

YOU'RE GETTING A GEM FOR TWOPENCE, BOYS!

The GEM 2^d

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HELPING THE NEW CAPTAIN ALONG!

Tom Merry & Co. have little time or inclination to devote to their new skipper, but they are always ready to "lend him a hand," as shown in the incident above. Read "A Split in the School"—this week's extra-long school yarn of St. Jim's.

THE CAPTAIN'S ELECTION! Aubrey Racke's ambition is to become junior captain of St. Jim's—so that he and his precious pals can smoke, gamble, and generally play the giddy goat, without fear or hindrance. And the great Aubrey jumps at the chance to put up for the captaincy when Tom Merry is deposed!



A Magnificent Extra-Long School Story of your old favourites at St. Jim's. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. Blake's Good Turn!

"BOY!" Jack Blake, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, returning from the village with a new pair of football boots under his arm, stopped and stared about him.

"Big boy! Stop, please!"

It was a child's piping voice that addressed him, and in another moment the junior caught sight of the owner. She—a little tot about four—had been playing at the side of the lane, and now she came trotting into the open, some twenty yards distant. What she could want presented something of a mystery to Blake, but he grinned and halted obediently.

"Tell me the time, please, big boy?"

"Oh, I see!"

Blake took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Nearly two o'clock!" he responded, kindly enough.

"Thank you, boy!"

Toot! Toot!

The little girl had turned, and began to cross the lane, when that warning sound came.

"Look out!" roared Blake, perceiving the danger, with sudden alarm. "That's right—run!"

Toot! Toot! Toot!

A heavy lorry, judging by the rattle and clatter it made, was approaching from beyond a bend in the lane, and the little girl sped swiftly for the safety of the hedge. But her foot tripped over a loose stone, and while Blake gazed, fascinated, she fell—right in the path of the vehicle as it lumbered in sight!

For a second the Fourth-Former's gaze was riveted; and then he awoke to action. There was no time to warn the lorry driver—it was already a matter of yards. Blake put on a desperate spurt, and arrived just as the lorry loomed over the child. So far from seeing her in time, the lorry driver had barely time to observe Blake, as a shout testified.

"Hi! Look out, you young idiot!"

The lorry swerved violently, and it was fortunate indeed that it did. Blake leaped forward, and, dragging the child clear of the ground, he was just in time to evade the wheel of the vehicle as it swung round. The junior almost

tittered as he leaned against the hedge, and pumped in breath.

He had been within an inch of death, and he knew it. The lorry driver pulled up in a few yards, and came back full of concern. Blake gasped, and summoned up a grin to meet him.

"That was a close-call, kid!" said the driver seriously.

"A miss is as good as a mile, you know!" responded Blake.

"I didn't see the babe, and, but for you, I should have been over her in a second. You're a good plucked 'un, kid! Sure you're all right?"

"Right as rain!" said Blake calmly, taking the child's hand. Throughout the startling experience which had befallen her, the tot had remained silent, and it seemed as if she did not realise how near she had been to the wheels of the lorry.

"I'll take her back to her parents—I've seen her playing about here before," said Blake. "She lives in the green cottage over there, I believe."

"All right, then. So long, and good luck!"

And the driver nodded and returned to his car. Blake turned his footsteps towards the little green cottage set back from the lane, with the kiddie still grasping his hand tightly.

The junior knocked on the door, and it was opened by a neatly-dressed woman, who gave a gasp on seeing her little daughter covered with dust.

"What ever has happened?" she said in alarm.

"Nothing to worry about, ma'am," said Blake modestly.

"Big boy pick me up when nasty motor try to run over me!" piped the little girl, speaking at last; whereat Blake cringed.

"Oh dear! Was that it, darling? And this brave boy rescued you?"

"Yes, mummy!"

Blake's cheeks fairly burned, and he wished devoutly that the ground would open and swallow him up. But it did not, and the child's mother turned to him with a warm smile on her somewhat wan features.

"I cannot thank you enough, my boy!" she said. "It seems that misfortunes never come singly, and, but for you, my little daughter might—" she broke off.

"My daddy is ill!" interrupted the little tot, eyeing Blake quizzically. "Do you think the nice boy could make my daddy better, mummy?"

"No, dear. You must be quiet." Then, turning to Blake

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again: "You see, Mr. Murphy is very ill—he has lost his work—and we are under notice to leave this cottage to-morrow unless we can pay ten pounds. If my husband had been able to work, we might have struggled on; but he had an accident, and the doctor's bills have run away with the money. We cannot pay—it seems as if everything conspires against us!"

"Don't say that, ma'am!" ejaculated Blake, feeling very uncomfortable indeed. He appeared to have stumbled on a family in the deepest distress, and the knowledge caused Blake's sympathetic heart to ache. "If there is anything a fellow could do——" he began; but Mrs. Murphy shook her head.

"I don't think anything can be done!" she responded miserably. "We cannot pay to-morrow—that is certain. Several neighbours have helped us as much as they could already, but this is the end, I am afraid."

Blake nodded sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Murphy. I wish I had some money to offer you, but, as it happens, I'm stony!"

"No. I could hardly accept it if you had, Master——"

"Blake."

"I am very grateful to you for rescuing Dorothy, but I cannot trespass on your generosity, Master Blake. Could I ask you to accept a cup of tea?"

"Oh, no!" Blake remembered, with a start, that he was playing football that afternoon at Abbotsford. "I've got to get back, ma'am. I'll say good-afternoon!"

"Good-bye, and thank you again, Master Blake!"

And the St. Jim's junior, his mind full of the little tragedy which was being enacted within the walls of the green cottage, resumed his interrupted journey back to the school. For all he knew, the family might even be short of food—Blake had caught sight of two or three other youngsters, besides Dorothy—and on the morrow they would be homeless unless ten pounds was forthcoming! Although actually it was none of his business, Blake could think of nothing else till he found himself in the hall, and paused from force of habit before the letter-rack.

"Letter for you, Blake!"

Julian of the Fourth tossed over an envelope, and Blake caught it mechanically, and slit it open. He glanced superficially at the contents, and then started. His letters did not usually contain much more than a postal-order, and not always that. But now something crisp had fluttered to the floor. The junior stooped and picked up—a ten pound note!

"Oh, my hat!"

Blake had seen ten pound notes occasionally before, in the possession of his aristocratic chum, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, but he had to pinch himself to make sure that he was not dreaming in this case. Then he turned his attention to the letter. It was from an uncle, and recalled that Blake had had a birthday a week or two back—whereat Blake grinned. The "tenner" was a belated, but none the less welcome present, and the junior's eyes gleamed as he crumpled the letter in his pocket, and his thoughts flew back to the plight of Mrs. Murphy and her family.

For a few moments he stood irresolute. The "tenner" could not have come at a more opportune moment—and his mind was made up. He was due to start for a football match at Abbotsford in a very few minutes, but there was just time to dispatch the note to the Murphy family.

There was nobody at home in Study No. 6 when Blake entered: his chums were probably changing, or even waiting at the gates for the rest of the team. It behoved him to hurry, and in a few seconds the junior had taken pen and paper, and commenced his letter. He scrawled the school address, and added:

"Dear Mrs. Murphy——"

All that was needed then was a short but appropriate note; but the composition of a short and appropriate note seemed to be causing Blake some difficulty.

He stared and stared at those three words until they swam before his eyes, but he could get no further. Time flew, and there was a crash on the panels of the study door, as Tom Merry looked in, ready to start for Abbotsford, and lacking only his inside-right. The expression on the Shell captain's face suggested that he had been waiting some time, and had become fed-up.

"Blake, you fat-headed jabberwock!" he roared. "Do you know we're all waiting for you at the gates? What on earth are you sticking up here for? We're due at Abbotsford in less than an hour!"

Jack Blake looked up with a start.

"Oh! I—I forgot!" he ejaculated, colouring. "I didn't know it was so late. You chaps ready to start?"

"I've just said so!" responded Tom Merry grimly. "Buck up and get your footer togs, for goodness' sake! What's that you're busy with—lines?"

The Fourth-Former hastily drew a blotting-pad over the sheet before him, and coloured still more as he met Tom Merry's gaze.

"No; not that!" he said, looking very uncomfortable. "Just—only a letter. But I had to finish it, so as to catch the post. You fellows had better go on. I'll come on in a few minutes and catch you up!"

"Well," said Tom Merry, drawing a deep breath, "if that doesn't take the cake! You keep the whole team waiting for ten minutes, and then you have the cool nerve to say you'll catch us up!"

"I can do that easily if I scorch a bit," said Blake defensively. "No need to worry about me, Tom Merry. I must finish this letter. It's important, as you might guess, but I shall be at Abbotsford in time for the match. Buzz off, and let a fellow get on. You're only wasting time interrupting me!"

The junior captain gave Blake a glance, and withdrew from the study.

"You'll be late if you stick there much longer!" he warned, and hastened back to the gates, feeling rather disturbed at Blake's obvious concern over the letter he was writing. A letter which interfered with a junior football fixture must be of some great moment, and Blake was not, as a rule, fond of using his pen. Still, if he arrived in time for the match, there would be no harm done.

The rest of the team greeted Tom Merry with a regular chorus.

"Where is the ass?"

"Why didn't you lead him along on a halter, Merry?"

"Couldn't you find him?"

Tom Merry raised one hand pacifically.

HOPE YOU HAVE A JOLLY NIGHT ON THE 5th, CHUMS— BUT MIND YOU DON'T GET BURNT!

—ED.

"Blake's catching us up!" he explained briefly. "He's writing an important letter!"

"Oh!"

"More important than a football match?" inquired Levison.

"If he lets us down——" began Figgins. "You'd do better to play Lawrence and chance it, Merry!"

"I would—only Lawrence is about half Blake's form at inside-right!" grinned Tom Merry. "Come on! Blake will have to scorch, that's all!"

In a rather disgruntled mood the junior footballers climbed on their bikes and cycled off down the lane, sped by a parting cheer from a crowd of juniors who were staying at St. Jim's to watch the first eleven match against Highcliffe. A number of juniors had already started for Abbotsford, and it behoved the team to put on the pace if they were to arrive at the scheduled time.

CHAPTER 2.

Not Blake's Lucky Afternoon!

FAIR from hastening to finish the letter which lay before him, Jack Blake had forgotten the time completely, and was chewing desperately at his pen, as if he hoped that it would afford him some inspiration. But the matter was of so delicate a character that Blake felt utterly at sea, and unable to think of a word beside the opening.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked on, and another ten minutes slipped by before the junior scribbled away at last. He paused to admire his handiwork with a critical eye, and then, addressing an envelope, sealed and stamped the letter, and jumped up from the table.

The matter could be dismissed from his mind now, and he was free to join his chums at Abbotsford. He gave a start as his eyes rested on the clock, and then threw open the door. As he did so there was a howl in the passage—a cry of pain which caused Blake's eyes to gleam angrily.

"Ow! Don't, Racke! Please, I—I didn't mean to run into you, honest Injun! Ow!"

Jack Blake stared grimly at the two juniors—Aubrey Racke of the Shell, and "Curly" Gibson of the Third. What Racke wanted in the Fourth Form passage was not very

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difficult to guess; he had come to visit one of his cronies—Mellish and Scrope—and while away the half-holiday with a game of "nap."

And it was just like Racke to pick upon a fag and indulge his cruel sense of humour. Probably Curly Gibson had merely brushed against the Shell fellow in passing, and, but for the arrival of Blake, would have had to pay dearly.

The fag gave a fresh yell, as Racke cruelly twisted his arm.

"You're sorry you nearly butted me over now, young Gibson?" asked Racke coolly. "Quite sorry?"

Curly Gibson opened his mouth to reply, but there was an interruption. Racke's shoulder was taken in a sturdy grasp, and the cad of the Shell was whirled away from his victim, to stagger speechlessly against the wall.

"That's enough of your rotten bullying, you cad!" growled Blake. "Cut off, Curly!"

"Oh, I say! Thanks ever so, Blake!" gasped the fag, delighted. "The rotter was twisting my arm just because he happened to bump into me—"

"You little beast!" hissed Racke venomously. "Wait till I catch you alone!"

"You'll not touch young Gibson, Racke!" observed Blake coolly. "Tell me if he interferes with you again, youngster! Now you can clear!"

And before the enraged Racke could summon sufficient courage to lay hands on him again, the fag scuttled off along the corridor.

Racke gave Blake a glance of hatred, but made no movement as the Fourth-Former passed on towards the cloak-room. He would dearly have liked to knock Blake spinning across the passage, but he was only too well aware that, in the matter of fisticuffs, he was hopelessly inferior to the athletic junior. But his face lit up suddenly as he recollected that Blake was in the team that afternoon—that he must at that moment be going for his cap and coat, preparatory to cycling over to Abbotsford. Whereat a crafty smile appeared on the cad's narrow face, and he hastened out of the House and across the quad.

He headed for the bike-shed, and found it deserted, as he had hoped. It was the work of a few seconds to spot Blake's machine, and up-end it. Then the cad produced two long pins, and, with great care, pushed them into the two tyres right up to the heads. In another moment he had replaced the bike on its stand, and, to all intents and purposes, it was ready for the road. It was likely, however, that there would be some trouble when the pins began to work loose, and Racke chuckled merrily at the thought.

"Hallo, Racke! What's the little game, old man?"

The cad of the Shell started violently, and spun round towards the door. A fat, podgy face had appeared there, and Racke set his lips as he realised that Baggy Trimble had very likely seen everything. But Blake would be along any minute now, and there was no time to tell Trimble exactly what he would like to have done. Instead, Racke summoned up a sickly grin, and hastily shoved his arm through Trimble's.

"Come along to the tuckshop, old man!" he remarked cunningly. "This was only a little jape, you know. No need to go blabbin' to anyone, eh, Trimble?"

Baggy winked and nodded understandingly.

"Trust me!" he responded cheerily. "I know how to treat a pal. I see Dame Taggles has got some rather special custard tarts in to-day!"

And Racke, with a glance towards the School House, took the hint, and footed the bill, while Baggy proceeded to dispose of the tarts.

A few seconds later, Jack Blake strode cheerily across to the bike-shed and ran out his "jigger." He glanced towards the gates, and grinned as he noted that the door of Taggles' lodge was shut. He swung his leg over his bike and rode swiftly down the drive.

Juniors were not supposed to mount their bikes in the school precincts, but this was an exceptional occasion. The writing of his letter had taken longer than expected, and time was short. In those circumstances, Blake felt justified in whizzing out of the gates at breakneck speed, and he chuckled as he caught a glimpse of Taggles' head protruding angrily from a window.

The lane wound invitingly before him, and Blake covered the ground at a record rate. At this speed he would reach Abbotsford in ample time for the game, even if the rest of the team had arrived there first.

But, going through Rylecombe, Blake became aware of a peculiar bumping, and out on the open road beyond the village, the cause of the bumping was revealed. The bike developed an absolute lurch, and the junior sprang off with an exclamation.

He gazed in deepest dismay at the tyres—both of them as flat as a flounder! Punctures—not one, but two—and at

such a time! It was inexplicable, for the bike had been in the best of trim only the day before.

Breathing hard, Blake up-ended the machine and began to examine the tyres minutely for fragments of broken glass. He gave a grim exclamation as he drew from the rear tyre a pin—a large and strong pin—which had evidently been jammed into the tyre right up to the head and left to do its fell work on the principle of slow but sure.

He drew another pin of exactly the same size from the front tyre, and surveyed them with feelings too deep for words. Given time, the pins had worked loose, and the bike as a means of transport was now useless.

The junior slipped the pins into the lapel of his coat, and got out the repair set from the saddle. The task before him was not a short one, and it was quite certain that he would not get to Abbotsford in time for the match. He glanced at his watch, and gave a grunt. In fifteen minutes the game was due to start; he would have had to scorch to do it in any case. And by the time he had repaired the punctures and ridden on, a substitute would be playing in his place.

"What rotten luck!"

Blake sat on a grassy bank and addressed himself to the onerous task before him, with a deep anger maturing against the unknown fellow who had tampered with his bike. The junior eleven, in an encounter with a strong side, were booked to play with one of their best men off the field! And all through a thoughtless practical joker—perhaps not quite so thoughtless as Blake imagined.

The job was done at last, and it was in a grim mood that Blake swung his leg over the machine and set off for his destination. He was too late to play now, but, at least, he could explain and clear himself in the eyes of the footballers, who would naturally think he had let them down. The Fourth-Former drove hard at the pedals, and fairly whizzed along the Abbotsford road.

CHAPTER 3. Trouble Brewing!

"GOAL!"

"Well shot, Lunn!"

"Go it, Abbotsford!"

Those were the shouts that greeted Jack Blake as he arrived on the Abbotsford football ground, hot and dusty, and eager to hear how the game was going in his absence. He hardly needed to ask, after that terrific burst of cheering. The faces of the Abbotsford supporters were jubilant, and those of the few St. Jim's fellows round the ropes were not. Evidently the visitors were finding it hard going, deprived of a crack forward.

Blake glanced over the players as they lined up again, and he saw Manners among the forwards. The Shell fellow had come over as a reserve, but his proper place was half-back, and he was experiencing considerable strangeness in his new position. And Abbotsford were dealing quite adequately with a weakened attack.

There was a gasp from the St. Jim's supporters as Noble was bowled over, and the Abbotsford skipper dashed down on goal. Fatty Wynn saw the danger and rushed out heroically to throw himself at the forward's feet. But Lunn, steadying himself miraculously, lobbed the ball gently over Fatty's head into the back of the net—whereupon there was another roar of applause from the home crowd.

Fatty Wynn's expression was lugubrious as he picked the leather out of the net and punted it to the centre again.

"Hard luck, old man!" said Figgins, slapping him on the back. "It couldn't be helped. If you hadn't come out, he'd have scored anyway."

"They won't do it again!" responded Wynn grimly.

While Blake watched with growing despair, St. Jim's instituted a fierce attack on the enemy goal, and there was a dashing sprint by Talbot, the leather going to Levison. The Fourth-Former shot, and the ball rebounded off the bar to Manners. Manners and a full-back leaped for it at precisely the same moment, and collided with a crash—and there was a yelp of pain from the Shell fellow.

"Pheep! The referee brought the game to a standstill."

"Not hurt, old chap?" asked Tom Merry anxiously, as his chum struggled to one knee, feeling his ankle and pulling a wry face.

"I—I don't think I can walk on it!" gasped Manners. "I'll try—yow! It's twisted or something!"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Kangaroo. "This is the giddy limit!"

"I shall have to go off!" said Manners dismally. "Lend me a hand, somebody!"

Tom Merry and Talbot helped the hapless junior to the touchline, where the Abbotsford sports-master speedily set to work to dress Manners' ankle. It was not a serious sprain, but precluded the junior from walking without aid.



Blake put on a desperate spurt and arrived just as the lorry loomed over the helpless child. The lorry swerved violently as Blake leaped forward and dragged the child clear—only just in time. (See Chapter 1.)

The game was resumed, but in another minute the whistle blew for half-time, and the footballers trooped off the field, looking and feeling very sorry for themselves. On the other hand, Lunn & Co., though sympathetic over Manners' injury, were grinning. It was not often that they had the pleasure of walking over their St. Jim's rivals like this.

"You chaps will have to pull up your socks!" grinned Lunn, joining Tom Merry.

"We shall!" assented Tom ruefully. "Still, the game's not lost yet, you know!"

"Hallo! Blake!" ejaculated Monty Lowther, suddenly catching sight of the absentee.

"What the thump—why, here he is!" roared Kangaroo excitedly. "What do you mean by leaving us in the lurch like this, you rotter?"

Jack Blake crimsoned under the far from friendly glances of the footballers. The fault had not been his, he knew, but just at present Tom Merry & Co. did not appear in the mood to accept explanations.

"I'm awfully sorry, you fellows—" he began.

"So you jolly well ought to be!" grunted Figgins. "Catch a New House fellow letting the team down in an important match—why, I'd scrag him!"

Blake set his lips, but held on determinedly.

"Look here, Tom Merry!" he commenced, addressing himself to the Shell captain. "Naturally, you chaps want an explanation. I can say at once that it wasn't my fault!"

"You said you would finish that letter and come on in plenty of time," said Tom Merry. "Was it so jolly important that you had to risk losing us the match?"

Blake's face, already crimson, assumed a fiery hue. He needed all his self-restraint to answer coolly.

"Don't I keep telling you it was—"

"Can't be much to tell, so far as I can see," interrupted Noble calmly. "You dallied too long with a fatheaded letter,

and now you think an apology will settle the matter. Do you know we're two down on the first half, and Manners has crocked his ankle?"

"I suppose I'm not responsible for all that?" said Blake tartly.

"It wouldn't have happened if you'd played up as you should have done. A fellow who lets things interfere with a school match—"

"I've told you I've got an explanation!" snapped Blake angrily.

"Well, let's jolly well hear it!" retorted Kangaroo.

Perhaps the fact that Kangaroo had been bearing the brunt of the work at centre-half added to his impatience. But there was a murmur of assent from the other fellows.

Phoe-cep!

The whistle, summoning the teams to a renewal of the conflict, put a sudden end to the discussion. Tom Merry glanced at Blake's heated face before he followed the remainder on to the field. Blake's look was angry and inquiring.

"We'll hear what you've got to say after the match," said Tom, rather coolly. "If it's anything reasonable—"

Blake's eyes gleamed, and his temper, fast rising, gained the upper hand at last.

"Oh, go to Jericho!" he grunted, and turned his back.

Tom Merry compressed his lips, and, without another glance, went on the field.

The whistle blew, and the ball rolled again, but Blake was no longer an interested spectator. He could not altogether grumble at the reception which had been accorded him, and he had been fully prepared to explain the whole matter, if given a chance. But the St. Jim's eleven, with two goals against them, were not in the mood to listen calmly, and Blake's own temper, roused by the trick which had made him too late, was kindled.

He felt less and less inclined to eat humble-pie to fellows

who, apparently, were only too willing to believe he had let them down through carelessness. And when a fresh roar from the home crowd announced that St. Jim's were a further goal in arrears, Blake did not even look towards the field. He even derived some satisfaction from the reflection that Tom Merry & Co. were probably growing more and more incensed against him as the game wore on.

St. Jim's attacked desperately now, and the ball went in, hot from Tom Merry's foot. But Abbotsford were soon in the ascendancy again, and Blake began to wheel his bike towards the gates. He had no desire to stay and see the finish of a match which was already well lost, and at the end face an inquisition of angry fellows. When they returned to the school, if they asked reasonably, they could have an explanation. If not—Blake shrugged his shoulders.

As for the fellow who had tinkered with his bike, Blake yearned with a deep yearning to discover his identity and mete out to him the fate he so richly deserved. As he cycled back to St. Jim's, he revolved in his mind who could be the culprit, without coming to any definite conclusion.

He jumped off at the gates, hardly noticing a fat figure which stared rather fixedly at him.

"Whose jigger, Blake?" grinned Baggy Trimble.

"Eh? Mine, of course!"

"He, he, he! What about the match at Abbotsford?" chortled Baggy, apparently finding great amusement in his reflections.

"What do you know about the match at Abbotsford?" inquired Blake, giving Trimble a rather steely glance.

"Oh, nothing! I thought you were playing, that's all, honest Injun!" gasped Trimble, realising, as usual, that he had let his fat tongue run away with him.

"You don't know anything about my tyres being punctured, I suppose?" asked Blake, watching Trimble closely, and with sudden suspicion.

"Nun-nunno! Nothing at all! I never saw anybody stick pins in them. And if you think it was Racke—"

"Racke!" snapped Blake. "Choke it up, you fat rotter! Was it Racke?"

"He—he told me not to tell anybody!" spluttered Trimble, quite alarmed at the expression on the Fourth-Former's fat face.

"If—if you don't tell me all you know, I'll—I'll burst you, you fat scoundrel!" hissed Blake.

"Ow! It was Racke, then, you beast! And if Racke asks if I told you, tell him—"

But Blake was gone. Once in possession of the name of the culprit, he stood not upon the order of his movements. One thought was uppermost in Blake's mind—to get within hitting distance of Racke and hammer him until he howled. The cad had to be made to understand that tricks on the junior footballers were not profitable, and a grim smile appeared on the Yorkshire junior's face as he entered the Shell passage and paused outside the door of Study No. 7. He had spent an unhappy afternoon—perhaps he would find solace during the next few minutes. After he had smashed Aubrey Racke to a pulp, Blake felt that he could quite cheerfully apologise to Tom Merry & Co. when they returned.

He knocked loudly on the panels, and then threw open the door. Racke, with his crony, Crooke, was at home. Their occupation might have been rather a shock to a master or prefect who had happened to drop in at that time. Both of the young rascals were smoking, and Crooke was reading a pink racing paper. They looked up with convulsive starts as Blake entered the study. Evidently one of them had forgotten to lock the door, which was their usual precaution prior to indulging in a "little smoke."

"Oh, my hat! Blake!" gasped Crooke.

"What do you want, you cad?" ejaculated Racke, hastily putting his cigarette out of sight.

Racke did not want that to be seen by any passer-by.

Normally, Blake might have felt disgust at the atmosphere in the study, but now he hardly noticed it. His eyes fairly glittered at Racke.

"I've just heard that you were responsible for putting my bike out of action, Racke!" he snapped. "I've come to show you what I think of your little joke. Will you step out into the passage, or shall I make a mess of the study?"

Racke licked his lips, and Crooke stared rather in alarm. Neither of the cads had seen Blake in this mood before, and Racke in particular did not like the look of him. He backed round the table, and eyed the junior with considerable apprehension.

"I—I don't know where you got your information from, Blake, but I assure you it's quite wrong. I haven't touched your bike. Honour bright!"

"Your honour's jolly bright—I don't think!" agreed Blake grimly. "I'll repeat what I said before—will you come out into the corridor, or shall I mop up the study with you? You can clear out, Crooke, unless you want a dose, too!"

"Rally round, Crooke!" gasped Racke desperately. "We can handle the rotter between us. Lend a hand!"

Crooke glanced at Blake, and shook his head.

"I'm off!" he remarked coolly.

And, while Racke watched with gleaming eyes, Crooke edged past Blake, leaving his crony to his fate. Blake made a movement, and Racke shot further round the table.

"I—I say—" began Racke savagely.

"Wait till I get at you!" responded Blake.

He made a sudden grab across the table at his quarry, but Racke was too quick for him. Prompted by desperation, he made a frantic dive for the doorway, and fairly flew through the aperture. Blake made a leap after him, and Racke dashed wildly up the passage.

At the turn Blake all but caught up with him; but Racke darted on down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time, with Blake a yard or two in the rear. In another moment or two the chase would have ended, and retribution—richly deserved—have overtaken the practical joker. But Racke's brain worked swiftly in the emergency, and he turned his fleeing footsteps in the direction of the Masters' Corridor. The corridor was deserted as he entered it, but the cad felt safe enough from vengeance right under the noses of the beaks, so to speak.

He slowed down into a walk, and grinned as Blake, his face red with wrath, dashed up to him. The Yorkshire junior had no thought to devote to the masters at that moment, and it is doubtful if the prospect of a licking could have stayed him. Racke had no time to duck, and he gave a wild howl as Blake's clenched fist smote him on the point of his sharp chin. In a few seconds there was a whirlwind combat in progress outside Mr. Railton's door—a very one-sided combat indeed!

Racke was knocked right and left by the Fourth-Former, his feeble defence being knocked aside with ease. But, although he was hopelessly out of the picture in a scrap, the cad of the Shell could howl, and howl he did, at the top of his voice.

It was likely that, on a half-holiday, several of the masters would be out, but one, at least, must be in his study, and Racke's roars were calculated to reach the ears of every inhabitant of the House. It was not surprising that the door of Mr. Railton's study was opened suddenly, and the Housemaster, looking extremely annoyed, looked out. Mr. Railton had been marking examination papers, and he did not like the interruption.

"Boys! Racke! Blake! Stop this immediately!"

Racke heard, and with deep thankfulness he dropped his hands and reeled, panting for breath, against the wall. Blake heard, too, and reluctantly stepped back. Mr. Railton glanced from one to the other, his frown deepening.

"Which of you boys am I to understand started this—this disgraceful exhibition?" he inquired grimly.

"I did, sir!" answered Blake coolly.

"Had you any reason for attacking Racke in so furious a manner?" asked the Housemaster. "You know that the gymnasium is the place in which to settle your disputes!"

Racke made no reply, and Blake looked grim.

"Racke—ahem!—annoyed me, sir!" Blake said calmly.

"I—I—"

Mr. Railton looked at him for a moment, and then motioned to his study.

"Racke, as you appear to have been attacked, you may go. I will deal with Blake. Go into my study, Blake!"

The Fourth-Former obeyed silently, and watched the Housemaster select a cane.

"You must learn to control your temper, my boy!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Racke will bear the marks of your savage treatment for some days!"

Blake held out his hand, and the cane swished. His lips set tighter as the infliction continued. Mr. Railton felt that this was a case for severe correction, and he was not sparing the rod. Blake's face was white when it was over, and he turned to go.

"I trust that will be a lesson to control your temper better in future, Blake!" observed the Housemaster coldly. "That is all."

Jack Blake left the study with a glint in his eyes, and he hardly noticed the ache in his palms. Racke, by his scheming,

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had kept him out of the match at Abbotsford; and now, when he had been called to account, he had landed the subject of his jest in for a record licking.

Blake made his way to Study No. 6 and threw himself in an armchair to rest. Racke would keep—and the footballers would be in soon, demanding an explanation. In his present mood, one of sullen anger, Blake was not likely to prove very patient under the questioning and chipping of his chums.

He went for a stroll in the quad at last, and caught sight of Trimble, lounging as usual. Trimble grinned as Blake approached, and chuckled.

"Tom Merry and his pals are just coming!" chortled Baggy. "I've seen them from the gates. Don't you want to meet them, Blake?"

Jack Blake glanced at Trimble, and made a movement.

"Yarooogh!"

There was a wild howl from Trimble as a boot clumped forcibly on his well-filled trousers, and he scuttled away as fast as his fat little legs would carry him.

Blake's eyes were fixed sullenly on the school gates, at which the junior footballers were just entering.

CHAPTER 4.

A Rift in the Lute!

"A HOY, there, Blake!"

It was a hail from Figgins.

The St. Jim's junior eleven, beaten at the finish by four goals to one, were approaching the School House steps, and the New House leader was the first to catch sight of the Fourth-Former.

The faces of the majority of the team were dark and angry, and they wanted very much to meet Blake and tell him in plain language exactly what they thought of him. They knew how to deal with a fellow who thought nothing of letting the eleven down with impunity. Unless Blake could offer some very concrete reason for his absence, nobody, with the possible exception of Tom Merry, was prepared to stand on ceremony with him.

Blake's manner when questioned at Abbotsford had appeared guilty—or so the juniors persuaded themselves—and, in their opinion, it was up to him to give his explanation promptly and frankly—always supposing that he had one.

"Well?"

Blake spoke grimly, and his manner was not apologetic. His usual stolid, good-humoured demeanour seemed to have disappeared entirely now, and his eyes gleamed as Tom Merry spoke.

"I suppose you're ready to explain now, Blake? You must see the fellows are feeling sore over the whole affair. Let's hear it, and get it done with!"

"Why didn't you turn up at Abbotsford, you dummy?" roared Kangaroo, interrupting. "You left us in the lurch and we were licked—four to one!"

"We're all waiting for an explanation, Blake!" said Tom Merry.

"Sticking in your study writing, while we wait at the gates?" remarked Figgins, with New House disdain. "I'd like to see a New House fellow treat the team like that! I'd jolly well talk to him!"

"Hear, hear!" came a unanimous chorus from the New House juniors present.

Blake's expression, far from softening at the storm of questions which were hurled at his head, hardened still more. He looked very unlike his usual cheery self as he faced the footballers.

"I seem to have heard that before, Figgins!" he remarked coolly. "If I remember, I gave you my word at Abbotsford—but apparently it isn't good enough!"

Tom Merry set his lips.

"Talk sense, Blake!" he suggested. "Nobody's doubting your word—we only want to know why you didn't turn up at the match—as we've a right to, I should think!"

Blake was silent, his sullen expression deepening.

"Well, buck up!" urged Lowther. "You don't want time to make it up, I suppose—like Baggy Trimble!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a chuckle, but it quickly died away. Blake's obvious reluctance to reveal what had happened could only be construed in one way—that he had no excuse which he could offer them. And at that thought the faces of the junior footballers became very grim.

As for Blake, he had decided that he would not reveal his reason. If these fellows could not take his word that he had not deserted them—

"I was delayed!" he said coolly. "I give you my word it was no fault of mine—you can take my word, I suppose. It couldn't be helped—that's all I've got to say!"

"Oh!"

"Delayed!" repeated Figgins, with deep disgust. "That

may be good enough for Tom Merry, but on our side of the quad—"

"So my word isn't good enough, Figgins?" snapped Blake, his face flushing.

Figgins eyed him grimly in return.

"If you put it that way, I suppose it is!" he admitted. "But all the same, you're offering a pretty lame excuse. I think Tom Merry is entitled to a fuller explanation than that—though we can all take your word, naturally!"

"Thanks!" observed Blake, not, however, appearing very grateful.

The junior captain gave Blake a glance, and nodded rather shortly.

"If you don't want to explain, I suppose you needn't!" he responded. "I can take your word, of course."

"Then I may as well say," observed Blake calmly, "that I don't care a fig whether you believe me or not, Merry! So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

There was a silence after that remark. All the juniors felt that the next move was up to Tom Merry. The Shell captain was silent for a few moments, but he responded evenly.

"If that's where we stand, there's no more to be said about it! Come on, Monty. Give me your other arm, Manners, old chap!"

And, in a strained atmosphere, the Terrible Three passed into the House, leaving Blake still with the steely look in his eyes.

The rest of the team gave the Fourth-Former a glance and followed their captain.

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They could not understand Blake's absence from the match, and this open defiance, coming on top of it, found them somewhat at a loss. Evidently something out of the ordinary must have occurred to disturb Blake's equilibrium, and the footballers tersely left it to the junior captain to solve the mystery.

As for Blake, he stared after the retreating form of the Shell captain with mixed emotions. Chief among them was defiance, but at the same time he could not help reflecting that it was the trick played on him by Racke, and still unavenged, that had rendered him so eager to take offence. The questioning of the team had stung his pride, but he was already repenting, in spite of himself.

An arm was slipped into his, and a voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Comin' up to the studay, deah boy?"

Gussy's eyeglass beamed benevolently on his chum, and Blake nodded without speaking, and suffered himself to be led up to Study No. 6.

Prep in the study that evening was done in a rather strained silence. Blake's chums were standing by him loyally, but he offered them no fuller account than he had given Tom Merry. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wisely deduced that Blake was feeling injured, and would unburden himself later, and Herries and Digby were of the same mind.

Prep over, Blake rose, followed by Gussy, and the two chums strolled down to the Common-room in a rather expectant mood.

They found a crowd of fellows there already, and it was soon obvious that Blake's desertion of the team was the main topic of conversation. The entry of the Fourth-Formers was not noticed at first, and Blake grinned slightly, though Arthur Augustus was looking very serious.

"If I were Tom Merry," came Baggy Trimble's fat voice, "I'd jolly well lick the chump! Fancy letting the team down in an important fixture, and then refusing to explain

"Oh, shut up!" grunted George Alfred Grundy from his position in front of the fire. "This is what comes of leaving me out of the team—almost a direct consequence, you might say."

"Yaw-aw-aw!" interpolated Cardew rather rudely.

"Yes, do give your jaw a rest, Grundy!" said Kangaroo irritably. "This is a serious matter—not an occasion for potty jokes!"

"Ain't I treating it seriously?" hooted Grundy indignantly. "If I were junior captain I should drop Blake for a bit, just to make him remember his place."

"Oh, you would, would you?" murmured Blake.

"The cheeky wottah—" began Arthur Augustus heatedly.

"Racke!" ejaculated his chum suddenly.

"Eh?"

"There's Racke," repeated Blake grimly. "I want to speak to him a minute."

Aubrey Racke of the Shell was the first to spot Blake's presence in the crowd, and he would willingly have backed into the passage, had time permitted. But he was obliged to stand his ground, as Blake grasped his shoulder.

"Now then, you cad!" said Blake grimly.

There was a shout as Blake came forward, and the junior was surrounded.

"You've got to explain, Blake!"

"No time like the present!"

"Cough it up, you rotter!" hooted Grundy.

"Bump him till he does!" squeaked Trimble.

The circle of excited faces did not ruffle Blake's demeanour, but Racke was looking quite scared. He had a wholesome fear of his rascally trick coming to light, and the anger of the footballers being re-directed upon him. And Blake's next words were not re-assuring.

"One thing at a time," said Blake coolly. "I'm questioning Racke at the moment. I'll give you my attention when I've finished."

"Why, you cheeky cad—"

"You Fourth Form swanker!"

"Scrag him!"

"Make him tell the truth!" squealed Trimble.

"Look here, Racke—" recommenced Blake.

Aubrey Racke's brain had been working swiftly during the last few seconds, and now he had decided on his course of action.

"You've got rather a nerve, Blake!" he said admiringly. "You object to being questioned yourself by the junior captain, but you think you have a perfect right to tax me in front of a crowd of fellows. Rather cool, what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good for you, Racke!"

For once it seemed that Aubrey Racke enjoyed the sympathy of the junior school, and he made the most of his opportunity.

Blake stood speechless, quite nonplussed by the rapid turn of events. If it came to that, Racke was right, he reflected, and the thought was not pleasing.

"I'm willin' to answer any questions Blake may care to put," said Racke boldly. "But I don't think he ought to be a privileged mortal exempt from being questioned himself. I leave it to you fellows."

The roar of appreciation which greeted Racke's remark died away suddenly as Baggy Trimble's voice sounded above the rest.

"Here's Tom Merry! Now for it!"

Looking rather surprised, the Shell captain was pushed forward until he was confronted by Blake and Racke in the centre of the crowd.

A dozen juniors started to speak at once, but piece by piece Tom Merry gathered the facts.

"It's a matter for you to decide, Merry," said Racke, with a cunning grin. "Is Blake to be allowed to do just as he likes, or—"

"That's enough, Racke!" snapped Tom Merry. "What was Blake taxing you about?"

Racke paled, and found himself at a loss for a reply.

Tom Merry glanced at Blake.

"What was it, Blake?" he asked calmly.

Jack Blake's lips set, and he shook his head.

"I've nothing to say," he responded. "I seem to be regarded as a criminal just at present, so I won't say anything further."

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"And that's the way you let fellows talk to you, Merry!" ejaculated Racke, almost gasping with relief.

Tom Merry's face hardened, but he held himself in check. "I'm sorry we appear to be on bad terms, Blake," he said levelly. "But I can't say I approve of your picking on Racke when you're so secretive yourself."

"Thanks!" said Blake grimly.

"Well, what's going to be done about the Abbotsford match?" roared Grundy. "We sha'n't be satisfied unless you do something to show your authority, Merry!"

"The least you can do is to drop him out of the team against Greyfriars," said Gore.

Blake started. That suggestion appeared to find favour among the Shell fellows, at least. There was a chorus of assent, with a few spirited protests from the Fourth-Formers present.

"Look heab, Tom Mewwy—" began Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Is Blake playing against Greyfriars or not?" asked Grundy.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath and glanced at the members of the committee. His eyes rested finally on Blake's defiant countenance.

"I think there's a majority," remarked the junior captain. "I'm sorry, Blake, but you won't be wanted for the Greyfriars match, unless you've a satisfactory explanation to offer."

"You said my word was good enough!" said Blake grimly.

"Dash it all, there's no need to keep anything dark!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "You must expect to come in for criticism if you persist in playing the giddy ox."

"All right!" responded Blake with surprising meekness. "Only I don't allow fellows to doubt my word. Is that enough for you?"

He stepped forward, and Tom Merry's cheek burned where Blake's flat hand caught it with a resounding smack.

"Bai Jove!"

"You ass, Blake!" breathed Cardew.

There was a pause, while the Shell captain gazed steadily at Blake.

"Any time you like, then!" he said at last.

"I'll send my second. There's no time before bed," said Blake, yawning. "Coming for a sprint in the quad, Gussy?"

"If you like, deah boy."

And in a dead silence the two juniors passed from the Common-room, with Tom Merry staring rather fixedly after them.

CHAPTER 5.

Behind the Chapel!

"TOM MEWWY!"

The captain of the Shell paused as he emerged from the Form-room, and found himself confronted by the elegant figure of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. It was the day following the episode in the Common-room, and although naturally incensed by being given the "coward's blow," he had been content for Blake to decide the time and place. Somehow, it went against the grain to be really angry with the Yorkshire junior, but there was no possibility of avoiding a combat now that Blake had taken the drastic step of smacking the skipper's face. Apparently Gussy was acting as "second" to his chum.

"Tom Mewwy—" Gussy paused and coughed, almost apologetically, while Manners and Lowther and a number of the Shell eyed him rather grimly.

"Carry on!" said Tom Merry quietly. "I suppose you've come from Blake to fix the scrap. Monty and Manners are acting for me."

"Yaas, Blake will be behind the chapel at six, if that will suit your convenience, deah boy?"

"Perfectly!" assented the Shell captain, with the trace of a smile. "I suppose we're still friends, though, Gussy?"

The swell of the Fourth coloured deeply.

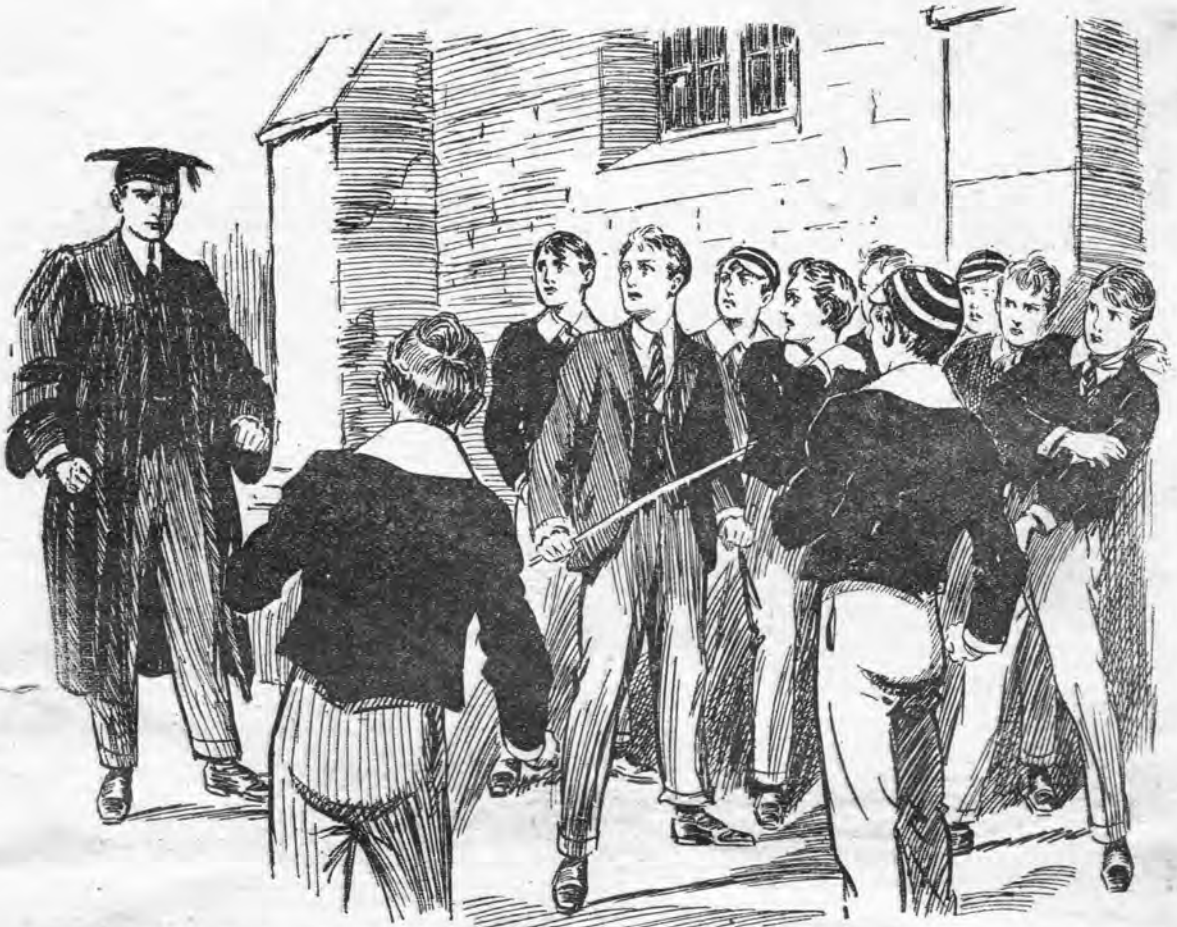
"Of course, I am bound to stand by my friend Blake," he said slowly. "But I am glad you do not want this—this vegwetttable affaiah to terminate our friendship. Perhaps—perhaps it will all blow ovah in a day or two!"

"I hope so!" agreed Tom Merry heartily. "Anyway, you can tell Blake I'll be there!"

Arthur Augustus nodded, and strolled elegantly away, leaving a buzz of conversation behind him. The general opinion of the Shell appeared to be that Blake had asked for it, and now he was going to receive it. Gore characterised the whole proceeding as "sheer Fourth Form cheek," and most of the fellows agreed with him.

But Tom Merry was rather silent at tea in Study No. 10 that afternoon, in spite of the efforts of Lowther and Manners to encourage bright and cheery conversation.

"Blake is an ass. It's high time he was made to realise



The contest was raging at its height when a well-known voice, quivering with anger, brought the juniors to their senses. Mr. Railton fairly stared as he beheld Kildare, his clothes torn and rumpled, gripping his ashplant in the midst of the juniors. "Bless my soul! Kildare, can you explain the cause of this remarkable demonstration?" asked Mr. Railton. (See Chapter 5.)

that he's not the giddy grand Panjandrum of the junior school!" opined Manners.

"And Tommy is the man to do it!" concurred Lowther.

To which Tom Merry's rather paradoxical reply was the classic monosyllable, "Rats!"

As the time fixed for the fight approached, Tom Merry grew more and more restless, much to his chums' surprise and annoyance.

"I can't help thinking that we don't know all the facts regarding Blake's desertion," he said, as he left the study, arm-in-arm with his chums, en route for the old chapel.

"Whose fault's that?" grunted Manners. "He's had enough chances to give an excuse—if he's got one! Instead of coming out into the open, he gets on his ear every time the matter is mentioned!"

"That's so!" said Tom Merry thoughtfully.

"I jolly well wish he had turned up for the match," continued Manners. "I shouldn't have crocked my ankle then. I shall have to hobble about on it for a week or so!"

"Can't very well hammer Blake for that!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Hallo! The rival champion is early on the field!" ejaculated Monty Lowther, as they entered the ring of juniors who had assembled to behold the battle.

"My hat! There's a crowd of the Fourth!" said Manners. "I think they're in for the harrowing sight of seeing their champion smashed!"

"Here they are!"

"Good old Merry!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

There was no lack of cheering from the Shell fellows present, but it was noticeable that the Fourth-Formers were ominously silent. Evidently whether he was in the right or not, Blake had the support of his Form fellows—who rather outnumbered the Shell.

Gloves had been fetched, and the seconds busied themselves with bowls of water and sponges. Then Talbot, who was refereeing, stepped into the ring, and Clive, the time-

keeper, sounded the gong—a tin ashpan—with the aid of a cricket stump.

The combatants, looking very cool and self-possessed, shook hands briefly, and the fight began.

It began in a manner calculated to electrify the onlookers, and it succeeded. Blake evidently realised that his opponent had the advantage in weight and reach, and had decided that his best chance lay in reducing the Shell captain to impotence during the first round, and finishing the bout off quickly with a knock-out.

He led off in hurricane style, left and right getting home on the body almost at once, and then a swift upper-cut sent Tom Merry reeling to the edge of the ring.

The Shell captain felt his jaw dazedly, and covered up instinctively as Blake was upon him again, pummelling away with fierce energy, and penning his adversary into a corner. Only the timely intervention of the gong prevented Blake from carrying his project into effect, and sending the junior captain to the boards in the first round.

Lowther made a knee, and Manners fanned his man desperately with a towel, but Tom Merry was obviously "groggy" as he stepped up for the second round. Blake, too, had taken something out of himself during that strenuous opening bout, but he came into action again as fiercely and as grimly determined as before.

The junior captain warded off the blows with better success for a while, but his right eye was fast closing as he staggered to his corner at the end of the round. Blake, on the other hand, was almost unmarked, though he was breathing heavily as Gussy fanned his face.

The third round was less virile than those preceding, for the simple reason that Blake was beginning to tire, in spite of himself, and Tom Merry was slowly but surely recovering. The fourth and fifth rounds were fought with no quarter on either side, and hard blows were exchanged. The gong found Blake with an eye to match Tom Merry's, while the junior captain was dabbing at a streaming nose.

"Phew! They'll have some marks to show to-morrow mornin'," whistled Cardew.

"Sixth round!" said Levison.

Tom Merry stepped up briskly enough, but it was obvious that Blake had shot his bolt, and could only hope desperately for a knock-out blow. On points Tom Merry was an easy winner of the round, but Blake held on grimly, and was still taking punishment in the next. With victory in his grasp, Tom Merry made a last effort to avoid the unpleasant task of sending the Fourth-Former down for the count.

"Chuck it, Blake, old man!" he whispered, as they entered a clinch. "I'm willing to call it square, if you are!"

"Get on with it, Merry!" came Grundy's emphatic roar. "You're playing with him!"

Blake flushed, and shook his head.

"No, thanks, Merry!" he gasped. "I'm going on to the finish!"

And he broke away, standing unsteadily, but with determination in every feature.

"Finish it quick, Tom!" whispered Lowther uneasily. "There's been enough damage done already. We shall have a break along if we're not careful; they must have been deaf not to have heard the shouting before this!"

The junior captain gave a brief nod, and feinted with his left, preparatory to ending the matter with a lightning right.

There was already a running fire of encouragement from the Fourth-Formers urging Blake to "stick to it," and Blake's face was red with sweat and shame.

He put up a desperate counter-attack to Tom Merry's, and almost succeeded in forcing an opening. There was a sudden silence, hardly noticed by the combatants. Then Blake caught sight of Kildare of the Sixth, staring grimly at the contest, and he dropped his guard. In the moment which followed Tom Merry's fist shot out automatically, and sent his man spinning on the grass, while a roar of anger went up from the Fourth.

The knock-out—for so it was—had been delivered while Blake's attention was diverted, and his supporters were not likely to consider the fact that Tom Merry had been quite unable to stop himself from delivering that final blow, though he would have given a term's pocket-money to have been able to do so.

The presence of Kildare at that moment, head prefect as he was, had little or no deterring effect on the incensed juniors. In a few seconds they had swarmed into the ring and lifted their champions, while a series of cat-calls and terms of opprobrium filled the air.

"Stop that, you young idiots!" rapped Kildare.

"He was licked to the wide, I tell you!" hooted Grundy, in response to a loudly-expressed opinion to the contrary from Roylance. In a matter of seconds, Grundy and Roylance had closed in mortal combat, and the movement spread with the rapidity of a prairie fire. Kildare dashed among the excited juniors, wielding his ashplant to the accompaniment of wild yells from the recipients, but he was powerless to quell the general scrap which had ensued on all sides.

To his complete astonishment and indignation, Kildare found himself being bumped into and finally bowled over, while a crowd of angry, shouting juniors surged over him like the waves of the sea. He struggled to his feet and waded into the combatants after the manner of a hurricane, but though he did great execution, the hostilities showed no signs of abating.

The contest was raging at its height when a well-known voice, almost quivering with anger, brought the juniors to their senses, and soothed the rabble. Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, was eyeing his pupils with mingled loathing and disgust. He fairly stared as he

beheld Kildare, his clothes torn and rumpled, gripping his ashplant in the midst of the juniors.

"Bless my soul! Kildare, can you explain the cause of this remarkable demonstration?" asked Mr. Railton.

"I—I think so, sir!" gasped the captain of the school grimly. "I found a fight in progress here between Merry and Blake—Merry struck Blake a blow while the latter was looking at me—with the result that the supporters of the combatants went mad!"

"So I observed!" remarked Mr. Railton dryly. "Upon my soul, I have never witnessed such a display of hooliganism in all my life! A friendly 'rag' I can understand, but this—"

"It appears to have been a Form dispute, sir!" put in Kildare. "Nearly all the Shell and Fourth are here!"

"I am at a loss to account for it!" ejaculated Mr. Railton. "But every boy present will be severely punished. Merry—Blake—step forward. One of you had better explain the cause of this disgusting encounter!"

Tom Merry and Blake, both looking the worse for wear, emerged from the crowd, the latter leaning heavily on the arm of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"You—you see, sir," began the Shell captain, blinking painfully with the eye which was not yet closed. "Blake and I had an—argument—"

"Merry couldn't help hitting me at the finish!" mumbled Blake. "He didn't see Kildare when I did. The fellows were a bit excited, sir." He paused to mop a streaming nose, while the Housemaster eyed them grimly.

"Every boy concerned in this will write me five hundred lines!" Mr. Railton announced. "As for you two boys, I should feel inclined to increase the imposition, but for the fact that you have already suffered severely at each other's hands. Kildare, I very much regret that you should have been obliged to engage in a rough-and-tumble with these boys—the whole affair is disgraceful!"

There was a murmur from the juniors. The weaker spirits had been completely subdued by the award of five hundred lines, but feeling still ran high in many breasts.

"What about the Greyfriars match?"

"We're fed up with Merry, sir!"

"Down with the Shell fish!"

"Why, you cheeky Fourth Form fatheads—"

There were already the beginnings of a fresh row when Mr. Railton, recovering from his surprise, silenced the juniors with a grim command.

"Silence, all of you!" he exclaimed angrily. "This is unbearable! This matter will have to be thrashed out here and now. Do I understand you Fourth Form boys are dissatisfied with Merry's conduct for some reason?"

"Yes, sir!"

"That's it!"

"It's time he chucked the captaincy, sir!"

"Bless my soul! The dispute would appear to be serious, Kildare!" said the Housemaster.

"They want another dose of my ashplant!" said Kildare, influenced a little, perhaps, by his recent rough treatment at the hands of the "raggers."

"I cannot tell you how much I deplore this manner of expressing your opinions, boys!" said Mr. Railton. "You are as well aware as I am that the proper procedure would have been to send a deputation to me in my study—however, if you have a genuine cause for complaint, I will look into it!"

"Tom Merry's all right!" hooted Grundy recklessly.

"Better than Blake, anyway!"

"Yah! Down with the Shell!"

"Silence! The next boy that speaks will be flogged!" rapped out the Housemaster. "Now, I will put it to the vote—hold up your hands all those who object to Merry as junior captain."

Jack Blake almost forgot his injuries as he beheld the forest of hands which went up. Evidently the dispute had become entirely a Form matter by this time, and Fourth voted solid for their own leader.

Mr. Railton's expression, as he received that answer to his appeal, was a little mixed. There was no difference of opinion in the Fourth—they were against Tom Merry to a man. Yet, what could they be holding against the junior captain? The Housemaster pondered that question in vain.

"Very well, then," he said, without troubling to count the hands, which were easily in the majority. "The only remedy for this state of affairs is a new election. I shall expect intending candidates to hand in their names to me by Friday, at the latest. The election will be held in the junior Common-room on Saturday at six o'clock. I think that should settle the matter. Your lines will be handed in before the election. That is all. Now return to the House as quickly as possible, and remove the traces of your dispute. Merry and Blake, you had better go to the House-dame, and she will dress your injuries!"

"Yes, sir!"

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And the juniors trooped off obediently across the quad, inwardly seething with excitement. Matters had taken a dramatic turn—an election for the junior captaincy had devolved from the fight between Tom Merry and Blake!

Mr. Railton and Kildare were quite unable to explain the reason for the sudden "set" against Tom Merry, and when the rest of the school heard of the election, they, too, wondered. But Tom Merry kept his own counsel, and Blake was still further entrenched in his decision not to explain—wherefrom great changes were looming ahead!

CHAPTER 6.

Racke's Scheme!

"CROOKE, old man, I've hit on the wheeze of a lifetime!"

Aubrey Racke, the cad of the Shell, made that announcement, and he made it in tones of enthusiasm.

Gerald Crooke, his chum and study-mate, did not appear very interested. Perhaps that could have been attributed to a pink racing paper which was absorbing all his attention.

The two juniors had retired to their study when classes were over for the day, and the next item on the agenda should have been tea. But Racke, at least, was not giving much thought to his inner man. The election was to be held on the morrow, and a wheeze which had been simmering in his mind all day had suddenly come to fruition.

The position which the electorate of the Shell and Fourth found themselves in was very intriguing. If they were School House Shell, they would naturally vote for Tom Merry, while the Fourth could be relied upon now to back up Blake, entirely oblivious to the rights or wrongs of the matter. As the Fourth held a considerable advantage in numbers, the present junior skipper appeared to have a somewhat lean chance of retaining office.

But to-day another factor had been brought to notice: for George Figgins, the lanky New House leader, had seized the opportunity presented by the split, and handed in his name as a third candidate. It went without saying that Figgins would collar all the New House votes, thus considerably lessening both Blake's and Tom Merry's adherents, though the former was likely to suffer most heavily.

The voters were thus split into three camps, all more or less equal, and there would probably not be half a dozen votes between the candidates at the poll. It was this position—annoying to the candidates, but quite unavoidable—which had given Racke so much food for thought, and finally he had resolved to carry an audacious scheme into execution.

Perceiving that Crooke's attention was fixed elsewhere, he coolly snatched the paper from the hand that held it, and tossed it aside.

"Here! What's the little game?" ejaculated Crooke.

"I want your opinion on a delicate matter, Gerald, my boy!" grinned Racke.

"Gee-gees?" asked Crooke hopefully.

"Not this time," said Racke. "It's a little scheme that occurred to me with regard to this election."

"I find it rather boring!" admitted Crooke frankly. "If Blake or Figgins gets in, they will be just as down on a fellow having a harmless flutter as Merry is—all of 'em good little Georgies! I don't think I shall vote at all."

"Yes, you will!" announced Racke purposefully. "When you've heard me sketch out my scheme, you'll put your heart and soul into it, an' vote as I tell you. How many fellows are there with votes in both Houses?"

"I don't know. Nearly sixty, I suppose."

"That's near enough. Well, you can see the way the wind's blowing—the three candidates look like finishing with about twenty each."

"Well, what if they do?" asked Crooke uninterestedly.

"What I'm driving at is, if a fourth candidate were to enter the lists, he'd only have to make sure of a score of votes to romp home!" said Racke coolly. "In that case, there would be only forty to divide between the other three."

"Oh!" said Crooke in a different tone.

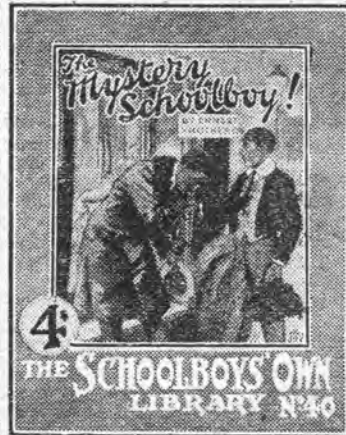
"Twenty votes isn't many, after all," observed Racke thoughtfully. "If a fellow were to set about canvassing the weaker spirits—with a bribe or two—I think it could be done."

"You as junior captain?" ejaculated Crooke.

Racke's smile widened, and he nodded.

"Why not?" he inquired coolly. "I shouldn't be so down on a little game in the study as our respected Merry,

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should I? What a gorgeous life. Crooke—with me ruling the roost!"

"My only hat!" gasped Crooke, struck with the audacity of the idea.

"Just think," urged Racke calmly. "I could rely on your vote, for one. Then there's Mellish, an' Scrope, of the Fourth—Mellish would sell his soul for a ten bob note! Chowle and Clampe, of the New House, would join up—they wouldn't worry about deserting Figgins if I promised them a good time afterwards. An' then there's Buck Finn—he'd come into the fold for a consideration. Lennox, too; Frere, an' lots of fellows who don't care much who wins—fellows who don't get a chance in the junior eleven, through bein' duds. I'll promise to play chaps like that after I'm elected; that ought to fetch 'em!"

"My dear chap, you're a regular genius!" said Crooke admiringly. "Dashed if I don't think you could work it, by scatterin' a little cash, as you mentioned. An' what a smack in the eye for Merry an' all that crowd—knucklin' under to your orders! I can see 'em doin' it!"

Aubrey Racke chuckled with keen amusement at the thought. He was full of enthusiasm for his scheme, and eager to be up and doing.

"I'll just run along an' hand in my name to Railton," he announced. "Then we'll do a bit of canvassin' before tea-time. With any luck, we ought to have made sure of the votes before dorm."

"Good man!" said Crooke. "But half a minute—what will Railton think?"

"Blow Railton!" grinned Racke. "I know he's not in love with me, but he can't raise any legitimate objection to my standin'. I shall enjoy watchin' the old bird's face when he takes my name! Sha'n't be two ticks!"

And, whistling blithely, Aubrey Racke hastened along the passage to the Housemaster's study and knocked. A deep voice bade him enter.

"Well, Racke, what is it?" inquired Mr. Railton, looking up from the pile of exercises he was correcting.

"I want you to take my name, sir," said Racke cheerfully. "I'm standin' as a candidate for the election."

The cad of the Shell suppressed a grin as Mr. Railton's eyes opened; but the Housemaster's reply was calm enough.

"Very well, Racke. I should hardly have thought—But, never mind, I will add your name to those already on the board, my boy. Is that all you wished to see me about?"

"Yes, thank you, sir!" responded Racke, backing to the door.

He was almost walking on air as he came down the stairs.

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passage. The last obstacle—so it seemed to him—had been removed. If Mr. Railton raised no objection to his standing—and it was difficult to see how he could object—Racke had no doubt of his own ability to rally a sufficient number of supporters round his banner.

"I say, Racke—"

The great Aubrey halted abruptly as a fat voice broke in on his pleasant thoughts, and he beheld the podgy form of Baggy Trimble in his path. Normally, he would have disposed of Baggy by the simple expedient of placing an elegant foot against the rear of Baggy's ample trousers, and force of habit was so strong that he even raised his foot this time. But as Trimble scuttled back in readiness to flee, Racke stopped, and an ingratiating smile appeared as if by clockwork on his face.

"Hold on a minute, Baggy, old pal!" he ejaculated.

The "old pal" came easily to the cad's lips at such a moment. It was at moments like this that elections were won or lost—and Aubrey Racke was taking no chances! He modulated his voice to quite a chummy tone as Trimble rolled up, rather suspiciously, it is true.

"What is it, Trimble?" asked Racke, in tones of the honey-bee. "Anythin' a fellow could do for a pal?"

Baggy stared for a moment, quite unable to account for this sudden friendliness on Racke's part, but Baggy was not the fellow to neglect an opportunity.

"To—to tell the truth—" he began, inwardly deciding on the most advantageous tale to spin, "I—I'm in need of a—quid—it ought to have come by the last post—from my pater, you know. Of course, I shouldn't like to ask—"

"Don't mention it, old bean!" said Racke airily, extracting his handsome Russian-leather purse. "A quid, you say? Here you are, old man. A little loan between pals—what? Pay me back any time."

And with an affable nod, the cad passed on, leaving Trimble staring after him in the deepest astonishment. Aubrey Racke—philanthropist—was hard to believe, even when seen!

Meanwhile, having laid the foundation-stone of a loyal party, Racke, re-entered Study No. 7, and found Crooke preparing tea.

"How did you get on with Railton?" asked Crooke at once.

"Great! An' I've just made sure of Trimble's vote!" grinned Racke. "I didn't even ask him for it—just played up like a real pal and lent him a quid—but I think he'll stick to me now till I throw him over."

"An' that will be the day after the election!" observed Crooke.

"Exactly!" agreed Racke coolly. "But that's neither here nor there. We'd better do our canvassin' after tea, as you've got it ready."

The two young rascals soon had tea over, fortunately without the addition of Baggy Trimble to the festive board. For once, it seemed as if Baggy's nose had failed him.

"Now for rallyin' the fellows!" grinned Racke, as he rose from the tea-table. "I've made a list of all the likely ones—we'll begin on the Shell passage, then do the Fourth, and after that the New House."

A start was made at once, the first port of call being Study No. 8, where Boulton and Walkley were discovered at tea.

"Hallo! What do you chaps want?" inquired Walkley, quite surprised to see Racke and Crooke, to whom he rarely if ever spoke. Neither Walkley nor Boulton ever took much part in the affairs of the school, and although they did not approve of Racke, he was no enemy of theirs.

"I've got a proposition to put before you fellows," said Racke impressively. "It's to do with the election."

"Oh, I'm voting for Tom Merry," said Walkley at once.

"Same here," concurred Boulton.

"I thought so," responded Racke. "An' I just want you fellows to think. If Tom Merry gets back to the captaincy—or even if Blake or Piggins wins it—what kind of a show will you chaps ever get in the junior eleven, an' the affairs of the junior school generally?"

"I don't know," said Boulton rather thoughtfully.

"Not much," responded Walkley frankly. "But then, neither of us is up to first eleven form, so what can we expect?"

"Modesty, thy name is Walkley," grinned Racke. "But what I'm drivin' at is this: How do you know you're no good for the junior footer eleven—you're a passable forward, an' with a bit of coachin' you'd make as good a man as Blake or the rest."

"Well, I've always thought I could do something if I was brought out," assented Walkley. "But I can't see the idea. Who do you want us to vote for?"

"Me!" said Racke, with the utmost coolness.

"But—but I didn't know you were standing!" ejaculated Boulton.

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"My name's just been shoved on the board," answered Racke. "An' perhaps you can see my meanin' now? If I can rely on your votes, fair's fair. You can rely on your places when I come to pick the junior eleven."

"But—but you'd make an awful mess of it," protested Boulton, somewhat dazzled, nevertheless, by the prospect of appearing in the junior eleven.

"Rot!" said Racke decidedly. "It's sheer bosh to say that you fellows aren't up to the form required—there's lots of fellows in the same boat, an' I can warn you that I'm gettin' a crowd of supporters. We're out to show St. Jim's that the back numbers can put up as good a show as the little tin gods they worship now."

"Something in that," said Walkley. "So you want our votes, Racke—and we shall both be picked for the next match—against Greyfriars?"

"I promise," assented Racke calmly. "It will be rather rippin' to send the Friars home with their tails between their legs, won't it?"

"By Jove!" breathed Walkley. "Rely on me for one, Racke!"

"You're not promising a place to anyone who will vote for you, I suppose?" asked Boulton, with a sudden gleam of intelligence.

"Of course not!" responded Racke glibly. "I mentioned it to you fellows because you will be 'certs,' that's all. I'll shove your names on my list then?"

"Right-ho!" agreed Walkley. "You might remember I rather prefer inside-left, Racke."

"Good!" responded the cad, while Crooke smothered a chuckle. "What about you, Boulton?"

"Anywhere for me," said Boulton modestly. "I'm best as a defender, though."

Racke nodded and entered up Boulton's preference with perfect solemnity.

"We'll be goin', then," he observed. "So long, old beans!"

Once in the passage again, Crooke burst into a chortle, but Racke stopped him.

"It's workin' like an oracle!" he grinned. "Keep your face straight, Gerald—we're goin' to spin that yarn to every fellow who's the least little bit doubtful in the Shell and Fourth."

"Suppose they compare notes?" suggested Crooke.

"They won't—there won't be time before to-morrow," pointed out Racke. "An', in any case, I'm restrictin' the number of actual promises to eleven—but I can throw out any number of hints—an' I'm goin' to!"

The two juniors spent the greater part of the evening in a round of the junior studies, and, thanks to Racke's persuasive tongue, their "bag" was considerable. Even allowing for a few backsliders, the position was extremely hopeful.

Besides Racke's immediate circle, Walkley and Boulton, Lucas and Frere, Gibbons and Lennox, all gave faithful promises. Then a patient combing of the Fourth Form studies added such names as Clarence York Tompkins, Wyatt, Lorne, Bates, Jones minor, and Lennox to the list. The New House proved difficult ground, but promises—for what they were worth—were extracted from Thompson, Digges, and one or two others.

At a conservative estimate, Racke had a score of votes, on which he could rely, and with the slightest element of luck, the scale would be turned heavily in his favour.

It was no wonder that Racke's face as he slept that night wore a happy smile, in anticipation of the triumph awaiting him on the morrow!

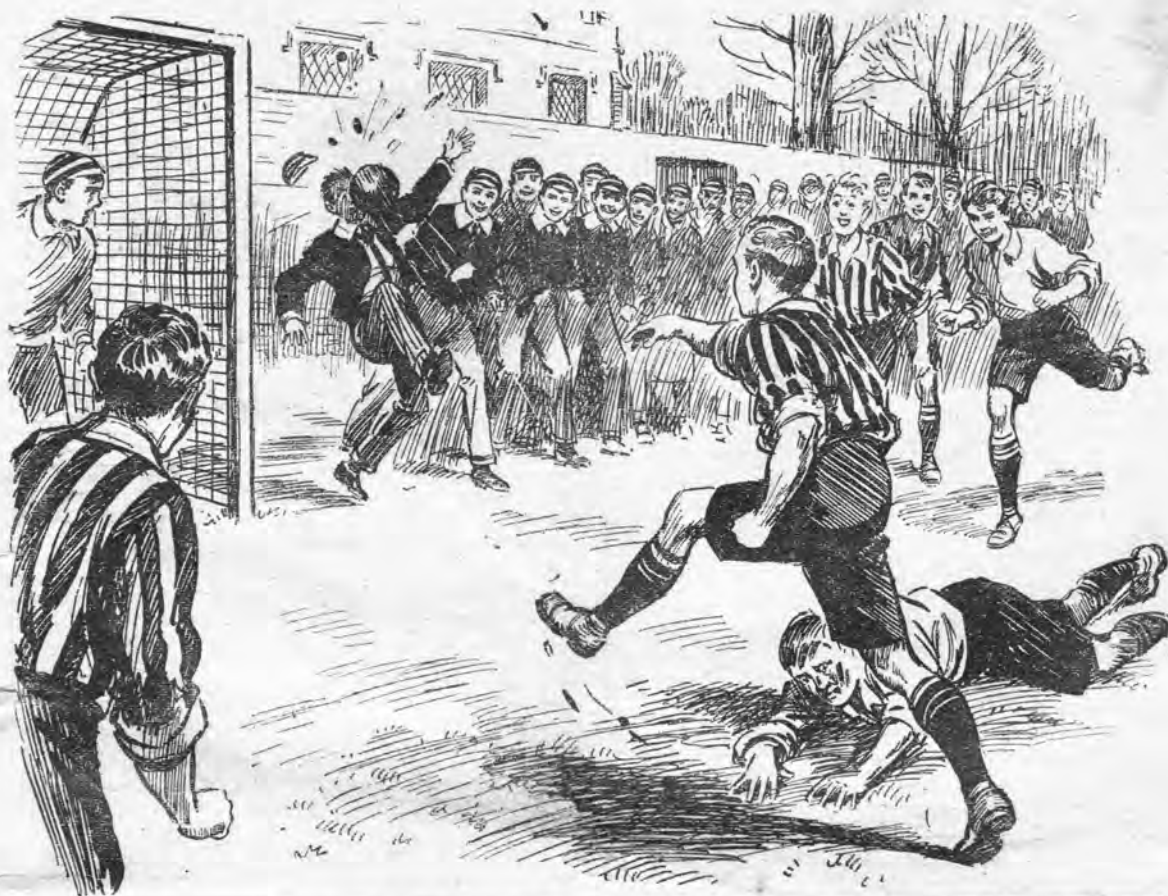
CHAPTER 7. The Election!

"WILL you fasten the door, Kildare? Thank you! We will now proceed!"

There was a buzz of excitement throughout the junior Common-room at St. Jim's. It was six o'clock, and time for the election to take place. On a raised dais at one end of the room stood Mr. Railton, with Kildare and Darrell of the Sixth, behind him. The Shell and Fourth were present to a man, and it was easy to spot the division of the various parties.

By the door, looking very cool and calm, was Tom Merry, with a loyal band of adherents surrounding him. Over by the fireplace, Blake and his supporters had gathered, their leader showing many traces of his recent combat, but appearing otherwise keen and confident. He did not glance towards Tom Merry, though the Shell captain's glance rested on him curiously once or twice.

Figgins & Co. of the New House, were present in force and though farthest from the dais, numbered a goodly crowd—so much so that there were anxious glances from several of the School House voters.



Monty Lowther took a swift glance in Racke's direction and let fly with all his strength. The ball fairly flew through the air, and there was a fiendish howl from Racke as he took it—mud and all—on his nose! "Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors. (See Chapter 8.)

Apart from the rest, looking pale and excited now that the crisis had arrived, stood Aubrey Racke and his coterie of friends—a newly formed party, only too conscious of the attention they were attracting from the other fellows. Baggy Trimble had slipped an arm chummily through Racke's, and in the peculiar circumstances the cad could do nothing but grin and put up with it. He was doing his best, but with the success of his scheme depending on such slender reeds, he did not look very happy.

"By Jove! Racke's got a crowd of supporters!" ejaculated Lowther, as Mr. Railton coughed, preparatory to calling for a show of hands.

"Bought 'em, I expect!" grunted Manners. "If Railton knew, he'd be disqualified."

"Hear, hear!" came from the rest of Tom Merry's party.

"How much did Racke pay for your votes, you fellows?" whispered Lowther, and several of the cad's adherents blushed deeply.

Racke had, indeed, spent the sum of three pounds five shillings on "election expenses," but, in his opinion, it was money well expended.

"We will take the candidates in alphabetical order!" announced Mr. Railton. "Blake first! All boys who wish to vote for Blake will raise their right hands!"

Blake's supporters shot their hands into the air, but there was an interruption. Wrenching himself free from the restraining grasp of Wilkins and Gunn, George Alfred Grundy charged up to the dais and faced the Housemaster with a grim frown on his brow.

"Come back, Grundy!" gasped Wilkins desperately.

"Oh, you ass!" murmured Gunn helplessly.

But Grundy gave no heed to his chums, nor to the glance which Mr. Railton gave him as he presented himself.

"Get back to your place, Grundy!" ejaculated Darrell. "Shan't!" retorted George Alfred defiantly. "I'm going to stand for election, and those silly asses thought they could keep me back! I'll attend to them afterwards. Just take my name, will you, sir? And if you call for a show of hands for me first you'll save a lot of time. I'm bound to win, you see!"

"Well, of all the nerve!" gasped Kildare involuntarily. And the corners of Mr. Railton's mouth twitched.

"Show for Grundy!" roared Monty Lowther. "Come on, you faithful supporters—up with your hands!"

There was a general laugh as not a single hand was raised, and a terrific glare from Grundy as Wilkins and Gunn grinned heartlessly.

"Why, you—you traitors!" he shouted fiercely. "I'll smash you, you rotters! Lemme gerrat you—"

"You'll shut up and get back to your place at once, Grundy!" interrupted Kildare, laying a firm hand on the great George Alfred's shoulder.

"If you do not cease this disturbance immediately, you will be removed from the room while the election is held!" said Mr. Railton sternly.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Grundy in amazement. "I—I'll stay. Only don't blame me if St. Jim's gets a worse junior skipper than they've got already, and goes completely to the dogs!"

"Shut up, Grundy!"

The egregious Shell fellow was swallowed up in the crowd, and proceeded to tell his chums exactly what he thought of their desertion—a monologue to which Wilkins and Gunn listened with really remarkable fortitude.

"Silence!" rapped the Housemaster. "Will Blake's supporters kindly raise their hands, please?"

The juniors in question obeyed with alacrity, and Tom Merry gave a wry smile as he perceived that his own band were hopelessly outnumbered.

Kildare and Darrell came forward, and the counting was quickly done.

"Nineteen!" announced the captain of the school calmly.

Darrell entered up the total, and Mr. Railton called for a show for Figgins. But the New House contingent had been thinned by Racke's election campaign, and they were not nearly so numerous as Blake's.

"Eleven!" announced Kildare; and Figgins' face fell.

"Merry is next!" said Mr. Railton; and the School House Shell shot up their hands. But again the counting was almost unnecessary, and Kildare announced the same total as Figgins—eleven.

Tom Merry grinned resignedly as the total was made known, and then there was a pause as Racke's name was called.

The cad of the Shell gave a smile of triumph as the hands went up, while Blake and his chums counted anxiously.

"Nineteen! He's tied with us!" gasped Blake.

"Bai Jove! I make it the same, deah boy!"

"What a sell!"

Kildare was counting audibly, and he came to the last of Racke's adherents.

"Seventeen—eighteen—nineteen—"

"Baggy, you fat idiot!" whispered Racke, suddenly becoming aware that Trimble's other hand—the one that was not through Racke's arm—was stuck in the fat junior's trouser's pocket.

"Nineteen!" repeated Kildare coolly, turning to Mr. Railton.

"Twenty!" squeaked Trimble. "Don't forget me, Kildare!"

"Oh! You—you—all right, old chap! Kildare's counting again!"

"Twenty!" announced Kildare finally. "Why couldn't you have stuck up your fat paw in the first place, Trimble?"

"Oh, I say, you know—" ejaculated Baggy.

"It counts, of course?" asked Racke anxiously.

"Yes," said Kildare shortly. "Mr. Railton, Racke appears to have beaten Blake by one vote."

"I am surprised!" said the Housemaster, raising his brows. "But if you are sure there has been no mistake—"

"None, sir," responded the St. Jim's captain.

"Then Racke is duly elected junior captain of St. Jim's," announced Mr. Railton in a rather doubtful voice.

The cad of the Shell gave an exclamation of satisfaction, and his supporters set up a terrific cheer. The rest of the juniors eyed Racke with almost stunned expressions. Racke—junior captain! It wanted a great deal of swallowing—but it was a fact!

"Ahem! Step forward, Racke!" commanded Mr. Railton thoughtfully. He coughed again before addressing the new junior skipper.

"I am sorry, Racke—" he began, and Racke's face took on an evil expression.

"You can't refuse the verdict, sir!" he said insolently.

"I can order a fresh election!" responded the Housemaster tartly. "But I have no wish to interfere more than is necessary in junior affairs. But, in regard for your general character, Racke, I must put you on probation for a week. If your schoolfellows are still of the opinion then that you are the junior best fitted to lead them, so be it. That is all. I hope you will make good use of the exceptional opportunity which has been given you, my boy!"

And, having shaken hands quite frankly with Racke, Mr. Railton left the Common-room with Kildare and Darrell.

Racke grinned happily as he was surrounded with juniors, all eager to congratulate him.

At that moment he felt almost generous.

"I'm havin' a spread in the study for supper!" he shouted. "Any fellow who voted for me is welcome! I can't say fairer than that!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Racke!"

"Long live Aubrey!"

"And that's how he got his votes!" grunted Manners.

"He deserves to be exposed!" said Lowther angrily. "He's got no right to the position at all!"

"Never mind. He won't last long," said Tom Merry pacifically. "Let's get up to the study for prep."

But, in spite of the erstwhile junior captain's cheery assurance, it was a subdued crowd which surged out of the Common-room in the wake of the victorious Racke-ites.

George Figgins paused in the doorway to slap Tom Merry on the back.

"Hard cheese, Merry!" he said sympathetically. "But it's only for a week, thank goodness!"

"The Grammar School fixture is on Wednesday, and the Greyfriars match comes on the last day of it—Saturday," pointed out Manners.

"It's rotten!" agreed Figgins. "And the fellows are saying he bought half his votes, too! What do you think, Blake?"

Jack Blake had been walking straight past with his chums, but he had no quarrel with Figgins.

"I'm sorry!" he said calmly. "You had hard luck, Figgy, old man!"

And the chums of Study No. 6 passed on without even a glance at Tom Merry.

(Continued on page 15.)

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ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY!

In the market-place a travelling auctioneer was trying to dispose of his wares, but the townspeople were slow to purchase. "Look here," shouted the salesman, in desperation, "here is a bargain—twenty-five postcards for one penny! Who'll have 'em?" A young fellow in the front row eyed the tempting bait eagerly as he began to fumble in his pockets, but before he could withdraw the necessary coin his mother laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "No, no, Jim!" she whispered loudly. "It's another fraud! I've seen 'em and there ain't no stamps on 'em!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Edgar Hatfield, 62, Manifold Road, Selly Park, Dogpool, Birmingham.

A COOL RETORT!

Magistrate: "So you robbed the restaurant because you were starving? Why didn't you take something to eat instead of looting the cash-registers?" Prisoner: "I'm a proud man, yer honour, an' I make it a rule always to pay for what I eat!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Morris Thompson, 140, Hartley Road, Luton.

A BURNING QUESTION!

The new system of memory training was being taught in a village school, and the teacher was becoming enthusiastic. "For instance," he said, "supposing you want to remember the name of a poet—Bobby Burns. Fix in your mind's eye a picture of a policeman in flames. See—Bobby Burns?" "Yes, I see," said the bright pupil. "But how is one to know that it does not represent Robert Browning?"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Miss M. Wallace, 8, Edge Hill, Plumstead, S.E. 18.

A NOBLE RESCUER!

Rich Gent (showing tramp a five-pound note): "What would you do if I gave you this?" Tramp: "Oh, I'd drop dead." Rich Gent (placing note in his pocket-book): "Well, I've saved your life, then!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to P. A. Stephenson, 19, Woodcote Side, Epsom.

TUCK HAMPER

THE GE

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PADDY SCORES!

A talkative American once fell in with a party of Irish travellers and began entertaining them with stories of his adventures. "Yep," he drawled, "I once fell over a thousand-foot precipice, and I guess it was luck for me a grizzly bear was at the bottom, because I fell on him and didn't even scratch myself." "Begorra!" said one of the Irishmen. "I once fell off an eighty-foot ladder on to the ground and was able to get up and walk away." "Rot!" snapped the American. "Bejabbers," exclaimed the Irishman, "but 'twas the bottom rung I fell from!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Edward Turnbull, 59, Back Heaton Park Road, Heaton, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

HONESTY—THE BEST POLICY!

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the world in
Competition a
hamper will be
VERY joke
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Sandy: "Ay, mon, there's nae doot that honesty is the best policy. I could easily have got off you 'bus without payin' ma penny." Mac: "Well, I canna see hoo that has benefited ye." Sandy: "Och, he gied me fivepence change for a threepenny piece!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Edward Copeland, 167, Clyde Road, Tottenham, London, N. 15.

THE EXPERT!

He had found a bad shilling in his pocket. He was pretty certain now he had come by it, and calling upon his tobacconist the next day, said: "I believe you gave me a bad shilling yesterday." "Hardly probable," observed the tobacconist. "I've never had a false coin since I've been in the trade. I seem to have an instinct for spotting them. What did you do with it?" "Oh," was the response, "I've just given it to you for these cigarettes!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to A. E. Crockford, 1, Prinrose Villas, Armscroft Road, Barnwood, nr. Gloucester.

TRES BON!

A Frenchman had returned to his native town, after doing some hundreds of miles travelling on the English railways. "There are no pains in the world to equal those of England," he told his awestricken listeners. "Why, they have compartments for everybody and everything. I have seen carriages not only labelled 'Smoking,' but 'Reading,' 'Bath,' 'Sandwich,' and lots of other things."—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to David Elford Price, Pantawell Terrace, Penygroes, Llanelli, Carmarvonshire.

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Accompanied by one of these Coupons.

"No go!" said Figgins mournfully. "I think Blah could explain if he liked, but he's on his giddy dignity."

"We'll speak to him when he comes out of it, then—not before!" grunted Lowther; and Figgins nodded and strolled on.

"Blake's an ass!" said Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear! And it's up to him to make the first move," said Lowther firmly. "Come up to the study for prep."

And Tom Merry's chums linked their arms in his and walked him up to Study No. 10, still, however, wearing a very thoughtful air.

CHAPTER 8. Racke's Regime!

"MERRY!"

Tom Merry gave Racke a cool glance as the Shell emerged from the Form-room. It was Monday, and classes were over for the day. The week-end had passed quietly enough, the new junior captain spending a pleasant Sunday in his study with a few cronies, and until now Racke had not spoken to the junior whom he had ousted.

But it was too much to hope that the week of Racke's regime would pursue the even tenor of its way, regardless of the change at the helm, and Tom Merry was prepared for almost anything but Racke's next words.

"I shall expect you and your friends on Little Side at six sharp, Merry! If you want your places against the Grammarians and Greyfriars, you'll have to put in plenty of practice!"

"What?" roared Monty Lowther.

"Was that Racke speaking?" inquired Harry Noble, in tones of the deepest wonder.

"Of all the sheer, undiluted nerve!" observed Manners. "Why, I've seen Kildare drag you down to practice by the scruff of your neck, Racke!"

The cad of the Shell flushed angrily and his eyes gleamed.

"Shut up!" he commanded. "I've given you fellows your instructions: it's up to you to obey them! Kildare will jolly soon uphold me if there's any insubordination. You can keep that in mind, Manners!"

"You can't jolly well order a practice just when you like, you dummy!" hooted Gore.

"Can't I?" retorted Racke unpleasantly. "Well, I'm doin' it! An' you'll be there, too, unless you want a taste of a prefect's asphalt!"

"On second thoughts," said Lowther, "this may be worth watching. We'll turn up in force, and run dear Aubrey off his feet. Ever been charged over in the mud, Racke? There's plenty to-day!"

Racke sneered.

"I probably sha'n't turn out at all!" he remarked loftily. "But it's necessary for you chaps. I shall be there to watch you!"

"You silly, swanking ass!" said Lowther, in measured tones.

"You burbling jabberwock!" observed Manners.

"You footling imbecile!" growled Noble.

"Thanks for your kind opinions!" said Racke, with a cool smile. "But I don't care a fig what you think. I've got my own supporters, an' I'm in a majority. So you can say what you like; only remember, you've got to knuckle under!"

And, with a cheery nod, the junior captain strolled on with Crooke, oblivious to glances which, if looks could have killed, would have dropped him dead in the passage.

But, grumble as they would, there was nothing for the juniors to do but obey their captain's orders and turn out on the football-field at six sharp. It would have been some consolation if Racke had been turning out himself, for it would have been safe to say that he would not have left the field whole; but evidently the same thought had occurred to the schemer, and he was taking no risks.

Tea in the study was not a merry meal that afternoon but promptly at six Racke might have beheld the whole of his flock gathered in readiness on Little Side. Tom Merry and his chums were already punting a ball about when six chimed from the old clock-tower, but there was no sign of Racke. Punctuality was the politeness of princes, but it was not Racke's.

"Swanking duffer!" remarked Kangaroo, to the general agreement. "He thinks it looks big to keep us waiting."

"We needn't wait," suggested Talbot. "Let's get on, just as if Tom were still skipper."

There was general assent to that suggestion, for there was a match on Wednesday against Rylcombe Grammar School, and the juniors intended to gauge their strength against Gordon Gay & Co., in readiness for the match on Saturday with Greyfriars.

The practice was in full swing when Racke's voice called from the ropes:

"Rotten, Merry! You ought to have scored easily then!" Tom, who had just put a difficult screw shot over the bar, coloured for a moment, but did not speak.

"Put some more life into it, for goodness' sake!" urged Racke. "Go on, Blake, kick it! Oh, feeble!"

Perhaps disconcerted by that cheery string of criticism, Blake fozzled quite an easy chance, and afforded Racke a genuine opportunity for his unpleasant tongue.

The juniors, suppressing their wrath, continued; but Racke maintained a running fire of comments that might well have moved a saint to homicide.

"Let him have the ball, somebody!" whispered Lowther, as Racke gave his private opinion of the humorist's dribbling—not a flattering opinion.

"Here, chuck it!" shouted Racke. "Take off that sweater, Wynn; you can't keep goal for toffee! Boulton, you'd better go in; you couldn't do much worse! And give somebody else a chance to shoot! I never saw such a lot of fozzlers in my life!"

With faces crimsoned with rage the footballers obeyed Racke's commands, and Boulton went in goal. Boulton had never been in such a position before, but he need not have worried. Under Racke's direction, he was only called upon to face the shots of Walkley, Clampe, Scrope, and Mellish, with one or two others—all equally at sea. When these juniors had exhibited their prowess—or lack of it—for a few minutes, Racke gave an encouraging cheer.

"Jolly good, you fellows! I can see you're the men for the junior eleven! Well saved, Boulton!"

The fact that Boulton had quite accidentally bungled the ball round the post when he should have caught and cleared it, did not appear to strike the new junior captain.

"Oh, give me it!" gasped Lowther, at last. "Let me have the ball a minute; I'll put an end to this!"

"Go it, Mellish!" roared Racke excitedly. "Shoot, man, shoot!"

Percy Mellish was dribbling—or trying to dribble—the ball up to the goal, with the intention of testing Boulton's powers with a flashing drive. But a gleam came into Lowther's eye, and he dropped back on goal.

"What do you think of this for a tackle, Racke?" he shouted.

Aubrey Racke had no time to reply. What happened thereafter occurred so quickly that he hardly saw it. Lowther bore down on Mellish like an avalanche, and the latter went spinning in the mud, leaving Lowther in possession of the ball. But the humorous Monty did not remain in possession for long. He took a swift glance in Racke's direction, and let fly with all his strength. The ball fairly flew through the air, and there was a fiendish howl from Racke as he took it—mud and all—on his nose. The new junior skipper went over like a ninepin, and a roar of laughter burst from the players.

Racke sat up, plastered with mud, and gouging the slush frantically from his eye. He staggered up and shook a fist fiercely at Lowther.

"You—you—" he spluttered, and then ensued a torrent of language which drew an angry murmur from the juniors. "Stop that, you low rotter!" ejaculated Figgins ferociously.

"What's this? Racke—"

Kildare of the Sixth, his usually sunny face very grim, strode up and took Racke by the collar.

"I've been watching this farce from Big Side for some time!" he remarked. "And now it seems you've descended to language worthy of a hooligan! Follow me! You will take charge of the practice for this evening, Merry!"

"Right-ho, Kildare!" said Tom.

Kildare's eyes gleamed at Racke, who tried to protest.

"But—but I'm junior captain, Kildare! You can't—"

"Are you coming with me now, or shall I drag you to the Head?" inquired Kildare evenly.

"Oh! I'm—I'm comin'!" stuttered the cad.

And he followed the St. Jim's skipper across the quad to the accompaniment of jeers and cat-calls from the footballers.

When Racke emerged from Kildare's study a quarter of an hour later he was looking very white, and crawled to his study to recuperate. Certainly, his first efforts at captaincy had ended in tragedy. But this was only the first round—Aubrey Racke wasn't beaten yet!

CHAPTER 9.

Licked to the Wide!

"MY only summer bonnet!"

"What a team!"

"Does he call it a team?"

"The prize idiot!"

These comments, plentifully supplemented by others of the GEM LIBRARY.—No. 977.

a similar nature, proceeded from the crowd of juniors who had gathered by the notice-board to discover the eleven selected by Racke to appear against the Grammarians.

The new junior skipper had kept rather out of the limelight since capturing that record licking from Kildare, and he had delayed posting his team on the board till after breakfast on the morning of the match.

Judging by the expressions of opinion which greeted his selection—and they were "frequent, and painful, and free"—he had not succeeded in pleasing the junior school. It had been expected, of course, that Racke would drop one or two of the regular players to make room for himself and one or two pals, but that he would have the pure effrontery to omit every one of the regular men had certainly not been expected. The list ran as follows:

Boulton (goal); Lorne, Chowle (full-backs); Frere, Crooke, Scrope (half-backs); Lennox, Mellish, Racke, Walkley, Clampe (forwards).

How Racke expected that remarkable combination to last five minutes against the go-ahead tactics of the Grammarians, was a deep and insoluble mystery.

"It's ridiculous!" said Talbot, smiling. "He'll have to make some alterations, that's certain!"

"The potty idiot!" snorted Grundy, with great contempt. "Why, he hasn't even got me down! I'd have excused the rest if he had! But that crowd—"

"Even you could make rings round a defence like that!" grinned Levison, and there was a chuckle.

George Alfred glared.

"Pity you fellows didn't show a grain of sense and elect me skipper!" he observed. "I'd have picked a team that would have licked Gordon Gay & Co. to a frazzle!"

"You couldn't have done worse, anyway!" agreed Blake. "Don't I wish Tom Merry—" He broke off suddenly.

"Go on!" grinned Digby.

"Blow Tom Merry!" said Blake decidedly. "He probably deserves this for not taking a fellow's word!"

"Hear, hear!" said Digby loyally.

"Hallo! Here's the merry skipper himself!" ejaculated Cardew. "All hail, Racke!"

"Hail!" said Blake.

"Hail!" echoed Digby.

"Hail, dear boy!" chimed in D'Arey.

Racke halted and scowled.

"You fools!" he observed sarcastically. "I suppose you think that's funny?"

"Not half such a joke as your footer list!" said Herries pointedly.

Racke's scowl increased and he sneered.

"When you've seen them play you'll think differently!" he remarked coolly. "I may as well tell you that I'm not makin' any alterations, though I expect some of you are feelin' sore at bein' left out!"

"We don't intend to be left out!" said Grundy, his jaw protruding. "At least, I don't! Do you think you can find a place for me, Racke?"

"No!" snapped Racke, though with an apprehensive glance at Grundy's huge fists, which he was clenching suggestively. "If you weren't a fool, you'd realise that you're no more use on a football field than a wild bull!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Grundy, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "No more use than a— By George, I'll smash you for that, Racke! Wait a minute, though; I'm as good as any man you've got in the team! You can shove me in, Racke! That's final. I don't care what position, but I'm in. Understand?"

And Grundy presented a leg-of-mutton fist under Racke's nose, while the cad blanched.

"I'll—Kildare won't allow this sort of thing!" gasped Racke angrily.

"Junior captain is supposed to be able to look after himself!" retorted Grundy brightly. "Kildare won't appreciate you running to him for help as soon as you've started!"

"Oh!" said Racke.

Grundy had him in a cleft stick, and he knew it. At any moment the burly Shell fellow could have knocked him flying along the passage, and Racke had no desire to sample one of Grundy's formidable fists.

"All—all right! You'll play!" he gasped at length, colouring deeply at that abject surrender.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Blake, in deep disgust.

"And that's the kind of chap we've got for junior skipper!" Several of Racke's supporters were looking at him expressively, and the cad turned to escape. But Gore stepped forward and barred his path.

"Hold on a second, Racke!" said Gore.

"Out of the way, you rotter!" hissed Racke, almost beside himself with rage.

"Am I playing this afternoon?" inquired Gore, folding his arms and giving Racke a glance that there was no mistaking. Gore was not such a hefty fellow as Grundy, but he was quite capable of handling a number of Rackes at

the same time, if necessary. The scheming cad began to realise that a junior captain needed to possess more than cunning if his position was to be even moderately comfortable.

"You—you—" stuttered Racke incoherently. "Yes, I'll put you down if you like, Gore. Now let me pass!"

And as the bell for morning classes sounded, Racke made a dash along the corridor, followed by a chorus of shouts and cat-calls—mostly emanating from fellows who were eager to try the methods of Grundy and Gore to gain admittance to the team.

Racke spent an apprehensive morning, wondering how many more changes he would be obliged to make before his team took the field. He almost contemplated putting the matter before Kildare, as he had a right to do, but he knew as well as the juniors that in that case his chances of retaining the captaincy after the expiration of his trial week would be practically nil.

After lessons, he locked himself in his study till dinner, and immediately dinner was over he and his team took refuge in the Shell dormitory, where they changed in peace. At first a crowd of juniors yelled threats through the keyhole, but upon Grundy offering to come forth and do battle with anybody who wanted a place there was silence, and the crowd melted away.

A few minutes before three, when the kick-off was fixed, Racke led his men down to the gates, amid ironical cheers, to meet Gordon Gay & Co. The Grammarians were astounded when they learned of the change of captaincy, but a brief chat with Tom Merry & Co. explained the position.

"Rely on us, Merry!" said Gordon Gay cheerily. "We'll run them off their feet!"

"We're waitin' to see you do it!" sneered Racke, who had overheard that remark.

"Come on, then!" said Gay. "Heads it is!"

"Tails!" responded Racke. "We'll kick with the wind."

There was a stiffish breeze blowing the length of the ground, and in a more serious encounter it might have made a difference. But the Grammarians had no doubt concerning the result, even in a blizzard.

Chowle had been dropped from the St. Jim's eleven to make room for Grundy, and Crooke shunted over to left-half to admit Gore in the centre, Scrope being dropped altogether.

Gordon Gay set the ball rolling, and there was a cheer for Racke's eleven as they dashed into the fray. In justice to the team which Racke had got together, it must be said that they were not at all hopeless, and that in some cases—especially in Grundy's—they were full of enthusiasm. But against Gordon Gay & Co. they were as chaff before the wind.

The Grammarians came through on the left, and a perfect centre found Gay unmarked. The Australian junior coolly aimed and shot well away from Boulton into the corner of the net. It was all done so quickly that the spectators could do nothing but gasp for a few moments. Then they woke up.

"Come on, St. Jim's!"

"Put some beef into it!"

"Don't let 'em walk over you!"

Racke rallied his men grimly, and a good run by Lennox saw the ball bobbing about in the Grammarians' goal-mouth. Racke shot, and missing the ball altogether, rolled on the turf; but Walkley, dashing up, took a blind kick, and, wonder of wonders, the leather sailed just over the goalie's fingertips into the top of the net!

"Goal!"

That yell might have been heard at Rylcombe, for the equaliser was as welcome as it was unexpected. Racke's eleven, feeling considerably bucked, lined up, and restarted with a roar of applause still ringing in their ears.

But the visiting team began to play in real earnest now, and Gore, at centre-half, was powerless to stem the tide. The ball went into the net, hot from the boot of Frank Monk, with Boulton, the St. Jim's custodian, full length on the ground in a vain effort to save it.

Lennox attempted a run, but was skilfully checked, and once again the play surged round the St. Jim's goal.

"Keep 'em out somehow, you chaps!" hissed Racke, who had fallen back to aid a sorely tried defence. "We simply daren't be licked!"

But the words were hardly out of the cad's mouth when Grundy, in essaying a mighty clearance, caught the ball on the edge of his foot and shot clean through his own goal!

"Goal!"

"By Jove, Grundy's changed sides!"

A series of derisive yells from the crowd did not serve to ameliorate Racke's already savage temper.

"You fool, Grundy!" he hissed, as Boulton picked the ball out of the net. "I've a jolly good mind to send you off the field!"

"Why, it was a pure accident!" hooted Grundy indignantly. "For two pins I'd chuck you off, Racke!"

"Shut up, there, and get on with the game!" granted Lefevre of the Fifth, who was refereeing.

Racke suppressed his anger, and the game was resumed. But in two minutes the Grammarians had gone still further ahead, and a fifth goal followed soon after.

The St. Jim's captain began to resort to sly tripping and ankle-tapping, and Lefevre stopped the game at last.

"Look here, Racke!" he ejaculated angrily. "If you can't play the game, for goodness' sake get off the field!"

(Continued overleaf.)

THE RIGHT SORT OF PRESENT!



"I know young Tommy will be pleased with this," said Uncle Bob. And Tommy was! All his pals are hoping that their uncles "come across" with a present like "The Holiday Annual" for Six Shillings, it can't be beaten!

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSAGENTS!

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You seem to have forgotten that you represent St. Jim's while you're on this field!"

"Sorry, Lefevre!" said Racke, infusing some meekness into his voice. He realised, perhaps rather late, that this was not the way to consolidate his new position. From that point the match was contested fairly enough, though there was only one side in it.

At half-time the score stood at 9-1 against St. Jim's, and during the second half Gordon Gay & Co. ran the total up to twenty without response. Racke's team almost crawled off the field at the finish, and hastened into the House to hide their diminished heads. Never within the history of St. Jim's had any eleven, junior or senior, suffered such a defeat, and the junior school was fairly seething with rage.

"Twenty to one!" repeated Monty Lowther dazedly. "Ye gods, think of it!"

"I can't!" said Manners. "It's simply too awful! I—I'd like to boil Racke in oil!"

"Too good!" said Lowther, shaking his head. "Much too good!"

"I say, Tom Merry—"

Gordon Gay, grinning happily, tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder.

"Hallo! Congrats, Gay!" said Tom Merry glumly. "What on earth did you think of Racke's crowd?"

"I was thinking we might wipe that off—call it a friendly game," suggested Gay. "From what I hear, that chap won't last beyond this week; and it isn't fair to you fellows to call that collection the St. Jim's junior eleven. They're not good enough for a kindergarten!"

"My hat! You're a sportsman, Gay!" ejaculated Tom Merry, his face lighting up.

"Not at all!" grinned Gay.

"Well, come and have tea in the study," invited Tom eagerly. "We're having a bit of a spread, as it happens. You're jolly welcome, you know."

"Thanks! I will," said the Grammarian. "Lead on, Macduff!"

And in a cheery group, enlivened by the Grammarian leader's view of the game, the Terrible Three and their visitors moved off towards the House.

Blake and his chums of Study No. 6 followed them in, but made no attempt to join up. Blake headed for the letter-rack in the Hall, and abstracted therefrom an envelope addressed in rather uneducated handwriting:

Master Jack Blake,
St. James' School,
Local.

"By Jove! Mrs. Murphy!" ejaculated Blake, and then coloured.

He read the letter, and then slipped it into his pocket. He screwed up the envelope and tossed it aside.

"Let's get up to the study, you chaps. I'm hungry!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

As the four chums moved on something fluttered from Blake's jacket to the floor, and a junior, who had been lounging close by, came languidly forward and picked it up.

"Careless sort of an ass, Blake!" mused Cardew, turning over the letter. "I suppose I'd better take it up to the study for him. What a fag. By gad!"

He stopped suddenly, as his eyes caught the first words of the letter, though the fold hid the continuation.

"Dear Master Blake,—I am writing to thank you for your letter of last Wednesday—"

Cardew had not meant to read as far as that, but the words seemed to leap from the paper. Last Wednesday! The day Blake had been writing in his study—the cause of trouble between him and Tom Merry. Cardew stared at that first line, and slipped the letter into his pocket.

Then he lounged into the quad. He had plenty of food for thought as he strolled under the old elms.

CHAPTER 10.

Persuading Racke!

"WELL!" said Monty Lowther.

"Well?" inquired Manners, eyeing Tom Merry seriously.

"Well what?" grunted Tom from the arm-chair.

"What's going to be done about it?" asked Lowther.

"You're not junior captain, Tom, but you're still head of the Shell—for all intents and purposes, anyhow. If you give the word—"

"We'll collar Racke and lambaste him till he can't howl!" said Manners vengefully.

"Something's got to happen after that—that apology for

a football match," said Lowther. "I knew Racke would make a pretty rotten skipper, but twenty to nil—"

"One!" corrected Tom Merry.

"Sheer luck!" ejaculated Manners excitedly. "That ass Walkley had no idea where he was kicking!"

"Which brings us to the same point," said Lowther grimly. "The question is, are we going to stand it?"

"If Racke plays a team like that against Greyfriars!" breathed Manners.

"He won't!" said Lowther decidedly. "My suggestion is, that we hold a meeting of the footer committee, and bring Racke to reason, even if we have to stand over him with a cricket stump!"

"Good idea!" concurred Manners heartily. "What do you think, Tom?"

Tom Merry had been silent through his chums' urgings, and he was looking very thoughtful.

"Calling a meeting of the committee is the only thing we can do at present," he said slowly. "We can protest against Racke's team to-day, and force him to revise his selection against Greyfriars. But—"

"Yes?"

"Well, let's try it," said Tom Merry non-committally. "We can scout along the passages for the fellows, and one of us can run across to the New House for Figgins and Reddy."

"I'll go," volunteered Manners at once.

"Right-ho!" agreed Lowther. "Then Tommy and I will gather in the clans. Meeting in here in ten minutes."

Manners nodded and left the study. His chums followed a moment later, and proceeded to put Lowther's scheme into execution.

The effect of persuasion on a skipper of Racke's calibre was a little doubtful, and the juniors realised it. But after that terrific licking on Little Side it was obvious that something would have to be done; it was unthinkable that Greyfriars should be opposed by a team such as took the field against the Grammarians. But it was with some uncertainty in their minds that Tom Merry and Lowther rounded up the members of the committee—Talbot and Kangaroo of the Shell, and Blake, D'Arcy, and Levison of the Fourth.

Talbot and Kangaroo joined up speedily enough, but the task of interviewing the Fourth-Formers was a little more difficult. The Form feud had slept during the period of unanimous condemnation of Racke and his team, but it had revived in full force, it might be difficult to bring the members of the committee together peaceably in Study No. 10.

Levison was accosted first, and on being informed of Lowther's idea, agreed to be there, and even offered to speak to Blake about it, which he was thankfully deputed to do, considerably to Tom Merry's relief. He had not wanted a row with Blake in the first place, and the whole affair was beginning to get on his nerves. The less he saw of the Yorkshire junior, until he had come round, the better.

A few minutes later the junior football committee had assembled in the Shell passage, and a move was made towards Study No. 7. Aubrey Racke was an unwanted but necessary adjunct to the proceedings, and the juniors were determined that he was coming, even if he had to be carried.

Tom Merry knocked, and threw open the door in response to Racke's invitation.

"Hallo! Don't remember askin' you fellows to my study!" ejaculated Racke, smiling calmly as he perceived the grim looks of his visitors. "Shut the door after you, won't you?"

Lowther grunted, and several of the committee began to appear restive. Racke's manner was not encouraging, and it began to look as if he would have to be "carried" to Study No. 10—a pleasant task which the juniors were only too eager to perform.

"We've come on business, Racke!" said Tom Merry, plunging straight into the matter. "It's about the footer—we are the rest of the committee, and we've quite a lot to say before we go!"

Aubrey Racke raised his eyebrows.

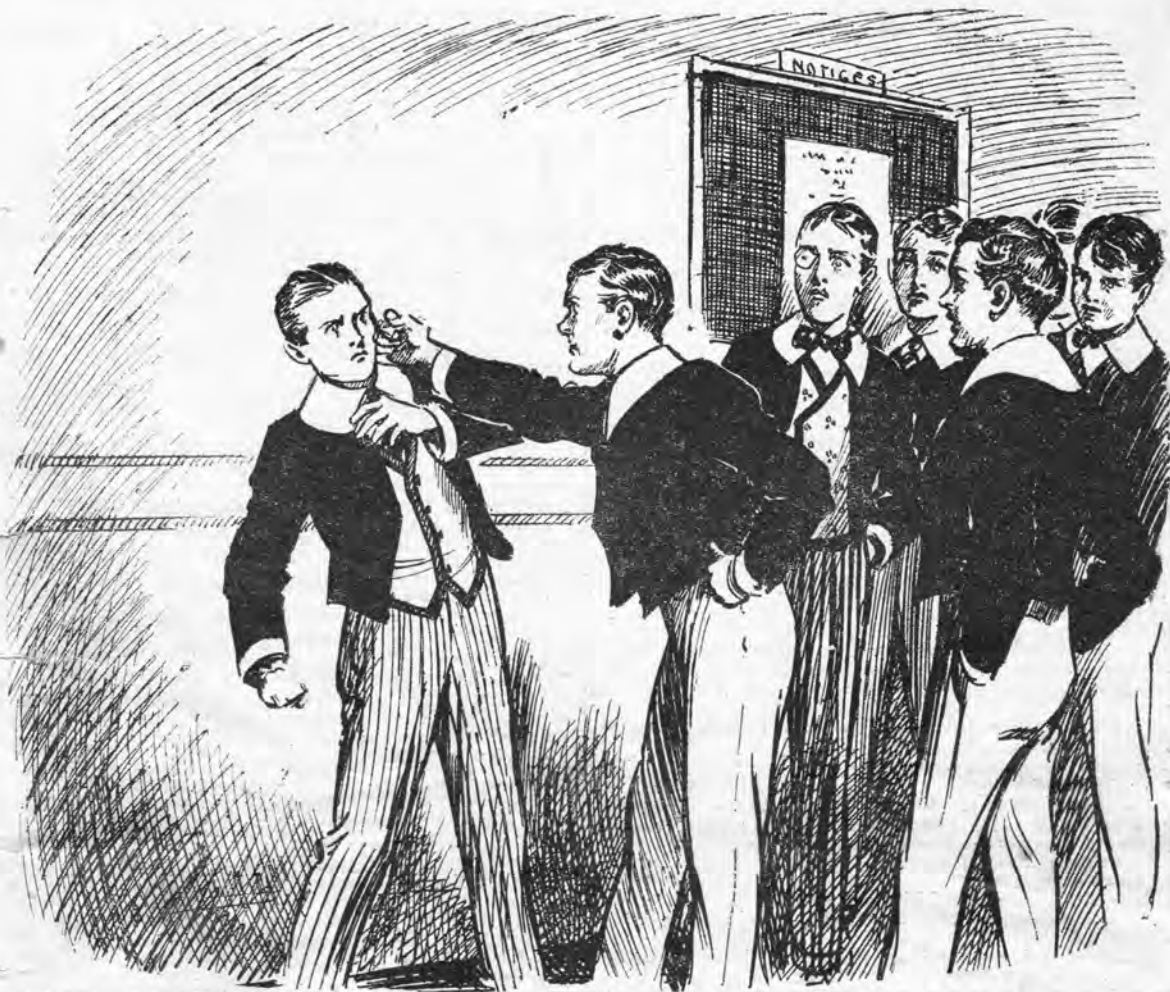
"By gad! What a nerve!" he remarked coolly. "But I think you fellows are takin' just a little too much for granted. Doesn't there have to be a fresh committee after the election of a new captain?"

"It's not necessary!" said Talbot. "In any case, the old committee stands until re-elected, of course!"

"Not while I'm skipper!" retorted Racke grimly. "I'm takin' no interference from any of you—so you can put that in your pipes an' smoke it!"

"You won't come along to Study No. 10 and discuss the matter?" inquired Lowther calmly.

"No!" sneered Racke. "An' I'll trouble you all to get on the other side of that door—sharp! When I say a thing I mean it!"



"You can shove me in the team," said George Alfred Grundy. "That's final, Racke! I don't care what position—but I'm in. Understand?" And Grundy presented a leg-of-mutton fist under Racke's nose to emphasise his words. (See Chapter 9.)

"So do we, Racke!" responded Lowther sweetly. "I think that's about all, then. Collar him, you fellows!"

"Here! What the—" began Racke in alarm.

But his angry protests were not heeded. Eager hands seized him from all sides, and he was lifted bodily from his chair and dragged, howling fiercely, into the passage. Crooke, his faithful henchman, stared askance at this drastic step, but made no attempt to go to the rescue.

"You—you—" spluttered Racke, becoming almost incoherent with rage.

"Bump him!" suggested Lowther, and the juniors proceeded grimly to bump their burden at intervals along the Shell passage, each bump being accompanied by a roar of pain and wrath from the junior captain.

The door of Study No. 10 was kicked open, and Racke descended in a heap on the rug, where he sat up and glared venomously at the circle of faces above him. Manners locked the door, and Racke struggled to his feet.

"You—you interferin' hounds!" he snarled. "I'll—I'll pay you back for this, you cads! I'm junior captain, an' if I tell Kildare—"

"Kildare's fed up with you already!" said Manners coolly.

"Look here, Racke!" said Tom Merry calmly. "This is a meeting of the junior selection committee. We didn't want to handle you, but you had to be brought here somehow!"

"I can hold any meetin's I like in my own study, can't I?" said Racke sourly.

"You wouldn't listen to reason there," said Tom Merry patiently.

"And we can deal with him here—if he isn't open to argument!" put in Figgins.

Racke's face paled, but his expression was still defiant.

"Well, get on with it!" he urged. "You don't like my team, I suppose?"

"And we don't intend to see it take the field against the Friars!" said Tom Merry.

"When you were junior skipper, you didn't allow much argument over your selection, did you?" asked Racke.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath, and several of the fellows made a move towards their prisoner. Really, Racke as skipper was more than flesh and blood could be expected to stand.

"Bump him!" suggested Lowther eagerly.

"Give him one more chance!" said Figgins magnanimously. "And you'll do well to make the most of it, Racke," he added warningly. "We're fed up with your rot!"

"We want the team against Greyfriars to be selected with the approval of the committee!" said Tom Merry. "I know it's a bit arbitrary—but another display like this afternoon's, and St. Jim's football will become a laughing-stock! If the Friars had seen it—"

"The Friars will see it!" flashed Racke, with fierce anger. "You cads may think you can bully me, but you can't! I'm quite satisfied with the performance of my team, and I'm stickin' to it!"

"He's quite satisfied!" murmured Lowther dazedly.

"And he's sticking to it!" added Manners, his lips set. "That means that St. Jim's will collar a record licking from Wharton & Co., and we shall never hear the last of it. All because Racke gained the captaincy by a lot of rotten trickery. Is it good enough, you fellows?"

The reply of the committee was unanimous.

"No!"

"Bai Jove, I should imagine not, dear boys!"

"What shall we do with him?"

Tom Merry turned to his chums with a rather peculiar expression.

"We've got no right to do anything!" he said slowly.

"What!" booted Kangaroo.

"Junior captain is bound to listen to his committee—but he needn't adopt their suggestions!" said Tom quietly. "I'm afraid we can only refuse to play if we're dissatisfied, and that won't make any difference. Racke's not likely to play any of us in any case!"

The cad of the Shell grinned at Tom Merry's words. He had authority on his side, and he knew it. The juniors' hands were tied, and protests, however vigorously put up, would roll off him like water off a duck's back. But he did not allow for the natural anger of the incensed juniors. Even as he grinned, Blake gave a snort and led the attack "Squash him!"

"Lick him till he gives in!"

"We'll teach him to drag St. Jim's down into the mud!"

Tom Merry made a movement, but held back. As a deposed captain, he was not sure even of a position on the committee, and he had no right to interfere. He could not bring himself to disregard the rights and wrongs of the affair—but the rest of the juniors could, and were doing so with great vigour and enjoyment.

Aubrey Racke was whirled over and placed conveniently for castigation. Then, while his arms and legs were firmly grasped, Kangaroo wielded a cricket stump with deadly effect.

Racke howled and roared, but the stump continued to descend on his wriggling form. Probably, in those agonised moments, Racke regretted deeply that he had set up in opposition to the committee. Now they had taken matters into their own hands; they were a force to be reckoned with. But the castigation was only half over when a knock sounded at the door, and Kangaroo paused with his stump in mid-air.

"Who's there?"

"It's I—Knox! Open the door, you young ruffians. You're half killing somebody by the sound of it!"

"Oh, cwumbs!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"That's caused it!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Buck up!" snapped Knox irritably. "It'll be all the worse for you if you keep me waiting!"

"Better let him in!" said Lowther, releasing one of Racke's arms, and stepping back.

The juniors silently allowed their captive to struggle into a sitting posture, and then Manners unlocked the door.

Knox's expression, as his eyes fell on the ill-used Racke, became terrific. He glared from one to another of the juniors, till finally his glance rested on Tom Merry.

"So this is how you back up your new skipper, Merry?" he asked grimly.

Tom Merry flushed and bit his lip.

"Merry refused to help us lick him," said Blake quite unexpectedly.

Knox grunted, and motioned to Racke to leave the study.

"See here, you little sweeps!" said the prefect coolly.

"I've got to keep order for Racke—I rather expected he'd have some trouble at the outset. You may think that you've got Kildare's sympathy, but that won't help you. You will each write five hundred lines, and hand them to me by the end of the week."

"Oh, my hat!"

"All for handling Racke!"

"You rotter, Knox!"

"What's that?" roared the prefect, swishing his ashplant. "By gad, another word, and I'll cane the whole lot of you as well!"

The juniors eyed the prefect grimly, but nobody spoke. Knox grinned, and tucked his ashplant under his arm.

"Remember," he warned, as he left the study, "if the lines aren't done, they'll be doubled—with a caning thrown in!"

And with a sneer the prefect strode away along the passage, followed closely by the grinning Racke.

Tom Merry & Co. glanced rather dismally at each other in the study.

"Well, my hat!" said Kangaroo.

"That was pretty much of a frost, wasn't it?" ejaculated Lowther. "And five hundred lines—we shall have to slave like anything to get them done by Saturday! I'd jolly well sooner have had a caning!"

"The cunning rotter!" grunted Manners. "He knew that well enough."

"Well, I'm afraid it's no go," said Tom Merry philosophically. "We shall have to think of some other wheeze."

"Easier said than done," grunted Figgins.

And that was the general opinion as the committee dispersed to their various studies, leaving the Terrible Three to their prep. Blake glanced at Tom Merry as he left, but did not appear to see him. Tom coloured, and the door closed. Evidently Blake was still "keeping it up," though Tom Merry would have welcomed a reconciliation.

"Prep," said Lowther, opening P. Virgilius Maro without much enthusiasm.

"I suppose so," assented Tom Merry, getting out his books. He was chewing his pen meditatively when there

was again a knock at the door—but not an authoritative rap, like Knox's.

"Come in!" called Manners, without looking up from his work.

CHAPTER 11.

The Clouds Roll By!

THE interest displayed by the Terrible Three as Cardew entered the study was not very noticeable.

Tom Merry nodded and continued to chew his pen.

Lowther glanced at the languid Fourth-Former rather in surprise, for the Shell and Fourth were hardly upon visiting terms, and Manners did not even look up.

Cardew must have noticed that his welcome was not especially warm, but that circumstance did not affect him in his present mood. He nodded and smiled, and lounged gracefully towards the only vacant chair in the study.

"Nobody goin' to ask me to sit down?" he asked rather plaintively.

Tom Merry started, and came out of his reverie suddenly.

"Oh, yes! Take a pew, Cardew. Excuse us—we're trying to think of a wheeze for dishing Racke."

"My mistake," murmured Cardew. "I thought I'd butted into the middle of your prep. Evidently all is not well with Thomas and his children!"

"Don't rot, Cardew!" said Lowther, shoving P. Virgilius Maro across the table and laying down his pen. "It's a serious matter, though I don't suppose you're capable of seeing that!"

The slacker of the Fourth inclined his head gravely.

"Of course, I know I'm not the authority on football you fellows are," he admitted. "But even I can see that Racke's gettin' a little too big for his shoes."

"Much too big," agreed Manners, abandoning prep, too.

"Has he been treading on your corns, Cardew?"

"I haven't any corns," said Cardew calmly. "But I've already fallen out with the dear Aubrey—an' I'm willin' to do all in my power to get Tom Merry back to his old job."

"Thanks!" said Tom, smiling, and rather surprised by Cardew's expressions of good will. Apparently Cardew did not approve of the Form feud, and it was just like him to show it in this roundabout way.

"How did you come to cross purposes?" asked Lowther interested.

"You fellows will agree that it wasn't my fault," said Cardew. "I ask you, Merry, as an ex junior captain, is it bullyin' to kick Trimble in the quad?"

"I've kicked him all over the school!" grinned Tom. "In the quad, in the passages, in this study, in the Form-room—"

"Racke said it was bullyin'," sighed Cardew, his eyes glimmering at the recollection. "An' he ordered me—in front of a crowd of fellows—to stop it."

"What did you do?" ejaculated Manners.

"Stuffed his cap down his neck an' sat him down on the asphalt," responded Cardew.

"Good man!" chuckled Lowther, and his chums grinned.

Racke's path as junior skipper seemed beset all round with thorns.

"I should imagine you chaps came on him in his study a few minutes after that," continued Cardew. "I've heard all that happened then, from Gussy. An' now I've come to speak to Tom Merry about somethin' rather important."

"Go ahead!" invited Tom.

Ralph Reckness Cardew paused, and drew a folded letter from his jacket. He proffered it to Tom Merry with a grin.

"What's this?" asked Tom, glancing at the address. "Dear Master Blake—why—Great Scott!"

Tom Merry stared fixedly at the letter, while the meaning of the first line—the only one visible—soaked into his brain.

"This is a reply to Blake's letter," he said at last.

"What letter?" asked Lowther.

"A reply to one he wrote last Wednesday," said Tom Merry calmly.

"Why, wasn't it something of the kind that started all the trouble?" ejaculated Manners excitedly.

"Yes. This must be from whoever he wrote to."

"By Jove! But how did Cardew get hold of it?"

"Dear men," said Cardew, smiling slightly, "I haven't descended to the inimitable methods of our Baggy, of Trimble Hall—if you really want to know, I picked it up."

"Blake must have dropped it," said Lowther.

"Good old Ferraers Locke!" grinned Cardew. "As a matter of fact, he dropped it within a yard or two of where I was standin'."

"Why didn't you give it him back?" asked Manners.

"Merely because I thought it might be a clue to the giddy mystery, dear man. Here's Blake under a cloud that started with the writing of a mysterious letter, an' at the same time the whole study is on the rocks. I know for a fact that Blake

had a remittance last Wednesday afternoon. Yet he's broke to the wide now—an' wherefore? Use your grey matter, old beans. He's been sendin' the money by post."

"How do you know?" asked Lowther.

"By usin' my eyes!" grinned Cardew, enjoying the sensation he was making. "By keepin' my eyes peeled, and doin' a bit of listenin' just now. I've discovered that the recipient of that mysterious letter is a Mrs. Murphy—"

"She lives in a cottage off Rylcombe Lane!" said Manners at once. "I remember we helped her once when her husband was ill—"

"I shouldn't be surprised to find that he's ill again!" yawned Cardew. "Funny Blake should send them his worldly wealth—an' even cut football matches—if there isn't somethin' wrong, isn't it?"

The Terrible Three were silent.

They began to realise, as they digested Cardew's information, that the reason for Blake's delay on the occasion of the Abbotsford match had been anxiety to send off a gift to Mrs. Murphy, and at that thought their consciences smote them. However careless Blake had been, it was due to his kind heart, and not, as they and the Shell in general had supposed, to his pig-headedness.

"You've got the letter from Mrs. Murphy," said Cardew. "I don't know whether your high moral code would allow you to read it in order to clear a fellow's name, Merry—"

"I don't want to read it!" said Tom firmly. "I've half suspected that there was something behind it all from the first; but you chaps know I had no choice about fighting Blake. I suggest we all go along to Study No. 6 now, and put it to him that we're sorry!"

Lowther and Manners nodded, and Cardew lounged to the door.

"I'll run along first, then, an' let Blake have his letter back!" he observed coolly. "I shall mention that I've been givin' you the benefit of my observation to try an' bring you to reason, Merry! An' there's just one other thing—"

"Yes?"

"Racke's breakin' bounds after lights out. I got it from Trimble!"

And Ralph Reckness Cardew nodded and lounged gracefully into the passage.

"He's a decent chap, though he will act the goat!" said Manners.

"By Jove! And Racke's startin' his little games again!" ejaculated Lowther.

"Come on! We've got to see Blake and straighten this rotten misunderstanding!" said Tom Merry, leading the way out of the study.

Jack Blake was engaged with his preparation when Tom Merry looked into Study No. 6. Blake glanced up, stared, and then nodded.

"Can a fellow come in?" asked Lowther, in a plaintive voice from the passage, and the other inmates of the study grinned.

"I've come to apologise, Blake!" said Tom Merry, plunging into the business in hand.

"No need to!" said Blake gruffly. "Cardew's just been in and told us that you had been thinking things over, and—and—"

"We've found out what silly asses we were!" said Tom colouring. "Cardew opened our eyes a bit—and I must say I never quite believed you were guilty, Blake. It was a rotten mistake—"

"It was my fault!" grunted Blake. "Racke stuck a pin in each of my tyres—that was what stopped me getting to Abbotsford! I know I asked for it when I refused to explain afterwards!"

"Not a bit of it, old man!" said Tom Merry happily. "Anyhow, we're all sorry, so let's shake hands and forget it! I'm jolly glad, for one!"

"Same here!" echoed all the juniors in the study. Blake grinned and gripped Tom Merry's hand firmly.

"Good man!" said Tom. "Now we can get together and think out a wheeze to get rid of Racke!"

"We've been twyin' to think of somethin' evah since the election, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus rather dimly.

"I've got an idea!" said Lowther modestly.

"Shell ideas aren't much good usually," said Herries, shaking his head.

"Why, you ass—"

In another moment there would have been a heated argument between Lowther and Herries, but Tom Merry dashed into the breach.

"Hold on, you couple of idiots!" he ejaculated grimly. "Keep the peace now, for goodness' sake! Cough up the wheeze, Monty, and we'll put it to the vote!"

"Go on!" said Digby encouragingly.

"It occurred to me just now, when Cardew told us that Racke intends breaking bounds to-night!" exclaimed Lowther. "We've tried to bring the cad to reason, and it isn't good enough, with prefects hanging round to uphold

his giddy authority. But if he's breaking bounds—even a junior captain isn't allowed to go gallivanting about after lights-out without getting into hot water—he's our mark! He will leave via the box-room window, most probably. What do you fellows think of following him and shutting the window after him? I think even Racke might be inclined to discuss terms with us on the inside and himself out in the cold!"

"Bai Jove!"

"My only hat! What a wheeze!"

"Why, we could force him to agree to anything then!"

"Of course!" said Lowther, grinning delightedly at the reception of his scheme. "I rather fancy Aubrey will climb down in a hurry when he thinks of the Head finding him locked out in the morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good man, Lowther!"

"Monty, you're a public benefactor!" grinned Manners, slapping his chum enthusiastically on the back.

"Wow! You'll burst my blessed backbone!" gasped the humorist of the Shell, massaging his shoulder.

"Then it's agreed that we adopt Monty's wheeze?" asked Tom Merry.

"Rather!"

There was no doubting the unanimity of that response.

"And it will work like a charm!" said Monty Lowther confidently.

CHAPTER 12.

Racke's Night Club!

"YOU fellows awake?"

Aubrey Racke whispered cautiously in the Shell dormitory as the last stroke of eleven died away.

There was no reply, only the deep breathing of the sleeping juniors.

Racke grinned in the darkness, and slipped out of bed. He held one hand over Crooke's mouth while he whispered in the latter's ear:

"Wake up, Crooke, old bean! It's time to start!"

Crooke gave a muffled grunt, and sat up, blinking at the pale starlight which came from the high windows.

"Ow! I feel sleepy!" he whispered.

"Get your clobber on, and follow me!" said Racke impatiently. "The other fellows will be waitin' for us at this rate!"

Leaving Crooke to slip on his clothes, Racke moved silently along the Shell dormitory, pausing at the bed of Boulton, Walkley, and one or two others, in order to awaken the occupants.

The juniors turned out swiftly enough once they had cleared the mists of sleep from their eyes, and Racke led the way silently to the door. There was the faint sound of the latch, and then fainter footsteps in the passage.

A bed creaked, and Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming, shook Monty Lowther violently by the shoulder.

"Yaw-aw-aw! Wharrermarrer? Tain't risin'-bell yet, is it?"

"Quiet, you ass! Racke and his pals have just started off on their midnight jaunt. Goodness knows what the game is—he's taken half a dozen fellows with him!"

"Back up, Monty!" came in a whisper from Manners. "I'm nearly dressed."

"Oh, all right! I'll be ready in a tick!" ejaculated Lowther, rolling back the sheets. "Br-r-r-r! It's cold!"

"I'll run along and tell Blake and his pals!" said Manners, slipping to the door. He was gone only a few minutes, and returned with the chums of Study No. 6, to find Tom Merry and Lowther waiting in the corridor.

"Bai Jove! Mannahs says Wacke is takin' a crowd with him, Tom Mewwy!" whispered Gussy.

"He's going the pace on the strength of his new job," responded Tom grimly. "This way, you chaps; he's got a good start!"

The seven juniors hastened to the disused box-room, which often served as a means of ingress and egress to juniors when breaking bounds. A slight scuffle from within warned them that the "blades" were not yet gone, and Tom Merry paused with his hand on the door knob.

Racke's whisper sounded angrily from the box-room.

"You fool, Walkley! If you're feelin' funky, get back to bed while you're safe! I tell you there's no danger so long as you don't make a thumpin' row fallin' over boxes like you did just now!"

"I didn't see that trunk!" came Walkley's voice, raised excitedly.

"Shut up, or you'll have the beaks on top of us before we start!" hissed Racke. "All gone? Out you go, Walkley. I'm comin' last, so as to see the window's left open."

Monty Lowther stifled a chuckle, and the juniors grinned behind the thickness of the door. There was the sound of

Walkley scrambling over the sill, and then Racke. The window rattled faintly as Racke closed it, enough to deceive any prowling master or prefect, but leaving a slit in which fingers might be inserted to raise it again.

Tom Merry pushed open the door, and the seven crowded in behind him. In a moment they were peering through the panes, keeping well in the shadow, but able to see Racke and his party with some distinctness in the starlight.

"My hat! There's quite a party of 'em!" ejaculated Blake.

"Ten, at least!" said Monty Lowther, in astonishment.

"Bai Jove! I wondah how they will all appveciate bein' shut out togethah?" grinned D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There they go!" said Herries suddenly. "But what the merry thump! They're heading across the quad! They can't get out that way!"

"This is a giddy mystemy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with excitement.

Indeed, it was difficult to account for the movements of Racke and his followers, if they intended breaking bounds in the normal manner. Tom Merry & Co. had taken it for granted that Racke was initiating some of his new followers—secured at the election—into a little excursion to the Green Man; but it was obvious that there was something else in the wind on this particular evening.

Taking every advantage offered by the shadows of the buildings, the breakers of bounds steered carefully across the quad and disappeared at last in the dense shadows under the old elms.

"Well, my hat!" said Blake. "There's more in this than meets the eye, Tommy. We ought to look into it!"

"Follow 'em!" suggested Herries eagerly. "Never mind about shutting them out; we can get back in time for that, after we've found out where they're going. It's up to you, Tom Merry!"

"Not now!" grinned Lowther. "Tommy isn't in a position of authority now, Herries! But I don't see any harm in doing a bit of trailing—better than yawning our heads off waiting for them to come back, anyhow!"

"What do you think, Tom?" asked Manners.

"We'll investigate!" said Tom Merry decidedly. "Up with that window!"

The juniors quickly had the window open, and one by one they dropped on to the leads beneath. The short drop from thence to the quad was negotiated with ease, and then, exerting all their skill as Boy Scouts, they set off on the trail of Racke's party.

Arrived in the shadow of the elms, they were somewhat at a loss, till Blake pointed suddenly to a figure moving by the old chapel.

"That's Racke!" whispered Manners, and the trackers moved forward.

As they approached the chapel, the figure, if it was Racke's, disappeared, and they found the strip of grass whereon he had stood deserted. The gaunt old pile towered above their heads, and dark clouds were scurrying across the sky.

"Where, oh where—" began Monty Lowther.

"The vaults!" said Tom Merry suddenly. "Of course, we were potty not to have thought of that before. There's the entrance!"

"Grooh! The silly asses will freeze down there!" ejaculated Digby.

"Come on!" said Tom Merry. "We're going down to have a look, now we've come so far!"

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry led the way to the head of the stone steps leading down to the vaults beneath the chapel, and commenced to descend.

"It's jolly dark! We ought to have brought our torches!" said Manners.

"All the better!" responded Tom Merry calmly. "They're bound to have brought a light of some kind themselves, and in the darkness they won't be able to see us!"

"Something in that!" assented Blake.

The descent of the stone steps was accomplished without mishap, and the juniors found themselves standing in pitchy blackness in the first of the long series of vaults.

"This is rather creepy!" said Digby, glancing over his shoulder a little apprehensively.

"Oh, rot!" grunted Lowther. "Keep that for some other time, Dig!"

His voice echoed eerily above and around, but the juniors determinedly suppressed their qualms.

"Hark! What's that?" ejaculated Blake.

In the intense silence which followed, the echo of Blake's voice sounded like a thunder-clap. After that, a pin might have been heard to drop.

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But as they listened, a faint echo of voices came to their ears, and the conviction that Racke and his party were not far off returned.

"Follow your leader!" said Tom Merry determinedly. "This way, and not a word, or they can't help hearing it!"

The rest nodded, and in silence they passed from the first vault into the second, and so on, stumbling occasionally on the rough floor, till the voices which Blake had caught echoed and re-echoed close at hand. A final turn and a sharply indrawn breath from Tom Merry brought them to a standstill.

Then, creeping carefully forward in the dark, they beheld a further vault, brilliantly illuminated, it seemed, after the blackness, by a number of bicycle lamps and electric torches placed on ledges and at intervals on the floor.

It was evident at a glance that the place had been carefully prepared for this "spree."

Beneath the illuminations, a little crowd of juniors, every one wearing a black crepe mask, were gathered round an oblong stone slab, over which a green cloth had been spread.

From where Tom Merry & Co. were concealed, they could perceive that the cloth was ruled into spaces, each bearing a number worked in gold, and on these spaces the occupants of the vault were placing silver—and in some cases, notes.

At the end of the improvised "table" Aubrey Racke was seated in state on a box, with a little bowl containing a numbered wheel before him. As the juniors gazed in amazement, he spun the wheel and tossed a small ivory ball into the bowl, droning coolly:

"Rien ne va plus!"

The ivory ball clicked into a numbered socket, and Racke announced the winning number.

"Seventeen, black, impair, and manque!"

Monty Lowther, who had been staring at that remarkable scene as if almost unable to believe his own eyes, gave a soft exclamation, just loud enough to reach the ears of his chums.

"Roulette!"

Tom Merry nodded, and continued to watch. The sight of nearly twenty juniors—there were more than there had seemed at first—gambling at a roulette table presided over by Racke, as croupier, appeared to fascinate him.

"There's a lot of the Fourth there, too!" breathed Blake. "And one or two from the New House, as well! Racke must have arranged for a general gathering of the class."

"I've got an idea!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, in a tense whisper.

His chums regarded him curiously. Monty possessed a fertile brain and his wheezes were usually worth listening to. "Get it off your chest, then," muttered Tom Merry.

"We can't do anything against these rotters to-night," whispered back Monty Lowther. "They're in force. They'd swamp us. But there's nothing to stop us planning a raid against them the next time they meet here. Then we'll bring a regular army along with us."

"Something in that," agreed Tom Merry.

The rest of Monty Lowther's idea was unfolded in stage whispers, but it appeared to meet with the approval of the chums, for there was a general nodding of heads in favour of it.

"Right-ho, then," said Tom Merry. "We've seen enough for to-night. Let's get back."

Quietly and stealthily the juniors made their way out of the vault, and in less than five minutes they were on the leads beneath the box-room window. The window was open, and they climbed through it one by one. Then they separated, the Terrible Three going to the Shell dormitory and Study No. 6 to the Fourth Form dormitory.

And it was with cheery anticipation that the juniors slept that night—anticipations of the complete downfall of Racke and the end of his tenure of office!

CHAPTER 13.

A Startling Climax!

"TRIMBLE!"

Baggy Trimble jumped, and hastily concealed the paper on which he had been scribbling beneath his desk.

"Trimble, it is your turn to construe. Pray continue from the point at which Levison ceased!"

Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, blinked reprovingly at the fat junior, and waited for him to commence. Several of the class had seen Trimble's furtive concealment of that paper, and they grinned heartlessly as Baggy stood up and rapidly turned over the pages of his Virgil.

"We are waiting, Trimble!" said Mr. Lathom mildly.

"Oh, yes, sir! Certainly, sir! Just—just beginning!"



"This is where we step in, I think," murmured Tom Merry. "Lay your stakes, gentlemen——" began Racke, and stopped suddenly. "Now!" yelled Tom Merry. In at the doorway swarmed the raiding party, and in a few seconds the members of Racke's night club were engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter with Tom Merry & Co. (See Chapter 13.)

gasped Baggy, finding the passage which had been set for prep at last.

"Pray continue, then!"

"Quite—quite so, sir!" stuttered Trimble, painfully conscious of the fact that he had not the foggiest notion where Levison had left off, and, more important, that he had not even prepared a single sentence of the work.

"Well?" ejaculated Mr. Lathom irritably.

Sundry whispers had informed Baggy of the place by this time, but he boggled miserably at the first words, unable to make head or tail of them.

"I—I—" he began feebly.

"Am I to understand that you did not prepare this passage yesterday evening, Trimble?" thundered Mr. Lathom, his face crimsoning. The Fourth Form master was a mild little man, but he objected to having his time wasted by a slacker like Baggy.

"Nun-nunno, sir!" gasped Trimble, with an apprehensive glance towards the cane. "I—I really didn't have time, sir. That was it. There was the maths, and the essay, and—and the history——"

"Ridiculous!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom. "This is not the first time you have omitted to prepare your Virgil, Trimble! You will write out to-day's passage, with a fair copy, five times. And now, supposing you bring me the paper which was occupying so much of your attention a few minutes ago?"

Baggy gave a gasp of alarm, and blinked hopelessly at the sheet beneath his desk. The imposition—much as he disliked hard work—he could have borne with equanimity; but the paper—he must on no account let anybody see that!

"You—you see, sir——" he began, with obvious perturbation.

"I perceive that you are taking great pains to conceal what you were writing from me!" said Mr. Lathom acidly. "Kindly bring the paper here at once!"

"Oh dear!" murmured Baggy, walking miserably out in front of the class. "Here—here it is, sir!"

"Thank you!" responded the Form master, examining Baggy's handiwork closely. "Why, what is this, my boy? Certainly nothing to do with your school work."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Baggy eagerly. "I mean, yes, it is, sir! You—you see, it's a little problem that suggested itself from the maths lesson. I—I'm interested in maths, sir!"

"A—a problem, Trimble!" said Mr. Lathom at last. "Perhaps you can explain more fully?"

"I—I can't—not just now, sir!" stuttered Trimble. "It's incomplete, you see. If—if you could let me have it back, sir——"

"Certainly, I have never seen a problem of this kind before!" said Mr. Lathom, staring with puzzlement at Baggy's paper. "But I suppose I must take your word for it, Trimble."

"Of course, sir!" said Baggy virtuously.

"I will, however, put it in my desk for the present!" observed the Form master dryly. "You must remember that the Latin prose hour is not the time for mathematical exercises, however absorbing! Perhaps the imposition I have awarded will impress that upon your mind, my boy. You may sit down."

And Baggy, with thoughts too deep for words, rolled back to his place, and sat down, glowering. For the remainder of classes he was in an extremely disgruntled mood, yearning for the recovery of that which had been taken from him. And, had Trimble only known it, Mr. Lathom was interested by that peculiar "problem," and he puzzled in vain over it in morning break.

Mr. Lathom was a man of mild pursuits, and he had never been to the gaming tables at Monte Carlo. Had he done so, the double column of figures recorded by Trimble,

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would not have presented such a mystery to him. For the paper ran:

Red.	Black.
25	2
	15
16	4
	33
	22
34	
9	
19	

There was a lot more, for Baggy had carefully taken down the numbers during the previous evening at Racke's "Night Club," with a view to working out a system of "beating the bank" afterwards. And it was the loss of that double column of figures, just when he felt that he had evolved a winning system, that roused Trimble's ire.

At dismissal the fat junior rolled morosely into the passage, and merely grunted when Cardew tapped him on the shoulder.

"Feelin' down, old bean?" asked Cardew cheerily.

"That rotter Lathom!" said Baggy vengefully.

"Sneakin' a fellow's notes?" grinned Cardew. "What was it you were workin' out, Baggy? A system?"

Trimble gave the dandified slacker a suspicious look.

"How did you know?" he ejaculated.

"Dear man!" smiled Cardew. "I know all about it! I may not have voted for Racke at the election, but I take it that doesn't exclude a fellow from the delights under his captaincy? Any chance for a chap with a bit of money to-night, Trimble?"

"Lots!" said Baggy eagerly. "I'll take you, and—and if you could lend me a quid—or two—"

"Some other time, old fat man!" smiled Cardew, quickening his pace. "So long, old bean!"

The slacker of the Fourth merely grinned as he heard Baggy's comment, "Beast!" floating after him. He had discovered what he wanted to know—that the night club was meeting again that evening. Arrangements could now be made to deal with Racke and his pals as soon as they had assembled.

"What luck, Cardew?" asked Monty Lowther, as the dandy put his head into Study No. 10.

"To-night—as usual!" grinned Cardew. "Trimble told me—we're such pals, you know. Count me in the expedition, Tom Merry!"

"Good man!" said Tom, smiling.

And Cardew, nodding, strolled on to inform the rest of the juniors concerned.

Quite a strong force of the Shell and Fourth had been let into the secret, and the proposed raid on the night club had been greeted with instant acclamation. The thought of catching the new junior captain fairly "on the hop" was a pleasant one to the juniors who had writhed under his regime.

The day could not pass quickly enough for Tom Merry & Co., and bed-time was welcomed when it arrived at last.

Between the sheets, the raiding party waited expectantly for Racke and his cronies to move, and on the stroke of eleven their vigil was rewarded. First, Racke, and then several shadowy forms began to flit in the gloom, and muffled whispers came to the watchers' ears.

The door closed with hardly a sound, but it was the signal for the majority of the Shell to slip out of bed and dress expeditiously in the darkness.

Then, led by Tom Merry, the juniors crept along the corridor to the box-room, where they were met by a Fourth Form contingent, headed by Study No. 6.

"Careful, now!" breathed Tom Merry; and in perfect silence the raiders climbed out on to the leads and dropped into the quad. All were wearing rubber-soled shoes, and they made no sound as they hastened towards the school chapel, keeping in the deepest shadows.

They halted to listen at the head of the stairs leading to the vaults, and then began to descend.

In a few minutes the whole party was creeping towards the large vault used as a gaming-den by Racke, and to which voices guided them without resorting to a light.

"Hist!" ejaculated Tom Merry warningly; and the juniors halted, blinking in the sudden glare of light.

"My hat! They're going the pace!" murmured Kangaroo, staring in amazement at the roulette-table presided over by Racke.

"What price the masks?" chuckled Cardew. "It gives them a reckless look, doesn't it, Merry?"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 977.

"Rien ne va plus!" droned Racke; and the ivory ball clicked into a numbered space.

"Thirteen, black, impair and manque!" announced the croupier, raking in the stakes—and there were a good many—which were forfeited to the bank.

He paid out on red, but there was a substantial margin of profit.

"This is where we step in, I think!" murmured Tom Merry grimly. "Wait till I give the word, and then collar them!"

"Right!"

Tom Merry waited till the round was finished, and then gave the signal.

"Lay your stakes, gentlemen——" began Racke, and stopped suddenly.

In at the doorway a crowd of fellows had swarmed, and in a few seconds they were engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with the youthful gamblers.

"You rotters!" hooted Racke, striking out fiercely, and catching Blake full upon the nose.

Blake gave an indignant roar, and fell upon the junior captain like a tornado. In a very few seconds Racke was knocked spinning on the floor; while Blake, breathing hard, stood over him and invited him to get up and have some more.

"I'm done, hang you!" gasped Racke, his face white with rage. "Oh, I'll get even with you for this, you cad!"

The rest of the gamblers had knuckled under quickly enough, none of them being of the stuff of which heroes were made, and were looking apprehensively to Tom Merry to take the lead. Junior captain or not, the "gay dogs" realised that his word was law at present.

"So this is how you intend to run the junior school, Racke?" asked Tom grimly.

"I'll do as I please, hang you!" snarled Racke. "And you'll be made to suffer for this to-morrow, Merry!"

"I fancy it'll be you who will suffer," retorted Tom coolly. "If the Head knew of this——"

"Sneak!" hissed Racke. "Go on, sneak to the Head; you rotter! The fellows will know what to think of you afterwards!"

Tom Merry flushed.

"I shall not sneak, Racke," he observed evenly. "But we—the majority of the junior school—have decided to take action before the Greyfriars match is tucked up as the last one was. Our plan is quite simple—we intend to lock you and your precious pals down here till the morning!"

There was a gasp of alarm from Racke's supporters, and Racke himself paled again.

"You—you wouldn't dare!" he burst out.

"That's the programme," said Blake. "We're not standing on ceremony, Racke!"

"Rather not!"

There was general agreement on that point.

"Look here," began Racke desperately, "what do you want? I'm willing to be reasonable."

"You've got to chuck the captaincy," said Tom Merry coolly. "Your style isn't quite good enough for St. Jim's, and you'd never have got in but for rotten trickery!"

"Indeed!"

Every eye in the old vault was turned to the doorway, in which a fresh figure had appeared—the figure of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House!

CHAPTER 14. The Old Order.

"PRAY continue what you were saying, Merry," said Mr. Railton calmly. "I am interested."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Railton!"

"It's all up!"

"Yow-wow-wow! I shall be flogged! Oh dear!"

The startled exclamations of the gamblers terminated in a fearful howl from Trimble, but Mr. Railton did not appear to notice it.

"I rather suspected that Racke had not won his position on his merits alone," remarked the Housemaster sternly.

"Go on, Merry, I desire to know the whole story!"

"There's—there's nothing much to tell, sir," gasped Tom, colouring. "We found out that some of Racke's votes were——"

He hesitated to "sneak" to a master, but what could he say?

"I see. You may save yourself further embarrassment, Merry," said Mr. Railton. "Racke purchased sufficient

votes to win the election; and now he has instituted some kind of a club—roulette, I perceive! You must thank Trimble for this, Racke. It was through Mr. Lathom bringing to me the truly remarkable problem which was exercising Trimble's mind that I became suspicious. I have been a little fortunate in my investigations, and especially in hitting on your retreat so easily; and I shall require an explanation from you, Merry. As you do not wear masks, I presume that you and your friends do not belong to—ahem—Racke's club?"

"We came down here to raid them, sir," said Digby.

The Housemaster nodded.

"I accept your explanation, then," he said. "You may release your prisoners—they will follow me to the House, and the Head will deal with them in the morning. Racke and the rest of you—come!"

"But these fellows, sir—" protested Racke, seeking to involve Tom Merry & Co. in his downfall.

"Obviously are a raiding party, as they term it!" retorted Mr. Railton. "You personally bear evidence of that fact!"

Racke scowled and felt his nose tenderly. He realized, too, that his left eye was far from normal. Under his mask the effect was hideous, and he ripped it off with an exclamation.

"You win, Merry!" he hissed. "Never mind, I'll get even soon; don't think you've finished with me!"

"Oh, get out! You make me sick!" grunted Kangaroo.

Racke set his lips, and followed his supporters through the vaults and into the open, the way being illuminated by Mr. Railton's torch. The little party was in the lowest of spirits, in dire apprehension of the woes of the morrow, and Racke came in for a unanimous "slanging"—which he bore with burning animosity towards Tom Merry.

The raiders, feeling very cheery, hastened back to bed, and awoke next morning feeling like giants refreshed. The dramatic finish of Racke's regime seemed to have acted like a tonic on them, and their satisfaction on gathering before the notice-board in the Hall knew no bounds. There was a new notice pinned up, and it bore a brief but pregnant message:

"NOTICE!"

"There will be an election in the Junior Common-room to-day (Saturday) at 2 p.m. to appoint a fresh junior captain. A. Racke will not be eligible for election.

(Signed) DR. HOLMES, Headmaster."

"You're for it, Racke!" grinned Blake. "That looks like the sack!"

"Hard luck, Aubrey!" chuckled Cardew. "It had to come in the end, but it's saddenin' when you actually come to the point, isn't it?"

"Hang the lot of you!" snarled Racke, turning away from the notice-board. "I shall be jolly glad to leave a rotten hole like this, if it comes to that! But if I stay, I mean to get even with you rotters for bringing Railton into it—"

"Shut up, you cad!"

"We should have dealt with you ourselves, if Railton hadn't!" said Blake coolly. "You know that as well as I do!"

"Oh, let the cad say what he likes!" said Tom Merry. "He's only gassing, as usual. Hallo! Here's Kildare!"

"Nice for Racke!" murmured Monty Lowther.

The captain of St. Jim's eyed Aubrey Racke grimly as he came up.

"You're wanted in the Head's study, Racke—at once!" he said. "The rest of the juniors concerned in the escapade are to be flogged after breakfast. Follow me!"

And Kildare strode away, with Racke looking like a whipped cur in his wake. Now that the blow had fallen, the full realisation of his position came home to the end with a rush. The summons to the Head's study could mean only one thing—he was to be expelled, while his supporters escaped with a flogging! As he thought of that, Racke ground his teeth.

Meanwhile, the juniors trooped in to breakfast, which was far from a cheery meal for those under sentence of a flogging. Baggy Trimble, the champion glutton of his Form, merely toyed with his food, and the rest were in pretty much the same plight.

There was a general murmur of surprise when Racke came in, late, but evidently not expelled. He looked white, and did not answer the questions which were addressed to him.

As soon as breakfast was over, the floggings took place, and it was noticed that Racke received a far more severe thrashing than his comrades. Taggles was gasping for breath when he lowered the cad, and Racke was as pale as a ghost.

"The school will now dismiss!" said the Head quietly, and the prefects proceeded to clear the Hall.

Morning lessons were a striking mixture of grave and gay, as Monty Lowther put it. The juniors who had been "through it" were passed over very lightly, while the remainder were seething with excitement over the afternoon's election.

The crowd in the Common-room at two o'clock was nearly a record, only one junior being absent, even Racke's followers having recovered sufficiently to take an interest in the proceedings.

The exception was Racke himself, who, although congratulating himself on capturing a stern warning and a flogging, in addition to being gated for the rest of the term, in lieu of "the sack," was likely to take a day or two to recover from his punishment.

But Racke was not missed, and there were only two candidates at the election—Tom Merry and Figgins. Figg, as was natural, took all the New House votes, but with Blake and his men standing solid behind him, Tom Merry was returned at the head of the poll, amid enthusiastic cheering.

"Good for you, Merry!" ejaculated Figgins, as soon as the result was made known. "You'll be better than Racke, anyway!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And now for the team to meet Greyfriars," said Monty Lowther.

"I'll shove it on the board now," announced Tom Merry. "The Friars are due in a quarter of an hour."

There was a rush to the board, and then the footballers—the regular junior eleven this time—hastened to the dormitories to change. When Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars, arrived in a charabanc soon afterwards they found the St. Jim's team ready and eager for the fray.

The captains tossed for ends, and Wharton won.

The opening changes were brisk but indecisive, the ball being exceedingly difficult to control. But both elevens adapted themselves skilfully to the conditions, and real football was seen. Half-time came round, and neither side had scored. Then a quarter of an hour before full-time Greyfriars came through on the left. A brilliant save by Fatty Wynn, however, averted the danger, and play swept to the other end. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy secured the leather, and swung a beautiful centre into the goal mouth, where Bulstrode, the visiting 'keeper, effected a clever save. But the ball spun out to wing again, and D'Arcy found himself unmarked. He swerved in, and then, as Sampson Quincey Ilfey Field, otherwise known as "Squiff" for short, threw himself out full length, shot across into the far corner of the net.

"Goal!"

"Oh, well shot, Gussy!"

"Good old tailor's dummy!"

Arthur Augustus blushed as his back was slapped and his hands wrung, though he was tremendously pleased at having drawn what was to prove the winning goal for his side.

Five minutes left—four—three!

The ball went out to Hurree Singh, and the nabob sprinted for the corner flag. He swung the leather back into the centre, and Penfold, pelting up, put in a great drive. But Fatty Wynn had his eye on the ball, and he caught it and cleared with a mighty kick. A prolonged shout went up as D'Arcy took the ball down at breakneck speed, and slipped it into the middle at just the right moment. Squiff went down in a heap to a flashing "grounder" from Levison, and threw out the ball, hard beset. Blake jumped, and, like a pip from an orange, the ball flew into the top of the net. A moment later the whistle shrilled, and the match was won!

It was quite a week before Racke recovered completely from his punishment, and he was not present to witness the replayed match between St. Jim's and Gordon Gay & Co., of Rylcombe Grammar School. Not that he was missed, for St. Jim's achieved a brilliant victory by three to nil—and in their excitement and satisfaction nobody gave a thought to the schemer or that brief but exciting period under Racke's regime! All was merry and bright once more, now that the split between Tom Merry and Blake was healed, and their chums were very careful for some time afterwards not to recall the time when there had been a Split in the School!

THE END.

(Look out for another rollicking fine story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, chums, entitled: "GUSSY'S NEWSPAPER!" By Martin Clifford. You will enjoy every line of it.)

THE VERDICT BEFORE THE TRIAL! Tom Holt realises with a sickening of the heart that his Indian friend White Cat, under arrest for attacking a white man, is doomed to an ignominious death before he is even tried. At all costs, then, White Cat must not be brought to trial!



Tom Intrudes!

"HANDS up, please!"

Tom's voice was politeness itself, but the men obeyed with extreme celerity, and Tom jerked the pistols from their belts.

"You will find these outside," he said, holding the weapons in one hand and keeping his own revolver in the other pointed at their feet. "But I shall ask you now to make my house your home while I pay a visit to report proceedings to Colonel Joseph Chapin. Malinka, get out of it!"

He spoke to the mare like a dog, to the men's surprise, and like a dog she obeyed, trotting quietly through the door and standing there. Hunks, however, did not move, nor did the men. They did not even speak, but Tom saw a significant change in their attitude when he mentioned the ranchman's name. Old Billee had been right.

Now Tom retreated backwards to the door, took out the key, and inserted it on the other side.

"Bid you good-day!" he said gravely.

Hunks arose slowly, growled once more at the men, and then followed his master.

"My respects to the sheriff," Tom turned to say. "I hope to be back before long to see him."

The man who had spoken nodded in reply and faintly grinned. Then the door was closed, the key turned, and the prisoners heard the sound of galloping hoofs and knew that their man was away.

Tom's composure in dealing with the sheriff's deputies considerably impressed those worthies, and when a passing cowboy released them from their confinement they spread the news of the incident far and wide without the least ill-feeling, while Old Billee was so delighted that he gave free drinks to every member of the jury, and entertained the sheriff and the judge royally in his private room.

Perhaps there was policy in this. At least it is note-

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE!

TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen, lands in New Mexico—at the invitation of some friends of his father's—to start business on the Doggett Ranch.

He finds the place in a deserted and dilapidated condition, and from a letter, left by a former employee, learns that his two friends have died. Tom's in a quandary, for he knows nothing about ranching, but he buckles to and makes the ranch-house shipshape. In the course of this general clean-up he comes across a dog with whom he makes friends instantly. Hunks, as he names the dog, proves a real pal.

Shortly after his meeting with Hunks, Tom falls in with a wandering tribe of Apache Indians. Their chief is Black Hawk. Unknown to Tom, the chief cherishes the hope of wiping out the "whites" in the country, and to help him to collect the necessary knowledge before a successful raid can be made on the white settlements, he offers to take Tom on the trail and show him how to become a successful rancher.

Knowing nothing of the sinister motive underlying all this, and keen to learn the ways of the country, Tom accepts the offer. He proves a most efficient pupil, and becomes the fast friend of White Cat, Black Hawk's son. Later, when Tom is in Serrita he falls foul of a bullying desperado named Mick Mander. Tom stands up to the bully, however, and publicly declares his friendship for the Indians amongst whom he has been living. This enrages Mick Mander's cronies, for a

WHITE EAGLE!

A Grand Story of a young Britisher's Adventures with a Tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

Told By

ARTHUR PATTERSON.

worthy that Mick Mander, on his sick bed, though he shared in the carouse to an extent which met with severe disapproval from his doctor, was the least happy person in Serrita that night, not excepting White Cat. To him was smuggled, through the agency of the big cowboy, a repast so excellent that, in the innocence of his Apache head, he concluded Mick Mander had been killed by Tom, and probably the judge as well, and that he would be released at daybreak.

If the company at Puat's Saloon, however, had seen Tom's face as he rode at speed towards Calumet Ranch, they would have had a surprise.

His reasoning on the matter had nothing to do with Sadie. Somehow he seemed to have grown older all of a sudden. He had almost forgotten her. It was the attempt to detain him which hardened Tom. He knew that the brass badge on the cowboy's breast meant official police authority. The man's words proved that it was not Pim Bolland this time who was playing a low-down game. The whole machinery of the law in the place was turned against him, and, what he most cared about, the welfare of the Indians.

This, then, was the end of all his hopes and intentions and promises to Black Hawk—White Cat to hang! Tom shivered at the thought, and Malinka, feeling the spur, sprang into her fastest lope. The Party ruined men, even if they were not held responsible in some way, and imprisoned; and he, their friend, a fugitive, probably to be henceforth under warrant of arrest anywhere in the State.

The only chance lay in the man he had to see—Colonel Josh Chapin. But what could he do? Surely no one person, however rich, could defy the law of the land.

This was not, to say the least of it, a useful state of mind in which to plead a difficult cause, and when Tom reached the ranch at last he was not attractive to look at, nor likely to win favour by the sweetness of his manners.

Then, as so often happens, misfortune overtook him at the start. After passing a long line of stables—log houses of various shapes and sizes, and corrals for horses and cattle—he came to a white gate, and as he passed up a drive of silver sand, hard as concrete, towards a big grey house, what should he meet just before he arrived at a deep porch and veranda but that fat spaniel!

Redskin is regarded as dirt. Thus, when Black Hawk's tribe arrives at Serrita, Mander's cowboys drive a "rogue" bull into that section of the town where the Indians have pitched their market. The infuriated bull does great damage amongst the valuable skins belonging to the Indians, before Hunks seizes the animal by the nose and hangs on like grim death. Whilst Tom is trying to get Hunks to release his grip of the stricken bull, Mick Mander draws his revolver and attempts to shoot Tom. At the critical moment, however, White Cat springs forward and buries his knife in the would-be murderer's ribs. Instantly White Cat is surrounded by the infuriated cowboys and marched off to gaol on the charge of attempted murder, and Tom, with a sickening at the heart, realises that his red friend is a doomed man before even he is tried. Billie Punt, who has taken a great liking towards Tom, advises the young Britisher to proceed to Colonel Chapin and lay all the facts before him. Tom, who has met Sadie Chapin, the colonel's daughter, thinks there is a sporting chance of saving White Cat's life and agrees to do as Billie proposes. Without loss of time Tom dashes round to the stable where he has left Malinka, his mare, and Hunks. On the way he bumps into two sheriff's officers who want to arrest him. Tom entices the officers into the stable and then, covering them with his revolver, calls on Hunks to guard them. The dog obeys immediately.

(Now Read On.)

Hunks, it must be admitted, behaved angelically. He was, indeed, uncommonly tired; besides which, knowing his master's depression, he must needs share it. But the mere sight of Hunks was enough for that spaniel. One instant it stood still, paralysed with a multitude of recollections, and then, with a long and piercing yell, fled for its life. Down the broad drive it ran, and up the broad flight of steps, and so into the house, squeaking—being short of breath, like some asthmatical toy elephant which had gone wrong in the works.

And this was only the beginning, for now emerging from the house came a couple of deerhounds. They were beasts massively built for their breed, and very powerful, and Hunks, bristling in every hair, made ready for combat.

Tom gazed round in despair, looking for a human being to hold those dogs. Not a soul was to be seen, and the hounds leisurely proceeded towards Hunks as grim and inevitable as Fate. There was only one thing to be done in such an emergency.

Tom dismounted. A word to the pup, and he came up to Malinka's head. His master lifted the reins from her neck and placed them in Hunks' mouth.

"Hold, boy!" he said. "And lie down."

Hunks obeyed very slowly. A shudder of cold disgust went through him. He knew as well as his master did what this meant. Over and done with was all possibility of a fight. What a lovely one it would have been with that lean greyhound, just about his own weight, with a jaw as long as a wolf! But he was now placed in charge of the mare. He was responsible for her, and must think of nothing else on earth. It was a hard, sad fate, and Hunks fairly wilted as he sank on the ground, and with the reins clenched in his itching teeth gloomily calculated to a nicety just where and how he would have pinned that deerhound if he had been free.

But Tom's trouble was only half over. These beasts, as guardians of the ranch—and from the way they moved it was obvious that they took themselves very seriously—might fall on Hunks as it was. Where the blazes were all the people of the house? Tom's temper was very much on edge. Should he call for help? No, he would not. If anything happened—and a great deal might happen if Malinka saw that Hunks was in difficulties—it should be his responsibility. He would deal with it alone.

As the great hounds approached, Tom went to meet them. The first thing to do was to stop their progress towards Hunks. He did this by collaring them one with each hand, with the same confidence and firmness that he would have dealt with his own beast. But these creatures were not used to such handling, and both growled. Upon this Hunks was on his feet in a flash, and though he still held Malinka's reins, they were now so disposed that if need be they could be dropped instantly. Meanwhile, Malinka herself, in perfect sympathy with Hunks, stood stiffly, her teeth exposed, one mass of steel springs, ready for a charge.

But Tom was in no humour for interference from his friends; and as for the growling of the hounds, in his present mood it had not the least effect. Strengthening his hold upon their collars, he calmly ordered them to be quiet in a tone of stern command, telling Hunks sharply to lie down.

This action proved effective. The growls of the animals ceased, and they contented themselves with sniffing this curious man all over, while Hunks sank again to the ground, and Malinka quieted down. Tom went to work at once with the dogs. He dropped on one knee, and brought their muzzles up to his face, and praised them with gentle, endearing words. His advance was well received, and two great tongues began to lick his nose.

This pact of peace concluded, he brought them together, and led them up to Hunks and Malinka. Now came the acid test. If these four creatures did not become friends, when he turned his back some of them would presently be in pieces. It was not a grateful task. The hounds were now on their dignity, and froze. Hunks was doggedly sullen; Malinka maliciously scornful. But Tom's will conquered. The hounds, with a little coaxing, became polite. Then Hunks, not to be outdone, responded, and lastly, at the crucial moment, Tom bid him let Malinka go. This settled it, for Hunks, with his master's fingers round his ears, at once rubbed noses with the hound he had singled out for attack, and peace was made all round.

The most delicate problem was Malinka, but in such a matter Tom knew she would follow the lead of the pup, and she did. There was, indeed, no effusive cordiality in her attitude. But her ears were forward now, her demeanour no longer malicious. So, again putting the reins into Hunks' charge, and with a final caress of the hounds, Tom turned to face his own ordeal, and went slowly to the house. As he did so he thought he caught a glimpse of something white at one of the long french windows situated on either side of the front door, but he could not be sure, and he only

found a negro butler to greet him when he mounted the steps.

The appearance of this man, however, was mysterious. He came into view so quickly, and there was something about his manner which led Tom to suspect that he had been within sight and hearing of the whole of his proceedings in the drive.

He was a very majestic person, perfectly attired in an old-fashioned dress-suit of blue cloth coat and waistcoat ornamented with brass buttons, and beneath, a magnificent, much-starched shirtfront. His curly wig was nearly white, whether from age or powder Tom could not make out, and in his bearing was the self-sufficiency and pride of the servant of an aristocratic family of the old South.

He looked Tom over with a critical eye.

"Want to see de kunnel?" he said briefly.

"Yes!" Tom replied, stepping into the hall. "Is he at home?"

He spoke with a very slight, and quite unconscious drawl, and, removing his hat and gloves, handed them carelessly into the servant's charge. Now, Uncle Ephraim had been a retainer in the Chapin family for half a century, and had served his present master since that gentleman was in long clothes, and if there were one thing he prided himself upon it was imperturbability on all occasions. But at this moment his presence of mind very nearly failed him.

It was not only that the things given to him were villainously dirty, and that their owner, take him all in all, was the most disreputable figure that had ever entered Calumet. It was much more. The butler had heard of Tom, and a story had spread through the servants' hall that he was half an Apache. Now, if there is one being a self-respecting negro of the South despises it is an Indian of the plains. Yet here was this person, standing coolly in the master's hall, showing clearly by his whole bearing that he was accustomed to be a guest at great houses, and by his speech—for Uncle Eph had been in the Old Country—that he was nothing more or less than an English gentleman.

The butler nearly expired, and took what was given him with the gasp of a dying codfish; then, almost dropped them, but didn't quite, and, recovering, by a mighty effort of will, bowed humbly.

"The kunnel at home, seh? Oh, yes, seh! Your name, i you please!"

Receiving it, and now more or less himself again, he ushered Tom, with solemn dignity, along a wide hall, threw open a door at the end of it with a flourish, and announced him in sonorous tones.

"Mr. Tom Holt to see you, kunnel."

Then, closing the door softly behind him, he went back to the premises under his rule a sadder but very much wiser butler and man.

It had been dark in the hall, and the room Tom now entered was brilliantly lighted. Tom was dazzled for a moment, and failed to notice that someone slipped out by another door as he came in. All he saw was a man standing with long legs wide apart in front of an old-fashioned fireplace.

The room was a well-furnished library, and Tom felt as though he had been borne suddenly back to England. He remembered just such a room in his grandfather's place before the family money was lost and everything had to be sold. This association of ideas held him so strongly that, forgetting the position he occupied in this new world, the state of his clothes, and even the mission on which he was bound, he went forward unhesitatingly to greet this man.

"Mr. Holt, I am happy to make your acquaintance."

Colonel Chapin's voice sounded extremely formal, and his manner, as he shook hands, was so stiff that Tom was brought back to realities with a jar; the smile which had been on his lips was abruptly checked, and he felt chilled to the bone.

Yet the face of his host was by no means a forbidding one, and he saw at once that he was in the presence of a strong man. Colonel Chapin was quite unlike the soldier of Tom's dreams. A typical American of the older school, he was clean-shaven, with keen hazel eyes, a hooked nose, thin, tightly compressed lips, and a bony, prominent chin. He was dressed in black, and there was not a sign about him of the stockman of the plains. He looked as if he had stepped out of a fashionable hotel in New York.

"You will sit down, Mr. Holt."

The voice was just a little less stiff now, and if Tom had been an observant person he might have seen the ghost of a twinkle somewhere in the depths of the colonel's brown eyes. But Tom was too much on strain to observe anything, except that he was being held at arms' length.

"I am intruding, sir," Tom began, his back as straight as a ramrod. "But I had to come."

(Will Tom's pleadings succeed in saving White Cat's Life? Be sure you read next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful serial, chums.)

YOUR EDITOR-CHATS WITH HIS READERS!

THE TREASURE HOUSE!

A Book with 20,000 Pictures.

Thursday, November 4th, is a date of which you should make a special note, for on that day the first fortnightly part of a wonderful book will be published. "The Children's Treasure House" will deal with every subject under the sun—it will reveal the beauty and wonder of nature, art, science, and history. It is written in simple language, and illustrated with tens of thousands of pictures, many of which will be reproduced in colours. It is edited by Arthur Mee, and will thrill with interest from end to end.

The price of each fortnightly part will be 1s. 3d., and an advance order for Part 1 should be placed with your news-agent to-day.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"GUSSY'S NEWSPAPER!"

By Martin Clifford.

That's the title of the next long complete story of Tom Merry & Co.—and a top-hole yarn it is, chums, take it from me. Look out for it in next week's issue.

"WHITE EAGLE!"

There will also be another ripping instalment of this serial, boys. Mind you read it!

ANOTHER CAMEO!

The St. Jim's Rhymester again piles in with a jolly little poem, entitled: "The Paper Chase." And don't forget the delicious Tuck Hamper waiting to be won. Order your GEM early. Cheerio, chums.

YOUR EDITOR.

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