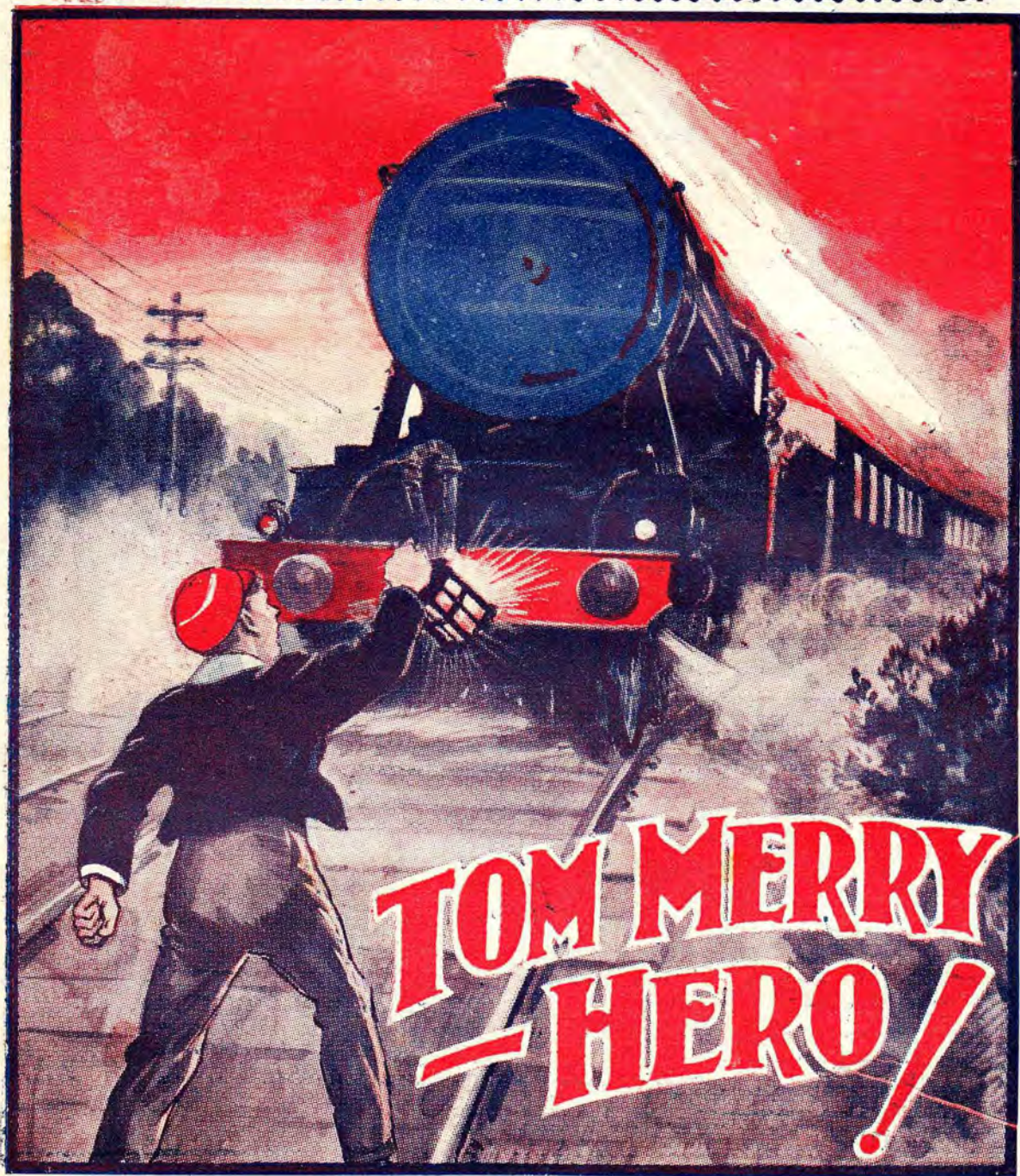


TOM MERRY AT CLAVERING! SPECIAL SCHOOL
STORY INSIDE!

The **GEM** 2^D



CHAPTER 1.

An Audacious
Proposition!

"SILENCE!"

"Silence for the chairman!"

"Who's the giddy chairman?"

"Tom Merry, of course."

"Oh, all right! Get ahead, Mr. Chairman!"

Tom Merry rose to his feet. He rapped upon the study table with a ruler and looked round the crowded apartment.

The study was crowded, not to say crammed. Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Gore, who shared that study, never found it any too spacious for them. But now some fifteen members of the Shell Form at Clavering College had contrived, by hook or by crook, to squeeze themselves into it. For it was a meeting of the Form, and a most important one—at least, in the eyes of those immediately concerned.

The door was locked, showing that the proceedings of the Shell were to be conducted in secret, safe from prying eyes and ears. Outside the door were gathered a number of Lower Form boys, intensely curious to know what the Shell was up to. Now and then a murmur of voices, or a rap of Tom Merry's ruler, reached their ears, but that was all.

The study window was wide open. The afternoon was a warm one, and the room was uncomfortably hot.

Little recked the juniors of the Shell of that. They had business in hand—most important business. Indeed, to judge by the solemnity of some of their faces, the fate of the school might have hung upon that meeting in Tom Merry's study.

Tom had now been at Clavering for some weeks, and was already very popular with the majority of the boys, though a few, such as Gore, still took every opportunity to get one up on him.

His work in school was good, and had carried him to the top of the Shell, and so it came about that he was presiding at a Form meeting, despite the fact that he was a comparative newcomer.

Jimson, the joker of the Form, was the only one who ventured to take the proceedings in anything approaching a flippant spirit. Jimson was seated upon the window-sill, with only his legs inside the room—under the circumstances the most comfortable place in the study. Monty Lowther and Manners sat upon a box in the fireplace. Gore and a couple more found room on the coal locker. The four chairs belonging to the study were occupied, and the table accommodated three boys, leaving only just room for Tom Merry to rap with his ruler. Phillips, who was nearest to the chairman, kept a rather nervous eye on that ruler.

Rap, rap!

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THE HERO OF



"Silence for the chair!"

Something like silence fell upon the meeting. Fifteen pairs of eyes were fixed upon Tom Merry as he stood up, his handsome, frank face very serious.

"Gentlemen of the Shell—" began Tom Merry.

"Hear, hear!" said Jimson.

"Silence!"

"Order!"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, all right!" said Jimson. "I'll go on with these nuts while the chairman gets on with his speech. Go ahead, Merry!"

Rap, rap!

Jimson commenced cracking nuts with his teeth. Tom Merry gave him a severe glance and rapped on the table again.

"Gentlemen of the Shell, we are met together upon an occasion of unusual solemnity and immense importance. It is not too much to say that this is an epoch-making meeting—a meeting the result of which will go down in the history of Clavering College, and—and will—will make things hum generally—"

This was rather a weak ending, but Tom had forgotten the latter part of his carefully prepared speech, which he had written out and learned by heart, to open the meeting.

However, the Shell were satisfied, and they burst into a loud cheer.

—ADVENTURE IN TUNNEL! WHO TRIED TO WRECK THE TRAIN?

CLAVERING!

A Sparkling Long Complete School Story of
TOM MERRY & Co.

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Martin Clifford.



everybody expected at first that the election would be a walk-over for him."

"Good old Felgate!"

"Order!"

Rap, rap!

"Look out!" yelled Phillips, squirming away from the chairman's ruler.

"You nearly had my knee that time!"

"Order!"

"It has always been a tradition at Clavering," resumed Tom Merry, taking no notice of Phillips, "that the captain of the school should be elected from the ranks of the Sixth. Within the memory of the oldest inhabitants of these ancient walls—ahem!—the captain has always been a Sixth-Former!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Shut up—I mean order! But on this point there is no law but that of custom, and it has occurred to the Fifth Form that the custom wasn't a particularly good one, so they've put up a candidate of their own."

"Down with the Fifth!"

"Three groans for Devigne!"

"Order!"

"Now we're coming to the point!" cried Tom.

"Time, too!" interjected Jimson.

"Chuck that fellow out of the window if he won't shut up!"

"All right!" said Jimson hastily.

"I'll be as mum as a baby oyster!"

"Now we're coming to the point," resumed Tom Merry. "The Fifth Form have put up a candidate for the election. We all said it was like their cheek."

"So it was."

"Well, perhaps it was. We all thought that the tradition ought to be carried on, and that the captain of the school ought to come out of the top Form."

"That's right!"

"I don't know. Anyway, all the Fifth, Upper and Lower, plump for Devigne, their candidate, and they're going to get him in if they can. Now, we of the Shell are not going to be domineered over by any giddy captain picked out of the Form next above us!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Of course we're not!"

"We could stand a captain out of the Sixth, but a captain out of the Fifth isn't good enough! We bar him!"

"That's the wheeze!"

"So most of us made up our minds to vote for Felgate," said Tom Merry. "And if the Shell plumped for Felgate, I fancy we could get him in."

"We'll get him in."

"Hurrah!"

"But it has occurred to some of us," said Tom Merry, "that there's a third course we could take."

There was a silence of surprise in the study. Even Jimson left off cracking nuts and looked at Tom Merry.

"We don't want any Fifth-Former lording it over us," said Tom, "and we're not going to have it, either."

"Rather not!"

"Hear, hear!"

"But I for one don't see what we want with a Sixth-Former, either. The Fifth have put up a candidate, and busted up the traditions of the school. What I want to know is, why can't the Shell do the same?"

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"Right-ho, Tom Merry! Bravo! Hurrah!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Jimson, unabated this time.

Nevertheless, some of the boys looked surprised.

The meeting was certainly an important one from their point of view, but they had not expected that it would make history in the way indicated by Tom Merry.

Had the chairman something up his sleeve, as it were, with which they were not yet acquainted?

It looked like it, and interest was keener than ever as Tom resumed. The expression on the faces of Manners and Monty Lowther hinted that they were already in the secret.

"Gentlemen," Tom Merry went on, when the cheering had subsided. "You are aware of the position of affairs now at Clavering. The late captain of the school has left us, regretted by all—"

"Hear, hear!"

"An election for a new captain of Clavering is impending—"

"Good old Felgate!"

Tom rapped sharply on the table with his ruler.

It was evident that the cheerful Felgate, the Sixth-Former who had put up for election as the new captain of Clavering was not pleasing to Tom Merry.

This fact was evident, and it added to the mystification of the Shell.

For Felgate was a fine fellow, a splendid cricketer, and athlete, and popular both in his own Form and in the Lower Forms at Clavering.

Moreover, Tom Merry was known to him well, and Felgate always had a pleasant nod for the scamp of Clavering School.

"Silence for the chair!" bawled Monty Lowther.

Rap, rap!

Silence was restored.

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, "an election for a new captain of Clavering is impending. Felgate, of the Sixth, has put up, and as he was the only candidate for the Sixth

ELECTION SENSATION!
Junior New Boy puts up for the
Captaincy of the School—and
nearly bags the job!

There was a general gasp. The audacity of the proposition took the breath away from most of the listeners.

The Shell gave a captain to Clavering!

It was audacious, unheard of; but all the more fascinating on that account.

For a few moments the silence of astonishment reigned. Then the study rang with cheering.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Tommy!"

Tom Merry looked round him with a pleased expression.

He had expected his proposition to jump into popularity at once, but this hurricane of cheering was very gratifying indeed.

It showed that the Shell were prepared to back him up in his novel idea, and to stand by him as one man to bring glory upon the Form.

"Order!"

"Silence for the chair!"

Rap, rap!

"What do you say?" continued Tom Merry. "Is it a go?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Rather!"

"After all," said Tom, "the Shell is the most important Form in the school."

There was a general grin at that.

"Hear, hear!"

"That being the case—and nobody can deny that it is the case—"

"Nobody in the Shell, anyway," giggled Jimson.

"That being the case," went on Tom Merry, unheeding, "it's only right and proper that the Shell should give a captain to Clavering."

"Hurrah for the Shell!"

"So the question remains to be settled—the only question, chaps—who shall be captain of Clavering—who, belonging to the Shell?"

And Tom rapped the table again for order.

Phillips gave a fiendish yell.

"Ow! You've nearly broken my beastly leg!"

"Keep your beastly leg out of the way, then!" said Tom Merry severely. "Your legs have got nothing to do with the question!"

"Ow, ow!"

"Don't make that row! Gentlemen—"

Crash!

There was a sound of scuttling feet in the corridor outside, and then a fearful thump on the locked door.

"Open tat door!" came a deep, furious voice. "Open tat door, ain't it?"

"Crums! I!" muttered Monty Lowther. "It's old Schneider! I forgot all about his study being underneath."

"Open mit you!"

Grey turned towards the door.

Rap, rap!

"Don't open the door, Grey!"

"But it's the German master knocking!"

"Let him knock! We're not going to have this meeting broken up till we've settled the point we met to decide!"

"But—"

"Who's the chairman of this meeting?"

"You are; but—"

"Then dry up! Gentlemen, which of the honourable members of the Shell is our candidate for the honour of being captain of Clavering?"

"Open tat door at voice after!"

"Kick up a row," said Manners: "then we can't hear him. We can't be expected to open the door if we can't hear him, can we?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear! Hurrah!"

The boys began cheering wildly and stamping their feet. "Now, chaps," said Tom, shouting at the top of his voice to make himself heard above the din, "who's our candidate?"

Monty Lowther jumped up.

"I beg to propose Tom Merry!" he shouted.

Gore was on his feet in an instant.

"I beg to oppose!" he bawled.

"Rats! You shut up!"

"Shan't! I'd make a better captain of the school any day than that spooner!"

"That spooner's licked you, anyway!"

"We don't want him as a captain!"

"Yes, we do! Hands up for Tom Merry!"

A dozen hands went up.

"Hands down! Now up again against him!"

Three hands rose in the air.

"Passed," cried Monty Lowther—"passed unanimously—"

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or as near as a touché! Tom Merry for captain of Clavering!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Tommy!"

Bump on the door!

"Open tat door, ain't it?" came a yell from the passage.

The Shell cheered and stamped, and took no notice. Tom Merry stood up on the table to make his acknowledgments.

"Believe me, gentlemen," he said, with his most grateful bow, which would have delighted the heart of Miss Priscilla Fawcett if she could have seen him—"believe me, I am honoured. Believe me, also, when I state that in proposing a member of the Shell as captain of this ancient college I had no thought whatever of my own advancement."

"Rats!" interjected Gore.

Tom fixed a withering glance upon him.

"Did you say rats, Gore?"

"Yes, I said rats, and I thought rats!" said Gore.

"Does that imply a doubt of my statement?"

"It implies a jolly big doubt of your statement. You were aiming at getting yourself elected all along."

"Open tat door after!"

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, "a member of this meeting has impugned the veracity of the chairman."

The Shell gasped; those words were really impressive.

"As chairman I cannot condescend to punch his head. He must be chuckled out—I mean, ejected!"

"That's the cheese!"

"Chuck him out!"

"Here, let me alone!" exclaimed Gore; and Lowther and Manners seized him, backed up by two or three more. "Let me alone, will you!"

"Chuck him out!"

Tom Merry jumped down from the table, and silently unlocked the door. The German master, in a state of boundless rage, was still thumping on the panels.

"I say, there's Herr Schneider there!" muttered Grey.

"What does that matter?" asked Tom.

"Oh, nothing, only—"

"If he gets in the way when we're chucking out an outsider he must expect a collision on the line," said Tom coolly. "Let him go with a swing when I open the door!"

"Right you are!"

"Now—one, two, three!"

Four juniors held the helpless, struggling Gore ready to hurl him forth. Tom Merry threw the door open.

"Go!"

With a swing Gore was hurled forth from the study.

"Mein Gott!"

Herr Schneider's hand was raised to hammer the door again as it was flung suddenly open, and he stood, with raised hand, as Gore came hurtling out. Gore crashed into the German master and knocked him across the passage. He brought up against the opposite wall, gasping like a newly landed fish.

"Mein Gott!"

Gore crashed down at his feet. And then the meeting of the Shell broke up. It broke up hurriedly. The boys realised that it would not be wise to wait for the Herr to recover himself sufficiently to deal with them.

The meeting slithered off down the passage like lightning before the Herr had time to grasp the situation—or them! Only Gore remained, staggering to his feet just as the German recovered his breath sufficiently to lay hold of him. Gore gave a yell as the master seized him by the collar.

"Here, let me go! It wasn't me!"

"Rascal!" snapped Herr Schneider. "Such impudence never was after! You vas run into me to let te oders get away, ain't it?"

"I didn't—I—I didn't—" Gore gasped truthfully enough; for, indeed, that would have been the very last thought to enter his mind.

"You vas tell a pig lie, ain't it?" exclaimed Herr Schneider, satisfied that he had hit upon the truth. "I teaches you, mein poy!"

"I was chuckled out! I—I—"

"Come along mit me!"

Gore had no choice about that, for the incensed German was dragging him along by the collar. Gore was looking very rumpled when he was bundled in to the German's study. Herr Schneider took up a cane.

"You vas all in tat business," he said, "but you vas the ringleader, Gore, and I punishes you because you vas to worst of te lot of dem."

"I wasn't—I didn't—I never—"

"Dey vas all pad, very pad, but de paddest of dem would not haf had te impudence to trow himself at de master and knock him ofer mit himself mitout te breath in his body!"

"I didn't! It was Tom Merry—"

"Hold out your hand!"

"If you don't believe me, you can ask—"

Swish!

The stinging cane caught Gore round the legs, and he gave a terrific whoop. After that he thought it better to hold out his hand as he was told, and he received six on each palm, and he went out of the German's study wriggling like an eel.

CHAPTER 2.

Three Candidates!

THE meeting in Tom Merry's study had been a huge success. Gore, it is true, was dissatisfied with the way it had ended, but then, there are always some dissatisfied people, and Gore was one of them. The rest were quite contented and delighted with the new prospect that had opened out before the young gentlemen of the Shell. The news was not long in spreading over the school.

There had been wondering and shaking of heads when Devigne of the Upper Fifth put up for the captaincy; but that was nothing to the wonder excited by the news that the next Lower Form had put up a candidate, too.

The captaincy had always been regarded as belonging to the Sixth by right; yet, as Devigne had pointed out, and as Tom Merry pointed out in turn, there was no law in the school upon the subject, and though a tradition might be all right in its way, things were often all the better for a little change.

The Sixth had received the news of Devigne's candidature with indignation and disdain. Both the Sixth and Fifth felt indignant and disdainful at the news of the presumption of the Shell.

Little cared Tom Merry for that. Tom Merry had made a sensation when he first came to Clavering, and his Form-fellows said that he was always doing something a bit out of the common. You could never expect anything but the unexpected from Tom. On this occasion he had certainly lived up to his reputation.

After escaping the angry German master, Tom Merry proceeded to the notice-board in the Hall, where the notices affecting the business of the school were always posted up.

There were notices in the handwriting of the Head, and of some of the masters, and amid them Tom pinned up a paper in his own handwriting.

The Shell stood round admiringly. The notice in the Head's handwriting ran as follows:

"The post of captain of the school having fallen vacant, an election will be held on the 22nd, in the Great Hall, for the purpose of filling the vacancy."

Underneath that notice was another written by Hawke, the head boy of the Sixth

"Gilbert Felgate has been nominated by his Form as candidate for the vacant post of captain of Clavering. Voting in the Great Hall at 7 p.m., 22nd."

"By Order."

Underneath that again, a third paper on the same subject

had been pinned; a paper that had roused dire indignation in the breasts of the Sixth. It was in the handwriting of Devigne of the Upper Fifth. It ran as follows:

"The Upper Fifth, having decided in committee that a change will be beneficial for the college as a whole, have nominated Edgar Devigne as candidate for the vacant post of captain of Clavering. Lower Form fellows who think it is time they had a look in the management of the affairs of the school, are requested to roll up and vote for Devigne, the people's candidate."

"By Order."

Tom Merry's notice made a fourth, relating to the same subject:

"Notice. To all whom it may concern. The Shell have decided, after a meeting of the Form, that neither the Fifth nor the Sixth truly represents the real interests of Clavering College. The middle



The door was suddenly flung open and Gore came hurtling out. He crashed into the German master and sent him flying!

school is the backbone of Clavering. The Shell therefore put forward a candidate for whom all good men and true are requested to vote. Hurrah for the Lower Forms and Freedom!"

Tom surveyed his handiwork with a great deal of satisfaction.

"I think that reads all right," he remarked. "It puts the case in a nutshell."

"Better fill in the name of the candidate," said Lowther.

"Right!"

Tom took out a pencil and added a line on the lower margin of the paper.

"The candidate is Tom Merry. Roll up and vote."

Then the chums of the Shell walked away. And then, the news having got about, there was a constant procession passing and repassing the notice-board, to read the audacious announcement of the Shell.

First came Fifth-Form boys, Devigne having quickly heard that there was a rival in the field. Devigne's brows grew

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dark as he read the notice. There was no love lost between him and Tom Merry already.

"Thundering cheek!" he exclaimed. "What right has he to stick a notice on the board, I'd like to know. Somebody ought to take it down!"

"I don't know," said Devigne's chum, Cary. "If we take down his notice he'll take down ours, so it's broad as it is long."

"The young cub wants a hiding."

"Yes, he does, badly. Perhaps he'll get one soon."

"It's beneath a fellow's dignity to fight with a kid in the Shell," said Devigne, "and he's an insubordinate young rascal; he wouldn't take a licking quietly."

"No, he's an obnoxious little brute altogether."

"Of course, he's got no chance whatever of getting in as captain of Clavering. Fancy a captain out of the Shell! We'll have some kid of the Fourth Form putting up his name next!" exclaimed Devigne.

"Rotten, and no mistake!"

"Come along; don't let them see us reading it, or they'll plume themselves that they've made a big impression," said Devigne loftily.

And the Fifth Form candidate walked away.

Fellows belonging to the Sixth came along and read the notice with varying feelings. Some were angry, some indignant, some amused.

Felgate stared, when a Sixth-Former who had seen it burst into his study with the news.

"Have you heard, Felgate?" demanded South, rushing in and startling the candidate for captaincy out of the middle of a mathematical problem.

Felgate jumped up.

"What's on, South? What on earth's the matter?"

"There's a new candidate for the captaincy!"

"Another Fifth-Former?" asked Felgate, laughing.

"No; a kid in the Shell."

"You're joking?"

"Come and look at the notice-board, then."

And South marched the amazed Felgate off to look at the board.

Felgate did not disbelieve the evidence of his eyes. He read the notice, and wrinkled his brows for a moment, and then burst into a laugh.

"Well, of all the cheek!" he exclaimed.

"I think I'd better take the notice down," suggested South.

Felgate stopped him.

"Don't do anything of the kind, old fellow. I don't know that we've got any right to interfere with Tom Merry's notice."

"But we can't let the thing go on!" exclaimed South.

"I don't see how we're to stop it. Devigne started the ball rolling, you know, and if we had wanted to make a stand for the exclusive rights for the Sixth, we ought to have done it then," said Felgate seriously. "Having allowed that to pass, we haven't any right to stop Merry if he chooses to offer himself as a candidate."

"But it's too ridiculous!"

Felgate laughed.

"Well, it would be a bit queer to have a captain chosen out of the Shell."

"Hang it, Felgate, you don't think it possible he might get elected?" exclaimed South, aghast at the bare idea.

"I don't know. The Lower Forms outnumber the higher ones, of course, and if they took it into their heads to vote for a Lower Form candidate, I don't see what we could do."

"The Head would interfere."

"He might; but it would cause a frightful lot of dissatisfaction," said Felgate, with a shake of the head. "Anyway, we can't ask him to. We must call a meeting of the Form and see what's to be done."

And the two Sixth-Formers walked away.

Later, when the excitement had worn off a little, the Head of Clavering came to take a look at the notice-board.

Mr. Railton, the Head of the school, was a young man, and an athlete, and the best-tempered master in Clavering. He liked Tom Merry, but a slight frown came over his face as he read the paper which had caused such a furor. Then he smiled.

"Pon my word!" he murmured. "I wonder what that boy will do next? Of course, it would never do—it would never do; but—how am I going to stop it? That's a difficult question. It would be rank injustice to bar a Shell candidate after admitting the justice of the Fifth Form claim, and—and I really don't see what I can do."

And the Head walked away in a very thoughtful mood. That evening he asked Felgate to tea with him. The Sixth-Former came, and over the teacups Mr. Railton broached the subject.

"I hear there is a new candidate for the captaincy, Felgate," he remarked, with a smile.

Felgate smiled, too.

"Yes, sir; a fellow in the Shell."

"I saw his notice up on the board. What do you think of his chances of getting elected if he's allowed to proceed, Felgate?"

"I don't know, sir," said the senior honestly. "I've been thinking it over. Of course, the Sixth will vote for their own Form as one man."

"Of course, that's to be expected."

"But I am afraid we must expect the same of the Fifth, sir—Lower and Upper will combine to get Devigne in."

"I suppose so."

"That wouldn't be nearly so bad, because Devigne is near his remove, and a term or two will see him in the Sixth."

"But what about Merry?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, we were depending upon the vote of the Lower Forms to keep Devigne out. The Shell and the Fourth would never submit to a captain from the Fifth Form if they could help it, and so, naturally, I expected to see them plump for me, as the only alternative."

"And they would probably have done so but for this freak of Merry's?"

"Yes, I think that's certain. But now I am afraid they will be a little intoxicated with the thought of getting a Lower Form fellow in as captain, and, besides, Merry is very popular in the Lower and Middle school," said Felgate rather ruefully.

"Yes, and I believe he deserves his popularity."

"That is quite true. He is head of the Shell now, and he puts down bullying in his own Form and in the lower ones also, and the fags adore him."

"And will vote for him on election day?"

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"I am afraid so."

"It won't do," said Mr. Railton, drumming on the table with his knuckles thoughtfully. "But unless you can come to terms with Devigne, Felgate, I don't see what's to be done. It would be hardly fair for me to interfere with authority under the circumstances."

"That's what I was thinking, sir."

"Could you get to an accommodation with Devigne, do you think?"

"I could try," said Felgate, not very hopefully. He knew better than Mr. Railton, the hard, obstinate nature of Edgar Devigne, of the Upper Fifth.

"Failing that," said Mr. Railton, "perhaps you could persuade Merry to withdraw his candidature."

Felgate looked very doubtful.

"I could try that, too," he said. "I will certainly do my best, sir."

"Then we will hope for the best, too," said Mr. Railton, smiling. "This position of affairs was never foreseen, and I will see that provision is made for such a contingency in the future; but, if possible, I desire to avoid appearing to act harshly or unjustly towards a Lower Form. Favouritism is an ugly word."

And Felgate left the headmaster of Clavering, hoping for the best, but very doubtful as to the result of his interview with Devigne—and still more doubtful as to his prospects of persuading the Shell candidate to withdraw.

CHAPTER 3.

Tom Merry's Electioneering!

TOM MERRY laid down his pen and pushed his books away.

"That's done," he said cheerfully. "Now let's talk about business."

"Right-ho!" said Lowther and Manners together. "About the election, you mean?"

"Yes, of course. That's the most important business in hand."

"Oh, rats to that!" said Gore, getting up. "If you're going to start that eternal topic again, I'm off!"

"I think you are," said Monty Lowther—"off your chump! Haven't you got any patriotism, you outsider? Don't you want a chap of your own Form in as captain?"

"No, I don't; a Sixth-Former is good enough for me!"

"Felgate may not get in; and then we shall have a Fifth-Former lording it over us, if we don't put up a candidate ourselves."

"Well, I'd rather have Edgar Devigne than a chap who came to Clavering a short time ago dressed in baby clothes!" said Gore, with a sneer.

"Oh, let that rest!" said Tom Merry. "That's ancient history. What do you want to dig that up again for? Do you mean that you won't vote for me at the election?"

"That I won't!" said Gore emphatically. "I'm going to vote for Felgate!"

"Well, who wants your measly vote, anyway? Get along with you!"

"I'll stay here as long as I like!"

"Stay, then, and be hanged to you!" said Tom Merry politely. "Let's get to business, chaps, and never mind that grumpy pig. Now, the first thing to do to win an election, I believe, is to start electioneering."

Gore went out of the study and slammed the door.

"That's so," agreed Monty Lowther. "We're all ready to electioneer if we knew how. No need of it in the Shell, of course. The Form will vote for you as one man—except Gore."

"Yes; but outside the Shell we shall have to fight for support."

"It will be a ticklish business," Manners remarked, tapping his chin thoughtfully with his forefinger. "The Sixth will vote solid for Felgate. That's only to be expected. The Fifth will plump for Devigne. The Shell will all go for you, with the exception of Gore. Unfortunately, the Shell numbers least of the three lots. The crux—"

"Well, that's a jolly good word, anyway!" said Monty Lowther.

"Shut up! The crux of the matter is how the Lower Forms will vote. Now, you are a popular kind of chap in the Fourth."

"Yes, I believe the juniors like me pretty well, and I shall scoop in a lot of votes there."

"Right; only we mustn't forget that the Fourth-Formers are fagged by the Sixth, and the Sixth may make things hot for their fags who vote for you."

"That would be mean!"

"Very likely; but it's human nature, and it's no good forgetting it," said the practical Manners. "So you must count on that. It's pretty clear that the whole thing

hangs on the Fourth Form. Luckily, kids in Forms lower than the Fourth are not allowed to vote. That takes all the giddy infants off our hands."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I had thought that out already," he said. "It all hangs on the vote of the Fourth Form, really, and the electioneering has got to begin with them."

"How are you going to begin?"

"Well, what do you say to standing a big feed for a start?"

Manners slapped him on the shoulder.

"Merry, you're a howling genius, and no mistake!"

"You think it's a good idea?" asked Tom modestly.

"The best idea I've heard for a long time."

"Ripping!" said Monty Lowther. "Why, a good feed will get you the votes of half the Fourth Form. Little brutes, they live only to eat, and they'll worship anybody who stands them a feed. It's a ripping wheeze!"

"Of course, I don't want to get anything near bribery or corruption," said Tom. "No reason why a chap shouldn't stand a feed, is there?"

"Not a bit. As for bribery and corruption, I know a good many of the Sixth have promised their fags a hiding if they vote for you or Devigne," said Monty Lowther. "I've heard the fags discussing it."

"There, you see!" exclaimed Manners. "If the Sixth use intimidation, I don't see why you shouldn't use bribery, if you want to. Besides, it isn't bribery. It will do those hungry little wretches good to give them a square meal."

"Then it's settled?"

"Certainly. Now the question is about the arrangements?"

"I was thinking of asking the whole Form into our dormitory after lights-out. We shall want a big room, of course, and we shall have to keep it dark. There'll be plenty of room in the dormitory, and we want to ask the whole of the Lower and Upper Fourth."

"It will run into a pretty penny to get in the grub, old fellow."

"That's all right. My old nurse sent me a 'tenner' yesterday."

"Good! We'll blow the 'tenner' and do the thing in style. It won't be easy to get the grub in, though, without some beastly prefect nosing it all out."

"That's where we shall have to be careful. It will have to be sneaked in after dark some night."

"Which means that we shall have to break bounds to get it in."

"Well," said Tom Merry, "haven't we ever broken bounds before?"

"Ye-es; once or twice, I think."

"And there never was a more important occasion."

"Quite right. We'll do the trick."

"My idea was to cycle down to High Clavering and get the grub—we can do that in the daytime, you know, before locking-up—and then put it somewhere near the school, so that when we go out for it later we shan't have far to go. We can't go down to the village in the middle of the night and knock up the tuckshop."

"No, that wouldn't do. But we shall have to find an awfully safe place to deposit the tommy," said Manners doubtfully. "It would be too awful if somebody happened to find it, and scoffed it before we could get into the school."

"You're right; but there won't be any danger of that: I've thought of a stunning place," said Tom, with a confident smile.

"Where?"

"The High Clavering railway tunnel."

Monty Lowther whistled.

"Well, that would be a safe place, certainly!" he assented; "and it's near the school. But it's a beastly dark hole of a place to get into at night, Tom."

"I was in it once in the daylight," said Tom coolly. "I went through to see what it was like. There's plenty of room to walk beside the lines, and to let the trains go by, if any should come."

Manners shivered.

"Fancy standing in the tunnel at night when a train went by!" he ejaculated. "You want a little bit more nerve than I've got, Tom."

"Well, there's no need for us to go right in the tunnel," said Tom. "There's a recess about a dozen yards in, in the brickwork, which I noticed, which would do awfully nicely to hide the grub in. We could put it there after dusk, and to-night we could nip in and get it out in a couple of minutes. You could keep watch for trains while I did it."

"Oh, I shouldn't funk it if you didn't! What do you think of the idea, Monty?"

"Jolly good!" said Monty Lowther.

"Then, as we've done work, let's get our bikes out and go down to the tuckshop," said Manners. "We shall be late back for calling-over if we stay till after dusk, but we can stand fifty lines apiece for the good of the cause."

The chums left the study and proceeded to the bicycle shed. Many curious glances were cast at Tom Merry. His cool, unequalled "cheek" in coming forward as a candidate for the vacant captaincy made him just then the most talked-of fellow at Clavering.

Tom, however, was not in the least disturbed by the general attention which he found bestowed upon him.

Hé nodded coolly to Felgate when he passed him in the Close, and the Sixth Form candidate laughed and nodded in return.

The trio soon had their machines out, and were pedalling away down the road to High Clavering.

In the sunset they arrived in the village, and stood their machines up outside the tuckshop. Tom Merry was a well-known customer there, and Dame Morgan was all eagerness to attend to his wants.

The good dame was accustomed to extensive purchases by Tom Merry, who had an almost unlimited supply of pocket money from Miss Fawcett, but his present outlay made her open her eyes.

Tom was the proud possessor of a "tenner," and he meant to make the feast a huge success.

Dame Morgan kept a goodly supply of all things dear to the heart of boyhood, but even the resources of her tuckshop were strained to meet the demand.

Tom rattled off his orders with the air of a prince, and the dame looked more and more astonished.

"How much does this come to, please?" asked Tom.

Dame Morgan was casting up the figures.

"Nine pounds ten shillings and threepence-halfpenny, Master Merry."

Tom laid the ten-pound note on the counter.

"There you are, Mrs. Morgan."

The dame counted out the change.

"But you will never be able to carry all these things, Master Merry."

"No," said Tom, surveying the tremendous pile. "You'll have to lend us a hamper, Mrs. Morgan. Have you one big enough?"

"Oh, yes, I've got a hamper, and I'll be pleased to lend it to you, Master Merry. But how will you carry it?"

"That's easy enough. Bunk off to Simpson's, Monty, and get one of his trailers."

"Good wheeze!" said Monty; and he was off like a shot.

"That's a jolly good idea!" said Manners admiringly.

"You think of everything, Tom. We can easily shove the hamper on a trailer and whisk it off behind a bike."

Monty soon came back with the trailer, which was attached to Tom Merry's bicycle.

Then the hamper, which Mrs. Morgan had carefully packed with the good things destined for the delectation of the Fourth Form at Clavering, was carried out and put on the trailer and secured there with a cord.

"We'll let you have the hamper back some other time, Mrs. Morgan," said Tom, "or if we don't we'll pay for it."

"Oh, don't worry yourself, Master Merry!" said the dame delightedly. "I can spare the hamper, and you're very welcome to it, I'm sure. I wish I had a few more customers like you."

The chums left the tuckshop, and mounted their machines. They started off and followed the road half-way to Clavering School, and then turned off into a lane which led to the railway cutting.

The dusk of evening was already gathering over the fields when the boys halted and dismounted at a spot where the lane bordered the cutting, only a high, thick hedge separating them.

The spot was a very lonely one, and there was but little danger of being observed. The bikes were laid against the hedge and the hamper taken off the trailer. Tom knew of a weak spot in the hedge where it was possible to squeeze through.

"By Jove, it weighs something!" said Monty Lowther. "If we get it down that slope all right, Merry, we shan't find it easy to get it up again."

"We shan't want to get it up again," said Tom.

"Not going to leave it there for good, I suppose?" queried Monty.

"My dear chap, we've got to get the tommy into Clavering after dark, but we can't lift a hamper like that over the wall. We shall have to fetch the grub in parcels and leave the hamper. We can make more than one trip."

"Oh, I see! Well, get on, kids."

They shoved the hamper through the gap in the hedge. Unfortunately, they shoved it a little too vigorously, and it escaped their hands and went rolling down the slope.

"Oh Christopher!" gasped Tom.

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"I heard something go," said Manners. "A bottle of currant wine, I suppose."

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"That will improve the rabbit pies if it soaks into them," he remarked.

"Oh, never mind!" said Tom. "There's plenty, and we can afford it. Let's go down after the hamper."

"Not in the same way, though," grunted Monty.

The boys squeezed through the hedge and picked their way carefully down the slope. The hamper was reposing in the brambles at the bottom. There was a goodly space between the bottom of the slope and the permanent way.

Now to the left yawned the dark tunnel—black as ink to their gaze. The glimmering metals ran into the opening and vanished into the blackness. Tom Merry looked at the tunnel and then at the signal-box some distance away over the trees. There was no danger of observation. He bent over the hamper and grasped the handle at one end.

"Come on," he said. "No time to waste. We don't want any giddy tramp to come and pinch our bikes while we are down here."

The suggestion spurred them on. They carried the hamper to the black opening of the tunnel and stumbled into it. As Tom said, there was a recess in the brickwork a short distance inside, in which the hamper was placed, and which held it comfortably.

There was no danger of its being found there by chance, unless workmen should come along the line. That was not likely to happen before the morrow. And that night the contents of the hamper were to be carried off by the heroes of the Shell.

Having disposed of it safely, the chums scuttled out of the tunnel and in a few seconds were through the hedge and in the lane again.

"Well, that's done," said Manners, with a great deal of satisfaction. "It's gone off easily enough, and it will be as easy as winking to fetch the stuff away to-night."

"Rather," said Tom. "Now let's take the trailer back to Simpson's and get back to the school. They've finished calling-over now, so we're sure of a row; but we can stand it."

It did not take long to scorch back to High Clavering, return the borrowed trailer, and then cycle home to the school.

The gates were, of course, closed when they arrived. Tom Merry dismounted from his bike and rang a loud peal on the bell.

He grinned a little as he did so. It reminded him of the occasion when he had at first arrived at Clavering College—when he had turned up in the middle of the night and rung up the porter and found Mr. Railton and Miss Priscilla sitting up for him.

After a few minutes' delay the round, red face of Tibbs the porter peered through the upper bars of the gate.

"Hallo, Tibby!" said Tom cheerfully. "Sorry to disturb you, old fellow, but we want to come in."

Tibbs slowly unlocked the gate.

"Nice row waiting for you, and no mistake!" he said with some relish.

"And a nice Job's comforter you are, Tibbs," said Tom Merry, as he wheeled his bike in. "Come on, chaps!"

They put away their bikes and then went in, prepared to face the wrath to come.

CHAPTER 4.

The Deputation of the Upper Fifth I

MR. WELCH, the master of the Shell, had taken the roll-call that evening, and he had, of course, missed Tom Merry and his comrades. He was waiting for them when they came in.

"Ah, so you have returned!" he said grimly. "Where have you been, Merry?"

"Out on my bicycle, sir," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Ah, and Lowther and Manners—have they been with you?"

"Yes, sir?"

The master's face relaxed.

"Well, well; it has been a fine evening for a spin," he said, "and if you overshot the mark by accident I don't want to be hard on you. I suppose you didn't notice how the time was passing? That being the case, I will excuse you, but it must not occur again."

Tom turned very red.

"I—I—Excuse me, sir," he stammered.

Mr. Welch, who was turning away, turned back.

"What do you wish to say, Merry?"

"It's a very kind of you to let us off, sir, but—"

"But what?"

"I don't want to tell you a lie, sir. We—we were not late by accident."

Mr. Welch stared at him.
 "Do you mean to say you were late on purpose, Merry?"
 "No, sir; I mean that we could have got in."
 "I don't quite understand you. Are you being unusually truthful, or is this intended for impertinence?"
 Tom's blush deepened.
 "I don't mean to be impertinent, sir—certainly not. But you said you would let us off because we didn't notice how the time was passing, and I thought it would be mean to let you think so."
 "Oh, I see! You want to be punished?"
 "Oh, no, sir!"
 Mr. Welch looked at Tom Merry very curiously.
 "Well, Merry, I am glad to find you so scrupulous in your sense of honour, and I shall let you off all the same. You may go."
 "Thank you, sir!" said Tom gratefully.
 The three youngsters marched off. Monty Lowther and

kettle, please; and you can poke the fire, Monty, while I get the sausages ready and clean the teapot."
 The chums were hungry after their ride, and they were soon busy. Gore growled—but nobody took any notice of Gore. He had not been of much account in the study since Tom Merry had arrived at Clavering. His chief object in life now seemed to be to make himself objectionable to the chums.
 Manners returned with the kettle full, and Monty, having poked up the fire, the kettle was planted upon the glowing coals. Gore himself sat down in the armchair, and put his feet on the fender again and glowered round him. The kettle was singing cheerily by the time Tom Merry had prepared the sausages and cleaned and greased the frying-pan. He came to the grato with the pan in his hand.
 "Get on one side, Gore!" he said.
 "Shan't!"
 "But you're in the way!"
 "Well, I'm going to stop in the way, then!"



Gore pointed Tom Merry out and the Inspector walked quickly towards him. Tom stood his ground as the boys crowded round!

Manners had been looking nervous, but now they were grinning.
 "Well, you giddy George Washington," giggled Manners, "where's your little hatchet?"
 "Oh, don't rot!" said Tom. "I couldn't tell him a lie, could I?"
 "Of course not; but it's lucky it turned out so well. We've got plenty of time for tea in the study now, and I'm as hungry as a hunter. Come on!"
 Gore was in the study shared by the four, sitting in the only armchair, with his feet on the fender, reading. He scowled at the chums.
 "Hallo! I thought I was rid of you lot for the evening! What do you want to come and disturb a fellow for?"
 "Oh, don't be a pig!" said Tom Merry, seizing the chair by the back and jerking it forward, so that Gore was deposited in the fender. "Hallo! What are you doing in the grate? If you don't want to stay there you might get out of the way, as I want to boil the kettle."
 Gore jumped up in a rage.
 "If you interfere with me I'll break your neck!"
 "Oh, I don't want to interfere with you!" said Tom.
 "Keep your wool on! Manners, old son, go and fill the

"I might spill some water over your legs in moving the kettle."
 "You'd better not!"
 "Rats!"
 The kettle had to be moved to make room for the frying-pan. Tom moved it, and a spurt of nearly boiling water came from the spout. Gore gave a terrific howl. Some of the water had gone on his ankle, and he jumped up on one leg, clapping the scalded ankle in both hands and dancing about wildly with the pain.
 "Oh! Ow! Ow! Ooh!" he roared.
 Tom Merry looked at him sympathetically.
 "I'm really sorry, Gore, but I told you it might happen if you wouldn't get out of the way!"
 "Ow! I'll smash you!"
 And Gore rushed furiously at Tom. Tom caught up the kettle of water and whisked it in the air.
 "Want some more?" he asked pleasantly. "All right—here you are!"
 Gore jumped away with really surprising activity.
 "Stop it, you mad idiot!" he howled. "Stop it, I say!"
 Tom Merry was following him, jerking spouts of water
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from the kettle. He didn't let the water touch Gore, but the latter was in terror of being scalded every moment.

"Keep off, you howling maniac!"

"Not at all, old chap!" said Tom. "You want some more, and you shall have it! Here you are—a little on the other ankle!"

Gore hopped frantically to escape the jet of water, and made a bolt for the door.

"You mad idiot, I'll—"

Tom rushed after him with the whisking kettle. Gore bolted out and slammed the door behind him, and the chums, shrieking with laughter, heard his rapid footsteps die away down the corridor.

Tom sank into a chair, and laughed himself breathless.

"I dare say I shall get on better with Gore some day," he remarked. "A little attention at times is bound to please him, isn't it? There's enough water left for the tea, Monty, so you can make it while I fry the sausages."

The grateful odour of frying sausages—grateful and comforting to three hungry boys—soon pervaded the apartment. Tom could do a good many things, and do them well, and he excelled as a chef. His friends said that his cooking was a marvel—and they certainly ought to have known, for they had plenty of it. Tom was very careful with those sausages, and they were done to a turn when he rolled them out.

Tea, bread-and-butter, and deliciously fried sausages made a tempting meal. The heroes of the Shell were soon at work upon the good things, and in high good humour. Just as the meal started, however, there came a knock at the door of the study.

"Hallo! Who's that?" said Monty. "It can't be Gore come back—he wouldn't knock."

Rap!

"Come in!" called out Manners.

The door opened. It was not a boy belonging to the Shell who had knocked. Tom Merry rose to his feet in amazement. A fellow of the Upper Fifth, named Saunders, stood in the doorway, and behind him a crowd of others of the same form.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry. "You've made a mistake. This isn't the Fifth Form classroom."

"That's all right," said Saunders affably. "We want to speak to you."

"How many of you?"

"All of us!"

"Sorry," said Tom politely. "I've only got two ears, and I can't listen to you all at once. Two of you had better go it at a time."

"Look here, Merry—"

"I'm looking; but I can't keep it up for long. Your face gives me a pain."

"If you want a thick ear, Merry, you've only got to say so!" shouted Saunders.

"Well, I don't, though you can keep it to match your thick head."

"Shut up, Saunders!" said a voice behind. "We've come on a peaceful errand."

"Well, let him shut up, then!"

"Keep your temper. If you can't I'll do the talking."

"You can do it, Cary, and be hanged to you!"

"All right," said Cary.

Cary was Devigne's chum, and Tom had seen him behind Saunders; and, though he did not know what the Fifth-Formers wanted, he suspected hostile intentions. And he wanted to show the Fifth that he wasn't in the least intimidated.

Cary walked into the study. Saunders came in with him, and four other Fifth-Formers followed. It was rather a squeeze, as the table was in the middle of the room, and the chums were seated round it.

Tom Merry sat down again.

"Oh, come in!" he said. "Don't mind us! Sorry we can't ask you to tea, but you should have sent us notice of the honour you intended, and we'd have had the table laid for twenty. Let me see—are there twenty of you?"

"There are six of us," said Cary, turning red, "and we've come to talk business."

"Go ahead," said Tom. "You don't mind us going on with our feed, do you?"

"Look here—"

"Pass the salt, Monty!"

"Here you are, my son!"

"Are you going to listen to us, Tom Merry?"

"Rather! I wouldn't miss the sound of your sweet voice for worlds! Shove the sugar this way, Manners; you're always trying to collar the lot—"

"I've sugared your tea, Tom."

"Give me your spoon, then. Now, Cary, go ahead—proceed!"

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"We're a deputation—"

"A what?" inquired Tom Merry politely, stopping his fork half-way to his mouth.

"A deputation from the Upper Fifth."

Tom Merry waved his hand.

"Proceed, deputation of the Upper Fifth."

Cary nearly choked in his wrath.

"Look here, Merry, we're not going to stand—"

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Cary. There's only four chairs in the room, and—"

"I didn't mean that; I meant—"

"There's one cane chair unoccupied, and the armchair. The cane chair has a leg that has seen better days, so you must be careful how you sit on it."

"I don't want—"

"The easy chair will accommodate three, or four if one sits on the back. What the rest of you will do I really don't know, but if you're not going to stand you'd better sit on the floor. It's a really comfy floor, if you can make up your mind to it, and I can recommend it."

Manners and Lowther giggled joyously. It was pretty plain that Tom Merry was able to keep his end up, and was not likely to allow himself to be sat upon by the haughty Pooh-Bats of the Upper Fifth.

Cary gritted his teeth, but he realised that it was of no use arguing with Tom Merry, so he controlled his temper and went on.

"We're a deputation of the Upper Fifth. We've talked the matter over, and thought we'd better come and see you about the election."

"Good!" said Tom. "You've come to promise me your support? Thanks! I was afraid all the Fifth would vote for Devigne, and I'm really glad to see that you chaps have got more sense than to do a silly thing like that."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners.

Cary gasped with rage. He made a step towards Tom Merry.

"We're not going to vote for you!" he bawled, "and for two pins I'd take you by the scruff of your neck—"

"Take it calmly," said Tom, in a soothing tone; and Saunders grinned.

"Who's losing his temper now, Cary—hey? You'd better have left the talking to me."

"Oh, you shut up!" snapped Cary ungraciously.

"I'll shut up, if you'll get to business; but if you want us to stay here all night while you quarrel with Merry—why, I'm off, for one!" said Saunders.

Cary calmed himself with a tremendous effort. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther went on with their tea, and Tom started on his second sausage as the leader of the deputation came to the point.

CHAPTER 5.

Not a Success!

"IT'S about the election," said Cary.

"I think you've said that before," Tom remarked.

"Still, no harm in your saying it again. You can say it a third time if you like."

Cary snapped his teeth, and Saunders grinned.

"Look here, Cary, get ahead!" he exclaimed. "We can't stay here all night!"

"Has that only just occurred to you?" said Tom sweetly, starting on his third sausage. "I really thought you had overlooked that important fact."

"It's about the election," repeated Cary, breathing hard. "There are two candidates up—one out of the Sixth and one out of the Upper Fifth."

"You are mistaken; there are three—you've forgotten the Shell candidate."

"That's what I'm coming to. The Fifth have had a meeting, and it's agreed that it's ridiculous for a Lower Form to put up a candidate for the captaincy. The result is that we've come in a deputation to put the matter to you sensibly."

"When are you going to start?"

"Why, ain't I doing it now?"

"Oh, I thought you said you were going to put it sensibly! If that's what you call sensible, what would you call silly?" demanded Tom.

"You cheeky little rat—"

"Keep to the point, Cary," came from Saunders, who, after being so summarily deposed from the position of chairman of the deputation, did not mean to be lenient with his successor.

"I don't see why you can't shut up, Saunders. If you keep on interrupting me how am I to explain to Merry?"

"And if you don't get to the point how are we to get finished to-night?"

"I don't see what you Fifth chaps want to come and squabble in our study for," said Tom Merry. "For goodness' sake, wash your dirty linen at home!"

"Quite right," said Hedge, another of the deputation. "My idea is that Saunders and Cary are a pair of silly cuckoos, and I'd better take the matter in hand. Now, Merry—"

"Dry up!" growled Cary. "What do you want to come shoving your spoke in for? Merry, we're a deputation of the Upper Fifth, come to put it to you plainly. You ought to withdraw your candidature for the captaincy."

"Why ought I to withdraw?" demanded Tom.

"Why, because you—you ought, you know."

"That's a matter of opinion. Now, my opinion is that it's high time to choose a captain of Clavering out of the Shell. We're the middle classes, the backbone of the nation—I mean the school. We're neither the scum at the top nor the dregs at the bottom. We're the most respectable and important—"

"Look here, if you think you're going to work off your second-hand speeches out of the newspapers on us, you're mistaken."

"Rather!" said Saunders. "Why, I read all that myself in—"

"Can't you keep quiet for a bit, Saunders? Now, Merry, the question is, are you going to withdraw?"

"And the answer is 'No,'" said Tom promptly.

"Mind, we haven't come here from interested motives," said Cary. "It's the good of the school we're thinking of. By a Lower Form fellow setting up as a candidate, ridicule is brought upon the captaincy itself."

"Did you think of that when Devigne set up?"

"Well, you see, the Upper Fifth is so near the Sixth that there's really no difference."

"Well, and the Shell is so near the Fifth that there's no difference there."

"Oh, it's no good arguing about it—"

"Who started the argument?"

"You know very well that you ought to stand out."

"I don't know anything of the kind. Of course, I should be glad to come to an accommodation, if possible. You know I'm the most peaceful and obliging chap in Clavering, and I don't want to be nasty."

"Yes, that's it," said Cary eagerly. "We want to come to an accommodation, Merry. What have you got to propose?"

"Why, if Devigne wishes the friction to come to an end—"

"He does! I can answer for that."

"If he's really got the good of the school at heart—"

"He has; we all have."

"If he wants to make the election a square one between two candidates, and eliminate the disturbing presence of a third party—"

"That's his aim all along."

"Then, of course, I can have no objection to offer to a reasonable accommodation."

"Ah! You are willing—"

"Yes, I'm willing for Devigne to withdraw."

"What?" yelled Cary.

"You heard what I said. However, if you're deaf, I have no objection to repeating my remarks. I am quite willing for Devigne to withdraw."

"I've had enough of this!" exclaimed Cary furiously. "Look here, Merry, give me a plain yes or no. Are you going to stand out of the election?"

"Hardly."

"You refuse to withdraw?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Is that plain enough for you? I don't mind repeating it, if you haven't fully grasped it yet. Yes, yes, yes. YES, YES, YES!"

It was too much for Cary to stand. He bolted at Tom Merry like a wild bull. Fortunately, Tom was on the alert. He jumped up, knocking his chair over backwards, and caught up the cup of tea Manners had just refilled for him. As Cary landed out, Tom jerked the contents of the teacup in his face, and Cary's blow went wide, and the unfortunate leader of the deputation gave a howl. The tea splashed all over his face and ran down his shirt.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners. "Give 'em some more!"

And he sent the contents of his own cup to follow Tom's, and Cary caught it with his neck. Monty Lowther, not to be outdone, used the remainder of a pat of butter as a missile, and it flattened on Cary's nose.

The deputation, instead of backing up their leader, were howling with laughter. Saunders seemed especially to be amused. Cary staggered blindly, and either by accident or design, drove his fist into Saunders' face instead of Tom Merry's.

Saunders gave a yell.

"You silly ass, what are you up to?"

"Hallo, is that you?" growled Cary, wiping the tea out of his eyes. "What did you want to stick your silly head in the way for?"

That remark, which was really adding insult to injury, was a little too much for Saunders, already smarting. He jumped at Cary, and returned the blow with one that came on his nose like the rap of a hammer.

"There, take that, you silly ass, and—"

Cary went for Saunders like a wildcat. He was too furious to care much whom he hit, so long as he hit somebody. They closed, and began to struggle.

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom Merry. "Two to one on Saunders! Go it, kids!"

Edgar Devigne looked into the study with an expression of amazement on his face.

"What on earth are you chaps up to?" he cried.

"Oh, that's all right, Devigne!" said Tom Merry. "They're a giddy deputation, come to explain things sensibly to me, and that's the way they do it. Looks sensible, doesn't it?"

"Oh, chuck it, you silly owls!" growled Devigne. "Come away. You've done precious little good coming here, and it's as much as I expected."

The deputation succeeded in separating their two leaders and hustled them out of the study. Both Cary and Saunders were looking much the worse for their encounter. The merry laughter of the chums followed them, and Hedge slammed the door.

"Well," said Tom looking round, "they've upset our study a bit, but it was worth seeing. I don't fancy the Upper Fifth will send any more deputations."

And he was right; they never did.

CHAPTER 6.

At the Risk of His Life!

THERE was an unusual air of suppressed excitement about the Fourth Form at Clavering, when those young gentlemen went up to their sleeping quarters. For word had gone forth of the feast that was toward in Dormitory D.

Tom Merry was already popular in the Lower Forms, but when it was known that he was going to stand a feed



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to the whole of the Fourth, Lower and Upper, and a really first-rate one at that, his popularity went up like a rocket.

Details of the coming feast were whispered from one junior to another with bated breath. Tom Merry always did things in style, but it was confidently anticipated that upon this occasion he would surpass himself.

A feed to the whole Fourth Form would cost him a good deal, but it was known that he had had a "tenner" from Miss Fawcett, and had spent the whole of it for the great occasion, and such munificence took the juniors' breath away. The whole Form accepted the invitation as one man, and agreed to come into Dormitory D, the quarters of the Shell, at half-past ten, when there would be little or no danger of discovery by master or prefect.

"I hope nothing will happen about getting the grub in," Manners remarked rather nervously. "If anything happened to spoil the feed, Tom, it would be a finisher. If those hungry bounders were disappointed, they'd go and vote for Felgate or Devigne out of revenge."

"Yes, and I know a lot of them missed their supper on purpose, so as to have plenty of room for the dormitory feed!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"I don't see what can happen to prevent it coming off," said Tom. "Of course, I know a disappointment would ruin everything. But we'll take care that the Fourth Form are not disappointed."

"How many of us are going for the grub?"

"Well, we don't want an army," said Tom thoughtfully.

"How many cricket bags would it take to hold the stuff?"

"Four would do it."

"Then four of us will be enough—us and Jimson."

"Good! And we'll get going as soon as Daly has seen lights out."

So it was settled. When the Shell went to bed and Daly, the prefect, looked into the dormitory, to see that all was right, he saw nothing suspicious. He said good-night to the boys and went his way, and as soon as the door had closed Tom Merry sat up in bed.

"Now then, kids!" he exclaimed. "Up with you!"

He was out of bed in a twinkling, and Manners, Lowther, and Jimson followed. They had only partly undressed, like most boys of the Shell, and it did not take them long to don boots and jackets. Tom Merry unlocked his locker and drew out a coil of stout rope, knotted at intervals in its length. He had prepared it for the occasion. By standing on a washstand he was able to reach a window, and he attached one end of the rope to the bar which crossed the casement.

"When we're down you pull up the rope, Harris," he said. "Mind you let it down again when you hear a pebble on the window."

"Right-ho!" said Harris.

The rope was dropped out, and the four boys slid down to the ground one after another. Then Harris drew up the rope and closed the window. Tom Merry led the way.

Skirting the shadowy Close, the boys reached the Head's private garden, across which lay the easiest way out of the school precincts. At one place the garden wall was covered with masses of strong, tough ivy, and at this spot the Clavering boys had more than once broken bounds.

In a few minutes they were standing in the lane, which bordered the walls of Clavering.

"Now, follow your leader," said Tom Merry.

By road the High Clavering tunnel was about two miles

from the school. By cutting across the fields it was not more than a quarter of a mile.

Tom Merry jumped a ditch and plunged through a hedge and led the way, the others close at his heels. It did not take them long to reach the cutting. The night was very dark and the spot lonely, and the only point of light in the surrounding gloom came from the signal-box at some distance over the trees.

The gloom and silence had a depressing effect upon the juniors, and but for Tom Merry's high spirits they might have hesitated to carry out the enterprise. But Tom seemed proof against the depressing influence of his surroundings, and, dark and gloomy as the tunnel looked, the aspect of it had no effect whatever upon Tom; at all events none that he allowed his looks to betray.

The four boys stole through the hedge and picked their way cautiously down the slope. The metals glimmered dully in the gloom. There was a sound from the tunnel.

"Hallo! A train's coming!" muttered Jimson, scuttling back into the brambles.

Boom-boom! came from the cavity in the earth.

A deafening sound swelled from the opening of the tunnel and lights appeared like two wild eyes staring fiercely from the darkness. The train came booming on, and the boys crouched in the brambles beside the track, and, with a scream and a roar, the train rushed by. The boys caught a glimpse of lighted windows and people's faces within, and then the train was gone, its pale light glimmering away down the line.

"My hat!" muttered Jimson, between his chattering teeth. "Suppose we had been on the line—in the tunnel—"

"It's a rotten, risky business!" said Lowther. "I think we're silly asses, and no mistake."

Tom had to admit that the business wasn't so simple and easy in the middle of the night as it seemed in the afternoon. But he was not in the least daunted.

"You see, it's wide in the tunnel, and there's plenty of room to stand aside for the train to pass," he said.

"Yes, but the wind of it might catch you."

"Well, it's gone now, anyway."

"How do you know there won't be another?" asked Jimson.

"Oh, I know that! And so would you, if you thought for a minute. The down trains go every half-hour at night, and that was a down train. There won't be another on the metals this side of the track for half an hour."

"I'd forgotten that," said Manners. "You've got a head, Tom. You ought to be a giddy general. But the London train goes up on the other side, you know, so we shall have to keep off the grass. And I believe it passes somewhere about this time."

"Well, a train on the other side of the track won't hurt us," said Tom. "Now—sh! Shut up! Don't move!"

"What's the matter?" muttered Lowther, in the breathless silence that followed Tom's sudden, startling whisper as they crouched back in the brambles.

"I saw a light in the tunnel!" whispered Tom. "A light that moved, I mean!"

"Stuff! There can't be anybody there!"

"I am certain I saw it."

"What kind of a light?"

"A white light, like a lantern."

The boys stared towards the gloomy tunnel, straining their

Potts, the Office Boy.



eyes through the blackness. They could see no trace of the light Tom Merry had caught a momentary glimpse of.

"You must have been mistaken!" muttered Jimson at last.

"It was your imagination, Merry."

"It wasn't. I know that I saw a light."

"You don't think there's anybody there, do you?"

"There must be."

"But who could it be? There wouldn't be platelayers or anything this time of night; besides, if there were, they'd burn a steady light."

"I know; but somebody's there."

"Somebody after our grub," said Manners, in a horrified whisper.

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's what I was thinking. Perhaps we were seen putting it there."

"But a chap who watched you would have got it away before this," objected Jimson.

"He may not have had a chance. Anyway, somebody's there, and we've got to find out what's up before we show ourselves."

"But what are we going to do?"

"I'm going to scout in that tunnel. Give me the lantern. Might have brought a dark one."

"Look here," muttered Manners, "you're not going alone."

"Yes, I am. If there's anything up we may have to keep dark, and one will be enough, anyway, to see what's going on there. If I call you can come."

"I wish you'd—"

"I shall be all right. Mind you stay here and keep quiet till I come back."

And Tom Merry, with the big lantern in his hand, as yet unlighted, of course, stole away with the stealthy tread of a cat towards the opening of the tunnel. He left his chums with beating hearts, anxiously waiting for what might happen.

Tom carefully picked his way among the sleepers, followed the down line into the tunnel, and blackness seemed to swallow him up. In the dead stillness of the night the tunnel seemed full of strange noises, which echoed in his straining ears with a weird effect.

He reached the spot where the hamper had been deposited in the recess between two supporting buttresses. In the dark, and without making a sound, he felt for it, and he found it there. It had not been moved or opened.

The hamper was safe! Then what was the meaning of the light he had seen? Who was skulking there in the darkness of the tunnel?

Grim, fearful thoughts came into Tom's mind as he stood straining his eyes in vain to pierce the darkness and straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. He had heard of train-wreckers; but the thought seemed too horrible. Suddenly a sound came from the silence that made his pulses leap wildly. It was a human voice, whispering; and it came from the other side of the tunnel.

"How long now, do you think, Lumden?"

"Can't be more than a few minutes."

The voices were low, husky—the voices of men oppressed with a heavy suspense.

Tom knew, as well as if he had been told, that they were speaking of the London train, which was almost due to pass through the tunnel. His heart thumped so loudly that he feared they would hear it.

What did it mean? Why were they here? What was their intention? The boy stood as still as a statue.

"Show a glim, Lumden, and let's see the time."

"Don't be an idiot; you can wait. It might give the whole game away."

"It's getting on my nerves, waiting here like this."

"It's getting on mine, too, Jex. But the game is worth it. If all goes well, we shall clear five thousand pounds by this job!"

"Sure we're safe just here, Lumden? It would be no joke to get caught in our own trap!"

"Of course I am, you shivering fool!" growled the other.

"I'm as fond of my skin as you are of yours. The train will have passed us before it hits the pile on the line and leaves the metals. We're safe."

"I wish it would come!"

"So do I, hang it! Hark! Can't you hear a rumble?"

"No," was the reply, after a pause.

"Put your ear to the metals and then you'll hear it." Another pause, as if the unseen man was obeying the instructions. Then his voice was audible again:

"I can hear her humming now."

"Good! She'll be here in a couple of minutes, or less."

Tom Merry was standing transfixed in the blackness. He was within six or seven paces of the talkers, and he dared not move in case they should hear him. He knew now that he had to deal with a couple of desperate train-wreckers; remorseless scoundrels, who, for the sake of plunder, were about to derail a train at the risk of the lives of the passengers. He knew instinctively that if they had guessed that he was there they would have thought no more of striking him down than of crushing a fly. But it was not his own danger that occupied his mind.

He was thinking of the train, laden with passengers, rushing on through the night, the driver assured by the signals on the line, and never thinking of the obstruction piled on the way in the depths of the tunnel.

Tom's heart was beating like a hammer, but his heart had never failed him yet. He must save the train at any risk; at any cost he must and would prevent this dastardly outrage.

Treading softly, he reached the open air, and breathed more freely when he saw the stars of heaven above him. After the blackness of the tunnel, the night, dark as it was, seemed light. There was a sound in the gloom behind him.

"Did you hear that, Lumden?"

"No. What?"

"There it is again!"

"By heavens, it's somebody on the line! We're discovered—"

Tom Merry heard no more. He scratched a match and lighted the big lantern. He fled up the line as fast as he could, throwing the light of the lantern before him. The light gleamed out through the night as he ran. Ahead of him sounded an ominous rumble. The train was coming.

From the bushes where he had left his chums came a voice calling in amazement. He neither heard nor headed. Behind him were the train-wreckers, whether pursuing him or not he did not know. Before him was the train, coming on headlong to destruction. The lights gleamed out of the black night—green and white and dazzling to his eyes.

Boom, boom!

There was the train in full view, rushing upon him like some mighty monster eager to seize him for its prey. Of

A Threat or a Promise?



THE SHELL CHALLENGES THE FIFTH TO A CRICKET MATCH: TOM MERRY TR.

his own terrible danger the boy did not think. He ran on towards the train, waving the light above his head and shouting at the top of his voice:

"Stop, stop!"

The train came booming on.

"Stop! Danger!"

Would not the driver hear him?

Bang!

A deafening report echoed from the tunnel, and something whizzed by Tom's head. He knew that he had been fired at, and he felt the wind of the bullet, but in his excitement he hardly realised it, and cared nothing.

"Stop, stop!"

He rushed on, waving the lantern frantically. He was not aware that in the roar of the train the engine-driver could not possibly hear his voice. But the light—surely they would see that.

Boom, boom! Clatter!

"Stop!"

Right in the path of the train stood the gallant lad, the lantern held high in his right hand, his left waving excitedly.

"Stop!"

A red face was peering past the engine, and there was a jamming of brakes.

Clatter! Boom! Clank! Clatter!

The train was slowing down. Tom turned sick with relief. He waved the lantern again, and shouted:

"Danger! Stop for your life!"

Slower and slower, and slower still, till the great locomotive stopped, not a dozen feet from Tom Merry.

The engine-driver sprang to the ground.

"Who are you? What's the matter here?"

"The line's blocked!" gasped Tom Merry. "Train-wreckers!"

And the brave lad, sick and giddy with the reaction, reeled, and the lantern went with a crash to the ground. The engine-driver caught him as he staggered blindly.

Excited voices were inquiring from the windows the cause of the sudden stoppage. Faces were craning out to look.

"A block on the line," said the engine-driver briefly, "and this boy has saved our lives."

A minute more, and Tom was surrounded by a crowd of excited passengers.

CHAPTER 7.

An Interrupted Feast!

TOM MERRY was not long in recovering himself. The driver and fireman had taken lanterns and rushed into the tunnel. There was no sign of the train-wreckers—they had fled as soon as they saw that they were baffled; but the huge pile of stones and wooden sleepers on the line told its own tale.

Had the train dashed into that pile at full speed nothing could have saved it from complete destruction. A dozen lives might have paid for the villainy of two greedy rascals, who thought more of the consignment of gold the train was carrying than of the lives of their fellow-creatures. The signalman was quickly warned of the happening on the line, and the telegraph flashed the news up and down.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry was the hero of the hour.

Women passengers kissed him and wept over him, men shook him by the hand till his arm ached, and called him all sorts of complimentary names. In the excitement and relief at having escaped so fearful a peril, no one seemed to think of asking Tom how he had come to be there. He had risked his life to save them, and that was enough for the moment.

Manners, Lowther, and Jimson, as soon as they were aware of what had happened, joined Tom, and they, too, slapped him on the back, looking extremely proud of their chum, who had so splendidly distinguished himself. But, now that the strain was over, Tom was thinking of the hamper hidden in the tunnel.

"I say, we shall be out all night at this rate," he whispered to Monty Lowther. "You chaps cut into the tunnel and fill the bags with the grub, while I keep attention off you. When you've got it up in the road, whistle, and I'll cut and join you."

Recalled to the object of their night expedition, the three hastened to obey Tom, and as Tom Merry was the centre of attraction, they were able to carry out their work unnoticed. The driver and his mate were busy, and the passengers surrounded Tom. The latter waited anxiously for the signal from his chums.

"Hallo, I must be off!" he exclaimed. "Good-night, ladies and gentlemen!"

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"You must not go—"

"You must be rewarded—"

"A subscription—"

"The police will want—"

"Stop—"

The passengers were speaking all at once. Without stopping to argue the point, Tom Merry scuttled off, and though several hands were put out to detain him, he dodged them with the skilfulness of a Rugby three-quarter making a break for the goal-line, and reached the side of the cutting. He scrambled up the steep slope, and plunged through the hedge.

"Get it all right?" he asked.

"Yes," said Manners. "Here it is, crammed into four bags. I don't know whether we left anything behind; but there's enough, in all conscience."

"Come along, then. We shall get mobbed if we stay here. These people are cackling like a lot of geese, as if nobody had ever stopped a train before!"

"Now, that's ungrateful. You're a giddy hero, and—"

"Dry up, and come along. What I'm afraid of is that they'll want us to give information to the police, and if we don't get off sharp, we may be detained. A nice row we should get into at Clavering, then!"

"My hat, yes! We shall have to keep this awfully dark."



Having lighted the gas, the German master looked int

The chums hurried away, burdened as they were by the crammed bags. They cut across the dark fields, and reached the college, and helped each other over the wall with their burdens. A few minutes later a pebble rattled on the dormitory window, and the wakeful Harris let the rope down. The bags were drawn up one after another, and then the four lads climbed in.

"You've been a thundering long time!" said Harris.

"That's all right," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Any of the guests arrived yet?"

"No; but it's just on time."

"Then let's get the feast ready."

The blinds were carefully drawn, and a bicycle lantern lighted. The Shell were all out of bed, and they looked on eagerly as Tom opened the bags and turned out the good things. The Shell, of course, were to join in the feast, in which the Fourth Form were to be the honoured guests.

"My only panama!" ejaculated Harris. "That's all

right! You must have bought up half the giddy tuckshop, Merry. There's enough to go round, and no mistake!"

A faint tap came to the door.

"Hallo, there's the guests!"

Tom Merry instantly extinguished the light.

The door opened, and a figure in shirt and trousers loomed up. There were a crowd of others behind it. Tom Merry stepped quickly towards the door.

"Is it all right?" came a hoarse whisper. "Is that you, Merry?"

"It's all right. Are you all there?"

"Yes, rather! What about the feed?"



itory! The midnight feasters were caught red-handed.

"It's ready. Excuse us receiving you in the dark, people, because we mustn't show a gleam till the door's closed. Come in!"

"Right you are!"

The Fourth Form filed in. Some of them were dressed, some were half-dressed, and some were in pyjamas. Lower and Upper Fourth had accepted the invitation to the last boy, and the file seemed endless.

At last they were all in the dormitory. Tom Merry closed the door quietly, and laid a folded blanket along the bottom of it, to keep any gleam of light from escaping into the corridor, and stuck a cap over the keyhole.

Then the lantern was lighted again, and several candles to augment the illumination. The eyes of the Fourth-Formers glistened at the sight of the good things spread out upon newspaper sheets on the floor. They had been warned to bring their own cutlery, and every boy had a knife or a fork, sometimes both, and some had spoons, while

a few lucky ones had articles of crockery in addition. Pocket-knives helped to make up the deficiency, and soap-dishes served as plates for those who had none.

"Well, this is a bit of all right," said Higgins, of the Fourth. "You are a jolly good sort, Tom Merry, and a chap who can stand a feed like this ought to be captain of Clavering, in my opinion."

"What-ho!" chorused the Fourth.

"I dare say," continued Higgins, "that you'll stand another feed like this after the election, if you get in."

"Rather!" said Tom hospitably. "But, tuck in, chaps; we never can tell if any beastly prefect is going to nose in at any minute."

The hint was sufficient. The Fourth Form and the Shell were quickly at work. Everyone helped himself to whatever he fancied, and, as Harris had remarked, there was enough of everything to go round.

Only one fellow refused to join in the feast, and that was Gore. He remained in bed, and watched the feasters with a sneer on his ill-natured face.

"I say, Gore, aren't you going to join us?" asked Tom Merry, whose hospitality was boundless.

"No, I'm not!"

"Gore, don't show ill-feeling at a time like this," said Manners. "There never was such a feed given in Dormitory D."

"I'm not taking any."

"Look here, Gore, what's the matter?" demanded Monty Lowther. "You're not the chap to turn up your nose at a feed like this. What have you got on your mind?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if some prefect comes in and catches you," said Gore. "I'm not going to run the risk, anyway."

"Pooh! What chance is there of that? They've no suspicion of—"

Monty Lowther paused in the middle of his remark.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor without. A chilly hush fell upon the feasters. Were Gore's words to prove prophetic? Tom Merry was the only one to show a quick presence of mind.

"Douse the lights, quick!" he whispered hurriedly.

He turned the lantern out. The candles were extinguished in a twinkling. Darkness reigned in the dormitory. The boys listened breathlessly. The footsteps had stopped at the door. If it were a master—and he looked into the dormitory and was satisfied to find it dark—all would be well. But if he had a light—

It was impossible to hide either the feast or the guests in time. The boys could only wait breathlessly to know their fate.

The door opened.

CHAPTER 8.

Devigne's Counter Move!

"WHAT'S that, Devigne?"

Edgar Devigne, the Upper Fifth Form candidate for the captaincy of Clavering School, looked inquiringly at his friend. It was just half-past ten o'clock, and Devigne and Cary had just come up to go to bed. Cary had stopped in Devigne's room to speak for a few minutes before going to his own, and as Devigne lighted the gas he uttered an exclamation.

Devigne looked at him, and then his eye followed the direction of Cary's pointing finger. Upon the table was a sheet of foolscap, placed in a prominent position, evidently to catch the eye as soon as Devigne should enter his room. Upon it a sentence was scrawled in letters sloping backwards—plainly for purposes of disguise.

"Hallo!" said Devigne. "Some cheek of the juniors, I suppose."

"I don't think so, Edgar," said Cary quickly, bending forward to look at the paper. "Read what it says, old man."

Devigne read the scrawl on the paper, and his eyes flashed. It ran as follows:

"If you want to spoil a rival candidate's little game keep an eye on Dormitory D at half-past ten to-night."

The message was signed "A Secret Supporter."

Devigne and Cary stared at one another in surprise and keen interest.

"What the dickens does that mean?" said Devigne. "Dormitory D is where Tom Merry has his quarters, with the kids of the Shell, so he must be the rival candidate referred to. It can't be Felgate."

"No; it's Merry plainly enough. But the Shell have gone

to bed long ago, and I really don't see what electioneering trick Merry can be up to at this time of night," said Cary, in a thoughtful way. "Have you a supporter in the Shell, do you think, who might feel inclined to give his game away, or is this a hoax?"

"There's Gore," said Devigne. "He hates Merry, and would rather get anybody in as captain, I believe, than Merry."

"Ah, Gore, of course! Depend on it, he's sent this warning."

"You think there's something in it, then?"

"Well, there may or may not be, but in the circumstances I think I should look into it. You can't afford to miss any chances."

"I don't see what Merry can be up to," said Devigne musingly. "Still, as you say, it won't do any harm to look into it. Suppose you go quietly along to the dormitory and see if there's anything unusual going on. Then, if it's a hoax we can burn this paper. We'll do that, anyway, and say nothing."

"All right! Wait for me."

Cary went out, and Devigne waited impatiently for his return. Tom Merry was the candidate he feared at the election because of his following in the Lower Forms. And he knew he could never count on what Tom was going to do next.

His suspense did not last long. In a couple of minutes Cary came back, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"What's on?" asked Devigne quickly.

"The whole of the Fourth Form are going into Dormitory D! It's a dormitory feed, from what they were muttering. Tom Merry's feeding the whole giddy Fourth as a bid for their votes, I suppose."

"By Jove!" said Devigne. "That's a clever move of his; but I fancy we'll checkmate him this time, thanks to Gore's warning—if it was Gore. That doesn't matter, anyway. The juniors may be jolly pleased at getting a big feed, but they'll be jolly wild at being disappointed at the last moment, and getting caned all round in the morning. All's fair in war, and the masters have got to come in on this scene."

"But you mustn't appear in it," said Cary quickly. "If the kids knew you had been the spoilsport you wouldn't catch many votes in the Fourth."

"How shall we work it, then?"

Cary reflected for a few moments.

"I know! Herr Schneider's down on Merry, and always likes to keep on at him. If he knew, it would make him jump with joy. I'll put him up to it, and you can go to bed and know nothing at all about it till to-morrow."

"Right you are!" said Devigne, laughing. "I'll keep that up."

Cary hurried away to the German's study. He had passed it coming up, and knew by the light under the door that Herr Schneider had not gone to bed. He tapped, and the deep voice of Otto Friedrich Schneider bade him enter.

"Vat is it tat you vant after?" asked Herr Schneider, laying down his German newspaper and looking inquiringly at Cary through his spectacles.

"If you please, sir, there's something going on that ought to be taken notice of by a master," said Cary diffidently. "Just as I was going up to bed I saw the Fourth Form going into the Shell's room, sir. I hope you don't think that I ought not to mention it."

Herr Schneider rose to his feet.

"It was very right of you to tell me tat, Cary. I tink tat Tom Merry is at te bottom of dis, ain't it?"

"I shouldn't wonder, Herr Schneider."

The German waved his fat hand.

"You can go to bed, Cary; I vill deal mit tis matter."

"You won't mention that I spoke to you, sir?" said Cary nervously.

"Certainly not."

Cary departed, well satisfied with himself. The German master, with an expression upon his face which would have made an uncharitable person suppose that he was really pleased to find out Tom Merry in a fault, left his study and proceeded upstairs.

He opened the door of Dormitory D, and, as we have related, found all dark within.

From the collected feasters there came not a sound.

They were holding their breath in agonised suspense.

The German master stared into the dark room, seeing nothing and hearing nothing, and a suspicion crossed his mind that he had been made a fool of.

"Poys!"

He spoke in a subdued voice, and received no reply. The listeners trembled with anxiety. Would the Herr go away without striking a light?

Alas for their hopes! There was a scratch in the dark-

ness, and a flare. In the light of a match the German looked into the dormitory.

Then he gave a gasp. Feeble as the light was, it was sufficient to show him the state of affairs. He smiled grimly and advanced into the room, and lighted the gas.

Then he grimly surveyed the scene.

"Ah, tat is vell!" he said. "I see tat you amuse yourselves when your masters suppose tat you are in bed. Vat are you Fourth-Form poys doing in dis room?"

The unhappy Fourth-Formers made no reply.

They sat in a state of dumb misery, waiting for the wrath to come.

"Merry, I suppose tat you are at te bottom of dis, as usual?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom cheerfully. He had quickly recovered himself. "I'm standing the feed."

"I tought so. Ve vill see vot te headmaster haf to say about it to-morrow. Poys of te Fourth, you vill return to your own quarters, and report yourselves to Mr. Tring in te morning. I shall acquaint him mit vat has happened."

The wretched Fourth-Formers filed out of the dormitory. Then the German pointed to the scarcely tasted feast.

"You vill collect all tat unwholesome food up and carry it to my study. Den you vill go pack to bed, Merry, and te rest."

It was done. It was the bitterest pill of all to swallow, but it was done. The great feast was conveyed in sulkily, almost mutinous silence to the German master's room by a file of boys and deposited there. Then the Shell went to bed, with feelings that were too deep for words.

CHAPTER 9.

The Hero of the Hour!

TOM MERRY'S electioneering had not fared well. In the morning every member of the Fourth Form was caned by Mr. Tring, the Form master, and given an imposition of fifty lines. It was a severe price to pay for a barely tasted feast, and, naturally enough, Tom Merry had to bear the brunt of the dissatisfaction.

He had certainly not been to blame, but he had, just as certainly, got the Fourth into this fearful row, and a chap who was so unlucky did not appeal to them as a captain. Instead of helping on his cause by that famous dormitory feed, Tom had ruined it, and he and his chums were fully conscious of the fact.

"It was a ghastly frost, and no mistake," Manners remarked. "I wonder how old Schneider got on the track? Not that it matters now. Two hundred lines apiece for all the Shell, and gated this afternoon. A caning and fifty apiece for the Fourth Form! Phew! It's enough to spoil the rosier prospects, Tom, my boy."

"I think the Shell will stick to their guns and vote for me," said Tom Merry. "But the Fourth will go over to Felgate, I expect. They feel a bit too sore now to vote for me, and there's not much time for them to get over it. They've lost a half-holiday to-day, and the election's to-morrow."

"Yes, it's rotten, and no mistake. Nothing we can do now will recover our lost ground."

"I can't think of anything," confessed Tom. "We must chance our luck. We may pull it off by the skin of our teeth, after all. Anyway, we'll try."

Such electioneering as was possible the chums did, but they had to admit that the prospect was not rosy. They stuck to their guns, but with big doubts in their minds as to to-morrow's election.

Probably the only boy in the Shell in a satisfied mood that day was Gore. He had effected his purpose, and he felt pretty sure now that Tom Merry would never be elected. After school that day, while Tom and his friends were busy, Gore happened to be standing at the school gates, looking idly down the road, when a man in the uniform of a police-inspector stopped at the gate.

"This is Clavering School, isn't it?" he asked, looking at Gore.

"Yes. Do you want anybody?"

"Yes, I do," said the inspector. "Perhaps you can tell me if a boy whose description I've got here belongs to this school and save me bothering the headmaster."

"Go ahead," said Gore, with interest, wondering what was up.

The inspector read out from his notebook.

"Boy about fifteen or a little over, with curly hair and blue eyes. Christian name Tom."

Gore gave a jump.

"Aha!" exclaimed the inspector quickly. "I see you know him, my lad!"

"I expect it's Tom Merry you want," said Gore. "What's he been doing?"

The inspector laughed.

"Do you happen to know whether he was out of the school last night, any time after ten o'clock?"

"Yes, rather," said Gore eagerly. "He was, and there were three other chaps with him. What have they been getting up to? I thought they were gone a long time."

"Three?" said the inspector, consulting his notebook. "Yes, that's right; there were three, and they addressed him in speaking as 'Tom. Surname unknown.'"

"It's Tom Merry, right enough," said Gore. "That's the boy you want. I'll show you where he is, if you like."

"Thanks; I wish you would."

Gore, in high glee, led the inspector in. He was quite convinced that Tom Merry had been guilty of some offence or other against the law while absent the previous night, and that the inspector had come to Clavering to arrest him.

Tom came out of the gym, as it happened, with Monty Lowther and Manners. The three stopped and stared towards Gore and the inspector.

"There he is, sir," said Gore quickly. "That's the chap you want."

He pointed Tom out, and the inspector walked quickly towards him. Tom stood his ground, wondering what was wanted. Boys were gathering from all sides, curious to know what was up, and a score or more gathered round Gore to ask for information.

The inspector tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder.

"Look!" exclaimed Gore. "He's going to arrest him for something he did last night when he was gone to fetch the grub. I wonder what it was?"

"Hallo!" said Tom coolly, looking up at the inspector.

"What's the little game? Do you want to speak to me?"

"Yes," said the officer, with a smile. "Are you Tom Merry?"

"Yes, old dear."

"Were you at High Clavering tunnel last night at the time of the stoppage of the London train?"

Tom hesitated.

"Come, my lad, you may as well own up," said the inspector good-humouredly. "I have your description, and there are a dozen people to identify you if necessary."

"Well, I was there," said Tom ruefully. "But if you give me away to the Head I shall get a fearful licking."

"I don't think the Head will lick you when he hears the whole story," said the inspector, smiling, and patting Tom on the shoulder.

Gore looked puzzled. Things were not working out as he had expected.

"But, I say, what has he done, sir?" cried a dozen inquiring voices.

"He has done a deed that ought to make you proud of him," said the inspector, looking round. "He risked his life to save a train that was on the point of being wrecked. He saved a dozen lives at least, perhaps more, and then scuttled off without saying a word to anybody."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Tom. "Back-pedal, old bean, and spare my giddy blushes!"

The boys of Clavering gazed at each other in wonder for a moment. Then a ringing cheer burst forth, and so loud was it that it rang through the school and brought a crowd of inquirers rushing to the spot.

Mr. Railton, who had already caught sight of the inspector in the Close, came out to inquire the cause of his visit.

The officer quickly explained.

"The boy is wanted to give any information he can as to the identity of the rascals who nearly wrecked the train," he explained. "Under the circumstances, sir, may I venture to express the hope that he will not be punished."

"He has done wrong—very grave wrong—in leaving the school at night," said Mr. Railton. "But I am sure that his object was not a bad one, however irregular. I shall certainly not punish a boy who risked his life for the sake of others."

A cheer followed the Head's words.

Then the boys made a rush for Tom Merry.

"Good old Tom!"

"Hurrah!"

He was seized and carried off, shoulder-high, around the Close in triumph. The boys fell into procession behind him, cheering and waving their caps. Mr. Railton looked on

(Continued on page 18.)



"Fine Score that!"

HE was well past the century before he was caught out. A fine score by a good player.

A piece of Wrigley's Chewing Gum in the mouth refreshes, keeps you alert during the game.

Wrigley's helps digestion, too, and cleanses the teeth. Chew a piece "after every meal."

In two flavours—P.K., a pure peppermint flavour; and Spearmint, a pure mint leaf flavour. Only 1d. a packet but the finest quality money can buy.

The flavour lasts—British made

WRIGLEY'S



1^D PER PACKET



with a smile. And Felgate of the Sixth, and Devigne of the Upper Fifth met each other's eyes, and read there the same thought.

Tom Merry was sure of election now!

For the Lower Forms of Clavering, now following him and cheering themselves hoarse, would be certain to plump for the hero of the hour at the morrow's election.

The captaincy of Clavering was in Tom Merry's hands, if he chose to take it.

CHAPTER 10.

The New Captain!

MORNING dawned—the morning of the election day. All Clavering was thrilling with suppressed excitement. Those of the Clavering boys who made bets were willing to offer three to one that Tom Merry would be elected captain of Clavering in the Hall that evening, but they could find no takers.

Fifth would kick, and the Lower Fifth would kick, at being ruled by a Lower Form boy. Endless trouble was in prospect if Tom Merry were elected—and his election was no longer a chance, but a certainty.

Mr. Railton thought the matter over again and again, viewing it from every aspect. He came to a decision at last, and after morning school he sent for Tom Merry.

Tom came promptly enough to the Head's study. He thought it was something more to do with the affairs of the train-wreckers. He had told the inspector all he knew, which was little enough, but the police hoped to catch the rascals.

"Come in!" said Mr. Railton, as Tom tapped at the door. "You may sit down, Merry. I want to speak very seriously to you."

Tom sat down, wondering what was wanted. He ran hurriedly over his latest escapades in his mind, trying to think which one of them could have got to Mr. Railton's ears.

The GEM 2^D

THE BEST FOR NEXT WEEK!

What's next week's GEM like? Why, just fine, of course! Take a glance at the small cover reproduction alongside. That'll give you an idea of the extra-special school yarn inside. You can see Tom Merry's band putting the Fifth through a form of musical torture! What for? Ah, thereby hangs the tale you'll be reading next Wednesday—that is, if you make certain of ordering your copy Now!

In addition, there's a smashing complete Rookwood yarn entitled:

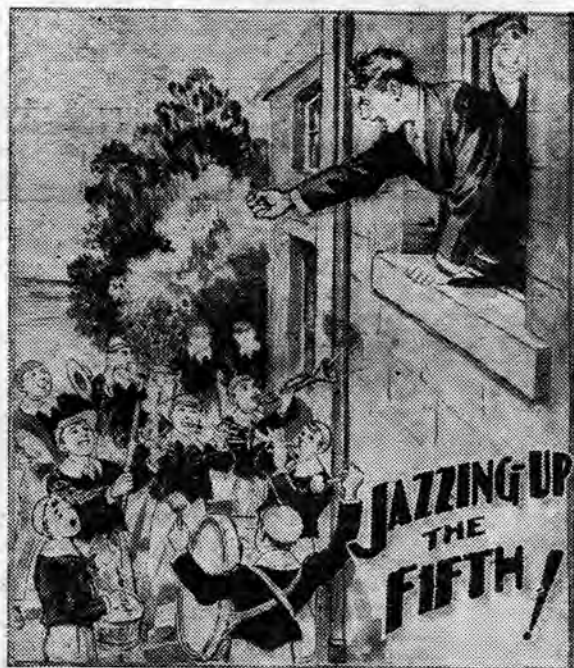
"Tubby Muffin—Artist!"

with Tubby Muffin doing his best to make you bust your buttons with laughing! Also another realistic episode from

"The Cricketer Cracksman!"

our splendid sport and adventure serial.

Don't delay—Make sure of your GEM—
Order it Now!



For to all it seemed that Tom's chances amounted practically to a certainty.

The Sixth would go solid for Felgate. The Fifth would vote for Devigne to the last man. The Shell would vote in a body for Tom Merry. The Fourth Form remained. And the Fourth Form seemed to be suffering from the severest attack of hero-worship they had ever experienced, and Tom Merry was their hero. The Fourth Form made no secret of their intention of marching into the Hall in a body and voting for Tom Merry.

The Fourth Form held the balance, and Tom Merry could reckon upon nearly every vote in the Form. On the morrow, the captain of Clavering would be named Tom Merry—there were few in the school who doubted that.

And Mr. Railton was not easy in his mind. Tom was certainly within his rights in putting up for the captaincy, and the boys were within their rights in voting for him; but the master realised, what neither Tom nor his supporters thought about, that it would not be for the good of the school for a boy out of the Shell to get in as captain.

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It was certain that the Sixth would kick, that the Upper

"Merry," said the Head seriously, "I am about to speak to you, not as a master to a pupil, but as a man to a boy, whom he respects, and of whom he therefore expects more than he would ask of any other boy."

"Yes, sir," said Tom, his wonder increasing.

"You have stood forward as a candidate for the captaincy, Merry. You have now every chance of being elected, I believe."

"I hope so, sir."

"What would you say if I were to ask you to withdraw?" Tom jumped.

"Withdraw, sir? Oh, sir!"

"What would you say, Merry?" asked Mr. Railton, with his eyes fixed on the boy's dismayed face.

"I—I— You could order me to withdraw, sir, of course," said Tom, with a gulp.

"Yes," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I could order you to withdraw, Merry, but that would be neither right nor just. I cannot feel that I should be acting fairly in doing

(Continued on page 24.)

THE Editor scarcely gave me time to get settled in the sanctum this morning before he started firing questions at me.

"You're pretty ancient, Whiskers," said he. "I expect you know a lot about bows and arrows."

"The earliest civilised people to use bows and arrows were the Egyptians," I rapped out. "The heads of their arrows were made of bronze. The Romans employed mounted archers in war, who could shoot arrows at the gallop that would pierce a shield or a suit of armour quite easily. The English took up the long-bow after the Battle of Hastings, and became very proficient in the use of it. Another nation that has always excelled at archery is the Japanese. Their soldiers had a bow of bamboo seven feet six inches in length, and feats of archery used to take place in the halls of Kioto and Tokyo, where the archers had to shoot arrows the whole length of a corridor that was 128 feet long. A chap—I mean a Jap—named Wada Daihachi, in the seventeenth century, shot eight thousand one hundred and thirty-three arrows down that corridor in twenty-four hours, right off. And just to show you what an archer could do with a bow and arrow, an archer in the time of Edward III. pierced an oak door four inches thick with his arrow head, shooting from a long bow. The arrow head stuck out on the other side of the door about half an inch. Then—"

"Look here," said the Ed. "I didn't ask you to recite all that, though it's very interesting, of course. But I've got a letter here from a reader named Ralph Hodgson, and he wants you to tell him something about archery at the present day. He wants to know whether archery is still practised in this country, what the targets are like, and how the scores are made?"

I drew a deep breath and got the old brain-box to work. "There are a number of societies in England," I told the Ed. "that follow archery as a sport. The Toxophilite Society, founded in 1781, was the great centre for archery in the south. Another old club is the Woodmen of Arden, with a membership limited to 80. Their headquarters are at a place called Meriden, in Warwickshire. Then there are John o' Gaunt's Bowmen, who meet at Lancaster, and various others. There are all sorts of prizes, one of the most curious being the Goose Medal. In the old days a goose was buried with only its head visible, and this the archers aimed at, but nowadays they use a small glass globe instead."

"What about the target?" asked the Ed.

"Targets in archery are made of straw, three to four inches thick, with faces of floor-cloth on which the rings for scoring are painted. The outer ring is white, the next one black, the one inside that blue, the one inside that red, and the inner ring of all, the bullseye, is gold. This centre part is called the gold—not the bullseye—and hitting it scores nine. The targets are set up on iron stands, sloping slightly backward, and each archer shoots three arrows at the target at a distance of a hundred, eighty or sixty yards. Shooting the three arrows is known as shooting 'an end,' and after it the archers cross over and mark their scores."

"And what are the bows made from?"

"Nowadays usually of yew. The yew is imported from Spain and

Italy, and before being made into a bow is seasoned for three years. After the bow is made it's kept another two years before it's used."

"Are the bows made all in one piece?"

"Very seldom. Usually two pieces of yew are spliced together in the middle, as it is very difficult to get a single piece of flawless wood of the necessary length. The wood is left thick in the centre, making a handle, with leather or india-rubber wound round it to give a better grip."

"And the arrows, are they made of yew?"

"You bet they're not," said I. "The arrows, the shafts that is, are made of seasoned red deal."

"I can see you've read a good deal about it," said the Ed. "Perhaps you would tell us what the feathers are they use in making arrows?"

"The feathers from the body of the turkey or the peacock, Ed. Three feathers go on each arrow. They are about an inch and a half long, and should all point the same way."

"What about the string? What's that made of?"

"Hemp, made up into three strands, and faced with a preparation of glue."

"The arrows are carried in quivers, is that so, Whiskers?"

"Quivers are only carried by ladies nowadays. The men put their arrows in leather or baize bags. When not in use the bows and arrows have to be kept in a special cupboard that is dry and not too hot. This cupboard is called an 'ascham'."

"An ascham, I see," said the Ed. "Well, it would be ascham to ask you any more about archery. I mean, you know all about it, so I'll never be able to catch you napping, will I? Now here's a question concerning goldfish."

"I know all about goldfish," I told the Ed. "I've trained them as pets for years. Goldfish come from China. In their wild state—if you can imagine a wild goldfish—they are only occasionally orange coloured, but the Chinese, by careful breeding, have produced large numbers of goldfish that are orange or golden yellow in colour. A goldfish that is highly prized in China is a weird looking chap called the telescope fish. This telescope fish has a very short snout and a pair of eyes that stick out like a couple of gooseberries."

"But there are goldfish in this country, aren't there?"

"Yes, goldfish were brought into England somewhere in the time of James the First. But goldfish won't thrive in rivers, and if they are put into large ponds they lose their colour. The best place for goldfish is a small tank, with plenty of food in the way of breadcrumbs, bran, worms, and small insects."

Send your Questions to the Oracle.



If there's anything you want to know, Whiskers is the man to ask—he knows everything! (Ed.)

"Well, I can't bowl you out even with a bowl of goldfish," growled the Editor. "Can you tell Eustace Maltravers what a gonfalonier is, or was?"

"Easy," said I. "In the middle ages the knights had a small pennant just below the heads of their lances. These were called gonfalons. The name was also used for rectangular ensigns hung from a cross-bar attached to a pole. The man who carried this ensign was called a gonfalonier."

The Ed. picked up another letter and looked at the clock. "It's nearly time you'd gone for lunch. Just two more questions, before you go. What is man-dram?"

"Man-dram is a West Indian medicine. It is made by mashing a few pods of bird pepper and mixing them with shallots and sliced cucumber, to which are added some lime-juice and some Madeira wine."

"Do you mean to say that's good for the inside? I should say it would be enough to give anyone the jim-jams for a week."

I glanced at the clock meaningly.

"Well," said the jolly old Ed., "I think we've heard enough about man-dram. Now can you tell me what is in the GEM next week?"

"Of course I can," I answered hastily. "You know quite well that I always read every story as soon as I can get hold of it. I got so excited that I wanted to read the serial right off, but I have had to wait and read it by instalments. And that reminds me, there's another instalment waiting now, and I want to get out and read it, so do you mind if I go?"

"Here, hold on!" snapped the Editor. "Don't be in such a hurry. You can't read that instalment now, anyway, because I've got it. Now get on with the question I asked you."

"Well," said I, feeling very downcast about that instalment, "there's another corking fine story by Martin Clifford."

...and it's just about the best thing Martin Clifford has ever written. Then there's a topping Rookwood yarn by Owen Conquest. I haven't finished reading it yet, because the office-boy pinched it when I wasn't looking, and started reading it himself! Then, of course, there will be the usual bright little features in the old paper. Now can I go?"

"Yes," snapped the Ed., and I rushed out to find that Rookwood yarn and finish reading it.

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LOVELL'S LUCKY LOSS!

By
OWEN CONQUEST.



CHAPTER 1. Lovell Knows!

"LOOK here—"

"Rot!"
"I tell you—"
"Piffle!"

"But do listen, Lovell—"

"Shut up! I know jolly well I'm right!" bawled Lovell. Useless to argue with Lovell. Arthur Edward knew—he always did know. Useless for Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome to suggest that he might be wrong. He knew he was right simply because—in his own valuable opinion—Lovell knew he couldn't be wrong.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were miles from Rookwood. They all wished they weren't miles from Rookwood. To three of them, at least, their chances of getting home to Rookwood before calling-over seemed remote.

Not to Lovell, however. He knew the right road—he knew the way to go.

His chums were beginning to doubt it now. At the last cross-roads Lovell had persuaded them to ignore the signpost and follow him—a short cut he knew. But the short cut had proved to be a very long one, and it had landed them via sundry narrow lanes, cart-tracks, and field-paths into unknown country. And as Lovell's chums had no desire to go round the world in order to get to Rookwood they had jumped from their bikes at last and refused to explore Lovell's short cut any farther.

Jimmy Silver frowned and glanced at Lovell's heated features.

"Now come along, Lovell, old chap," he said patiently. "Don't be pig-headed."

"If you say I'm pig-headed, you cheeky ass—"

"Well, what's the good of going on and chancing it?" asked Jimmy mildly. "Goodness knows where—"

"Who's chancing it?" hooted Lovell. "I tell you I know—at least, I'm almost certain I do."

"Well, almost isn't quite good enough for us, old chap—we're going back to put our giddy faith in a signpost," said Jimmy grimly.

"You can go to pot!"

"Now, look here, old man—"

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"Rot!"

"But you aren't even sure—"

"Bosh!"

"Here, hold on—"

"Rats! Go and eat coke!"

And with that, Arthur Edward mounted his machine and rode on, snorting. Evidently even pleading was useless. So Jimmy Silver sighed, turned his machine round, and also rode on—after Raby and Newcome towards the cross-roads. In his present mood it was useless to argue or reason with Arthur Edward Lovell. And Jimmy decided to let him have his head—indeed, there was nothing else for it.

While Jimmy, Raby, and Newcome rode back to the cross-roads Lovell rode on into the unknown.

In the circumstances he was not feeling very happy or comfortable. But he rode on, pushing angrily at the pedals as if they were at fault and not he himself.

Another mile or so he rode on, and then he reached some cross-roads. At the cross-roads was a signpost, and Lovell glanced at it—though he tried hard not to.

Lovell dismounted.

One of the fingers of the post pointed towards him, and on it was printed:

"To Combe, ten miles."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Lovell.

He was undone. Instead of riding towards Rookwood he had been riding away, in the opposite direction! He had been wrong all along.

"Ten miles!" groaned Lovell. "Oh, my hat! I'm not jolly well turning back even now, though. Those rotters will chip me no end!"

Arthur Edward was convinced now, but still obstinate. If he turned back he knew how his chums would chip him—or he thought he knew, quite overlooking the fact that his chums would think him a bigger fool if he did not turn back.

"Must be some other way back to Combe," he muttered. "Even if it means going a longer way round I'd rather take a kicking from Dicky Dalton than let those chaps chip me."

So Arthur Edward rode on for another half-mile hoping to find another way out. He then reached a small hamlet consisting of a garage, a post-office, and a few cottages.

Lovell dismounted outside the post office and, leaning his machine against the hedge, he walked up the garden path. If there was another way to Combe without going back the post-office people would be bound to know of it.

The little place happened to be a general store, as well as a post office, and Lovell had to wait while the postmistress served a girl with some potatoes. In seething impatience Lovell waited, but at last his turn came.

No, there was no other way back—only the way he had come—at least, so far as the postmistress was aware.

Lovell went back down the garden path, breathing hard. There was no help for it—unless he wanted to go on adding to the distance from Rookwood. Intending to swallow his pride, Arthur Edward returned to where he had left his bike.

But the bike was not there—it was gone!

Lovell stared and stared, and then he looked about him angrily. He saw it then. It was being ridden away rapidly in the direction he had just come, and it was being ridden by a schoolboy. In fact, Lovell was sure he recognised the fellow's cap as a Rookwood cap!

"Well, my hat!" gasped Lovell. "The cheeky—Hi, hi, hi! Bring my bike back, you cheeky rotter!" he bawled.

The only answer was an increase in speed of the bike ahead, and with a wrathful exclamation Lovell went pelting in pursuit at top speed, yelling furiously as he ran.

But it was in vain. The distance between cyclist and runner gradually lengthened until Lovell's bike and its rider vanished along the dusty lane.

Arthur Edward Lovell, panting, exhausted, and raving, gave it up at last and dropped for a well-needed breather on the grass by the wayside. And his feelings were too deep for words.

He was stranded—stranded, at least twelve miles from Rookwood.

Once again Lovell's obstinacy had landed him in the soup!

CHAPTER 2.

No Stopping for Lattrey!

BANG!

If Lattrey, of the Fourth at Rookwood, had had any doubts as to what that explosion meant, he had none the next moment as he found himself bumping dismally on the rim of his front wheel.

It was a burst, and by the sound of it a very bad burst.

Lattrey himself nearly burst in utter dismay as he heard and realised.

"Oh, hang it all!" he snarled. "Hang and blow it!"

Lattrey dismounted hurriedly to examine the damage.

Never a very pleasant youth at any time, Lattrey of the Fourth looked far from pleasant now. He gritted his teeth and frowned like a youthful fiend.

Lattrey knew the district well—unlike Jimmy Silver & Co.—and he knew he was twelve miles from Rookwood. Moreover, he knew he had no right whatever to be twelve miles from Rookwood. He had asked Mr. Dalton for a pass to visit his uncle at Hensham, and Mr. Dalton—who did not trust Lattrey—had refused the pass. Thereupon Lattrey had broken bounds and gone to Hensham, nevertheless.

Now his number was up, by the look of things. He was stranded with a useless machine, twelve miles from home. To get home before call-over was impossible, and he knew what to expect from Dicky Dalton for breaking bounds. He was, like Lovell, undone—only much more so!

"Oh, hang it all!" he snarled again.

Luckily the burst had happened just outside a tiny hamlet—a hamlet consisting of a post office and general stores, a garage, and several cottages. So Lattrey hadn't to push the useless bike far.

He pushed it to the garage, and there his last hope vanished.

"No, young gent!" said the garage-keeper, after examining the tyre. "Can't repair it to-night—impossible!"

"But I've got to get back to Rookwood!" almost wept Lattrey. "It won't take you long. You might—"

"Which I got this here car to do afore seven o'clock," said the garage man, pointing with a grimy forefinger to the car he was working on. "It's the doctor's car, and it's got to be done, sir. And I've no help—"

"But can't you hire me a bike—"

"There ain't a bike to be got anywhere round here, as I

knows of," grunted the man, shaking his head. "You'll have to tramp into Latcham, and get a train there, young gent. There's one for Combe about eight o'clock, I think."

"Oh, my only hat!"

Lattrey looked about him dismally. But no bike was to be seen and it was clear the garage-keeper could not help him. So, after further argument—to no purpose—the junior left his machine and went out into the lane.

It was just then he saw, and recognised, Arthur Edward Lovell.

Lattrey could not believe his eyes at first. But it was Lovell, right enough. Lattrey saw him jump off his bike and lean it against the hedge of the post office garden, and he was just about to run across when a startling idea came to the cad of the Fourth.

His first idea had been to beg Lovell for a lift on his back-step, but a moment's reflection told him that Lovell was the last fellow to agree to haul him twelve miles. Certainly Lovell was good-natured enough, and would certainly have done it for a friend. But Lattrey was far from being a friend.

He watched Lovell walking up to the little post office, his sharp eyes glimmering. For several brief seconds he watched in trembling indecision, and then he made his mind up. It was now or never.

He whipped across the road, grabbed up the bike, and turned it round, and then he leaped into the saddle and rode away.

Lattrey was amazed at his own nerve, for Lovell was the last fellow he would have chosen to play such a trick on. But he had done it, and now it was done Lattrey drove hard at the pedals, anxious to get out of sight before Lovell emerged.

There came a sudden series of frantic, furious yells behind him, however, and he knew he had failed in that. None the less, Lattrey grinned as he drove on. He knew Lovell could never recognise him at that distance; indeed, from the fact that Lovell did not shout his name he knew he was unrecognised.

The running figure behind vanished into the dusty distance, and then Lattrey slowed down a little and took it easier. He had just nice time now to get to Rookwood before call-over. This was a far better idea than riding home on Lovell's back-step. And he was safe—nobody knew he was in that district, and Lovell would never suspect him. What Lovell would do now he didn't waste time wondering. Other fellows' troubles never troubled Lattrey.

He rode on quite cheerfully.



Crouched behind the hedge, Lattrey watched Lovell walking up the path towards the little post office. The bike was unattended!

Outside Latcham, Lattrey risked the loss of a few minutes by taking a by-road in order to skirt the little town. It wouldn't do for anyone who knew him to see him in Latcham just then. And he made up the loss easily by furious riding long before he reached Combe village.

In fact, it was entirely owing to that reckless spurt that Lattrey came such a terrific cropper.

Turning a sharp corner suddenly, Lattrey crashed full-tilt into another cyclist who emerged from a side-turning just then. Lattrey scarcely knew what happened next.

There was an alarmed yell, a clash and clatter of falling machines, and next instant Lattrey found himself flying over the handlebars. He fell sprawling in the dust, skinning his nose badly and shaking every bone in his body.

He sat up dizzily and blinked about him.

His bike had struck the other amidstships, so to speak, and its rider—an elderly villager—lay on his face a few yards away, as if half-stunned. Near him was a large, deep basket, and surrounding the man was a mass of smashed eggs. The whole roadway, in fact, seemed to be covered with smashed eggs.

"Oh!" gurgled Lattrey. "Oh, my hat!"

He sat gasping for breath and hugging his nose—only for a brief moment or two, though! For suddenly the elderly man moved, and as he moved Lattrey jumped up in alarm.

Being a fellow who always put self first, Lattrey did not hesitate as to his next move. He knew it was his fault—that he had been on his wrong side and riding recklessly. So he did not wait to discuss the matter with the villager—or to find out if the man was hurt.

As the man strove to get up, Lattrey grabbed up Lovell's machine, leaped into the saddle, and drove on, without a thought as to whether the bike was damaged or not. But evidently it wasn't, for it answered to the drive of the pedals and the turn of the handlebars.

From behind him came a husky, gasping yell.

"Here, 'old on! Stop, you reckless young rip! Hold on!"

Lattrey rode on furiously, and the yells died away behind him.

Ten minutes later Lattrey rode up to Rookwood School. Not a soul was in the lane, and Lattrey grinned as he dismounted by the school wall and leaned the bike against the post of the gateway. He glanced at his watch; it wanted but a few seconds to call-over.

"Done it!" muttered Lattrey. "Luck, and no mistake! Here goes!"

Leaving the bike where it was, Lattrey strolled into the quadrangle with his hands in his pockets. He wasn't going to risk being seen housing Lovell's bike. At the fountain in the quad he paused a few moments to wet his handkerchief and wipe his heated, bruised face. Then he dusted himself swiftly down, and marched indoors just as the bell rang for call-over. Lattrey felt he had a lot to congratulate himself over.

CHAPTER 3: Not Guilty!

"THE ass!"

"The dummy!"

"The silly owl!"

Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome were not discussing their absent chum wrathfully. They were feeling sorry for Lovell, and wishing he was safe home within the fold.

But Lovell was still out. Call-over had passed, and the chums were having a belated tea in their study. They were calling the absent one names, but they were feeling rather uneasy and disturbed, knowing Lovell as they did.

"I suppose he's got himself into trouble, as usual," groaned Jimmy Silver. "The awful ass! Why didn't he turn back with us? Goodness know where he'll be at this moment! He's too pig-headed even to ask anyone the way."

"Still pedalling on away from Rookwood, I expect," said Raby. "Shouldn't be surprised if he's thirty miles away by this time. He'll go on and on until he strikes the English Channel."

"Then he'll try to ride on, rather than own up he's wrong!" grunted Newcome. "Still, I wish—"

"We ought to have made the dummy come with us," said Jimmy Silver. "After all, I suppose he can't help being obstinate, it's his nature, and there you are. I don't like the idea of the awful dummy roaming about the thumping country—Oh! Hallo, here he is!"

It was Lovell. They had left the door open to welcome the wanderer, and now he walked in—and to judge by his looks he had not failed to hear Jimmy's remarks.

He stood in the doorway and gazed at his chums. He was

a trifle dusty, but he did not look like a fellow who had been on a long, tiring ride. He looked angry, however—exceedingly angry. There was an ominous glint in Lovell's eye as he regarded his chums.

"So you've got back then, old man," said Jimmy, trying to speak cheerily. "How did you get on? We told Dicky Dalton you must have lost your way."

"Oh, did you?" said Lovell, speaking at last. "Like your thumping cheek to suggest that, I must say. Am I the fellow to get lost?"

"Um! You see, old chap—"

"But never mind that," said Lovell with ominous calmness. "Did you also tell Dicky Dalton that you pinched my bike and left me stranded twelve miles from Rookwood? Answer me that, Silver?"

"Eh? What on earth are you gassing about, Lovell?" demanded Raby.

Arthur Edward coloured. As a matter of fact he simply couldn't convince himself that he did really believe that one of his chums was the fellow who had bagged his bike. Even when he found his machine lying by the gatepost at Rookwood he couldn't believe it possible.

Yet someone had bagged it—and a Rookwood fellow. And who else was likely to be round Hensham way? It had been hard for Lovell to allow the suspicion into his mind at all. Yet it was possible that one of them had followed him and bagged it—or Lovell told himself that it was possible.

It was, in fact, almost incredible that one of his chums could have played such a dirty trick. But, in his fury, Lovell was ready to believe—or pretend to believe—anything.

"Yes, what on earth do you mean, Lovell—if you mean anything at all?" demanded Jimmy Silver, staring. "Who's pinched your silly bike?"

"That's what I want to know, and what I mean to find out," said Lovell in sudden rage. "I stopped at a little village—Little Horton—and went into the post office. When I came out my bike was gone—I spotted a chap—a Rookwood chap—riding away on it. I was stranded twelve miles from home."

"What? Is that a fact, Lovell?" gasped Newcome.

"Yes, and if one of you fellows didn't do it, then who did?" snapped Lovell heatedly.

"Of course we didn't, you silly owl!" said Jimmy Silver warmly. "Think we'd play a rotten trick like that?"

"Well, someone did—a Rookwood chap!"

"And—and you think one of us played a rotten trick like that on you?" gasped Newcome. "Why, you cheeky, footling fathead—"

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Newcome—"

Newcome was not looking for a thick ear, but it was clear that Lovell was looking for trouble.

"Shut up, Newcome—easy on, Lovell!" pleaded Jimmy Silver. "Don't get your rag out, for goodness' sake, old man! If anyone played a trick like that on you—"

"Aren't I telling you they did?" roared Lovell. "Why, I'll punch the silly nose of any fellow who dares to—"

"Lovell!"

It was Bulkeley who appeared just then in the doorway—fortunately, perhaps, for Lovell was already turning back his cuffs.

"You're wanted in Mr. Dalton's study, Lovell!" said Bulkeley. "Buck up!"

"What's Dalton want me for, Bulkeley?" snapped Lovell.

"You'll know soon enough," said the captain grimly.

"And I hope you get it as you deserve, Lovell. A fellow who knocks an elderly villager over, and then rides on without stopping to help him, deserves more than a licking. Come on!"

"But—but—what—what—" stammered Lovell blankly.

"Come on—look lively!" roared Bulkeley.

And Arthur Edward, looking absolutely bewildered, obeyed, while his startled chums followed—in great and dismal apprehension. What had Arthur Edward Lovell done now?

CHAPTER 4. Not So Lucky!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL entered Mr. Dalton's study, and Bulkeley followed him in. Outside in the passage, Lovell's chums waited in dismay and apprehension. Lovell had a genius for getting himself into scrapes, and they wondered what on earth he had done now.

Mr. Dalton was not alone. With him was an elderly villager. He stood on the study carpet, twirling his cap nervously. At his feet was a big, deep basket, at the bottom of which was a mass of broken eggshells, yolks and white of egg.

Lovell blinked about him.

"You—you sent for me, sir!" he said looking at Mr. Dalton.

Dicky Dalton eyed him sternly—in a disgusted sort of way which quite startled Lovell.

"Yes, I certainly did send for you, Lovell," snapped the master. "This—this gentleman states that, this evening, you knocked him off his bicycle, not only causing him bodily hurt, but the loss of some two or three score of eggs."

"I—I did, sir?" stuttered Lovell.

"Yes. But that is not the worst side of the affair from my point of view," went on Mr. Dalton curtly. "I understand that you immediately mounted your machine and rode on, not even stopping to find out if your victim—the victim of your reckless behaviour—was injured or not. That is conduct unbecoming to a Rookwood boy, Lovell."

"But—but I never did, sir—it wasn't me!" gasped Lovell.

"Nonsense, Lovell. Look at this; is not this your property?"

And Dicky Dalton held out a bicycle pump for Lovell's inspection. A single glance showed Lovell that the pump was his. His name was scratched on it clearly.

"Y-yes, sir—it's mine right enough," he stammered. "But I never did it—I've never even seen this man before, sir!"

"What—what—"

"I don't doubt but what this is the young gent, sir," interposed the elderly man, eyeing Lovell indignantly. "He was just about his size, and if that's his pump—"

"This is certainly Lovell's pump. Lovell has—"

"But it wasn't me, sir," said Lovell heatedly. "Someone bagged my bike at Little Horton, near Hensham, and left me stranded there. I should have been there now, perhaps, but a vanman gave me a lift back. And when I got here I found my bike leaning against the school gatepost."

"Bless my soul! And you expect me to believe that extraordinary story, Lovell?" stuttered Mr. Dalton.

"It's the truth, sir," said Lovell indignantly.

"Absurd! You have, apparently, concocted your story, in order to evade punishment for your reckless behaviour," said Dicky Dalton angrily. "I am surprised—shocked that you, Lovell, a boy in whom I had hitherto placed trust, should attempt to evade punishment with such a story. I understand you were on your wrong side, and that you were riding recklessly. But I can forgive that in a junior. What I cannot forgive is the fact that you rode away without stopping to render this man help, or even to ask if he were hurt. You should be ashamed of yourself, Lovell."

"But I didn't do it!" almost shrieked Lovell. "Someone bagged my bike—"

"This pump was found on the spot after the accident, Lovell!" snapped Mr. Dalton. "It evidently fell from the bicycle unnoticed by you. I have asked Bulkeley to examine the machines in the cycle-shed. He states that your machine bears clear traces of a recent spill, and that the pump is missing from it. You were also seen, a few minutes ago, wheeling the machine to the shed from the gates by Bulkeley, who went and examined it at once. If you still deny—"

"Of course I do, sir!" hooted Lovell. "The fellow who bagged my bike must have done it."

"Nonsense! If you can bring proof, however—"

Buz-z-z-z-z-z-z-z!

It was the study telephone, and with an impatient exclamation Mr. Dalton went to the instrument.

"Hallo, hallo! Yes, this is Rookwood School! Who is that—what, what—a boy name Lattrey! Yes, yes. But you cannot speak—What is that? One moment. I am his Form master. Kindly explain why you wish to speak to Lattrey."

Mr. Dalton paused. Evidently the person at the other end was explaining. And suddenly Mr. Dalton gave a startled exclamation. After that he asked a few rapid, grim questions.

Lovell was not interested. But he became suddenly interested as he heard Dicky Dalton mention "Little Horton." When Mr. Dalton slammed down the instrument at last Lovell was more than interested.

Mr. Dalton was looking grim.

"Lovell, you state that your bicycle was taken by a Rookwood boy from outside the post office at Little Horton. How do you know that he was a Rookwood boy?"

"I recognised the cap, sir, though it was a long way off."

"Very good! Bulkeley, kindly bring Lattrey here—Lattrey of the Fourth."

"Oh, yes, sir!"



There was the crash and clatter of falling machines, and the next moment the road was strewn with eggs!

Bulkeley went to fetch Lattrey of the Fourth. He was not long in bringing that youth. And Lattrey gave a startled jump as he saw who was Mr. Dalton's visitor.

"You—you sent for me, sir?" he gasped, pulling himself together desperately.

"Yes, I did send for you, Lattrey," said Mr. Dalton, his glance lingering on Lattrey's face and clothes. "How did you get your face scratched in that strange manner, Lattrey?"

"I—I fell down in the quad, sir!" gasped Lattrey.

"Oh, indeed! Very well. This morning, Lattrey, you requested me to give you permission to visit an uncle at Hensham."

"Oh, yes, sir! But—but you refused me permission, and so I didn't go, sir. I spent the afternoon on the river, sir," said Lattrey—he was quite calm now. But he wasn't calm for long.

"I am afraid I cannot believe that statement, Lattrey," said Mr. Dalton. "I have just been speaking on the telephone to the owner of a garage at Little Horton. He states that a boy giving your name left his machine there to be repaired this evening. He rang up to ask you, Lattrey, if he was to put a new tube in your front wheel as the burst

"LOVELL'S LUCKY LOSS!"*(Continued from previous page.)*

was far too bad to repair. He has just examined it and discovered that, apparently."

"Oh, sir!" panted Lattrey.

"Do you still deny that you went to Hensham, Lattrey?"

"I—I—I—"

"I should not believe you if you did," remarked Mr. Dalton calmly. "However, that is not the matter I wish to ask you about at the moment. I wish to know, Lattrey, how, if your machine was useless in the garage at Little Horton, you managed to get back to Rookwood in time for call-over? The man states emphatically that you left there at five-thirty."

"Oh, sir! I—I walked to Latcham and took the train, sir!" gasped Lattrey.

"There is no train to Combe between five and eight o'clock," said Mr. Dalton. "You did not return by train, Lattrey. I suggest that, on emerging from the garage, which is almost opposite to the post office, you saw a bicycle flying unattended there and you took it and returned to Rookwood on it."

"Well, my hat!" gasped Lovell. "Why, you—you rotter, Lattrey! It was you, then, you frightful sweep—"

"Kindly be silent, Lovell!" snapped Dicky Dalton. "I suggest, Lattrey, that you took Lovell's machine, and that on the way home you met with an unfortunate accident, colliding with this gentleman here. Being too cowardly to stay to discover the harm you had done, you instantly mounted your machine and rode to Rookwood, leaving your victim lying in the roadway."

"I—I—I—"

"As I do not wish this matter to go before the headmaster, Lattrey, I would advise you to speak the truth at once. Unless you can give satisfactory proof that you returned in some other manner to Rookwood, I am afraid you will find it very difficult indeed to convince Dr. Chisholm of your innocence. Well, did you go to Hensham, and did you return from Little Horton on Lovell's machine, Lattrey?"

Lattrey gasped. He knew he could not bring any proof.

"Y-yes, sir!" he panted. "I—I was desperate, sir, knowing I'd be late for call-over and you'd find out where I'd been. I—I own up, sir."

"Very well. You are very wise to do so, Lattrey," said Mr. Dalton calmly. "You will, of course, compensate this gentleman for the damage and apologise to him. You have acted throughout in a scandalous and cowardly manner. You have defied my orders; you have played a cruel trick upon Lovell; you have disgraced Rookwood by your unmanly and cowardly running away after the accident; finally you have lied to me, openly and flatly. I intend to punish you very severely indeed!"

"Oh, sir!" gasped Lattrey. "I'm sorry, sir, but—"

"Enough! Lovell, you may go. Lattrey, bend over that chair!"

Lovell went, and Lattrey bent over the chair. As Lovell passed out he heard the swish of a cane and a wild yelp from Lattrey of the Fourth. Lovell's chums heard it also, and they eyed Lovell blankly as he came out.

"Well? What on earth—"

"What's it all about, Lovell?"

Lovell told them.

"But what on earth are you turning back your cuffs for, Lovell?" demanded Jimmy Silver. "Not going to start on us, old chap—"

"You'll see in a minute," said Lovell ferociously.

And Lovell's chums did see. The door suddenly opened and Lattrey came limping out. He sighted Arthur Edward, and suddenly his limp vanished and he made a bolt for it.

But there was no escape for Lattrey. Arthur Edward had suffered a great deal that evening, and someone had to pay for it, and that someone was Lattrey.

Lattrey had already paid—Dicky Dalton was not the man to risk spoiling Lattrey by sparing the rod. But Lovell made him pay more—compound interest, as it were. But when at last Lattrey of the Fourth made for his own study he was crawling, not limping, and he obviously regretted bitterly and with anguish that he had bagged Lovell's bike!

THE END.

(Lovell was nearly for it again that time! He only just got out of trouble! There'll be another new complete Rookwood yarn in the GEM next week, boys, Tubby Muffin is to the fore again, and you'll split your sides laughing at his antics in "TUBBY MUFFIN—ARTIST!" Don't miss it.)

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"THE HERO OF CLAVERING!"*(Continued from page 18.)*

so. That is why I prefer to appeal to your right feeling, and I am sure that I shall not appeal to you in vain."

"You wish me to withdraw, sir?"

"Yes, Merry."

Tom's face showed what his feelings were; but for the moment he could not speak. The headmaster's hand dropped gently upon his shoulder.

"Merry, listen to me. You have put up as a candidate, without much thought as to what would happen if you were elected—is it not so?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so, sir," Tom confessed. "I don't see why I shouldn't make a pretty good captain."

"If you were old enough, and in the Sixth, certainly. But think. If you are elected—you know how necessary it is for a captain to have authority. Do you think the Sixth will submit?"

"I—I don't know. They'd have to."

"And if they had to, what feeling would there be about it? You do not want to have a whole Form against you, Merry—all with bitterness ranking in their breasts?"

"Oh, no, sir! That would be rotten—I—I mean, I shouldn't like that at all."

"Now, confess," said Mr. Railton, with a smile. "You thought only of winning the election, and nothing of what would follow. But now that I have put it to you, you can see that it would not be a good thing for you to be elected captain of Clavering?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so, sir."

"Then, if I ask you to withdraw?"

"I will do so, sir, if you wish." There was a big gulp in Tom's throat as he said this, but he got the words out bravely. "I will withdraw, sir, if you like."

"I thought you would say that, Merry," said Mr. Railton heartily. "I am greatly obliged to you for acting in a generous and manly way."

"But what you said about my candidature, sir, applies equally to Devigne's," said Tom quickly.

"I do not think Devigne will get in if the Shell vote against him."

Tom understood.

"Right, sir. We shall plump for Felgate."

And he left the Head's study. His chums were waiting for him outside, and in a few words Tom acquainted them with what had passed at the interview.

"Well, it's rotten," said Manners; "but I suppose the Head knows best!"

"Mr. Railton is right," said Monty Lowther. "Anyway, you couldn't refuse him. But it's rotten—distinctly rotten!"

Tom made his way to the notice-board. Five minutes later all Clavering was discussing an amendment which had appeared upon his notice there.

"Upon second thoughts, Tom Merry withdraws his candidature, and decides to vote for Felgate. All his friends are requested to do the same."

There was a huge meeting in the Great Hall at Clavering that evening. From the first it was known how the voting would go, now that it was between two candidates. For the Shell backed up Tom Merry, and his enthusiastic admirers in the Fourth Form were prepared to follow his lead anywhere—either to elect him, or to elect somebody else. Only the Fifth backed up Devigne, and the votes of the Fifth were lost in the mass of voting for Felgate. The Sixth, Shell, and Fourth plumped for the latter.

A hurricane of cheers made the Hall shake as the result was made known—Felgate, one hundred and fifty votes; Devigne, fifty-seven. Gilbert Felgate was captain of Clavering.

In the midst of the cheering, Felgate crossed over to Tom Merry and shook hands with him.

"I understand, Merry," he said—"I understand. And I know how to appreciate your conduct. You're a jolly good fellow, and I think the time will come when you will be captain of Clavering—when you're in the Sixth."

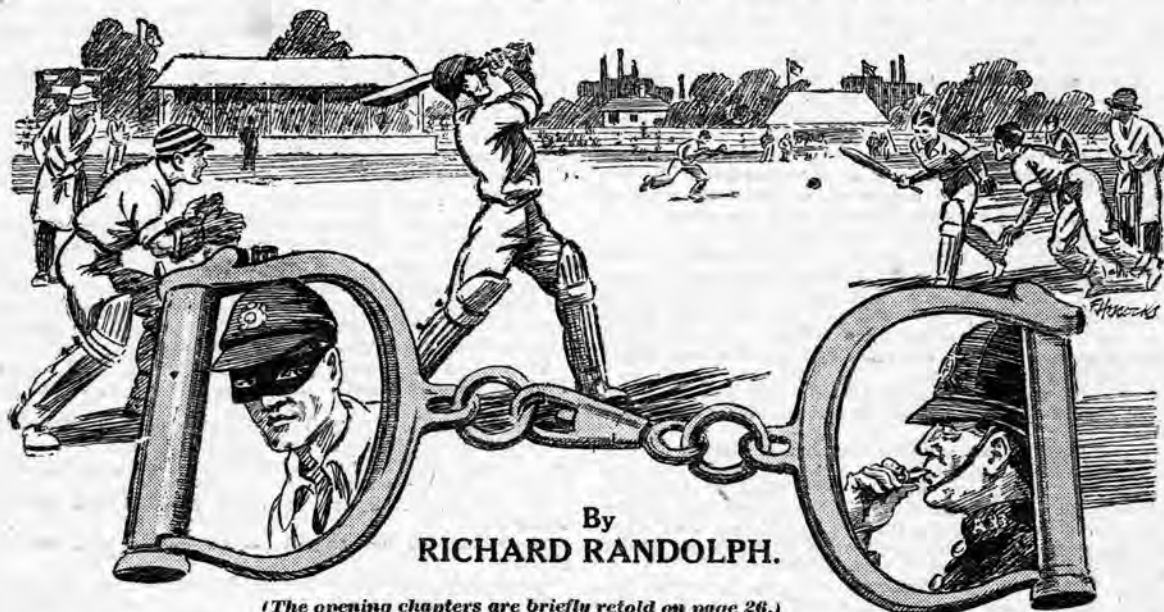
And Tom Merry looked as satisfied as anybody in the Hall, though he had not become—what he could have become—captain of Clavering.

THE END.

(Tom Merry has certainly made a name for himself pretty quickly! He goes even farther in next week's ripping cricket story, "Tom Merry's Challenge!")

MORE OF OUR GRIPPING SERIAL

THE CRICKETER CRACKSMAN!



By
RICHARD RANDOLPH.

(The opening chapters are briefly retold on page 26.)

Rod's First Match for the Mill Team!

THE Hyde Mills C.C.'s selection committee, consisting of Bill Tranter, formerly skipper, now retired from active service, but as keen as ever, his brother, Walter Tranter, who had followed him in the leadership, and Dick Tomson, sat in conclave to choose the team for the first match of the season.

Both the Tranters had seen Rod bowl and bat. He would have gone into the team on his bowling alone. But it was evident that he could bat also. Someone had to be left out for him, every member of last year's side being still available. In fact, two had to be omitted, for no one could say just what the best eleven then had been. Owing to casualties and illness twelve men had played in more than half the matches.

"Tom Jones, Ben Tranter, and young Redgrave," said the veteran. "Two of those three must be left out. I'm afraid my boy must be one of the two, for his fielding leaves a bit to be desired."

"You're a sport, Bill!" said Dick Tomson. "Young Ben will make good yet; he tries main hard, but there's summat of a puppy's clumsiness about the lad." He'll outgrow it, for he's keen."

"I think he will. I want to see him make good. What do you say as to the other two, Walter?"

"I never saw young Jones miss a catch yet," replied the captain. "He doesn't make many runs, but he can stick there if he's needed. There's grit in him. To my mind young Redgrave is mostly wind. Looks a player, but don't shape like one when anything's asked of him. I'd rather have Ben than him, and I can't see leaving out Jones. Now, Dick!"

"Leave out Redgrave—that's my word. I'd be glad to think he'd never play for us again," spoke Dick Tomson emphatically. "If it was his dad now—though the old man's getting past it—I'd think hard to find room for him. But Ralph—let him go!"

So it was decided. But when Ralph heard that he was not included in the team he was quite sure that Rod had robbed him of his place, and felt more bitter than ever against him.

His first instalment of revenge was childish. When Rod went to bed on the night of the day that saw the team posted in the Mills club-room, he happened to turn down the bedclothes lower than usual before getting in.

He saw at once that Ralph had played a dirty trick on

him. This was something worse than the apple-pie beds of schooldays. Ralph had emptied a gallon or so of water into the bed.

Rod chuckled. First he stripped the other fellow's bed. The sheets he threw under it; he did not care to use them. But he took Ralph's blankets and put on Ralph's bed his own soaked blankets and sheets.

After that he went downstairs again. He had gone up well before his usual time; he guessed that Ralph meant to be early. Probably his plans had been thrown out by his attendance upon the illustrious Hyde. Rod could not help despising Ralph for the way in which he pandered to Alured Hyde.

"Hallo, boy! Thought you said good-night," remarked John Redgrave.

"I did, but I've something to tell Ralph when he comes in, and I was afraid I might be asleep before that if I got into bed," answered Rod innocently.

He knew that Ralph's father and mother would never hear about the trick attempted on him unless Ralph was so enraged at its being foiled as to give himself away.

Ralph came in a few minutes later, and Rod followed him upstairs.

One of the two undressed hurriedly. That one was not Rod. He took his time, but he said nothing yet.

Ralph plunged into bed—and out of bed!

"You—you!" he spluttered furiously.

"Not a bit of it! It was you! Dirty trick, I call it; but I don't see why I shouldn't pay you back in your own coin. Your sheets are under the bed; I didn't want them. But I've got your blankets, and you've got mine, which happen to be a trifle damp."

Ralph was beaten, and he knew it. He could not even rage at the fellow who had discomfited him thus. Well he knew what his father would say to such a trick as he had tried upon Rod!

He consoled himself as best he could with the thought that before long the family home would know him no more. Rod was fast asleep before Ralph had managed to make his bed fit to sleep in.

Next day the Hyde Mills cricketers had something of a shock. The secretary of the Reelthorpe Mills club, whose team they had expected to meet on the Saturday, wired that the Reelthorpe Mills could not raise an eleven.

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9 for 19!

Boy skittles out a County side on a perfect wicket! And then makes a century!

It was very disappointing. The match was only a friendly, outside the League tourney in which Hyde Mills took part. But it was the first fixture of the season.

Alured Hyde came to the rescue. He offered to raise a team to meet the Mills.

The fellows ought to be grateful to him, he considered. But, though the match was welcome, no one felt much that way. No one gave young Hyde credit for doing anything whatever for the benefit of anyone else.

"It's a chance for you, Ralph," he said. "Of course, you'll play for me—they can't object to that, as they've dropped you. The weather's set fair now, apparently; the pitch on Saturday should be good enough for anything. If we can slam that young boulder Rodney it will take him down a peg or two. I can get at least five of the county pros. I'll send them in before us, to break the back of the bowling—twiggez-vous? Then our turn will come."

"You've a long head, Ally!" answered Ralph.

He was glad he had said nothing to Hyde about his bedroom trick. Had it succeeded they would have gloated over it together. But it had failed dismally. An uneasy foreboding that Alured Hyde's schemes for Saturday might have no greater success sat upon Ralph. Somehow Rod Rodney seemed to come out right end up, whatever might be attempted against him.

And there was a factor that Alured Hyde had not taken into account sufficiently in connection with Saturday's match.

It had just been made public that Arthur Hereward, who had led the Norlandshire team ever since the War, had resigned the captaincy. He had been dead off form last year—not fit to bowl, hardly good for a run—only in the slips his old value. He was ill, they had known then. Now they knew that he was dying—that in all likelihood twelve months was the longest span he could hope for.

They had loved him, amateurs and pros alike—all but Hyde. It saddened them to think that they would never see him walk to the middle again—fair-haired, capless, erect, good at any time, best of all when a big effort was needed—never again hear his little jokes, answer to the nicknames that were mostly of his invention, never again feel the hearty clap of his hand on back or shoulder when something deserving of praise had been done.

And Alured Hyde was his successor! Like a coyote after a lion, like a mongrel cur after a bulldog, game to the last in fight, but gentle and kindly to his friends. Not one of them all believed in Hyde, though they had to admit the fellow could bat and field.

The appointment was not yet made public. But it was a very open secret.

In the circumstances, no member of the Norlandshire ground staff felt that he could afford to decline Hyde's invitation to play for him. There was no money in it, but in the ordinary way they would have been glad of the match practice, and if they were not glad now, there was reason enough why they should not be.

"We'll have enow an' to spare of being bossed by that one before the season's done wi'!" growled Red Harman, the oldest but one of the pros, uncle of Ginger.

So they all felt, the six who turned out on the Saturday. The side was completed by Hyde, Ralph Redgrave, and three other amateurs, all Public school men, and all hoping to get a chance in the county team now that their pal Hyde was to skipper it.

On the face of it, Hyde's eleven was overweight for any local team. But in any case Hyde's Mills would have given their opponents a good game, for there was no duffer or slacker among them.

Walter Tranter lost the toss and Hyde, naturally, took first innings. The pitch looked a beauty, and the first five men on the batting list of the scratch team were Harman, Deeks, Baines, Coote, and Hebblewhite, all tried and proven in county fray. Hyde was No. 6, Ralph No. 7, then came the three aspirants, and, last of all, veteran Roger Rogers, the slow left-hander who had made a big name before the War, and could still get wickets, though nearing the end of his tether.

Not one of the pros threw his wicket away. It is seldom any pro does that, even in a small match. But not one of them really cared about the result of the game, so that each considered only himself, not his side, and that attitude towards a game does not make for victory.

Rod and the Mills team's skipper bowled.

Walter Tranter had been tried out for the county years before. He was not thought

good enough. He knew himself—and his comrades knew him—better by far at thirty-seven than he had been at twenty. He had lost some of his pace, but he had learned much in other ways.

But the Norlandshire pros all knew him. They were wary with Walter, who might have been one of them with a little luck. He got one of the first four wickets; but Rod got the other three—and got them by looking easy money for anyone who could hit.

Four were out for 33. Red Harman, who had gone in first, was still there, and had made twenty odd. Hyde joined him.

Ginger's uncle turned to his nephew as the new county captain walked to the wickets. It was the last ball of an over that had bowled Hebblewhite.

"That lad can bowl," said Red.

"I reckon so," replied Ginger, behind the stumps. "Happen he'll be playing for the county before long."

"I wouldn't wonder much," said Red.

He played carefully two balls from Walter Tranter, then hit him for 3. Hyde made a cut for 4 off the first ball he had—a really good stroke—put the next back to the bowler, and, by scoring a single, came opposite Rod.

Things had not worked out as he had hoped. Rod was as fresh as when he started. But Hyde felt full of confidence after that four.

The ball he had to play looked easy enough. How he came to miss it he could not understand. But miss it he did, though only by the merest fraction of an inch. His middle stump went down.

Out for 5! And he had meant to paste this upstart fellow!

He swung his bat angrily as he walked back to the pavilion.

Ralph came in and took guard. Ralph was not built for a situation such as this. It is hardly too much to say that he was out before the ball was delivered. But it would have beaten him at his best, for he had no notion that Rod could send down a fast ball once in a while with no longer run and no change of action.

He was playing at it after his middle stump had fallen.

The man who followed him made a fluky single. Then the wary Red Harman was enticed out of his crease, missed the ball, and turned to see Ginger whip off his bails before he could get back.

"You young dog!" he growled. "Not a mite of respect for your uncle!"

Ginger grinned.

Not another run was scored. Rod's analysis was nine for 19. And there was really nothing the matter with the pitch. If it troubled any batsman, that was merely because it was faster than any he had been practising upon.

"You'll go in first with Tomson, Rodney," said Walter Tranter.

"Right-ho!" answered Rod.

His place in the Nunwick team had been second wicket down; but he did not mind going in first now. At school he had been looked to for retrieval if the early batsmen failed. It was different with the Mills team.

"Hit 'em, lad!" said burly Dick Tomson, as they walked out together. "Look out for grey old Rogers, but there's nowt much in any of the rest of the crowd."

Hyde put on two of his pals to start with, and over a score of runs came from three overs. Then Rogers was given a turn. But the veteran only needed careful watching, Rod found. The years had taken toll of him; now he knew more than he could do.

The figures on the telegraph-board jumped. Tomson was hitting his hardest. Rod, without seeming to hit nearly as hard, yet kept pace with him. Hebblewhite and Coote, county bowlers as they were, did not trouble Rod. As for Ralph and the other amateurs, they would not have been deadly to the Nunwick tail, he thought.

The hundred went up in an hour—twenty minutes more saw 50 added to it—in two hours the score was 220 for no wicket—Tomson 105, Rodney 101, extras 14.

Then Tranter called his men in.

"It's not worth while going on," said Alured Hyde morosely. "You've won—we're not denying that."

"Mean to say you quit? I wouldn't have thought that of your father's son, Mr. Hyde!"

"Oh, well, what's the use? But if you like we'll go in again," answered Hyde, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Seeing how early it is yet, we do like," said the Mills captain.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

After his father's death RODRODNEY goes to live with the Redgraves at Norchester, a mill town in the North of England. The first night there Rod and RALPH REDGRAVE go to a boxing saloon kept by HARRY HAM and his son HARRY. In a scrap there Ralph fouls Rodney because he cannot beat him. Rod also meets ALURED HYDE, Ralph's enemy, who is son of a millowner, and plays cricket for the county. Playing in the nets a few days later, Rod gets Hyde out three times in three balls. Hyde is furious and swears vengeance!



Rod sent down a ball that looked easy to play. Hyde stepped out—and missed it. His middle stump went down!

This time Hyde went in first with Red Harman. Rod beat and bowled him before he had scored. Ralph followed, though he would rather have waited.

He swiped at Rod. The ball seemed to go off his bat beautifully—a 4 for certain! But it towered, and Ginger was waiting behind the stumps. And Ginger's ready gloves received it as it fell, for all the nasty squirm on it.

A pair of them!

But Rodney was not going to have his way every time and all the time. The tables would be turned presently!

Before the next man was out Hyde and Ralph had left the ground.

It was contrary to all cricket etiquette that the captain should depart thus. But none of the pros seemed at all surprised. Indeed, it appeared that they felt happier without him.

Rod was taken off. His skipper felt that he had had his full share of glory. The scratch side put up a fight, and Red Harman topped 60; but in the end the Mills team won by an innings and 25 runs, without having lost a wicket.

"Son," said old Roger Rogers to Rod, "you're marked out as plain as plain can be to take my place in the Norlandshire side! Roger Rogers—Rod Rodney—there's what the folk that know grammar an' such would call a co-in-ci-dence! An' you can do more than I could at your age—as much, maybe, as I've ever been able to. But don't get above yourself, an' don't think there's no more to learn."

"There's lots more, Mr. Rogers," replied Rod. "And you could teach me it, I'm sure."

"Well, happen I'll have the chance yet. I think they'll make me coach when they retire me, and it won't be long. Luck, young Rodney!"

Arthur Hereward had always said of Rogers that his heart was almost too big for his body. Rod Rodney, whose fate it might be in the fullness of time to fill Hereward's place, sensed that greatness of heart in his first meeting with the veteran pro.

With Bare Fists!

HARRY HIAM and Ginger Harman met in Main Street.

They had been chums at school. Ginger had liked Hiam well, and Harry had thought no end of Ginger. But lately they had drifted apart.

"Hallo, Harry!" said Ginger.

"Hallo, yourself! Why don't you ever come along to our show now?"

"Don't fancy some of the crowd there," answered Ginger bluntly.

"I don't, either. But I have to stick it."

Harry did not look very cheery, Ginger thought. But Harry never had been very cheery, even as a schoolboy. Ginger had often felt sorry for him.

"You look as if you'd had a bit of good luck," said Harry.

"My word, I have! You know they're running a Second Eleven again for the county—first time for five years."

"I guess I heard; but I don't take a lot of interest in cricket."

"Your mistake!" replied Ginger briskly. "You don't seem to me to take much interest in anything. But you may like to know that I've been asked to keep wicket for the Second, and it means a heap to me, because what I want is a place in the county team when Jerrold gets past it."

"I am glad, Ginger!"

And Harry spoke with evident sincerity.

"There's more than that to it. I'm not sure yet, but it's said that Rodney will be asked to play. There's a lot of talk about his bowling last Saturday."

"I knew he could box—didn't know he was a great cricketer. You and he—you're pals, I reckon, Ginger?"

Harry Hiam's face was very wistful just then, but Ginger Harman, in his elation, hardly noticed the wistfulness of it.

"Oh, rather!" he answered. "Of course he's better educated than I am, but there's no swank about him. All the decent fellows like him no end. Do you know him?"

"In a way; though, maybe, you'd hardly call it knowing him. I liked what I saw of him. Expect I shall see more to-night—he's coming to our show."

"Who says so?" snapped Ginger, pricking up his ears at that like a terrier at a suspicious noise.

"Ralph Redgrave—says he'll bring him along. There's something fishy in it, Ginger! It's a put-up job between Redgrave and that sweep Hyde. They want to get your pal to fight Hyde, I reckon."

"I should worry!" retorted Ginger.

"With bare fists—not gloves," Harry said.

"All the worse for Hyde!" Ginger answered. "See here, Harry, is there anything against me breezing in?"

"Well, no, as far as that goes. But I don't think my old man will agree to you seeing the set-to unless you're on the books. Five bob would do that for you, though. Or I might smuggle you in some way if you're hard up—can't be sure, though. They'll fight in the cellar, you know—if it comes off. The old man won't stand for anything but gloves in the saloon."

"You can take my five bob now, if you like! I'm no millionaire, but I can fork out that. And I think you're a dashed good chap, Harry!"

Ginger did not even guess how much those words meant to the boy who had been his friend and admirer two or three years earlier.

"I won't take it now," said Harry, his voice husky.

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"You come along early, and I'll enrol you as a pupil in the ordinary way. You can get your money's worth if you want to; I don't say I could teach you anything else that's worth while, but I could put you up to the ropes in the boxing way."

"I know you could, and if you'll take to cricket I'll give your game a turn."

Harry Hiam shook his head.

"I should never be any good at it," he said. "But you come."

"You bet I will! So long, old sport! I must hurry off; I'm supposed to be taking a message that won't wait."

They parted. Ginger never looked back; but the other lad stood on the busy pavement gazing after him till he was hustled aside by a stout woman with a market-basket.

Ginger was in good time. It chanced that Horry—old Hiam—was in the saloon when he entered.

"Hallo! Don't think I know your mug," said Harry, scanning the newcomer doubtfully.

"Reckon you know my coconut, though," answered Ginger, grinning as he removed his cap. "They say it's the reddest in Norchester. I went to school with Harry."

"Did yer? Goin' to take up boxing? You ought to strip well—wiry, if light, and quick. They say you're a stumper, young Harman, an' no slow one is any use for that job. Pay Harry your fee; he's secretary an' registrar. We'll see what we can make of you."

Ginger was not so sure about that. He had always disliked the gross Horry, and he liked him no better now. But it seemed worth while to pay his footing, in order that he might have a chance to witness Rod take down Alured Hyde.

Before he had been ten minutes in the saloon, however, he found himself with gloves on his fists, facing another light-weight—a lad who knew a lot more than he did about this game, but would never go as far in it as Ginger might go if he cared to try.

The spirit of it got hold of him, and he was not aware of the entrance of Rod Rodney and Ralph Redgrave till they, with half a score of others, had been watching him for several minutes.

The bout had been quite informal. Now both Ginger and his opponent, breathing hard, fell back and dropped their hands.

"This is a bit of a surprise, Ginger!" said Rod.

Ginger started, and whipped round.

"Oh, I met young Harry to-day, and he talked me into having a lesson, or two," he answered.

"You'd soon pick it up!" Rod said.

"Another Jimmy Wilde!" sneered Ralph.

Then Alured Hyde came in, with a following, as usual. Ginger was on the alert. But he never even thought of warning Rod that there were designs against him. He had the most complete faith in his new chum. Rod could take care of himself.

Ralph had had no great difficulty in persuading Rod to come along to the saloon. For the sake of Ralph's father

and mother Rod wanted to keep on decent terms with the swanker. It was not likely that Ralph would try again any such foul trick as had recoiled upon his own head.

But Ralph and Hyde had no definite plan for bringing about the encounter they wanted. On the spur of the moment Hyde resorted to a crude device.

He stepped in front of Rod, and said:

"I want an apology from you, Rodney!"

"Then you want what you aren't a bit likely to get," Rod answered calmly. "What's it for? Getting you out twice on Saturday? But that was all in the game, you know."

"Of course it was! Flukes are all in the game, and you had plenty of them. Not that; but you called me 'Side'!"

"Did I? I'd almost forgotten. Well, it's not your name, I admit; but I don't think it's such a bad misfit as it might be, and I'll see you a long way farther before I'll apologise for it!"

Hyde smacked Rod's face—no mere tap, but a smack that was heard in every corner of the big saloon.

A prompt reply came. Rod smacked. Hyde's hand had stung his cheek; but the force of his buffet did more than sting Alured. It actually made him reel. His face showed a great red mark, and his head was singing.

"You know what that means!" he howled.

"Go on with it!" Rod retorted. "Oh, I'm game! Your turn now! Have a go at the other side—Side!"

"No! You've got to fight me!"

"Right-ho! Chuck me a pair of gloves, someone!"

"And not with gloves, either!"

"Have it as you like."

Then Horry Hiam spoke, growling after his fashion.

"You ain't goin' to use your dukes that way up here," he said. "If it's a bare-fist business you go down below."

For a split second Rod hesitated. He had heard from someone a little about Hiam's cellarage. But what did it matter? He need never go down there again, and he had no unwillingness at all to fight gloveless. He was calm enough on the surface; but beneath it he was aching to get at Hyde and batter him.

"Right-ho!" he said. "Lead down to the nether regions!"

Within five minutes they were hard at it under the brilliant light of the many electric bulbs.

Ralph and Joe Dixon, one of Hyde's disciples, seconded the older fellow; Ginger and Harry Hiam were behind Rod. Horry Hiam was referee, and Geering timekeeper.

The dice were loaded against Rod, and young Hiam was sure of it, while Ginger suspected it. Neither of the two had any confidence in Horry's sense of fair play, and one of them knew Geering for a rascal!

(Alured Hyde can fight; he's not like Ralph. Rod is certainly up against a stiff proposition, with the referee and timekeeper on Hyde's side! Don't miss next week's smashing instalment!)

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