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By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry's Team.

TOM MERRY stopped in the hall in the School House at St. Jim's, to put up a paper on the notice-board. Several fellows who were standing near came up at once to look at the notice. For Tom Merry was captain of the junior eleven of St. Jim's, and the paper he had pinned upon the notice-board contained the list of the players in the morrow's match with Frampton Fliers.

"Hallo!" said Gore, the first to arrive on the spot. "Where have you put my name?"

"Nowhere," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "You're not playing."

"What! I told you I could play to-morrow."

"Yes, you told me you could play," said Tom Merry serenely; "but I've watched you at practice, and come to the conclusion that you were mistaken."

There was a chuckle from the other juniors gathering round the notice-board. Mellish read the names out in order:

"Wynn; Kerr, Herries; Manners, French, Pratt; Figgins, Blake, Merry, Lowther, D'Arcy. Why, my name's not there, Tom Merry."

"Go hon!" said Tom Merry.

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"And where's mine?" asked Walsh excitedly. "Do you mean that you are going to play that ass D'Arcy instead of me, Merry?"

"Certainly, as he's a better player."

"Better rats! That tailor's dummy!"

"My dear kid, he can run you off your legs, tailor's dummy or not. When I found you smoking yesterday I knew that you wouldn't do. A forward wants wind, my dear fellow, and you've got none—nothing but gas."

"Look here, Tom Merry," began Gore, Mellish, and Walsh in chorus.

"Well, I'm looking," said Tom Merry, "and I can see three silly duffers. If you want to play for St. Jim's Juniors you will have to mend your ways. I don't think anybody can deny that that eleven represents the best material to be found in the Shell and the Fourth Form, and in both houses."

"That's it; you've shoved in five New House bounders, instead—"

"Instead of favouring the School House because it's my own house!" exclaimed Tom Merry scornfully. "Well, I'm not likely to do that. I tell you, whether you like it or not, that if there were ten better players to be found in the New House juniors than in the School House, I'd play a wholly New House team. So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Bravo, Merry!" said a deeper voice behind the juniors, and they turned round to see Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, looking at them. "That's the right sentiment, Merry. This is not a house affair, but the team that goes to Frampton to-morrow will represent all St. Jim's, and every player should be picked strictly upon his merits."

"That's what I've tried to do, Kildare," said Tom Merry.

"I know you have, Merry." The captain of St. Jim's ran his eye over the list. "And I think you've succeeded, too," he went on. "I couldn't suggest an improvement. As for you grumblers, you ought to know better than to find fault with a football captain's selection. If a captain played every fellow who thought he ought to be in the team, the match would be like an old-fashioned Rugby game, with a side of fifty or sixty. You ought to know better."

And Kildare, with a severe look at the grumblers, walked away.

"That's all very well," said Gore discontentedly; "but look here, Tom Merry—"

But Tom Merry had walked away too.

The group of juniors remained before the notice-board, passing comments favourable or unfavourable on the selected team, according to their views on the subject. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy, the chums of the Fourth, came along and read the notice with much satisfaction. Gore was holding forth on the subject in a loud voice.

"Even if they left me out of the front line," he said, "for the sake of putting in that fellow Blake in my place, that's no excuse for leaving out Mellish, on account of that utter ass D'Arcy."

Blake and Herries chuckled. Gore had his back to D'Arcy, and did not know that the swell of the School House was near at hand.

"What does D'Arcy know about football?" exclaimed Gore. "You'll see him turn up at Frampton in a fancy waistcoat and an eyeglass, you mark my words."

"Oh, weally, Goah!"

But Gore was too excited to notice the mild, remonstrating voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Nice sort of a fellow to represent St. Jim's Juniors on the football field," went on Gore, with a contemptuous sniff. "That silly tailor's dummy, without a mind above fancy waistcoats! Why, any fag out of the Third Form could wipe up the ground with him. He's no good, silly ass!"

"Goah, I refuse to be chawactawised as a silly ass!" exclaimed D'Arcy indignantly.

Gore heard him this time, and turned round.

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his right eye, and regarded Gore with a stare of the most supreme scorn.

"Hallo, you're here," said Gore, with a sniff. "You've heard your character, then. Do you really think you are fit to represent St. Jim's on the football field?"

"If I did not weally think so, Goah, I should not give Tom Mewwy permish to put my name down as a membah of the eleven," said Arthur Augustus, with stately dignity. "I wegard all your weemarks as impertinent in the extreme, and I should immediately proceed to administrah a feahful thwashin' for your cheek; but that I wegard you with pwofound contempt, Goah."

"You—you tailor's dummy—"

Arthur Augustus, with his beautiful waistcoat, his nicely-creased trousers, and high collar, certainly bore some resemblance to the object Gore compared him with. But none the less the comparison roused the indignation of the swell of the School House.

"Goah, I object to such an oppwobwious epithet, and unless you immediately withdraw it, I shall swike you."

"Strike away!" said Gore scornfully. "You couldn't lick one side of me!"

Arthur Augustus rushed forward with a most warlike look, but Blake and Herries caught him by either arm and dragged him back.

"Welease me, Blake," said D'Arcy, struggling. "Welease me, Hewwies! I insist upon bein' immediately weleased, to punish the insolence of that wotiah!"

"Don't be an ass, Gussy!" said Blake. "You're not going to fight the day before the match. You can lick him on Saturday night, if you like."

"Yah, coward!" said Gore, provokingly.

Arthur Augustus turned crimson with indignation.

"Do you hear what he is callin' me, Blake? I insist upon bein' weleased. I will give him such a feahful thwashin'—"

"No you won't!"

"Welease me, Blake, or I shall no longah wegard you as a fwend."

"Go hon!" said Blake. "Don't be an ass, Gussy! Can't you see that that rotter only wants a row so as to make you unfit to play to-morrow? Do you think we could take you along to Frampton with a black eye and a double-sized nose?"

"Yaas, yaas; but weally—"

"As for you, Gore, if you pick a quarrel with any member of the team," said Blake, looking rather savagely at the cad of the Shell, "Mind what I say, we'll give you such a licking that you won't get over it for weeks. I know your little game, and you're a rotten cad."

"Are you looking for trouble?" said Gore, rolling back his cuffs. "Come on!"

"No, I won't come on," said Blake. "I'll give you a licking after the match to-morrow, if you give me any of your cheek though."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Goah, I wefuse to fight with you. You are not worth it. But if you are impertinent I shall thwash you to-morrow after the match."

"Righto!" said Herries. "And look here, Gore. Another word and we'll all three take you by the neck and give you the hiding you're asking for."

Gore scowled sullenly. But he knew that the chums of Study No. 6 were not to be trifled with, and he said no more, but walked sulkily away with Mellish.

"Weally, that fellow is a wotten wascal," said D'Arcy, as he walked out into the quad with Blake and Herries. "I did not think what he was up to, you see, dear boys, or I should not have allowed him to pwovoke me. You know, I get into a feahful wage when I am pwovoked."

"Yes, I know you're a terrible fellow, Gussy," said Blake. "A terrible ass, at all events."

"What did you say, Blake? I stwongly object—"

"Hallo, look at Figgins & Co.!" exclaimed Blake, ruthlessly interrupting the swell of St. Jim's. "I say, kids, we ought to be on in this scene."

It was a cold winter afternoon. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, of the New House, were punting a ball about on their side of the quadrangle for exercise, with a number of other New House juniors. Blake was on the warpath at once. On the morrow afternoon, School House juniors and New House would be united to do battle with the Frampton Fliers. But to-day they were at war, for the rivalry of the two houses at St. Jim's seldom slept, and never for long.

"Come on, kids," said Blake. "We're in want of a little exercise, and we're going to have that ball away from Figgins & Co."

"Righto!" said Herries heartily. "Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The three juniors broke into a run. They passed Tom Merry, who was talking to Manners and Lowther, his chums in the Shell.

"Come on, kids!" called out Blake.

"What's the game?" asked Tom Merry.

"On the ball!"

The Terrible Three understood. They were after Blake in a moment, and the six of them came with a rush into the midst of the New House juniors.

CHAPTER 2.

A House Row—and an Unexpected Goal!

FIGGINS, Kerr, and Wynn—otherwise known as Figgins & Co.—were all in the team that was to represent St. Jim's on the morrow, and they were three of the best junior footballers in the school. They were knocking an old football about in the quad to fill up a spare ten minutes, and to keep up their form by a little exercise, and had for the moment forgotten the existence of the School House. The rush of the rival juniors came as a surprise.

Tom Merry was the first of the School House party to reach the ball, and he took it away from Figgins' foot in the neatest way in the world. Figgins glared at him speechlessly for a moment, and then tore after him.

But Blake gave him his shoulder, and Figgins sprawled in the quad, and Kerr and Wynn piled up over him in their hurry.

Tom Merry was off with the ball, and the School House juniors, with yells of triumph, bore it away towards their own side of the quadrangle, passing it to one another in fine style.

There was a rush of juniors to the scene, to join in the fun. Figgins & Co. were upon their feet in a twinkling, and tearing in pursuit.

"Stop 'em!"

"Give us our ball!"

"Yah, thieves!"

"Burglars!"

"School House cads!"

"Stop 'em!"

"Yell away, my pippins," said Blake. "We've got the ball!"

But Figgins's long legs covered the ground like lightning. He came driving through the thick of the School House juniors, and ran neck and neck with Monty Lowther, who happened to have the ball. A heave of his shoulder sent Lowther out of his stride, and Figgins captured the ball.

"Got it!" yelled the Co., "pass, Figgy, pass!"

Tom Merry and Blake were rushing at Figgins. But Figgins gave a powerful kick before he could be dealt with, and the ball sailed over the heads of the juniors and dropped fairly at the feet of the Co.

Kerr had it in a moment, and dribbled it away towards the New House in splendid style. In a moment the whole pack was streaming after him. Tom Merry came up with Kerr, and was about to hook the ball away when Kerr passed to Fatty Wynn, who rushed it on.

At that moment a tall, thin figure in cap and gown came out of the New House, and stood regarding the boys with an eye of extreme disfavour.

It was Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House.

Unlike Mr. Railton of the School House, Mr. Ratcliff was down upon the rivalry between the juniors of St. Jim's, with a heavy "down." He would have had all boys submissive and quiet and shivering in the presence of their elders, if he could have had his way. He couldn't, and that fact made him sour. A row between the rivals of St. Jim's always aroused his bad temper, which indeed needed little rousing.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as he looked at the scene of somewhat rough, but perfectly harmless frolic. "Ha! More youthful horseplay and savagery. If I were head of this school, I would put all this down with a hand of iron. But I will certainly not allow the boys of my house to turn the quadrangle into a bear-garden. Boys!"

Mr. Ratcliff's thin, sour tones were not likely to be heard in the din of tramping and shouting, and his words passed unheeded.

"Boys!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff, angrily.

But still no notice was taken. The New House master advanced into the quad with a frowning brow, and shouted at the top of his voice.

"Boys! Stop that horseplay instantly!"

Tom Merry had just put on a spurt and overtaken Fatty Wynn. Fatty Wynn was a first-class goal-keeper, but in the forward line he was hardly the thing. Tom Merry had the ball from him with hardly an effort, and dribbled it round the New House fellows who tried to intercept him, and started towards the School House again. There was a rush to stop him.

Mr. Ratcliff was unheeded. The New House master waved his hands and shouted.

"Boys! Stop this instantly!"

Biff!

There was a wild tussle raging round the ball; Tom Merry was surrounded, and the ball suddenly flew from a press of excited juniors, from whose foot it was impossible to see—and it whizzed right at Mr. Ratcliff—and before the house-master realised his danger, it had plumped upon his nose with terrific force.

Mr. Ratcliff staggered back, and back, and back, and finally sat down upon the lowest step of the New House.

"My word!" gasped Figgins. "It's Ratty, and you've got a giddy goal on his proboscis, Tom Merry!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Ratcliff sat on the stone step looking dazed. The ball had been in a very muddy condition, and a great deal of the mud had been transferred to the countenance of the New House master. Mr. Ratcliff was scarcely recognizable as he sat there. The juniors did not wait for him to rise. They melted away from the scene like snow in the sunshine.

"My word!" said Mr. Ratcliff, in a mumbling voice. "What has happened? I have been assaulted, struck in the face in a violent manner. So it has come to this."

He rose from his sitting posture.

The football was lying at his feet, and there was not a junior to be seen in the quadrangle.

"So it has come to this," said Mr. Ratcliff, fairly stuttering with rage. "We shall see—we shall see! Ah, Mr. Railton," he broke off, as the master of the School House came in sight, "Mr. Railton will you stop a moment."

"Certainly," said the School House master, stopping. "Dear me! What has happened! Your face is smothered in mud."

"I have had a football kicked in my face, Mr. Railton."

"Impossible."

"You see for yourself. I should have considered such a happening impossible, if—in short, if it had not actually happened."

Mr. Railton looked at the New House master, and then at the football lying in the quad, and he had to be convinced.

"This is a serious matter," he said, "I can only hope that it was an accident."

"It was not an accident, Mr. Railton. It was a deliberate outrage."

"You saw the boy who did it, then."

"No, I could not distinguish him among the rest. But I will find out, Mr. Railton, I will find out. He shall be punished."

"He should certainly be punished severely, if he committed such an act purposely," said the master of the School House warmly, "I hope it was not a boy of my house."

"I cannot say, but I shall discover, and if it should prove to be so—"

"Of course I should leave his punishment in your hands, Mr. Ratcliff."

"Thank you, Mr. Railton. That is what I expected."

The School House master passed on, looking troubled. He could have said no less, but he was not easy in his mind. Mr. Ratcliff had made himself very unpopular at St. Jim's, and specially in his own house, by ill-timed severity and his cold, hard nature. It was in all probability a New House boy who had landed that unlooked for goal, Mr. Railton thought. But it might be a School House fellow, and the occurrence annoyed Mr. Railton extremely, as he thought of that possibility. He prided himself upon the discipline of his house, and the act, if deliberately committed, was one of outrageous insubordination. Mr. Railton wore a worried look.

Mr. Ratcliff went into his house to clean off the traces of the accident. He was determined to probe the affair to the bottom and to find out the name of the boy who had kicked the ball.

He lost no time about it. When he was once more presentable, he called in the prefects of the house into his study, and told them to make inquiries. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, went straight to the study of Figgins & Co. He found them in a state of merriment, which confirmed his suspicions.

Figgins & Co. had come in to tidy themselves for afternoon school. They became instantly and almost preternaturally grave at the sight of the prefect, but it was too late. Monteith looked at them grimly.

"Which of you biffed Mr. Ratcliff with the football?" he asked, coming directly to the point.

"None of us, dear boy," said Figgins.

The prefect hesitated.

"I don't think you would lie about it, Figgins."

"You know I wouldn't."

"Well, then who did it?"

"It wasn't one of us, Monteith, and what's more, it wasn't a New House fellow at all. It might have been just as easily, though. It was an accident."

Monteith laughed.

"Yes, I think I know exactly how much of an accident it was, Figgins."

"Honour bright, Monteith," said Figgins earnestly, "we were all struggling round the ball, to get it, and T—the fellow I am speaking of, kicked it to clear, and didn't know in the least that Ratcliff was coming up. If Ratty hadn't shoved his long nose into what didn't concern him, he wouldn't have got it biffed."

"Well, if it wasn't a New House boy, that settles it, as far as I am concerned," said Monteith. "I won't mention to Mr. Ratcliff that you know who it was, or you'd find yourself in hot water for not telling."

And the prefect returned to make his report to Mr. Ratcliff. "Ha," muttered the New House master, with his sour smile. "So it was a School House boy! Figgins says he is sure of that, Monteith?"

"He says he's certain it wasn't a New House boy, sir."

"It comes to the same thing. I guessed it, and I think I would be safe in saying that it was either Tom Merry, or Blake, or perhaps Lowther. We shall see."

The prefect left the study. Mr. Ratcliff was wanted a few minutes later to take his class, the house-master being also form-master to the Fifth. But while he was snapping at the Fifth that afternoon, Mr. Ratcliff was thinking of the occurrence in the quadrangle, and wondering how he could discover the culprit.

If he could have heard a whispered conversation in the Fourth-Form room he would have been enlightened. Little Mr. Latham, the short-sighted, big-spectacled master of the Fourth, was quite unaware that Figgins & Co. and Study No. 6 were exchanging confidences under his very nose.

"How's Ratty?" asked Blake, as Figgins dropped on to the form near him. "Has he got over that smite, yet?"

Figgins grinned. "He's inquiring all through the New House for the chap that goaled."

"It was Tom Merry, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he kicked the ball, but of course, it was an accident. He didn't know that Ratty was just coming up with his long nose."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "It was certainly Tom Mewwy, for I saw him. He had just pushed me out of the way in a decidedly wude and wuff mannah, as I stopped to adjust my collah. I saw him kick the ball, and then Mr. Watcliff shwicked out. I gweatly wesented Tom Mewwy's conduct, for he made me twead on somebody's foot, and—"

"So it was you, was it, fathead?" growled Kerr.

"Eh? Was it your foot I twod upon, Kerr?"

"Yes, it was, and it was my ankle you bified your great hoof against, fathead, and you've given me a twist I may not be able to get over by to-morrow."

"I am weally extemely sowwy. You see, I lost my footin' when I was pushed, and I had to knock against somebody. It was fortunate you were there, Kerr, or I might weally have fallen to the gwoound."

"I wish you had, ass."

"I strongly object."

"I say, is that right about Kerr's ankle?" asked Blake, anxiously. "Is it hurt?"

"Yes," said Figgins, with rather a long face. "I hope it will pass off in time for the match to-morrow, though. Kerr somehow twisted his ankle when he fell, I think, through Gussy knocking him over."

"It weally wasn't my fault, and I hope Kerr does not—"

"Oh, that's all right," said Kerr. "One expects to stand a knock or two in a football scrimmage. I'm not complaining. Only it will be deuced awkward if I can't play against the Fliers to-morrow."

"Yaas, wathah! We weally can't spare you, Kerr."

"That's true," said Blake, "I admit that there isn't another fellow up to taking Kerr's place at back, even in the School House. I hope it will be all right to-morrow morning, Kerr, old chap."

"Oh, I hope so. If not, you'll have to take Jimson, and I'll come in the brake as a beastly spectator," grunted Kerr.

"Hard cheese. I—"

"You are talking, boys," said Mr. Lathom, at last awaking to the fact that a conversation was being carried on under his nose. "I insist upon silence in the class."

So the discussion ended. When the Fourth Form were dismissed, Mellish nudged Blake as they went out of the classroom.

"I say, Blake—" he began. Blake stopped, and regarded him with an eye of disfavour. He did not like the cad of the Fourth.

"Well, what do you want, Mellish?"

"Nothing. Only I heard what you and Figgins were saying."

"You generally contrive to hear what's not intended for your ears, Mellish."

"Oh, don't get ratty! Of course, I don't intend to give Tom Merry away, though he has treated me badly over the Frampton match."

"If you gave him away we'd give you a licking that would last you a very long time."

"Of course, I don't mean to do so. But I say—"

"Oh, rats! I don't say it to me," said Blake. And he walked away, leaving Mellish considerably out of humour.

"Hallo, Mellish!" said Gore, slapping the junior on the shoulder. The Shell were coming out of their class-room, and Gore stopped to speak to Mellish. "What's the trouble? What are you scowling about?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Mellish. "It would serve those cads right, though, to spoil their little game for to-morrow."

Gore started, and an eager look came into his eyes.

"What do you mean, Mellish?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Could you do it—what you just said?"

"Perhaps I could, perhaps I couldn't."

"Come over into the tuck-shop, will you? Dame Taggles has got in a fresh lot of jam-tarts, and they're prime."

"Righto!" said Mellish, with great alacrity.

Gore did not question him again till they were seated in Dame Taggles's tuck-shop, and discussing half a dozen really good jam-tarts. Then he resumed the topic.

"Look here, Mellish, what's the game? You said you could upset them for to-morrow? They've left us both out of the team, and made us look fools to all the fellows. I had counted on a place, and told several chaps I was playing forward. I've been chipped like anything since Tom Merry put up the notice on the board."

Mellish grinned. He knew that Gore had counted his

chickens too early, and had had to take the natural consequences.

"Oh, it's nothing to snigger at!" growled Gore. "As a matter of fact, you're in the same boat. Now, how can you spoil their game to-morrow?"

"Oh, I shouldn't like to do it, you know! If Tom Merry were kept in, St. Jim's would lose that match against the Fliers—"

"You couldn't get him detained?"

"Oh, yes, I could, if I liked!"

"How, then? Out with it, and don't beat about the bush."

"Mind, I'm not going to do anything of the sort; but if I liked to tell old Ratty that it was Tom Merry that bified him on the nose with a football—"

Gore gave a jump, and dropped a jam-tart on his waistcoat in his excitement.

"Do you mean to say that you know that, Mellish?"

"I heard Blake and Figgins saying so. They saw him."

"My hat! If Ratcliff knew—the old brute would have Merry detained to-morrow afternoon on purpose! I know him! He kept Figgins in once on the day of an important fixture, as as specially big punishment. He knows how to hit harder than with a cane. Is that what you were thinking of?"

"Yes. If he didn't think of it himself, a hint would be enough, and he would jump at the idea—"

"Good!" exclaimed Gore. "You're a genius."

"But, I say, Gore, I'm not going to sneak," said Mellish.

"Mind, nothing in the world will induce me to give Tom Merry away to old Ratty."

"Oh, I know that!" said Gore contemptuously. "You'd rather somebody else took the risk."

"Er—not at all—er—no!" stammered Mellish. "Tom Merry's not to be given away, you know. I won't say a word, and what I have told you is in confidence, of course. Though to be sure if Merry were left out, Blake would probably take his place as captain, and you'd get Blake's place. But, of course, we can't sneak."

And Mellish, with an extremely virtuous expression upon his face, finished his treat and walked out of the tuck-shop. He knew that he left the matter in safe hands. Gore sat there for some time, thinking, with a very unpleasant grin upon his face.

CHAPTER 3.

Mr. Ratcliff Comes Down Heavy!

"PLEASE, sir—"

Mr. Ratcliff gave a start and looked down. He was walking in the quadrangle at St. Jim's, with a thoughtful and moody frown upon his face. He was thinking of the occurrence of the afternoon, when a form loomed through the dim winter dusk, and the low voice broke in upon his meditations. He looked down, and recognised Gore, and came to a stop.

"Do you wish to speak to me, Gore?"

"Yes, sir, if you please."

"Well, say what you have to say, and be done," said Mr. Ratcliff snappishly. "What is it? What are you mumbling about?"

Gore looked round nervously. No one was visible in the dusk, and both houses were hidden from sight by the gathering mist of the winter evening.

"If you please, sir, it's about what happened this afternoon."

Mr. Ratcliff started again.

"Can you tell me anything about that, Gore?"

"I could, sir, only—if the fellows knew of it they would call it sneaking, and I should get a fearful time of it," faltered Gore.

The house-master understood. His steely eyes glinted.

"You may speak to me safely, Gore. I should certainly not disclose the name of my informant in a case of this kind."

Gore breathed a little more freely. He had fully made up his mind as to the course he intended to take; but it was the first time he had ever actually "sneaked," and he was not quite sure of his ground. But he thought he knew Mr. Ratcliff's



POLLIE GREEN

IS IN

This Week's

"Girls' Friend."

PRICE ONE PENNY.

nature pretty well, and the house-master's reply showed him that he was not mistaken.

"Thank you, sir. I shouldn't like to act the part of a sneak, and if you think I ought not to tell you——"

"I decidedly think it is your duty to tell me who was guilty of that outrage, Gore, if you know the name of the guilty party. I will see that you do not suffer by it."

"Thank you, sir. I did not see it done, but Tom Merry will not deny it if he is asked—— There, I have——"

Mr. Ratcliff snapped his teeth.

"So it was Tom Merry!"

"Oh, dear, I hope I have done right in telling!" said Gore. "Of course, suspicion rests on all the fellows till he's found out, and so he ought to own up. If he don't own up I ought to give him away, oughtn't I, sir? He served me a trick something like that once."

"You have done quite right, Gore."

"Yes, sir. Of course, I haven't done this because I dislike him, and I should be very sorry if he were detained to-morrow, and prevented from playing in the Frampton match."

"Ah," murmured Mr. Ratcliff. "The Frampton football match! Ah!"

"But it would really be only his own fault, and——"

"That is enough, Gore."

Mr. Ratcliff strode away. He went, not towards his own house, but towards the School House. Gore followed him hurriedly.

"You—you won't let anybody know, sir, that—that——"

"Certainly not. You may be assured on that point."

And Gore, satisfied that his evil work was well done, disappeared. Mr. Ratcliff entered the School House, and went straight up to Tom Merry's study. He opened the door without the formality of knocking, and entered.

The study presented a cosy scene. The Terrible Three usually had tea there together, and they were preparing the meal now. Tom Merry was toasting muffins, with a countenance crimsoned by the heat of the fire, and Monty Lowther was attending to the tea-kettle. Manners was opening a tin of sardines. The chums of the Shell looked very bright and cheerful, and the firelight made the room look cosy and warm after the cold and darkness of the quadrangle. But the scene was not in the least softening in its effect upon Mr. Ratcliff.

The three juniors looked up quickly as the house-master entered.

"Ah!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a grim smile. "You are, doubtless, surprised to see me."

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, with some spirit. "It is the custom in the School House for a master to knock before entering a room."

Mr. Ratcliff's sallow face flushed red.

"Do you dare to criticise my actions, Merry?" he asked harshly.

Tom did not reply. He was tempted to do so, and to speak the scorn he felt; but he held back the words from his lips. He turned to his muffin-toasting again.

"Stand up, Merry. I have come here to speak to you, though I have no doubt that Manners and Lowther are equally guilty."

Tom Merry stood up, with a look of wonder and uneasiness on his face. It seemed impossible that Mr. Ratcliff could have discovered who had kicked the football, yet his manner seemed to imply as much. His next words removed all doubt on the point.

"Merry! You were in the crowd that behaved disgracefully, like a set of hoodlums, in the quadrangle to-day."

"I was in the crowd, sir," said Tom Merry. "But I did not behave disgracefully, and I saw no one else do so."

And Manners and Lowther gave a very audible murmur of approval.

"Don't dare to bandy words with me, boy!" exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff harshly. "You were there, you do not deny that?"

"No, sir, I do not deny anything that is true. I was there, certainly."

"And you kicked the football into my face?"

Mr. Ratcliff's steely eyes were glittering with triumph now. He knew that Tom Merry would not tell a lie, so if the accusation was true, there was no escape for the hero of the Shell. Tom Merry bit his lip.

"I kicked the ball, sir, certainly; but its striking you was quite by accident. I did not know you were there."

"I do not believe you, Merry."

Tom flushed scarlet. It was with great difficulty that he held back the hot and indignant words that leaped to his lips.

"But whether you are speaking the truth or not," said the master of the New House, "is of little moment. The fact remains the same, you were indulging in violent horseplay in the quadrangle, and you kicked a football into my face."

"It was an accident, and I was sorry it happened."

"Doubtless!" sneered Mr. Ratcliff. "I can quite understand that you are sorry, but your sorrow is probably caused by fear of the consequences."

Tom threw up his head proudly.

"I am not afraid of the consequences, sir, whatever they are!" The New House master smiled grimly.

"Good! I shall not cane you, Merry, or send you to the Head to be flogged. I must bear in mind the fact that you state the occurrence to have been an accident, and inflict a lighter punishment. I shall simply detain you for a single half-holiday, and I hope that my leniency will have the effect of touching your conscience. You will be detained to-morrow afternoon, Merry."

Tom's face fell.

When Mr. Ratcliff had commenced speaking of leniency he had wondered whether his ears were deceiving him. But he understood now. Under a cloak of leniency, the spiteful man was giving him what he knew would be a harder blow than the severest caning.

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Tom. "Not to-morrow afternoon!"

"Yes, certainly. Understand me, you are detained, and in order that I may see that you do not leave the school you will bring your work into the Fifth-Form room, and do it there under my eyes."

"It's the Frampton match to-morrow, sir——"

"Is it?" said Mr. Ratcliff indifferently. "I take little interest in football. I have no more to say to you, Merry."

He turned to leave the study.

Tom ran forward.

"Stop a minute, sir. Couldn't you let me off to-morrow afternoon, sir, and make it Wednesday—or—or cane me—or anything but that? Frampton are a strong team, and I am captain of our side, sir, and I'm wanted there."

"Do not talk to me of these absurd trifles, Merry. You are detained for to-morrow afternoon, and that is an end of the matter."

"It is not the end!" flashed out Tom Merry. "You are not my house-master, and I shall appeal to Mr. Railton."

Mr. Ratcliff showed his teeth in a smile that was more like a snarl.

"I forgot to mention, Merry, that your house-master left this matter entirely in my hands, to deal with as I should think fit. If you need a confirmation of my sentence you can appeal to Mr. Railton."

And the New House master strode away.

The Terrible Three looked at each other in blank dismay. Tom Merry laid down the muffin he had been toasting, Manners dropped the sardine tin on the table, the kettle boiled over, and the chums hardly noticed it.

The blow was a stunning one.

The match with Frampton Fliers was one of the most important of the junior fixtures of the football season at St. Jim's. Frampton were a town team, and, as a matter of fact, rather above the weight of a junior side, and St. Jim's required to put their very best men into the field and to play hard for victory to escape returning home defeated. That Tom Merry was the finest junior footballer at St. Jim's, with the possible exception of Figgins, was hardly questioned in either house. Tom Merry was far from being conceited, but he knew his value to the side. It was not only the blow to his own hopes that hurt him, it was the knowledge that without him St. Jim's would have a hard struggle on the football field against heavy odds, with the almost certainty of defeat.

Manners and Lowther looked utterly glum. The match they had looked forward to as something like a certain victory was to be a certain defeat. St. Jim's had been beaten in the last two matches by Frampton. They had determined that the present match should show a change. But the same tale of defeat was to be told again.

"The hound!" broke out Lowther at last, wrathfully. "The hypocritical hound! Leniency! He has picked on this because he knows it's the worst he can do!"

Manners nodded gloomily.

"It's just like Ratty!"

"It's rotten!" said Tom Merry slowly. "You know what it means to the side, kids. It's not that I care for myself; but it's pretty certain that Kerr won't be able to play now on account of his ankle, and Jimson will have to go in his place, and Jimson is not half as good. Now if I am left out——"

"We shall want a new centre, and there isn't one to be had," said Lowther gloomily.

"Well, it's not as bad as that. Blake or Figgins could take the place; but we've got the best material we have in the team already, and if there's a place to be refilled it will have to be by second-rate stuff. Who is there? Gore, for instance."

"He would crack up in the first half."

"And he's about the best. He can play; it's his wind that's wrong. If I can't go he will have to be put in the team."

"You shall go!" exclaimed Lowther passionately. "That confounded brute sha'n't muck up the Frampton match. He's not our house-master. Appeal to Mr. Railton."

"You heard what he said."

"He may have been lying—he wouldn't be a bit above it!" Tom Merry shook his head.

"He wouldn't be above it, very likely, but he wouldn't tell a lie that could be put to the proof so easily," he said. "Still,

it may be of some use to speak to Railton. He may be able to persuade the beast."

"It's worth trying, at any rate."

"Go and try at once," said Manners. "You'll find Mr. Railton in his study at this time. Nothing like seeing about it at once. If he can't, or won't, do anything, we shall have to think of something else. One thing's jolly certain—that you're not going to miss the Frampton match to-morrow."

Tom Merry nodded, and, without speaking, left the study.

CHAPTER 4.

What's To Be Done?

LOOKS cheerful, doesn't he? Nice sort of expression for a football captain on the eve of a match."

It was Blake who spoke, to Herries and D'Arcy, as Tom Merry passed them on the stairs of the School House.

But Tom did not smile.

"Anything up, old chap?" asked Blake, changing his tone.

"You look as if you were going to a giddy funeral."

"Yaas, wathah! I weally hope that you are not in any feafuhl twouble, Mewwy."

"Oh, that's nothing—only Ratty has found out who took that goal this afternoon," said Tom, forcing a smile.

Blake gave an expressive whistle.

"Oh, he has, has he? And he's come down heavy. But you're not usually the sort of chap to make a long face about taking punishment. What is it—caning, flogging, lines, or something with boiling oil in it?"

"I'm detained for to-morrow afternoon."

Blake's face at once became as lugubrious as Tom Merry's.

"Detained for Saturday afternoon? What price the Frampton match?"

"I've got to cut it."

"You can't! You sha'n't!"

"Not much," said Herries. "You couldn't! You wouldn't!"

"Yaas, wathah! You won't, and you sha'n't—I mean

"That's what Rateliff says, and he says that Railton is backing him up. I'm going to see if Mr. Railton can do anything for me."

"Ratty is doing this on purpose," said Blake excitedly. "He knows all about the Frampton match, and he's glad of a chance to muck it up for us."

"I know he is, the cad!" said Tom Merry. "He never liked footer, and he always sniffs at anything healthy or manly, the beastly rotter! But I'd better go."

And he walked on towards Mr. Railton's study. He left the chums of Study No. 6 looking at each other in utter dismay.

"It can't be," said Blake. "It sha'n't be! It isn't that we couldn't get a captain for the side quite as good as Tom Merry—"

"Righto! I wouldn't mind—"

"Yaas, wathah! I would be vewy pleased indeed to take the lead, deah boys, and cwush the Fwamptun Fliahs; but we can't spare Tom Mewwy frowm the fwont line. It's not poss."

"You—you asses!" said Blake witheringly. "I was going to say that I could captain the team every bit as good as Tom Merry, but we can't get a forward to replace him. There isn't such a sprinter, such a sure kick, in either house, except myself and Figgins. If Tom Merry is left out, it's as bad as if I were dropped—"

"Worse," said Herries, who had an uncomfortable way of blurting out the truth. "Much worse, Blake, for you see—"

"Yes, I see a confounded duffer," said Blake, putting his hands in his pockets and walking away.

Herries stared after him.

"I say, D'Arcy, Blake looks quite huffy," he remarked. "You must have annoyed him by what you said just now."

"Ha, ha! Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha!"

Tom Merry tapped at Mr. Railton's door. The deep voice of the house-master bade him enter.

Mr. Railton laid down his pen as Tom Merry entered, and looked concerned.

Tom was not the fellow to look troubled for nothing, and the expression upon his usually sunny face surprised the house-master.

"What is the matter, Merry?"

"Can I speak to you a few minutes, sir?"

"Certainly. Go on."

"It's—it's about what happened this afternoon, sir," said Tom Merry, colouring a little. "We were kicking a football about in the quad with some of the New House fellows."

Mr. Railton's expression changed.

"Yes, I have heard about that from Mr. Rateliff, Merry. Someone in the crowd kicked the ball in his face."

"It was quite an accident, sir."

"How do you know that?" asked the house-master, looking at him very keenly.

"Because it was I who kicked the ball, sir. I did not know that Mr. Rateliff was there, and the ball struck him purely by chance."

"I believe you, Merry," said Mr. Railton, after a searching glance at the junior's face. "It was a most unfortunate occurrence, though, as Mr. Rateliff seems to be convinced that it was done intentionally."

"I have assured him that it was an accident, sir. He says I am to be detained to-morrow afternoon as a punishment."

"Well, Merry, an afternoon's detention is surely not such a heavy penalty."

"But it's the Frampton match, sir," said Tom Merry eagerly. "I'm captaining our side, sir. If I'm kept in I can't go to the match with the Fliers."

"Ah, I forgot that!" said Mr. Railton, his face becoming grave. "That is very unfortunate. Is Mr. Rateliff aware of that, Merry?"

"I explained it to him, sir."

"And it made no difference to his decision?"

"None at all, sir."

"I am sorry, Merry," said the house-master, with a troubled shade on his brow. "I left the matter in Mr. Rateliff's hands, and I cannot go back upon my word now. It is impossible for me to interfere."

"I thought you might speak to Mr. Rateliff, sir."

"I am afraid it would be of no use. It would be going back on my word. He has evidently made up his mind, and I am more sorry than I can say, as I know the importance of this junior fixture. I can only advise you to see Mr. Rateliff in the morning, when he will probably think more calmly of the matter, and beg him to let you off."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom Merry.

He quitted the study with a heavy heart. He understood that the house-master could do nothing more for him. He did not resent that. But there was a fierce anger in his breast against the New House master.

"Well," said Blake, meeting him in the passage, "what does he say?"

"He can't interfere. He says I had better appeal to Ratty to-morrow."

"Much good that will do."

"Well, I'll try. Anything's better than missing the Frampton match, even eating humble pie to that cad," said Tom Merry.

And Blake nodded a gloomy assent.

Tom Merry went into his study. Manners and Lowther looked up hopefully, but became downcast again at once when they saw the expression of Tom Merry's face.

"No go?" asked Lowther despondently.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"All the same, you shall go," said Lowther, setting his teeth. "But I say, do you know how Ratty came to know that it was you?"

"No; I suppose he's been making inquiries."

"Somebody has sneaked, you mean."

Tom Merry gave a start. "Oh, I say! I don't think anybody would be so beastly mean—"

"I don't know. Gore would!"

"I hardly think so. Besides, he wasn't there at the time."

"He may have found out. He's cad enough to sneak, I believe. If you're really kept away from the match to-morrow afternoon—"

"Hallo, what's that?" said a voice at the door, and George Gore looked into the study. "Tom Merry going to be kept away from the match to-morrow afternoon!"

"I'm detained," said Tom, looking keenly at Gore.

"Scott! I'm sorry! That's too bad!" said Gore, but his eyes did not meet Tom Merry's. "Is it certain, Merry?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, it's bad for us, then. You'll want another forward. If I should be any good, you can call upon me, if you like. I'm ready at any time."

"Thank you," said Tom Merry drily. "I'll think of it."

"Who'll be captain?" went on Gore eagerly. "Of course, I shouldn't expect that—"

"Wouldn't you?" said Monty Lowther. "It would be like your modesty, Gore."

"Who's it to be, Merry?" asked Gore, taking no notice of Lowther's remark. "Blake or Figgins, I suppose?"

"Very probably," said Tom Merry.

"Unless they fight over it, as they very likely will," grinned Gore. "Come to think of it, it would be better to keep the peace by giving it to a third party."

"Well, there's Manners and Lowther," remarked Tom Merry. "You wouldn't have it, Gore, if that's what you're driving at."

"Oh—er—no! I didn't mean that. But—only—"

"And I don't think I should put you in the team, either. Somebody has given me away over this business to Ratty, Gore. Was it you?"

Gore tried to assume an expression of virtuous indignation.

"If you think I've been sneaking, Tom Merry——"

"I hate to think it of any fellow," said Tom Merry quietly. "But somebody has. I don't accuse you, but it looks suspicious. Anyway, new arrangements in the team are not going to be made just yet, so it's no good talking about it."

"Oh, very well! But as I'm ready to play, and I'm in good form, I think I have a right to be considered, that's all," said Gore, and he went away with a dark brow.

"I believe it was Gore," Lowther said firmly.

Tom Merry nodded.

"More likely to have been Gore than anybody else, and it certainly was someone; but that is a minor point now. The question is, what's to be done? If Ratty won't relent when I ask him to-morrow——"

"Then you'll have to take French leave, that's all," said Monty Lowther.

The hero of the Shell smiled slightly.

"Do you think Ratty will give me a chance? I'm to stick in the Fifth class-room with him, so that he can keep an eye on me."

"The beast!" said Manners and Lowther together.

But beyond that tribute to the personal character of the New House master, they had nothing to say, and the Shell went to bed that night with the matter still in doubt.

CHAPTER 5.

A Futile Appeal—Monty Lowther's Brilliant Idea.

TOM MERRY awoke with a heavy heart on Saturday morning.

He was usually first up in the Shell dormitory, and bright as a lark in the early morning, but there was a difference on the morning of the Frampton fixture.

He rose quietly, and dressed himself with hardly a word. The thought of the afternoon's match was in his mind, and of the probable fortunes of the St. Jim's Juniors if they went to the fight without their captain.

Manners and Lowther were equally glum.

The chums had looked forward to that match so much, and for once St. Jim's Juniors were in the very best of fighting trim, and prepared to avenge their late defeats at the hands of Frampton Fliers.

In the midst of their rosy hopes this heavy blow had fallen upon them.

It was cruel, and they could not help their thoughts about it being bitter. If Mr. Ratcliff had had anything of the sportsman in him, he would have spared the junior football captain that afternoon. But Horace Ratcliff was the last man in the world to ever feel or do anything like a sportsman.

Morning school was a bore to the juniors of St. Jim's. It often was, but more so than ever that day. All the School House boys knew of Tom Merry's detention, and it made them anxious about the match. And under the nose of Mr. Lathom, in the Fourth Form room, Blake imparted the lugubrious tidings to Figgins.

Figgins's face fell at once.

"Tom Merry's detained!" he repeated. "Detained for this afternoon! But it's the Frampton match!"

"That's why old Ratty has fixed on him."

"The—the brute! He sha'n't stay in. Why, that would make two of our best out of it, for Kerr can't come."

Blake gave a hopeless shrug of the shoulders.

"Is that certain about Kerr?"

"Yes. His ankle's swollen. He can come in the brake, and he can walk about, but he couldn't play against a girls' school. He's out of it."

"Jimson can take his place, after a fashion. But what are we to do without Tom Merry?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Yas, wathuk! I should be quite weady and willin' to captain the team in the absence of Tom Merwy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy modestly. "But that would leave a place in the forward line to be filled, and we weally haven't the man, you know."

"Yes, I can see you captaining the team," grunted Figgins. "You could captain a tailor's shop, I dare say, but——"

"What did you remark, Figgins? Did you——"

"Silence!" said Mr. Lathom.

The news of Tom Merry's detention was as dismaying to Figgins & Co. as to the School House fellows. To them it appeared that the Frampton match was destined to end in a third consecutive defeat for St. Jim's. It was too rotten for words, as Figgins remarked; but however much the Co. turned it over in their minds, they could think of no way out of the difficulty. They knew their house-master too well to think that he would relent.

Tom Merry was bent upon trying that forlorn hope, however. After morning school he made his way to the New House before dinner, and found Mr. Ratcliff just come in from his class-room. The New House master glanced at him sourly.

Perhaps he guessed the boy's mission, for a glimmer of malice came into his hard eyes.

"Please, sir, can I speak to you a few minutes," said Tom Merry respectfully.

"Certainly, Merry. You may come into my study. Now, what is it?"

"It's about my detention, sir."

"Ah, yes! You will bring your work into the Fifth Form class-room. I have some writing to do this afternoon, which I shall do there, and I shall have the pleasure of your company. I shall expect you there immediately after dinner, Merry."

"Yes, sir. But, sir——"

Tom Merry hesitated. It went sorely against the grain to ask any favours at the hands of Mr. Ratcliff. Had he himself been only concerned, he would have bitten off his tongue first.

But he thought of his comrades, he thought of the hardest struggle of the football season in front of them, and of the colours of St. Jim's being lowered again to the enemy, of the team returning defeated and dispirited home!

And, at the thought, Tom Merry crushed down his own feelings, and went on to speak, in a quiet voice, from which he tried to keep all trace of the indignation and scorn that were throbbing in his heart.

"I—I've come to make an appeal to you, Mr. Ratcliff, if you will listen to me."

The New House master glanced at his watch.

"I have two minutes to spare," he said coldly. "You are welcome to it."

Tom Merry's heart sank.

Mr. Ratcliff's manner was sufficient to dash any hopes he might have entertained. But he went desperately on.

"I don't think you understand, sir, how important that football match is to us this afternoon——"

Mr. Ratcliff shrugged his shoulders.

"No, probably not. I am not one of the masters who place football before more important matters," he said drily. "I take little interest in it, and certainly less than I take in the maintenance of discipline in the college."

"But, sir, if you will listen, this isn't an ordinary match. Frampton have beaten us twice, and we've been slogging at the game for weeks to get into form for giving them a licking this time. We're in good form, and we hope to win and uphold the honour of the school. We've already lost one man, as Kerr has hurt his ankle and can't play. If I have to stand out too——"

"And you are so exceedingly valuable, in your own opinion, Merry——"

Tom Merry flushed scarlet.

"It isn't my own opinion, sir. The fellows chose me as captain because they thought I could play. If I couldn't play I shouldn't be captain of St. Jim's Juniors."

"H'm! That is a question of no interest to me. I suppose all this is leading up to an appeal to be let off this afternoon."

"Yes, sir. I am very sorry that accident happened, and I give you my word of honour that it was only an accident——"

Mr. Ratcliff smiled sourly.

"That makes little difference. The incident should never have occurred. You were as much to blame, accident or not. I certainly shall not release you from your detention this afternoon. It would be a dereliction of duty to do so."

"If you would hear me, sir——"

The house-master glanced at his watch again.

"The two minutes are up, Merry. You may go."

"But, sir——"

"If you talked for two hours it would make no difference. I shall expect you in the Fifth-Form room immediately after dinner. You may go."

There was nothing more to be said. Tom Merry went from the house-master's study with a heavy heart.

Figgins & Co. were waiting for him in the porch of the New House. They looked at him with eager inquiry.

"He won't let you off?" asked Figgins.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"The—the—but there ain't a word!" said Figgins. "What's going to be done? If you don't play, we're done. Frampton Fliers will walk over us!"

"You must put up a good fight, that's all. I'll look round for a substitute——"

"No, you won't! You've got to come! You must take French leave."

Tom Merry smiled sadly.

"You don't mean to say you funk it, Merry?" said Figgins, in amazement. "I know it would mean a fearful row and a flogging in the Head's study. But the match is worth it. Any other fellow would stand the racket for the sake of the match."

"And so would I, Figg; and you know it. But it's no use. Ratty expects me in the Fifth-Form room after dinner; and if I don't turn up he'll look for me. I should never be allowed to go."

Figgins gritted his teeth.

"The beast! He thinks of everything! But we're not

going to be done. If we all put our heads together we may think of something."

"Come up to my study, then. Blake and the rest are there; and we can talk it over. I don't see what's to be done."

Figgins & Co. went into the School House with Tom Merry. Kerr was limping a little. His ankle was swollen, not badly enough to prevent his getting about, but playing was out of the question. The Scottish partner in the Co. took it cheerfully enough, on his own account. He was more worried about the detention of the junior captain than about himself.

Study No. 6 were there, with Manners and Lowther, when the juniors came in. Tom Merry's expression was enough to tell them the result of his appeal to the New House master.

"What's to be done?" said Blake savagely. "I'd like to scrag Ratty! Figgy, you horror, what do you mean by having such a rotten, measly house-master?"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Figgins as bein' extremely wepwehensible—"

"Oh, don't rot," said Figgins—"the matter's too serious! I tell you what, kids! Tom Merry has got to come with us. We can't meet the Fliers with our best forward left at home."

"That's so," said Blake. "But how's it to be done? Ratty is going to keep him under his eye in the Fifth Form room."

"And there's no escape from Ratty's gimlet eyes," Lowther remarked.

"Weally, deah boys, I've thought of a weally wippin' ideah—"

"Get it off your chest, then, Gussy—and buck up!"

"I wefuse to be huiwied. I find bein' in a huiwuy most exhaustin'. I—"

"Buck up, or shut up!"

"Weally, you are wude, Kerr. If you were not alweady injahed; I should be gweatly inclined to administah a feahful thwashin'. But to come to the point—"

"Time you did!" growled Fatty Wynn.

"If you intewwupt me, Wynn, I shall lose the thwead of my ideahs," said D'Arcy. "As I was sayin', when Wynn so wudely intewwupted me, my ideah is this: Why shouldn't Tom Mewwy buzz off at once on his bike, without waitin' for his amnah?"

"Can't expect a chap to do that," said Fatty Wynn, shaking his head. "It's asking too much of any fellow."

"He could take some sandwiches in his pockets, deah boy. Then he could get to Fwampton, and be there weady when we came up in the bwake."

"And as soon as Ratty found he was gone he would be after him," growled Figgins. "He'd very likely come in our very brake with us to fetch Tom Merry back."

"Yaas, I certainly nevah thought of that—"

"Don't you start thinking at all, Gussy," said Lowther, in a tone of friendly advice. "You may break something in your head—if there's anything there. No, you chaps; it's pretty plain that if Tom Merry bunks, he will have to do it only just in time to get to Frampton for the match; or Ratty will be after him. It would make us look a lot of asses to the Frampton chaps to have Merry yanked off the field in the middle of the game."

"Yaas, wathah, that's vewy tvue."

"But if Merry bunks just before the start, and gets there in time, Ratty will have lots of time to follow if he likes," said Kerr. "The game takes ninety minutes, and it wouldn't take Ratty half an hour to drive over. He'd collar Merry out of the second half."

"Well, if we had Merry in the first half, it would give us a leg-up," Manners remarked. "It would be better than not having him at all."

"But you've forgotten," said Tom Merry quietly, "if I cut off at once, as Gussy suggests, I should be fetched back before the match; and if I leave it till later, I shall be in the Fifth Form class-room under Ratty's eye, and there will be no escape."

A silence fell upon the juniors.

The point was well taken. The dilemma was complete. There was no escape from it, and it seemed hopeless to attempt to think of one.

In the midst of the dismayed and troubled silence a curious expression upon Lowther's face attracted general attention.

Lowther first of all gave a start, then he wrinkled his brows in a thoughtful frown, and then his frown slowly changed to a grin. The grin became a laugh; the laugh extended itself into a roar of merriment.

They stared at him in amazement.

"What on earth's the matter with him?" exclaimed Figgins.

"Are you ill, Lowther? Are you off your silly rocker?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What is it, Monty?" asked Tom Merry, in surprise.

"Blessed if I can see anything to laugh at at the present moment."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Explain yourself!" shouted Blake, thumping Lowther on

the back. "You silly cackling ass, tell us what's the joke before we jump on you!"

"He, ho, he!"

Two or three pairs of hands grasped the hilarious Lowther, and he was jammed against the door, and Blake knocked his head upon the panels.

"Now, then, you howling idiot—"

"Hold on," gasped Lowther, "Pax! Gently does it! I'll explain."

They released him, but still regarded him with wrathful glances.

Lowther gasped for breath, and put his collar straight.

"It's an idea," he said—"it's a— Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go on, fathead!"

"It's the funniest wheeze I ever— Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Collar him and—"

"Hold on! I'll tell you! It's a grand, ripping idea! Ha, ha, ha! I'll explain. Look here, Kerr's the chap to get us out of this difficulty."

"Kerr!" exclaimed half a dozen voices in amazement. And no one looked more surprised than the Scottish partner in the Co.

"How the dickens am I to get you out of it?" demanded Kerr. "Of course, I'd do anything; but what can I do?"

"Why, you asses, have you forgotten?" exclaimed Lowther. "The idea shot into my head all of a sudden, and I— Ha, ha, ha!"

"Explain!"

"Why, you know how Kerr makes up as other people; you remember his impersonations—he made up as Lathom, and took us all in, he made up as Herr Schneider, and once as the head-master of Rylcombe Grammar School—"

"Yes, I know he did; but what about it?" demanded Blake.

"Oh, I see, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus—"I see! Lowthah means that Kerr should make up as Tom Mewwy and come with us to Fwampton, but that wouldn't do any good, Lowthah. I weally think that is a wotten ideah."

"Fathead! Of course it's rotten—but it's yours, not mine—"

"I object to bein' chawactewised as a fathead—"

"I'll tell you the wheeze," said Lowther. "You see, if Kerr can pass himself off as a man of sixty, he can certainly make up as a chap of fifteen or thereabouts. Now, he could make up as Tom Merry—"

"That was weally what I said, Lowthah, and I wegard the ideah as distinctly wotten."

"Ass! What I mean is—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass! I wefuse—"

"Shut up, Gussy! Go on, Lowther," said Tom Merry, rather excitedly. "I think I see the idea now. Go on, old chap."

"Kerr can't come, anyway, on account of his busted ankle," said Lowther. "So it won't hurt him to stay behind. He can make up as Tom Merry, and be detained in the Fifth Form room by Ratty, and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter shook the study.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I think it's a pretty good idea," Lowther said modestly.

"Tom Merry has got to turn up in the Fifth Form room after dinner. Well, his double turns up; and Ratty doesn't know the difference. You'll sit in the shady corner of the room, Kerr, and as for speaking, well, if you can imitate Lathom's voice, you can imitate Tom Merry's."

"Easily," said Kerr. "I can work the oracle all right, never fear."

Figgins gave Lowther a tremendous slap on the back.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "It's bound to succeed—and it's remarkable that I didn't think of it myself! Kerr will do the trick first-rate! I'd back him against any actor in London for impersonating anybody. And while he turns up in the class-room with Tom Merry's books—"

"While he's there, Tom Merry slithers off to Frampton. He can't come in the brake, of course, because he would be seen. That wouldn't do. He can leave the school quietly without waiting for dinner, and get a lift in a farmer's cart to Frampton. There are plenty on the road on Saturday."

"First-rate!"

"We'll take his things in the brake, of course. I'll shove them into my bag, and they won't be noticed. He joins us at Frampton, and plays with us there, and we lick the Fliers."

"Yaas, wathah, we shall lick the Fliahs, deah boys!"

"Meanwhile, Ratty keeps Tom Merry's double under his eyes in the class-room. He's satisfied; and so are we."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Gore, as he passed the door of Tom Merry's study, wondered to hear the thunderous peals of laughter that rolled from it.



Gore shook his fist at the disappearing brake containing Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 6. Off for Frampton.

MR. RATCLIFF sat at his desk in the Fifth Form class-room at St. Jim's. He had come in as the clock struck the hour, and glanced round. Tom Merry was not present.

The brows of the New House master wrinkled a little.

He considered it quite possible that Tom Merry would break bounds that afternoon for the purpose of attending the football match without leave, and if he did so, Mr. Ratcliff was quite prepared to act.

It would have pleased his mean nature to follow the hero of the Shell to Frampton, and order him back to St. Jim's after the match had started, and then to send him in to the Head to be flogged for disobeying orders.

But any anticipations of the kind that he was forming were suddenly scattered by the boy he was thinking of walking quietly into the class-room with his books under his arm. Or, if it was not Tom Merry, it was so like him that no difference could be seen.

Mr. Ratcliff glanced at him viciously.

"I was beginning to think that you were not coming, Merry."

"Indeed, sir."

The junior spoke somewhat huskily, as if he had a slight cold.

"However, I am glad you have come. It saves you from a more severe punishment."

"Yes, sir."

"You may begin your work, Merry."

The junior went to his place.

There he sat down, opened his books, dipped his pen in the inkpot, and commenced working. Mr. Ratcliff, satisfied that his victim was safe, turned his attention to his own work. He had examination papers to prepare, which would occupy him

all the afternoon, and it was no inconvenience to him to sit there like a cat watching a mouse for two or three hours.

Only the scratch of the pens broke the silence of the class-room. Presently a step was heard in the passage, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, stepped into the room. The boy and the master looked up at the same time.

Kildare's blue, Irish eyes were glinting, but his manner was quite respectful as he addressed himself to Mr. Ratcliff.

"May I have a few words with you, sir?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Ratcliff, laying down his pen. He knew what was coming, and he smiled in his hard way. He disliked Kildare, as he habitually disliked any open and frankly manly nature, and he anticipated the pleasure of refusing a request.

"Merry seems to be detained for the afternoon. I have just heard so—"

"That is the case, Kildare."

"Mr. Railton tells me that the matter has been left in your hands, and therefore that any appeal must be made to you, sir. I venture to make an appeal, because I think you do not know how important this football match is to the juniors, and I am sure you would not disappoint them if you knew how—"

"I am afraid I cannot agree with you, Kildare. The outrage to which—"

"That seems to have been accidental—"

"Accidental or not, it is all one. Such hooliganism is to be severely reprehended—"

"I do not regard a scramble for a football as hooliganism, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's rather hotly. "It is good exercise, and keeps the youngsters fit—"

"Ahem! I do not care to argue upon that subject. I am satisfied with my own opinion, and I leave you to keep yours. Have you anything else to say to me?"

"If you will be kind enough to pardon Merry, I will answer for his conduct—"

"I am afraid that I could not consider that at all satisfactory." Kildare shut his teeth hard.

"Do you mean, sir, that nothing will induce you to be lenient on this occasion?"

"Yes, Kildare, it would not be consistent with my duty to be lenient, as I am bound as a man in a responsible position, to put duty before everything."

"Then I have no more to say, sir," exclaimed Kildare, hardly concealing his disgust. "I am sorry not to have been able to help you, Merry."

"Thank you all the same, Kildare," said the junior.

Kildare gave a slight start, and looked more closely at the youngster.

The latter coloured slightly, and bent over his work. A puzzled look came over Kildare's face for a moment, and a slight smile succeeded. But he said nothing. Without a word he walked out of the class-room and closed the door. The junior breathed again.

There was a good deal of noise in the quadrangle. The brake was about to start for Frampton, and the youthful footballers were taking their places in it. With two exceptions they were as the list on the notice-board had specified the day before. Jimson was in the place of Kerr, disabled; and Tom Merry was not visible at all.

Gore was hanging about as the young players came to the brake, and he was puzzled and curious. He tapped Blake on the shoulder.

"I say, what's the game, Blake?" he demanded aggressively.

"Football," replied Blake innocently. "Association rules—"

"I don't mean that," scowled Gore. "I mean, what are you up to? If Tom Merry isn't coming with you, who is going to take his place?"

"Nobody," said Blake, as he climbed into the brake.

"Do you mean to say that you're going to play a team like Frampton a man short?" Gore almost shouted.

"I don't mean to say anything."

"Who's captain in Tom Merry's place?"

"Captain? Oh, Figgy's captain at present," said Blake carelessly.

"Figgy's, are you going to play a man short?"

"I? What's it got to do with me?" demanded the chief of the New House juniors, as he tossed his bag into the brake and prepared to follow it.

"Why, you're captain, aren't you?"

"Certainly not. Lowther's captain." Figgins jumped into the brake and took his seat.

Gore turned to Lowther.

"I say, Lowther, do you mean to say that you are going to play ten men against eleven of Frampton?" he began.

"I?" said Lowther. "No business of mine. I'm not skipper, am I?"

"Figgins says you are. Who is, then?"

"Who is? Oh, Manners," said Lowther, as he climbed up beside Blake.

"Oh, Manners, is he? Manners, you'll want me as a reserve if you're going a man short to Frampton. You can't play ten men against such an eleven as—"

"My dear chap, it's nothing to do with me. Why don't you speak to the captain? Let go my arm. You're stopping me."

"Who is captain, then?" yelled Gore, red with rage. "Who is captain instead of Tom Merry, you beast? Who is it?"

"Why, don't you know? It's Herries, of course."

"Herries!" Gore clutched Herries by the arm, as if determined that he at least should answer questions. "Herries, I am coming with you to Frampton to play eleventh man—"

"Better speak to the skipper about it, Gore," said Herries, shaking his head. "What's the good of talking about it to me? I'm only a back."

"Then who's captain?" screamed the infuriated Gore.

"Where is he? Whom shall I speak to?"

"There's Fatty Wynn. Speak to him." And Herries joined the grinning footballers in the brake. Most of the fellows standing round were grinning too. Some were in the secret, some were not. But Gore's excitement seemed very funny to all of them.

Fatty Wynn was clutched by Gore as he was getting into the brake. Gore pinned him against the step and shouted his inquiry.

"Are you captain in Tom Merry's place, Fatty Wynn?"

"I wish I were," said Fatty. "I don't see why I couldn't keep goal and captain the team too. Lots of fellows couldn't do it, but I think— Let go, ass! I want to get in."

"I'm coming as last man. Who's your skipper if Tom Merry isn't?"

"Oh, you'd better speak to Gussy," said Fatty Wynn, as he escaped from Gore's clutch, and jumped into the brake.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the last of the team to enter the brake. He came up in his usual spick and span attire,

drawing on a lavender kid glove. Gore planted himself directly in his path.

"You captain the team in the absence of Tom Merry, I suppose?"

Gussy adjusted his eyeglass and looked at him.

"Answer me, you ass!" yelled Gore, shaking his fist in the calm face of the swell of the School House.

"I object to being called an ass. I distinctly—"

"Are you captain now, while Merry's away?"

"Yaas, wathah! While Tom Mewwy is away, I naturally take my place as head of the affair," said Arthur Augustus. "I don't know that I have weceived pweice instructions on the point, but it would naturally fall to a fellow like me. Have you any wemarks to make on the subject, Goah?"

"Yes, I have. I'm coming with you. You can't play a man short against a team like the Frampton Fliers. I'm coming, do you hear?"

"Yaas, wathah. I am not in the slightest degwee afflicted with deafness, deah boy. I hear you perfectly well, and should hear you with as much ease, and gweatah comfort, if you did not woah at me like that."

"Look here, D'Arcy, it's time to start, and if you haven't an eleventh man, I'm coming. Do you understand that?"

"Yaas, I compwehend perfectly. You can come to Fwamp-ton if you like, Goah, and see us thwash the Fliahs—"

"I'm coming in the team, fathead."

"Oh, no, quite a mistake on your part, Goah. You are not coming in the team, you know. Whatevah put that cawious ideah into your head, deah boy?"

"You can't play a man short against the Fliers—"

"Certainly not. We are not goin' to, you know. Pway stand aside, deah boy, or I shall be compelled to wemove you frowm my path in a wuff mannah."

"Look here, if you're going to play a substitute, who's the man?"

"You are weally gwowin' quite a boah, Goah. Will you pway allow me to pass? With your permish I should like to get into the bwake."

"Buck up, there," shouted Blake. "We're starting."

"You hear, Goah. Will you kindly stand aside, Goah? I am wegwetwfully compelled to insist upon your standin' aside, deah boy."

"You won't get into the brake till you've told me—"

Jimson leaned out of the brake and caught Gore by the collar of his jacket behind. He jerked the cad of the Shell out of the way and sent him staggering. Arthur Augustus placidly stepped up into his place.

"Off you go, dwivah!" he exclaimed.

The whip cracked, and the brake rolled off. Gore ran after it, shouting.

"Stop, you cads! There's room for me, and—"

Several pea-shooters replied to Gore from the brake, and he stopped. He shook his fist after the brake as it rolled out of the ancient gateway of St. Jim's, and took the road to Frampton.

CHAPTER 7.

The Frampton Match—Gore is Astonished.

THE party in the St. Jim's brake was a merry one. That the trick would probably be discovered afterwards, and the boys concerned in it called to account, mattered not a whit to the enthusiastic young footballers.

They had something more important than that to think of now. The Frampton match was to be a victory instead of a defeat, if Tom Merry could lead them to victory; and they believed that he could. While the disguised Kerr sat under the watchful eye of Mr. Ratcliff, Tom Merry would be kicking goals for St. Jim's—and the reckoning might come afterwards. That did not matter!

The brake bowed merrily down the road. Nearly a mile from St. Jim's, a figure appeared in a gap in a leafless hedge, and there was a shout from the Saints.

"Good old Tommy!"

The brake came to a halt, and Tom Merry stepped in. They slapped him on the back till he was sore, and the brake rolled on again towards Frampton.

"It worked all right?" asked Tom Merry, squeezing himself into a seat between D'Arcy and Figgins, his face all smiles.

"Like a charm," said Figgins. "Trust Kerr for a thing like that. He's doing your exercises in the Fifth Form class-room at this blessed moment."

"We'll give Kerr a feed for comin' to the wescue in this weally noble mannah," said D'Arcy. "Isn't that a good idea, boys? If we beat the Fliahs, we'll give a feed in No. 6, with Kerr as the honahed guest of the evening, bai Jove!"

"Good wheeze," said Figgins, reaching across Tom Merry to give D'Arcy a slap on the shoulder. It was a hard smack, and as Gussy moved at the same moment, he got it in the neck, and gave a yell of surprise.

"Figgin's! Whatevah are you stwikin' me for in that wuff way?"

"Oh, that's only a sign of approval—"

"Then I weally wish you would show your approval by punchin' somebody else in the beastly neck, Figgin's, and soilin' somebody else's collar. I weally—"

"It's a good idea," said Blake, interrupting Gussy. "Kerr is a brick. And we shall beat the Fliers, of course. Gore didn't know what to make of our startin' a man short, Merry. He wanted to come on as extra man."

"Ha, ha! I'm glad he's not here," said Tom Merry. "I don't trust Gore, as a matter of fact, and it would be a sell to be given away at the last moment."

There were a good many of the juniors of St. Jim's following the brake on bicycles, but Gore was not among them. The road, too, was pretty well sprinkled with walkers. Some had started early, to arrive in time for the match; others only hoped to get in to see the finish. But pretty nearly all the lower Forms at St. Jim's had resolved to be on the ground somehow or other, sooner or later.

"Frampton!" exclaimed Blake, as the brake rolled into a straggling country town. "We'll be at the ground in a few minutes now."

"Here they come!" yelled a voice a few minutes later.

And the brake rolled into a field through the opened gates, and the footballers from St. Jim's were on the ground of the Frampton Fliers.

The Fliers were there already, waiting. The kick-off was timed for twenty minutes later, so the Saints were none too early. Young, the Frampton captain, welcomed the team heartily. He was a big, sturdy fellow, as big as most of the Fifth at St. Jim's, and the rest of the team were well above the weight of the Saints. As far as size and weight went, the Frampton Fliers had an undisputed advantage. But in knowledge of the game, in skill in combination, Tom Merry hoped to pull ahead.

The afternoon was cold and fine, splendid weather for football. There was already a goodly crowd round the ground, villagers and country people, and friends of the Fliers. The crowd was added to every moment by fresh arrivals from St. Jim's.

Frampton Fliers were, as we have said, a town team. Young, the captain, was a solicitor's clerk, and there were several young mechanics in the eleven. They were fine fellows all, and played the game well, as St. Jim's knew by past experience. Some fellows a little tinged with snobbishness had sniffed when Tom Merry agreed upon the fixture with Young's team. But Tom Merry was always ready to answer for his acts with his good right hand, and so the sniffing was not done in his presence. As for Tom, he didn't care a rap who or what a fellow was, so long as he played a straight and clean game.

"We're glad to see you here, Merry," said Young, as he shook hands with the St. Jim's captain. "We're going to do our best to lick you, you know."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Righto, old fellow, but you won't find it so easy this time. I warn you that we're out for scalps. But we shall see."

"Here's your dressing-room. Kick-off at three, as you know."

The dressing-room was in fact a tent, of none too large dimensions. But the Saints were there to play football, not to grumble at accommodation.

It did not take the Saints long to change. When they emerged from the dressing-tent, they found the Fliers kicking an old ball about. The referee, a gentleman belonging to Frampton, looked at his watch, and the two captains tossed for choice of goals.

Young won, and chose the goal from which the wind was blowing. It was a pretty keen wind, too, and the advantage was a decided one.

There was a cheer from the Fliers' supporters round the ropes. The crowd in the field was thickening, and the top of the fence was lined with small boys.

The teams went out into the field, both sides looking very fit. The disproportion in size was very marked when they faced each other, only Figgin's on the Saints' side being as big as the average Flier. There were few among the natives of Frampton, looking on, who did not expect the home team to simply wipe up the ground with the visitors.

Phip! went the whistle, and the ball rolled from Tom Merry's foot.

The game started, and it was hard and fast from the start. Young knew very well in what lay the strength of his side, and he tried rushing tactics, and the weight of the Fliers told. "Fliers" they were, but it was seen before long that they had not the speed of the St. Jim's boys.

The fight went right into the visitors' half at the start, and the heavy Fliers drove it right up to the St. Jim's goal.

And Fatty Wynn, who had been slapping his thighs and his chest to keep himself warm, now stood alert and ready for business.

There were few junior goalkeepers to equal Fatty Wynn, and he was in his best form to-day. A tearing shot came in

from Young's foot, and Wynn sent it back again, and it bounced in again from the head of the Frampton inside-right, and Fatty's fat fist plumped on it and it went out to Jimson at back. Jimson cleared before he was rolled over by a heavy Frampton forward, and the ball came down in mid-field.

Then the St. Jim's forwards had their chance.

Tom Merry was on the ball in a twinkling.

Away he went, with the field in pursuit, Figgin's and Blake and Lowther well up with him to take a pass when required.

Now it was seen how the speed and nimbleness of the younger team more than compensated for the additional weight and age of the Frampton Fliers.

The St. Jim's forwards outran the Fliers with hardly an effort, but the home backs fell in towards the goal and stopped the run for a moment.

But Tom Merry passed to Figgin's, who rushed the ball on, and got it through the halves, and then rolled on the ground with a couple of backs sprawling with him.

But Lowther was on the ball.

In it went, with a whizzing shot that would have beaten many a goalie, but by luck more than anything else the Frampton custodian collared it, and hurled it forth in the same movement.

But Tom Merry was there!

As the ball came out, Tom Merry leaped from amid the Frampton backs, and his head smote the ball, and it went in again almost before it was out.

The Frampton goalie was not quite prepared for that.

He made a hasty clutch but missed, and the ball climbed up the back of the net, and there was a shout of amazement and admiration from the crowd.

It had been sharp work, but there was the goal, and the spectators from St. Jim's waved their caps and yelled in glad chorus.

"Goal!"

"Goal! Hurrah!"

"Good old Merry!"

"Bravo, Tom!"

And all joined in the cheering. The goal-keeper slung out the ball, and the teams walked to the centre. Figgin's slapped Tom Merry on the back.

"Good old Tommy! What should we do if we had left you at home at St. Jim's?"

"Yeas, wathah! That was weally a vewy good bit of work, Tom Mewwy, and I have seldom done bettah myself," said Arthur Augustus.

Whereat Tom Merry smiled.

The teams were lining up again, and the cheers had not yet died away, when George Gore came through the gateway into the football field, and mingled in the crowd.

"Good old Merry!"

Gore nearly jumped when he heard the ringing shout.

"What the dickens does that mean?" he muttered.

"Merry! Merry is at St. Jim's! Are they all off their silly coccanuts?"

He listened again, wondering if his ears had deceived him.

But there was no mistake.

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

Gore felt as if his head were turning round. He had the best of reasons for supposing that the hero of the Shell was still at St. Jim's. Yet here was his name shouted on the Frampton ground, coupled with ringing cheers.

What did it mean? What could it mean?

Gore tried to get to the ropes, but the crowd was thick, and it was not easy to get a front place. The game had restarted, too, and the players were mingled on the further side close to the touch line, and not easy to distinguish.

"I say, was that a goal?" asked Gore of the nearest fellow, a Frampton mechanic. "I've only just arrived."

"That it was, sir," said the man; "and the finest goal I've seen for a long time. He went at it like a flying fish."

"But who kicked it?"

"He didn't kick it, he headed it in."

"Yes, yes, but who—who did it, then?"

"A chap named Merry, I think—I don't know him by sight, but he's a good-looking lad, and he's the school captain."

"But—but Merry isn't here! He can't be here!"

The man stared at him.

"Well, I only know what the fellows are saying. There are a lot here from the school, and they're all cheering Merry for the goal."

Gore turned away gnawing his lip.

He looked round in search of a St. Jim's fellow, who would be able to enlighten him. He found Walsh of the School House eating toffee and looking on from the top of a cart a little distance back from the crowd.

"Hallo, Walsh—I say, old fellow—"

"Hurrah!" shouted Walsh. "Tom Merry's got the ball—he's away—run, run—pass—oh, pass—there, he's done it, and Figgy's off—no, Young has robbed him of it."

"I say, Walsh—"

"There goes Young over, with Pratt on top of him—well done, Pratt. My word!"

"Walsh!" howled Gore. "Do you hear, you ass?"

"Hello," said Walsh, looking down. "Is that you, Gore? I didn't know you were coming."

"Oh, I came!" growled Gore. "I got a lift in a farmer's cart. What's this rot about Tom Merry being on the field, He's not here."

"Isn't he? He's taken the first goal for St. Jim's—the first goal of the match, too—that's all!" grinned Walsh.

"But he can't be here!" yelled Gore. "I tell you I looked into the Fifth Form room just before I left St. Jim's, to make sure that Merry hadn't hooked it—I mean, to see whether he had hooked it."

"And he had, of course?"

"No, he hadn't!"

"Eh?"

"I tell you he hadn't. He was sitting at his desk writing, and old Ratty was there, doing exam. papers, and watching him like a cat."

"Off your rocker?" inquired Walsh pleasantly.

"I tell you it's true!" almost shrieked Gore. "You're all mad. I suppose they're playing a substitute for Tom Merry, and—"

"Think I don't know Merry by sight? You can see him from here if you climb up."

"He's not there! He can't be!" growled Gore obstinately. But he climbed up on the cart to see for himself.

There was a good view over the heads of the crowd, and Gore had good eyesight. The sides had been engaged in a close tussle in midfield, but now they broke away, and a nimble figure went speeding to the home goal with the ball at his feet.

Gore did not need telling whom that was.

"Tom Merry!"

He almost hissed out the name. Walsh looked at him with a grin.

"Do you believe it now, Gore?"

"I can't understand it. I tell you I looked into the Fifth Form room before I left St. Jim's, and Merry was there under Ratty's eye."

"Did you come straight here?"

"Yes, and nobody passed me on the road."

"Ha, ha! I suppose you're dreaming. Tom Merry has been here from the start. I know he was detained, of course, and he certainly didn't leave the school in the brake with the rest. I found him on the ground when I got here, and concluded that he had sneaked away before the brake started, and joined the others on the road."

"Yes, yes, but he was in the class-room—"

"Oh, rats to that! How could he be in the class-room at St. Jim's and on the football field at Frampton at the same time?" demanded Walsh.

Gore could not answer that conundrum, and he gave it up. He descended from the cart, and departed in search of information to clear up this amazing mystery.

He encountered Mellish in the crowd, and Mellish was able to enlighten him. Mellish had first learned that Tom Merry was still in the team when he arrived on the ground, and he had been amazed to see him there, but he had inquired, and learned the truth from some of the Saints who were in the secret.

"Tom Merry's here, Mellish," said Gore. "And I looked into the Fifth Form room just before I left St. Jim's, and—"

"And saw him there?" grinned Mellish.

"Yes. What are you sniggering at? You look as if you knew all about it."

"So I do. Tom Merry never went into the Fifth-Form room at all—"

"But I saw him—"

"You didn't see him; you saw Kerr!"

"Kerr!" almost shouted Gore. "Kerr! What on earth are you talking about? Do you think I don't know Kerr from Tom Merry?"

"Not when he's made up to imitate Merry," grinned Mellish. "You know Kerr's old tricks—you remember how he impersonated old Lathom—"

"Yes, yes, but—"

"Well, he's made up as Tom Merry, and is sticking it out in the class-room, while the real Merry is here playing Frampton. See? And old Ratty hadn't an idea! Ha, ha, ha!"

"My hat!" said Gore. "I see now. What a nerve of Kerr. And what a row if old Ratty should discover the facts."

"Yes," said Mellish, with a covert glance at his friend. "Yes, that's so. This rather spoils somebody's little game, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?" asked Gore roughly.

"I mean that somebody—of course I don't know who—but somebody must have told Ratty about Merry, and that's why he was detained. I don't care who it was, but the chap must be awfully disappointed to find Merry here all the same."

It will be lucky for Merry if the fellow, whoever he is, doesn't spoil his game yet."

"How could he spoil it?" asked Gore eagerly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he could send a wire from Frampton post-office, if he thought of it, and warn Ratty that Merry is here," sniggered Mellish. "Of course, it would be a caddish thing to do, and he very likely wouldn't think of it. But if Ratty got that wire, he'd come over here as fast as horseflesh could bring him to fetch Tom Merry away."

Gore started.

"Of course, I don't suppose the fellow—whoever he is—would think of it," said Mellish, "and, besides, it would be horrid mean. Where are you going, Gore?"

Gore had suddenly turned away and was striding towards the gate. Mellish looked after him with an ill-natured grin.

"I say, Gore," he called out, "aren't you going to see the match?"

Gore did not reply. He disappeared in a few moments, and Mellish turned to the football field again, with a shrug of his narrow shoulders.

"I really think that Tom Merry will be sorry, in the long run, that he left me out of the team," he murmured.

He watched the game. The tussle between the school and the Fliers was hard and obstinate. As yet no second goal had been taken. The school were fighting bravely against the adverse wind and the weight of the Frampton men. They held their own gallantly, and opposed skill and combination to the kick and rush business of the home team.

Close upon half-time, however, the Fliers succeeded in beating Fatty Wynn, and the leather lodged in the St. Jim's net.

There was a deafening cheer from the crowd.

"Goal!"

"Hurrah for Frampton."

The score was equal. The whistle went for half-time, and the players retired for a brief rest. Gore came into the field again, and Mellish turned as he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"How does it go?" asked Gore.

"One to one—but the wind will be behind our men in the second half," said Mellish. "St. Jim's will win—if Tom Merry is still here."

"Yes," said Gore, with a grin, "if Tom Merry is still here!" He said no more, but Mellish understood.

CHAPTER 8.

Bowled Out—Kerr on His Mettle.

SCRATCH—scratch—scratch!

Two pens were scratching patiently away that Saturday afternoon in the Fifth-Form class-room at St. Jim's.

Mr. Ratcliff, at his desk, was still busy with his exam. papers, though every now and then he lifted his hawkish eyes to throw a glance towards the detained junior.

The latter was working diligently.

Mr. Ratcliff had expected to see many a sign of impatience and weariness, and of suppressed anger; but he saw only a junior diligently working, apparently thinking of nothing but of getting his exercises done in a creditable manner.

The New House master could not quite understand it. That was not how he had expected Tom Merry to take it, and he was somewhat disappointed. There was no opportunity for fault finding, and that, of course, was rather a worry to Mr. Ratcliff.

The junior never looked up to meet the house-master's eyes. He worked away, only resting for a few minutes every now and then. When he looked up, it was at the clock.

Under other circumstances Kerr would have felt his exclusion from the football match, and his enforced absence even from the ranks of the spectators, very keenly.

But the knowledge that he was acting in the interests of the St. Jim's eleven, and that his staying there enabled the college to uphold its fame on the football field, imparted fortitude to the detained junior.

Tom Merry and his team might win the match on the field, but they would owe their success to Kerr, and that was enough for the young Scotsman to know.

And the thought of how completely and satisfactorily he was "doing" the hawk-eyed house-master was additionally comforting.

There was a knock at the door at last, at a quarter to four. Kerr, who, of course, knew the time of the kick-off at Frampton, knew that the first half would be just ending. How had the match gone? He would have given a great deal to know whether Frampton or St. Jim's was ahead at the interval.

As it was something like half-a-hour's journey to Frampton, even discovery was not so dangerous now. If Mr. Ratcliff had found out the truth, and hurried off that moment, there would have been only a quarter of an hour to play when he arrived there. In a quarter of an hour, then, all would be safe. Kerr thought so as he was looking at the time, and the knock came at the door of the Fifth-Form room.

It was the School House buttons that entered. He had a telegram on a salver, which he presented to Mr. Ratcliff. The New House master glanced at it and opened it. Kerr was looking at him carelessly, and he gave a start to see the look that came over Mr. Ratcliff's face.

"No reply," said the house-master, in a thick voice.

"Yessir," said Buttons, and he retired.

The door closed. Mr. Ratcliff read the telegram again, and then fixed his eyes on the detained junior.

Then he read once more through the message from Frampton.

"Merry is here at Frampton. It is a trick."

There was no signature, but Mr. Ratcliff knew from whom the wire had come. It could only have come from Gore.

Was it a hoax—though? Was it from some lad who knew that Gore had sneaked, and was inclined to play a joke on the house master?

Merry was before his eyes, writing at his desk. How could he possibly be on the football field at Frampton.

"It is a hoax," murmured the Fifth-Form master, "or else it is from Gore, and he is mistaken. There is Merry before my eyes—yet."

Mr. Ratcliff was of a suspicious nature. The telegram plainly stated that he was the victim of a trick, and he noticed that the detained junior had selected the desk where the least light fell, and had not once turned his face towards the window. He remembered the absence of impatience he had expected to see in the boy. He remembered many little things—yet—Tom Merry had no double at St. Jim's! And the boy sitting at the desk there was Tom Merry or his double!

What did it mean?

There was a trick somewhere. The house-master left his desk, and approached the form where the junior sat.

"Let me see your exercise, Merry," he said, quietly.

The junior felt a tremor run through him. He had been writing industriously, to keep up appearances, but his handwriting was nothing like Tom Merry's, and would not pass for Tom's to the most careless glance. He hesitated, and the house-master's suspicions strengthened. He picked up a sheet from the desk, and looked at it. Then he looked simply stupefied.

He was not very well acquainted with Tom Merry's hand.

But the hand here he was perfectly well acquainted with, as it was the hand of a boy belonging to his own house, whose imposts he had read over many a time and oft.

"Kerr!"

The junior sat dumb. He was discovered.

"Kerr! What—what—what is this masquerade? What—what—what!" Mr. Ratcliff was choking and spluttering with fury. "Kerr! Rascal! What—what—what—"

Kerr was looking at the clock. Five minutes to four. The interval was over, and the second half at Frampton had been going five minutes, if the teams had kept to time! Only ten minutes required to make all safe—and here was discovery!

"Kerr!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff, seizing the boy by the shoulder and shaking him violently. "Kerr! You young rascal! What does this masquerade mean?"

"If you please, sir—" stammered Kerr.

He was rather scared at the rage in the house-master's face, but he was not so frightened as he pretended to be. He wanted to gain time. Another ten minutes and Tom Merry's team were safe to finish the match.

"If—if you please, sir, I—I—I—"

The house-master shook him till his teeth chattered.

"You are Kerr! You are not Tom Merry! You have made up in this way to deceive me. Where is Tom Merry? Where is he?—at Frampton?"

"Was that telegram from Frampton, sir?"

"That is nothing to do with you. Where is Tom Merry?"

"I—I haven't see him for some time, sir."

"Did he go to Frampton?"

"I—I—you're hurting my shoulder, sir."

"Will you answer me?" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "Is Tom Merry at Frampton? Did he go in the brake?"

"No, sir. I know he didn't go in the brake."

"But he has gone, he is there? Answer me."

"If you p—p—please, sir—"

"Answer me."

"You—you're hurting my shoulder, sir, and you've made me b—b—bite my tongue, and—"

"Will you speak?"

"How can I speak when you have made me b—b—bite my t—t—tongue, sir? I—"

Mr. Ratcliff hurled the boy away from him and rushed from the class-room. He had glanced at the clock, and knew that Kerr was trying to detain him. Kerr staggered and fell heavily, striking his head on the floor. He sat up looking dazed. But he grinned.

"My word, if he's not off! I suppose he's going to Frampton to fetch back Tom Merry!" Kerr looked at the clock as he slowly rose to his feet. "Well, he'll have to buck up. It's half an hour to Frampton, and there's only thirty-five minutes more to play."

The house-master's footsteps had died away. Kerr looked

out into the corridor, a thoughtful expression upon his made-up face.

"Suppose the match should have started late? Suppose we should want a goal to win in the last five minutes? Suppose he does it under the half-hour—"

There were a good many possibilities to be considered. It occurred to Kerr that the house-master might do the distance on his bicycle, instead of taking the trap, and then he would gain a great deal of time. It all depended upon how determined he might be to stop Tom Merry playing in the match, and Kerr knew how strong was Ratty's determination. All the malice and spite of his petty nature were aroused. He would have fetched Tom Merry off the football field at Frampton if he had had to walk every yard of the way.

"Yes, by Jupiter, if he goes by the bike he'll dish us yet!" muttered Kerr. "Hang him! It all depends upon me now! What am I to do?"

There were not two ways about it. Mr. Ratcliff had to be stopped somehow, and Kerr had to stop him! How was it to be done?

The junior was making his way to his own quarters to get off his disguise. He thought deeply as he went. He gave a start as a sudden idea flashed into his mind. The New House was deserted on the fine half-holiday, else the pseudo Tom Merry might have been chased and collared as he raced through the New House corridors towards Figgins's study. But now no one was to be seen.

Kerr reached the study and ran in. To take a length of slim but strong cord from a locker, and dart out of the study again with it, was the work of a moment. A few moments more, and he was outside Mr. Ratcliff's door.

In however great a hurry Mr. Ratcliff might be, he had to prepare to go out, and that would take him a few minutes. Kerr heard him moving quickly inside the room. The house-master's bed-room was on the second floor. The door faced that of another master's room, unoccupied like most of the other rooms in the house at that hour.

Kerr slipped a noose over the handle of Mr. Ratcliff's door, and tightened it, without a sound. Then he drew the rope taut across the passage, and wound it round the opposite door-handle and knotted it there.

It was the work of a few moments only, but it made Mr. Ratcliff as helpless a prisoner in his bed-room as if the door had been bolted and barred.

Kerr, with a deep breath of relief, stood grinning. He knew that it was a risky business to fasten a house-master's door, but the whole affair had gone too far for retreat now. He waited; he had not long to wait.

There was a sudden wrench at the rope. The house-master's door opened about half an inch, but not far enough for the occupant of the room to look out into the passage. Then it held! Mr. Ratcliff evidently did not comprehend what was the matter. He thought that his door had become jammed somehow, and he pulled and pulled again. The door, of course, did not open. Kerr had no fear of the rope breaking. It had borne the weight of a junior in its time, in a descent from a dormitory window, and it was likely to stand easily all the strength Mr. Ratcliff could bring to bear upon it.

The voice of the house-master, hoarse with rage, came through the keyhole.

"Is someone there holding this door?"

Kerr grinned, but he did not commit himself by replying.

"Who is there? Who is holding this door?"

Dead silence!

"Kerr! Is it you, Kerr? I will have you flogged—I will have you expelled! Rascal—scoundrel—open this door! Villain! Open this door."

Kerr grinned silently. There was a fresh wrenching at the door. Mr. Ratcliff might as well have wrenched at the solid stone walls of St. Jim's.

The house-master commenced to thump on the door, in the hope of attracting attention to his plight. But it was an unfortunate time for him. On a half-holiday, few people remained indoors at St. Jim's. And on this specially fine afternoon, there was not a soul, nearer than the kitchen, which was too far from the bed-rooms for a sound to be heard there. Mr. Ratcliff's frantic hammering was not likely to be heard.

He might, when he thought of it, succeed in attracting attention in the quad, from his window. But time was passing!

Kerr, realising that the enemy was safely trapped, hurried off to his own room, and soon divested himself of all traces of his disguise. Then he left the New House. He intended to get to Frampton now; there was nothing to stay at St. Jim's for, and the further away he got from Mr. Ratcliff at the present moment, the healthier it was likely to be for him. He could have cycled over in a quarter of an hour, but the injury to his

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foot prevented that. He limped into Rylecombe and hired a trap, and was driven over, though without much hope of arriving before the match finished. He would be in time, however, to warn Tom Merry that Ratcliff was on the war-path, and to save a scene on the Frampton field. Meanwhile, Mr. Ratcliff, when he bethought him of his window, opened it and yelled and raved for help, and, at last, succeeded in attracting the attention of Taggles the school-porter, who ascended the stairs of the New House to release him.

"Get out my bicycle!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

A few minutes later he was pedalling frantically away towards Frampton. If he were in time to drag Tom Merry ignominiously off the football field under the eyes of the Frampton fellows, that would be a consolation. But would he be in time. St. Jim's clock chimed out the quarter past four as he mounted his machine.

CHAPTER 9.

Tom Merry Kicks the Winning Goal—and Mr. Ratcliff Arrives Too Late!

"GOAL!"

"Hurrah!"

The second half was being fought out gallantly.

With the wind behind their backs, the juniors of St. Jim's had held their own bravely, and brought the tussle more than once right up to the home goal. But Young and his men were putting their beef into it, too, and the first goal after the interval was scored by a Frampton Flier. Frampton were two up! But that only added to the grim determination of the Saints, and they played up grandly.

And so, when we look down upon the football field again, it is to see the teams lining up after the fourth goal—taken this time by St. Jim's!

Two goals all!

The score is level, and little more time remains to play! Ten minutes more—and both sides determined that the match shall not end in a draw!

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"Play up, St. Jim's!"

"Buck up, Frampton!"

The crowd yell and shout encouragement to their favourites. Loud cheers greet every bit of fine play on either side. And the teams did play up well!

Ever to the front was the athletic figure of Tom Merry, and the long legs of Figgins stood his side in good stead that day. It was to Figgins that the second St. Jim's goal had fallen, and it had been a difficult one, and splendidly kicked.

Even Gore and Mellish felt something of the prevailing excitement, and joined in the cheering. And for once Gore, somewhat to his own astonishment, felt a momentary pang of regret for a mean action, and half-wished he had not sent that wire to St. Jim's.

But that thought was only momentary. He looked round occasionally for the arrival of Mr. Ratcliff on the scene. But the New House master did not come!

And the game was drawing to a close now! Five minutes more—four minutes, three! Was it to prove a draw after all!

"Play up, St. Jim's!"

"One more goal, Merry!"

"On the ball, Frampton! On the ball!"

They were going at it hammer and tongs now. Frampton Fliers had quite abandoned finesse. Kick and rush, rush and kick—that was their game!

"On the ball!" muttered Young. "One more goal!"

And his men tried to obey. But they were fighting with foemen worthy of their steel. St. Jim's were quite as determined as their opponents!

Tom Merry's face was set and determined.

"Play up," he cried. "Play up for St. Jim's! On the ball!"

"Yas, wathah!" gasped D'Arcy.

A Frampton back had sent the ball well down the St. Jim's half. Fatty Wynn ran out of goal and kicked it up the field, and dropped it right at Figgins's toe.

Three Fliers were on Figgins in a twinkling, but not before he had kicked the ball across to Tom Merry, who captured it and was away like an arrow.

Then was seen as pretty a bit of football as could be desired by the most ardent lover of the grand old game!

St. Jim's forwards broke away in line, passing the ball with the precision of clockwork, each parting with it at the last moment in the nick of time, as it were, and that splendid run brought the ball right up to the home goal, with only the goalie to repel the attack, and Tom Merry, who had the ball again, kicked—a kick that might have baffled the custodian of many a League team.

The referee had his whistle to his lips.

There was a roar as the Frampton goalie was seen to clutch at the ball—and miss it—and lose his footing with the effort and sit down. The ball was in the net, and the boys of St. Jim's round the ropes were yelling like maniacs.

"Goal! Goal! Goal!"

"Bravo Merry!"

"Goal! Goal! Goal!"

The shrill note of the whistle rang through the roar of cheering. The game was ended, and St. Jim's had won three to two!

In a moment more the field was black with a surging crowd. In the midst of a wildly hurrahing crowd, St. Jim's Juniors were escorted off the field and back to their dressing-tent. At the door they met an unexpected figure—Kerr!

"Kerr!" exclaimed Tom Merry, in amazement, "you here—" "Somebody's given the game away," said Kerr hurriedly. "I was bowled out. Ratty's coming. I don't know where he is now, but he's certainly coming. I got here just in time to see you kick that last goal. It was ripping!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!" the crowd were yelling. Caps and hats flew into the air, and the cheers were deafening.

But the faces of the St. Jim's footballers were serious.

"Ratty coming!" murmured Figgins, "we must travel. We don't want a scene before the Frampton fellows. That's just what Ratty would like, to make us look asses—but he shan't have his way, the rotter. Kerr, old kid, see the brake got ready while we change. We've got to fly."

It did not take the St. Jim's Juniors long to change. There was need for haste, if the New House master was to be eluded. Tom Merry hastily explained to Young, and said a hearty good-bye to the Frampton captain. In a very short space of time the St. Jim's brake was rolling away from the ground, with the victorious footballers in it, and Kerr with them.

"We'd better get off the usual road, or we shall meet Ratty," said Tom Merry. "Go round by the wood, driver. A little longer doesn't matter."

So the brake left the main road. Ten minutes after it had left the Frampton ground, a breathless cyclist jumped off his machine there.

"Are the footballers from St. James's Collège here?" he called out, addressing two or three loungers at the gate of the football ground.

"They're gone, sir."

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(Continued).



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"You come now, or it will be te vorse for you!"
"Seems to me dat it is going to be de worse for me; anyhow. De man ought to hab told us who he was!" growled Venus. "I dunno how he guessed dat I was here."

"Why, you silly owl," exclaimed Cyril, "it was your giddy laughter! All the same, it does not matter; I will come with you."

"I expect we had all better come," grumbled Billy. "It's a bother, because a good scheme like that ought to have come off. Look here, Cyril, just you convince him that we are not in any way to blame."

"How would you like me to do that?"

"I don't know; I haven't got time to think. Hark! He's coming up!"

"De man has gone into our dormitory," murmured Venus.

"In that event, we will go into his study. Creep softly."

They got down the stairs all right, and then they entered the German master's study. Venus rolled his eyes at the cane which hung from a nail in the wall, and gravely shook his head. It was obvious that he did not like the look of things.

Billy kept in the background. Cyril suggested that there was no sense in his coming, but although Billy was not clever, he was very staunch, and he declared that he would take his share.

Cyril looked somewhat despondent, but he was, as usual, quite cool. What he was going to say he did not know, but he had the conviction that however badly he put it, he would have done.

They were kept waiting nearly a quarter of an hour, and then Herr Ludvig entered the study. The expression on his face was not reassuring, and he groaned when he sat down.

"So you are te tree boys?" growled the badly-flogged master. "I might have known it. So vat have you to say for yourselves? Und just hand me down tat cane!"

"I don't tink you will need anything like dat, sah," observed Venus, who was the nearest to it.

"Hand me tat cane, boy!"

"Suttinly, sah! Woohoo! Oh, I tought you were going to hit dat time!"

"A misunderstanding has occurred, sir," murmured Cyril, bowing profoundly, though the best bow he could

have made would scarcely have put Herr Ludvig in a good temper. "We mistook you for someone else. Mistakes must occur. We have authority for that, and personal experience. I—er—desired to catch another boy—I mean, a boy, and not a master. Quite an accident!"

"You consider tat you have te right to catch a boy up mit a rope, and flog him?"

"Oh, no, sir! We consider the boy had te right to the flogging. That is all."

"I must say tat for a boy mit your intellect your excuse is insignificant."

"Well, sir," exclaimed Cyril, "this is a case where it will not make any difference what I say. I only want you to be convinced that it was a mistake, so far as you are concerned."

"You vish me to believe such is te case?"

"I hope you will not doubt my word, sir. You never do."

"No; I did not mean tat. I do not doubt your word, because you always speak te truth to me. Of tat I have no doubt. Vat I desired to say vas to ask te question if you only desire to assure me tat you did not intend to injure me?"

"That is so, sir. There is no reason why we should desire to harm you; and even if there were, we would not do so. A master is one matter—a boy another."

"So, you can only assure me tat you made a mistake, and you admit tat all I suffered vas intended for a boy?"

"Such is the case, sir. There is nothing else to be said."

"Not even an expression of regret?"

"Well, so far as you are concerned, that goes without the saying. There isn't a doubt that we give you a lot of trouble, and shall certainly give you a lot more, if you don't get us expelled for this little lot; but I hope you will never doubt that we would not insult a master."

"Und te boy you vished to catch?"

"I would rather not name him, sir, if you will kindly excuse me."

"Vich means tat you vill not tell me?"

"I'm afraid it amounts to the same thing."

"Vell, I assume your reason is tat he did something to you, and you do not desire to sneak?"

"Yes, sir; that is about the fact of the case."

"Und do you consider tat te vay you treated me by mistake for him is te proper vay to treat a monitor of tis college?"

"I see you know who it is."

"Yes, I know. Go und fetch Graft into tis study. I desire tat he shall see how I punish tis matter. Mind, it is most serious, and von tat shall be punished most severely. If a master is insulted it cannot be overlooked. I shall not report it to Dr. Buchanan. I shall administer te punishment myself. Tell Graft tat I desire to speak to him in my study, and you vill come back mit him, und ten te whole matter vill be settled."

Graft was in his study when Cyril, looking as mild as watered milk, entered it. Graft looked slightly uncomfortable because he did not know what was going to happen.

"Er, good-evening, Graft!" murmured Cyril, carefully brushing a little tobacco-ash from the table-cloth, and as carefully throwing it into the fire; "nice evening, isn't it? Rather cold, but that is no detriment, because it may enable us to get some skating, and—"

"What do you want in my study this time of night, you idiotic-looking camel?" snapped Graft, knowing perfectly well that there was something behind this.

"Er, there has been a slight mishap, Graft, and one that I feel sure will fill your breast with sorrow. You see, we wanted to sling up a certain fellow—I won't mention his name, because it might hurt your feelings, but he is an

unconscionable scoundrel, and we intended to haul him up with a lasso, and when we had him in that position to flog him soundly. We did it, but unfortunately caught the wrong bird. We caught Herr Ludvig, the German master. Well, we slung him up and flogged him, and he didn't like it a bit."

"Ha, ha, ha! I hope he has broken every bone in your rats' bodies!"

"Well, we were much more likely to have broken his bones, especially as we dropped him; but, you see, we struck him where he doesn't carry many bones, and when we dropped him, quite inadvertently, it only wounded him. At any rate, he desires to see you in his study. Step this way, if you please!"

(Another long instalment of this splendid school story in next Thursday's number. Please order your GEM in advance.)



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