

Troublesome Tom!

By
MARTIN
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Popular Tom Merry, whose adventures at St. Jim's have for many years delighted thousands of young readers, actually began his career at Clavering—before that school became part of St. Jim's. This story of his early days at Clavering will therefore have a special interest to all HOLIDAY ANNUAL readers.

THE FIRST CHAPTER Hare and Hounds!

TOM MERRY laid down his pencil. He had written fifteen names on as many slips of paper. Monty Lowther took the slips and shuffled them in a hat-box.

It was a cheery spring afternoon. A bright sun looked in at the windows of the Form-room where the fifteen lads had met to draw for hares. It was a half-holiday at Clavering School, and the Shell were getting up a paper-chase. All of them had been busy the previous evening, tearing up old exercise-books and impot paper for "scent."

The boys were already in their running-shorts. Tom Merry looked very fit and trim. Tom had been training hard lately, and was in excellent condition for a long

run. Manners took charge of the hat-box.

"Tom Merry!" he exclaimed. "Hallo, Tommy, you're a hare!"

Tom's name was the first out of the box.

Tom Merry nodded cheerfully.

"Oh, what rot!" exclaimed Gore. "He can't run. What's the good of having Spooney for a hare? We sha'n't get anything like a run!"

Tom flushed red. The name of "Spooney" had been bestowed upon him when he first came to Clavering, and it must be admitted that it was not then undeserved. For Tom had been the darling pet of Miss Priscilla Fawcett, his old nurse, at dear old Huckleberry Heath, and he had been very much spoiled.

He had come to Clavering in a pretty velvet suit and a big bow, though he was fifteen years old, and he had the most polite

and elegant manners imaginable. But a very short stay at Clavering had knocked most of the nonsense out of him, and the boys, who had chipped him mercilessly at first, had come to like him very well in the long run.

But Gore had never liked him. Gore watched his growing popularity with disfavour, and did his best to revive the old feeling against him.

"Better draw again," went on Gore. "Spooney's no good for a hare. He'd crack up in the first quarter mile."

"I don't think I shall crack up," said Tom politely. "I've been training, and I am sure——"

"Oh, rats! You're no good!"

"Shut up, Gore!" said Manners. "Bless us, that chap's always talking! Lemme see, who's the next? Hallo, it's Gore!"

"Oh, it's me, is it?" grunted Gore. "And you want me to run with that image, do you?"

"You needn't if you don't want to. Keep out of the chase, and a good riddance to you," said Manners.

"My idea is," said Monty Lowther, "that Tom Merry will leave Gore miles behind. Gore can't run for toffee. He smokes too many cigarettes."

Whereat Gore turned red and let the argument drop.

"Don't mind that brute, Tom," said Manners, linking his arm in Tom Merry's as they left the Form-room. "He's a pig, and he can't help it. The trouble with him is that you won't let him bully you. What he wants is a hiding. Mind he doesn't play any mean trick on you during the run."

Tom's eyes opened.

"Why, what could he do, Manners?"

"Lots of things, and he's mean enough for anything. What Monty said is quite true. He can't run so well as he ought, and you'll simply walk away from him, if you put your best foot foremost. And he wouldn't let you do it if he could help it."

"All right, I'll look out for him," said Tom.

The hares and hounds reached the starting-place, on the border of Clavering Moor,

not far from the college gates. Tom and Gore had their bags of "scent" slung on. It could not be denied that Tom looked by far the more fit of the two, though Gore was much bigger and older than the former.

"Five minutes start," said Monty Lowther, taking out his watch. "Are you ready?"

"Quite," said Tom, in his cheery way.

"Yes," growled Gore.

"Off, then."

The hares started off. The way lay across the breezy, heathery moor, and was to extend as far as the lighthouse, a run of six miles. The hares soon disappeared behind a belt of trees.

"Come on," said Gore. "I know this ground a good deal better than you do, Spooney, and you'd better follow my lead."

"Certainly," said Tom, in his polite way.

"Keep up with me, if you can."

"Oh, I think I can, Gore, thank you!"

Tom was running very easily, side by side with Gore, and as a matter of fact he could have shot ahead if he had wanted to. The ta-ra-ra of Monty Lowther's bugle came floating faintly from afar.

"Hallo!" said Gore. "They've started. This way."

They left the moor behind, crossed a stile, and ran on over some fields. The ground was heavy, but Tom did not appear to notice it as he ran fleetly on.

"Don't run yourself out in the first lap!" growled Gore. "What's the good of pumping yourself, Spooney?"

"I'm not pumping myself," said Tom. "I could keep this up for a long time. I could go quicker if you like."

"I don't like. Just slack down a bit till we get on better ground. I'm thinking of you, not of myself."

Tom Merry smiled, but he slacked down. There was a louder ring of the bugle behind. Gore knew what it meant; the hares were sighted. He glanced anxiously back, and saw thirteen pink shirts streaming from the moor.

"Buck up!" he exclaimed.

They accelerated their pace. Behind them, as they ran, fell the trail of torn

paper. Gore led the way down to the canal bank. A mile had now been covered, and Gore was looking very puffy. Tom was as fresh as paint.

"Can you jump it, Spooney?" asked Gore. "This will settle some of them. If you can't do the jump you can stick here and get caught."

He slung his bag of scent across. The canal was twelve feet across, so the jump was a good one. Tom followed his example.

"I think I can do it!" he exclaimed.

"Wait a bit! I'll go first, and then if you don't quite do it I can lend you a hand."

"Well, that's really kind of you, Gore!" exclaimed Tom, who had by this time, in the excitement of the run, quite forgotten about Manners' warning.

Gore took a run and just cleared the canal. He went down on his knees on the other side and grunted, but he was quickly up again.

Ta-ra-ra-ra! rang out from the distance.

"Jump it!" called out Gore.

By apparent accident Gore knocked Tom in the chest, and Tom fell with a sounding splash into the canal.

Tom ran and jumped. Right across he went in fine style, and his foot came down on the bank, and at the same moment Gore reached out as if to help him land, and by apparent accident knocked him in the chest. Tom made a desperate effort to save himself, but in vain. Back he went, falling with a sounding splash into the canal.

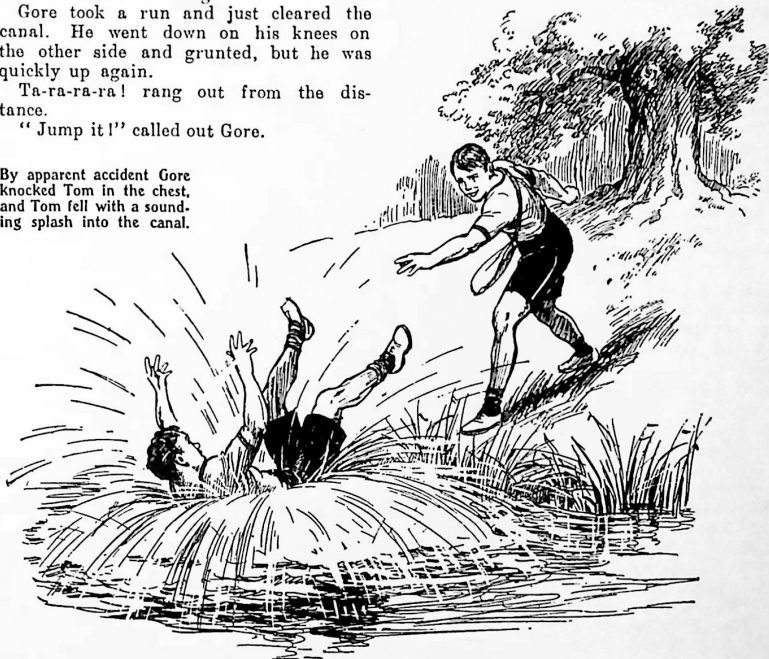
"Ha, ha!" yelled Gore. "Well, you are clumsy!"

Tom's head popped up from the water, and he scrambled to the bank.

"What did you do that for?" he exclaimed.

Gore stared at him.

"Do you think I did it on purpose?" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you take hold of my hand? It was all your own clumsiness."



"It wasn't anything of the kind!" exclaimed Tom hotly. "You shoved me in the chest and knocked me back into the canal!"

"Oh, rats! Come on, and don't argue!"

And Gore, shouldering his bag of scent, started off.

Tom wrung the water as well as he could out of his clothes and followed him. He felt almost certain that Gore had played him that scurvy trick on purpose, and now he was on the look-out for anything of the kind to occur again.

His spill had soaked his clothes, and he knew that he must keep in rapid motion to avoid catching a cold. He put on speed and passed Gore.

"Hallo, where are you bolting to?" exclaimed Gore. "That isn't the way."

"This is the way to the lighthouse."

"Yes, but we don't want to go straight—"

"Well, buck up and show me the way, then!"

"Don't pump yourself out. There's no such hurry, and—"

"You've said that before," said Tom. "If you can't keep pace you had better chuck it."

After the spill in the canal he was not inclined to have mercy on Gore.

The latter scowled, but he quickened his pace and joined Tom. He now led the way over some ploughed fields. If he had hoped that Tom's spill would spoil his form, he was mistaken. Tom Merry was running as well as ever, and he seemed good enough for hours yet.

From the top of a rise in the ground Tom looked back. Six pink shirts were collected on the farther side of the canal. Seven had crossed it, and were taking up the chase. Among them he recognised Manners, Monty Lowther, and Jimson.

"Nearly half of them are out of the running!" exclaimed Tom, with satisfaction. "Come on, Gore! Which way now?"

"Through that gate."

"But that leads through a farmyard!" exclaimed Tom.

"Well, what about it? That's the way!"

Gore vaulted over the gate, and sprinted through a flock of quacking ducks. Tom, not to be outdone, followed him, though he had his misgivings, especially when he saw a stout, red-faced man coming towards them, a cart-whip in his hand.

"Scoot!" gasped Gore. "That's Farmer Oliphant. Beastly unlucky the brute should spot us. Get on!"

The boys fairly flew. The farmer was red with rage at the liberty taken with his farmyard, and the whip in his hand looked very business-like. He was giving chase at the top of his speed and gaining round.

Gore looked back apprehensively.

"My hat! He's gaining! Put it on!"

Tom kept pace with his companion. He could easily have escaped by himself, but he felt that he could not desert Gore. They left the farmyard, and sprinted down a lane, but the farmer was not appeased. A thudding of footsteps behind showed the boys that they were still pursued, and the farmer, big man as he was, was gaining.

Gore gasped with exhaustion. He was run out, and he felt that he could go no farther. He stopped where a park wall bordered the lane.

"Here, give us a leg-up!" he exclaimed.

"I'll help you up from the top. Buck up, for goodness' sake, or he'll have us! He'll skin us with that beastly whip!"

"Right-ho!"

Tom gave Gore the required leg-up, and Gore grasped the top of the wall. He drew himself up with a quick jerk, rolled over the wall, and disappeared on the other side. Tom looked up anxiously at the wall. It was impossible to climb it without aid.

"I say, Gore!" he called out.

"I'm awfully sorry," came a voice from the other side of the park wall. "I slipped over, Merry. You had better hook it."

Tom set his teeth.

It looked very much as if Gore had left him in the lurch on purpose; but whether that was so or not, certainly Gore could not help him now. He could no more gain the top of the wall from the inside than Tom could from the outside.

Tom gave a last look up at the wall, but it was too high for a spring, and the thudding footsteps were close behind. He turned round.

The farmer was within twenty paces of him, the cart-whip flourishing in the air. His red face expressed the liveliest satisfaction. He was certain that he had caught one of the culprits now.

But Tom Merry was not so easily caught.

Now that he did not have to keep a slower pace with Gore, he felt that he had at least a chance of escape, and he sprinted off as fast as he could go.

But Farmer Oliphant was good for a race, and he came thundering on behind Tom, his long legs covering the ground in great style.

A flick of the whip, curling round his calves from behind, warned Tom that the enemy was close on his track.

He cast a desperate look round.

A sudden gleam shot into his eyes. A wide ditch bordered the lane, and it was full and flowing with water. Tom swerved towards it, as if intending to jump across.

The farmer's heavy footsteps were pounding close behind, and he felt an outstretched hand touch his shoulder. The moment had come, and Tom flung himself down on the very edge of the ditch, with such suddenness that the slow-witted farmer was not in the slightest degree prepared for the trick.

His knees knocked against Tom, and he flew over the boy head first, and went into the ditch with a mighty splash.

Tom was on his feet in a second.

A furious face glared at him from amid a coating of mud and green slime as the farmer arose erect in the ditch, the water flowing up to his armpits.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Tom. "How's that, umpire?"

Without waiting for an answer, he darted off.

He hurried back to the spot where he had parted from Gore, in the hope of re-joining the other hare. The hounds were well behind, and he was not afraid of falling into their hands. As he drew near

the park wall again, he heard Gore's voice raised in anguish:

"Lemme alone! Leggo my ears!"

Tom stopped. There was a gate in the wall, not far from the spot where Gore had entered, and now it was open, and Gore was being led out by a couple of men dressed as keepers, each of whom grasped him by an ear, and with no gentle grip to judge by his face.

Judgment had evidently overtaken Gore.

"Leggo, you beasts!" howled Gore.

"You're hurting me!"

The two keepers grinned at one another.

"You don't mean to say so," said one of them humorously. "We're letting you off lightly. You'll get hurt a good deal more the next time you trespass in Sir Alexander's park, my lad! Get along with you!"

They gave Gore a spin that sent him reeling out into the lane. He spun round and sat down in a bed of nettles. The keepers, laughing loudly, re-entered at the gate, and closed it behind them.

"Can't you give a chap a hand up," snarled Gore, "instead of standing there grinning like a rotten Cheshire cat?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Tom. "You look funny, Gore. Next time you may not play such a beastly mean trick."

"I couldn't help tumbling off the wall, could I?" snarled Gore.

"Yes, I believe you could. You did it on purpose, and what you've got serves you right," said Tom unceremoniously.

"Do you want me to give you a thick ear?"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom. "For goodness' sake buck up, if you're going to, and come on! There goes Monty Lowther's bugle again!"

"Where's that beastly farmer?"

"I left him in the ditch. We'd better not go that way. Come on!"

The hares started running again. It was high time, for the hounds were coming down the lane in full cry, and were not two hundred yards away. Manners and Monty Lowther were still in the lead, and Jimson, Clarke, and French were still at their heels. The rest had tailed off or given up the chase.

Ta-ra-ra-a! sounded the bugle.

To be caught half-way on the outward run would be too humiliating. Gore and Tom ran hard, putting on a spurt. Again the distance between them and the hounds increased. But Gore was getting spent.

"Can you stick it?" asked Tom anxiously.

"Yes, confound you!"

"Let's go through the wood and do some dodging."

"Right!" gasped Gore.

By leaving a winding trail in the wood the hares puzzled the hounds a little, and gained more ground. They slacked and ran steadily, and though Tom seemed still fresh, Gore was glad enough when the lighthouse rose to view against the sky. The lighthouse, overlooking the North Sea, was the outward limit of the run. With their feet trampling in the yellow sands, the hares stopped for a breather.

"Done them so far," muttered Gore. "They're close behind, though. That beastly bugle seems to haunt me. Can't spare more than a minute here."

Ta-ra-ta-ra-a!

The hounds were in sight again. As they came into view, Tom Merry counted them, and found that they were four; French had dropped out.

"We're thinning them down," said Tom. "Manners and Monty will stick it to the end, I think. Come on, Gore!"

Gore grunted as he took up the run. They went along the shore for half a mile, and then turned inland. Again the hounds vanished from sight, but the notes of the bugle came from afar at intervals.

Gore was now pretty well blown, but he would not give in. He plodded steadily on, and Tom slacked to keep pace with him. Tom kept an anxious look-out behind. He did not want to leave Gore, in spite of the scurvy tricks his companion had played him. But he did not intend to get caught.

They reached the old bridge over the mill-stream, and there Gore reeled against the low stone parapet and gasped. He was fagged out.

Tom Merry stopped.

"Are you done, Gore?"

"Yes, hang you!" snapped Gore. "Go on if you like. I'll punch your blooming head when we get back to Clavering, see if I don't!"

Tom looked back. Ta-ra-ra-ra went the bugle, and then Monty came into view. He was running steadily, and Manners was close at his heels. But they were the only two. The rest of the pack had been unable to "stick" it.

"Well, at any rate, they won't catch us both," said Tom cheerily. "I'll——"

He broke off suddenly.

From the stream below the little bridge came a sharp cry.

Then a woman's voice was heard, raised in a scream of terror.

"Help! Help!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Just in Time!

TOM MERRY looked quickly over the low stone parapet. At a glance he saw what was the matter.

A woman was standing on the bank, wringing her hands and screaming wildly. On the surface of the stream glimmered a mass of flaxen hair for a moment ere it went under.

A child had fallen into the stream, and Tom felt as if a hand of iron had gripped his heart when he saw that the current would bear the child towards the huge mill-wheel, grinding there, to be crushed and killed as soon as she reached it.

"My hat!" gasped Gore. "She—she'll be killed!"

The child's face came up from the water, white and unconscious. The woman on the bank seemed about to throw herself into the river.

"Stop!" shouted Tom. "Stop! I will save her!"

The woman glanced up to the bridge, and saw the two boys.

"Save her!" she shrieked. "Save her! The mill-wheel!"

Tom heard no more.

He threw his hands together and dived boldly into the stream.

Splash!

Right under he went, right down into the deep, cold waters. But up again, up like a cork! He dashed his hand across his eyes and looked wildly round. The woman on the bank was excitedly pointing, and Tom caught a glimpse of flaxen hair on the rushing water.

He struck out bravely.

Every stroke, assisted by the strong current, carried him nearer to the grinding wheel, and he rapidly overtook the little girl, but before he could reach her she sank again. He swam on, and caught her hair as she came up. In a moment he shifted his grip to the collar of her dress.

A little white face and closed eyes came out of the water. The woman on the bank cried out with relief, but Tom knew that the danger was not over, that it had

The farmer, coated with mud and green slime, rose erect in the ditch, and glared furiously at the laughing Tom.



scarcely begun. For he was in the grip of the strong current, and whether his strength would be equal to battling against it he did not know. And if not, then it would be two deaths instead of one.

Yet the thought never crossed his mind of abandoning his burden. Supporting the

unconscious child, he fought against the current.

Monty Lowther and Manners came running upon the bridge. They had seen Tom's leap, but had no idea of what was the matter.

"What is it, Gore?" cried Monty. "What has happened?"

For the time being the game of hare and hounds was forgotten. Gore, without



speaking, pointed to the stream.

Monty looked, and his face went white as a sheet.

"Heavens! Tom!"

Manners turned as white as Monty as he saw Tom's fearful peril.

The brave lad was battling against the current, which seemed to be savagely striving to hurl him upon the grinding wheel.

He was just holding his ground, but

that was all. He could not gain an inch, but ere long his strength must be spent, and then——

Monty clenched his teeth, and sprang upon the parapet. But Manners seized him by the arm and dragged him back.

"No good, Monty," he muttered huskily—"no good. You couldn't do it. But the punt!"

He pointed to the miller's punt, which was moored to the bank below the bridge.

"Come on!" muttered Monty.

Together they raced down to the bank. The woman, who seemed to be the miller's wife, was watching the swimmer with staring, straining eyes. The two boys reached the punt and sprang into it. Monty shoved off.

Tom was fighting hard for his life, and the life of the child.

But the strong current was too much for him. He could not reach the shore, and as his strength failed him, he was slowly but surely sucked away towards the wheel.

He knew his terrible peril, and even yet he might have saved himself had he let the child go and exerted all his strength to save his own life.

But he did not even think of it. It was to be both or neither, and Tom Merry fought a losing battle with dogged British pluck.

"Buck up, Tom!"

The voice of Monty Lowther came like music to the ears of the brave lad, who had already felt himself doomed. His wild glance swept the water, and he saw the punt rapidly approaching him, and Manners, with his hands stretched out, ready to seize him.

But Tom was nearly spent now. Swifter he went with the current, and the roar of the water under the wheel sounded in his dazed ears with the noise of thunder. His senses seemed to be floating away in a maze, and if he struggled still it was from instinct, and through no conscious effort.

The water was over his head, but a strong grip was on his collar, and up he came again, and he felt the weight of the child taken from him. He came to his senses with a start. The child was lying in

the punt, and Manners was dragging him in. He made an effort to help himself, and rolled into the bottom of the punt.

Monty Lowther was poling, and Manners now went to his assistance, while Tom lay gasping and exhausted. Not without difficulty the two boys brought the punt safely to land, where a man in a white smock seized it and made it fast, and then lifted the child out.

It was the miller, who had come too late to the scene of his little daughter's peril. He shook hands with the boys, half crying, and fairly hugged Tom. The woman hurried up to the house with the unconscious child.

"God bless you, lad," cried the miller again and again—"God bless you! I never saw such a plucky 'un—never!"

Tom stood up with some difficulty. He was exhausted by the fight with death after the long run in the paper-chase, and his narrow escape had left him white and shaken.

"That's all right," he gasped. "I hope the little girl is safe. Monty, old man, cut off for a doctor as quick as you know how."

Monty was off like a shot.

"Oh, I say, Tom," cried Manners, who was half laughing and half crying in his excitement, "you are a scorcher! Fancy anybody calling you a spooney! I—I thought you were a goner!"

"So did I," said Tom.

"God bless you!" said the miller. "Come into the house and get into some dry things, my lad. You must stay here and rest a while."

Tom hesitated.

"I say, Manners, this busts up the paper-chase!" he exclaimed. "I couldn't run now, even if you gave me a start. It's a capture."

Manners thumped him on the back.

"Don't talk rot, Tom! It isn't a capture. We shouldn't have caught you this side of Christmas. You're a giddy hero—and blow the paper-chase! Come and change, before you catch your death of cold!"

"Yes, do come, young gentlemen!"

exclaimed the miller anxiously. "My wife will give you all some tea when the doctor's seen to the girl."

The invitation was too good not to be accepted. Gore came down from the bridge, and the three of them went into the miller's house, where Tom was given a hard rub down by Manners which did him a world of good.

Then arose the question of clothes. The miller had offered him a change, but he could only provide a suit of his own; and as the miller was fat and forty, and Tom was slim and fifteen, the fit was not exactly a good one. However, it was Hobson's choice, so Tom tumbled into the miller's clothes, and with a good deal of furling and reefing he made it possible to walk in them.

But his aspect was so comical that Manners could not help laughing, and even the miller, stolid man as he was, grinned at the sight of the heroic rescuer in a suit of clothes a dozen sizes too large for him.

By the time Tom had changed, Monty Lowther returned with the village doctor. The latter attended to the little girl first, and the chums were glad to hear that she was in no danger. The mother thanked Tom with tears streaming down her cheeks, much to his discomfort. She insisted upon the doctor examining Tom, to see if he was damaged, and the village medico did so; but Tom was, as he expressed himself, "all soreno!" Then the four boys sat down to a substantial tea with the miller and his wife.



Bravely Tom struck out and rapidly overtook the drowning girl, while Manners and Lowther put out in a punt to their aid.

After a hard run in the keen air they enjoyed a homely meal of bread-and-butter and tea and cake, and they felt in a satisfied mood when they took their way back to Clavering. But Tom was not exactly pleased when they came out on the high-road, and passers-by began to stare at his peculiar raiment.

With huge trousers turned up a foot or more at the ankle, and bagging round his legs like sacks, and a coat that reached down past his knees, the sleeves rolled back nearly a foot, and a cap that came down over his ears and almost over his eyes, Tom Merry certainly looked what Gore called him—"a funny merchant."

Tom's first arrival at Clavering had been in a garb strange to the eyes of Clavering lads, but now he bade fair to outdo the sensation of his first arrival.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom. "It's too bad, but it can't be helped!"

And with that philosophical reflection he

marched on to Clavering, in the midst of his grinning chums and the giggles of all who beheld him.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

Spoofing the Herr I

HERR SCHNEIDER could hardly believe his eyes. Herr Schneider, the German master at Clavering College, had a "down" upon Tom Merry, and he was always determined to find something wrong in whatever that youngster did. Tom was not without his faults, of course, but to Herr Schneider's eye he was all faults. His high spirits and frolicsome disposition were the head and front of his offending to the dry, crusty old gentleman from the Fatherland.

With or without reason, Herr Schneider was always finding fault with Tom; but he thought he had never had better reason than he now had, as he stood at the gates of Clavering and saw the merry party coming up the road.

Monty Lowther, Manners, and Gore were grinning, and there was a smile on Tom's face. He saw the humorous side of the situation. But the German master's frown was portentous.

Otto Friedrich Schneider could not for some moments believe that he had seen aright. He took off his spectacles and wiped them, and perched them again on his little fat nose, and took another look.

"Mein Gott!" murmured Herr Schneider. "Tat Merry is up to his dricks again. Tat poy is te vorst in te school, ain'd it? I vill gif him vun lesson, and in dis case even Mr. Railton cannot find an excuse for him."

The German's lips came tightly together over the name of Mr. Railton. The Head of Clavering was a young man—much younger than most of his masters—and with Herr Schneider especially he often had difficulties.

Herr Schneider belonged to the old school of masters, who believed in driving knowledge into the heads of boys as you drive a nail into wood—with repeated blows. He never ran the risk of spoiling a child

by sparing the rod. He believed that boys could never be sufficiently sat upon.

Mr. Railton was different. He was an old Blue, strong on every kind of athletics, and believed in being a friend and counselor rather than a driver to his boys. He did not disapprove of high spirits and frolic on principle, though he could draw the line tightly enough when required.

Herr Schneider stared at the party coming up the road with a fixed gaze, which somewhat disconcerted them as soon as they saw it.

"Hallo!" groaned Monty Lowther. "There's old Schneider, looking at us like an owl! He's spotted your rig, Tom."

"And he looks shocked!" said Gore maliciously. "You're coming in for something this journey, I fancy, Merry."

"Stuff!" exclaimed Manners. "Why, when we tell him that Tom jumped into the mill-stream to save——"

Tom Merry turned red.

"Oh, rats!" he interrupted. "Don't tell him anything of the kind. I don't want to make capital out of that. I'll tell him I've had a ducking; and that's the truth, and quite enough of it."

"He doesn't look as if he would listen to much," said Gore. "Look how red his face is. That always shows he's boiling. You'd better keep your distance while you explain."

The boys walked on, looking rather doubtful. They could not pass in, as the German had placed his portly figure in the centre of the gateway, with the evident intention of stopping them.

"Good-afternoon, Herr Schneider!" Tom ventured.

The German glared at him through his spectacles.

"Merry, how dare you go apout te public street dressed like tat?"

"If you please, Herr Schneider——"

"Tat is another of your silly tricks."

"I have had——"

"Silence!"

"But——"

"Hold your tongue! You have deliberately dressed in tat manner to pring discredit on te college."

"I do assure you, Herr Schneider——"
"Mein Gott! You pass all bounds, Merry. I have said before tat you are te vorst poy in te college!"

"Yes, sir," said Tom demurely. "I think I have heard you make that remark, sir."

Monty Lowther giggled and Manners grinned. The German master turned purple.

"Merry! Tat impertinence vill do you no goot!"

"I did not mean to be impertinent to you, sir. I assure you that I respect you too highly," said Tom, with a touch of his old manner. "If you would have the kindness to give me your attention for a few moments, I will explain——"

"I tink tat dis matter does not require explaining," said the German dryly. "You have dress like te mountebank, and you shall be punish!"

"I have had a duck——"

"Follow me!"

"Certainly, sir; but if you will allow me to explain that I have had a duck——"

"Silence!" shouted Herr Schneider.

"Anoder vort and I cane you!"

Tom Merry was silent.

It was evidently of no use to argue with the incensed German.

Herr Schneider strode across the Close, his fat face purple with wrath and his eyes gleaming behind his spectacles. Herr Schneider had a peculiar half-military strut, which the boys of the lower Forms at Clavering often amused themselves by mimicking. Tom had been told to follow the German master, and he followed him. He had not been told how to walk, so he pleased himself about that—and it pleased him to imitate exactly the pompous strut of Otto Friedrich Schneider.

There were a good many boys in the Close, and every eye was, of course, turned at once upon Tom in his peculiar garb. His aspect in those clothes would have been funny at the best of times. But as he strutted after the German, with a face as solemn as an owl's, the sight was excruciatingly funny.

The boys yelled and howled with laughter.

Herr Schneider strode on, hearing the laughter but not heeding it. He put it all down to Tom's ridiculous clothes. As they proceeded, the merriment redoubled, for Monty Lowther and Manners, seized with the spirit of mischief, fell in behind Tom Merry, strutting along in the same absurd way. Gore, not to be outdone, joined in. It was now a regular procession, with the unconscious German at the head of it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!"

The spectators were nearly in hysterics.

The unbounded merriment on all sides excited Herr Schneider's suspicions just before he reached the door of the school-house.

He turned his head and looked behind him.

The movement was unexpected, and it took his followers by surprise. Caught in the very act, the four lads strutted on for a moment without being able to stop, and nearly ran into the German.

Herr Schneider gasped with rage.

Words were too weak to express his feelings—much too weak. He stretched out both hands and caught hold of Tom Merry.

Tom gave a roar as the angry Herr began to box his ears right and left.

Having relieved his feelings a little this way, Herr Schneider marched Tom into the house with a grip on his collar, taking no notice of the others.

Straight to the dormitory occupied by the boys of the Shell and some of the Lower Fifth the Herr marched Tom, and thrust him inside, and put the key in the outside of the lock.

"Tat is where you spend te rest of your half-holiday!" he exclaimed, with a withering look. "You can tink over your conduct till tea-time!"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Tom, in remonstrance.

But the German took no notice of him. He went out, locked the door on the outside, and went away to his study to soothe his ruffled breast with a big German pipe.

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Tom. "This won't do! That man has absolutely

no sense of humour. He wants a lot of educating!"

There was a tap at the door.

"Are you there, Tom?"

"I am," replied Tom. "Is the key there, Monty?"

"No; our kind teacher has taken it away with him."

"How am I to get out, then?"

"Well, Herr Schneider must have forgotten that you want to get out," chuckled Monty. "Very thoughtless of him!"

"Go and stand under the window, and catch me if I fall."

"You are not going to get out of the window?"

"Yes, I am. Buckez-vous up!"

Monty went away. Tom looked at the window. It was a good height from the floor, but by dragging a washstand there and climbing upon it he was able to reach the sill. To open the window and get out on the sill was quick work.

Monty and Manners were standing below, looking up. Tom Merry sat on the window-sill, his legs dangling, and looked down at them.

"You can't do it," called out Manners.

"You'll break your giddy neck. Get in!"

"I only want a rope," said Tom.

"But you haven't got one."

"Oh, that's all right! I'll take the sheets off the bed and make one."

"Oh, I say! Remember whose window is underneath!"

Tom whistled.

He had forgotten that. Under the end window of the dormitory was the window of the study shared by the chums. Under that again was the window of Herr Schneider's room. If Tom came sailing past his window, it was very likely that the German master would spot him.

"You can't do it!" called out Manners.

Those words settled it for Tom.

When he had made up his mind to do a thing he never turned back, and to be told that he couldn't do it only made him anxious to try.

"Well, I can't stick here for a couple of hours, and such fine weather!" he exclaimed. "That's out of the question—

isn't it? I think I can dodge that window. Wait a bit!"

He disappeared into the dormitory again.

His fingers worked rapidly in making a rope of sheets.

He twisted them together and tied them securely at the ends, and ere long had an improvised rope sufficiently long for the purpose.

This he slung over his arm and mounted to the window again.

The end he had tied round a stick, so that when the window was closed down upon it, it could not possibly slip out.

Manners grinned as he saw Tom at the window again.

"I say," he called out. "If you're coming, you may as well change your clothes first!"

"Good idea!" agreed Tom.

He hadn't thought of it, but it was evidently advisable. It did not take him long, and he left the miller's clothes neatly folded up upon a bed. Then he got out of the window and closed down the sash upon the end of the rope.

The rope of twisted sheets he carefully lowered, contriving to make it pass on one side of the German's window.

Manners and Monty watched him with interest. They were not alone, either. This part of the Close was screened to some extent by the old elms, but a number of boys had discovered what was going forward, and they had gathered to see how it would turn out.

Tom Merry swung himself off the sill and began to lower himself hand below hand.

"The giddy ass will break his neck," said Gore, who had joined the watching crowd. "Jolly good thing, too!"

But Tom did not look like breaking his neck.

He came down steadily and swung in front of the study window; but, of course, the rope hung straight now that his weight was upon it, and it descended directly in front of Herr Schneider's window.

Still, unless the Herr's attention was directed towards the window, there was no reason why he should notice it; and, besides, he might not even be in his study.

Anyway, Tom had made up his mind, and he risked it.

He hung in front of the study window belonging to the chums, and descended cautiously lower, till his feet were on a level with the top of Herr Schneider's window.

His idea now was to slip down quickly and cover the last bit of distance like a flash of lightning.

But it did not work out exactly like that.

He slid down, but the rope of twisted sheets was full of big knots, and so Tom's descent was decidedly zigzag, and his attempt at rapidity made it more so.

He swung to and fro right in front of the German's window. A warning cry came from Monty Lowther, who had heard a sound of the window opening. It startled Tom, who twisted his head round to look at Monty and see what was the matter. Naturally enough, his foot swung against the window and went through the glass.

Crash!

Herr Schneider, as he sat smoking his big German pipe, had become aware of something that looked like a wriggling snake hanging outside his window.

He had risen to ascertain what it was, and he had the window half open when Tom Merry's foot came crashing through the glass.

The German master staggered back with an exclamation:

"Mein Gott!"

Then he sprang angrily to the window again. The rope was gyrating, and Tom was swinging round with it. Startled by the crash, he had ceased to descend. The German master reached out and grasped him by the shoulder and stopped his gyrations.

"Merry! So it vas you?"

Tom looked at the German master. He had recovered his coolness in a moment, and he met Herr Schneider's angry stare with a sweet smile.

"Yes, sir; it is I," he said cheerfully.

In his peculiar garb Tom strutted after the German master, causing much merriment among the juniors.



"Merry! So you disobey mein orders and you preak my vindow?"

"I am very sorry I broke it, sir!" said Tom, truthfully enough.

The German smiled grimly.

"I have no doubt apout tat, Merry. As you have come to my vindow, you may as vell get inside mit you, and I vill give you somet'ing for coming!"

"I don't think I could get in, sir," said Tom, who knew what that something was likely to be. "Hadn't I better go down, sir, and come up the stairs?"

"You will come in at vunce!"

Tom began to sway on the rope. The German clutched him angrily, and suddenly Tom loosed his hold on the sheets and slid down so swiftly that he was torn from Herr Schneider's grasp. He went down with a rush and alighted on his feet, but in an instant he was on the ground, flat on his back. The German put his head out of the window and looked down anxiously. He saw Tom lying prostrate, motionless, with his eyes closed, and Herr Schneider turned pale.

Tom's action had been so swift that many of the boys thought he had fallen. Manners ran forward quickly and knelt by his side.

"Tom! Tom!"

"It's all right, fathead," whispered Tom, without moving or opening his eyes. "I only want to give Fatty a scare!"

Manners grinned.

But the grin was only momentary. An expression of grief and horror came over his face as natural as life as he looked up towards the German at the window.

"You've killed him!" sobbed Manners. "Oh-oh-oo! Tom's killed, and Herr Schneider is his murderer!"

The German's fat face became the colour of putty. He leaned out of window, in imminent danger of falling out himself.

"Is he hurt?" he called out anxiously. "Has te poy hurt himself?"

"Oh-oo-oo! Tom's killed!"

"Oh-oo-oo!" roared Monty Lowther, joining in the demonstration of grief, and the other boys were not long in tumbling to the joke and taking it up.

Handkerchiefs came out and were applied to eyes, and also served the purpose of hiding broad grins. A weeping and wailing was set up such as had never been heard before within the precincts of Clavering.

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!"

"Poor Tom!"

"Poor old Tommy!"

"Oh, oh, oh!"

Herr Schneider clutched at the window-sill, and then at his scanty locks. Tom lay still, his eyes closed, a peaceful look upon his face.

"What is the matter here?"

The grief of the youngsters ceased as if by magic.

For the new voice was that of Mr. Railton, and the Head of Clavering, with a frown upon his handsome face, strode upon the scene.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

The Hero!

MR. RAILTON looked at Tom Merry, and then at the boys round him. Tom had opened his eyes at the sound of the master's voice, and he now sat up.

Herr Schneider gave a gasp of relief.

But the next moment his relief changed to rage as he realised how he had been made a fool of.

Mr. Railton's glance was very stern.

"Merry! What are you doing?"

"Taking a rest, sir," said Tom glibly.

"I'm a bit fagged, sir, after running in a paper-chase, and I thought a rest would do me good."

There was an outburst of chuckles on all sides.

"He pretend to be hurt!" shouted Herr Schneider. "He make me tink that—that he keel!"

Tom looked up at the window with an innocent expression.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed. "Did you think I was dead, sir?"

"You pad poy——"

"Merry," said Mr. Railton sternly, "it is clear that you have been guilty of a practical joke upon Herr Schneider, which I cannot excuse."

Tom looked very meek.

"I am sorry for that, sir."

He did not state which part of the Head's sentence his sorrow applied to.

Mr. Railton concealed a smile.

"What does this rope from the dormitory mean?"

"I put it there, sir."

"Why did you put it there?"

"I wanted to come down from the window, sir."

"I mean—never mind. Herr Schneider's window has been broken, and you have played a trick upon him——"

"He play more tan vun drick!" exclaimed Herr Schneider. "He come to te school in absurd clothes, and I lock him in te dormitory for te punishment. Den he get out of te window."

"This is very serious, Merry."

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"And it is very unfortunate," went on Mr. Railton, "as for a particular reason I am very unwilling to punish you this afternoon."

Tom looked at him in wonder.

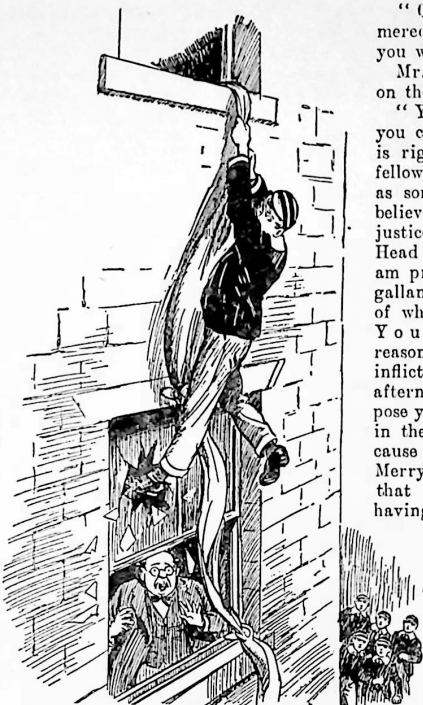
He had expected a flogging at the least. He was ready to stand it, and why Mr. Railton should let him off he could not guess.

The Head of Clavering glanced round at the boys, most of whom were looking as surprised as Tom Merry, and curious, too.

"My boys," said Mr. Railton very quietly, "I am glad to be able to tell you that a most heroic deed has been performed by a boy belonging to Clavering. I have just come from the village, where I heard the story of what Merry had done."

Tom knew what was coming now, and he blushed scarlet.

"Merry," continued Mr. Railton, "jumped into the mill-stream, and ran a terrible risk of losing his life to save a drowning child."



Tom's foot swung against the glass and went through it with a crash. Herr Schneider, in the room, sprang angrily to the window. "Mein Gott!"

"Oh, I say, sir," stammered Tom, "I—I wish you wouldn't—"

Mr. Railton patted him on the shoulder.

"Your modesty does you credit, Merry, but it is right for your school-fellows to know, especially as some of them have, I believe, hardly done you justice so far," said the Head of Clavering. "I am proud to have such a gallant lad in the school of which I am the Head. You understand my reason now for wishing to inflict no punishment this afternoon. And as I suppose you came to the school in the miller's clothes because your own were wet, Merry, I have no doubt that Herr Schneider, having punished you under an error, will be willing to overlook your present offence."

Herr Schneider, when it was put like that, could hardly refuse.

As a matter of fact, it occurred to him that he had been rather hasty.

"I am quite willing to do so," he said, with a not very good grace. And he withdrew into his room and closed the window.

"Now, Merry, you are pardoned," said Mr. Railton. "I could pardon a good deal of a boy who has acted as you have done to-day. But mind, no more of these tricks."

"No, sir," said Tom.

And then Mr. Railton shook hands with the boy who had been called "Spooney" by half Clavering; but no one wanted to call him Spooney now.

As the Head turned away, a rush was made for Tom, and he was seized in a dozen pairs of hands and hoisted into the air.

"Hallo! Hallo! What's the row?" ejaculated Tom, in some alarm. "What are you up to?"

"You're a giddy hero," explained Jimson. "We're going to chair you round the close. That's the wheeze."

"Rats! You're not going to do anything of the kind."

"Aren't we? That's all you know. Come on, chaps!"

Tom, willy-nilly, was flung up on the shoulders of Jimson and Manners, and the rest crowded round in array.

"I say, chuck it!" exclaimed Tom. "Let me down, you asses!"

"Rats! Bring him along!"

"March!"

Monty Lowther produced a mouth-organ, and placed himself at the head of the procession. He began to play, and they started off round the close.

"Here, I say, Monty," exclaimed Gore. "why don't you play the 'Conquering Hero'?' That would be about the tune."

Monty Lowther removed the musical instrument from his lips for a moment, and bestowed a glance of withering scorn upon the questioner.

"I am playing it," he replied.

"Well, blessed if I knew it, Monty."

"What did you think I was playing, then, fathead?"

"Didn't know you were playing anything. Thought you were just blowing away, tuning up or something of that sort," said Gore innocently.

Monty Lowther contented himself with bestowing another crushing look upon Gore, and recommenced with the mouth-organ.

Now that the boys knew what tune he was supposed to be playing, some of them recognised the strains of the "Conquering Hero," or thought they did; anyway, Monty was making

plenty of noise, and that was what was chiefly wanted.

Round and round the close they went, tramping and shouting, the blushing hero borne high upon their shoulders. They were passing the gymnasium when Devigne of the Upper Fifth came out. Devigne was captain of his Form, and not very popular outside it.

He stared at the procession.

"Hallo! Have you kids gone off your rockers?" he demanded.

Now, if there was anything the boys of the Shell could not stand, it was being alluded to as "kids." Their position, midway between the Lower and Upper school, laid them open to the imputation of being still kids, and they didn't like to be reminded of the fact.

"Oh, rats to you!" said Manners.

"Get out of the road!"

"What are you carrying that kid about for?"

"I'm the conquering hero," said Tom cheerfully. "No dogs or members of the



Upper Fifth allowed to get in the way. Skedaddle."

Devigne scowled, and reached out for Tom; but the procession closed up, and Devigne was hustled out of the way. He thought it prudent not to come to close quarters, on second thoughts, with such odds, and so the procession passed on and left him scowling.

Thrice round the Close they went, and then into the house, and they tramped upstairs with Tom still in his elevated position. At the door of the chums' study they set him down, breathless and a good deal dishevelled.

Tom was glad to get upon his own feet again.

"Now make a giddy speech!" exclaimed Jimson.

"Oh, rats!" said Tom.

"Speech! Speech!" howled the procession.

"Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry.

"Let me see! I'm highly honoured by the ovation you've given me——"

"Hear, hear!"

"And I hope you'll never give me another!" concluded Tom.

And he dodged into the study.

"Well, that's a beastly measly speech," said Jimson. "Never mind! He's a hero, ain't he? Let's go and give him three cheers outside Devigne's study."

That idea caught on, and the whole of the Shell, with half the Lower Forms, crowded the wide corridor where the Upper Fifth studies opened, and at Jimson's word they began to cheer.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The volume of sound was deafening. Devigne had gone to his study to read Greek, and the sudden uproar outside the door made him jump off his chair.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Devigne tore open his door and glared out.

But the Lower Form boys were strong in numbers, and they were not afraid of the savage senior.

"Go it!" shouted Manners. "We're only cheering Merry, Devigne. We know



The German master's face went white as he saw the weeping juniors and the still form of Tom Merry. "Has te poy hurt himself?" he called anxiously.

how much you love him. Three times three, kids! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Devigne slammed his door. The Shell, very well satisfied with themselves, gave three more threes and marched off. Manners and Monty Lowther joined Tom in their study, in high good humour.

"Devigne didn't seem pleased, somehow," said Manners. "He doesn't like you, Tommy. When they first stuck you into this study, kid, we wanted to chuck you out of the window. We didn't know we were entertaining a hero unawares."

"Oh, dry up!"

"A giddy hero——"

"Shut up, won't you?"

"Don't hide your light under a bushel," said Manners serenely. "We're proud of you, ain't we, Monty?"

"We are," said Monty solemnly. "We is. And how pleased! Miss Priscilla will be when she hears about it!"

Tom Merry looked up in alarm.

"She mustn't hear about it!" he exclaimed hastily.

"Why not?"

"She'll—she'll come down. She'll think I caught a chill or something, and she'll come down with a barrelful of cod-liver oil, and want to wrap me up in cotton-wool!" exclaimed Tom, in distress. "I wouldn't have her know for anything."

Manners chuckled.

"Well, unless I'm greatly mistaken, Mr. Railton will write to her and tell her," he opined. "Of course, she ought to know that her darling boy is a noble hero——"

"Shut up!"

"Sha'n't! Far as I'm concerned, I'd like Miss Fawcett to come down to Clavering again. She stood us a stunning feed last time!"

"What-ho!" exclaimed Monty. "Don't be selfish, Tom. Surely you can stand the cod-liver oil if we get a jolly good feed?"

"Oh, hang it!" said Tom uneasily. "I hope Mr. Railton won't write."

But Mr. Railton did.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

Gore Sends a Telegram

TOM MERRY awoke on the following morning with a cold. It was only a slight cold, and after his adventures of the previous day he was fortunate to escape so lightly. But it was enough to start him sneezing and sniffing.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Manners, at the first sneeze. "You've got it, Tom! Won't Miss Fawcett be anxious when she sees you?"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom. "She's not going to see me. Dry up!"

"I'll bet the Head has written to her."

"I hope he hasn't."

"He's bound to," chuckled Gore, "and the old lady will be awfully frightened for her dear little boy. We must be on the look-out for her when she arrives, chaps, and receive her with all honours."

"Rather!" ejaculated Jimson, the joker of the Shell. "I only hope she won't arrive during lessons. That would be a pity."

Tom turned red. Clavering College had

never forgotten the two visits of Miss Priscilla Fawcett.

On the first occasion she had insisted upon stopping all night, because Tom had not turned up and she was afraid something had happened to him. On the second occasion she had opened Tom's shirt at the neck to examine his chest before half the Form. The sturdy lad of fifteen was still a dear little boy in the loving eyes of his old nurse, and Tom, though he was very fond of her and very grateful for her devotion to him, wished that she would be a little more considerate "before the fellows."

He couldn't help wishing that, especially as the boys never allowed him to forget the solicitude Miss Fawcett showed for his health and comfort.

"Oh, she won't come during lessons!" said Gore, who had evidently given the matter some thought. "Of course, we take it for granted she'll come by the first train to see how her darling ducky is."

"Of course," said Jimson.

"But the first train from London doesn't get into High Clavering till a quarter-past twelve, and then there's the drive here."

"You know all about it, Gore!" exclaimed Manners. "Perhaps she won't come after all."

"Oh, yes, she'll come!" said Gore confidently.

"I don't see how you can be so beastly certain about it."

"Well, you'll see."

Atchoo-oo-ooh! That was Tom Merry's contribution to the conversation. Gore looked at him with an expression of great sympathy.

"Feel very bad, Merry?" he asked. "Poor chap! Poor chap! You must have forgotten to put on your chest-protector before you jumped into the river!"

"Never mind," said Jimson. "Miss Fawcett will soon be along with a bottle of cod-liver oil. Do you think you can hold out till midday, Merry? If you can't, I'll get a can of cycle oil for you to go on with."

This generous offer caused a loud laugh, in the midst of which Fatty Daly put his head in at the door and asked the boys if

they were coming down, or whether they wanted him to come to them.

"Merry's ill," said Gore. "We're worried about him."

"Merry ill!" exclaimed the prefect. "He looked all right yesterday. What's the matter with you, Merry?"

"Nothing," said Tom indignantly. "I'm not ill. It's all rot. I've only got a bit of a cold in the nose, Daly."

"His nurse is coming to wrap him up soon," said Gore. "You don't happen to have any cod-liver oil about you, do you, Daly?"

"No," said Daly, laughing, and he went out of the dormitory.

"You'll have to wait till Miss Fawcett comes, Merry," said Gore. "I—— Ooch!"

Tom had had enough of it, and he had cut short the flow of Gore's chaff with a sponge soaked with water, which he hurled with unerring aim. It squelched in Gore's face, and ran down the shirt he was fastening. Gore gave a shout of rage.

"You little beast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exclaimed Tom. "You've no sense of humour, Gore. That's just as funny as chipping me about the cod-liver oil, if you could only see it!"

Gore seized the sponge, soaked it in his basin, and hurled it back at Tom. Tom was crossing to the door, and it was in that direction that Gore hurled the sponge. Tom saw it coming and promptly dodged.

The missile flew over his head. Every bullet, it is said, has its billet, and that sponge certainly had. For precisely at that unfortunate moment the master of the Shell put his head into the dormitory to see why the boys were late in coming down.

"Boys, I——"

Squelch! The soaking sponge smote the speaker full in the face. He staggered back with a startled cry, and Gore, as soon as he saw what he had done, stood frozen with terror.

The master of the Shell wasted no words. He went for Gore, and boxed his ears till they rang and sang. Gore yelled, but he had to stand it, and he sat down on a bed

blinking and gasping when the angry master had finished with him.

"Now, be quick down," said the master sharply. "If you are more than two minutes longer, I will give the whole Form an imposition of fifty lines."

And he strode away.

"Well, of all the cheek!" ejaculated Manners. "Fancy chucking a sponge at a master!"

"I meant it for Merry!" howled Gore.

"Then all I can say is that you're a blithering ass," said Manners. "Come down, kids. We don't want that fifty to do."

"I'll make you pay for this, Merry!" exclaimed Gore.

"Why, what have I done?" exclaimed Tom. "I didn't want you to chuck the sponge, did I? You've had your fling, Gore, and you ought to be satisfied."

"Some people are never satisfied," chuckled Manners.

The Shell trooped downwards. Gore did not go in to breakfast. Tom Merry saw him wheeling his bike towards the gates.

"Hallo! Where's that kid going?" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "I suppose he's got a permit to go to High Clavering before school."

"He'll miss his breakfast, then."

"Oh, you can get a better breakfast at the tuck-shop, if you can pay for it, than you can get here!" said Monty Lowther. "I suppose that's Gore's idea. He got a pass from Daly, I suppose, with some yarn. He's an artful dodger. But what he wants to go off so early in the morning for is more than I know."

They soon forgot, however, about Gore and his early morning ride.

Gore came in in time for first lesson with a satisfied grin on his face that some of his Form-fellows noticed at once.

"What have you been up to, Gore?" asked Manners. "Playing a beastly mean trick on somebody?"

"Mind your own business," was the reply.

Tom glanced at Gore and caught his eye. Gore grinned, and the thought flashed through Tom's mind that the visit to the

village had something to do with himself. But the next moment he dismissed it.

He did not guess that Gore's destination had been the village telegraph office, and that he had sported one and a penny upon the following telegram :

"Miss Fawcett, Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath, Kent.—Tom caught cold. Come at once."

Gore had not signed the wire, but had put as the address of the sender "Clavering College," which went with the wire.

Whether the Head's letter brought Miss Fawcett to Clavering or not, there was no doubt that Gore's wire would do so.

It did.

While Tom Merry sat in class with the Shell, hoping that Miss Priscilla would never hear of his adventure, that estimable lady was speeding towards Clavering as fast as an express train could carry her.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

The Invalid I

As soon as they were at liberty, the boys of the Shell trooped down to the school gates to watch for the expected arrival of Miss Fawcett.

None of them knew the trick Gore had played, but Gore's certainty that she would come had infected the others. Of course, they all hoped she would. To the fun-loving youngsters, the coming of the dear old lady promised a rare treat.

Tom, needless to say, did not share the general delighted anticipation. He knew that if Miss Priscilla came, his slight cold would alarm her as much as an attack of smallpox or plague, and he did not enjoy the prospect of being made to look absurd.

The rest of the Shell enjoyed it, though. Not that they loved Tom less, so to speak, but they loved a joke more.

Tom saw the crowd at the gate, and Manners, catching his expression, grinned.

"Tommy," he said, wagging his finger at our hero, "I fear that you have not an affectionate heart. Dear Tommy, are you no longer the loving child who played in

innocent babyhood in the giddy garden at Huckleberry Heath?"

"He is not," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "The coming of his loving nurse does not make his bosom thrill with joy."

"Perhaps he is disguising his feelings," suggested Manners thoughtfully. "Under that external expression of frowning discontent he may be throbbing with joyousness unlimited. Is it so, Tommy?"

Tom grinned in spite of himself.

"Oh, don't rot!" he exclaimed. "Miss Priscilla has been awfully kind to me, and I'd do anything for her. I'd even let her make a fool of me rather than hurt her feelings. But a chap doesn't like being made a guy of."

"Never mind," said Manners comfortingly. "Think of the cod-liver oil. You'll be able to have a good, long drink —"

"Oh, dry up!"

And Tom Merry went into his study.

There was a buzz at the gate. Jimson was keeping watch on the road, and he turned and waved his hand to the rest lounging in the gateway. Gore looked at him.

"Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?" he inquired.

"I do, I does," grinned Jimson. "I see an ancient vehicle, which bears a strong resemblance to Noah's Ark on wheels, but which by experience I know to be the station hack from High Clavering. Ten bob to tuppence it contains the revered relation of our darling Tommy!"

Gore raised his hand.

"Now, this thing has got to be done in style!" he exclaimed. "Merry is not here to receive his devoted nurse, and we must take his place and give her a good reception. Keep your eyes on me, and do as I do."

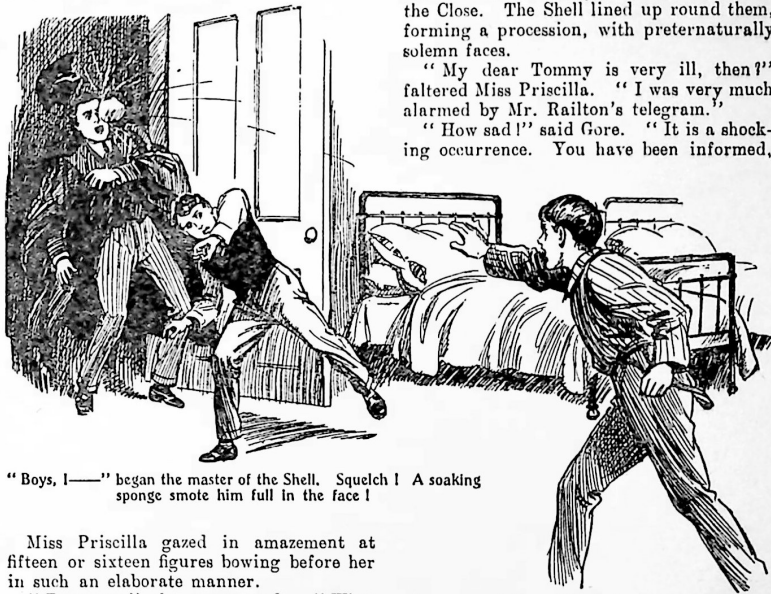
"Right-ho!" was the general reply.

The station hack from High Clavering drove up to the school gates. A kind old lady's face looked out of the window. It was so kind and so anxious that some of the boys relented. But it had no effect upon Gore.

Gore signed to the driver to stop, which he had to do, as the boys were blocking up the gateway. Then Gore stepped forward and opened the door of the hack.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett looked out.

Gore placed his left hand on his heart, and raised his cap with his right, at the same time bowing till his nose nearly touched his knees. And the boys of the Shell followed his lead as if moved by clock-work.



"Boys, I—" began the master of the Shell. Squelch! A soaking sponge smote him full in the face!

Miss Priscilla gazed in amazement at fifteen or sixteen figures bowing before her in such an elaborate manner.

"Dear me," she murmured. "What exceedingly polite boys! What is your name, my little man? Are you a friend of my dear Tommy?"

The question brought a giggle from the Shell, and Gore turned red.

He was the biggest and oldest fellow in the Shell. To be called "my little man" was about the deadliest insult possible.

He rose erect with a sort of jerk.

Miss Priscilla's kind face beamed on him

from the hack. Gore recovered himself in a moment.

"Madam," he said politely, "we are all the friends of dear Tommy, and are most anxious about his health. May I have the distinguished honour of assisting you from this vehicle and leading you to our dearest chum?"

Miss Priscilla accepted Gore's assistance.

Then Gore gave her his arm, and with a wink to the other boys marched her across the Close. The Shell lined up round them, forming a procession, with preternaturally solemn faces.

"My dear Tommy is very ill, then?" faltered Miss Priscilla. "I was very much alarmed by Mr. Railton's telegram."

"How sad!" said Gore. "It is a shocking occurrence. You have been informed,

of course, of the gallant deed perpetrated—I mean performed by our darling Thomas?"

"Mr. Railton wrote me an account of it, which I received this morning. Then I had the telegram. I came at once. How is Tommy now? Where is he? Has he been asking for me?"

"He has been asking for no one else," said Gore solemnly. "His first words when he woke up this morning were: 'Oh,

where is my dear old nurse?' You heard him, Jimson?"

"I did," said Jimson, with positively owl-like gravity. "'Where is my dear old nurse?' were his very words. Then he began to cry."

"My darling Tommy!"

"It was really due to his carelessness," said Gore. "Before jumping into the river he ought to have put on his chest-protector, and taken a good dose of cod-liver oil. He did neither. He has been getting simply reckless about his health."

"He is so delicate," murmured Miss Priscilla.

It was very hard for the Shell to retain their gravity during Gore's explanation. Some of them dropped behind to grin.

"I hope you have brought plenty of cod-liver oil with you, Miss Fawcett," said Gore anxiously. "Tommy has been asking for it. 'If I only had a good, steady drink of cod-liver oil' is what he has said a dozen times this morning."

"The dear, dear boy," said Miss Priscilla. "And it used to be so hard to persuade him to take it at Laurel Villa."

"Indeed?" said Gore, with an air of surprise. "You astonish me, Miss Fawcett. He simply thirsts for it now. I hope you've brought plenty."

"Yes, I have a large bottle in my bag," said the innocent old lady, "and I will send for some more from London. I have also brought a large bottle of Dr. Bones' Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers."

"Ah, that's what he wants!" exclaimed Gore enthusiastically. "Dr. Jones' Marvellous Muck for Seedy Duffers—"

"Dr. Bones' Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers," corrected Miss Priscilla.

"Ah, yes, I had it wrong! Marvellous Humbug for Silly—Hallo, here's Tommy!"

Tom Merry was standing in the doorway, watching the advance of Miss Priscilla and her escort in silent wrath and indignation.

Miss Priscilla uttered a cry as soon as she saw him, and flew to embrace him. Tom tried to dodge, but it was no use. He was folded in a loving embrace and hugged. The Shell stood round admiringly. So did

a number of lads of other Forms. There was quite a crowd on the steps of the house and in the hall. Tom wriggled.

"Leggo!" he exclaimed. "Chuck it!"

Miss Priscilla released him. She tore open the bag. Out came a bottle of cod-liver oil, and the stopper was drawn in a moment.

"Tommy, take a little quickly, and——"

"Drink, puppy—drink!" howled Gore.

Tom stared at Miss Priscilla in amazement.

"I won't!" he yelled. "I'm not ill! I'm all right! And I wouldn't take that beastly stuff, anyway. Chuck it away!"

Miss Priscilla looked amazed. This certainly did not agree with what Gore had told her. She looked round at Gore, and he tapped his forehead.

"Delirious," he murmured. "He was light-headed all last night, and saying all sorts of things. He's raving."

"You—you howling fibber!" shouted Tom. "If you tell such lies about me I'll punch your beastly head!"

Miss Priscilla looked horrified.

At Laurel Villa, at dear old Huckleberry Heath, her darling Tommy had never dreamed of threatening to punch anybody's beastly head. The only explanation was that he was delirious. Certainly at that moment he looked extremely excited.

"My darling Tommy! Calm yourself!"

"Pray be calm!" cried Gore.

"Dearest Tommy, don't be angry with your dear friends, who are so anxious about you. Remember how I sat up with you, and held your hand, and whispered sweet words of comfort when you——"

Gore was interrupted.

Tom went for him; he had had enough of it. Gore received a thump on the nose that sent him against the wall.

"Hold him!" yelled Gore. "He's delirious! He's mad! Collar him!"

Five or six of the Shell, entering into the joke, collared Tom promptly. Gore fixed a grip on the back of his collar. Tom Merry struggled in vain. The bottle of cod-liver oil fell from Miss Priscilla's hand and smashed on the tiled floor.

"Oh, oh, oh!" wailed Miss Priscilla.

"My darling boy!
My sweetest Tommy!
Put him to bed at
once, my dear lads,
and send for a doctor.
Oh——"

"What is the
matter here?"

It was Mr. Railton's
voice. The headmaster
of Clavering came on
the scene with a
frowning brow. He
closed his lips a little
at the sight of Miss
Priscilla.

"My dear Miss
Fawcett, I am glad to
see you. Pray excuse
this disgraceful scene
in your presence.
I——"

"Dear Mr. Rail-
ton, help these kind
boys to put Tommy to
bed, I beg of you!"
cried Miss Priscilla,
wringing her hands.
"He is delirious, and
——"

"Delirious! Im-
possible!"

"I assure you it is
the case. He refused
to take his cod-liver
oil, and he attacked one of his dearest chums
in a savage manner. Dear Tommy was
always the gentlest boy! Oh, get him to bed
and send for a doctor!"

"We'll soon have him in bed," said Gore
cheerily. "It's all right, Mr. Railton.
We can manage him. He's awfully savage,
though."

"I—I—I——" gasped Tom Merry.

He could get out no more, because Gore
was twisting his collar from behind and
choking him. Gore did not intend to let
him do any explaining.

"This is mere nonsense!" exclaimed the
Head. "I—— Oh, goodness gracious!"

The latter exclamation was caused by Miss
Priscilla falling into his arms.



As Miss Priscilla saw Tom, she flew forward and embraced him lovingly.
"Leggo!" exclaimed Tom. "Chuck it!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Head, in great
distress. "This is most annoying! Merry
—Gore—I—yes, dear madam, I beg of you
to calm yourself. Merry is quite well—very
well indeed. You are quite right. I beg
of you— Dear me! Goodness
gracious!"

The Head hardly knew what he was
saying.

Miss Priscilla was developing hysterics of
an alarming character, and Mr. Railton
had not the faintest idea of what he ought
to do.

"Pray calm yourself, madam!" he
entreated. "I beg of you—think of your
ward. He—he needs your care. He needs
your care, my dear Miss Fawcett."

This was a brilliant inspiration. It worked like a charm. Nothing but anxiety for her darling Tommy could have brought Miss Priscilla out of hysterics at that moment.

She made a great effort to recover herself.

"Is he put to bed?" she murmured faintly. "Is the doctor sent for?"

"Ye-es!" gasped the distracted Mr. Railton. "Gore, Jimson, put Merry to bed immediately. Merry, I command you to go to bed quietly. French, go for the doctor—run all the way. Miss Fawcett, pray calm yourself. Oh, dear, dear me!"

Tom was still struggling. He was too furious to heed even the headmaster's order. But the boys of the Shell, backed up by Mr. Railton's authority in this way, soon had him up the stairs and in the dormitory.

"You beast!" yelled Tom. "I—I—I—"

"Oh, you shut up!" grinned Gore, twisting his collar. "You're a giddy invalid in this act. How can you cause your loving nurse such anxiety? Drag his togs off, chaps, and get the darling to bed."

"I won't go to bed. I w-w-won't——"

"Yes, you will."

Tom was plumped on the bed, and they began to strip him. Manners and Monty Lowther, who had learned what was going forward, came bursting into the dormitory. They came to Tom's aid with a rush, but the odds were against them. They were hurled back, and Tom, half-clad, was shoved into bed and covered up. Then the boys sat on his bedclothes all round him, to keep him from throwing them off.

"Done it!" gasped Gore. "Keep quiet, you bouncer! Don't you know you're an invalid? Oh, crumbs, this is the howlingest jape I've ever heard of!"

"Dear, dear Tommy!"

It was Miss Priscilla's voice. She came into the dormitory, leaning weakly on the arm of Mr. Railton. If Mr. Railton's face was an index to his feelings, they must have been very mixed.

"Boys, you can go," he said sharply. "Merry, lie still. I command you to do so. Miss Fawcett is anxious about you,

and you must remain in bed till the doctor has seen you."

"I'm all right!" howled Tom. "It's only their rotting, sir!"

"See how excited he is, sir," said Gore. "Haden't we better remain in case he gets violent again, sir? He might go for you, sir—— Ow, ow ow!"

Mr. Railton's finger and thumb closed tightly on Gore's ear, and he was twisted away from the bed towards the door.

"You may go," said Mr. Railton quietly.

The boys left. Downstairs they shouted themselves hoarse with laughter. Manners and Monty were indignant, but they could not help laughing, too.

Miss Priscilla sat by Tom's bedside, and her anxious expression did more than Mr. Railton's authority to calm the injured Tommy.

"Pray calm yourself, dear Tom! You know me, don't you?"

"Of course I do," growled Tom. "I'm not ill. It's all a joke."

"My dear, dear boy! Of course, you don't know how ill you are. Try to go to sleep," said Miss Priscilla soothingly.

"How can I go to sleep in the daytime? I tell you I'm not ill. It's all a joke of Gore's. I'm all right. Can't you see I'm all right?"

"Yes, yes, but be calm."

Mr. Railton frowned.

"My dear Miss Fawcett," he said, "I think Merry is speaking the truth. He has a slight cold, and nothing more. There was really no necessity for you to come here to see him. If I had known that my letter would have had such a result, I should certainly not have written it. I assured you when I wrote that Merry had suffered no injury whatever."

"Yes, but your telegram——"

"My what?"

"Your telegram, which I received this morning soon after your letter arrived——"

"You must be dreaming, madam. I sent no telegram."

"Sir, I do not understand you! Perhaps you are attempting to deceive me in order to reassure me? It is useless."

"I tell you that I sent you no telegram."
"And I tell you, Mr. Railton, that I received one, telling me to come at once."

"There must be some—some mistake," said the bewildered Head. "I certainly did not send it."

"Then it was sent by someone here who felt the anxiety which you, as headmaster, ought to have felt," said Miss Priscilla, with unusual asperity.

"It must be some—some joke."

"I should think the health of my dear Tommy too serious a subject for joking," said Miss Priscilla, with crushing dignity. "Ah, thank goodness, here is the doctor!"

Gore had just shown the doctor to the dormitory. The medico came to the bedside. He looked inquiringly at Mr. Railton as they shook hands.

"I wish you to see this boy," said Mr. Railton with an effort. "Miss Fawcett is alarmed—needlessly, I believe—about his health."

"I'm all right!" growled Tom.

The doctor looked at him with a smile.

"Ah, this is the lad who rescued the miller's little girl yesterday," he said. "I saw him then. A brave lad—a very brave lad. I sincerely hope there is nothing wrong. But we shall soon see!"

The examination of poor Tom was brief, but it might have been an operation of the most dangerous kind by the way Miss Priscilla watched and waited.

She awaited the doctor's verdict with breathless anxiety.

She clasped her hands nervously as he turned to her again.

"Oh, doctor, doctor, tell me what is the matter!"

"Certainly."

"What is it? What is it?"

"Nothing!"

"What—which—how——"

"Nothing at all but a slight cold in the head," said the doctor blandly. "I am glad to tell you, madam, that your anxiety is groundless."

"He is so delicate——"

"On the contrary, he is one of the strongest and heartiest lads I have ever examined," was the reply. "I don't see how anybody could ever have thought him delicate."

Miss Priscilla developed hysterics of an alarming character, and Mr. Railton had not the faintest idea of what he ought to do.



Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

"You see, my dear madam——" he began.

But Miss Priscilla was not listening.

"You do not think the dear child ought to get up yet?" she said to the doctor, almost imploringly.

The man of medicine hesitated.

"Well, it won't do him any harm to stay in bed and nurse his cold," he admitted. "I'll send him down some simple medicine."

"Oh, thank you, doctor, but I have the best medicine!"

"Oh, have you, madam?" said the physician huffily. "If you know my business better than I do, I wonder you took the trouble to send for me!"

"Pray excuse me, but doubtless you have heard of Dr. Bones' Marvellous Mixture for Sorrowful Sufferers, and——"

"Yes, I've heard of it. Humbug—sheer humbug, madam! Simply water, with a little colouring added. The best that can be said of it is that it is harmless, or nearly so!"

Miss Priscilla was the most patient and gentle of old ladies, but she couldn't stand that. She had pinned her faith to the Marvellous Mixture for some thirty years or more, and she wasn't inclined to have her idol shattered by a mere country practitioner.

"Thank you," she said icily. "We need not discuss that."

"Certainly not," said the doctor blandly. "Keep the boy in bed till tomorrow morning if you like, and throw the Marvellous Mixture out of the window, and all will be well."

And he marched off, chuckling to himself.

Miss Fawcett looked gloomy and anxious.

"Are you sure that man is to be relied upon, Mr. Railton?" she asked.

"Absolutely, madam. He is my own physician."

"But he shows astonishing ignorance for a medical man. He cannot see that dear Tommy is a delicate child!"

"My dear madam——"

"I hope you do not intend to repeat his absurd assertions, Mr. Railton?"

"N-no," said Mr. Railton feebly.

"There is, of course, no objection to my remaining here to look after Tommy until he is well?" said Miss Fawcett.

"N-n-n-no," mumbled the Head. "I—I shall be—be delighted!"

"Thank you, Mr. Railton. Tommy, my dear, you would like me to stay, wouldn't you?"

Poor Tom could do nothing but nod assent. He wouldn't have hurt the dear

old soul's feelings for worlds. But he registered a mental vow to make Gore sorry for the part he had taken in the matter. For he guessed who had sent the telegram. Gore's early morning spin to the village was explained now.

"The dear boy!" murmured Miss Priscilla. "I will read to you, Tommy, and compose you to sleep. I have a little book in my bag, called 'Naughty Georgie: the Story of a Boy who was Tossed by a Mad Bull when Stealing Apples in an Orchard.' I am sure it will compose you nicely to sleep!"

"Yes, I am sure it would," groaned poor Tom.

"And perhaps Mr. Railton would let that good, kind lad sit with you as well?" said Miss Priscilla.

"What, old Manners?" said Tom, a little more brightly.

"I do not know his name. The dear lad who sat up with you and held your hand during the night."

Tom gritted his teeth, and Mr. Railton, coughing hard to keep back a laugh, walked out of the dormitory. Miss Priscilla went on innocently:

"Would you like to see him, Tommy? He is outside, I perceive, and he appears to be still anxious about you."

As soon as Mr. Railton was gone, Gore peered into the dormitory. He was wondering whether it would be possible to squeeze any more fun out of the joke.

"Yes," said Tom, with a light of vengeance in his eyes, "I should awfully like Gore to come in for a minute, nurse!"

He took a firm grip on his pillow.

Miss Fawcett beckoned to Gore.

"Please do come in, my dear little man. Tommy would like to speak to you."

Gore came in, grinning blandly.

Whiz went the pillow, so suddenly and swiftly that Gore could not guard against it. It caught him on the chin and curled round his head and swept him fairly off his feet. He went down with a crash that made every bone in his body ache.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom. "Bowled out first ball of the over! Isn't it funny, Gore?"

Gore sat up, looking exceedingly dazed and stupid.

"Tommy!" shrieked Miss Priscilla.

"Dear me! It's the delirium again!"

"Yes, I may as well have the game as the name," said Tom.

And as Gore rose, scowling, he sent the bolster after the pillow, and Gore reeled and crashed into a washstand. There was a terrific smash of china.

Gore gave a wild howl and went for Tom, but Miss Priscilla jumped in the way.

"Please go," she said softly. "Your presence excites him, and——"

"I'll excite the beast!" howled Gore.

"I'll—I'll——"

"Please go."

And Gore thought he had better, for Tom had grabbed up one of his boots and was taking aim with it. Gore dodged away, and the boot crashed on the door as he eluded it behind him.

"Oh, pray, pray be calm!" cried Miss Priscilla.

"That's all right," said Tom, somewhat relieved in his mind now. "I'll be as calm as you like, and you can read me that giddy rot about the bull that was tossed by a mad apple—I mean the apple that was tossed by a mad boy—— Hang it, you know what I mean!"

Miss Priscilla produced that valuable piece of literature and began to read, and the effect was all that she could have desired, for ere she had finished the first chapter of the adventures of Naughty Georgie, Tom was asleep as sound as a top.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

Tom Merry's Ordeal!

MISS PRISCILLA stayed until the evening, and Tom did not get up all the rest of that day. When he wanted to do so, the old lady was alarmed, and broached the subject of staying over the morrow to continue to look after him. That prospect was so terrifying that Tom gave in at once and remained in bed.

It was what he afterwards described as a "rotten" time. He wasn't particularly sorry to miss the afternoon classes, but when school was over, and in the golden

spring evening he heard the shouts of the boys from the playing-fields, he felt that he could have enjoyed kicking somebody.

The Shell were at cricket practice, and Tom had to lie there and listen to the dreary adventures of Naughty Georgie; how that naughty boy was tossed by a mad bull while stealing apples, and turned over a new leaf in consequence, and became an insufferable prig. At least, that was how Tom put it when he told Manners, though the author used quite other words.

But everything comes to an end at last, and so Tom's trial ended finally when the boys of the Shell came up to bed.

Miss Priscilla took an affectionate leave of him—implored him to wire to her at once if he took a turn for the worse—and then at last departed. She was going home by a late train, and the Head could not do less than drive her to the station.

But Mr. Railton would willingly have driven her a hundred miles to get her away from Clavering. Her concern for Tommy was very creditable to her heart, but it was liable to pall upon disinterested outsiders.

Tom, of course, had to endure a storm of chaff.

It was not till the Shell had gone to sleep that he was left in peace, and as he had been in bed most of the afternoon, it was a long time before he could fall asleep himself.

However, he woke with the others in the morning, his cold almost gone, and was the first to jump out of bed. Gore yawned and sat up.

"How do you feel, Spooney?" he asked. "I hope your chest is all right. Have you taken your giddy Mixture for Howling Duffers?"

Tom looked at him with a flash in his eyes.

"Was it you sent that telegram to Miss Fawcett?" he asked.

"What telegram?" asked Gore innocently.

"She had a telegram after she received the Head's letter. It was that, and not Mr. Railton's letter, that brought her to Clavering."

"Was it? I suppose Mr. Railton sent it."

"I heard him say that he did not."

"Perhaps it got sent to her by mistake."

"And perhaps a rotten cad sent it to her," said Tom scornfully. "A miserable rotter who didn't care if he caused her anxiety so long as he had his fun!"

Gore flushed and jumped out of bed.

"Are you calling me a cad, Merry?"

"I say you're a cad if you sent that telegram," said Tom unflinchingly. "I can take a joke as well as anyone, and I don't mind being chipped. I think I've stood that pretty well, and goodness knows I've had enough of it to stand."

"He's about right there," said Jimson.

"Spooney's right. He's stood it like a little man!"

"But this is past a joke," said Tom.

"So long as you go for me, I don't care; but your telegram made Miss Fawcett anxious, and she's an old lady, and only a cad would play a trick on an old lady!"

"And you believe I sent that telegram?" asked Gore, coming towards Tom with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "What proof have you got?"

"Well, I know the Head didn't send it, and it must have been sent by somebody for a joke. Nobody really thought I was ill. It was just the trick a fellow like you would play, and you were gone to High Clavering about the time it would be sent. No other fellow in the Form was there."

"It's clear enough," said Monty Lowther. "You're bowled out, Gore, and you may as well own up and tell the truth."

"Suppose I did it," said Gore defiantly. "It was a joke. But if Merry intends to give me away to Mr. Railton——"

"You know I don't intend to do anything of the kind," said Tom quietly. "I don't think any chap here can say I've ever been a tell-tale."

"Gore knows you won't tell," said Manners. "That's only his rot. Why don't you own up, Gore? Why can't you say out plain you did it, and not beat about the bush?"

"Well, I don't care," said Gore. "I did it! There! It was a joke, and a jolly

good joke, too. Now Merry can make as much as he likes of it. What have you got to say, Merry?"

"Only what I said before," said Tom.

"And what's that, my dear, delicate Tommy?"

"That you're a howling cad, and ought to have a hiding."

"Perhaps you'll give me one?" sneered Gore.

"Yes, perhaps I will," said Tom. "I'm going to have a try, anyhow. You've been trying to bully me ever since I came to Clavering, and now you've done this. I'm going to give you a hiding, or you're going to give me one, Gore."

The bully of the Shell burst into a laugh.

"Hold him back, chaps!" he exclaimed.

"Mammy's darling is going to whack me!"

Tom did not flinch under the laugh that went up.

He was in serious earnest, and he meant every word that he said.

"Yes, that's what I'm going to do," he said. "You have been asking for it for a long time, Gore, and if I can give it you, you're going to get it at last!"

"I feel awfully nervous," said Gore. "I never guessed that mammy's baby boy would blossom forth as a giddy warrior, or I'd have minded my P's and Q's very carefully."

"You can take that for a start," said Tom, flicking his open hand across Gore's cheek. "Now you can come on as soon as you like!"

Gore turned scarlet with rage.

"My hat! I'll break you into little bits for that!" he exclaimed.

And he went for Tom like a bull.

But Manners and Monty Lowther jumped in the way and held the combatants back.

"Let me go!" howled Gore, wriggling in Monty's grip.

"Hold on, infants," said Manners coolly. "You can't fight now. If we ain't down in five minutes there'll be a master on our track, and this affair can't be settled in five minutes. Just hold in your hosses, kids, and wait till the proper time!"

"Oh, all right," said Gore. "I'll



Miss Priscilla clasped her hands nervously as the doctor turned to her. "Oh, doctor, tell me what is the matter!"

smash him up to-night, if you like. I don't care when I do it!"

"I suggest Saturday afternoon," said Monty. "Then you'll be able to get away and have it out without danger of interruption."

"I'm agreeable," said Tom.

"All right," growled Gore. "Tomorrow afternoon, then. And I'll make Spooney wish he had never been born. You mark my words!"

The boys finished dressing and went down. The coming encounter between Tom Merry and Gore was a topic of great interest that morning. Gore was the biggest fellow in the Form, and, as a matter of fact, was old enough to be well up in the Fifth long ago. There was no one in the Shell who could tackle him, and even Manners, who was a boxer, fought shy of Gore. That Tom would be hopelessly and absolutely licked few doubted for a moment. The only question of interest was what kind of fight he would put up, and how long he would stand up against Gore before he was knocked out.

When the Shell were at work, Mr. Railton

came into the class-room at the end of a lesson and addressed them. He explained how the telegram had been sent to Miss Fawcett, and asked the boys if they knew anything about it.

The Shell were silent. Gore shifted rather uncomfortably in his seat, and Tom Merry kept his eyes fixed upon the desk before him.

"This is a serious matter," said Mr. Railton. "The telegram was practically sent in my name, and it caused Miss Fawcett a great amount of needless anxiety, and put her to the trouble of taking a long and unnecessary journey. I can pardon a joke among my boys, but this is far beyond the bounds of a joke. I must, therefore, insist upon knowing the name of the culprit. I cannot promise to pardon him, but if he takes the manly course of confessing frankly, I can say that his punishment will be lighter than it would be otherwise."

A long silence followed the Head's remarks.

The boys looked at each other, but no one was inclined to speak.

Mr. Railton waited a full minute for the reply that did not come, and then his brow darkened.

From Phipps, the Head worked his way through the Form to the top boy.

The answer was the same in every case.

"No, sir!"

Gore gave the reply without flinching. He felt a slight inward discomfort at telling a barefaced untruth, but it was not sufficient to make him own up.

The Head's brow was darker than ever when he finished. He felt certain that one of the boys had told him a falsehood, though he could not guess which.

"The matter does not end here," he said.

"This compels me to pursue the matter in a way I wished to avoid. Merry!"

"Yes, sir!"

"You are doubtless aware of the identity of the boy who sent the telegram. As the joke, such as it was, was against you, you are probably aware of the joker's name."

Tom flushed a little and was silent.

He would as soon have bitten out his tongue as told a deliberate lie, but he felt that he could not give Gore away.

The Head's quick eye at once read his flush aright.

"You know whom it was, Merry?" he repeated.

"Am I bound to answer that question, sir?"

"Certainly you are. I command you to answer me at once!"

"Yes, sir. I know whom it was," said Tom slowly.

Gore clenched his teeth.

"Oh, you rotten sneak!" he muttered. "See if I don't pay you for this!"

"Who was it, Merry?" asked Mr. Railton.

"I don't think I can tell you, sir."

"What! You have just told me that you know!"

"Yes, sir. But it wouldn't be cricket to give him away, would it?"

The whole Shell held their breath. They were accustomed to surprises from Tom Merry, but they had never expected to see him hold an argument with the headmaster.

The red crept into Mr. Railton's cheeks, but he remained quite calm.

"Merry, it is not for you to think for yourself when your headmaster gives you an order. I have put the question to you before the whole class in order that the imputation of tale-bearing cannot be made. Your Form-fellows will know that you speak by my direct order, which you have no choice but to obey."

Tom Merry was still silent.

"Merry! You can either give me the name of the boy in question, or take yourself the punishment that would otherwise fall upon him!" exclaimed Mr. Railton very angrily.

Tom brightened up wonderfully.

"All right, sir," he exclaimed. "I'll take the punishment, if you don't mind."

"The punishment," said Mr. Railton grimly, "will be a severe flogging, which I can assure you will not be pleasant when you come to endure it."

"I don't mind, sir."

"Very well," said Mr. Railton. "You will come to my study after morning lessons, Merry."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Railton left the room. The morning's work went on, and many a sympathetic glance was cast towards Tom by his Form-fellows, and many a condemnatory one towards Gore.

Gore himself was feeling and looking very uneasy.

He felt that he had played a very unmanly part in sitting silent while the burden of his fault fell upon another who had already suffered by it.

But he had not the pluck to own up and "take his gruel" like a man.

He kept his eyes down while the lesson lasted, meeting none of the expressive glances thrown towards him. But when the class was dismissed, he could not help learning the opinion of the Shell upon his conduct.

"Of all the rotten cads," said Monty Lowther, "I think Gore is about the rottenest!"

"The very rottenest," said Manners. "He ought to be scragged!"

"He wants a Form licking," said Jimson.

"The beast!"

"The sneak!"

"The rotter!"

In the midst of all these compliments Gore took himself off, followed by a chorus of groans and hisses.

Tom, on the other hand, came in for something like an ovation. His cool "cheek"—though he had not meant it for that—in refusing to answer the headmaster's question had taken the Shell's breath away. But they couldn't help admiring his nerve and pluck, and such of them as knew what a flogging by the Head was like gave him great sympathy.

"You're really going to take the flogging then, Tom?" asked Manners as Tom Merry turned to make his way to the headmaster's study.

"Rather! There's no getting out of it, is there?"

"It would serve Gore right to give him away. He deserves it, the beast!"

"Oh, I can stand the licking!" said Tom, more cheerfully than he felt.

"You don't know what it's like," said Jimson. "I've been there, Merry, and I know. Look here, I'd advise you to tell the Head the truth and get out of it!"

Tom smiled and shook his head.

"He can lay it on," said French, with a reminiscent wriggle. "He knows how to hit scientifically, and he makes you fairly squirm!"

"Well, I'm off," said Tom, who fancied the flogging the less the more he heard it talked about. "Better get it over!"

And he walked away to Mr. Railton's door and tapped.

"Come in!" said the deep voice of the Head of Clavering, and Tom entered.

Mr. Railton fixed a scrutinising glance upon him.

"Well, Merry," he said, not unkindly, "have you come to tell me the name of the culprit?"

"No, sir," said Tom respectfully, but very firmly.

The headmaster's brow contracted slightly.

"Very well, I will ring for Giles."

Giles, the school janitor, came to the ring. It was his business to "hoist" the un-



Tom hurled the bolster after the pillow, and Gore reeled and crashed into a washstand as he was hit.

fortunate youngsters condemned to a flogging, and, to judge by his expression at such times, he found it a pleasing task. He grinned as he came into the study. He knew what he was wanted for.

We will draw a veil over the next few minutes.

They were minutes of anguish to Tom Merry, but he stood it all with clenched teeth, and did not allow a single cry to pass his lips.

And probably Mr. Railton, who liked pluck more than anything else, let him off a good deal more lightly than he would have let off the culprit had he been revealed.

But the flogging, which was a totally new experience to Tom Merry, was the most painful one of his life so far, and he went from the headmaster's study with a white face, twisting about in a most uncomfortable manner.

His comrades of the Shell met him with sympathy.

They could see that he had been "through it." Some of them had waited outside the study to hear the expected yells of Spooney. They had heard the rhythmic swish of the instrument of torture, but the expected yells had not come. A boy who could go through a flogging without a cry was entitled to respect in the opinion of the young gentlemen of the middle school. They patted Tom on the back and thumped him on the shoulder in the keenest admiration.

"Well, you are a real plucky 'un," said Jimson. "As for that beast Gore, he ain't fit to be in the school. I vote we give him a Form licking."

"Or frog's-march him round the Close," said French.

"Make him run the gauntlet," exclaimed Monty. "A double row of chaps with knotted towels or slippers, and——"

"Good wheeze! That's the idea!"

"I say," exclaimed Tom, "let Gore alone. He's got to fight me to-morrow afternoon, and if I can give him a licking he's going to have one."

"But you can't!"

"We'll see about that," said Tom; "anyway, let him alone now. You needn't go for him on my account. I don't suppose he feels very comfy about it, anyway."

"Well, come to think of it, I don't suppose he does," said Monty Lowther thoughtfully. "Let the rotter alone, chaps. As for his licking Tom so easily to-morrow, I don't believe it. Merry has been our pupil for some time—hasn't he, Manners?—and I fancy at least he's got a sporting chance."

"That's so," said Manners, with a nod.

"Far as I'm concerned, I shouldn't be surprised to see Merry knock Gore out to-morrow afternoon."

"I'll do my best," said Tom quietly.

"I'll give you another boxing lesson to-night," said Manners, taking Tom's arm as the latter walked away, with a rather uncertain wriggle in his gait. "I don't suppose you feel up to one just at this minute, do you, Merry?"

Tom made rather a wry face.

"N-no, not exactly, Manners, old chap. But to-night I shall be fit enough."

"Good! I'll put you through it once more, and if you don't lick Gore to-morrow it won't be my fault," declared Manners.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

A Fight to a Finish!

IN the morning, when Tom Merry rose, he still felt the smart of the flogging, but he was very fit.

During the morning school a good many impositions fell to the lot of boys who discussed the coming fight instead of attending to their lessons.

When at last the welcome hour of dismissal came, the Shell crowded out of the school, greatly relieved, and after dinner they betook themselves to the chosen spot.

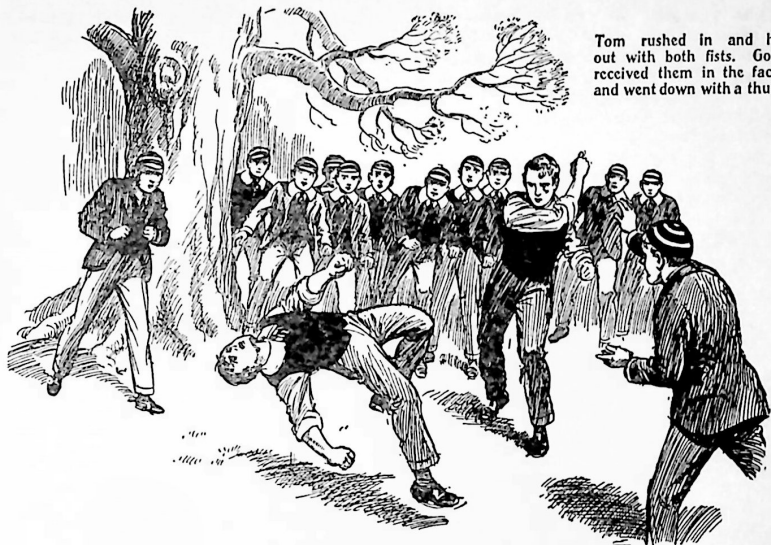
This was at some distance from the school, a secluded space behind the boathouse, shaded by ancient elms that had been the abode of innumerable rooks for generations.

Under the elms, in the golden afternoon, a crowd of boys of all the Lower Forms at Clavering gathered. Not only the Shell, but Upper and Lower Fifth, and half the Fourth Form came to see how Spooney would show up in the fight.

Their glances were approving as Tom Merry came on the scene with Monty Lowther and Manners. Whether a licking awaited Tom or not, he certainly didn't seem the least bit scared. His face was calm and cheerful as ever.

Gore came down to the spot with a swagger. Jimson had offered to act as his second, and Jimson bore a huge sponge and a bottle to fill with water in the stream. Monty Lowther was to act for Tom.

Tom rushed in and hit out with both fists. Gore received them in the face, and went down with a thud.



Devigne, of the Upper Fifth, volunteered to keep the time and was accepted. Devigne did not like Tom Merry. He was a bit of a bully himself, and was inclined to favour Gore. He had really come there to see Tom Merry licked.

The two boys stripped and faced each other. Gore was so much the bigger of the two that most of the spectators, comparing them, dismissed from their minds the belief that Tom had even a sporting chance.

"Now, then," said Devigne, looking at his watch, "shake hands and buckle to! Time!"

The adversaries shook hands and "buckled to." Gore commenced with a confident swagger, which seemed justified by his weight and size. But there was a surprise in store for him and for the lookers-on. He drove Tom Merry twice round the ring, and then his fist came home on Tom's nose with a whack that brought the water to the recipient's eyes.

But Tom countered swiftly, and before

Gore could recover his guard, Tom's knuckles had come in contact with his mouth, and Gore gave a gasp. He rushed on furiously, and then came Tom's chance. Up came his left in a rapid upper-cut. Gore wasn't looking out for it in the least. Tom's fist caught him fairly on the point of the chin, and he staggered back and fell heavily on the grass.

"'Ray, 'ray, 'ray!'" shouted Manners jubilantly. "That's a sample of the Merry upper-cut, kids! He's my giddy pupil! What price Gore now?"

Jimson helped Gore to his feet. He sponged his heated face, and whispered words of counsel.

"You'll have to look out, Gore. He ain't such a spooney, after all. If you fancy you're going to carry it off with a high hand you're mistaken, old chap."

"Rats!" snapped Gore. "That was a fluke."

"Hum!" said Jimson.

"Do you think it wasn't?" snarled his principal angrily.

"Time!" called out Devigne.

Gore stepped up to the mark. Tom came up smiling, as cool as a cucumber. The second round commenced, and Gore, though he had snarled at his second for his counsel, acted upon it. He was a good deal more careful, and used more science. Tom received a couple of heavy blows in the face, but he returned them with three harder ones, and at the end of the round it could not be said that Gore had recovered his lost ground.

The opinion of the onlookers was veering round now. The fact that Spooney had stood up to Gore for a couple of rounds and had decidedly not had the worst of it showed that he was, in fact, a "dark horse," and that he possessed a quality hitherto undreamt of.

The fight now became more keenly interesting than ever. The possibility of Gore being licked was freely discussed, but without an expectant satisfaction. The bully of the Shell was not popular. The third round was more to Gore's advantage, and it finished with Tom on his back on the grass. Monty Lowther looked rather anxious as he helped him up.

"I'm all right," said Tom, reading his expression. "I let him get one in straight from the shoulder then, and he can hit! It won't happen again."

And Tom played very carefully in the fourth round.

Both the combatants received severe punishment, but neither gained a decided advantage until the end of the round. Then Tom's swift upper-cut came into play, and Gore "got it" on the chin a second time. He went down as if he had been shot, every tooth in his head jarred by the impact.

Monty and Manners exchanged glances of satisfaction. Tom was coming out strong now, with a vengeance. Gore was looking extremely groggy as he came up for the fifth round.

"Better chuck it, Gore," said Devigne curtly. "You can't stick it out."

"I'm going on," said Gore obstinately.

"All right. Time!"

The last round—for such it proved—commenced. Tom was feeling the effects of the hard tussle, though not so severely as Gore. He felt that he had the fight in his hands now if he played his cards carefully. Taking care to keep out of reach of Gore's desperate drives, he kept his adversary on the move, and suddenly, deceiving him with a feint, rushed in and hit out with both fists.

Gore received them both in the face, and went down with a thud. He staggered up again, and reeled into Jimson's arms.

"I—I'm done!" he gasped.

Gore was gasping for breath. He was utterly and hopelessly licked, and he knew it. Tom's face, however, did not express anything like exultation over a fallen foe. He held out his hand.

"Shake!" he exclaimed. "We've had it out, fair and square, Gore, and it's over and done with. No need to bear malice."

Gore was not proof against that appeal. He took Tom's hand.

"You're a decent sort," he said. "I've felt rotten about not owning up to that telegram. I wish I had now, and taken the licking. It serves me right what I've got, and I don't mind saying so. So that's off my chest!"

"Well, that's decent to say so," said Manners. "You'd both better wash off some of the marks of the fray now."

The advice was too good to be neglected. Tom and Gore washed off as much as they could of the signs of combat, and made themselves as presentable as possible to return to the school. Mr. Railton met the boys in the Close, and he looked from Tom to Gore, and from Gore back to Tom, very sharply. Perhaps he guessed the facts; at all events, he turned away without making a remark, and the delinquents breathed more freely.

"I suppose you don't feel up to any cricket practice, Tom?" Manners remarked.

"Don't I?" said Tom promptly. "I can bat with one eye shut, and my nose has stopped bleeding. Come on!"

And they were soon at work at the nets.

THE END