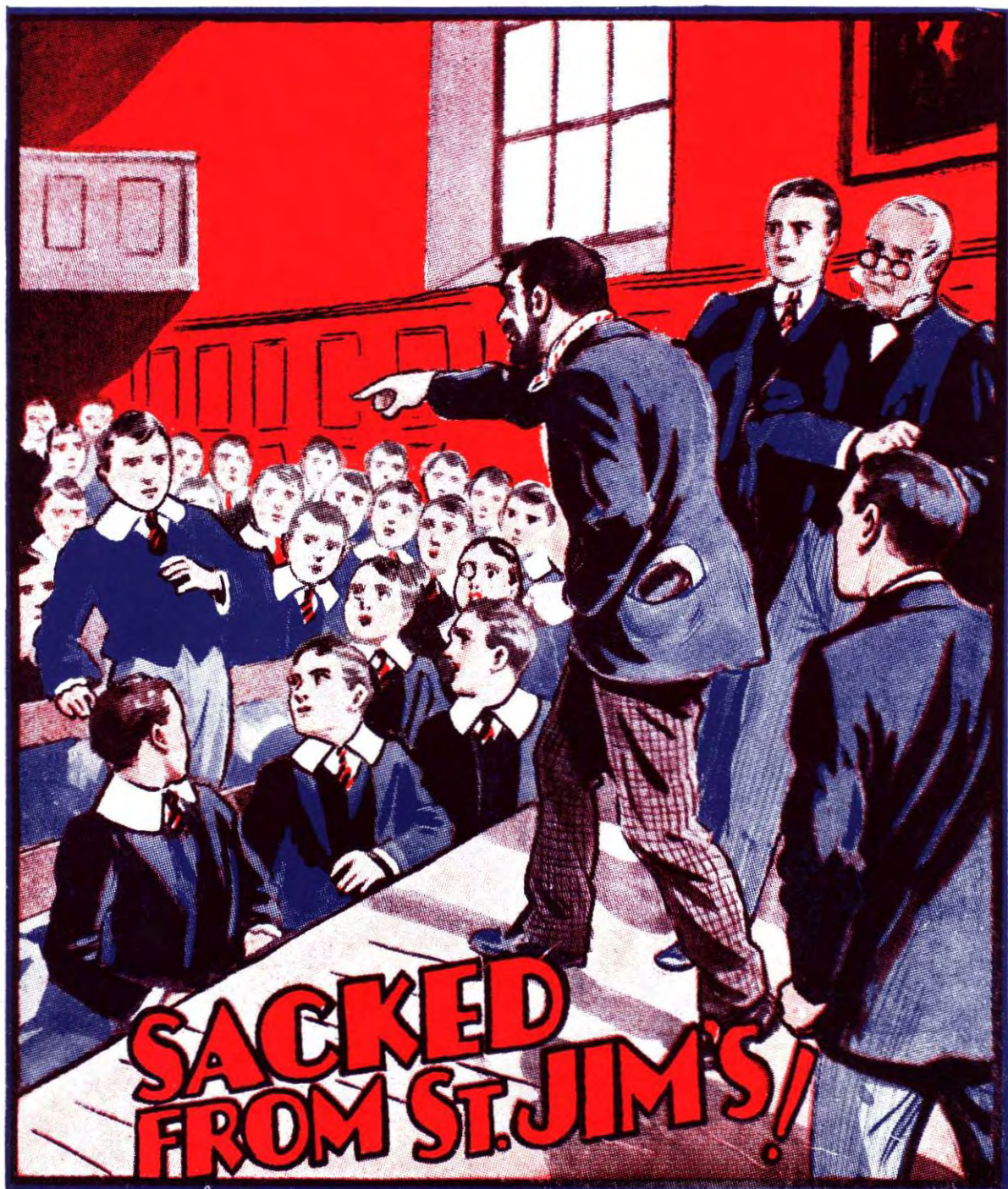


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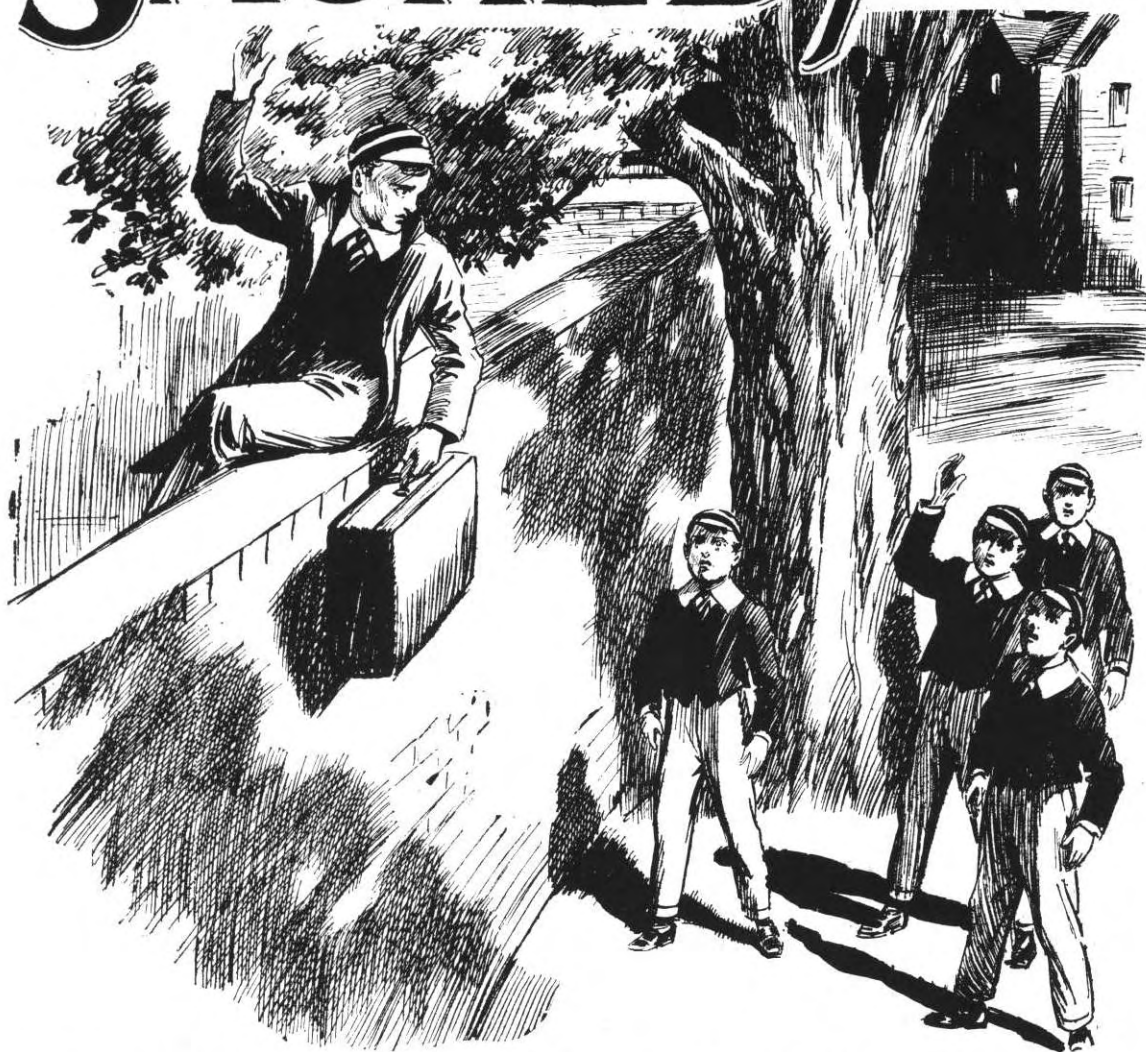
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SACKED *from*



**Who paid Black George to kidnap Figgins on the day of the House cricket match?
Black George says it was Tom Merry—but was it?**

CHAPTER 1. Figgins in Form.

CLACK! The cheery sound of bat meeting ball rang over the junior cricket pitch at St. Jim's.

"Hallo, there's old Figgy bowling!" exclaimed Tom Merry of the Shell as he came out of the School House with Manners and Study No. 6. Monty Lowther was not with them as he was at home on special leave to recover from a sharp attack of influenza. "Let's go and have a look at him. I hear that he's been staggering humanity lately with his bowling."

"Yes, by Jupiter!" said Blake. "Figgy has been coming on wonderfully, and if we lose the House match, kids, it will be Figgy's bowling that does it."

"His batting is jolly good, too," Manners remarked. "When I saw him at practice yesterday he was hitting like a giddy Hobbs—and he had some jolly good bowlers to deal with, too."

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"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry. "Figgy's not going to beat us in the House match, if I have to knock him on the head with a cricket bat!"

"Ha, ha! Well, let's have a look at him."

The juniors stopped and looked at the New House practice.

Figgins & Co. were there in all their glory. Figgins, the long-limbed chief of the New House juniors, Kerr, the canny Scotsman, and Wynn, who hailed from Wales, were the three inseparable chums known through St. Jim's as Figgins & Co.

They were hard at practice now on the cricket pitch, and most of the New House Junior Eleven were with them.

It was not a regular match—simply practice with bat and ball—but it was ample to show the proficiency which Figgins & Co. had attained in the grand old game.

Kerr was at the wicket, and Figgy had just grasped the round red ball again to bowl. He looked up as the School House juniors stopped to watch him.

—FEATURING TOM MERRY & CO., BLAKE & CO., AND FIGGINS & CO.!

ST. JIM'S!

By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

"Hallo, kids!" was Figgy's greeting. "Come to see how we're going to lick you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let's see what you can do with that ball, Figgy," said Blake curiously. "Bet you twopence it goes within a yard of the wicket, Tom Merry!"

"Done!" said Tom Merry promptly.

Figgins snorted. He put extra care into bowling that ball, and the result was disastrous for Kerr. The ball broke in true for the middle stump, and whipped it right out of the ground. Figgy cast a triumphant look at Tom Merry.

"How's that?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, anybody could get a New House silly ass out!" said Tom. "You wouldn't find it so easy to bowl a School House batsman, Figgy!"

"Go to the wicket and see," said Figgins grimly. "Kerr, old man, give Tom Merry that bat—he's going to do wonders with it!"

"Oh, I won't take a hand, thank you!" said Tom airily. "I don't want to interfere with your cricket—you call it cricket, don't you?"

"Bosh! You're afraid to face my bowling!"

"Rats! I'll bat if you like," said Tom Merry instantly.

"Well, go to the wicket and see!"

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry took the bat from Kerr and went to the wicket. The ball was tossed back to Figgins, who gripped it and prepared to bowl.

Every eye was bent curiously upon the pair. Figgins was captain of the Junior Eleven of his House, as Tom Merry was captain of the School House juniors, and so this contest between them was extremely interesting, and might give some idea of how the House match was likely to go.

Figgins had a rather peculiar style of delivery. He ran about six yards and then turned himself into a kind of catherine-wheel and sent the ball down like a shell.

The spectators often grinned when they saw Figgy bowl. But the batsmen usually looked solemn enough.

"Go to it, Figgy!" murmured Blake, as Figgins prepared to bowl to Tom Merry. "Go it! But for all our sakes, old chap, don't tie yourself into a knot that won't come undone!"

Figgy took no notice of Blake's appeal. All his attention was given to the work in hand. He took his run and catherine-wheeled himself, so to speak, and the ball went down like lightning.

Crack! There was a shout as Tom Merry's wicket went down. Tom himself looked amazed.

He had played that ball with great care, and yet, somehow or other, it had eluded his bat, taken the middle stump out of the ground, and scattered the bails.

"How's that?" roared every New House boy on the ground.

And they replied to their own question with another roar:

"Out!"

Tom Merry glanced down at his wrecked wicket, and then at the grinning Figgins.

"You can't do that a second time, Figgy!" he called out.

"Well, I don't know whether I can or not," said Figgy, with becoming modesty, "but if you like to stick the wicket up again I'll have a jolly good try!"

The wicket was set up. Tom Merry grasped the cane handle of the bat with an air of determination.

The New House boys were grinning with anticipation, while those of the School House looked considerably serious.

Tom Merry was certainly the best junior bat in the School House, not excepting Blake.

If Figgins handled him so easily it was a bad look-out for the School House in the House match on Saturday.

Figgins gripped the ball and took his little run. Up and over went his sinewy arm. Down went the ball, and it broke in with a cunning twist on it that would have baffled many a county batsman.

It was a ball that Figgins had practised long and often, and which he seldom found to fail him. It did not fail him in this case.

Tom Merry played a shade too far forward, and the clack of a falling wicket followed. The bails were on the ground.

And the New House juniors were yelling:

"How's that?"

"Out!"

"Good old Figgy!"

"What price the House match?"

Figgins grinned.

"Like to try again, Tom Merry?"

"Yes, hang it!" said Tom, looking puzzled. "I used to think I could bat a little! Give us another, Figgy!"

Again the bails were put on, and Tom Merry took his stand, and the chief of the New House juniors prepared to bowl.

The School House eyes were fixed anxiously upon Tom.

If his wicket fell again it would show that Figgy's bowling was destined to win a victory for his House on Saturday, in the opinion of most present.

Down went the ball.

Clack!

The middle stump was jerked from the ground, and the bails fell.

Tom Merry dropped the bat on the crease.

"Thanks, Figgy! That will do!"

"Good old Figgy!" shouted the juniors. "What price the House match?"

The School House boys strolled on, Tom Merry looking rather red.

"My hat!" said Manners. "I never dreamed that Figgy was in such awful good form! Why, he bowls like a county professional."

Tom Merry made a grimace.

"Yes; Tom Merry made a rotten show against him!" said Blake.

"If you can make a better show, Blake, I'm willing to leave the position of captain to you," said Tom.

"Thanks! But I didn't mean that! You can bat as well as I can, and if you can't stand up to Figgy, I can't, either. But it's beastly!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We've counted on winning that match on Saturday," said Blake. "As a matter of fact, to tell the solid truth, we've crowed a little bit."

"Just a little bit," said Herries.

"As a matter of fact," said D'Arcy, "I weally think that some of you fellahs have crowed a gweat deal about that wicket match."

"Well, we thought we had a sure thing," said Tom Merry. "We've always given the New House the kybosh. And who'd have thought of seeing Figgins develop into a giddy Freeman and Larwood rolled into one?"

"It looks serious," Blake observed thoughtfully. "I don't see what's to be done unless we hark back to Tom Merry's suggestion."

"What's that?"

"Why, knocking Figgins on the head with a cricket bat!"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Tom. "This is too serious a subject for joking. We shall never hear the end of it if the New House win! They'll chip us no end!"

"And all the chaps in our own House who think they ought to be in the eleven, and who've been left out, will start chipping us, too!"

"And after the way we've talked it will make us look a lot of silly asses!"

"Well, so we are!" said Tom Merry desperately. "It's a jolly good idea not to gas, and we ought to have known it. We took too much for granted. We didn't really mean all we said, but it will be brought up against us if we get licked on Saturday. It's too rotten! Look here, we are not

going to be licked! We must win—we will win—we shall win!"

Tom spoke in deadly earnest.

"We'll do our level best," said Blake. "But with Figgy bowling like that—" He concluded with an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"That's it!" said Manners gloomily. "Unless Figgy falls down somewhere and breaks his neck before Saturday we shall be done in!"

"Excuse me, young fellows—"

It was a stranger's voice.

The juniors had been so absorbed in the painful discussion that they had not observed him before.

"Excuse me, young fellows, I think one of you is named Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry looked round.

CHAPTER 2.

The Man from India.

A YOUNGISH man, with a darkly bronzed face and penetrating black eyes, was looking curiously at the juniors. Although they had not observed him before, he had been looking at them for some time, and hardly a word of their conversation had escaped his keen ears. Tom Merry looked at him inquiringly.

"I am Tom Merry," he said. "Do you want to speak to me?"

The bronzed stranger smiled. His face was not a pleasant one, nor had his smile a pleasant effect, having something unconsciously satirical and cynical in it.

"Yes, certainly!" he said. "I see you do not know me."

Tom scanned his face cautiously. Then he shook his head.

"I don't think I have met you before, sir," he replied.

The stranger laughed.

"You have, Tom, but it was a good many years ago, and you were quite a little fellow. I should not have known you, either, had I not caught your name uttered by one of your friends. I am your cousin, Philip Phipps, from India."

Tom Merry made a step back. Philip Phipps! The name brought back keen and unpleasant memories. For it was not long since Amos Keene, for a short time the master of the Shell, had left St. Jim's in disgrace, and ere he went he had confessed to being in the pay of Philip Phipps, and had come to the school with the especial purpose of causing the ruin of Tom Merry. Had he told the truth?

His confession had been made to Tom Merry and the Head of St. Jim's, but whether he had lied or not it was impossible to tell. Tom had not known what to believe, but the matter had soon passed from his mind altogether; he had plenty more pleasant things to think about. It had, in fact, quite slipped his memory until this moment, when the stranger's words brought it all back keenly enough.

"My cousin!" he stammered. "Philip Phipps!"

"Yes!"

Phipps was holding out his hand in a very frank and friendly way. Tom Merry hesitated for a moment. But it was only for a moment. It was surely unfair to condemn Philip Phipps on the word of a man who had proved a rascal and who was a villain by his own confession.

It was only fair, at least, to give Philip Phipps the benefit of the doubt. And so, after a brief and almost imperceptible hesitation, Tom Merry took his cousin's hand and shook it cordially enough.

"I did not know you, Philip," he said. "I heard of you some time ago—"

Philip gave a start.

"How was that?"

"Mr. Keene told me about you," said Tom Merry, looking at him steadily.

"Keene! Amos Keene!"

"Yes; he was a master here. You wrote to him from India while he was here."

"Ah, yes!" said Phipps carelessly. "I knew him at college, you know. We were at Trinity at the same time. I remember writing to him here, now I come to think of it. I have heard nothing from him since he left, though I fancy he went to the bad."

"He went to prison afterwards."

"Ah, poor chap!" said Phipps indifferently, but watching Tom's face keenly as he spoke. "I dare say he talked a good deal about me."

"No; he only spoke of you once, just before he left."

"H'm! I believe I'm detaining you," said Phipps, looking round. "You were just going on to practice, I believe."

"Yes!" said Tom. "These are my friends; we're playing the New House on Saturday."

He introduced the juniors.

"Happy to make your acquaintance," said Philip Phipps

cordially. "I won't interrupt your practice. I'll see you in your study afterwards. Unless customs have changed since I was at St. Jim's there are sometimes quite excellent feasts given in the studies."

All the juniors thawed at once.

"You used to be at St. Jim's, sir?" exclaimed Blake.

Philip Phipps smiled.

"Yes; and I was a School House boy, too. Fifteen years ago I played for the School House against the New House at cricket."

"And you won?" asked half a dozen voices, keenly interested.

"Oh, yes; we beat them hollow!" said Philip Phipps, laughing. "I hope you will have as good luck on Saturday. Who is your captain?"

"Tom Merry!"

"My Cousin Tom! I am glad! Of course, you'll beat them, Tom!"

"We're going to try," said Tom. "But—"

"Nonsense! You're going to win. I shall stay over the Saturday and see the match," said Philip Phipps. "I'm putting up in Rylcombe for a few days, and I shall certainly see the House match. I have heard from your old governess, Miss Fawcett, that you have become a wonderful cricketer, Tom."

"I'm getting on," said Tom, smiling. "Miss Priscilla thinks everything I do is wonderful. But about the House match. I'm afraid—"

"Come, you won't let me see you licked. You've got to beat the New House, Tom. I won't keep you from your practice any longer."

And Philip Phipps, with a nod round, walked on towards the principal's house. He left the juniors looking rather dubiously at one another.

"Your cousin seems a nice sort of chap, Merry," Blake remarked. "I didn't know you had any old St. Jim's boys in the family. Fancy his playing the New House fifteen years ago! Before some of us were born! I say, it will be rotten if we let them lick us, with an old School House boy looking on!"

"Especially as the School House beat the New House in that match," said Tom. "You know the way old boys have—they always say things have gone down since they left the school, and it would be rotten to have Phipps chipping us."

"Well, we must make up our minds to beat them, that is all."

The juniors set to work to practise with an earnestness worthy of the occasion. Meanwhile, Philip Phipps was shown in to the Head of St. Jim's.

Dr. Holmes' manner was very formal as he received the gentleman from India. He had not forgotten the confession of Amos Keene, and he, like Tom Merry, had never been able to make up his mind as to how much of it was truth.

He did not condemn Phipps in his mind, and neither did he exculpate him. Phipps was quite keen enough to see that something was working in the Head's mind, preventing him from being as frank and cordial as he would have been to an old boy revisiting the school after long years spent in a foreign land. Exactly what it was, of course, he could not know, and the Head was not inclined to tell him; but Phipps set to work to remove the unfavourable impression. He succeeded pretty well. He could talk well and fluently, and he had seen much of the world, and his attachment to the old school, real or pretended, was exactly the thing to please the Head, to whom St. Jim's was something like the centre of the universe.

And during the half-hour he spent with Dr. Holmes he did very much to remove the unfavourable impression the Head had of him, and when he left it was with an invitation to lunch with the Head on Saturday, and see the House match afterwards. There was a smile upon Philip Phipps' face as he strolled away from the Head's house.

"Keene must have said something," he murmured to himself. "But it cannot have been anything very definite, and I do not think it will interfere with me in any way. I am glad I came here—I have come at an opportune moment, and, if I am not mistaken, all will go well."

He stopped at the cricket ground to watch the School House juniors at practice. Tom Merry was at the wicket, facing Blake's bowling. He faced it well, and cut the leather all over the ground and made a very good figure at the wicket. But Philip Phipps, before he spoke to Tom, had seen the incident of Figgins' bowling, and he was a judge of form at cricket. That Tom Merry would, in time, become a first-class cricketer was probable enough, or rather, certain, but Phipps did not believe that by Saturday his form would have improved sufficiently to enable him to face Figgins' bowling with confidence.

"The New House will win if Figgins plays," murmured Philip Phipps; and there was a strange smile hovering

round his lips, as if an amusing idea had entered his brain. Tom Merry left the wicket while Phipps was still there, and he came to speak to his cousin.

"You haven't forgotten that feed in the study afterwards?" he asked. "We're going to knock this off at five. Do you care to watch a practice game?"

"Immensely!" said Philip Phipps. "Nothing I like better!"

Tom laughed.

"Then you won't mind waiting?"

"Not at all!"

Phipps sat down under a tree, and smoked a cigar, while the juniors went through their practice. At times that peculiar smile came upon his face again. The practice over, the juniors adjourned to the School House, very red and

"Jolly quarters," he remarked. "This part of the House has been put up since I was at St. Jim's. They make the studies more roomy now."

"Yes," said Tom. "This is the new wing of the School House."

"Very comfy. I feel like a boy again."

Phipps sat down in the only easy-chair, and stretched his legs, which were very long and thin, and took up a great deal of room.

"I say, excuse me a minute, will you?" said Tom Merry. "There's something I've forgotten to say to Blake."

"Certainly!" said Phipps agreeably.

Tom, leaving Manners to entertain the visitor, rushed off to Study No. 6. He heard Blake's voice as he came up to the open door.



The School House eyes were fixed on Tom Merry. If his wicket fell it meant that Figgy's bowling would win the match for his House on Saturday. Down went the ball. Clack! The middle stump was jerked out of the ground. "Good old Figgy!" shouted the New House juniors. "What price the House match?"

healthy, and Philip Phipps was conducted in state to Study No. 10, the quarters of the Terrible Two—Tom Merry and Manners.

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy went off to their own quarters, rather surprised that Tom Merry did not ask them to the feed. The fact was that Tom, in the generosity of his heart, had asked his cousin to a feed in the study, overlooking the fact that the larder was in a state of unexampled bareness.

The fact was that the Terrible Two were in a very low state financially, and supplies in the study had run so low, that they had been driven to taking their tea lately at the common table in the dining-hall, a thing the juniors never did when they could raise the wind sufficiently to provide the meal in their own quarters.

Tom was feeling a little uncomfortable with this knowledge weighing on his mind. Philip Phipps looked round the study with much admiration.

"I should like to have a jaw with that chap from India who used to be in the School House. I really wonder Tom Merry didn't invite us."

"Perhaps the grub's short," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah. Tom Mewwy and Mannahs have been having their tea downstairs several times lately, deah boys."

"Well, if that's the case, he ought to know he could call on us," said Blake. "We'd come to the rescue, to the last bone in the larder—"

"Thanks, awfully!" gasped Tom Merry, bursting into the study.

The trio looked at him.

"Hallo! You look excited!"

"So I am. Look here, I've asked my cousin to a feed, and there's simply nothing in the cupboard. Can you chaps stump us something, and I'll settle with you afterwards."

We can't let an old School House boy go away unfed. It'll make the House look horribly mean."

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Blake heartily. "You've come to the right place. You're welcome to everything there is in the cupboard, old chap!"

"Thanks! You're a good sport, Blake!"

"Don't mention it!" said Blake, throwing open the door of the cupboard with the air of a prince. "There you are."

Tom Merry looked into the cupboard. Then he looked at Jack Blake. Then he looked into the cupboard again.

There was half a loaf, and a fragment of cake that had seen better days. There was a morsel of butter and a cracked egg. There was the remnant of a ham, which gave the whole cupboard a distinctive odour, for the weather was hot, and the ham had been there for a long time. There were a few other remnants.

"Thank you, Blake!" said Tom Merry. "I'll wait till my cousin makes his will in my favour before I feed him on that mouldy ham."

"Well, the supplies have run rather low, and no mistake!" said Blake thoughtfully. "I had my doubts about that ham yesterday. I thought there must be something wrong with it when Herries' bulldog wouldn't eat it."

"If you think I'm going to feed my cousin on what Herries' bulldog turns his nose up at—"

"Don't get ratty, old chap! We can only offer what we've got. I wish it were more, for your sake. But, I say, you can get any amount of tommy at the school shop by paying for it, you know."

"Broke!" said Tom Merry tersely. "Manners is busted, too!"

"That's bad. We're in the same fix, I believe."

Blake ran his hands through his pockets. He brought all sorts of odds and ends to light, but of cash there was the sum of twopence-halfpenny, neither more nor less. Herries added sixpence.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was usually rolling in wealth, went through his pockets and shook his head solemnly.

"I've got a fivah somewhere," he said. "I wemember havin' it, and I put it somewhere, but where I cannot wemembah."

"Hunt for it," said Tom Merry. "I don't know what my cousin will think of my staying away all this time. I hope he won't smell a rat."

D'Arcy felt in all his pockets again; but it was hopeless. The fire refused to come to light.

"It is weally most annoyin'!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's. "I am awfully, fearfully sowwy, deah boy. The beastly thing's got lost somehow."

"Oh, this is rotten!" said Tom Merry. "We're already in debt at the tuckshop as far as old Dame Taggles will let us go. We can't tell Phipps we can't feed him. What's going to be done? I—"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Herries suddenly.

"What is it?"

"Look here!"

Herries was staring out of the window. They stepped towards the window and looked out in the quadrangle, following the direction of Herries' finger.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The figure of Kerr could be seen issuing from the school shop with a basket in his hand. There was no doubt as to what that basket contained.

"Corn in Egypt!" gasped Tom Merry. "I heard some of them say that the New House eleven were standing a feed to Figgins because he's going to knock spots off us in the House match. They've sent Kerr to get the grub. Kerr always gets the best for the money. Kids, we're on to this!"

"It will be risky," said Blake. "As soon as we show ourselves, there'll be a crowd on to us, and—"

"Look here, we've got to fix it. This is my idea; we'll make a rush, and one of us will bolt with the tommy, leaving the others to cover his retreat. It don't matter if the others get jumped on, so long as the one with the basket gets clear."

"Right-ho!" said Blake. "I'll collar the basket."

"I was thinking of doing that myself."

"Oh, no; you can stay and be jumped on!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Oh, I don't care. Come on!"

"We're ready!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Collar the basket, and bolt with it, and take it straight to my study. You three had better come and feed with us. We want to make a party of it, and there's bound to be enough in the basket for a party of six. Come on!"

They rushed down the stairs. To get out into the quad-

rangle and to sprint off so as to get between the New House junior and his destination, was the work of a few minutes.

Kerr spotted the four at once, and he stopped as he saw that they had cut him off from the New House. He did not need telling what their intentions were.

"Rescue!" roared Kerr. "Rescue, New House!"

There was an instant rush of juniors from the direction of the New House. Kerr was so near the building that none of the New House juniors dreamed that the enemy would dare to venture so far from their own quarters to make an attack upon the basket; and indeed, even Tom Merry would not have made the venture had he not been in such a desperate strait.

"Rescue! Rescue!"

The four School House juniors rushed on Kerr. He set down the basket and put up his fists, like the valiant Scotsman he was, to defend it against the School House till his comrades could arrive upon the scene.

Tom Merry received a terrific rap upon the nose, which brought the water to his eyes; but, unheeding, he leaped upon Kerr, and the two went to the ground together.

"Rescue!" yelled Kerr.

"Bolt!" roared Tom Merry.

Blake's grip was on the basket in a moment. He promptly bolted with it. The rescuers were very near at hand, and running hard to get on the spot. Herries and Arthur Augustus threw themselves in the way to cover Blake's retreat with the basket. Tom Merry tore himself loose from Kerr, and rushed to help them.

Figgins went rolling in the quadrangle with Tom Merry's arms entwined lovingly round his neck. Fatty Wynn and Pratt were each seized by Herries, who clung to them in spite of terrific punches. Arthur Augustus seized a New House junior, and struggled with him frantically, yelling at the top of his voice.

"School House! Come on, deah boys! Wescue! Wescue!"

There were a good many School House juniors in the quadrangle, and the noise attracted their attention. Without stopping to ask questions, they rushed into the fray. A free fight was soon in progress. Meanwhile, Blake was running as if on the cinder-path for a big wager, with the basket in his hands.

He reached the School House, went tearing up the stairs, and headlong into the Hall, with blind and breathless haste. There was a yell.

"You young ass! What are you up to?"

It was the voice of Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's. The change from the bright sunny quadrangle to the shady Hall had blinded Blake, and he had rushed right into the captain of the school.

The concussion sent Kildare reeling, and it made Blake sit down suddenly, and the basket went to the floor with a thump.

There was a crash of breaking crockery, and a stream of red spurted from the basket; while oranges and apples and nuts and biscuits flew in all directions. Blake stared dazedly at Kildare.

"I'm sorry!" he gasped.

"I should think you were!" said Kildare grimly. "What the dickens were you bolting into the House like that for? What's that row in the quadrangle?"

"New House cads!" gasped Blake.

Kildare's good-humoured face broke into a smile.

"Ah, another House row, I suppose!"

"Yes, that's it."

"I see you've got a supply of grub there. The New House kids after it?"

"Yes, that's their little game."

"Oh, I see! Well, if they're trying to collar your tommy—"

"It isn't exactly like that, Kildare," murmured Blake.

"What do you mean?"

"You see, I've collared their tommy," said Blake. "That's why they're after me. All's fair in war, you know."

Kildare laughed heartily.

"Get along, you young rascal!"

Blake picked up himself and the basket, and gathered the fallen loot, and made his way a little more slowly to Tom Merry's study.

He was safe from pursuit now. The New House juniors would not venture into the School House. Kildare went out into the quadrangle. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, had also sallied out with a cane in his hand. The appearance of the two seniors put an end to the fight.

The antagonists separated, all of them looking considerably the worse for wear. Figgins called off his bruised and battered band.

"They've done us," said Figgins, grinning. "They've got the grub. We'll have to go without; but we'll make 'em sit up for this on Saturday, kids."

"Go without," said Fatty Wynn, in consternation. "Go without, when we have made up our minds to a feed! Oh, Figgy!"

"Ha, ha! You'd better go into the School House and ask for the grub, then."

"We'll have a whip round, and get a fresh supply," said Kerr. "We'll go for those bouncers another time. We've lifted their tommy often enough, and it's only tit for tat. Come on, let's get some more."

So the feast came off in Figgy's study, after all. But it is with the feast in the School House that we have to deal.

CHAPTER 3. A Study Feed.

BLAKE entered Tom Merry's study in the School House, and set down the basket. Philip Phipps was yawning over a cigar. Manners had tried to entertain him, but the conversational powers of Manners were not extensive, and the man from India was bored. But he looked up with interest as Blake entered.

"Hallo!" he remarked. "Where's Tom Merry?"

"He's just coming," said Blake diplomatically. "He'll be here in a minute. He's been laying in some tommy for tea."

Manners looked at the basket in amazement. "Where did you——" he began.

Blake winked. Manners took the hint and asked no awkward questions. Blake began to set out the contents of the basket. The crash on the floor had not done them any good. There was a bottle of red-currant wine broken, and the spilt fluid had soaked into the ham sandwiches and the loaf, and this could hardly be considered in the light of an improvement. But there was ample more.

There were puddings and pies and cakes, oranges and apples and bananas galore. Figgins & Co. had certainly intended to "do" themselves well that time.

"Shove the kettle on, Manners," said Blake. "Better get the tea made. Tom Merry will be here in a minute."

"Right you are!"
The fire was low, for the afternoon was warm; but Manners stuck the kettle right down into it, and poked the fire underneath. There was a hurried step in the passage, and Tom Merry came in.

"Hallo!" said Phipps, staring at him. "Had an accident?"

"No," said Tom; "only a little row with the New House."

"Oh, you look as if you'd been under a lawn-mower or something!"

Tom was certainly looking rather disreputable.

His collar was torn out, his cap was gone, his hair ruffled, and his nose swollen, and a thin stream of "claret" was oozing from it.

"I'm all right," he said cheerfully. "Or I shall be in a jiffy. Sorry to keep you waiting, Cousin Phil."

"Oh, don't mention it!"

"There are a few guests coming," said Tom Merry. "The chaps I introduced you to on the cricket field, you know; so you know them. Six is a comfy number to feed in a study this size. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes, rather!"

"Here's Herries! Come in, Herries, old chap!"

Herries was looking as worn and dilapidated as Tom Merry himself. He had a black eye, a cut lip, and his jacket was torn down the back.

"Another row with the New House?" drawled Philip Phipps.

"Yes," said Herries. "You see, we collared their—— Ow!"

The last ejaculation was caused by Tom Merry treading heavily upon Herries' toe.

"I say, Merry, mind where you're stamping with your big hoofs!" exclaimed Herries, who was always rather dense. "You've fairly squashed my little toe!"

"Oh, blow your little toe!"

"Well, that's jolly civil to a guest, I must say. As I was saying, Mr. Phipps——"

Blake dug his elbow in Herries' side. The would-be narrator broke off with a gasp.

"I say, Blake, what are you shoving for?"

"Hold your row!" whispered Blake fiercely.

"That's all very well. Tom Merry stamps on my feet,

and you nearly puncture me in the ribs, and then you want me to hold my row. I——"

"Shut up!"

"Well, then, let me finish what I was saying. We collared——"

"Hallo, here's D'Arcy!" exclaimed Blake hurriedly. "Hallo, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus came into the study. He was looking even worse than Tom Merry or Herries. His beautiful waistcoat had been ripped open, and his nice tie torn off. His trousers were crumpled and muddy. His boots had been trampled on, and his hair ruffled. There was a thin stream of red issuing from the corner of his mouth, and his nose was swollen to about twice its usual size.

"More rows?" asked Philip Phipps, with interest.

"Weally, those New House juniors are extremely wuff," said D'Arcy. "Of course, I don't mind a wow every now and again, but weally some of them are feafuhl wuffians. Pwatt actually jumped on my eyeglass and bwoked it."

"Horrid!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, it is extremely howwid, Tom Mewwy, for it is the tenth eyeglass that has been broken this term, and they are awfully beastly expensive, don't you know!"

"Shocking! Never mind; let's have tea. Have you got the tea made, Manners?"

"Just on," said Manners.

"I'm afraid I can't sit down to tea in this extremely shockin' state," said Arthur Augustus, looking down at his clothes. "It would not show a pwopah respect for Mr. Phipps."

"Oh, don't mind me!" said Philip Phipps. "This reminds me of old times, when we used to row with the New House fifteen years ago."

"Weally! How intewestin'!" said D'Arcy. "But I weally must go and change, deah boys. I shall only keep you waitin' for half an hour, and——"

"Collar him!" said Tom Merry, as Gussy turned towards the door.

Blake properly collared him and plumped him down in a chair.

"Blake, don't be so wude and wuff!"

"Sit there! If you move we'll slaughter you!"

"But——"

"Dry up!"

"I wufuse to dwy up. And unless you cease this extreme wuffness, Blake, our fwendship will come to a sudden termination."

"You'll come to a sudden termination yourself, if you don't look out," said Blake darkly. "If you get off that chair I'll stick this pin into you. Not a word! Dry up! Manners, old man, how's that tea getting on?"

"I've made it," said Manners. "The pot's hardly big enough for six, but we can add some water afterwards. Here we are."

Manners had filled the teapot to the brim with boiling water. He brought it across to the table, and stumbled over Philip Phipps' long legs, and a spurt of the scalding tea escaped from the spout. Phipps gave a fiendish yell.

He leaped to his feet, so startling Manners that the teapot fell from his hand and went to the floor with a crash. It broke into a dozen pieces, and the tea was splashed far and wide, nearly everybody in the study coming in for a few drops.

"Ow, ow, ow!" yelled Phipps, clapping his leg and dancing. "You silly ass! You've scalded me! Ow, ow!"

"I'm sorry," said Manners.

"You've busted the teapot," said Tom Merry. "You are an ass, Manners!"

"Well, he startled me, jumping up like that."

"Ow!" gasped Phipps. He was looking furious, but he calmed down a little as the pain abated, and he remembered where he was. "By Jove, you scalded me! Never mind." He sat down again, still nursing his leg tenderly.

"I say, we're all awfully sorry," said Tom Merry. "Manners is a clumsy owl! I hope you're not hurt very much, Cousin Phil."

"Er——no; it's all right," said Phipps unamiably.

"Buzz off to Gore's study and get his teapot, Manners," said Tom. "He's out, so you'll be able to borrow it."

And Manners buzzed off. He was not trusted to make the tea a second time, Tom Merry taking charge of the teapot, and Philip Phipps taking more care of his legs.

This time the tea was successfully made and poured out, and the tea commenced. In spite of the late fray, and the prominent signs of it they bore, the juniors enjoyed the feed, and Philip Phipps seemed to have a good time.

He was very chatty with the juniors, telling them stories of tiger-hunting and pig-sticking and polo in India, and

old yarns of former days at St. Jim's, to which they listened with breathless interest. He showed, too, a keen interest in the House match, and asked all sorts of questions, and was especially curious about the splendid form Figgins had lately shown.

"But you don't mean to say that the New House are going to win!" he exclaimed.

"Well, we can't say, Mr. Phipps," said Blake. "But unless we try Tom Merry's idea with Figgy, I fancy he'll give us a lot of trouble."

"Tom's method! What is it?"

"Why, knocking him on the head with a bat just before the match."

Phipps laughed.

"Well, I hope it won't come to that," he said. "But really you must make up your mind to win. I've heard old boys say that the School House spirit has gone down since their time; that the New House is always Cock House now. I don't believe it, of course."

"It isn't so!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "We beat the New House hollow all along the line. We give 'em the kybosh at rowing, running, fives, and tennis, and—"

"At everything except cricket?" said Phipps slyly.

Tom turned red.

"We'll beat them at that, too!" he exclaimed.

Phipps rose to his feet.

"Well, I hope you will," he remarked. "There are some of the old School House fellows at Boggleywallah, and when I go back I should like to tell them that the old House is keeping its end up."

And Philip Phipps, with many thanks for the study feed, took his leave. He left a rather unpleasant impression behind him. He had been very agreeable, yet he had contrived to convey the impression that he didn't consider the juniors were keeping up the honour of their House in an adequate way—a point the youngsters were, of course, very sore upon.

Tom Merry looked round uncomfortably.

"It's beastly that that chap should visit us just now," he said. "It would be bad enough to be licked by the New House, but to have the tale told all over the world is distinctly rotten. It's unfortunate."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"The only thing is," said Tom Merry, clicking his teeth, "we've got to beat the New House. We're not going to have that chap sneering at us, and saying we can't play cricket, and the School House isn't keeping its end up like it did in his time. Hang it all! You hear, kids! We're going to beat the New House by hook or by crook!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Mysterious Disappearance of Figgins.

SATURDAY! A fine summer's morning. The day of the House match had dawned at last. All the juniors of St. Jim's had been looking forward to it with mingled feelings. In the New House was an anticipation of triumph, all the more keen because it was really only of late weeks that the New House hopes had risen high.

The School House were dubious. They hoped, but they lacked the feeling of certainty that usually preceded any contest between the rival Houses. The senior House match had been won by the School House; a fact which made Figgins & Co. all the more keen to win the junior match for their House.

Great interest was taken in the match at St. Jim's. Both elevens were in good form, and the match was certain to be a splendid one for juniors, whichever side gained the victory. Kildare, captain of St. Jim's, and Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, had been appointed umpires, and most of the Sixth and the Fifth had signified their intention of being present and seeing the match.

As only an afternoon was at the disposal of the cricketers, and the batting was likely to be good on both sides, a single-innings match had been agreed upon, in order that there might be a good chance of finishing before the time came for the stumps to be drawn.

Stumps were to be pitched at two o'clock, giving the whole of a long afternoon for the contest.

The Terrible Two came down in good time to the pitch. Tom Merry looked very fit in flannels, with his bat under his arm, but his usually cheery face was serious. The importance of the match was weighing heavily upon his mind. Philip Phipps was already on the ground, and he nodded to Tom.

"Fine day for your match, Tom," he remarked. "Splendid cricket weather."

"Yes, we're getting some summer at last," said Tom.

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"We couldn't expect anything nicer than this, Phil. Hallo, Kerr!"

Kerr was looking rather worried.

"Have you seen Figgins?" he asked.

Tom stared at him.

"Figgins? No. Where is he?"

"That's just what I want to know," said Kerr; and he walked away towards the New House.

"Nothing wrong with Figgins, I hope," Phipps remarked. "Of course, it would be a bit of luck for you if he were ill, or anything."

"We don't want luck like that," said Blake, joining in. "Better get licked than win because Figgy was ill. But he's not ill."

"Have you seen him?" asked Fatty Wynn anxiously.

"Yes, I saw him go out half an hour ago. Hasn't he come in yet?"

"We can't find him anywhere."

"Look in the gym. He might be there."

And Fatty Wynn walked away to the gymnasium.

Tom Merry glanced at his watch.

"I say, this is queer of Figgins!" he exclaimed. "It's time in five minutes to toss for choice of innings, and Figgy seems to have disappeared."

"Well, I saw him go out," said Blake. "Something has detained him, I suppose."

New House juniors were running in all directions looking for Figgins.

Fatty Wynn came out of the gym, and Kerr returned from the New House, and both looked disappointed.

Questions were asked on all sides, but a satisfactory answer could not be obtained.

Others beside Blake had seen Figgins go out at the gates just before half-past one, but no one had seen him return.

Juniors went out into the road to look for him, but up or down the long, white lane there was no sign of Figgins.

"I say, what's the trouble here?" exclaimed Kildare, coming up to Tom Merry. "Where's Figgins? It's time you tossed."

"I know, Kildare; but Figgins isn't here."

"Not here?"

"No; we can't find him anywhere."

Kildare looked puzzled.

"I don't understand this at all," he said.

"I don't either. He left the school, and hasn't come in. I hope no accident has happened to him. It would be too rotten just before the match."

Kildare looked at the Terrible Two keenly.

"I suppose this is no little trick of yours?" he said quietly.

Tom Merry stared.

"Trick! I don't know what you're driving at, Kildare."

"I mean, none of you know anything about Figgy's disappearance?"

Tom flushed indignantly.

"You surely don't think we're capable of trying to keep him out of the match, Kildare, because he's in good form?" he exclaimed.

"No, certainly not. I thought it might be one of the pranks you juniors are so fond of playing upon one another, that is all."

"We shouldn't play a trick on a fellow in the opposing eleven, just before a match," said Manners.

"No, I suppose not."

"I say," exclaimed Monteith, the New House prefect, and Kildare's fellow umpire, coming up, "I say, Kildare, this is queer news about Figgins. He's gone out and not come back."

"It seems very queer, Monteith."

"What can the young ass be up to? He can't have forgotten the match."

"Forgotten the match?" exclaimed a dozen astounded voices. "Forgotten the House match?"

Monteith laughed. Such an idea savoured of something like sacrilege to the juniors.

"Well, what has become of him, then?" asked Monteith.

Kildare looked worried.

"I can only imagine that an accident has happened," he said.

Monteith glanced at Tom Merry.

"I suppose there's no practical joking in this matter?" he said. "It isn't one of the juniors' tricks?"

"I have just asked Merry about that, and he has assured me—"

"Well, I was only thinking—"

"What were you thinking?" asked Kildare quickly, seeing that the prefect had something in his mind he had not uttered.

"Well, I was talking to Mr. Phipps just now, and he told me—for a joke, of course—of some remark of Tom Merry's to the effect that the School House could only win the match by getting rid of Figgins first."

There was a general buzz. Every eye was fixed upon Tom Merry.

Tom went scarlet and then pale, and his eyes flashed with indignation.

"Philip Phipps had no right to say anything of the kind," he exclaimed. "It was just a joke I made, that was all, and I didn't put it like that. I just said that it would be a good wheeze to knock Figgy on the head with a cricket bat, or something to that effect. I can't remember the exact words. It was only fun."

"Of course, there was nothing in it," said Kildare. "You surely wouldn't suspect any of the School House boys of keeping Figgins out of the match, Monteith?"

At one time the head prefect of the New House would have seized upon the chance of saying unpleasant things. But lately he had grown to be more just to Kildare than of old, and the two Sixth-Formers were on very friendly terms.

Monteith now had no desire to cause trouble, but he was

Tom understood their looks, and his face was slightly haughty in expression as he turned away.

To one so frank and honourable as Tom was, it was mortifying in the extreme to be suspected of a mean action.

"This is awfully queer," Manners remarked to Tom. "It was silly of Phipps to say that to Monteith. If anything has happened to Figgy, it will give those chaps the impression that you had a hand in it."

Tom looked worried.

"I hope to goodness he will turn up for the match!" he exclaimed.

"I should think he's bound to," said Manners.

They waited anxiously for the half-hour to pass.

Kerr and Wynn mounted their bicycles, and went scouring up and down the road, one either way, to look for Figgins.

They did not come in until the half-hour's grace was almost expired, looking hot and dusty and disappointed.



"Collar him!" The four School House juniors rushed on Kerr. "Rescue!" he yelled. He set down the basket and put up his fists. Tom Merry received a rap on the nose, while Blake grabbed the basket. "Bolt!" roared Tom.

naturally of a suspicious nature, and had very little faith in anybody at all.

"Well, I shouldn't like to say so," he replied, shaking his head, "but in the light of Figgy's disappearance, Tom Merry's words seem queer, that's all. The remark as Mr. Phipps told it to me didn't sound exactly as Merry puts it. But we shall know for certain when Figgy turns up. He's bound to come back some time, I suppose."

Kildare looked at his watch.

"Suppose we put off the match for half an hour, and give him a chance?" he said.

"Good! If he's coming, he'll come by then; and if he doesn't the match will have to be played without him, that's all."

The New House boys looked dismayed.

With Figgins at their head, the New House were certain of success. But without Figgins! It would be an extremely doubtful struggle, if not a certain defeat!

And some of the New House juniors, who happened to be like Monteith, of a suspicious turn of mind, were looking very dubious at Tom Merry.

"You haven't seen Figgins?" asked Kildare.

"No," grunted Fatty Wynn. "I went as far as the village, but he hasn't been seen there that I can find out."

"And I've been a mile up the road," said Kerr. "There's no sign of him anywhere. I can't understand it a bit."

Kildare wore a worried look.

"You don't either of you think that this is a trick of the School House kids?" he asked.

"Oh, no, Kildare," exclaimed the Co. together instantly. "Of course it isn't."

"I'm glad to hear you say so. Some of the juniors in your House have been saying this."

"Silly asses!" said Kerr. "Why, Tom Merry wouldn't dream of keeping Figgins out of the match; and besides, it would be bound to come out afterwards."

"Of course!" said Fatty Wynn. "We play little games on each other, but in a matter like this we shouldn't think of anything of the kind."

Monteith joined them. He was looking serious.

"That's all very well, Wynn," he said, as Fatty made his

last remark, "but it's peculiar that what Tom Merry said about getting rid of Figgins; and his account of the words he used doesn't agree with what I heard from Mr. Phipps."

Fatty Wynn looked puzzled.

"Perhaps Phipps didn't remember correctly," he suggested. "I don't see what he wanted to bring the matter up at all for. But one thing's jolly certain, and that is, that Tom Merry never had a hand in keeping Figgins away from the match."

"Quite certain," said Kerr. "He's not that sort."

"But it's true, isn't it, that Figgins was in such form that the match would be practically a walk-over for our House?" said Monteith.

"Well, yes."

"And the School House had been crowing about their expected victory."

"Well, we always crow at one another, you know."

"I hope there's nothing in it," said Monteith. "I suppose we shall find out for certain when Figgins turns up. Meanwhile, it's impossible to keep back the match any longer. Don't you agree with me, Kildare?"

The captain of St. Jim's gave a nod.

"Certainly, Monteith. If the match is to be played to-day, it will have to start now."

The Co. looked dismayed.

"Start without old Figgy?"

"Well, what else is there to be done?"

"It means a licking for us," said Kerr.

"Have you anything else to suggest?"

"N-no, I suppose not. It wouldn't be possible to postpone the match?"

"That could hardly be done without inconvenience to everybody concerned. Besides, a single player missing from the eleven is not a sufficient reason. You can play a substitute."

"We've nobody a patch on Figgins. But I suppose it must be so."

"Another thing. If Figgy turns up while the match is going on, you can withdraw the substitute and play him. I am sure Tom Merry will agree to that."

Kerr brightened up.

"Yes, that's a good idea."

They adjourned to the dressing-tent on the junior ground. Tom Merry was waiting for them, a shade upon his face.

"You haven't heard anything of Figgins?" he asked.

"No," said Kerr; "it's jolly mysterious."

Tom Merry looked straight at the Co.

"Look here, you chaps," he said, "some of your fellows have been muttering that I know something about this matter, because of a joke I made the other day, which has got twisted into something I never said at all. Do you think I know anything about Figgy being missing?"

"No!" said the Co. together.

"Mind, if you did suspect me of any dirty meanness of that kind I wouldn't play in the match," said Tom Merry. "If you don't, we'll go ahead."

"It's all rot," said Kerr; "we know you're true blue."

"Good enough! Then call, then, will you?"

Kerr won the toss.

The New House breathed a sigh of relief. Having won the toss, they could bat first, and as the School House would be batting later in the afternoon, there might be time for Figgins to turn up and bring his wonderful bowling powers into play. Tom Merry had readily agreed to Kildare's suggestion that Figgins should come into the team whenever he turned up.

Good batsman as Figgins was, it was not at the wicket that he would be most missed by his comrades, but as a bowler, so there was a chance yet.

It was high time to commence, and now the crowd thickened round the ropes, and there was a buzz of interest as Tom Merry led his men out to the field, and Kerr and Wynn opened the innings for the New House.

CHAPTER 5.

The House Match.

TOM MERRY bowled the first over against Kerr's wicket. Tom was looking somewhat uncomfortable, and not at all his usual self. The thought that among the spectators were some at least, who suspected him of treachery towards his opponents was humiliating and disturbing. It was like a weight upon his mind, and it kept him off his form.

The first over gave Kerr 10 runs, and the New House cheered the splendid start made in the innings.

Jack Blake looked worried. Tom Merry was not bowling as Blake had seen him bowling at the nets in practice, and if his falling-off in form continued the results might be serious.

But Tom Merry was too good a captain to commit blunders. He realised in the first over that he was not up to the mark.

to his bowling form, and at the end of it he tossed the leather to Blake, and took his place at point.

"Not feeling fit?" said Blake, looking at him.

Tom shook his head.

"I shall be all right presently. Just now you and Manners had better have the bowling."

"Right you are!"

Blake bowled to Fatty Wynn.

Fatty took a single and brought Kerr opposite Blake, and Kerr made 8 for the rest of the over.

Kerr was evidently in form, and the New House cheered him loudly. Manners bowled to Fatty Wynn, and Blake fielded, and caught Fatty out at mid-off. Clack! went the ball into Blake's palm, and up it went straight as a dart, to fall into the fieldman's hand again.

"How's that?"

"Out!" said Kildare.

Fatty Wynn carried his bat back to the dressing-tent for a single run.

But Kerr was still knocking up runs, and partners came and went, and he was still batting. At the end of an hour's play the New House score was 80 for four wickets, and of that total 60 belonged to the Scotsman.

Blake and Manners had exerted themselves against Kerr's wicket in vain. Herries and D'Arcy had taken a turn, but equally without avail.

Tom Merry was feeling more like his old self now. The green turf, the bright sun, the cheers and shouts, the merry click of bat and ball, were enough to drive dismal thoughts from any mind but a confirmed misanthrope's, and Tom Merry was too sound and healthy to be anything like a misanthrope.

His merry face was merry once more, his eyes sparkled, and he was the keen and eager cricketer that his comrades knew so well.

"I say, Merry, you'd better take an over," said Blake, as the field crossed once more. "Do you feel up to bowling Kerr?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"I was thinking so myself, Blake."

"Here you are then!"

Blake tossed the ball to Tom Merry, who went to the bowler's end. Kerr saw him go, and prepared for squalls. He knew that Tom was the finest bowler in the School House team, and wondered why he had not taken a hand earlier. Tom Merry gave a little run and sent down the ball.

Clack! Kerr gave a gasp as his off stump flew out of the ground. Tom had bowled him first ball.

There was a frantic cheer from the School House crowd.

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, Merry!"

"Hurrah! Well bowled!"

Kerr was out for 60, a splendid score in a junior match, and one that the New House might well be proud of.

The New House juniors cheered him loudly as he went.

Another New House batsman took his place, and Tom Merry prepared to deliver his second ball. Tom's eyes were sparkling, and he looked in fine form now.

He had done well to relinquish the bowling while he was not feeling fit, but now he was quite his old self again, and prepared for the contest.

Down went the ball like lightning. The New House batsman did his best, but he never really knew where the ball was until he heard the crash of a falling wicket.

Out!

The unfortunate batsman, dismissed for a duck's egg, walked away disconsolately, and warned the next man in to look out for a ball that came down like a rifle-bullet.

Next man in promised to do so, and did; but the next ball, as it happened, was a slow one, with a puzzling leg-break on it, and it beat the batsman all the way.

Clack! The bails were on the ground once more.

The School House yelled themselves hoarse.

"The hat-trick!"

"Bravo!"

"The hat-trick! Hurrah!"

Loud and long were the cheers.

The School House captain had stemmed the tide of the New House success with a vengeance, three wickets falling to three successive balls.

The board now read seven down for 80, last man 0.

Tom Merry's eyes sparkled. Like every true cricketer he found keen enjoyment in doing well for his side, and the cheers that greeted a fine feat were music to his ears.

He was in a mood now to conquer worlds, and he did not intend his success to stop with the "hat-trick," if he could help it.

The next batsman in was very wary. But he might as well have been rash for all the good his wariness did him. For Tom sent down a googly that was a hidden mystery to the batsman, and his bails were down in a twinkling.

"My hat!" shouted Blake. "This is ripping! Keep it up!"

The School House boys cheered loudly.

The New House youngsters were mostly silent. If this sort of thing continued the New House innings would peter out in a lamentable way.

As the cheers died away there was another sound heard on the cricket field, the sound of a distinct and prolonged hiss.

Tom Merry started as if he had trodden on an adder.

Blake looked round him savagely.

"Hiss-s-s-s-s!"

There was no mistaking the sound.

Then a voice was heard:

"Yah! What have you done with Figgins?"

Tom turned pale. He took no notice of the taunting words, affecting not to hear them, but gripped the ball to bowl again as a new batsman came to the wicket.

"Silence, there!" called out Kildare angrily.

The fellow who had called out, whoever he was, relapsed into silence. But Tom Merry's hand was trembling as he bowled again.

It was a ball that a child could have stopped, and Pratt, who was at the wicket, cut it away to the boundary for four with the greatest ease.

The last ball of the over gave him three.

Then Tom walked away from the bowling-crease.

"Don't let that cad's words worry you, Merry," said Blake anxiously. "I'll give the rotter something to howl about when the match is over!"

Tom Merry nodded without speaking. He was too deeply hurt for words.

The taunt, called out in the presence of the whole school, showed that there were some—or, at least, one—who believed that he had deliberately planned to win the match unfairly.

Tom hardly felt angry, but a feeling of wretchedness such as he had never known before took possession of him.

"You'll take the next over, Blake," he said, after a moment or two.

Blake took the ball. Blake's bowling had not been able to touch Kerr's wicket, but it was a little too wily for Pratt, and at the third ball the wicket went to pieces.

Pratt was out for 7, the New House total being now 87. Nine down for 87.

"Last man in!" said Kerr.

Last man in did not remain there long. Manners bowled to him, and Mellish caught the ball, and last man in went out again for a duck's egg.

The New House innings was over. The score was 87, but if Tom Merry had been in good form all through the match, and untroubled by other matters, it was highly probable that the figure would not have been more than half of that. Still, as it was, the School House had every hope of reaching a higher one, and in the School House breasts there was little doubt that they would pull off the match.

The New House were disappointed and annoyed. Figgins had not returned. The innings had lasted two hours, and in that time nothing had been seen or heard of the missing New House captain.

It was now certain to all minds that something must have happened to Figgins, and opinion was growing that Tom Merry knew something about it.

CHAPTER 6.

The School House Wins.

PHILIP PHIPPS patted Tom Merry on the shoulder as he came off the field.

"I congratulate you, Tom!" he exclaimed. "Four wickets for four balls was an achievement, and no mistake. You are not looking very pleased, though."

"I am not feeling pleased," said Tom shortly.

Phipps looked astonished.

"Why, what is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"You haven't any worry on your mind, have you? I say, Tom!" Phipps lowered his voice, but it was perfectly audible to several persons near at hand, as he fully intended it should be. "Tom, there's surely nothing in what some of the boys are saying—that you know anything about the disappearance of Figgins?"

Tom bit his lip.

"Do you think I know anything about it?" he asked, looking his cousin straight in the face.

"How should I know?"

"You ought to know," said Tom, with some heat. "You ought to feel certain that I am incapable of such baseness. You have no right to doubt my honour."

Phipps coloured a little at his tone.

"I don't doubt your honour, Tom. But you were set

on winning the match, and now Figgins has disappeared. And then there was what you said—"

"Which you repeated and twisted into something quite different," said Tom bitterly. "Look here, Cousin Philip, we may as well have this out! If you believe for one moment that I could be guilty of foul play, I don't ever want to speak to you again. Unless you believe that I am a decent fellow, you oughtn't to want to speak to me, either."

"I really don't know what to think about the matter."

"Then don't speak to me again, please!"

"Tom—"

The boy swung round without waiting for him to finish. Phipps bit his lip.

"Merry seems to take this very much to heart," he remarked to Kildare.

"Naturally, I should say," replied the captain of St. Jim's.

"I hardly like to believe that there can be anything in it, yet Merry's manner is certainly very much against him," Phipps observed. "It's an unfortunate occurrence altogether."

"Very unfortunate," said Kildare dryly.

Tom Merry rejoined Manners, looking white and worried.

"I say, don't let this bother you so much," said Manners.

"It will all be explained when Figgy turns up, and they will know you had nothing to do with it."

"Where can he be?" said Tom, in a low voice. "It's horrible! They suspect me of foul play—me! I should think they might have known me better!"

"Only a few cads think so."

"I don't know. Most of the New House fellows are looking at me as if they thought I had murdered Figgins somewhere," said Tom bitterly.

"It's a rotten business! Where on earth can he be?" muttered Manners.

The pitch was being rolled, and during the interval there was a buzz of talk—and Tom Merry was certainly right in thinking that opinion was growing against him in the New House. The Co. still remained firm in their belief, but many of their followers openly said that Tom Merry could tell where Figgins was if he liked.

The interval between the two innings ended, and still there was no sign of Figgins. The School House opened their innings with Blake and Herries. Kerr and Pratt took charge of the bowling.

The "Saints" crowded round the ropes again to watch, many of the New House boys muttering darkly to one another. Without Figgins, the mighty bowler, it was very probable that the School House innings would end in triumph, and that the batsmen would pass the New House total with only five or six wickets down. And, indeed, it soon looked like that.

Blake made 24 before he was caught out by Fatty Wynn, and Herries was responsible for 10. Then Manners obtained 12, and D'Arcy put on 8. Arthur Augustus was batting with his eyeglass on, and it brought him disaster. He stopped to screw it into his eye, to take a better view of a ball Kerr was sending him, with the result that the ball scattered his bails long before he was ready for it.

"I say, that was a twial, I suppose!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Rats!" howled the New House. "You're bowled!"

"Oh, weally, I wasn't weady!"

"You're out!"

"I wufuse to considah myself out!" said D'Arcy. "I await the opinion of the umpire, to whose decision I must, of course, bow with respect!"

The umpire grinned.

"You're out, you young ass!" said Kildare.

D'Arcy stared at him frigidly.

"What did you say, Kildare?"

"I said you were out."

"You added an extwemely wude observation—"

"Oh, get out!"

"I considah that an apology is due to me."

"Are you going?"

"Certainly not, until I am tweated with pwopah respect!"

I wufuse to submit to bein' chawactewised as an ass!"

"Oh, kick him out, somebody!" said the umpire.

"I wufuse—"

"Chuck him out!" roared the New House, with one voice.

Two grinning fieldsmen laid hold of the swell of St. Jim's and bundled him off the field. His voice was still heard in indignant protest after the game had been resumed.

The School House were now 54 for four wickets, and Tom Merry and Mellish were batting now. Tom was looking pale and worried. He batted well because he was exerting himself to play up for his House, but it was not the keen pleasure to him that it would otherwise have been.

He defended his wicket steadily, however, and it soon

became apparent that none of the New House bowlers could touch him.

Kerr was bowling well. He succeeded in performing the "hat trick," as Tom Merry had done in the previous innings, but against Tom Merry's wicket he laboured in vain. Tom added 20 to the score in as many minutes, the other batsmen putting on 4 between them, so after the "hat trick" by Kerr the School House were 78 for seven wickets.

They only wanted 10 more to win when a fresh batsman came in to join Tom Merry. Tom had the bowling, and he was cutting it all over the field. Two boundaries and a single came from the first three balls of the over, and the School House score leaped to 87, and the sides had tied!

Grim and glum were the faces of the New House juniors. The School House wanted only a single run to win, and they had three more wickets to fall. All hope of a victory was now given up by Kerr.

Walsh had the bowling now, and his wicket went down to a yorker from French. Eight down for 87!

Next man in lived through the over, and the last chance of the New House had gone. They knew that Tom Merry's wicket would not fall. But Kerr meant to have a try. It would be something to tie with the rival House, and save the humiliation of a defeat after their triumphant anticipations. And the Scotsman looked very grim and determined as he took the ball for the next over.

Tom Merry was alert and watchful.

"Yah! Where's Figgins? What have you done with Figgys?"

It was a sudden yell from an incensed New House junior. Tom Merry gave a start, and at the same moment the ball flew.

Clack!

The balls flew wide apart, and the middle stump reclined at an inebriated-looking angle.

"Out!" yelled the New House, with one voice.

Tom Merry glanced quietly at his wicket and then put his bat under his arm.

"Stop!" yelled Kerr.

Tom looked back.

"You're not out! I won't have it! It was that cad howling that put you off the ball! Stop where you are!" It was generous of Kerr.

But a roar rose from the New House crowd, and a frantic storm of appeals to the umpire. Monteith was umpire at the batsman's wicket, and with him the decision rested.

He hesitated.

"How's that?" yelled the New House. "How's that, Monteith?"

The prefect walked across to speak to Kildare, and the two seniors were seen consulting for a few moments. Then Monteith spoke:

"Out!"

And Kildare nodded. It was the game, and the game had to be played. Tom Merry had waited for the umpire's decision, and now he walked away to the tent.

Blake looked deeply chagrined.

"Hard cheese, old fellow!" he said, as Tom came into the tent. "It was decent of Kerr, but the umpire's decision was all right!"

Tom Merry nodded.

Nine down for 87! If one more wicket fell without a run being scored, the New House would have succeeded

in making it a draw. Keenly, eagerly, the New House juniors watched the game now.

Tom Merry's place at the wicket was taken by Jones, of the Shell, and Jones was a cautious batsman. He knew how much depended upon him, and he was extremely careful. He stopped five successive balls of the over without attempting a run, and the sixth was carefully flicked away through the slips.

Two New House fieldsmen made a frantic dash for it, but it was useless. The batsmen had crossed. The single run wanted was scored! The School House were cheering wildly. With a rush they swept on to the field, and Jones was slapped on the back till he ached for having scored that single run.

"Who's Cock House at St. Jim's?" yelled a jubilant School House junior.

And his comrades yelled:

"We are! We are!"

But from a New House group came a taunting shout:

"What have you done with Figgins?"

And at that taunt the cheering died away. The School House had beaten their old rivals, had pulled off the House match—but in the midst of the triumph was a canker. Had the match been won by fair play? There was a peculiar smile upon the face of Philip Phipps as he left St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 7.

The Return of Figgins

"Figgins!"

"Figgins!"

"Figgins!"

"Here he is!"

The match had long been over; the cricket field was deserted. Half-past six had chimed out from the clock-tower of St. Jim's. Many of the juniors, as soon as the match was concluded, had gone off to hunt for Figgins, a good many of the seniors also joining in the hunt.

Some of them had returned, tired and disappointed and unsuccessful. Most of them were discussing the mystery and the fact that the Head had sent a message to the police station in Rylcombe, informing the police of the disappearance of Figgins, and requesting that he might be searched for.

That showed that the Head thought there was something very wrong. Just as the half-hour chimed from the tower a shout went up near the gates, and it was echoed and repeated all through the quadrangle.

"Figgins!"

A dusty dishevelled figure came running in at the open gate, red with exertion, gasping for breath. It was Figgins—Figgins, looking as if he had been through an extremely rough time, and as if he had run at express speed to get back to the school, as indeed he had.

A crowd surrounded him at once. The Co., who had come in a few minutes before from a useless search, were the first to spot him, and they rushed upon him in a twinkling.

"Figgys!"

"Where have you been?"

"What's the matter?"

"What happened?"

"Gimme something to drink!" gasped Figgins. "I'm parched!"

Potts, the Office Boy!



Kerr rushed to the fountain in the quadrangle, and in a moment returned with his cap full of water. Figgins plunged his red, burning face into it, and drank. Then he gasped like a fish.

"My hat! I've had a time! How's the match gone?"

"School House won!"

"Hang!"

"By a single wicket!"

"Beastly!"

"Why didn't you come? We should have beaten them hands down. We thought there was an accident. Why didn't you turn up?" demanded Kerr.

"Because I couldn't."

"Why couldn't you?"

"I've been kept away. Where's Tom Merry?"

"There he is, coming this way. But—"

"I want to speak to him."

Figgins wiped his face with his handkerchief, and pushed his way towards Tom Merry. The two leaders of the rival juniors of St. Jim's met face to face, with a buzzing crowd thronging round them. Tom looked at Figgins, and met his eyes steadily.

"I am glad to see you again, Figgins, and to see you're not hurt," he said quietly. "I was afraid there had been an accident, as you did not turn up."

Figgins did not speak. He seemed to have a struggle going on in his mind.

"Some of the fellows," said Tom, "have been saying that I had a hand in keeping you away, so that you couldn't bowl against us in the match. I think you'll be able to saw now that it isn't true."

Figgins started a little.

"Who says that?" he asked hastily.

"A good many of the fellows of your House."

"And some of your own, too," said a New House voice.

Figgins was silent. Every eye was fixed upon him, and never had the chief of the New House juniors been seen to look so extremely uncomfortable.

"Why don't you speak?" said Tom Merry. "You know your reason, whatever it is, for staying away, and I suppose you know that I had nothing to do with it."

Figgins turned redder.

"Tell us all about it, Figgy!" exclaimed a score of voices.

"I— Hang it! I've got nothing to tell you," said Figgins, at last. "I was kept away from the match by a beastly ruffian, who shut me up in the old woodman's hut in the Castle Wood; that's all I know about it."

There was a buzz of excitement.

"Figgy, look here—"

"Oh, let me get away! I'm tired, and want a rest."

"You're keeping something secret!" howled Pratt. "Make him tell it out, chaps! He's trying to screen Tom Merry!"

Tom gave a start.

"There's no reason why Figgins should try to screen me!" he exclaimed. "I haven't the slightest objection to his speaking out. I would much rather he did, of course."

"Here's Mr. Railton."

The Housemaster of the School House was coming through the crowd. He had seen the arrival of Figgins. The boys respectfully made way for him. Figgins showed a strong desire to escape, but Mr. Railton signed to him to stop, and he had no choice but to obey.

"Figgins, I am very glad to see you return unhurt," said Mr. Railton quietly; "but you must give us an explanation. The police have been notified of your disappearance, and asked to search for you. What has caused you to act in this unaccountable manner?"

"I couldn't help it, sir."

"Tell me the reason."

"I was set upon by Black George, sir—you know, that ruffian who hangs about Rylcombe—and he shut me up in the old hut in the wood, and wouldn't let me go till six o'clock."

Mr. Railton looked astounded.

"You amaze me, Figgins! I cannot see the man's motive for such an action."

Figgins coloured uncomfortably.

"Speak out, Figgins! What was his motive?"

"I—I—"

"Come, come, speak out!"

"Well, the ruffian said I was to be shut up there till six o'clock, and from words he let drop I gathered that someone had put him up to it," confessed Figgins. "Of course, he had no motive of his own for wasting an afternoon keeping me shut up there."

Mr. Railton's brow darkened.

"That is very true. He was not intoxicated?"

"He was quite sober, sir."

"It is impossible to suppose that he acted in such a way for nothing," said Mr. Railton slowly. "Is that all, Figgins?"

"Ye-es, sir!"

"He hasn't said why he left the school before the match at all, sir!" howled Pratt.

"Oh, you shut up!" said Figgins.

But Mr. Railton instantly took up the point.

"Pratt is quite right, Figgins. This tale you have told is so extraordinary that it is a tax upon my faith in your honesty to believe it. Mind, I do believe you, but you must keep nothing back. Everything will have to be explained. Why did you leave the school only half an hour before an important match in which you were expected to play as captain?"

"I—I had a note, sir."

"A note!" said Mr. Railton, looking puzzled. "From whom?"

"I don't know, sir."

"This is inexplicable, Figgins. Have you the note now?"

"Yes, sir."

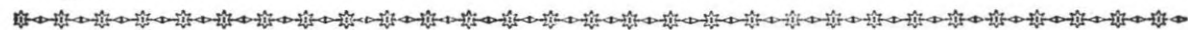
"Give it to me."

Figgins drew a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket, and handed it to the Housemaster. There was a buzz at once. The paper was of a delicate, pearl-grey colour, and scented, and a score of boys knew it at once as the notepaper upon which Miss Priscilla Fawcett was in the habit of writing to Tom Merry.

The number of letters Tom Merry received from his old governess was a standing joke at St. Jim's, and the stationery the old lady used was distinct enough to be known at once.

This note which had been written to Figgins was written upon a half-sheet of notepaper, which had evidently been torn off one of Miss Priscilla's letters.

Tom Merry noted it at once, and a look of wonder came



AN AWKWARD QUESTION!



upon his face. Several pairs of eyes, as well as the Housemaster's, read that note. It ran as follows, in a sprawling, boyish hand:

"Dear George,—Can you come out and speak to me for a minute? I'm in fearful trouble at Greyfriars, and I've bolted. I'm waiting at the top of the lane.—ARTHUR."

Mr. Railton looked puzzled.

"What does this mean, Figgins?"

"Arthur is my cousin, sir, at another school, and that note was given to me by a kid from the village, and I never thought that it was—was a hoax. I thought Arthur was in trouble, and had bolted from the school," said Figgins. "I noticed that—the paper—"

"What about the paper?"

"That it was like Tom Merry gets from his old governess, sir," stammered Figgins. "I might have thought it a joke of his, only there didn't seem any sense in it. And then I knew Tom Merry was in St. Jim's, and hadn't been outside the gates since morning school, so I reckoned he couldn't have sent it. Besides, as it was only a couple of minutes to the top of the lane, I should have gone, anyway."

"And you went?"

"Yes, sir; and just round the corner, under the trees, a pony-cart was waiting. I thought it must be all right, and that Arthur had come in the pony-cart, and then that ruffian Black George suddenly set on me and slammed me into the cart, and held me down there with a rug over me, while another brute drove off. I didn't know what to make of it, but when Black George shoved me into the old hut, and wouldn't let me go till six o'clock, I thought that—"

Figgins halted.

"Well," said the Housemaster quietly, "what did you think?"

"I'd rather not say any more, sir."

"You must go on, Figgins."

"Well, from that and what he said, I thought that I was being kept away from the match, and that somebody had put Black George up to it," said Figgins unwillingly. "I remembered that the note looked like Tom Merry's paper, and then when I examined the writing it didn't seem much like my cousin's. I hadn't noticed that at first."

"So, in short, you believed that Tom Merry had put the ruffian up to this outrage?"

"No!" exclaimed Figgins vehemently. "I didn't! I—I admit the thought crossed my mind, and when I came back I wanted Tom Merry to explain, but I—I couldn't believe him guilty of such a thing. It's impossible!"

"Yaas, wathah, quite imposs!" said D'Arcy.

Tom Merry was white as death. He had listened to the tale with amazement as absolute as that of any present; amazement greater than ever as he heard his own name connected with the outrage.

Surely Figgins did not mean it!

Surely this was some joke, or else a strange and horrible nightmare, and he was not awake at all. Piggy's final words brought a rush of tears to Tom Merry's eyes.

"Thank you, Piggy!" he said, his voice shaking a little. "I can only say that I know nothing at all of the matter. I am in the dark as much as you are."

There was a murmur from the crowd of boys. It was a murmur in which amazement was blended with disbelief. Tom looked round proudly.

"Does anybody here doubt my word?"

He flung out the question like a challenge.

"It is not a question of that, Merry," said Mr. Railton quietly. "This is a matter of proofs, and proofs will, I think, be easy to obtain. This ruffian, Black George, can be found, and when he is arrested he may be compelled to tell the truth."

Tom drew a deep breath.

"I hope so, sir."

Mr. Railton looked at him keenly. Was it possible that Tom Merry was guilty? He had always known the boy as frank and brave and true, yet the evidence against him was almost overwhelming, and the Housemaster knew how keenly in earnest Tom had been to win the match for his side. Was it possible that the boy had yielded to that temptation?

"The matter will be reported to the Head at once," said the Housemaster quietly. "Then it must stand over till Black George is detained."

He was turning away when Gore's voice was heard.

"Let him explain how the note came to be written on his paper, sir."

"I have said that the matter shall stand over for the

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present," said Mr. Railton. "However, if Merry has an explanation to give it is only fair that he should be allowed to give it at once. You are quite right, Gore."

Gore coloured a little. He had not meant his remark for Tom Merry's benefit, but quite the reverse, as Mr. Railton probably knew.

The Housemaster looked at Tom.

"If that note was written by the poacher, or somebody else, Merry, can you explain how your notepaper came into his hands?"

Tom shook his head.

"You do not deny that it is yours?"

"No, sir! It has been torn off a letter sent by my old governess, I think. I have never seen any other paper at St. Jim's like it."



"Then it must have come from your study."

"I suppose so, sir!"

"Nothing in that," said Jack Blake. "It may have been chucked away with old rubbish in the wastepaper-basket and picked up by somebody."

"It is quite clean," said Gore.

"It does not look as if it had been thrown away," said Mr. Railton. "Still, it is possible. I am going now to speak to the Head. I earnestly counsel you lads not to make up your minds about this matter until definite proof has been obtained. It is very easy to commit an act of gross injustice by proceeding too hastily."

And Mr. Railton walked away towards the principal's house, with the letter in his hand. Kildare and Monteith hastily followed him.

Tom Merry remained standing, white and silent. Some of the boys hissed him, or gave him derisive looks. He

did not seem to see them. Manners slipped his arm through Tom's

"Come on, old chap; no good sticking here!"

Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy came nearer the Terrible Two.

"I want to say," said Blake, looking round with an extremely aggressive manner, "that I believe Tom Merry is innocent of doing anything underhand, and that I'm willing to fight anybody who doesn't agree with me. I can't say fairer than that."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.



"An egg from the hand of Herries suddenly smashed on Blake's ear. The next second one broke on his right ear, and then from all sides as the Combine appeared on the scene. Phipps yelled like a maniac under the storm of eggs.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Blake was looking at Figgins. Poor Figgins was looking the picture of misery. The Co. were silent; they did not know what to think. Tom Merry and Manners turned to go, and Study No. 6 prepared to march with them as a sort of guard of honour, to testify to their faith. Figgins started forward.

"Stop a minute, Merry! I want to speak to you."

Tom turned his head.

"What is it, Figgins?"

"Look here! Things look suspicious. You'll admit that?"

"I can't help admitting it."

"But all the same, I don't believe you had anything to do with it, Merry, and there's my list on it," said Figgins, holding out his hand.

Tom grasped it warmly.

"Thank you, Figgy, old man! If you believe in me, I can stand what the rest think. I shouldn't like you to believe that I could play a blackguardly trick like that."

"I don't believe it for a moment."

Somewhat comforted, Tom Merry went on his way, leaving the crowd in a buzz behind him. In spite of Figgy's act of faith and his influence in his House, it was pretty plain that most of the New House juniors had made up their minds that Tom Merry was guilty.

Meanwhile, Kildare and Monteith were speaking to the Housemaster before he entered the principal's study. The same thought had occurred to both.

"Don't you think, sir," said Monteith, "that it would be best to keep the police out of this matter if possible? We don't want a scandal, to make St. Jim's the talk of the country."

"That's what I was thinking," said Kildare. "If the poacher is arrested and confesses that he was bribed to commit this outrage by a fellow of St. Jim's, it will ring through the country. I cannot quite believe that Tom Merry is guilty. But if he is we don't want St. Jim's to be disgraced."

Mr. Railton looked thoughtful.

"But we must hear the poacher's evidence," he said.

"We might find him, sir, and make him come here. He must know he is liable to a term of imprisonment, and so if we find him I expect he will be submissive enough if a chance of escape is held out to him. Otherwise, even if he is arrested, he may prove obstinate and refuse to say anything."

"You are right. If you can get the scoundrel here so that we can satisfy ourselves, every useful purpose will be served," said the Housemaster.

"We will manage that, sir."

Mr. Railton nodded and left them. Kildare glanced at Monteith.

"We can arrange it, Monteith?"

"Rather—if we have to wring the rascal's neck for him first!" said the prefect. "We'll get him here."

CHAPTER 8.

Expelled From the School.

DR. HOLMES was in discussion with Mr. Railton, in his study, and looked extremely worried about an hour later when a tap came at the door.

"Come in!" called out the Head of St. Jim's.

Kildare entered. Behind him came Monteith, with his arm linked in that of a black-bearded, ruffianly-looking fellow in a fur cap. The latter stood shambling and shuffling nervously, his shifty eyes wandering round the room, and refusing to look steadfastly at anything.

"Who is this man?" asked the Head.

"Black George, sir. We found him skulking in the wood, and persuaded him to come," said Kildare. "We have promised him a safe conduct if he tells you all you ask him, sir."

"Very good! Was he willing to come?"

"I didn't ask him, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's simply. "He had to come or take a fearful hiding, and then be carried here. I suppose he liked to walk best."

Dr. Holmes smiled slightly. He adjusted his pince-nez and looked steadily at the ruffian.

"My man," he said quietly, "you know that you are liable to arrest for kidnapping a junior belonging to this school. You may be allowed to escape if you tell the whole truth. Why did you do it?"

"I did it for five jimmy-o-goblins," said Black George sullenly.

"Who employed you?"

The ruffian hesitated.

"That is the important point," said the Head. "If you refuse to answer, I shall detain you here and telephone for the police."

The ruffian shifted uneasily.

"It was a boy belonging to this 'ere school," he said at last. "He said as it was only a joke to keep a feller away from a cricket match, and I never thought any harm."

"What was the name of the boy?"

"I dunno!"

"Would you know him again?"

"Oh, yes; but—"

"Mr. Railton, will you kindly have the whole school assembled in Hall at once? This man will then pick out the boy he mentions."

"Certainly, sir!" And Mr. Railton left the study.

Black George was looking more uneasy than ever. He

fumbled with his fur cap, and shifted from one leg to the other.

"I don't see as I want to give 'im away!" he mumbled.

"You have no choice in the matter. That is the price of your release."

"I didn't think any harm. He said it was a joke—"

"Possibly; but it happens to have been more than a joke. You need say no more."

There was silence in the study till Mr. Railton returned to say that the school was assembled in the Hall. The doctor rose and proceeded thither with Mr. Railton, followed by Kildare and Monteith with the poacher.

There was a buzz in the Hall. All the boys could be seen in the order of their Forms, and Tom Merry could be seen in his place in the Shell. Manners was by his side, but the rest of the Shell seemed somewhat desirous of giving Tom a wide berth. Silence fell as the doctor entered and mounted the dais.

"Boys," said the Head slowly, "this—this person"—with a wave of the hand towards the poacher—"has confessed that he kidnapped Figgins this afternoon, being employed to do so by a boy of this school, who told him that Figgins was to be kept away from a cricket match for a joke."

There was a murmur.

"He will now proceed to pick out the boy, whose name he does not know," resumed the Head. "All of you remain where you are. You can proceed, my man."

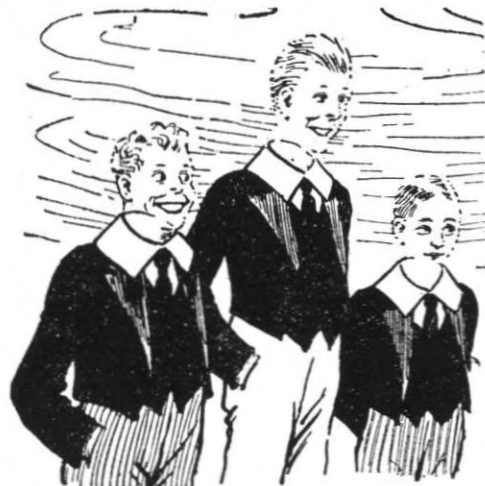
"I don't want—"

"Do as you are told, and at once!"

The ruffian looked along the lines of boys, his shifty eyes seeking their faces. As he caught sight of Tom Merry's face, his hand rose to point to the captain of the Shell.

"There he is!"

The VANISHING THREE!



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Tom Merry started.

"It's a lie!" he cried huskily. "A lie—a foul lie!"

"I didn't want to give you away," said Black George, mumbling. "You told me it was only a joke on the other chap, and now they say it's a matter of prison. It's your own fault!"

"You—your foul liar! I never said anything of the kind to you. I—"

Tom's voice was drowned by the roar that went up.

"Tom did it!"

"He's guilty!"

"Shame!"

"Boo!"

"Kick him out!"

Tom's face was white as chalk at the shock. Manners, his own chum, was staring at him with dazed eyes, as if he believed it, too. Was the whole world gone mad—or was he dreaming? Could it really be that he—Tom Merry—was being howled at and hissed at by his schoolfellows; that in the faces round him he could read nothing but hatred and scorn? The doctor's voice rang through the din.

"Silence! Step out here, Merry!"

Tom almost reeled out from the ranks of the Shell. He was dazed, almost stupefied. The Head's face was black with wrath.

"Merry, you are guilty—guilty of this wicked and cowardly outrage, calculated to bring undying disgrace upon the school if it becomes public. The proof is complete; do not add to your guilt by falsehood. Unhappy boy! What could have induced you to be guilty of this cowardly and abominable treachery?"

Tom did not reply. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he stared wildly at the Head.

"You do not speak," said Dr. Holmes. "I do not wonder. What, indeed, could you have to say? Merry, you must be aware that now your guilt is known, there is but one step I can take. You have disgraced the school and yourself! You leave St. Jim's to-morrow morning, sir! You are expelled from the school! Go!"

Without a word—for he was not capable of speech at that moment—Tom turned and walked unsteadily to the door. A howl of scorn and contempt followed him as he disappeared.

CHAPTER 9.

Backing Up Tom Merry!

TOM MERRY sat alone in his study, that study which had been the scene of many a feed and frolic, which he now looked upon for the last time.

In the morning he was to leave St. Jim's—for ever. The rows with Study No. 6, and the conflicts with Figgins & Co. of the New House, the fun and frolic of his life at St. Jim's were over. He was to leave the old school he loved so well, and to leave it with a stain upon his name.

No wonder the boy sat silent and stricken in the growing dark in his room, thinking miserably of what was passed, and of what was to come.

He had been expelled, and since he had heard his sentence, a sentence from which there was no appeal, he had seen only the averted looks or glances of scorn among the school fellows to whom he had been leader and a true comrade.

He was alone. Even his own chums seemed to have forsaken him, and to have followed the example of all the rest of the school.

And that thought brought the moisture to the eyes of Tom Merry.

"All of them believe me guilty!"

He muttered the words aloud.

"Blake, Figgins, Manners—all of them! Oh, what shall I do?"

He covered his face with his hands.

The study door opened.

Tom Merry looked up dully. In the thickening gloom of the study he could not see who it was that entered.

A dim form came towards him, and he heard a choking breath.

"Tom! Tom, old fellow!"

It was Manners.

Tom gave a start.

"I'm here," he said, in a low voice.

"Tom, old chap, I—I beg your pardon. I—I half believed it for a minute when that brute Black George pointed you out. But now—"

Tom gave a bound.

"Do you believe in me still, Manners?"

"Yes, yes! A thousand times yes!" cried Manners vehemently. "I was a silly ass to doubt for a moment; but

it seemed so—so— You understand? Why should Black George say you did it, if you didn't?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I have never done anything to him that I know of, and I cannot guess why he should lie to ruin me. But he lied!"

"I know he did, Tom. He lied, like the villain he is," said Manners, pressing Tom's hand. "I know you are innocent. I know you never played that trick on Figgins."

"Thank you, old chap!" said Tom, with a break in his voice. "It's horrible to leave St. Jim's like this, but it's a comfort to know that you believe me innocent."

"Leave St. Jim's?"

"Of course—I'm expelled."

"You can't! You shan't go! Why, the old school won't be the same without you. If you go, I go, too! I won't stay! And Monty Lowther, I'll write to him, and he'll leave, too!"

Tap!

It was a gentle knock at the door.

Neither of the chums noticed it. Their thoughts were elsewhere.

"I won't stay without you," went on Manners. "Perhaps the Head will relent. Perhaps we shall be able to get at the truth somehow."

The door opened.

"Hallo! Who's there?"

"Only us," said the familiar voice of Jack Blake. "I see you're all in the dark. Can we come in? I don't want to bother you."

"Oh, come in!"

Study No. 6 came in, the three chums of the Fourth—Blake, Herries, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They groped their way in.

"We've come to speak to you, Merry," said Blake. "We want to say we don't believe this thing about you."

Tom could not speak. His voice choked in his throat.

"We believe in you, kid," said Blake emphatically. "I admit that at first I was staggered. The way that poacher chap rolled out lies was enough to stagger humanity."

"It certainly was," said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"But we've thought it over, and put our heads together, and come to the conclusion that we were silly asses to think for a moment that you could do such a thing."

"And now we want to assure you on that point. We know you're innocent, that's all."

"Thanks, you fellows!" said Tom Merry, in a suspiciously trembling voice. "I might have known you would stand by me. The rest of the School House have made up their minds, though, and the New House are all down on me."

"Oh, the New House," said Blake, with a sniff. "Those silly asses don't know enough to go in when it rains. As for the School House, I admit that's rotten. You see, the evidence was pretty strong, and they don't all know you as well as we do. But when one has been having rows with a chap as often as we have with you one gets to know him."

Tom smiled faintly.

"And we have decided how to deal with the matter," went on Blake. "We have decided to knock down on the spot every kid who says anything against you whatever. After a time this is bound to have some effect."

"Yaas, wathah!"

A voice was heard in the passage.

"Here's the study. There's no light. I suppose he's here, though."

It was a well-known voice.

"It's Figgins & Co.," whispered Blake. "Stand ready! Give 'em the kybosh the moment they get in!"

CHAPTER 10.

Figgins' Great Idea!

FIGGINS & CO. were coming along the dusty corridor towards Tom Merry's study in the School House.

"Here you are!" said the great Figgins, stopping at the open door and looking in.

Blake drew a deep breath.

That the New House all believed Tom Merry guilty he knew, and he naturally supposed that Figgins & Co. shared the opinion of the rest of the House.

He jumped to the conclusion that the three had come over from the New House to give voice to their opinion on the subject, and so he was ready to give them a warm reception.

"Ready, kids?" breathed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Blake was on one side of the door. Herries and D'Arcy on the other. Tom Merry and Manners were still at the window.

Figgins & Co. came unsuspectingly in,

"Charge!" roared Blake.

Study No. 6 charged.

Figgins went down with a crash, with Blake on top of him. Fatty Wynn collapsed with a gasp under the weight of Herries, and Kerr went staggering across the study with Arthur Augustus clinging to him.

"What the—who the—how the—" spluttered Figgins.

"Who the—what the—" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"What's the game?" roared Kerr, getting a grip on Arthur Augustus and jamming him against the table. Gussy had caught a Tartar, in fact. "What's the giddy game, hey?"

"You're bweakin' my back!" gasped D'Arcy, struggling vainly in the grip of the young athletic Scotsman. "You are weally causin' me the most exewuciatin' pain, deah boy!"

"Jolly good thing, too!"

"Weally, I wish you would not pwess me so hard against the table!"

"Rats!"

"Hold on!" shouted Blake, successfully pinning down the great Figgins, who was struggling wildly. "Got that boulder, Herries?"

"I've got him!"

"Have you got your man, Gussy?"

"No," gasped Gussy. "He's got me!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Hold him tight!"

"He's holding me tight!"

"Dot him on the boko!"

"I can't!"

"Manners, you boulder, come and lend Gussy a hand!"

"Here, fair play!" exclaimed Kerr, as Manners obediently came on the scene. "Fair play's a jewell Hands off!"

"Weally, I insist upon Maunahs lendin' me some assistance!" said D'Arcy. "You are bweakin' my back in a weally cwel way—and besides, this is not a fight, this is a punishment for your beastly cheek, don't you know?"

Kerr went over with Manners' grip upon his collar.

"Sit on him, Gussy!"

"All wight!"

And Arthur Augustus dropped his nine stone odd on Kerr's chest, and Kerr gasped.

"Gerroff me chest!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the kind. You have nearly bwoke my back in the most bwutal way, and I wefuse to get off your chest, deah boy!"

"That's right," said Jack Blake. "Keep him safe! We're going to put these boulders up to a wrinkle about coming into people's study to chip them! Rather! Manners, I'll trouble you for a shovelful of soot from the chimney!"

"Right you are!" answered the obliging Manners.

"Hold on!" gasped Figgins. "What are you up to?"

"Going to improve your complexion, old chap!"

"Look here—"

"I'm looking."

"We didn't come to—"

"Thank you, Manners! I think that will do. Plop it on his physiognomy!"

"Stop!" yelled Figgins. "We came here to— Gr-r-r-r—wooroooh—gr-r-r-r!"

There was soot on his face, and some had found its way into his mouth as it opened in protest.

"Gr-r-r-r-r!"

"Now for Fatty!" said Blake. "Serve 'em all alike, and they'll benefit by this little lesson a lot! Don't gurgle like that, Figgy! You make me feel ill!"

"Gr-r-r! We came here to—gr-r-r-r!—to tell Tom Merry that we didn't believe what they're—gr-r-r-g!—saying about him, and to assure him that we'd—gr-r-r-r!—stand by him!" gasped Figgins.

Blake gave a jump.

"Eh, what's that? Say that again, Figgy!"

"We came here as friends!" roared Figgins. "You set off silly asses!"

"Is that a giddy fact?" demanded Blake. "You're not rotting?"

"No," yelled the hapless Figgins. "I'm not! Why couldn't you stop to ask the question before you started, you silly owl?"

"Why didn't you explain before I shoved the soot on your dial?"

"Didn't I try to?"

"You didn't make it clear, anyway."

"That's because you're a silly ass!" howled Figgins.

"You can slang me as much as you like, Figgy," said Blake penitently. "I admit that we may have been a little too hasty."

"I should say so."

(Continued on page 19.)

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Address all letters : The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, chums! Your Editor calling! Did you enjoy this week's EXTRA-LONG story of Tom Merry & Co.? Of course! And you are going to enjoy next Wednesday's yarn, too. It's the first of a grand holiday series, and it is entitled:

"TOM MERRY & CO. ON THE SPREE!"

Don't miss it, whatever you do. You can look forward as well to the opening instalment of a grand new flying adventure serial under the title of

"THE WORLD WRECKERS!"

It's packed with thrills and is written by a man who was a flying officer during the Great War. Yes, Potts the Office Boy will be included in the programme, so book your copy of the GEM in advance.

THE DREAM WARNING!

Do you believe in dreams? Some say "No jolly fear," while others fearlessly admit that they do. In the latter category now is a Glamorgan man who dreamed one night that half-way across the road in front of his house, where he had crossed every day for a number of years, he was knocked down by a motor-car and killed. He was so impressed that he avoided the spot the next day, and to his amazement, saw a motor-car suddenly swerve, mount the pavement and bump into a lamp-post—exactly in line with where he would have crossed in the normal way, and exactly as he had dreamed. You can't blame him if he believes in dreams after that, can you?

HEARD THIS ONE?

Lodgekeeper (to trespasser): "Hi, young man! Didn't you read that notice at the entrance to this park?"
Young Man: "No—it said 'Private,' so you could hardly expect me to read it!"

SHARKS!

Do we ever get sharks around the English coast? asks a Birmingham reader. We do! We do! Only just recently some fishermen off Weymouth snared four whacking great sharks in their net. But the monsters didn't give in tamely. One of them threshed his way out of the net, leaving a trail of havoc behind him, whilst another lashed out with its giant tail and knocked one of the fishermen spinning into THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,277.

the sea. Fortunately the man was rescued by his pals, and when they all reached shore these hardy men of the sea were given a rousing cheer, for out of the four sharks, each more than six feet in length and with an average weight of two tons apiece, three were captured and dispatched.

PUTTING OUT THE FIRE!

It was a broiling day and the cricketers were looking forward to the tea interval. A hot cup of tea, as you know, is mighty refreshing and strangely enough cooling. The urns were filled with water, which was on the "boil," when suddenly came the cry of "Fire!" It was a real fire, too, and it broke out in the score box. Bang went all the water for tea in a massed attack on the fire, but the fire was put out by these prompt measures, and the story goes that the cricketers had their tea after all. They deserved it!

A WORLD'S RECORD!

Talking of cricket, the record-smashing feat of Hedley Verity, the twenty-seven years old left arm bowler who plays for Yorkshire, is well worthy of mention. In the recent match against Notts—played at Leeds—this demon with the ball took no less than ten wickets for ten runs! Makes you gasp, what? In nineteen-point-four overs, of which sixteen were maidens, he dismissed the ten batsmen and incidentally brought off a hat trick as well! Form like this suggests that Verity would be a tower of strength in the English side we are sending to Australia to try to recover the Ashes. Whether or not he is selected by the powers that be, Hedley Verity's performance against Notts will live for many a day.

ANOTHER ARGUMENT!

Fred Groves, of Lincoln, wants to know if there is "lots of ice" in Iceland, as he has been arguing with his pal on this subject and they have come to a "full stop." As a matter of fact there is very little ice in Iceland, whilst its climate is fairly mild and temperate. On the other hand, Greenland is really icy—and hardly the place to recommend for holiday if it's sun tan you are needing. Perhaps, Fred, your pal has confused these two places.

A TEN DAYS' FAST!

I've just heard the story of a peculiar wager which is being carried out at Blackpool, and there is real pathos behind it. The wager is that a certain lady has agreed to stay in a barrel for ten days, without food. If she succeeds she will be the winner of two hundred pounds. With

that two hundred pounds it is her intention to pay for an operation which will probably be the means of saving her brother's life. It is reported that this plucky lady has entered the barrel, watched by holiday-makers, and has taken with her only a pencil and paper, four novels, and a comb. It is to be hoped that she wins her wager, for the reason behind this freakish effort is anything but freakish.

A FIFTY-MILE-AN-HOUR THRILL!

If you had been present at a motor-cycling tournament held at Tidworth recently, you would have gasped in wonderment at the extraordinary feat of a mechanic in the sidecar of a combination machine changing a wheel while whizzing over the ground at fifty miles an hour. With iron nerves the driver of the combination tilted the machine over at a steep angle, lifting the sidecar wheel well clear of the ground and keeping it there, what time his passenger mechanic coolly took off the wheel, slung it away, and refitted a fresh one. One slip on the part of either of these daredevils would have meant disaster, but that slip fortunately never occurred. The spectators cheered as they watched, and the feat deserves a cheer, so to speak, in these columns. Let's hear them!

THE LUCKY CAMERA!

He was a government "stock inspector," and he wasn't exactly looking for elephants, although, in his "district"—Dar-es-Salaam, East Africa—there were plenty of these huge beasts to see. He certainly wasn't looking for an angry elephant, either, but suddenly one appeared and charged at him. The inspector dodged the first wicked rush of the infuriated beast, but the elephant came again, and eventually landed a terrific blow with one of its tusks. That blow would, in the ordinary course, have killed a man on the spot. But in the pocket of the inspector was a camera. Straight for that camera went the vengeful tusk and smashed it, but that camera was the means of saving the inspector's life. This isn't the end of the story, for the infuriated elephant returned to the attack again and tossed its victim into a tree. There the inspector wisely remained, marvelling at his lucky escape, until the beast moved off. A doctor who was dispatched to the scene by aeroplane marvelled more, for on arrival he found that the inspector was uninjured. Will that camera be treasured as a memento of the inspector's "biggest thrill"? You bet it will!

FROGS ON THE HOP!

Hop, hop, hop! Where ever the people of Park Drive district, Rhyl, looked they saw thousands of hopping frogs—all hopping in one direction. Where they had come from nobody knows, but their ultimate destination was an open drain which carries the inland water to the sea. The frogs were of the small species—being no more than an inch in length, all the same for that they gave the inhabitants a busy time "picking up their feet" in order to avoid crushing them. The sudden invasion of the frog army followed a severe thunderstorm, but the Rhyl people are still wondering where these thousands of frogs actually came from. Can any GEM reader solve the problem?

YOUR EDITOR.

SACKED FROM ST. JIM'S!

(Continued from page 17.)

"Awfully sorry!" said Herries, releasing Fatty Wynn, who got up, breathing like a stranded grampus.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus politely, allowing Kerr to rise, and lending him a helping hand. "Yaas, wathah, deah boys! We are awfully beastly sowwy, don't you know, and we weally and twuwy apologise!"

Figgins rose to his feet.

"Turn on some beastly light, you owls!" he said. "Nice sort of a reception to give a chap who comes with friendly intentions."

Blake lit the gas. At the sight of Figgy's face, which looked as if it had been specially made up to resemble a nigger minstrel, there was a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Blake. "We're sorry, you know—really sorry! But you do look funny, Figgy!"

Figgy gave a growl. He jerked Blake's pocket handkerchief from his jacket, and began to rub the soot from his countenance as well as he could.

But when he had done his best he still bore a striking resemblance to a Hottentot.

"Never mind," said Figgins cheerfully, at last. "I can clean that off presently. I suppose this silly game means that you are standing by Tom Merry, Blake?"

"Through thick and thin," said Blake.

"Right-ho!" chimed in Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good!" said Figgins. "We came over to say the same, Merry, old man. We don't believe a word of it. I was the chap who was kidnapped, and our House lost the match through it. And I say that I believe you are innocent. There's my fist on it!"

Figgins held out his hand. The tears started to Tom Merry's eyes as he grasped it.

"Thank you, Figgy!"

Figgins looked round.

"Now, I have an idea," he said. "I thought we might make a committee to inquire into the matter and bring the truth to light. If you chaps are willing—"

"Bravo!" shouted Blake. "Ripping good idea of yours, Figgy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Figgins seemed to grow an inch taller on the spot.

"Well, I thought it a good idea," he said modestly.

"You see, most of the fellows have made up their minds that Tom Merry is guilty. But we know him better, don't we, chaps?"

"We does—we do!" said the loyal Co.

"That's it! We know he didn't put that brute, Black George, up to kidnapping me!" said Figgins. "But we know, too, that somebody did. The fellow didn't do it all on his own. We are going to discover the right party, kids."

"My hat!" said Blake. "Of course, somebody's guilty! All we've got to do is to find that somebody. It's simple enough."

"H'm! Easier to say than to do, I fancy," said Manners. "But it's a jolly good idea to have a try, you know."

Something of the colour and the old look came back to Tom Merry's face. When he had heard the terrible sentence pronounced in the Hall he had felt himself alone, deserted, in despair. Now he found that, though all the rest of the school was against him, he had friends left in Study No. 6, and Figgins & Co. Seven loyal friends were still there to rally round him. That meant very much to him, even if he had to leave St. Jim's in disgrace.

"I say, Figgy, this is jolly good of you!" said Tom gratefully. "Considering that we are rivals, and that your side lost the match through that kidnapping business—"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Figgins. "Of course, it's our business to row each other, but in time of trouble we stand shoulder to shoulder."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

"We're all in this," said Figgins, looking round. "House rows are put off till this matter's cleared up."

"Hear, hear!"

"My idea is to form a Combine——"

"A what?"

"A Combine," said Figgins. "You know what that is? It's an American idea, you know. When a lot of rival firms decide to amalgamate and pull together, so as to make things hum, they call it a Combine. That's what

we're going to do. We're rivals, and we're going to join forces to look into this matter. We're a Combine."

"Hear, hear!"

"I think it's a ripping idea, though I say it who shouldn't," said Figgins. "Starting from the fact that Tom Merry is innocent, the puzzle is to find the guilty party. That's what we're going to do."

"We are."

"It's jolly good of you!" said Tom Merry. "But have you forgotten that I am to leave St. Jim's in the morning? As a matter of fact, I may as well tell you that I'm not going to wait till the morning. I'm going to-night."

"I've thought of that," said Figgins, with a nod of the head. "You're to leave the school, and we can't keep you here against the Head's wishes. But you're not going home. We've formed a plan, which I think is a nobby one."

"What is it?"

"You know I was shoved into the old woodman's hut in the Castle Wood when I was kidnapped by that poacher beast?"

"Yes."

"It's a lonely place, right off the track, and anybody could live there for months without a soul being the wiser. You've got to leave St. Jim's, but there's no need for you to go far away. Why shouldn't you camp out in that old hut while the Combine is at work proving your innocence?"

Tom Merry started. He had thought of running away from the school, to escape the shame and humiliation of being sent home in disgrace.

Figgins' idea was certainly a good one. The idea of camping out in a wood naturally appealed to a boy of an adventurous disposition. And he would be at hand if anything came to light to establish his innocence.

Blake gave Figgins a slap on the back that made him stagger.

"Why, what the——"

"Ripping wheeze!" exclaimed Blake. "Figgy, old son, I'm proud of you!"

"Well, you needn't dislocate my beastly spinal column!" growled Figgins. "What do you say, Merry, old chap? Are you game?"

"Rather! It's jolly clever of you to think of these things, Figgy. I shan't forget all this, if this affair turns out all right."

"It's bound to turn out all right if the Combine sets to work in earnest," said Figgins. "This evening the whole lot of us are going to break bounds and escort you to the hut, and we'd better all go to carry the things you'll want for camping out there. Each of us will contribute something."

"Good idea!"

"You won't be afraid of sticking there alone, Tom?" asked Manners.

Tom smiled.

"I don't think so, old fellow."

"It will be beastly lonely at night," said Herries. "In the daytime we can come and see you sometimes and report progress. But at night——"

"I can stand it. It's better than going home in disgrace."

"I say, you can have my bulldog, if you like," said Herries. "He'll keep you company, and it'll be safe, too. Towser likes you."

"Thanks, old chap. I'd be glad to have him."

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in!" said Tom Merry.

The door opened and Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, entered the study.

CHAPTER 11.

The Combine Gets at the Truth.

MR. RAILTON looked surprised as he saw the crowded state of Tom Merry's study. He glanced at the juniors and then at Tom Merry.

Tom was pale, but his eyes met the Housemaster's steadily.

Mr. Railton's look was cold and severe. He had been Tom's headmaster at a school before either of them came to St. Jim's, and he had always liked Tom Merry, but now it was clear that he believed the charge against him, and that liking had been replaced by contempt.

"I came here to speak to you, Merry," he said. "I did not expect to find so many here. What are you New House boys doing on this side?"

"We came to tell Tom Merry that we're standing by him," said Figgins.

"That you're what?"

"Standing by him, sir. We know he's innocent."

Mr. Railton stared. Perhaps Figgy's complexion surprised him as much as Figgy's words.

"You think Tom Merry is innocent of the charge brought against him, Figgins?"

"We are quite sure about it, sir."

"Indeed! The proof to me seems complete, and I am amazed at Merry's effrontery in still protesting his innocence," said the Housemaster coldly.

Tom Merry's face flushed.

"I shall never leave off protesting my innocence!" he exclaimed. "I am innocent, sir!"

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Merry, for it convinces me more than ever that I was mistaken in the estimate I once formed of your character."

"So you believe me guilty, sir?"

"Unquestionably."

"Oh, what rot!" said Blake involuntarily.

The Housemaster turned on him.

"What did you say, Blake?"

Blake turned as red as fire.

"I—I—I—"

"You will take fifty lines for your remark," said Mr. Railton. "I like to see loyalty among boys; but I think you are mistaken, and that Merry is imposing upon your credulity. Merry, I came here to tell you that you must pack your box to-night, as you will leave by the first train in the morning. There is an early Sunday local to Wayland Junction, where you can take a train for Huckleberry Heath."

Tom Merry did not reply.

"You hear me, Merry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," Mr. Railton glanced at the juniors again. "You New House boys had better return to your own House."

He quitted the study and closed the door.

The juniors looked at one another rather uncomfortably. They had been enthusiastic in the task they had set themselves, and the words of the Housemaster had come like a cold douche upon their enthusiasm.



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Tom Merry's face was white and hard. He felt that the tears would come to his eyes; but he was determined not to let them come, and his teeth were tight on his under lip.

"Hang it!" said Figgins, breaking the silence at last. "That's rotten of Railton. I should have thought he would have more sense."

"Oh, he's taken in like all the rest!" said Blake. "He'll look a pretty ass when the Combine gets to work and brings the truth out." He slapped Tom on the shoulder. "Buck up, Tommy! It ain't like you to be downhearted."

Tom Merry smiled faintly. He had never felt so downhearted in his life as he did at that moment. Under ordinary circumstances there was no lad who could have faced a difficult situation more coolly or courageously. But the suspicion of having acted in a cowardly, a treacherous manner overcame even Tom Merry's fortitude.

"Keep your pecker up, old kid!" said Figgins.

"We're going to see you through. Suppose we run over the points of the case and see just how it stands. Now, in the first place, I was kidnapped and shoved into the old hut by Black George, the poacher. We may take it for granted that he didn't risk being sent to prison just for fun, and so he was put up to doing what he did."

"That's certain."

"He says Tom Merry put him up to it, and gave him a fiver for his trouble. Now, we all believe that Tom Merry did nothing of the kind. Now, you see what follows? I wasn't kidnapped to be kept away from the cricket match at all."

There was a buzz of surprise.

"It's quite clear," said Figgins firmly. "I was kidnapped, kids, so that that poacher brute could tell that lie about Tom Merry, and make out that Tom had served me that trick. If you think over it you'll see it."

"My only pyjama hat!" said Blake, with a deep breath. "Bless me if old Figgy hasn't hit on the exact truth! Black George could have had no motive for accusing Tom Merry, unless he was put up to it by someone who wanted Tom expelled from the school. It's some enemy of Tom's who's at the bottom of the whole business."

Tom Merry started violently.

"That's it," said Figgins; "I believe that's the true theory. But the difficulty is to think of any fellow at St. Jim's who could be mean beast enough to play a trick like that to get Merry expelled. Frankly, I can't think of a chap who would do it."

"There's Monteith, your head prefect, over in the New House," said Blake musingly. "He's a mean beast, and he never liked Tom Merry."

"Look here, Blake—"

"I was only making a suggestion. I don't think Monteith would be mean enough, especially as he seems to have turned over a new leaf lately, and has been behaving for weeks in a quite civilised manner."

"You can leave Monteith out of it. I wish I could think of somebody, but I can't. What do you think yourself, Tom Merry?"

"I have thought of someone," said Tom, with a deep breath.

"His name?"

"It's not a fellow at St. Jim's at all."

"Then who is it?"

"My cousin, Philip Phipps."

There was a general exclamation of amazement.

"I say, Tom, that's pretty strong," said Manners.

"I feel certain of it," said Tom Merry, with conviction.

"Listen! I'm going to tell you chaps a secret. You remember Amos Keene, who was once master of the Shell here, and who afterwards went to prison?"

"Rather! He was a cad!"

"Well, my cousin wrote to him at least once from India. Keene was mixed up with a burglary, and had to leave the school. The Head could have sent him to prison if he had liked, but he saved himself from that by making a confession. He confessed that he had been sent to St. Jim's by Philip Phipps to plot against me, and get me expelled in disgrace from the school."

"Great Christopher Columbus!"

"I didn't know what to believe, and when my cousin came here I tried to be civil to him, though I never trusted him. I thought it wasn't fair to condemn him simply on the word of a rascal like Keene. But now—"

"My word!" ejaculated Manners. "It's a fact! Why, you know that the note by which Figgins was lured into leaving the school before the match was written on paper belonging to Tom Merry? That's a strong point in the evidence. The Head thinks that if Black George was lying, how did he get hold of that notepaper? He's never been inside St. Jim's. Why, of course, that brute Phipps



"Seize him! Worry him!" Like an arrow from a bow the bulldog shot forward. Black George started back in amazement and alarm as the big bulldog came tearing out of the darkness under the trees straight at him.

picked it up to use for the purpose, when we had him in the study here giving him a feed. That was his gratitude for a jolly good feed."

Figgins made a grimace. The provisions for that feed had been raided from the New House juniors, and so Figgins had good reason to remember the occasion.

"And you remember the keen interest Phipps took in the House match," said Blake. "Of course, he was spying out the lay of the land. He knew our suspicion was certain to fall on Tom Merry if anything happened to Figgy."

"And he started it, too," said Kerr. "Don't you remember how the first suspicion was caused by Phipps repeating to Monteith some joke of Merry's about knocking Figgy on the head before the match?"

"By Jupiter! Kids, we're on the track. This Combine is going to be a howling success," said Figgins. "Mind, we won't say a word to a soul. When the truth comes out, it's going to be a surprise all round; and it will make those silly kippers sing small, and no mistake."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake. "But I say, Merry, what do you imagine your cousin's motive to be for playing a mean game like this?"

"Oh, that's plain enough! Keene confessed it all before he left St. Jim's," said Tom. "My uncle, General Merry, in India, is awfully rich, and at present he intends me to be his heir. But he is an awfully stiff and rigid old fellow, and the least suspicion of blackguardism would be enough to get me out of his will. If Phipps could disgrace me, so that I could never get my name cleared, it would be worth a quarter of a million pounds to him in the end."

"Phew!"

The Combine had no further doubts.

"You see how things get cleared up when we put our heads together and talk 'em over," said Figgins. "Of course, we've got to get the proof. We've got to fix it on the scoundrel. We'll find a way of doing that."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Philip Phipps is staying in Rylcombe now," Tom Merry remarked. "Of course, he's staying till he's quite sure the plot has worked out all right. He won't go till I'm expelled from St. Jim's. He left soon after the match to-day, so as not to get mixed up in the matter more than he could help, I suppose."

"We're on his track," said Figgins. "We'll have the truth

out somehow. That poacher brute will have to be made to confess, too."

"Yes. We might get him in the study here somehow," suggested Herries, "and put him to the torture, or something, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I don't know about that!" grinned Figgins. "Still, we'll work it somehow. See how much we've done already. We know the whole game from start to finish, and now we've spotted the scoundrel we've only to prove it. But before that, kids, we've got to get Tom Merry fixed up in his camp in the Castle Wood."

"Right-ho!"

"Then I vote that this meeting breaks up, and that we proceed to get together the things we are going to take, and fasten 'em up in bundles," said Figgins. "Then we shall all be ready to start. We'll stick the things somewhere handy, and at eleven o'clock we'll rendezvous at the same old spot under the elms where we get over the wall—I mean where naughty boys, not like us, break bounds sometimes."

"Ha, ha, ha! That's settled."

So the first meeting of the Combine forthwith broke up.

CHAPTER 12.

Tom Merry Camps Out.

BOOM!

The stroke from the clock tower of St. Jim's echoed in a hollow way through the dim, silent night.

Boom!

Again, till eleven strokes had been tolled off.

All was dark and silent in the great school. From a few study windows a light still gleamed, where late students still hung over their books; but they were few and far between. St. Jim's was wrapped in silence.

It wanted but an hour to midnight and Morpheus reigned in the long dark dormitories in the two Houses of St. Jim's. Just as the last stroke of the hour died away several dark figures might have been seen—to borrow an expression from the novelist—stealing away from the School House, each with an enormous bundle under his arm, and one of them leading a big bulldog.

They made their way direct to a certain spot in the wall overlooking Rylcombe Lane, where the thick clinging ivy offered a secure hold for the climber.

As they reached it several other dark figures came into view, each similarly equipped with a bundle of gigantic dimensions. There was a whispered greeting.

"That you, Figgy?"

"Yes, here we are—the three of us—before you."

"We're on time," said Jack Blake. "It's only just eleven."

"All right. I see you've got your bundles," said Figgins, with a chuckle. "Feeling pretty fit, Tom Merry?"

"Pretty good!" said Tom. "Can't expect to be very cheerful in the circumstances."

"Not funky?"

Tom laughed.

"Oh, no!"

"Don't be downhearted, Merry," said Figgins; "we're going to see you through. This Combine of ours is going to stagger humanity at St. Jim's, I tell you. Give me a bunk up, and I'll go over the wall first. Then you can sit on it and hand down the parcels into the road."

"Good!"

Figgins was very quickly over the wall. Tom Merry followed him to the top and sat astride of the wall, and Blake handed him up the bundles one by one. Tom Merry slung them over to Figgins, who caught them and placed them in a row along the wall.

"Eight," said Tom Merry; "that's the lot! Towser comes last. Quiet, old boy, I'm not going to hurt you. Stroke the brute, Herries. That's right! There you are, Figgy! Now I'm coming."

Tom Merry dropped into the road. Manners followed, then Study No. 6 and the Co.

The eight juniors picked up their parcels again, and, led by Tom Merry and Figgins, they started down the lane towards the village of Rylcombe, Herries leading the bulldog.

It was a clear, starry night, and there was plenty of light in the lane. It was as lonely as a churchyard, and not a soul passed them. They crossed the stile into the wood and followed the footpath half-way to the ruined castle. Then they turned off into the wood in the direction of the deserted woodman's hut.

"Jolly lonely, ain't it?" said Figgins, starting as a wakened bird rushed by in the thicket. "You won't like it, Tom Merry."

"I shall be all right."

"I say!" It was a thrilling whisper from Blake, from behind.

Tom Merry turned his head.

"What's the matter, Blake?"

"There's somebody in the wood. I'm sure I heard a footstep. Lay low."

The eight juniors stopped at once. The wood at that hour was so dark and silent and weird that the happening was sufficient to set their hearts palpitating.

Herries put his hand over the bulldog's muzzle to stop him from growling. Any other hand there would probably have received a bite. The juniors listened intently.

A smell of strong tobacco was wafted through the wood, and a gleam of red became visible in the darkness.

A burly, dark figure crossed an open patch where the starlight fell, and the juniors recognised Black George, the poacher.

Tom Merry gritted his teeth. There was the scoundrel who had slandered him, who, for a few paltry pounds, had lied away his honour and happiness. He clenched his fists and made a step forward.

Figgins hastily grasped his arm.

"Hold on, Tom!" he whispered. "We don't want to give ourselves away. Keep quiet!"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath and nodded.

But the poacher had heard some slight sound, for he turned his head and stared directly towards the spot where the boys stood in the dense shadows of the trees. He stopped instead of passing on his way, and in the moonlight they saw his eyes glimmer with suspicion.

"He knows there's something up," murmured Figgins.

"He mustn't see us, though. How the—"

Blake tapped his arm.

"It's all right. There's Towser."

Figgins chuckled silently.

"Good! Tell Herries!"

He drew Tom Merry aside to allow a clear path for the bulldog.

The poacher heard the rustle, and his suspicions strengthened, and he came quickly towards the spot, his hands tightening on the cudgel he carried.

Blake whispered to Herries. The latter grinned.

"Right-ho!"

A word to Towser was sufficient.

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"Seize him! Worry him!"

Like an arrow from a bow the bulldog shot forward.

Black George started back in amazement and alarm as a big bulldog came tearing out of the darkness under the trees, with flaming eyes and open jaws. Towser's hostile intentions were evident to the dullest glance. He meant business—deadly business.

Black George gave him one startled, terrified glance, and then turned and bolted at top speed, crashing through the thickets with the bulldog in hot pursuit.

"Grr-r-r-r!" That was all Towser said; but a moment later a fearful fiendish yell was heard from Black George.

Herries gave a whoop.

"Good old Towser! Towser's got him!"

Towser certainly had him! Black George went tearing on madly through the wood with the bulldog hanging on to him, and both disappeared from the keen sight of the juniors.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry staggered against a tree, laughing till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"My hat!" gurgled Figgins. "This is about the biggest surprise Black George ever went in for, I imagine!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

It was some minutes before the juniors recovered their gravity sufficiently to resume their way. The bulldog was gone; but Herries said that he would find him again. The party marched on again through the gloomy wood. The tension had been broken by that comical incident, and they chatted freely and easily now in spite of the darkness and the eerie silence of the wood.

"Here we are!" said Figgins at last.

He halted in a narrow glade shut in by overhanging trees. Under one of the big trees stood the old hut which had once been occupied by a woodman. It must have been many years before, for the hut had fallen into utter ruin. The walls were shaky and dilapidated, the roof was almost entirely gone, and there was no vestige of door or window. Weeds and grasses had grown up all over the floor and the walls were thick with clinging creepers and half hidden by shrubbery.

"Jolly little place," said Tom Merry, entering and lighting a cycle lantern, which he flashed round the interior of the hut. "I shall like this all right."

"You'll find it a bit lonely."

"Well, there's the bulldog," said Tom Merry; "I'll teach him tricks—that is, if he turns up again!"

"Oh, he's sure to!" said Herries confidently. "The sense that dog has got is astonishing. You can teach him anything but Greek. Why, here he is!"

Towser was rubbing his nose against his master's shin.

"Hallo, you've come back, then?" said Herries, stooping to pat the head of his pet. "What's that you've got in your teeth?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cried Tom Merry. "It's a patch from Black George's trousers!"

Towser gave up his capture. And on examination it proved to be a patch of corded cloth such as the poacher's nether garments were made of.

"My hat!" grinned Blake. "Black George will feel a pain for some time when he sits down, I fancy. Good old Towser!"

Towser wagged his head. He evidently considered that he had done pretty well and deserved commendation.

Figgins was unfasting the bundles. The contents, as they were turned out, were many and varied. The juniors had not spared the property of the ancient foundation of St. Jim's.

There were blankets galore, washing utensils, receptacles for cooking, a camp-stool, a waterproof coat, books and papers, and, in fact, all sorts and conditions of things. There were three bicycle lanterns, one of them of the acetylene type, so Tom Merry was certain to have plenty of light in the dark hours. There were cans of oil and carbide of calcium for reloading the lamps.

Then there were the provisions. Extensive purchases had been made in the school tuckshop. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had generously contributed a "fiver," as he called it, to the fund, and the juniors had done the thing well. If Tom Merry stayed a week at the woodman's hut he was not likely to consume all that had been brought there, unless he assumed the proportions of a Falstaff.

There was a spirit-stove and a big bottle of methylated spirit, teapot and crockery, and cutlery.

The various articles were deposited in the hut, and the juniors surveyed them with eyes of pride.

"I say, this looks jolly!" said Tom Merry. "I always had a fancy for leading a Robinson Crusoe life, you know, and this will be something like it."

"Wish we were going to stay with you," said Figgins.

"It wouldn't do, though. If only you are missing they'll think you've bolted, and won't imagine you're hanging round here; but any of us they would be after like a shot. They know we shouldn't cut it."

"Don't worry about me," said Tom cheerfully. "I shall be all right. Only come to see me as often as you can."

"Rather!" said Figgins. "We'll run in one at a time, you know, so as not to rouse suspicion. If they suspected you were here they'd soon have you out. Now, are you all right?"

"Perfectly!"

"If it rains there's the waterproof coat. But I don't think it will. The fine weather's come at last, and I think it's going to stay with us for a week or two. So long as it's fine this is a jolly place enough."

Blake & Co. and Figgins & Co. did everything they could to make the youthful hermit comfortable. Then at last they solemnly shook hands with him all round, and parted.

As a matter of fact, all of them were very sleepy. The juniors retraced their steps through the wood, and Tom curled himself up in his blankets, with the bulldog curled up by his side, and was fast asleep long before his chums had arrived at St. Jim's again!

CHAPTER 13.

Facing the Music!

SUNDAY morning was usually very quiet and peaceful at St. Jim's. After early chapel the boys were mostly free to do as they liked with the morning, but it was not the thing to row or to indulge in any relaxations of a noisy nature. An interval of quiet restfulness probably did them good, for at St. Jim's they worked hard and played hard.

But on this particular morning St. Jim's was in a buzz. The sentence of expulsion pronounced upon Tom Merry the day before in the crowded Hall was sufficient to keep the boys excited for days to come; but it was not only that which was now the topic of eager discussion.

Tom Merry was to have left the school by the early Sunday train. A crowd of fellows had assembled to see him drive off with Mr. Railton, and to give him a parting storm of hisses and boos as he went. But they had been disappointed.

The crowd had waited near the gate till long past the hour upon which the train left Rylcombe, but neither Mr. Railton nor Tom Merry had appeared. It was impossible that the sentence had been rescinded, and the boys were left to wonder in amazement why Tom Merry's departure was postponed.

Slowly the truth leaked out. Tom Merry had already gone! Instead of waiting to be taken away in shame and humiliation, the sentenced lad had taken French leave, and left the school under cover of darkness.

The news was soon confirmed. Manners was expected to know more of his chum's movements than anybody else, and a number of curious inquirers sought out Manners.

"I say, Manners, old fellow," said Gore persuasively, "where's Tom Merry?"

"Go and eat coke!" said Manners.

"Has he left St. Jim's?"

"Find out!"

"Did you help him go?"

Manners turned his back.

It was evident to all that no information was to be looked for from Manners.

Monday morning dawned upon the school, and the round of the week's work commenced. But in corridors and classrooms the boys were still discussing the strange departure of Tom Merry.

Nothing had been heard of the missing lad.

During the Sunday several members of the Combine had stealthily paid visits to the hut in the Castle Wood, to take to the youthful Crusoe various necessities that had been overlooked in the first journey, and to talk to him and cheer him up.

But they were extremely careful not to be watched or followed, and they did not breathe a hint at St. Jim's of the true state of affairs.

The general impression was that Tom Merry had bolted, and that he was by this time far away from the school.

That impression suited the plans of the Combine, and they said nothing to remove it.

Inquiries had been made for the missing junior at the railway station, but he had not been seen there, of course.

The Head could only conclude that Tom Merry had gone from the school on tramp, and he hesitated to call in the police to assist in the search.

It was quite possible, he thought, that the junior was making for his home at Huckleberry Heath, and that he would arrive there, only later than he had intended.

So Dr. Holmes satisfied himself with writing a full account of the matter to Miss Fawcett, and hoped for the best.

It had been arranged for Mr. Railton to take Tom home and explain matters to his old governess, but the House-master was not sorry to be relieved of his task.

He had had some previous experience of Miss Priscilla. And to face her and tell her that her beloved ward had been expelled from St. Jim's was a task the boldest might have shrunk from.

The Head had sent a message to Philip Phipps, who was staying in Rylcombe, and after morning school that gentleman appeared at St. Jim's, and entered Dr. Holmes' house.

Blake spotted him, and hastened to inform the Combine of his presence.

Philip Phipps, in the course of two or three visits to the Head, had succeeded in removing the bad impression Dr. Holmes had had of him.

As an old St. Jim's boy, with an affectionate regard for his old school, he had known how to reach the soft spot in the Head's heart.

Dr. Holmes shook hands with him now quite cordially.

"This is a bad business, Mr. Phipps," he said.

"Very bad," said Philip Phipps. "And you will excuse me, sir, but I find it very hard to believe that my young cousin is guilty of the conduct ascribed to him. I know you would not expel him without good reason, but, at the same time, I cannot help hoping that some terrible mistake has been made."

"That is a natural feeling, and I respect you for it," said the unsuspicious Head. "But, unfortunately, there is no hope that a mistake has been made. I will tell you the whole of the circumstances."

Philip Phipps listened intently while Dr. Holmes recapitulated the evidence against Tom Merry, upon the strength of which the hero of the Shell had been condemned.

At the end of the recital he bowed his head as if in unwilling acquiescence.

"You are convinced?" asked the Head.

"I confess that I am," said Phipps sadly. "This is a blow to me, sir. I should never have suspected the lad of anything of the kind. No wonder he has bolted from the school. I should have been astonished if he had stayed to face his schoolfellows a moment longer than he could help."

"You are right. I am sorry to have to dispel your faith in your cousin, Mr. Phipps, but the truth is the truth. I am only concerned now to know what has become of the unhappy boy. He has run away from St. Jim's, where, I do not know."

"Doubtless he will make his way back to Huckleberry Heath, sir."

"You think so?" said Dr. Holmes. "I am glad to hear it. Though I wish I could feel sure of it."

"I have no doubt of it, nevertheless, for Miss Priscilla Fawcett is certain to take his part in the matter, and to believe his version of the story," said Philip Phipps. "He will find a backer in her, and she will not listen to reason, sir. She will accuse you of injustice."

Dr. Holmes coloured slightly.

Phipps' words were cunningly calculated to get the Head's "back up," as the saying is, and rouse the obstinacy in his nature.

"I hope not," said Dr. Holmes. "I have written to Miss Fawcett fully explaining the matter, and stating the evidence, and I can do no more."

"I should not be surprised, nevertheless, if Miss Fawcett were to come here."

The Head started.

"Come here!"

"Certainly, to point out to you the impossibility of Tom Merry having done what you have expelled him for doing."

"Dear me," said the Head nervously. "I really—I—ah—really—"

"I hope you will be able to pacify her," said Philip Phipps, with a smile. "She is an old lady who can be very insistent."

Phipps took his leave, leaving the Head of St. Jim's in a very perturbed state.

Miss Fawcett was a somewhat terrifying old lady to the Head, and the prospect of an interview with an angry and exasperated female was almost alarming.

Phipps walked out of Dr. Holmes' house with a smile upon his face.

Success was in his grasp; he had planned, and his plans had succeeded almost without an effort on his part.

It only remained for him now to reap the reward of his rascality.

Rosy anticipations of the future filled the mind of the scoundrel who had ruined an innocent lad for the sake of money.

But Phipps was about to reap the part of his reward that he had not calculated upon.

Jack Blake was standing outside Dr. Holmes' house watching the pigeons, but with a corner of one eye on the door.

He spotted Phipps as soon as the man from India came out, and gave a low whistle.

Philip Phipps nodded to him in passing.

Blake gave him a frigid stare.

Phipps was a little surprised, as he had been on cordial terms with all the juniors on the Saturday of the House match, but he walked on.

The next moment he gave a fiendish yell. Blake's hand had come round from behind him, and there was an egg in it. That egg shot from the junior's fingers to its true mark.

Squelch!

The smashing of an egg on the back of Philip Phipps' neck was sufficient to make him yell. He whirled round in amazement and rage. Blake was looking at the pigeons again, as innocent in appearance as a junior could possibly be.

"You young imp!" roared Phipps. "How dare you!" He was trying to wipe the sticky mess from the back of his neck with his handkerchief.

Blake stared at him.

"Hallo! What's the matter with you?" he asked, in surprise.

"You threw that egg at me!"

"Did I, really?"

"I'll break your neck for it, you young whelp!"

Phipps rushed furiously at Blake.

Squelch!

An egg from a different direction, from the hand of Herries, smashed on his left ear. The next second one broke on his right ear, deftly hurled by Figgins. Blake's whistle had brought the whole Combine to the scene.

They were there in force, each armed with half a dozen eggs, some of which had seen their youth a long time before, and had reached an odorous old age.

"Go it!" yelled Figgins excitedly.

"Yaas, go it, deah boys—watah!"

Squelch! Squelch!

Phipps stopped his wild rush at Blake, as the attack came from all sides. His face was in a fearful state.

He turned upon Figgins, and Figgins retreated, while the rest of the Combine rushed forward to pelt Phipps from behind.

Then he furiously turned towards them, and they scattered, and still the eggs came whizzing to the target. Phipps was yelling like a maniac, and bolting blindly hither and thither in pursuit of first one and then another of the elusive juniors.

The extraordinary scene, of course, attracted a crowd in next to no time, and howls of laughter greeted the appearance of Phipps, who was certainly very comical to look at, though he felt anything but amused himself.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Hear me smile, Phippy, old dear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Figgins. "Pelt the rotter!"

Phipps, blind with rage and eggs, rushed to and fro like a lunatic. As ill-luck would have it he managed to get hold of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was not quick enough in dodging. The swell of St. Jim's had paused for a moment to adjust his eyeglass, and in that moment Phipps had him.

Arthur Augustus gave a whoop as the infuriated man seized him and began to thrash him.

"Wescue! Wescue!" roared D'Arcy, struggling in Phipps' grasp. "Help! Help, deah boys! He is hurtin' me! The howwid wuff boundah is hurtin' me extremely!"

"Take that—and that!" panted Phipps, cuffing D'Arcy right and left, satisfied at having somebody upon whom to wreak his rage.

D'Arcy took the blows—he couldn't help it. He squirmed and yelled:

"Wescue! Wescue!"

The juniors were not long in coming to the rescue. Philip Phipps looked rather dangerous at close quarters, but they were not the fellows to leave D'Arcy at the mercy of the foe.

"Line up!" shouted Blake. "All together! To the rescue!"

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The Combine charged in line. They tumbled upon Phipps like so many cats, and had him on the ground in a twinkling, and the few remaining eggs were smashed upon his features.

Phipps was yelling with rage, and using language never yet heard within the classic precincts of St. Jim's.

The uproar had reached Dr. Holmes' ears, and he had looked out of the window, and the sight he saw almost petrified him. He came out of his house with unusual haste.

"Boys!"

The deep voice startled the juniors, and, to tell the truth, scared them a little. In their excitement they had quite forgotten the very existence of the Head.

"Yes, sir?" said Figgins.

"How dare you! I—I—"

Dr. Holmes stopped.

Phipps, who had almost lost his senses with fury, was screaming out a stream of flowery language which would have shocked a hooligan. The true character of the man came out as he lost his usual cunning guard over himself in that moment of blind rage. Anybody would have been exasperated by the treatment he had had, but only a blackguard would have used bad language, especially as bad as that Phipps was indulging in.

Dr. Holmes' brow grew very stern.

"Mr. Phipps! Silence! How dare you use such words in the presence of boys! Silence, sir, or you will tempt me to strike you, sir!"

Mr. Phipps wriggled to his feet. He was too furious to care for the Head, or anybody else, or to remember his plans, or anything but his desire to be revenged on the juniors.

"Why don't you keep your brats in better order, you old fool?" he yelled. "I'll break their infernal necks for them!"

He clutched at Blake, and caught him, but Figgins tripped him up, and he sat down in a hurry, and the Combine laid hold of him again.

Dr. Holmes was red with anger. He had never been addressed like that before, and the provocation Philip Phipps had had was no excuse.

"Boys, release him instantly! Every lad concerned in this shocking outrage shall be severely punished, and the leaders shall be expelled from the school!"

"Oh, sir!"

Mr. Phipps, you had better go into the House and clean yourself. I am sorry this has happened, but nothing, sir, can excuse your rudeness to me, or the vile language you have used in the presence of lads. Not a word. Say a word more—one single coarse expression, sir—and I will have you flung out into the road in your present state."

That threat was sufficient to quieten Phipps, and now something of his cunning was coming back to him, and he realised what a terrible blunder he had made.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Holmes—"

"You need say no more."

"I am really sorry."

"I hope you are. It will show that you have some fragment of self-respect left," said Dr. Holmes majestically. "But nothing can excuse you. You are a blackguard, sir!"

"I—"

"Say no more. The sooner you get off these grounds the better I shall be pleased, and I shall take it as a favour if you will not call again. Taggles, you will show this person where he can clean himself. Not a word, sir. Boys, all of you who have been concerned in this outrage, follow me."

And the Head stalked into his house again.

Phipps went away with the grinning Taggles to improve his appearance a little, and the juniors followed the Head to his study—not without trepidation.

Phipps left the House a little later, cleaner, but still bearing traces of his experience at the hands of the juniors of St. Jim's. His face wore a savage scowl as he strode towards the gate. He had made a bad blunder, and set the Head against him—the last thing in the world that he wished to do.

Still, after all, his work at the school was done. Whatever Dr. Holmes thought of him would have no effect upon his plot, though it was a point lost in the game to lose the esteem of Dr. Holmes.

He strode from the gates, a good many curious glances following him. A rough-looking fellow with a black beard came slouching towards him. It was Black George, the poacher.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Phipps."

"Fool!" hissed Phipps. "Dolt! I warned you not to speak to me in public—and here, of all places!"

"I want—"



"Now then, you youngsters!" said Kildare, looking into the hut. There was no reply. Kildare stepped inside and felt for a match. The next moment he was attacked and went to the ground with three juniors sprawling over him. "Quick!" panted Blake. "The rope!"

"Fool! I will see you later!" whispered Phipps. "This evening at the old hut in the wood. Leave me now!"

"Well, mind you come, or—"
"Idiot! I will come! Go, I tell you! No, I have nothing to give you, my man," went on Phipps, raising his voice, for the benefit of the boys near the gates who were watching him curiously. "I never give to beggars. Get along!"

He walked on savagely. Black George grinned and slouched away.

CHAPTER 14.

Miss Priscilla on the Warpath.

DR. HOLMES had never looked sterner than he did as he stood in his study, a cane in his hand, and faced the great St. Jim's Combine.

The juniors were looking extremely uneasy. In their conviction that Philip Phipps had plotted against Tom Merry, they had "gone for" the plotter, without taking into consideration the probable consequences of their action. Now was the hour of reckoning.

"Boys, I have never known anyone belonging to this school to be guilty of such ruffianism," said the Head, after a long pause. "The fact that the man you ill-used is a blackguard does not condone your offence. I cannot conceive your motive for acting as you have done. Have you any explanation to offer?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Certainly, sir," said Figgins. "The man is a howling rotter!"

"How can you possibly know anything about him?"

"We—you see, sir, we—"

"I must request you to be a little more lucid, Figgins," said the Head.

"You see, sir, knowing that Tom Merry was innocent—"

"You know nothing of the kind."

"Excuse me, sir," said Figgins, with firmness, "we do. We know old Tom is innocent, and as the chap who was kidnapped, I ought to know something about it, sir. We

know that Philip Phipps plotted against him once before, so as to disgrace him with his uncle—"

The Head started violently.

"How can you know that, Figgins?"

"Tom Merry told us, sir. You see, knowing Tom to be innocent, we have formed a Combine—"

"A what?"

"A Combine, sir."

"Ah—h'm! And so you have formed a Combine in the school?" asked the Head, not knowing whether to be angry or amused.

"Yes, sir. We've combined to prove Tom Merry innocent. You see, sir," said Figgins obstinately, "we know he's innocent. He told us how that chap Keene, who used to be here, was sent here to ruin him by Philip Phipps, and we've got the case up against Phipps in a way that would make any detective green with envy. We know that he got all this up against Tom Merry, sir."

The Head looked thoughtful. Half an hour ago he would probably have caned Figgins for the suggestion, but since the behaviour of Philip Phipps in the quad his views had changed. The man was a blackguard.

That much was certain, and so the old impression which had been made upon Dr. Holmes by Amos Keene's confession revived in full force.

He had not thought before of connecting that with the present affair.

Now he thought of it, and the result was that his eyes seemed to open.

Tom Merry, as he had known all along, was the last lad in the world to be guilty of this treachery, unless he had succeeded in deceiving everyone as to his true character.

Was it possible that it was a plot against Tom Merry?

Dr. Holmes stroked his chin in a reflective way.

"Go on, Figgins," he said quietly. "Tell me what you believe about Phipps."

Figgins, delighted to have made an impression, related the whole case against Philip Phipps as the Combine had worked it out.

The Head listened attentively.

"And that is why you attacked Phipps in the quadrangle?"

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"Yes, sir. We're on his track, sir."
 "And did you hope to bring the truth to light by pelting him with eggs?" asked the Head.
 "Well, not exactly," stammered Figgins. "But if it hadn't been for the Combine, you'd never have known what a horrid blackguard he is, sir."

"Yaas, wathah!"
 Dr. Holmes smiled slightly.
 "That is true, Figgins. I shall probe into this matter very carefully. Now—"

The door was suddenly opened.
 "It is useless for you to tell me that Dr. Holmes is engaged, young man," said a shrill voice. "I insist upon seeing him. I insist upon seeing Dr. Holmes."

"My hat!" gurgled Blake. "It's Tom's old governess!"
 "Miss Priscilla!" murmured the Combine in a breath.

An old lady marched into the room.
 Miss Priscilla Fawcett was under ordinary circumstances the quietest, and gentlest, and sweetest old lady in the world.

But even a timid hen will become warlike in defence of her chicks. And the aspersions cast upon Tom Merry had evidently brought Miss Fawcett post haste from Huckleberry Heath to St. Jim's in a warlike mood.

Her kind old face was flushed, and her eyes sparkled behind her glasses.

"Dr. Holmes!"
 "Madam—"

"Don't madam me! Where is my dear boy?"
 "Miss Fawcett—I—"

"Where is my darling boy?"
 "He has run away from school, and—"

"Don't prevaricate, sir. I insist upon your producing Thomas Merry immediately, unless you have made away with him, sir."

"Don't be absurd—"

"Well, where is my sweet Tommy?"
 "Boys," said the Head, frowning at the giggling Combine, "you may go."

The Combine unwillingly left the study.

"I say," whispered Figgins, "isn't she a jolly old sort?"

"Yaas, wathah! Simplay wippin'!"

"Dr. Holmes will never convince her that Tom Merry is guilty," grinned Manners. "The Head won't enjoy himself this journey."

Certainly, the Head was not enjoying himself. He tried argument with Miss Priscilla. He tried persuasion. He tried anger and pleading in turns. He might as well have talked to a stone or a brick wall.

"I do not leave this room until you have restored my darling Tommy to me," she said firmly.

The Head wiped his fevered brow.

Miss Priscilla evidently meant what she said, and it was impossible to call in Taggles and order him to remove an old lady by force.

What was to be done the Head did not know. He finally left the study, leaving Miss Priscilla in triumphant if solitary possession, waiting patiently for the restoration of her darling Tommy.

The Head proceeded to Mr. Railton's study in the School House to ask advice. He always turned to Mr. Railton in an emergency.

The Housemaster was in his study, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was with him.

"Miss Fawcett has arrived," said the Head helplessly.

"She has sat down in my study and refuses to move until Tom Merry is produced. She will not listen to a word."

Mr. Railton smiled.

"I have just been hearing from Kildare on this subject; the subject of Tom Merry, I mean," he said. "I think he can throw some light on it."

Dr. Holmes turned inquiringly to the captain of the school.

"I think that Tom Merry is probably not very far away from the school, sir," said Kildare.

"Indeed, what makes you think so, Kildare?"

"Perhaps you have heard, sir, of an absurd 'Combine,' as he calls it, which Figgins has formed for the purpose of investigating this matter?"

Dr. Holmes smiled.

"Yes, I have heard of that."

"Well, sir, the House-dame in this House has missed all sorts of articles which appear to have been taken away from their proper places by the School House members of the Combine, and I hear from Monteith that the same has happened in the New House. The things taken are blankets, cooking utensils, and so forth; the things, in fact, that anybody would want for camping out."

The Head started.

"Dear me!"

"So I cannot help thinking that Tom Merry has not run

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away at all, sir, but is camping out somewhere in the neighbourhood," said Kildare. "I have also discovered that the members of this ridiculous combine have been disappearing at intervals ever since Sunday morning, and I have no doubt that their absences have been for the purpose of visiting Tom Merry in his hiding-place."

"It is very probable."

"I was thinking, sir, that I would keep an eye on Blake or Figgins the next time one of them leaves the school, and see where they go," said the captain of St. Jim's. "Under ordinary circumstances it would be mean to follow anybody, but the case is a peculiar one, and Tom Merry certainly ought to be found."

"I think you are right, Kildare. Pray do so," said the Head. "Especially as I have now grave doubts in my mind as to Tom Merry's guilt. The whole matter shall be investigated again from the beginning."

And the Head revisited his study to explain to Miss Fawcett that Tom Merry was probably near at hand, and that she would see him soon in all probability.

It was useless.

"I do not leave this room," said Miss Priscilla, "until my darling Tommy is restored to me. Where is my darling Tommy?"

And the Head beat a retreat in despair.

CHAPTER 15.

The Success of the Combine!

DUSK was falling on St. Jim's and the woods and meadows surrounding the old school when Jack Blake came down to the gates, looking very much on the alert.

Figgins came out from the shadow of a tree and joined him.

"The coast's clear," he whispered; "come on!"

"Right you are!"

The two juniors scuttled out of the gates of St. Jim's. It was close upon locking-up time; and they would be shut out long before they could return, but neither cared for that. It was their first chance since dinner of getting away unobserved, and they could not miss paying another visit to Tom Merry.

They had news for him now; they had the progress of the Combine to report and the punishment of Philip Phipps to relate. There was much to say to Crusoe of the Castle Wood; and, besides, it was certain that Tom Merry would feel very lonely unless he had another visit.

An imposition more or less did not count for much with the juniors. Blake and Figgins set off at a trot, caring nothing for "impots."

Once or twice they glanced back, from the habit of caution, but in the dusk it was not easy to distinguish anything. They entered the wood and passed along the footpath and turned off towards the old woodman's hut. The darkness was thick under the trees. A gleam of light from the hut warned them when they were near it. Figgins glanced in.

Tom Merry was seated on a log, reading the latest number of the "Magnet" by the light of a bicycle lamp, and Towser was curled up at his feet. Tom was not looking any the worse for a couple of days in the open air.

"Hallo!" said Figgins.

Tom Merry looked up.

"Hallo, chaps," he said. "I'm jolly glad to see you! It's lonely here. But I say, you'll get into a row for being out after locking up!"

"That's all right," said Figgins. "We were bound to give you a look up. We've got news for you, too. Miss Fawcett is at St. Jim's."

Tom Merry's face clouded.

"Poor old gov! This will be a blow to her!"

"Not much. She's giving the Head a high old time!" chuckled Figgins. "You should have heard. It was a treat!"

"Ripping!" said Blake. "But that's not all. We're on the giddy track, Tom, my son, and I know we've raised doubts in the Head's mind, as well as given your beautiful cousin a high old time!"

And between them Figgins and Blake related the adventure of Philip Phipps, punctuating the narration with many a chuckle.

Tom Merry grinned.

"Serve the cad right!" he said. "I say, it's jolly good of you fellows to stick to me like this! Do you think anybody at St. Jim's has any suspicion that I'm still near the school?"

"Not a soul," said Figgins confidently. "They think you've mizzled right off. Hallo! What's that dog got the matter with him?"

Towser was starting and sniffing suspiciously. "There's somebody coming!" muttered Blake. "Douse the glim, Tom!"

Tom Merry extinguished the lantern in a twinkling. Black darkness settled on the old hut. The three juniors looked from the dark doorway through the clinging creepers with uneasy glances. It would be too bad to be discovered. Near the old hut a patch of starlight fell into the glade. An athletic figure crossed it, and the juniors recognised Kildare.

"My hat!" muttered Blake. "Kildare!" The captain of St. Jim's was coming straight towards the hut. It was clear that he had seen the light and knew that the boys were there.

"He's shadowed us from the school, the horrid bounder!" muttered Blake. "He guessed, then. He's not going to collar Tom Merry."

Tom Merry gritted his teeth. "I'm not going back to the school." "Not much," said Figgins. "You'll have to hook it; but we'll see that Kildare doesn't collar you. Stand ready, and nail him the moment he puts his nose into the door!"

"Right-ho!" The juniors were in deadly earnest. "Now, then, you youngsters," said Kildare, looking into the darkness of the hut. "I know you're here; I saw your light."

There was no reply. Kildare stepped inside and felt for a match. The next moment he was on the ground with three juniors sprawling over him.

The captain of St. Jim's was taken at a disadvantage, and they were three to one. He struggled, but it was futile. A rope was knotted round his ankles and his wrists, and a pocket handkerchief was stuck into his mouth and tied there with a string.

"Can't let you talk," said Blake. "I've no doubt there's some more of you looking for us. Can't let you utter a single yell, old chap?"

"We must see if the coast's clear before Tom goes," whispered Figgins. "It's very likely that Monteith or Darrell was with Kildare."

The three juniors crept to the door and looked out. No one was visible in the starlight, but the shadows of the trees might have concealed a score of forms.

A faint rustle in the wood caught Tom Merry's ear. "Somebody's coming," he muttered.

"Quiet!" whispered Blake. "Keep that dog still." Tom Merry put his hand on Towser's collar to keep him quiet. The bulldog understood, and made no sign or sound.

With keen, anxious eyes the juniors watched from the ruined hut, and they saw a tall, burly form appear from the trees into the starlight.

Tom Merry gave a start. "Black George!"

It was the poacher. Black George came towards the hut as if he intended to enter it, and stopped five or six paces from the door and looked round him. His manner clearly indicated that he expected to meet someone on that spot. It was a rendezvous.

The juniors remained as still as mice. What Black George wanted there they did not know;

but he was their enemy, and it would not be prudent to make their presence known, especially after the adventure of the bulldog, in which the poacher had figured so painfully for himself.

The poacher lighted his pipe, and the familiar smell of tobacco came to the concealed juniors. Ten minutes or more elapsed, during which the ruffian many times muttered to himself and stared about him impatiently.

There was a rustle in the wood. Another figure appeared in the starlight and joined the poacher. It was all the juniors could do to restrain an exclamation. For the newcomer was Philip Phipps.

In a moment it flashed into their minds that, at this lonely spot in the heart of the wood, the two rascals had met for a consultation, little dreaming that anyone could be concealed at that moment in the tumbledown hut.

"I've been waiting for yer!" said Black George sullenly. "Indeed!" Phipps stopped before the ruffian and looked at him fixedly. "Well, I am here. And now I am here, what do you want?"

"I want ten pounds to start with."

"You won't get a penny out of me," said Phipps coldly. "You had five pounds for your work, and you were extremely well paid for that matter. You will get nothing more."

Every word was clear and distinct to the occupants of the hut. There was a faint movement; it was made by Kildare. The captain of St. Jim's could not speak, but he could hear. He recognised the voice of Black George and Philip Phipps, of course, and now he knew all.

The poacher muttered an oath.

"I mean to have more, anyhow!" he exclaimed. "I desay you make a lot by gettin' your cousin kicked out of the school. You wouldn't take all this trouble for nothin'."

"That's no business of yours."

"I want a bigger share, and I'm going to have it! If you don't hand it over, I'll see what Dr. Holmes will give me for tellin' the truth."

"You had better take care," said Phipps, in a low, menacing voice. "You spoke to me to-day before people. You have forced me to come here and talk to you. It is for the last time. I am not a man to be trifled with. I could send you to prison if I chose, Black George—" He broke off suddenly. "Are we alone here?"

"Yes," said the poacher contemptuously. "Are you afraid of the dark?"

"I heard something in the hut."

"Bah! That was nothing!"

"You hound! Have you played me false? Have you friends in the hut there to hear me give myself away? By Heaven, if it is so, I will put a bullet through your heart!"

"I tell you—"

Phipps did not stay to listen. He rushed into the hut and stumbled over Blake, and went to the floor, and the next moment Blake was sitting on his chest. Figgins promptly seized his wrists and dragged them up over his head, and held them fast.

Philip Phipps struggled desperately, but in vain. Tom Merry swiftly lighted the lamp. Further conceal-

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ment was, of course, impossible. Tom picked up a stick as the amazed face of Black George looked into the hut.

"Stand back, you scoundrel!"

"Help me!" gasped Phipps. "Fool! Coward! Help me!"

The poacher looked irresolute. Tom Merry did not seem safe to tackle with his weapon.

Figgins, leaving Blake to pin Phipps down, ran to Kildare and rapidly untied him. The strong arm of the captain of St. Jim's was needed just then.

"Come on, Black George, if you like!" said Tom Merry, his eyes flashing. "Come on, you scoundrel!"

Kildare sprang to his feet.

That decided Black George. He turned and belted, leaving Phipps to get out of his difficulty as best he could.

Phipps was struggling and cursing furiously, and his face was white with rage in the gleam of the lamp. But Blake had the advantage, and he kept him pinned down.

"Sorry," said Blake, "but I really can't let you go, you know; I'm really too fond of you. Now don't get naughty, or I shall be compelled to jam your head against the ground." He suited the action to the word.

Kildare grinned.

"Let him get up, Blake."

"Oh, I say, Kildare," I wanted to take him a prisoner to St. Jim's, and make him own up before the whole school," protested Blake.

"That's not necessary, Blake. I have heard all that the scoundrels have said," replied Kildare. "I have only to speak to the Head. Let him get up."

Blake reluctantly released his prisoner.

Philip Phipps rose to his feet, looking very ruffled.

Kildare regarded him with a look of contemptuous scorn. "You cur!" he said. "I know all now; and the Head will soon know it. You plotted with that ruffian against Tom Merry. Merry is innocent! You scoundrel!"

Phipps muttered an oath. He knew that the game was up now, that the wrong would be righted, and that his deep-laid scheme had gone to pieces.

"Hang you!" he snarled. "Hang you! I could—"

"What could you do?" asked Kildare scornfully. "You had better start. I find it very hard to keep my hands off you."

Phipps looked at the athletic captain of St. Jim's, and then turned away. Without a word he slunk out of the hut and disappeared.

Kildare glanced at the juniors. They were eyeing him in a very peculiar way, evidently not exactly knowing how he would take the late happening.

"I say, Kildare," ventured Blake, "you're not wild, are you? We had to stand by Tom Merry, you know; it was the rule of the Combine."

Kildare laughed.

"You young rascals! I had made up my mind to give

each of you the hiding of your lives, but as the matter has turned out—"

"That's a decent chap."

"I shall look over it. Merry, you had better come back to St. Jim's at once. Your innocence will be publicly acknowledged now."

There were tears in Tom Merry's eyes.

"I owe it all to you chaps," he said, as he followed Kildare with Blake and Figgins from the hut. "I shall never forget it."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Figgins. "The Combine has been a howling success, after all, and that's all I care about. By Jove, won't we make those silly asses sit up who wouldn't believe that you were innocent! And won't Miss Fawcett be glad to hear the truth? The Combine is in for a high old time, and no mistake."

Figgins was right; there was a "high old time" in store for the Combine. They swaggered about St. Jim's after their great success, putting on airs that the rest of the juniors pronounced to be insufferable.

After what Kildare reported to Dr. Holmes, of course, there could be no doubt as to Tom Merry's innocence.

To make assurance doubly sure, Black George was searched for and arrested, and in the dock he confessed to the truth, and was sent to prison for three months for kidnapping Figgins. His confession had mitigated his sentence. Philip Phipps had disappeared, but he had a narrow escape of standing in the dock beside Black George.

Dr. Holmes made a speech in the Hall before the school, completely exculpating Tom Merry, and explaining the true facts, and the Hall rang with cheers for the boy who had lately been almost unanimously condemned. And after that speech in Hall came a celebration in Tom Merry's study.

Miss Priscilla was so delighted by the turn affairs had taken that she was in a more generous mood than ever, and under the skilful guidance of Tom Merry, she made purchases in the school shop that made Dame Taggles open her eyes.

That feed in Tom Merry's study was a feed to be remembered. Miss Priscilla presided, and the members of the Combine feasted right royally, and finished up by singing "She's a Jolly Good Fellow" to Miss Priscilla.

The next day School House and New House were "rowing" each other as of yore, but Tom Merry never forgot the loyalty and true comradeship of Figgins' Combine.

THE END.

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