necks like a hundred bricks."

"Good! And mind, not a word to Study No. 6."

The chums nodded together.

"Not a giddy word."

CHAPTER 2.

The Artfulness of Figgins!

F IGGINS stood with his hands thrust deep into his trousers' pockets, a thoughtful frown corrugating his manly brow. The Co. watched him, waiting for him to speak. The great Figgins was deep in thought, and Kerr and Wynn did not venture to interrupt him. Figgins looked up suddenly.

"We're not going to be left out of this!" he exclaimed.

"Certainly not!" said Kerr, the Scottish partner in the Co. "Perish the thought! But what is it we're not going to be left out of?"

"Yes; what's the wheeze, Figgy, old chap?" said Fatty Wynn. "You've been scowling like a demon in a pantomime for five minutes; and now, what's the trouble?"

"Tom Merry is up to some new wheeze," said Figgins. "We used to have our hands pretty full to keep our end up against the School House when Blake was head-cook-and-bottle-washer, over there among the juniors; but since Tom Merry came to St. Jim's, there's no denying—among ourselves—that the School House has gone ahead."

"Oh, I don't know," said Kerr unwillingly. "We've done pretty well, you know."

"I know we have; but Tom Merry is always getting up to some new wheeze—something a bit out of the common," said Figgins. "There was that detective affair, for instance. He got no end of giddy glory out of that; and any of us could have done as much as he did, or twice as much, for that matter."

"Rather!" said Fatty Wynn emphatically. "I don't know exactly what it was he did, but I know we could have done it better."

"And now there's something of the sort cropping up again," said Figgins gloomily. "You heard him say that that letter was from Ferrers Locke. That means that there's some new case he's going to take a hand in, and we shall have the School House wasters crowding over us the same as they did last time."

"Beastly!" said Kerr.

"Well, we're not going to be left out of it," said Figgins. "It's the New House against School House, and all's fair in war. We are going to take a hand."

"Good!" said the Co. together. "But how?"

"Oh, I don't know how! Never mind how. We shall soon find out how," said Figgins rather vaguely. "The thing is, to decide what we're going to do, and do it. Let's have a stroll round and think it out. And mind, not a word! No good letting the Three guess that we're on the track."

"No good at all," agreed the Co.

Figgins & Co. strolled down to the gate.

"Hallo, there's the bounders!" said Figgins, in a whisper. "I suppose they're going out. Don't take any notice of 'em."

Manners and Lowther were strolling down to the gate. Figgins & Co. turned up their noses and walked off. They took a circuitous route round the New House, and stopped to look in at the "menagerie," as the boys called the house where the pets belonging to the Saints were kept. They had not been there two minutes when Manners and Lowther strolled past the door. Figgins gave a little start.

"I say, that looks queer," he said.

"What looks queer?" asked Fatty Wynn. "Do you mean Herries's bulldog? He—"

"No, I don't, fathead. I mean Manners and Lowther passing the door just now. It looks to me as if they're watching us."

"My hat! What on earth should they watch us for?"

"I don't know, unless they're keeping us under observation while Tom Merry is up to some game. He's not with them. Anyway, don't let them see we notice them, and we'll soon make sure whether they're watching us."

Somewhat excited, the New House trio quitted the menagerie, and wandered away with apparent aimlessness through the doctor's garden. Sure enough, Manners and Lowther were hovering in the distance. Figgins & Co. strolled down to the football ground, and stood looking at a practice match of the Sixth Form. A few minutes later Manners and Lowther were watching the match, too, and cheering a goal kicked by Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

There could be no further doubt.

Manners and Lowther were watching the New House chums. Something was on the tapis, and Figgins & Co. were to be kept under observation. Where was Tom Merry? The school clock chimed out the hour of three.

Figgins's eyes were glittering with excitement now.

"You can see it for yourselves now," he murmured. "Look here, there's only one possible reason why they should watch us, and that is, because Tom Merry is going to meet the detective somewhere, and they don't want us to spot him."

"We'll jolly soon see to that," said Kerr. "If Tom Merry leaves the school, we'll follow on his track, and see for ourselves."

"And then they'll go for us, and keep us busy while Tom Merry gets away," said Figgins sagely. "Not much! I know a trick worth two of that. Come over here, and let's speak to Blake."

Somewhat mystified, the Co. followed Figgins as he walked towards the pavilion, where Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were watching the play of the Sixth Form teams. Study No. 6 were usually at loggerheads with the New House boys, as well as being in a state of warfare with the Terrible Three in their own house. But sometimes the rivals met on friendly terms, and Figgins's manner was cordiality itself as he nodded to Blake now.

"Hallo, old chap!" he said, in a very friendly tone. "Good game—eh?"

"Yes, pretty good," said Blake rather suspiciously.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I weally think Kildare plays a pretty good game, but some of the team are not vewy much up to the mark. I weally think that Kildare would improve the team by playin' a juniah or two. I should be quite willin' to play for the first eleven as centah-forward."

"Go hon!" said Figgins. "Kildare must be blind not to take you on, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah!" I'm not the fellah to put myself forward in any way," said D'Arcy modestly. "But you wequire a fellah well up in ewevy bwanch of the gweat game to play centah-forward with success, and I weally think I do do the twick with cwedit."

"Why don't you make Kildare the offer, then?"

"I did," said Arthur Augustus, with a sniff.

"And what did he say?"

"He used some vewy wude expvessions, and kicked me out of his study," said D'Arcy. "I nevah knew that Kildare was so wuff and wude before."

"Ha, ha! But I say, Blake, will you do me a favour?"

"Millions of 'em," said Blake generously. "Hard up? You've come just at the right time, as I had a remittance this morning. How much?"

"You're awfully good, old chap," said Figgins gratefully. "But it isn't cash. I'm in funds just now, as it happens. It's something else—something up against those bounders of the Shell, you know."

"I'm on!"

"There's Manners and Lowther; they're following us about like our giddy shadows," said Figgins. "Like their cheek, isn't it? We want to get rid of them, and they're sticking to us. We're going for a—for a stroll soon, and if they follow us from the school, I want you to stop 'em."

Blake looked amazed.

"What the deuce are they following you for?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, it's a little game they're playing, I suppose," said Figgins. "Will you do it for me?"

"Certainly!" said Blake heartily. "If they follow you, we'll jump on them, and they'll get it where the chicken got the chopper—in the neck. We'll sit on them, never fear."

"Right-oh!" said Herries. "We haven't had a row with the Terrible Three for a couple of days, and things are getting monotonous."

"As a matter of fact," said Blake, in a burst of confidence, "we were wondering whether we should go for the Terrible Three, or for you, Figgy, just to liven things up a bit. We were going to toss up for it."

Figgins grinned.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "It was my idea all along, though, to go for the Tewwible Thwee. Tom Mewwy was extremely wude to me this mornin'. He actually chawactewised me as an ass, and wefused to apologise. I was goin' to give him a feahful thwashin', but he pushed me ovah a form in a vewy wude way."

"Horrid!" exclaimed Figgins. "Then you'll keep an eye on those kids, Blake, and snatch 'em bald-headed if they start their tracking business on our trail?"

"Certainly, old chap. Anything for a row."

Kerr nudged Figgins.

The chief of the New House juniors looked round, and saw Tom Merry leave the School House and cross towards the gates. Figgins's eyes gleamed.

His surmise had been correct. Tom Merry was going out, undoubtedly to meet the detective, and here was a chance for Figgins & Co. if they could only get rid of their obstinate shadowers.

"Come on, kids," muttered Figgins.

The New House trio strolled towards the gates. Manners and Lowther promptly strolled after them. Blake was watching the chums of the Shell.

"Hallo, there they go!" he murmured. "We're on in this act, my children. Follow your uncle!"

"Right-oh!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins & Co. disappeared out of the gateway after Tom Merry. Manners and Lowther broke into a run. At the same moment Blake, Herries and D'Arcy started running. They were nearer the gate, and they reached it first and blocked the way.

"Here, let us pass!" exclaimed Manners hurriedly.

Blake gave him a playful push on the chest.

"Not this afternoon, dear boys. Some other afternoon."

"Don't be an ass, Blake. We're in a hurry."

"I'm sorry for that," said Blake. "Because, you see, we're not going to get out of the way. Are we, my gentle youths?"

"Not half!" said Herries.

"Certainly not," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, screwing his eyeglass into his eye and fixing his lofty gaze on the Terrible Two. "I depwecate wuffness as a wule, but undah the cires, we cannot allow these two persons to pass. They can wun away and play."

"Yes, that's right," advised Blake. "Run away and play at marbles."

"Are you going to let us pass?" howled Manners. "I tell you we're in a hurry."

Blake shook his head solemnly.

"Get out of the way!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "What the dickens do you mean by blocking the gateway, you confounded cheeky kids?"

Blake looked at Herries.

"Herries, what do we mean by blocking the gateway? How dare we?"

Herries chuckled.

Herries and Monty Lowther exchanged a look, and—then made a rush. It was no time to stand upon ceremony, when Figgins & Co. were upon the track of Tom Merry and following him to his rendezvous with the detective at the old castle.

The chums of Study 6 were quite ready for that rush. They had been expecting it, and as they were three to two, they were not uneasy about the result. Blake grasped hold of Manners, and they rocked to and fro in a deadly embrace. Herries closed with Lowther, and was borne backwards to the ground, falling upon his back with what a novelist would describe as a sickening thud. But he did not let go, and Lowther went down with him.

D'Arcy, with his eyeglass screwed into his eye, surveyed the scene with great interest. His assistance did not seem to be wanted, and the swell of the School House was not the fellow to exert himself if he could get out of it.

"Go it, Blake!" he exclaimed encouragingly. "Go it, Hewwies! Give the boundahs beans! Give them a feahful thwashin'! Keep it up, deah boys! You are weally gettin' the best of it, I think, Blake. Hewwies, old man, you will have to buck up, or else that boundah will get away from you."

"Lend me a hand, you lazy ass!" gasped Herries.

"My dear boy, fair play's a bwright jewel. Thwee to two would not be fair play," said D'Arcy, shaking his head. "See if you can't manage it alone."

"You—you image! You're finking!" gasped Herries.

"Hewwies, you are insultin'! Bai Jove, I'm not goin' to stand that!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"Lowthah, leave that person alone while I thwash him. I will show him whethah I am a funk or not."

"You howling idiot!" gasped Herries. "If you let Lowther get away—"

"I shall be sowwy if Lowthah gets away, but I cannot allow your wude remark to pass without bwingin' you to book," said Arthur Augustus. "I am accustomed to bein' tweeked with pwopah respect, and— Dear me, here is Mr. Watcliff!"

Mr. Ratcliff, the housemaster of the New House, was bearing down upon them.

The New House master was a sour-faced individual, very different from Mr. Railton of the School House. His thin face was flushed with anger now.

"How dare you fight like hooligans in the gateway?" he exclaimed, in a voice of thunder. "Cease instantly, I command you!"

The combatants ceased and separated as if by magic.

"Blake! Manners! Lowther! Herries! How dare you —"

"If you please, sir," began Blake meekly.

"You were fighting, Blake. You were —"

"We weren't exactly fighting, sir," ventured Blake. "It was only a little friendly row, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff smiled grimly.

"Indeed! You must learn not to have these little friendly rows in the gateway. It is bad enough when you are quarrelling with the boys of my house; it is positively disgraceful that you cannot even keep the peace among yourselves."

"But, sir, really we —"

"You need say no more, Blake. I can believe what I see, I suppose?"

"If you would allow me to explain, sir," said D'Arcy, "I should like to point out in the most respectful way that —"

"Enough, D'Arcy —"

"But weally, sir, I protest that —"

"Silence. Go at once to your house, and remain there for the rest of the afternoon."

The School House boys looked at each other. There was fierce resentment in every face. Not one of them made a movement.

"Do you hear me?" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

"If you please, sir," said Blake, respectfully but firmly, "you are not our housemaster, and —"

Mr. Ratcliff's sallow cheek flushed red.

"Ah, indeed! Very well, follow me, and we will see what your own housemaster has to say to such conduct."

It was impossible to disobey. The juniors, dejectedly enough, followed the New House master to the School House, and to Mr. Railton's study. The School House master was busy there, and he looked up in some surprise at this invasion.

There was no love lost between the two housemasters; but they were always scrupulously polite to each other.

"I hope I do not interrupt you, Mr. Railton," said the New House master. "These boys of your house have refused to obey an order of mine, as I am not their housemaster."

Mr. Railton coloured with annoyance.

"Indeed! That was very wrong of you, my boys."

"I found them," said Mr. Ratcliff, "fighting like hooligans at the gate, and ordered them to remain in their house for the rest of the afternoon. They did not obey. I leave the matter in your hands, Mr. Railton, with entire confidence."

"You may safely do so, Mr. Ratcliff," was the somewhat tart reply. "I am quite capable of managing the affairs of my house without assistance from outside."

"I am glad to hear it," said Mr. Ratcliff satirically; and he bowed and withdrew, leaving the housemaster and the boys feeling very uncomfortable, which was his amiable object.

Mr. Railton looked sternly at the delinquents.

"Have you anything to say?" he said shortly.

He was deeply annoyed. He prided himself upon the discipline of his house, and it was deeply exasperating for the other housemaster to find a real excuse for picking faults.

"We weren't really fighting, sir," ventured Blake. "It was only just a row. We wouldn't have hurt each other, really, for anything."

"Of course not, sir!" said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah! It was weally a little fwiendly scwap, sir, and nothin' at all sewious. Mr. Watcliff takes too gwave a view of the mattah, sir."

Mr. Railton concealed a smile.

"That is possible, but you should have obeyed his order at once. I endorse it. You will remain in the house for the rest of the afternoon."

"But, sir —" began five dismayed voices.

The housemaster waved his hand.

"You may go."

There was nothing for it but to go. The five went disconsolately from the study. They stopped in the passage to look dolefully at one another.

"This is distinctly rotten," said Blake, with a growl. "I should like to knock Ratcliff's head against the wall."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"All your fault," growled Manners. "What did you want to stop us in the gate for?"

"All your fault, you mean. What did you want to insist upon passing for?"

"We wanted to go out, fathead."

"Well, we wanted to keep you in, fathead."

It looked for a moment as though the fracas would recommence there in the passage outside the housemaster's study. But D'Arcy interposed.

"Pax, deah boys!" he exclaimed. "Don't make a wov now, or we shall pewwaps get a beastly imposition as well as detention. It was all Mannahs and Lowthah's fault for bein' so extwemely obstinate, but bygones are bygones —"

"I don't see what you wanted to be so obstinate for," Blake remarked. "Why couldn't you stop in when we told you? You ought to have seen that we were determined."

Monty Lowther snorted.

"You ass, you've played into Figgins & Co.'s hands, and it's up against the School House."

Blake started.

"Hallo! What's that? It was Figgins who asked us to keep you in. I thought there was some sort of a joke on, but —"

"Figgins & Co. were following Tom Merry. Now we can't stop them. It's up against the School House if they get on to what Tom Merry's gone out for. Figgys has just led you by the nose like a silly cuckoo, as you are."

Blake whistled.

"Well, I couldn't guess all that," he said. "Why couldn't you explain. I —"

"You are quite w'ong, Lowthah," said D'Arcy, with an air of reflection. "How could you lead a cuckoo by the nose? He hasn't one."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Lowther crossly.

"That is a wude remark. I —"

"Rats! Come on, Manners, let's go and have a box in the study."

The chums of the Shell walked off. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy proceeded towards their own study. They had not expected to enter it again that pleasant October afternoon till tea-time, at any rate. As they drew near the door they were surprised to see that it was ajar.

"Hallo," muttered Blake, "I'll swear I shut the door! Some bounder been rummaging in our quarters, I suppose, and —"

"Bai Jove, he's still there!" exclaimed D'Arcy.

There was a sound from within the study. The chums hurried on, and Blake threw open the door. There was an exclamation inside.

A little man, with a thin, somewhat foxy face, stood staring at the chums as they entered. He was a stranger to them. He seemed quite taken aback for a moment, but recovered his self-possession immediately.

"Hallo! What the dickens are you doing here?" exclaimed Blake sharply.

"No offence, young gentlemen. I—"

"Who are you?"

"If you please, sir, I am George Cuffe, the new man-of-all-work, sir—assistant to Mr. Faggles, sir, who sent me here to dust Master Kildare's study, sir."

"This isn't Kildare's study."

George Cuffe looked astonished.

"Not Mr. Kildare's study, sir! I really thought it was, sir. I was dusting it, sir."

He had a duster in his hand, so that part of the tale looked true. Blake did not like the man's looks, but he saw no special reason to doubt his explanation.

"Well, you're off the track," he said; "Kildare's study is No. 2 on the lower floor. You can clear."

"Thank you, sir! You are extremely good, sir! Can I do anything for you, sir?"

"Yes," exclaimed Blake, exasperated; "you can leave off calling me sir, you ass!"

"I am sorry, sir! Certainly, sir! I will, sir! I—"

George Cuffe darted to the door as Blake made a spring towards him. He vanished with a patter of feet down the passage. Blake burst into a laugh.

"That chap's too civil by half," he exclaimed; "I don't like him. I suppose he wasn't up to any mischief here, though. Fancy old Taggles getting an assistant! That chap's getting lazy in his old age, kids."

"I don't like this fellow Cuffe," said Herries; "he's too soapy."

"My deah boys, I like to see a fellah polite, even if he is only a man-of-all-work," said D'Arcy. "I wathah like the person, don't you know?"

"Yes, but you're an ass," said Blake politely. "Here, get out the foils, and let's have a three-handed duel, to live things up, do!"

And Study No. 6 was soon the scene of a lively encounter; and if it had not been a half-holiday, the noise would certainly have brought half a dozen prefects to the spot in towering wrath.

CHAPTER 3.

Shadowed by Three!

TOM MERRY strode on his way to the old castle without a suspicion of what was happening at St. Jim's after his departure. He looked round once or twice to make sure that he was not being tracked, and saw nothing to make him uneasy.

Figgins & Co. were on the track, all the same.

Whatever the "little game" was in which Tom Merry and the London detective were engaged, the New House trio meant to have a hand in it. Tom Merry had been altogether too much in the public eye of late, Figgins thought; and it was time the New House had a look in. If there was anything to be done, he could manage it quite as well as Tom Merry could. All was fair in war.

He managed this shadowing very well, as a matter of fact. Whenever Tom Merry looked back, he saw the lane clear behind him, and he had no idea of the three relentless pursuers who were trailing him down to the rendezvous. Figgins & Co. had adopted the simple device of walking on the inner side of the hedge, along the edge of the fields, and so it was impossible for Tom Merry to spot them.

Tom Merry crossed the stile into the wood, to follow the footpath to the ruined castle. Then Figgins & Co. had to come out of their cover; but it did not matter, for they knew where Tom Merry was going now, and it was no longer necessary to keep him in sight.

"He's going to the castle," said Figgins, with a smile of satisfaction. "Now, a chap could have no earthly reason for going to the old castle alone, except to meet somebody. That stands to reason, doesn't it?"

"You're right, Figgv."

"And whom can he be meeting except the detective?"

"Nobody, of course."

"Then it's all right," said Figgins. "We'll see what this blessed mysterious meeting is about, and put a spoke in the School House wheel. Come on!"

Taking care to keep out of Tom Merry's sight, in case he should look back, they followed the footpath through the wood. Their footsteps made no sound upon the thick carpet of fallen leaves.

When they came out on the hill, they caught a glimpse

of Tom Merry passing in at the ruined gateway of the old castle. He vanished from sight the next moment.

"Come on!" muttered Figgins.

They went at a run up the path to the castle. In a few moments they were safe among the massive fragments of the ancient building. Keeping well in cover, they looked through a rift in a tottering wall into the interior of the shattered building.

A sound of voices reached their ears.

"Look!" murmured Figgins. "There they are! It's Ferrers Locke!"

Figgins was right.

Tom Merry was standing there in conversation with a well-built man, whose calm, clear-cut face was quite familiar to the boys from St. Jim's. They had seen Ferrers Locke more than once before.

"You are punctual, Tom," the detective was saying; "it is not yet four."

"Thought I should be here first, sir," said Tom cheerily.

"I gave myself plenty of time, in case of accidents. I was afraid some of the fellows might get on my track."

"I hope that has not happened."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, no, sir! Manners and Monty Lowther are keeping guard, and they'll take good care that Figgins & Co. keep off the grass."

Figgins & Co. exchanged a grin.

Every word came to them perfectly clearly in the silence of the old ruins.

Under ordinary circumstances Figgins would as soon have cut off his ears as listened to a conversation not intended for them. But the present case was entirely different.

He regarded himself as a scout discovering the plans of the enemy, and stratagems were permitted in the war between the School House and the New House. That was understood upon both sides.

"I am glad of that," said Ferrers Locke. "I remember Figgins & Co. They played a trick upon us once, Tom, you remember. I rather like Figgins, and I think he could be trusted, but a matter of this kind cannot be kept too quiet."

"Right you are, sir! Figgins & Co. are out of it. You want me to help you again?"

"That is it. I am not going to ask you to come to London," said Ferrers Locke, with a smile; "what you can do for me can be done at St. Jim's."

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"I can't guess what it is, sir," he remarked. "Does the Head know?"

"No; I have said nothing to Dr. Holmes. I do not wish to needlessly cause him worry, and he could not assist in the matter. I will explain. Some short time ago an arrest was made in London of a gang of rascals, of whom a character called Jim the Nailor was the leader. Jim the Nailor escaped, and has not been seen since. Now, among the belongings of the rascals which were seized by the police a paper was found, which had evidently been drawn up by a spy of the gang who had paid a visit to this school."

Tom Merry's eyes were wide open with interest.

"This paper," resumed Ferrers Locke, "contained a plan of St. Jim's, marked with various items of information respecting the valuables kept there, and was evidently intended to aid the rascals in committing a robbery at the school. The police found this paper, but nothing was said about its discovery, and Jim the Nailor cannot know that it is in our hands. Now, the rascal is still at liberty, and he dare not remain in London, and he is almost certainly in great want of money. Under the circumstances, I regard it as very probable that he will attempt to carry out the scheme of effecting a robbery at St. Jim's."

"I should think it very likely, sir."

"Exactly! That is why I have come down, Tom. I want you to keep your eyes open for Jim the Nailor."

"I'll do it, Mr. Locke, willingly. But is it a burglary you expect?"

"A robbery in some shape or form, certainly. But Jim the Nailor is not a common burglar. His method, so far as I can discover, is to introduce himself in some capacity into the house he intends to rob, or else to make a tool of someone already there. He has been known to assume the character of a gasfitter, and on another occasion that of a local inspector. He has been cunning enough, too, to keep himself out of our hands so far, and so we have not got his photograph. He usually wears a beard, but at present he has probably sacrificed it for security. Now, you understand what I expect to happen. Jim the Nailor will probably turn up at the school sooner or later, in some character or other, and will disappear again with most of the doctor's valuables in his possession. That is what I want you to keep your eyes open for, Tom."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I understand perfectly, sir."

"You will note any person who comes to the school to stay there, especially any new servant," went on Ferrers Locke. "But there is no telling what character the fellow may assume. Of course, it is quite possible that he may not come at all. To speak to the Head would be useless, as it is probably only a false alarm. But you can keep your eyes open without trouble. In case of necessity, you can wire to me from Rylcombe, and I shall come down instantly, or send someone in my place."

"I'll do my best, sir. It will be a lark if we catch him." Ferrers Locke smiled.

"I cannot give you any description of him, Tom, as I have never seen him, but I know that he is a small man, and usually wears a beard of a sandy colour. He sometimes wears spectacles, but I suspect simply as a disguise, and not from necessity. That is all I can tell you."

"I'll keep a jolly sharp look-out, sir."

"And keep the secret, too, Tom. Let no one know that you have met me here. You see, if it were known that I had come down to St. Jim's, it would get talked of, and would undoubtedly reach the ears of the fellow, if he is about, for he is as sharp as a needle. That is chiefly why I have not spoken to the Head. He would probably question all the servants, and thus put the rascal on his guard, and cause him to be doubly careful."

"I'll keep my eyes open, sir; and I'll spot him if he comes to St. Jim's," said Tom Merry confidently. "You don't mind my telling Manners and Lowther, sir? They'll be as mum as oysters, and they'll help to spot the scoundrel if he turns up."

Ferrers Locke nodded assent.

"Yes; you may tell them, if you like, but no one else; and mind that you are not overheard discussing the matter. That is the risk."

"We'll be jolly careful, sir."

"I think that's all, Tom. You know where to wire to in case of need."

And after a few more words the famous detective shook hands with the hero of the Shell, and they parted.

Tom Merry took the path back to St. Jim's. He little dreamed of whom he left behind in the ruins. Figgins & Co. did not move or speak a word till both the detective and Tom Merry were out of sound and sight. Then Figgins broke into a long-suppressed chuckle.

"My only hat! What do you think of that, kids?"

"Ripping!" said Kerr. "We're right on the track this time, Figgy. Of course, it's no good leaving a matter of this kind in the hands of a School House fathead!"

"No good at all," said Fatty Wynn. "We've got to take it in hand ourselves."

"That's the idea," said Figgins. "Tom Merry is pretty certain to make a hash of it if we give him his head. We're going to look out for Jim the blessed Nailer."

"And I say, Figgy, if we were to catch him, very likely the detective would stand a feed," Fatty Wynn remarked.

Figgins sniffed.

"That's your mark, Fatty; always thinking of a beastly feed. I'm thinking of giving the School House one in the eye, and getting some giddy glory for our side."

"I'm not saying anything against the glory, Figgy; but a feed would be—"

"Oh, blow the feed! We're going to look into this, my infants. If there are any burglars to be caught red-handed, we're going to catch them. Tom Merry caught a burglar once, I remember. There's no reason why we shouldn't do the same. It will be a take-down for the School House when we catch their own burglar! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good wheeze!" said Kerr. "But, I say, Manners and Lowther saw us come out after Tom Merry. They may guess that we are on to the game."

Figgins looked thoughtful.

"Jim! That won't do! We must keep it dark, you know."

"Let's go down to Rylcombe, and have a row with the Grammar School fellows," suggested Fatty Wynn. "Then they'll think we've been there all the time."

Figgins thumped him on the back.

"Jolly good idea, Fatty. You're a genius."

"Well, you needn't bust my beastly spinal column if I am!" grunted Fatty.

"We'd better lose no time," said Figgins. "Luckily, the Grammar School has a half-holiday the same day that we do, and we're bound to find some of the wasters about. Hurry up!"

The New House trio left the ruins, and made their way to the village. They were pretty certain of finding some Grammar School boys at the tuck-shop there, and a fight would be the most natural thing, in consequence.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry had returned to St. Jim's. He found his chums in the study playing at chess, with rather doleful looks.

"Well, you must be asses to stick indoors on a fine after-

noon!" exclaimed Tom. "Why aren't you playing football, or, at least, watching it?"

"Detained!" grunted Monty Lowther.

"How's that?"

Lowther explained. Tom Merry's face became serious.

"Then Figgins & Co. followed me, you think?"

"Well, we thought they were following you, but we couldn't make sure, as those Study No. 6 bounders stopped us at the gate. Of course, Figgins may have been going on for any reason."

"I didn't see them," said Tom thoughtfully. "I was on the look-out, too. I'll have a look for Figgins, and if he's been shadowing me, I expect he'll give himself away."

And later on Tom Merry saw Figgins & Co., when they came in. Figgins had a swollen nose, Kerr a cut lip, and one of Fatty Wynn's eyes was surrounded by a ring of a beautiful purple colour.

"Hallo, been in the wars?" exclaimed Tom Merry, as he sighted them.

"Yes," said Figgins; "a row with Monk, Carboy, and Lane, of the Grammar School. We met them down at the tuck-shop."

Tom was greatly relieved. If Figgins & Co. had been rowing with the Grammar School boys at the tuck-shop, they could not have been shadowing him to the old castle. He did not suspect how deep the innocent-looking Figgins could be.

"Well, I hope you got the best of it," he remarked.

"Blessed if I know who got the best of it!" said Figgins. "I think we were all pretty well done up by the time we finished. Come on, kids, I want a wash, and you look as if you do!"

"It's all right," Tom Merry announced, rejoining his chums in the study in the School House. "Those kids have been down to Rylcombe, rowing with the Grammar eads. Figgins isn't on the track, after all!"

If he had only known.

CHAPTER 4.

A Brilliant Capture.

FIGGINS gave a sudden jump.

"My only pyjama aunt—I mean hat! Look there!"

It was the day after the meeting of Tom Merry and the detective at the old castle, when he had been shadowed by three. Figgins & Co. had been keenly on the watch ever since, but as yet they had seen nothing of Jim the Nailer. If the Nailer came to St. Jim's, they were determined to capture him before Tom Merry had a chance, and their anxiety upon this point made them so inattentive in class that Mr. Lathom showered impositions upon them like leaves in Vallambrosa.

Little cared Figgins & Co. They were on the track, and they were going to take a rise out of the rival house, and that was all they cared about. Afternoon school was over now, and the New House chums were strolling up the lane, when Figgins suddenly uttered the exclamation which opens this chapter.

The Co. stared at him inquiringly.

"What's the row?" asked Kerr. "Look at what?"

"That chap! Look—just look!"

Figgins nodded towards a man coming up the lane towards the school. He was a gentleman of short stature, with a short, crisp beard of a sandy hue, and a pair of gold-framed spectacles.

"Look at him!" murmured Figgins. "Spot the colour of his whiskers! Note his specs! Size him up! You remember Ferrers Locke's description of Jim the Nailer?"

The Co. gave a simultaneous jump.

A little man, with a sandy coloured beard and spectacles! The very man!

"My word," murmured Kerr, "you've hit it, Figgy! But, I say, he looks awfully respectable for a burglar. That's his best frock-coat, and he's got a silk topper, too."

Figgins sniffed.

"My dear chap, do you think all burglars look like Bill Sikes?" he exclaimed. "Did you expect to see a chap come out in broad daylight with a mask on, and a jemmy sticking out of his pocket, and a revolver up his sleeve?"

"Well, no; not exactly. But he looks awfully respectable."

"If you'd read as many detective stories as I have," said Figgins, with a superior smile, "you'd know that that was a point against him. If he were an honest man, why should he take the trouble to look so awfully respectable? If he's a burglar, he gets himself up in that way, of course, to disarm suspicion. That's how Sherlock Holmes would work it out. He looks as if he's above suspicion, therefore he's the very first person you ought to suspect. That's the Sherlock Holmes system."

The Co. looked at their leader admiringly.

"I say, Figgy, you ought to be a detective," said Fatty Wynn admiringly. "You could teach Stanley Dare or Sexton Blake something in their own line of business."

"I dare say I could," said Figgins modestly. "I think I shall probably become a detective when I grow up. I can deduce things, you know, and work out theories first-rate. I haven't the slightest doubt that that chap is Jim the Nailer got up in a new rig; but we must be careful. We've got to find out if he's going to St. Jim's. If he is, that settles it."

"Right-ho! But how are you—"

"Cheese it! He's going to speak to us."

The gentleman with the glasses and beard had indeed stopped as he came by the juniors, and turned to them with the evident intention of speaking.

"Can you tell me if that building is St. James's Collegiate School, my boys?" he said.

Figgins's heart beat hard. His suspicion had received confirmation sooner than he had dared to hope.

"Yes, sir; that's St. Jim's," he said. "We belong to the school."

"Do you really?" said the stranger. "Indeed!"

"Yes, sir! Are you going to St. Jim's?"

"Yes."

"We'll show you the way, sir, if you like. We're just going in, as a matter of fact. Come on, kids! This way, sir!"

"You are very obliging, my lad," said the stranger.

"Not at all, sir! Only too happy!"

Figgins led the way. The stranger walked by his side. The Co. dropped to the rear, with the idea of cutting off the rascal's escape if he should lose his nerve as soon as he came near the school and should try to bolt.

They arrived at the gates of St. Jim's.

"Here's the school, sir," said Figgins. "This way, sir. Whom is it you want to see?"

"Mr. Ratcliff, my lad."

"He's the master of our house, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. We belong to the New House. You're sure it's Mr. Ratcliff you want to see?"

The gentleman gazed at him in surprise.

"Of course, I am sure," he replied. "What a singular question!"

"Oh, I only asked, sir, because Mr. Ratcliff isn't at home now!" said Figgins, with a wink at the Co. "He went out about half an hour ago."

"Dear me! How annoying! Probably he has gone to meet my train."

Figgins could hardly suppress a laugh.

He had worked the matter out satisfactorily in his own mind. The scoundrel knew that Mr. Ratcliff was absent, hence his pretence of coming to see the New House master. He expected to be shown into the New House, and left there to wait for Mr. Ratcliff to return, and in the meantime he would effect the robbery and escape before the housemaster turned up.

"Yes, sir," said Figgins, giggling. "No doubt he has gone to meet your train. What a pity he should miss you, sir!"

The visitor looked more astonished.

"Yes, it is a pity; but I fail to see the cause of your merriment, my boy."

"Was I merry, sir?" said Figgins, becoming grave at once.

"I—I didn't mean it, sir. It—it seemed so funny that he should miss you."

"It was natural enough under the circumstances. I came by an earlier train than I had intended, and walked from Rylcombe," said the visitor. "I did not know it was my cousin's intention to meet the train."

Figgins gave a start. He knew that Jim the Nailer had plenty of nerve, but that he should have the nerve to claim the housemaster for a cousin was amazing.

"Your cousin, sir?" ejaculated Figgins. "Is Mr. Ratcliff your cousin, sir?"

"Yes, certainly! I am Mr. Dawkins. Please show me to the New House, and I will await his return. It is a great pity."

"This way, sir. This is the New House. That rotten old show over there is the School House—a measly hole, and no mistake. This one is the New House, the cock-house at St. Jim's, you know. Come in, sir."

With the Co. still bringing up the rear, Figgins ushered the little gentleman into the New House. Tom Merry was coming off the football field, and he glanced towards the visitor. Figgins gave him a glance of triumph, which Tom Merry did not understand.

Mr. Dawkins entered the New House.

"This way, sir," said Figgins. "I'll show you to Mr. Ratcliff's study."

"Thank you, my lad!"

Figgins led the way—not to Mr. Ratcliff's study, but to Figgy's own. Mr. Dawkins followed him without a sus-

picion, and entered the room. Then he looked round him in amazement through his gold-rimmed spectacles. He seemed amazed to find himself in an apartment of such small dimensions.

"My lad, you have surely made a mistake——"

Figgins chuckled as he stepped back into the passage. The door slammed. Figgins had placed the key in the outside of the lock, and he turned it in a twinkling.

"Caught!"

Figgins put the key in his pocket. The Co. grinned with satisfaction. The very first effort had been crowned with success, and Figgins & Co. were triumphant.

There was a knock at the door from inside.

"Boys, what does this mean? Have you dared to play a trick on me?"

"Oh, ring off!" said Figgins. "We know you, my pippin."

"What do you mean? Open this door instantly!"

"Rats!"

"I shall complain to Mr. Ratcliff when he returns."

"Ha, ha! You'll be given in charge when Mr. Ratcliff comes in."

"Are you mad? Given in charge?"

"Yes, my boy. I know you."

"You know me?"

"Yes, my enterprising burglar, I know you like a book. Ha, ha! We've got you!"

The imprisoned man knocked angrily on the door.

"Open this door instantly!"

"Oh, climb down!" said Figgins. "I tell you, we know you, Jim the Nailer."

"What!"

"We've captured you. You won't leave that room till you go to prison, my giddy burglar."

"Is it possible that you mistake me for a burglar?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Quite possible, I should say."

"I am Mr. Ratcliff's cousin."

"Cheese it! I tell you, you can't take us in."

"You will be severely punished for this."

"Ha, ha, ha! Keep it up."

"If you do not instantly open the door I will request Mr. Ratcliff to have you severely flogged!" shouted the prisoner.

"We'll risk it, Jim, my boy."

"You must be mad! Do I look like a burglar?"

"No, you don't. You're got up well, and you'd have taken in lots of people, but, bless you, I know how to spot a rascal when I see one."

And Figgins & Co. laughed loud and long.

The appeals from within ceased; the imprisoned man doubtless realised that argument was useless. He crossed to the study window and looked out, to ascertain whether there was an avenue of escape on that side. Figgins heard him opening the window.

"I say, you kids, stay here and keep watch!" he exclaimed. "I'll go and keep an eye under the window. He can't get out without breaking his neck, but I don't want to run risks. We must keep him safe till Mr. Ratcliff comes in."

Figgins hurried out of the New House. Mr. Dawkins, as he called himself, was looking out of the study window. He had apparently decided that it was too dangerous to attempt to climb out. He had called to a boy who was in sight, who happened to be Tom Merry. Tom was just coming up to the window when Figgins arrived.

"Hallo! What's the trouble?" asked Tom.

"I have been shut up in this study by a boy playing a practical joke," called out Mr. Dawkins. "Will you inform some master, so that I can be released?"

"Sorry, sir," said Tom Merry. "That's Figgy's study you're in, and I couldn't possibly tell tales of Figgy. I'll see if I can get you out myself. Hallo! Here is the image."

Figgins arrived upon the scene.

"Yes, that is the boy," said Mr. Dawkins, glaring at Figgins through his spectacles. "He has locked me in this room."

"What's the giddy game, Figgy?"

Figgins grinned triumphantly.

"Nothing," he replied; "only we're first in the field."

Tom Merry stared at him.

"First in the field? I don't quite catch on."

"We've captured the burglar, that's all."

"What burglar? Whose burglar? Which burglar? What are you driving at?"

"Oh, I don't see that we need keep it a secret any longer," said Figgins loftily. "I didn't let on to you before, because we were going to keep it dark until we had captured Jim the Nailer. Ha, ha! That's a surprise for you."

"You horrid bounder! So you followed me yesterday after all!"

"Rather! And learned the whole game from start to finish. We made up our minds to be first, and we are."

"You don't mean to say that that's Jim the Nailer?"
"Look at his beard! Look at his spectacles! Look at his size!"

"Yes, I can see all that, but still—" "He pretends he's Mr. Ratcliff's cousin," said Figgins, chuckling. "He came here while Ratty was out, you see, and put on a lot of concern for having missed him. Of course, he knew he was out. We've got him safe, though, till Ratty comes back."

"Well, I hope you've not made a mistake," said Tom Merry, with a grin. "But my private belief is, that you've put your big hoof in it this time, Figgy."

And he walked away to tell his chums what was on. Figgins looked uneasy for a moment.

"Rats!" he muttered. "He's jealous, that's all. It gets his back up to see us rope the rascal in. Hallo, Blake!"

The chums of Study No. 6 were coming round the New House after a visit to the "menagerie." They stopped to look at Figgins and the angry-faced man at the study window high above.

"What's the row?" asked Blake curiously.

"I have been shut up in this study by that rascally boy!" shouted Mr. Dawkins. "I beg of you to inform some master of my predicament."

"Sorry, sir," said Blake. "It's Figgy's business. Better take it quietly."

Mr. Dawkins muttered something which perhaps it was just as well the youthful ears below did not catch, and closed the window with a slam.

"I say, that's rather a risky wheeze, Figgy," said Blake. "Yaas, wathah!" remarked D'Arcy. "I think it's extremely pwoth that Figgins will get a fearful thwashin'."

"That's all you know," said Figgins loftily. "As it happens, that chap's a burglar, and we've captured him in the act of attempting to rob the school."

"Bai Jove! Weally? How surpwisin'!"

"I don't mind letting you into the secret now that we've done the trick," said Figgins. "Tom Merry met that detective chap yesterday, and he asked him to look out for a rascal called Jim the Nailer, who was coming to try to rob the school. We turned it over in our minds—"

"Impossible!" gasped D'Arcy.

"What do you mean? What's impossible?"

"For you to turn the school ovah in your minds. You—"

"Ass! We turned the matter over in our minds, and decided that it wouldn't do to leave such a delicate matter in the hands of a School House chap."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Blake, looking dangerous.

"And I suppose that was what you wanted me to keep Lowther and Manners back for, so that you could shadow Tom Merry?"

"Exactly," grinned Figgins. "I'm sorry you got into a row. I'll stand a feed next Saturday to make up for that."

"Oh, all sereno; I don't mind! It was our luck; still, we'll come to the feed. We never refuse an offer of that kind."

"Yaas, wathah! But are you sure you've got the wight burglah, Figgins?"

"Yes, Ferrers Locke gave Tom Merry his description, and it fits this chap to a hair—sandy beard, spectacles, and all. Then his coming here pretending he was Ratty's cousin, when he knew Ratty was away, proves it up to the hilt."

"I hope you've not made a bloomer. If he's really Ratty's cousin—"

"Oh, you'll see!" said Figgy confidently. "Hallo! There's Ratty coming in at the gate. I must be off. So long!"

The chums of Study No. 6 looked at one another as Figgins decamped.

"Well, this will be a feather in Figgy's cap, if it's all right," said Blake. "If it's all wrong, Figgy will go through something soon, and no mistake."

"The chap didn't look like a burglar," said Herries. "My impression is that Figgins has put his foot in it."

"Yaas, wathah! But I say, deah boys, if this isn't the weal burglah, it would be a wippin' ideah for us to catch the genuine burglah, and take a wise out of Figgins & Co. and the Tewwible Thwee both," said Arthur Augustus.

Blake slapped him on the back. "Good wheeze, Gussy! We'll do it."

CHAPTER 5.

The Wrong Man.

THUMP! Thump! Thump! The spectacled gentleman in Figgins & Co.'s study was getting impatient. His appeals for rescue from the window having failed, he had taken to thumping on the door. The Co., watching outside, thought this rather a singular proceeding for a captured burglar. No doubt the man was desperate.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Here he is, sir!" It was the voice of Figgins. The New House chief was coming up the stairs, with Mr. Ratcliff at his heels. The housemaster was looking amazed. "You can hear him making a fearful row, sir."

"I—I don't understand this, Figgins. A burglar, you say?"

"Yes, sir. A fearful criminal from London. He's wanted by the police. He came here to rob the house, and we captured him as neatly as anything, sir."

"If you have the facts correctly, Figgins, you have acted in a most meritorious way. I can hardly believe, however, that a burglar would dare to enter the school in broad daylight. Did you actually catch him in the act of committing a robbery?"

"N-no, not exactly, sir. He—he was just going to."

"I think there must be some mistake somewhere. In case of accidents, however, it would be better to have help at hand. Monteith, will you come this way, please?"

Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, was going downstairs. He stopped as Mr. Ratcliff called to him.

"Figgins says that he has caught a burglar and shut him up in his study," said the housemaster. "I cannot understand this at all."

"Some practical joke, I suppose, sir," said the prefect, looking at Figgins. Monteith had had his rubs with Figgins in the past, but they were on a better footing of late, the prefect being much more popular than he had once been.

"Not at all, Monteith," said Figgins. "It's a fact, honour bright."

"We had better see into it," said the housemaster. "Come this way. If it should turn out to be a joke, Figgins will have reason to be sorry for it."

Figgins's spirits were somewhat damped.

This was not the way in which he had expected his feat to be received. He reflected rather bitterly that Mr. Railton, of the School House, would have been much more pleasant about it. He led the way silently towards the study, whence the thumping noise proceeded.

"By the way, Monteith," said Mr. Ratcliff, "are you aware whether anyone has called to see me during my absence from the school?"

"I am not aware of it, sir."

"It was very unfortunate," said the housemaster. "I was expecting my cousin to come and see me, and I went to meet his train, but he appears to have changed it, and so I have missed him. If he came by an earlier one he ought to be here before this."

Figgins turned pale.

"I haven't seen him, sir," said Monteith.

Thump! thump! thump!

"By Jove, the chap in there is getting excited," exclaimed Monteith. "I'll open the door, sir, and all of you stand ready to stop him when he rushes out."

"Yes; very good," said Mr. Ratcliff hesitatingly.

He was not a fighting man, but he could not decline. After all, a master and four boys should be able to deal with any burglar.

Monteith unlocked the door, and threw it open.

A furious figure appeared in the doorway.

"How dare you shut me up like this?" roared Mr. Dawkins. "I will complain to the doctor. You shall be flogged! You shall be— Ah, Horace!"

Mr. Ratcliff stared at him.

"Henry!"

Mr. Dawkins came out of the study.

The housemaster shook hands with him mechanically. Figgins & Co. prayed for the floor to open and swallow them up.

"You!" said Mr. Ratcliff faintly. "Is it possible that the juniors have had the unspeakable audacity to lock you up in a study—you, my cousin—my visitor? Is it possible?"

"Yes, it is possible," said Mr. Dawkins, with a glare at the unfortunate Figgins. "These three boys did it. They pretended to show me in to your study, and showed me in here, and suddenly locked the door on me, and refused to let me out."

"My aunt!" murmured Monteith.

Figgins & Co. could only gasp.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Ratcliff. "Is it possible? I can scarcely believe my ears!"

"It is only too true! They declared that they believed me to be a burglar—why, I cannot possibly comprehend. I have never been told that I resembled a burglar in appearance. The whole affair is most astounding."

Mr. Ratcliff gritted his teeth.

"It is a practical joke!" he exclaimed. "Figgins, stand forward!"

Figgins came forward unwillingly.

"Did you know this gentleman was my cousin, on a visit to me, when you shut him up in your study?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff, in a voice of thunder.



In the stream of light appeared for a moment the figure of the burglar. "Collar him!" yelled Blake.

"N-n-no, sir!"

"Why did you play this extraordinary trick?"

"We—we thought he was a burglar, sir!"

"Figgins, it is bad enough to play such an insolent trick upon a gentleman, without adding to the turpitude of your conduct by a barefaced falsehood!"

Figgins flushed.

"I am not telling falsehoods, sir. I suppose I was mistaken, but I have never been called a liar before!"

Figgins spoke with spirit, too much to please the incensed housemaster. He reached out and gave the junior a savage box on the ear.

Figgins reeled against the doorpost.

"You will remain indoors now," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I will deal with this matter later on. You will all three be severely caned. I have a great mind to take you, Figgins, to the Head for a flogging!"

"We were all in it, sir," ventured Kerr. "We're both as much to blame as Figgy."

"Hold your tongue, Kerr!"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Silence! Go into your study at once and remain there! I apologise most profoundly for the insolence with which you have been treated, Henry!"

"It is no matter," said Mr. Dawkins, with a wave of the hand. "I think that a severe caning each will meet the case, cousin."

"It shall be severe enough!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a frown.

"Excuse me, sir," said Monteith, "if you will allow me to speak. It's pretty plain that the juniors really thought they had captured a burglar, though how they came to suppose so I can't imagine. Under the circumstances—"

Mr. Dawkins stared at him. The housemaster cut him short without ceremony.

"I have not asked you for your opinion on the matter, Monteith. When I want it I will not fail to let you know!" The prefect flushed, and bit his lip.

"Very well, sir," he said quietly; and turned on his heel. The housemaster and his visitor walked away, and Figgins & Co. went into their study. They stared at each other in silence and dismay for some minutes.

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish!" said Figgins at last. "We've made a ghastly muck of it, and no mistake!"

"My hat," said Kerr, "there's no doubt about that! Come to think of it, we did jump rather suddenly to the conclusion that he was the burglar."

"It was all his own fault. What the dickens does he mean by going around with a sandy beard and a pair of spectacles if he's not a burglar?"

"Fancy his being old Ratcliff's cousin all the time!" said Fatty Wynn. "He's as big a cad as Ratty, I think. He might have spoken up for us, and got us off, as it was all a mistake. After all, we never hurt him."

Figgins nodded gloomily.

"Oh, they're a pair!" he said. "We're in for a fearful licking, and no mistake! Never mind, I suppose we can stand it. The worst of it is that we crowed to Tom Merry and Blake about having captured the burglar, and they'll have the grin of us."

"Have you told Blake about the detective and Jim the Nailer?"

"Yes. You see, I thought we had got the man, and there was no need to keep the secret any longer," explained Figgins.

"Well, it can't be helped now, and it's no use crying over spilt milk," said Fatty Wynn. "Now that Blake's in the secret, I expect he'll have a try to capture the burglar. It will be a take-down for us if he should succeed. We have two rivals now—Blake as well as Tom Merry."

"Can't be helped," said Kerr. "As for the licking, we can stand it. And we'll stick to the trail like gum, and there's no reason why we shouldn't be successful next time, if Jim the Nailer really turns up at the school at all."

The caning came off in due course, for Mr. Ratcliff never forgot a thing like that. Figgins & Co. tore it philosophically. Their ardour was not in the least damped, and long ere the smart had left their palms they were making fresh plans for the capture of Jim the Nailer.

CHAPTER 6.

Kerr Has a Bright Idea.

"I SAY, Figgy!"

Figgins looked round suspiciously at the sound of Tom Merry's voice. It was the morning after that brilliant capture which had turned out so badly for Figgins & Co.

Tom Merry came up to him with a face very concerned.

"I say, Figgy, I thought I'd better tell you—"

"What's the matter?"

"Your burglar's escaped."

Figgins coloured.

"Thought you'd like to know," said the obliging Tom, "he's got away, and he seems to have chummed up with your housemaster. I've just seen them walking together in the quad."

"Oh, ring off!" said Figgins crossly. "I know it was a ghastly frost. It was all Ferrers Locke's fault."

"How do you make that out?"

"What did he want to describe the chap for as he did? I found a man who fitted the description, and he looked suspicious; he was so beastly respectable—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Hard cheese on an amateur detective!"

"The chap had a sandy beard and spectacles, and—"

"But a chap may have a sandy beard without being a burglar, and I've known fellows to wear spectacles, and yet to be perfectly honest," said Tom Merry gravely.

"Oh, don't rot! You chaps haven't captured anybody, anyhow!"

"No, we're waiting for the right man to come along."

"That's the idea!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, bursting into melody.

"We shall not want our Figgins there to tell us what to do,

When the right man comes along!"

"You're awfully smart!" said Figgins disdainfully. "I'm open to bet you a thick ear each that we shall be the ones to capture the real burglar!"

"Well, if you keep on as you've started," said Tom Merry, "you're bound to succeed. If you capture everybody who comes to St. Jim's—"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "Do get off that subject!"

"Seriously, Figgy, we'll both do our best to lay the rascal by the heels," said Tom Merry, "and we'll keep mum on the subject. Have you told anybody?"

"Only Study No. 6, and they've agreed to say nothing."

"Good! That means three parties of rival detectives in the field, for Blake is sure to take a hand," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "So long as we keep it dark, and don't give the rascal a chance to take warning, it won't hurt. We'll all go ahead, and see who gets there first."

"Righto! Two to one on the New House!"

"Done!" said Monty Lowther gravely. "All the wrong parties you capture not to count."

Figgins sniffed and stalked away.

The capture of Mr. Ratcliff's cousin was a sore point with him, and with the Co., and the School House youngsters did not seem inclined to give it a rest.

"I beg your pardon, sir—"

Figgins looked round. George Cuffe, Taggles' new assistant, was touching his cap to him. Figgins had noticed the man before, and had not much liked his oily ways. Mr Cuffe's clean shaven face was very soapy in its expression.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "What do you want?"

"I accidentally heard something, sir—something about capturing a burglar—"

"Like your cheek, then?"

"Yes, sir. I stand corrected. But if you please, sir—"

"Not so many sirs! What the dickens do you want?"

"I—I am rather nervous, sir. Is there any danger of a burglary being committed in the college, sir? If so, I should like to communicate with the police. I—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Figgins contemptuously.

"There's no danger."

"But—but the burglar, sir!"

"There wasn't any burglar. It was all a mistake."

"Oh, I see, sir! I quite understand, sir," said Mr. Cuffe, looking considerably relieved. "You do not think there is likely to be a burglary in the college, sir? You have no

reason to suppose there is going to be a burglary? I am very nervous, sir."

"There's nothing to be nervous about. Get along, do!"

And Figgins walked off.

"But, sir, I should like you to assure me—"

"Cuffe! Where are you, Cuffe? Do you hear, Cuffe?"

It was the voice of Taggles.

George Cuffe turned instantly in the direction of the voice. He appeared to be greatly in fear of his chief's wrath.

"Yes, sir! I'm coming, Mr. Taggles, sir!"

"Then be quick!" roared Taggles. "What the dickens do you mean by hanging about the quadrangle, you lazy rascal, when I told you to wash down the doctor's trap?"

"Pray forgive me, sir. I—"

"None of your blarney, my man. You're a lazy 'ound, that's what you are!"

"Yes, sir! Quite so, sir! You are quite right, sir," said the submissive Mr. Cuffe.

"Took you in out of charity, I did," continued the virtuously indignant Taggles. "This is 'ow you repays me, wasting your time talking to the young gentlemen in the quadrangle, instead of washin' down the trap accordin' to horders!"

"I am very sorry, sir—extremely sorry, sir."

"That's all very well," said Taggles morosely. "That don't mend matters, that don't. I've caught you lazying before. Says the doctor to me, says he, when I tells him I'm 'ard done by—which I am, and that's the honest truth—he says, says he, I can look out for an assistant, says he, and I took you on."

"And it was very kind of you, Mr. Taggles, sir."

"Yes, it was kind of me. Took you on, I did, out of kindness of 'eart, because I took pity on yer, and you came on trial without any wages to start with. I give you a trial out of pure kindness of 'eart."

"And kept the screw for yourself, you old rascal!" murmured Mr. Cuffe.

"What's that you're saying?"

"I say I never met a kinder-hearted and more generous man than you are, Mr. Taggles."

"Well," said Taggles, thawing a little, "perhaps I am. I've suffered from my generosity many a time, and it's a wonder it hasn't 'ardened my 'eart. But it hasn't. I give you a trial out of sheer kindness."

"I hope I've given satisfaction, Mr. Taggles."

"Well, you ain't," said Taggles. "You're lazy! That's what you are! My fault for taking you without a character. You're lazy! Hain't I found you nosing about the Head's library when you ought to be at work? And now here you are talking to Master Figgins instead of washin' down the doctor's trap as hordered."

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"That's all very well, but—"

"Oh, let him alone, Taggy!" exclaimed Figgins in disgust. "Blest if you don't go on lik' a rotten slave-driver out of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'!"

"You mind your own affairs, Master Figgins, and I'll mind mine," said Taggles with dignity. "I think I can manage my staff without—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Good old staff!" grinned Figgins. "I say, Cuffe, you're a giddy staff. Ha, ha, ha!"

Cuffe grinned, too, as he walked away. Taggles bestowed a glare upon Figgins and beat a retreat. He never came off best in a wordy encounter with that lively young gentleman.

The subject of that unfortunate capture was not allowed to drop. When Figgins & Co. came into the Fourth Form classroom, Blake whispered to the New House chief:

"I say, Figgy. You don't mind my asking—"

"No; what is it?" said Figgins.

Figgins turned red and went to his place.

When school was over it was just as bad. Figgins & Co. met the Terrible Three, and Tom Merry anxiously inquired whether he had made any additions to his collection of burglars. Figgins & Co. walked away simmering with wrath.

"We shall never hear the end of that," said Figgins, "until some new wheeze turns up. Jim the Nailer doesn't seem to be coming here to be captured. We shall have to take a rise out of those School House bounders somehow."

"I've been thinking," Kerr remarked thoughtfully.

"If you've got a scheme, get it off your chest, old chap."

"We've made a bloomer," said Kerr, "and a bad one, and those kids won't let it rest. It's occurred to me that the Terrible Three might make one as bad, with a little assistance from us."

"Go on, kid," said Figgins, interested at once. "What's the wheeze?"

"You know," said Kerr modestly, "that I'm a pretty good hand at disguising myself."

"Jolly good!" said Figgins heartily. "There isn't any-

body in the New House Dramatic Society who is a patch on you."

"That's so," said Fatty Wynn. "You've made up as Herr Schneider and as Mr. Lathom good enough to take in the School House kids, and you couldn't do more than that."

"Well," said Kerr, "Tom Merry is looking for a chap with a sandy beard and spectacles, just as we were. We found one, and I don't see why he shouldn't find one, too."

Figgins uttered a delighted exclamation.

"Kerr, old man, you're a giddy genius! Come here and let me slap your back."

"No thanks," said Kerr hastily; "I'll take the will for the deed. I really think this would be a rather good wheeze, if it works out well."

"Oh, it will work out all right!" Figgins said confidently. "But about the props? Have you got the things you will want?"

"All except the spectacles," said Kerr. "I can't use the same I used as Mr. Lathom, or they might be spotted. I can easily get some in Rylcombe. I'll buzz down there on my bike now, if you think the idea's good, Figgy."

"Good? It's first-rate!" said Figgins. "My hat! I can see a prospect of making the Terrible Three look bigger asses than they've ever looked before, which is saying a lot."

"Then I'll be off," said Kerr. And a few minutes later Kerr was spinning on his bicycle down the lane to Rylcombe. Figgins and Fatty Wynn watched him start. As soon as he was gone they strolled away to the New House. A voice floated to them from the School House side.

"Any more captures yet, Figgins?"

Figgins did not turn his head.

"They can go on crowing now," he murmured. "It will be our turn soon, Fatty."

"What-ho!" said Fatty.

CHAPTER 7.

Study No. 6 on the Track.

JACK BLAKE uttered a suppressed exclamation.

"I say, kids, come and look here!"

Blake was sitting at the window of Study No. 6, which was open, for the evening was a warm one for late October. Darkness lay on the quadrangle under the ancient elms, but here and there the yellow glew from a lighted window streamed out into the night.

Blake had caught sight of a slinking figure in the gloom below. There was no light in Study No. 6, the juniors having been talking earnestly on the topic of Jim the Nailer, and none of them having yet taken the trouble to light up.

"What is it?" asked Herries, coming nearer to the window.

"Hush! Look!"

Blake pointed. Herries looked out of the window, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked over his shoulder. The figure Blake had seen was still visible, slinking along in the shadow of the trees. The light from a window fell upon it for a moment, and then revealed a little man with a sandy beard and spectacles.

"Goodness gwacious!" exclaimed D'Arcy, startled.

Blake poked him in the ribs.

"Quiet, you ass! Don't give the show away."

"Please don't be so beastly wuff, Blake. You have eased my waistcoat."

"Gr-r-r! I say kids, what do you think of that? If that's not Jim the Nailer, I'm a double Dutchman!" said Blake in a whisper.

"Looks like him," said Herries excitedly. "But I say, we don't want to make a bloomer like Figgins & Co."

"No, but we're right this time. It's not old Ratty's precious cousin, because he's gone away from St. Jim's this afternoon. Besides, this fellow is smaller. Now, it's not likely that another chap with a sandy beard and spectacles would come to St. Jim's, unless it was the one we are looking for."

"That's right enough."

"Besides, what's he slinking about like that for? An honest man wouldn't want to go around like a frightened dog, would he?"

"I suppose not," assented Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think you are quite wight, Blake."

"Thank you, Gussy. If you think I am right, I must be right. When you bring your mighty brain to bear on a subject—"

"Oh, don't wot, Blake, pway!"

"Well, that's Jim the Nailer," said Blake, with conviction. "You see, he's dodged in just before locking-up, and I suppose he's going to hide somewhere till it's safe to start, his burgling operations. My hat! This will be a sell for Tom Merry and for Figgins, too, if we capture the burglar."

"If" repeated Herries. "There's no if about it. There's the burglar, and we've only got to track him across the quad and capture him. We can do it without help."

"Suppose he's got a wevolvah," suggested D'Arcy. "It would be feahfully wisky work if he's got a wevolvah, deah boys."

"If you're funky—" began Herries disdainfully.

"I'm not funky, deah boy, but I weally think that we ought to take pwopah pwecautions. I will go and bowwow Mr. Wailton's gun."

And the swell of the School House started towards the door.

Blake caught him by the collar and jerked him back into a chair just in time.

"You'll borrow nothing, fathead! Do you want to give the show away, image?"

"I object to bein' chawactewised as an image," said Arthur Augustus with dignity. "And I weally considah that it is strictly necessary to bowwow Mr. Wailton's gun."

"You ass! Do you think he would lend it to you?"

"Yaas, wathah, if I explained to him that we were goin' to capchah a beastly burglah."

"Ass! If he had a suspicion of the fact he'd keep us in. We've got to keep this thing dark. Don't be a fathead. If you leave my side for a single instant I'll day you!"

"I wefuse to—"

"Dry up! Now come along, kids, and let's track down the enterprising burglar."

"But weally, Blake, considerin' the feahful wisk of tacklin' that despewate wuffian, I think we ought to bowwow Mr. Wailton's gun."

"Oh, cheese it, and come along!"

"He may have a wevolvah, and blow our bwains out."

"He couldn't blow yours out till you grow some. Come along, and dry up!"

The chums of the Fourth hurried out of the School House, Blake keeping his arm linked in Gussy's, for it was evident that the swell of St. Jim's still had a lingering desire to fetch the housemaster's gun.

"He was going towards the gymnasium," whispered Blake, looking round for the vanished burglar. "The Terrible Three are in there, I believe. Hallo, there he is!"

The enterprising burglar was in sight again.

The big door of the gymnasium was open, and the light streamed out from it. In the light appeared for a moment the slinking figure of the burglar.

"Collar him!" yelled Blake.

The three chums bolted at the burglar.

The bearded, spectacled ruffian gave a gasp of alarm and swung round, staring towards the three figures launching themselves at him from the dusk. Then he broke into a run.

"After him!"

The burglar had escaped the rush and the clutching hands. He darted away into the dusk, and after him went the chums of Study No. 6 at top speed.

Tom Merry looked out of the gym.

"Hallo! What's the row here?"

No one replied, but he heard Blake's voice in the distance.

"After him! He's dodging round the New House! He's the man, right enough! Don't let him get away!"

Tom Merry's eyes sparkled.

"I say, Manners! Monty, come here!"

His chums joined him in a moment.

"Those kids from Study No. 6 are chasing somebody!" muttered Tom. "Looks to me as if they're after our burglar, or else another mare's nest. We'd better look into it."

And the Terrible Three started in pursuit of the pursuers.

Meanwhile, the burglar was speeding away through the gloom of the quadrangle.

The chums of the Fourth followed him fast, losing him and finding him again, never far from the track.

Blake could have called for help, and soon had the rascal surrounded, but he did not intend to do anything of the kind. The chase was leading him close to the New House, and a call for help would probably be answered by New House juniors. Blake did not mean to let the New House have any hand in the capture of Jim the Nailer.

"Come on!" panted Blake, "we're gaining on the beast!"

"Wait a minute, deah boys!" gasped D'Arcy. "Stop for me! I've droppped my eyeglass!"

Blake snorted.

"Come on, you howling fathead! Come on, I tell you!"

"But I've weally droppped my beastly eyeglass! I—"

Blake did not stop to listen.

The pursuers were clearly gaining on the burglar, and had they been a little more suspicious, they might have guessed that he was allowing them to do so.

The chase had led them far from the gym., and they were drawing near the building where the boys kept their pets—

a very dark and secluded corner of the extensive school grounds.

Still, in the starlight, the running figure could be seen, dodging and running, hardly ever for a moment out of sight.

"We've got him!" panted Blake. "He doesn't know this place, kids. There's no way out in this direction, and we shall see that he doesn't double back."

"Righto!" panted Herries. "We've got him!"

"Look out for his wevolvah, deah boys!"

"Rats!"

They dashed on. The fugitive had disappeared at last, passing behind the "menagerie," as if to seek a hiding place in the dark shadow there.

"Come on!" gasped Blake.

Right on dashed Blake and Herries, and close behind came Arthur Augustus. The juniors were too excited to think of the risk.

They passed the corner of the building, and paused for a moment in the dense shadow; and then, through the gloom, came a sudden sound of swishing water!

Swish! Sloosh!

Blake gave a fearful yell, as a flood descended upon his head, drenching him from crown to sole; and he staggered back, gasping and spluttering.

At the same moment came a similar drenching shower upon Herries, who started spluttering and gasping as if in rivalry.

"My word!" gasped D'Arcy. "What the—how the—o-o-ooch!"

Swish came the water upon himself, and he gave a wail of anguish.

There was a clatter of falling buckets and a sound of scrambling feet, as if unseen persons were hastily descending from a roof.

Then came a shout of laughter from the darkness.

"Ha, ha ha!"

"Who's cock-house at St. Jim's?"

"We are! We are!"

"Hear us smile! Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake rubbed the water out of his eyes.

"Figgins & Co.!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha! Have you caught that giddy burglar? Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake gave a groan.

"Taken in—taken in and done for! Foiled, diddled, dished, and done!"

His comrades were silent. Their feelings were too deep for words!

CHAPTER 8.

The Capture of Kerr.

TOM MERRY came up, panting, with Manners and Lowther at his heels. Blake and his chums had turned to go back to the School House, and Tom Merry caught sight of them clearly in the light of the stars. He uttered a startled exclamation.

"My hat! Where have you been?"

"Under a tap, I should say," remarked Monty Lowther. "Is that a new idea of yours, Blake, taking a bath with your clothes on?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Blake crossly. "We've been done!"

"My waistcoat!" murmured D'Arcy. "Oh, my waistcoat! It's howbly soiled! I shall nevah, nevah be able to wear it again—nevah!"

"I'm drenched!" growled Herries. "Oh, I'll make Figgins sit up for this, some time!"

The chums of Study No. 6 went their way, leaving the Terrible Three in convulsions.

"I don't know exactly what's happened," remarked Tom Merry; "but it's funny. Blake thought he was going to catch a burglar, and he's caught a shower-bath! Hallo, what's that?"

A figure flitted by in the gloom.

Monty Lowther uttered an exclamation.

"Jim the Nailer!"

In a twinkling the three had dashed towards the flitting figure.

"He's running! Stop him!"

The burglar was running his hardest, in earnest this time. But he was cut off from escape by the wall of the New House; and in a moment or two the Terrible Three cornered him, and he was grasped by three pairs of hands.

"The burglar!"

"Jim the Nailer!"

"We've got him!"

"Hurrah for us! Bring him along!"

"You silly asses!" came a gurgling voice. "I'm not Jim the Nailer! I'm Kerr!"

"Kerr!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Yes, confound you! Let me go!"

"Wait a bit!" said Tom Merry. Kerr had been dragged down, and the hero of the Shell proceeded to sit upon his chest to secure him. "I'm not so sure that you are Kerr. You'll have to explain yourself. What's this rig of yours?"

"He's got up to imitate Jim the Nailer," said Manners. "I suppose he's the giddy burglar that Blake and Herries and Gussy were chasing."

Kerr chuckled.

"Is that so, kid?" demanded Tom Merry severely.

"Yes, it is," said Kerr. "We got this up for a joke on you kids, only Blake hopped in at the wrong time. I was going to let you spot me, you see, and lead you into a little trap; but Blake got it instead."

"Oh, I begin to see," said Tom Merry. "You led them a dance, to where Figgy and Wynn were waiting on the roof of the menagerie, with buckets of water ready to drench them."

"That's it!" grinned Kerr. "I didn't want to disappoint them, you know. I thought they ought to catch something. They got it instead of you."

"Where are Figgins and Wynn now?"

"Blessed if I know. I ran on, to get rid of this rig while they were soaking Blake. I've lost them in the dark."

"And we've found you," said Tom Merry, shaking his head. "What do you think of his yarn, kids? Pretty steep, I call it."

"Fearfully steep!" said Manners and Lowther, taking the cue. "It's pretty hard to swallow a tale like that. It's very cute of him."

"Yes, very cute, indeed; but he can't take us in."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Kerr. "I've told you the truth!"

Tom Merry shook his head solemnly.

"I'm afraid I can't quite believe you, Jim the Nailer. If you could make us believe that you were Kerr, of course we should let you go."

"I am Kerr! You know I'm Kerr!" howled the prisoner.

"I don't know anything of the kind. I've only got your word for it, and I'm not going to take the word of a burglar," said Tom Merry obstinately.

"I'm not a burglar! I'm Kerr!"

"Nonsense! You're Jim the Nailer. I know you by your beard."

"It's false; it will come off."

"That only makes the case blacker against you, if you're in disguise, my man," said Tom Merry sternly. "I remember now. Mr. Locke said that the rascal would probably be clean-shaven. Yes, the beard does come off," he went on, jerking it from the prisoner's chin. "That proves the charge against the villain. He's the burglar, right enough!"

"I'm not! I'm Kerr! I'm not!"

"It's no use, my man, you're known," said Tom Merry. "Bind his hands, chaps! He's a fearfully desperate character, and he may have a revolver or a dagger in his pocket."

"Let me alone! I'm Kerr! You know I'm Kerr!"

"His necktie will do very well, as we haven't any handcuffs. Tie it tightly; he's a fearful desperado, and if he gets loose there may be murder done."

Kerr's wrists were fastened securely together. Then his ankles were bound with a whipcord Tom Merry happened to have in his pocket.

"There, I think he's safe," Tom Merry remarked, rising. "We've succeeded, after all, chaps. Blake tried, and Figgins tried; but we've done the trick, and laid the burglar by the heels."

"I'm not the burglar—you know I'm not! You know I'm Kerr!"

"Now we'll go and fetch the police," went on Tom Merry. "We won't try to carry him away. He can remain here safe enough till we get the police."

"I'm Kerr! You know I'm Kerr!"

"Surprising how he keeps that up, when he knows he can't pull the wool over our eyes!" said Tom Merry, in wonder. "What a fearful fabricator!"

"You—you beast! You School House cads! Let me go!"

"Yes, we'll let you go to prison," said Tom Merry.

"That's where you ought to have been long ago, Jim the Nailer. Come on, kids, and we'll get the police on the scene. They've wanted that fearful criminal for a long time."

And the Terrible Three walked off.

Kerr wriggled and squirmed on the ground. He could roll about, but he could not get loose. He had to wait till

ANSWERS

someone should come for him. In spite of what Tom Merry had said, he did not think that the police would come.

Outside the New House the Terrible Three found Figgins and Wynn, evidently waiting for Kerr to turn up. They stopped to speak.

"I say, Figgins, have you lost anything?" asked Tom Merry affably.

Figgins stared at him.

"Why, I thought—we thought—that is—"

"Ha, ha, ha! You made a little mistake! It was Blake, Herries, and Gussy who were on the track of the burglar, and they got it in the neck instead of us."

Figgins broke into a chuckle.

"Well, it's up against the School House anyway," he said comfortably. "You've been done, and it's much the same to us. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha! But haven't you lost anything?"

"Lost anything!" said Figgins. "No, not that I know of. What are you driving at, Tom Merry?"

"Oh, I thought you might have lost a burglar, or a partner in the Co.!" said Tom Merry carelessly. "If you haven't, it's all right. So-long!"

Figgins caught him by the arm.

"Do you know where Kerr is?"

"How should I know?" said Tom Merry, in astonishment.

"But if you've mislaid a burglar, you will find one yonder, tied up all ready to be taken to prison."

And the Terrible Three marched off, laughing.

Figgins and Wynn looked uncomfortably at each other.

"Better look into this," said Figgins shortly.

Fatty Wynn nodded, and they hurried in the direction indicated by Tom Merry. In the gloom it was not easy to see anything, and Figgins called out his chum's name.

"Kerr, Kerr! Where are you, Kerr?"

"Here!" came a snapping voice. "Here, you silly asses! Come, and let me loose!"

Figgins hurried towards the spot, and stumbled over a sprawling figure, and came down with a bump across Kerr.

"Look out!" yelled the unfortunate burglar. "Look out, fathead! I'm not a beastly cushion!"

"I didn't see you," said Figgins apologetically. "My hat! Who tied you up like this?"

"Tom Merry, of course! Get me loose, for goodness' sake, and don't stand there chattering like a parrot," said Kerr.

Figgins seemed to swallow something. He took out his penknife, and cut Kerr loose without a word. The discomfited burglar rose to his feet.

"Well, you are a silly ass!" he said. "You've cut my necktie to ribbons!"

"Have I?" said Figgins. "Sorry—you didn't tell me it was your necktie! Don't be ratty, old chap! All's fair in war, you know, and we have to take things as they come."

"Right-ho!" said Kerr. "I didn't mean to be ratty. But—but this has been rather a ghastly frost. We've given Blake the kybosh instead of Tom Merry; and then Tom Merry—oh, hang! He's been one too many for us again."

CHAPTER 9.

The Right Track at Last.

THE Terrible Three entered the School House, and went up to their study. Tom Merry caught a gleam of light under the door.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's in our quarters! We never left a light burning!" He pushed open the door and entered. "Hallo, there! Who—why—what are you doing here?"

"I came here to speak to you, sir," said George Cuffe meekly—for the intruder was the soft-mannered new assistant of Taggles. "I did not find you here—"

Tom Merry stared at him.

"So you had the thundering cheek to light the gas, and wait here for me?" he asked.

"I—I wanted to speak to you very particularly, sir."

"What about?" asked the hero of the Shell, eyeing him. He had noticed Cuffe once or twice before, and had not liked him, the man's soapy manners rather getting on his nerves.

"I have found a half-sovereign, sir," said Cuffe, holding out the coin between his finger and thumb. "I picked it up where you young gentlemen had been talking, and I thought it must belong to you."

Tom Merry went through his pockets.

"It's not mine!" he said shortly.

"Nor mine!" said Manners. "I've got two bob, and I haven't lost ten out of that! Is it yours, Monty?"

"Nix!" said Lowther shortly.

"I am sorry to have troubled you, young gentlemen," said Cuffe, in his soft voice. "I was sure it belonged to one of you, and I could not rest till I had restored it. Please excuse me! Good-night, gentlemen!"

"Good-night! You had better take that half-sovereign to Mr. Railton."

"Yes, sir! I will certainly do so, sir!"

And George Cuffe departed. Tom Merry stood in the doorway watching him down the passage. Then he came back into the study, and closed the door. There was a strange expression upon his face, and his chums watched him curiously.

"What's the trouble, Tom?" asked Manners.

"Nothing, only—"

"Only what? What are you thinking of?"

"I don't trust that fellow! I've been thinking. Listen!"

Tom Merry held up his hand for silence. In the dead silence a faint creak came from the passage without. The chums did not need telling what it was. It was the faint sound of a stealthy footstep, and they knew that Cuffe was creeping back to listen at the door, just as well as if they had seen him.

Manners made a wrathful step towards the door, but Tom Merry signed to him to stop. He began to speak in a rather loud voice, as if he wished the words to reach the ears of the man he knew had an ear to the keyhole.

"I say, chaps, don't say a word about seeing those banknotes in Mr. Railton's desk. It's awfully risky of him to leave them there without locking the desk, you know, and I really think he should take more care of them."

Manners and Lowther stared at Tom Merry, as if they thought he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. This was the first they had heard of banknotes in the housemaster's desk. "It would be a temptation to anybody hard up," went on Tom Merry, in the same key. "I saw a bundle of banknotes, and quite thirty pounds in gold, and it won't be paid away in the house accounts till to-morrow. It's not safe, especially as that rascal, Jim the Nailer, is supposed to be in the neighbourhood."

There was a faint gasp outside the door.

"Let's go down to the common-room, chaps," went on Tom Merry.

A faint creak, but louder than before showed that the listener outside had taken the alarm at the words, and scuttled off down the passage in time to escape being seen. Tom Merry gave him time to get clear, and then opened the door. Wondering greatly, Manners and Lowther followed Tom from the room, and down the stairs. They entered the common-room, and drew into a corner by themselves.

"Now, just you explain yourself, you mysterious boulder!" muttered Monty Lowther. "Are you right clean off your rocker, or what is it?"

"I'm not off my rocker," said Tom, "I'm on the track."

"On the track of what?"

"Jim the Nailer!"

His chums gave a simultaneous whistle.

"Tom, you don't mean to say you think—"

"Look here," said Tom quietly. "You know what Ferrers Locke said. The rascal intended to rob the school, and he was most likely to get a job of some kind here, as some sort of a servant very likely."

"Yes; I know that, but—"

"Well, this fellow Cuffe has been here only a few days. He's new here, and he's a suspicious character. That was a yarn about finding half a sovereign, and coming there to give it back to us. It was too thin for anything. Of course, it was the first excuse that came into his mind when we found him in our study."

"But what do you think he was doing, then?"

"Looking for valuables. He knows I have a good deal of money; and there's my gold-watch, he's seen me wear that sometimes. He was either going to steal or to ascertain where the things were kept so as to be able to take them when he was ready. I heard Blake say the other day that D'Arcy had lost a five-pound note, and hadn't found it yet. Gussy is awfully careless with his money, but it looks suspicious to me."

Manners and Lowther nodded.

"But I say, Tom, Locke said he was a 'little man, with a sandy beard, and spectacles.'"

"I know he did, but he said, too, that he would most likely shave off his beard, for disguise, and that the spectacles were only a disguise themselves, and would be left off," said Tom Merry. "The description fits Cuffe very well."

"My hat! It would be curious if it were true."

"We can't be sure, of course. But what did he want to come back and listen at our door for, if his presence there was as innocent as he made out? He wanted to make sure whether we suspected anything."

"I suppose that's it!" said Manners thoughtfully.

"That's it, right enough! That's why I told that yarn about money in the housemaster's desk, and mentioned that Jim the Nailer was known to be in the neighbourhood. You see, if he thinks himself in danger here, he'll clear out, and if he thinks there's an easy haul to be made in the housemaster's room, he'll go there first to collar it."

"I suppose so, but—"

"After what I said—and he heard—I believe that if he's Jim the Nailer he will clear out of St. Jim's to-night, after robbing the housemaster's desk," said Tom Merry firmly.

"But—I say—that's not a thing we want to bring about, old fellow."

"Yes, it is! So far as I know there's nothing of value in Mr. Railton's desk, so he doesn't stand to lose anything," said Tom Merry coolly. "And we shall be there, ready for him; and if he gets away—well, I shall be surprised."

"Jove! I see the idea! But if he's not Jim the Nailer?"

"If he's not Jim the Nailer, we shall have our watch for our pains," said Tom Merry. "But it's my firm belief that he is. His listening at the door is proof enough. And I happen to know that Taggles took him in without a character. He's twitted him with it lots of times before us when he's been annoyed with him. And my belief is that Taggles has made something by taking him on like that, without thinking that Cuffe may be a rascal who has his own purpose to serve."

"Taggles is ass enough for anything, and the Head left that matter in his hands," Lowther remarked. "It's likely enough."

"Anyway, we shall see to-night. If he's Jim the Nailer, it's pretty certain that he'll put his plan into execution to-night, isn't it, as he knows his presence is suspected in the neighbourhood?" said Tom Merry. "He may wonder how we know anything about Jim the Nailer; but he can't doubt the fact."

"That's right enough! He'll bunk, and he's pretty certain to try the burglary game before he bunks; especially that remarkably easy job at the housemaster's desk!" grinned Lowther.

"That's my belief! Now, after lights are out, when the dormitory is asleep, we're going to watch in the housemaster's study, or near it. He's pretty certain to rob the principal's house, too, but we can't prevent that if he goes there first, and so long as we catch him it makes no odds."

"Good! If he's Jim the Nailer, we'll have him."

"But mind, mum's the word! We're going to make this capture! We three are enough to handle any burglar that ever burgled!"

"I should say so! Study No. 6, and Figgins & Co. are dead out of it! We'll take a cricket-stump each in case he kicks up a fuss."

"And some rope to tie him up with," added Manners.

"But mind, not a whisper! If we're on a false scent, and anybody knew we were watching all night for a burglar that never came—"

"Ha, ha! We should never hear the end of it!"

"Figgins and Blake have both discovered mare's nests," Tom Merry remarked. "But there's no reason why we should give them the laugh of us. It was like their cheek to think that they could handle a job like this, and they will look pretty green in the morning when we hand Jim the Nailer over to the police."

And the Terrible Three kept the secret with terrible earnestness. The more they thought over it, the more they were certain that they were on the right track, and that Cuffe was in reality Jim the Nailer, and the temptation was strong to let Study No. 6 know all about their success. But they resisted it. There would be time in the morning for a triumph over their rivals, if the enterprise worked out successfully, and they mustered their patience to wait till then. Not a word passed their lips on the subject, and when they went up to the Shell dormitory, none of their Form-fellows had a suspicion of what was in their minds.

No one noticed that they concealed a cricket-stump each under their mattresses, to arm themselves with when the moment came to sally forth on the burglar-hunt. Knox, the prefect, saw lights out, and after the usual buzz of talk the dormitory sank into silence and slumber.

But the Terrible Three did not sleep. They had far too important a matter in hand to think of slumber. They lay awake, and listened for the boom of the clock-tower, which was to be the signal for rising. Eleven strokes boomed out, and the chums of the Shell waited with what patience they could for another weary hour to pass.

They were getting extremely sleepy, and once or twice Manners and Lowther nodded off, and woke up again with a start.

Twelve at last struck from the school tower. Boom! The last stroke died away, and seemed to leave a deeper silence than before. Tom Merry rose from his bed.

"You awake, you chaps?" he whispered.

"Ye-es," murmured Monty Lowther sleepily, "I'm wide awake."

Manners snored. He had really gone off at last. Tom Merry shook him by the shoulder.

"Get up, lazybones! No noise, now!"

The three chums rapidly dressed, putting on slippers instead of their boots, and then took the cricket-stumps from

their hiding-places. The rest of the dormitory was sleeping soundly. Tom Merry opened the door quietly, and they stole out, and the door closed without a sound.

St. Jim's was sleeping. At midnight the latest to retire was in bed, and not a single light gleamed from a window of the School House. All was dark and silent as the Terrible Three, with beating hearts and tense nerves, descended the gloomy stairs to the housemaster's study to take up their vigil for the night.

CHAPTER 10.

The Capture of Jim the Nailer.

CREAK! Tom Merry started, and nudged his companions. The stroke of one had boomed out from the clock-tower, and the silence of the night had not been broken otherwise. The Terrible Three, hidden in an alcove in the passage near the door of the housemaster's study, watched and waited.

The weary hour had passed on leaden wings, and Manners, curled up in a corner of the alcove, had dropped off to sleep. Monty Lowther was nodding. Only Tom Merry was still wide awake and on the alert.

The sudden creak from the gloom came as a welcome sound to his ears. He had begun to fear that he was upon a wild-goose chase, and he knew that his comrades regretted the warm beds they had left, though they did not complain. The creak on the stairs warned him that someone else, whoever it was, was out of bed at that unearthly hour. Manners and Lowther were instantly wide awake at Tom's nudge.

"Quiet!" whispered Tom Merry tensely.

Creak—creak! The sounds were faint; would have been imperceptible in the daytime, but in the dead stillness of the night they were perfectly audible to the straining ears of the juniors.

Someone was stealing along stealthily past the alcove. The chums, keeping back in the darkness, caught a momentary glimpse of a dim form flitting by in the darkness.

They held their breath for a moment. All doubts were gone now. Whether the man was Jim the Nailer or not, it was perfectly clear that he was not upon an honest errand. Tom Merry looked out of the recess after him.

He heard a faint sound at the door of Mr. Railton's study. The door was locked, which was the reason why the juniors had taken up their watch in the passage. The sound was quite explicable to Tom Merry. The thief was picking the lock.

A glimmer of light fell into the dark passage. The study door had swung open, and the pale starlight that glimmered through the window within cast fugitive rays out into the passage. Tom Merry touched his companions lightly.

"Come on!"

Grasping the cricket-stumps, the chums of the Shell stole on tiptoe along the passage. They reached the housemaster's study, but the door had been closed again.

A glimmer of light came from under it, stronger than the starlight. The marauder had lighted the gas, turning it up just sufficient for his work. Tom Merry set his teeth.

"We've got him now, kids."

He opened the door of the study as quietly as he could. For a moment the burglar did not hear him. He was bending over Mr. Railton's desk, and had his back to the door. Tom Merry could not see his face, but he knew the figure well enough. It was that of George Cuffe, the pseudo man-of-all-work.

The chums stepped into the room, and the burglar turned his head. A piece of black crape masked his face. His eyes gleamed with sudden terror. He stared at the boys, and made a wild spring to the door; but they were in his path in a moment.

"Surrender!"

He started back from the brandished cricket-stumps. His hand went into his breast, and reappeared with something in it that glimmered and flashed in the dim gaslight. Tom Merry struck fiercely, and the scoundrel gave a cry of pain as the stump cracked on his wrist, and a knife went with a clatter to the floor.

They were upon him the next moment. He went down heavily, with the three juniors on top of him. The crape was torn from his face, and the clean-shaven countenance of George Cuffe was revealed. He struggled desperately, but in vain.

"Got him!" said Tom Merry, with much satisfaction.

"Surrender, you silly chump, or you will get hurt!"

"Let me go—let me go!"

"Yes, I can see us doing that!" grinned Tom. "We've been looking for you for a long time, Jim the Nailer."

The man gasped as his name was uttered.

"Let me go! I will give you—"

"Rats! You're our prisoner."

Cuffe made a desperate effort to break loose; but the chums of the Shell pinned him down, and, in spite of his struggles, he was secured, and after a few minutes, as he lay gasping and exhausted, his wrists were bound together with the rope Tom Merry had thoughtfully provided himself with. Tom sprang to his feet, breathing hard.

"My hat! That was a tussle! But we've got him!"

"We've got something else, too!" grinned Manners. "Look here!"

"By Jove, what a haul!"

In the struggle all sorts of property had been scattered on the study floor from the capacious pockets the burglar was provided with for carrying his loot in. Money, gold and silver, several watches, a roll of banknotes, silver spoons and forks by the dozen, and many other articles of value, lay dispersed on the floor.

The thief had evidently been busy in the other parts of the school buildings before he came into the School House for the final coup in Mr. Railton's study.

"Lucky for the Head we were on the spot," remarked Tom Merry. "Some of these things belong to the school, and there would be a fearful row if they were lost. Hallo! Here's somebody coming at last!"

There was a glimmer of light in the passage, and a sound of hurried footsteps. The noise of the scuffle had awakened more than one sleeper in the School House, and doors could be heard opening in various directions.

Mr. Railton's face appeared at the door. The house-master held up a candle, and stared into the study in blank amazement. He had a poker in his other hand.

"Wh-what has happened?"

Tom Merry turned up the gas. In the blaze of light Jim the Nailer could be seen lying bound upon the floor, scowling like a demon and grinding his teeth with helpless rage.

"We've caught a burglar, sir!" said Tom Merry. "Stopped him from bunking with a fearful lot of loot, sir! He's Jim the Nailer!"

"Merry, I see what you have done, though I cannot quite understand this. You have run a great risk, my boys."

"It was great fun, sir. This will be one up for the School House, and Figgins & Co. will have to sing small."

Mr. Railton took a closer look at the prisoner.

"But this—is this Cuffe—George Cuffe! I should never have dreamed—"

"He's Jim the Nailer, sir," said Tom Merry. "An awful rascal! I'll put a few more turns of the rope round him, in case of accidents."

Mr. Railton smiled as Tom Merry proceeded to wind the rope round the hapless burglar and knot it.

"That will do, Merry. I will wake Taggles, and have this rascal taken to the police-station at once in the trap! I will not run any risk with him. You may go back to bed, and you shall give me a full explanation in the morning."

And the Terrible Three, well satisfied with themselves and their exploit, returned to their dormitory, and in a few minutes were sleeping the sleep of the just.

St. Jim's was all agog with the news the next morning. Jim the Nailer—for he had confessed his identity—had been lodged in Rylcombe Police-station overnight, and Taggles had been called before the Head, and he had received a lecture on his carelessness which made him uncomfortable for a long time.

The news of the capture had been wired to Scotland Yard overnight, and early in the morning Ferrers Locke was in Rylcombe. He came to St. Jim's, and paid a visit to Tom Merry. Tom was called out of the Shell class-room to see him. The detective gripped his hand warmly.

"I knew I could rely upon you, Tom," he said. "You have done well—amazingly well! The rascal is Jim the Nailer, right enough; in fact, he has confessed it. Now I want you to tell me the whole story."

Tom related simply enough the incidents of the capture. He also told of the unsuccessful attempts of Figgins & Co., and Ferrers Locke laughed heartily.

"You have saved the school from a serious loss, Tom, and helped to rid the public of a pest," he said. "I am proud of you. I hope the time may come when you can aid me again in the cause of justice. I know you will be ready and willing."

"Rather!" said Tom Merry emphatically.

And they parted. Tom Merry and his chums were the heroes of the Shell, and of the whole School House, for that matter.

"You were a horrid bounder not to call us up to take a hand in it," Blake said, when he met Tom. "Still, you've done very well. You're not such an ass as you look!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "You are weally not such a feahful ass as you look, Tom Mewwy!"

"Thank you!" said Tom. "If I were not a stickler for the truth, I would say the same of you, Gussy."

Even Figgins & Co. came round. They were disappointed at first, but they had to confess that the Terrible Three had done the business neatly enough.

"Well, you've scored this time," said Figgins. "We give you best; but we'll make you sit up soon, you bounders! We'll soon pull you off your perch!"

But for the time, at least, the Terrible Three were at the top of the tree, and in a position to crow without limit over the rival detectives.

THE END.

(Next week a Long, Complete Tale will again deal with the doings and adventures of Tom Merry, and is entitled "Head Cook and Bottle Washer," by Martin Clifford. Please order your copy of "The Gem" Library 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."

(Now go on with the story.)

"That 'ere insinivation is false!" declared Porker. "I'd scorn the haction!"

"Of course you would, Porker," said Rex, "unless you thought you had a good chance of winning. At any rate, I saw you go into Jader's inn last night, and we all know that he will bet on anything. Besides, Jardon and Swipes went with you, and Swipes would back his eyeglass, if he had nothing else to stake. But look here, Porker, my pleasing fat pig, if you tell us who are to be caught, I will tell you whether they will be caught. It's a matter that the captain settles, and no doubt you have slightly overheard his conversation with the doctor concerning the matter."

"I never listened to conversation in my life, you worm!"

"No! You would scorn the action, wouldn't you? But

The Commencement of the Great Paper-Chase.

The chums were busily engaged tearing up paper, and they were being assisted by nearly all the boys in the Lower School, for the morrow was the day of the great paperchase, in which most of the boys, both big and small, took part. They were making a frightful mess in the hall, and Porker, who knew that he would have to clear it up, was storming at them; but they went on with their work and conversation with charming disregard to his complaints.

"I have an idea that Porker has been betting on the result," observed Rex Allingham.

NEXT
THURSDAY.

"HEAD COOK AND BOTTLE WASHER."

A TALE OF TOM
MERRY'S SCHOOLDAYS.

you have a knack of overhearing, and we are deeply interested to know. Jader is a wily old bird, but he will back anything if you give him odds. Come, I know you three scamps raised some bets last night with Jader, and he would not have made them unless he had known the names of the hares. Is Bully Jardon one of them? Because, if Swipes is another, they will be caught. Swipes is no runner without his eyeglass, and he can't run a bit with it, so we shall have him. The hares have not been caught for the three past years, but we should have Swipes to a certainty!"

"It is the dooty of Hal Trehearn, the captain of this college, to name the hares," observed Porker, "the same as it's his dooty to map out the course. He'll tell you in good time the way you've got to go—at least, he'll tell the hares in confidence. No one else knows it. And as for betting, it's a thing I set my face against."

"I'll bet you a shilling the hares don't get caught!" growled Bob Bouncer.

"Done with you! Stake your money!"

"I thought you set your face against betting?"

"My rule is never to bet; but there's exceptions to all rules, and I want to give you a lesson as to the danger and wickedness of betting."

"I don't think I will bet with you, as it is so wicked, Porker!"

"Well, it don't matter when you make it a small amount like a shilling; but I'd set my face agin anything higher."

"Suppose I give you two to one in sovereigns that the hares don't get caught?"

"I'll take you! I'll—"

"You will take what, Parker?" demanded the young captain, entering the hall at that moment, and fixing his eyes on the porter.

"I said as I would take the young gent's box up next term, sir."

"Naturally you will, and you will please to bear in mind that it would be my duty to report you if you made bets with the lads of this college. Now then, youngsters, as you know, the country round about here is very difficult, and the hares have seldom been caught. For that reason I have decided to send off two boys of the Lower School as hares. I have selected one who is very fast on the level, and another who is good at hills. Those two boys are Rex Allingham and Bob Bouncer. Come into my study, and I will tell you the course that I have arranged with the doctor. We are not going to let you run at your own sweet wills, or you might not get back to the college for a week."

This decision elated the youngsters. They looked on it as a great honour, for big boys were invariably selected for the purpose of hares.

"Did you discuss the course with the doctor, Hal?" inquired Rex.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing! We are not bound to keep exactly to it, I suppose?"

"Yes, you are."

"Well, I mean to say, we can go five hundred yards one way or another?"

"Certainly! The doctor wishes you to keep to the course mapped out, but if you choose to cross any other fields, or anything like that, it will be all right. He does not wish you to go back any farther, but you can make near cuts. Jardon and Symes are sure to follow, and as they are excellent runners, you will have all your work cut out."

"Right you are!" growled Bob. "We will look after them. Come on, Rex! We've got some frightful hills to climb, and there's bracken on the moors, but we will take them through it. We will give them a good run, even if they do catch us. Are you going to follow, Hal?"

"No, I can't, bother it! I'm slaving. Good luck, though! I hope you won't be caught!"

"You think there's going to be some foul play, Rex?" inquired Bob.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," answered Rex. "You know that Jardon is quite capable of it. Porker knows more about the matter than he pretends to, and if they have been betting, you can depend on it they will leave no stone unturned to win."

"All right, we will be level with them; but, even if they know the course, I don't see how they are going to cut us off. You leave them to me. I'm going to break bounds, because there are one or two little things that I want to do."

"Better not get caught, old chap, or they may stop you running to-morrow."

Fortune favoured Bob. He was an adept at breaking bounds, and knew as well, or better, than any boy in the college how to escape detection. All went well until he was scaling the college wall; then his luck deserted him, for he dropped right on the top of Porker, who was keeping watch at the very place to make sure no-boy came in.

"Oh, you young varmint," groaned Porker, picking himself up, for Bob had bowled him over, "won't I make you smart for this! Jest you come straight to the doctor!"

"It's all right, Porker!"

"Why, it's Bob Bouncer!" growled Porker. "I might have known it would be you. You are the worst boy in the college for breaking bounds!"

"Well, I had something soft to drop on this time, Porker. Your head is so soft that I made sure I was dropping on a cushion. There's one consolation, I can't have added your brains, because you haven't got any."

"Well, this 'ere is a pretty go!" growled Porker, who appeared to be lost in thought. "Now, if I was to take you to the doctor, it's downright certain you would not be allowed to run to-morrow. I'm not the sort of man to spoil sport. What will you give me to let you off?"

"I won't give you anything, Porker. Not so much as twopence. You can let me off or not, just as you like, but I won't tip you. You are too jolly nasty for anything like that."

"Don't you understand that you won't be allowed to run to-morrow if I report you?"

"I have an idea that you want me to run, in which case you won't report me at all. Rex and I have come to the conclusion that you have been betting about this paper chase, and if that is the case, why, you won't do anything to stop it."

"You ain't got the intellect of a blowfly!" growled Porker. "If you wasn't to run there would be plenty of others as would take your place."

"True enough; but if you learnt that we were to be chosen you would have made your bets accordingly, in which case they would be off if someone else were to run in my place."

"You senseless beast! How could I tell that you were going as one of the hares?"

"Very easily. All you would have to do would be to listen, and I know you are always doing that. Very well, supposing you discovered that Rex and I were to be the runners, and you went to Jader's and bet him we would be caught, if I weren't to run, the bets would be off."

"Have you seen Jader to-day?"

"No, I haven't. But that question makes me certain that you have got some bets with him. In which case, you won't report me."

"I won't report you if you give me half-a-dollar."

"I'm not going to tip you at all, and you are not going to report me. Good-night, Porker! I hope they have put some clean straw in your sty. You become objectionable if they don't change the straw pretty often."

"You stupid beast of a boy!" snarled Porker. "Don't I wish I was your master for half an hour! I'd train you, you beauty! I'd take some of the cheek out of you!"

"It is a pity you can't get someone to take some of the fat out of you, Porker!" retorted Bob.

(Another long instalment next Thursday.)



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THE EDITOR.

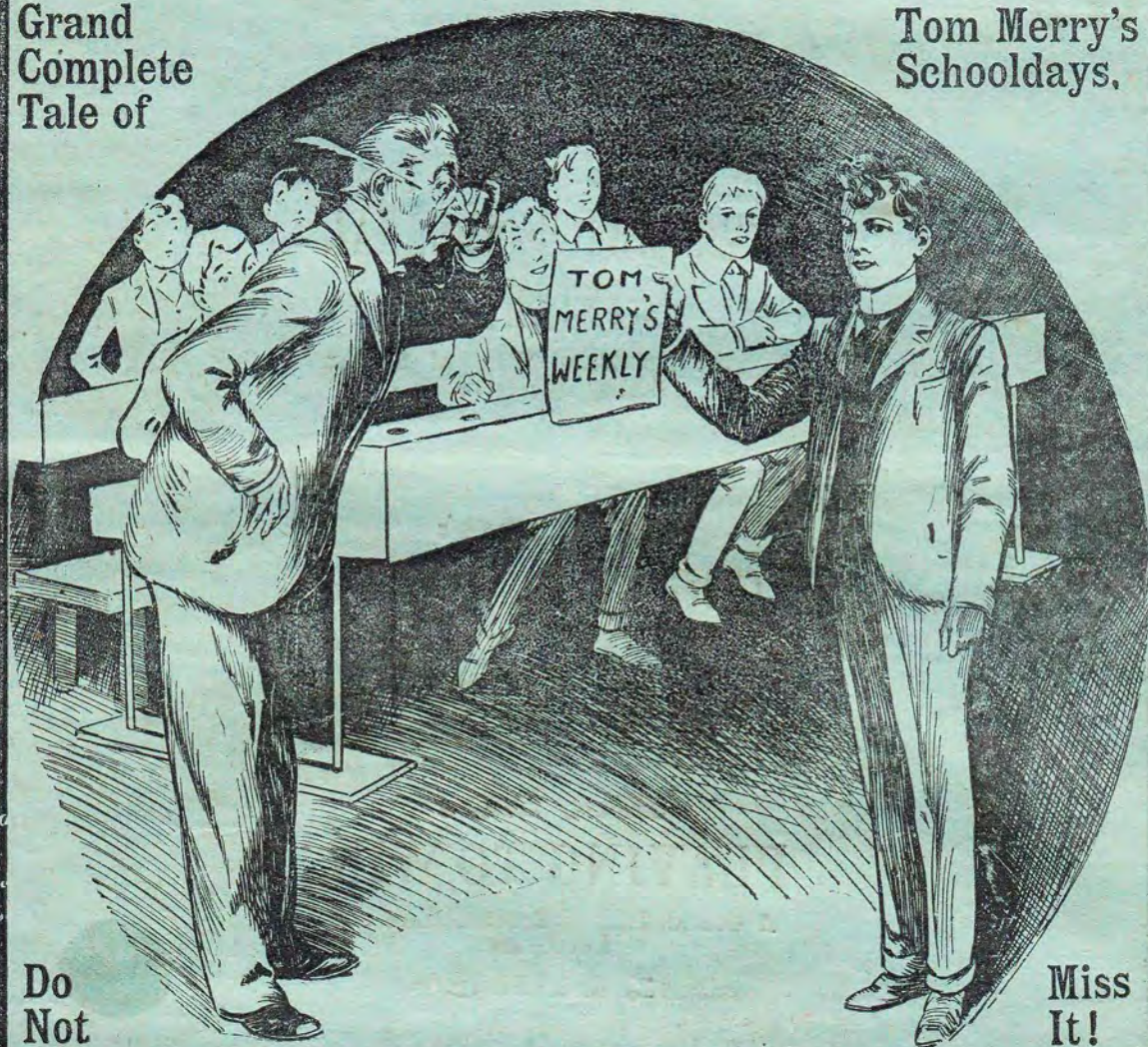
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