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EVERY WEDNESDAY.



A BLACK OUTLOOK FOR THE NEW SKIPPER!

(A ragging incident from this week's splendid school
story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.)

A STIRRING LONG COMPLETE YARN OF TOM MERRY & CO.—

WHO SHALL BE

BY
MARTIN CLIFFORD.



From long experience, Tom Merry has learnt that a captain's life, earning as it does more kicks than ha'pence, is far from being a bed of roses. For all that, however, there are plenty of fellows at St. Jim's who are ready to take on the job of skipper, and who think they can do it a thousand times better. And now they get their chance!

CHAPTER 1. A Skipper's Woes!

"RACKE!"

"Hallo?"

"And Crooke!"

"Hallo?"

"Footer field—sharp!" said Tom Merry. "Get a move on!"

"Rats!"

"Eh?"

"Rats!" repeated Aubrey Racke, glancing round carelessly. "Don't bother, dear man. We're no end busy at the moment, aren't we, Crooke?"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Crooke. "Run away and play, old chap."

"Call again another time!" said Racke, waving his hand. "Shut the door after you!"

Gerald Crooke grinned again. In the doorway of Study No. 7 on the Shell passage, Tom Merry stood and breathed hard.

It was something new for Racke and Crooke to treat his orders with such cool impudence. And the junior captain of St. Jim's was not in the mood to stand "cheek" from two such slackers as Aubrey Racke and Gerald Crooke of the Shell. It being compulsory footer practice that afternoon, Tom Merry had gone to the trouble of warning Racke and Crooke that their presence was required on Little Side. But they had failed to turn up at the time appointed, and Tom had been obliged to trot back to school in order to seek and rout them out.

Being a very important personage in the Lower School, Tom Merry, naturally enough, was not pleased at having to run after fellows like Racke and Crooke. He was less pleased at the reception he met with from the black sheep of the Shell.

But he kept his temper—for the moment. "I suppose you think you're being funny, Racke?" he said, his eyes gleaming a little. "If you're not both down on the footer field within five minutes, you'll find it more painful than funny."

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"Really?" said Racke, yawning.

"Yes. Kildare's got his eye on you frowsting slackers. He missed you from the last practice. I advise you to go, unless you want trouble from Kildare as well as from me."

"Go hon!"

"Mind you turn up!" snapped Tom, his eyes gleaming dangerously now.

"Sorry—too busy, old chap!"

"Awfully busy!" chuckled Crooke.

"You look it!" snapped Tom grimly. "Well, now I'm going to get busy."

"Good! Close the door after—Here—what—"

Crash!

Racke's voice ended in a wild howl as Tom Merry made one swift stride into the study, grasped the back of the easy chair in which he was reclining, and tipped it up violently.

"Yarrooogh!"

Racke shot out of the chair, the magazine he had been reading flying from his grasp. He shot full into the chair in which Crooke was sitting, and as Crooke's feet were resting on the mantel-piece, Crooke could scarcely help what followed.

Describing a sort of somersault, Gerald Crooke landed with a loud crash, and a still louder howl, on top of the sprawling Aubrey.

The two rolled about, mixed up with the two chairs, roaring.

"That's just to show you I mean business!" said Tom Merry. "I'll give you one minute to get out of this study, you lazy slackers. If you're not clear by then you'll feel the weight of my boots."

"You— You howling rotter!" hooted Racke, scrambling to his feet. "Get out! You cheeky—"

"Time's up!" said Tom coolly. "Out you go!"

He grabbed Racke by the coat collar, twisted him round, planted his footer boot behind him, and then slung him like a sack of coke through the doorway.

Then he pounced upon the startled Crooke, and treated him likewise, despite that furious youth's desperate efforts to break free. The slacking Crooke was helpless in the hands of the junior captain, and a powerful swing sent him

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CAPTAIN?



spinning out into the passage where he collapsed on top of the yelling Racke.

Crash!

"Yoop!"

"Yow! Oh! Ow! Oh, you cad!"

"Bless my soul! What—what—"

It was Mr. Linton of the Shell. He came along the passage hurriedly, brought there by the sounds of strife. He was just in time to see Crooke collapse on top of his study-mate.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Tom Merry.

The master of the Shell looked at Tom Merry severely over his glasses.

"Merry, how dare you? What—what does this disgraceful disturbance mean?" gasped Mr. Linton. "Racke—Crooke—"

"I'm sorry to cause a disturbance, sir!" said Tom Merry hastily. "I was only persuading Racke and Crooke to come down to the footer field. It's compulsory practice this afternoon. I was just helping them to decide to come."

"Then I do not approve of your—your methods, Merry!" said Mr. Linton tartly. "Racke—Crooke—get up this instant and cease this ridiculous noise."

"Ow! Yes, sir!" panted Racke, scrambling to his feet and giving the junior captain a furious look. "It wasn't our fault, sir. That cad—Merry, I mean—attacked us without giving us a chance to explain that we'd been excused footer practice this afternoon."

"You excused us, sir, yourself!" said Crooke, glowering.

"Certainly I did!" said Mr. Linton, frowning at Tom Merry. "Why did you not give these boys an opportunity of explaining that they were excused practice, Merry, instead of attacking them in this violent and ruffianly manner. I am surprised at you."

"You—you've given them permission to cut practice, sir?" gasped Tom.

"Certainly!"

"Oh!"

He understood now why Racke and Crooke had dared to defy him, to lead him on with their cool insolence. They had been excused by Mr. Linton, their Form master, from attending footer practice.

Tom Merry reddened, and breathed hard.

"It's usual, sir, when a master excuses a fellow from practice, for him to give the fellow a note to show either to Kildare, as head of the games, or to me, as junior captain," said Tom quietly. "Racke showed me no note, nor did he attempt to explain."

"You didn't give us a chance!" said Racke.

"No chance at all!" added Crooke.

"You had plenty of chance!" snapped Tom heatedly. "You were just—"

"That will do, Merry!" said Mr. Linton impatiently.

"There is no necessity to make a mountain out of a mole-hill. Both Racke and Crooke asked my permission to be excused football practice in order to devote the afternoon to English History. In view of the fact that the history examination is approaching, and that Racke and Crooke are very behind in that subject, I gladly gave permission. Football cannot be allowed to interfere with lessons, Merry."

"That's just what we thought, sir!" said Racke, hoping devoutly that the master of the Shell would not see the opened magazine on the floor. "We were just making a start when Merry rushed in and went for us."

"You have evidently been too precipitate, Merry," said Mr. Linton, regarding the captain of the Shell severely. "You should not take your duties as captain so seriously. I did not give either Racke or Crooke a note; but, after all, that is a trivial detail, my boy."

"Then—then I am to take it that Racke and Crooke will not attend footer practice this afternoon, sir?" said Tom, biting his lip.

"Certainly! Their desire to devote the time to extra study is very commendable, and I am very pleased to support them in it."

"Very good, sir!"

Tom Merry turned abruptly and walked away. He was inwardly seething with wrath and chagrin. He knew perfectly well that Racke and Crooke were spoofing—that they had not the slightest intention of studying English History that afternoon. It was just a dodge to escape footer practice, and the two slackers had intended to spend the time in slacking and frowning before the study fire—as was their usual custom on half-days.

Yet Tom could scarcely explain that to Mr. Linton—it was too much like sneaking—though Racke's sneering grin as he turned away made him sorely tempted to do so.

Dealing with slackers was one of the least of the many trials and worries of the junior skipper, and the annoying part of it was that, often as not, those in authority, either knowingly or unknowingly—as in the present instance—made his task more difficult.

Tom felt sorely tempted to give it up and return to the footer field. But there were two more cases to deal with—Trimble and Cardew of the Fourth—and Tom set his lips, and made tracks for the Fourth Form passage to interview Trimble and Cardew.

CHAPTER 2.

Hard Lines!

"TRIMBLE!"

"Ow! Groogh!"

A deep groan answered Tom Merry, as he looked into Study No. 2 on the Fourth passage and called to Trimble.

The fat member of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's was reclining on the couch in the study. He was alone, and he sounded very unhappy indeed. At first Tom Merry was quite startled by that deep, hollow groan from Trimble.

Then he looked grim.

Baggy Trimble was, undoubtedly, the worst slacker in the Fourth—if not the school. He was fat, greedy, and lazy. The only exercise he ever took voluntarily was, according to Blake, the use of his jaws in eating, and his fat wits in avoiding work of any kind.

Knowing this, Tom Merry was not impressed by that fearful groan from the fat junior now. Trimble knew it was compulsory footer that afternoon. He undoubtedly guessed, on hearing Tom Merry call him from the doorway, that the captain of the Shell was after him to haul him off to the footer field. Therefore—in the junior captain's view—that groan was but a prelude, so to speak, to a woeful excuse that Trimble was too ill to attend practice.

Tom Merry was determined not to be taken in with such an ancient "dodge" by Baggy Trimble.

"Trimble!" he repeated. "Come along, you fat slacker! Footer field at once!"

Groan!

"You can drop that silly row!" snorted Tom Merry, coming wrathfully into the study. "You won't take me in with that dodge, Trimble!"

Groan!

"D'you hear, you fat worm!" roared the junior skipper. "The malingering dodge won't work to-day, Trimble! Cut it out, and get into footer togs—sharp!"

Groan!

Trimble rolled over on the couch—apparently in anguished pain. Tom Merry grabbed him far from gently.

"Now, you fat clam—" "Yow-ow! Grooogh! Lemme alone, you rotter!" wailed Baggy Trimble. "Ow-ow! I believe I'm poisoned. It was the Yorkshire pudding we had for dinner—though I only had three helpings. Ow-ow! I'm certain it wasn't the sausage-rolls I had at the tuckshop after—grooogh!—wards! Ow! Go away, you beast! Ow! Lemme alone, for goodness' sake! I'm fearfully ill!"

As a matter of fact, for once Baggy Trimble was not malingering—or "spoofing." He had not only dined, not wisely but too well, but he had also supplemented a dinner enough for two ordinary fellows by a feed afterwards at the school tuckshop. And Baggy had very much overdone things. His features, besides being screwed up with anguish, were almost green. He really did look very bilious and very ill.

But Tom Merry was not in the mood to notice that, and much too suspicious of the artful dodger of the Fourth even to take the trouble of verifying Trimble's statement that he was ill.

"You fat spoof!" he roared. "That chicken won't fight this time, my lad! Come along! I'm not wasting more time on you, Trimble! Out you go!"

"Grooogh! Yarrooogh! Lemme go!" shrieked Trimble.

Bump!

Trimble landed on the carpet with a heavy concussion.

Tom Merry then grabbed him, and again lifted him to his feet, with a wrathful heave, and planted his footer boot behind him forcibly.

It was a method that usually had the best results with Baggy Trimble—and the only sort of method as regards discipline that Baggy really understood and took notice of.

But it did not act this time. Instead of obeying in great haste, Baggy promptly collapsed on the carpet again, fairly shrieking his anguish.

"Well, you fat rotter!" gasped Tom, really angry now. "You mean to keep this game up, do you? Right! Well, you're coming down to footer, if I have to dribble you all the way, you lazy fat slacker! Up you get!"

"Yarrooogh! Oh dear! Grooogh! Lemme alone!" shrieked Trimble frantically. "Ow-ow. Grooogh! I shall be sus-sick in a minute! Yow! Wow! Leggo!"

For answer, Tom Merry ruthlessly grasped him, and, hauling him to his feet, again essayed the rather hefty task of helping Trimble to the door. He was half-way across the study with Trimble roaring fiendishly in his grasp, when Mr. Lathom, the Fourth Form master, appeared suddenly in the doorway.

He blinked in at the scene in his mild, short-sighted way.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, his voice taking on rather an angry note as he took in the scene. "Merry, whatever are you doing to that boy? I am surprised and shocked. Release Trimble this instant."

"Oh! Yes, sir."

Somehow, Tom had a feeling that once again he had put his foot in it.

He was right. Mr. Lathom looked scandalised—especially when Trimble collapsed on the couch again, twisting himself into fearful contortions.

"Yow! Ow! Wow! I'm ill—fearfully ill! Grooogh!" he groaned.

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Lathom in alarm, as he peered down at Trimble's pasty face. "The boy really is ill! I am surprised—astounded at finding you bullying a boy who clearly shows signs of illness, Merry."

"B-bub-bullying?" stuttered Tom, his face the colour of a freshly-boiled beetroot.

"Yes, bullying!" said Mr. Lathom indignantly. "I am amazed that you, holding a position of some authority in the Lower School, should stoop to ill-treat a boy like Trimble. He has quite obviously been over-eating, and is suffering from severe indigestion. Why were you ill-treating him, Merry?"

"Ill—ill-treating?" gasped Tom, scarlet.

"Yes. I am surprised—shocked!"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Tom Merry. "I mean, I—I didn't believe he was ill; I thought he was shamming—to dodge footer practice, sir."

"The poor boy is certainly not shamming," said little Mr. Lathom, quite angry for once. "Trimble, what—"

"Ow! Lemme alone!" groaned Trimble, shaking off the master's kindly arm. "Lemme alone. I—I think I'm dying! Lemme die in peace!"

"Dying?"

"Ow! Yes. I'm fearfully ill! Grooogh! It wasn't the tarts and sausage rolls, I'm certain. It was that Yorkshire pudding. Yow!"

"Nonsense! The pudding was excellent, Trimble. You had two helpings, certainly. But—"

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"Ow! D'Arcy couldn't eat his, and I ate it for him, sir!" groaned Trimble. "I wish I hadn't now. Ow! Groooooogh! Then the tarts and sausage rolls—"

"Bless my soul! You are an exceedingly greedy boy, Trimble!" said Mr. Lathom, with kindly severity. "I trust that this unpleasant experience will be a lesson to you. Come, and I will escort you to the sanatorium—"

"Ow! Don't touch me, sir!" gasped Trimble. "Ow! Grooogh! I believe I'm going to be sus—ow! Oh crumbs!"

"Good gracious—what—Trimble—"

But Trimble was gone. He fairly rolled from the couch and jumped for the door. He vanished, obviously making a speedy bee-line for the nearest bath-room.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom. "I really trust that Trimble will profit from his unpleasant experience. You really should have been more careful, Merry," he added, frowning at that hapless junior. "Had you taken the trouble to look at that poor boy, you would have seen at once that he was ill."

Tom Merry was silent.

"Your conduct in attacking Trimble in such a rough manner is quite inexcusable," went on Mr. Lathom sternly. "I fear you take your duties much too seriously, Merry."

"Oh, sir!" mumbled Tom.

Mr. Lathom was using almost the same words Mr. Linton had used.

"You must not think that your position as junior captain entitles you to abuse authority, Merry," said Mr. Lathom.

"I was not abusing my authority, sir!" said Tom, flushing with anger. "Trimble is a hopeless slacker—he always tries to dodge footer practice in some way or other. I've been getting into trouble with Kildare lately for being so lenient with slackers. I was only doing my duty, sir."

"Then I do not approve of your methods of carrying out your duties, Merry," said the master of the Fourth tartly. "However, I will accept your assurance, in this case, that you believed Trimble to be malingering. I trust that you will be more careful in future. You may go."

And Tom Merry went—scarlet and fuming. Such a "ticking off" from a kindly little gentleman like Mr. Lathom hurt him badly—and made him seethe with rage at the sheer injustice of it. Certainly he had made a mistake—even Tom now saw that Trimble had not been shamming after all. None the less, Mr. Lathom was well aware of Trimble's character, and he ought to have understood that such methods, rough or not, were necessary in his case.

It was in no good temper that Tom Merry tapped at the door of Cardew's study and looked in a few seconds later. Though disheartened and wrathful, Tom was not the fellow to give in until his task was finished. He had left the footer field to rout out the slackers, and he was not going back until he had done what he could, personally, to accomplish that.

He found Cardew—as he expected—reclining lazily on the study couch, with half-closed eyes. He was smoking a cigarette, and there was a mocking smile on his face—quite a usual occurrence with Ralph Reckness Cardew. His chum and studymate Levison was with him, apparently lecturing him—another far from unusual occurrence where Cardew was concerned.

"Come on, you footling slacker!" Levison was saying warmly. "What's the good of frowning in here on an afternoon like this. Chuck that silly fag away and get into footer togs."

Cardew yawned, and shifted his elegant head slightly more comfortable position on the cushion. But he did not answer.

"You'll be getting it in the neck one of these days," warned Levison. "Old Kildare's on the warpath, I believe, and that means Tom Merry will soon be on the warpath, too. He's a bit too good-natured for a footer captain, perhaps, but—"

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry grimly, coming into the study. "So I'm too good-natured for a footer captain, am I, Levison?"

"Well, yes," said Levison, with a grin. "You've been a bit too lenient, in my opinion, with slackers like Cardew here."

"Dear me!" murmured Cardew, lazily blowing out a thin cloud of smoke. "Is that what you call bein' loyal to a pal, Ernest? Alas! Life's full of disappointments. Seein' dear old Thomas comin' in with the gleam of battle in his eyes, I was just about to ask you to boot him out. I can see that Thomas is after me."

"I'll help him to boot you out instead, you silly ass!" snorted Levison. "How you can fool about like this beats me, Cardew. You're a rattling good footballer, and yet—"

"Oh dear!" interrupted Cardew, with a groan. "Don't start that all over again, Ernest. You don't shine as a moralist—you don't really. Besides, you bore me to tears, old man! Do run away and help dear Thomas to lead the strenuous life."

"You silly duffer—"

"Here, hold on, Levison!" snapped Tom Merry. "I've come here for Cardew. I'm not listening to his silly rot. I've wasted enough time this afternoon on lazy slackers. Now, Cardew, you know why I'm here?"

Cardew gently inclined his head, and yawned.

"I'm here to see you turn up for footer practice, Cardew!" said Tom, his eyes glinting at Cardew's cool impudence. "You know it's compulsory practice to-day?"

"Yes, old bean!"

"Then you're either coming down on your own, or else I'll have to yank you there by the scruff of the neck, Cardew. Got that?"

"Quite, dear man!" yawned Cardew. "That all?"

"Yes. Are you turning up for footer practice, or not, Cardew?" snapped Tom.

CHAPTER 3.

Routing out the Slackers!

"DASH it all!" exclaimed Eric Kildare. "Where the thump has that young ass, Merry, got to? How long has he been gone, Blake?"

"About ten minutes," murmured Blake meekly.

"Shouldn't think he'd be much longer now, Kildare."

"He'd better not!" snapped Kildare. "I'm about fed-up with this! What's he gone for at all? What the dickens does he think he's playing at, keeping practice waiting like this?"

"He—he's gone up to rout out the slackers, I think," said Lowther.

"B-r-r-rrr!" exploded Kildare. "Where the dickens is his authority when slackers do as they like? It's his job to see they turn up without having to be yanked here by the scruff of the neck!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Hunting up slackers shouldn't be necessary at all if the junior skipper had more control than he apparently has!" fumed Kildare.



There was a startled gasp from Racke and Crooke as the door of the study crashed open, and Kildare strode in. Aubrey Racke nearly swallowed the cigarette he was smoking, while Crooke over-balanced completely. His feet left the mantel-piece, his chair went backwards, and a second later he was reclining on the carpet. Crash! "Yoo-oop!" (See Chapter 3.)

"Yes, old chap. Certainly."

"You—you are?" said Tom, not a little taken aback.

"Of course."

"That's good enough," said Tom, his brow clearing. "Come along Levison. I'll expect you down in a few minutes then, Cardew."

"Right, dear man!"

And Tom Merry left the study, Levison following him, and looking back rather doubtfully at the smiling face of Cardew. For all his faults, Ralph Reckness Cardew was a fellow of his word, as both Tom and Levison knew. Though surprised at his sudden readiness to turn up, Tom was satisfied. But Levison was not quite so satisfied. He knew Cardew.

The door closed behind them, and, after blowing out another cloud of smoke, Cardew chuckled softly.

"Dear man!" he murmured to himself. "What a fellow Thomas is for jumping to conclusions. He must have thought I meant I'd turn up for footer practice to-day. What an idea! If Thomas is really expecting me down in a few minutes he's booked for a disappointment. What a life!"

And Cardew settled himself more comfortably amongst the cushions and closed his eyes. He quite intended to turn up for footer practice as he had said—some day. But not to-day!

There were covert grins from the crowd of Lower School fellows on the footer field. Kildare, skipper of St. Jim's, was undoubtedly in a "royal wax." It wasn't often that the good-natured captain of games interfered in Lower School matters—not those for which Tom Merry was responsible, at all events. Nor was it often he allowed himself to criticise the conduct of his junior captain even in private, much less in public.

But he was doing so now; Kildare was undoubtedly on the warpath.

Kildare, as captain of the school, and head of games, was a very important person indeed—little less important than a master of St. Jim's. And Kildare, fully aware of this, had his dignity to consider. He felt that his dignity was being injured by having to wait for juniors in the Lower School. Naturally, it made him exceedingly wrathful.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth, feeling called upon to say something on Tom Merry's behalf. "Weally, Kildare, I do not think it is exactly Tom Mewwy's fault, you know. Aftah all, though he is wathah too easay-gooin', he is a vewy good skippah, and—"

"That's enough, D'Arcy. I'll ask for your opinion when I want it!" snapped Kildare.

"Bai Jove!"

"I'm waiting no longer!" said Kildare grimly. "Blake, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,073.

you and Figgins will pick up sides— Oh, here's Merry now!"

Tom Merry came trotting up, with Levison at his heels. Tom was looking flushed and wrathful. He flushed still more as he met Kildare's irate look.

"So you've condescended to come, Merry?" said Kildare, with heavy sarcasm.

"Yes," assented Tom; "I've come."

"You've been rounding up the slackers, I hear?"

"Y-yes, Kildare."

"Where are they?"

"Hem! You—you see—"

"I don't see them at all!" snorted Kildare. "Trimble, Racke, Crooke, and Cardew are absent. As junior skipper, it's your job to produce them. Where are they?"

Tom looked mutinous. He liked old Kildare, and the two, junior and senior, usually got on well together. But he was not in the mood now to take a "mobbing" from Kildare cheerfully—far from it!

"I've done my best, Kildare!" he snapped. "Cardew has promised to come down. If you want to know where Trimble is you'd better ask Mr. Lathom; and if you want to know where Racke and Crooke are you'd better ask Mr. Linton."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

It was something decidedly new to hear Tom Merry checking the captain of the school. Kildare's eyes gleamed.

"I'm not asking for cheek, Merry!" he snapped warningly. "I'm asking you where those slackers are, and why they're not here!"

"Cardew said he would come presently—"

"He should be here now. You should have yanked him here by the scruff of his neck, Merry."

"I suppose so!" admitted Tom, his eyes glinting as he began to suspect that Cardew had no intention of coming. "If I spent my time yanking slackers about I should never have time for footer or anything else, though."

"You know your job—why don't you do it?" insisted Kildare. "And Racke and Crooke—what about them?"

"They're excused by Linton—to stay in and swot up English History."

"What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell. That the two most notorious slackers in the Shell had stayed in to swot up English History struck the Lower School as screamingly funny.

Kildare saw nothing funny in it, however.

"And—and you swallowed that yarn?" gasped he.

"No. But Linton did."

"Oh! I—I see. And Trimble?"

"He's excused because he's ill."

"And you swallowed that?" hooted Kildare. "Why, the fat little sweep is always malingering!"

"Lathom swallowed it, anyway!" snapped Tom. "In fact, I believe the fat ass was ill this time."

"Oh, you do, eh? We'll see about that!" said Kildare in a deadly tone. "You young idiot!"

"Look here—" began Tom Merry.

"You young idiot! You ought to know those frowsters and slackers better than to allow yourself to be spoofed in this manner!"

"I didn't allow them—I had no choice!"

"Rubbish! Are you the junior skipper or not? Have you any authority or not? Have the duffers so little respect for your authority that they do just as they like?" asked Kildare, with biting sarcasm. "I'm fed-up with this rot, Merry. You've got to buck up, my lad!"

"It's no use jawing me—"

"Who's jawing?" snapped Kildare. "I'm only pointing out the fact that you seem to be neglecting your duties as junior skipper, Merry."

"Am I?" said Tom Merry hotly. "Then the best thing you can do, Kildare, is to get someone else for the job. I'm fed up, too. If you want me to resign from the job, say so."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"My hat!"

There was a murmur, and Kildare's face changed a little. He had said rather more than he had intended to say—much more, in fact.

"Don't talk rot, you young ass!" he said gruffly. "There's no need to talk of resigning and rot of that kind, Merry. Aren't you to be spoken to—to be pulled up at all?"

"Yes—when I've deserved it, though there's no need to do it in public, even then, Kildare."

"Heah, heah! Quite wight, Tom Mewwy!"

"D'you want six, D'Arcy?" snapped Kildare, in a dangerous tone.

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Then I should advise you to hold your tongue!" said

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Kildare, biting his lip, as he began to realise that the scene was becoming a trifle ridiculous. "Now, Merry, there's been enough of this rot and enough time wasted. You'll come with me, and I'll see if my authority is to be flouted in this manner."

"Very well!" said Tom.

"Blake, you and Figgins can pick up sides and make a start!" snapped Kildare, giving the grinning Blake an angry glare. "Come on, Merry."

Tom Merry, seething with indignation and anger, followed Kildare off the footer field.

To his surprise, Kildare made straight for his own study. Tom understood, however, when the skipper of St. Jim's picked up his ashplant from the bookshelves.

"Now," said Kildare, his face grim. "We'll see if these slacking young rotters will venture to give me any of their confounded impudence!"

Tom Merry said nothing, though his face was scarlet with anger and chagrin. Kildare was certainly in a "royal wax."

Kildare made his way first to Racke's study—and his intentions were obvious. Without troubling to knock, he twisted the handle and kicked the door open with a crash.

It was rather unfortunate for Racke and Crooke.

The sudden, unexpected shock made Racke drop the magazine he was reading, whilst the sight of Kildare made him nearly swallow the cigarette he was smoking.

It had a somewhat similar effect upon Crooke. So startled, indeed, was Crooke, that he overbalanced completely—his chair went backwards, his feet left the mantelpiece, his book went one way and his cigarette another. A second later he was reclining on the carpet.

Crash!

"Yoooooop!"

"Very nice!" said Kildare, with terrific grimness as his eyes took in the scene. "Just what I expected, in fact. So this is how you study English History. Very nice!"

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Racke.

Crooke groaned in a different way as he slowly and painfully staggered to his feet, rubbing himself.

"You first, Racke!" said Kildare, pointing. "Bend over!"

"Oh crumbs!" panted Racke, his face paling. "I—I—look here, Kildare, we—we're excused footer practice, Linton's excused us. You can ask Merry."

"Bend over!" snapped Kildare.

"Oh, gad! I—I—"

Racke gave one look at the skipper's irate features, and then he slowly and apprehensively touched his toes.

His apprehension was soon justified.

Thwack!

Racke leaped upright with a fiendish yell.

"Now again!"

"Ow! Oh, dear! I—I say—"

Racke stopped short and bent down again hurriedly as Kildare made a stride towards him. The captain of St. Jim's was in deadly earnest, and as Racke took his "six" that slacking junior had good reason to know it.

Then it came Crooke's turn, and Crooke yelped more, if anything, than did Racke.

"That's what you're going to get every time you dodge footer practice—whilst I'm seeing to things," said Kildare briefly. "You say you've been excused by Mr. Linton. Very well. If you feel you've been treated unjustly, you can go and report this to either Mr. Linton or the Housemaster."

"Yow! Ow—ow!"

Racke and Crooke were not likely to do that. When Mr. Linton learned how they had been studying English History, he was likely to add another six to Kildare's—not more. As for the Housemaster—Racke and Crooke shuddered at the thought of what Mr. Railton might do.

"Ow! Ow—wow! It—it's all right, Kildare!" panted Racke, his pasty features drawn with anguish. "We—we'll get down to footer practice."

"Ow! Groooh! Yes—it's all right, Kildare," assented Crooke, with a hollow groan. "Ow—ow!"

"Right! Cut off and get changed—smartly!"

Racke and Crooke cut off—though not "smartly." They tottered from the study, rubbing themselves and groaning. Tom Merry could not help grinning a little at their expressions of dire woe.

"Now for Trimble!" said Kildare.

They proceeded in search of Trimble. Tom Merry suggested that he might be in the sanatorium by this time, but Kildare only snorted. He flung open the door of Study No. 2.

Trimble was not in the sanatorium. He was in the study. He was lounging in the armchair, and on his lap was a rather large plum-cake. With a pocket-knife he was busy digging into the cake and devouring it.

Tom Merry almost fell down. Having left Baggy in the throes of an acute attack of indigestion—dying, from his

own account—Tom was naturally surprised at seeing him devouring a large plum cake so soon afterwards.

But Trimble had obviously made a miraculous recovery—more, he had obviously become even hungrier again! It was very surprising, but Trimble was a very surprising fellow! "So Trimble's ill, is he, Merry!" said Kildare, again adopting his tone of heavy sarcasm.

"M-mum-my hat!" gasped Tom. "He—he really was ill, Kildare; that—that is unless the fat rotter was really spoofing, after all."

Kildare gave a ferocious snort. Baggy Trimble had dropped the cake, and was trying to cram it behind him in the chair. Apparently Trimble had some reason for not wishing that cake to be seen in his possession.

"Ow!" he gasped, in startled alarm. "It—it's all right, Kildare—honour bright! If that beast, Grundy, says I've pinched his cake, he's telling fibs. I haven't seen the thing even—didn't know he had one, in fact."

"You—you fat, young rascal!"

"Oh, really, Kildare, ain't I telling you that I haven't seen the cake?"

"You fat, young spoofer!" roared Kildare. "So you're ill, are you—so ill that you're scoffing a cake that belongs to someone else, eh?"

"Ow! I—am ill, really, Kildare!" gasped Trimble, suddenly remembering his recent and fleeting attack of indigestion. "You can ask Lathom—he excused me footer practice because I was so—so ill. Ow! I—I do believe it's coming on again now. Yes—Oh, it's started again. Ow! Wow! Grooogh!"

And Trimble clasped his extensive circumference and groaned a hollow but obviously insincere groan, twisting his features in his desperate effort to play the part.

But Kildare was not deceived.

CHAPTER 4.

Ticked Off!

"S O you've got a pain, have you, Trimble?" he asked.

"Ow! Yes. Awful! A fearful attack! Ow-ow!"

"Right! Then I'm going to give you another sort of pain to keep it company, Trimble."

"Ow! I say—leggo! Ow! Oh crumbs!"

Thwack, thwack, thwack!

This time Kildare did not give the order to bend over.

He just grabbed the squirming fat Fourth-Former by the collar and brought the ashplant down upon his tightly-stretched trousers.

Trimble roared and roared.

"There!" snapped Kildare, ceasing his labours at length. "Let that be a lesson to you, Trimble. If you feel you've got a complaint to make, all you need do is to trot off and report this to Mr. Lathom."

"Ow! Yow! Yow, yow, yow! Yow! Wow!" said Trimble.

"If you don't want to report to Mr. Lathom, then off you go to the footer field!" snapped Kildare. "Got that?"

"Yow, wow! Ow! Yes! It's all right, Kildare," wailed Baggy, in sudden alarm. "I'll attend footer practice. Yow-ow! Groogh!"

"You'd better!" said Kildare. "If you're not there in five minutes, Trimble, you'll get another dose of my special medicine for slackers!"

"Ow!"

Kildare left the study—he knew Trimble would be on the footer field well within the five minutes' grace. Tom followed him along to Cardew's study. He was wondering if Cardew was still as he had left him—and if he was how Kildare would deal with the dandy of the Fourth. Cardew was scarcely the kind of fellow to treat as the other slackers had been treated.

Tom soon knew.

Cardew was still reclining upon the couch, which he had dragged nearer to the fire. His form was hidden from the

doorway now by the back of the luxurious couch. But from the couch a coil of bluish smoke curled lazily upwards.

Kildare strolled into the room, his face grimmer than ever. Tom Merry followed at his heels, his eyes gleaming with anger. Cardew had let him down—he had had no intention of playing footer that afternoon.

From the couch came a lazy voice, before Kildare could speak.

"Oh bother! That you again, Thomas? Dear man, how perseverin' you are! Do run away and play, there's a good chap."

"You rotter, Cardew!" snapped Tom Merry angrily. "You said you were coming down to—"

"So I did," yawned Cardew, still without looking round. "But I didn't mean to-day—I meant some other day, dear man! Run away an' play footer like a good boy! That Ernie with you? Tell him to do likewise, and tell Kildare, if he asks after me, to go and masticate coke, also to chop chips."

"No need," said Kildare calmly. "He's here, Cardew!"

Cardew leaped up on the couch, and blinked round in utter dismay.

But he quickly recovered himself—the dandy of the Fourth was not lacking in nerve.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, smiling quite genially at the skipper of St. Jim's. "This is an unexpected pleasure, Kildare. Take a pew, dear man."

"Impudence won't help you, Cardew!" rapped Kildare. "Pitch that cigarette into the fire."

"But—I ask you, old bean," protested Cardew, with mild reproof. "It's a new one, just put on. Why waste cigarettes? By the way, won't you have one?"

With cool insolence Cardew took out his cigarette-case and proffered it to the captain of the school. Cardew knew he was "for it," and apparently he had decided that he might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb.

Kildare gave him one look, and then he grabbed the cigarette case and flung it with a swift movement into the fire.

Cardew gave a startled gasp, utterly taken aback. Then he jumped to the fireplace to recover his property.

His brief hesitation had been fatal, however. The

case—an expensive leather one—was already half hidden in the flames.

"You—you rotter, Kildare!" gritted Cardew, all his airy coolness left him now. "That case cost—"

"I've no interest in hearing how much it cost, Cardew!" snapped Kildare, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "I've had quite enough cheek from you. Juniors have no right to possess such things. If you don't like my action you can complain to the Head. And if you don't like the licking I'm going to give you, you can complain to either the Housemaster, or the Head, or to whom you like. Bend down!"

"What?"

"Bend down!"

"I jolly well won't!" said Cardew, his face flushed with rage and rebellion. "If you jolly well think—"

That was as far as Cardew got. With a swift movement Kildare grasped him and whirled him across a chair. Then the ashplant rose and fell.

Thwack, thwack, thwack!

Cardew struggled and kicked, but in vain. Kildare was a bit too hefty a senior for a junior to hope to hold his own against. Six times Kildare brought the cane down with resounding thwacks, and then he released the struggling, gasping dandy of the Fourth.

The junior had not given a cry, though the licking had been severe enough, for Kildare was really in a rage now—a very unusual occurrence indeed with the good-natured

"USE YOUR FISTS!"

This is the advice of George Alfred Grundy to all junior captains. He tries it on himself when he becomes skipper of the Lower School at St. Jim's.

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skipper. Cardew stood panting, his eyes glittering with rage and humiliation.

Tom Merry looked on, scarcely knowing whether to be glad or sorry at the fact that Cardew had met his "Waterloo." Cardew had certainly asked for it, if any fellow ever had.

Kildare tucked his cane under his arm, breathing hard as he did so.

"That's a little disciplinary action that will occur again unless you look out, Cardew!" he said. "Now get down to the footer field—sharp!"

"Hang you! I—I won't!"

"You won't!" ejaculated Kildare. "Rebellion as well as defiance, eh? Merry!"

"Yes, Kildare?"

"So far you've had the pleasure of looking on while I did your job for you. Now you can take a hand in helping me to do your job for you for a change. Cardew's going down to footer practice if we have to carry him. Lend a hand!"

"Y—yes, Kildare."

Tom Merry did not like the job at all. He would, cheerfully enough, have yanked the rebellious Cardew down to the footer field himself, or with other juniors to aid him. But he did not like doing it under these circumstances.

None the less, Kildare was skipper, and Cardew was a slacker, and there was no sense in thinking of disobeying the order, or of protesting on Cardew's behalf.

The next moment, kicking and struggling, Cardew was being rushed to the door by the senior and junior skippers of St. Jim's. Apparently, it was not an honour that Cardew enjoyed, for his face was convulsed with fury. Outside the study he made a desperate stand.

"Now, look here, Cardew!" said Kildare, breathing hard. "No use in showing yourself off as a spoiled kid, and making yourself look ridiculous. If you don't want to be carried down to the footer ground in front of all the school I'd advise you to go quietly. You've got to go!"

"Right!" panted Cardew. "You can let go—I'll go down all right."

"Good! You'd better!"

If there was one thing Cardew could not stand it was being made to look ridiculous, and he realised that that was just what he was asking for. Moreover at that moment Darrell of the Sixth came along, and the dandy of the Fourth knew that resistance was hopeless, in any case.

But his face was pale and hard as Kildare and Tom Merry released him.

"Come on!" snapped Kildare. "I'll see you to the field myself, Cardew. You can dispense with footer togs for once, my lad."

Cardew nodded without speaking, and followed down to the footer field without further trouble. It was a relief to Kildare—a great relief. He also had realised suddenly that for the captain of St. Jim's to be carrying juniors about was likely to make him look ridiculous, too. He had made the threat in anger, and he was glad it was not necessary to carry it out.

But he gave Cardew no chance to escape, and there was a buzz on the field as the Fourth-Former appeared in sight with Tom Merry on one side of him and Kildare on the other. Cardew's scarlet and furious face told them enough.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "Cardew's been licked, and now Kildare's yanked him along beah!"

"Looks like it!" grinned Lowther.

"Do him a world of good!" said Blake. "Knock a bit of the swank and conceit out of him. I bet he won't do much playing, though."

"Wathah not! You can lead a horse to the watah, but you can't make him drink, you know!"

But they were wrong there. Once on the field, Ralph Reckness Cardew peeled off his jacket with a business-like air. His face was quite composed, but each time he looked at Tom Merry his eyes glittered.

It was clear to Tom that the dandy of the Fourth blamed him for his humiliation. But Cardew said nothing, and soon he was playing footer with his usual dash and brilliance, and it was he who scored the only goal of the "pick-up" match. Few who did not know him would have dreamed that he was the same fellow who had been licked only that same afternoon for slacking. They might have thought it of Tom Merry, however, for he could do nothing right, and his play was slack and desultory. Tom was still in an angry, bitter mood, and his play suffered severely in consequence.

Kildare noticed it, and more than once he made sarcastic remarks on the subject—all of which only served to increase Tom's seething anger. To be called to order before the whole of the Shell and Fourth, and to be blamed for what he did not consider his own fault, filled him with anger.

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and bitter chagrin. It was not a happy afternoon for the junior skipper of St. Jim's.

But it was not over yet.

As the juniors trooped off the field at the end of the game, Kildare called Tom Merry:

"What's the matter with you this afternoon, Tom Merry? Are you ill?"

"No!"

"Then what—?"

"I'm fed-up with being slanged before a crowd of fellows!" snapped Tom. "That's what!"

"Oh! Sulking, eh?"

"Not at all. At least—" Tom paused and coloured. To some extent he certainly had been sulking, though he hadn't purposely muffed his play.

"It seems to me, Merry," said Kildare, before the captain of the Shell could go on, "that you're getting' thundering slack!"

"Oh!"

"You can't expect your skipper to be running about doing your job for you!"

"I don't!" said Tom.

"You're junior skipper," said Kildare. "For some time I've noticed chaps cutting practice—always with some wonderful excuse. In this case this afternoon, you should have explained the case fully to both Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom. If you knew those slackers were spoofing—and you must have known—then you should have done your duty and shown them up, instead of leaving me to deal with them."

"Oh! I—I—" stuttered Tom.

"You'll have to pull your socks up!" said Kildare. "If you're going to hold your job you've got to make the fellows respect your authority—not do just as they like. You're just a bit too easy-going for my liking."

"Get somebody else on the job, then!" snapped Tom, stung to the reply by the grins of the onlookers. "If you want a better man—"

"No need for that talk!" said Kildare impatiently.

"You're as good as any that can be got; better, perhaps, Merry. But you've got to understand that a skipper's job means work. That's all!"

Kildare walked away, leaving the hapless Tom Merry staring after him, his lips set grimly.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Kildare is weally in a feahful bate this aftahnnoon. Hard lines, Tom Mewwy."

"Oh, rats!"

"Bai Jove!"

"This comes of having a School House man in charge," remarked George Figgins of the New House, with a chuckle. "I suppose Kildare's right. Tom Merry is slack. But then, you can't expect to get grapes off thistles, and you can't expect an efficient skipper from a House of slackers."

"Too much to expect!" grinned Kerr. "As I've always said, the junior skipper should come from the New House."

"You burbling New House duffers—"

"Slackers!" said Figgins. "I really hope you will pull your giddy socks up, Tom Merry. Though, for the good of the school, I think there ought to be a change. It's time we had a New House man in charge."

"Hear, hear!" grinned Fatty Wynn.

"Oh, rats!"

Tom Merry stalked away, leaving the New House fellows chuckling, and the School House fellows grinning. The afternoon had been quite entertaining to them. But it had not been so for Tom Merry—nor for the slackers.

CHAPTER 5.

Very Unfortunate!

"BUSY, old chap?"

"Yes."

"Getting the final list out for the match to-morrow?"

"No."

"Haven't you done it yet?" asked Lowther, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Who's playing?"

"Not you!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Lowther chuckled and looked at Manners. That worthy grinned rather ruefully. Since footer practice Tom Merry had been anything but amiable, even to his chums in Study No. 10. During tea he had been uncommunicative—even snappish. Lowther and Manners had had the conversation—and most of what was for tea—all to themselves. After tea they had left Tom Merry to himself, hoping that his mood would have changed for the better by their return.

Evidently it hadn't. Tom Merry had not yet got over his public "ticking off" by Kildare. The injustice of it still rankled.

Though very sympathetic with Tom, both Lowther and Manners simply could not take him seriously. It was something so utterly unusual for the sunny-tempered and cheery Tom Merry to be sullen and resentful, that they could not yet believe that he was seriously upset by the unfortunate chain of tickings off from Mr. Linton, Mr. Lathom, and from Kildare.

"Cheer up, old man!" said Lowther. "After all, old Kildare didn't really mean it. Something must have put him out before he turned up and found those rotters missing. He'll be sorry enough that he slanged you before such a crowd when he's cooler."

"Kildare's gone too far this time!"

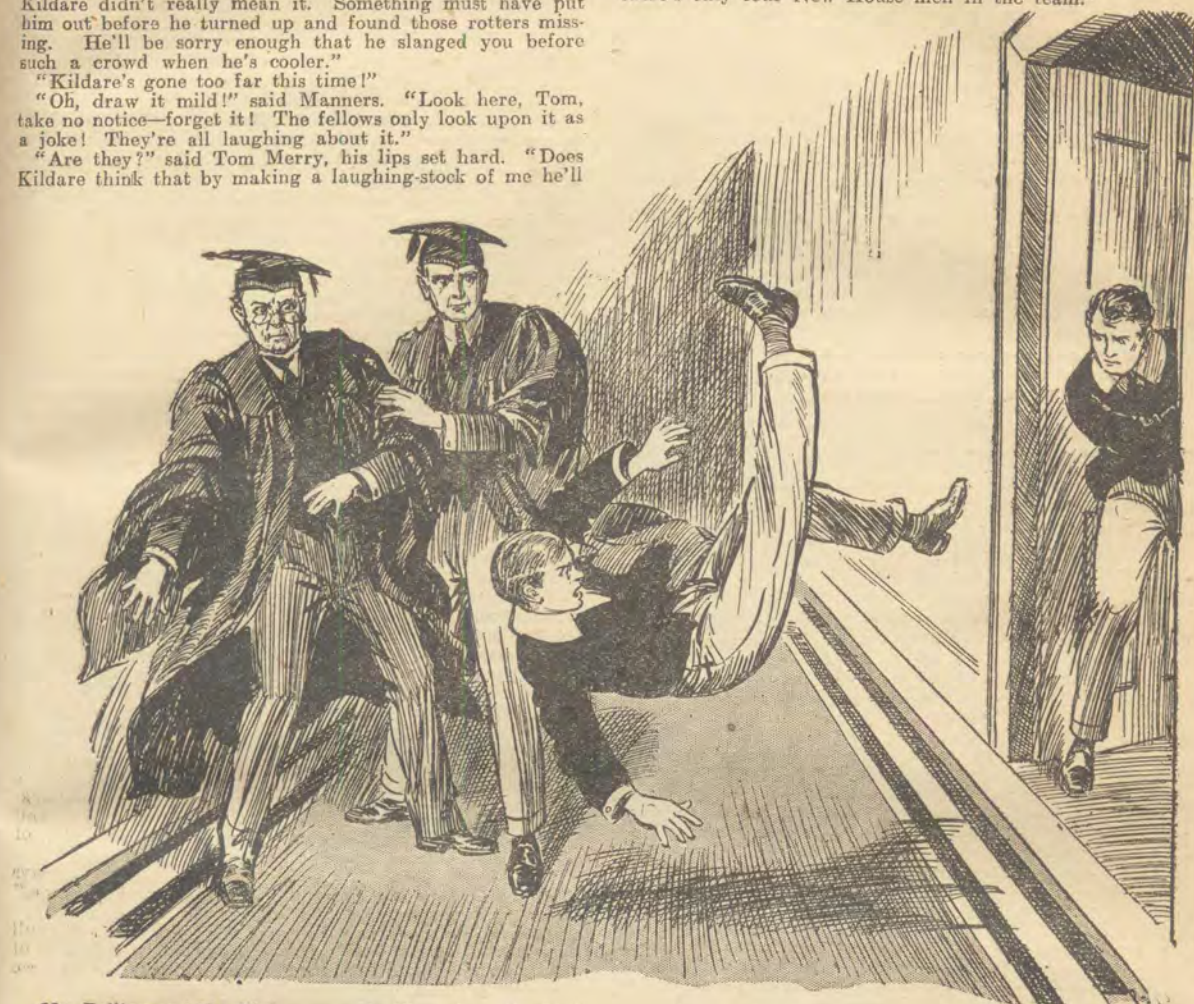
"Oh, draw it mild!" said Manners. "Look here, Tom, take no notice—forget it! The fellows only look upon it as a joke! They're all laughing about it."

"Are they?" said Tom Merry, his lips set hard. "Does Kildare think that by making a laughing-stock of me he'll

"Have you decided on that vacant place yet?" said Lowther.

"Yes—you're not the man, though."

"I hardly expected to be," said Lowther, with a rueful grin. "But it's pretty certain it will have to be either Redfern or Cardew. Both are pretty good men at their positions. The new House men will howl if it isn't Reddy—there's only four New House men in the team."



Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton were strolling along the Shell passage, deep in discussion, when they came to an abrupt halt. A burly figure, all arms and legs, hurtled out of No. 10 Study and collapsed in a yelling heap almost at their very feet. "Bless my soul!" articulated Mr. Railton. "Grundy!" (See Chapter 5).

teach the fellows to respect my authority? Is that the way for a senior skipper to back up a junior skipper?"

"Look here, Tom—"

"I'm not going to discuss it with anyone!" said Tom curtly. "I'm fed-up, and it wouldn't take much to make me chuck up the job—the job Kildare seems to think I'm not good enough for. In fact, I'm seriously thinking about it."

"Wha-at?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"I'm slanged by Linton and Lathom for being high-handed and over-officious, and I'm slanged by Kildare for being easy-going and slack. Lathom called me a bully, even. Linton said I took my duties too seriously, and so did Lathom for that matter. Kildare—"

"Never mind, old man," said Manners soothingly. "It was just a series of unlucky misunderstandings. Nobody seriously believes you're either slack or too easy-going, Tom. You're the best skipper we could have, and the fellows know it—excepting a few born idiots like Grundy who don't count."

"Thanks!" said Tom bitterly. "I'm glad someone seems to think I'm not a hopeless dud at my job, anyway."

"Grin and take it as a joke, Tom," urged Lowther. "Look here, the list isn't up on the board yet. If you've finished it, hadn't you better shove it up. The fellows are asking about it."

"Let 'em ask."

"Well, how many men does Figgins want in the dashed team?" snapped Tom. "I've far more School House men and good men to choose from—Figgys knows that well enough."

"Then it isn't Redfern?"

"No."

"Cardew, then, of course!" said Manners, with a soft whistle. "Will he play? He showed great form even this afternoon after that licking from Kildare. I didn't even think the beggar would play at all. But—"

"He'll play," said Tom Merry, looking grim as he thought of Cardew's trick that afternoon. "He said he would play—at least, he as good as said so two days ago. Anyway, I've decided to play him."

"It won't be a popular decision—even in the School House," said Lowther dubiously. "He's brilliant when he likes to be—but that's none too often. He's too fond of slacking. That isn't all. He's none too reliable—you never know."

"I know that. I'm risking it, though. He played a great game the last time I played him. He's miles above even old Redfern when his heart's in the game. I'm risking it."

"Figgys and his crowd will rave!"

"Let them!"

"You've really decided that?"

"Yes."

"Haden't you better shove the list up for the fellows to see, then?"

"The fellows can wait my time!" said Tom, his eyes glinting.

"But—but look here, old man—"

Manners' uneasy remonstrance was interrupted as the door flew back and Grundy of the Shell marched in.

"Oh, here you are, Merry!" he said grimly. "Made that list out yet?"

"Yes."

"Am I on it?" said Grundy.

"You're on a list—yes."

"For the match to-morrow afternoon?" shouted Grundy in great excitement.

"No, not at all. You're on my list of duds, Grundy—fellows who don't know football from hopscotch! Now clear out if you're satisfied."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Manners and Lowther at the extraordinary expression on Grundy's face.

But George Alfred was not at all satisfied, and he did not get out.

"You—you cheeky owl!" he roared, shaking a fist at Tom Merry. "Yah! Nice footer skipper you are—I don't think! Why, you haven't the faintest idea of judging a footballer—in fact, you know nothing about the blessed game, it strikes me!"

"Outside, you footling ass! I'm not in the mood to listen to your funny turn just now, Grundy."

"What? Why, you cheeky rotter!"

"Get out!"

"I jolly well won't!" roared Grundy. "I've come to know if I'm selected to play to-morrow, and if not, why not?"

"Because we want to win—that's one reason. Another is that we've no intention of helping Abbotsford to win—as we would be doing if we played you."

Grundy spluttered and clenched his big fists.

"You—you cheeky owl!" he bawled. "Yah! I refuse to argue with you—"

"Good! Outside, then!"

"But I'll tell you this!" hooted Grundy. "In my opinion Kildare was quite right this afternoon—you're absolutely no good as junior skipper, Tom Merry!"

"Thanks! If I had your good opinion in that respect I'd resign at once and then go and drown myself!"

"Yah! Why don't you resign, then?" roared Grundy excitedly. "Hasn't Kildare made it clear what he thinks about you? Yah! You can't even control the slackers! Hasn't Kildare had to do your job for you? You're not a bad sort, Tom Merry—I will say that for you—but you're absolutely no good as skipper! Think I'd let the fellows slack about like you do? No fear! I'd rule 'em with a rod of iron if I were skipper."

"That's enough. Get out!"

Tom Merry flushed angrily. At any other time he would have laughed at the great George Alfred's claims and opinions. On scores and scores of occasions Grundy had told him plainly that he was no good as skipper, and Tom had smiled. But he did not smile now. Kildare's remarks were too recent, and even from Grundy a reminder of them was unpleasant and wounding.

"I won't get out!" bellowed Grundy. "We want a new skipper—that's what's wanted here, and Kildare knows it, and thinks it, though he doesn't like saying so. He's weak like you if it comes to that. Call yourself efficient, and can't tell a born footballer when you see one."

"I can tell a born idiot, anyway!" snapped Tom.

"You're going out of this study—now!"

"Look here—why, what—Here, why, I'll—"

Grundy's bellowing voice ended in a gurgle as Tom Merry grabbed him by the back of the neck, whirled him round, and fairly rushed him to the door.

Grundy was taken completely by surprise, but at the door he recovered himself and made a desperate stand. Locked in each other's arms the two struggled furiously for the mastery. Tom Merry was angry and Grundy was angry.

But Tom Merry was just a trifle too good for the burly Shell fellow—especially in his present mood. After waiting about for a whirling few seconds in the open doorway, Tom managed to get the upper hand, and Grundy went flying out to fall with a crash and a yell against the opposite wall of the passage.

It was just at that interesting moment that Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, and Mr. Linton, happened to stroll along the passage.

They were chatting genially—probably discussing scholastic matters. At all events, their discussion ceased abruptly as the mighty George Alfred, all arms and legs, came hurtling out of No. 10 Study to collapse in a yelling heap almost at their very feet.

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"Bless my soul!" articulated Mr. Railton, his face showing alarm and then anger. "It—it is Grundy! Grundy—Merry—how dare you?"

"Oh!" gasped Tom Merry.

He stood in the doorway, gasping and looking helplessly at the two masters. Grundy scrambled up, his rugged features red and furious. Covered with dust, with collars adrift and faces red and dusty and wrathful, Tom Merry and George Alfred Grundy stared at Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton.

It was really a most unfortunate meeting.

CHAPTER 6.

The Eleventh Man!

"MERRY!"

Mr. Railton's voice was like unto the rumble of distant thunder.

"Y—yes, sir."

"I—I am surprised!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, giving the junior captain a very severe look. "I expect a certain amount of horse-play and mischief from the junior element in this House. But—but I do not expect to find the junior captain of the school fighting in the passage like an unruly and irresponsible Third-Form boy."

"Oh! I—I—" gasped Tom, his face reddening.

"As the head boy in the Lower School, I expect something better from you, Merry!" snapped Mr. Railton. "Yet, instead of setting a good example—an example of law and order—to the House, I find you fighting in this disgraceful manner."

"Oh, sir!"

"You should know better, Merry—I am surprised at you!" said Mr. Railton sharply. "Only this afternoon I happened to hear a disturbance from this passage, and on mentioning the matter to Mr. Linton I was surprised to learn that you were the cause of it—that you were attacking two other Shell boys in an inexcusable manner."

"I—I—I—"

"This sort of thing cannot go on, Merry," proceeded Mr. Railton. "Instead of using your authority to promote law and order in the school you are, apparently, using it to impose your will upon weaker boys. Why were you fighting with Grundy now?"

"I—I—I—" stuttered Tom.

"It was as much my fault as his, sir!" growled Grundy gruffly. "He ordered me out of his study and I wouldn't go. As for my being weaker than he is—my hat! I could eat him!"

"Grundy!"

"Well, I'm not the fellow to allow Merry or anyone else to order me about."

"Silence, Grundy! There is no excuse for you, and less for Merry. You will take five hundred lines, Grundy."

"Oh!"

"You will take the same punishment, Merry!" rapped out the Housemaster. "And kindly let me hear of no more fighting and quarrels in which you are concerned. If anything further of this nature comes to my notice I shall feel reluctantly obliged to consider the question of removing you from your position of authority."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Tom. "But—"

"That will do! I shall expect the lines by Friday morning, at the latest."

Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton marched away, both looking angry, and Mr. Linton also looking rather distressed. As a matter of fact, by sheer chance, Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton had also learned from Mr. Lathom of the Trimble incident. In the circumstances, not knowing the true facts, it was perhaps no wonder that Mr. Railton had taken Tom Merry to task so severely.

But he little dreamed what an effect it would have on Tom Merry. The Housemaster expected Tom to be somewhat ashamed, and determined not to transgress again. Instead of which Tom was only made more bitter and furious. Certainly, in throwing Grundy out of the study he had been far from respecting law and order. None the less he felt the stinging reprimand was unjust and unnecessary.

He entered the study again slowly, banging the door after him.

"Hard cheese, old man!" said Lowther sympathetically. "My hat! Your luck's out fairly to-day, Tommy. Old Railton—"

"Hang Railton!"

"He didn't really mean it, Tom—Railton thinks no end of you, old chap!" said Manners mildly. "No need to take it to heart."

"He's another who thinks I'm not fit for my job," snapped Tom bitterly. "Well, if they want a change, let 'em—"

Knock!

The door opened to reveal Figgins, Kerr, and Redfern of the New House. They looked grimly determined.

"Hallo, here you are, Merry!" said Figgy warmly. "What about that list?"

"What about it?" snapped Tom.

"It should have been up before this."

"You setting up to teach me my job?" inquired Tom Merry curtly.

"I could teach you a lot about it for that matter!" returned Figgins coolly. "In fact, the general feeling in the New House is that you're played out, Thomas. What's wanted is a new man for skipper—and that new man must be a New House man."

"You, of course!"

"Exactly!" said Figgins.

"Just that!" said Kerr.

"Hold on!" said Redfern frowning. "I don't know so much about that, Figgy. You're a good man, I'll admit, and a sight better than any School House worm could be—even Tom Merry. But there's a better man over in the New House even than you."

"Who's that, then?" said Figgins, with deadly politeness.

"Me!" said Redfern inelegantly. "Little me, old chap! Or, failing me, one of the chaps in our study—Owen or Lawrence! I've nothing to say against you Figgy—you're better than a School House man naturally. But you're hardly up to my weight, if I may say so."

"You—you burbling owl!" hooted Figgins wrathfully.

"Same to you, old chap. But never mind the question of skipper now, Figgy. We've come to ask Tom Merry

about that list. Have you decided on that vacant place, Merry?"

"Yes."

"Who's got it?"

"Not you!"

"Oh!"

"Does that mean you're shoving in Cardew—that slacker?" hooted Figgins.

"Just that!"

"Well, my hat! Cardew, a rotten frowster, who won't practise, and who's bound to let us down in the match! Cardew, the—the—"

"He ran rings round you this afternoon, anyway!" said Tom Merry curtly. "There wasn't a fellow on your side to stop him. I've decided upon Cardew at outside-right, because he's a better man than Redfern. That's all. If you're not satisfied—"

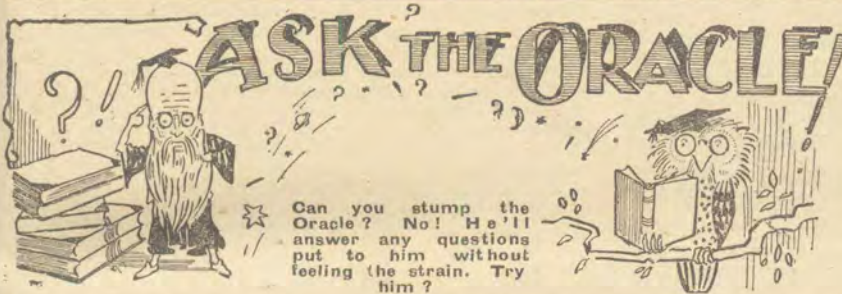
"We're jolly well not!"

"Then you can go and eat coke!" said Tom. "Now clear out of my study. Your New House faces worry me."

"Why, you—you cheeky School House worm!" shouted Figgins excitedly. "For two pins I'd mop your own study up with you! You're choosing Cardew, not because he's the better man, but just because he's a School House sweep. A skipper shouldn't show favouritism!"

"So I show favouritism, do I?" said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "Say that again, Figgy, and I'll punch your silly head and boot you out of this."

(Continued on next page.)



Can you stump the Oracle? No! He'll answer any questions put to him without feeling the strain. Try him?

Q. Where are the Elysian Fields?

A. Your friend told you wrong, Reggie Wray; the Elysian Fields are not near the Hackney Marshes. We find mention of them in those great poems by Virgil, known as the "Æneid," which means "About Æneas." According to the poems Æneas was supposed after sailing from Sicily to visit that realm where the ancients believed souls gathered after death, and which was known as the Elysian Fields. Other names given to the heaven known as the Elysian Fields by the ancients are Paradise, Olympus, the Vallhalla of the Scandinavians, Nirwana of the Buddhists, and Happy Hunting Grounds of the North-American Redskins.

Q. Who are the Linseed Lancers?

A. This is a nickname given to the Royal Army Medical Corps—and not the only one. And that the familiar initial letters R.A.M.C. stand for Rob All My Comrades, is a distinct libel on a gallant body of men.

Q. What is the meaning of hors de combat and hors de propos?

A. Your schoolmaster, Tom Hatcher of Feltham, was quite right in giving you three cuts with the cane. And it was decidedly unwise of you to tell him in the French lesson that hors de combat means

war charger, and the translation of hors de propos is clothes' horse. The real translation of hors de combat is out of the fight—in other words, to be disabled, knocked flat, K.O'd or sent to dreamland. Hors de propos means simply out of place, or not to the purpose. For which French lesson no extra charge has been made for this week's GEM!

Q. Has a cow's tail any similarity to a swan's breast?

A. Yes, Gertie Mayhew—I know that one. It grows down.



The signal flag hoisted when a ship requires a pilot.

Q. Who is a pilot-jack?

A. I have printed your question as you have asked it, Bennie McGuffie of Troon, who is a lover of sea yarns, although the real form should be, "What is a pilot-jack?" Certainly in a sojourn of nearly eighty years on this planet, I have never heard the term applied to a person, but to the flag which is hoisted at the fore of a ship when a pilot is wanted on board. The pilot-jack simply consists of the Union flag in a white surround.

Q. What is a bolas?

A. I am glad you have asked this question, "Adventure Story Reader" of Doncaster—as the weighty knowledge

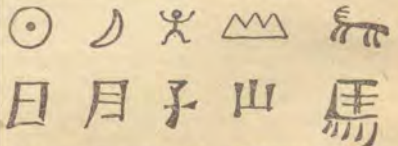
you want has been on my chest for years. The bolas is a heavy weapon used by the Gauchos and Indians of Mexico and South America, and it is composed of a short rope or chain heavily weighted at either end. When thrown with accuracy at a running steer, for instance, the rope part of the bolas will strike first, and the weights wrap themselves round the beast's legs, bringing him heavily to the ground.

Q. What is a puggaree?

A. The thin turban or scarf of muslin worn round a sun-helmet in hot countries, such as India, and which sometimes extends over the back of the wearer's neck to keep off the sun rays.

Q. Is it hard to learn to write Chinese?

A. As you are a Welshman, Owen Owens of Llanrhaidrmochnant—Ooh, my jaw!—you will already have some experience of a tough language. For all that, my sympathy is with you in your heroic determination to learn to write Chinese before you go out to Hong-Kong with your father, in eight months' time, though how you are going to do it in eight months, when I have failed in eighty years, I cannot conceive! Yes, Owen, Chinese is both hard to write and hard to speak. In speech the meanings of words are often obtained by different inflexions of the voice, hence the curious sing-song sound of the Chinese tongue. For writing purposes, there are some tens of thousands, or millions—I forget exactly how many—different characters which should be memorised if you wish to be really proficient. The present characters are supposed to have evolved from simple hieroglyphs—and here goes to give you a first simple lesson in Chinese! Just look at the hieroglyphics and characters that stand for the Chinese equivalents of sun, moon, child, hill, and horse, and you will see better than I can explain in words, the development to which I have referred.



Chinese hieroglyphics, and their present-day definition. Read what the Oracle says about them.

"I will say—" Figgins was beginning wrathfully, when four other visitors appeared in the doorway. They proved to be Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, regarding the angry faces through his monocle in surprise. "What is the matten heah, dear boys? Pway, do not allow your angwy passions to awise. Let dogs delight to bark and bite, you know."

"What is the trouble, anyway?" said Blake, frowning as he noted Tom Merry's angry face.

"I'll jolly soon tell you that!" hooted Figgins. "He's shoved in Cardew for the match to-morrow, instead of old Reddy. Fancy shoving in a slacker like Cardew when a reliable man like old Reddy is available. Yah! Calls himself a skipper!"

"Well, Tommy has blundered there," agreed Blake, shaking his head seriously. "Cardew can play right enough, but he's not to be relied upon. I always said that the junior skipper should really come out of the Fourth, and I'm afraid we shan't get absolute efficiency until he does."

"That's right!" agreed Figgins. "A Fourth Form man should fill the post; but he should come out of the New House!"

"Bai Jove! What fearful cheek!"

"Awful rot!" said Blake scornfully. "I admit that Tommy shouldn't have chosen Cardew—if he has—but Redfern's not the man. He must be a School House man, of course, and Tom Merry should have shoved in Digby."

"Hear, hear!" said Robert Arthur Digby heartily.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What rubbish!" snorted Figgins, his rugged face red with wrath. "I'm fed up with the existing state of affairs. Only three New House men in the team—why, it's rank injustice, and just what a fellow might expect with a rotten School House man in charge."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Figgy, you wottah—"

"You dry up, Gussy!" snapped Tom, his eyes flashing. "There's been enough of this rot! So you still think I'm showing favouritism in playing Cardew, Figgins?"

"Ahem! Well, er—ye-es!" said Figgins, going rather red in the face, for he was not at all certain that he did think it. "What else—"

"Then this is my answer!" snapped Tom.

His fist shot out and the New House leader staggered.

"Yoooop!" roared Figgins. "Why, you—you—"

He rushed at Tom Merry.

"Out with the New House cads!" shouted Lowther. "We'll teach the rotters to come making trouble here. Out with them!"

"Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!"

"Back up!" yelled Figgins.

In a flash Redfern and Kerr had jumped to his side, but the odds were too many. The Terrible Three and Blake & Co., though they often enough squabbled amongst themselves, were as one against the New House fellows. Before Figgy & Co. quite knew what was happening they found themselves sprawling, breathless and gasping, in the passage outside.

"Now clear off!" rapped Tom Merry. "If you aren't on the move in two ticks, Figgy, we'll dribble you across to your casual ward."

"Yaas wathah!"

"You—you—"

Figgins spluttered as he scrambled to his feet, and he was just about to renew the struggle again, despite the odds, when Kildare came along. Fortunately, both Mr. Railton and Mr. Linton had strolled out into the quad by this time, but Kildare's appearance was quite enough to restore order.

"Here, that's enough!" he rapped out, elbowing the School House fellows to right and left. "Oh, I see. What are you New House kids doing here? Asking for trouble, as usual, what?"

"Nunno! We—we came over to discuss footer matters," gasped Figgins, glaring at Tom Merry.

"Then back you go—sharp. If you're not out of the House in three minutes, I'll fetch my ashplant."

"Oh!"

Figgins, Kerr, and Redfern did not stop to argue—they went. They did not wish to make the acquaintance of Kildare's ashplant.

Kildare turned to Tom Merry.

"Trouble again, Merry?" he snapped, frowning. "What's the matter now?"

Tom Merry flushed at the look Kildare gave him.

"If you want to know, they don't approve of my team for the match to-morrow!" he said bitterly. "I suppose this is the natural result of what happened at practice this afternoon. When a senior captain slangs his junior skipper before a crowd, it's bound to have its result in a lessening of discipline."

"Don't talk rot!" snapped Kildare, though he coloured

uneasily. "It was time I pulled you up a little, Merry. It seems you're losing control in other matters, as well as footer. Your job is to help me to keep a certain amount of order in the House. Is this how you do it—fighting with New House juniors, rioting like this?"

Tom Merry said nothing. In this case he certainly had started the "riot"—though not without provocation.

"No need to rub it in, Kildare!" said Blake. "It wasn't Merry's fault at all. They were charging him with favouritism—with playing School House men simply because they were School House men."

"Oh!" said Kildare. "Perhaps the blame wasn't all on one side. All the same, Merry should exercise a little more forbearance and self-control, it seems to me. If I were to let myself go every time I was criticised I should be scraping all day long. Let there be no more of this, anyway."

With that, Kildare walked away.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "Kildare is fairly on the warpath these days, dear boys. Pway, take no notice of him, Tom Mewwy. You can't please ewevybody, you know. As for Cardew, though I weally do not approve of your selection, dear boy, I do twist that he will justify it for your sake."

"H'm. I doubt it!" said Blake. "Especially after this afternoon. He blames you for his licking, Tommy, and he'll have his knife in you after it. Take my tip and don't risk it. He's a decent enough chap in the ordinary way, but when he gets his back up he's capable of anything."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's right enough!" agreed Lowther, looking at Tom Merry seriously. "Have you asked him if he will play, Tom, or did you only just shove him on the list and take it for granted?"

Tom Merry started. Blake's reminder of the afternoon's happenings had made him suddenly uneasy. He knew Cardew's queer character only too well. Cardew was a fellow who never forgave an injury—or a fancied injury. If he blamed Tom for his humiliation that afternoon there was no knowing what he would do. And he had been let down by Cardew more than once.

"N-no," he answered slowly; "I haven't actually asked him. But I mentioned to him there was a chance that I should want him some days ago, and he said, 'Right-ho!' As a matter of fact, Railton has suggested that I should play Cardew in to-morrow's match. He saw him play the other day, and was quite taken with his dash. And—Well, after all, Cardew is a better man than Redfern."

"H'm! Railton doesn't know him. But I should tackle the beggar anyway, Tommy."

Tom Merry frowned uneasily, and then, with sudden decision, he nodded.

"I will!" he said grimly.

He went out at once, and walked along to Cardew's study on the Fourth. Cardew was there with his chums, Levison and Clive. His half-closed eyes glittered a little as he sighted Tom Merry. But his voice was quite cool and unconcerned as he greeted the junior skipper in his usual urbane way.

"Hallo! On the knees, you fellows! All hail to our noble skipper! Here comes dear old Thomas! Prepare to do suitable homage, varlets!"

"You silly ass!" grinned Clive. "Hallo, Merry! Want me?"

"No!"

"Not for the match to-morrow?" said Clive, in pretended disappointment. "I was hoping—"

"Nothing doing!" said Tom, half-smiling. "It's Cardew I've come to see. Cardew, I mentioned to you the other day that I might want you for the Abbotsford match; I asked you to keep fit for it."

"You did, O Noble One!" assented Cardew, smiling.

"Well, I've decided to put you down," said Tom calmly. "Any objection?"

"None, dear man!"

"It's a pretty stiff fixture," said Tom. "You'll need to play at the top of your form, Cardew. You can play when you want to play, I know."

"Thanks, old bean! Thank you for those kind words!"

"Railton's noticed your form lately, Cardew. He as good as asked me to play you."

"Convey my best thanks to Railton, and my grateful appreciation of his sagacity," said Cardew gracefully.

"Right!" Tom Merry laughed. "Then I take it you've no objection to your name going down?"

"None, whatever, old bean!"

"That's good enough, then!"

With a nod, Tom Merry left the study, leaving Cardew smiling, Clive laughing, and Levison looking a trifle uncertainly at Cardew.

But Tom was satisfied. Straightforward and open as the day himself, Tom rarely suspected duplicity in others—even

in the whimsical and changeable Cardew. The suspicion that Cardew might allow the afternoon's happenings to influence him in the matter did not enter his mind now.

CHAPTER 7.

Nice for Tom Merry!

"ALL here?"
"Yes, I think so!" said Blake, looking around him. "All aboard, skipper!"
"Bai Jove! We are not all aboard, dear boy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Where is Cardew?"
"My hat!"

Tom Merry gave a violent start.

He looked round for Cardew. Only three minutes ago he had spoken to him at the gates, as they waited for the brake that was to take them to the station. The brake was at the gates now, and all the rest of the players were aboard.

But Cardew was missing!

It was queer—and disturbing! Was it possible that Blake's suggestion was right—that Cardew might let them down? Tom Merry's lips set at the thought.

Since he had put the list up on the notice-board the previous evening, Tom Merry had been criticised severely by a good many, in addition to the New House fellows, over his inclusion of Cardew in the team. Even Kildare had hinted that he was taking a big risk, that he was making a mistake; but Tom had chosen to be blind to the hint. There was a strain of obstinacy in Tom's nature. He was still feeling exceedingly bitter and sore over Kildare's treatment of him, and he was determined that Kildare was bent on trying to find fault with his selection.

He met Kildare's eye as he stood in startled indecision. Kildare was accompanying the junior team, and he was already on board the brake.

"Come along, Merry!" called Kildare sharply. "Time we were off! What are you standing mooning there for?"

Tom flushed. He knew from Kildare's tone that he was still in disgrace with the captain of St. Jim's.

"Cardew isn't here!" he said shortly. "He was here a few minutes ago, though."

"Cardew not here?" almost yelled Kildare.

"No!"

"Blessed if I can see the ass!" said Figgins. "Stopped behind to put scent on his hair, I expect. You know what these School House dandies are!"

"Or to have a last quiet smoke!" murmured Kerr.

"Bai Jove! This is wathah twyin'!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "I trust that Cardew is not up to any of his twicks, you know. Most of the fellows are out of gates, and with no one to take his place we shall be in a weally wotten posish."

"Better send someone up to hunt him out," said Blake.

"I should jolly well think so!" snorted Kildare. "He deserves a good licking, keeping us waiting like this, the cheeky young sweep!"

"I'll run in and see what he's up to!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Here, hold on!" shouted Kildare, looking at his watch. "You young ass! We'll miss that train if we wait another two minutes! If he doesn't come in one minute we'll have to go without him! I'll—I'll boot him for this!"

"You needn't wait!" said Tom. "I'll cut on after you on my bike if you're gone!"

With that, Tom started off at a run for the School House before Kildare or anyone else could stop him. Tom was seething with fury now. He felt quite certain that Cardew did not intend to turn up. The dandy of the Fourth had appeared at the gates to allay suspicion, and then he had watched his chance and slipped away.

Tom's eyes were opened now. What a fool he had been to trust Cardew after what he knew of him! Tom set his teeth hard as he tore up the stairs and made for Cardew's study. As he expected, Cardew was not there—he was not likely to be there until he heard the brake drive away!

"Oh, the—the howling cad!" breathed Tom. "He's done this to spite me—to make me look a fool! He knows what the majority of the fellows think about my playing him, and he knows I shall get it hot if he let's me down. He's done this to pay me out for yesterday, the sweep!"

Hurriedly Tom Merry searched the studies from end to end of the passage. He was determined to take Cardew along by main force if he could find him. He gave it up suddenly, however, as he heard the sound of the brake driving away.

He dashed down the stairs, realising that it was folly to waste further time. As he went out into the quad he met a junior who came strolling round the corner of the building, hands in pockets and a smile on his face.

It was Cardew.

Tom Merry stopped and gave him a furious look.

"Cardew—you cad!"

"Cheerio, Thomas!" said Cardew, in a mocking drawl. "Not gone yet? My dear man, you'll be losing your train! Don't stop to say good-bye to me, old bean. Just cut off! The team can't afford to miss you!"

"You—you sweep!" blazed Tom Merry, his eyes flashing as they met Cardew's mocking smile. "You—you howling rotter! You lied to me—you never intended to play, you cad!"

"My dear man, of course I didn't intend to play! Too much fag, old nut!"

"You agreed to play—you lied to me!"

"Not at all! I said I'd no objection to your putting my name down. I didn't say I'd play! You can put my name down just as much as you like. That doesn't mean that I'm going to play, though."

Tom Merry breathed hard.

"You—you tricky rotter!"

"Thanks, old bean!"

"You've done this—you've tricked me and let me down to pay me back for yesterday—for what you think I did yesterday."

"Exactly!" said Cardew, his voice still mocking, though his eyes gleamed now. "You got me a licking from Kildare, and made me look small before the whole school, Thomas. I didn't mind the licking in itself so much; but I did mind bein' made to look so jolly small before the school!"

"You—you cad! You knew I trusted to your word—that I thought you meant you would play. You've purposely let me down."

"Exactly! I did, old bean!" drawled Ralph Reckness Cardew in his irritating fashion.

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"You've got to play now, though!" said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "I'm going to make you come to Abbotsford, you sweep!"

"I shouldn't bother, old chap! You can take a gee-gee to the water, but you can't make him drink, you know!"

"You won't come to Abbotsford and play the game, you rotter?"

"No—hardly!"

"You wouldn't play up if I made you come—is that it?"

"Exactly! How clearly you put it, Thomas!"

"Then—then you're going to get the licking of your life for this, Cardew!" hissed Tom Merry. "I'll make you think twice before you trick—"

"Nothin' I should like better, dear man!" yawned Cardew, carelessly turning back his cuffs. "Come on, my dear—Ow!"

Tom Merry had come on.

Cardew's mocking insolence proved much too much for Tom Merry's control. He had not intended to "lick" Cardew then—far from it. He had meant he would do that later—on his return from the match. But in that moment Tom forgot Abbotsford and everything else, excepting Cardew's trick and his mocking smile. Already in a far from amiable mood, Cardew's trickery was the last straw.

He lost his temper completely. His fist shot out straight from the shoulder, sending Cardew's head back with a jerk.

The next instant the two were fighting furiously under the windows of the School House.

It just suited Cardew's book. In fact, that unscrupulous junior had played for this—to make Tom Merry lose his temper—and his train!

The quad was deserted save for a few fags, who rushed up in great excitement.

Tramp, tramp tramp!

Backwards and forwards on the gravel path the two struggled, hitting out fiercely, and both were soon showing signs of the combat.

But it was impossible for such a scene to go on in such a public place without authority stepping in. There was a sound of footsteps on the path, and Mr. Railton appeared, followed a moment later by Mr. Linton.

"Stop! Cease this brawling at once! Do you hear? Merry—Cardew! How dare you!"

Mr. Railton's voice was angry and scandalised.

He strode forward and grasped both juniors by their collars, wrenching them apart by main force.

The fight was over; but the trouble was not over by any means. Mr. Railton's brow was thunderous. He scarcely seemed to notice Cardew, however.

"Merry!" he gasped, eyeing that hapless junior grimly.

"What—what does this disgraceful scene mean? I imagined you were on your way to Abbotsford now—both of you. Instead of that I find you fighting in the open quadrangle like hooligans! Answer me at once!"

Tom Merry panted. He remembered Abbotsford with a thrill of utter dismay then.

"I—I say, sir!" he panted. "There—there's no time to explain now."

"What?"

"I shall miss the train, unless I rush off at once, sir!" gasped Tom. "I'll rush off on my bike, and perhaps I'll just—"

"You will do nothing of the kind until I have received an explanation of this disgraceful conduct, Merry!" thundered the Housemaster. "If you have missed your train then it is entirely your own fault. I, myself, from my study window, witnessed your attack upon Cardew. It is the second time within two days that I have found you fighting."

"I—I— You see, sir—" gasped Tom.

"I do not see, Merry. Why did you attack Cardew?"

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"Cardew had better explain that himself, sir!" he said bitterly.

For all his wayward unscrupulousness, Cardew was no funk, and he had no intention of getting Tom into trouble with the Housemaster. Indeed, at that moment Cardew was beginning to regret already what he had done. To do him justice, he honestly believed Tom Merry had brought Kildare on his track that previous afternoon.

"Certainly, I'll explain, sir!" he said coolly. "It's just a little misunderstanding, sir. Merry was under the mistaken impression that I had agreed to play at Abbotsford this afternoon."

"You—you gave me permission to put your name down!" said Tom Merry, his face white with anger.

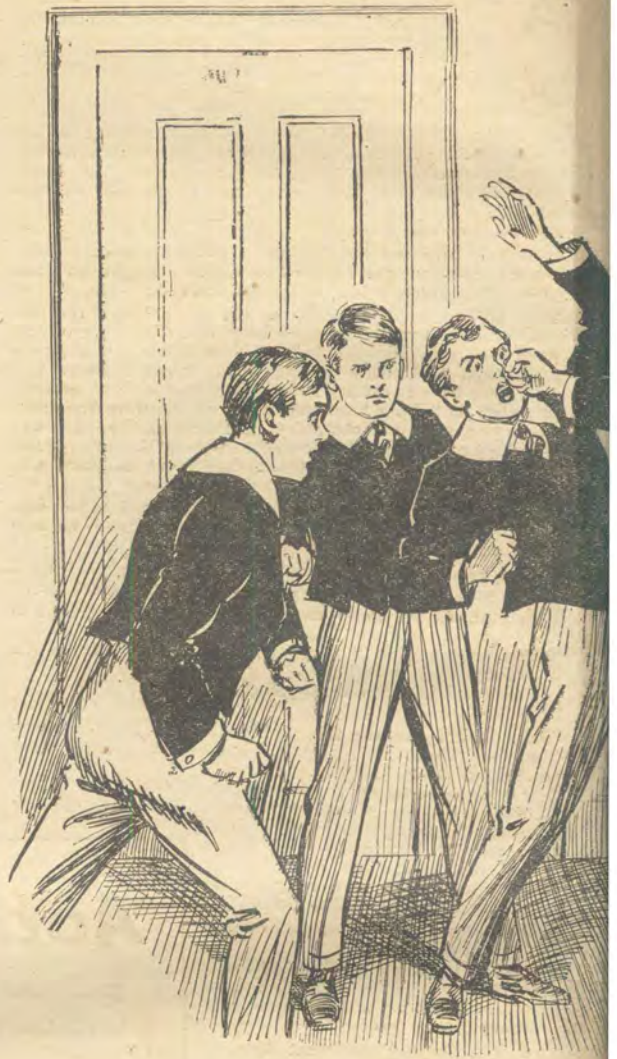
"Quite right," admitted Cardew. "But I didn't agree to play. If you want to put my name on any old list I don't mind—so long as you don't expect me to play."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1.073.

"Bless my soul! Am I to understand that you allowed Merry to put down your name when you had no intention of playing, Cardew?" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"I'm afraid so, sir!" admitted Cardew. "Merry must have jumped to the conclusion that I intended to play. It was quite an error—I had, and have, no intention to play at Abbotsford."

"You knew—" Tom was beginning explosively, when the Housemaster interrupted him.



"So you think I'm showing favouritism in playing Cardew, Fag?" he said, his face redder than a beet. "Ahem! Well—er—ye-es!" he said, his face redder than a beet. "Shell's fist shot out and Fag."

"That will do! I think I understand!" snapped Mr. Railton, with a grim look at the serene and untroubled Cardew. "You have obviously made a fool of Merry, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself for playing such a trick, Cardew!"

"Oh, sir!"

"I do not see how I can interfere in this matter, however!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, setting his lips. "I have no doubt that your schoolfellows will punish you by their contempt at such trickery. For fighting in the quad you will take three hundred lines. You may go."

"Very good, sir!"

Cardew strolled away, Mr. Railton frowning as he glanced after him. Then the master turned to Tom Merry.

"You will also take three hundred lines to add to those I have already given you, Merry!" he rapped out. "That will give you less time, I should think, to seek quarrels."

and fights. I can understand your anger with Cardew, but that is no excuse for you to lose control of yourself in that manner. Unless you can control your temper you are quite unfitted for a position of authority in this school. I have been very disappointed in you of late. I will speak to Kildare concerning the advisability of retaining you as junior captain. Now you may proceed to Abbotsford."

Mr. Railton walked away with Mr. Linton, leaving Tom to stare after him with crimson face, and seething inwardly with indignation.

But he did not stay thus for long. The Housemaster's reminder regarding Abbotsford made him turn abruptly and make for the cycle-shed at top speed. He was in trouble enough all round without making matters worse by missing the match.

In a matter of seconds he had his bike out and soon he was speeding towards Wayland Junction, where he hoped to get the next train to Abbotsford. He had lost the one the team would go by, of course—it was much too late to think of that now. Still, the Abbotsford men were very



gine snapped Tom Merry, his eyes flashing. The New House leader "Then this is my answer!" The captain of the "See Chapter 6.)

decent fellows, and in view of the fact that the team from St. Jim's would be two men short otherwise, he had some hope that they would agree to him playing if he did arrive after the start.

It was a hope that was not to be realised, however. Tom Merry's luck was out that afternoon. Half-way to Wayland his back tyre burst, and the captain of the Shell was faced with the dismaying prospect of a half-hour's walk either back to St. Jim's or on to the station at Wayland.

He chose the former. It was all up now. He could not possibly catch the train—the road both ways was deserted of traffic of any kind. And as the next train after that was over an hour later, it was useless to go on. In dull despair Tom Merry turned his useless machine round and started his two mile tramp back to St. Jim's. Meanwhile, the St. Jim's team were playing at Abbotsford with two men short—one of whom was their best man and skipper!

CHAPTER 8.

Tom Merry's Decision!

"HERE they come!"
"My hat! Like a blessed funeral procession!"
"Yes, rather! That means a licking, I bet!"

There was a rush towards the gates of St. Jim's as the sound of heavy wheels was heard in Rylcombe Lane. It was the footballers returning from Abbotsford in the autumn dusk, and certainly there was some cause for the remarks that went up as the brake came into sight of those at the gates.

The return of a victorious team was usually heard well before the brake was sighted—if it happened to be a brake. Cheers and laughter usually heralded its approach, and those who had stayed at home usually knew well before it reached the gates how the fortunes of their team had progressed.

They knew it now. There were no cheers, no laughter. Only the wheels of the brake were heard in the lane. And as they sighted the faces of those aboard the brake they knew the worst.

Most of the fellows on the brake looked dejected, others looked angry, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, looked terrifically grim.

They poured off the brake, and were surrounded at once.

"Licked?"

"Licked? Of course!"

"What was the score?"

The crowd took the result for granted, apparently.

"Yes, we were licked!" said Figgins, with a grunt. "Six-three!"

"Six-three! Phew!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"All Tom Merry's fault!" snorted Figgins. "Fancy a skipper letting his blessed team go off without him. This comes of a blessed School House man being in charge! He wouldn't take my advice, either! If only he'd played old Reddy, this wouldn't have happened!"

"Oh rats!" said Blake crossly. "No need to rub it in more than you have done already, Figgins. Give it a rest! After all, it was scarcely Tom Merry's fault!"

"Whose was it, then?" demanded Figgins.

"Cardew's, of course!" snapped Blake, his eyes glinting. "That rotter—that sweep is going to be called to account for this! He's let us down, not Tom Merry!"

"Yaas, wathah! Quite wight, Blake deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head with a troubled air. "The whole affair is weally wegwettable in the extweme. Howevah, in the cires, I think we did not do so badly to score three goals against Abbotsford."

"Rather not!"

"Oh rot!" said Figgins. "If Tom Merry hadn't failed us—"

"Look here, you New House worm—"

"Look here, you School House duffer—"

"Enough of that!" snapped Kildare, turning round abruptly. "You've done quite enough squabbling all the way back. Any more and there'll be trouble for someone. Where's Merry?"

Kildare's eyes gleamed as he asked the question.

There was silence for a moment.

"In his study, I think," said Gore at last. "He tried to get to Wayland Junction, I believe, but his tyre burst and he had to return."

"Oh, did he? Right!"

Apparently, Kildare was not much impressed by the fact that Tom Merry had tried to reach Wayland Junction. He turned abruptly and went towards the School House. Most of the School House players followed him, curious to know what was going to happen. From his face Kildare looked as if he intended something should happen.

He went straight to Study No. 10 in the Shell passage, and Blake & Co. and a good many more followed him, Lowther and Manners especially looking far from comfortable. Kildare kicked open the door and strode in, leaving the door open behind him.

"So you're here, Merry!" he snapped.

Tom Merry was there. He faced Kildare calmly, his face composed.

"Yes, I'm here," he said.

"You've heard the result of the match?" asked Kildare.

"No."

"Well, I'll tell you!" snapped Kildare. "Your men were licked by six goals to three."

"They did very well to get away with that in the circumstances!" said Tom coolly.

"You don't seem very upset by the news, Merry!"

"You seem to take a lot for granted, Kildare!"

"I want no cheek, Merry!" said Kildare, his eyes gleaming. "What do you think of yourself—acting the goat in

this footling manner. You've lost St. Jim's the match—you've let the team and the school down!"

"Have I? I don't see it!" said Tom.

"Yes, you have. I called up to come back to the brake. Why didn't you do so? You disobeyed me, and this is the result. You should have sent someone else after that fool, Cardew. A skipper's place is with his men. You must have known what you were risking. As it is, I can't understand why you didn't reach the station in time. We had several minutes to wait for the train. Didn't you find Cardew?"

"Yes—just after you'd gone."

"Then why—"

"I punched him and we had a scrap!" said Tom Merry composedly.

"Wha-at? You—you started scrapping, knowing the team was waiting?"

"I'd forgotten that at the moment. But you needn't worry, Kildare. Railton caught us scrapping and punished us both."

"And after that, I suppose, you decided you'd saunter along Abbotsford way?" said Kildare, with deadly sarcasm.

"I got my bike out, hoping to get the next train at Wayland Junction! My tyre burst half-way there, and I had to come back."

"Don't you think you make a wonderful sort of a skipper, Merry?"

"I never considered I was wonderful in any sort of way, Kildare!" was the quiet answer. "I never even expect to reach anything near your stage of perfection."

There was a chorus of chuckles from the doorway. Kildare flushed, and his jaw set.

"You apparently think this sort of thing funny, Merry!" he snapped. "I don't! I don't consider you've been carrying out your duties as junior skipper at all satisfactory of late. I shall speak to Mr. Railton about you."

"Do!" said Tom.

"I shall suggest that either you show in the next few days that you mean to take your job seriously, or else that you are asked to resign."

"Good! But why waste your time, Kildare?"

"Eh? What d'you mean, you cheeky young ass?"

"Simply because I have already resigned," said Tom serenely. "You'll find a note to that effect on your study table now. I've also sent a note to Mr. Railton."

"Oh!"

"Phew!"

"Bai Jove!"

Kildare gasped like a stranded fish, and there were other gasps from the doorway.

"Tom!" murmured Lowther appealingly. "Chuck it! Don't be such an idiot, for goodness' sake!"

"Yaas wathah! Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Stop that row!" snapped Kildare, glancing angrily towards the crowd. "Do you mean that, Merry—that you've resigned?"

"Yes."

"You young idiot!"

"Thanks!"

"There was no need for that, Merry!" said Kildare, changing his tone. "You're about the best junior skipper we can get, and just because you've been getting rather slack lately, is no reason why you should resign. Neither Mr. Railton nor I myself wish you to resign."

"But I do," said Tom. "You'll have somebody else to slang then, Kildare, for a change. I'm fed up. I've done my best, and whether I've been a little too easy-going or not, neither the sports nor anything else have suffered that I am aware of. To-day was—well, it would not have happened if you'd been a bit more reasonable yesterday. I don't admit that it was my fault, anyway. At all events, I've finished!"

"Don't be a young idiot! Look here—"

"My mind's made up!" said Tom. "Everybody seems to be fed up with me. A change will do good, perhaps. I'm going to give someone else a chance to show what he can do. Nothing will make me change my mind, Kildare!"

Kildare looked at Tom Merry's squared jaw and steady eyes. He opened his mouth to speak at length.

"Very well, Merry!" he said gruffly. "I'm sorry—dashed sorry that you can't take a bit of jawing meant for your own good, without doing this. It's a pity, but—"

Kildare shrugged his shoulders and went from the room, the staring crowd opening to make way for him. There was a buzz of voices as he departed, and the fellows crowded into the room.

"Is—is that a fact, Tommy?" demanded Levison. "Have you really resigned?"

"Yes."

"You—you silly chump!"

"You burbling fathead!"

"You—you abject ass!"

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"Yaas wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, quite distressed. "I weally considah you are an ass to resign, Tom Mewwy! Considahwin' you are a Shell-fish, you weally make a jolly good skippah."

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry, with a grin; now he had "done it." Tom Merry felt surprisingly relieved. "Considering you're just a Fourth Form youngster, Gussy, I consider you show a touch of sense now and again."

"It's no joking matter, though!" said Manners warmly. "What the dickens are you thinking of, Tom? Just because of what's happened this last two days! Oh, you—you—"

"This is all that cad Cardew's fault!" said Blake wrathfully. "He did it—played that dirty trick just to pay out Tommy for what happened yesterday. He ought to be scalped, the sweep!"

"Hear, hear!"

"What happened, Tom?" asked Talbot. "Did Cardew own up that he intended to leave the team in the lurch?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, he did! He did it solely to pay me out! He was crowing about it—grinned in my face, and I couldn't stand it. I hit him, and—well, I was too busy the next few minutes to remember that you chaps were waiting, or anything else."

"Phew!"

"The rotter!"

"Let's go and deal with him!" hooted Herries excitedly. "He deserves a Form licking, the cad!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Look here—" began Tom, but his voice was drowned in the roar of approval. Without further ado, Blake led the crowd with a rush from the study. Blake made straight for the Fourth Form passage, only Levison and Clive hanging back. For once they were disgusted with their chum's conduct, but they had no intention either of helping or hindering the avengers.

Cardew was reclining on the couch—as usual—when the angry and excited crowd burst in upon him. He gave a start as they crowded in, and though he guessed what they wanted, he scarcely turned a hair.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed affably. "Come in—make yourselves at home, you fellows. Is this a deputation? To ask me to put up for junior skipper, or what? Sorry there aren't enough chairs to go round, but there's the coal-scuttle, the window-ledge, and the floor."

"You—you rotter, Cardew!" stuttered Blake. "You can drop that silly rot! I fancy you know what we've come about!"

"You have the advantage of me, old bean!" said Cardew gracefully.

"Well, we'll jolly well tell you!" roared Grundy, shaking a huge fist under Cardew's nose. "You've let the team down, and you've let the school down, and you've let Tom Merry down."

"Dear me!" drawled Cardew. "Have I? Anythin' else? If not, kindly take that dirty paw away, Grundy!"

"You—you—" Grundy spluttered, with wrath and indignation.

"No need to waste time like this!" snapped Blake. "Out of that, Grundy—no need to scrap with him. We'll deal with Cardew. He knows perfectly well what we're here for. It's wasting time to question or try him. You told Tom Merry he could put your name down for the match, Cardew?"

"Quite so, old bean!"

"You had no intention of playing, though. It was all spoof, you rotter!"

Cardew hesitated. He was looking a trifle uneasy now, though his coolness did not desert him.

"I had no intention of playin'—no!" he answered, after a pause. "No reason why I shouldn't say so, is there? If the great and dutiful Thomas jumps to conclusions—I ask you—can I be responsible? I ask you? You see, it was like—"

"We want to hear no more, Cardew!" snapped Blake, his eyes gleaming. "Kildare blames Tom Merry for what's happened, but we don't. You're to blame entirely, you cad! You're going through the hoop for it—now! Collar him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Here—good gad! I say, you—leggo!"

Cardew's nonchalance left him abruptly as numerous hands grasped him, and he descended to the carpet with a mighty bump.

"Yarrooogh!" roared Cardew—he could not help it.

"Now put him across a chair!" said Blake. "We'll teach Cardew to play the game, if he won't play footer! Over with him!"

"Right-ho!"

"Look here—oh, you—ads! Why, if you dare—" Thump! They did. Cardew was flung across a

chair, face downwards, and Blake took the fire shovel from the hearth.

Four of the juniors held the wriggling Cardew while Blake commenced operations. A dozen times the fire shovel was brought down, and even the iron-nerved Cardew had to gasp out a yelp before the last stroke.

"There!" snapped Blake, throwing down the shovel at last. "Perhaps that will stop you from doing any more of that kind of practical joking—if you call it that, Cardew? Come on, chaps!"

Leaving Cardew, white faced and gasping, sprawling on the floor, the juniors filed from the room.

Cardew had had his revenge, though he had paid dearly for it. But he had had it, and it had resulted in the resignation of Tom Merry from his job as junior skipper of St. Jim's. Even Cardew had not foreseen that. Perhaps he would never have acted as he had done had he known what it would result in. As a matter of fact, Cardew himself suffered more from his conscience than from his physical hurts that evening. The dandy of the Fourth was more good than bad, and he was always sorry afterwards when he had gone a bit too far. He was sorry now. But the damage was done. Tom Merry was no longer junior skipper of St. Jim's. Who was to take his place?

CHAPTER 9. Definite!

"TOM, old man—"

"Cheese it!"

"But look here—"

"Ring off!" said Tom Merry bluntly. "You can gas until you're blue, but it won't make any difference. I've resigned, and that's all there is to it. Talking won't make me change my mind—either from you fellows or anyone else!"

"You—old ass!" said Manners.

"Thanks."

"You—you chuckle-headed chump!" said Lowther.

"Go it!"

"Look here, Tom," went on Manners earnestly. "It's no good going on like this. If only you'd kept a stiff upper lip it would have blown over easily enough. Neither Railton nor Kildare really meant anything they said—I'm pretty certain of that! You ought to have taken the slanging as being all in the day's work."

"Ought I? And I ought to have been blamed for the loss of the match this afternoon, of course!"

"Everyone knows whose fault that was—everyone with any sense, anyway! Kildare was waxy because you didn't obey him and come back."

"Blow Kildare! He's got what he wanted now," said Tom obstinately. "He's got the chance to find a man who'll perhaps back him up better than I did."

"He can't—there isn't one at St. Jim's."

"Thanks. But that's Kildare's look out!"

"Look here, Tom," pleaded Lowther.

"Rats! It's done with! I hear Grundy's going to put up for the captaincy."

"Skimpole's talking about it, too!" grinned Manners.

"But that's all silly rot! Look here—"

A sharp rap came to the door, and Kildare looked in.

"You're here, Merry!" he said. "I've just been speaking to Railton. You've seen him, and—"

"I've seen him," assented Tom.

"I know. You're still determined to resign, you young ass!"

"Yes. I've told Mr. Railton that already, and nothing will turn me. I think somebody else ought to have a chance to show what they can do, Kildare. I bear nobody any malice—I'm acting because I feel somebody else ought to take a turn, and because—well, I'm a bit fed up with the job!"

"You're a young idiot!"

"Perhaps I am! You've told me so often enough, anyway, Kildare."

"Never mind that now. If you are really and finally determined—"

"I am!"

"Right. Then the Housemaster has told me he accepts your resignation. There will be a new election, probably on Saturday. If you've changed your mind before then you can put up again."

"I shan't have changed my mind, and I shan't put up."

"Right!"

Kildare withdrew, looking slightly nettled. He walked along to Talbot's study and entered. Talbot eyed him in surprise.

"Yes, Kildare? You want me?"

"I want to know if you'll put up for the captaincy in Merry's place," said Kildare crisply. "I fancy you're the

next best man for the job, Talbot. Mr. Railton will approve I know, and you're pretty popular with everyone. You'd stand a good chance. Say the word!"

"Thanks, no!"

"What?"

Kildare looked utterly taken aback—he had obviously expected a ready, eager acceptance of such an opportunity.

"You—you mean you don't want the job, Talbot?" he ejaculated.

"No. Tom Merry's the man for that job!" said Talbot bluntly. "At all events he's the only man I'm going to support for the job. I certainly shan't put up in his place!"

"You mean that?"

"Yes; absolutely, Kildare!"

"Right! You're a young ass!"

Talbot did not answer that, and Kildare left the study, looking a trifle anxious as well as annoyed. He walked along next to Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage. He found a rather heated argument going on in that celebrated apartment.

"Kildare is wathah an ass, I admit!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was remarking warmly. "None the less, if Tom Mewwy is determined to wesign, then I see no weason why one of us in this studay should not put up for the captaincy. It is wathah a high honah, and as it needs a fellow of gweat tact and judgment I fancy I would just fill the bill, deah boys. If that feahful ass, Kildare—"

"Thanks!" said Kildare calmly, entering the study. "Is that how you usually refer to your skipper, D'Arcy?"

"Oh! Oh, bai Jove! Gweat Scott!"

"I've come to see you, Blake," said Kildare, ignoring the blushing Arthur Augustus. "You know, of course, that Merry has definitely resigned from the junior captaincy?"

"Yes, I do know!" grunted Blake. "It's a thundering shame! We shan't get another man like him."

"Weally, Blake—"

"That's enough, D'Arcy!" snapped Kildare. "Give that silly chin of yours a long rest!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I'm not here to listen to your opinion of the last junior skipper, Blake!" said Kildare rather tartly. "I've come to ask you to put up for the captaincy. You're a good man, and you've a lot of influence in the Lower School. I fancy you've a good chance of getting in."

"Thanks!" said Blake slowly. "I—I'd like to be skipper in some ways, but—well, I'm not taking Tom Merry's place. He should never have lost his job. I think it's a jolly shame, and I, for one, have no intention of stepping into his shoes. The sooner the silly ass is persuaded to change his mind the better, I think!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Kildare. "You—you refuse to stand, Blake?"

"Absolutely, Kildare!"

"Then you're a silly young idiot!"

"Perhaps so. But I'm not standing. I fancy you won't find many fellows who will, either—not in the School House, at all events! Tom Merry may have resigned, but the fellows mean to back him up. It won't be backing him up to collar his job. It isn't good enough!"

"Oh! Ah! Very well, Blake!" gasped Kildare. "If you really mean it—"

"I do!"

Kildare grunted, and turned to leave the study. Arthur Augustus held out a detaining hand.

"Bai Jove! One moment, Kildare. You are appawntly forgettin' me!" he remarked, in some surprise.

"Eh? Who's forgetting you, and why, D'Arcy?"

"Bai Jove! You have just asked Blake to put up as junior captain. He has wefused. I do not at all appwove of his way of lookin' at the mattah at all. Wathah not! As Tom Mewwy definitely wefuses to weconsidah his decision, I see no weason wathevah why one of us should not



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put up. It will be much better than to allow a New House wastah to bag the captaincy," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "And I feel it is up to this studay to prevent that happenin'. In any case, Blake would wathah make a muck of things. Still, theah is a better man available, Kildare; you are forgettin' him."

"Eh? Am I? Who the dickens is he, then?"

"Myself, of course!" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I considah that I am— Bai Jove! Pway allow me to finish, Kil— Bai Jove! The wude wottah has gone!" Kildare had gone. He did not seem at all interested in the available "better man" now he knew whom he was.

"The wude wottah!" repeated Arthur Augustus, frowning at the grinning faces of his study-mates. "I see nothin' whatevah to gwin about, Blake. I considah, as I said befoah, that I am just the man for the job. If Tom Mewwy had possessed tact and judgment to the same degwee as I pvide myself I possess, he would nevah have allowed this to happen. Howevah, the point is, can I wely upon this studay to support me?"

"Rats! Don't be an idiot!"

"Bai Jove! I do not undahstand you, Blake. As Tom Mewwy will not withdwaw, I see no weason why someone should not make the effort to keep a School House man as skippah!"

"Our fellows will see a New House man doesn't get in, you silly chump!"

"I wish I could think so, deah boys. Howevah, the gweat point is, can I wely upon the support of you fellows to begin with? The election will be on Satahday, I fancy, and I want all my friends to wally wound me. I am quite confident that I shall make a vewy competent and successful skippah. Don't you think so, Blake?"

"Eh? Oh, yes; especially if it was skipper of a team of neckties, or a school of fancy waistcoats! You'd be the man for the job!"

"Bai Jove! You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake, Herries, and Digby marched out of the study, laughing. They left Arthur Augustus spluttering. Apparently they did not take their noble study-mate seriously. But the swell of St. Jim's was in deadly earnest.

CHAPTER 10.

Grundy's Chance!

"A T last!"

George Alfred Grundy spoke in a tone of great excitement, and he looked excited. He thumped the study table to emphasise his remark. He thumped it so violently that a stream of blue-black ink shot out of the inkpot and over Gunn's exercise book, in which he was writing, while a little spattered even in William Cuthbert Gunn's features.

Gunn jumped to his feet with a roar.

"You silly dummy!" he roared. "What the dickens do you think you're playing at, Grundy?"

"Don't shout!" said Grundy, "and don't get so excited over a trifle, Gunny. Show a little more poise and control, for goodness' sake, Gunny! You're not a kid!"

"Why, you—you—"

"Now, listen to me—"

"Haven't we been listening to you and trying to do our blessed prep for the past hour?" hooted Cuthbert Gunn, in some excitement. "Why don't you start your own prep, and let us do ours, you footling idiot?"

"Well, my hat!" snorted Grundy. "Is prep more important than this question of the captaincy? Chuck that rot, and listen to me, Gunny, and you, too, George Wilkins. I'm going to keep you fellows in proper order when I'm skipper!"

"So you really mean to go on with that rot?" asked Wilkins wearily.

"Of course, I'm going to put up for election, if that's what you mean, you footling idiot! Why, it's the chance of a lifetime—my chance at last! I've been kept back by envy and jealousy long enough. Now Tom Merry's seen sense at last; he's realised that the job's a bit too much for him to handle. It leaves the ground clear for me."

"And you actually think the fellows will back you up if you do put up?"

"Why not? Wouldn't I make a good captain?"

"All depends what of!" said Gunn. "If it's captain of a regiment of wooden soldiers, perhaps you might do."

"Or a gang of village urchins playing at soldiers!" said Wilkins facetiously. "You'd manage that a treat, Grundy."

"Why, you—you cheeky asses!" spluttered Grundy, glaring ferociously at his grinning study-mates. "D'you both want a thick ear?"

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"Nunno! Now, don't be an ass, old chap. Get on with your prep, and never mind the captaincy, there's a good chap."

Wilkins spoke soothingly; but it had little effect upon the excited Grundy.

"I—I'm amazed at you footling idiots!" he snorted. "It—it's a chance of a lifetime for me. Aren't you fellows eager to have a fellow out of this study as skipper?"

"Not in this case—no!" said Wilkins curtly. "None of the fellows who count in the School House have any intention of putting up; they've mutually agreed upon that. Tom Merry's the best man for the job, and we're having no other if we can help it. Tom Merry didn't deserve what he's been getting lately, and we mean to stick out until he changes his mind and takes over the job again."

"Rats! Rot! Rubbish!" said Grundy. "I admit that it was hard lines on Merry. I admit that he's a decent chap enough; but I don't admit he's the man for the job. Why, he doesn't even know a footballer when he sees one! From the very beginning he's always kept me out of the footer. What does that show?"

"His sense!" said Gunn. "I should think there was something wrong with his mental arrangements if he did otherwise."

"You cheeky rotter!"

"Thanks! Now what about getting on with prep?"

"Blow prep! Now, I don't want to quarrel with you fellows!" said Grundy warningly. "But I'm standing no nonsense over this matter of captaincy. I'm putting up for the job, and you fellows have got to back me up for all you're worth!"

"Rats!"

"What? If you say rats to me, George Wilkins—"

"I do, old chap! We're backing neither you nor anybody else up for the captaincy—only Tom Merry. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"We'll see about that!" said Grundy. He got up and started to pull back his sleeves grimly. "Now, look here, I want your promise to back me up, to canvass for me, and to vote for me. If you refuse to give it, I'm going to hammer you both until you do! Got that?"

It was an original way of asking for support. But Grundy always was original, and he often backed up requests with threats.

"Now, for goodness' sake do be reasonable, Grundy!" said Wilkins, with an uneasy glance at Gunn. "You wouldn't stand an earthly chance if you put up!"

"What? Don't talk rot! And ain't I reasonable?" hooted Grundy. "Isn't it reasonable to expect a fellow's pals to back him up? Now, listen. I'm expecting Kildare in here to see me any minute now."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"What on earth for?"

"To ask me to put up for the captaincy, of course," said Grundy. "I believe he's already asked Talbot and other duds like him. They've refused. I'm not going to refuse. I can't understand why Kildare hasn't been to me first of all. However, he's bound to come."

Grundy's words were prophetic. As he spoke a rap came to the door, and Kildare looked in. Kildare was looking none too pleased. He had already visited several fellows—Blake, Talbot, Levison, and fellows of their standing in the Lower School—at Mr. Railton's request, and he was getting fed-up with their refusals to stand for the junior captaincy. It seemed to him that there was a conspiracy afoot to force Tom Merry to withdraw his resignation—a suspicion that was nearer the truth than Kildare realised.

And now Kildare had visited Grundy's study—though not to see the great George Alfred.

"Wilkins here— Oh, here you are, kid!" he exclaimed grimly. "You've heard that Merry's resigned from the captaincy?"

"Yes."

"Right! There's to be an election on Saturday. If you'd care to stand for election I think you'd stand a good chance, Wilkins."

"Thanks, but I'd rather not!" said Wilkins coolly. "The school should have stuck to a good man when they had one. I'm not setting up to take a better man's place. Tom Merry's the man for that job."

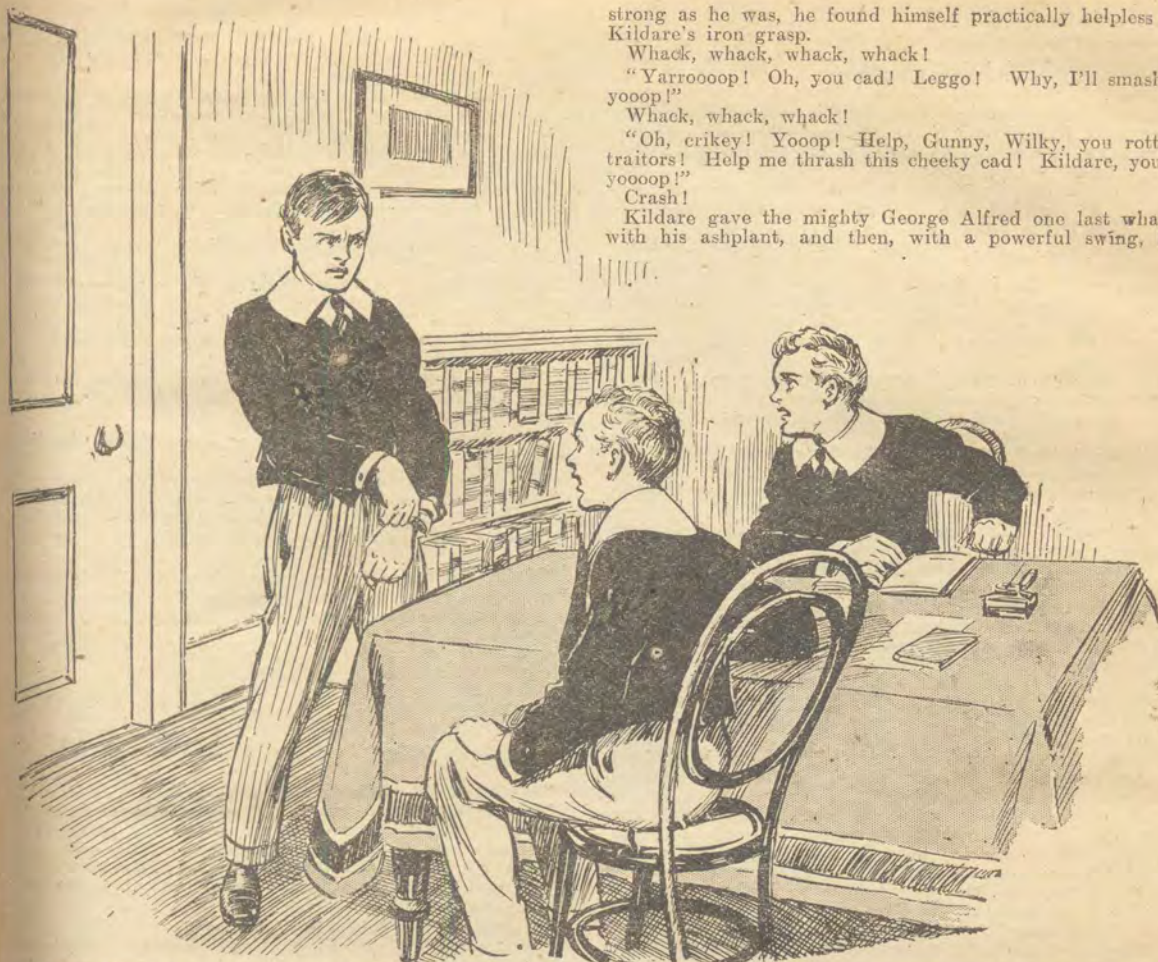
"Right!"

Kildare turned away. He saw it was useless to argue or to do any more "touting," as he called it himself. As he turned away and strode for the door, however, Grundy woke up, so to speak.

"Here, hold on, Kildare!" he roared. "What's this mean?"

"Eh?"

"What about me? What on earth are you tackling a



George Alfred Grundy rolled his sleeves back and faced his study-mates grimly. "Now, look here," he began. "I want your promise to back me up and to vote for me. If you refuse to give it, I'm going to hammer you both until you do. Got that?" It was an original way of asking for support, but it was nothing unusual for Grundy. (See Chapter 10.)

duffer like Wilkins for? Ain't I here? Are you overlooking me? Are you potty?"

Apparently Grundy was staggered—dumbfounded that Kildare had actually overlooked him and selected Wilkins for the high honour of being asked to stand as junior captain.

But Kildare had.

"What about you?" he snorted. "Nothing about you, you footling young duffer!"

"You—you cheeky rotter!" spluttered Grundy.

Kildare was striding for the door, but he stopped and came back at that. Kildare was "fed-up"—he had had a lot to try him that day. He was not in the mood to stand such "cheek" from Grundy.

"Eh? What did you say, Grundy?" he rapped out.

"You called me a cheeky rotter—the captain of the school?"

"Yes," snorted Grundy, who feared no man at any time. "I jolly well did. It's carrying personal jealousy a bit too far when this sort of thing happens, Kildare. You knew I was here, and yet—yet," spluttered Grundy, "you purposely ignored me and asked a fumbling duffer like Wilky!"

"Fetch my cane, Gunn!" snapped Kildare.

"Certainly, Kildare," said Gunn.

He hurried out of the study. Gunn, like Wilkins, was tired of seeing Grundy that evening, and he would have enjoyed seeing him taste Kildare's ashplant. He brought it and handed it to the captain almost before Grundy had recovered from his amazement.

"You—you're going to cane me?" he hooted, glaring at Kildare.

"Exactly. Hold out your hand, Grundy. I'll teach you to respect the captain—not to call him names and bowl at him in that manner! Out with it!"

"I jolly well won't!"

"Won't you?"

Kildare made one stride, and caught Grundy by the collar. Grundy roared and struggled furiously. But,

strong as he was, he found himself practically helpless in Kildare's iron grasp.

Whack, whack, whack!

"Yarrooooo! Oh, you cad! Leggo! Why, I'll smash—yooop!"

Whack, whack, whack!

"Oh, crikey! Yooop! Help, Gunn, Wilky, you rotten traitors! Help me thrash this cheeky cad! Kildare, you—yoooop!"

Crash!

Kildare gave the mighty George Alfred one last whack with his ashplant, and then, with a powerful swing, he

sent him whirling across the room. Grundy collapsed and sat down in the easy chair with such force that the chair went backwards and the burly junior went headlong over it.

Crash!

"Yarrrrroooooogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kildare strode out, tucking his cane under his arm, the laughing crowd in the doorway making way hurriedly for him.

Grundy scrambled up. His face was crimson with wrath and amazement.

"The—the awful rotter!" he spluttered. "The hulking bully! He—he's thrashed me—Grundy! Well, I'm dashed! Oh, you—you rotters! I'm going to smash you for standing by like that and letting that cad handle me!"

"Now, look here, Grundy, old man—"

"I won't! Gunn, you awful rotter, you actually went and fetched his rotten cane so's he could lick me! You rotten pair of traitors! Call yourselves pals?" hooted Grundy furiously. "Well, I'm going to show you just where you stand in this study!"

"But, do listen, Grundy—"

"Put your fists up!" gasped Grundy. "So you won't back me up in my candidature for the captaincy, won't you? We'll jolly well see about that! Look out!"

Grundy was kind enough to give the warning before he made his rush. None the less, Wilkins and Gunn had no time to get out of the way. Wilkins took Grundy's right under the chin, and Gunn took his left in the chest. Both sat down with heavy concussions on the carpet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The entertained onlookers from other studies on the passage roared. Wilkins and Gunn roared in a different key. They were hurt, and they jumped up and proceeded to make that fact clear to Grundy.

As a general rule Grundy's henchmen were very chary of

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tackling their powerful leader. But this time they were too wrathful to care whether they were hurt or not in the process. For once, Grundy found he had bitten off more than he could comfortably masticate.

Crash!

Grundy went down before the combined onslaught.

Instantly Wilkins and Gunn piled upon him with a will. They knew better than to give the mighty George Alfred the chance to get up again.

"Roll him over!" gasped Wilkins. "Put the silly owl through it! Teach him better than to handle his pals just as he likes! I'm fed-up with him!"

"Same here!" panted Gunn. "Hand that ink here, somebody!"

"Certainly! Ha, ha, ha!"

Lowther came into the study and handed Gunn the bottle of ink from the table willingly enough. Grundy roared out threats. But they were ignored.

Splash!

The contents of the ink-bottle splashed over Grundy's upturned face, as he lay flat on the carpet. It ran into his wide-open mouth, and trickled over his hair and down his chin.

"Now rub his head in the cinders!" gasped Wilkins.

"Good wheeze! They'll help to dry the ink!"

On the principle, possibly, that if a thing was worth doing at all it was worth doing well, Wilkins and Gunn rubbed Grundy's head in the cinders. It took them all their time to get Grundy over to the fireplace, but several juniors came in and kindly lent a hand in the proceedings. Grundy's head was rubbed well in the cinders on the hearth, some of which—to judge by Grundy's fiendish howls—were none too cold.

"There!" said Wilkins, panting breathlessly. "That should teach the silly owl that he can't do just as he likes in this study. Let's hope it'll do him good!"

"Yooooop! You—you— Oh, you—you rotters!" choked Grundy. "Why, I'll— Ow-ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Leaving the choking George Alfred, with his head fixed in the coal-scuttle, Wilkins and Gunn and the kindly helpers trooped out, Grundy's study-mates taking their prep books with them. They felt it was scarcely safe to do any more prep in that study that evening. They closed and locked the door after them as a last thoughtful act, and Grundy's roars were subdued somewhat.

Quite plainly, if Grundy wanted to be junior captain of St. Jim's, he was not going to get much support in his candidature from his own study-mates. As Wilkins and Gunn confided to Talbot some seconds later in the latter's study, Grundy was bad enough without authority. With authority he would become a menace to peace and safety, and a danger to the community at large.

CHAPTER 11.

The New House Candidate!

"IT'S the chance of a lifetime!" said Figgins gleefully. "Yes, rather!" agreed Fatty Wynn.

"No doubt about that!" said Kerr thoughtfully.

Figgins & Co. were in their study in the New House discussing the situation that had arisen over Tom Merry's resignation of the captaincy.

"You see," pointed out Figgins, with a grin, "this gives us a chance we've never had before—the chance to get a New House man in as skipper. We've always been at a disadvantage in that line simply because we're a smaller House. Whether our chaps plump with their votes for a New House man or not, we're bound to be licked. It's not fair; but there it is."

"Oh was!" corrected Kerr.

"Exactly. But this time things are different," said Figgins, his eyes dancing. "I believe Kildare's hawking the blessed job round, asking fellows if they'll put up. He hasn't been to me yet—cheeky rotter! Still, there it is. Nobody over in the School House seems to want the job—not the fellows who count, at all events. They want Tom Merry back, and they think that if they stick out, Tom Merry will change his mind and withdraw his resignation."

"That's so!" admitted Kerr, frowning a little. "But I—"

"Well, that's just where we come in!" grinned Figgins. "Most of the fellows say they won't vote for anyone—in the School House, I mean, of course. They think dear old Tommy has been treated badly."

"Well, so he has!" said Kerr, frowning again.

"I agree!" said Figgins grimly. "Old Tommy's a jolly good sort, and he's a good man. But there are better in the New House."

"Um!"

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"Ahem!"

"There are, you silly asses!" hooted Figgins, going rather red. "In any case, we can't overlook this chance. All's fair in love and war."

"You—you think it's quite the thing—decent, you know, to put up in the cires?" asked Kerr doubtfully.

"Of course, you silly owl!" said Fatty Wynn, witheringly. "Tom Merry hasn't been kicked out; he's resigned of his own accord. Besides, haven't we a right to get a look in? In any case, as I say, all's fair in love and war. We're always in a state of war with the School House worms!"

"Well, that's so!"

"You're right, Fatty!" admitted Fatty Wynn, brightening up. "Go on!"

"I'm going on!" grinned Figgins, his face flushed with excitement. "Well, now's our chance. All the New House will vote for a New House man. With half the giddy School House standing out, I should simply romp home!"

"You?" said Kerr.

"Eh? Of course, you silly chump!" said Figgins, staring. "Who else is fit to stand for skipper but me? Tell me that, you footling owl!"

"Hum!" said Kerr, colouring a little. "The—the fact is—"

"Well?" said Figgins, with dangerous calm.

"The—the fact is, I've got an idea that I should make a good skipper myself," admitted Kerr modestly. "You can't deny that I've as much right to put up as anyone else."

"Well, if it comes to that, what about me?" said Fatty Wynn, eyeing Figgins rather uneasily. "My people would be jolly glad to hear the news that I'd been made junior skipper of St. Jim's. In fact, the idea rather pleases me. They'd stomp up, and I should get heaps of hampers sent along. They'd be so jolly pleased, you know."

"Well—well, my only hat!" spluttered Figgins, going red in the face in his amazed wrath. "Of all the—the cheek! Why, you silly owls have a nerve, and no mistake! Ain't I leader of this study, and of the blessed New House chaps?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"There are no buts about it!" roared Figgins in great wrath. "My hat! I never heard such cheek in my life! Now look here, there's to be no more of this rot! I'm the man for the job of skipper, and nobody else."

"Oh, all right!" said Fatty Wynn hastily, looking disappointed.

"Anything for a quiet life!" grinned Kerr.

"That's better!" said Figgins, quite cordially. "I knew you fellows would see sense. Now look here, we'd better run along and see Reddy and his crowd. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if they didn't question my right to be skipper."

"I shouldn't either, Figgy!" assented Fatty Wynn.

"In fact, I shall be much surprised if they don't!" chuckled Kerr. "Reddy especially has a good opinion of himself, and he never will admit that this is cock study in the New House. Awful cheek!"

"Fearful!" said Figgins grimly. "Well, we're going along there now to see him about it. I shall tell him straight that I'm going to allow no insubordination."

"Good! That's the idea, Figgy!"

"Come on, then!"

The New House trio went along to visit Redfern & Co. Dick Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence, called themselves the New Firm, and they were very apt to dispute Figgins' supremacy in the New House. Naturally, this led to a great deal of trouble.

When Figgy and his chums arrived at the study they found that Redfern & Co. were having a "family" squabble—their voices were raised excitedly and heatedly.

"Who's leader in this study, then—that's what I want to know?" Redfern was snorting. "Of all the cheek! I'm the man—"

"Rot!" said Owen.

"Rubbish!" snorted Lawrence. "You're all right as a study-leader in some ways, Reddy, but you haven't the all-round qualities of a skipper. What's wanted is a fellow like me."

"Me, you mean!" said Owen indignantly. "Look here—"

"Oh, my hat!" grinned Kerr. "What did I tell you, Figgy?"

"Oh, rats!"

Figgins marched into the study with a very warlike look. He saw that there were going to be difficulties in his ambition to become junior captain of St. Jim's. Apparently others were ambitious in that direction as well!

"You can drop that rot, you silly owls!" he said, in a wrathful tone. "You're all three off the rails. You must be potty to think either of you are fit for the job of skipper! I'm going to lick the first man who disputes my right to put up as skipper. That's straight from the shoulder, you chaps."

"My hat! You—you cheeky rotter, Figgy!" gasped Reddy, wheeling round. "Go and chop chips! I'd like to see you lick me, anyway."

"So would I!" snapped Owen. "You cheeky—"

"Now do be reasonable!" pleaded Figgins, realising that if he wanted the support of Redfern & Co. he would be very unlikely to get it by licking them. "Listen to me, you fellows. The New House has got the chance of a lifetime now. We don't want to spoil it by squabbling amongst ourselves. If we stand shoulder to shoulder in this we'll soon have a New House man as skipper."

"Just what I was going to come and point out to you!" said Redfern agreeably. "You fellows back my candidature up, and it's a cert for me. Now—"

"That's rot!" snorted Owen. "Look here—"

"I tell you—"

"I'm the man—"

"Listen, you footling idiots—"

"I'm not listening to your rot, Reddy. You burbling owl—"

"If you call me a burbling owl, Figgy—"

"I do—a silly, swollen-headed, burbling owl!" repeated Figgins, with wrathful deliberation.

"Then here's my answer!" shouted Redfern. "Kick 'em out, you fellows. We'll show 'em who's cock study in this House, anyway. We'll settle it once and for all!"

"What-ho!"

Owen and Lawrence were always ready to try to settle that important and much-disputed point. They closed with the equally eager Figgins & Co., and three separate "scraps" were soon in vigorous progress. Figgins himself had already forgotten his injunction to "stand shoulder to shoulder" against the common enemy. All he wished to settle at that moment was the moot point as to which was "cock" study.

Backwards and forwards the battle swayed with varying fortunes for both sides. Naturally, such a commotion in a small, junior study could not proceed without noise—the uproar, indeed, was terrific. It soon brought curious visitors. It also brought a very angry individual, in the shape of Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the House-master of the New House.

He whisked into the study, his scanty hair almost on end in his outraged wrath.

"Boys!" he hooted. "Figgins, Redfern—boys! Cease this ruffianism this instant. Stop this disgraceful hooliganism! Bless my soul. Good gracious! Scandalous!"

It certainly was—from a master's point of view. Hearing that rasping, irate voice, Figgins & Co. and Redfern & Co. drew apart, gasping and panting, their faces heated, their hair ruffled, their collars and ties adrift.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Ratcliff in grinding accents. "What is the meaning of this? Why were you fighting, Figgins?"

"We—we—we—" stammered Figgy.

"It—it was like this, sir—" began Redfern.

"Answer me!" rasped the Housemaster.

"It—it was really about the junior captaincy, sir!" gasped Figgins at last. "Redfern thinks he's the man for the job, and I think I am. That's what led to the trouble, sir! Only—only larking, really, sir."

"Oh, indeed! I might have guessed this wretched matter would lead to trouble of this kind!" snorted Mr. Ratcliff. "The whole affair is absurd and ridiculous in my view. Why should such a thing as a junior captaincy be necessary? Aburd!"

"Oh, sir!"

"None the less," said Mr. Ratcliff, frowning. "I see no reason why the junior captain should not belong to my House for a change. The present system of voting is monstrous and unjust in view of the size of the Houses."

"Quite so, sir!" said Figgins heartily, agreeing with Mr. Ratcliff for once in his life. "That's just what we say, sir."

"I see no reason why not!" repeated Mr. Ratcliff. "If any boy of my House chooses to try for the position, he has



The silk hat containing six slips of paper, one marked with a cross, was placed high on the bookshelves. "Here goes!" grinned Kerr, as he plunged his hand into the "topper" and pulled out a slip. "Blank!" he said, and he jumped to the floor. Fatty Wynn took his place, and it was left for him to draw the fateful slip! (See Chapter 11.)

my approval. But there must be no more hooliganism. I shall deal very severely indeed with any further case of this nature, Figgins."

"Oh, ye-es, sir!"

"You six boys appear to be leading the boys of this House. There is no necessity for more candidates for the position than one, however. To obviate further trouble," said Mr. Ratcliff sourly, "the candidate must be one of you six boys. You must decide whom it shall be amongst yourselves in a peaceable manner, and the name of the selected boy sent in to Kildare. You understand?"

"Oh. Oh, yes, sir!"

"Very well. For fighting in this disgraceful manner you will do me two hundred lines each. That is all!"

And Mr. Ratcliff turned and swished out of the study, the crowd departing hurriedly before him.

"Well, my only hat!" murmured Figgins with a gasp. "The silly old hunk!"

"Might have been worse!" grunted Redfern. "Two hundred wasn't so bad for him!"

"Rather not! I expected that and a licking as well. I fancy Ratty's gleeful at the thought of a New House chap getting in as junior skipper—just to spite Railton!"

"Phew! That's it! Like his cheek, though, to tell us what to do. Blow him! Still, it'll stop every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the blessed House putting in for it!" grinned Redfern, adjusting his collar and tie. "Phew! We'd better make it pax after this, Figgy. Of course, it's understood that I'm the man, I hope."

"Rats! Rubbish!" snorted Figgins. "I'm standing!"

"So am I, and I bet I lick you into a cocked hat! Our chaps know a good man when they see one."

"Hold on!" said Kerr suddenly. "Old Ratty's wheeze about choosing one man out of the six is a good one. I believe I know why he suggested it, too, the crafty old hunk. He knows that more than one candidate from the New House will split the votes and result in a licking."

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"Phew! I never thought of that!" said Redfern in dismay.

"Nor did I," admitted Figgins. "That settles it, though. You'll admit it'll have to be me now, Reddy—for the good of the House."

"Bunkum! I'm the man, you silly ass!"

"Hold on!" said Kerr again, his eyes gleaming suddenly. "This sort of game won't do at all. You two chaps will never give in, I know. And if one of you doesn't, then we're done. I've got a suggestion to make. Why not all draw lots, and the winner stands for the job—the others promising to back him up. That's fair enough."

"It's either that or a School House man getting in it."

"But—" began Figgins.

"It's either that or a School House man getting in it seems to me," said Kerr sagely. "United we stand, you know—"

"But supposing you win, or even Fatty Wynn, or Owen, or—"

"Well," said Kerr indignantly, "why not? Isn't that fair enough? I bet I'd make as good a skipper as anyone here!"

"So would I," said Fatty Wynn promptly.

"And I'd make a jolly sight better!" said Owen.

"Give me the chance, and you'd jolly soon see!" snapped Lawrence. "I vote we do that, anyway."

George Figgins laughed. "Well, I'm on if Reddy is," he said. "After all, so long as a New House man gets in that's all that matters. I vote we do it—draw lots and abide by the decision. The winner is backed up right along the line, whoever he is."

Redfern frowned, but after a pause he nodded.

"Well, it's fair enough," he admitted. "Yes, I suppose I'd better agree, though; but it doesn't matter."

"Come along to our study, then!" said Figgins.

"Why not?" grinned Redfern. "Shut that door, and we'll get down to it."

"Oh, all right!"

They got down to it at once—only Figgins and Redfern seeming to be at all dubious about the arrangement. Yet even Figgins and Redfern realised that anything was better than splitting the vote, and they knew they could never agree to give way to one another.

Six strips of paper were cut from an exercise book, and on one of them a cross in red ink was boldly drawn. Then the slips were put into a silk hat and shaken up thoroughly, all taking a turn at the task. Then the hat was placed high on the bookshelves.

"Now!" grinned Figgins, his face quite pale and excited. "Who's going first? I shook the hat last, so perhaps—"

"I shook it first!" grinned Kerr. "So here goes!"

He jumped on the chair placed in readiness, and plunged his hand into the hat. Then he jumped down with a slip in his hand.

"Well?"

"No luck—blank!" said Kerr ruefully, throwing down the paper and jumping on it. "Now, Fatty—you next!"

Fatty took his turn and jumped down with his slip.

"Me next!" said Figgins, his voice almost trembling. "I—"

"No need, Figgy!" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"Wha-at?"

"I've got it!"

"You—you've got it?" gasped Figgins faintly.

"Yes, old chap. Here it is."

Fatty Wynn showed his slip; there was a red cross on it.

"Well, my only hat!"

"Phew!"

"Oh, my giddy aunt!"

Figgins almost collapsed, and his fellow juniors stared blankly. Somehow they had taken it for granted that Fatty Wynn couldn't be the selected New House candidate.

But he had. Fatty Wynn, the genial, good-natured, and easy-going member of Figgins & Co. was to be the candidate for the junior captaincy of St. Jim's on behalf of the New House.

"G-good man!" said Figgins faintly. "Congrats, old chap!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kerr.

Fatty Wynn's face was like unto the harvest moon. He fairly beamed.

"Isn't it ripping?" he gasped. "I tell you what, if I get in I'll stand a whacking great feed to you fellows—a real stunner!"

"I—I suppose you wouldn't like to stand down in my favour, Fatty?" said Figgins hopefully. "Let me stand the feed instead."

"Eh? Oh, really, Figgy, I'm surprised at you!" said Fatty reproachfully. "I do hope you're not going to try

to back out of the arrangement—you all agreed, remember."

"Ahem! Nunno! It—it's all right, Fatty!" gasped Figgins. "After all, you're a New House man—and the captaincy will be in this study."

"Well," said Redfern, drawing a deep breath. "Well, I'm blowed! You—you're quite sure you want to be skipper, Fatty, old man? Remember you'll have a lot of worry and trouble, and you'll have heaps of work to do—no time for feeding in the tuckshop, you know. What about standing down in favour of me. I tell you what, I'll stand you a feed every day for a week if you would!"

It was a tempting offer—very tempting to the Falstaff of the New House. But Fatty was not to be tempted. He had glimpsed honour and glory, and the glittering prize proved the stronger. The thought of being able to write home and tell his people in Wales that he was junior captain of St. Jim's was not to be overlooked so easily. It would be something worth writing home about—and to doting uncles and aunts, as well as home! It might bring no end of tips and tuck in one way and another. The prospect was bright—if he did win the coveted distinction.

"Not likely!" he grinned, his eyes dancing with excitement. "I'm keeping you fellows to the agreement. I'm putting up for the captaincy on behalf of the New House. After all," added Fatty, looking at his chums' dismayed faces with some indignation, "ain't I the best goalkeeper in the Lower School?"

They had to admit that. Fatty undoubtedly was!

"Very well," said Fatty, his good-humoured face quite determined for once. "As regards sport, I can hold my own with any chap, and I'm blessed if I can see why I shouldn't make as good a skipper—if not better—than Tom Merry. I'm going to do my best, anyway, if the chance does come my way!"

"Good for you, Fatty!" said Figgins, brightening up and clapping his fat chum on the back. "We'll back you up, old man, never fear! Thank goodness it's in our study, anyway! Congratulate Fatty, Reddy."

"Oh, rats!" said Redfern, quite crossly. "Go and eat coke!"

And the leader of the New Firm marched out of the room, with the grinning Owen and Lawrence at his heels. They had no intention of backing out of the agreement by any means. But the idea of Fatty Wynn being the New House candidate for the junior captaincy of St. Jim's wanted getting used to!

CHAPTER 12.

Amazing!

"WOT!"

"But, you ass—"

"Wats!"

"But, look here—"

"Wubbish!"

Arthur Augustus was most emphatic. When he liked—which was fairly often—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could be as firm as a rock; at least, he termed it "firm as a rock"; his chums terming it, "obstinate as a mule." At all events, he was firm now.

It was noon the next day, and the chums of the Fourth were in Study No. 6, arguing heatedly. And they were arguing about the question of the junior captaincy; which question looked like causing unusual trouble in the Lower School.

Had Tom Merry failed in his duty as skipper—had he lost prestige in the House, the matter would have been simple, or fairly simple. New candidates would have appeared eagerly enough—fellows like Talbot, or Levison, or Blake, or Clive, or Dane. It would then have been a matter of the best man winning the vacant position.

But Tom Merry had not failed in his duty—in the opinion of the fellows who mattered—nor had he lost prestige. He was more popular, if anything, than ever. In their opinion Tom had been treated shabbily. The authorities had "backed up" the slackers against him, and in the matter of the fiasco of the Abbot'sford match, Cardew was solely to blame.

Unfortunately, however, Tom Merry appeared to share the unjust opinion of the authorities, that he had failed in his duty. He was bitter and hurt about it, and no amount of argument or persuasion would turn him from his decision to resign.

It was a most peculiar situation, and there seemed to be no way out of it—to Tom Merry's loyal supporters. To the New House fellows, however, the way out seemed simple. Much as they sympathised with Tom Merry, they felt it their duty to take advantage of the opportunity that presented itself of getting a New House man as junior captain. They felt that the School House had held that coveted position quite long enough.

There were others, also, who saw another way out of the difficulty. These were the fellows who had such a good opinion of their own capabilities that they felt they could make a better skipper than Tom Merry, and that it was their duty—to themselves and the school—to put up for the vacant position.

Arthur Augustus was one of these. As Tom Merry was determined not to give way, he saw no reason why he should not fill the position for many reasons.

"Wubbish!" repeated Arthur Augustus firmly. "I see no reason whatever why I should not put up, and plenty of reasons why I should. Tom Mewwy is a vewy gweat friend of mine, and I should hesitate befoah twyin' it had he not resigned of his own accord. As he has done so, however, I feel it my duty to put up in ordah to pwevent the position fwom fallin' into the hands of an incompetent man."

"Oh, my hat!"

"I see no occasion for gwinnin', Blake," said Arthur Augustus severely. "To be quite fwank, I considah that I shall make a bettah skippah even than Tom Mewwy. I see no reason why I should not waise the standard of footah, and I am quite certain that I shall succeed in leadin' the School House against the New House to bettah purpose, and that undah my leadahship, we shall have gweat victowies against the Gwammar School."

"You—you burbling chump!" gasped Blake.

"There is also anothah vewy good reason why I should put up!" said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "I have heard that the New House pwopose to put forward a candidate. If they do, and all our fellows wewain fwom votin', as they say they will, then Figgay will womp home. That will nevah do!"

"Phew! Rather not!"

"Well, there's a lot in that, Gussy!" said Blake, looking suddenly very thoughtful indeed. "I—I never thought of that. We'll have to see that awful chump, Figgay. I thought, like all the other fellows, that the New House chaps would back up Tom Merry."

"But it's too much to expect from them!" said Digby, shaking his head. "They mean to make the most of their chance, the awful rotters!"

"Well, there you are, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "Those are my main reasons for puttin' forward my candidate! And I twust," he added earnestly, "that now you have heard those reasons, you will back up and wally wend. Aftah all, it would be vewy nice to have a skippah out of this study!"

"Very nice!" agreed Blake grimly. "Nothing I should like better, in fact—if that chap happened to be me, or a fellow with an atom of common-sense in his make-up. But for an ass, an imbecile, a burbling duffer like you to have the cheek to put up—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"But the point is, nobody out of this study is going to put up!" said Blake emphatically. "We're backing Tom Merry up—Levison, Talbot, and all the rest of us are determined on that. Not only because we feel Tommy's the best man for the job, but as a protest against masters chipping in and mucking up the authority of the junior skipper."

"That's it!" said Herries, nodding. "If Tom Merry was a failure, or played out, we'd jolly soon put up a candidate for the Fourth! As it is—"

"Gussy will get squashed if he tries it on!" said Blake, rising to his feet. "Look here! We'd better go and see Tom Merry about this. It would be frightful if a New House man got in. Come on!"

"One moment, Blake, you wottah!"

"Out of the way, Gussy, you ass—"

"I wefuse to get out of the way, Blake! I insist upon this studay backin' me up, bai Jove. I—"

"Oh, we'll back you up all right!" said Blake. "Like this!"

"Weally, Blake— Bai Jove! Welease me, you wottah! Oh, gweat Scott!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "Hewwies, Dig—"

Bump!

At a nod from Blake, Herries and Digby had also grasped Arthur Augustus, and he smote the carpet with a terrific concussion.

"That's what we're going to do every time you mention this rot!" snapped Blake warningly. "So you know what to expect. Now, come along, you chaps! We'd better see Tom Merry, and call a general meeting of the Shell and Fourth. Something will have to be done to put a stop to Figgay's game."

"Yes, rather!"

Leaving Arthur Augustus seated on the carpet, gasping, Blake, Herries, and Digby marched out in search of Tom Merry.

In the passage they nearly walked into Mr. Railton and Kildare, who happened to be strolling past in earnest con-

sultation. Mr. Railton was looking very angry and concerned.

He stopped Blake, giving him a far from amiable glance. "Blake," he exclaimed, "I asked Kildare to request you to send in your name for the junior captaincy! You refused!"

"Yes, sir," said Blake, flushing a trifle. "I'm sorry, sir; but I do not wish to stand."

"Why?"

Blake hesitated, and then his jaw set squarely. "Because I think Tom Merry has not been fairly treated, sir," he said quietly. "I'm not the only one, either. None of Merry's friends intend to put up, nor do they intend to vote—not in the School House, at all events!"

"Not to vote, either?" ejaculated the Housemaster. "This—is this absurd. It seem to me that there is a conspiracy afoot to prevent the appointment of a new captain. Is Merry behind this nonsense, Blake?"

"No, sir! He has had nothing to do with it—in fact, he doesn't approve of our attitude. He also flatly refuses to take our advice to withdraw his resignation. We hope that, by refusing ourselves to put up, or to vote, we shall force him to change his mind. At all events, we're determined not to give way!"

"Oh, indeed!" snapped Mr. Railton, his brow darkening with anger. "You, as the friends of Merry, have set yourselves to defy the authorities in their desire to arrange the appointment of a new captain?"

"Not at all, sir—"

"It is nothing less!" rapped the Housemaster angrily. "The fact that Merry's friends refuse to stand or vote shall not be allowed to interfere with the appointment of a new captain. I suspected this, and to avoid any further trouble in the matter I have decided to dispense with the ordinary procedure and ceremony. On this occasion, Blake, there will be no election at all."

"No—no election, sir?"

"I will not be flouted in this manner, Blake!" snapped Mr. Railton. "I am convinced that there is plenty of talent in both houses—a number of boys, who, though possibly not popular, are quite capable of carrying out the duties of a junior captain efficiently. For this reason I do not propose to rely upon voting at all. A notice will be issued at once, requesting would-be candidates to send in their names by six o'clock this evening. From this I propose to select six, who will take it in turns to be junior captain for one week. At the end of the six weeks the boy who has proved himself to be the most efficient and satisfactory will be proclaimed permanent junior captain of St. Jim's until another election becomes necessary. Kildare, kindly come with me and the notice shall be issued without delay."

With that, Mr. Railton walked away, Kildare, looking rather uneasy, following him. They left the juniors staring at each other blankly.

"Oh, m-mum-my hat!" gasped Blake, at length. "What a—what a blessed idea!"

"What a scream, you mean!" grinned Herries. "Old Railton's booked for a jolly old surprise. If the fellows mean what they say nobody will send his blessed name in. What a sell for Railton!"

"Racke, or fellows of his kidney might!" said Digby dubiously.

"Not they!" snorted Blake, frowning. "The job of skipper means hard work, and the slackers don't like work. No; but—what about the New House rotters? Look here, we'd better see Figgay and talk to him. He's a decent sort, after all, and if we put the facts before him, and ask him to help us back up Tom Merry, perhaps he might."

"Hum! We can try it."

"We'll get some fellows together, and go across!" snapped Blake. "If only Figgay will play up—"

Leaving his sentence unfinished, Blake & Co. went away to break the news to the other School House supporters of Tom Merry. The news was received with almost incredulous amazement, but it was agreed that Figgins should be tackled and a deputation started for the New House. They met Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn in the quadrangle, however. All three were looking very satisfied with themselves.

"We were just coming to see you, Figgay," said Blake grimly. "Look here, is it true that you're going to stand for the junior captaincy, Figgay?"

"Not guilty, me lord!" grinned Figgins.

"You—you're not?" ejaculated Blake. "But we heard—"

"Little boys often hear things they shouldn't hear!" grinned Figgay.

"Then—then you're not sending a name in after all to Railton?" demanded Levison, eyeing him keenly.

"Not at all, old chap. No reason why we should!"

"That's good enough, then!" said Blake, in great relief, and little dreaming that Fatty Wynn's name had already been sent in. "I'm jolly glad you're backing Tom Merry up, Figgy. I somehow didn't think you would."

"Didn't you, old chap? Fancy that now!"

"No. Well, it's a jolly good thing—we'll put the kybosh on Railton's game, after all. Come on chaps!"

And the deputation returned to the School House feeling very satisfied. They would have been less satisfied had they heard what passed between Figgins & Co. after they had gone.

"Dear, innocent little men!" gurgled Figgins, gazing after the deputation gleefully. "What a good thing they didn't ask if we had sent a name in instead of only asking if we were going to. Wouldn't they be surprised if they knew one had been sent in more than a hour ago. I fancy, my beloved hearers, that Fatty will romp home a winner."

"Yes, rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Figgins & Co. fairly doubled up with laughter.

CHAPTER 13

The List!

"HALLO!"

"Here it is!"

"Bai Jove!"

There was a rush for the notice-board in Big Hall as Kildare was seen approaching it with a sheet of paper in his hand. The announcement had been made that the list of temporary captains would be placed on the board at six-thirty, and the Hall was crammed with Lower School fellows, eager to see that list.

Practically all the School House were there and all the New House. Most of the faces wore grins of anticipation. Blake, and the supporters of Tom Merry were grinning because they were expecting a blank sheet to be pinned up—or a notice to the effect that no names of candidates had been handed in or selected. In their view, now they knew the New House weren't putting up a man, the amazing scheme of Mr. Railton's was bound to be a fiasco.

The New House fellows—who had kept their secret well—on the other hand, were looking forward gleefully to seeing Fatty Wynn's name on the list.

Grundy of the Shell was also there. Everybody knew, of course, that Grundy had sent his name in. But nobody gave that any serious attention, simply because they did

not for one moment expect Mr. Railton to pass such a hopeless "dud."

Skimpole, of the Shell, was also there, and it was known that he also was ambitious to become junior captain—a feat that had caused general hilarity. But his candidature was not taken seriously either.

There was a hush as Kildare pinned the paper to the board. Then, his face very grim, the captain of St. Jim's walked away.

There was a buzz of voices. Fellows crammed six deep round the board, those behind craning their necks for a view of the paper. There arose a sudden yell:

"Oh, my hat!"

"Help! Great Scott!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Cardew, getting a sudden glimpse of the sheet. "Old Gussy—"

"And—Grundy—"

"And Skimpole—"

"And—Fatty Wynn—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Those nearest the board reeled away, roaring with laughter—they could not help it. Others scanned the notice wonderingly, and then they understood and roared.

"Bai Jove! Pway, what is the joke, deah boys?"

Arthur Augustus got his turn, and he read the notice slowly. It was as follows:

"JUNIOR CAPTAINCY."

"In accordance with the scheme drawn up by Mr. Railton and approved by Dr. Holmes, the following members of the Lower School have been selected from the seven names submitted, and will therefore take over the duties of Junior Captain, in turn, for one week:

"Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Fourth Form.

"George Alfred Grundy, Shell.

"Percy Mellish, Fourth Form.

"Herbert Skimpole, Shell.

"Clarence York Tompkins, Fourth Form.

"David Llewellyn Wynn, Fourth Form.

"(Signed) VICTOR RAILTON, Housemaster."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Six—and five of them hopeless duds, bai Jove!"

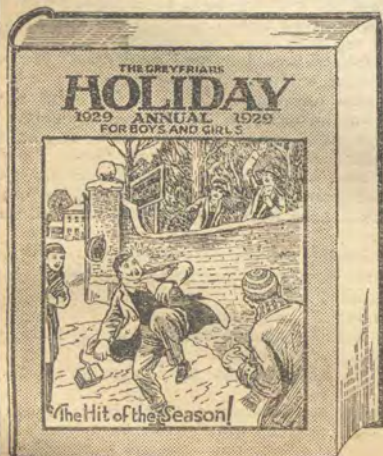
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I weally cannot undahstand how Mr. Wailton could have included those names affah mine," gasped Arthur Augustus, glancing over the names again with the aid of his monocle. "Fancy Gwundy—and Skimpole—and—Bai Jove! This is vewy weamarkable! Five hopeless duds, deah boys!"

(Continued on page 28.)

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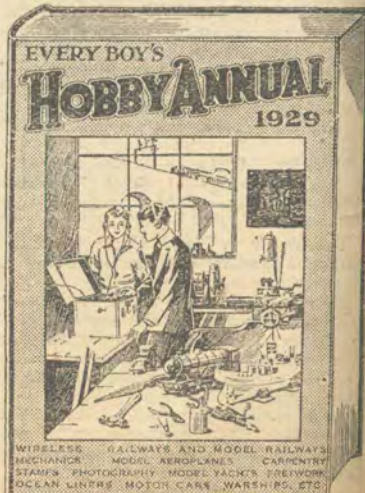
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STARRING JACK KENNEDY, A
YOUNG SPEED MERCHANT.

WRITTEN SPECIALLY
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(The Motor-Racing Author.)

INTRODUCTION.

JACK KENNEDY drives a Saxon car so well in a big motor-race that he gets nicknamed "Skid," and is offered a job in the Saxon firm with his chum and mechanic—

FRED BISHOP. Both of them have been sacked from the Falcon Six works through the jealousy of—

PHILIP SLADE, a crack Falcon speedman. Jack's elder brother Ben, gets a job in the Saxon racing stable, while the two boys go into the showroom to sell cars. They learn that Slade and the Falcon Six people are out to smash the Saxon firm. Jack is asked to drive a specially-built car called the Silver Saxon in the big Cragside Hill Climb against their rivals, and Jack agrees to take the job on. On the night before the event, Jack's suspicion is aroused by the actions of a salesman named—

CARNABY. Jack and Fred watch by the racing stable; they see Carnaby climb through a window and go to the Silver Saxon. He is going to pour into the engine a powder which will absolutely wreck it. With a combined shout, the two boys hurl themselves through the window.

(Now read on.)

Just in Time!

CARNABY spun round as he heard the boys dive through the window into the big shed. His eyes widened, and an ugly expression dawned on his lean features.

For a moment he remained where he stood, with the packet of carborundum poised above the oil filler at the side of the shining engine. The powder was harder than steel; if it got into the engine it would churn round with the oil, scoring and grinding the metal, and utterly wrecking the great power unit.

Carnaby's hand tilted as the boys leaped at him. He meant to pour the powder in, and then settle with them afterwards!

Jack saw his action as he dropped through the window, and from the bench beneath it he snatched up a gallon can of oil, then hurled it with all his strength at the man. The coloured can whirled through the air and it struck the packet fairly, knocking it clean out of Carnaby's hand and sending it skating across the floor, strewing its contents harmlessly over the concrete.

With a snarl breaking from his lips Carnaby shook his fist, then crouched to meet the boys' rush.

"Lights—switch the lights on, Fred!" Jack gasped, and as his chum leaped for the switch, the boy speedman hurled himself at the man whom, he now knew, must be in Slade's pay.

Carnaby was half as big again as Jack, and he ducked as the boy rushed him. Jack's left cracked over the fellow's ear, then Carnaby's right jarred under his jaw and knocked him half off his feet—just as Fred snapped on the powerful electric lights which hung from the roof, and hurled himself into the fight.

Fred was lean as a lath, but he was as supple as springy steel. His bunched knuckles whipped full into Carnaby's wind. He sent the fellow staggering back against the gleaming shape of the Silver Saxon.

Fred dived in again, but Carnaby slipped his wild rush and brought his right fist flailing round with all his weight behind it. The shattering punch took Fred squarely on the

side of the head, picking him clean off his feet and sending him down, dazed and dizzy.

As his chum dropped, Jack came into the fight again, and now he was a shade more cautious. He knew that he couldn't match Carnaby for strength, but he had him beat for speed. He ducked the mad punches that the man slung at him, and leaped in with his fists thudding like pistons.

Twice he got home on the man's lean jaw, jumped away, dodged Carnaby's rush, and leaped in anew. The two fought madly round the floor of the shed, Jack ducking and dodging and diving in to land stinging blows; Carnaby flailing the air with mad punches, snarling and cursing as his wind began to give out.

On the floor, Fred sat up and watched them. Everything appeared misty, and the shed seemed to be heaving around him. It looked to him as though Jack needed some help, but Fred felt too shaky to get to his feet.

Near him lay the can of oil which Jack had thrown when they first entered the shed. Oil was oozing out near a broad, shallow drip-pan which lay by the front of the Silver Saxon. Fred bent and eased the can over the edge of the pan, so that its black and greasy contents flooded out. There was another can of oil near; Fred tipped that in, too, then he sat watching the fight.

Jack was getting the upper hand now. He had Carnaby winded and slowing. Like a terrier at a mastiff, Jack kept ripping in his dead-straight, stinging punches. He had both the man's eyes puffed and swollen, and blood was trickling from a cut lip.

Twice Carnaby all but fell as he missed with a savage punch which looked as though it would have knocked Jack through the wall had it caught him. Then Jack steadied, bent, and rocked a last, terrific drive for the man's jaw.

It landed with deadly accuracy—close beside the point Carnaby's heels slid under him—and, as he dropped, Fred slid the tray full of oil over the floor.

Carnaby dropped into it with a splash that sent oil flying high and wide, dropping in great gouts over his immaculate clothing, and smothering his pomaded, smooth-brushed hair. A gasp broke from his bruised lips, then he sprawled full in the drip-pan, wriggling feebly as the oil soused around him.

"Wallop—right in the middle of it!" Fred muttered, as he blinked at him. "That's what we did to Slade the other day; gave him a bath of oil! That's the way we serve all dirty rotters like you. Jack, open the doors, an' we'll slide him out."

Jack staggered to the doors and flung them wide. Between them, they caught one end of the tray and sent Carnaby skating out into the night. He slithered across the threshold, then the tray hit a bump in the ground, lifted and shot him forward.

They had a glimpse of Carnaby sprawling on his face, with the tilted tray spilling the remainder of its black and oily contents over him, then they slammed the doors behind him.

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Record Breaking!

FOR a space, the boys leaned against the doors, panting as they stared at one another. Presently, Fred went to a tap in a corner and dipped his head into a bucket of water.

"That's better!" he gasped, as he straightened up and tried to dry himself on his handkerchief. "That outsider caught me a fearful smack on the side o' the nut, made me go all of a jelly for a bit. Are you hurt?"

Jack's knuckles were skinned a little, but he had suffered no real harm, and in a little while the two were examining the Silver Saxon.

None of the carborundum had gone in; they made absolutely sure of that. Then they swept up the floor of the shed and went outside to see what had happened to Carnaby. They discovered that, judging from the oily trail on the ground, he had crawled hurriedly away, probably afraid the boys would call the night watchman and hand him over to them.

Jack and Fred took the tray into the shed and cleaned it; when everything was tidy they locked up and left the works.

"I bet Carnaby won't have the nerve to show his face at the show-rooms to-morrow," Jack commented. "It's as plain as anything that Slade paid him to try and wreck our hill climber."

"But it didn't come off!" Fred grunted. "We'll watch that swab if we see him again, and to-morrow we'll put it across old Slade's Falcon, with a bit to spare. We'll go to the show-rooms first thing, just to make sure Carnaby doesn't turn up. If he does, we'll tell him to clear out."

"He won't come anywhere near the Saxon show-rooms or these works again," Jack said, and he was right. They saw nothing of Carnaby in the morning, and they hurried on to the racing stable, getting there just in time to see the Silver Saxon being loaded on to a lorry which would take it to the scene of the Cragside Hill Climb.

The boys travelled there with Ben in a car. They arrived an hour or so before the first event was due to be run off, and they found the winding road up the hill packed solidly with a great crowd of excited spectators.

At the foot there was a roped-off field which did duty for a paddock, and more spectators were clustered against the ropes, staring at the Falcon Six Speeder and at Philip Slade, who was doing something to it.

It seemed as though everybody knew how strong was the rivalry between the Falcons and the Saxons; a crowd gathered to watch the silvery machine run down from the lorry—and to stare at the lean, sinewy, clear-eyed boy who was to drive it.

Some of the most famous cars in the world were in the paddock, with mechanics making them ready and intrepid speedmen preparing to drive them.

"We've taken on something if we think we're goin' to beat this lot!" Fred grunted to Jack, as they gazed around the paddock, listening to the bellowing thunder of rival machines as their engines were started up. "Still, we pretty nearly pulled it off in that other big race, so we ought to do something good here, even if it is a hill climb."

A hill climb is an event in which cars race up a hill. They travel one at a time, and the machine which reaches the summit in the shortest time is the winner. Slade was out to break the record with his specially-tuned Falcon Six—and so was Jack.

He knew only too well how much it meant to the Saxon works that he should do well with the magnificent machine that his brother had tuned.

"We'll lick 'em, or we'll bust!" Jack informed Fred, then gave his attention to the car. In a little while the racing started, machine after machine hurtled at the hill and scuttled up it in a film of dust.

The road was not very wide, and there were three turns on it, the last one being very near the summit; the second turn was about halfway up, and its outer edge formed the lip of a steep drop—if a car went over that it would mean disaster, because the light safety fence which had been built there would never hold a speeding machine which struck it.

Presently, the smashing roar of the Silver Saxon spanged out. The wide-mouthed exhaust bellowed on a fiendish note as the engine was warmed up and, glancing across to the Falcon Six, Jack saw Slade looking towards him.

There was an ugly expression on the man's features, then he mounted his own machine and ran it down to the starting line, ready to make his ascent of the hill. He was to make his effort five minutes or so before the boys went up. They were just donning their crash helmets when they saw the flag drop and the Falcon Six surged away from the line.

Up the straight and into the first bend it went—screaming on the road, leaping and bucking madly. It took the bend in a mad, slashing skid, with the crowd gasping at the speed with which it went around.

On, up the hill, exhaust booming and engine roaring wildly until the car shot over the summit. The boys heard the machine go and they glanced at one another, then climbed into the bucket seats of their own car, while the engine was started up again.

Ben leaned over to grip Jack's hand.

"Put your foot down hard, young 'un," he said. "Make her shift!"

Jack grinned at him cheerfully, while Fred leaned over and grunted:

"Jack'll beat whatever Slade's done, anyhow!"

They saw grey-haired Mr. Lloyd, the Saxon director, smiling at them. He waved his hand, then Jack sent the car towards the starting line. As they went, loud-speakers announced the time in which Slade had climbed the hill:

"Slade's time on the Falcon Six is forty-three and one-fifth seconds—breaking the record by two clear seconds!"

The boys heard the thunderous applause rise at the announcement, and they looked at one another.

"Broken the record, has he?" asked Fred. "Right-oh, we'll break it again!"

The Challenge!

THE Silver Saxon stood on the starting line, shimmering in the bright sunlight. The low-built machine looked fiercely powerful as it stood with its exhaust burbling with leashed power.

The boys sat wedged down in their bucket seats, the backs resting against the petrol tank set across the nickelled frame. Out in front, just beyond the black electrical timing strip across the road, stood the starter, his flag uplifted—a red splash against the green grass of the bank behind him.

Ahead, the road ran straight up to the first turn, where spectators were crowded on the high bank at the outside of the bend.

"Get ready for it!" gasped Fred, as he saw the starter's flag twitch.

Jack slipped into gear and revved up the engine. He wriggled his head a little to make his crash-helmet sit more comfortably, then his hand clamped on the big, cord-bound steering-wheel as he watched the flag.

It twitched again then, abruptly, whipped down.

With a shattering roar the Silver Saxon jumped forward, threshing rear wheels slinging dust and stones behind as they gripped the road-surface and spurred the car on.

Up the straight, rising road the machine hurtled, a glimmering streak in a dust haze, the war song of her exhaust crashing out with a challenging roar as she leaped at the turn.

Fred clung with both hands to his seat as he felt the car juddering on the road, while the outer bank of the turn slammed to meet them. Over went the steering-wheel and round came the tail of the machine in a tearing skid.

Dirt and dust fountained from the slithering tyres as they whined on the road, while the watching crowds pressed back in alarm at the car's furious speed.

Round the turn went the speed-iron, Jack wrenching on the wheel as he fought the car out of the mad skid and flung the machine at the slope which led to the next bend. They hurtled at it. Fred had a glimpse of the fence-guarded gulf which waited for them if Jack should miscalculate by the fraction of an inch, then the car was skidding again.

Across the curve it went, heaving straight at the fence!

Through the bellow of the roaring engine clearly came the shouts of startled men as it seemed that the car must go over the drop. The spinning wheel-hubs kissed the very planks in the fence, plucking splinters from them ere Jack battled the Silver Saxon straight and sent her on.

Ahead, loomed the last turn. Spectators were crowding back from the roadside as the car slammed on, weaving all over the course from the stress of her furious speed. The last curve slid at them. Jack took it wide, then hurled the wheel over to cut the corner close.

The Saxon jumped into another mad skid. Her sliding tyres chipped at the grass—men leaped for their lives as the mighty machine plunged at them—then they were through the curve and, split seconds later, charged beneath the banner which marked the finish, with the wheels stamping on the timing strip.

"Wow! That—was—a thriller!" Fred gulped as he yelled the words, while Jack slowed the Saxon to take it on to a by-road which led back to the paddock. Down the slope they trundled towards the spot from which they had started.



Across the curve the car went, heaving straight at the fence! Through the bellow of the roaring engine clearly came the shouts of the startled spectators as it seemed that the car must go over the gulf. But Jack battled the Saxon round, as the wheel hub splintered the fence! (See page 26.)

They could see Ben and Mr. Lloyd and a group of mechanics waiting by the loud speaker. Near them was Philip Slade with his Falcon, and with him they saw Carnaby—bruises on his face and one eye in mourning! Jack ran the car up, then switched off the engine as he heard a preliminary grunt from the loud speaker.

"Hallo, everybody! 'Skid' Kennedy's time was forty-one seconds dead! He breaks the Falcon Six's record by two and one-fifth seconds!"

Instantly, the paddock and the watching crowd became one big cheer. The Saxon mechanics, Ben and Mr. Lloyd, came leaping forward to congratulate the boys, and the director's eyes were shining, because he knew that Jack had made a climb which would prove beyond all doubt the supremacy of the Saxon over the Falcon Six.

But, as they rushed, Slade leaped in front of them. His pallid face was lowering and his eyes were blazing as he jumped to the side of the car.

"I challenge you!" he rasped. "I'll race you up the hill here and now, Kennedy! I'll show you I've got a better car—I'll race you!"

"Right!" A reckless smile twisted Jack's lips. "Right, I'll take you on!"

All Out to Win!

At first neither Ben nor Mr. Lloyd would hear of Jack accepting the challenge of the Falcon Six speed-man.

"The road is barely wide enough for one car to go up that hill at speed, let alone two!" Mr. Lloyd exclaimed.

"If he got in front of you, he'd never give you room to pass him!" Ben told the boys. "You can't do it!"

"We're going to have a shot at it, anyway," Jack assured them. "Look what a good thing it'll be if we can lick him, Mr. Lloyd! It's all very well to break a record for the hill, but to go up it and lick the Falcon in a proper race—that's something to talk about!"

Another difficulty arose. The organisers of the hill climb refused to allow the cars to run. They said it was too dangerous. By this time, Jack had persuaded Mr. Lloyd to agree to the race if the officials would let the cars use the course. Finally, the organisers said the machines could run after the other events had finished, but they would not accept any responsibility for what happened.

The moment that the decision was reached, the Silver Saxon was rushed to a corner of the paddock. Mechanics got busy, making certain that everything about the car was perfect, while the loud speakers announced the challenge race to the crowd.

Jack and Fred heard the excited murmur which arose at the announcement, and they both grinned. Once, while they were working, they saw Carnaby hanging about near the car, but he cleared off the moment that he saw he was spotted.

"Wonder what he's after?" Fred asked. "Very likely he's just having a look round. So long as he ain't got any pals about here, it doesn't matter!"

It was as the last event was run off that Jack and Fred climbed into their machine and rolled the car to the starting line. They saw Slade bringing his Falcon up, and it drew level as the Saxon stopped.

Slade did not even glance at them as he crouched behind his wheel. The boys could hear the thunder of the rival car's engine as Slade kept it turning at speed.

Marshals on the corners signalled down the course that the road was clear, and Jack slipped into gear as he saw the starter's flag go up.

He knew perfectly well that if once Slade snatched the lead the Saxon would get no chance to pass the Falcon; Slade would make sure of that. This meant that the race would develop into a blind rush for the first corner, and after that it would be one mad fight up the hill.

Jack knew only too well how risky the race would be. Both cars would skid on the turns, and if once they struck and locked their wheels it meant the finish!

He could see the spectators craning to watch the start. The whole hill was in a state of excitement, and by the timing strip Ben was standing with the others, frowning as he watched. He knew that Jack was a great little driver, but he was beginning to wish that he hadn't let him accept the challenge.

Jack was watching the starter's flag. He heard the Falcon bellowing, then the red fabric slashed down and the two machines shot away together.

Up the slope they went, wheel to wheel. Jack could see the Falcon as it blared and thundered at his very elbow, and he gave the silvery car full throttle, in an effort to get the lead before they reached the bend.

Still together, they crashed at the turn, and went into it in a smother of dust and flying stones, both skidding!

Jack could feel the steering-wheel kicking and jerking under his hands as his machine tried to smash itself against the outer bank. It needed all his strength to force the car round. He yanked it out of one skid, only to find it shoot into another which carried him within an ace of hitting the Falcon.

Clearly, while the Saxon slid all but sideways on the road, he saw Slade's mouth open as he shouted wildly, then

Jack had his car straight again and they were storming for the second bend—still level.

Into it they went, the gasping crowd watching wide-eyed. From the banks on either hand the stupendous bellow of the racing cars blared with fendish thunde, deafening in its intensity.

Jack eased out on the road to take the curve wide—to find that Slade was crowding him, forcing him into the fragile fence which guarded the drop! Jack saw the palings whip up; he heard Fred roaring at the rival driver to give them more room—and then they hit the fence!

Jack saw broken woodwork fly from the front wheel in the instant that he wrenched it over. For one awful moment, he saw the gulf below him, fencing fading out in a cloud of dust as the tail of the machine struck the rest of it.

He braced himself over the wheel as he dragged it round, forcing the car back on the road—with the Falcon Six now a clear length in the lead, because Slade had forced Jack to lose ground as he skidded his car too far.

Jack gave the Silver Saxon every ounce of power that was in its mighty engine, and he leaped to the tail of his rival as the last bend whipped up. He saw Slade shaping to take it wide, and on the instant Jack poked the Saxon's nose over, cutting inside him!

He was level and going ahead while the Falcon was yet storming round the turn. Jack could hear the mad cheering of the crowd as they saw the effect of his clever driving—and then the cheering changed to a wild gasp!

Jack, hunched and straining as he fought the Saxon round the turn, suddenly saw one front wheel leave the car!

It hurtled ahead of them, spinning and wobbling!

Travelling at speed, they had lost a wheel! It meant only a miracle could save the machine from smoking, crashing disaster!

(Bad luck, isn't it, boys? But Jack and Fred are not beaten yet! You'll discover what real grit and the will to win will do in an emergency when you come to read next Wednesday's powerful instalment.)

WHO SHALL BE CAPTAIN?

(Continued from page 24.)

"Six, you mean!" laughed Bernard Glyn. "Oh, my hat! What a giddy scream!"

"I say, you fellows," grumbled Baggy Trimble, his face showing acute disappointment. "I sent in my name, you know! It's a bit thick. Railton's left me out!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake ceased laughing suddenly.

"We've been had though," he gasped. "Gussy, you awful idiot, so you've sent in your thumping name, after all—after we warned you what we'd do if you did?"

"Bai Jove! I have no intention of being intimidated by you, Blake. However—"

"And Fatty Wynn!" ejaculated Herries blankly. "And Figgins told us they weren't sending in a name at all. The rotten, fibbing cads!"

"Not at all!" laughed Figgins gleefully. "We said we weren't sending in a name simply because we had already sent it in—Fatty Wynn's."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The New House fellows roared.

"But—but this is idiotic!" gasped Blake, hardly knowing where he was. "Six duds— Oh, my giddy aunt! Railton must be off his chump!"

"Look here, Blake!" began Grundy, whose eyes were dancing with excitement. "You'd jolly well better be careful! If you jolly well call me a dud—"

"The worst dud of the lot!" said Blake dazedly. "What's it mean? I suppose old Railton had to do it to save his face. He wasn't going to be made a laughing stock by having to shove up a blank list and confess himself beaten."

"That's it!" laughed Glyn. "He's saved his giddy face and his scheme by doing this. And he'll give them all a day each and sack 'em one by one."

The crowd howled.

The selected temporary junior captains did not laugh, however. They took the position very seriously, indeed.

"I am exceedingly gratified that I have been chosen," remarked Herbert Skimpole, scratching his bony forehead, and looking quite pleased. "I do not approve of the rest of the list, but Mr. Railton has certainly shown great wisdom and foresight in selecting me. I have often wished that I was given a post of authority, so that I could place my scientific knowledge, and socialistic and economic views before my school-fellows, and insist upon them being adopted. It will undoubtedly have a far-reaching effect upon the progress of St. Jim's."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can understand you fellows laughing," said George Alfred Grundy, his face ablaze with excitement. "Railton must be potty to include those five duds in the list. But he's realised my abilities at last. He's given me my chance at last. I'm going to make the most of it. As for these duds on the list—well, I'll soon put the kybosh on them. I'm going to ask Railton to let me have my turn first. If he agrees it won't be necessary for that ass, Skimpole, and that born idiot, Gussy, and the rest to take their turns. Everybody will be so impressed and pleased with my abilities as skipper that they'll be cancelled and I shall get the job permanently. I'm going to see about it now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

George Alfred Grundy, looking in deadly earnest, fairly rushed from Big Hall to interview Mr. Railton. A howl of laughter followed him.

Grundy came back four minutes later. His eyes were dancing, and he looked very satisfied indeed.

"It's all right, you fellows," he said, glancing rather superciliously over the throng. "Railton's agreed—I'm to have my turn first. That means there won't be any need for the others. I'll see to that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Railton agreed at once!" said Grundy. "He seemed fed up about it all, somehow—fairly looked at me as if he could eat me. Still, that didn't trouble me. I'm to start my duties as junior skipper to-morrow morning. And—" he added grimly, looking round him warningly. "I mean to make things hum. Some of you slackers had better look out. I mean business. I shall stand no nonsense, mind—I warn everybody, here and now. I mean to raise the standard of sport to heights St. Jim's has never reached before. I mean to put the New House in its place. I mean to lead St. Jim's to victory against the blessed Grammar School at sports and in rags. I'll make those Grammar School rotters afraid to show their noses outside their school wall. That's the programme!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!" hooted Grundy, glaring round him furiously.

But the Lower School could—and they yelled. Grundy, as junior captain, was something new. But Grundy himself was not new, and they anticipated high times ahead with him as junior captain of St. Jim's.

THE END.

(Tom Merry & Co. are not going to be disappointed. There are high times ahead of them—and for Grundy, too! You'll thoroughly enjoy "HE THOUGHT HE WAS CAPTAIN!" Stand by for it, chums!)



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