

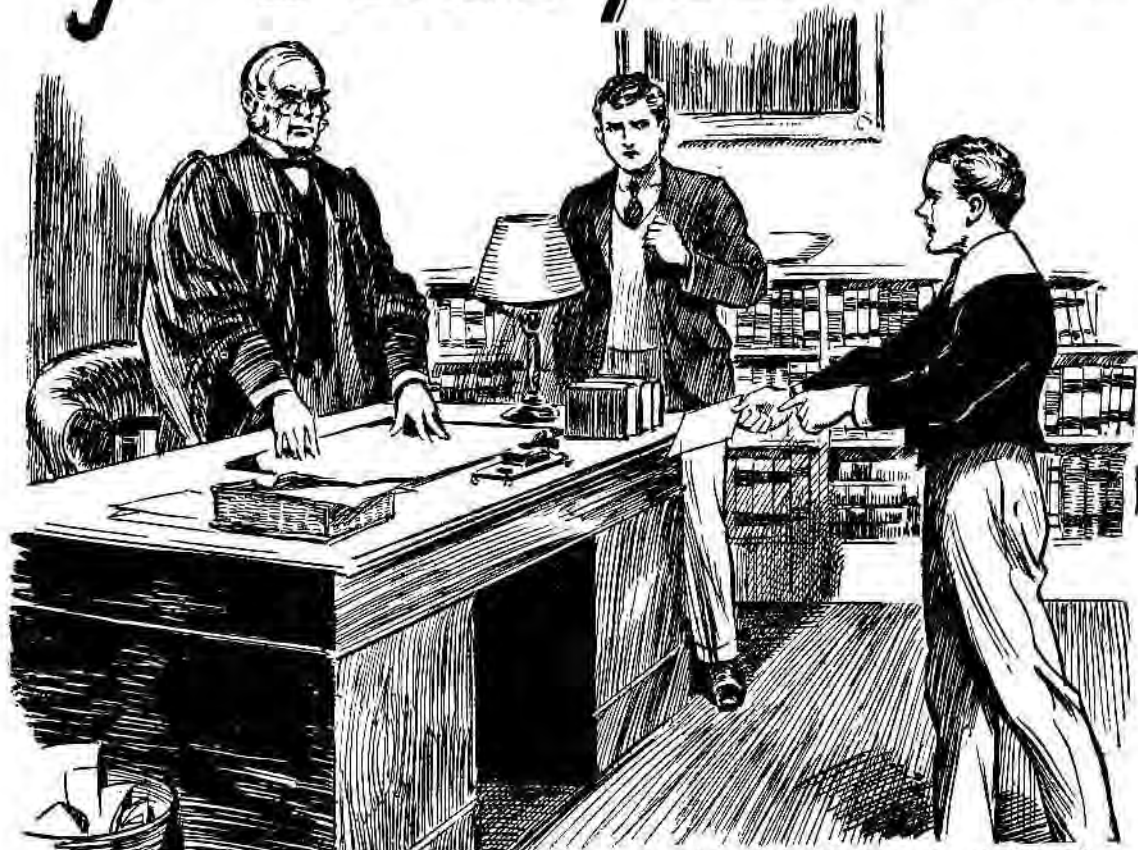
"THE PLOT AGAINST TOM MERRY!" This Week's Dramatic Long Complete
School Story of St. Jim's.

The **GEM**

2d



The PLOT AGAINST



"I did not write this letter, sir," protested Tom Merry. "It's not in my hand." "How can you tell such impudent falsehoods?" said the Head. "The letter, written in a disguised hand, is found sealed in your pocket, and you deny having written it!" "I did not write it, sir!" exclaimed Tom.

CHAPTER 1. Late Hours!

"QUARTER TO TEN!" said Monty Lowther, glancing at the clock in the Common-room in the School House at St. Jim's. "Time you kids were in bed!"

"Bai Jove!" "Jolly queer the prefects don't give us a look-in!" said Jack Blake of the Fourth, with a puzzled look. "What's happened to them?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact, deah boys, we ought weasly to go up to the dorm without waitin' to be told!"

To which there came reply in a kind of chorus:
"Rats!"

It was a quarter of an hour past the usual bed-time of the juniors of St. Jim's. As a rule, the prefect whose duty it happened to be to see the lights out for the juniors was prompt enough in seeing them off to their dormitories. But on this special evening there was certainly something wrong somewhere.

The Third Form had gone; but the Fourth and the Shell were still undisturbed.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,443.

If the prefects had forgotten junior bed-time, there was no reason why the juniors should not forget it, too; that was how the Fourth Formers and the Shell fellows looked at it. Moreover, Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell, was out, and had not come in yet, and his chums had naturally decided that they couldn't go to bed without him—unless they had to.

"It's queer!" said Blake again. "Who's seeing lights out for the Shell chaps to-night?"

"Kildare," said Monty Lowther.

"My hat! Kildare is generally as punctual as the giddy rising bell!" said Blake, in surprise. "Bingham is looking after us, and he's a careless ass—"

"Shut up!" murmured Digby, catching sight of Bingham of the Sixth, who had just appeared in the doorway.

"My dear chap," said Blake, who had his back to the door, "everybody knows that Bingham is a careless ass!"

"Thank you, Blake!" said the prefect, stepping into the room.

Blake whirled round.

"Oh! Is that you, Bingham, old man?" he said cheerfully. "We've just been wondering what had become of you. I was just remarking to Dig what

a careful and punctual person you are—"

Bingham laughed.

"Well, cut off to bed!" he said. "I've been studying, and I didn't notice the time. Off to bed with you!"

Blake rose, with a yawn.

"You Shell fellows had better go up, too," said Bingham. "Kildare's gone out, I believe, and he won't be pleased to find you up at this time when he comes in!"

The Shell fellows looked at one another, and did not move.

"We're waiting for Tom Merry," said Monty Lowther politely.

Bingham of the Sixth looked round.

"Isn't Merry in?" he asked.

"No. He's gone over to Wayland; you gave him a pass out of gates yourself," said Monty Lowther. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, now I come to think of it! But he ought to be in by now," said the prefect. "Get a move on, you kids!"

The Fourth Formers marched reluctantly out of the Common-room, and the room was left to the Shell. They had not taken Bingham's hint that it was time to retire. There was a very peculiar look upon Monty Lowther's

TOM MERRY!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

face as he watched Bingham go out with the Fourth Formers.

"Our respected prefect has forgotten the great and glorious example of George Washington," Monty Lowther murmured to his chum Manners.

Manners looked up from a chess problem.

"Eh—what's that?" he said. "What do you mean?"

"Bingy said he was studying, and didn't know the time passing," said Lowther. "He isn't much given to burning the midnight oil, as a rule. Did you notice his boots?"

"Blow his boots!" said Manners. "How could I notice his boots when I was working out this problem? Look here, would you move the rook to king's fourth?"

"Blow the rook, and blow the king's fourth!" said Monty Lowther. "I'm thinking of Bingy's boots!"

"What on earth's the matter with his boots?" demanded the astonished Manners.

"Wet!" said Lowther. "Muddy! It's raining!"

"Well, how did Bingy get his boots wet and muddy by staying in his room studying?" asked Lowther, with a grin.

"Blessed if I know," said Manners, "and blessed if I care! Why should he come in and tell us a whopper for nothing? Don't you set up as a Sexton Blake, Monty. Lend me a hand with this giddy problem. Now, look here, if I move the rook to king's fourth, and then white moves the bishop—"

"Yaw-aw-aw!" yawned Monty Lowther. "I'm too sleepy for chess problems! Still, we won't go to bed till Tommy comes in!"

"Where on earth has Tommy got to?" said Kangaroo, coming over to the two chums. "He's very late, isn't he?"

"Seems so. But he's got a pass out; Bingham gave it to him."

"Everybody seems late to-night," remarked Bernard Glyn—"Kildare, Tom Merry, and Bingham. Bingham's been out. He had mud on his bags—I noticed that."

"I noticed it on his boots," said Monty Lowther. "I wonder what he told a whopper for? No business of ours, though."

"Queer that Bingy should have given Tom Merry a pass out, too," said Kangaroo thoughtfully. "He doesn't like Tommy. They had a row only yesterday, and Tom Merry stopped him bullying young Frayne of the Third. I should have thought Bingham would have given him a thick ear sooner than a pass. Queer Tommy asking him for one, too."

"Tommy didn't ask him; he offered it," said Lowther. "He heard Tom saying that he wanted to go over to Wayland with Brooke, and said he'd give him a pass out for the evening, if he'd like."

"Very forgiving chap!" said Kangaroo.

"Ye-es," agreed Lowther. "Must be,

though nobody's ever mentioned before that Bingham was a forgiving sort. But he must be; I expected him to give Blake lines for calling him an ass just now, but he took it quite sweetly."

Kangaroo looked at the clock. "Ten!" he said. "Tom Merry is sticking it out to-night. Hallo, here he is!"

There were hurried footsteps in the passage outside.

The chums of the Shell turned towards the doorway, expecting to see Tom Merry.

But it was not Tom Merry who appeared; it was Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's.

Kildare had his coat on, wet with rain, and his boots were muddy and splashed. His face was excited, and he was breathing fast.

"Is Tom Merry here?" he asked abruptly.

"No," said Lowther. Kildare glanced round the room.

"You are sure?" he asked. "Yes," said Lowther, looking in surprise at the St. Jim's captain's excited

With startling suddenness Tom Merry finds himself involved in a plot designed to end in his complete disgrace. And only too well does Bingham, the rascally prefect, succeed in his scheming intentions—but Bingham reckons without the loyalty and astuteness of Tom's chums!

face and wondering what had happened. "He went home with Brooke—the day boy in the Fourth, you know—for the evening."

"He had a pass out," added Manners. "Then he is out of doors!" said Kildare. "I thought so. A pass out doesn't hold good after bed-time; he ought to be back at half-past nine at the latest."

"Might be staying out of the rain," suggested Lowther, anxious to save trouble for his chum. "It's been raining hard, Kildare."

"I know it has," said Kildare. "I've been out in it. Did Tom Merry say he was going home with young Brooke?"

"Yes; they went away together." "Brooke's mater invited him," said Manners.

"Oh!" said Kildare grimly. "Well, got off to bed, you kids. You needn't have waited up till I came in. Buzz off at once!"

"All right!" "I—I say, has anything happened, Kildare?" asked Lowther anxiously.

"Yes," said Kildare shortly. "Nothing wrong with Tom Merry, is there?"

"Yes!" growled Kildare. "Something has happened to him?"

naked Manners and Lowther together, in alarm.

"Not yet," said Kildare. "Something's going to happen to the young rascal when he comes in, though! Don't jaw; get off to bed!"

"But I say—" "Go to bed!" exclaimed Kildare angrily.

Monty Lowther gave it up. Kildare of the Sixth was usually one of the best-tempered fellows at St. Jim's; but he was evidently in anything but a good temper now. The Shell fellows went up to their dormitory, and Kildare followed them in grim silence.

CHAPTER 2.

A Startling Accusation!

THE Shell undressed in silence, and turned in. All the fellows could see that something unusual had happened, and that there was trouble in store for the captain of the Form when he returned to the school.

Kildare's face was set and angry—angrier than the juniors had ever seen him before.

Tom Merry's chums were puzzled and anxious. But it was evidently no use asking Kildare questions.

The captain of St. Jim's was about to turn out the lights in the Shell dormitory when footsteps came along the passage and Tom Merry appeared.

Tom Merry came hurriedly into the dormitory, his handsome face wet with rain and red with haste. The rain was dripping from the cap he had taken off, and his boots were muddy. He breathed hard as he came into the Shell dormitory, and gave Kildare an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Kildare!" he exclaimed. "It really wasn't my fault!" Kildare fixed a grim look upon him.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"I've been home with Brooke."

"Anywhere else?"

"No."

"Then why are you so late?"

"I stopped for shelter from the rain. I hadn't my coat with me," explained Tom Merry. "It came on to rain just after I left Brooke's."

"Where did you stop?"

"In the wood. I came home by the short cut across Rylcombe Wood," said Tom Merry. "I should have been in by half-past nine, but for the rain. I had a pass out till bed-time, you know. Bingham gave it to me."

"And you've been nowhere but at Brooke's and waiting in the wood out of the rain?"

"Nowhere else, certainly."

"You didn't see me while you were out?"

Tom Merry looked surprised.

"See you, Kildare! No; I didn't know you'd been out."

"You didn't pass me on the Wayland Road?"

"No; I haven't been on the Wayland Road."

"You haven't seen anybody but Brooke?"

"Brooke, and his mater and his sister," said Tom Merry, in wonder. "That's all."

"Then how do you account for this?" Kildare groped in his pocket and drew out a handkerchief, stained with mud and wet. "Whose is this?"

Tom Merry looked at the handkerchief.

"Mine," he said. "There are my initials in the corner—" T. M."

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"Yes," said Kildare; "there are your initials in the corner—T. M." When I picked it up on the Wayland Road I saw the initials on it, and knew that it was yours."

"You picked it up—where?"

"On the Wayland Road, half an hour ago," said Kildare. "You passed me there, and ran away as soon as I came by you; and you dropped that handkerchief as you ran."

Tom Merry flushed crimson.

"I didn't!" he exclaimed. "I tell you I haven't been on the Wayland Road to-night! You have made a mistake!"

"Why don't you say I'm not speaking the truth, and have done with it?" said Kildare angrily. "I passed you and your companion on the Wayland Road, and I recognised him. I didn't recognise you, because you had your face muffled up; but I knew you were a St. Jim's fellow by your cap. When I picked up that handkerchief I knew that it was you, and when I got back here I found that you hadn't come in."

Tom Merry looked blankly at the captain of St. Jim's.

There was a dead silence in the dormitory.

The Shell fellows were sitting up in bed, looking on at the strange scene in wonder. They understood now the meaning of Kildare's angry look when he came in, and his inquiries after the missing Shell fellow.

"Well," said Kildare grimly, "what have you to say now?"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Only what I've said already," he replied. "I came back directly from Brooke's, and never set foot on the Wayland Road at all. I don't know how anybody came to have my handkerchief about him."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Yes, I do!" Tom Merry exclaimed. "All the fellows here can tell you whether I'm in the habit of telling lies or not."

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther. "Hold your tongue, Lowther!" said Kildare sharply.

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Lowther undauntedly. "You can't expect me to hold my tongue when you're calling Tommy a liar!"

"No fear!" said Manners. "I'm jolly well not going to hold my tongue, either! Tom Merry has told you the truth!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Kangaroo.

Kildare frowned angrily.

"I wish Tom Merry deserved your faith in him, that's all," he said. "But he doesn't. He was on the Wayland Road to-night, and he has denied it."

"I wasn't there!" said Tom Merry. "Suppose he was there," said Bernard Glyn, "what then? It's no crime to be on the Wayland Road, I suppose?"

"It's not the way home from Brooke's," said Crooke maliciously.

"Oh, you shut up, Crooke!"

"Tommy might have come round that way," said Clifton Dane.

"But I didn't," said Tom Merry. "I came through the wood by the short cut. Look here, Kildare, there's a mistake somewhere, but I think you might take my word. If I had come round by Wayland, why should I deny it—even if I wanted to lie?"

"Yes, answer that!" growled Lowther. "There would be no need to make a secret of it."

"You know perfectly well why you've denied it, Tom Merry. You know that I recognised your companion," said Kildare sternly.

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"My companion! What do you mean?"

"You were with a man nobody at this school is allowed to know—a rascal who is known to be the worst character in Wayland. You were with Pudsey Smith."

Tom Merry started.

"Pudsey Smith! What rot! I don't even know the man!"

"You ought not to know him, and I wouldn't have believed that you did," said Kildare. "Only I saw you with him!"

"You didn't! I wasn't there! It was somebody else!"

"Somebody else who had your handkerchief in his pocket, and was called by your name, I suppose?" said Kildare sarcastically. "Pudsey Smith called out: 'Look it, Tommy!' as I came up, and you hooked it."

"My hat!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Now what have you to say?" demanded Kildare.

Tom Merry looked dazed.

"I—I can only repeat what I've said," he replied. "It wasn't I who was there. I came home by the short cut through the wood."

"You stick to that?"

"I stick to it because it's true!"

"Very well," said Kildare, between his teeth. "You will have a chance of sticking to it before the Head in the morning. Go to bed now."

"Kildare, I give you my word—"

"Go to bed!"

Tom Merry went to bed in silence. Kildare switched out the light and quitted the Shell dormitory without another word.

As soon as he was gone there was a buzz of voices in the dormitory.

CHAPTER 3.

Quite Convincing!

"TOMMY!"

"Tom Merry, old man!"

"You ass, Tommy!"

"What have you been up to, now, you chump?"

"Pudsey Smith! My word!"

"The high and mighty Tom Merry found out at last!" said Crooke, with a chuckle. "The model youth is discovered! The good little boy who could never do wrong is shown up! My hat! Pudsey Smith! What a choice friend!"

Whiz!

Monty Lowther's pillow sailed through the air and descended upon Crooke.

"Ow!"

"Shut up!" said Monty Lowther, in a sulphurous voice. "If you cackle again, Crooke, I'll get out of bed and slaughter you!"

"Ow! You rotter—"

"Shut up!" roared Lowther.

And Crooke thought he had better shut up.

"Now, Tommy, let's know what this means," said Manners.

"Blessed if I know what it means!" said Tom Merry, in a dazed way. "I can't make it out. It's extraordinary the fellow having my handkerchief."

"Very extraordinary!" sneered Crooke.

"Quite remarkable!" observed Gore.

"And his name being Tommy, too," said Bernard Glyn. "That's jolly queer, Tommy. I suppose you're quite sure you weren't there?"

"You ass!" said Tom Merry. "Of course I'm sure! I suppose I ought

to know whether I was on the Wayland Road or not?"

"Well, you ought to," said Gore.

"I wasn't there! I left Brooke's place at a few minutes to nine, and I should have been back here by half-past but for the rain."

"Very unlucky, that rain!" said Crooke.

There was the sound of somebody getting out of bed.

"Look here, Lowther," began Crooke, in alarm. "Oh! Ah! Yaroooh!"

Monty Lowther's grasp was upon the cad of the Shell. He was dragged out of bed, and descended with a bump upon the floor.

"Ow! Wow! Leggo!" he roared.

"Yes, I'll leggo when I've spanked you!" said Monty Lowther savagely.

"Spank, spank, spank!"

"Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"Let him alone," said Gore. "I suppose he has a right to doubt Tom Merry's word if he wants to?"

"That's where you make your mistake," said Monty Lowther. "He hasn't, and you haven't. Will you kindly attend to Gore, Manners?"

"Yes, rather!" said Manners, leaping out of bed.

"If you come near me—" began Gore, sitting upright and grasping his pillow. "Yaroooh!"

Bump!

Gore rolled on the floor, and there was a renewed sound of spanking.

"Yow-ow!" roared Gore.

"Go it!" yelled Kangaroo. "Do you want any help?"

"N-no! I think I can manage!" gasped Manners.

"Spank, spank, spank!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, then, are you quite satisfied that Tommy has stuck strictly to the bonds of veracity?" asked Monty Lowther, sitting on Crooke's chest, and pinning him down by sheer weight to the floor.

"Ow!" roared Crooke. "No! Yow!"

"Not satisfied yet? Kangy, old man!"

"Hallo!" said Kangaroo.

"Hand me my jug, will you?"

"Certainly!" said the Cornstalk.

"Yow!" roared Crooke. "Don't you spill that water over me? Yow—ah—oosh! Groogh!"

Water swamped upon the head of the unfortunate cad of the Shell. He gasped and roared and struggled wildly.

"Yow! Oh! Lemme gerrup! Ow!"

"Are you satisfied with Tommy's veracity?" asked Lowther sweetly.

"Yow! Oh! Yes!"

"Fully satisfied?"

"Groogh! Yes!" groaned Crooke.

"Oh, you beast! I'll pay you out for this! Yow! I'm wet! I'm drenched! Ow!"

"Good!" said Lowther calmly. "I thought I should be able to satisfy you if I used enough water."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther released his victim, and Crooke staggered up, with water running in little rivulets from his hair.

"Now, if you'd like to finish this little matter with your fists, I'm ready for you," said Monty Lowther.

"Ow!" groaned Crooke.

Apparently he did not want to finish the matter. He scrambled away to his washstand, and began to mop his head furiously with his towel.

Monty Lowther turned towards George Gore, who was extended upon his back, with Manners sitting on his chest.



Monty Lowther sat on Crooke's chest and pinned him to the floor. "Don't you spill that water over me!" roared Crooke. "Yow—ah—Grooooh!" Water swamped down upon the head of the cad of the Shell. "Now are you satisfied that Tom Merry is telling the truth?" grinned Lowther.

"Gore, old man, it's your turn!" he remarked.

"Keep off!" yelled Gore.

"Are you satisfied with Tommy's veracity?"

"Ow! Yes! Keep that jug away, you beast!"

"Fully and completely satisfied?"

"Ow! Yes!"

"Sorry you spoke?"

"Yes! Keep off!"

"Well, if you're satisfied already, I needn't swamp you, and it's a waste of water," Lowther remarked. "But if you're not really fully satisfied, I should be quite happy to oblige. You've only got to say the word."

"Gerraway!"

"You're more easily satisfied than Crooke," remarked Lowther, setting his jug back on the washstand. "Better for you. Let the cad go, Manners."

Gore was allowed to rise. He was breathing fury, and as soon as Manners released him, he made a wild rush at Monty Lowther.

Lowther was ready for him, and they embraced quite affectionately. In two seconds Gore's head was in chancery, and Lowther was hammering away cheerfully at his features.

Gore bellowed.

"My hat!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "Shut up that row! You'll have all the giddy prefects here soon!"

"Cave!" shouted Glyn.

The warning came too late.

The dormitory door was thrown open and Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, strode in, and switched on the electric light. The Housemaster looked thunderstruck as he gazed at Gore and Lowther.

"What—what does this mean?" he asked. "Boys, separate at once! How dare you fight at this hour? It is disgraceful! What does this mean?"

Monty Lowther obediently released

Gore, and Gore staggered away from him, with his nose streaming red, and one of his eyes closed, gasping with pain and fury.

"What is the cause of this?" demanded Mr. Railton sternly.

"Only a little argument, sir," said Lowther respectfully. "Gore was not open to conviction, and I was trying my hardest to convince him."

There was a chuckle from the Shell fellows; and Mr. Railton frowned.

"Take a hundred lines, Lowther. Go back to bed at once, both of you! If there is another sound from this dormitory, I shall come back with a cane."

And the juniors turned in.

Mr. Railton, with a frowning glance at them, turned out the light and withdrew.

"Ow!" groaned Gore.

"Your own fault," said Monty Lowther politely. "I don't allow anybody to cast giddy aspersions upon Tommy, Tommy, old man, now the interruptions are over, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Nothing," he replied. "Kildare's made a mistake, that's all; but how it's come about, I don't know any more than you do."

"It looks bad for you, Tommy," said Manners. "Kildare's going to have you up before the Head in the morning."

"I know it; but it can't be helped. It's a queer business; but the facts are just as I've told you. I can't say more than that."

That it was a queer business all the Shell fellows agreed. Tom Merry's chums took his word without a doubt; and if anybody else felt inclined to doubt it, no one felt inclined to share the unhappy fate of Gore and Crooke, so no doubts were expressed.

But the Shell were puzzled very much

over the matter and it was a long time before they slept.

Tom Merry was the most wakeful.

It was almost midnight before the hero of the Shell fell asleep; and then his sleep was troubled, and he dreamed that he was being chased along the Wayland Road by Kildare and Pudsey Smith, waving handkerchiefs at him, from which vision he was aroused by the rising-bell.

CHAPTER 4. Cheer Up!

"JOE!"

Joe Frayne, of the Third Form at St. Jim's, gave a start as his name was rapped out close by his ear. He was standing under one of the old elms in the quadrangle at St. Jim's, leaning against the trunk, and with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

His youthful brow was corrugated in an expression of deep thought.

Wally—otherwise D'Arcy minor of the Third—had come out to look for him, and he regarded Frayne's thoughtful brow with disapproving astonishment.

"Joe, you young ass!"

"Yes, Master Wally," said Joe Frayne meekly.

Wally snorted. Wally was the younger brother of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth, but he did not much resemble that elegant junior in his ways. He did not err upon the side of politeness.

"Look here, you young cuckoo, what's the matter with you?" he demanded. "You've been looking down in the mouth for two days now. You started it on Monday, you kept it up all day yesterday, and now this morning

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you slithered off from the dorm before rising-bell, and I didn't know what had become of you. Look here, Joe, I'm not having it."

Frayne smiled faintly.

"I'm all right, Master Wally."

"Rats!" said D'Arcy minor. "Breakfast will be ready soon. You can't take a chivvy like that into the dining-room. Cheer up!"

"I—I can't!"

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Wally.

"Nothing."

"Then what are you downhearted about?"

"It's all right."

"Heard something from those giddy old acquaintances of yours, chaps who knew you before you came to St. Jim's?" asked Wally, eyeing the waif of the Third in a suspicious sort of way.

Frayne shook his head.

"Then what's the worry?" demanded Wally. "I know Bingham of the Sixth was ragging you on Monday. But I suppose that isn't hanging on your mind, is it?"

Joe was silent.

"My only Aunt Jane!" exclaimed Wally, in surprise. "Is that it?"

Joe coloured.

"Master Bingham is 'ard on a feller," he said. "There's some people as think that a bloke ain't straight because he was born in a slum, and only come to this 'ere school through the kindness of Master Merry."

Wally snorted more emphatically than before.

Joe Frayne, as all St. Jim's knew, was a waif of a London slum, and it was through Tom Merry's kindness that he had been brought to St. Jim's.

Tom Merry's uncle was paying his fees there, and Tom Merry was his friend and protector.

D'Arcy minor had stood by Joe from the first; partly, perhaps, because some of the more snobbish fellows in the Third had been down on him.

Wally, being the son of a lord, could afford not to be snobbish. And nothing made Wally more furious than to hear a sneer or gibe about Joe's early days in the slums. Most of the fellows, indeed, were too decent to give Frayne any trouble on that score.

"Look here, Joe," said Wally savagely, "do you mean to say that Bingham has been chipping you about the slum?"

"Not exactly that, Master Wally."

"Oh, don't Master Wally me, you young ass. Can't you call me Wally?"

"Yes, Master Wally."

"Fathead! Now, what has Bingham been doing?"

"N—nothing."

"You said he didn't think you were straight, because you'd been born in a slum," said Wally. "I'll show him! What did he say to you?"

"It—it's all right! Master Tom stopped him ragging me," said Frayne. "He ain't said anything to me since."

Wally growled.

"I'll jolly well teach him not to rag you," he said. "Prefect or no prefect, he's not going to hit below the belt."

"I—I say, Master Wally, don't you go for to say anything to him!" exclaimed Joe, in alarm. "Master Tom has stopped him, and he can't do anything now, so long as Master Tom has the letter, and—"

Wally stared at him.

"The letter! What letter?"

"I—I—"

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"Look here, I don't like riddles," said Wally crossly. "Tell me what you're talking about."

Joe's face was crimson with distress.

"I—I can't, Master Wally."

"Why can't you?"

"Because—because I wasn't going to say nothin' about it, you know."

"About what?"

"About—about that, you know."

"What letter are you talking about?"

Joe was silent.

"You mean that Bingham gave you a letter to take somewhere?"

"Ye-es."

"Where?"

No answer.

"And Tom Merry's got it?"

Silence.

"Won't you tell me, Joe?"

"I—I can't, Master Wally. I said too much already. I—I promised not to speak about it—not to say a word," said Joe, in distress.

Wally grunted.

"You young ass! Why didn't you say so before? Do you think I'd have asked you questions if I'd known that?"

"I—I s'pose not," faltered Joe. "I'm sorry, Master Wally."

Wally regarded him with doubt and anxiety.

"Is the affair, whatever it is, all over now?" he demanded.

"Yes, yes!"

"Then what are you so down in the mouth for?"

"I—I—"

"I'll jolly well go to Bingham, and give him my opinion of him," said D'Arcy savagely. "I'll jolly well—"

Joe uttered a cry of alarm.

"Don't, Master Wally. Hold on! You can't say anything to him; it'll look as if I've broke my word."

Wally paused.

"Well, yes; that's so," he said. "But, look here! I'm not going to have this go on, Joe. You shouldn't have promised. You ought to have come to me and told me all about it."

"Ye-es."

"Now, cheer up, and don't look so beastly glum," said Wally. "If the affair's all over, what is there to worry about? You're not afraid of Bingham, are you?"

"Oh, no, Master Wally!"

"Then what's the trouble with you?"

"I'm thinkin' of Master Tom," confessed Joe. "I—I'm afraid that Bingham will go for him, somehow, over that letter. I—I—"

He paused.

Wally looked perplexed.

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of it!" he exclaimed. "It seems to me you've acted like a silly young ass, anyway. Cheer up. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Master Wally," said Joe meekly.

"Can't you grin?" demanded Wally. Joe grinned feebly.

"That's better," said his chum. "Keep that up. You needn't worry about Tom Merry. He's able to take care of himself."

"Yes; I—I suppose so," said Joe.

"As for Bingham, he's a rotter!" growled Wally. "You don't want to have anything to do with him. It's jolly well known by some fellows that he breaks bounds at night, and he goes out for things he wouldn't care to explain to the Head or Mr. Raiton. He's a giddy blackguard, and that's the long and short of it."

"I think you're right, Master Wally."

"I know I am," said Wally. "He'll come a cropper one of these days. You give Bingham a wide berth, and don't even fag for him if you can help it."

My only Aunt Jane, you're looking down in the mouth again! Grin!"

Joe grinned.

"That's better. Now come in to brekker, and if I see you looking glum again, I'll punch your silly head!"

And Wally linked his arm in Joe Frayne's, and marched him into the School House.

They met Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, the chums of Study No. 6, in the Hall, and all the four Fourth Formers were looking decidedly glum.

Wally stared at them.

"Blessed if it isn't catching!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you chaps? What are you down in the mouth for?"

"Haven't you heard?" growled Blake.

"Heard what?"

"About Tom Merry."

Joe Frayne started.

"Master Tom ain't in trouble, is he?" he asked quickly.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Of course, it's all wot; but it looks like vewy sewious twouble for him. We shall stick to him, and buck him up."

"But what's happened?" asked Wally.

"He was out late last night," said Blake. "Kildare's going to have him up before the Head this morning. I've heard it from Kangaroo. There was a row in the Shell dorm last night."

"Well, he went home with Brooke," said Wally. "Nothing serious in staying a bit late, is there? It only means lines."

Jack Blake shook his head.

"It's worse than lines this time," he said. "Kildare declares that he saw Tom Merry on the Wayland Road, in company with Pudsey Smith. It can't be true."

Joe Frayne turned white.

"Pudsey Smith?" he said faintly.

"Yes. Of course, it's all rot!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Tom Merry denies it?" asked Wally.

"Of course!"

"Then it's not true."

"Wathah not," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But it's jolly queeah. If Tom Mewwy had anythin' to do with Pudsey Smith, we have all been vewy much mistaken in him; and I, for one, won't believe it, unless Tom Mewwy tells me so himself."

"It's not true," said Joe Frayne, in a low voice. "It can't be! Only—"

"Don't you be cut up about it, kid," said Blake kindly. "It will come out all right. Tom Merry will clear himself."

Joe Frayne was silent. There was a frightened expression in his eyes, and he moved away without speaking again.

Wally strode after him, and caught him by the sleeve.

"What's the matter, Joe?" he asked sharply. "You don't believe this about Tom Merry surely?"

Joe gave him a miserable look.

"Master Tom 'as gone and got 'imself into trouble," he muttered, "and it's all my fault!"

"What on earth do you mean? You don't think that Tom Merry was really with that awful rotter, do you?" demanded Wally.

But Joe Frayne declined to say another word; but when he took his place at the Third Form table for breakfast, he looked as if all the troubles in the world had descended upon his young shoulders.

CHAPTER 5.

Nothing to Say!

TOM MERRY was the cynosure of all eyes as he sat at the breakfast table with the rest of the Shell that morning.

The Shell fellow kept his head very erect, and his face, though a little pale, was composed and calm. All the School House knew of the trouble in store for him now; the affair in the Shell dormitory of the previous night had been talked about up and down the quad, and the fellows over in the New House knew almost as much about it as the School House fellows.

Gore was looking very much of a wreck at the table; one of his eyes was closed, and his nose seemed nearly twice its usual size.

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, glanced at him sharply, but made no remark. Monty Lowther and Manners looked worried and miserable. At the Sixth Form table Kildare was very taciturn. The matter was worrying the captain of St. Jim's very much.

Tom Merry had as good a reputation as any fellow in the House, and it was a painful surprise to Kildare to discover him, as he believed, to be guilty of such duplicity. He would have trusted Tom Merry to any extent, previous to that occurrence, and the feeling that his faith and confidence had been misplaced made the captain of St. Jim's very bitter.

When breakfast was over Kildare called to Tom Merry as the fellows came out of the dining-room.

The Shell fellow quietly followed the captain of St. Jim's to his study.

Kildare closed the door, and stood with his eyes fixed upon Tom Merry's face.

"Well?" he said.

"Well!" repeated Tom Merry.

"Have you anything to say?"

"Only what I said last night."

"You still deny knowing Pudsey Smith, the biggest blackguard in the neighbourhood?" asked Kildare savagely.

"Yes."

"Look here!" said Kildare, more quietly. "I don't want to be too hard on you, Merry, if you own up and do the decent thing. So that you needn't tell any more lies about the matter, I'll explain to you."

"I've told no lies!"

"Don't interrupt me! I'll explain to you how I came to find you out. It's been known for some time that some St. Jim's fellows, or, at least, one, chummed up with that outsider, Pudsey Smith. He's having a London boxer down to his place in Wayland for a glove contest, and it's perfectly well known that one St. Jim's chap, at least, has been over there. He's been seen. The Head heard something about it, and he asked me to make inquiries, and to see whether there was anything in it. That's how I came to be over there last night, when I found you with Pudsey Smith."

"You did not find me; it was somebody else."

"Somebody else with a handkerchief bearing your initials on him," said Kildare, with angry sarcasm.

"The name is nothing. Tom isn't an uncommon name," said Tom Merry. "As for the handkerchief, I don't know how to account for that. I might have dropped it somewhere, and that fellow may have found it."

"I'm afraid that kind of explanation won't do much good, Merry. Look here! I cannot believe that you have been playing the double game all the

time that you have been in Co. with that gang of rotters at Pudsey Smith's place. If you will explain to me how you got into it, and give me some reason to believe that you will keep clear of such things in the future, I'll do my best to make this easy for you."

Tom Merry's eyes met Kildare's calmly.

"I can't do that," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know Pudsey Smith, and have never spoken to him in my life."

Kildare's eyes gleamed.

"You are going to keep that up, then?" he demanded.

"I must keep it up, as it's the truth."

"Can't you see that you're doing the worst thing possible, Merry?" said Kildare, with much patience. "Now you're found out, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it."

"I've nothing to make a clean breast of."

"I want to know whether any other fellow at St. Jim's is mixed up in this?" said Kildare. "If any other fellow has led you into it? I know what the other fellows say about Knox and Sefton, and if they have influenced you—"

"Knox and Sefton have never spoken to me about Pudsey Smith."

"Then you have got into it all by yourself?"

"I never got into it. I know nothing about the man."

Kildare clenched his hands.

"I won't go to the Head about it now," he said. "I'll give you until this afternoon to think it over, Merry. If you're sensible, you'll confess."

"I'd confess if I had anything to confess," said Tom Merry quietly. "But I haven't anything."

"You have never had anything to do with Pudsey Smith?"

"Never!"

"And you don't know any fellow at St. Jim's who has?"

Tom Merry did not reply.

"Ah!" said Kildare. "We are getting to something now. You do not deny that you know some fellow here who has had dealings with that rascal?"

"It's not a fair question," said Tom Merry. "I'm not called upon to sneak about another fellow."

"Then there is someone."

"I don't think you ought to ask me that."

"You've admitted it, at all events. Is it a friend of yours?"

"No!"

"Give me his name?"

"I can't tell you anything. It's not fair to ask me to accuse anybody."

"Very well," said Kildare. "I'll say no more at present. But this matter is going to be thrashed out to the very end, and your part in it will come to light, and that of any other St. Jim's fellow who is mixed up in it. I may as well tell you that the Head spoke on the subject to all the prefects in the school, and warned them that he ex-

pected the matter to be cleared up, one way or the other."

"All the prefects?" asked Tom Merry, in a rather peculiar tone.

"Yes; in both Houses."

"Well, I hope it will be cleared up," said Tom Merry. "I can only say that I have got nothing to tell you."

"Very well, you can go. I'll leave this matter over till the morning. Come to my study after third lesson, and tell me all about it, and I'll do my best for you. Otherwise, you will be taken before the Head."

"Then I must be taken before the Head," said Tom Merry quietly. "I think you might have a little more faith in me than this, Kildare. You've always known me to be decent."

"I've always supposed you to be decent, you mean!" snapped Kildare. "I'm finding out my mistake now. Get out!"

Tom Merry left the study without another word.

"Master Tom!"

Joe Frayne was waiting for the captain of the Shell in the passage. Tom Merry looked at the waif of the Third rather grimly.

"Hallo, Joe!" he said.

"Have you told him, Master Tom?"

"Told him what?"

"About what you saw Pudsey Smith for."

Tom Merry stared at the fag.

"You young ass!" he replied angrily.

"I haven't seen Pudsey Smith. Can't you take my word, either?"

"But—but I—I thought Kildare said he saw you with him," said Joe.

"He was mistaken."

Joe Frayne drew a deep breath.

"Then you ain't seen that man, Master Tom?"

"Of course I haven't, you young fat-head!"

"I—I thought you p'raps 'ave seen 'im about that letter," faltered Joe.

"Well, I didn't, Joe. I never thought of seeing him," said Tom Merry curtly.

And he walked away, leaving Joe Frayne looking very worried and distressed.

Mr. Linton found Tom Merry very much preoccupied in the Shell Form Room that morning, and Tom Merry received a hundred lines for carelessness in his lessons. But he did not mind that. Indeed, he hardly noticed

(Continued on the next page.)



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it. He was thinking of something more serious than lines.

Kildare's accusation was worrying him. It hurt Tom's feelings to think that the prefect, whom he had always liked and admired, would not take his word that he knew nothing about the affair of the night before. But the junior realised that unless he could prove his innocence, his position might become serious.

CHAPTER 6.

Mr. Smith Confesses!

MR. PUDSEY SMITH was seated upon a bench outside his little public-house on the Wayland Road, with a mug of ale upon the seat beside him and a black pipe in his mouth.

Mr. Pudsey Smith looked very cheerful and contented. He was in his shirt-sleeves as the afternoon was warm.

The old ex-pugilist drank his beer and puffed at his pipe with enjoyment. He seemed to be enjoying his thoughts as well as his beer and his tobacco, for occasionally he broke into a little chuckle.

He looked up lazily as a footstep passed outside the public-house. Then, as he saw who the newcomer was, the old pugilist straightened up in his seat, and took the pipe from his mouth.

The newcomer was Kildare of St. Jim's.

The handsome, athletic senior of St. Jim's stood before the old "pug," fixing a grim look upon him. Pudsey Smith affected to be at his ease.

"Afternoon!" he said.

Kildare did not answer the greeting.

"I've come to ask you a question or two, Mr. Smith," he said abruptly.

Mr. Smith nodded.

"Sit down, sir!" he said affably.

"I know wot you're arter!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes," said Pudsey. "You've got a little bit on the glove contest atween

the Bermondsey Chicken and Clobber Jim."

Kildare made a gesture of disgust.

"It's going to be a nice little scrap," said Mr. Smith, apparently not noticing Kildare's gesture. "But if you want a tip from me I ain't givin' information away. I don't 'ave nothin' to do with bettin'. I keep a respectable house, and I've got to consider my licence. But if you'd care to see the fight—"

"I shouldn't care to see it, thank you!" said Kildare.

"No bettin' wouldn't be allowed on my premises, anyway," said Mr. Smith. "I've got to think of the name of my 'ouse. Feller can be respectable, I 'ope, though 'e's 'ad 'is day in the ring, and stood up to 'eavy-weight champions in 'is time."

And Mr. Smith emptied his mug.

Kildare looked over him keenly.

Mr. Pudsey Smith had been a powerful and brawny man in his time, but like many old heroes of the ring, he had run to seed since his retirement from active service. He had developed corpulence, and his cheeks were fat and red and flabby, and a triple chin descended in rolls of fat upon his collar. Mr. Pudsey Smith had had a name in the ring once, but he did not look as if he could have put up much of a fight just now. The athletic St. Jim's fellow could have made rings round him, and Mr. Smith was quite aware of that fact, and perhaps that was one cause of his excessive civility.

"I met you on the Wayland Road last night," said Kildare abruptly.

Mr. Smith nodded.

"Allers takes a little stroll up the road of a hevenin'," he said. "It keeps me in condition."

"You had a lad with you."

"Struth, I did!" assented Mr. Smith.

"Who was it?"

Mr. Smith grinned.

"Don't yer know?" he asked.

"I think I know, but I want you to tell me."

"That wouldn't be playin' the game," said Mr. Smith. "I ain't

givin' anythin' away. No 'arm in a boy speakin' to me, I s'pose? S'pose it was a young gentleman interested in the manly art of self-defence, stopped to pass the time of day with me? What 'arm in that?"

"Plenty of harm in that," said Kildare. "But that wasn't all. You can say what you like, Mr. Smith, but most people know that bettin' does go on in this place of yours, and if the police about here were a little sharper, you would be run in."

"If you've come 'ere to insult me, young gent, you'd better go!" said Mr. Smith, with dignity. "I ain't takin' any lip from nobody!"

"Some fellow from St. Jim's has been seen about here," continued Kildare, unheeding. "I came along here last night to look for him."

"Indeed!"

"I found him talking to you on the road. It's pretty clear to me that he had just left this place, and that he was walking down the road with him."

"Quite a mistake," said Mr. Smith. "I 'ope you don't think as I'd allow any boys on these 'ere premises out of school, arter hours, too!"

"I am quite sure you would, if they had money enough to make it worth your while," said Kildare coldly. "Now, I want to know the name of that St. Jim's fellow who was with you last night."

Mr. Smith's jaw set obstinately.

"I ain't nothin' to tell you," he said.

"What was his name?"

"Find out!"

"I'm going to!" said Kildare grimly.

"Get up!"

"Eh?"

"And put your hands up!"

"Wot?"

"I'm going to give you a hiding!"

said the captain of St. Jim's coolly. "You're too cunning to let the law touch you, although everybody knows what goes on in this place. But you won't be allowed to get St. Jim's fellows here for gambling on fights. You'll give me the name of that fellow who was with you, or I'll give you a hiding!"

Mr. Pudsey Smith blinked at him.

"I suppose you know I've been in the ring?" he said. "You'd better be careful 'ow you pick a scrap with me!"

"I'll take my chance."

"Look 'ere, I don't want a row with you!" said Mr. Smith, showing no disposition to get up. "If I was as young as I used to be I'd wallop you till you 'owled! But I ain't! I'm not going to scrap with you."

"You will unless you give me the name of the fellow who was with you last night on the road when I met you!"

"You 'eard me speak 'is name!" growled Mr. Smith.

"I heard his Christian name, that's all. If he had been with you for no harm you wouldn't have called to him to run when I came up."

Mr. Smith chuckled.

"I was jest torkin' to 'im," he said. "If you want to know who it was you needn't ask me. I s'pose all the fellows at your school ain't named Tom? Make a list of the Toms, and find out which was away from the school. It ain't fair to ask me to give a pal away."

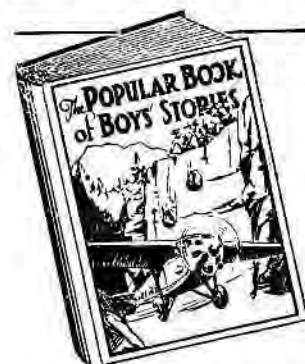
"Give me his name!" said Kildare, pushing back his cuffs. "I give you one minute!"

"Look 'ere," said Mr. Smith, "the kid was doin' no 'arm! 'E was jest askin' me a bit about the form of the Bermondsey Chicken."

"His name?"

"That's all it was, and I ain't tellin' you no more! Find out for yourself!"

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Kildare stepped towards the publican. Mr. Pudsey Smith shrank back in his seat, looking very much alarmed.

"Ands off!" he roared.

"Get up!"

"I won't! 'Ands off! I'll 'ave the law on yer!"

Kildare's grip closed upon the shoulder of the fat man, and he was jerked to his feet.

"Old on!" he exclaimed. "I don't mind tellin' you the name, as far as that goes."

"What is the name?"

"You see, I don't want to get the young gent into trouble. 'E wasn't doin' no 'arm—jest askin' a question about the Bermondsey Chicken—takin' a hinterest in boxin', you know, which I'm sure is natural enough in any young gent."

"His name?" growled Kildare.

"Tom Merry!" snarled the publican. Kildare drew a deep breath.

"That is enough!" he said quietly. "Thank you!"

He released the publican and strode away.

Mr. Pudsey Smith stood looking after him and blinking in the sun. There was a very peculiar look upon the fat face of Mr. Smith. As Kildare turned from the wood into the pathway through Rylcombe Wood and disappeared from sight Mr. Smith burst into a loud and prolonged chuckle.

"My heye!" he murmured. "Well, he asked for it—he was determined to 'ave the name! My heye! I want a drink arter that!"

And Mr. Pudsey Smith went into his bar and mixed himself a particularly strong cocktail, and chucked with enjoyment as he consumed it.

CHAPTER 7.

Before the Head!

"MASTER MERRY!"

It was the voice of Toby, the School House page. He came plodding across the quadrangle of St. Jim's to where Tom Merry & Co. were chatting by the football field.

Tom Merry turned round. He knew what was wanted.

"Well, Toby?"

"Ead wants you in 'is study, Master Merry!"

"Thank you!"

"Master Kildare is there, Master Tom," said Toby. "I'd look out if I was you!"

And Toby, having delivered his friendly warning, departed.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Well, I've got to go through it," he said.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It's beastly wotten, Tom Mewwy, deah boy! But surely the Head will take your word!"

"Kildare doesn't."

"I wegard Kildare as an ass!"

"He's several sorts of an ass!" said Monty Lowther. "He ought to know that Tommy wouldn't tell any lies about it if he had seen that old pug. But it was jolly queer about the handkerchief."

"Must have been a St. Jim's fellow who was with Smith," said Jack Blake.

"The question is—what fellow was it?"

"Bai Jove! Suppose we try to find out how many chaps were out last night, deah boys, and we may be able to show up the woad wottah!"

"I don't think anybody was out," said Manners glumly. "Monty and I have been asking some questions. We've asked Figgins & Co., and they've asked the New House chaps, and it seems that

nobody belonging to the New House had a pass out."

"And nobody in the School House excepting me," said Tom Merry.

"The only chap who was out besides Tom Merry was Brooke," said Manners. "He had gone home, of course, as he's a day-boy. But Tom Merry left him at his house, so he's out of it."

"It wasn't Brooke," said Blake. "We all know that. His people could clear him, too; they'd know whether he was out after Tom Merry left."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then who the dickens could it have been? I suppose it's certain that Kildare saw somebody?"

"Well, that's pretty certain," said Kangaroo. "Kildare isn't ass enough to fancy it. He said clearly that the chap was wearing a St. Jim's cap."

"Nobody had a pass out excepting myself, and nobody seems to have missed calling-over," said Tom Merry.

"The only explanation is that it was a senior."

"Phew!"

"Do you know whether Bingham was out, you fellows? It was Bingham's turn to see lights out for the Fourth last night, I believe."

"My hat!" said Blake. "He didn't come to see lights out till a quarter to ten. Kildare was later; but we were all remarking about Bingham being late. He said he had been studying and had forgotten the time—I remember."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My hat!" said Manners excitedly. "And Bingham is a little chap, you know. He is broad-built, but he's short, and in the dark he could easily be taken for a junior."

Tom Merry nodded.

"And he had mud on his boots last night," said Monty Lowther. "You remember, I mentioned it, Manners, and said he was whopping?"

"I remember it!"

"You'd better buzz off and see the Head, Tommy," said Blake. "No good keeping him waiting. But we're jolly well going to look into this."

Tom Merry gave his chums a nod and hurried away towards the School House. He left the juniors engaged in an excited discussion.

Bingham met him in the passage as he came in and signed to him to stop.

Tom Merry paused, with a look of dislike upon his face. The short, thickest senior was no taller than the Shell fellow as he stood facing him.

"I hear you're in trouble, Merry," Bingham remarked.

"Yes," said Tom Merry shortly.

"I'm sorry. When I gave you that pass last night I had no idea you were going to do anything so reckless. I thought you were simply going to see Brooke at his home."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"I did simply see Brooke at his home," he said. "You know jolly well that I've never had anything to do with Pudsey Smith, Bingham."

Bingham looked surprised.

"How should I know?" he asked.

"You know well enough! If I'd had anything to do with the man myself, why should I have interfered when you wanted to send young Frayne on a message to him?" demanded Tom Merry hotly.

Bingham laughed.

"And I've got a jolly strong suspicion who it really was with Pudsey Smith last night," said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming.

(Continued on the next page.)



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CONCRETE EXAMPLE.

Each boy in the class was told in turn to stand up and give an example of an English proverb. All of them succeeded except Smith minor.

"Now, look at me!" said the teacher. "Although I am bald, I can—"

"Ah, I know, sir!" interrupted Smith minor. "Empty barns need no thatch!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to L. Brice, 64, Whatley Avenue, Merton Park, London, S.W.20.

NO COMPLIMENT.

Johnny (to visitor): "Please, Mr. Brown, are you a good swimmer?"

Mr. Brown: "No, Johnny. Why did you ask?"

Johnny: "'Cos I've heard father say many times that you could just manage to keep your head above water!"
Half-a-crown has been awarded to A. Morawaka, St. John's College, Paudura, Ceylon.

HELPFUL.

Old Lady (to driver of steam-roller): "I say, my man, have you noticed a pound of butter lying in the road?"

Driver: "H'm! Well, come to think of it, ma, I did notice a bit of a bump a little way back!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to F. Cairns, 36, Baydons Road, Dagenham, Essex.

HE SAID IT.

One of Simpkins' customers was notorious for his slowness in meeting his debts. In desperation, Simpkins sent him the following letter:

"Sir,—Who bought a lot of goods from me and did not pay? You! Who promised to pay in sixty days? You! Who didn't pay in six months? You! Who is a scoundrel, a thief, and a liar?—Yours truly, JOHN SIMPKINS."

Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Morris, Hole Hill, Smithills, Bolton.

PROOF.

Teacher: "Is your father a vegetarian, Willie?"

Willie: "Yes, sir. He has carrotty hair, a cauliflower ear, a beetroot face, and a pen that leaks!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to G. Nelson, 39/6, Murad Bey, Heliopolis, Egypt.

NOTHING DOING.

Father (to lazy son): "Why don't you get out and find a job? When I was your age I was working for three pounds a week in a store, and at the end of ten years I owned the store!"

Son: "You can't do that nowadays, dad—they have cash registers!"
Half-a-crown has been awarded to H. Dunthorne, 103, Stag Lane, Edgware, Middlesex.

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"Who, then?"

"You!"

The prefect laughed again.

"Oh, you are thinking of squirming out of it by pushing another fellow in, then?" he said sneeringly. "Well, you won't find it answer. As it happens, I've talked to Kildare about the matter, and it seems that when he met you and Pudsey Smith it was just on half-past nine, and I was seeing the Fourth Form to their dormitory about that time."

"You were late seeing lights out for the Fourth."

"Yes, I believe I was a few minutes late—"

"A quarter of an hour," said Tom Merry.

"I was in my study—"

"Making your boots muddy indoors?" said Tom Merry.

Bingham started.

"Who saw my boots were muddy last night?" he asked sharply.

"Fellows who saw you come into the Common-room at a quarter to ten."

The prefect gritted his teeth.

"Thank you for telling me!" he said bitterly.

Tom Merry bit his lips. He felt that he had been imprudent in speaking too freely to the prefect; but it was too late to think of that now.

He hurried on to the Head's study and knocked at the door.

"Come in!" came the deep voice of Dr. Holmes.

Tom Merry entered the study.

Dr. Holmes was seated at his writing-table, and Kildare stood by the window. Both of them were looking very grave and serious.

The Head of St. Jim's fixed his eyes upon Tom Merry.

"You know why I have sent for you, Merry?" he said.

"I can guess, sir."

"Kildare has made a very serious charge against you."

"I know it, sir."

"You deny it?"

"Totally, sir."

Kildare made an angry gesture; but the Head signed to him to be silent.

"Let Merry speak, Kildare," he said. "Where were you last evening, Merry?"

"At Brooke's place!"

"I have questioned Brooke," said the Head. "He says you left his place about nine o'clock, so near as he can remember."

"That is correct, sir."

"You did not arrive at the school until ten."

"I stopped for shelter from the rain, sir."

"You did not meet the man Pudsey Smith, the landlord of the Peal of Bells, on the Wayland Road, Merry?"

"No, sir; I did not go that way; that way would have been much longer. I took the short cut through the wood from Wayland Moor."

"You are aware that Kildare heard Mr. Smith address his companion by your Christian name, and that the lad, in fleeing, dropped a handkerchief which you acknowledged to be yours?"

"Kildare says so, sir."

"You do not mean to imply doubt on Kildare's word?" said the Head sternly.

"Oh, no, sir!" said Tom Merry at once. "I know Kildare wouldn't say anything that wasn't true, sir. But he might have been mistaken about hearing the name."

"He was not mistaken," said the

Head. "He has visited Mr. Smith at his home this afternoon, and has extracted a confession as to the identity of his companion last night."

"Then that settles the matter, sir."

"Quite so."

"I'm glad of it, sir," said Tom Merry, with a breath of relief.

Dr. Holmes frowned.

"Glad of it, Merry! What do you mean?"

Tom Merry looked surprised.

"I mean that I'm glad I'm cleared, sir. If Mr. Smith told Kildare the name of the fellow concerned, that clears me, surely. Kildare doesn't think he saw two fellows there."

Dr. Holmes looked at him long and hard.

"Either there is some extraordinary mistake in the matter, or else you are the most consummate young rascal I have ever encountered!" the Head exclaimed. "The name that Mr. Smith gave to Kildare was your own!"

Tom Merry staggered.

"Mine, sir?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Smith gave Kildare my name? He said that I was with him?" gasped Tom Merry.

"Yes."

"It's a lie!" shouted Tom Merry, forgetting everything else in his anger and excitement. "It's a lie!"

"Merry! Do you dare to say that Kildare—"

"Not Kildare, sir; he's been taken in, that's all. But that villain, Pudsey Smith, has told him a lie, I know that!"

"You do not know this man Smith?"

"No, sir!"

"He is neither a friend nor an enemy of yours?"

"Neither, sir! I've happened to see him on the Wayland Road sometimes, sir, but I've never spoken to him."

"Then he can have no cause to dislike you?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Then why should he seek to injure you by giving your name if you were not with him last night?" demanded the Head.

"Not that I know of, sir."

Tom Merry looked dazed.

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Kildare reports to me that Mr. Smith was very unwilling to give the name. He prevaricated for some time; and it was only with great difficulty that he was made to speak," said the Head.

"And then he gave my name?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have done it to deceive Kildare, and protect the fellow who was really with him," said Tom Merry. "I certainly wasn't there. Another fellow from St. Jim's is thick with Pudsey Smith, and Smith was trying to screen him by dragging me into it."

"Why should he drag you into it when he does not know you?"

"I—I don't know."

"Have you any reason to suppose that he even knows your name, if your statement is correct that you have never spoken to him?"

"I—I don't see how he could know it."

"Then you are condemned out of your own mouth, Merry."

"He—he may have heard my name—and it was the first that came into his head, perhaps, when Kildare asked him," stammered Tom Merry.

"Nonsense!"

"He told a lie, anyway, sir."

"You persist, in spite of this conclusive evidence, that you have never had

any dealings with this man?" asked the Head patiently.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well; the investigation must go further. If you have been mixed up with these rascals, I think it is probable that you may have something in your personal belongings to prove it—some communication, perhaps," said the Head. "It is Kildare's suggestion."

"I didn't think of it myself, sir," said Kildare. "One of the prefects suggested it, and I thought there might be something in it. There might be notes about bets, or records of debts, or something, or a letter."

"Quite possible. Have you anything of the kind, Merry?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"Are you willing for your belongings to be searched?"

"Quite willing, sir."

"And your person?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Very well!" The Head touched the bell, and Toby, the page, appeared so quickly that a suspicious person might have fancied that he had been very near the door. "Toby!"

"Yes, sir," said Toby, with a glance of commiseration at the pale, harassed face of the hero of the Shell.

"I wish you to search Master Merry; to turn out all his pockets, and place the contents on the table," said the Head.

Toby looked hesitatingly at Tom Merry.

"Go ahead, Toby," said Tom Merry, forcing a smile. "I don't mind."

"Yes, Master Merry."

And Toby, with a very shamefaced air, began the search.

From the inside breast pocket of Tom Merry's jacket he drew a sealed letter, and Tom Merry, as he saw it, gave a sudden start, and his face flushed crimson.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "That letter isn't mine."

"Give it to me!" said the Head, in a voice of iron.

The letter was handed to him.

Tom Merry made a movement as if he would catch at it; Dr. Holmes placed it upon his desk, and laid his hand upon it.

CHAPTER 8.

The Letter I

CRIMSON and silent, Tom Merry stood there.

It was not surprising if both the Head and Kildare read in his flushing and troubled face the signs of conscious guilt.

Dr. Holmes fixed a stern look upon him as he stood with his hand upon the letter on the table.

"I shall look at this letter, Merry," he said.

"It is not mine, sir."

"Whose is it, then?"

Tom Merry did not answer.

"How did it come into your possession if it's not yours?"

The troubled look deepened upon Tom Merry's face, but he did not answer.

Dr. Holmes made a gesture to Toby.

"You may go," he said. "I do not think any further search will be necessary."

"Yes, sir!" said Toby.

And with a look of commiseration at Tom Merry, the page left the study, and closed the door softly behind him.

Dr. Holmes picked up the letter and glanced at it.

It was sealed, but there was no name or address upon the envelope.

The Head took a paper-knife in his hand and slit the envelope.

A single sheet of paper was inside,

written upon in a backward, slanting hand, in pencil.

Dr. Holmes unfolded it, and read it, and a frown gathered upon his brow.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that there can exist such duplicity in so young a lad?"

Tom Merry's lips trembled.

"It is not my letter, sir!" he stammered.

"Silence!"

Dr. Holmes handed the letter to Kildare.

"I wish you to read it," he said.

"Yes, sir!"

The captain of St. Jim's glanced at the letter, and started.

"My word!" he murmured.

"It is clear proof," said the Head. "Merry, there is no further doubt in my mind. That letter is a clear proof."

"I do not know what is in the letter, sir," said Tom Merry steadily. "It came into my hands sealed, and I have never opened it."

"Let him see it, Kildare."

Kildare handed the letter to Tom Merry.

The junior's senses almost swam as he read it, and realised what a fearful proof it was against him.

The letter ran:

"Dear Pudsey,—I shall try to get over to-night, but I don't know whether I shall be able to manage it, as K. has his eyes very much open now. Somebody must have been talking. But I shall manage to see the scrap, you may bet on that.

"YOUR PAL."

There was no other signature.

"You can see that that is not my writing, sir," said Tom Merry.

"It's nobody's writing," said the

Head; "the hand is slanted backwards for the purpose of disguise. Whoever wrote that letter disguised his hand; perhaps he did not wish it to be even in the power of Pudsey Smith to betray him. You did not trust even your associate."

"I did not write that letter."

"How can you tell such impudent falsehoods?" said the Head, losing patience. "The letter is found sealed in your pocket, all ready for the post, and yet you deny having written it!"

"I did not write it!"

"I should never have dreamed that Merry could lie like this, sir!" said Kildare, aghast. "I've been as much deceived in him as anybody."

"He shall not have an opportunity of deceiving us any further," said the Head grimly. "I ask you to confess, Merry."

"I will confess how this letter came into my possession, sir, if you will listen to me," said Tom Merry miserably. "I hope you will believe me."

"I think that is very improbable, Merry; but I am willing to listen to what you have to say, at all events."

"It was given to a fag on Monday, sir, by another fellow," said Tom Merry steadily. "A fag of the Third Form—a kid I've always stood by, and who always comes to you for advice when he's in a bother of any sort."

Tom Merry paused. The evident disbelief in the Head's face disconcerted him.

Kildare turned away towards the window with a gesture of disgust.

"You may go on, Merry," said the Head.

"You do not believe me, sir?"

"Go on!"

"Very well, sir. This letter was given to the fag I've mentioned to be

taken to Pudsey Smith. He wouldn't take it—he refused—and the senior—"

"It was a senior, then, who gave him this letter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Continue."

"The senior threatened him, and licked him, and I interfered. I've always stood by that kid. He's had troubles enough since he came to St. Jim's, and I was the cause of his coming here, and I was bound to protect him. I chipped in, sir, and when I found what the matter was, I took the letter from him. The senior wanted to get it back then, but I wouldn't part with it. I said I'd keep it by me, and if he ever tried to lead the fag into his rotten games again, I'd show him up, sir."

"I never meant that letter to come to light; and it was understood that I shouldn't give him away if he let the fag alone. If he worried him again, I was going to hand the letter to Kildare. It's not my business, of course, what Sixth Form fellows do, and it's not for a junior to interfere if they care to disgrace themselves; but I wasn't going to have a kid dragged into it."

"What fag are you alluding to, Merry?"

Tom Merry hesitated.

"From what he said, sir, he can only mean Joe Frayne," said Kildare.

"Was it Frayne of the Third Form, Merry?"

"Yes, sir."

"In taking possession of this letter, then, you were acting as the protector of Frayne against a Sixth Former who was trying to lead him into bad connections."

"I don't know whether the rotter wanted to do exactly that. He wanted a messenger between him and Pudsey Smith, and he thought young Frayne



A St. Jim's boy had been seen with Pudsey Smith, and Kildare intended to know his name. His strong grip closed upon the shoulder of the ex-pugilist, jerking him to his feet. "Old on!" gulped Pudsey Smith. "I don't mind tellin' you the name!"

could do it, because Frayne was brought up in a slum and has been through a lot of things that other fags here don't know anything about. He was wrong about Frayne; there isn't a more decent kid in the school!"

The Head looked hard at Tom Merry. "And what is the name of the senior concerned, Merry?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"You heard my question, Merry!"

"I don't think I ought to give his name, sir. It was understood that I wasn't to produce this letter if he let young Frayne alone."

"Will Frayne bear out your statement?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fetch Frayne here, Kildare."

"Yes, sir."

Kildare quitted the study. Dr. Holmes sat silent and grave while he was gone.

Tom Merry stole a timid glance at his face. The Head did not believe him, that was clear. But the headmaster of St. Jim's was a just man, and he would not leave a stone unturned to get at the truth.

If there was a chance for the accused he should have it.

Kildare returned in a few minutes, followed by the waif of the Third, who was looking very startled and scared.

"Come in, Frayne!" said the Head kindly.

"Yes, sir," murmured Joe.

"Joe—" began Tom Merry.

"Say nothing, Merry," said the Head, with a frown. "I do not wish you to prepare Frayne for the questions I am going to put to him."

"I was only going to tell him not to mention names, sir," said Tom Merry, flushing.

"Frayne," said the Head, "were you given a letter on Monday by a member of the Sixth Form to take to a man named Smith in Wayland?"

Joe Frayne cast a scared look at Tom Merry.

"Answer, Joe," said the captain of the Shell. "Tell the Head everything he wants to know."

"Yes, sir," said Joe.

"Was this the letter?"

Dr. Holmes showed the slit, unaddressed envelope.

Frayne looked at it.

"It was like that, sir," he answered. "Just a plain envelope, with a note inside it, sir. I didn't see the note. The bloke wanted me to take it to Mr. Smith at the Peel of Bells, sir, and I wouldn't."

"And what happened then?" asked the Head, evidently surprised at the ready corroboration of Tom Merry's statements.

"Master Tom interfered, sir, and took the letter. He said that he would keep it, and if the bloke didn't let me alone, he'd show it up again 'im. I 'ope that wasn't wrong, sir. Master Tom only wanted to protect me from the bloke, sir. It wasn't right of him to try an-

get me to go to the Peel of Bells, sir. I should 'ave been punished if anybody 'ad seed me go in there."

"Quite true, Frayne," said the Head quietly. "Any boy in this school known to visit such a place would certainly be most severely punished. Now, Frayne, think carefully before you answer me again. Is this story true, or is it a concoction between you and Merry?"

"Bh, sir? I don't understand!"

"Did you know that Merry was to be brought before me this morning?"

"All the school knows it, sir."

"Did he arrange with you that, if he were found to have a certain letter in his possession, you should come here and tell this story?"

"Certainly not, sir," said Joe, in wonder. "Master Tom was goin' to keep that letter dark if the bloke let me alone."

"Do you know whether Merry was in communication with Pudsey Smith?"

"I know he wasn't, sir. 'E ain't that sort," said Joe.

"What is the name of the senior who gave you the letter, with instructions to carry it to Pudsey Smith?"

Joe cast a look of distress at Tom Merry.

"Master Tom!" he muttered. "I-I oughter tell 'im."

Tom Merry was silent.

"I command you to tell me, Frayne!" said the Head sternly. "Listen to me. Unless it can be proved that this letter was given to you by someone else, and handed to Merry, Merry will be adjudged guilty of having written it himself—and he will be expelled from the school."

"Oh crikey!" said Joe, in dismay.

"If any senior at this school was so wicked as to attempt to induce you to take a letter to such a place as Mr. Smith's public-house, he does not deserve to be protected by you, Frayne. It is your duty to tell me the truth, and it is the only way to save Merry from punishment."

Frayne cast an appealing look at Tom Merry.

"I must tell 'im, Master Tom!" he muttered.

"Don't look at Merry, Frayne!" said the Head sharply. "Now, what can you tell me—is this story a total invention, or was the letter really given to you by a senior?"

"Yes, sir, it was."

"Who was the senior?"

"Bingham, sir, the prefect," stammered Joe. "I was bound to tell 'im, Master Tom. After all, it's Bingham's own fault—e's caused all the trouble!"

Kildare uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Bingham?"

"Yes, Master Kildare."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the Head.

"Bingham—a prefect!"

"It's true, sir."

"Do you say that it's true, Merry?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry; "as Frayne's given you the name, I must stand by him. It was Bingham."

"Call Bingham here, Kildare!"

"Yes, sir."

And Kildare left the study for the second time.

Joe Frayne stole a miserable glance at Tom Merry.

"I 'ope I ain't done wrong, Master Tom!" he muttered. "It was all Bingham's own fault—e oughtn't to 'ave given me the letter. We ain't called on to protect 'im—it was 'is own look-out."

Tom Merry nodded without speaking. The study door reopened, and the captain of St. Jim's came in with the accused prefect.

CHAPTER 9.

Condemned!

BINGHAM was perfectly cool and self-possessed as he entered the Head's study.

He glanced at Tom Merry and Joe Frayne, but it was a casual glance, as if he did not connect their presence in the study with himself in any way.

"Kildare says you want to see me, sir," he said respectfully.

"Yes, Bingham," said the Head, with a sigh. "I'm trying to straighten out the most extraordinary tangle, and I want your assistance. Frayne has brought an accusation against you, and Merry corroborates it."

"Indeed, sir!" Bingham glanced at Frayne and the captain of the Shell. "Before you go into the matter, sir, I think I ought to tell you that these two boys are very thick, and I have suspected them of breaking bounds, and paying visits to a place kept by a man named Pudsey Smith. On Monday I questioned Frayne on the subject, but he denied it; and my suspicions were still stronger with regard to Merry."

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

"Liar!" he exclaimed promptly.

"Silence, Merry!" exclaimed the Head, in a voice of thunder.

"He is lying, sir!"

"Silence!" Bingham, Frayne says that on Monday you gave him a note to Pudsey Smith, at the Peel of Bells, at Wayland, and that Merry took possession of it. Is there any truth in this?"

"None, sir!"

"My heye!" gasped Joe Frayne. "Oh crumbs!"

"Silence, Frayne! You did not give Frayne a note, Bingham?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any acquaintance with Pudsey Smith?"

"None, sir."

"Great Scott!" murmured Tom Merry.

Bingham smiled slightly.

"If I gave Frayne such a note, sir, and Tom Merry took it, I suppose it is still in existence. Let them produce it."

"This is the note, Bingham," said the Head.

The prefect glanced at it.

"That is certainly not my writing, sir. It is a disguised hand."

"Yes, that is evident, Bingham. You know nothing about this note?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Very well. I am almost ashamed to have asked you; it is only too clear that it is an impudent invention of this junior's."

"Bingham has not told the truth, sir," said Tom Merry hopelessly.

"That is the note he gave to Joe Frayne, and I took it, and told him that if he tried to get Frayne into trouble again, I'd give it to Kildare. I didn't know that the note was in a disguised hand, and that it wasn't signed. I never opened it."

Bingham shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose I need hardly defend myself from such a ridiculous accusation, sir," he said. "This is evidently a note that Merry has written to send to Pudsey Smith, and as it has been found upon him, he has invented this preposterous story to account for it. If any proof is necessary, Kildare will tell you that I suggested searching Merry for evidence."

"That is so, sir," said Kildare.

"I should hardly have done so if incriminating letters belonging to myself had been in Merry's possession," the prefect remarked.

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"You rotter!" burst out Tom Merry. "You knew the latter was in a disguised hand, and that it wasn't signed. You knew that if it was found on me, it would be supposed to be written by me."

Bingham laughed. "Come, Merry!" he said. "You will not be able to make the Head believe this nonsense. Why do you not confess, and throw yourself upon Dr. Holmes' mercy?"

"You hound!" "Silence!" said Dr. Holmes. "Bingham, you are completely exonerated. Merry has been found guilty of a wicked falsehood, and he has led this foolish youth, younger than himself, into the same wickedness. That is only too clear. Frayne came here with his story all ready, and I suppose they had arranged it beforehand, in case that letter should come to light before Merry had succeeded in sending it to Smith. Frayne, you may go. I regard you as being under the influence of this wicked lad, and I shall take into consideration your unfortunate antecedent, and pardon you. Leave the study."

Joe hesitated. "Master Tom—" he began. "Go!"

Kildare took Frayne by the arm and led him to the door, and pushed him outside the study.

"Master Kildare," said Joe in a voice of agony, "Master Tom is innocent! I swear—"

The door closed upon him.

In the study Tom Merry stood silent and pale. It seemed to the unfortunate junior that he was tangled in a web, through the meshes of which he could not break.

In his simplicity he had entered into this contest with the rascally prefect, and he had fancied that he held the upper hand, but the prefect's plot had completely turned the tables upon him.

He was helpless now, at the mercy of his enemy; not a word he said would be believed, and his well-known influence over Joe Frayne only gave colour to the suspicion that Joe's evidence was concocted, and designed to clear him, regardless of the truth.

"Merry," said the Head, in slow and measured tones, "I am greatly disappointed in you. It is only too clear that you have been deceiving me all along. You have practically led a double life, and I am glad that you are discovered before you have an opportunity of corrupting others as well as that foolish boy Frayne. Now that the case is clearly proved against you, I trust you will have the decency to confess."

Tom Merry shivered. "I have nothing to confess, sir."

"You still deny it?" "I must, sir. Bingham is lying. I should never have dreamed that anybody could tell such fearful lies as he has," said Tom Merry brokenly. "I know I can't make you believe me, sir. But I've told you the truth."

"You certainly cannot make me believe you, Merry," said the Head coldly. "I am not likely to believe outrageous falsehoods. Kildare, take Merry to the punishment-room, and lock him in and bring me the key."

"Dr. Holmes! You will not—"

"I shall communicate with your guardian, Miss Fawcett, immediately," said the Head coldly. "You can hardly expect to remain at this school after what has happened. For the sake of Miss Fawcett, an old and venerable lady whom I greatly esteem, I shall

JUST MY FUN

Monty Lowther Calling!



Hallo, everybody! You ought to pity turtles. Because theirs is a hard case. Your chair has a right to complain. Because it's always sat on. Ever thought of wearing banana skins? They make good "slippers." Pause here for a breath. "Why does that old pig keep trying to come into my room?" asked the summer boarder. "That's his room in the winter," explained young Joe. "Nother; 'From your references I see you have had four places in the last month!'" "Yes, sir," said the office boy brightly, "that just shows how much in demand I am!" "Now, D'Arcy minor," said Mr. Selby, "there are two words I want you to stop saying. One is 'oke,' and the other is 'scatty.'" "Yes, sir," said D'Arcy minor. "Which words are they?" You heard of the chap who went into the huge multiple store, was whisked up in the lift, and said: "Is this the boot and shoe department?" "Yes, sir," said the salesman. "Give me a couple of corn plasters, will you?" came the request! A big order "to boot"! Then there was the optimistic corn cure merchant who opened up next to the hikers' hostel. He did a "sore"-ing trade! Listen: "I can't stick peppermints," said Mellish. "By gum, no," agreed Crooke. Yes, their noses were "glued" to the window!

A Matabele warrior strangled a rattle-

not expel you publicly. I shall break the dreadful news to her as gently as possible, and ask her to remove you. In order not to give her too painful a shock, I shall not send you home directly. I shall ask her to come here and prepare her mind for it before I tell her the baseness you have been guilty of, which makes it necessary for you to leave the school. I shall be more considerate to Miss Fawcett, Merry, than you have shown yourself; you must know what a grief this will be to her."

"It's enough to break her heart," Tom Merry muttered.

"I am glad you have the grace to be sorry for the harm you have done, at all events," said the Head.

"I have done nothing. That fellow has lied!"

"Silence! Take him away, Kildare!"

"Come, Merry!" said Kildare grimly.

Tom Merry followed him blindly from the Head's study.

CHAPTER 10.

In the Punishment-room!

ALL St. Jim's knew of Tom Merry's disgrace before he had been in the punishment-room for ten minutes.

Joe Frayne had related what had happened in the Head's study, and a crowd of fellows had seen Tom Merry following the captain of St. Jim's to the punishment-room.

The key had been turned upon him, and Kildare had taken it to the Head's study.

snake in fifteen minutes. Every minute his companions thought he would get "rattled"! Do actors live in Acton? Or billiard players in Kew? Or admirals in Fleet? All right, I don't know! Gore says he had the stitch watching a football match. He was "hemmed" in by the crowd. Gussy wants to know what's the best thing to take before singing? Your breath, Gus. Then there was the amateur fireman who connected his hose with the petrol pump. With "sparkling" results! "I've just had a lovely dream," said D'Arcy minor to Gibson one morning. "I dreamed I was on fire, and you were putting me out with ginger pop!" Then there was the Channel swimmer who took the wrong turning and found himself at the North Pole. The "frozen" truth?

An elephant story: "Poor thing, it's had a lot of worry," said the visitor, looking at the elephant. "Why?" asked his friend. "Well, look at its wrinkles!" A reader asks if it's true that a rhinoceros has a tusk on its nose. Yes, the rhino is "ivory-tipped," and its temper will "catch alight" easily. It never "draws" away, and is hard to "put out." A "fiery" proposition! Which cigarette is worst for you, asks another reader, the first or the last? The first usually is the last, old chap! Story: "This is a small loaf for fourpence," said the customer. "You'll not have so much to carry," said the baker. "Then here's threepence—you won't have so much to count!" snapped the customer. Last: The officer of a big liner shouted to the barge to get out of the way. "Who are you?" came the reply. "The first officer of this ship," shouted the liner's officer. "Then talk to your equals!" bawled the bargee. "I'm the captain of this ship!"

Ahoy, there, chaps!

Tom Merry was locked in—away from his chums—to await the arrival of his guardian, who was to take him away from St. Jim's.

The news almost stunned his chums. A melancholy group gathered in the passage outside the locked room to discuss the matter, and to them Joe Frayne told his version of the incident of the letter.

Tom Merry's chums naturally believed that version, but it was only too clear that they would not be able to upset Bingham's account of it.

Their faith in Tom Merry was the result of their friendship for him, and that was not evidence of his truth.

"We've got to do something," said Manners. "Toby told me he's posted a letter to Miss Fawcett from the Head. She will be here to-morrow to take Tommy away."

"Bai Jove, it's wotten!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Somethin' will have to be done before to-morrow."

"Bingham will have to be shown up somehow," said Monty Lowther. "But how—"

"We've got to see Tommy and talk it over with him," said Jack Blake.

"He's locked in," said Lowther hopelessly.

"Let's bang on the door," said Digby. "We can tell him through the keyhole that we're backing him up, anyway."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The punishment-room was at the end of the Fourth Form passage at the extremity of a deep recess. It was in one of the oldest portions of the school, an obscure room in a secluded corner,

with stone walls, and a little window looking out upon a narrow space between high walls. It had once been used as a study, but it was secluded and badly lighted, and had been deserted for that reason; and it was sometimes called by the fellows as Nobody's Study.

The recess which led to it from the passage was dim and dusky, and closed at the end by the heavy oaken door.

The juniors crowded into the recess, and two or three of them knocked cautiously at the big oak door. They did not want the knocking to reach the ears of the prefects, as anybody confined in the punishment-room was supposed not to be spoken to.

There was a movement inside the room.

"Hallo!" called out the voice of Tom Merry from within.

"Hallo, Tommy!"

Tom Merry came to the inside of the door.

"We're all here, Tom, old man," said Monty Lowther, through the keyhole. "We just want to tell you that we don't believe a word against you, and we're going to stand by you!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry. "I'm afraid it's all up with me here! The Head is down on me, and Bingham has made him believe that I wrote a letter to Pudsey Smith, and it was found on me. I suppose Frayne told you about it?"

"Yaas, deah boy!"

"We're going to prove it somehow!" said Manners. "We'll make that cad Bingham own up, if we have to scalp him!"

"I don't know what can be done," said Tom Merry, through the keyhole. "It's a plot of Bingham's. I suppose he was afraid I should show the letter, and he's fixed this up to discredit me beforehand. It has been arranged with Pudsey Smith; he told Kildare himself that I was the fellow with him last night."

"The rotter!"

"I'm coming in to see you after lessons, Tommy," said Monty Lowther. "We've got to have a jaw over this and decide what's to be done. The Head has written to Miss Fawcett, and she will most likely be here to-morrow. We've got to get something done before that."

"I wish we could, Monty! But while I'm shut up here—"

"While you're shut up here, we're going to work for you. We can't talk to you now. Somebody will be along in a minute to stop us. I'm coming to see you after lessons."

"But you can't get in here."

"There's the window."

"But—"

"I'll bring a knotted rope with me," said Lowther, in a low voice at the keyhole. "You can let down a cord from the window and pull it up and tie the end, so that I can climb up. If you haven't any string, you can strip up your necktie, and make a cord of that good enough to pull up a rope with."

"Good!"

"I'll bring you some grub, too. You won't get much here on punishment diet," said Monty Lowther.

"Thanks, old man!"

"Cave!" called out Blake from the passage, where he was keeping watch.

Bingham came striding towards the group of juniors. He turned out of the Fourth Form passage into the dusky

recess before the door of the punishment-room. He smiled sneeringly as he looked at the juniors.

"So you are all here?" he exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy.

"I suppose you know that no one is allowed to communicate with a fellow in the punishment-room?" said Bingham.

"Oh rats!"

"Yaas, wats, and many of them!"

Bingham scowled.

"You will take fifty lines each, every fellow here!" he exclaimed angrily. "And if you are found here again you'll be caned!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Rats!"

"Cad!"

"Rotter!"

Bingham clenched his hands. He had authority as a prefect to punish the juniors for talking to him in such uncomplimentary terms; but their respect for him as a prefect was gone. They looked upon him as a cowardly plotter and the enemy of their imprisoned chum.

It would not have been safe for Bingham, prefect as he was, to attempt to punish the exasperated Co.

"I shall report this to Mr. Railton!" he said.

"Report, and be hanged!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! I regard you with utter contempt, Bingham! You are a wascal!"

"Will you go?" shouted Bingham.

"Yes, we'll go," said Lowther. "But you know our opinion of you! You are a cad and a rotter, and we'll show you up yet!"

The juniors moved away down the passage.

There was a shadow upon many faces that afternoon. Monty Lowther and Manners felt the disgrace of their chum keenly, and most of the Shell fellows were depressed.

Tom Merry's personal friends believed in him; but other fellows, of course, went by the evidence, and the evidence certainly was overwhelmingly against the hero of the Shell.

Crooke and Gore, indeed, declared their firm belief that Tom Merry was found out at last, and that he deserved what had happened to him; and Levison and Mellish of the Fourth took the same line. But they did not venture to express their opinion in the presence of the Co.

In the Fourth Form, Blake and his comrades were Tom Merry's champions, and they were loyally backed up by Figgins & Co. of the New House.

Figgins & Co. were the rivals of the School House fellows; but, as Figgins remarked, on an occasion like this House rows were off, and it was time to rally round.

Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence of the New House took the same view. In his hour of need it was clear that Tom Merry had friends in the rival House at St. Jim's as well as in his own House. But whether his friends would be able to help him to any extent beyond sym-



Tom Merry's loyal chums gathered outside the punishment-room. "A word against you," called out Monty Lowther. "And warning," and Bingham, who had schemed for Tom

pathising with his misfortunes was very doubtful.

After lessons Monty Lowther secured a rope, coiled it up, and concealed it under his jacket.

Bingham was keeping an eye on the punishment-room, and two or three of the Co. lingered in the passage, as if to wait for an opportunity of speaking to Tom Merry through the keyhole.

This little device kept the prefect hovering near the spot, and left a clear field for Monty Lowther outside the House.

He strolled out into the quadrangle, and sauntered round the old chapel, and as soon as he was sure that he was not observed, he slipped into the narrow entry between two high walls upon which the window of the punishment-room looked.

There he tossed up a pebble to the window.

He heard the window open above, and Tom Merry looked out at him.

"Good old Monty!" murmured Tom Merry.

A string composed of threads of a torn-up necktie came fluttering down from the window-sill.

Monty Lowther caught the end of it, and attached it to the end of the rope, which he uncoiled from his pocket.

The string was drawn up, and the rope followed it, and after a few minutes Tom Merry waved his hand



room. "We just want to tell you that we don't believe we're going to stand by you." Then there came a sudden and disgrace, strode angrily towards the group.

from the window as a signal that he had secured the end of the rope.

Monty Lowther hung upon it for a few moments to test it and then climbed it, hand-over-hand.

In a couple of minutes, he reached the window-sill, and Tom Merry helped him in.

Monty Lowther crept silently in at the window, drew in the rope after him, and closed the sash.

CHAPTER 11.

A Council of War!

"HERE we are again!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Good old Monty," said Tom Merry.

The room was very dusky, for the small window gave little light. The atmosphere was chilly. The only furniture was composed of a table, a chair, and a bed. Nobody's Study was not a cheerful abode; and as Monty Lowther glanced round the room, he remembered the legend of St. Jim's, that the room was haunted.

But there were more serious matters than ghosts to be thought of now.

"Better whisper," said Monty Lowther, in a low voice. "Bingham is keeping an eye on the passage; he doesn't mean us to get at you if it can be stopped."

Tom Merry's eyes burned with anger at the mention of the name.

"The rotten cad!" he muttered. "I suppose he won't be easy in mind till I'm fairly out of the school."

"Not likely! He's playing a risky game; and he knows that you've got chums to stick to you, and that we won't leave a giddy stone unturned to get the truth out."

"It's jolly decent of you chaps," said Tom Merry, with a break in his voice. "Some chaps would go back on a fellow in my position."

"Rot!" said Lowther. "Don't we know you're true blue?" He fumbled in his pockets, and produced several neatly-tied packages. "Put these out of sight; they'll be a change from the grub you get here. Ham sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, cakes and tarts, and two bottles of pop."

Tom Merry smiled faintly. He was thinking of anything but a feed.

The packages were deposited out of sight under the bed.

Monty Lowther sat on the table.

"Now let's decide what's to be done," he said. "We mayn't have much time. In the first place, what do you mean by keeping these giddy secrets? If you'd told us about that rotten letter at the time, on Monday, this wouldn't have happened."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I wish I had," he said.

"Well, let it be a warning to you, my infant, not to keep secrets from your uncle," said Monty Lowther magisterially. "How did it happen?"

"Bingham was trying to get Frayne to take a letter to Pudsey Smith. I suppose he'd fixed it to meet Smith at his place, and he found Kildare was on the watch," said Tom Merry. "There have been suspicions about St. Jim's fellows going there to watch a fight, and all the prefects have been warned by the Head to look into it. Of course, Bingham was told, along with the others, and so the Head put the cad on his guard. Bingham fancied that Joe would be willing to do anything shady, you know, from the poor kid having been in the slums before he came here; but he was mistaken, and I chipped in and took the letter. Bingham was awfully wild; but I defied him, and kept the letter. I told him that if he tried anything of the kind with Frayne again, I'd show the letter to Kildare, and I'd keep it as a guarantee of his good behaviour. If he did the decent thing, neither Frayne nor I would say a word about it. I thought that was a good arrangement; I couldn't have the cad sending Joe to such a place and such a man."

Monty Lowther nodded.

"I thought that would be an end of the matter," said Tom Merry ruefully. "But I suppose Bingham fancied himself under my thumb, so long as I had his letter, and was afraid that I should let it all out sooner or later. He was very ratty, too. So he thought out

this rotten scheme, to nip it in the bud, and put the letter on me."

"What was in the letter?"

"I never know till it was opened in the Head's study to-day. I naturally supposed that Bingham had written it in his own hand, and that it was signed. It turned out to be in a disguised hand, and without a signature—so it might as well have been written by me as by Bingham. In it he told Pudsey Smith that he couldn't come because "K"—that's Kildare—was on the alert, but that he wouldn't miss the scrap."

"The scrap?" repeated Lowther.

"Yes; there's going to be a fight at Pudsey Smith's place, so I understand. You know he has fights there, and fellows go there to see them and bet on them."

Lowther's eyes gleamed.

"Do you know when the fight is to be?" he asked.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"So Bingham said in the letter that he wouldn't miss it?" said Lowther.

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure!"

"Good!"

Tom Merry looked at him inquiringly.

"Don't you see?" said Lowther. "If there's a fight coming off at Pudsey Smith's place, and Bingham is very keen on it, he won't miss it. And we may have a chance of catching him on the hop if we can find out when the fight is to be."

"My hat!"

"It's a chance," said Lowther. "We shall have to keep it dark, of course; but if we keep an eye on Bingham we may bowl him out over that."

"Oh, good!"

"Pudsey Smith must be in the game to fix this on you," Monty Lowther remarked, after a pause.

"That's certain. You see, it's clear enough that some St. Jim's chap is mixed up with him, and if it's proved to be me, that leaves Bingham clear, and he thinks he will be able to go there without risk."

"He's a deep beggar!"

"If I'd known how deep he was I shouldn't have kept that letter on me," said Tom Merry ruefully. "That was the worst thing against me. Of course, Bingham denied knowing anything about it. It was Bingham who suggested to Kildare searching me for evidence; and that was how the letter came to light. Who could have suspected him of being such a deep rotter? He pays me out and makes himself quite safe at the same time. And when I'm sacked from the school the whole thing will blow over, and he will be able to go to Pudsey Smith's place to see the fight without danger. That's how he's worked it out."

"There's many a slip, you know," said Monty Lowther. "It isn't ended yet. If Miss Fawcett takes you away to-morrow, Tommy, you mustn't go home. You can stay in Rylcombe till we've got this matter settled, and then we'll have you back in triumph."

Tom Merry smiled.

"I hope so, Monty."

"Oh, we'll do it!" said Monty Lowther confidently. "I must say you've been rather an ass, Tommy; but you couldn't foresee that Bingham could be so cunning. As Frayne wouldn't take his letter he went to see Pudsey Smith apparently on Tuesday. I suppose he has some rotten business with him that couldn't be neglected—some giddy betting, or something of that sort. But he ran a big risk. Kildare very nearly caught him with Pudsey Smith on Tuesday night. It

was jolly unlucky your having gone home with Brooke that evening."

"That's why he gave me the pass out, so that I should be out on the same evening," said Tom Merry. "He knew, of course, that Kildare was going to keep an eye on the Wayland Road near Pudsey Smith's place. I was surprised when he offered me the pass for the evening; but, like an ass, I thought he was trying to be decent after having acted like a cad the day before."

"He wanted me to be out last evening, and I fell into the trap. When I went home with Brooke he went to meet Pudsey Smith; and, knowing that Kildare was on the alert, he was watchful, and he was muffled up so that he couldn't be recognised if anybody came upon him. When Kildare surprised them together he bolted before old Kildare could collar him, and Pudsey Smith called out 'Hook it, Tommy!' They'd arranged that, so as to give Kildare the impression that it was I."

Lowther nodded.

"It's all clear to us," he said; "but we can't make it clear to the Head, that's the trouble. We should have to have jolly strong proof before he'd believe that one of his prefects was such an awful rascal."

"That's so. The handkerchief, too. Kildare thinks I dropped it in running; but Bingham must have taken it with him with the intention of dropping it if Kildare came upon him. He had everything cut and dried. I think it's very likely that the meeting wasn't by chance, as Kildare thought. I think very likely Bingham knew he was on the road and fixed the whole scene for his benefit."

"Quite likely. Then he bolted full pelt back to St. Jim's, looking for you on the Wayland Road, and got home first, and came into the Common-room with a yarn about having been studying and forgetting the time. I noticed at the time that his boots were muddy, as if he'd just come in—so did Kangaroo."

"Why, if you told Kildare that—"

"If I told Kildare that, my son, Bingham would say that he took a turn in the quad to get some fresh air, or some yarn like that, and so made his boots muddy."

"Ye-es, I suppose he would. There doesn't seem any way of catching such an awfully slippery beast."

"Well, we've gained this much: we know it was Bingham; we can't prove it, but we know he was with Pudsey Smith last night; and we know that he's going to see the fight when it comes off," said Monty Lowther. "That's what we've got to work upon. If we can prove that Bingham goes to the Peal of Bells for the fight that will settle it, I should think."

"He won't go if he thinks you are shadowing him, Monty."

"We shall have to be awfully careful," agreed Monty Lowther. "I won't tell the other chaps about it—only Manners. My hat! Suppose Manners could get a snap of him, with his camera, among those cads at the Peal of Bells!"

"My hat! That would settle it!"

The chums of the Shell went on talking in low tones, discussing every aspect of the matter; but suddenly Monty Lowther raised his hand.

"Listen!"

There were footsteps outside. They stopped at the door of the punishment-room.

Monty Lowther slipped off the table.

"Caught!" he murmured.

There was no time to escape by the

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window. There was no place of concealment in the room. The door opened, and Monty Lowther braced himself to face the music.

Toby, the School House page, entered with a tray.

"Hallo, Toby!"

Toby stared blankly at Monty Lowther. In his surprise he almost dropped the tray.

"M-Master Lowther!" he gasped.

"Mum's the word, Toby!" murmured Lowther. "Don't give me away—there's a good chap!"

"I—I've brought Master Tom his tea," said Toby dazedly, setting the tray upon the table. "Ow did you get 'ere, Master Lowther? The 'Ead gave me the key to unlock the door, and it was locked when I put the key in!"

"Oh, I came here through the key-hole!" said Lowther cheerfully.

Toby grinned, and nodded towards the rope on the floor.

Tom Merry kicked it under the bed.

"You'd better get bout, Master Lowther!" he said. "I ain't sayin' nothin', of course. I know Master Tom is innocent."

"Good for you, Toby! Good-bye, Tom, and keep your pecker up!"

Monty Lowther stepped out of the punishment-room. Manners, Kangaroo, and Jack Blake were in the passage, looking very anxious. Lowther joined them quietly, and at the same moment Bingham came striding along the passage from the direction of the stairs.

"Clear off, you juniors!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Can't we go in and say a word or two to Tommy?" asked Lowther, with much meekness.

"No, you can't!" growled Bingham. "Clear off!"

The juniors cleared off. Bingham evidently had no suspicion that Lowther had just emerged from the punishment-room. He waited grimly in the passage till Toby came out and locked the door again.

CHAPTER 12.

A Painful Interview!

DR. HOLMES rose from his chair, and sat down again, rose again, and coughed.

The sound of wheels in the drive outside announced the arrival of Miss Priscilla Fawcett, Tom Merry's old governess and guardian, and the Head expected her to be shown into his study any moment.

The interview was likely to be a painful one, and it was no wonder that the Head shrank from it.

But it had to be faced.

Dr. Holmes coughed again uncomfortably as Toby announced Miss Fawcett.

The kind old lady came into the study, and accepted the chair the Head offered her with a gentle smile.

"I was very much surprised to receive your letter, dear Dr. Holmes," said Miss Priscilla. "But I was very glad to come and see my dearest Tommy. How is he?"

Dr. Holmes coughed again.

"Ahem! He is quite well in health, Miss Fawcett."

"I am so glad! Dear Tommy is so delicate, you know, and he will never understand that he must take care of his health," said Miss Fawcett. "You are quite sure that he is well?"

"Quite well, madam."

"He has not caught a cold?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Does he eat well?"

"I—I think so."

"He is not looking pale?"

"N-no."

"I am so relieved," said Miss Priscilla. "Your letter quite alarmed me. I was afraid that my dearest boy had caught a cold."

Dr. Holmes suppressed a smile. He would not have been likely to write an urgent letter to Miss Fawcett if Tom Merry had caught a cold. But to the dear old lady the figure of Tom Merry filled up the horizon. It had never occurred to Miss Fawcett that Tom Merry was growing up; to her he was still the infant she had brought home from India at a tender age, and she was continually alarmed for the health of the sturdiest fellow in the Lower Forms at St. Jim's.

How to break the unpleasant news to Miss Fawcett that Tom Merry was in disgrace, and had to leave St. Jim's, was a puzzle.

Dr. Holmes coughed, and coughed again, and Miss Fawcett's unsuspicious mien made his task all the harder.

"Then my darling boy is quite well?" said Miss Fawcett.

"Quite, madam."

"I suppose he was anxious to see me!" said Miss Fawcett musingly. "It was just like the dear boy. Where is he, Dr. Holmes?"

"Ahem!"

"I should like to see him."

"Ye-es. I—I wish you to see him," said Dr. Holmes hesitatingly. "The—fact is, Miss Fawcett, I—I think it will be better for you to remove Tom Merry."

"From the school?" asked Miss Priscilla.

"Yes."

"Ah, you think the air doesn't agree with him?" said Miss Priscilla. "I have been anxious upon that point several times."

"N-not exactly."

"I have consulted the school doctor, sir, and he assured me that the situation was most healthy," said Miss Fawcett. "But if you think that dear Tommy's health is likely to suffer here, I—"

"It—it is not that."

"Then I do not understand," said Miss Fawcett perplexed. "Why do you wish me to remove him if his health is satisfactory?"

"The fact is, madam, he—ahem!—he— It will be better for him to leave the school. There has been some—some trouble."

"Oh dear!"

"Tom Merry has been very reckless, madam."

"The poor foolish lad! I know he was always reckless," said Miss Fawcett weakly. "I see that you have been breaking this gently to me, Dr. Holmes."

"Yes, that is so, madam."

"My darling Tommy is ill, after all."

"Oh, no—no!"

"Then it is an accident?"

"No."

"He has been playing those dreadful dangerous games," said Miss Priscilla tearfully. "I have said to him many times that he should not trouble so much about scoring goals and things when he is playing cricket, but he always smiles when I speak about it."

The Head smiled, too; he could not help it.

"My dear Miss Fawcett—"

"I—I hope he has not broken a limb, Dr. Holmes? Tell me, please! I—I can bear it now. I am prepared."

"Oh, no; nothing of the sort! He is quite well in health."

"Then what ever has happened?"

"He has done wrong."

(Continued on page 18.)



Let the Editor be your pal. Write to him to-day, addressing your letters :
The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House,
Farrington Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, Chums!—Here we are again with all the news of next week's best school yarns. As a reader said in his letter the other day, "Martin Clifford's stories get better and better." He has certainly been writing some extra-special ones recently. Next week there's another on the programme. It is called

"THE CAPTAIN'S RIVAL!"

It's a great story of the footer field and the rivalry that breaks out between the seniors of the two Houses at St. Jim's. Usually it's the juniors who keep alive the rivalry between New House and School House, the seniors being too lofty and dignified for such a high-spirited pastime. But next week you will read how the seniors of both Houses get to grips, and they are far from friendly over it. Friction first starts between Kildare and Monteith, the two House leaders, over the selection of the St. Jim's First Eleven. The New House wants more members in the team. The School House avers that there are too many already. And in his task of trying to smooth matters over for the good of St. Jim's, Kildare finds that in Monteith he has a rival whose object seems to be to make that task as difficult as possible.

Watch out for this gripping yarn of sport, fun, and adventure. It's too good to miss.

The same may be said of the next nerve-tingling chapters of our wonderful St. Frank's thriller.

"THE BLACK HAND AT ST. FRANK'S!"

In spite of the careful precautions taken by Nelson Leo to ensure the safety of Nipper & Co. from their enemies, the sinister Zangari has over-

come them. At last he has in his clutches those who are a danger to him. What will he do with his schoolboy prisoners, who have yet to make the unpleasant discovery that they are the captives of a ruthless killer? Read all about it in next week's thrill-packed instalment.

Finally, the Jester has another fine selection of readers' prizewinning jokes, and Monty Lowther is full of wit and humour again. Don't forget to order your GEM early, chums!

THE MECHANICAL MAN!

All sorts of devices for defeating the aims of Burglar Bill have been invented from time to time. The invisible ray, which, as soon as it is broken by an intruder, flashes a warning to the night-watchman, is probably the safest and most efficient so far. But the recent invention of a German engineer is certainly unique. He has made a mechanical man which can perform the duties of a night-watchman just as efficiently as if it were alive. If there is an attempt at burglary the mechanical man will ring up the police and give warning. In the same way it will also warn the fire brigade if a fire breaks out. In the event, however, of something going wrong with the robot one wonders what would happen. It is to be hoped that the police and the fire brigade won't get a series of false alarms!

THE PRICKLY FIREMAN!

Talking about fires, a farm worker

in South Sweden was burning some old tree-branches he had cleared up when he was astonished to see a hedgehog scurry out of the fire. He watched the animal curiously, and saw it rush to some water. There it drank feverishly, scuttled back to the fire, and ejected the water from its mouth over the burning branches. Then the animal fire-fighter scurried back to the water and repeated its performance. Wondering why the hedgehog was trying to put out the fire, the farm worker kicked away the burning wood, and then the hedgehog's object was revealed. Beneath the fire was a hole, and in it were five baby hedgehogs! Luckily the mother had been fighting the flames to save its young.

SOME HIKE!

For a footer fan to travel two hundred miles to see his team play a Rugby match shows his great enthusiasm for his favourites. But to hike that distance and then hike back again—well, he must be one of the world's most ardent football supporters. But Leslie Atkinson, who recently walked from Lancashire to London to see Oldham play Streatham and Mitcham, had a double reason for making the hike. It is his proud record that he has walked to every one of Oldham's "away" matches for six years, and he didn't want to spoil that record. So he set out on the two-hundred-mile trip to London, and it took him just over four days to do it. And he had the satisfaction of seeing his team win!

AN OUTSIDE MEAL!

How would you like to sit down to this meal? Six eggs, six rashers of bacon, steak and fried potatoes, and coffee. You might shift that lot if you hadn't eaten for two days. But it's certain you couldn't manage two hundred and forty apples on top of it, and then, two or three hours later, put away four pounds of spaghetti, three boned chickens, a pie, and several bottles of wine! But that's the outside appetite of a barber in Philadelphia who recently demonstrated his powers as a trencherman. I should imagine that even Fatty Wynn of St. Jim's would give him best!

TAILPIECE.

Father: "How much longer am I going on supporting you?"

Son: "Well, pop, you're in the pink of condition!"

PEN PALS COUPON
12-10-35

THE EDITOR.



A free feature which brings together readers all over the world for the purpose of exchanging topics of interest to each other. If you want a pen pal, post your notice, together with the coupon on this page, to the address given above.

Eric Harris, 46, Wentworth Gardens, Palmers Green, London, N.13; geology, mining; age 16 up.

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Miss M. Penny, 7, Sydney Terrace, Lower Cape, Warwick; girl correspondents; age 14-16; Old Gems, cycling, reading.

Frank C. Bate, 42, Poplar Street, Blakenhall, Wolverhampton, Staffs; age 11-13; football, cricket; Canada, U.S.A.

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Miss Joan Catherall, 1, Cloverdale Square, Smithills, Bolton, Lancashire; girl correspondents; cricket, cycling, football; age 15 up; Dominions.

Benny Ogilvie, 31, Regent Street, Yeoville, Johannesburg, S. Africa; stamps, photography, sports.

A. Jemmett, 42, Bennett Park, Blackheath, London, S.E.3; age 11-15; amateur magazines.

Reginald Arnsworth, 40, Earls Court Square, London, S.W.5; wants members for Union of British Youth.

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Ron Cannoll, 80, Ransom Road, Foleshill, Coventry, Warwickshire; age 15-17; stamps, cycling; Dominions.

Miss Bobbie Williams, Sunnyside, Cavendish Road, Henleaze, Bristol; girl correspondents; age 13-15; music, acting, films.

Miss V. Rayment, 151, High Street, Peckham, London, S.E.15; girl correspondents; age 15-18; overseas; stamps.

M. A. Richardson, 46, Badminton Road, Balham London, S.W.12; age 10-12; animals, books, trains.

A. Kelly, 103, Whitehall Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, 21; overseas; swimming, stamps.

Miss Jean M. Macrae, Devon, 2, Malvern Road, Mont Albert E.10, Victoria, Australia; girl correspondents; age 18-19; sport, films.

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"Impossible!"

"My dear madam—"

"Dr. Holmes!"

"The proof is complete—"

"Nonsense!"

"Madam!"

"Nonsense!" repeated Miss Fawcett.

"My dear Miss Fawcett—" said the Head feebly.

"I'm surprised at you, Dr. Holmes! Of course, I know that you are making a mistake; but, still, it is very surprising that you should make such a ridiculous accusation against my dearest boy. I am very much surprised."

"Madam!" said the Head.

"I decline to hear a word of it! I can only hope, Dr. Holmes, that you will come to take a more sensible view of the matter. Surely you have known Tom long enough to know that such a supposition is the height of absurdity!"

"Madam!"

"What does Tom say himself about the accusation?"

"He denies it."

"There!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett triumphantly. "I told you so! He denies it, of course. And surely that settles the matter."

"Unfortunately, madam, it does not settle the matter. He has allowed himself to become mixed up with a rascally set of persons, among them a retired pugilist."

"Nonsense!"

"It is proved that he was with this man."

"Perhaps he was trying to reclaim him, and teach him the error of his ways?" suggested Miss Fawcett.

"He denies having been with him."

"Ah, that alters the case. He was not with him, then."

"It is clearly proved."

"Nonsense!"

"The man himself has admitted it."

"He has spoken untruthfully."

"Kildare found them together."

"Kildare is a truthful boy," said Miss Fawcett. "He was mistaken."

"A letter was found upon Tom Merry, which he had been about to send to this man Smith."

"Impossible!"

"I have the letter here," said the Head, laying it upon the table before Miss Fawcett's eyes. The old lady adjusted her eyeglasses carefully and scanned the letter.

"This is not Tom's handwriting," she said.

"The hand is disguised."

"Nonsense!"

"Really, madam, you make this interview very painful to me," said the Head mildly. "Surely you must know that I should not have decided to send Tom Merry away from the school without making every possible investigation, and establishing his guilt beyond the possibility of doubt."

"This is a plot."

"Madam!"

"I exonerate you, Dr. Holmes," said Miss Fawcett, waving her glasses at the startled Head. "You have evidently been deceived."

"Miss Fawcett!"

"But I am very much surprised, sir, that your credulity should be imposed upon in this way. The headmaster of a Public school should be more careful."

"Madam, this is unbearable!" exclaimed the Head. "I have no more to say. I will send for Tom Merry and leave you together. You will oblige me by taking him away from the school at once."

Miss Fawcett rose, shaking her umbrella at the Head in anger.

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"I shall certainly do that!" she exclaimed. "I shall not allow him to remain here among wicked enemies and with a foolish headmaster."

"Madam!" shouted the Head.

"A foolish headmaster to believe silly accusations against him," said Miss Fawcett. "I am surprised at you! A man of your age should really have more discrimination. You shock me, Dr. Holmes!"

Dr. Holmes seemed about to choke.

"I will send him to you!" he stammered and quitted the study.

Miss Priscilla sank into her seat again. She was crying now. A few minutes passed and the study door reopened to admit Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 13.

Exit Tom Merry!

TOM MERRY came into the study with a pale face and hesitating manner; but if he had had the slightest doubt of his old governess, her greeting dispelled it at once. Miss Priscilla tottered towards him.

"My darling Tommy!" she sobbed.

"The Head has told you?" asked Tom Merry, as he kissed the old lady upon her withered cheek.

"Yes, dearest. There is some silly accusation against you."

"It's not true—"

"I know it is not, Tommy. As if my darling could act in a disgraceful manner!" said Miss Priscilla, regarding him fondly through her tears.

Tom Merry choked. The simple trust and faith of Miss Priscilla went straight to his heart.

"I am glad you believe in me," he said.

"Of course I believe in you, Tommy. As if I could believe anything against you! I have changed my opinion of Dr. Holmes very much. I suppose it is the approach of second childhood," said Miss Fawcett thoughtfully.

Tom Merry smiled faintly.

"You mustn't blame the Head," he said. "They've worked it up so that it looks plausible enough, and Dr. Holmes has been taken in."

"Yes; I told him that was how it was," said Miss Priscilla, with a nod.

"But I've got to leave St. Jim's," said Tom Merry.

"My darling boy!"

"It's rotten!" said Tom, with a sigh. "I don't want to leave all the fellows. But if the truth comes out afterwards—"

"It must come out," said Miss Fawcett. "It is impossible to believe that such a ridiculous slander can last long. My poor boy! I am sure that Dr. Holmes will apologise to you for this when the truth is made known."

"But I've got to go now," said Tom Merry miserably. "My box is packed. I can't even say good-bye to the fellows. They're in the Form-room."

"Come!" said Miss Fawcett, with dignity. "Let us go, my dear child. I hope the time will come when Dr. Holmes will be sorry for these base suspicions. Come!"

And leaning heavily upon Tom Merry's arm, the old lady left the study.

Dr. Holmes was not to be seen. Apparently he did not wish to face Miss Priscilla Fawcett again.

Taggles, the porter, had already placed Tom Merry's box upon the station taxi. As Miss Fawcett and Tom Merry came down to the door there was a rush of footsteps, and Monty Lowther and Manners ran up.

"We've got leave from Mr. Linton to see you off, Tommy!" said Monty

Lowther. "How do you do, Miss Fawcett? I'm sorry this has happened, but it will come out all right. Nobody here believes it about Tom."

Monty Lowther was exaggerating a little in the excitement of the moment.

Miss Fawcett shook hands with the chums of the Shell.

"It is ridiculous," she said. "I hardly know what Tommy is accused of, but I know that he is innocent."

"Of course he is, ma'am," said Manners. "All his friends know that, and we're going to prove it somehow."

"I hope you will," said Tom Merry, with a sigh.

"No doubt about it," said Monty Lowther cheerily. "Look here, I don't think you ought to go home. Why not stay in Rylcombe till we've cleared it up and you can come back?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"That may be a long time, Monty—if at all. Miss Fawcett can't stay in Rylcombe. But—but if anything turns up, you can let me know at Huckleberry Heath, and you bet I shall come back by the first train."

"Right-ho! It's rotten that you're going."

"Beastly!" said Manners.

The chums of the Shell followed Miss Fawcett into the taxi, and it drove off. The cab disappeared out of the gates of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry cast a long look back at the old school.

Would he ever see it again?

Was this a last farewell to the school where he had spent so many happy hours, and where he left so many loyal chums?

At the thought of it a lump rose in his throat.

"Cheer up!" said Monty Lowther. "It's bound to come out all right. You're leaving a good many friends to work for you while you're gone, Tommy."

"I know, old chap, but—but—" Tom Merry's voice broke.

In moody silence they drove to the station.

Manners and Lowther saw their departing chum into the train.

Miss Fawcett was crying softly behind her veil. Tom Merry shook hands with his chums from the window of the carriage.

"Back up, Tommy!" said Lowther.

"Cheer up, old man!"

"Good-bye, Miss Fawcett!"

The train rolled out of the station.

Manners and Lowther watched it with lugubrious faces as it disappeared down the line; then they looked glumly at one another.

"My hat!" said Lowther. "If this isn't utterly rotten—"

"I feel like hammering that awful cad Bingham!" exclaimed Manners angrily.

"The rotter!"

"But we'll show him up somehow!"

The chums of the Shell left the station. They were silent and gloomy as they walked back to St. Jim's.

The parting, and the uncertainty of the future weighed heavily upon their spirits.

"We've got to be careful," Lowther muttered, as they entered the school gates. "Bingham's got to be bowled out somehow. But mum's the word. He mustn't suspect that we're going to watch him."

Manners nodded.

"If he knows we're on the watch he will be careful, and you know he's as slippery as an eel," said Lowther. "We've got to catch him napping, same as he caught poor old Tommy. Not a syllable. And let him suppose that the

matter's ended, and we've made up our minds to it."

"I understand."

They tramped glumly into the quadrangle.

Morning school was finished, and the fellows had come out of the Form-rooms. A crowd surrounded the chums of the Shell as they came up to the School House.

"He's gone—eh?" asked Gore.

"Yes," said Manners.

"The Terrible Three are reduced to the Terrible Two," grinned Crooke.

"Well, I don't complain, for one."

"I'll give you something to complain of, then," said Monty Lowther savagely, and he hit out with all his force, and Crooke rolled in the quad.

"Hear, hear!" said Jack Blake. "If you want any more, Crooke, you can ask me for it!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "And if you repeat Cwooke's caddish remarks, Gore, I shall give you a fearful thwashin'."

Gore did not repeat them. He shrugged his shoulders, and walked away.

Tom Merry's friends were in a very touchy humour just then, and it was not safe for anybody to say anything against Tom Merry, "sacked" from the school as he was.

During the afternoon, Levison and Mellish of the Fourth showed signs of damage, the result of incautious remarks upon the subject, and in the New House Figgins & Co. had several fights upon the subject.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy proposed raiding Bingham's study and ragging the prefect, but the other fellows frowned upon that hasty suggestion. As Monty Lowther said, if anything was to be done, it would have to be done with caution, if the unscrupulous prefect was to be caught napping. And the best way to lull him into a sense of false security was to let the matter drop.

CHAPTER 14. Loyal Chums!

TOM MERRY was gone from St. Jim's.

The prefect's plot had succeeded, and Tom Merry was gone; his place knew him no more. His chums missed him at every turn—in the Form-room, in the study, on the football field, Tom Merry was missed.

Monty Lowther and Manners looked very gloomy after his departure, but of their secret hope that he would return they said nothing.

They waited.

It had been agreed among the chums that Bingham's movements should be observed; but, as if the prefect guessed

something of the sort, he was very much on his guard.

That day, and the next day, he did not stir outside the walls of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry was gone, but life at St. Jim's went on in the old way.

On Saturday, as soon as morning school was over, Monty Lowther and Manners left St. Jim's and walked away towards Rylcombe.

When they reached the stile in the lane they turned into the footpath through the wood, and crossed the wood to the Wayland Road.

They came in sight of the Peal of Bells, and caught sight of Mr. Pudsey Smith seated upon a bench outside the building, his usual place in the afternoon.

The two Shell fellows gritted their teeth at the sight of the old pugilist.

"There he is!" muttered Lowther.

"Keep out of his sight, Manners. This way!"

The Shell fellows stopped on the edge of the wood, which bordered the road opposite the little public-house. The Peal of Bells stood at some distance from the town of Wayland.

A paling and a ditch separated the road from the wood, and behind the palings the Shell fellows were able to keep a watch upon the inn and upon the road which ran past its doors.

They settled down to watch.

Lowther had judged very shrewdly that Bingham was only biding his time, and waiting for a safe opportunity of visiting his old haunt, and on the half-holiday, when all St. Jim's would be on the playing-fields, the rascally prefect would find his opportunity.

If he came to the Peal of Bells that day, the two watchers could not fail to see him.

They sat in the grass and watched.

An hour passed—and then another.

Monty Lowther yawned.

"Blessed if I should like to be a giddy detective!" he remarked. "It must get on a chap's nerves in the long run, I should think!"

Manners nodded.

"Yes, rather. But this is for Tommy's sake; stick it out!"

"Oh, yes! I'm not thinking of chucking it!"

Monty Lowther glanced along the road again, through an opening in the wood palings.

Mr. Pudsey Smith had gone into his house, and presently he appeared in the doorway, in talk with a short, bull-necked youth who had several teeth missing.

"That's the Bermondsey Chicken!" said Monty Lowther. "I've seen his portrait in the paper."

Manners whistled softly.

"Then the date of the fight can't be far off!"

"My hat, no!" said Lowther excitedly. "I'll bet it's coming off to-day—to-night, anyway."

"If it's to-night, Bingham will be along here some time," said Manners.

The Bermondsey Chicken and the landlord of the Peal of Bells disappeared into the building again.

A light rain began to fall, and the Shell fellows kept under the trees by the palings.

Monty Lowther had taken the precaution of bringing a packet of sandwiches with him, and when tea-time came round, the two amateur detectives were glad of the sandwiches.

"No luck so far!" said Monty Lowther.

"Never say die!" said Manners stoutly.

Several times footsteps on the road made the juniors look out with renewed hope; but they did not sight the prefect of St. Jim's.

The road was not a much-frequented one, but a good many people passed, and the eyes of the juniors watched them cautiously from behind the palings.

But the one they sought did not come.

But as dusk began to fall, Monty Lowther's keen eye noted a peculiar circumstance.

A good many pedestrians came along to the inn and entered quietly and stayed there. They were not ordinary wayfarers in quest of liquid refreshment. For the most part, they were men of sporting appearance, and there were at least two or three of them whom the watchers could not mistake for anything but bookmakers.

"There's getting to be quite a crowd collected in there," Lowther remarked thoughtfully, "and you see the kind of men they are, Manners, old man."

Manners nodded.

"It's pretty certain the fight's coming off this evening!"

"I should say so."

"And Bingham will be there. Most likely he won't come till after dark," said Lowther, in a low voice. "Where do you think the fight will take place—in the house or somewhere at the back?"

"In the big shed at the back, I should say," said Manners thoughtfully. "Pudsey Smith is keeping it dark, you know. He's only pretending it's a glove-fight; it's nothing of the sort. They're going to slog with bare knuckles. Everybody knows it."

"Except the police!" grinned Lowther.

"Exactly."

"If Bingham comes after dark we shan't stop him entering," said Lowther.

"Then we'll scout round the building

(Continued on the next page.)



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as soon as it's dark enough not to be seen."

"Good!"

The darkness thickened on the road before them. They could make out nothing of the opposite building now save the lighted windows.

There was a soft whistle in the wood and Lowther started.

He whistled low in reply.

Footsteps followed, and Jack Blake came out of the trees and joined the chums of the Shell by the palings.

"Well, I've found you," he remarked breathlessly.

"Any news?" asked Lowther.

"Yes. Bingham's left the school."

Lowther's eyes gleamed.

"Sure?" he asked.

"I watched him go. He went out on his bike, and I heard him mention to Lefevre of the Fifth that he was going to see a fellow at Abbotsford. He borrowed Lefevre's bike-lamp. Abbotsford's the opposite direction from this."

"Which means—"

"That's he's coming here," said Manners.

"Just so," said Blake, with a nod. "He'll put up his bike somewhere, and walk back to the Peal of Bells, I reckon. I don't see why he should choose a rainy evening for a long bike-ride to Abbotsford. It's an excuse for getting away from the school."

"I believe the fight is coming off to-night here," said Lowther. "I've seen the clasp they call the Bermondsey Chicken, and a crowd of sporty-looking characters have been going in on and off some time past."

"Then Bingham will be here?"

"We're sure of it."

Blake peered out into the dark road through the opening of the palings. Only the winking lights of the Peal of Bells caught his eye.

"Bingham can't miss it," he said. "It stands to reason he won't, and I'm pretty certain he's got bets on it."

"Quite certain," said Manners.

"Only we shan't see him from here," said Blake doubtfully.

"He may sneak in at the back way, too, in the dark," Manners remarked.

"I'm going to scout round the place," said Lowther. "There's nothing else to be done. It's the only way to find out."

"Pshaw! It's risky!"

"No good sticking here," said Lowther. "The giddy fight may be taking place, and Bingham watching it, while we're wasting time."

"That's so. Perhaps I'd better do the scouting, though," said Jack Blake thoughtfully.

"Rats!" said Monty Lowther promptly.

"Well, I've had a good deal of practice as a Boy Scout."

"So have I, haven't I?" demanded Lowther warmly.

"Yes; but—but I—"

"Oh, rot!" said Lowther. "I'm going. Look here, you fellows had better stay here, and wait for me to whistle. You know my whistle. If you hear me whistle, you'll know that I've seen Bingham go in, and you're to buzz off to St. Jim's and bring Kildare here as a witness. He'll come if you tell him how the matter stands. I won't give the signal unless I'm sure of Bingham being there."

"Mind you don't make a mistake," said Blake dubiously.

"Oh rats!"

"Then, if you whistle, we're to take

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it that Bingham's there watching the fight, and one of us is to cut off to St. Jim's?"

"That's the programme."

"All serene, then. Mind you don't get spotted."

"Trust me!"

Monty Lowther moved away in the darkness. Night had fallen now, and the woods were enwrapped in deep gloom. The lonely road was deep in shadow, save where the glimmering lights of the inn penetrated the night.

Blake and Manners watched and waited anxiously.

The minutes passed, seeming like hours to the anxious juniors.

An hour slowly crawled by.

"My hat!" murmured Blake restlessly. "I wonder where Lowther is? I wonder if they've spotted him—"

Manners clutched his arm.

"Hark!" he breathed.

Clear and soft, from the darkness of the road, came Monty Lowther's whistle.

Blake drew a deep breath.

"He's seen him!"

Manners cautiously answered the whistle. Then there was a deep silence.

"I'm off!" muttered Blake.

And he disappeared into the wood in the direction of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 15.

Kildare is Called In!

KILDARE was at work in his study when there came a hurried knock at the door, and it was thrown hurriedly open, and a panting and rainy junior came in.

The captain of St. Jim's stared at him.

"Blake!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

Blake gasped for breath.

He closed the door behind him and turned towards the St. Jim's captain, panting.

Kildare rose to his feet and gazed at the junior almost in alarm.

"What on earth's happened?" he exclaimed.

"I want you."

"What?"

"You must come!" panted Blake.

"Are you mad, Blake?"

"No!" said Blake breathlessly. "We've bowled him out, that's all!"

"Bowled who out?"

"Bingham!"

Kildare frowned.

"Look here, Blake, let that matter rest!" he exclaimed. "I know you kids have some idea that Bingham fixed that charge upon Tom Merry; but the idea is utterly ridiculous and unjust. Nothing of the sort is the case. Bingham is sorry for him, and he had nothing to do with the matter."

"He's bowled out now."

"I will not listen to anything against him," said Kildare. "Let the matter drop, for goodness' sake. As for Tom Merry, the sooner you forget there ever was such a fellow at St. Jim's, the better," said Kildare harshly.

"Do you know where Bingham is?" asked Blake.

"Yes; he's gone on a ride to Abbotsford."

"Suppose he were at the Peal of Bells with Pudsey Smith and his gang, at this very moment?" said Blake.

The St. Jim's captain stared.

"Impossible!" he said.

"But if he were?"

"I refuse to suppose anything of the sort!" said Kildare testily. "What nonsense are you talking?"

"Wouldn't you take that as a proof

that he was lying about Tom Merry—that the letter found on Tom Merry was really Bingham's, just as Tom Merry said—and that Bingham was the fellow you saw with Pudsey Smith on Tuesday evening?"

"Really, Blake, this is all rot!"

"Bingham was out that night," said Blake. "He came in late to see the Fourth to bed. He said he had been studying in his room, and hadn't noticed the time pass; but his boots were muddy and his bags were wet with rain."

"He might have been in the quad."

"He might, but he hadn't. He was the fellow you saw on the Wayland Road with Pudsey Smith, and the whole thing is a plot between them," said Blake, "and I'm going to prove it to you."

"How are you going to prove it?" said Kildare impatiently, yet somewhat impressed, in spite of himself.

"By taking you to the Peal of Bells and showing you Bingham among that gang."

Kildare started.

"But he's not there!" he exclaimed.

"He is there!"

"You mean to say that you have seen him?" asked Kildare.

"Lowther and Manners and I have been watching for him," Blake explained. "Lowther was scouting close to the house, while we stayed behind some palings. Lowther gave us the signal that he had seen Bingham go in."

"It's impossible!"

"Lowther saw him!"

"Great Scott!" muttered Kildare.

"If this should be true—"

"It is true!" said Blake.

"I can't believe it!"

"Well, come and see. Seeing is believing. We're going to see this through," said Blake. "If you won't come, I'll go to Mr. Railton."

"Oh, I will come!" said Kildare, picking up his cap. "I'm bound to look into the matter as head prefect of the School House. But I shan't believe this about Bingham unless I see it with my own eyes. Lowther may have been deceived."

"You will see!"

Kildare quitted the study with Blake. They left the School House together.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy caught Blake's arm on the steps.

"Have you discovered anything, dear boy?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Yes; but mum's the word!"

"But, what—"

"Can't stop! Mind, not a word!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Blake and Kildare disappeared into the darkness of the quadrangle.

The captain of St. Jim's strode along so rapidly that Blake had to break into a trot to keep pace with him.

Kildare's brow was contracted, and there was a glint in his eyes. It boded ill to the treacherous prefect if Kildare found him with Pudsey Smith. In spite of himself, Kildare was impressed by the earnestness of the junior, and a suspicion was born in his mind that he had been deceived; that he had been made the tool of an unscrupulous rascal, who had ruined an innocent lad to cover up his own misdeeds.

They tramped through the shadows of the wood. The rain had ceased, but the ground was wet, and the road was dark.

Where the footpath ended in Wayland Road, a shadowy figure loomed by the gate, and Manners started towards them.

He had left the place where watch had been kept to wait for them at the end of the footpath.

"Is that you, Blake?" he breathed.

"What-ho!"
 "And Kildare?"
 "Yes," said Kildare shortly.
 "Good egg! We've got him now!"
 "Got whom?"
 "That cad—Bingham!"
 "Where is Lowther?" asked Kildare.
 "He's gone back to watch them. He came over to speak to me about ten minutes ago," said Manners in a whisper. "The fight's begun, and it's going on in the shed at the back. Lowther says it's an awful slogging match, and he saw Bingham making bets with a bookmaker there."
 "Can you guide us to the place?" asked Kildare.

many voices inside the shed; and as the St. Jim's fellows drew near it, they heard a heavy thud.
 "One of 'em down!" whispered Manners.
 A voice came from the shadows.
 "This way!"
 It was Lowther's voice.
 Lowther's voice was recognised, but he himself was invisible until they were very close to him.
 A shadow moved, and a glimmer of light came from a chink in the shed.
 Lowther's hand groped for Kildare's.
 "This way!" he murmured. "Put your eye there and look!"
 Kildare obeyed.

"Can you see him?" muttered Monty Lowther.
 "No."
 "Look in the far corner—chap with his face muffled up."
 Kildare started as he applied his eye again to the chink.
 Bingham, probably not wishing to be generally noticed in that disreputable assembly, was standing in a corner of the shed in talk with a fat, ruddy-faced man, whom Kildare recognised as a bookmaker well known in Wayland.
 The St. Jim's prefect had his raincoat on, with the collar turned up, and his cap was drawn down low over his forehead.



"You will oblige me by taking Tom Merry away from the school at once," said the Head. Miss Fawcett, Tom's guardian, rose, shaking her umbrella at the Head in anger. "I shall certainly do that," she exclaimed. "I shall not allow him to remain here among wicked enemies and with a foolish headmaster!"

"Yes; but don't make a row. They'll put out the lights in a second if there's any alarm, and Bingham will bolt."
 "Lead on, then!"
 "This way!"

Manners led the way across the dark road, with Kildare and Blake at his heels.

They moved round to the rear of the inn garden and climbed over the fence.

Manners whispered that an ostler was keeping watch at the garden gate, and that no one could pass without the alarm being given.

A sound of murmuring voices greeted their ears as they dropped on the inside of the fence.

Then there was a shout.

"Bravo, Clobber!"

"Go it, Chicken!"

The fight was evidently in progress.

Kildare set his lips.

At the back of the inn was a large shed, and, although the door was closed and the shutters fastened over the windows, gleams of light came out from several chinks in the wood.

There were sounds of many feet and

CHAPTER 16.

The Truth at Last!

WITHIN the shed there was a blaze of light.

A crowd of men were standing about or sitting on benches encircling a roped ring.

In the ring two men, stripped to the waist, were facing one another, sparring.

They were not wearing gloves, and their faces and bodies showed signs of fearful punishment.

The audience were looking on at the brutal scene with evident enjoyment.

Mr. Pudsey Smith was prominent, acting as timekeeper.

Among the brutal faces clearly shown in the light Kildare looked round for the face he had come there to see—Bingham's.

At first he could not see it.

Were the juniors mistaken, after all? The fight was in progress; but that was no business of Kildare's unless St. Jim's fellows were present.

At a glance he would not have been known; but now that Kildare's attention was specially directed towards him, he recognised Bingham easily enough.

He gritted his teeth.

There was no doubt about it now.

Bingham of the Sixth, the prefect of St. Jim's, was there, watching the fight, and evidently discussing bets with the bookmaker.

Mr. Banks had a book in his hands, and was making an entry in it as Kildare looked.

"Satisfied now?" asked Lowther in a whisper.

"Yes," said Kildare.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take Bingham away."

"Phew!"

"There may be a row if you interrupt the fight," said Manners. "They're not a very pretty crowd, Kildare."

"You juniors keep away; I'm going in."

"We'll stick to you, you bet!"

Kildare moved round to the door of

the shed, no longer taking the trouble to be quiet in his movements.

He reached the door and struck upon it heavily.

Crash!

There was a loud exclamation within the shed.

"Who's there?"

"I am."

"Who—who's that?"

"My name is Kildare, of St. Jim's, Mr. Pudsey Smith! You know me!" said Kildare, through the door. "Open this door at once!"

"Hang yer!" muttered the ex-pugilist, between his teeth. "Wot do you want 'ere?"

"I want Bingham, and I am not going to leave without him! If you don't open the door, I'll smash it in!"

There was a muttering of voices in the shed.

Kildare, impatient, threw his weight against the door, and it creaked ominously.

In two minutes the door was half off its hinges, and the senior looked in.

There was a sudden yell from the other side of the shed. A little door at the side—planned for such emergencies, in all probability—had opened, and a glare of light for a moment illuminated the wet, dark bushes.

The door closed again immediately, and there was the sound of a fall and a struggle.

"Got him!"

"This way, Kildare!"

Kildare dashed round the building.

On the ground three forms were sprawling and rolling in a desperate struggle.

One of them, the undermost, was Bingham, and Manners and Lowther were clinging to him and pinning him down, in spite of his frantic struggles.

"Here he is!" roared Blake.

And he sprang to aid the Shell fellows.

"You'd better give in, Bingham," said Kildare quietly. "I saw you there and recognised you. You're found out!"

Bingham's struggles ceased.

"Kildare!" he muttered.

"Yes."

"Don't give me away to the Head, Kildare," said Bingham hoarsely. "I happened to hear the fight was going on, and looked in. I—"

"Don't tell lies, Bingham," said Kildare coldly. "You've told enough lies, I should think. You left St. Jim's on your bike, pretending you were going to Abbotsford. Where is your bike now?"

"I—I left it at Wayland Station."

"And happened to walk here—a mile from the station," said Kildare sarcastically. "You had better think out something better than that to tell the Head, Bingham."

The prefect groaned.

"Kildare, you won't tell the Head! It's ruin for me!"

"What was it for Tom Merry when you lied about him?" demanded Monty Lowther wrathfully. "If Kildare didn't tell the Head, we jolly well should—and we're three witnesses."

"The game's up, Bingham," said Kildare quietly. "Come!"

The prefect rose to his feet with a groan.

He attempted no further resistance; it could not help him now.

With a drooping head, he walked away in company with the captain of St. Jim's.

Lowther, Manners, and Blake followed gleefully.

They were triumphant. They had no

compassion to waste upon the prefect. He had lied away Tom Merry's honour, and retribution had overtaken him at last, and the chums of the School House could feel nothing but satisfaction.

"Won't Tommy be pleased?" grinned Monty Lowther.

"What ho!"

"Hallo! There's some of the fellows at the gates!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Digby, and Herries and Kangaroo were in the school gates.

"He's found out!" yelled Lowther. "Caught in the giddy act! Found out and done in! Three cheers for us!"

"Yaas, wathah! Huhwah, deah boy!"

A triumphant procession of juniors escorted Kildare and his wretched companion to the School House.

Kildare took Bingham directly to the Head's study.

Bingham was deadly pale, and he moved like one in a dream.

Dr. Holmes gazed at the two seniors in blank astonishment as they came in. He rose quickly to his feet.

"What is the matter, Kildare?" he exclaimed.

Kildare pointed to Bingham.

"Ask him, sir," he said.

"Bingham! What—"

Bingham groaned.

The cool nerve he had shown in winding the chain of guilt about Tom Merry had quite deserted him now. He was pale as death and trembling in every limb. He knew that he was ruined, and the knowledge had deprived him of what little courage he may have possessed.

"I—I—" he stammered. "Oh, sir, I—I'm sorry—I—"

"He has lied about Tom Merry, sir," said Kildare; "that's quite plain now. I have found him at Pudsey Smith's place, watching the prize-fight and making bets with a bookmaker."

"Good heavens!"

"He is hand in glove with that gang. That is why Pudsey Smith made out that his companion of Tuesday night was Tom Merry—to shield this rotter!" said Kildare, with flashing eyes. "It was a plot between them."

The Head's brow was like thunder as he fixed his eyes on the shrinking wretch before him.

"Is that the case, Bingham?" he exclaimed.

"I—I—"

"You lied, then, when you said that you did not know Pudsey Smith and had no connection with him?" demanded the Head.

"I—I—"

"If that fact is established, the rest follows," said the Head. "It appears, then, that Tom Merry's and Frayne's statements were true, and that the letter was really yours, Bingham?"

The prefect could not speak.

Of what use were words to him now; the truth was known, and falsehood could not save him.

As the Head gazed at the miserable plotter a contemptuous pity came into his face.

"You do not seem to have the courage of your vices, Bingham," he said. "You know, of course, that I shall expel you from this school."

"I—I suppose so, sir," groaned Bingham. "I—I don't know how I shall face my pater. If—if you'd let me off this time, sir—"

The Head interrupted him.

"After you have done your best to ruin a boy who is proved to be innocent!" he thundered.

"I—I was driven to it," groaned Bingham. "Tom Merry had the letter

—I couldn't be sure he wouldn't produce it—and he wouldn't give it back to me when I asked him. I—I had to get in first word, and make out that the letter was his. If he had given it back to me, I—I shouldn't have done anything against him."

"Your excuses are as bad as your crime, Bingham," said the Head harshly. "You have caused a serious wrong to be done—you have made me act unjustly. Go! You will leave the school this very night!"

Bingham cast a wild look at the Head, and then turning, tottered to the room.

The Head turned to Kildare.

"How did you come to know of this, Kildare?" he asked.

"Tom Merry's chums found it out, sir, and caused me to go to Pudsey Smith's place," said Kildare. "Here they are!"

He signed to Lowther, Manners, and Blake to come in, and they entered the study, looking rather sheepish.

"You have done well, my boys," said the Head. "I am only sorry that my faith in Tom Merry was not so strong as yours."

"I—I say, sir—" said Blake, hesitatingly.

"Yes, Blake?"

"May I—I send him a telegram, sir, and say he can come back to St. Jim's?" asked Blake.

"Yes, certainly."

"Hurrah!" shouted Blake, forgetting in his joy that he stood in the august presence of the Head.

But the Head only smiled.

The telegram was duly sent, and the next day there came a reply from the missing junior, announcing that he was returning to St. Jim's early on Monday morning.

Monty Lowther waved the telegram in the air and cheered when he received it.

And on Monday morning, when Tom Merry's chums requested leave from classes, in order to meet Tom Merry on his return, the masters of the Fourth and the Shell granted it at once, doubtless having had a hint to that effect from the Head.

When the station taxi drove up, with Tom Merry in it, there was a roar of cheering from the crowd of juniors at the gates.

They rushed to open the door.

Tom Merry's face was very bright and happy as he stepped out.

"Here he is again!" roared Manners. "As large as life, and twice as natural! Hurrah!"

"Hip, pip, hurrah!"

"Bravo!"

"Shoulder high!" yelled Figgins.

"Hold on!" gasped Tom Merry, laughing. "Cheese it! I'm jolly glad to get back—glad to see your old chivvies again! But—"

"Bring him in!"

"Hurrah!"

Tom Merry was swung up on the shoulders of Lowther and Manners, and carried bodily into the quad.

Round him the rest of the juniors surged, waving their caps and cheering enthusiastically.

That evening there was a most gorgeous celebration in Tom Merry's study, and the hero of the hour was the junior who had so nearly been ruined by the prefect's plot!

(Next Wednesday: "THE CAPTAIN'S RIVAL!"—a powerful long St. Jim's yarn of football, fun and adventure. Make sure you don't miss it, chums.)

NELSON LEE WINS A TRICK—BUT THEN HIS ENEMIES PLAY THEIR TRUMP CARD!

The BLACK HAND at ST. FRANK'S!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

The Prison Barge!

WHAT is the sinister activity which is being carried on at Gallows Mere, an old house near St. Frank's School? That is the problem which baffles Nelson Lee, the schoolmaster-detective. To all appearances, Dr. Zangari, who lives at Gallows Mere, is a harmless astronomer, but Lee knows that astronomy is only a blind to Zangari's secret and lawless "game." The detective, however, is powerless to act until he can get clear evidence to warrant a police search.

Ever since Nelson Lee and eight boys of St. Frank's became involved in the mystery, following the murder of an unknown airman, their lives have been in danger from masked men in black. It is obvious to them that they are a menace to Zangari, and, therefore, he is determined to "silence" them.

Several secret attempts have already been made on the lives of the school-boys, but in vain. Zangari, growing more and more nervous, plans a daylight raid on St. Frank's to capture the eight boys and Nelson Lee. An aeroplane flies over the school, dropping gas bombs. In a short space of time all the inhabitants of St. Frank's are unconscious—all except Nelson Lee, who, seeing what was happening, had quickly donned a gas-mask.

Meanwhile, on the River Stowe, a large barge moors near the school playing fields, and from it a dozen men, dressed in black, with gas-masks on, emerge from the hatches and advance on the silent stricken school!

THE twelve mysterious raiders, clothed from head to foot in black, advanced openly across the playing fields in the daylight towards the school buildings of St. Frank's. There was no one to question their right, or deter their progress.

For everybody in the great school was sleeping—struck down by the invisible gas which Dr. Zangari's agent

had spread over St. Frank's from the aeroplane. Everybody—except one.

In Common-rooms, in the senior day-rooms, in the masters' quarters, in studies—all had sunk into the sound sleep which had immediately followed inhalation of the invisible vapour.

An amazing situation.

Even people in Belton Lane, stricken as they neared the school, were lying just where they had fallen. Thus, in open daylight, the masked raiders were permitted boldly to invade the school. Many boys, seniors and juniors, were lying in the Triangle. The black figures spread out, and boy after boy was turned over, and his features were keenly scanned.

"No. Not this one," said the man in charge of the invading party. "Nor this—nor this. Leave them. Waste no time."

He looked about him, his face completely hidden by the black mask which covered his head; even the eyes and mouth slits were covered with black gauze. This man was he who served Dr. Zangari as butler at Gallows Mere. He was in charge because he knew the eight boys by sight—the eight boys who knew too much! He pointed to the Ancient House.

"This way," he said briefly in Italian.

The enemy, apparently, had an efficient intelligence department; they knew to which House their intended victims belonged. There was no hesitation. Into the Ancient House they went; they examined boy after boy, and then passed on.

And at the top of the great West Tower a figure, grotesque and fear-some, crouched; a figure with great saucer-like goggle eyes, noseless, and a tube where its mouth should be. In other words—Nelson Lee wearing a gas-mask! The detective, horrified at the disaster which had befallen the school, was nevertheless alert. He was exasperated at his own helplessness, for he could do nothing.

If he attempted to leave the school he would undoubtedly be seen—and

ruthlessly shot down. He could not hope to win through against a dozen armed, desperate men.

So he watched—and waited.

He was convinced, by the very nature of the attack, that the invisible gas was harmless. For if the enemy had planned to destroy its eight schoolboy enemies by this drastic means, regardless of the great loss of life of others, it would have been unnecessary to raid the school. The very fact that the twelve masked men were on the premises proved that they had come to fetch the eight—and Lee himself. But Nelson Lee, thanks to his own prompt action, was beyond their reach.

The consolation, however, was a small one. Lee had known that the enemy was determined, but even he had not been prepared for a drastic daylight raid of this nature. All he could do was to look on.

Meanwhile, the search of the Ancient House progressed. In Study D, in the Remove passage, Edward Oswald Handforth had collapsed on the floor, half in and half out of the window, which was open. Evidently, he had been "struck" as he had opened the window. His chums, Church and McClure, were unconscious on the floor.

"This one—yes," said the leader, after a brief examination of Handforth's features. "Take him. And this one. And this one. Three we have. Good!"

Three of the figures in black, without a word, lifted Handforth and Church and McClure, and carried them out. They worked speedily and efficiently. The leader identified Nipper, Tommy Watson, and Tregellis-West in Study C. Three other figures in black carried the sleeping juniors away.

There were but two more—Archie Glenhorne and William Napoleon Browne. Archie was soon found, sleeping quite normally, apparently, on the lounge in his own study. But Browne was a senior, and it was some little time before the raiders reached the

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Fifth Form studies and identified him. Then he, too, was removed.

Still the search went on. But now the boys were ignored. Men only were turned over and scrutinised. The raiders were looking for Nelson Lee.

They failed in their search; and, having failed, consulted.

There were but four men; the other eight, each carrying a prisoner, had left the school premises.

"Lee is not here," said the leader with concern. "It is strange. Our information, as ever, was reliable. We were told that the man Lee had been soon to return to the school, and had not gone out again."

"Then he must be here, Francesco," said one of the others, shrugging. "We will search again. He cannot have escaped. No living thing can have escaped."

Francesco Ricotti, the man who acted as butler, was troubled.

"Yes, we will again search," he replied. "If we return without the man Lee, our mission has failed. It is important to get the boys, yes; but Lee is more dangerous to us than a thousand boys. We have our orders; we must obey them."

In Nelson Lee's study they found evidence that the detective had recently been at his desk. They found his hat and his overcoat in the cupboard. But of Lee himself there was no trace. Again they made a quick search of the Ancient House, and this was a comparatively easy task, for most of the sleeping figures were boys, and needed no examination. There were only a few men. Definitely, Nelson Lee was not among them.

Ricotti divided his forces. One took the West House, another the East House, and a third the Modern House, and Ricotti himself went to the headmaster's quarters. Ten precious, tense minutes were thus wasted. They met again in the Triangle.

"It is useless," said Francesco Ricotti. "Lee is not here. We have searched every inch—even to the towers."

Yet, at that very moment, through a crevice in the stonework, Nelson Lee was looking down upon the four baffled searchers! It was true they had searched the towers, but the man who had mounted the West Tower had been unable to get upon the roof. The door was secured. His search had been cursory, for he had never really believed that Lee would be in such an unlikely place. It made little difference, however. Had he forced the door, Lee would have been ready for him. The detective, in fact, had been prepared to make a swift attack—and then don the black clothing and mask of his victim. But such a move had not been necessary.

"Come," said Ricotti. "Already we have spent too much time, and now we are taking risks. We must go. It is a pity we have not secured the man Lee. But he has escaped us only for the moment."

Without further delay, the four men hastened across the playing fields, and they reached the river. The barge lay moored against the bank, an innocent looking vessel. At the helm stood a man in rough clothes, with a weather-beaten face—a typical bargee. Silently, without a word, the four black figures slipped below to join their companions—and the prisoners.

The raid on St. Frank's was over.

A motor started chugging in the barge, and soon the clumsy vessel was

making leisurely progress up-river. Just a commonplace barge, unlikely to attract any attention. It ploughed on slyly into the gathering dusk.

In the forward hold the eight young prisoners were still sleeping; in the after hold the twelve raiders, having removed their headgear, were talking. Francesco Ricotti, the leader, was in a grim and sullen mood.

"It is useless to talk, comrades," he said in Italian. "We have failed."

"But the eight boys—"

"Boys!" snapped Ricotti. "It was the man Lee we should have captured. How he escaped I cannot tell. No. 1 will be angry. Men who fail to accomplish their allotted task are punished."

"But if Lee was not there, Francesco, how could we seize him?" demanded one of the others, gesticulating excitedly. "Shall we be punished for nothing?"

"No. 1 listens to no excuses," replied Ricotti sombrely. "So, comrades, we must be ready."

"But the accursed Lee cannot escape," protested another man. "We did not find him, yet we took measures. We left something in his room, did we not?" he added cunningly. "Something hidden—something unsuspected. No. 1 will admit, then, that we did all within our powers—yes?"

Whatever the nature of this grim and terrible organisation, it was evident that Dr. Zangari was held in awe by the members. Dr. Zangari was No. 1; his word was law; his punishment for failure was death. As Ricotti had said, No. 1 listened to no excuses.

So the barge plugged on. Mile after mile it slowly covered, winding, twisting, as the dusk of the dull autumn day increased. The countryside up here was dreary and deserted. A bridge loomed up ahead. The bargee at the tiller, chanting monotonously, deftly steered his vessel through the stone archway.

Thud!

A figure had dropped from the bridge—almost as the barge was clear. It landed close by the man at the tiller, and a startled expression leaped into the bargee's face. Something hard, something round, was pressed into the small of his back.

"Make no sound, my friend," said a soft voice in his ear. "Continue your voyage, and take orders from me. The thing you feel in your back is the muzzle of a gun, and if you make one false move, one sound, I shall fire."

The bargee gulped, but made no other sound. In the voice of the man beside him he had detected a grimness which chilled his blood. One glance at the face of the man with the gun was enough.

It was the clear-out face of Nelson Lee!

"Proceed as you are," murmured the detective calmly. "Remember my warning."

The barge proceeded. A wide reach of the river stretched ahead, with meadows on one side and thick woods on the other—woods which came down almost to the water's edge. The normal course for barges was in midstream. Nelson Lee with his free hand pointed.

"Steer towards this bank," he ordered softly, indicating the bank of forest-land. "You see the overhanging tree? When you reach it stop your engine at once. You understand?"

"Yes," muttered the bargee, his voice hoarse.

The vessel altered its course; it neared the bank, and at the vital moment the engine ceased. As though by magic, dark figures leaped on board from among the trees—ten, fifteen,

twenty, twenty-five. Figures in uniform, each carrying a gun. Police!

"Hold this man!" rapped out Nelson Lee, now throwing caution to the winds. "You there, Lennard? This way!"

Chief Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, joined Lee. They dived into the barge's cabin, but, as Lee had expected, they found it empty. In a moment they were on deck again. The bargee had been secured; the police, divided into two parties, were removing the hatches.

The after hatch was off first; the beams of many electric torches flashed downwards. In the hold were twelve men, some of them struggling to don their headgear.

"Put your hands up!" shouted Lennard curtly. "If they try any tricks, men, shoot. They may have poison-gas bombs—and we're taking no chances!"

But the surprise was complete. Francesco Ricotti and his men were utterly unprepared for any such development as this. They saw the uniforms, they saw the guns, and without hesitation they raised their hands. They knew they were caught like rats in a trap, and any show of resistance would have been madness.

One by one they came out of the hold, and each man was handcuffed, taken ashore, and searched. Thus the whole twelve were dealt with. Police officers, under Inspector Jameson, marched the prisoners off through the wood to a neighbouring road. Here stood two police vans ready.

Meanwhile, the forward hatch had been raised. Nelson Lee, Lennard, and Dr. Brett, of Bellton, descended. Torch-lights flashed upon the unconscious prisoners. Swiftly, but efficiently, Dr. Brett made an examination.

"They're all right," he said at length, with satisfaction. "Still suffering from the effects of that peculiar stuff, of course, but when they wake up, I think they'll be unharmed."

"Good!" said Nelson Lee. "I want you to tell your men, Lennard, to carry the boys out and put them in the waiting cars. They must be rushed back to St. Frank's without a moment's delay."

"Just a minute!" said the Yard man. "I still don't quite understand how you managed all this, Lee. Don't forget, I only had a few words with you on the phone, and then at St. Frank's you rushed off—"

"We've got twelve of the beggars," interrupted Lee, with satisfaction. "That'll be a shock for No. 1, won't it? Not a bad hour's work, Lennard. But I'm not claiming much credit; it was mainly luck which enabled me to turn the tables in this way."

"Luck—nothing!" grunted Lennard. "It was your presence of mind."

"I can't give you any details now," said Lee. "I'll only tell you this—as soon as I found the school was completely in the grip of the mysterious gas, with everybody unconscious, I made for my bed-room telephone. One intake of breath there would have knocked me out, and I knew it. But by removing my gas-mask for a moment I managed to give the number I wanted; then I replaced my mask and listened. When I got hold of the police station I removed the mask again and said just sufficient to let you understand what I wanted."

"I'm jiggered if I understood," replied Lennard. "I knew, of course, that you asked for as many police as we could muster. We got busy at once. What did you do then?"

"Knowing the raiders were searching for me, I went up into the West Tower; in other words, I concealed myself from



As the barge neared the bank dark figures leaped on board from among the trees—figures in uniform, each carrying a gun! Police! "Hold this man!" rapped out Nelson Lee, indicating the terrified barges.

the enemy," replied Lee, smiling. "However, it was worth it. From the tower I watched for your coming, Lennard. As you know, you reached the school soon after the raiders had gone."

"Yes; and by then, fortunately, the wind had carried the invisible gas away," said the chief inspector. "Not from the interior of the school, though; several of my men were bowled over as soon as they entered. Then you appeared on the scene, and gave us instructions regarding this rendezvous. Of course, I understand now. The barge only made slow progress, so we were able to get ahead of it nicely. A smart idea of yours to drop from that bridge, Lee! Well, I think we have every reason to congratulate ourselves. This ought to be something like a knock-out blow for Zan—for No. 1."

"Make no mistake, Lennard—the real fight is only just beginning!" replied Lee grimly. "Well, we must be going. The sooner we get the boys back to St. Frank's the better!"

Two motor-cars were waiting. Lee drove one, Lennard the other. There were four unconscious boys in each. When St. Frank's was reached it was nearly dark. Lights were glowing normally in the windows of the various Houses; there were no figures lying prone out of doors, for police officers, on Lee's instructions had carried them inside.

Nevertheless, the victims still slept.

Again acting on Lee's instructions, men had gone through the school, switching on lights. Nipper, Handforth, Archie, and the others were taken back to their studies and left there—just as they had fallen.

The police officers took their departure. The school, to all intents and purposes, was the same as at the beginning of the raid. Not a master, boy, or servant knew that enemies had been in their midst, and later, police officers.

For they had all slept throughout the excitement.

Nelson Lee and Lennard went to the former's study in the Ancient House.

"What's the reason for all this?" asked the inspector curiously. "You can't possibly hide it from the school that something extraordinary has happened."

"No; but the boys need never know—or the masters, either—that the school was raided by a grim and dangerous enemy," replied Nelson Lee. "Nobody need ever know what actually happened. My object is to prevent a panic. I don't mean a panic amongst the boys, but amongst their parents. If parents get to know the real truth, St. Frank's will be virtually stripped of pupils. It must be kept quiet, Lennard!"

"Well, I don't know how you're going to manage it, but I dare say you have some ideas," said the inspector. "It's another feather in your cap, Lee! Twelve more men grabbed, and the kidnapped boys rescued! Good work!"

The Awakening School!

NELSON LEE did not share his official colleague's enthusiasm.

"Good work, as far as it goes—yes!" he admitted. "But take note of the enemy's cunning, Lennard! There is still no proof against Dr. Zangari. There's not an atom of evidence that the raiding party came from Galloway Mere. One thing is certain: Zangari will redouble his efforts after this, and we must be ready. I want you to go now, Lennard; at any moment the sleepers may awaken, and I don't want you to be here. But hold yourself ready for instant action; I may communicate with you at any hour. In fact, I have already determined upon certain plans, and I shall need your help. But I'll tell you later—by phone."

As they sat there in that quiet room, with St. Frank's so ominously silent

about them, they knew nothing of the "object" which Francesco Ricotti had placed in Nelson Lee's study. Even Lee himself, alert as he was, suspected nothing.

"But, look here, what's going to happen when the boys awaken?" asked Lennard. "The masters, too, and the servants? There'll be the very dickens of a commotion, Lee! You can't hide a thing like this."

"No. Soon everybody will awaken, naturally, and some, of course, will awaken before the others," replied the detective. "That will lead to a good deal of excitement, and perhaps a scare. But I shall be there, and I'll make certain that there is no panic. I shall cause a rumour to be circulated that the 'invisible gas attack' was in the nature of some idiotic practical joke."

"H'm! Think they'll swallow it?"

"There'll be nothing else for them to swallow," retorted Lee. "Nobody will have come to any harm; nothing has been stolen; nobody saw the masked figures. What else can it but a foolish practical joke? Naturally, there'll be a mystery about it and a deal of speculation, but as soon as the masters and boys find they are suffering no ill-effects—Well, I think we'll manage to smooth things over somehow without the school knowing the actual truth."

And so it proved.

Even while Nelson Lee was speaking, many of the victims, in all parts of the school, were rousing themselves. The last vestige of gas had disappeared. In junior studies, in Common-rooms, in kitchens and dormitories, masters and boys and servants were recovering. As most of them had been struck down in virtually the same minute, most of them, being healthy, recovered at the same time. Whole groups of boys sat up, yawning, looking about them in bewilderment. Nobody knew what had happened.

At first there was confusion. There were no ill-effects, only a tired feeling. Those who were slow in coming round attracted the attention of the others. Masters, yawning, went about in utter stupefaction. Then, when memory began to stir, the strange aeroplane was recollected, and the thermos-flask-like things which had been dropped. After that the excitement began to grow; the boys went about shouting, making inquiries, asking a thousand questions.

But Nelson Lee was busy; he started the rumour that some fool in the aeroplane had dropped harmless gas bombs as a practical joke on one of England's greatest Public schools. In all probability, the perpetrator would never be discovered, for nobody had taken note of the plane's index letters.

And while this story was passed from mouth to mouth, and while the school, now fully recovered, began to get over its first excitement, certain boys—eight boys, in fact—knew the truth.

Nipper, Handforth, and the others collected in Study C. Nipper had called them together.

"I don't pretend to understand it," said Nipper seriously, "but this business was no practical joke, you chaps. It was done by Zangari's men!"

"But why?" asked Handforth.

"To grab us, of course!"

"But we weren't grabbed."

"Something must have gone wrong," replied Nipper. "Anyhow, I don't believe that practical joke yarn! We're going straight to my gun—nor—all of us!"

"A suggestion, Brother Nipper, I was about to make myself," said Brown. "Let us waste no further time. Brother Lee is undoubtedly the man to approach."

In a body, then, they went to the detective's study. Anticipating some such move, he was awaiting them. He thought it advisable to be perfectly frank. He told them just what had happened.

"You can't mean it, guv'nor!" ejaculated Nipper at length.

"Begad, it sounds too frightfully amazin' to be true!"

"Absolutely!"

They were all staggered.

"By George!" said Handforth, with feeling. "Do you mean to say we were actually bagged, sir? That we were carried away, shot in a barge, and taken up the river? Then you swooped down with a lot of police, rescued us, and grabbed the crooks?"

"You have put it neatly, Handforth," said Lee dryly. "That is just what happened."

"And we missed it all!" groaned Handforth. "Crumbs! What a frost! We missed everything!"

"Be thankful you are safe and sound—back at the school," retorted Lee.

"You know, of course, what would have happened to you if the barge had reached its destination? You would have been in Zangari's hands; and I don't think I am taking an alarmist view if I say that you would have been in very great danger."

"But Zangari couldn't have meant to kill us," said Nipper shrewdly. "If so, he wouldn't have gone to the trouble of kidnapping us. He would have killed us here, in the school!"

"Yes, there's that point—and I'm thankful about it," replied Lee. "I can only conclude that Zangari has decided to change his tactics. He realises the great danger. Therefore, his aim is to take you prisoner—so that if you talk, you can do no harm. I suppose you

realise, also, that as this raid has failed, another will follow?"

"By George! Really?" said Handforth, his eyes sparkling. "Then we shall get some excitement, after all!"

"I don't think you will, Handforth," replied Lee grimly. "You are all going away."

"What?"

"Oh, I say, sir!"

"Cheese it, Mr. Lee!"

"Fortunately, the school—and by the school, I mean its inmates—has come to no harm," continued the detective. "But we can't risk any more sensational happenings of this kind. I believe I can smooth things over. There will, of course, be a bit of a sensation, but as nobody has come to any harm, it will pass. However, there can be no more of it. You eight boys are the cause of the trouble, and you must therefore be eliminated. In other words, you are going away. The enemy will know you have gone, and, consequently, St. Frank's will thereafter be safe."

"When are we going, sir?" asked Nipper.

"To-night."

"But—but I don't agree to it, sir," burst out Handforth indignantly. "How can we continue our investigations if we're sent away?"

"I'm afraid your investigations will have to go by the board, Handforth," retorted Nelson Lee. "Good gracious, don't you realise that the danger is deadly? Now, listen to me. There must be no further arguments. You must do exactly as I tell you. You are going away to-night. Your schoolfellows will believe that you have gone home—"

"Believe?" interrupted Tommy Watson. "Do you mean that we aren't going home, sir?"

"No. That would be much too risky."

"How risky, sir?"

"You are to be secretly removed, and you will be taken to a secret destination," answered Nelson Lee. "Now, I have already made certain plans. The thing must be done at once, for it is possible that Zangari, furious at the failure of this evening's raid, will take fresh steps. I have made certain plans; I am now going to give you careful instructions. I want you to listen attentively. Without telling anything to the other boys, you will put on your stoutest shoes, don your overcoats and caps, and go out to the school garage. There you will find a small motor-coach waiting, with drawn blinds."

"Oh, I say, sir, this is a bit thick!" objected Handforth dismally. "Fancy being smuggled away from the giddy school like that! I suppose you're having the coach round at the garage so that none of the other chaps will see it!"

"That's one reason," agreed Lee, nodding. "For you will not go out to the garage until after calling-over. Therefore you will attract no attention. Nobody will see you. The coach itself will depart unostentatiously; and as the blinds will be drawn, if there are enemy spies, they will not be able to see within."

"And where is the coach going to take us, sir?" asked Church.

"That I can't tell you," replied Lee. "Now, boys, let me once again assure you that all this is very necessary. Listen carefully now; I have some very precise instructions which you must bear in mind."

Dr. Zangari, at Gallows Mere, had heard the startling news.

At first he was stunned; he could not

believe that his plans had so miscarried. He had taken every precaution. But news had come in that the barge had been raided, and that twelve valuable men—thirteen, including the bargee—were in the hands of the police. It was known, too, that Nelson Lee was the cause of the disaster.

Rapidly recovering from the shock, Dr. Zangari became a furnace of white-hot temper. His fury was vitriolic, and for some time none of his associates at Gallows Mere dared go near him. When he had calmed down somewhat he talked with a man named Carlo Mazzini.

"This dog Lee is our greatest menace," said No. 1, his voice unsteady with rage. "Lee must die. He shall die to-night. He is a venomous snake."

"Venomous snakes, you will remember, are apt to turn and bite," replied Mazzini. "Lee will not be so easily killed."

"Are we to be foiled, are our plans of years to be ruined by one man?" snarled Zangari, his eyes burning like coals. "Attend, Mazzini! To-day I instructed all members to report at midnight. Fortunately, many have already arrived. We have, then, sufficient men here now."

"You suggest another raid on the school?" asked Mazzini dubiously. "There may be police—"

"There are no police," interrupted the other. "Two spies are on duty there; one has reported by telephone. The cunning of this man, Lee! It seems he has managed to smooth things over. Nobody at the school knows what really happened."

"Would it not be better, Excellency, to wait?" asked Carlo Mazzini. "All may be lost if we are too precipitate. Surely this is a time for lying low!"

"In a way, my friend, you are right," replied Dr. Zangari thoughtfully. "We must have the boys, yes. Later, we will decide how we shall get them. Perhaps our chance will come early." A cunning light entered his eyes. "What will Lee do after what has just happened? He knows that the eight boys are a danger to the school. Therefore, it is likely that he will send them away. Good! We must keep careful watch; we must know of all that goes on. If we can seize the boys, we'll keep them alive. I have changed my mind, Mazzini. It would be dangerous to kill them—now. But seize them we must, so that we may hold them as hostages. The situation has become critical, and we must safeguard ourselves."

"I think, Excellency, it is time for us to abandon everything," replied Carlo Mazzini grimly.

"Take care of your tongue, fool!" snapped Zangari. "Men of this organisation have been sentenced to death for less!"

"But the danger, Excellency," protested Mazzini, turning pale. "I only speak this way because I feel it is useless to go on. It is not only the man Lee; there are others from Scotland Yard; the county police are becoming more and more active, too. We are suspected—here, in this house. So far they are without evidence, thus they cannot act. But how long will this last?"

"To-night, Mazzini, we shall strike—and we shall succeed!" retorted Dr. Zangari. "The two spies at the school are reliable men; I await their next report."

At the very moment the two spies in question, as black as the night itself, were lurking in the neighbourhood of St. Frank's. Their danger was slight. Clothed as they were, they were virtually invisible. If the place had

been surrounded by police officers they might have moved about unchallenged. But they were satisfied that the school was unguarded. By this time the excitement had died down. St. Frank's was almost normal.

The enemy spies were aware of the fact that a small motor-coach had entered the school premises from the rear. It was brought to a stop just outside the main garage where all was quiet. The fact that two uniformed police officers accompanied the coach was significant. And these men now proceeded to draw blinds within the vehicle. It stood ready; its engine ticking over. The driver remained in his seat; the two police officers stood near the door, waiting.

They had not to wait long, for their arrival had been timed to the minute. Eight figures appeared from the direction of the school—eight boys well clothed ready for travelling. They all carried suitcases.

And the spies, unseen, but watchful, knew the truth then. The eight boys who had given so much trouble were leaving—were being secretly removed from St. Frank's in this coach with the drawn blinds. And the spies chuckled with inward contempt. This man, Nelson Lee, was not so smart, after all. Did he really imagine that such a crude and simple plan would serve?

One by one the eight boys entered the coach. Not a word was spoken; but the light which streamed out through the open doorway was all-revealing. There was no trickery about this. The boys were Nipper, Watson, Tregellis-West, Handforth, Church, McClure, Glen-thorne, and Browne.

But having entered the coach, the boys proceeded to do something which the watchful spies did not see.

Inside the vehicle with the drawn blinds, there was a square hole in the floor. Nipper was in the lead. He left his suitcase, which was a mere blind, on the floor. Then he silently lowered himself through the hole. His feet found a ladder. He went down and down into the repair pit, over which the coach was standing. Only a small section of the repair pit was uncovered, but it was sufficient.

One by one the boys descended.

Thus, while it appeared that they had all entered the coach for the journey, they actually entered it only for a moment—immediately to make their secret exit. Nelson Lee was not so crude, after all.

This trick was brilliant, in its way. Never for a moment had the detective lost sight of the fact that Zangari would have spies on the watch. Very well, then! Lee had given the spies something to see—something to report.

It was all done very quickly, very efficiently. The instant the last boy had entered the two police officers followed them inside, and the door was closed. The driver received a signal; he switched on his headlights, and the coach moved off, leaving the school premises by the rear as it had entered. To a watcher it seemed absolutely convincing that the eight boys had entered the coach, and were being driven away.

And one of the spies, running like a black shadow, climbed a pole some distance away, which carried telephone wires. With his special equipment he tapped the wire, and within a single minute Dr. Zangari was in possession of the false news that his eight schoolboy enemies had left St. Frank's in a motor-coach with drawn blinds.

A Trick to the Enemy!

BY George! What a game!" whispered Handforth tensely. "Can't beat the guv'nor when it comes to strategy," said Nipper. "You see, he had an idea that Zangari might have a spy on the job; that our departure would be reported, and the coach held up somewhere on the road. Let 'em hold it up. By the time they've discovered their mistake, we'll be well out of reach."

"The point is, Brother Nipper, where shall we be?" asked Browne, with interest. "I think I may say, with truth, that I am a patient fellow. But it is an undeniable fact that life has recently become hectic. To-night it is positively chaotic. We not only drop through floors, like demons in the pantomime, but we lurk in pits, and we are left completely in the dark as to our ultimate destination. The knowledge, moreover, that we shall have no further opportunity of taking a smack at the Black Hand Gang grieves me to the quick."

"I say! Black Hand Gang!" ejaculated Handforth, with a start. "I wonder if—That's it! You've hit it, Browne! Those blighters at Gallows Mere—Dr. Zangari, and the others—are all members of the Mafia!"

"Cheese it, fathead!"

"Don't air your ignorance!"

"Ignorance!" repeated Handforth truculently.

"They're right, Handy," said Nipper, with patience. "The Black Hand Secret Society, the Mafia, the dreaded terrorist gang of Italy, was smashed up years ago. In any case, it's no

good making wild guesses. Don't forget, the guv'nor told us not to talk."

"Rats! We're only whispering!" A rumble sounded, and a moment later a shabby-looking covered lorry backed into position near the garage. Actually it came to a standstill immediately over the pit, the boards of which, of course, were now in position. The boys had been holding their whispered conversation in complete darkness, with the pit floorboards overhead covering them.

There were two men in charge of the lorry—two ordinary-looking van-men. The sharpest eyes could not have detected that they wore plain clothes police officers. They spoke cheerily and openly as they proceeded to unfasten the rear door of the lorry, and unload the vehicle. A number of packing-cases were carried into the garage.

By the talk of the men it appeared that the packing-cases contained some new equipment for the school gymnasium. In other words, a perfectly ordinary lorry, delivering a perfectly ordinary load. And as soon as the lorry had unloaded, to a certain point a square hole appeared in the floor. By this time Nipper had removed a section of the pitboards. He was watching and waiting. He saw the hole appear in the lorry floor, just off the centre, clear of the driving shaft.

"All serene, you chaps!" he whispered. "Be ready to follow me when I give the word."

He waited. It had all been pre-arranged by Nelson Lee. The supposed lorryman, having removed the last packing-case, closed the rear doors of the vehicle with some noise. There was trouble with the catch, too, which



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caused a bit of a delay. And while this delay lasted the eight boys climbed nimbly up, squeezed through the hole in the floor, and were safely within. The last of them had even replaced the pitboards, so that when the lorry should drive away everything would be quite normal.

The men, having secured the fastening, went round to the front of the vehicle, lit cigarettes, climbed in, and drove away.

"Well, now we can talk," came Handforth's voice out of the darkness inside the vehicle. "Crums! I wonder where the dickens we shall finish up? Do you mean to say your gun nor didn't give you the slightest idea of where we're going, Nipper?"

"Not the slightest," replied Nipper. "Better for us not to know. We may be going to London, or we may be going to the South Coast. That's an idea, you chaps. Perhaps the giv'nor hired a private yacht for us. Plenty of 'em available at this time of the year, and we should be safe enough at sea. Anyhow, whatever the plan is, you can be jolly certain that we shall be safely tucked away."

"That's just it," growled Handforth. "Safely tucked away! That means there'll be no more excitement for us."

"As far as I'm concerned, Handy, I've had enough," remarked McClure. "My only hat! We've been jolly lucky to escape so far, and it couldn't last much longer. Far better for us to clear out, and leave Mr. Lee and the police to get on with it. Anything for a quiet life!"

The others, in the main, were in agreement with him. Handforth and Nipper were the only two who really regretted this secret flight. It savoured to them of quitting, and they hated the very thought of it. But whereas Handforth grumbled, Nipper was content to abide by Nelson Lee's decision.

The lorry, rumbling through Bellton, took the road to Caistowe. And Caistowe was a seaport. Perhaps, after all, Nipper's theory would prove to be right. The boys, however, knew nothing of their direction; within the lorry they could see nothing. There was not even a crack between the doors through which they could see out. The journey to them was a mystery one; they did not know how long it would last, or where it would land them. In this alone there was a certain amount of thrill. Furthermore, they felt very safe. Nelson Lee's precautions had freed them from molestation.

On went the lorry. The disguised police officers in charge were both armed, and they kept their guns handy.

But they had been told that there was very little chance of a hold-up. No matter what happened on the road, they were not to stop. Their instructions were to keep going.

A mile and a half from Caistowe, where the road was narrow and lonely, they found it impossible to carry out their instructions to the letter. Two objects lying on the road came into the beam of the headlamps. It was now raining hard, and the evening was thoroughly wretched, with a high wind blowing and the road running with water.

"What's that ahead?" muttered the officer who was driving.

"Never mind what it is. Sam—drive straight on," said the other. "You know what Mr. Lennard said."

"Yes; but, hang it, we can't run over people!" protested the driver. "It's a motor-bike. The chap must have skidded. Can't you see? If we go on, we shall run right over him."

This was quite true. A motor-cycle was lying broadside across the road, and near it sprawled the figure of a man, one leg crumpled under him. To proceed without moving him aside—for there was not sufficient room to swerve in that narrow lane—would mean killing the man. The disguised policemen were alert, but they had every reason to believe that the lorry was not under suspicion. This looked to them like a very ordinary motor-cycling accident, and common humanity demanded that they should do something.

Even so, they took their guns out as they dropped to the road and went forward. The next moment they felt that their fears were groundless. For they saw an ominous pool near the head of the prostrate motor-cyclist. They bent over him—then, without a sound, both men fell forward. The invisible gas again! They had seen nothing to arouse their suspicions, and thus, prepared for trickery as they were, they were, nevertheless, completely tricked. And even as they fell, two roughly dressed men slipped quickly through the hedge, climbed into the lorry, and revved up the engine. Other men with lightning speed swept the unconscious police officers and the motor-cycle clear. The motor-cyclist had risen to his feet; the pool of blood was a fake. The gas had evidently been localised, for although the men in the road wore gas-masks, the two on the lorry were not protected. There was really no reason why they should be, for they drove on during the next instant, and the halt from first to last had not occupied more than twenty seconds.

Inside, the schoolboys knew that the lorry had stopped, and they had con-

jured as to the reason; but it had gone on again so soon afterwards that they forgot the incident. Certainly they had no suspicion, no knowledge, that they were now being driven by the enemy!

It was a trick to Dr. Zangari!

In spite of every precaution, he had seized the schoolboys. Yet, actually, he owed this success to modern science—and the forethought of Francesco Ricotti. It was that ingenious rascal who had left a certain "object" hidden in Nelson Lee's study. He had removed the top drawer of Lee's desk, and had fixed the little instrument to the wood-work at the back of the drawer. There it was concealed—unsuspected.

It was a very sensitive instrument—a miniature microphone. It required no wires. Yet, outside, concealed in the shrubbery a hundred yards away, one of Zangari's spies had been able to hear every word which was spoken in that room! For, fixed to his person, he had the controlling instrument, with ear-phones. It was a delicate instrument, with a powerful battery and tiny valves. On pressing the switch, the voices of those within the room came to his ears. The range of the "wireless listener" was only two hundred yards; beyond that it could not operate.

For the spy, listening, had heard Nelson Lee's instructions to the schoolboys! He had heard Lee telling them to get into the motor-coach, and then descend through the floor to the pit, in order to wait for the lorry. In this way Zangari had known every detail. When his other spy had tapped the wire, and had informed him of the departure of the boys in the coach, Zangari had already known that the boys would actually leave in the lorry!

So the coach had been allowed to go on its way unmolested, and measures had been quickly taken to deal with the lorry. As soon as it took the Caistowe Road an ordinary-looking private car overtook the vehicle. The rest had been easy, for inside the car were the motor-cyclist and his machine—and others.

The lorry drove on. Near Caistowe it turned aside, went down a narrow by-lane, joined up with another road, and finally reached the Bellton-Bannington Road. Along this it proceeded for a certain distance, turned off, and plunged on into the rain and darkness.

And the eight schoolboys, sitting contentedly within, went onwards, little dreaming that they were in the hands of the enemy!

(Where are Nipper & Co. being taken, and what will happen to them? More big thrills from this super serial next week.)

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