

THE

MASTER'S SECRET

or

HOW TOM MERRY CAME TO ST. JIM'S

A Splendid Complete Tale of School Life

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With Illustrations by

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THE FIRST CHAPTER

Startling News

"TOM MERRY again!"

Herr Schneider snapped his teeth over the words. The German master at Clavering School had just come out of his study with a cane in his hand, and a dark frown upon his face, and he stood for a moment in the passage, listening.

There certainly was a terrific din proceeding from the corridor above, where the studies of the young gentlemen of the Middle School were situated. A peculiar bumping and crashing noise was followed by the stamping of feet and the shouting of voices, and loudest of all was the voice of Tom Merry.

"Bravo, old Manners! That's a wicket to you!"

"Now let's see what you can do, Tom!"

"Right-ho! Chuck me the ball!"

"Here it is!"

"Ass! I didn't say chuck it at me. Why couldn't you give me a catch? Never mind, here goes. Stand clear, you chaps!"

Herr Schneider's hair stood on end with wrath. He took a firm grip on the cane, and began to ascend the stairs three at a time. It

was a rainy day out of doors, but the chums of the Shell were not to be done out of their cricket practice, and they were practising bowling in the upper corridor.

It was Tom Merry's way to make the best of everything, and that was what he was doing now; but the German master, whose study was underneath, was not likely to be pleased by indoor cricket practice just over his head. But, as Tom said, it was impossible to please everybody.

"Beastly close quarters for cricket practice," said Tom Merry, as he took hold of the ball. "Never mind, it saves the fag of fielding, anyway. Now I'm going to bowl a lob."

"I say!" exclaimed Manners, in alarm. "I think I heard——"

But the ball had already sped. Down the long corridor it went, just as Herr Schneider, crimson with wrath, came bouncing up the staircase and rushed into the corridor. The next moment he gave a fiendish yell. The cane went one way, his spectacles another, and Herr Schneider danced on one leg, clasping the other affectionately with both hands.

"Ach! Mein leg! Mein leg! Mein leg!"

He howled with pain and rage as he hopped frantically.

The boys of the Shell gasped with alarm at the sight of the catastrophe, but the sight of the fat German clasp ing one leg and hopping on the other was too funny. A shout of laughter rang through the corridor. It added to the fury of Herr Schneider.

"Ach! Mein leg! It is proken! Tom Merry, you did tat on purpose!"

"Did the ball hit you, sir?" asked Tom Merry innocently.

And the boys yelled again at the absurd question. It was pretty plain that the ball had hit the German.

"Ach! Mein leg, it is proken!"

"Then you're out, sir," said Tom Merry demurely.

"Hein? Vat you say?"

"You're out, sir. Leg-before wicket, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Manners.

Herr Schneider panted with rage. It was only Tom's fun, but to the Herr it seemed like insult added to injury.

"Merry! I—I—vat shall I say? You are te vorst poy in te whole school. I do not feel equal to dealing mit you meinsel f, so you vill go to the Head. You vill say tat you have trown ein cricket ball at your master."

"But I didn't, sir. I didn't know you were going to hop in on the pitch like that."

"You vill do as I tell you, Merry."

"But——"

Herr Schneider hopped towards him, and Tom deemed it better to go.

It was hard lines, for although Mr. Railton would believe that the German's mishap was an accident, Tom was certain to "catch" it for bowling cricket-balls in the corridor. But there was no help for it, and so Tom marched off to the study of Mr. Railton. He tapped at the Head's door. There was no answer from within. Tom tapped again more loudly. Still no reply. The scamp of the Shell smiled to himself.

"The Head's not there," he murmured, "so I certainly can't report myself. I suppose I'd better look in, in case the old Dutchman asks me."

He opened the door of the study and carelessly glanced in. The next moment he gave a violent start. The room was not empty, as

he expected it would be. Mr. Railton was in his accustomed seat at the writing-table. But his attitude was such as Tom Merry had never seen before. Both his elbows rested upon the table, and his face was sunk in his hands. Before him on the table lay a letter. His attitude was so plainly expressive of utter despondency, that Tom Merry could not help seeing that a heavy blow had fallen upon the popular Head of Clavering.

Mr. Railton was evidently so absorbed in his gloomy reflections that he had not heard Tom's tapping at the door. Tom hesitated, wishing he had not entered, and at the same time wondering what could have happened to cause such a change to come over the usually strong and cheery Head.

Mr. Railton raised his head. He started at the sight of Tom Merry, but in a moment he seemed himself again.

"I knocked twice, sir," said Tom. "Herr Schneider sent me to you, sir."

Mr. Railton nodded.

"You may come in, Merry."

Tom walked into the study. Mr. Railton's handsome face was very pale, and he looked worn, but he was quite calm. He took up the letter from the table.

"Herr Schneider sent you to me, Merry. Why?"

"It was an accident, sir."

Mr. Railton smiled slightly. Tom's career at Clavering School had been marked by unusual happenings, and the Head never knew what to expect next.

"Well—well, what was it, Merry?"

"I was bowling a lob in the upper corridor, sir, and Herr Schneider got leg-before-wicket—I mean, he came bolting into the corridor without warning, and stopped the ball with his leg, sir," said Tom ingenuously. "I was awfully sorry."

"I dare say you were. Do you assure me that it was an accident?"

"Certainly, sir, on my word."

"Then I will excuse you, Merry. It is wrong of you to bowl in the corridor—you might hit anybody, and you must never do it again. I do not wish to punish you, however. I do not wish the last act of my authority here to be the infliction of punishment."

And Mr. Railton sighed. He had spoken the last words more to himself than to Tom Merry, and hardly seemed to be aware that they were uttered aloud. But Tom caught them. And in his amazement he stared at the headmaster.

"Mr. Railton! You are not going away, sir?"

The distress in the boy's face touched the Head. He liked Tom Merry, in spite of his scapegrace ways, and it moved him to see what he did in Tom's look.

"Yes, Merry. I did not mean to mention it, but I may as well tell you now. I intended in any case to make an announcement to the school to-night. But it is not only I who am going, and probably we shall not part. Clavering School is to be closed."

Tom looked blank. He had been only a few months at Clavering, but he already felt quite at home there, and quite part of the institution.

There had been rumours abroad in the school lately—rumours vague and undefined, foreboding change of some sort; but Tom had never looked for this.

"Clavering to be closed, sir!"

"Yes, Merry," Mr. Railton nodded, "the school is to be closed. It is a heavy blow to me, as you may imagine, but there are reasons. But, as I said, we may yet be together. I am making arrangements for the transfer of the boys to another school; the two schools will be, in fact, amalgamated. That school is the famous St. James's—better known to you as St. Jim's. The school Clavering played a short time ago on the cricket-field."

"St. Jim's, sir! We are going to St. Jim's!"

"Yes, Merry. It is a grand old school, older than Clavering, and more famous, and you will be in good hands there, all of you. Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, is my oldest and best friend, and we are arranging this matter between us. I shall take a position at St. Jim's, and most of my boys, I think, will accompany me there. Their parents, of course, have all been communicated with, and their consent obtained. By the way, I think your governess, Miss Priscilla

Fawcett, will be coming down to see you about it. She has written to me and seems a little anxious about the change." The Head smiled slightly. "Now you may go, Merry. I depend upon you to keep the best of order for the last few days that we shall be at Clavering."

"Yes, sir." Tom hesitated. "Don't think it's an awful cheek of me," he broke out, "but—but can't anything be done, sir?"

"Nothing, Merry," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I need not conceal—it will soon be known to everyone—that money has been advanced upon the land Clavering stands on, and that the person who advanced it claims his strict rights. A seam of coal has been discovered on the land, and it extends right under Clavering College, and the moneylender sees a prospect of immense profit, and so he is not likely to make any concessions. As a matter of fact, I have here a letter from him, warning me that he is coming down to-day, and that no concession need be expected."

"The—the brute! I beg your pardon, sir. But—but it's rotten!"

Tom Merry went slowly to the door. It was not so much himself that he cared about. He liked Clavering, but he was quite ready to go to St. Jim's. He had met the fellows from that school on more than one occasion, and he knew that he could have a good time there. But he knew that this was a heavy blow for the Head. And he liked Mr. Railton.

He went out and closed the door, and went back to his own quarters looking less cheerful than usual. Monty Lowther and Manners were in the study, and they met their chum with glances of sympathy.

"Got it on both hands, Tom?" asked Manners. "Hard cheese!"

"Looks more like a flogging," said Lowther. "Did he lay it on awfully hard, kid?"

"I've not been licked," said Tom.

"You don't mean to say that he let you off?"

"Yes, he did."

"And you come back looking as solemn as an owl, and cheating us out of our sympathy!" Manners exclaimed indignantly. "What do you mean by it?"

"I've had some news."

"Oh, is that it? Something awful going to happen? Is Miss Fawcett coming down to see you?"

Tom laughed.

"Yes, I think so, but that's not the worst. It's all up with Clavering."

"Don't rot! What are you talking about?"

Tom explained the news he had received from the Head. Monty Lowther and Manners gave expressive whistles.

"Well, my Sunday topper!" exclaimed Manners. "This is a go! I'm sorry for the Head, but I dare say we shall be able to dig up some fun at St. Jim's."

"It's all right if we all go together," said Monty Lowther. "We must write to our people, and give 'em their orders. You know there's two houses at St. Jim's, and they're always on the warpath against one another, and I've heard they squeeze a lot of fun out of that. We must all three go into the same house."

"Rather!" said Tom Merry.

The news was not long in spreading over Clavering. It was received with mingled feelings, partly with regret, partly with a relish for the novelty of the situation. The boys were curious to see how they would get on at St. Jim's, a school they had met more than once on the cricket and football field.

Before bed-time the boys were called together in the hall, and the Head made a speech. It was a brief one, but to the point.

He explained the difficulties into which the school had fallen, touching very lightly upon that part of the subject, and then passed on to explain the new prospects to such of the boys as were permitted by their parents to accompany him to his new abode. The speech was received in perfect silence.

It was broken by Wingate, the captain of Clavering, who stepped forward to reply for the school.

"We're all sorry to hear this, sir," said the captain of Clavering; "but we're glad to be able to go with you, and I expect most of us will do so. I shall for one, I know."

"And I!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"And all of us!" came a general shout.

"Thank you, Wingate! Thank you, my

boys!" said Mr. Railton. "We have, I am safe to say, done our best, and played a straight game while we have been here, and I hope we shall do the same in a new sphere. St. Jim's will not need to be ashamed of us, and I hope we shall lose nothing in being merged in a greater and more famous school; but I hope St. Jim's, in fact, will gain by it. Now, good-night!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The first post in the morning brought Tom Merry a letter from his old governess and nurse—Miss Priscilla Fawcett. It announced that the good lady was coming down to see him that day, in order to consult with him over the news Mr. Railton had written to her.

Miss Fawcett was at Clavering an hour after her letter. The news of her coming was brought to Tom in the Shell class-room, and he was permitted by the master to go out and see his affectionate governess.

"Dearest Tommy!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla, enfolding him in her embrace. "Dearest Tommy, how have you got on all this long time?"

"Why, you saw me only a fortnight ago!" said Tom.

"It seems such a long time, my sweetest!"

"Oh, please don't! Somebody may hear you!"

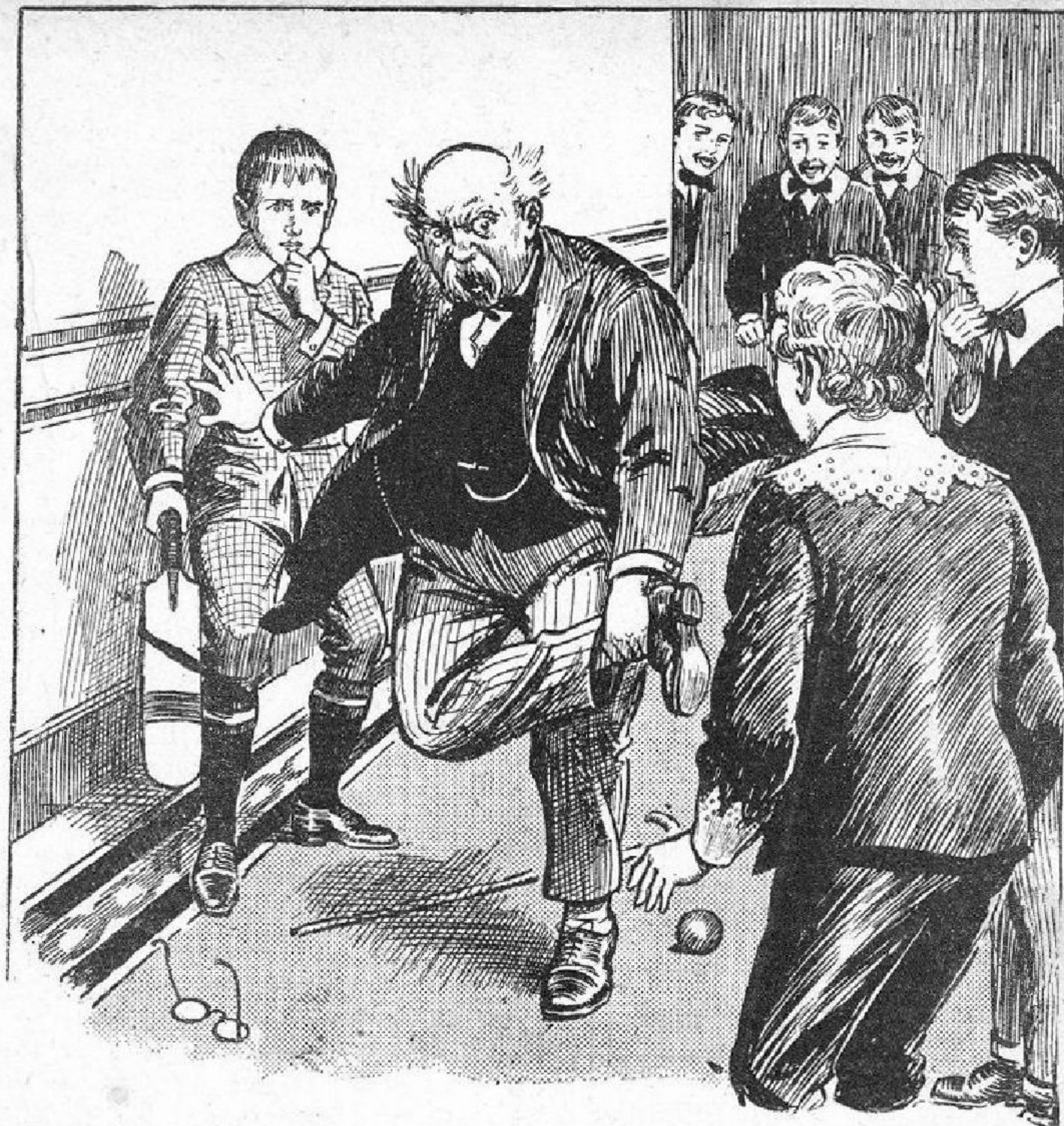
"Very well, dear Tommy. You know why I have come down," said the old lady, holding him at arm's length and regarding him affectionately. "It's about this change Mr. Railton designs to make. It's a little unreasonable of him to decide to change the quarters of the school at such a short notice, before I have had time to fully inquire and inspect the new college; but I do not mean you to go there into danger——"

"Danger!" exclaimed Tom. "What on earth are you driving at, my dear nurse?"

"My sweetest boy, there may be draughts or—or anything. The drains may be bad. They may put you into a draughty study."

Tom Merry grinned. It seemed funny to him that Miss Fawcett's principal concern in the catastrophe that had overtaken Clavering was whether he might be put into a draughty study when he took up his new quarters.

"I shall have to go over the school, of



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course, and examine things," said Miss Fawcett "I have heard nothing about the school——"

"It's one of the finest in England," said Tom hotly. "They licked us at football once, and at cricket twice, and what more could you want to know? I've seen a lot of their chaps, and they are ripping. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, is a regular ripper."

"What an expression, Tommy! But I have heard that there are two houses at St. James's——"

"So there are at lots of schools; five or six sometimes."

"Yes; but these, the School House and the New House, are always on bad terms with one another, and sometimes they

fight," said Miss Fawcett, looking horrified. Tom laughed.

"My dear nurse, if you think I've been all this time at Clavering without learning how to fight, you are a giddy old innocent!" he exclaimed. "You should have seen my slogging match with Gore. It was an eye-opener."

"Oh, Tommy!"

"Besides, there's always a certain amount of rivalry between two houses at a school," said Tom, who had learned much of public school life since leaving Laurel Villa, at Huckleberry Heath. "It does them good. Keeps them up to the mark in sports, and so on. And it's jolly good fun at St. Jim's. I've heard about it from the chaps. Why, that's what I'm looking forward to."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Tom Merry Arrives at St. Jim's.

"HALLO, a new kid!"

As Tom Merry stepped from the vehicle, Jack Blake, of St. Jim's, fell into the arms of Herries, while Digby collapsed into the embrace of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The chums of Study No. 6 in the School House seemed completely overcome.

"What is it?" murmured Blake, in tones of exaggerated faintness. "What can it be? I wonder if it has a name?"

"It's something new," said Digby. "I've never seen anything like it before off a Christmas-tree. Fancy meeting that!"

"It is weally too extwaordinary," said D'Arcy. He pushed Dig into a sitting position, and solemnly adjusted his eye-glass, and through it took a survey of the wrathful Tom Merry. "It is alive; I can see its features move. What a stwange object!"

"Look here!" exclaimed Tom Merry, looking warlike. "If you——"

Blake covered his face with his hands.

"Don't!" he gasped. "Don't! Oh, Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Don't ask me to look! I can't really. I'm not strong, and I'm afraid it might be too much for me!"

"Tommy! Dear Tommy!"

It was Miss Priscilla's voice from inside the hack. And Tom, with whom politeness outweighed everything else, turned to assist the lady from the vehicle.

"Take no notice of those rude boys," said Miss Priscilla. "Give me your arm, dearest Tommy."

Dearest Tommy turned scarlet, but he obeyed. Blake gasped with merriment. He hadn't seen anything as funny as this for a long time.

"Oh, my only hat!" he giggled. "Dearest D'Arcy, give me your arm. Don't take any notice of these common, rude bounders. You vulgah people, get off the earth!"

And Blake, taking the arm of D'Arcy, followed Miss Priscilla and Tom Merry to the door of the Head's house. He walked in a graceful way, leaning upon the arm of the swell of the School House, and the sight was irresistible. Herries and Digby howled with laughter, and Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, looking out of his study window to see what was the matter, had to laugh, too.

"Oh, that young rascal Blake!" he murmured. "Blake! Blake!"

The chief of the School House juniors stopped.

"Did you call me, Kildare?"

"Stop that immediately!"

"Oh, I say, Kildare!" remonstrated Blake. "Mustn't D'Arcy and I take a little constitutional for our health after morning school?"

"Weally, we wequire it for our livah," said Arthur Augustus.

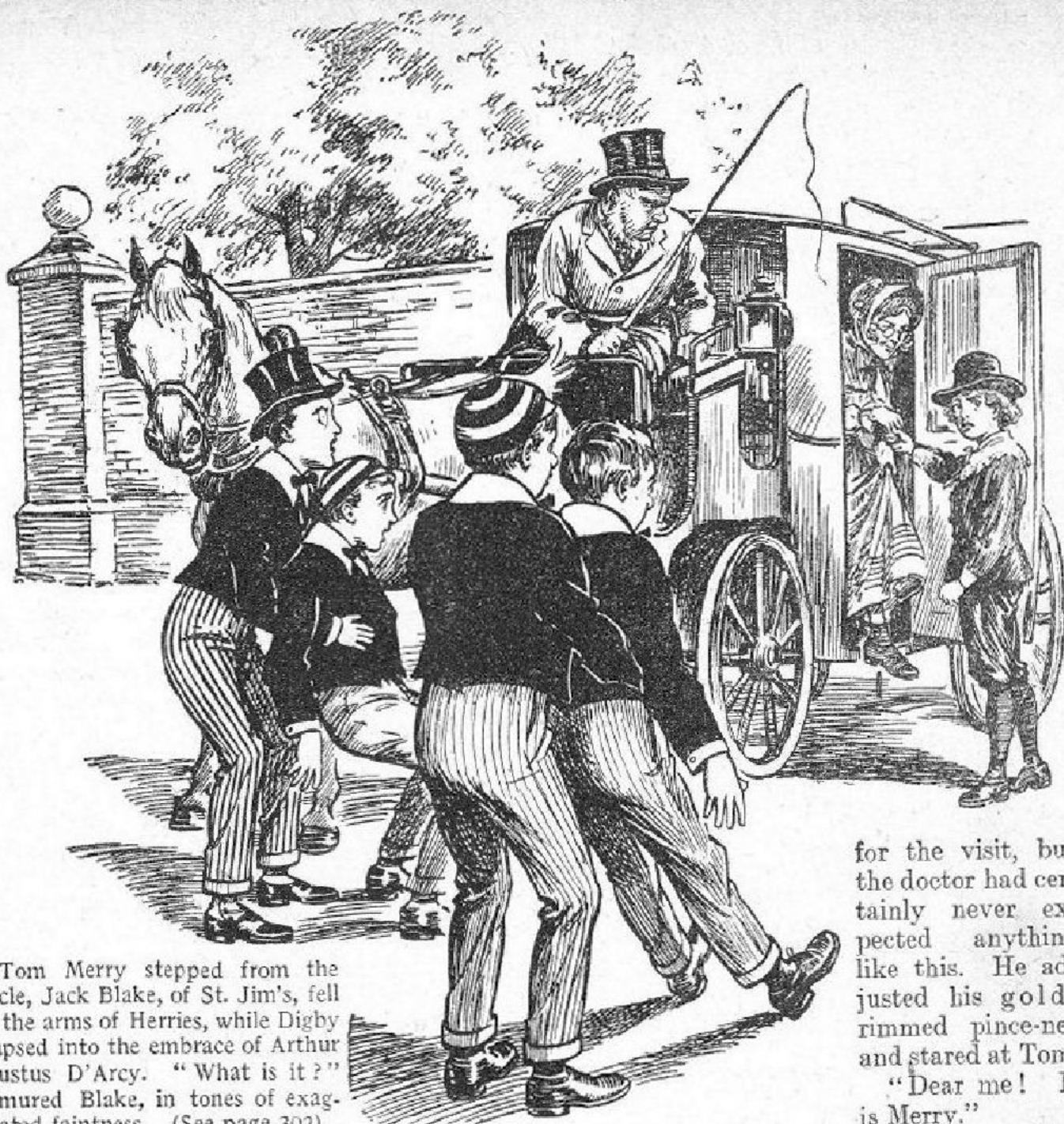
But the door opening to admit Miss Priscilla and Tom Merry, sent Blake and D'Arcy scuttling off. They rejoined Herries and Dig.

"Well," said Blake, wiping the tears from his eyes—"well, my pippins, we're not likely to go in want of a good cackle if that funny merchant is going to stop at St. Jim's!"

"I suppose it's a new kid," said Herries. "But if they put it in the School House I shall kill it. It's too funny to live."

Blake looked alarmed.

"Oh, they wouldn't dare!" he exclaimed. "The New House is the proper place for it. It was a bit of a wrench for us to stand D'Arcy when he came——"



As Tom Merry stepped from the vehicle, Jack Blake, of St. Jim's, fell into the arms of Herries, while Digby collapsed into the embrace of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "What is it?" murmured Blake, in tones of exaggerated faintness. (See page 302)

"Oh, weally now, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Then they gave us that howler, Marmaduke Smythe, but we shoved him off on to Figgins & Co.," went on Blake. "Figgins can have this merchant. We won't. If they stick it in here there will be trouble. But, my word, what a giddy velvet suit. Ha, ha, ha!"

Meanwhile, Miss Fawcett was shown into the presence of the Head of St. Jim's. Mr. Railton had somewhat prepared Dr. Holmes

for the visit, but the doctor had certainly never expected anything like this. He adjusted his gold-rimmed pince-nez and stared at Tom.

"Dear me! It is Merry."

"It is my dear boy," announced Miss Priscilla, with a glance of fond pride at Tom. "I have brought him with me, Dr. Holmes. You will be very kind to him?"

Tom Merry gave a wriggle.

"Oh, very kind," said Dr. Holmes. "But what is the meaning of this peculiar attire? I—ah——" he paused, reflecting that it would be easier to deal with this matter after Miss Fawcett was gone. "Well, let it pass. Now, what is it you wish, my dear madam?"

"As I informed you, I believe, Dr. Holmes

I wish to make an inspection of the school, in order to fulfil my duties towards this dear boy," said Miss Priscilla. "Of course, I fully accept your assurance, but at the same time——"

"Exactly," said Dr. Holmes, touching a bell. "As Merry will go into the House School, I will ask Mr. Kidd, the housemaster, to show you over the building, Miss Fawcett. I am, unfortunately, very much occupied just now." He turned to the maid who answered his ring.

"Kindly request Mr. Kidd to come to me."

In a few moments the master of the School House made his appearance. He gave Tom Merry a very curious look as he bowed to Miss Fawcett. The doctor explained in a few words.

Mr. Kidd expressed himself as delighted to be of any service to Miss Fawcett, and he politely conducted her to the School House. The lady insisted upon taking Tom by the hand, and making him accompany her, so that he, too, should be satisfied by an inspection of his new home, and this was a martyrdom to Tom. Fellows came to their study doors, or collected on the stairs and in the corridors, to look at him.

Morning school was over, and all the School House seemed to be at liberty to devote its attention to the new boy. Mr. Kidd kept a face as solemn as a judge's, as he escorted Miss Fawcett over the building, and whenever he saw a grinning face he frowned at it. But chuckles and giggles followed the party wherever they moved. When they passed along the upper corridor, the chums of Study No. 6 were standing at their door, looking out with much interest.

"There it is again!" said Blake. "As large as life!"

And as Tom Merry passed, they all four bowed low, with their hands upon their hearts, in the most respectful and graceful manner.

"Dear me!" said Miss Priscilla. "What nice, polite boys!"

But Tom was boiling inwardly. A little later, when Miss Fawcett went to inspect the dormitory, Tom contrived to slip away, and he returned to Study No. 6. He wanted to have a little talk to the chums there, a little talk which would probably have led to a little fight had Blake and his comrades been still

there. But when Tom Merry opened the door the room was empty. The juniors were no longer in their quarters. Tom Merry glanced round the study, and a gleam of mischief darted into his eyes. He stepped quickly inside.

On the table stood a hat-box, which evidently contained a new silk topper, destined for one of the dwellers in Study No. 6. Near it were the books, papers, pens and ink belonging to the juniors, left where they had used them last.

Tom Merry's brain worked rapidly, and he owed the chums a little account which he now saw an opportunity of paying. Quickly opening the hat-box, he took hold of the hat, a gorgeous new topper, belonging to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's.

"My word!" murmured Tom Merry. "This will be a surprise for whoever wears this giddy hat. It will be one to me."

There was an inkpot of red ink on the ink-stand. Tom picked it up and emptied about half the contents inside the leather lining in the hat. Then he returned it to the box.

There was a surprise in store for whoever wore that hat. Tom quitted the study and closed the door.

"My dearest Tommy, wherever have you been?" exclaimed Miss Fawcett, a little later. "I have looked over the house, Tommy, and I think it is quite satisfactory. Mr. Kidd has shown me the study you are to have. You will share it with two companions."

"Manners and Lowther, or there will be a row," said Tom to himself.

And he went to inspect the study.

It was a new room belonging to some additions that had lately been built to the School House. A pleasant room, though not over large, and Tom liked it. His nurse had already made a long list of articles that were to be sent down to furnish it from London. Tom having expressed himself satisfied with his new quarters, the tour of inspection ended for the time. Miss Priscilla lunched with the Head, while Tom took his dinner in the dining-hall of the School House with the rest of the house.

Later Miss Priscilla came out into the quad and found Tom Merry.

"I have just inspected the New House, Tommy, and I am quite satisfied with that. For the present, until further arrangements are made, you will share a study with four boys named Figgins, or Wiggins—no, I think it is Higgins—and I forget the others; but I was assured by a very polite young gentleman named Monteith that they are nice boys."

Tom, however, had heard of Figgins and Co. Figgins, long and lanky; Wynn, short and stout; Kerr, canny and sandy—three of the best, were famous at the good old school as leaders of the New House juniors in their alarums and excursions against the School House! But Tom intended making his own arrangements.

"I am leaving the school now, Tommy," said Miss Priscilla, "so good-bye, sweetest boy."

Tom looked round nervously. Near by Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth Form, was arranging a column of Third and Fourth Form and Shell juniors preparatory to taking them for a nice country walk.

"Good-bye, nurse," said Tom Merry hastily—"good-bye!"

"You will not forget what I told you about always wearing flannel on your chest, and the hot-water bottle——"

"Yes, yes."

"If you take the cod-liver oil I have left for you every evening, a tablespoonful——"

"Yes; good-bye!"

"Pardon me, madam, but you are delaying us," said Mr. Lathom politely.

Perhaps he took pity on Tom, who was scarlet, while the rest of the column were giggling like lunatics.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Good-bye, dear Tommy!"

And, throwing her arms round Tom's neck, Miss Priscilla kissed him on the forehead, and at last he escaped.

Most of the juniors seemed to be in hysterics as they marched for the gate. Even Mr. Lathom was smiling, though he tried to keep a serious face.

Tom breathed more freely on the open road, safe from the attentions of his fond nurse.

"Oh, chase me!" murmured Blake. "Kiss me on my baby brow, and call me Angelina!"

Tom glared at him.

"Do you want a thick ear, Blake?"

"Silence there!" said Mr. Lathom. "Step out! Dear me, D'Arcy, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, sir," said Arthur Augustus, looking surprised.

"Do you feel no pain? Look at your face!"

It was hardly possible for D'Arcy to look at his face, but he put up his hand and felt it, and the effect was startling.

The red ink Tom Merry had so liberally placed under the band inside his hat was oozing through, and it had begun to trickle down his forehead. D'Arcy had felt the dampness, and imagined it to be perspiration, as the day was warm. As he felt over his face to see what was the matter, he smothered the streams of red ink over his features.

Mr. Lathom was too short-sighted to see what the juniors saw at once, that it was red ink oozing out under the brim of D'Arcy's hat. He fixed a horrified gaze upon the boy.

"D'Arcy! This is terrible! Come here, let me examine your injury at once."

"But I am not injured, sir!" exclaimed D'Arcy.

"Your head is bleeding terribly."

D'Arcy looked at his hand, which was crimsoned. He took off his hat and looked into it, and uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Some horrid beast's been sticking red ink into my hat!"

"Ink!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, greatly relieved, but very angry. "Who could have played such a trick? This must be inquired into at once!"

"My new hat!" bellowed D'Arcy. "It cost me a guinea!"

"His nice, new hat!" said Figgins. "Ha, ha, ha!"

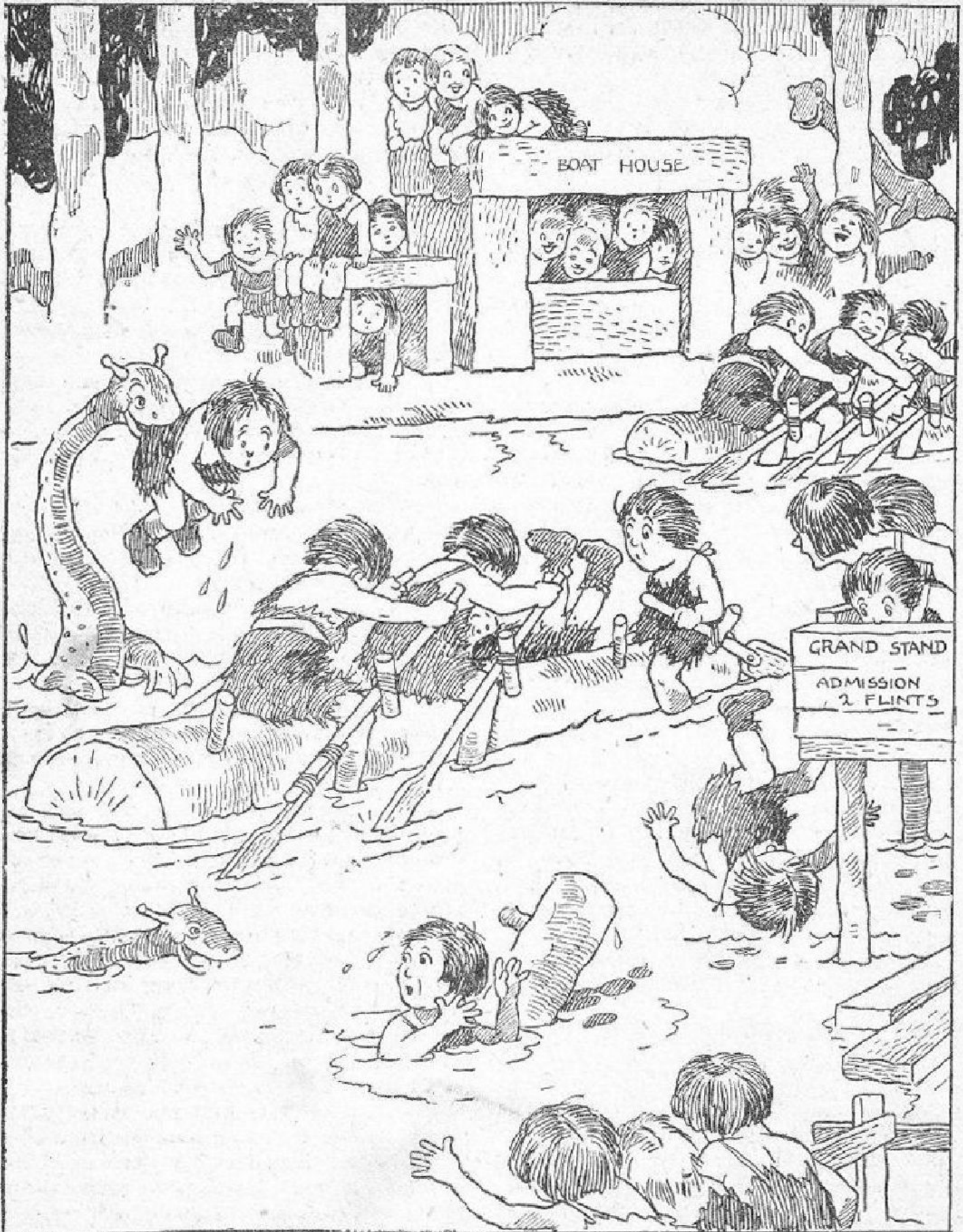
"Figgins, did you play this absurd trick upon D'Arcy?"

"I, sir? Oh, no, sir. I respect D'Arcy too much to play a trick upon him."

"Where did you leave your hat, D'Arcy?"

"It came down from London to-day!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "It was left in the box on my study table. Some beastly bounder——"

GREYFRIARS SCHOOL IN PREHISTORIC DAYS



AN EASY VICTORY FOR THE SIXTH FORM—THE FINISH OF THE ANNUAL BOAT RACE

"It must have been one of your study mates," said the master of the Form sternly. "Now, Blake, Herries, and Digby, you will each of you take fifty——"

"Pardon me, sir," said Tom Merry, with his best bow. "May I speak, sir?"

"Certainly, if you have anything to say connected with this matter."

"I happen to know who played that trick, sir, and I think I ought to tell you."

A hiss came from every boy within hearing.

"Sneak! Sneak!"

"Silence!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, though he looked far from pleased. "Speak, Merry."

"Shall I tell you his name, sir?"

"You had better do so."

"I don't want to get him punished, sir."

"It would have been better if you had not spoken. Tale-bearing is not approved of in this school, Merry. I shall not punish the perpetrator of this practical joke, because I should not consider myself justified in doing so under the circumstances. Now you may tell me his name."

"Very well, sir. I did it."

There was a moment's silence, then the juniors howled with laughter. Mr. Lathom stared at Tom Merry for a moment, and then caught him by the ear.

"Hold on!" cried Tom. "You said you wouldn't punish me!"

"I said I—you—well, well." The master of the Fourth released Tom's ear. "I will keep my word, Merry, though you have certainly tricked me. D'Arcy, you may return to St. James's, and get that terrible mess cleaned off, and you had better go, too, Merry. Boys, march on."

And the afternoon's walk proceeded without Tom Merry or the swell of St. Jim's.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

The New Master

THE next day Tom Merry's box arrived from Clavering, and he was able to effect another change of clothing, which he very much needed. Clad in everyday raiment, he ceased to be the conspicuous object he had been on his first arrival at St. Jim's, but the juniors did not soon leave off chip-

ping him. Tom Merry stood all that cheerfully.

On the following day Monty Lowther, and a good many of the Clavering boys, arrived. Tom Merry was glad to see his chums Lowther and Manners again. With little trouble, they managed to get put in the School House together, and they quickly fell into the new state of affairs.

"Study No. 6 are awfully decent fellows," Tom remarked to them; "but, of course, they have got to follow our lead. I fancy there will be ructions in time."

At the same time Blake was speaking on the same subject in Study No. 6.

"Tom Merry is an awfully decent chap, kids," said Blake; "but, of course, these new fellows will have to follow our lead. I shouldn't wonder if there were ructions to come."

On Wednesday afternoon, a half-holiday at St. Jim's, the three chums, Tom Merry, Monty Lowther and Harry Manners, decided to walk over to Rylcombe.

"We'll call in at the station," said Tom, "it's high time our bikes arrived. Perhaps they'll come on the afternoon train if they're not there already."

"I heard one of the chaps say that the new master for the Shell is due to arrive to-day," remarked Lowther, "Kidlet's going down to meet him."

The "Kidlets" referred to was their respected master, Mr. Kidd, of the School House. Unknown to the chums, he had noted the quickness with which the three Clavering fellows had found their feet at St. Jim's, and knew also that they were being already referred to as the Terrible Three. Others, too, had their eyes turned towards them with interest, for since the coming of Tom Merry to the school, Blake had been put upon his mettle to see that his laurels as leader of the School House juniors were not won from him.

"We'd better step out," said Manners, "it looks as though a storm were coming on."

The three chums reached Rylcombe and called in at the tuck-shop to regale themselves with cakes and lemonade, and then proceeded to the station. To their delight they found that their bicycles had arrived and were

waiting them, and an obliging porter wheeled them from the luggage room and obtained their receipt.

"Now, then, you chaps," said Tom Merry, "we can have a jolly good spin before going back to St. Jim's!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a low growl of thunder caused them to pause.

"Oh, come on," said Tom, "it isn't going to be much. We've time to get back, anyway."

Hardly, however, had they wheeled their bikes outside the station when the deluge burst. With almost tropical force the rain beat down and with the rain spattering upon them they beat a hasty retreat to the station to escape a thorough wetting.

"We'll have to wait now," said Lowther, "so we might as well be comfortable. Let's go into the waiting-room, where there's a fire."

"Yes," agreed Manners, "I'm nearly soaked as it is. Five minutes of it outside would about have drowned us!"

They propped their bikes against the wall and entered the waiting-room in which a small fire blazed cheerfully. As they stood chatting the faint whistle sounded in the distance, and two minutes later a train drew into the station. The rain was pelting down still, but the two or three passengers who alighted seemed to make for the exit, for no one entered the waiting-room. The Terrible Three were left in sole possession of the little fire, and they grouped round it, cheered and warmed by its influence. Not until the train had left the station and the last faint chugs had died away in the distance were they disturbed in their possession. Quick, nervous steps sounded outside and a stranger entered. He wore a travelling coat and cap, and carried a leather-strapped bag upon which were the initials "A. K." He was looking the reverse of amiable as he came in, and he threw himself on to the hard seat of the waiting-room with an air of annoyance.

"It's a pity people cannot be punctual in their engagements!" he muttered. Then, seeing the three St. Jim's juniors steaming away merrily before a fire, he rose and walked over to them.

"Stand aside from the fire!" he commanded. "I wish to see it!"

The Terrible Three stared hard. They did not like the look of the stranger at all. He had a hard face and little keen, grey eyes, that looked like flints, and very tight lips.

"Excuse me, sir," said Tom Merry politely, "but we got rather wet and are drying ourselves."

"Do you want me to box your ears, boy?"

"Not particularly."

"Then do not be impertinent. You should not be so careless as to become wet. If you were in my charge, I should cane you very severely. Stand aside!"

As Tom Merry did not move very quickly, the stranger pushed him roughly out of the way and settled himself comfortably with his legs outstretched and his back towards the fire.

"I didn't know pigs were allowed in here," said Monty Lowther to Tom.

The stranger bristled with fury and advanced threateningly on the speaker.

"You—you young pup!" he gasped. "I'll thrash you—I'll—I'll——"

But the rest of his remarks were lost, for Mr. Kidd, the master of the School House, strode into the waiting-room.

"Excuse me," he said, approaching the stranger. "Are you the new master of the Shell Form at St. Jamss's?"

"I am Mr. Keene," replied the man. "But I understood that someone from the school was to meet my train."

"I am sorry I am late," said Mr. Kidd, "but I was delayed unexpectedly. However, the trap is waiting outside, and I will drive you to the school."

"Before I go," said Mr. Keene, "I should like to mention that these three lads, who are from the school apparently, have been grossly insulting me."

"Merry—Lowther—Manners! Impossible!"

"Do you doubt my word, sir?"

"It—it seems so unbelievable," stammered Mr. Kidd. "It is true, I have known these boys but a very short time, but I would have sworn to their having the instincts of gentlemen."

"Nevertheless, these young pups insulted

"Take no notice of those rude boys," said Miss Priscilla. "Give me your arm, dearest Tommy." Dearest Tommy turned scarlet; but he obeyed! (See page 302)



me!" said the new master fiercely. "One of them actually called me a pig to my face!"

Mr. Kidd looked at the three chums.

"Merry, what explanation have you to offer?" he asked.

"We did not know he was the new master, sir," said Tom. "And we could not have guessed from the way he came in and pushed us out of the way and bagged the fire for himself. He acted like a pig, sir, and brought the remark upon himself."

Mr. Keene's eyes flashed dangerously. "You whelp!" he cried. "I'll—I'll smash you!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Kidd. "I think we had better be going, sir."

"And you'll see that these impertinent young rascals are punished as they deserve?"

"No!" And Mr. Kidd turned on his heel and led the way from the waiting-room.

With a venomous glance at the three boys, the new master followed him out.

"A pretty beauty, isn't he?" said Tom Merry. "Let's wait till he gets clear of the station, and then we'll bike back. The rain has stopped now."

"It's a rotten prospect having to put up with the beast in the Shell," said Lowther. "He'll have it in for us. Did you notice the queer way in which he looked at you when Kidlets mentioned our names? I suppose you've never met before?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Merry.

The encounter with the new master was

soon forgotten in the exhilarating ride back to the school, but they were soon to have cause to remember him again.

The new master at St. Jim's did not become popular. Boys are sometimes very keen, and the boys of St. Jim's did not take to Mr. Amos Keene, without knowing exactly why they did not like him, but at the same time quite, quite sure that they did not like him a little bit.

To the other masters he was very pleasant and suave, and he got along with them pretty well, except perhaps Mr. Kidd, the master of the School House. The House-master was always polite to Mr. Keene, but he did not like him.

The boys of the Shell disliked him from the top boy to the lowest. And the Fourth Form, whom he took in the English history class, disliked him equally.

Mr. Keene boarded in Mr. Kidd's house, and so the Terrible Three and Study No. 6 saw more of him than their fellow-formers in the New House. And the more they saw of him the less they liked him.

Mr. Keene did not go in for sports of any kind, for one thing. That was the head and the front of his offending in the first place. Then he was spiteful, and would sometimes rap knuckles with a ruler in a way that was exceedingly unpleasant to the recipients of those little favours. Whenever he imposed lines, he never forgot them afterwards, as some of the other masters did; and he imposed more than any other two masters in the school.

His nature was hard and cold, and such a nature was not likely to pull well with boys. It was noted from the first that he had a peculiar dislike for Tom Merry. It could not have been wholly due to the adventure in the railway waiting-room.

It seemed almost as if he had known Tom in the past, and had saved up a dislike for him, as it were. Yet, as far as Tom knew, he had never seen the man before he met him in Rylcombe.

There was, in fact, some slight smack of mystery about the new master, which probably added to his unpopularity.

One Saturday afternoon, a half-holiday,

the Terrible Three arranged with the chums of Study No. 6 to go for a long spin on their bikes. The weather was glorious, and in high fettle they met Jack Blake and Co. in the quadrangle.

"Come on!" cried Tom. "Let's get the old jiggers from the shed and push off. We mustn't waste an afternoon like this!"

As he spoke the words, Mr. Keene crossed the quad towards them.

"Merry!"

The master of the Shell spoke in the hard, harsh tone he usually used in speaking to Tom Merry. Tom touched his cap.

"Yes, sir."

"I gave you an imposition this morning, I believe," said the master of the Shell.

"Yes, sir. A hundred lines from Virgil, sir," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Have you written them out?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Did I not tell you to do so before you left the school?"

"I—I believe you did, sir. I quite forgot."

Mr. Keene smiled sarcastically.

"Then you must learn not to forget, Merry. You will write them out and bring them to me before tea, and another hundred lines as well."

Tom looked dismayed, as well he might. The imposition would fill up every minute that was left of his half-holiday.

"Oh, I say, sir, wouldn't it do if I did them this evening? I——"

Mr. Keene glared at him.

"It would not do, Merry. When I say a thing I mean it. It would not do. You will bring me the two hundred lines before tea, or I shall double the imposition and report you to the Head."

"I will do them, sir," said Tom quietly, but with a glint in his eyes.

"You had better, Merry. If you forget again the consequences may be serious for you," said Mr. Keene, clicking his teeth.

And he walked out.

"The beast!" said Blake, looking at Tom sympathetically. "What has he got such a down on you, for Tommy?"

"Blessed if I know," said Tom. "He seemed to dislike me from the first. He gave me the impot. this morning for next to nothing. I

just whispered to old Manners. Fancy a hundred lines for that! Any other master wouldn't have given twenty."

"Keene is a beast," said Blake.

"Keene's a cad," said Manners.

"Keene's a rotten outsider!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "I wish we could get the brute kicked out of St. Jim's."

"I wish we could," said Tom with a sigh. "Well, I suppose I had better cut off and do that impot. I don't want to be reported to the Head."

"I'll come and help you," said Blake generously.

Tom shook his head.

"Thanks, Blake, that's good of you, but it's no go. Old Keene is as sharp as a needle. Monty did some of my lines for me yesterday, and he detected the difference in the handwriting at once, and he made me write out the whole imposition again, what I had done myself as well as what Monty had done."

"The horrid bounder! What a howling cad!"

"So I'd better cut off. Ta-ta!"

And Tom Merry went away to his study to work through the imposition. It was a long and hard one, and though Tom set to work with a will, the lines seemed endless before him. He commenced with the familiar "Arma virumque cano," and went on slowly through the first book of Virgil, weary of his task before it was half-over. Manners and Lowther came into the study while he was still hard at work.

"Nearly done, Tom?" asked Manners, looking over his shoulder.

Tom grunted.

"Another sixty to do," he replied.

"Then you'll never do it, old kid. The tea-bell goes in ten minutes."

"I shall have to take them in unfinished, then," said Tom. He finished the line he was doing and rose from his chair. "There will be a row, I expect."

"Try and soap him over," said Manners. "You mustn't have any more this evening. Blake is going to smuggle the parrot into his study, and he wants us to go there and help to teach him to talk."

"Not much good trying to soap over old Keene," said Tom; and he took up the lines

he had written and went to the study of the master of the Shell with them.

Mr. Keene was there, and he looked up sharply as Tom came in, with his black, ferrety-looking eyes, that always had an unpleasant glint in them. He had been reading a letter, and he laid it on the table as Tom entered.

"Well, Merry, have you done your lines?" he asked pleasantly.

"I've done all I could, sir," said Tom respectfully. "I haven't had time to do the whole two hundred. I have been doing them ever since you spoke to me, sir."

"Indeed! It would have been better if you had not forgotten them in the first place, Merry, would it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have not finished them, then. Very good! Hold out your hand."

A deep flush came into Tom's face as the master of the Shell picked up a cane from the table. He had had it there all ready, evidently anticipating that the junior could not get the imposition finished in time.

"Hold out your hand, Merry."

"You are going to cane me, sir?"

"Yes, I am going to cane you," snapped Mr. Keene, savagely. "Hold out your hand."

Tom slowly held out his right hand. The cane came down upon it with a slash that made him wince.

"Now, the other."

A second slash made the left palm feel as if it had been burned.

"Now the right hand again."

Tom put his hands behind him, his eyes sparkling.

"You have no right to cane me like this!" he broke out, passionately. "If you touch me again I will complain to Mr. Kidd."

The master of the Shell stared at him for a moment, as if he could scarcely believe his ears.

"Merry!"

Tom did not speak, but his hands remained behind him, and his clear blue eyes met the master's steadily.

Mr. Keene seemed to be at a loss for a moment. He was inclined to take Tom by the collar and thrash him without mercy, but he felt that it would not do. Punishment was

rarely inflicted by the under-masters at St. Jim's; serious cases being dealt with by the Head himself. Mr. Keene had never looked for resistance, but he knew that if his conduct was made known to the House-master, he would find himself in trouble. And the new master was already not on the best of terms with Mr. Kidd.

There was an awkward pause. It was broken by an unlooked-for incident. The study window was open, and the wind at that moment blew the letter Mr. Keene had been reading off the table, and it fluttered to Tom Merry's feet.

Tom stooped to pick it up as a matter of course. The new master muttered something, and sprang forward to snatch it from him. To Tom's amazement, Mr. Keene's face had gone quite pale, and his eyes were startled, almost scared.

His hand knocked against Tom's, and the letter fell to the floor again. It was impossible for Tom to avoid seeing the writing then. It was a thick, black writing, which showed up heavily on the thin, foreign notepaper. It was a hand he knew!

He did not touch the letter again, but allowed Mr. Keene to pick it up. The new master thrust it hastily into his pocket. Then his ferret eyes searched Tom's face.

Tom's look was startled, amazed.

Mr. Keene saw that he had seen the handwriting of the letter, and that he had recognised it. He bit his lip hard. Then, with a wave of his hand, he dismissed the boy.

Tom, glad enough to escape, hurried from the room, and hastened back to his study, where Lowther and Manners were waiting for him.

"Got off all right?" asked Manners. "Hallo, what's happened?"

Tom's startled look caught his attention.

"A giddy mystery," said Tom. "I don't know what to think. Keene was reading a letter when I went in. The wind blew it off the table, and I picked it up——"

"Nothing particular startling about that, that I can see."

"I saw the writing by accident, and I recognised it. It's the writing of my cousin, Philip Phipps, in India."

Manners and Lowther stared at him.

"You're dreaming!" exclaimed Manners. "What could your cousin want to write from India to a master at this school for?"

"I don't know; but I'm certain of what I say."

"Then it looks fishy," said Manners, shaking his head. "How do you get on with that cousin of yours—chummy?"

"I haven't seen him for years, but we never pulled very well together. He's ten years older than I am, you see, and not a bit like me."

"We said that Keene acted as if he knew something about you before he came to the school," said Manners, thoughtfully. "If he knows your cousin that would account for it. But why he should be down upon you, Tom, is a funny mystery. Hallo, there goes the tea-bell!"

The three hurried down to tea. The matter was certainly mysterious, but for the time they dismissed it. Amazed as they were, they did not dream of the strange developments that were to follow the coming of the new master to St. Jim's.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Midnight Excursion!

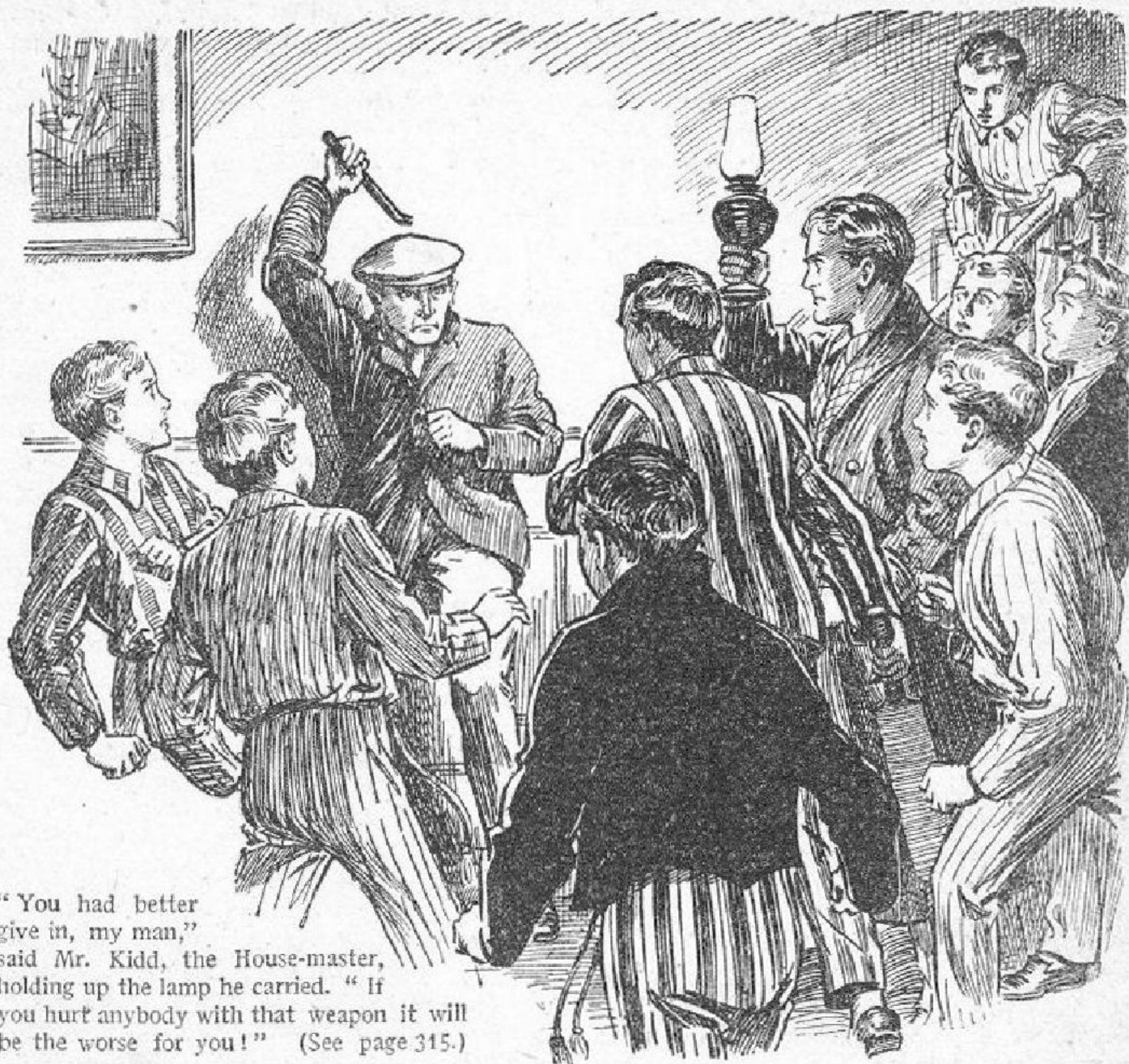
"HUSH!"

Tom Merry spoke in a low, cautious whisper. Still and silent lay the vast pile of St. Jim's. Upon the wide, green, quadrangle the moon glimmered faintly, and the old elms cast ghostly shadows. Within the School House the corridors were dark and gloomy, only from under one or two doors coming a gleam of light, showing where some "swotting" student still burned the midnight oil.

"Hush, you chaps! I believe I heard something!"

The three juniors stopped in the dark passage, still as mice, listening. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—known in St. Jim's as the Terrible Three—were on the warpath. The Fourth Form dormitory was the object of their midnight raid.

There the chums of Study No. 6 were sleeping the sleep of the just, little dreaming that their rivals for the leadership of the School House juniors were up and doing.



"You had better give in, my man," said Mr. Kidd, the House-master, holding up the lamp he carried. "If you hurt anybody with that weapon it will be the worse for you!" (See page 315.)

The Terrible Three had left their sleeping-quarters as the clock boomed out the hour from the tower of St. Jim's, and as the last stroke died away they stole silently down the shadowy passage towards the head of the stairs. It was then that Tom Merry suddenly called a halt.

The three chums listened breathlessly. The raid had been planned in the sunny afternoon, under the elm-trees in the quadrangle, and then it had seemed a ripping good idea to the Terrible Three. Now, in the still hour of night in the midst of a silent, sleeping building, it did not seem quite so ripping. They had

hardly thought that the old, familiar house could seem so strange and ghostly and eerie. And Tom's whispered warning sent the hearts of his comrades beating and thumping like hammers.

"Wh-wh-what was it?" murmured Manners.

"I didn't hear anything," muttered Monty Lowther. "You're getting nervous, Tom."

"Shut up! I believe it's the new master moving about."

"Oh, crumbs! Mr. Keene?"

"What did you think you heard?" whispered Manners.

"A footstep."

"You must have been mistaken."

"I suppose so, for it seemed to come from the stairs. Come on!"

There was a glimmer of light in the hall below. The juniors did not need telling whence it came. It was evidently a glimmer from a partly unclosed dark-lantern. The three chums stopped still, their hearts beating hard. Who could be moving about in the school in the middle of the night with a dark-lantern?

"Wh-wh-wh-wh can it be?" muttered Lowther.

Tom pressed his arm.

"It's a burglar!"

Manners and Lowther shivered.

"A b-b-burglar!" muttered Manners.

"Let's get back. We don't want to meet a b-b-burglar."

Tom held him fast as he would have retreated up the stairs.

They held their breath. Unfortunately, Monty Lowther had been holding his already, and he was beginning to feel suffocated. He held on as long as he could—as long as flesh and blood could stand the strain—and then gave vent to an involuntary but exceedingly noisy gasp. There was a muttered exclamation in the darkness.

"Diable!"

It was a foreigner with whom they had to deal. The next moment a groping hand in the gloom struck against them, and Tom Merry, realising that all was up, took his courage in both hands, as it were, and sprang at the unseen enemy.

The result was disastrous to the midnight intruder, and to Tom Merry as well. The impact sent the burglar reeling down the stairs, and Tom Merry went with him, and, clutching each other, they rolled to the bottom of the staircase. Tom was dazed and breathless when he reached the bottom, but he was still clinging to his foe.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help—help!"

"Help!" roared Manners and Lowther; and, caring nothing for danger now, they raced down the stairs to the assistance of their chum.

Their shouts rang through the School House.

"Diable!"

The burglar was struggling furiously with Tom Merry. Tom—strong and athletic as he was for his age—was, of course, a child in the hands of a grown man. He would have fared badly had not Lowther and Manners come tearing to the rescue.

The light was streaming on the dark stairs now from Mr. Keene's door in the corridor above. The new master of the Shell, aroused by the disturbance, had come hastily out of his room, and was looking down the stairs in amazement.

"Help!" shouted the Terrible Three in unison as they grappled with the burglar.

Mr. Keene came running downstairs. Other doors were opening now. Lights were flashing, and voices calling. The whole School House was roused by the terrible uproar in the middle of the night.

The burglar, with a powerful effort, wrenched himself loose from the chums, and staggered a few paces away. Encouraged by the help near at hand, the heroes of the Shell were springing upon him again, when he whipped an iron jemmy from his pocket, and his hand went up savagely to strike.

Tom Merry jumped back, dragging back his chums with him.

"Hold on, kids!"

They could not face a weapon like that. The burglar, exhausted by the struggle, reeled panting against the wall, his hand still upraised. Mr. Keene had reached the bottom of the stairs, and Mr. Kidd, the master of the School House, was upon the spot at the same moment.

Lights were gleaming on all sides, and the midnight intruder was cut off from escape by the window in the rear of the house by which he had entered. He stood like a wild animal at bay—gasping, defiant, desperate. He was not a pleasant object to look at. His face had been blackened with soot from forehead to chin, for purposes of disguise, and from the sooty blackness of his countenance his white teeth gleamed, bared like a savage dog's, and his eyes glittered with ferocity. Escape was cut off. He stood at bay.

On the stairs stood Mr. Keene, the master of the Shell, with a poker in his hand; and

behind him were a score of fellows in night-shirts and pyjamas.

Mr. Kidd, whose bedroom was a floor lower than Mr. Keene's, had come upon the scene even more quickly, with a dressing-gown hastily thrown round his athletic form. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was only a few moments behind him, and Kildare had caught up a cricket bat before leaving his room. After Kildare came Darrel, Rushden, and a dozen School House seniors. And from a Fourth Form dormitory, which was on the same floor, came a crowd of juniors. And, needless to say, Jack Blake and the chums of Study No. 6 were in the lead.

Like a wild beast surrounded by hounds and hunted to a corner, the grim-visaged ruffian stood glaring upon his foes, still with the weapon raised to strike any who should approach close to him, and there was a pause.

"You had better give in, my man," said Mr. Kidd, the House-master, holding up the lamp he carried and surveying the blackened face of the burglar. "If you hurt anybody with that weapon it will be the worse for you."

The ruffian snarled savagely, and gripped the jemmy tighter.

"Keep back!"

He spoke in English, with a nasal accent.

"You will not be allowed to escape," said the House-master calmly. "If you do not immediately surrender yourself you will be seized by force."

"I will kill whoever approaches me!"

"We shall see. Kildare, give me that bat, please. Mr. Keene, you and I between us can manage this rascal, I fancy. Boys, stand back!"

"I—I— Yes, certainly," said Mr. Keene, in a strange, halting voice.

For the first time the burglar looked towards the master of the Shell. Amos Keene was pale as death, and there was a strange light in his eyes and his lips were twitching.

Those around him who noticed it put it down to "funk," and certainly the master of the Shell looked as if he were a prey to deadly fear. The man with the blackened face stared at Mr. Keene, and his eyes blazed.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You will lay a hand upon me!"

Mr. Keene made a step towards him.

"My good man," he said, in halting tones, "it will be the better for you if you surrender quietly. Don't be a fool. Give in, I advise you, and you will be all the better for it in the long run."

A strange look came into the ruffian's eyes.

"Come," said the House-master testily, "we have no time to waste, fellow. Make up your mind."

He took a grip on the cane handle of the bat. Jemmy or no jemmy, the burglar did not look as if he would have much chance against the athletic Mr. Kidd.

The jemmy went with a clang to the floor.

"I give in," growled the ruffian. "Diable! I am your prisoner."

"You are wise."

The next moment the man was pinioned by the House-master and Mr. Keene, one on each side. Mr. Kidd called for a rope, which was promptly brought by Jack Blake.

The House-master secured the ruffian's wrists.

"Shall I telephone for the police to come from Rylcombe, sir?" asked Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

Mr. Keene looked round hastily.

"It would be better to lock the man up in the box-room till morning, would it not, Mr. Kidd?" he asked quickly. "The police would not be here under an hour, and we do not wish to remain up for them."

The House-master nodded.

"Yes, he will be safe enough in the box-room. Show a light, Kildare, and we will take him there."

The burglar walked between the House-master and the master of the Shell without a word, a crowd following them. The man with the blackened face did not seem to be downcast by his capture. On the contrary, there was a jauntiness in his step, and an assured impudence in his look, which seemed strange enough to see in one in his situation.

The key of the box-room was turned upon him, and he was left to consider himself till morning there. The excitement was over, and the boys prepared to go back to bed to

discuss the startling happening rather than to return to the arms of Morpheus. Mr. Kidd signed to Tom Merry to stop.

"You were the one to give the alarm, I believe, Merry?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"Did the burglar wake you up, Merry?"

"We were going to work off a surprise on Study No. 6, sir," said Tom Merry regretfully. "The game's up now, of course."

"I am glad to hear that," said Mr. Kidd grimly. "I shall excuse you upon this occasion, Merry, as the matter has turned out so fortunately. The next time you will not escape so easily. You may go back to your room."

"Thank you, sir."

Ere long silence and slumber reigned in the great school; but there were some who were wakeful. The captured burglar, shut up in the locked box-room; the master of the Shell, pacing his room with a white, haggard face and burning eyes; and four juniors in the Fourth Form dormitory, sitting on their beds and talking in low tones. Study No. 6 were wide awake as the school clock chimed out again. One good turn deserves another; and Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy thought so. The happenings of that eventful night were not yet over.

Jack Blake slipped off his bed as the clock chimed out.

"Are you ready, you chaps?"

"Rather!" said Herries and Digby together.

"Excuse me, I am not quite weady," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I cannot—aw—discovah my monocle. Pway wait for me, deah boys."

"Monocles are barred, ass," said Blake. "You may get a fist in your eye this journey, and then your giddy monocle will give you a pain. Don't be a sillier cuckoo than you can help, Adolphus!"

"You are wewy wude, Blake, and——"

"Shut up! Now, chaps, ready for the raid? I'm going to take a wet sponge with some red ink on it. I think that's what Tom Merry needs to improve his countenance, and that's what he's going to get, anyway. Perhaps he'll wish he hadn't started on the warpath, and started us innocent kids retaliating."

"Ha, ha! I shall take a stuffed stocking," said Herries.

"I've got a pillow," said Dig. "What have you got, Gussy?"

"I'm looking for my monocle," said D'Arcy, who was groping on the floor in the dark. "I am vewy wegwetful to diswegard your opinion, Blake, deah boy, but weally I cannot start on this expedition without my——"

"Then we'll leave you here," said Blake. "I'm getting fed up with you and your beastly monocle. You are going on exactly the right road to get a prize thick ear, Gussy! I'm warning you for your own good."

"Thanks vewy much, Blake. But I weally——"

The chums did not wait to hear D'Arcy's finish.

They left the dormitory, leaving Arthur Augustus still groping hopelessly in the dark for his beloved monocle.

Blake led the way with a light step.

The three juniors were grinning hugely in the dark. The Terrible Three had started out to raid them, and the unexpected incident of the burglar had sent them bootless home. But Blake could see no reason why the compliment should not be returned.

It would be a surprise for Tom Merry to be attacked in his own stronghold, and it would be one to Study No. 6 if they carried out the scheme successfully.

The School House was very dark and silent. To reach the stairs the chums had to pass the box-room where the captured burglar was locked in. As they drew near it Blake suddenly stopped, and his companions halted.

"Hold on!" whispered Jack.

The juniors "held on," wondering what was the matter.

"What is it?" whispered Dig. "Not another giddy burglar?"

"There's someone on the stairs."

"I didn't hear anything."

"But I did," said Blake, in a low voice.

"I tell you there's someone coming down."

That it was a second burglar was extremely unlikely. But why should anybody belonging to St. Jim's go about the house at such an hour with such cautious tread, and without carrying a light?



Famous Fights for the Flag

The China War. The storming of the Taku Forts on August 21st, 1860. Drummer Phillips, of the 61st gallantly defending a wounded officer



The Battle of Doornkop on May 29th, 1900. The Gordon Highlanders carrying an important Boer position. Bugler McAllister, saving the life of his captain



The Battle of Plassey on June 23rd, 1757. The British soldiers gallantly charging the enemy, which led to the final rout

The footsteps passed them, and stopped. The hearts of the juniors were beating with excitement as they realised that the unseen man had stopped at the door of the box-room. Click!

It was the faintest of sounds, but sufficient to tell the breathless three that the door of the box-room had been unlocked from the outside.

Whoever the mysterious individual was, he was evidently there to visit the burglar!

It was mystery piled on mystery, and the chums were lost in wonder.

They dared not move, lest their presence should become known to the unseen man; they could only remain still, breathless, expectant?

There was a faint creak as the box-room door opened.

Then a whispering voice in the gloom:

"Lasalle!"

Blake gave a jump.

He knew that voice, though it spoke in a faint and trembling whisper,

It was the voice of Amos Keene!

The new master of the Shell—the mysterious new master at St. Jim's, whom, before this, the boys had been puzzled about by more than one strange circumstance!

Blake, in his excitement, gripped Digby's arm so hard that Dig was hard put to it not to gasp aloud. He gave Blake, as he supposed, a punch in the ribs as a hint to let go; but in the dark the punch alighted upon Herries's back, and the astonished Herries staggered against the wall.

"You silly cuckoo!" gasped Herries.

In the still silence of the night, Herries's words might have been heard half across the School House; and the new master was not much more than six or seven paces distant!

It was clear that Amos Keene had instantly taken the alarm.

There was not a second to lose.

What the consequences might be if the master of the Shell discovered their presence there, Blake did not know; but he knew they could not be pleasant.

He seized Herries and Digby each by the arm, and dashed away, dragging them with him, in a hurried, frantic flight.

"Who—who is there? Stop!"

It was the panting, frightened voice of the master of the Shell!

The juniors took no heed.

Their only thought was to get back to their dormitory and scuttle into bed before their identity could be discovered.

The three juniors fled down the passage and dashed into the Fourth Form dormitory. As they did so Blake collided violently with somebody and crashed to the floor. Staggering to his feet, he heard the voice of D'Arcy near by.

"You wuff bwute, you have bwoken my eyeglass!"

"Blow your old eyeglass!" growled Blake. "Nip into bed sharp!"

"You have hurt me."

Blake grasped D'Arcy and slammed him on his bed.

"Ass!" he whispered fiercely. "Cave! Old Keene's coming!"

The door of the dormitory opened.

Fortunately, even Arthur Augustus realised from Blake's tone that something unusual was afoot, and to the immense relief of the chums he said no more, but laid down and covered himself up.

A second later, Mr. Keene was looking into the dormitory.

He heard nothing but the steady breathing of sleepers, and the faint snores of some of the juniors. But that did not satisfy so old a bird as Amos Keene.

"Boys!"

It was a faint whisper, but clearly audible to the wakeful ones. Mr. Keene was in a difficult position, which might have troubled a man of stronger nerve. He had given himself away to somebody, he did not know whom. He did not know whether the boys he had almost captured were juniors or seniors, but he had come to the Fourth Form dormitory because most of the mischief on that floor proceeded from the Fourth.

"Boys, are any of you awake?"

No sound but a businesslike snore from Herries.

The master of the Shell waited a full minute, holding the handle of the door, straining his eyes into the gloom of the dormitory.

Then, baffled, he withdrew, and the door silently closed.

There was a faint creak as the master of the Shell stole quietly away down the passage.

For full five minutes the dormitory remained silent, the chums not moving or speaking, in order to make assurance doubly sure. Blake was the first who sat up in bed and spoke.

"That was a narrow shave, kids."

And even Blake's voice was a little shaky.

"A blessed mystery about this," said Herries. "What could Amos Keene want paying a visit to the burglar in the night?"

"Did you hear him call him by name?" said Blake.

"Yes; shows that he knew him."

"It's a giddy mystery," said Digby. "How could a master at St. Jim's know a burglar—and a French chap, too? Looks queer!"

"Anyway, one thing's a dead cert.," said Blake sagely, "if he discovers that we were the parties who found him visiting the burglar, he will be down on us like a hundred of bricks—and he's down on Study No. 6 as it is."

"Right-ho!"

"So mum's the word."

And this important point being settled, the chums went to sleep, without troubling to answer the curious inquiries of Arthur Augustus. As Blake said, the swell of the School House had been bother enough for one night. And they slept like tops till the unwelcome clang of the rising-bell called them up to a new day.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

The Escape!

TOM MERRY seized Blake by the shoulder as he came down that morning.

"Have you heard?"

Blake stared at him.

"Heard what?"

"The news."

"What news?"

"The burglar's escaped!"

Blake gave a jump.

"Escaped! The chap in the box-room?"

"Yes."

"Is this a little game?" asked Blake suspiciously. "Has he really hooked it?"

"Honour bright," said Tom Merry. "All

the fellows who are down are talking about it. I've looked into the box-room myself. Kidlets is looking quite worried."

"My hat!" said Blake. "So the man's gone, has he?"

"Yes, I tell you. And Kidlets 'phoned to the station before he knew, and the police are coming from Rylcombe to fetch him, and he isn't here!"

"That accounts——"

"Eh? What accounts? And for what?" asked Tom Merry.

"Nothing!" said Blake. "I'm going to have a squint at the box-room. I want to see with my own peepers how the boulder bounded."

Jack Blake hurried off to the box-room, with Tom Merry.

The news was certainly true. The room was vacant—so far as the burglar was concerned.

Two forms could be seen in it—those of Mr. Kidd and Inspector Skeet, the fat, pompous official from Rylcombe.

The inspector had just arrived, and was listening to the housemaster's explanation that the captured burglar had made his disappearance. A policeman was waiting below, jingling in his pocket the handcuffs that were no longer wanted.

"The man's gone!" said Mr. Kidd, looking very worried, as Blake peeped in at the open door. He had his back to the door, and did not notice the juniors in the passage. "I had not, of course, the faintest idea that such was the case when I telephoned to the station. It appeared impossible for him to get away."

The fat inspector wagged his head wisely.

"There's no telling what tricks these rascals will get up to!" he exclaimed. "I see that the window is open. Inference that he escaped that way."

"There is a blank wall below, and no means of descent," said Mr. Kidd testily. "He certainly was not able to do anything of the kind."

And Blake murmured, sotto voce:

"Then the inference is that he did not escape that way. Good old Sherlock Holmes!"

The inspector gnawed the end of his pencil.

"But I thought you said that the door was locked on the outside, Mr. Kidd?"

"That was the case."

"Yet the burglar escaped by the door?"

"Evidently, as he did not use the window."

"Unless he went up the chimney," murmured Tom Merry.

"Why doesn't the inspector track him up the giddy chimney? He might find footprints in the soot."

Mr. Kidd, whose face expressed a decided unbelief, strode from the room. The two juniors had nipped into the recess near at hand in time, and the house-master passed without noticing that they were there. Blake was grinning.

"Let's watch Sherlock Holmes," he murmured. "It's really too funny. I wouldn't miss it for worlds."

They crept back to the door. The fat inspector was evidently bent on rivalling the famous Sherlock, for he was examining every corner of the box-room with a critical eye.

What he expected to find was a mystery; but, doubtless, material for some more notes in the fat pocket-book lying on the trunk.

He came towards the door at last, and the two juniors stepped quickly back into the recess. Mr. Skeet examined the lock and the key, and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Ah, the key has evidently been turned from the inside with a pair of pliers!" he muttered, loud enough for the juniors to hear.

"I can distinctly see the traces."

Blake doubled up with mirth.

"Here, shut up!" whispered Tom Merry.

"You'll give us away."

"Oh, my only maiden Aunt Matilda!"

"What's the matter, ass? There's nothing funny in his finding traces on the key if the burglar chap turned it from inside."

"No, if he did; but he didn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because—he, he!—I was here—he, he!—and the door was unlocked from the outside—he, he, he!—and I saw it. He, he, he!"

And Blake seemed to be trying to tie himself up into a knot. Tom Merry shook him.

"Quiet! He'll hear you. Don't give it away."

Blake controlled himself with an effort. The inspector's deductions as to what had—or, rather, had not—taken place, and his triumphant discovery of traces that did not exist, proving the occurrence of some-

thing that had never happened, were excruciating, from the junior's point of view, and Blake deserved great credit for not exploding on the spot.

Having examined his examination of lock and key, the inspector passed down the passage, his eyes bent carefully on the linoleum. Tom Merry waited till he had turned a corner, and then he darted out of the recess and into the box-room. Blake was after him like a shot.



"Nearly done, Tom?" asked Manners, looking over his shoulder. Tom Merry grunted. "Another sixty to do," he replied. (See page 311.)



To face page 321

TOM MERRY'S GUARDIAN SAYS GOOD-BYE TO HER WARD

"Here, I say, what's the game, Tom?"

Tom Merry had opened the inspector's notebook, which lay on top of a trunk. He was busy with the inspector's official pencil. Blake glanced over his shoulder, and nearly gave a yell, for at the end of the important notes made by Mr. Skeet Tom Merry had written in big letters the following sentence:

"George Frederick Skeet is the champion ass!"

Tom closed the book again, and left it as he found it.

"Oh, you bounder!" gasped Blake. "Come on; we shall have to prove a fearfully strong alibi over this!"

They hurried from the box-room. In the alcove they hugged each other with silent mirth.

"Oh, my only Panama hat!" sobbed Blake. "I only want to see George Frederick's face when he opens his pocket-book again, and die!"

"Shut up! Here they come!"

There was a rustle of a gown in the passage. Dr. Holmes, the revered Head of St. Jim's, and Mr. Railton, his second master, were coming towards the box-room. They evidently expected to find the inspector there.

Mr. Railton, who had now taken up a position at St. Jim's, was a great object of interest to the School House lads, because there was a rumour that he was to become House-master when Mr. Kidd left.

The two gentlemen passed into the box room, and looked around them. The room was empty, save for the boxes, and the fat pocket-book lying upon one of them. Dr. Holmes glanced round over his gold pince-nez.

"I certainly understood from Mr. Kidd that Inspector Skeet was here."

"Here he is!" said Mr. Railton.

The fat inspector entered the room. The knees of his trousers looked rather dusty, as if he had been down on them looking for clues. No doubt he had.

"Good-morning, gentlemen! This is a bad business. I hope to lay the rascal by the heels shortly, however."

Dr. Holmes, who had had a previous experience of the inspector's ability in lay-

ing rascals by the heels, did not look too hopeful.

"Have you discovered anything more, inspector?" asked Mr. Railton, with a blandness which would have seemed suspicious to anyone less absolutely self-satisfied than George Frederick Skeet.

"Certainly," said the inspector. "After leaving this room the villain went down the passage, descended the lower stairs, and let himself out in the hall in the usual way. A trace of clay, evidently from his boots, I found here, and again in the hall just inside the front door."

"Splendid, inspector!" said Mr. Railton. "Few would have discovered that clue, especially as the hall has been swept this morning. To an untrained intellect it might have appeared that the fragment of clay was deposited there since the hall was swept, and, as you say, it shows the use of a detective force. You think, then, that you will find the man?"

"I hope so, sir. I haven't his description at present, but Mr. Kidd will give me that. I have made a few notes on the matter," continued the inspector. "Perhaps you would like to see them."

He picked up the pocket-book. Dr. Holmes was thinking of his breakfast, but he was nothing if not polite.

"Certainly, Mr. Skeet."

The inspector opened the pocket-book where the pencil marked the place, and handed it to the doctor.

"These notes relate to the circumstances of the happening last night," he explained. "I shall be glad if you will look at what is written there, and tell me if it is correct."

Dr. Holmes's face was amazed for a moment; then he burst into an involuntary laugh. He was reading—not the notes made by the official but the concluding note made by Tom Merry, and it struck him as funny.

Mr. Railton, who saw it at the same moment, could not help breaking into a chuckle.

The inspector stood very stiff and dignified. He knew that he was not admired at St. Jim's so much as he deserved, but he had never expected the two masters to actually smile when he presented his notes for inspection.

"I fail to see what can excite your risibility there, gentlemen," he said stiffly. "I only wish to know whether what is written there is correct."

"Indeed," said the doctor, "I hope not."

"I hope not, certainly!" echoed Mr. Railton.

The inspector stared at them in amazement.

"You hope not, gentlemen! I fail to understand you."

"Do you know what is written here, Mr. Skeet?"

"As I wrote it myself, sir, I can hardly fail to know."

"You wrote this yourself?" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"Certainly!"

"Then I can only conclude that it is correct," said Mr. Railton, handing the inspector back the book.

Inspector Skeet, puzzled, glanced at the line written there under his notes:

"GEORGE FREDERICK SKEET IS THE CHAMPION ASS!"

He turned pale with wrath.

"What—who—which—— My notebook has been tampered with!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Railton.

"I never wrote that, sir."

"It is some trick of a junior, I suppose?" said Dr. Holmes, trying not to smile. "You must forgive it, inspector. Boys will be boys."

Mr. Skeet, with a countenance of a really beautiful crimson colour, was scratching away at the offending line with his pencil to obliterate it. He was bubbling over with wrath.

"It is a serious thing to tamper with the law!" he almost shouted. "I demand to know who——"

Tom Merry seized Blake by the arm and dragged him away.

"This is where we hook it," he murmured. "There's sure to be a row if we're seen. Some people don't like the truth being told 'em all of a sudden."

And the grinning juniors hurried away.

How Dr. Holmes succeeded in pacifying the angry inspector they did not know; but a

little later he left St. Jim's, with the constable and the unused handcuffs—doubtless on the track of the escaped burglar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Jack Blake laid themselves down in the passage and laughed till their ribs ached. The idea of Inspector Skeet showing Dr. Holmes what was written in his notebook, and asking him if it was correct, seemed too funny for words.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "Hear us smile!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" echoed Tom Merry. "He, he, he!"

"Did you see old Skeet's face?"

"Yes. I spotted him through the crack behind the door."

"The champion ass! Ha, ha!"

"He wanted to know if it were correct."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"When you are quite finished, boys!" said a quiet voice.

Blake and Tom jumped up as if they had been electrified. Mr. Kidd, the House-master, was looking down at them with an expression he vainly tried to make severe.

"Well, Merry—well, Blake," said the House-master calmly, "you seem to have been immensely amused by something. May I share the joke?"

Tom Merry looked at Blake, and Blake looked at Tom Merry, but they could not find a word to say.

"Come," went on the House-master genially, "what is the joke, Merry?"

"The joke, sir?" stammered Tom Merry.

"Yes, I think I spoke plainly. Can it possibly have any relation to the incident Mr. Railton has just described to me, concerning Mr. Skeet's pocket-book?"

Tom Merry looked solemnly at Blake.

"Can it, Blake?" he asked.

"I was just about to ask you the question," replied Blake.

"It is very wrong," said Mr. Kidd, "to show impertinence to an officer of the law engaged in the zealous execution of his duty."

"Yes, sir," said Tom; "but—but we



For an instant Blake remained petrified with amazement. A man was springing at him from the trees with a cudgel upraised to strike him down. (See page 336)

couldn't help laughing, sir. His clues are so funny."

"Indeed! What do you know about his clues?"

Tom turned red; he had given himself away.

"We happened to be in the passage, sir," he murmured.

"Quite by chance, of course?" said Mr. Kidd. "I am afraid I can't allow these chances to go unpunished. You will take fifty lines each for happening to be in the passage when Mr. Skeet was working out his—er—clues."

"Yes, sir."

"And were it not for the fact that I overheard your words by accident, I should punish you for the trick upon Mr. Skeet's pocket-book," said the House-master. "Of course, as it is, I can take no notice of the matter. Go in to your breakfast, or there will be no time for you to have any before school."

"Yes, sir," said the delighted scamps; and they hurried away.

"Well out of that," said Tom Merry, thumping Blake on the back; "but you were a giddy goat to give yourself away!"

THE SIGHTS OF GREYFRIARS



No. 1
STUDY
REMOVE
PASSAGE

THIS is the seat of mighty brains,
Where many things are written
Which cause the most side-splitting pains
To girls and boys of Britain.
Here budding authors nobly strive,
For it is Wharton's sanctum;
Then blessings on the Famous Five!
I'm sure you've often thanked 'em!

They sit and burn the midnight oil
With faces bright and ruddy,
Though interruptions sometimes spoil
Their progress in the study.
Dick Penfold staggers in with verse
(Each poem is a winner);
And gentle Lonzy doth rehearse
"The Trials of a Sinner"!

The artful Bunter then rolls in:
This is a moment when you
At once snatch up a rolling-pin
And wipe him off the menu!
For Billy Bunter is a bore,
He's always in a poor way;
"I say, you fellows—" No word more,
He's flying through the doorway!

Of course, this study is the scene
Of countless celebrations;
And nothing infra dig. or mean
Attends these jubilations.
It is a ripping spot, by Jove,
Where all is bright and merry;
Within its walls I love to rove—
(Hear, hear, old chap!—Bob Cherry.)

"I?" exclaimed Blake indignantly. "Why, it was you!"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry, changing the subject. "I say, I want you to tell me how you know the box-room door was unlocked from outside."

"All right; I'll tell you after school. Grub now!"

"There you are, then; go to the other kids," said Tom.

And he passed on to the Shell table, leaving Blake speechless with wrath.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Mr. Keene Makes a Discovery.

"MERRY! Blake!"

It was Kildare's voice. The captain of St. Jim's came along the passage.

"Hallo, Kildare!" said Tom. "What do you want?"

"You and Blake are wanted in the Head's study at once."

The two leaders of all the mischief that ever happened in the School House at St. Jim's looked at each other in dismay.

"I say, Kildare," exclaimed Blake, "I'm sure you're joking!"

"You won't find it a joke if you don't hurry up."

"Is the Head alone?"

"No. Mr. Kidd and Mr. Railton are with him."

"Have they—have they got any canes knocking about?" asked Blake diffidently.

"No," said the captain, laughing. "I don't think it's a punishment. Cut along!"

Considerably brightened up by this intelligence, the two juniors cut off as bidden, leaving Lowther and Manners wondering what the secret was which Blake had so nearly confided to them.

Inspector Skeet was perfectly satisfied that he had discovered the true ways and means of the burglar's mysterious escape from the box-room; but Dr. Holmes was not so sure about it. The Head of St. Jim's turned the matter over in his mind, and after morning school, when he was at leisure, he asked Mr. Kidd and Mr. Railton into his study, to compare notes with them on the subject.

"The inspector believes that the man got his hands loose, and then opened the door from inside by means of some instrument," the Head remarked. "What is your opinion, Mr. Kidd?"

"That he did nothing of the kind," replied the housemaster immediately.

"And yours, Railton?"

"The same as Mr. Kidd's."

"Then I agree with you both," said the Head, with a nod. "The traces which Inspector Skeet found upon the key he was determined to find there, because they were necessary to bear out the theory he had formed in his mind. It is pretty clear to me that the door was unlocked from outside in the usual way."

"My opinion exactly, sir," the housemaster agreed. "Mr. Skeet is too wise to see what is under his very nose. I did not suggest this thought to him, however, doubtless for the same reason that you remained silent."

"My reason," said the Head, "was that the inspector is too fond of fanciful theories, and if it had been suggested that someone belonging to St. Jim's opened the door of the box-room he might have begun theorising that the burglar had a confederate in the house."

"Exactly! It was our duty to call in the police, but not to furnish them with theories," the housemaster remarked. "I was glad to see Mr. Skeet too occupied to notice the staring facts of the case."

"And I, also," said Mr. Railton. "But I take it, Dr. Holmes, that the matter is not to rest here. It is a serious matter, and, though Inspector Skeet is happily out of it, the party who released the burglar ought to be discovered and punished in a fitting way."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"I think so. I am certain that the door was opened for the burglar by somebody within St. Jim's, but after that I can say no more. The only possible explanation is that one of the boys was curious to see the burglar, and ventured into the box-room, or else was touched with compassion for him, and went there deliberately to release him. In either case, it is necessary to get at the truth. I have sent for the two boys who are likeliest to know something about the matter."

The other two masters smiled.

"Tom Merry is one of them, I presume?" Mr. Railton remarked.

"And Jack Blake the other," said Mr. Kidd.

"You are right."

Tap!

"Come in!" called out the doctor.

The two juniors entered the study. They were looking very innocent. Tom Merry especially really seeming as if butter could not possibly melt in his mouth. But the masters knew them too well to take much heed of that.

"Merry," said Dr. Holmes, "did you last night unlock the box-room door, and release the ruffian who was confined there?"

Tom's look showed his utter astonishment at the question.

"No, sir," he said immediately.

"Do you know any boy who did?"

"No, sir."

"Blake, was it you?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"And you do not know what boy was concerned in the matter?"

"No, sir," said Blake, with an inward sigh of relief at the form the question took.

Of course, he did not know for certain that the master of the Shell had released the imprisoned burglar, but everything pointed to that, and the junior could not help suspecting Mr. Keene. But he was far from wishing to give the master away on a suspicion, however strong and well founded.

But the Head of St. Jim's, of course, never dreamed that a master of the school could have done what he suspected the juniors of doing. Dr. Holmes looked puzzled. He knew both Merry and Blake too well to think that either of them would tell him a deliberate lie, yet he had fixed upon them first of all as the probable culprits.

"Understand me, boys," he said. "I think that the burglar did not escape without assistance, and I can only conclude that some very young boy released him, probably from a merciful motive. But I believe your word."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom. "It certainly never crossed my mind to set the man loose. He was too utter a ruffian for that."

"Very well; you may go."

And the two juniors departed.

"I don't understand this, gentlemen," said the doctor, with a shake of the head. "If a Lower Form boy of the School House had done as I suspect, it is not likely that it would long escape the knowledge, at least, of Merry and Blake, even if they had no hand in it. It must have been a junior who performed this foolish action; a senior would be more reflective. I am afraid we must give the matter up for the present."

And Mr. Railton and the House-master nodded assent.

Blake's face was very grave as he left the principal's study. He wondered whether he ought to have told Dr. Holmes of the strange happening of the night. Yet to make such a serious accusation against a man in Mr. Keene's position, and with such shadowy proofs to advance, would be a dangerous step. For, although he was certain that it was the master of the Shell who had passed him in the darkness, and whose voice he had heard whisper the name of "Lasalle" at the door of the box-room, he might not find it so easy to convince others on that point.

Mr. Keene would undoubtedly deny it all from beginning to end, and the possibility of a mistake in the dark, in a moment of high excitement, was great. In fact, it was possible that the Head would think that he had dreamed it all, rather than believe that a master of St. Jim's could be on terms of acquaintanceship with a member of the criminal classes, and the evidence of Manners and Lowther would be worth no more than his own.

It was undoubtedly wisest to keep silence, to say nothing of a boy's natural feeling against telling tales about anyone which would get the party told about into trouble. Yet Blake was not quite easy in his mind.

Tom Merry was not long in noticing that. He gave Blake more than one curious glance, but the junior did not speak.

"I say, Blake," exclaimed Tom, who was never long in coming to the point, "what have you got upon your chest? It isn't possible that—that——"

"That what?" said Blake, stopping in the passage and looking at him.

They were standing close to the corner of

the corridor which led back into the school House, the principal's house at St. Jim's being only an adjunct of the more ancient building. Tom hesitated for a moment.

"Well," he said, "you are a cheeky kid, Blake, and you haven't a proper respect for a fellow in the Shell two months and seven days older than yourself—quite your senior, in fact—but I know you ain't the sort to tell a lie to the Head."

Blake placed his hand upon his heart and bowed.

"Many thanks, Master Merry; your perspicuity does you credit," he said solemnly.

Tom grinned.

"All the same," he went on, "you know something about this matter, and you feel that perhaps you ought to have told the Head. Now, I know you wouldn't tell a whopper, so I'm sure that it wasn't a junior who let the burglar out of the box-room."

"Quite right."

"But you know whom it was. That's what you were going to tell us, I suppose, when Kildare called us to come to the Head."

"Right again. But——"

"But you don't mean to say that it was a senior did such a silly trick? And—and what did you mean by mentioning Mr. Keene's name to us in connection with the matter?"

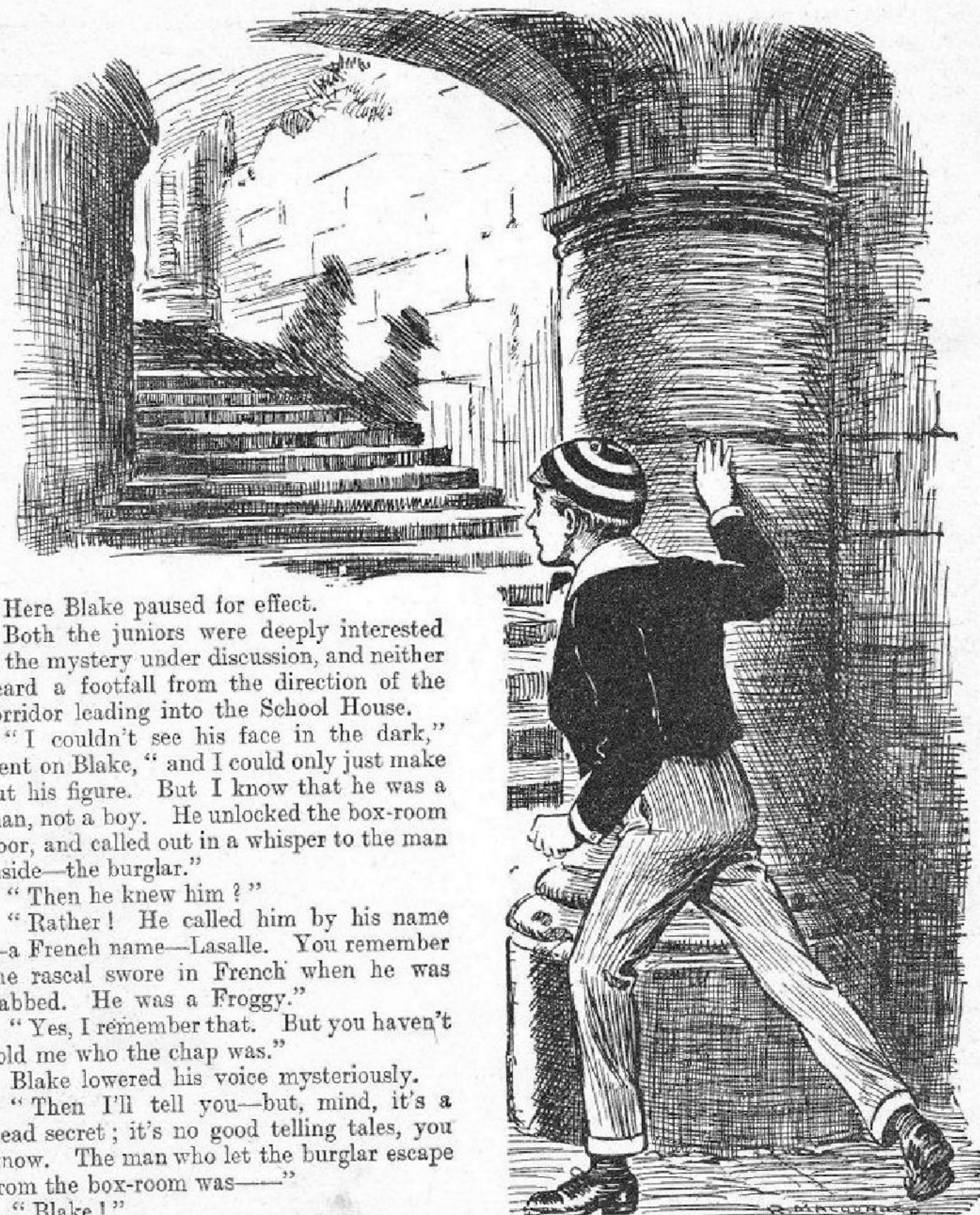
"There's no harm in telling you about it," said Blake thoughtfully. "It's a curious business altogether, and I can't get the hang of it, somehow. The Head asked me if I knew if any boy was mixed up in setting the burglar loose, and I told him I didn't. That was quite true. There wasn't any boy concerned in it. It was a man."

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom, deeply interested. "Go on!"

"It happened this way. After the alarm, we heard you say that you were coming to raid us, and we made up our minds to return the compliment—see?"

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Tom Merry, rather grimly.

"That's how it was. Herries and Dig and myself were coming towards the stairs, when we heard someone coming, and dodged into the alcove near the box-room."



Here Blake paused for effect.

Both the juniors were deeply interested in the mystery under discussion, and neither heard a footfall from the direction of the corridor leading into the School House.

"I couldn't see his face in the dark," went on Blake, "and I could only just make out his figure. But I know that he was a man, not a boy. He unlocked the box-room door, and called out in a whisper to the man inside—the burglar."

"Then he knew him?"

"Rather! He called him by his name—a French name—Lasalle. You remember the rascal swore in French when he was nabbed. He was a Froggy."

"Yes, I remember that. But you haven't told me who the chap was."

Blake lowered his voice mysteriously.

"Then I'll tell you—but, mind, it's a dead secret; it's no good telling tales, you know. The man who let the burglar escape from the box-room was——"

"Blake!"

It was a sharp, rapping voice. The two juniors started violently as Mr. Amos Keene, the master of the Shell, came from the side corridor, his face pale, and his eyes blazing.

Crouching on the stone steps below, Tom Merry felt a sickness of horror creep into his heart at something he detected in the tones of the master of the Shell. (See page 333)

Blake's heart gave a painful jump. He knew that the master of the Shell must have overheard his last words, and had purposely interrupted him in time to prevent the secret being told to Tom Merry.

He knew that Mr. Keene was now aware of the identity of the boy he had nearly caught in the corridor, and who had escaped. And Blake, in spite of his nerve, felt a thrill of uneasiness as he caught the savage blaze in the eyes of the master of the Shell. For a moment there was a tense pause. Mr. Keene looked as though he would spring upon the junior, and both Blake and Tom Merry placed themselves in an attitude of defence. But the master of the Shell controlled himself.

The drawn, tense look passed from his face, his hands unclenched. With a great effort he regained his calmness.

"Blake, what are you dawdling about the passages here for?" he exclaimed harshly. "You two boys, Merry and Blake, are always in mischief of some kind. Merry, I have given you an imposition for the afternoon. Go to your Form-room at once!"

"Mustn't I have any dinner, sir?" said Tom innocently.

He had been startled by the sudden appearance of his Form-master, but Tom Merry was never long in recovering his coolness.

Mr. Keene bit his lip. In his confusion of mind he had forgotten that.

"You may go to the dining-hall, Merry. Remember that you are detained for the whole afternoon, and if you finish the first book of Virgil before tea, you will commence on the second. Not a word. Go!"

Tom Merry, with a comical grimace at Blake, went. The master of the Shell fixed his eyes upon Blake, with a strange expression in them. He had been thinking rapidly.

"Blake, do you happen to be much occupied this afternoon?"

The change in his voice and manner astounded Blake. He had expected a punishment of some kind, for Mr. Keene was never at a loss to find an excuse for one. He would not have been surprised if the master had ordered him to remain in for the half-holiday, and set him some endless imposition to do.

"Occupied, sir?" repeated Blake. "There's the cricket practice, sir."

"Ah, and you do not want to miss that, Blake?"

"The School House will be meeting the New House soon, sir, in the junior house match," said Blake. "I'm in the School House junior eleven. A chap wants to keep fit."

"Then you would have no time to go over to Wayland for me?" said Mr. Keene. "I wanted someone to take a message there for me."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Blake. "I'll have a go at the nets after tea. I don't mind going a bit, sir."

Blake was always willing to oblige, and he had no objection to taking a stroll through the woods and along the leafy lanes to the country town.

"Thank you!" said Mr. Keene. "I will give you a pass to allow you to go out of bounds, Blake. Come to my study, and I will give you the message."

Blake followed the master of the Shell to his study. A suspicion had glimmered into the junior's mind. Mr. Keene had stopped him just when he was going to tell Tom Merry who had released the captured burglar the previous night. Mr. Keene knew that Blake had seen him in the act. Yet his manner was quiet and almost cordial.

What was this sudden message to Wayland invented for? Blake could not help thinking that it was an excuse to get him away from the school, so that the secret would yet remain untold.

When he came back it might be told, certainly; but this was just the device of a scared and startled man, weak of nerve, to gain time.

If Amos Keene had made a frank appeal to Blake then to say nothing about the occurrence, the junior would have given his word cheerfully, and kept it; but that was not Amos Keene's way.

He had never been kind to Blake, and the junior had only too much cause to dislike him. It would therefore have been difficult for Mr. Keene to ask a favour of the boy he had often bullied and punished, and he was of

too unscrupulous a nature himself to have much faith in the honour of others. If Blake had given his word he would have kept it through thick and thin; but Amos Keene would not have believed that.

The master of the Shell sat down at his table and wrote a note. He sealed it, and handed it to Blake. The juniors' dinner-bell was beginning to ring.

"You will take that to Wayland, Blake. Here is your pass. Give the note to Mr. Short, at the White Lion Hotel. Mr. Short is to make the catering arrangements on the day of the school sports," he added, in a tone of explanation, "and the Head has asked me to see to it."

"Yes, sir," said Blake, looking as stupid and wooden as he could.

Inwardly, he was more convinced than ever that the message was designed simply to get him away from the school for the afternoon.

"You will deliver it as quickly as possible," said Mr. Keene. "It is important. You need not get back to the school before tea. Come in by then, and it will be all right. You may go."

"The dinner-bell is ringing, sir," Blake ventured.

"You can dine at the hotel, Blake. I have mentioned it in my letter to Mr. Short."

"Certainly, sir."

"Now you may go. Stay! I will walk down to the gate with you."

"Yes, sir."

The master of the Shell put on his cap, and walked across the quadrangle with Blake. He stood at the gate, and watched the junior disappear into the wood down the lane. Then with slow steps he returned to the School House. Up the stairs he went, and into his study, where he locked the door, and as soon as the key was turned he seemed to break loose in an instant from the restraint he had been imposing upon himself.

The expression of calmness vanished from his face like a mask that is torn off, and his features seemed to grow old and thin and haggard in a moment. He paced his room with irregular strides.

"So it was Blake!" He hissed out the words. "I was sure of it when I went into

the Fourth Form dormitory last night and challenged any of the juniors who might be awake. I felt that it must be Blake. Now I know for certain."

He ground his teeth together.

"Was he alone? It seemed to me that there were others with him, but I could not see them in the dark. Perhaps I was mistaken. He has evidently not told the secret yet; but I was only just in time to stop him from telling it—and to Tom Merry!"

Amos Keene's face grew more lined and haggard. There was a weight upon his mind—a weight of guilt and fear.

"Blake knows enough to get me kicked out of St. Jim's—to ruin me at this school, and to prevent me from doing the work I came here to do. Then what have I to expect from Philip Phipps? I came here to carry out his plan in regard to his cousin, Tom Merry; and if I fail, it is not only that I lose the price of success, but I am at his mercy, and he will show me none. Only flight—the loss of everything—could save me."

He muttered the words feverishly.

"What shall I do? What can I do? Blake must be silenced, but how? I have put off the telling of the secret. I am safe for a few hours. But then he will speak; it will spread over the school, and I am ruined!"

The school clock chimed out and interrupted the meditations of the miserable, guilty man, restlessly pacing the room. He started.

"It is time I was gone." A blaze came into his eyes. "I must see Lasalle. He has brought this danger upon me. Perhaps he can save me from it."

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

The Plot Overheard

"*ARMA virumque cano,*" groaned Tom Merry, opening his Virgil at the old, familiar lines. "*Trojae qui primus ab oris—*" Rats!"

Tom Merry was in for it. Lowther and Manners had offered, in the true spirit of friendship, to stay in with him; but, as Tom said, it was no good to spoil three half-holidays instead of one, and he would not let them

stay. Tom stepped on a desk near one of the windows, and looked out over the sunny quadrangle. He saw the form of Amos Keene cross to the gates and disappear.

"The boulder's gone out," muttered Tom. "Why shouldn't I go out, too? I've got an impot for nothing, and as I can't possibly finish it, what's the good of beginning?" He returned to his desk, and looked dubiously at his books. "He knew I couldn't do half of it, for that matter. It's only a mean excuse for rowing me. I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb; so here goes!"

He slung the foolscap one way and Virgil another. Then he put on his cap and walked out of the class-room.

As it was quite possible that Mr. Keene had asked some prefect to keep an eye on the detained boy, Tom Merry did not venture to linger in the quadrangle.

And so he passed out of the gates of St. Jim's, and crossed the stile down the lane into the wood before he stopped to reflect what he should do with himself for the afternoon.

He had noticed in passing that Figgins and Co. were not to be seen in the school grounds, and he remembered what Blake had said about the excursion planned by the New House juniors for that afternoon.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—the famous trio of the New House and the deadly rivals of the School House juniors—were doing things in style that afternoon.

They were having out a trap in Rylcombe for an afternoon's drive, and the thought crossed Tom Merry's mind of going down to the village and looking for a chance of taking a rise out of the ancient enemies of the School House of St. Jim's.

But he shook his head.

Figgins and Co. had doubtless started on their drive before this; and, anyway, it was not much use for a single fellow to go on the war-path against three, and one of those three the great Figgins!

"Where shall I go?" murmured Tom. "There's that old castle; I haven't explored that yet, and Blake was telling me a thrilling yarn the other day about a St. Jim's chap being kidnapped by a gipsy and kept a

prisoner there once upon a time. Suppose I go and have a look at the place? I've got to keep off the grass round the school, that's certain, and it's no good hunting for Figgins and Co. I've got plenty of matches, and I could explore the vaults there all right, and see the place where D'Arcy was shoved by the gipsy."

It seemed about the best idea, and Tom Merry was not long in acting upon it.

He followed the footpath through the wood to the Castle Hill, upon the slopes of which the ruins of the ancient castle stood.

Suddenly he halted with a muttered exclamation.

He had caught sight of a figure on the path before him—a figure he knew. It was that of Mr. Amos Keene, the master of the Shell.

"Oh, my Aunt Maria!" murmured Tom. "What an awfully narrow shave! I might have run right into him. He's going to Woodford, I suppose. I'll go through the trees."

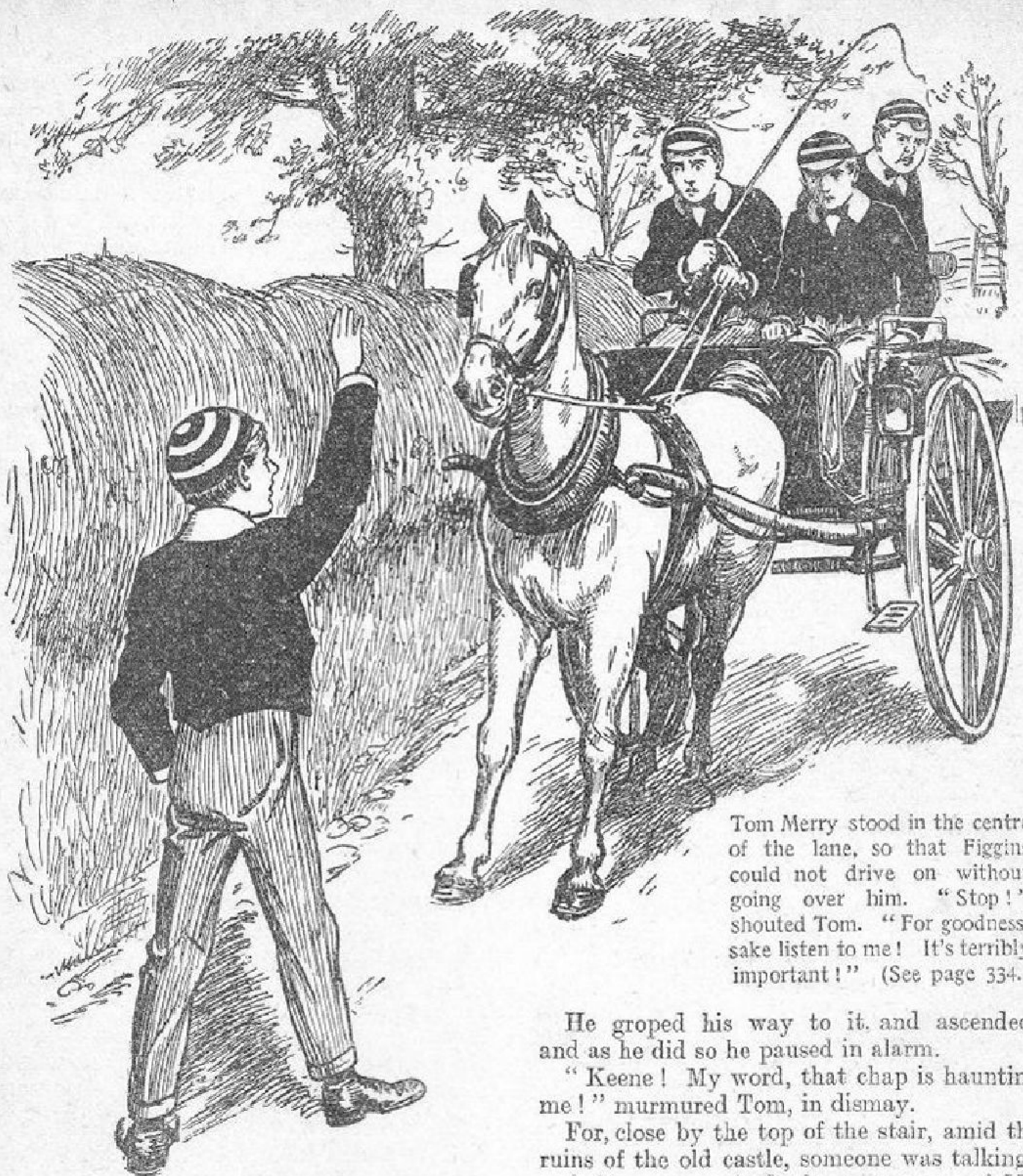
And the scamp of the Shell left the footpath and plunged into the wood. It was a pleasant walk under the old elms and beeches, amid the wood-ferns that grew waist high. Tom came out of the wood close to the old castle, at a considerable distance from the spot where the footpath entered the lane at the foot of the hill.

The ruins of the old castle were before him, and in a minute more the boy was inside the remains of the ancient building and picking his way among huge masses of fallen masonry and fragments of the ancient walls and windows, now open to the four winds of heaven.

"Jolly old place!" murmured Tom, looking round him. "I'd like to explore every inch of it; but awfully lonely. I wish old Manners and Lowther were here."

He stopped at the yawning gap in the stone flags which gave entrance to the stone stairs leading down to the vaults below the castle.

He stepped into the opening and descended the stair. The first turn of it plunged him into darkness, and he struck a wax vesta.



Tom Merry stood in the centre of the lane, so that Figgins could not drive on without going over him. "Stop!" shouted Tom. "For goodness' sake listen to me! It's terribly important!" (See page 334.)

He groped his way to it, and ascended, and as he did so he paused in alarm.

"Keene! My word, that chap is haunting me!" murmured Tom, in dismay.

For, close by the top of the stair, amid the ruins of the old castle, someone was talking; and Tom recognised the sour tones of Mr. Amos Keene, the master of the Shell!

Tom stood quite silent, in dismay.

To be caught by Mr. Keene, when the Form-master imagined him to be writing out his endless imposition in the class-room at St. Jim's, would have painful results for the truant junior.

He had a boxful of them, and did not spare the matches. Dark and gloomy looked the vaults, damp and eerie.

His last match went out, and, having had quite enough of the vaults, Tom turned back to the stairs that lead him to the upper regions.



THE SIGHTS OF GREYFRIARS

LITTLE SIDE

HISTORIC footer ground! the scene
Of many thrilling tussles;
Upon your level stretch of green
We exercise our muscles.
When dreary lessons have expired
We seek your verdant patches,
And there, in footer garb attired,
We play our merry matches!

St. Jim's have often figured here,
To lick us is their mission;
And round the touchline cheer on cheer
Has hailed their exhibition.
When Fatty Wynn is keeping goal,
How eager every one is!
It really is, upon my soul,
A sight for gods—and bunnies!

The Rookwood boys have also paid
Full many a rousing visit;
And often in the mud they've laid,
It's not surprising, is it?
For sometimes, Little Side, you cause
Confusion, slips, and muddles;
And then we like you not, because
You're just a sea of puddles!

Whatever happens, Little Side,
We cannot do without you;
Though on occasion, in our pride,
We feel we'd like to rout you.
Long may you flourish to behold
Our games so scientific!
We love you when you're neatly rolled,
When bumpy, you're "terrific"!

It was evidently his best plan to lie low, and remain hidden where he was until the coast was clear.

"Confound the man!" murmured Tom. "He seems to haunt me! I suppose he was coming to the castle, and not going to Woodford at all when I saw him in the wood. What on earth can he want here? He isn't the kind of chap to want to explore an old ruin, and—— My only aunt! Who's that he's talking to?"

Tom gave a violent start as he heard a second voice above him.

He had cause to be astonished.

"Diable! It is safe enough to meet here, I should think. Who could possibly see us? Besides, I could not be recognised now. Mon ami, you allow your fears to run away with you!"

Tom Merry knew that voice.

It was the voice of the Frenchman with whom he had struggled the night before; the voice of the burglar who had broken into the school in the still small hours!

The voice of the man who had so mysteriously escaped from the box-room in which the House-master had locked him for security!

What was the meaning of this meeting—evidently a secret one—between the master of the Shell and this escaped criminal in the lonely ruins of the old castle?

Tom Merry remained silent, lost in amazement and alarm.

The sharp, rapping voice of the master of the Shell replied to the remark made by the Frenchman.

"You should not have remained in this vicinity. You should never have come at all."

The other laughed slightly.

"My dear fellow, my appearance is so changed that I tell you no one could recognise me. You forget that my face was blacked last night, a complete disguise."

"I know it, but——"

"As for the rest, I did not know you were at the school when I came. How was I to know that my old friend had turned over a new leaf, and——"

"Confound you!" muttered Mr. Keene. "Leave all that unsaid. I am in no mood to

be mocked. The mischief is done now, anyway."

"True; and it is useless to recriminate. I had no idea that you were a master at St. Jim's, but had I known, I tell you frankly that it would have made no difference. I am in want of money; and this is my profession. It was different in the old days; my position was as good as yours is now, or better. We both made false steps; but the difference is that I was found out, and lost all, while you, somehow, bought the silence of the man who could have ruined you."

"And have been under his thumb ever since," exclaimed Mr. Keene hoarsely. "The slave of his will, to do as he chooses to order!"

"That is better than penal servitude, which was my fate," said the Frenchman. "You fared better than I did, though I acknowledge that almost any fate would be preferable to being under the thumb of a man like Philip Phipps."

Tom Merry gave a jump.

His cousin's name—on this man's lips! What did it mean? He knew that his cousin was in communication with Mr. Keene. The mystery was deepening.

"Hark!" exclaimed Amos Keene. "Did you hear anything?"

"No."

"I thought I heard a sound."

Tom Merry scarcely breathed.

He had made a slight sound, involuntarily, at the mention of his cousin's name; a sound that would have hardly alarmed a rat, but Mr. Keene's ears were those of a man in ceaseless fear, which nothing could escape.

The boy remained still as stone; he dared not venture to go down the steps again, for he knew that he would be heard. He almost held his breath, his heart beating hard.

To his relief the Frenchman broke into a mocking laugh.

"You are as nervous as an old woman, Keene! It was nothing!"

The master of the Shell drew a deep, quivering breath.

"I have been in terror since yesterday. As you know, I was seen to open the door of the box-room and release you. I did not know then by whom; I have heard since.

It was a boy named Blake, and to-day I stopped him in the very act of telling the secret to Tom Merry."

"Ma foi!"

"That is what I wish to speak to you about," said Mr. Keene, lowering his voice involuntarily, though he did not think there was anyone to hear. "You have insisted upon meeting me here, Lasalle, and I knew what you wanted; and I am willing to pay you, if you can help me."

"Good! But what can I do? Nothing will still the boy's chattering tongue."

"Listen! I stopped the boy, as I told you, before he had time to tell the secret, and I have sent him away upon an excuse which will keep him from St. Jim's all the rest of the afternoon. The secret is safe for a few hours."

"But then?"

"He has gone from St. Jim's," went on the master, unheeding. "He has gone to Wayland, a town near here, and will come back by a footpath through the wood, the loneliest in the county."

Lasalle started.

And Tom Merry, crouching on the stone steps below, felt a sickness of horror creep into his heart at something he detected in the tones of the master of the Shell.

"And what then?" said the Frenchman.

"Upon his silence hangs my safety," said the master of the Shell, in low tones. "It is not only that I shall be ruined, but I am at St. Jim's to do the work of Philip Phipps. I need not explain how, and I shall suffer if I fail. Do you understand? If I go, he will think it is a trick to escape doing his bidding, and he will not spare me. I dare not leave the school, yet if this boy tells his secret I shall have no choice. He must not tell it, Lasalle."

"But you do not wish me to——"

"Fool! That will not be necessary!" muttered the master of the Shell, understanding the Frenchman's unspoken thought. "You remember what you did once—a blow behind the ear, and there was no memory left. Nothing more serious than that."

Hidden upon the stone steps, Tom Merry remained half frozen with horror.

He realised now that it would not only mean

a punishment, but danger, if he showed himself. The villain who was capable of this cowardly plot against Blake was capable of anything.

"I will do as you wish," said Lasalle. "I am in desperate need of money, and the task is not difficult. But, mark you, I must have fifty pounds."

"Then I will tell you of a spot which will be the best for your purpose, and leave you there. I must be at St. Jim's when it happens, to have an alibi ready proved in case of any suspicion. There is a spot where a plank crosses a pool, and if you remove the plank, Blake will have to stop, and then you can deal with him. Lose no time."

There was a sound of retreating footsteps, and then silence.

Tom Merry remained in suspense.

The master of the Shell was within a dozen paces, leaning against a fragment of wall, and smoking a cigar. His back was towards Tom.

The boy's heart beat painfully.

What was he to do? Already Lasalle was on his way to his dastardly work, and here was Tom cooped up, unable to fly to Blake's aid or to warn him. If he showed himself now he would have to deal with a desperate man, and that would not help Blake.

Would the villain never go? He looked out again. To his joy he saw that the master of the Shell had thrown away the stump of his cigar, and was walking out of the ruins. Tom barely waited till he was gone before he came up from the stone stairway.

Then, taking a different course from that followed by Mr. Keene, the boy quitted the ruins, and in a few minutes more found himself in the lane at the foot of the hill which led to Woodford and Wayland. There he paused in painful doubt and indecision.

He could race off to Wayland to warn Blake, but he might—possibly would—miss him. He could cut off to the scene of the ambush to help the junior when he was attacked, and doubtless arrive in time. Which should he do? What was the use of two juniors meeting the attack of an armed and desperate ruffian? Yet that was better than leaving Blake to his fate. If there were only help to be had?

But the place was lonely, and the minutes were precious.

"Hallo, there! Get out of the way! Hallo, hallo!"

Tom Merry started and looked up. A trap was coming down the lane at full tilt, and the reins of the pony were held by the great Figgins, the chief of the New House juniors. Fatty Wynn and Kerr were with him in the trap, munching oranges.

"Hallo!" roared Figgins. "That you, Merry? Going to sleep standing up, like a giddy horse? What do you want to take a nap in the middle of a road for, fathead?"

Tom waved his hand.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop, Figgins, I want to speak to you."

"That's likely, you School House waster! Get out of the road, or we'll run over you."

"Stop!"

Tom stood in the centre of the lane, so that Figgins could not drive on without going over him. Figgins, whose threat, of course, was an empty one, dragged the pony to a halt.

"Here, hold these reins, Kerr!" he said wrathfully. "I'll teach that School House cad to stop me like this!"

And Figgins jumped out of the trap, looking very warlike.

"Now then, School House cad, come on!"

"Pax, Figgins, I——"

"Pax be blowed! I'm going to punch your head."

"Figgins! For goodness' sake listen to me. It's terribly important!"

Figgins for the first time noted the junior's strained, white face. His hands unclenched themselves immediately. The rival houses of St. Jim's were always on the war-path against one another, but at a serious time they could forget their little differences and pull together in a true, loyal, British way.

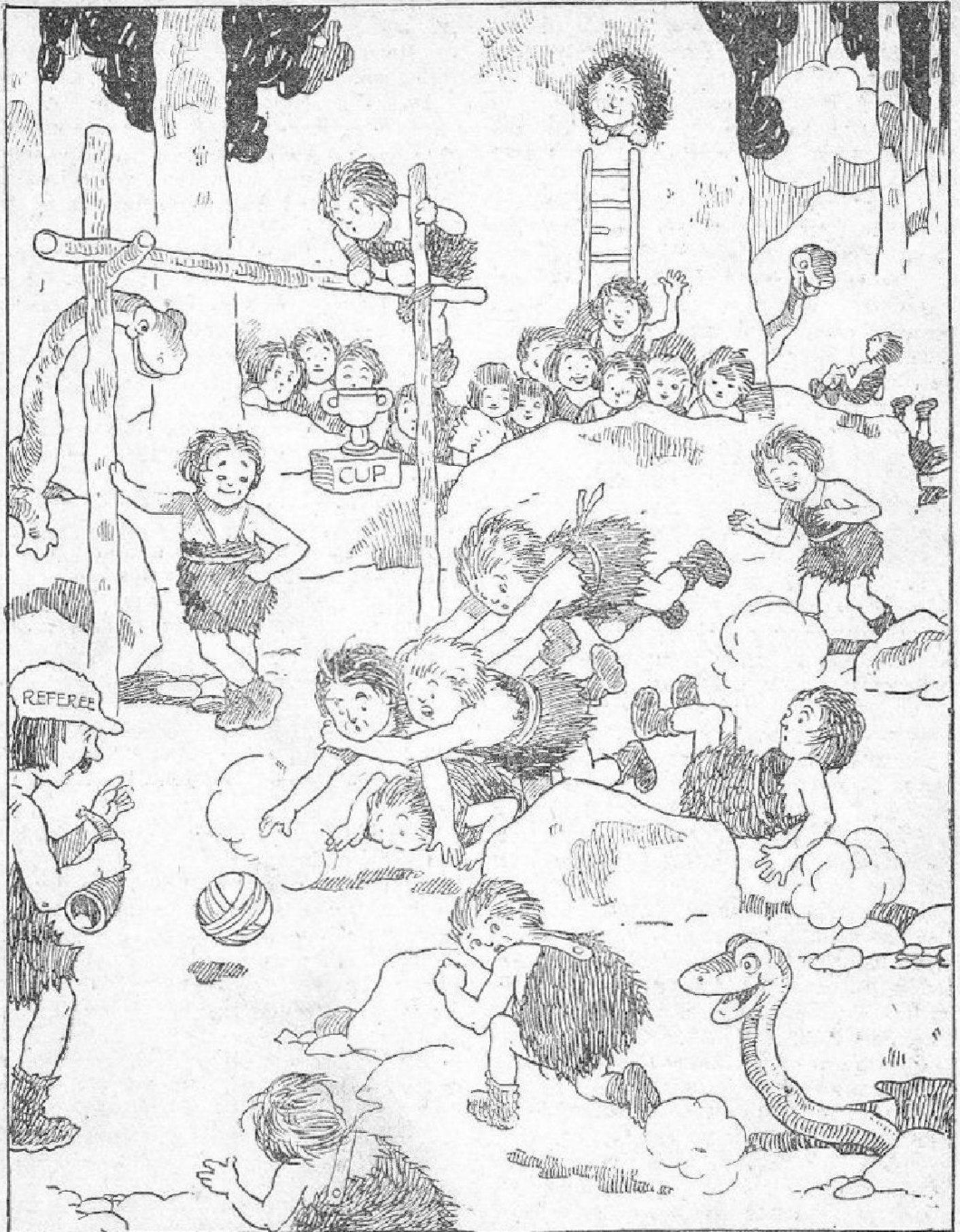
"What is it, Merry?" asked Figgins quickly. "Anything gone wrong? I was only rotting, old chap. What's the row?"

"It's Blake!" gasped Tom Merry. "He's in danger—horrible danger. Will you chaps help me to save him?"

"Will we?" said Figgins. "Well, rather! Where is he? What's the matter?"

"You know the plank over the pool, on

GREYFRIARS SCHOOL IN PREHISTORIC DAYS



THE FINAL FOR THE HEAD-MASTERS' CHALLENGE CUP—A GRIM STRUGGLE IN THE PENALTY AREA

the footpath through the woods from Wayland ? ”

“ Yes ; I gave Blake a ducking there once.”

“ There’s a scoundrel waiting there for him, to hurt him. It’s the burglar who broke into the School House the other night. He’s going to injure Blake ; perhaps kill him. Never mind how I know. I am going to save him, or get served the same myself. Will you come ? ”

“ I—I say, Merry, you’re not romancing, are you ? ”

“ Do I look as if I were romancing ? ” cried Tom, in an agony of anxiety.

“ No, you don’t. Let me see,” Figgins thought rapidly. “ The trap will take us more than half the distance, and then we’ll cut through the woods on foot. Jump in ! ”

Tom Merry nimbly followed Figgins into the trap.

Figgins took the reins again, and turned the vehicle in the lane, and set off at a spanking speed. And as they went, Tom hurriedly explained what he had overheard in the ruins.

The trap fairly flew, and the distance was covered in good time, and then the four juniors dismounted, and tied the pony to a tree beside the lane.

Then they plunged into the woods, led by Figgins, who knew every inch of the ground for miles around St. Jim’s.

With Figgins and Tom Merry, two of the best junior sprinters at the school, in the lead, the rescuers dashed through the wood, Kerr close behind the leaders, and Fatty Wynn panting desperately in the rear. There was a sudden ringing through the wood.

“ Help ! Help ! ”

Blake’s voice !

Tom Merry and Figgins dashed madly on.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Capture !

JACK BLAKE came along the footpath from Wayland whistling cheerily.

The chief of Study No. 6 had delivered his message in the little country town, and hung about looking at the shops for some time, and after a pleasant afternoon he was returning to St. Jim’s to arrive in time for tea.

He came down the footpath without a thought of danger.

He had been puzzled at Mr. Keene’s sending him off, knowing well that the master’s object was to gain time before the secret was told. What else might be in Mr. Keene’s mind he did not guess ; and he would never have dreamed of suspecting Mr. Keene of the black treachery of which he was really guilty.

In his little excursion, in fact, the junior had almost forgotten the matter, and he was thinking of anything but the master of the Shell and his secret as he came along whistling under the old beeches.

Even in broad daylight this footpath was dusky, overshadowed by the huge branches that interlaced above. Blake arrived at the pool which, spreading far under the trees, blocked the path, and was usually crossed by a long, wide plank.

“ Hallo, hallo ! ” muttered Blake, stopping in dismay on the margin of the pool. “ Some silly ass has shoved the plank into the water.”

He looked across the pool in dismay.

The end of the plank, which should have rested on the margin, was plunged into the water, sunk deep in the mud below, five or six feet from the bank.

Blake was calculating the width of the pool, and wondering whether he could venture to attempt a clear jump of fifteen or sixteen feet, when there was a rustle in the foliage near him.

He looked round.

For an instant he remained petrified with amazement. A man was springing at him from the trees with a cudgel upraised to strike him down.

A moment more, and the blow fell, and few lads would have been quick enough to escape it. But Blake did not put in continual practice on the cricket field without learning to be quick and wary. He instinctively dodged, and darted away, and the cudgel swept the empty air a couple of feet from his head.

Lasalle—for, of course, the ruffian was he—turned upon the junior again with a snarl.

Blake, his heart beating like a hammer, for he could only imagine that he had a dangerous madman to deal with, fled at top speed, back the way he had come.

"Help! Help!" he shouted.

The next moment he caught his foot in a root trailing over the path, and went heavily down. Dazed by the fall, he struggled blindly to regain his feet, but before he could do so the Frenchman was upon him.

"Diable!" hissed Lasalle. "Did you think to escape me?"

He flung himself upon the junior, and Blake went down heavily again, with the ruffian's weight upon him.

"Help! Help!" he shrieked.

There came a crash in the wood—a crash of parting thickets.

"Buck up!" yelled Figgins. "St. Jim's to the rescue!"

He came out of the wood like a shot, and, without a thought of hesitation, hurled himself upon the Frenchman.

Lasalle went over backwards with a clutch upon his collar.

He struggled furiously, but before he could use his weapon Tom Merry had hold of his arm, and, twisting it savagely, forced him to drop the cudgel.

"Diable!"

The man fought like a wild cat. But Kerr came panting up, and piled himself upon him, and Blake, dazed and dizzy as he was, was not the fellow to be left out of a fight. He soon had a grip on the scoundrel. Last, but not least, Fatty Wynn arrived, panting and breathless, his fat figure quivering with his exertions, but as plucky as anybody. He plumped himself down on the Frenchman's head, and that settled it!

Fatty's weight would have settled almost anybody. The suffocating ruffian ceased to struggle, only wriggling painfully. Figgins giggled.

"That's right, Fatty! Sit on his head, the brute! We've got him!"

"G-r-r-r!" came from the Frenchman.

"Hold him tight! Give me your belt, Kerr, to fasten his wrists. Hurrah!"

Lasalle's wrists were soon secured. Powerful ruffian as he was, he had no chance against five determined and plucky juniors. His hands were fastened, and then his legs were shackled. Then they dragged him to his feet.

A torrent of oaths in his native tongue

poured from his lips, but Figgins soon stopped that by picking a wet turf from the bank of the pool, and ramming it into his mouth, sending it well home with a thump. Lasalle stammered and spluttered frantically.

"Got him!" exclaimed Figgins jubilantly. "This is one up for the New House kids!"

"School House, you mean," said Tom Merry quickly. "Why—— But never mind. We won't row about that now. You've done jolly well this time, Figgy, and you're a decent sort."

"Thank you," said Figgy, with a bow. "We needn't quarrel about the glory. We've got the brute, anyway. Let's march him off to the trap, and drive him into Rylcombe to the police-station. They'll be glad to see him."

The prisoner's legs were left loose enough for him to shamble along in the grasp of the juniors. He was forced through the wood, and out into the lane where the trap was waiting. He was bundled into it, and then the jubilant boys drove off in triumph to Rylcombe.

It was rather a close fit in the trap, with the ruffian and the five juniors, but they managed it. Figgins drove, and they entered Rylcombe in great state, Kerr performing a selection upon his mouth-organ to attract the attention of the public.

Needless to say, they attracted attention, a huge crowd following the trap to the police-station, where the prisoner was delivered into the charge of the astounded Inspector Skeet, who was glad enough to get him, though amazed by the capture.

"Now for St. Jim's!" said Tom Merry. "And for Amos Keene! We had better tell Mr. Kidd first, and leave it to him whether Keene is arrested or not. We don't want to bring any disgrace upon St. Jim's if we can help it; but, in any case, our Form-master will have to go, and a jolly good riddance!"

It was dark when the juniors arrived at St. Jim's. They entered the School House quietly, not wishing to give the alarm to the master of the Shell, and went straight to Mr. Kidd's study. The housemaster was there, and he looked rather astonished when, in response to his cheery "Come in!" five juniors marched into his study.

He looked more astonished still when he heard what they had to tell him. He was at first inclined to be incredulous, but when he learned that Lasalle was a prisoner at Rylcombe police-station, he could no longer doubt.

"You may go back to the New House, Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn," he said. "You have done very well, my lads—very well indeed. I am proud of you. Merry and Blake will come with me."

The New House juniors, pleased as Punch with the House-master's words of commendation, went back to their own house. Mr. Kidd, with a dark brow, signed to Tom and Blake to follow him, and went direct to the study of the master of the Shell.

"There's a high old time in store for the Keene bird, Tommy!" whispered Blake. "He deserves all he gets, but I don't envy him facing Kidlets just now—do you?"

"Rather not, Blake."

Mr. Kidd tapped at Mr. Keene's door, and entered. The juniors, at a sign from him, followed him into the room. The master of the Shell was there, apparently busily at work. The "alibi" would certainly have been an excellent one had the cowardly deed in the wood turned out as the schemer had designed.

Mr. Keene looked up as the House-master came in. His glance was simply inquiring at first; but when it passed Mr. Kidd and fell upon the two boys, a hideous greyness overspread his face.

There was Blake, well and strong, evidently none the worse for the ambushade in the wood. He had escaped. And what did this visit to the study portend? Ruin, for all must be known now.

"I have a few words to say to you, Mr. Keene," said the House-master. "I have just learned a story that has amazed me, but which I cannot doubt. Were you the one who released the burglar from the box-room last night?"

"A very strange question to put to a man in my position, Mr. Kidd!" said the master of the Shell, trying to speak calmly. "I presume you are jesting?"

"Did you meet him at the ruined castle this afternoon?"

Amos Keene started violently

"Did you plot with him to waylay Jack Blake in the wood, and injure him so that he would be unable to bear witness against you?" went on the House-master remorselessly.

"Good heavens!"

"If you did, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it, for your accomplice, the Frenchman Lasalle, is arrested, and all is known."

"Lasalle arrested?"

"Yes," said Mr. Kidd sternly. "Coward! Villain! Your plot was overheard by Tom Merry, and he, with the assistance of some juniors belonging to the New House, rescued Blake from the hands of your dastardly confederate. Lasalle is now in prison, to take his trial for burglary and murderous assault. I need not ask you if the tale is true. Your face tells me enough."

The master of the Shell gave a hunted look round. His glance fell upon Tom Merry again, and his eyes flashed.

"Listen!" he cried. "I came to St. Jim's with an object—a secret motive—and it concerns the safety of that boy. I can tell you what may save him from disaster—perhaps from death—as the price of my liberty!"

"I have no right to grant you liberty."

"Then Tom Merry is doomed! What I came here to achieve others can achieve, if I am sent to prison. Spare me, and I will tell all!"

The House-master hesitated.

"Come with me," he said briefly. "Merry, you may come also. It is for the Head to decide what shall be done. Blake, I can trust you to say nothing?"

"Certainly, sir!"

The House-master and Mr. Keene left the study. The latter walked with dragging steps, like a man upon whom old age had suddenly descended. The blow had crushed him. Tom Merry followed. The boy was amazed. Was the strange mystery which had surrounded the new master to be cleared up at last—that mysterious communication between Philip Phipps and the master of the Shell to be explained?

Dr. Holmes looked in surprise at his



The prisoner's legs were left loose enough for him to shamle along in the grasp of the victorious juniors! (See page 337)

visitors. He looked amazed when the house-master, in a few clear, crisp sentences, explained his errand.

"Impossible!" gasped the Head. "Have the walls of St. Jim's sheltered such a scoundrel? The law must take its course. I would not interfere for the sake of such an utter villain, even if I had the power!"

"You have the power!" muttered Amos

Keene huskily. "I ask only to be allowed an hour's interval to make my escape; and I can save Tom Merry!"

"What danger threatens this boy?"

"A danger I came here to bring upon him, which will threaten him till it overwhelms him unless I give you the warning, which is the price of my liberty."

There was a long pause, during which the

face of the exposed villain seemed to grow older, more haggard, as if years instead of minutes were passing.

"Speak!" said the doctor at length. "Speak, and if you are telling the truth, I will grant you what you ask. And Heaven forgive me if I do wrong! It will be in a good cause!"

The master of the Shell huskily cleared his throat.

"I was forced to come here by Philip Phipps, Tom Merry's cousin. I am in his power. It is years since I was concerned in a crime with Lasalle. The Frenchman went to penal servitude. It lay in Philip Phipps's power to send me also, but he forbore. He knew that he could make use of me. I need not tell you all that I have done at his bidding. I may be a villain. I am an angel of light beside him."

"My cousin!" murmured Tom Merry, pale to the lips.

"He made me come here. I was to plot against Tom Merry—to ill-use him as much as I could, to drive him into rebellion if possible, and obtain him a bad name in the school, then to fix upon him some disgraceful charge; and as soon as he was disgraced, driven in shame from the school, I was to have my reward."

"And why," said the Head, horror-stricken—"why was this cowardly, this dastardly plot formed against an innocent lad?"

"Because he is Philip Phipps's rival for a fortune; because General Merry, his uncle in India, intends to leave him the bulk of his wealth, and would cross his name out of his will to-morrow if he were convicted of being a coward or a thief. A fortune is at stake, and Philip Phipps has no scruples. He is sup-

posed to be in India, but he is in England, and I have been under his thumb ever since I came to St. Jim's, acting under his orders. When I am gone, Tom Merry will still have him to fear. I swear that I have told you the truth. Have I earned my freedom?"

"Go!" said the Head slowly.

Without another word Amos Keene left the room, and five minutes later he had left the school, never to return.

"Merry," said the Head quietly, when the door had closed behind the departing scoundrel, "you have heard this story. How much truth there is in it I cannot say. I can only say that while you are at St. Jim's I shall watch over you with every care, and see that no harm comes to you from any enemy you may possess."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom.

And he quietly left the study. His face was very sombre as he went. The master of the Shell's confession had cast a cloud even upon his sunny spirits; but in the passage he met Blake.

"Hallo! Down in the dumps?" exclaimed Blake, slapping him on the shoulder. "Buck up! I've come for you."

"What's on?"

"Figgins and Co. are giving a feast to celebrate the departure of our highly-respected new master, and we're all going. Lowther and Manners are waiting, and so are Study No. 6. So clear your noble countenance, and come and eat, drink, and be—Merry!"

And Tom laughed, and willingly enough went over the way with the little crowd of School House guests, to be hospitably received by Figgins and Co., and to have what the juniors afterwards correctly described as a real, ripping, high old time.

