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Complete Tale of

TOM MERRY.



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THE MASTER'S SECRET.

LONG, COMPLETE
SCHOOL ADVENTURE
TALE.

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD



**A BIFF
FOR
AUGUSTUS!**
(See page 14.)

NO 14.

VOL. 1.

"I'M AFRAID
OUR FWIEND-
SHIP WILL
HAVE TO CEASE,"
GRUMBLED ARTHUR
AUGUSTUS. "NO-
THING CAN EXCUSE
SUCH WUFFNESS;
AND -I—OH!"

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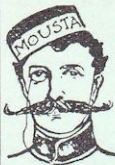
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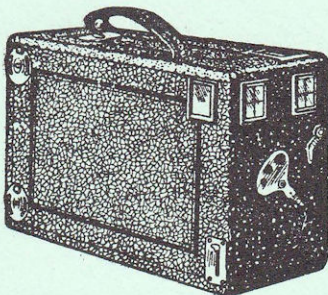
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The Master's Secret!



“Hallo—hallo!” muttered Blake. “Some silly ass has shoved the plank into the water!” (See page 13.)

A Tale of Tom Merry. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. A Midnight Alarm.

“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 war-path. 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.

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, crumble! Mr. Keene?"
"Yes. And if he catches us it will mean a warning. I can tell you. He's down on us. Curious thing that so many people should be down on nice, harmless chaps like us."

Manners and Lowther gave a silent chuckle. They listened intently for a repetition of the sound that had alarmed Tom Merry. It would certainly have been no joke to be caught by Amos Keene, the new master, but, at the same time, they did not want to give up the raid upon the Fourth Form dormitory if they could help it.

The master's door was further down the long passage towards the stairs, and they could see a glimmer of light under it, showing that Mr. Keene was still up. But the door did not open, and the sound was not repeated, and at last even Tom began to think that he had been mistaken.

"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!"

"I say," muttered Lowther, as a new thought struck him, "I suppose it isn't possible that there's any other party raiding to-night? That would account for it. It would be a good joke to run into Blake and Study No. 6 in the dark."

"Not likely," said Tom Merry. "Anyway, we've got to risk that. We're not going to give up the raid for nothing."
And the Terrible Three stole on softly, to pass the master's door and reach the stairs. They passed the door safely with beating hearts, and Tom led the way down the stairs. He was less than half-way down when he stopped, catching his comrades by the arms.

"Silence!" he whispered. "Look!"
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-who 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.

"Not a sound!" he murmured, in the faintest of whispers. "He's heard us already. Keep still; don't move!"

They did keep still, crouching against the wall at the side of the staircase, scarcely daring to breathe. They were no cowards, but this sudden and unexpected encounter, in so strange a time and place, was enough to shake any nerve. And what followed was not calculated to reassure them.

The ray of light from the dark-lantern travelled slowly up the stairs, as if the unseen man below had heard some slight sound, and intended to ascertain whether the coast was clear before he ventured upon the stairs.

The chums hardly breathed. If the ray fell upon them and revealed their presence there, what would be the result? They clenched their hands hard. It might mean a desperate struggle with some dangerous ruffian.

The ray of light did not reach them. It passed carelessly over the stairs, and missed the three boys crouching against the wall. Apparently satisfied, the unseen man shut off the light, and darkness reigned. Then a faint footfall told that he was ascending the stairs.

The boys had no time to think. The man was close upon them before they quite knew that he was coming, and they could only hope that he would pass them and fail to discover their presence.

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.

Manners groped for the burglar and found him, and threw an arm round his neck from behind, and tried to drag him off Tom. Lowther, guided by a smell of burning oil, picked up the dark-lantern the burglar had dropped on the stairs, and turned on the light. Then, placing the lantern quickly on the bottom stair, he sprang to the aid of Tom and Manners.

The burglar had dashed Tom Merry to the floor, and was turning on Manners like a tiger. Lowther had hold of him in a moment, and he struggled between the two. Tom Merry, gasping and dazed, but still game, jumped up, and laid hold of the ruffian again.

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 nightshirts and pyjamas.

Mr. Kidd, whose bed-room 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, Rusden, 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 housemaster, holding up the lamp he carried, and surveying the blackened face of the burglar. "If you hurt anybody with that weapon it will be all 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 housemaster

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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 housemaster 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 housemaster and Mr. Keene, one on each side. Mr. Kidd called for a rope, which was promptly brought by Jack Blake.

The housemaster 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 housemaster 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 housemaster 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.

He felt an inward uneasiness. He had hoped in the excitement to escape question as to how he had happened to be out of the Shell dormitory at that particular time of night. But the housemaster evidently wanted to know all about it.

"Did the burglar wake you up, Merry?"

"N-no, sir!"

"How did you come to be awake, then?"

"Manners woke me up, sir."

"Ah! Did you hear the burglar, Manners?"

"N-no, sir! Monty Lowther woke me up."

The housemaster turned to Lowther.

"Then you were the one who first heard the burglar, Lowther?"

"No, sir!" stammered Monty. "I—I woke up because—"

"Well, what did you wake up for?"

"The alarm clock went off, sir."

"Indeed! Does your alarm clock usually go off in the middle of the night?"

"No, sir, not exactly, but—"

"But you had timed it to do so, I suppose, on this occasion?"

Monty Lowther had to admit the soft impeachment.

"You may as well be frank," said the housemaster calmly. "You were out of your dormitory at forbidden hours, you three! Is it not so?"

The Terrible Three looked at one another.

"Come, Merry, answer my question."

"Is a prisoner bound to convict himself, sir?" asked Tom Merry, with refreshing coolness. "Of course, I may have been out of the dormitory. But—but if I've got to accuse

myself, sir, I—I don't think I could quite rely upon my memory."

There was a general grin. Mr. Kidd's face relaxed.

"Come, Merry, under the circumstances, as you have certainly been instrumental in preventing a robbery from taking place, I shall inflict no punishment. I simply desire to know exactly what happened. Can you remember clearly now?"

"Quite clearly sir," said Tom promptly. "We were out of the dormitory, sir, and coming down the stairs when we came upon the giddy burglar. Then the tumpus started."

"And what were you coming downstairs for?"

"Er—because the Fourth Form dormitory is a floor lower than ours, sir."

"So you were going to pay a visit to the Fourth Form dormitory?"

"Yes, sir."

"You hounder!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "You were, were you?"

"Silence, Blake! What was your object in planning a visit to the Fourth Form room at such an hour, 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."

The chums of the Shell went upstairs again. They were disappointed, it is true, but, still, they were in a satisfied mood upon the whole. They had captured a burglar, and greatly distinguished themselves, and it was certain that their exploit would throw Study No. 6 into the shade.

Erre 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!

CHAPTER 2.

A Startling Discovery.

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 ready," 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 war-path, 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 very wewettful to disregard 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 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, my son," said Blake, in a low voice. "I tell you there's someone coming down."

"It can't be another burglar."
"No; but it's very likely Tom Merry on the way-path again. He may only have waited till the house quieted down."

The chums chuckled silently.
"If it is, we'll get the Terrible Three in a beautiful ambush!" murmured Herries. "Let's get into the recess near the box-room, and swipe 'em as they pass."
"Good enough!"

The School House at St. Jim's was an ancient building, full of strange twists and turns. Near the room that was used as a box-room was a deep recess, in which mischievous juniors had many a time lain in ambush for boys coming down the passage. It did not take the juniors long to get into it silently in their stocking-feet.

"He cometh!" murmured Blake. "Can't you hear his footprints, kids?"
All three of the chums could hear the sound now of faint, cautious footfalls.

Someone had come downstairs from the upper floor, and turned into the passage leading to the box-room and the Fourth Form dormitory.

"He's alone," muttered Herries.
Blake nudged his companions.
"Don't act till I give you the word. Mind your eye! It may not be Tom Merry at all."

The warning held the chums mute and still as the footsteps came nearer.

A form, dimly seen, loomed up in the darkness of the passage.

Faintly as the hidden juniors discerned it, they could see that it was not the form of a boy, but of a grown-up man.

Whom could it be?
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?

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.
It was very injudicious at such a moment; but Herries had caught his head a crack against the wall, and he was surprised and hurt.

There was a gasp from the doorway of the box-room.
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.

But as they fled a groping hand caught Blake's head, and fastened upon his hair, and he was dragged to a halt.

Although he was hurt, he had presence of mind enough not to call out and betray himself by the sound of his voice.

He released Dig and Herries, and turned round, setting his teeth to keep back a cry of pain. He still had the wet sponge daubed with red ink, in his hand, and he brought it into play in a flash.

The master of the Shell was clutching at him, as if determined to know who had discovered him at such an inopportune moment. Blake dashed the wet sponge into his face, squeezing it hard as he did so.

There was a gasp, and the grip on his head relaxed.
Blake tore himself away in a twinkling.

The master was gasping, and trying to rub the ink out of his eyes: the three juniors bolted on, and dashed into the Fourth Form dormitory.

There was a howl in the darkness, as Blake collided with somebody, and they went in a scrambling heap to the floor together, and a crack as of a breaking piece of glass.

"Wh-wh-what is it?" gasped Blake, started out of his wits by such an encounter, in that moment of wild and thrilling excitement.

Dig had closed the door, and he and Herries were already bolting into bed. Blake staggered to his feet as he heard D'Arcy's voice beneath him.

"You wuff brute, you have broken my eyeglass!"
"Blow your old eyeglass!" growled Blake. "Nip into bed, sharp!"

"You have hurt me."
"Ass! Into bed!"

Blake threw his sponge under the nearest bed, and then seized D'Arcy by the shoulders and ran him towards his. D'Arcy wriggled protestingly. He wasn't accustomed to hurried movements. But every second Blake was dreading to see the master of the Shell put his head into the dormitory.

"Blake, I insist upon your releasing me. I am not accustomed to such wuffness."

Blake slammed him upon his bed.
"Ass!" he whispered fiercely. "Cave! Old Keene's coming!"

"That is no reason why you should act so wuffly, Blake, and I tell you—"

"Into bed, cuckoo! Into bed, ass!" hissed Blake. And he thumped Arthur Augustus into bed, and jammed down the bedclothes over him. "Keep quiet, idiot! Don't make a sound, lunatic! If you so much as breathe I'll break you into little pieces, maniac!"
"I weally protest—"

Blake stuffed the bedclothes over Arthur Augustus's head, and choked off his protests. He heard a sound in the passage without, and bolted into his own bed and drew the clothes over him. His innocent face rested on the pillow with the eyes closed; but his heart was beating excitedly.

To his horror the voice of Arthur Augustus was audible again. The swell of St. Jim's had sat up in bed, in a state of extreme indignation, popping up a good deal like a Jack-in-the-box as soon as he found himself no longer held down.

"Blake, I am afraid that our friendship will have to cease," said Arthur Augustus. "It is all vewy well to tell me that Mr. Keene is coming, but nothing can excuse such wuffness and violence. I— Oh!"

A boot, hurtling through the darkness, caught the complaining swell of St. Jim's on the side of the head, and cut short the flow of his eloquence.

"Blake, you are no longer my friend—"
"Shut up! He's coming!" whispered Blake, in agony.
"Gussy, old chap, this is serious! Do you hear? For mercy's sake shut up!"

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. If the delinquents were there, he wished to know it; if they were not there, he did not want to awaken any of the juniors, and start them wondering what Mr. Keene was doing, wandering about the house in the middle of the night.

"Boys!"

If any of the juniors were awake, they might answer the voice of authority; if they had sufficient presence of mind to pretend to be asleep, he knew that he could do nothing without making matters, that were already bad, worse.

"Boys, are any of you awake?"

Still silence.

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!"

"Very queer," said Blake drily—"very queer indeed! We always knew there was a bit of a mystery about Amos Keene. You remember how he started to be down on Tom Merry the very day he came here; and what Merry told us about his having a letter from India, written to him by Merry's cousin out there? He's a funny animal altogether; and now we find that he has an extensive acquaintance among the criminal classes—"

"Oh, I say, one man ain't an extensive acquaintance!"

"My dear chap, if he knows one he knows others. I don't know what we ought to do about the matter; but a still tongue shows a wise head."

"You mean we are not to give him away?"

"It's a strange tale to tell, kid, and it's possible we might not be believed. And he may have innocent intentions all the time; a man isn't bound to be a bad 'un because we can't understand what his little game is," said Blake sagely. "Anyway, one thing's a dead cert.: 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. 5 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.

CHAPTER 3.

Escaped!—Tom Merry's Little Joke.

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 bouncer 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, who had distinguished himself at St. Jim's once before, on the famous occasion of the kidnapping of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy by a gipsy.

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 is 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."

"And the man's hands were tied, you say?" said the inspector, jotting down something in his notebook.

"Yes."

"Then," said the inspector triumphantly, "the man must have got his hands loose, and picked the lock from the inside in some manner."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes, certainly! You had taken the key from the lock, and—"

"No, I had left the key in the lock."

The inspector looked crestfallen for a moment, but only for a moment.

"Ah, yes, of course, it is easy to turn a key from the other side, to an accomplished cracksmen provided with his tools," he said. "You had not searched him?"

"No. As his hands were tied, I did not think of doing so."

"Then all is clear. He wriggled his hands loose, and with some instrument he unlocked the door from the inside. You agree with me that it is clear?"

"I am quite willing to trust to your experience, inspector. You should know more about these matters than I do," said the housemaster.

The inspector purred; and Tom Merry whispered to Blake in the passage:

"Kidlets doesn't believe him. He's got a theory of his own."

And Blake nodded assent. Both the juniors were keen enough to see that the housemaster was holding back some opinion of his own, though such a thought never entered the inspector's head.

The inspector was busy making notes in his fat notebook, though what he wanted to make notes for was a mystery. Perhaps he did not know himself; but it looked impressive and businesslike. Then he laid notebook and pencil on one of the trunks in the box-room, and began to make an examination of the apartment.

Mr. Kidd watched him with ill-concealed impatience.

"As you seem likely to be detained, inspector, I think I will leave you, if you will excuse me," he said. "I have duties to attend to."

"Certainly, sir!" said the inspector. "I also have my duty to do, and you can trust George Frederick Skeet to do it. I hope we shall soon be on the track of the rascal."

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 upon 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!—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 something 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 finished 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.

"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 bouncer!" 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 had once been headmaster of Clavering, Tom Merry's old school, and after the failure and closing up of Clavering he had accepted a position at St. Jim's.

He 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 laying rascals by the heels, did not look too hopeful.

"I trust so, inspector. It is very unfortunate that he escaped, in a sense, as such a dangerous ruffian ought cer-

tainly to be in prison. But if his narrow escape is a warning to him to abandon his evil ways I shall not be sorry."

The inspector smiled.

"That is hardly likely in the case of such a skilled and desperate criminal," he remarked. "I have worked out exactly what happened here last night. Perhaps you would care to hear the details. The rascal was placed here with his hands tied behind him. He got loose from the bonds by rubbing them against the bars of the fire-grate."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, you see, the remains of the rope are here, and these traces of soot—"

"The man's face was blackened with soot for purposes of disguise," Mr. Railton remarked. "Perhaps that would more easily account for the traces of soot."

The inspector gave him a frigid look.

"I suppose you will admit, sir, that the man got loose somehow," he said; "otherwise he could hardly have picked the lock from the inside and opened the door."

"Yes, it seems undoubted that he got loose somehow."

"Then," said the inspector pompously, "he opened the door from the inside with a pair of pliers, the key being in the lock, as you may observe for yourself by looking at these traces upon the end of the key."

Mr. Railton examined the key.

"What are the traces you refer to, Mr. Skeet?"

"They are perfectly plain to a trained eye, sir," said the fat inspector, with a wave of the hand. "To an amateur, of course, they may be a little abstruse—decidedly abstruse," repeated the inspector, rather pleased with the word. "Extremely abstruse, I may say."

"There is nothing like having a trained intellect brought to bear upon these matters," said Mr. Railton, handing the key back to the inspector. "My unpractised eye would never have detected the traces you mention upon that key."

"I can quite believe it, sir; otherwise what would be the use of us detectives?" said the inspector. "We are expected to see what others do not see."

"Blessed as those who don't expect!" murmured Blake.

"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 looked 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?"

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"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.

CHAPTER 4. The Secret.

"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 was 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 housemaster, was looking down at them, with an expression he vainly tried to make severe.

"Well, Merry—well, Blake," said the housemaster 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 housemaster 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 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 housemaster. "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!"

"Why," 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.

Blake went to the Fourth Form table. He was two months younger than Tom, which was a sufficient reason for the scapegrace of the Shell to allude to him disrespectfully as a "kid." Half the rows between Study No. 5 and the Terrible Three were caused by that. The Shell could always put the Fourth Form's back up by treating them as "kids," and they were rather fond of doing it.

Breakfast was nearly over. Tom Merry dropped into his seat between Manners and Lowther, and expected a reprimand from the master of the Shell, who was in charge of the table. Mr. Amos Keene was usually only too ready to be down on Tom Merry, but on this occasion he let the opportunity slip.

Mr. Keene did not seem himself that morning. Perhaps the happenings overnight had disturbed him. He was very pale and worn, and he hardly tasted his breakfast. The boys of the Shell chattered freely in undertones, and more than one master glanced from another table towards them, but Mr. Keene did not appear to notice it. He was evidently distraught.

When the Shell went into their Form-room it was the same. Mr. Keene was absent-minded, and he passed over the most palpable blunders in construing without remark. When Manners rendered "Exanimunqne auro corpus vendebat Achilles," as "He lifelessly sold the golden corpse of Achilles," Tom trembled for his chum, but Mr. Keene never said a word.

It was evident that something was the matter with him. But, disturbed as he was, he had not forgotten to be down on Tom Merry, and when it came to Tom's turn he began to pick faults with him, although Tom's construing was the very best in the class. Tom, though certainly a scamp in some respects, was by no means a slacker, and when he worked he worked hard, and his Latin was the best of any in the form.

That made no difference to Mr. Keene. His unreasonable dislike of Tom, which he had shown from the day of his first coming to St. Jim's, seemed to break out more than ever now that he was in a troubled and worried mood, and, although Tom tried not to displease him, he could not succeed. It was, as Manners said, a case of the wolf and the lamb over again.

"Your Latin is a disgrace to the class, Merry!" said Mr. Keene, after picking faults at almost every other word. "You will remain in this afternoon, and write out the whole of the first book of the Æneid!"

Tom's eyes flashed rebelliously. But he was a sensible lad, and he knew that he had to obey orders, so he took this act of rank injustice in silence. Then the master left him in peace. His chums were full of sympathy when the class was dismissed.

"Horrid rotter!" said Manners. "Never mind, Tom. We'll take it out of him somehow. Every time he's been down on us we have found some means of pulling his august leg in return. I wish I could guess why he was so down on you, though."

Tom shook his head dolefully.

"It's no good trying to guess," he replied. "I've got a feeling that it has something to do with my cousin, Philip Phipps. I know that Phipps and Keene are friends, and correspond, and Philip Phipps never liked me. But why Keene should have such a down on me because of that is a mystery."

"The brute ought to be shown up!" said Manners wrathfully. "I wish we could get Mr. Kidd or Mr. Railton to see him in his true colours; but he's such a soapy brute to the other masters!"

"Hallo, Merry!" said Blake, coming up the passage. "What do you say to a little run this afternoon? I hear that Figgins and the New House fellows are going to have a horse and trap out in Rycombe, and it would be rather a good wheeze to raid it. We can join forces, you know and leave our own rows till afterwards."

Tom laughed.

"A jolly good idea, Blake," he said; "only I happen to be detained for the afternoon."

Blake whistled.

"I say, that's rotten! Who's the beast?"

"Keene."

"Why, he's always detaining you. Of course, you don't deserve it?"

"No, I don't."

"Of course not. We never do—any of us. A more undeserving set of chaps it would be hard to find— No; I don't mean exactly that, either."

"Seriously, I don't deserve it," said Tom. "The chap has a down on me for something. There's a lot of things we can't understand about old Keene. He's not the kind of man that ought to be a master in a school."

Blake nodded.

"You're right there, my pippin! Do you remember the way he carried on when we handed him that day in the railway-carriage, coming to Rylcombe, before we knew that he was a new master here? And now—well, my aunt, I hardly expected it of even him!"

"Hardly expected what?" demanded the Terrible Three together, interested at once by Blake's mysterious tone.

Blake looked round cautiously.

"It's a great secret," he said. "Of course, you chaps won't let it go any further?"

"Honour bright!"

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you, you know; but it's such a queer business I'd like to have your opinion on it."

"Is it anything to do with our Form master?"

"Yes, of course it is. But perhaps I ought not to mention—"

"Look here, out with it!"

"Of course, I can speak about it if I like; yet perhaps—" Tom Merry seized Blake by the shoulders and ran him against the wall.

"Look here, kid—"

"Who are you calling a kid?" demanded Blake instantly.

"You! You, you ass! What's this secret you're talking about?"

"Upon second thoughts, I won't tell you."

"Then you'd better tell us upon third thoughts," said Tom Merry, "for I'm going to knock your head upon the wall until you do."

Blake gave a wriggle, but the Terrible Three pinioned him in a moment.

"Now," said Tom, with a sweet smile, "are you going to unbosom yourself of the dread tale, kid, or shall I knock your head against the wall?"

"Pax," exclaimed Blake, "I meant to tell you all along I look here." He lowered his voice very mysteriously. "You know the burglar escaped from the box-room last night—"

"All the school knows that."

"Yes; but the door was unlocked from the outside."

"So you said before; but I don't see how—"

"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, kid? Like me to coach you a bit in your cricket for the Redcliffe match?"

Kildare laughed.

"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.

CHAPTER 5.

Mr. Keene Makes a Discovery.

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 housemaster nodded assent.

Hidden upon the stone steps, Tom Merry remained half-frozen with horror.
(See page 12.)



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 at 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 doctor."

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 doctor. 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 somebody coming, and dodged into the alcove near the box-room. The chap came down and unlocked the box-room door.”

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 knew 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. 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 seized last night in the corridor, and who had escaped after drenching him with inky water. 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 instinctively 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 this morning, and found the traces of red ink on the sponge on his washstand. 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 fight—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.”

CHAPTER 6.

The Plot Overheard.

"**A** RMA virumque cano," groaned Tom Merry, opening his Virgil at the old, familiar lines.

"Trojæ qui primus ab oris—," Rats!"

Tom Merry was in for it. He sat in the deserted classroom, with the summer sunlight streaming in at the high windows on the empty desks. Lowther and Manners were on the cricket-field. They 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.

"Go and knock yourselves into form for the cricket match with the New House," said Tom. "We've got to beat Figgins & Co. hollow, you know, and we three have got to be in the School House. Eleven. Keep up your practice, and never mind me. I'm going to spend the afternoon with our old Roman friend Virgil. Oh, I wish I had been the Emperor Augustus!"

"Why?" asked Lowther.

"Oh, I'd have chucked Virgil into the Tiber!" said Tom.

"Now, cut off!"

"Well, keep your pecker up!" said the chums; and so they left him.

Tom was the only boy in the Shell detained that afternoon. He sat down at his desk, and opened his Virgil, and took pen and paper, and dipped the pen into the ink, and did not write a word. He couldn't.

The bright sunlight, the whispering breezes fluttering the old elms in the quadrangle, the distant shouts from the cricket-pitch seemed to be calling to him.

"Arma virumque cano," he groaned. "The number of times I've been through that! Oh, my hat! Arms and the man, I sing. I'd rather sing legs and the boy. Ha, ha!"

He laughed as he wrote down the improvement upon the Latin poet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Tom Merry's merry laugh sounded hollow in the deserted class-room.

"You seem to be in high spirits, Merry."

It was Mr. Amos Keene's sour voice in the doorway. Tom looked up. The master had on his hat and coat for going out. He came over to Tom's desk, and glanced at the almost blank sheet of paper before the boy.

"You have not made much progress with your imposition, Merry," he said sarcastically. "Why, what—what is this?"

Tom coloured. He had not intended to let the Form-master see that little pun in Latin; but Mr. Keene was reading it out.

"Crura puerumque cano. Legs and the boy." What does this mean, Merry?"

"It's—it's only a pun, sir. It means, I'd like to use my legs just now, sir, and do—do a bunk, sir!" said Tom diffidently. "It's—it's an improvement upon Virgil, sir—a little bit more up to date."

Mr. Keene apparently did not see the humour of the joke. He took the sheet, and tore it across.

"You will write out the whole of the first two books of Virgil, Merry, instead of only one!" he said grimly.

"Hadh't you better set me the whole giddy Æneid, sir?" said Tom recklessly.

He could afford to be reckless, for the imposition was an impossible one, and if Mr. Keene added to it, it would make no difference, as, in any case, a great deal would have to remain undone. It was evidently only the master's intention to deprive him of the whole of his half-holiday. Mr. Keene frowned darkly.

"Take care, Merry, or you will have a caning as well. I shall return shortly, and I shall expect you to have made good progress."

"You can expect what you like!" murmured Tom.

The master of the Shell went out. 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 bouncer'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 as Lowther and Manners were busy on the cricket pitch with a crowd, he could not very well call upon them without the risk of

being spotted by some unpleasant person in authority and sent back to his task.

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 & 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 at St. Jim's.

But he shook his head.

Figgins & 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 gypsy 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 & 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.

"Ugh! If Arthur Augustus was shut up down there, he must have had a high old time!" Tom exclaimed. "Well, here goes!"

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

He had a boxful of them, and did not spare the matches. Dark and gloomy looked the vaults, damp and eerie. Tom, remembering Blake's description, soon found the secret chamber in which Arthur Augustus had been shut up on that famous occasion.

"My hat!" murmured Tom, looking into it. "That must have been nice for Gussy! I wish I had been at St. Jim's at that time!"

His last match went out, and, having had quite enough of the vaults, Tom turned back to the stair leading to the upper regions.

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.

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.

"Diablo! It is safe enough to meet here, I should think. Who could possibly see us? Besides, I could not be recognised now! Amn 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 housemaster 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?

CHAPTER 7.

Two Rascals.

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!"

"Listen to me, Lasalle," the master of the Shell went on feverishly. "You can see that my career at the school hangs upon a thread. You insisted upon my meeting you again, though I urged you to leave the neighbourhood at once—"

"That did not suit me," said Lasalle coolly. "I did not break into the school last night for a joke. I want money. If you can help me with cash, I will leave you in peace and go away. If you choose to help me another way, it will suit me better, and will be cheaper to you. Let me enter the school to-night, and—"

"And help you to commit a robbery?" panted Mr. Keene.

"Why not? In the past—"

"The past is dead and gone. I am a master at St. Jim's. I dare not risk it, even if I had no conscience—and I have one. Besides, I—I have not the nerve."

"No," said the Frenchman, with a contemptuous laugh, "I do not think you have."

Amos Keene ground his teeth.

"You need not taunt me with that, Lasalle. I had nerve enough in the old days, when I was a lawless scoundrel as you are now. Now I have a position to keep up, and it is different. I cannot do as you suggest. It is impossible."

"The other way will suit me as well, but I must have money. But from what you say, I should hardly think your position would be kept up in any case," said the Frenchman carelessly. "If this boy—Blake, did you call him?—if he knows your secret, I suppose it will not be long before the whole school knows it."

"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."

"You have called me a scoundrel! What am I to you?"

"I am not here to guess riddles," said the master of the Shell coldly. "Blake has brought this upon himself; it was not my fault that he learned my secret, and he must pay for the knowledge. But I have no desire to discuss that with you. Do my work, and I will pay you; refuse to do it, and I defy you, for I shall have nothing to lose."

The Frenchman wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

The master of the Shell waited coldly for him to reply. 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 the sooner you get to the place the better," said the master of the shell coldly. "I do not know exactly when the boy will return to the school, but it may be at any time. You must wait for him on the footpath from Wayland. Do you know the country about here at all?"

"Yes; I have visited it—er—professionally before."

"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.

He knew that the Frenchman had gone, but was Mr. Keene still there? Silence reigned in the ruins. After a lapse of five minutes Tom cautiously ascended to the top of the stair and ventured to peep out.

He popped back again in a moment.

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 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 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. Merely 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.

CHAPTER 8.

Figgins & Co. to the Rescue—A 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 shore.

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 twigs.

"Back 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-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 curses in his native tongue poured from his lips, but Figgins soon stopped that by picking a wet turf from the margin 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 in to Rylcombe to the police-station. They'll be glad to see him."

"Ripping idea."

Blake drew a deep breath.

"I believe I've had an awfully narrow escape," he said. "That chap's the burglar of last night, I can see; but why he should go for me is a mystery. Chaps, I ain't a fellow of many words, but you know just how I feel now."

"That's all right," said Figgins. "Shoulder to shoulder against outsiders, whatever rows we have at home. That's the idea. Let's get the brute along."

The prisoner's legs were left loose enough for him to stumble 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 dusk 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 housemaster'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?"

Tom grinned.

"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 housemaster 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 ambuscade 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 housemaster. "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 housemaster 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 groaned as he let his head fall into his hands.

"Then I am lost!"

Mr. Kidd's look was unpitiful.

"Yes, you are lost. This night you will join your accomplice in prison. Till the police arrive, you will remain locked in your room."

The master of the Shell started to his feet. For a moment the two juniors thought he was going to attack Mr. Kidd, and attempt to escape, and they exchanged a glance and clenched their fists ready to rush to the aid of the housemaster. But the miserable, guilty, cowardly schemer had no such intention. He knew that it would be useless. He clasped his hands appealingly.

"For mercy's sake let me go!" he said huskily. "I am ruined, disgraced for ever! Be satisfied with that, and let me go."

Mr. Kidd shook his head.

"You ask an impossibility. You must take the punishment of your crime."

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 housemaster 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 housemaster 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 visitors. He looked

ANSWERS

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amazed when the housemaster, 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 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 supposed 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 & 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 & Co., and to have what the juniors afterwards correctly described as a real, ripping, high old time.

THE END.

(Another Tale dealing with Tom Merry next Thursday. Please order in advance and also introduce Tom to your friends.)

LOOK on Page iii. of the OUR NEXT COVER!



Stormpoint

A School Tale. By MAURICE MERRIMAN.

READ
THIS
FIRST

Rex Allingham, Jim Fisher, and Bob Bouncer are three well-known chums at Stormpoint College. Hat Trehear, the captain of the school, favours them; but they are bullied by Jardon and Symes, two Fifth-Formers. In return for spiteful tricks that Jardon and Symes play on the three chums, Bob one night pours a strange lotion into the bullies' water-jug. As Bob does not want to be found out, the next morning he pours the water that Jardon and Symes have used out of the dormitory window. Unfortunately, Parker is underneath, and he gives an awful yell, and then threatens to report Bob. Jardon and Symes then appear in a jet black condition, and accuse Rex of the trick. He is sent for by the Head, and states that he does not wish to incriminate another boy, but, at the same time, he will answer any questions which the Head likes to ask. (Now go on with the story.)

Bob's Hiding-Place.

"If you assure me, Allingham, that you did not play the trick, that is sufficient," said the doctor. "I never expect one boy to incriminate another in such matters as these. Come here, Jardon. Let me look at your face. Well, when did you notice this?"

"Soon after I had washed this morning. It has been getting worse ever since."

"It can't get worse than it is now," observed Rex. "You have that consolation."

"Silence, Allingham! I believe someone must have put some sort of a dye into your jug, Jardon."

"How am I to get it off?"

"Do you know of any means to remove the stains of this dye, Mr. Salmon?" inquired the doctor, as that master entered the room.

"Indeed I do not! And the porter is in just the same state. He is jet black."

Here fresh roars of laughter drowned the master's voice.

Dr. Andale had not the slightest doubt that Rex could have given such information as would have led to the discovery of the lad who had blackened the bullies' faces, but, seeing that they had played a similar trick on Rex, he let the matter drop. This was not at all satisfactory to Porker, nor did the chaff from the chums tend to improve his temper.

"It has gone off famously!" exclaimed Rex.

"Why, that's so," answered Bob. "But I doubt if it will be so famous for us when Jardon and Symes come across us. It's a pity it is wet this afternoon, because we sha'n't be able to go out. No matter! You leave me to arrange matters."

DON'T MISS the Long, Complete Tale, TOM MERRY next Thursday.
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STORMPOINT (continued).

Bob was rather late at dinner-time, and his chums had not the slightest doubt that he had been breaking bounds, because he looked so remarkably innocent when Mr. Salmon questioned him.

"What makes you late, Bouncer?" demanded the master. "If you please, sir, the bell went too soon."

"No such thing. It rang at the usual time."
 "Yes, sir! But it went too soon for me. I wasn't quite ready for it. If it had gone three or four minutes later, I should have been in time."

"Do you expect the bell to be rung to suit your convenience?"

"I should prefer it that way, sir, and I would have it rung an hour later every morning for a start. But I'm afraid it is no good asking the doctor. He likes to keep to his own rules."

"Sit down, and just you be careful it does not occur again."

"It's all right, old chaps," whispered Bob. "I've worked everything splendidly. We will have a nice, quiet afternoon out of the rain. We've got to bolt from the room directly dinner is over."

"I will come with you," said Perkins, who had listened to the conversation.

"No, you won't," growled Bob. "We don't want any sneaks where we are going. The best thing for you to do is to go and enjoy yourself in Bully Jardon's study, and I hope you will get the flogging you deserve."

"All right, Bob Bouncer! I'll show you," snarled Perkins. "Jardon and Symes are going to half-murder you, and I happen to know where you are going."

"Where?"
 "Never you mind. How do you get all the money you are spending—eh? You daren't answer that, but I know all about—"

"Write a hundred lines for talking, Perkins," ordered Mr. Salmon.

"If you please, sir, I'm not the only one who was talking, and if a boy like Bouncer asks me a question, I suppose I ought to answer it."

But Mr. Salmon detested a sneak, and as he had not detected Bob talking, although he knew that he often did so, he took no further notice.

"All right, Bob Bouncer!" muttered Perkins. "I'll be level with you. I'll jolly well find out what you are up to."

"We must dodge that little sneak," exclaimed Bob, when the meal was finished. "I know how we will do it. Come this way, Rex and Jim. Let me do the talking, and he shall do the overhearing. You follow me into Porker's lodge. He won't be there now, but that's all the better for us. This is for Perkins's benefit. Don't look round. I'll bet he is following us up." Then Bob raised his voice so that Perkins should hear.

"You see, old chaps, Porker won't be in his lodge for at least a quarter of an hour, and the little scheme won't take us above five minutes at the very outside. Ha, ha, ha! It will be a glorious joke, and then we can spend the remainder of the afternoon on the roof. Perkins will never guess we have gone there."

"Won't he?" murmured Perkins. "I'll bet he will. They can't fool me!"

He watched them enter the porter's room, and when he reached it he heard them talking and laughing inside. They had closed the door, but Perkins concealed himself in the opposite room, and kept watch for ten minutes. Then he became so impatient that he stepped across the passage, and opened the door.

"Oh, Porker!" he exclaimed. "Could you tell me— Well, I'm blowed!"

Perkins knew perfectly well that Porker was not there, but he fully expected to find the comrades there. In this he was mistaken, so he entered Porker's bed-room.

The window was open, and on the bed, lay a sheet of paper, with one word written on it. That word was: "Muggins!"

"Oh, won't I pay them out for this!" muttered Perkins. "I'll send Jardon after them on the roof, and if he doesn't give them soaks for blacking his face, I shall be surprised!"

Perkins was about to turn from the room, when Porker came rushing in.

"You young varmint!" he roared, getting Perkins's head in chancery. "I'll teach you to come lumbering in my bed-room. Eat that, and see how you like it!"

Porker seized a piece of soap, and shoved it into Perkins's mouth, and in order to prevent his being shoved down his throat as well, Perkins clenched his teeth, with the result that he bit off a large piece of soap.

"If I don't make you swallow it, it's a caution!" cried Porker, placing his hand under the unfortunate Perkins's jaw, so that he could not possibly open his mouth. "All right, my young beauty. I ain't in any hurry. You can gurgle away as much as you like, but I'm going to make you swallow this 'ere soap, and p'raps that will be a lesson to you not to come into my bed-room in my habesence."

"I'm—grouah—choking—"

"You can grouah—choke, as much as you like, you varmint, but you will eat that soap. It's bound to melt in your mouth sooner or later, and I ain't in the slightest hurry. I said I'd make an example of the next boy as come into my bed-room, and I jolly well will. Now, the sooner you swallow that little mouthful, the sooner I shall let you go!"

Perkins kicked and struggled, but Porker held him firmly, until the soap had dissolved, then he let him go.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Porker, as his victim rushed about the room, spluttering in a most extraordinary manner. "How did you like that little lot? Nice flavoured soap, ain't it?"

"Oh, you beast!" hooted Perkins. "Won't I have vengeance for this. I'll make you sorry you were ever born! I'll report you to the doctor, you bloated brute. You ought to be hung, and I'd like to see it done. I'll get level with Rex and Bob, too, for playing me this trick."

Then Perkins went away spluttering, but it was a long time before he got the taste of that soap out of his mouth. Meantime, Bob had led his comrades through Porker's bed-room window, and across the little farmyard, which lay behind the college, where there was a large barn, with a loft above it. The loft was never used, and Bob knew that it would be a quiet hiding-place from the bullies.

Ascending the ladder, he pushed open the trap-door, and conducted his chums into the loft, where a most surprising scene met their view. Bob had laid in a splendid stock of provisions of all sorts, and he had borrowed Porker's oil-stove to do such cooking as might be required.

"You see, old chaps," he explained. "I thought we would stay up here till calling-over, so naturally we shall want a lot of provisions, and we've got them here."

"But, I say, Bob, they must have cost you money."

"Eh? Well, I can always get money now. My dear stepfather has stopped my pocket-money, but I can get as much as I want—in fact, more than I want, in other directions."

"He must have struck a gold-mine," observed Rex.

"Well, it doesn't matter, but if ever you want any money, just you let me know, and I'll let you have it straight away."

(To be continued in next Thursday's "Gem."
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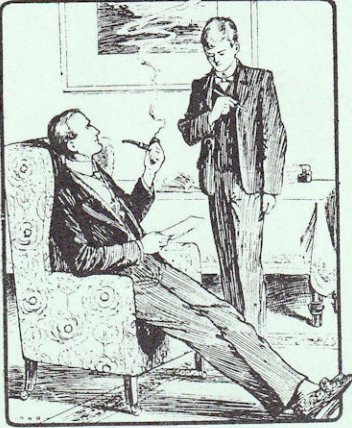
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