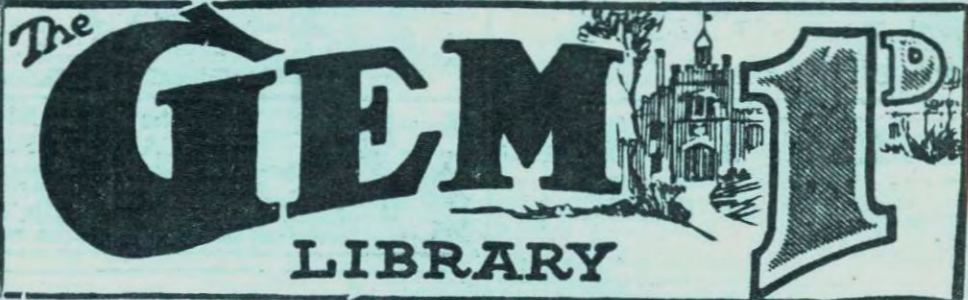


A SPLIT IN THE SCHOOL!

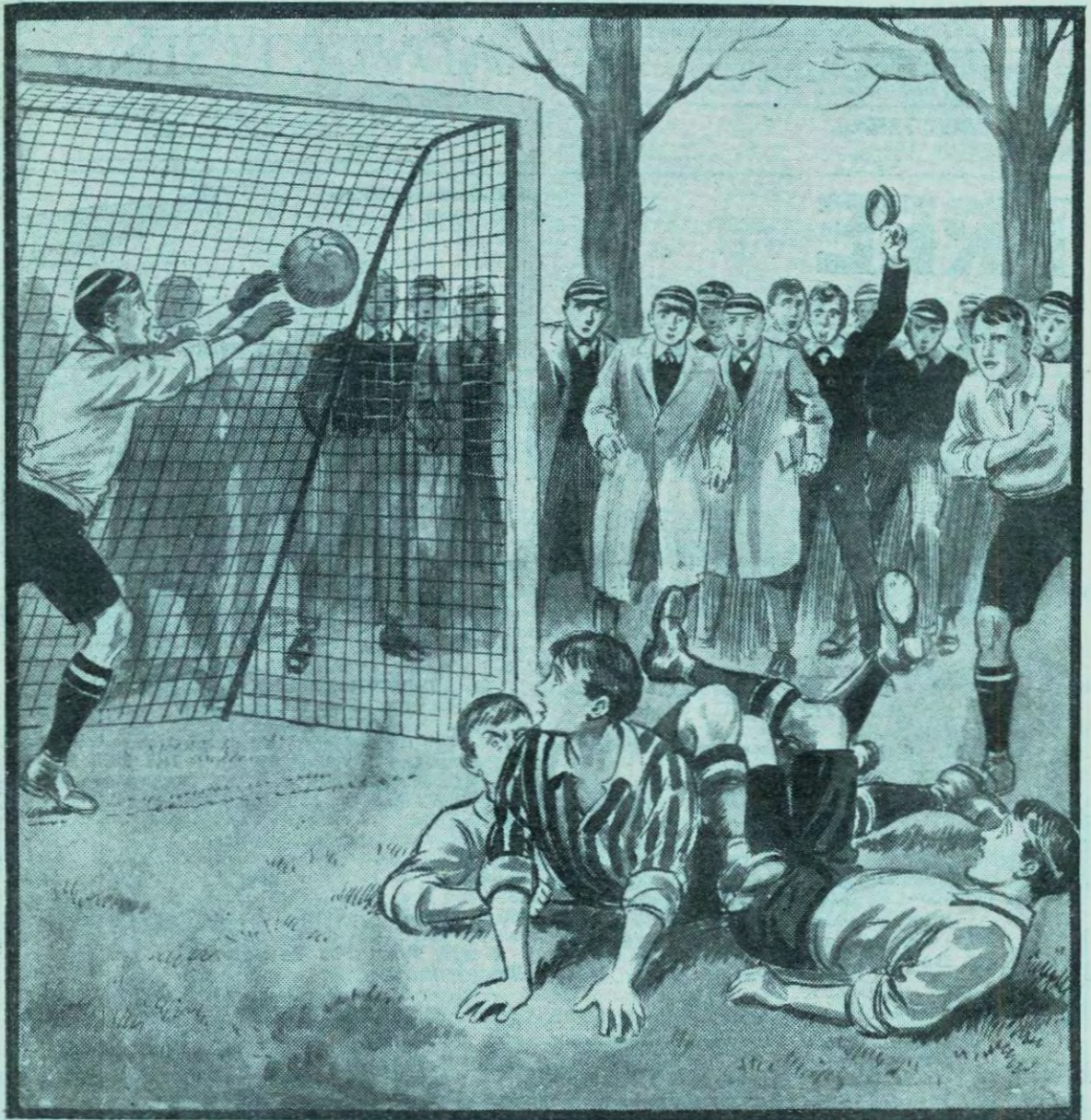
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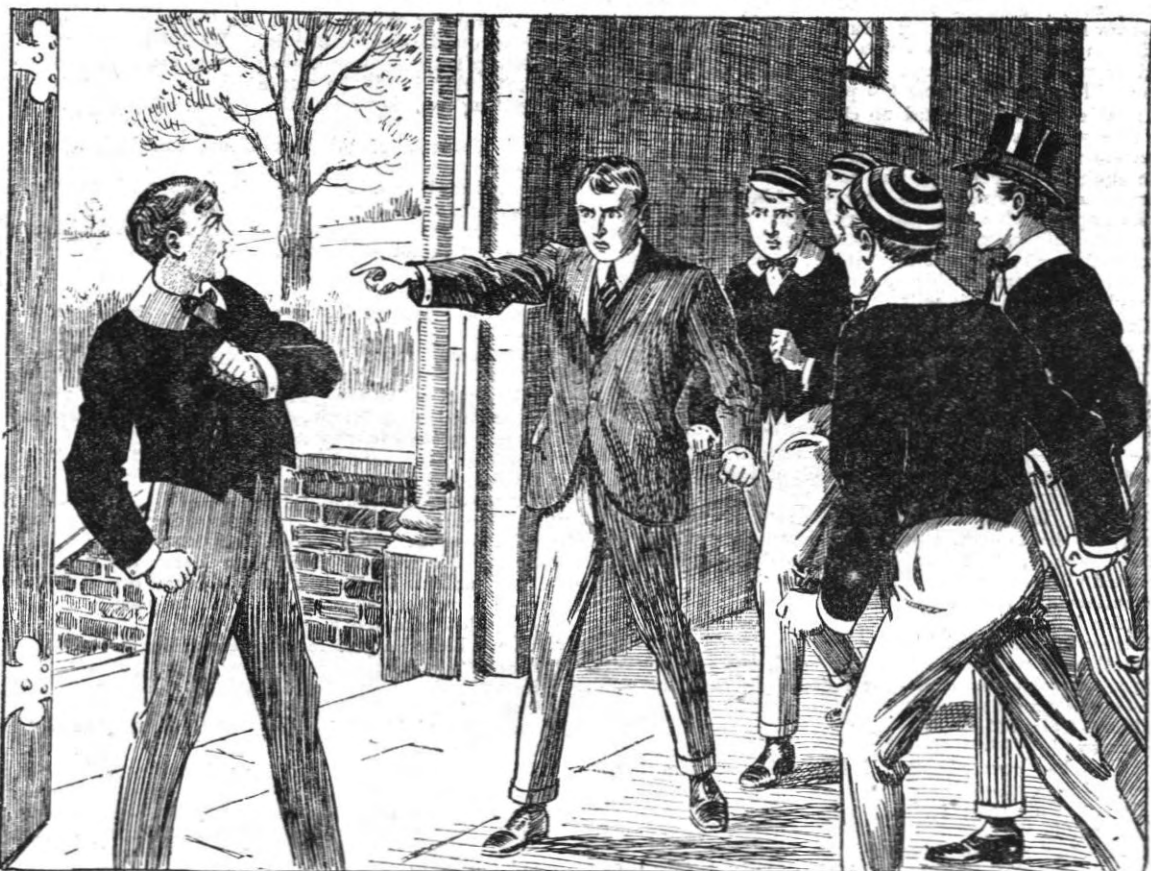


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A SPLIT IN THE SCHOOL!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



"You—you have the cheek to shove yourself into the first eleven—you—a hound from the slums—a—a—!" Sefton choked with rage. "You ought not to be allowed in the school. A reformatory's the proper place for you. You—hands off, you young hounds!" roared Sefton, as Tom Merry & Co. made a rush at him. "Kick the cad out!" exclaimed Tom, red with rage. (See Chapter 3.)

CHAPTER I. A Study Celebration.

KILDARE of the Sixth came along the Shell passage, in the School House at St. Jim's, and stopped at the door of Tom Merry's study.

He did not enter.

It would have been difficult for the smallest fag in the Second Form to have entered Tom Merry's study just then, let alone the stalwart captain of St. Jim's.

For the study was crammed.

And the noise that proceeded from that famous study resembled a super-pandemonium. Tom Merry & Co. were celebrating. When the ohms of the School House celebrated they could generally be heard at a considerable distance. But on this occasion they were surpassing themselves.

In the excitement that reigned in the study no one

observed, for the moment, the big, handsome Sixth-Former looking in, with a smile on his face.

Tom Merry was on his feet—or on his legs, to put it in Parliamentary language. He was making a speech—"jawing," as Blake described it. But his "jaw" was constantly interrupted by cheers, so evidently it was upon a popular subject. Indeed, there were more cheers than speech, and it was not easy to follow the speech.

But the juniors did not mind that. The study table was spread in a festive style, with good things galore, and they attracted more attention than Tom Merry's speech. Round the table the guests were packed, and all chairs were occupied by one or two juniors, and many more were standing. For the occasion was one of unusual importance, and Tom Merry's friends had rallied from far and near. And Tom Merry had many friends—especially when he was standing, a feat that could only justly be described as whacking.

Next Wednesday:

"MASTER MARIE!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

Tom Merry, as we have said, was on his feet, or, rather, his legs. His study-mates, Manners and Lowther, shared a chair. The four chums of Study No. 6, Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, occupied a form that had been captured from somewhere and dragged in. Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn somehow contrived to seat themselves on one chair. It was a tight fit, and led to slips and pushes and loud protests. Then there were Reilly and Lumley-Lumley and Kerruish and Hammond sharing chairs. Also there were Figgins & Co. of the New House, the deadly rivals of Tom Merry & Co., but not looking very deadly at the present moment. Indeed, they were looking exceedingly lively, and Fatty Wynn especially was enjoying himself.

There were two or three other fellows, too. The study was large for a junior study. But how so many fellows could cram themselves into it was a mystery. No wonder the door was left open, and a full view of the festive scene could be obtained from the passage.

The table had been shoved up close to the fender, and Tom Merry was standing in the fender. Opposite him, across the table, was Talbot. Talbot of the Shell had a whole chair to himself. It was easy to guess from this circumstance that Talbot was the guest of honour. Talbot was smiling, and his face was very bright and cheerful. Evidently Talbot, who was sometimes given to very thoughtful moods unusual in a junior of his years, had banished black care on this auspicious occasion, and was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Gentlemen, chaps, and fellows—" Tom Merry's voice came through the buzz.

"Hear, hear! Pass the nuts!"

"Lowther said there was a pie!" This came from Fatty Wynn, the Falstaff of the New House. "You remember you said there was a pie, Lowther."

"So there is—or was!" said Monty Lowther. "Somebody push a jar of jam down the neck of that porpoise. Order for the speech!"

"Weally, Lowther"—this from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth, the elegant swell of the School House—"weally, deah boy, that is hardly polite to a respected visitah from the othah side—"

"Gentlemen!" roared Tom Merry.

"Order!"

"Silence for the speech!"

"Gentlemen, we have met on this suspicious occasion—I mean, auspicious occasion—for reasons you well know. Talbot—here present—"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Hurray!"

"Talbot has covered himself this afternoon, in the House match, with—"

"Mud!" This from Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Glory!" roared Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah," chimed in Arthur Augustus. "I considah—weally, Wynn, I have passed you the jam seven times, and you are intewwuptin' my wemarks—I considah—"

"Glory! Talbot has played up like a—a—a Trojan!" pursued Tom Merry. "Gentlemen, I need not describe the match to you. It was such a match as could only be played at St. Jim's. At this school we play footer—with the accent on the play."

"Hear, hear!"

"Cake this way!"

"Look here, Wynn, if you want all that jam—"

"It would need the pen of a Pinder or the typewriter of a Kipling to describe that match," went on Tom Merry, waxing eloquent. "Both sides at the top of their form—the School House perhaps a bit better form than the New House—"

"Hear, hear!" from the School House fellows.

"Rats! Bosh! Piffle!" from Figgins & Co.

"Some slackers say that House matches are rot—"

"Shame!"

"Slackers like Croke or Mellish—"

Deep groans for Croke and Mellish!

"But it is the noble ambition of every fellow worth his salt to play in the House matches. For from the House elevens are selected the teams to play for the THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 370.

school. And a fellow who doesn't want to play for his school wants boiling!"

Loud applause.

Tom Merry went on, encouraged. He was very warm, as his trousers were dangerously near the fire as he stood in the fender. But a trifle like that could not be heeded on an occasion like this. He shifted his legs a little and resumed.

"House matches are the thing. And among House matches, senior and junior, I need hardly say that the more important are the junior matches—played by us—"

Thunders of applause.

"Not but what Kildare is a jolly good player—"

"Good old Kildare!"

The captain of St. Jim's, still in the passage, smiled. It was an unsolicited testimonial. He did not interrupt. Tom Merry's speech was quite interesting, and Kildare forbore to chip in till he was finished. At the rate he was getting on, however, the finish was not yet in sight.

"And Monteith of the New House can kick a good goal—"

"Hear, hear!" from Figgins & Co. Monteith was their head prefect, and they loyally cheered him.

"But for real lively play give me a junior House match—or a junior school match—"

"Bravo!"

"Pass the pickles."

"And the match to-day was a corker. Of course, we won—"

"Of course, rats!" hooted Figgins. "A blessed fluke!"

"Why, you silly ass, you say Talbot's goal was a fluke!" roared Tom Merry, forgetting the courtesy due to a guest in his excitement.

"Not Talbot's," said Figgins cheerfully, "yours."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, you—your thumping ass—"

"Bai Jove! Is it quite the wight thing to intwoduce those expressions into a speech, Tom Mewwy?"

"Ahem! To resume," said Tom Merry hastily, "we won the match. Figgins kicked a goal for the New House—I'm not saying it wasn't a pretty good goal—"

"Top-hole!" shouted Kerr and Wynn.

"Then I kicked a goal for the School House—"

"Fluke!"

"Rats!"

"Order!"

"And then, right on the stroke of time, Talbot—"

"Good old Talbot!"

"Charged Fatty right into the net, and scored for his side, and won the match," said Tom Merry. "A finer bit of play has seldom been seen on the St. Jim's ground, and never on any other ground—except, perhaps, when we've played out—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Therefore, we have met on this festive occasion to—"

"Pass the pickles."

"To celebrate the victory," shouted Tom Merry. "We all join together in offering Talbot hearty congrats for his splendid goal—"

"Bravo!"

"And the New House bounders, who were licked, join with us heartily—"

"Hear, hear!"

"And in conclusion—"

"Time you got to that bit," remarked Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"In conclusion," roared Tom Merry, "I rise to propose the health of Talbot of the Shell. May his shadow never grow—"

"Whiskers!"

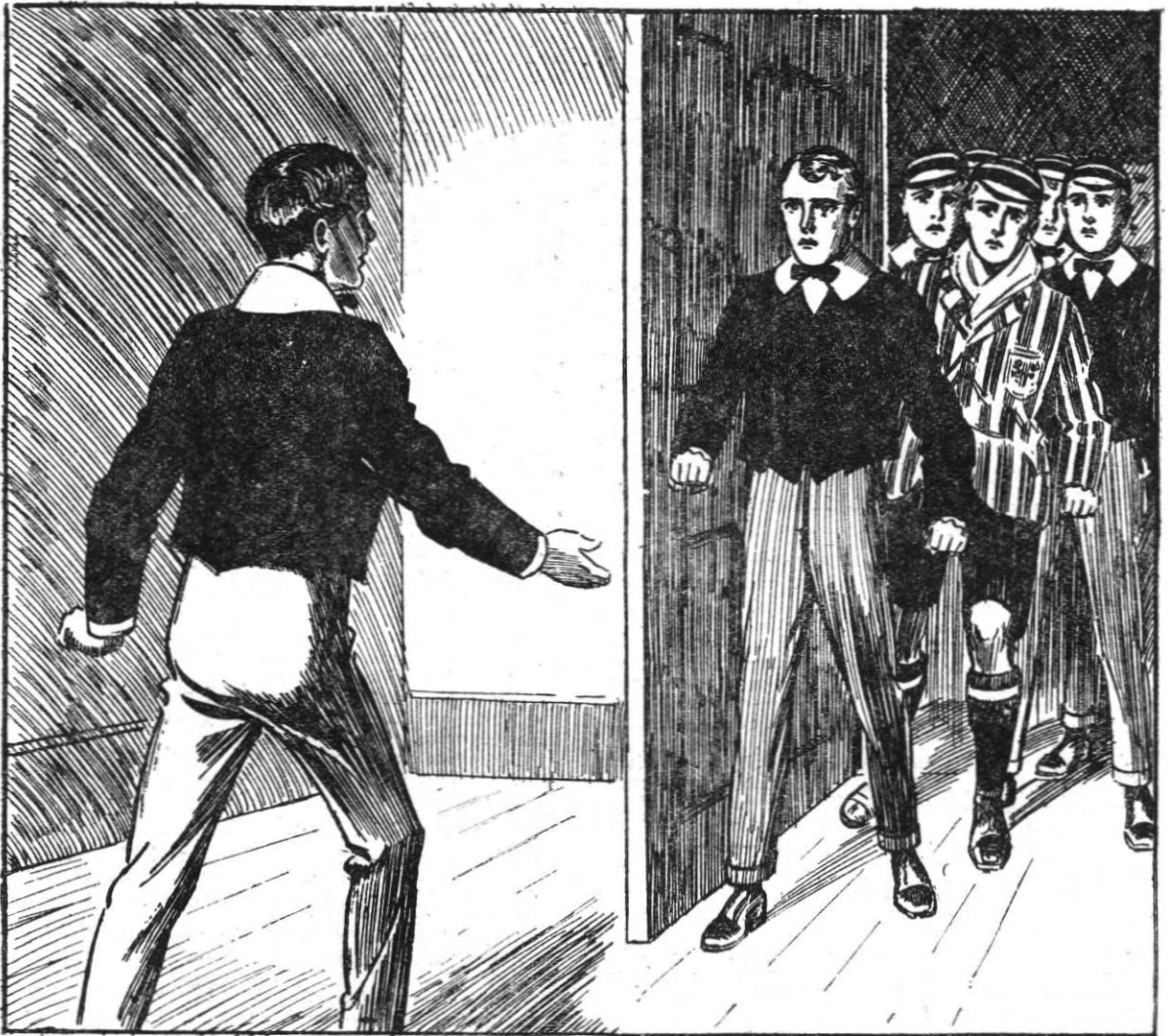
"Shut up, Lowther!"

"May his shadow never grow less, and long may he wave! Long may he play for the School House of St. Jim's, and give the New House wasters socks!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Pathead!"

"Gentlemen, charge your glasses—ahem!—and teacups with flowing cham—I mean, ginger-beer, and drink to



Click! Montcith started. He could scarcely believe his eyes as the heavy door swung open. Talbot looked in upon him with a smile. "You can come out!" he said. "Talbot!" muttered Montcith. "I—I'm awfully obliged to you for this." (See Chapter 14.)

the long life of Talbot of the Shell, and good luck to him!"

Roars of applause.

"Hear, hear!" chimed in a hearty voice from the passage. And the juniors suddenly left off cheering and looked round, and beheld the smiling face of the captain of St. Jim's looking into the study. Then there was a general chorus:

"Come in, Kildare!"

CHAPTER 2. Talbot's Luck.

KILDARE grinned.

The invitation was hearty, spontaneous, and general.

But exactly how it was to be accepted was not clear. So Kildare did not accept it. He stood in the doorway.

"Make room for Kildare, you fellows," said Tom Merry. "Come in, Kildare!. Awfully good of you to give us a look in! Say, you've come to the feed."

"Ahem! Not exactly."

"Oh, come in! It's an honour to entertain the giddy skipper of the school. Make room, some of you chaps. Could you hang your feet out of the window, Herries?"

We saw you watching the match, Kildare. What did you think of Talbot's goal?"

"Topping!" said Kildare.

"Hurray!"

Talbot of the Shell flushed with pleasure. Praise from the captain of the school was praise indeed.

"The fact is," said Kildare, "that's what brought me here. I guessed that Talbot would be here when I heard the thundering row you were making. No, I won't come in, thanks. Darrel expects me to tea. I wanted to speak to Talbot, if I'm not interrupting."

"Sure, it's a pleasure to hear ye interrupt!" said Reilly.

"Yaas, wathah! Pway wun on, deah boy!"

"You know we're playing Rookwood on Saturday?" said Kildare. "You know their first eleven is a tremendous team? It's a new fixture, and a tough one. Well, you know some of my men are laid up?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry wonderingly.

"I dare say I'm going to surprise you," said Kildare, with a smile; "but I've been watching Talbot play to-day—I've watched him before—and I've come here to ask him to play in the first eleven next Saturday."

There was a general gasp.

A Shell fellow asked to play in the first eleven of St. Jim's—that tremendous team which was selected from

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the Sixth Form in both Houses, with a few lucky members of the Fifth thrown in!

It was not unheard of, for such a thing had happened before; when the great team was in a bad way through some of its members being crooked. Fatty Wynn had bowled for the first eleven in a never-to-be-forgotten match in the cricket season. But it was enough to make the juniors gasp and to make Talbot's eyes dance with delight. Tom Merry stared blankly. Perhaps for a moment there was a little pang of disappointment because the request had not come to him. He was captain of the junior eleven, and he had been passed over for Talbot, who was practically a new boy at St. Jim's. But loyalty to his chum, and delight in his good luck, chased away any personal feeling immediately.

"The first eleven!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Talbot! Bai Jove!"

"My hat!" said Figgins. "Quite sure you don't want a New House chap, Kildare? If you want a goalkeeper, there's Fatty—"

Kildare laughed.

"I don't want a goalkeeper; I want a winger to take Langton's place, as he's crooked. What do you say, Talbot?"

"Say!" gasped Talbot. "Oh, Kildare!"

"You'd like to play?"

"Well, rather!"

"Then you turn out to-morrow to practice with the first eleven," said Kildare, "and I'll put your name in the list when I post it up."

And Kildare, with a cordial nod to the juniors, walked away down the passage. He left Tom Merry's study buzzing with excitement. Congratulations were poured on Talbot from all sides. If the junior thus honoured had shown any signs of "swank," feeling would doubtless have been different. But Talbot bore his blushing honours thick upon him with becoming modesty.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "You are in luck, you boundah! But Kildare is quite wight. If he wants a weally good man for the first eleven he can't do better than come to the Lowah School for one. Of course, he might have looked into Studay No. 6—"

"I should say so!" said Blake. "I don't deny that Talbot plays up remarkably well for a Shell chap. But in the Fourth—"

"Bow-wow!" said Tom Merry. "Kildare's done the sensible thing. If there's a junior in the school who's fit to play in the first eleven it's Talbot. Talbot's a giddy tower of strength in the junior eleven."

"Oh, rot!" said Talbot, colouring. "Don't pile it on, you know. Lots of fellows here are quite as good as I am."

"Kildare doesn't think so," grinned Figgins. "I congratulate you, kid! I fancy there will be some sore feelings in the senior Forms, though. Lots of seniors would jump to get into the first eleven. There's Cutts of the Fifth, and Sefton of our House. Sefton has been bothering Monteith to put his case before Kildare. We all know that—"

"Sefton's no good," said Tom Merry. "He's a cad, too! As a matter of absolute fact, Kildare might have put three or four of us in, and no harm done. He could leave out the New House players to make room for us. I've often thought there's too much New House in the St. Jim's first—"

"Fathead!"

"Now, as a reasonable chap, Figgins—"

"Rats!"

"Yaas, wathah! I considah—"

"Pass the cake!" said Fatty Wynn.

The feed went on with great glee. All the juniors, including the New House fellows, were glad that a junior was to be played in the first eleven in the Rookwood match. It was an honour for the Lower School. And, apart from their own claims, all the fellows agreed that Talbot of the Shell was a good selection. Talbot was really a wonderful player for his age, and since he had been at St. Jim's he had won golden opinions on the footer-field.

When the celebration came to an end Figgins & Co. were escorted home to their House by a crowd of School House fellows, on the most amicable terms. For once the keen rivalry and warfare between the two Houses slept.

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It was generally kept in a very lively state by the juniors, though the seniors somewhat frowned on it. Time had been when Monteith, the captain of the New House, had been very much "up against" old Kildare; and, if Sefton of the Sixth could have had his way, he would have been so still. But in these days Monteith pulled well with the captain of the school, and even Tom Merry & Co. admitted that the New House skipper was a decent sort of chap. His old jealousy of Kildare seemed to sleep.

Sefton of the Sixth was standing in the doorway of the New House when the merry party of juniors came up. They were singing "Tipperary" in a chorus that could be heard from one end of St. Jim's to the other, and the bully of the Sixth greeted them with a scowl.

"Not so much thumping noise!" he exclaimed.

"Hallo, Sefton!" said Figgins affably. "Top of the evening!"

"You're late in your House!" growled Sefton. "What do you mean by staying out?"

"Special occasion," urged Figgins. "House match to-day, you know. We've been celebrating."

"Take fifty lines each, you three," said the prefect, "and get indoors at once!"

"Weally, Sefton," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "on an occasion like this—"

"Cut off, you School House sweeps!" said Sefton.

"Bai Jove!"

"Good-night, you chaps!" said Figgins. "See you to-morrow, and give you the kybosh! Ta-ta!"

And Tom Merry & Co., with affectionate farewells, trooped back across the dusty quad, and Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn entered their House, under the morose eye of Sefton the prefect. Sefton of the Sixth did not like Figgins & Co., which, as Figgy had remarked, was jolly bad taste on his part, considering what awfully nice boys they were.

"I suppose you were only joking about those lines, Sefton?" Figgins remarked persuasively. He did not want to wind up that jolly evening with lines.

Sefton scowled.

"You'll find I'm not!" he snapped.

"But look here—"

"Shut up, and clear off, or I'll double them!"

"Oh," said Figgins, "then I won't tell you the news!"

"Eh—what news?"

"Oh, nothing—only about the new name Kildare's putting down for the first eleven," said Figgins carelessly.

Sefton's eyes glistened. It was his great ambition to shine in the first eleven of St. Jim's, though he never took the trouble to keep himself fit for it. There had been a good deal of bitterness over that, and it was an open secret that Sefton never tired of urging his claims upon Monteith. Monteith, who had been very pally with Sefton, had mentioned him to Kildare, but the captain of St. Jim's had declined to entertain the notion in the most decided way. He did not think Sefton good enough, and he made no bones about saying so.

"Whose name?" asked Sefton quickly.

"Good-night!" said Figgins.

"Hold on! You needn't do those lines."

"Thanks!"

"Whose name has Kildare put down for the eleven?"

"Talbot's," said Figgins cheerfully. "Come on, you chaps. Not much time left for prep."

"Figgins"—Sefton caught the Fourth-Former by the shoulder and swung him back, with a savage face—"what do you mean? You dare to cheek me!"

"You asked me," said Figgins.

"You are trying to pull my leg, you young hound," said Sefton, his face inflamed with anger. "Kildare would never play a junior."

"Well, he said so."

"Is that the truth?"

"Honest Injun!"

Sefton released the junior, clenching his hands. His rage was so great that his hard, sharp face went quite pale. But it was not against Figgins—it was against Kildare. He gritted his teeth venomously.

"Talbot! That outsider—that reformed thief! He's putting him in the first eleven. It's impossible!"

"Fact! For this occasion only, I suppose. 'Tain't a

permanency," grinned Figgins. "It's because Langton's laid up, and Talbot's a ripping winger, you know. Kildare wants him for the Rookwood match. They're hot stuff, the Rookwood First, though their eleven would make a 'cat laugh."

"It can't be true!" exclaimed Sefton. "Kildare must have been joking. He would never dare. By Jove, if he does——" Sefton did not finish. He hurried down the steps, and disappeared across the quad towards the School House.

Figgins grinned at his comrades.

"The noble Sefton is wrathful," he remarked. "Come to think of it, it is rather cheeky of Kildare to put in a School House kid instead of a New House senior. Still, Sefton's no good. He smokes too much, and he's a slacker. Looks as if there's going to be a row, my sons."

"Kildare will boot him out if he cheeks him," remarked Kerr. "He doesn't like Sefton any too much as it is."

"Good luck to him, if he does!" said Figgins. "Come up and do your prep."

And Figgins & Co. went up to their study, quite unmoved by the thought that their prefect might be "booted" out by Kildare. Indeed, if that should happen, Figgins & Co.'s only regret would be that they were not there to see it.

CHAPTER 3.

Sefton Makes a Call.

"**T**HERE will be trouble over the way!"

Darrel of the Sixth made that remark.

Kildare frowned a little. Kildare was in his study, with Darrel, Langton, North, and Mulvaney major of the Sixth. Langton was "crooked" for the football match with Rookwood; his ankle had been damaged in practice, and was not likely to be right again for some time. Kildare had been much worried by the crocking of his best winger, especially as two other regular members of the first eleven were laid up with colds.

"I don't see why these should be trouble," said Kildare, with a knitted brow. "Monteith is a sensible chap. We used to have our little bit of friction, but that's all over. Monteith sees as well as I do that we ought to pull together for the sake of the school record. The School comes before the House."

"Only, Talbot being a junior——"

"He's the player we want," said Kildare. "I know it's rather unusual. But I suppose a football captain is entitled to use his own judgment."

"Hear, hear!" said Mulvaney major.

There was a loud knock on the door, and Sefton of the New House came in. The four School House seniors looked at him a little uncomfortably. It was Sefton that Darrel had been thinking of when he predicted that there would be trouble "over the way."

"Come in," said Kildare, as cordially as he could. He did not like the bully of the Sixth, and it was not easy for him to assume a friendliness he did not feel.

Darrel pushed a chair towards Sefton. The New House prefect did not take any notice of it. He had not come there to be friendly.

"I've just heard something," said Sefton, who was evidently in a state of great excitement, but trying to keep his temper under control. "I suppose it must be simply a joke—a silly joke; but I thought I'd ask you, Kildare."

"Go ahead!" said Kildare.

"You haven't finished making up the eleven for the Rookwood match."

"Yes, I've settled that at last."

"May I ask who's going in, in Langton's place?"

"Talbot of the Shell."

Sefton's lips came tight together.

"Then it wasn't a joke?"

"If that's what you heard, it wasn't a joke," said Kildare. "Langton's crooked, you see, and we wanted a winger. I've watched Talbot's play, and I think he could keep his end up. Of course, it will be rather a trial

for a junior, playing in a senior match. But I really think that young Talbot will fill the bill for this occasion. He has a pace that is simply wonderful, and his passing is splendid."

"And you think that the New House will stand it?" exclaimed Sefton fiercely.

Kildare began to look grim. The demand was made so truculently that it was scarcely possible to reply in a friendly manner. But Kildare did not want to quarrel.

"Why, yes," he said mildly. "The New House chaps have confidence in me, I suppose, as captain of the team."

"We don't believe in rotten favouritism, on our side."

"Ahem! I think you'd better go, Sefton," said Kildare drily. "After all, you are not a member of the eleven."

"Whose fault is that?" snapped Sefton.

"Well, your own, if you want me to answer. If you took the trouble to keep yourself fit, and turned up to practice regularly, you'd have as good a chance as anybody else. I'd rather play a Sixth-former than a junior, of course."

"Which means that you consider that kid Talbot a better player than I am?"

"Certainly! He's as fit as a fiddle. You're not."

Sefton trembled with rage.

"Look at the list," he said. "You've got six School House in the team to five New House—I mean you had. Three of your men are crooked. You filled up two places with School House fellows. Now you give the last place to a School House junior, rather than let in another of our House. Do you expect us to look on that as fair play?"

"Yes."

"You'll be disappointed, then. We don't."

"I don't want your opinion, Sefton. I'll talk it over with Monteith, as vice-captain and a member of the committee. But really, you haven't anything to do with it."

"I'm a member of the club, at all events, and I should be in the team if I had fair-play. There are other reasons why you shouldn't play a fellow like Talbot. You know what he was before he came here."

"That's got nothing to do with it."

"I think it's got a lot to do with it. That fellow was a thief—a member of a gang of cracksmen. He's supposed to have reformed. But I don't believe in reformed thieves, for one."

"You're welcome to your opinion."

"If you want a lock picked, Talbot's your man," said Sefton bitterly. "But you've no right to put that young scoundrel in the first eleven."

Kildare rose to his feet.

"That's enough, Sefton. You'd better go."

Sefton glared at him, his fists clenched, and his eyes burning. It looked for a moment as if he would attack the captain of St. Jim's. Kildare read the thought in his face, and his own hands closed. He was quite prepared to throw Sefton neck and crop out of the study, prefect as he was.

Some remnant of common-sense held Sefton back from that, however. He turned on his heel and strode from the study, closing the door after him with a bang that rang through the School House. Kildare resumed his seat, with a knitted brow, and Darrel smiled slightly.

"I hope that's the end of it," he remarked.

"Of course it's the end of it," said Kildare.

"If Monteith takes up Sefton's cause——"

"He won't."

"Well, I hope he won't."

"It won't make any difference if he does," said Kildare. "I've acted as I judge best, and I think I've done right. I'd rather resign than be dictated to. I think Monteith will take a sensible view of it. Sefton's his pal, but he knows that the fellow is no footballer."

And the subject was dropped. But Kildare remained in a thoughtful and somewhat troubled mood. He knew that Sefton, if he could, would revive those old troubles between the seniors of the two Houses, and make bitter blood in the first eleven. If Monteith listened to him there would be a split in the team. And if that happened the Rookwood match was as good as lost. And Kildare

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wanted very much to wind up the football season by winning the last big match.

Meanwhile, Sefton, almost blind with rage, was striding away from the captain's study. Tom Merry & Co. were chatting in the hall, and they looked curiously at Sefton as he came striding by. The terrific bang of the door had reached their ears, of course, and it was a warning that there was trouble afoot.

Sefton paused as he saw them, and fixed his eyes on Talbot of the Shell. He had not dared to wreak his rage in Kildare's study. But at the sight of Talbot's handsome face he could restrain it no longer.

"So you are in the team, you young hound!" said Sefton.

Talbot met the enraged senior's glance calmly.

"Kildare says so," he replied.

"You have contrived to wedge yourself in, somehow, you cunning young rascal."

"You have no right to speak like that," said Talbot quietly. "Kildare told me of his own accord. It came as a surprise to me."

"You young liar!"

"You'd better get out!" said Talbot contemptuously.

"You—you have the cheek to shove yourself into the first eleven—you, a reformed cracksman, a hound from the slums, a—a—" Sefton choked with rage. "You ought not to be allowed in the school. A reformatory's the proper place for you. You—Hands off, you young hounds!" roared Sefton, as Tom Merry & Co. made a rush at him.

"Kick the cad out!" exclaimed Tom, red with rage.

"Yaas, wathah—throw him out!"

Sefton struggled furiously in the grasp of the juniors. But they were too many for him, and he was sent whirling down the steps of the School House. He rolled breathlessly into the quadrangle.

"Now come back, you cur, if you dare!" shouted Tom Merry.

Sefton picked himself up, panting. The juniors lined up on top of the steps ready for him. But Sefton was too infuriated to count odds. He charged up the steps like a bull. Another moment, and the juniors would have had him again. But a sharp voice rang out.

"Stop!"

It was Mr. Carrington, the Housemaster. Tom Merry & Co. reluctantly dropped their hands. Sefton halted on the top step, panting.

"You—you saw what they did; they—"

"I saw it," said the School House master sternly, "and I heard what you said to Talbot, Sefton. I am not surprised that the boys treated you roughly. You cannot expect them to respect a prefect who acts in so contemptible a manner, Sefton."

"Sir, I—I—" stuttered Sefton.

"And you will beg Talbot's pardon for your base taunts immediately, or I shall report your words to the Head!" exclaimed Mr. Carrington.

"What!"

"Instantly!" rapped out the Housemaster.

Sefton looked as if he would suffocate. But the stern look on the Housemaster's face awed him. He dared not be taken into the Head. He knew Dr. Holmes's regard for the one-time "Toff," whose unfortunate past was so difficult to live down. It was a bitter pill for the bully of the Sixth to swallow, but he had to get it down.

"I—I—I beg your pardon, Talbot!" he stuttered.

Then he turned and strode away across the quadrangle, quivering with rage. The cup of his humiliation was full. He had brought it upon himself, but he found no comfort in the knowledge of that.

CHAPTER 4.

A Bully Well Licked.

"TOFF!"

"Marie!"

The moonlight was glimmering on the old garden. The trees, in their spring green, glistened with silver. In the Houses the juniors were hard at work on their preparation. But Talbot of the Shell—the strange and wayward junior who in the past had been known as

the Toff—was out of doors. Marie Rivers came down the path in the moonlight, with a smile on her sweet face. The cracksman's daughter, the Little Sister of the poor, was a permanent inmate of St. Jim's now. And she was very happy there. The strange and shadowed past, when she had been the comrade of the Toff in many a wild adventure, was cast behind her now.

"I have had a letter," said Marie, smiling.

"From your father?"

"Yes. He is getting on well in Kitchener's Army. They have made him a corporal. He hopes soon to be sent to the front."

"That's good news, Marie." Talbot smiled a little. "I wonder what the Thieves Club in Angel Alley would think if they knew that the Professor had joined the Army to fight for King and country?"

"I wonder!" said Marie. "But it makes me happy and proud. Those wretched old days are over now, Toff. He tells me that he is on friendly terms with Mr. Railton, who is in the same battalion—your old Housemaster here. It's good news, isn't it?"

"Very," said Talbot.

Marie looked quickly at his face. It looked pale and strained in the moonlight. The girl's look became anxious.

"Is anything the matter, Toff?"

"Nothing, dear."

"You are not looking the same. You have heard no bad news?" The girl caught her breath a little as she asked the question. In spite of her present happiness, there was always a lurking fear in her heart that the shadow of the past might yet fall again upon her life and her comrade's.

Talbot shook his head.

"No. It—it isn't easy to live down the past, that's all," he said, a little wearily. "Give a dog a bad name, you know, and hang him! I suppose I'm a dog with a bad name." He laughed a little. "But I can stand it."

"Someone has—Levison, I suppose?"

"No, not Levison. He isn't such a bad chap; I'm on good terms with him. Most of the fellows are real bricks," said Talbot gratefully. "They all know what I was before I came here, and they treat me awfully decently. Never a word about the past. But I've news for you, Marie. Kildare has asked me to play in the first eleven."

Marie did not seem so surprised as might have been expected. Perhaps she did not fully understand the highness and mightiness of the St. Jim's first.

"I saw you play to-day, Toff," she said. "Kildare is very sensible."

Talbot smiled.

"Of course, it's only for this once," he said. "One of his wingers is crooked, and I'm taking his place. But it's a tremendous thing, and I'm as pleased as Punch. I only hope it won't mean any worry for old Kildare. Some of the New House seniors may cut up roughly about it."

"And they have?"

"One of them, a fellow named Sefton," said Talbot. "He taunted me; he wanted the place himself, you see, and so—but never mind him. I suppose I shall live it all down in the long run. But it's rather hard. I want to get that wretched time right out of my mind. And you, Marie—you are happy here?"

"So happy, Toff. I never knew before what happiness was. There used to be excitement in the old days, but there was no happiness. And I owe it to you that that is all over. Now, when I think of it, it seems like a dream—unreal. There is a different life before us now, Toff, and we shall always be pals."

"Always, dear."

There was a step in the garden. Marie uttered a little exclamation. Talbot looked round, and his handsome face set grimly as Sefton of the Sixth came through the rhododendrons.

A bitter look came over the prefect's face as he saw Talbot.

"I thought I saw you come in here," he said.

"What do you want?"

"I suppose you know that juniors are not allowed in the Head's garden?"

"I have the Head's permission; and, anyway, I am not answerable to a prefect of your House," said Talbot quietly.

"But—" Sefton started a little as he caught sight of the Little Sister in the shadow of the trees. "I did not see you, Miss Marie. So that is why you are here, Talbot?" he went on, with a sneer.

"Mind your own business, you cad!" said Talbot fiercely.

"It is my business to warn Miss Marie of the kind of fellow she is talking to," said Sefton, who had no knowledge of the former acquaintance of the Toff and the cracksman's daughter. To him Marie was simply the Little Sister of the Poor, and even Sefton, coldhearted as he was, had an admiring regard for her.

Talbot smiled slightly. Sefton was not likely to be able to tell Marie anything she did not know of the Toff.

"Are you aware, Miss Marie," went on the prefect, "that this fellow Talbot is, or was, a cracksman, a member of a gang of thieves? The police would be after him now if he hadn't been 'cute enough to get the King's pardon by some sort of a theatrical trick."

"Talbot won the King's pardon by saving a troop-train from being wrecked, at the risk of his life," said Marie, her voice quivering with indignation; "and I know everything about him, and he is my best friend!"

"There is no accounting for tastes, then!" said Sefton, with a sneer. "I should not have thought you would select a reformed cracksman for your best friend!"

"That does not concern you!"

"Quite so. Perhaps you had better run in now. I have something to say to Talbot—or, rather the Toff—the other cracksman used to call him that, I think. You had better not be present."

Marie saw the ashplant under the prefect's arm, and she understood what he had to say to Talbot. The Shell fellow understood too. His handsome face hardened. If the bully of the Sixth had come looking for trouble, Talbot was fully prepared to give him all he was looking for, and perhaps a little more. Big as the Sixth-Former was, the Shell fellow had no fear of an encounter. His peculiar life before he came to St. Jim's had hardened him; he was as hard as nails, and there was no trick in wrestling or boxing that he was unacquainted with. Sefton was evidently "out" to thrash him, but it was likely that the bully would meet with a surprise.

Sefton waited for Marie to go. But the girl did not move. She drew a little nearer to Talbot.

"Please go," she said, in a low voice. "What quarrel have you with Talbot? It is not his fault that Kildare has put him in the first eleven."

Sefton bit his lip.

"So he has been boasting of that to you already," he said.

"I have not been boasting," said Talbot. "But I won't argue with you, Sefton. You are not wanted here. Get out!"

Sefton stared at him, and chuckled softly. He took a grip on the ashplant.

"I suppose you know I'm going to lick you!" he said.

"I know you're going to try," said Talbot contemptuously.

"If you prefer it in the presence of Miss Marie—"

"You had better go, Marie," said Talbot, in a soft voice. "This won't be fit for you to see."

"You must not fight him, Toff," whispered the girl. "He is a prefect—it will mean trouble for you."

"He isn't my prefect. He has no right to interfere with me. It's all right, dear!"

"You are going, Miss Marie?"

"No," said Marie; "and if you dare—"

Sefton laughed.

"Come here, Talbot!"

"I am here, if you want me," said Talbot contemptuously. "Don't be afraid, Marie. I can manage this bullying cad!"

That was enough for Sefton. He made a rush at Talbot, the ashplant in the air. Marie gave a little cry:

"Toff!"

But Toff was on his guard. His eyes were on Sefton, and as the prefect bore down on him he side-stepped quickly. The next moment he was under Sefton's guard, and his right came up in an upper-cut that jarred every tooth in Sefton's head. The prefect staggered back, dropping his hands.

In a twinkling Talbot jerked the ash-plant from his hand, and, with a swing of the arm, sent it whirling away over the shrubbery. It dropped at a distance among the rhododendrons. Then the Shell fellow faced the bully of the Sixth, his hands up, and his eyes gleaming behind them.

"Now come on, you cad, and use both hands!" he exclaimed.

Sefton came on like a bull.

Talbot had to give ground before the heavy rush, but his guard was unbroken. Sefton's heavy fists never reached their mark. He paused, winded by his furious attack, and then Talbot closed in like lightning.

Crash! crash! came his right and left, full in the flushed face of the Sixth-Former. Sefton struck out blindly, and Talbot caught a hard knock, and his cheek was cut by the ring Sefton wore. He did not heed it. He closed in, hitting out with all his strength, and Sefton's left eye closed up and his nose spurted red.

The Sixth-Former was staggering now, and Talbot had no mercy on the bully. His attack came like lightning—right and left, left and right—till a powerful drive right on the "mark" doubled Sefton up like a jack-knife, and he dropped gasping on the ground.

Talbot stood over him, his fists clenched, his eyes glittering. Marie, panting, leaned against a tree, looking on with scared eyes. But she had no need to be scared for the Toff. He was master of the situation now.

"Do you want any more?" asked Talbot, in a low voice. "If you don't, you'd better clear off! I'll kick you out if you don't go!"

Sefton staggered up blindly. His eye was closed, his nose was bulbous. He stood very unsteady on his "pins." He gave Talbot a glare of deadly hatred; but he evidently did not want any more, for he turned and staggered away through the shrubbery. The fight was over.

Talbot rubbed his cheek, and smiled slightly to Marie. "Nothing to be alarmed about," he said.

"Oh, Toff," murmured Marie, "you—you are not hurt!"

"Only a scratch."

Half-past eight boomed out from the clock-tower, and Marie started.

"I must be off, Toff! Good-night!"

"Good-night, dear!"

Marie disappeared, fitting like a shadow through the trees, and Talbot walked back to the School House. There was a mocking smile on his lips now; he looked more like the Toff of old than like Talbot of the Shell. He knew why Sefton had attacked him—it was not only to wreak vengeance upon him. After the terrific thrashing Sefton had meant to give him, the junior would not have been fit to play in the Rookwood match—that was undoubtedly Sefton's chief object.

But the terrific thrashing had not come off. Talbot laughed as he thought of it. If the school learned that the bully of the Sixth had been thrashed by a junior, his humiliation would be bitter. But Talbot was not the fellow to triumph over a beaten foe, and he did not intend to say a word.

CHAPTER 5.

Trouble Ahead!

THE next day, after morning lessons, Talbot of the Shell went down to football-practice with the first eleven.

It was an unusual sight to see a junior of the Shell at practice with those mighty men, and a crowd of juniors gathered to watch him.

Tom Merry & Co., nobly chucking their own practice for the sake of "bucking-up" old Talbot, stood in a group by the pavilion, in an enthusiastic mood. Lots of fellows might consider, in the depths of their own consciousness, that Kildare would have done better to

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choose them. But it was undoubtedly an honour for the Lower School to have a junior included in the first eleven, and they all agreed that Talbot was first-rate, and a lucky bargee, and that there wasn't an atom of swank about him.

He threw himself keenly into the footer-practice, and Kildare was quite satisfied with the form he showed.

Tom Merry & Co. could not help noticing, however, that there were some who were not quite satisfied. The School House seniors in the team never thought of questioning their captain's decision. Kildare was their idol. Darrel, Mulvaney, and MacGregor would probably have backed up old Kildare if he had put a kid from the Third Form into the team. And Cutts of the Fifth, who was playing in the place of Rushton, who was laid up with a cold, was surprised, but had no criticism to make.

But there were five New House seniors in the School eleven; and it was noticeable that they were not exactly joyful. Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, was very quiet. Baker and Webb and Grey and Dudley gave Talbot very queer looks. Kildare did not seem to observe it; perhaps he made a point of not observing it. It was a case of least said soonest mended.

Sefton of the Sixth was looking on at the practice, with a sneering smile on his face. He had something else beside a smile on his face—a big bruise on one cheek, a slight swelling on his nose, and a bluish shade round one eye. Sefton looked as if he had been in the wars.

He had been agreeably surprised not to receive any chipping on the subject from the School House juniors. He had fully expected that the story of that encounter in the Head's garden would have become common talk in the School House, and that Tom Merry & Co. would "gloat." But Talbot had evidently said nothing about it, and Sefton was greatly relieved. Not that he felt a spark of gratitude towards Talbot for keeping his humiliation a secret. If anything, that generosity from the Scholarship boy added to his hatred. But he was very glad, all the same, that the school did not know that he had been licked by a Shell fellow.

The New House prefect hoped to see Talbot fail to play up among the tremendous players of the Sixth. But he was disappointed. The Shell fellow held his own very well, and even the New House onlookers admitted that he filled old Langton's place remarkably well for a junior. Lefevre of the Fifth, who was limping with a damaged ankle like Langton, and so was out of the team, looked on, at first with a grim face, but afterwards with approval.

"That kid plays up well," he remarked to Sefton. "I thought that Kildare was an ass at first."

"I think he's an ass now!" snapped Sefton.

Lefevre shook his head.

"No; old Kildare knows what's what!" he declared. "That's what I say. Talbot will do very well. Of course, it's a bit infra dig to stick in a junior. But where was Kildare to find another winger?"

"In the New House," said Sefton.

"Oh, that's rot!" said Lefevre.

Lefevre belonged to the School House.

After the practice Kildare spoke to Talbot of the Shell as the players came off.

"Very well indeed," he said. "Of course, we shall miss Langton; but, for a junior, you are really a ripping winger. We shall beat Rookwood. Mind, they're a big team, and you've got to play the game of your life."

"You bet!" said Talbot cheerfully.

"You don't feel nervous?"

Talbot laughed. The Toff was not troubled with nerves.

"Not in the least," he said.

"Hallo! Have you been scrapping, young 'un?" asked Kildare, as he spotted the cut on Talbot's cheek, where Sefton's ring had struck him the previous evening.

The junior coloured.

"I— Yes. Nothing important."

"Keep out of scraps till after the match," said Kildare. "I don't want my winger crooked. I'm playing two reserves now as well as a Shell kid."

"Rely on me," said Talbot.

And he went off cheerfully to rub down and change, and then his chums escorted him to the School House in triumph.

"I suppose you're quite decided about playing that kid, Kildare?" Monteith remarked.

Kildare nodded.

"You can see his form," he remarked.

"Good enough for a junior," said Monteith. "The Rookwood chaps will grin to see a junior in the team, though."

"Let 'em grin, so long as we beat 'em."

"But shall we beat them? That's the question," said Monteith. "You know what a team they are—Bulkeley and Knowles and the rest. They've given us pretty tough tussles before. Some of the fellows in my House think you might have put in a Sixth-Former. There are a good many in the New House keen enough to play. There's another point, too."

"What's that?" asked Kildare, with a worried look.

He could see that Sefton had been at work, and he was particularly anxious not to have any trouble with Monteith.

"Well, the School House always has a majority in the team—never less than six—and on this occasion, as three of your side were crooked, it was a chance to let the New House have a whack for once, just to show that it's fair-play all round."

"There are nearly double as many fellows in the School House as in the other house, Monteith. You have more than a fair share, in proportion to numbers. But this ain't a question of numbers. If you had ten better men on your side, I'd put them all in, if they scragged me in the School House for it. You know that, don't you?"

"Well, yes," admitted Monteith.

Kildare's frank manner was hard to resist, even by a fellow who was seeking a grievance. And he knew that Kildare was sincere too. Some of his House-mates thought that the New House was too well represented in the School eleven already; but Kildare held steadfastly to his system of picking out the best men wherever he could find them.

Monteith gave the captain of St. Jim's a nod, and put on his muffler, and walked off to his own House. When nobody was making mischief, he pulled very well with Kildare. Sefton joined him as he walked away, and Monteith had an uneasy look.

"Well?" said Sefton.

"Kildare seems set on it," said Monteith.

"And are we going to stand it?"

"Well, he's captain of the school, you know," said Monteith. "I don't want to make a division in the team, just before a big match, too!"

"So you're going to let our House be put on in this way?" said Sefton bitterly. "I'm not shoving myself forward. If Langton were playing I wouldn't say a word. If it were Rushton or Lefevre, either. Even if he's put in St. Leger of the Fifth. But he's put in a junior. He talks as much as you like about keeping an even hand, and doing justice all round, but the long and short of it is that he means to keep a School House majority in the team, and he'd rather put in a kid from a junior Form than let us have a good show for once."

"It does look a bit like it, I admit."

"Well, ought we to stand it?" said Sefton. "You're captain of our house, Monteith, and we look to you to see justice done to our side."

Monteith hesitated.

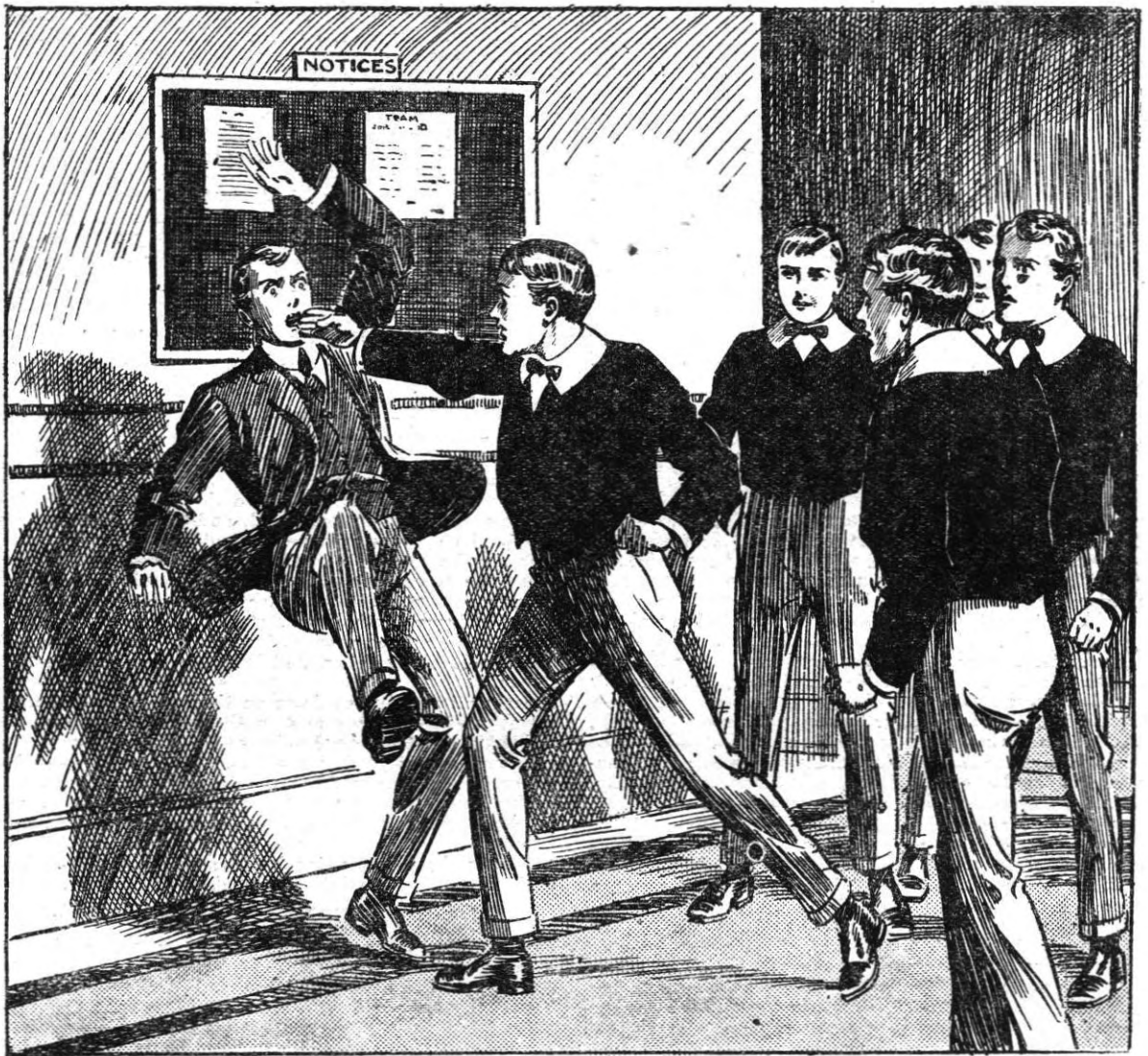
"We'll talk it over," he said. "I'm pretty keen about the Rookwood match, but, as you say, I'm not going to see our side slighted. It is a bit thick, putting in a School House junior, when there are a dozen seniors in the New House who'd jump at the chance. You don't look very fit, though, Sefton," he added. "What the thunder have you been doing to your face?"

"Accident with the punchball," muttered Sefton. "I'm fit as a fiddle. Better than a kid in the Shell, I suppose, anyway."

ANSWERS

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Smack! Sefton reeled back as Monteith's palm came across his face. The New House captain glared at him. "Now, if you want to keep on, we've time for a round or two before the match!" exclaimed Monteith angrily. (See Chapter 11.)

"Well, I suppose so. Come into my study at tea-time, and I'll have the fellows there, and we'll talk it over."

"A council of war," said Sefton gleefully.

"No!" exclaimed Monteith sharply. "Just a meeting to talk it over! I'm not going to have any split if I can help it."

Sefton nodded assent. He did not care to utter his thoughts. He had a good deal of influence over Monteith. There was not going to be a split if Monteith could help it; but Sefton's thought was that if he played his cards well Monteith might not be able to help it. And if he could not "wedge" himself into the first eleven, at all events he might spoil Talbot's chance, and perhaps "muck up" the big match he was left out-of. And that would be a consolation to the cad of the Sixth.

CHAPTER 6. Fairly Caught!

"B AI Jove, I shall be twapped!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy murmured those words in dismay.

The swell of St. Jim's was in hostile territory. He was in the Fourth Form passage in the New House,

where, of course, a School House junior had no business at all. But D'Arcy had business there—quite important business.

There had been a truce between the rival juniors of St. Jim's till after the House match, which had ended in such a glorious victory for the School House, owing to Talbot's topping goal at the finish. But the truce was over now, as Figgins & Co. had plainly testified by knocking off Arthur Augustus's beautiful silk topper in the quad. They had added to that injury by "passing" the topper from one to another till it was in a sad and woebegone state, and Arthur Augustus had been left with simply the wreck of a topper, and a thirst for vengeance. Which thirst he intended to slake by a raid upon Figgy's study. He had seen Fatty Wynn ordering a lovely pie in the tuckshop. That pie had been sent home by means of Taggles the porter, and now it reposed in Figgy's study. And Arthur Augustus had conceived the nobby idea of "slithering" into Figgy's study during the absence of the Co. and filling that pie with ink. The anguish of Fatty Wynn, when he discovered his beautiful pie filled with ink, would equal the heart-breaking experience Arthur Augustus had gone through.

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"MASTER MARIE!"

on account of his ruined topper. It was making the punishment fit the crime, as the celebrated Mikado recommended.

But, alas! for Arthur Augustus. He was not born to be a strategist. He stole into the New House with such excessive caution that at least a dozen fellows observed him. And when he had reached the junior passage he heard footsteps on the stairs. To add to his alarm, he heard the door of Redfern's study at the end of the passage open. He was going to be caught between two fires—Redfern & Co. in the passage, and Figgins & Co. on the stairs. And a raider caught red-handed in hostile territory could only expect to be made an example of.

Arthur Augustus was as brave as a lion; but he trembled at the thought that when the New House juniors had finished with him his natty clobber might be in the same state as his wrecked silk hat.

So Arthur Augustus looked round for an avenue of escape.

He thought of dodging into a study, but as it was nearly tea-time, most of the studies had somebody in them. He did not want to rush out of the frying-pan into the fire.

"Bai Jove! This is wotten!" he murmured.

Redfern had not come out of his study yet. He was pausing in the doorway to speak to his study-mates Lawrence and Owen. But the footsteps of Figgins & Co. were coming nearer on the stairs, and they evidently suspected the presence of an enemy, even if they were not sure.

Arthur Augustus backed away into a shadowy alcove in the passage. There was a door there, but it was not a study-door. It was the door of the punishment-room. That room, much used a few decades before, in the harder old days, had fallen into disuse. It was a small room with a little barred window looking out on a blank wall, and a big spring lock on the door that could not be opened from the inside. Arthur Augustus squeezed himself flat against that door, and listened cautiously. There were footsteps in the passage and voices.

"The silly ass must be here," said Figgins; "I saw him come into the house quite plainly. He must have come up here."

"Hallo, Reddy!" called out Kerr. "Have you seen a tame lunatic knocking about?"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "The diswepctful beast!"

But he made that remark sotto voce.

"Only you chaps," called back Redfern cheerily.

"Oh, don't be funny!" said Fatty Wynn. "There's a School House duffer in here somewhere, and he may be after my pie."

"Look in the study," said Figgins.

The trio hurried to their study.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, "the disgustin' boundahs know that I am heah. That is vewy remarkable, as I was vewy careful. They will search the beastly passage, and they will put ink on my collah, and pewwaps jam down my back—gwooh! The wotten pewwaps! Bai Jove! I'll dodge in heah!"

He cautiously turned back the key of the punishment-room and opened the door. The room within was very dark, though there was a glimmer of light in the quad still. The swell of St. Jim's stepped quickly into the room and closed the door. Click!

Arthur Augustus grinned with satisfaction. Unless they made a very rigorous search, the New House fellows weren't likely to look in that cobwebby apartment. And D'Arcy knew that Fatty Wynn, at least, would be keen to get to work on his pie. The raid had been a failure, but Arthur Augustus would have been very well satisfied to escape scot-free.

He listened inside the door. The door was of thick and ponderous oak, and sounds came but faintly through it. And Arthur Augustus could not find a keyhole. But he heard footsteps pass and repass. Then there were voices, but the voices died away. The door was not opened.

Arthur Augustus breathed more freely.

Figgins & Co. had evidently "chucked" the search. No doubt they had returned to their study, and were

beginning operations on the pie. The swell of St. Jim's waited for a quarter of an hour till he was assured that the coast was clear.

"I wathah think I'll be off," he murmured. "Pewwaps I had better postpone punishin' those wottahs!"

He felt over the door for the handle. The handle turned, but the door did not open. Arthur Augustus felt a thrill of alarm.

"What's the mattah with the wotten door? Wats! I am quite sure that I unlocked the wotten thing, or I couldn't have got in. This is weally vewy remarkable. It must have got jammed somehow."

He dragged at the door.

But the big oak door did not move. It was evidently locked, and the key was on the outside.

"Oh cwumbs! It's a beastly spwing lock!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Oh, gweat Scott! What a disgustin' sell!"

He was a prisoner.

Naturally, as a School House fellow, he did not know anything about that lock on the door of the punishment-room in the New House. He knew all about it now. But his knowledge had come too late.

In great dismay he crossed to the window. But the window was high up and small, and it was crossed and recrossed by strong iron bars. And the wall below was blank, and had a depth of thirty feet or more. Evidently there was no escape that way. A few yards distant the blank wall of the laboratory faced him. He could hardly get a glimpse of the quad. And darkness was falling now. There was no chance of attracting the attention of any School House fellow and bringing his chums to the rescue.

Arthur Augustus sat down on the bare pallet-bed and shivered. It was very cold in the punishment-room.

"What the dooce am I goin' to do?" he murmured.

It was an interesting problem. There was certainly no avenue of escape from the trap he had cheerfully walked into. The only way of getting out was to knock on the door and attract the attention of the New House fellows.

Arthur Augustus naturally shrank from that. He did not want to fall into the hands of the enemy.

But there was no help for it. It was close on time for closing up in his House; and he could not remain out all night. There was nothing for it but to summon Figgins & Co. to the rescue.

"How uttahly wotten!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "The silly asses will chip me for bein' caught like this when I get back, and—and what will happen befoah I get back? Oh cwumbs! Blow Fatty Wynn's beastly pie! If he wasn't such a gorgin' wottah I shouldn't have come heah at all! Blow him! Blow ewevybody!"

And, having made up his mind to the inevitable, Arthur Augustus began to knock on the oaken door. Knock, knock, knock!

CHAPTER 7.

A Narrow Escape.

"HA, ha, ha!"

That was the reply to Arthur Augustus's knocking.

"Bai Jove!"

"Still there, Gussy?" came Figgins's voice through the door.

"Pway open the door!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah wottah! Did you know I was heah?" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha! Where else could you be, fathead?" roared Figgins. "We've been waiting for you to find out that you couldn't get out!"

There was a roar of laughter from the passage outside. Arthur Augustus trembled with indignation. He had not dodged the enemy, after all. They had known where he had taken refuge, and they had left him to make the discovery that there was no escape.

"You uttah wottahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Open this door, you frightful beasts!"
 "Why not try the window?"
 "The window is barred, you ass!"
 "The chimney, then?"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I wefuse to twy the chimney. Besides, the chimney is barred too. I insist upon this door bein' opened at once, Figgins."
 "Go on insisting."
 "You feahful beast! It is time for me to be back in my House. I will give you a feahful thwashin', Figgins, if you do not open the door!"
 "How are you going to do it if I don't open the door?" queried Figgins.
 That was a poser. Arthur Augustus thumped on the door.

"Figgins, you wottah, I insist on bein' let out! I will let you off the thwashin', and will go away quite peaceably."
 "Wouldn't you like to?" chuckled Figgins. "You're not getting away so peaceably as all that, Gussy. You've caught yourself in a trap, and we're going to keep you as a specimen. On half-holidays we shall charge twopence for admission to see you. Fellows pay to see the monkey-cage at the Zoo, so—"

"You wottah!"
 "Take it calmly. You will get used to it in time. Monkeys, when caught young, grow accustomed to the cage, and even get to like it in the long run."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Will you open this door?" shrieked Arthur Augustus.
 "Can't be did! You're our only specimen at present."

Thump, thump, thump, thump!
 Arthur Augustus was growing excited, and his thumps on the door rang along the passage.

"When first confined to a cage they show fury, but in time they calm down, and will feed from the keeper's hand," said Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Oh, you awful wottah! I will thwash every one of you when I get out!" shouted Arthur Augustus.
 "You feahful beast! I wegard you as a Pwussian!"

"Well, perhaps we might let you out if you ask us nicely," said Figgins, relenting. "Are you prepared to ask us nicely and sweetly, like a good little boy?"

"You—you—you—"
 "Say 'Dear Figgins—'"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I wefuse to say anythin' of the sort!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I look upon you as a wotten beast!"
 "Then you can stay there till I've changed from a rotten beast into dear Figgins!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Ahem! If you will open the door, Figgins, I am willin' to wequest you to do so civilly," said Arthur Augustus, with an effort.

"Very well. Begin 'Dear Figgins—'"
 "'Deah Figgins—'" said Arthur Augustus, nearly choking.

"I am sorry I have been a cheeky kid—"
 "I wefuse!"
 "All serene! Good-night!" There was a sound of retreating footsteps, and Arthur Augustus gasped.

"Hold on, Figgins! I am willin' to wepeat your widiculous words. 'I am sowwy I have been a cheeky kid—'" gurgled Arthur Augustus.

"And I will never be cheeky again—'" dictated Figgins.

"And I will nevah be cheekay again—"
 "'And I admit that the New House is cock-house at St. Jim's—'"
 "Nevah!"

"You'll stay there till you do!" chuckled Figgins.
 "Oh, you uttah beast! I wefuse to admit anythin' of

the sort! I wegard you as a set of uttah wottahs! Don't go away, Figgins—Figgins, you wottah!"

But there were retreating footsteps again, and this time in earnest. Figgins & Co. had gone; and Arthur Augustus, shut up inside the dark room, could not see that they had bolted as a prefect came along the passage. It was Sefton of the Sixth, and he had heard the thumping. Sefton had brought a cane with him, and Figgins & Co. had promptly vanished into thin air.

"The feahful wottahs! They are weally gone!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Bai Jove! I'll make a dweadful wow till somebody comes!"

Thump, thump, thump!
 "Who's making that thundering row?" shouted Sefton.
 Arthur Augustus jumped.
 "Oh, gweat Scott! It's that beast Sefton? Pewwaps I'd bettah lie low for a bit."

But it was too late.
 The prefect's footsteps approached the door of the punishment-room. His ears had told him that the knocking came from within that apartment.

"Some young whelp playing tricks in there!" muttered Sefton, taking a grip on his cane. "I'll warm him!"

D'Arcy heard the key turning. He drew back from the door. With a brilliant inspiration, he flattened himself behind the door so that it would conceal him when it opened. He hoped to be able to dodge past the prefect when he entered and escape. The door was flung open, and it rolled back heavily on Arthur Augustus, and he suppressed a yell as it nearly flattened him on the wall. Sefton of the Sixth peered into the darkness of the room.

"Who's there?" he rapped out.
 Arthur Augustus held his breath.
 "I know you're there, whoever you are," growled Sefton. "I'm going to lick you for kicking up that row. Come out at once!"

No reply. Sefton muttered something, and struck a match, and came into the room. He looked about him in the flickering light. There was no one to be seen.

"Hiding under the bed, you cheeky young sweep!" growled Sefton. "I'll jolly soon rout you out!"

Arthur Augustus peered round the edge of the door. Sefton was stooping down, holding the vesta low while he peered under the bed. He had his back to the swell of the School House, but there was no room to escape without touching him.

Arthur Augustus resolved upon a bold stroke at once.

He stepped out cautiously from behind the door, and gave Sefton a sudden shove from behind. There was a howl from the prefect as he pitched forward on his hands and knees upon the floor. The match went out. As a matter of fact, Sefton extinguished it on the floor with his face. Arthur Augustus did not stay to listen to Sefton's remarks; they were really not suitable for youthful ears. He whipped out of the room and ran for his life.

Down the passage he went like a deer, and down the stairs three at a time. The repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere was utterly forgotten. If Sefton got behind him with that cane Arthur Augustus knew what to expect, and he did not waste a decimal fraction of a second. In a twinkling almost he was whipping out of the House and speeding across the quad for safer quarters.

Sefton collected himself up in the punishment-room in a state of fury. He came raging out into the passage with a half-burnt vesta squashed on his face. He had not seen Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, but he had heard him, and he proceeded to pay a series of domiciliary visits in the Fourth Form studies in search of the delinquent. But every fellow was able to prove an alibi; and Sefton had to give up the search, after bestowing fifty lines each on Figgins & Co. for grinning.

Arthur Augustus rushed into the School House breathlessly, and "took" the stairs at a terrific rate. He

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burst into Study No. 6, where Blake and Herries and Dig were getting tea, and sank gasping in the armchair.

"Oh cwumbs!"

His chums stared at him.

"What do you mean?" began Blake wrathfully.

"Oh, bai Jove, I've had a time!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been in the New House, you know. I've been shut up, you know, and I've neahly been nailed by that cad Sefton, you know!"

"What do you—"

"You should have seen him spawlin' ovah, though," said Arthur Augustus, bursting into a breathless chuckle.

"I got out all wight. But, bai Jove—"

"What do you mean—" roared Blake.

"Weally, Blake, I've explained—"

"What do you mean by sitting down on the marmalade tarts?" shrieked Blake.

"What!"

"Arthur Augustus leaped to his feet as if the armchair had become suddenly red-hot. There was a yell from the study-mates. He was stuck all over with juicy tarts.

"Oh cwickey! You sillay asses—"

"You've ruined those tarts—"

"What do you mean by leavin' tarts in the armchair, you dummay?"

"What do you mean by sitting in them, you silly ass?"

"Oh cwumbs! My twousahs!"

"My tarts!" roared Blake.

"My twousahs—"

"Look at my tarts!"

"Look at my twousahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Herries and Dig.

"Get these beastly stickay tarts off me, you howwid idiots—"

"I'll get them off!" howled Blake. He proceeded to use his boots for the purpose, and Arthur Augustus dodged wildly round the table, and fled from the study, still with two or three tarts clinging lovingly to his beautiful bags.

CHAPTER 8.

The Die is Cast!

"WELL, we're all here," said Sefton.

It was quite a meeting in Monteith's study in the New House. Baker and Webb and Gray and Dudley, all members of the eleven, were there. Sefton was anxious to get to business. Monteith looked worried. It had been easy for Sefton to work upon his feelings, and rouse up the old jealousy that had slept so long. The thought that his House, and himself as the head of it, should be slighted, put Monteith's back up at once. He had agreed that the New House should not be slighted. Yet, when he thought of Kildare's frank face and candid manner, Monteith felt uneasy. He could not bring himself to believe that Kildare really intended to treat him badly. He had done his best of late to pull with the captain of St. Jim's. Had he really been too amenable, too submissive to the School House skipper? Sefton seemed to think so. And Sefton was not the only New House fellow who felt sore about a School House junior being put into the first eleven, while seniors of the other House were left out.

In fact, a good many fellows had made remarks to Monteith on the subject. They were all fellows who considered their claims to play for the first were pretty good, if not undeniable. And they were a little sore over the selection of Talbot. They felt much more sore and indignant after Sefton had talked to them. Sefton was quite an adept in rousing animosity.

"I suppose something ought to be done," said Monteith reluctantly. "What do you fellows think? I suppose it is rather thick, Kildare putting in a School House junior over the heads of seniors on this side."

"Well, some of the chaps think so," remarked Baker.

"He might have put in Cary, for instance."

"Cary's a good goal," said Monteith; "but Kildare wanted a winger. Cary's no good in the front line."

"Or Sefton," said Webb.

"I don't want to shove myself forward," said Sefton, "but I'm a member of the club, and I'm in the Sixth. It's an insult to me to put that Shell kid over my head. I wouldn't mind that, even, but it's an insult to our House. Ever since Monteith has tried to pull well with Kildare, they've taken advantage of it on that side."

"I've done my best for the school," said Monteith.

"We all know you have," said Sefton. "You've put up with a lot of things for the sake of peace. But when it comes to the New House being walked over in this way, I think it's time to draw a line. Mind, I'm not only speaking for myself. Put it to Kildare that a New House senior should be played instead of a School House kid. So long as we get our rights, I don't care about myself. Make it Cary or Jones major, or anybody you like, so long as we stand up for our rights."

There was a murmur of approval. Nothing could be fairer than that, the New House seniors thought.

"Kildare won't give way, though," remarked Baker.

"He might be made to," said Sefton. "Look here, we've had to stand up for our rights before. A lot on that side don't like us having five members in the team. I know there was talk of giving St. Leger Baker's place, but it came to nothing."

"By Jove!" said Baker.

"We've never grumbled at their having six to five. Now three of the School House members are crooked. It's a chance to give our side a show, if Kildare liked to take it. But what does he do? Shoves in two School House reserves, and for the third man picks a kid in the Shell. I think that shows pretty plainly that he'd go to any length before he'd let our side have a majority in the team."

Monteith nodded gloomily.

"Kildare puts it that he picks out the best men, wherever they happen to be," he said.

"And they always happen to be in his House," sneered Sefton. "Are we going to take it that we can't play footer on this side? You wouldn't listen to me before, Monty. You would sacrifice everything to keeping the peace. But when he selects a Shell kid rather than put in a New House man, I really think that even your eyes ought to be opened. The House looks to you to see fair-play."

"Well, there's a lot in what Sefton says," said Webb. "I really think you ought to put it straight to Kildare, Monty, old man. I don't see why our House should be passed over."

"My idea exactly," concurred Gray.

"I'll send him a note," said Monteith, making up his mind. "Dash it all, it's too thick to have their juniors put over the heads of our seniors."

Monteith wrote a note, and the other seniors read it over, and nodded approval. A fag was called in to take it to the School House. It happened to be Figgins of the Fourth.

"Take that to Kildare, and wait for an answer," said Monteith.

"Right-ho!" said Figgins.

He departed with the note, and scudded across the quad. There was an exclamation of wrath as he entered the School House. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—resplendent in new bags—made a movement towards him.

"Figgins, you wottah—"

Figgins held up the note and grinned.

"Pax!"

"I wefuse to pax! I mean—"

"Hold that lunatic, somebody," said Figgins. "I'm an ambassador—a giddy ambassador. Special message from our skipper to the skipper of this old barn. Ta-ta, Gussy! Tell me next time you want to burgle our punishment-room."

"And Figgins walked on, grinning, to Kildare's study. He knocked at the door, and marched in. Darrel and Langton were having tea with Kildare.

"Well, young shaver?"

"Special message from Monteith," said Figgins cheerily. "I'm to wait for an answer."

"Right!" said Kildare, looking a little worried as

he took the note. He opened it, and the three Sixth-formers read it together, with frowning brows. It ran:

"Dear Kildare,—I have consulted with the fellows on my side, and we all think it's rather unreasonable of you to put a School House fag over the heads of New House seniors. We feel that it is a slight to our House. We are very unwilling to do anything that might cause any kind of trouble before the Rookwood match, and I am sure you understand this. But we feel we have a right to ask you to make a change as far as the junior is concerned. I suggest three names for you to choose from—Cary, Jones major, Sefton.—Yours truly,
"JAMES MONTEITH."

"Trouble in the air!" said Darrel.

"What are you going to say, Kildare?" asked Langton, with a very serious look.

"There's only one thing to say," replied Kildare.

He wrote an answer, scaled it up, and handed it to Figgins, after the others had read it and signified their approval.

"Give that to Monteith, kid."

"Anything for the messenger?" inquired Figgins humorously.

"Yes, a thick ear if you don't buzz off!"

"Thanks! I won't wait for it."

Figgins scudded off, and duly delivered the note in Monteith's study, where the New House fellows were waiting rather anxiously for it.

"Want me any more?" asked Figgins.

"Yes, you can wait," said Monteith, opening the note. "There may be an answer."

"What I want to know is, how is an industrious junior to get his prep done at this rate?" observed Figgins.

But Monteith did not heed him. The New House seniors read Kildare's reply. It was quite to the point.

"Dear Monteith,—I considered the matter very carefully before I selected Talbot. You cannot suppose I acted in a hurry without thinking. As for the names you mention, if a goalkeeper were needed, I would take Cary at once, and if I wanted a back, Jones major would do very well indeed. But a winger is wanted, and neither of the fellows you mention would fill the bill so well as the player I have selected. As for Sefton, I should decline to play him in any case. Of course, my judgment may be faulty, but if a footer captain can't select his own team, it's not much good his being captain, is it? I hope you'll try to see this, and let's all pull together to beat Rookwood.—Yours sincerely, ERIC KILDARE."

The Sixth-formers looked at one another grimly. It was put very nicely, but it was a refusal, point-blank. Kildare meant to go his own way.

"He's right, about Cary and Jones major," said Monteith, after an awkward pause. "They have never shown up in the forward line."

"And what about me?" exclaimed Sefton hotly. "I'm not to be played in any case! Why not? Because I'm a New House fellow. There's no other reason."

"It's pretty rotten!" said Baker.

"If the New House takes this lying down we deserve all we get in the future—and we shall get plenty," said Sefton.

"I don't see what's to be done," remarked Monteith. "Kildare's refused right out."

"My hat!" murmured Figgins.

"And it will be blabbed over the whole school before bedtime," said Sefton, with a look at Figgins. "All St. Jim's will know that we've asked for our bare rights, and have been refused, and that we're going to take it smiling. Those cads over the way will be crowing over us to-morrow."

"Don't look at me," said Figgins independently. "I'm not going to say a word."

"Hold your tongue!"

"You can trust me, Monteith," said Figgins. "I don't want to make trouble. I sha'n't say a giddy syllable about it."

"That's all right, kid," said Monteith. "Don't jaw. Well, you fellows, we've run up against a stone wall by the look of it. We might really have known it before we sent the note. We've only made matters worse."

"Unless we put the screw on," said Sefton.

"How? Kildare's captain."

"He thinks of his House before the school, as that letter shows plainly."

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Figgins. "We all know Kildare's as fair as a judge."

Sefton jumped up in a fury.

"Get out, Figgins!" said Monteith hastily. "I'll call you if I want you!"

And Figgins, with a snort, got out.

"It'll be all over the House now," said Sefton. "That kid won't hold his tongue. He'll let it out, even if he doesn't mean to. We shall be laughed at by all the school for starting standing up for our rights, without having the pluck to stick to our guns."

"There's plenty of pluck here if that's all that's wanted," said Baker, frowning. "I don't see what the dickens is to be done, that's all."

"Monteith could bring the cheeky rotter down off his perch easy enough, only he's so taken with peace at any price."

"It's not that," said Monteith. "I don't like being refused any more than you do. I think Kildare's riding the high horse a bit too much. What can I do?"

"Tell Kildare that, if he won't give us a decent show in the team, he can fill it up with School House fags if he likes!" said Sefton savagely. "He might like to put in Tom Merry and Blake and Skimpole, perhaps. Tell him you insist upon what you stated in your letter."

"But if he refuses? And he will."

"Then tell him that, rather than be done out of bare justice, the New House will stand out of the Rookwood match, and he can make up a School House team from end to end!"

"Phew!" said Baker. "That would mean throwing away the match."

"Of course it would, and for that reason Kildare will give in. He daren't lose the match over such a question as playing a junior."

"Blessed if I don't!" said Monteith.

Once more a note was written, the five seniors putting their heads very carefully together over it.

"Dear Kildare,—I'm sorry you say you can't meet my wishes. I must tell you that the New House feels very strongly on this matter. Unless the junior is left out, and a New House senior played, I'm afraid the New House members of the team will feel called upon to resign in protest. This would mean chucking away the match, so I hope you will think it over and let me have a favourable reply.
JAMES MONTEITH."

The indefatigable Figgins was despatched with the note. Monteith & Co. waited very anxiously for his return. They felt that Kildare must give way now. Unless he gave way, the Rookwood match was as good as lost, for Monteith could not fail to carry out his threat. After making the threat, he could not fail to back up his words by action, unless he wanted to look utterly ridiculous. Kildare must give way! There could be no doubt about that. But the meeting in Monteith's study passed a very uncomfortable ten minutes while Figgins was absent.

The Fourth-Former came in at last, and laid a note on the table. Monteith opened it hastily. There was a muttering of anger from the Sixth-Formers as the note was read.

"Dear Monteith,—I have nothing to add to my reply. I cannot in conscience act against my deliberate judgment, much as I want to meet your wishes in every possible way. Don't let us fall out over nothing. We want to win the last match of the season.—Sincerely yours,
ERIC KILDARE."

"It's up to you, Monty!" said Sefton.

Monteith sat staring at the note. It was indeed up to him. He had uttered his threat, and his threat had been totally disregarded. Without a humiliation that

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he was not at all disposed to submit to, he had to carry out his threat. His cheeks flushed, and his eyes burned with anger. Whether he was most angry with Kildare or with Sefton, or with himself for getting into such a position, it would have been hard to say. But he had only one course left to take, and he took it. He stretched out his hand for the pen, and wrote hastily, angrily, without stopping for much reflection:

"Dear Kildare,—The following members of the St. Jim's First Eleven beg to resign their places in the team: Baker, Webb, Dudley, Gray, and

JAMES MONTEITH."

"Take that to Kildare!" said Monteith harshly.

"I say, Monteith——" began Figgins, in dismay. He had not seen the contents of any of the notes, but he could see that there was trouble brewing.

"Don't talk! Do as I tell you!" snapped Monteith.

Figgins obeyed.

"I wonder if he'll send an answer?" said Dudley, after a few minutes of painful silence in the study.

"He'll come round," said Sefton.

Monteith did not speak. He did not think that Kildare would come round, but he had a lingering hope that he might. His look, as it dwelt on Sefton, was not pleasant. Step by step the cunning senior had led him on to this till he was in a position that it was impossible for him to extricate himself from. If Kildare gave in at the last moment his dignity was saved, and it was a score for the New House. But if Kildare did not give in it was a worse defeat for the New House than if the supposed wrong had been taken "lying down," to say nothing of the fact that the last big match of the season would be lost, and the whole school would probably visit the responsibility for that on Monteith's shoulders. The match would be played without them, and lost, and their position would not be pleasant. Surely, as Sefton argued, Kildare would pull in his horns at the last moment. Yet he could not do so without submitting to such humiliation as no captain worth his salt would submit to.

The study door opened at last, and Figgins came in. Monteith stretched out his hand eagerly for the note. He tore it open. It contained one line:

"Resignations accepted.

KILDARE."

Figgins retreated from the study, almost scared by the look that came over Monteith's face. There was a long and bitter silence.

"Well, it's done now," said Baker heavily. "We've got to stick it out."

"He'll come round before the match," said Sefton.

No one answered him. They all knew perfectly well that Kildare would not come round. It was done now. As they had made their bed, they had to lie upon it. The die was cast!

CHAPTER 9.

In the Cart.

ST. JIM'S was in a buzz next day with the news.

Five members of the first eleven had resigned from the team, and it was the day before the big match. On the morrow Rookwood were coming over, and Kildare had a team of six, including one junior, ready to meet them.

All the resigning members were New House players. It was evidently a recurrence of the old House rivalry among the seniors, which Kildare, with infinite tact and patience, had succeeded in putting an end to. It had cropped up again—more dangerous than ever.

The juniors learned the news from the notice-board in the hall. The list of the first eleven was pinned up there. That day five names were seen to be crossed

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out in the list. As yet they had not been replaced. It was not easy to replace them immediately, even with second-rate players. Tom Merry & Co. dismally conjectured that the match was as good as lost. Even Kildare could never make up a team in the time to meet the mighty men from Rookwood. Tom Merry & Co. played matches with the Rookwood juniors, and were accustomed to win. But Rookwood First was quite another matter. They were a tremendous team, and St. Jim's had to put forth their greatest strength for that match. With five of their best men standing out, sulking like Achilles in his tent, the match was as good as thrown away.

That day Kildare was observed to have a grim look on his brow, and no wonder. Talbot of the Shell was looking worried too. He knew that Sefton had been at work, and, although no reason was assigned in public for the resignation of the five players, he could guess easily enough what the reason was. After lessons he made his way to Kildare's study, where the School House seniors were met in a somewhat doleful council. Kildare's friends all backed up his decision without hesitation. It was impossible for the football captain to submit to the dictation that had been attempted. But they knew that Rookwood were going to beat them, and they were not cheerful.

Kildare gave the Shell fellow a kindly nod as he came in. The worry on his mind did not sharpen his temper. Talbot was colouring a little.

"Well, what is it, kid?" asked Kildare.

"About this—this—the resignations, you know," said Talbot, his flush deepening. "I know pretty well what's the reason of it, Kildare. If it would make matters any better, my standing out of the team, you've only got to say the word. You've given me the place, but I'll give it up instantly if it's any help."

"Good, man!" said Kildare approvingly. "But it wouldn't be any help, Talbot. I want you to play, and I want you to play the game of your life, that's all."

"Rely on me for that," said Talbot. And he left the study.

"It doesn't matter much whom we play now," remarked Darrel. "We're beaten before the start. I should hardly have expected this of Monteith."

"I hardly think Monteith is responsible entirely," said Kildare. "Somebody's been making trouble, I suppose."

"It's a bad look-out. Where are we to get five new men from?"

"We've got to get them. I can't scratch the match at a late moment like this. Bulkeley and his team are coming over to-morrow. It would be a bit thick to tell them not to come, the very last day before the match. We've got to raise the best team we can. I'm thinking of St. Leger of the Fifth, for one, and North. They're two good men. As for the other three

"No good looking to the New House for them, I suppose?"

Kildare wrinkled his brows.

"I suppose the New House will follow Monteith's lead all along the line. But there are plenty of New House members of the club, and unless they state plainly that they are standing out, they have a right to be selected. Cary will do rippingly. We want a goalie as Webb is standing out. He was our goalie. Jones major will take Gray's place very well."

Kildare's comrades looked at him very dubiously. After the conduct of Monteith & Co. in resigning from the eleven on the eve of the match, they were inclined to give the New House a wide berth altogether. Neither did they believe that any New House fellow would be willing to fill the place of the New House leaders. Monteith's House were certain to back him up.

"Looks like asking a favour of the cads," growled Langton.

"Let the New House slide altogether," said Rushden.

FOR NEXT WEEK:

MASTER MARIE!

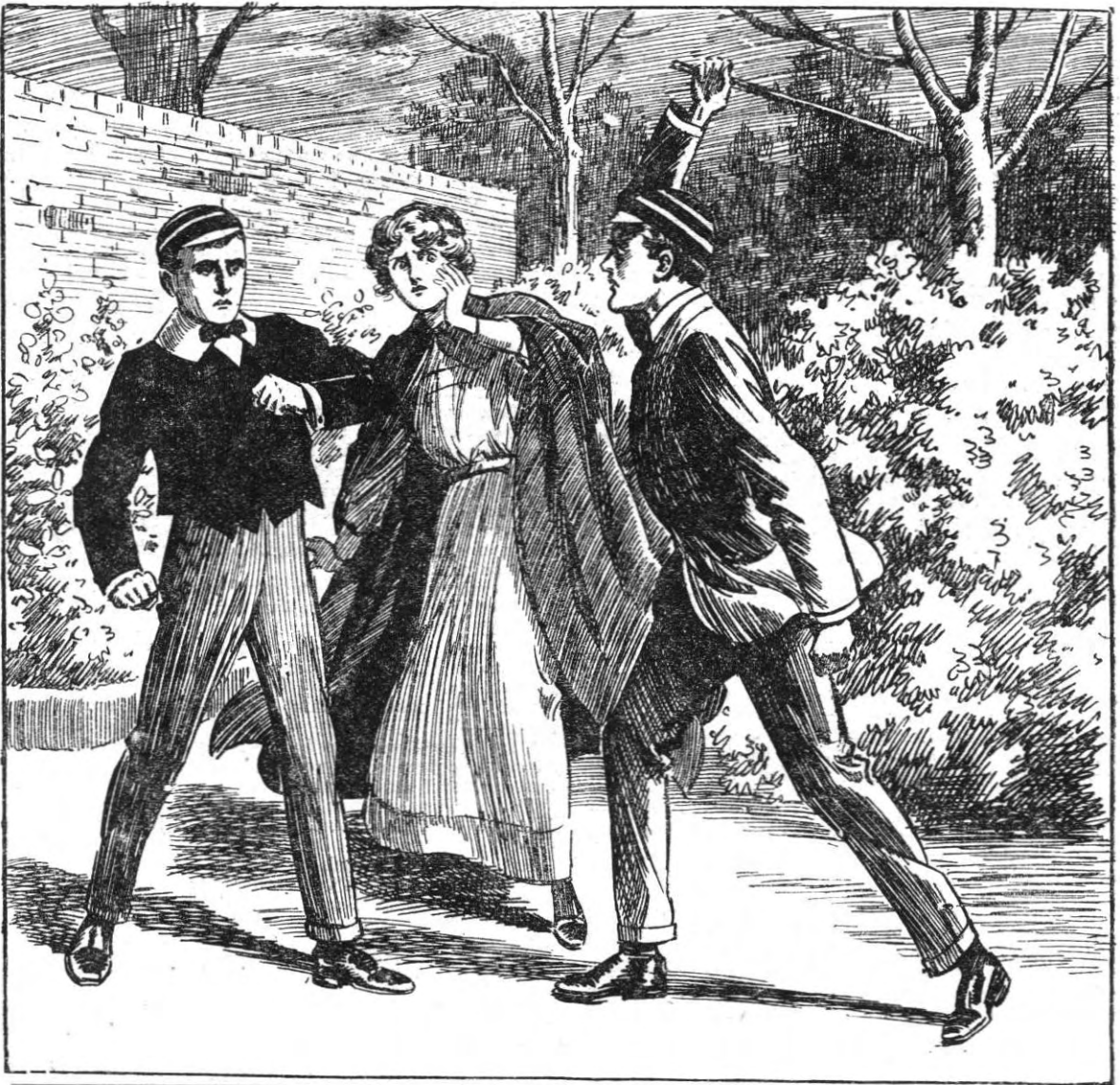
Another Splendid Long, Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., Talbot and Marie Rivers at St. Jim's.

—By—

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

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PRICE ONE PENNY.



"I am here, if you want me," said Talbot contemptuously. "Don't be afraid, Marie. I can handle this bullying ca." That was enough for Setton. He made a rush at Talbot, swinging the ashplant in the air. (See Chapter 4.)

Kildare shook his head.

"I know what you're thinking," he said quietly. "You think it's rather humiliating to ask New House men to play, after what Monteith's done. But it's a question of justice. As members of the club, they have a right to play if they choose. I can't do less than ask them. It wouldn't be fair."

"It won't be much use," said Darrel. "They are certain to back up Monteith."

"I believe so. Still, fair-play's a jewel, and I must ask them. If they refuse, we must see what we can find in the Fifth, on this side, and among the juniors. There are at least a couple of juniors who would put up a good game. Tom Merry is first class for a youngster, and there's Blake too. But we'll give the Sixth a chance first, as in duty bound."

"You won't go to them?" said Darrel dubiously. He had an idea that a visit from Kildare to the New House just then might be followed by unpleasant consequences.

"No; I'll send a note."

A little later Monteith was in his study, looking considerably glum and morose, when three seniors came in. They were Cary and Jones major of the Sixth, and Duff of the Fifth. They looked a little pink and uncomfortable, and Jones major had a note in his hand. Monteith

gave them a look of sour inquiry. He was not in a good humour.

"I've had a note from Kildare," said Jones major, plunging into the subject at once.

"What does he say?"

"He's offered us three places in the first eleven for the Rookwood match."

Monteith sneered.

"And you've accepted?"

The three New House seniors looked uncomfortable.

"We've come to ask you about it," said Jones major, after a pause. "You and the others have resigned from the first eleven. We know your reasons, and we back you up. But it's a rotten pity about the match, isn't it? We don't want St. Jim's to lose."

"It's Kildare's fault if we lose," said Monteith savagely. "It's all come through his sticking in a School House junior, and leaving us in the lurch. I was bound to stand up for the rights of the House."

The three seniors nodded.

"I don't deny that. All the same, Kildare has asked us if we'd like the places. Now, we haven't any wish to step into the other fellows' shoes," said Jones major; "and we don't want to go back on the House. The only thing is, if we refuse, Kildare will play some scratch

gang from the School House, and get a licking. So we leave it in your hands, Monteith. We'll do as you say."

"That's it," said Cary and Duff together.

Monteith's face cleared a little. He was not to have mutiny in his own House added to his other worries. The loyalty of the three fellows touched him somewhat; he knew their keenness to play in the first eleven.

"Well, that's quite right of you," said Monteith. "It would look pretty rotten if fellows in our own House were eager to step into our shoes."

"That's what I thought," said Jones major. "Only Kildare has asked us simply as members of the club."

"Do as you like about it. I should refuse in your place. But I don't want to dictate to you," said Monteith moodily.

"That settles it," said Jones, with a sigh. "We'd like to play, but we're not going back on the House. We refuse."

And Jones & Co. retired from the study, to despatch a reply to Kildare to that effect. Monteith was left alone, in a worried and unhappy mood:

It was a relief to him to find loyalty in his own House. He knew that all the fellows did not approve of his high-handed ultimatum to Kildare. Even Baker and the rest, whom he had consulted at the time, regarded him as having put his foot in it, though they did not falter so far as backing him up was concerned. If fellows on his own side had stepped into his shoes, his humiliation would have been complete. He had been spared that. Yet he was not satisfied. For those New House recruits were the only possible ones to bring the eleven up to anything like the form required to match the Rookwooders. Without them, Kildare would have to make up the team with a decidedly scratch lot, probably including three or four juniors. That meant a certain licking. And Monteith was almost as keen as Kildare about winning that big match, and keeping up the School record.

As a matter of fact, his position was a false one, every way he looked at it. On the morrow afternoon five good players would be standing idle, missing the best game of the season, and seeing their school beaten—and why? Even if Kildare had been in the wrong, it wasn't worth all that. And after all, had he been in the wrong? As football captain, it could not be denied that he had a right to use his own judgment. He had chosen to play Talbot of the Shell instead of a New House senior. He declined to play Sefton at any price. But was that so unreasonable after all? Monteith knew that Sefton was a smoker, that he was not fit, that he had no wind for a hard and gruelling game. And it came bitterly into his mind that, without the cad of the Sixth to urge him on, he would not have made all this trouble. He would never have sent that ultimatum to the captain of the school, and he would not have found himself in this humiliating and painful position. He was angry with himself, angry with Kildare, and bitterly angry with Sefton. What had the confounded fellow wanted to make all this trouble for?

That was the thought in Monteith's mind when the door opened and Sefton of the Sixth came in. The New House skipper looked at him grimly.

"It's all right," said Sefton.

"All right, is it?" grunted Monteith. "Looks all wrong to me."

"I mean, you can depend on the House," said Sefton. "I've just seen Jones major. There won't be any surrender on this side."

Monteith shrugged his shoulders irritably.

"I know that."

"Well, that's satisfactory, isn't it?"

"In a way, yes; in another way, no. I don't want to see St. Jim's wiped off the ground by Rookwood to-morrow."

"It will be Kildare's fault."

"What does it matter whose fault it is? It's the fact that matters. Besides, I'm not so sure it's Kildare's fault," said Monteith morosely. "I've been thinking about it. If I were football captain, I wouldn't be dictated to. Then why the deuce should I expect it of Kildare? It wasn't reasonable."

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Sefton gave him a quick glance, with a bitter sneer on his thin lips.

"You're not thinking of climbing down? Why, you'd be laughed at by every cad in the School House, Monteith."

"I can't climb down now. I've got to stick it out; and a precious fool I've made of myself," said Monteith moodily. "The fellows all think so. They don't say so, but they think it. They back me up because I'm captain of the House, and they're too decent to leave me in the lurch. But they think I've played the giddy ox. I know that."

"Kildare will come round before the match," said Sefton.

"He won't."

"Then let him take the consequences."

"We've all got to take the consequences. A licking for the first eleven is a licking for the school; and everybody will put it down to me."

Sefton made no reply to that. As a matter of fact, the defeat of the first eleven was what he looked forward to, as a punishment for Kildare, for his exclusion from the team. But he did not venture to say so to Monteith.

"Better have let matters alone," pursued Monteith.

"After all, that kid Talbot is a good player, and he's fit as a fiddle. And that's more than you are, Sefton. You smoke too much for that, and Kildare knows it."

Sefton bit his lip.

"So you're turning on me now!" he muttered.

"Well, you got me into this fix," snapped Monteith.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you; I blame myself. But I wish to goodness you'd held your tongue. We've had enough of that dashed House jealousy before, and trouble enough it made too."

"If you want Kildare to rough-ride over this House—"

"He doesn't want to do anything of the sort. He's fair and square; a jolly good deal more than I am, for that matter," said Monteith, with a touch of remorse.

"He may have made a mistake, but he never had any intention of slighting our side. I've a jolly good mind —" He paused.

Sefton looked alarmed.

"Monteith, you can't surrender now. It would be like funking—. The cads over there would think you were afraid—"

"I don't want you to tell me what I'm to do. For goodness' sake get out, Sefton! You worry me, and that's a fact."

Sefton left the study without another word. Monteith was on the verge of quarrelling with him, and Sefton wanted to avoid that. But the cad of the Sixth was feeling far from comfortable in his mind now. He could read what was in Monteith's mind. If Monteith should surrender, after all, it would be a terrible come-down for his pride. But the whole school would applaud him. Sefton knew that.

Sefton knew, too, what Monteith did not know—that Kildare would be only too glad to meet his old rival half-way, and that he would make that surrender easy for the New House skipper. The plotting prefect ground his teeth as he thought of it. With infinite cunning he had played upon old jealousies and half-forgotten animosities, and brought about that split in the school; and now, in his mind's eye, he saw his cunning scheme crumbling away like a house of cards.

If Monteith should surrender, after all!

CHAPTER 10.

Tom Merry & Co. Take a Hand.

"**B**AI Jove, deah boys, it's a wotten state of affairs!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that statement on Saturday morning. Morning lessons were over. That afternoon the Rookwood team were to arrive, and they were to find a depleted eleven on Big Side to meet them. The prospect was a black one for St. Jim's.

And Tom Merry & Co. agreed with the Honourable Arthur Augustus that it was decidedly rotten.

The five blanks in the football list had not yet been

filled up. But it was known that all the New House possible players were keeping out, and that Kildare had to look for recruits only in his own House. North and St. Leger were holding themselves in readiness to play, and Kildare had spoken to Gilmore of the Fifth. There were high hopes among the juniors. Tom Merry and Jack Blake had been told that they might be wanted.

But the names were not yet inserted in the list. Perhaps Kildare was hoping that, at the eleventh hour, some arrangement might be come to with the disaffected members of the team.

"Of course, Kildare might have secured a weally good man on our side," Arthur Augustus remarked. "I am wathah surprised that he has not spoken to me."

"What should he speak to you about?" queried Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, you know that I am a pwetty good wingah—"

"Topping!" said Lowther, with a chuckle. "A topping outside-left, Gussy. There's only one thing suits you better—that's being left outside."

"You uttah ass!"

"I suppose Tommy and I are going to play," remarked Blake. "Kildare as good as said so. I'd be jolly glad of the chance. I don't see why we shouldn't put up a good game. Only Kildare looked so jolly worried when he spoke to me about it that really—"

"Same here," said Tom Merry, with a nod. "I'd give anything to play, especially alongside Talbot. But poor old Kildare thinks we're a sort of last hope."

"Yaas, that's quite wight!"

"Why, you ass—"

"The fact is," said Blake, "though I'd give one of my ears to play in the match, I'd rather see Monteith come round, for old Kildare's sake."

"Just how I feel," admitted Tom Merry. "Three juniors in the team is a bit thick, considering the form of the Rookwood chaps. And Gilmore and St. Leger are not much class for the first eleven."

"No class at all," said Herries. "Kildare would have done better to ask Dig and me."

"What twice me, deah boy?"

"Tuppence, and dear at that!" grunted Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"It's rough on Kildare," said Talbot, with a wrinkle in his brow. "I can't help thinking that it's all Sefton's work. I feel a bit rotten about it, because it's all come from Kildare shoving me in. Still, that wasn't my fault. Of course, I was glad of the chance. But Kildare did it off his own bat."

"And he couldn't have done better," said Tom Merry. "You'll have to play up like thunder, Talbot. We shall all be watching you."

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus; "and Miss Mawie will be watchin' you, too. I have requested the honah of escortin' Miss Mawie to the footah ground for the occasion. Do you know, deah boys, Miss Mawie is almost as nice as my Cousin Ethel."

Talbot smiled.

"Hallo! Here are those New House rotters!" growled Blake, as Figgins & Co. came along. "Well, what do you think of your measly House now, you wasters? Nice sort of a trick for your House to play, isn't it?"

"Don't rub it in!" said Figgins, with a distressed look. "We feel just as bad about it as you do. I can't understand Monteith playing the giddy goat like this."

"Oh, it's just his style!" grunted Herries.

"Tain't his style," said Figgins warmly. "I expect some cad has been getting round him. Sefton, I think. I admit that Sefton is a rank rotter. He ought to be in the School House; that's the place for him. What he's doing on our side beats me."

"Why, you cheeky fathead—"

"You can keep him on your side," said Talbot, laughing. "But I think you're right, Figgy. Sefton's at the bottom of this."

"As far as I can make out, Monteith sent old Kildare an ultimatum," said Figgins. "It was in those blessed notes I was carrying to and fro. If I'd known I'd have shoved the lot in the study fire."

"Awful cheek to send our captain an ultimatum!"

growled Manners. "Blessed if I know where the New House gets its nerve from!"

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Kerr. "We don't want any House ragging now. The matter's too jolly serious. I was wondering if anything could be done."

"Nothing but for your skipper to climb down and eat humble pie," said Blake.

"He won't do that."

"Then he ought to be made to!"

"Yes, wathah! I wegard Monteith's conduct as disgustin'!"

"Oh, he isn't a sportsman!" said Digby.

"Rot!" said Fatty Wynn. "Let our man alone. I dare say it was School House swank at the bottom of all the trouble."

"Weally, Wynn—"

"Let's be fair," said Talbot. "Monteith has put Kildare into an awful hole, but he isn't really a bad sort. I've been thinking—"

Talbot paused. The juniors regarded him eagerly. If there was any possible way of helping old Kildare out of that awful hole they were willing to jump at it. Dearly as Tom Merry and Blake would have liked to play in the Rookwood match, they would have preferred to bring about a reconciliation, if it had been possible, for Kildare's sake. They knew that the Toff was a remarkably keen fellow. If anybody could think of a way out of the difficulty it was Talbot of the Shell.

"What have you been thinkin', dear boy?"

"What about making an appeal to Monteith?" said Talbot slowly. "Kildare couldn't do it, of course. But suppose a deputation of juniors went over? He isn't really a bad sort, you know, and my belief is that he's taking this to heart as much as anybody. He's in a false position, and he'd very likely be glad of an excuse for getting out of it. Well, if a School House deputation asked him to come round he might think his dignity was saved, and do it."

"Blessed if I feel like asking favours of a New House waster!" said Blake.

"You'd rather see Kildare's team licked?" said Figgins sarcastically.

"No fear! But—"

"Bai Jove, it's a wippin' good ideah! You can leave it to me, deah boys! I will put it to Monteith as a sport, you know!"

"You'll put your silly foot in it, you mean!" growled Blake. "Look here, you fellows, it's a chance. Suppose we try it?"

"Yes, come on!" said Tom Merry. "Let's buzz over before dinner!"

"Come on, Talbot!"

Talbot shook his head.

"Better leave me out," he said. "I'm rather like a red rag to a bull in the New House at present."

"Yaas, that's wathah thoughtful of you, Talbot, deah boy. Come on, you fellows; you can leave the talkin' to me!"

"Catch us!" grunted Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Come on!" said Tom Merry. And the party of School House juniors started for the New House. Whether their embassy would be of any effect was very doubtful, but it was a chance, and they decided to try it. If they could put an end to the trouble, and rally the disaffected seniors to Kildare, it would be a feather in their cap. And on the part of Tom Merry and Blake, at least, it was really heroic, for if they succeeded in their mission their own services would not be wanted in the eleven. But they nobly determined to do their best for old Kildare.

Monteith was in his study, talking rather dismally to Baker. The two New House seniors stared at Tom Merry & Co. as they marched in.

"What do you fags want?" snapped Monteith gruffly.

"We've come ovah, deah boy—"

"We're a deputation from the School House," said Tom Merry.

Monteith's face lighted a little.

"Do you mean to say that Kildare's sent you?"

"Oh, no! He doesn't know we've come."

"Then what the dickens do you want?"

"Weally, Monteith——"

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"Tom Mewwy, deah boy, you'd bettah leave this to me. I am goin' to put it to Monteith as a sportsman. Yow! Get off my foot, Blake, you howwid beast!"

"The fact is," said Tom Merry, taking his courage in both hands, as it were, "we've come over to make an appeal to you, Monteith. If your fellows stand out of the match the school is going to be beaten."

"Is it possible that a School House brain can realise that?" asked Monteith, with heavy sarcasm.

"Bai Jove! I wegard that—yow!"

"If you don't play, Kildare's going to put in Blake and me——"

"Precious lot of good you'll be against Rookwood!"

"Well, we should play up, you know. But I've only mentioned that to show you that we're quite disinterested in the matter," said Tom. "The fact is, Monteith, we want the School to win, and we know you want it, too. We've come here to appeal to you as a St. Jim's fellow, universally respected—ahem!—not to leave the old school in the lurch. Play up, and blow House rags!"

"Hear, hear!" said the deputation.

"Yaas, wathah! Play up for the School, Monteith, and nevah mind anythin' else! We are the leadahs of the School House, and we ask you," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy impressively.

"And you can be jolly certain that Kildare will be decent about it," said Blake. "You know Kildare. You needn't be afraid of any crowing. You ought to know that."

"And you can remember that the request comes from the School House!" added Monty Lowther. "You can look upon us as a——"

"As a set of cheeky fags!" said Monteith.

"Ahem! No! As representatives of our House."

"Yaas, wathah! Pway, listen to me, Monteith."

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to shut up! I am goin' to explain——"

"Thanks! I've heard, enough!" said Monteith. "Shut the door after you."

But Monteith did not speak angrily. Tom Merry & Co. looked at him, and looked at one another. They thought they saw signs of yielding in the New House skipper's face, and they felt they had done all that could be done. Arthur Augustus would have lingered to rub it in, but Blake and Herries took hold of his arms, and he was marched out. The door closed behind the junior deputation.

"Well, we've done our best," said Tom Merry.

"Wats! I was going to explain to Monteith—pway, welease me, Blake, you ass!—I am goin' back to point out to Monteith——"

"You're not," chuckled Blake. "Help him along with a boot, somebody."

"Wow-wow!"

The School House deputation quitted the house. In Monteith's study there was a grim silence. Baker was looking at his leader with a peculiar expression. Monteith broke the silence at last.

"Well, Baker?"

"Well?" said Baker.

"It would be a frightful come-down for the House."

Baker was silent.

"Oh, I know what you're all thinking," said Monteith, with some bitterness. "You think I've got you into a bad box."

"Well, it's a rotten state of affairs."

"The trouble is if a chap climbs down it gives the other side a chance to crow over him," said Monteith uneasily. "If—if Kildare showed any sign of—of triumphing over me I should hit out, I know that."

"That wouldn't improve matters."

"But would he?" muttered Monteith. "Look here; we're in the position now of leaving the school in the lurch. The long and the short of it is that we've put ourselves in the wrong. You all think so, though you don't say so. If you think I ought to go to Kildare and eat humble pie——" He paused.

"I don't know about the humble pie," said Baker.

"I wouldn't advise that. But if Kildare was willing to

let bygones be bygones, without any humiliation on either side——"

"But would he be?"

"What about giving him a chance?"

Monteith drew a deep breath.

"There goes the dinner-bell. After dinner I—I'll give Kildare a look-in."

"Hurray!" said Baker.

CHAPTER 11.

The Right Thing.

KILDARE went to his study after dinner. The brow of the captain of St. Jim's was very grim. He had had no word from the New House, and he had given up hope now that Monteith would do the right thing. Indeed, he realised that Monteith could hardly retreat from the position he had taken up without swallowing a very bitter pill. As for any surrender on the part of the captain of St. Jim's, that was impossible.

It only remained to make up the best team he could and play the match with a foredoomed certainty of defeat. But he meant to put up the best fight possible. There was a chance that the game might be pulled out of the fire.

In an hour's time the Rookwood fellows were expected. There was no more time to be lost.

"Gilmore, St. Leger, North, Merry, and Blake," said Kildare. "I'd better put the names on the board now, Darrel."

Darrel nodded.

"Nothing else to be done," he said.

"After all, we may pull it off."

"Rather a knock for the New House if we won the biggest match of the season without their help," said Darrel.

"Yes; though I'm not thinking of that. It's the split in the school that worries me—St. Jim's fellows standing out of the team on an occasion like this. Still, I suppose it can't be helped. I can't see that I'm to blame."

"Not in the least, old chap."

"Well, it's settled—Hallo!"

Kildare started as Monteith of the New House looked in at the doorway. Monteith was looking red and uncomfortable.

"Can I come in?" he asked awkwardly.

"If you like."

Monteith came in.

The two School House seniors regarded him grimly. They supposed that he had come to make a final effort to make Kildare give in. Doubtless, he had expected surrender from the St. Jim's captain before this. Kildare's handsome face hardened at the thought.

"You haven't scratched with Rookwood?" said Monteith at last.

"Certainly not!"

"You're playing juniors in the team?"

"Yes!"

"You can't expect to win."

"We hope for the best."

"It's rotten, isn't it?"

"Whose fault is that?" said Kildare drily.

Monteith flushed again.

"I didn't come here to go into that," he said. "The fact is, I—I came over——" He hesitated. "I—I looked in to speak to you about it, Kildare. This split is really a lot of trouble over nothing. It looked to me as if you were putting on my House."

"I wasn't," said Kildare.

"Naturally, the New House chaps don't like the idea of being left out to make room for a School House fag."

"That isn't the question. But it's no good arguing about it, and I've not got much time, either."

Monteith's colour deepened. It was a plain hint, and he turned towards the door. But he turned back again.

"You don't quite understand what I came over for," he said awkwardly.

"No, I don't!"

"We're willing to play if you like," said Monteith,

getting it out with an effort. "We don't want to stand out and see St. Jim's licked. We—we give in."

Kildare started. He had not expected that or anything like it, and he could hardly believe his ears. But his face lighted up at once.

If there had been any sign of triumph, any trace of "crowing" over a vanquished rival, in Kildare's look the New House prefect's pride would have been up in arms at once, and matters would have been worse instead of better.

But there was nothing of the kind. Monteith, scanning Kildare's face with jealous eyes, saw nothing there but relief and satisfaction.

"By Jove! I'm glad to hear you say that!" said Kildare heartily. "I had a feeling all the time, really, that you wouldn't leave us in the lurch, Monteith. What does it matter about the blessed Houses so long as we get a win for St. Jim's?"

He held out his hand impulsively.

Monteith, ashamed of his suspicions, and greatly relieved, too, took his hand cheerfully enough.

"That settles it," said Kildare. "As you've put it so decently, Monteith, I'm willing to give you my word of honour, if you like, that I never had the faintest idea of scoring over your House in any way. I put Talbot in because I thought he'd fill Langton's place best. I'd rather have put in one of the Sixth. As for which House he belonged to, you might give me credit for never even thinking of that at all."

"I—I know it," said Monteith. "I—well, I've made a mistake, and I'm sorry. I can't say more than that."

"Quite enough," said Kildare cheerily. "It was only a misunderstanding, and it's all over, and I'm jolly glad of it. And we'll beat Rookwood now."

"What-ho!" chimed in Darrel. "Let's get the names on the board. By Jove, this will be good news for the school!"

Monteith's last doubts had vanished. The cordial reception Kildare and Darrel gave him was more than enough to compensate for the little sacrifice of his pride in owning himself in the wrong. He drew a deep, deep breath of relief. He was glad that he had paid Kildare that little visit. A few minutes later the School House fellows were surprised to see Kildare, Darrel, and Monteith, on the best of terms with one another, come out into the hall together. Kildare proceeded to write in the names of the five New House members on the football list, and then all the fellows knew what had happened.

"Hurrah!" chirruped Jack Blake. "Three cheers for Monteith, you fellows!"

"Hip-hip-hurray!"

Monteith laughed rather awkwardly. It was a new experience for him to be cheered in the School House. But it rang pleasantly in his ears.

He walked back to his House with a cheerful expression on his face. Baker and the rest were waiting for him in the porch, in an anxious mood. Monteith's expression relieved their doubts.

"All serene!" said Monteith.

"We're playing?"

"Yes."

"Hurrah!"

"So you've climbed down to Kildare?" broke in Sefton's unpleasant voice.

Sefton was almost white with anger and chagrin. Monteith had not said a word to him of his intention before going over to the School House. Sefton had feared something of the sort, but when it happened it took him by surprise. His carefully-laid schemes had crumbled away after all.

"I haven't climbed down," said Monteith coldly. "I made a mistake, and I've owned up to it. Any decent fellow ought to be willing to do that."

"You've let that crowd crow over you."

"If they'd crowed over me, we shouldn't be playing. There wasn't a sign of it. Kildare was a real brick."

"Of course, you would say that," sneered Sefton, his rage getting the better of his discretion. "You've let our House to be left in the lurch, and crowed over—"

"Enough of that! I'm fed up with that kind of thing! And look here, Sefton, to put it plainly, I let

you lead me by the nose into this, and if Kildare hadn't been thoroughly decent, we should be up to the neck in it still. I don't want to hear you saying anything against Kildare. In fact, I won't stand it!"

Sefton panted. This was a change of front with a vengeance.

"Why, you—you rotter!" he shouted. "You put it on me, because you hadn't got the pluck to stand up for your House—"

"Hold your tongue!"

"I say you hadn't the pluck! I say you've acted like a coward and a cur— Oh!"

Smack!

Sefton reeled back as Monteith's palm came across his face. The New House captain glared at him.

"Now, if you want to keep on, we've time for a round or two before the match!" exclaimed Monteith angrily.

"Hear, hear!" murmured Baker.

Sefton did not reply. He turned back into the House, trembling with rage. Evidently there was nothing more to be done with Monteith. And the New House seniors, glad enough to be out of their scrape, fell to discussing the coming match, and forgot all about Sefton. But the bully of the Sixth did not forget!

CHAPTER 12.

Sefton's Last Card.

A CROWD was beginning to gather on Big Side.

The Rookwood team had not yet arrived, but the ground was filling up. On that great occasion the juniors of both Houses "chucked" football themselves to watch the big match. It was not often they did the first eleven such an honour. Naturally, their own matches interested them most. But this was an unique occasion. Besides, a junior was playing in the first eleven—one of the most popular juniors in the School. Everybody had determined to "roll up" and encourage old Talbot.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in fine feather. He could not help thinking that Kildare had made a mistake in selecting Talbot instead of the Honourable Arthur Augustus. But, apart from that, he was very satisfied. It was his pleasant duty to escort Miss Marie to the football-ground, and to look after the Little Sister during the match. That was a duty that was particularly agreeable to Arthur Augustus. There was no doubt that he would perform it well.

Talbot was in high spirits too. The split in the school was ended, and there was going to be a good match. And the Shell fellow was at the top of his form, and fully prepared to do justice to the side, junior though he was.

Indeed, there was satisfaction all round; Monteith & Co. being very glad to be out of their scrape, and the New House generally feeling that their captain had done the right thing.

Only one fellow looked on the preparations for the Rookwood match with an evil eye and a black brow. That was Sefton of the Sixth.

From his study window Sefton had a view of the football-ground on Big Side, and he watched the gathering crowd of joyful juniors with bitterness in his heart.

His cunning schemes had not only gone wrong, but they had gone wrong with a crash. The quarrel had been healed up, and, instead of a row between Monteith and Kildare, there was a row between Monteith and himself. And Monteith had struck him.

He could almost have bitten his tongue out for his folly in provoking the New House skipper. If he had kept cool, there might have been a chance yet of doing his enemies an evil turn.

But it was too late to think of that now. His temper, usually kept well in control, had got the better of him, and that smack still tingled and burned on his cheek. He had brought it on himself; Monteith could not have been expected to take his gibes quietly. But, apart from that, the game was up.

Talbot, the junior who had licked him in the Head's garden, in the presence of Miss Marie, was to play after all, and the New House members were to play alongside him. There was no further chance of punishing Talbot, Kildare, and everybody generally, by mucking up the

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match, as he had hoped. If, at the last moment, he could have thought of a trick for effecting that, he would have been satisfied—that would have paid for all. But what could he do?

His teeth came together with a click, as he saw Monteith and Kildare chatting together in the quad. Both were in high good humour, all disputes evidently forgotten on both sides. Both were looking forward to the arrival of the Rookwood party. They separated, and Monteith came with a light step towards the New House.

Sefton watched him with bitter eyes. At that moment he felt that he hated Monteith even more than Kildare or Talbot. His old pal had turned on him—whom he had led by the nose up to a certain point, and who had then turned round and disappointed his whole scheme. And Monteith was anticipating a triumph for that afternoon—a victory for St. Jim's, contributed by himself and the other New House players.

Sefton would have given a year's pocket-money to see his school beaten. If he could only have disappointed Monteith as Monteith had disappointed him—if!

A sudden glitter came into the eyes of the selfish, evil-natured prefect. Where there was a will, there was a way, and what did risk matter? He could stand a ragging, if he could only obtain the vengeance he thirsted for. With his heart beating quickly, Sefton hurried out of his study.

Monteith had paused in the porch to chat with Baker and Dudley; but a little later he came into the House. Sefton was lounging in the Sixth Form passage, and Monteith coloured as he saw him. He was in a specially good temper, and, after a moment's hesitation, he came towards Sefton.

"Don't be sulky, Sefton," he said. "I'm sorry I hit out, but you did pile it on, you know. I don't want to row if you don't."

Sefton gave a curt nod. His heart was not softened in the least. Monteith, after a moment's pause, went on to his study. Then there was an exclamation, as he looked out of the study again.

"Seen my ball, Sefton?"

"Your ball?"

"Yes. You know we're using my match-footer to-day."

"I remember you said so the other day."

"Well, it isn't here," said Monteith, with a puzzled look. "Some ass has taken it out of my study."

"Oh!" said Sefton. "A trick of one of the fags, I think. I saw a kid buzzing along the passage with a ball, and I suppose it was yours."

"The young ass!" said Monteith. "Where did he take it?"

"He ran upstairs with it. I think I heard him go into the punishment-room. Hiding it there for a lark, I suppose."

"I'll lark him!" growled Monteith. "Thanks!"

Monteith ascended the stairs two at a time. There was plenty of time to get the ball, but he was exasperated at the idea of a fag daring to play tricks with his special match-footer. Sefton followed him upstairs, smiling in a curious way.

Monteith unlocked the door of the punishment-room, in which Arthur Augustus had spent so uncomfortable a time a day or two ago, and strode in. Sefton remained at the door, and, with a jerk of his hand, removed the key from the outside.

"I can't see it," said Monteith, staring about the room. "There's nobody here, and no footer. Are you sure, Sefton—Why—what?"

Click!

Monteith swung round towards the door in amazement. It had clicked shut. He ran quickly towards it, and thumped on the oak. He knew that it was useless to attempt to open it; the spring-lock had closed. He thumped angrily.

"Sefton, open this door at once! You utter ass, to play a silly fag trick like this. Open the door! Do you hear?"

Whether Sefton heard or not, he did not reply. Monteith faintly heard the sound of his footsteps as he retreated.

The New House skipper set his teeth. To be caught like this was too ridiculous, and he could not understand Sefton's motive. It was such a trick as one fag might

play on another; but for a prefect to play it on another prefect was too absurd. Monteith hammered angrily at the door.

But Sefton was gone. He had the key of the punishment-room in his pocket, and he knew that there was no other key to fit the lock. He walked smiling out of the New House.

Without losing a moment, he went round to the bike-shed and wheeled out his machine. He did not mean to be within the precincts of St. Jim's when search was made for the key. As he wheeled his machine out of the gate a brake drove up. Rookwood had arrived. Sefton waited for the brake to pass in, and then wheeled out his bicycle, mounted in the road, and pedalled away.

"There'll be a row," murmured Sefton, "of course! But I've got a scrap on with Monteith, anyway—he can't punch me for nothing! Let him call me to account after the match if he likes—I'll be ready for him. He won't get out of that room in a hurry. Ratty won't let them bust in the door—and they couldn't, it's too strong for them. And there isn't another key in the school to fit the lock. Kildare can play without Monteith. I hope they'll lose the match. Monteith will lose it, anyway, hang him!"

And Sefton rode on at a good speed, chuckling.

CHAPTER 13.

The Toff is Wanted!

KILDARE greeted the Rookwood team cheerily.

They were a fine-looking eleven, and their captain, Bulkeley, was a mighty man of war. It was evident, after a glance at the Rookwood crowd, that St. Jim's needed all their best men in the field for that match.

Tom Merry & Co. gave the Rookwooders a cheer, in the exuberance of their spirits. Arthur Augustus had brought down Miss Marie to Big Side, and a seat had been found for her outside the pavilion. Talbot, in footer rig, and with an overcoat and muffler on, was standing beside her chair, looking very bright and happy. It was one of the brightest of days for the "Toff." And all his friends were glad to see him looking so fit and well.

The Rookwood fellows were taken into their dressing-room, and the St. Jim's players, who had not yet changed, proceeded to do so. They were first out in the field, and some of them punted an old ball about while they waited. Talbot, with a smile to Marie, left his friends and went into the field.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry, "there's only ten of them there. Where's—who is it—Monteith? Figgy, have you mislaid your skipper?"

"I suppose he's changing in the House," said Figgins. "I'll cut off and tell him the Rookwood chaps have come."

"Queer he hasn't seen them," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard this as vewy careless of Monteith. He will be keepin' the team waitin'."

"Kildare's looking for him," remarked Blake.

Kildare was glancing round him with a puzzled expression. He was surprised not to see Monteith in the ranks of the Saints.

"Anybody seen Monteith?" he called out.

"He went into the House a bit back," said Baker.

"Figgins has gone for him, Kildare," called out Tom Merry.

"Oh, all right."

Most of the crowd were looking towards the New House. The field was circled now by a dense throng. Hardly anybody was left in the Houses. Most of the masters had come out to see the big game. But Figgins did not return. Figgins, when he entered the New House, had the surprise of his life. He looked into Monteith's study, but the room was empty. He looked up and down, and round about, but there was no sign of the New House captain. As he came back along the hall, in a very perplexed mood, Figgy heard a sound of loud thumping from above stairs.

"My hat!" murmured Figgins. "Some silly ass shut himself up like Gussy. No time to bother about him now."



"Magnificent!" is the verdict accorded our artillery, who, despite the terrible conditions under which they fight, are ever alert to assist in dealing Germany's sea-blow. Our picture shows a well-known artillery battery galloping into action.

"Figgins!" Mr. Ratcliff looked out of his study. "Go upstairs and tell whoever is making that noise to come to my study instantly!"

"Have you seen Monteith, sir?"

"No. Do as I tell you."

Figgins reluctantly ascended the stairs. It was just like Ratty to bother him like this when there wasn't a moment to spare. Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! came in a heavy beat on the door of the punishment-room, from inside, as Figgins approached it.

"All right, you ass, I'm coming!" growled Figgins, and he felt over the door for the key; the alcove was dusky. To his surprise, no key was there.

"Open this door!" raved a voice from within.

Figgins jumped almost clear of the floor at the sound of that voice.

"Monteith!" he gasped.

"Who is that? Figgins? Let me out at once!"

"I—I can't! There's no key here."

"No key!" yelled Monteith.

"No. It's been taken away."

"Oh, the hound! Have you seen Sefton?"

"Sefton, yes. He's gone out on his bike."

Monteith raved. At last he understood. It was not for a fag's trick that Sefton had trapped him in the punishment-room. The cad of the Sixth intended that he should be kept out of the football match.

"You're sure he's gone out, Figgins?"

"Yes—I saw him go, as the Rookwood fellows came in."

"Then they've come?"

"Yes; and Kildare's waiting for you. I've come to tell you. How on earth did you get shut up there, and where the dickens is the key?"

"It's a trick!" raved Monteith, "a dirty trick to keep me out of the match. Ask Kildare to come here—quick!"

"Right-ho!"

Figgins, very much wondering, cut off down the stairs. But Mr. Ratcliff stopped him in the passage.

"Where is that boy?"

"It's Monteith, sir. Somebody's shut him up in the punishment-room for a lark."

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"Bless my soul!"

Figgins darted out of the house, and almost ran into Tom Merry and Lowther. They had come to see what had become of him.

"Where's Monteith? Found him?" exclaimed Tom.

"Somebody's shut him up in the punishment-room, and he can't get out," panted Figgins, and he raced away towards the football ground.

"My only hat!"

Tom Merry and Lowther ran into the House, and up to the punishment-room. They found Mr. Ratcliff, in a very bad temper, talking to Monteith through the door.

"Certainly there is no other key, Monteith. You are quite aware of that. It is a most ridiculous joke, and I shall speak to Sefton about it."

"Sefton!" muttered Tom Merry.

"But I must get out, sir," shouted Monteith. "They're waiting for me on the football ground. And Sefton's gone out with the key."

"Really, I do not see what is to be done."

"Might get a locksmith, sir," suggested Monty Lowther. "I'll cut off if you like, sir?"

Mr. Ratcliff grunted. He was annoyed by the whole occurrence.

"Send for a locksmith, sir, please," exclaimed Monteith.

"I do not wish the door to be damaged," said Mr. Ratcliff surlily. "Sefton will probably return ere long. He cannot intend you to be shut up here all the afternoon. Besides, the locksmith is closed on Saturday afternoons."

"Oh, my hat! I forgot that!"

Kildare came striding along the passage, with an angry brow. Figgins's message had astounded him. The Rookwood fellows were ready for the kick-off now, but the St. Jim's captain did not wish to begin without Monteith. He had excused himself to Bulkeley, on receipt of Figgy's astonishing message, and hurried over to the New House. Two or three fellows came along with him, equally angry and surprised.

"You're in there, Monteith?" called out Kildare.

"Yes; Sefton shut me in." Monteith was stuttering with rage. "He told me a yarn about a fag hiding my match footer here, and I came to look for it. Then he shut the door. The key's gone, and Figgins says that Sefton has gone out on his bike. He's got the key with him, of course. What's to be done?"

"The miserable cad!"

"Not much good calling him names. What's to be done?"

"There's no other key, sir?" asked Kildare, addressing Mr. Ratcliff.

"None!" snapped that gentleman.

"What about the window, Monty? We could get a ladder—"

"Iron bars!" growled Monteith. "The chimney's the same. It's fixed up as a rotten punishment-room. That's why the cad got me here."

"It would take too long to get a locksmith," said Kildare. "Even if we could ask the Rookwood chaps to wait—a man couldn't get here under an hour—if we left the match as late as that, it would be too dark to finish."

"Oh, the rotter worked all that out, you can bet," groaned Monteith. "He's played this trick to keep me out of the match."

"There's nothing for it but to break in the door," said Kildare, with a hesitating glance at Mr. Ratcliff, and then at the door. It did not look a hopeful prospect. The door was of solid oak, and tremendously strong. It had been put up at a time when builders were builders. Mr. Ratcliff frowned angrily at the suggestion.

"Break in the door!" he snapped. "Kildare, I am surprised at you! Do you think that I shall allow such havoc in my House? I should certainly not permit anything of the kind."

"But, sir—"

"Not a word more. Understand, once for all, Kildare, that I forbid anything of the sort!" grunted Mr. Ratcliff. And he swept away with rustling gown, thus putting an end to all further argument on the subject.

Kildare gritted his teeth. It was impossible to think of breaking in the door after that. It would have been

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a long and difficult task in any case; and the visiting team were waiting. And Kildare realised, with bitter anger, that the astute Sefton had calculated upon the well-known, unaccommodating nature of Mr. Ratcliff.

"What's to be done?" shouted Monteith furiously.

"Blessed if I know. We can't break in the door, and there's no key."

"You can't play the match without me."

Kildare made no reply to that. It looked as if he would have to.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Tom Merry cudgelled his brains for a "dodge." But he could think of no dodge for opening that door. Figgins & Co. had arrived on the scene now, and they were giving their brains unaccustomed exercises; but with an equal lack of result.

"We can't keep those chaps waiting much longer, Kildare," said Darrel.

"What's to be done?"

"Well, there's only one thing to be done. It's rough on Monteith, and rough on us, to play without our best winger. But it can't be helped."

"May make all the difference," said Kildare bitterly.

"It may mean losing the match for us to leave one of our best men out."

Monteith's voice came through the door again, a little calmer now.

"Kildare!"

"Hallo!"

"It can't be helped. You'll have to play without me. I'll smash Sefton when he comes in. No good wasting time."

"Hold on!" cried Tom Merry suddenly. "My hat! Why didn't I think of it before?" His eyes were dancing.

"What do you mean?" growled Kildare.

"Talbot!"

"Eh! What about Talbot?"

"The Toff!" shouted Tom. "Don't you see?"

"No, I don't! Talbot can't open that door, I suppose?"

"Can't he? I'll bet you there isn't a lock in the school he couldn't open if he liked. Don't you remember—"

Kildare started. He had forgotten the peculiar past of the Toff, once the prince of cracksmen, and now a Shell fellow at St. Jim's.

"My word!" said Kildare breathlessly. "It's possible—it's a chance. Fetch him here."

Tom Merry rushed away at top speed.

CHAPTER 14.

Goal!

TALBOT arrived on the scene a couple of minutes later. His face was flushed. Tom Merry had rushed him across to the New House at lightning speed. The Toff did not yet know what was wanted. He was wondering whether Tom Merry was "off his rocker." He stared at the little crowd outside the door of the punishment-room.

"What on earth—" he began.

"Monteith's in there," said Kildare abruptly. "Sefton has shut him in, and taken the key away. He's got to miss the match, unless the door's opened. Tom Merry thinks you might be able to open it without a key. Could you?"

The colour faded out of Talbot's handsome face.

It was a service he could perform, for which the whole school would be grateful; and he alone could perform it, because he had once been a cracksmen among cracksmen. Kildare understood the expression that came over his face, and he went on hurriedly:

"Talbot, I know it isn't fair to ask you. It's a rotten thing to remind you of what you'd rather forget. But we're in a hole. It may mean losing the match if Monteith is kept out of it, as well as being rotten rough on Monteith. I know he was up against having you in the team. But I'm sure you don't want to think of that. And—and if you could do this for us—"

Talbot smiled slightly, though his handsome face was pale.

"You needn't apologise, Kildare. Everybody here knows what I was, and knows that I am that no longer. But I have not lost my skill. I am glad that what I learned in my bad old days will come in useful for once."

"Could you open that lock?"

"Easily."

"Then pile in. And—and pardon me for having asked—"

"That's all right. Will you get your tool-box, Figgins?"

Figgins promptly scuttled off for the box. Talbot opened it quietly and calmly, and proceeded to work. Kildare made a sign to the others to follow him down the passage. Talbot's cheeks were burning now. He was performing a service for them. But to be seen at his old cracksmen's work was not pleasant. The other fellows understood, and they followed Kildare. At the window at the end of the passage they waited.

Monteith was chafing in the locked room. He knew that the Toff was at work on the lock, but he was doubtful of the result. And there was something like remorse in his breast. The junior who was labouring to release him, who was facing this rude reminder of his black and miserable past, was the fellow he had tried to keep out of the first eleven. Talbot was not giving that a thought. He did not bear any grudge.

Click!

Monteith started. He could scarcely believe his eyes as the heavy door swung open.

Talbot looked in upon him with a smile.

"You can come out!" he said.

"Talbot," muttered Monteith, "I—I'm awfully obliged to you for this. It was jolly decent of you, considering—"

"Not at all," said Talbot cheerfully. "Glad to be of use. It's all right, Kildare."

"Get into your things as quick as you can, old chap," said Kildare, as Monteith came hurrying out.

Monteith rushed away to change. The match ball was found in Sefton's study, and Figgins bore it down to the field in triumph. Talbot walked back to the ground with his chums. The Rookwood fellows were still punting the old ball about, wondering what was the cause of the delay. But Monteith soon came speeding down to the field. He had made a lightning change.

"Ready!" he called out.

And the Saints and the Rookwooders lined up.

"Now look out for a good game," said Tom Merry.

"And what a giddy surprise for Sefton when he comes home from his spin. What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a tremendous game. From the kick-off the play was hard and fast. Talbot was inside-right, and he had Monteith on his right. Anybody who had expected to see friction between the two wingers was agreeably disappointed. They played together like clockwork. It was not easy to get through the Rookwooders; they were in great form. But twenty minutes after the whistle Monteith made one of his rapid rushes down the touch-line, and passed in to Talbot as he was charged, and Talbot centred deftly to Kildare just before he fell to the heavy weight of Bulkeley, and Kildare slammed the leather in with a shot that beat the goalie to the wide. And then there was a roar from two hundred and fifty throats.

"Goal! Goal! Hurrah!"

And the crowd saw Kildare clap Talbot on the shoulder as they walked back to the centre of the field. Monteith, Talbot, and Kildare shared the credit of that goal among them. And it was first blood to St. Jim's. But Rookwood played up hard, and the next goal was to their credit, Bulkeley putting it in. Just before half-time, however, the St. Jim's forwards made a fierce attack on goal. The ball, sent in from Kildare's foot, came out from the fist of the goalkeeper; only to meet Talbot's head, and shoot into the net like a pip from an orange.

Then the juniors yelled themselves hoarse, and Marie clapped her hands.

"Goal! Talbot! Good old Talbot! Goal!"

The whistle went for half-time, St. Jim's being two goals to one. Any doubt about Talbot's ability to keep

his end up was dispelled now. Kildare's choice of the junior winger was fully justified. Langton, who was looking on, declared himself that his place was jolly well filled, and that he couldn't have done better. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked to Miss Marie that he himself couldn't have done better than that, a remark with which Miss Marie heartily concurred.

After the restart, Knowles of Rookwood equalised with a deadly shot, which Webb was not able to save. Then the match went on ding-dong. The minutes passed quickly, and there was brilliant attack and defence on both sides, but the attacks did not materialise. Anxious glances were cast towards the clock-tower over the elms. Time was getting close.

"Don't let it be a draw, for goodness' sake!" grunted Jack Blake. "Dash it all! Only five minutes to play—and two all. Play up, Talbot!"

"Play up, deah boys!"

"Talbot—Talbot, on the ball! Oh, well run! Well passed!"

The St. Jim's forwards were swooping down. Kildare was over—a fair charge. Talbot had the ball, and was speeding on. Would he have time to kick? The backs were almost upon him, and Kildare was nowhere. And the goalie was watching, all eyes and hands. There was no chance for a shot. Out went the ball to outside right. It was the last chance. Over went Talbot, fairly bumped by the two backs together. But a shout rose from the St. Jim's crowd, swelling to a terrific roar, as Monteith sent the ball in with a long shot from the wing. Would the goalie save? He was clutching at the ball. It missed his finger-tips. It lodged in the corner of the net. And St. Jim's, with one stentorian roar, burst out into a pæan of triumph:

"Goal! Goal! Goal!"

Then the whistle went. Nobody heard it in the uproar. Juniors and seniors were fairly laying back their heads and roaring:

"Goal! Goal! Goal!"

After dark, Sefton of the Sixth wheeled in his bike, and walked away to the New House with an uneasy look on his face. He had played his game, and the hour of reckoning was at hand. Figgins & Co. were waiting in the doorway—very likely for Sefton. They grinned as they saw him.

"Good news, Sefton!" chortled Figgins. "I know you're anxious about the match." The Co. chuckled. "It's all right, Sefton. We won! Now, why don't you cheer?"

Sefton did not look like cheering. He looked more like committing assault and battery, if not manslaughter.

"But that ain't all," chuckled Figgins. "Not by long chalks! Monteith kicked the winning goal. Ain't you glad? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Monteith!" yelled Sefton.

"Yes, rather! Ain't you glad?" shrieked Figgins, and then he had to dodge.

And Figgins & Co. marched over hilariously to the School House, to join Tom Merry & Co. in a celebration in Study No. 6, and to tell them what Sefton looked like when he got the news; which made them very hilarious too. As for Sefton, when he learned more fully what had happened, he simply gnashed his teeth. But when, a little later, he had a painful—an extremely painful—interview with Monteith, he had no energy left for gnashing his teeth. For a long time after that interview he could do nothing but caress his eyes and his nose and mumble.

But Sefton was the only one who had any dissatisfaction with the results of that great day. Everybody else was perfectly satisfied. And most of all the heroes of the Fourth and the Shell, who felt that it was really due to them that the situation had been saved, and that the great match had not been "chucked away" owing to a Split in the School.

THE END.

(All my readers should make a point of getting next week's "GEM" Library, which contains a magnificent story of Tom Merry & Co. and Talbot, and their girl chum Marie Rivers. Do not miss it!)
THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 370.

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"MASTER MARIE!"

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

WASTED EXERTION.

Algernon was out one day with his best straw hat on, but had the misfortune to have it blown off. Off he raced after it, and kept up the chase for half an hour.

At last he caught up with it, and, breaking into a smile of satisfied endeavour, leaned against the nearest wall to recover his breath, which was coming in gasps and sobs after his prolonged sprint.

Just then a fat man came running up, and said: "Ah, thank you, young man! It is extremely kind of you to take all this trouble in getting my hat."

"Y-your hat!" gasped Algernon, looking dazedly at his capture. "Then where's mine?"

"Yours is hanging down your back by a string," said the fat man.—Sent in by F. Savage, Kingston-on-Thames.

THE HAIR HAS NOW SNAPPED.

At an Embassy dinner some years ago in the province of Alsace-Lorraine, the conversation turned upon the subject of the cleverness of French workmen, a young French lieutenant remarking that no matter how ugly a thing was you gave to a French workman, he could make it into something beautiful.

Thereupon the German governor of the province pulled a grey hair out of his head, and, handing it to the lieutenant, said sarcastically:

"Let him make something beautiful of that!"

Some time afterwards the governor received a small packet, which, on opening, he found to contain a gold scarf-pin in the form of a Prussian eagle sitting on a rock. In the eagle's beak was suspended the grey hair, on one end of which was a tiny golden ball, with the word "Alsace" upon it, and on the other was another ball, with "Lorraine," while inscribed on the rock was the legend: "You only hold them by a hair."—Sent in by H. Raymond, Islington, N.

WHAT HE WANTED.

A small boy was on the look-out for a situation, and when he passed a mill office he noticed a bill, which stated that a boy was required—apply inside.

In he rushed, and asked for the manager, to whom he said:

"What kind of a boy do you want, sir? Will I do?"

"Why, I want a nice boy," said the manager—"one who is quick, doesn't swear, smoke cigarettes, or whistle in the office—"

"Why, guv'nor," interrupted the boy, as he made for the door, "you don't want a boy—what you want is a bloomin' girl!"—Sent in by A. Blair, Failsworth.

CONTRADICTORY.

Interested Old Lady (to wounded soldier): "And you carried the hill at the point of the bayonet, did you not?"

Paddy: "We did, mum. And then we were forced to retreat by weight av numbers."

Interested Old Lady: "Were there many dead left on the hill?"

Paddy: "Shure, mum, the hill waz aloive with 'em!"—Sent in by George Allman, Newport, Mon.

NOTHING DOING.

Ikey: "I've got an invitation to Solly's wedding, an' on the card it's got 'R.S.V.P.' Vat does id mean?"

Cohen: "Vy, id means, 'Remember, Send Wedding Present.'"

Ikey: "Ah, does id?" And he threw the card away, and didn't go.—Sent in by Eric Gibson, Manor Park, Essex.

HENS HIS APPLICATION.

"Here's a Swiss who lives in Liverpool petitioning to have his name changed. His name's Egg."

"Sort of eggs-cited about it—ch?"

"Yes. He and his wife have four children, and his family is constantly referred to as the half-dozen Eggs. He says his yolk is too heavy to be borne."

"I suppose it must be eggs-asperating. But why doesn't he go for his tormentors?"

"It appears he did once, and got beaten—whipped to a froth, in fact. Poor Egg could hardly scramble home."—Sent in by Miss N. Jones, Brynmawr, Breconshire.

THRILLING.

Old Joe was talking, as usual, on his favourite subject—football.

"I shall never forget one final," he said. "Thrilling it was, absolutely! We were drawn one all, with a minute to go, when at last I got the ball. Off I went, passing man after man, till I got within range, and then I paused. I can hear the crowd shouting now: 'Shoot man—shoot!'"

"Well, Joe, did you score?" asked a listener, breaking the tense silence.

"Score! Why, man, it took fully ten minutes to get the bed-rail from between my toes!"—Sent in by R. P. Jones, Carnarvon, N. Wales.

GOING TO COP IT!

A raw recruit was on guard duty one night, when the sergeant came up, and asked him if the colonel had passed.

"No, sir," replied the recruit.

About an hour passed, and up came the sergeant, and again asked the recruit whether the colonel had passed, and received the same answer as before.

Shortly afterwards an important-looking gentleman approached the recruit.

"Are you the colonel?" asked the green one.

"I am," answered that gentleman pompously. "And say 'Sir' when you address me!"

"Well, sir, you ain't 'arf goin' to cop it! The sergeant has been lookin' for you all night!"—Sent in by W. McCambley, Brixton, S.W.

WHY HE IMPROVED.

"Jack," said the young wife, after she had just danced with her husband, "you've certainly improved wonderfully in your dancing. Don't you remember how awfully you used to tear my dresses?"

"Yes," he replied. "I wasn't buying them then."—Sent in by L. Ruse, Waltham-stow.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

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SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a famous Hussar regiment, known as the Die Hards. After Bob has been in the regiment for some time, his ne'er-do-well cousin, Captain Lascelles, joins also. Bob finds that, so far from being friendly, Lascelles is constantly endeavouring to get him into trouble, with the object of having him dismissed from the Service in disgrace. Bob, however, with the help of his many friends, is successful in defeating the villain's schemes. Bob comes into contact with the Earl of Dalkey, who finds that Bob is some connection of his family's, and promises to have investigations made. It transpires that Bob is heir to a large fortune, which Lascelles is in enjoyment. Bob's villainous cousin is just about to burn the proofs of his parentage, when they are seized by a book-maker named Brand, who hurries away with them. News is brought that the regiment is to be drafted to Edinburgh, where Bob is promoted to the rank of lance-corporal. While in the town one day Bob notices Captain Lascelles, and, knowing he is there for no good purpose, follows him to a low den. Bob climbs on to the roof, and by means of a skylight, overhears Lascelles conspiring with two ruffians to get him (Bob) out of the way, and also to ruin Haines and Hamshaw, two popular officers of the Die Hards. As Bob is listening, the rotten woodwork on which he is laying gives way, and he falls into the room below, overturning a lamp, which sets fire to the house. Bob manages to get out safely, but when the sharp, fresh air arouses him, he realises that Lascelles is still in the burning building.

(Now go on with the story.)

Bob Exposes the Villains.

Dashing, therefore, through the crowd, Bob Hall swept aside the policeman who sought to stop him, and now he struggled with a couple more.

"Let me go! he shouted. "There's a man in the burning building! I must save him! I know him! Let me go—let me go!"

A roar went up from the crowd as Bob still wrestled desperately. The policeman, uncertain that what he said was true, and anxious that there should be no risk that was unnecessary, still clung to him, feverishly demanding the proofs of his statement; and Bob, growing more excited as the precious moments fled, exerted all his strength to break away. At last he flung one man aside, tripped up the other, jumped over him, evaded all outstretched hands, dashed up the steps, and disappeared into the house amidst the ringing cheers of the thousands now gathered to the spot.

The smoke was curling out through the doorway, and the cheers were changed into a profound wail as the spectators realised the peril the plucky young soldier had faced. The police rushed forward, but too late; Bob had vanished, and as the crowd pressed forward, the police turned again and drove them back from danger.

"Hi! Hi! Hi!"

Round the corner swung a fire-engine, the horses galloping frantically, the men clinging to the sides and bawling a frenzied warning.

"Hi! Hi! Hi!"

Up from another street raced a fire-escape, and a yell arose

—a yell that seemed as if it would rend the sky—a shout of heartfelt joy. All eyes were fixed on the house, a thousand voices shouted to the firemen that a soldier had dashed into the burning building to rescue life. A dozen men sprang to the ground, and willing hands grasped the fire-escape, and ran it against the wall.

Moments passed—moments full of agonising anxiety to all in that great multitude, whilst the firemen eagerly sought for information, and the horses were run out of the shafts, and the tubing was connected with the water-main.

What had happened to Bob? Had he got safely upstairs? Had he fallen? Was he overcome by the stifling smoke that now crept out of every window and rose in a dense black cloud over the city itself?

Moments passed, and then a woman's piercing sob was answered by the thunder of four thousand human throats. For out in the open air, high where all could see, a strong figure in uniform had emerged, half bent, and dragging a prostrate form behind it. Across the slates and on to the stone coping it came; then Bob bent lower, lifted Lascelles in his arms, and thus he stood gazing down into the sea of upturned faces.

There was a yell—a yell of bewildered amazement—and a couple of troopers in the uniform of the Die Hards burst their way through the cordon of police. Roughly pushing a fireman to one side, they ran up the rungs of the fire-escape, ignoring the shouts of the gallant fellows whose duty it was to rescue the twain.

A strong arm grasped Lascelles, and he was passed down. Again the hand shot out, and as it gripped the hero of the night the roof sank in, a blaze of lurid light burst upwards, and a volume of smoke, thick as oil, belched forth like a flood of lava.

Rescuer and rescued for an instant were hidden in the pall; then it cleared away, and a heartfelt roar of congratulation arose from the crowd below. For Bob, though staggering to keep his feet, was firmly held in an iron grip by the wrist. The lad, half-swooning, was pulled from off the coping and grasped tightly in the arms of his comrades.

"Steady, there, Hosty!" said Dent, with a catch in his voice, as he lowered Bob. "By gum, he's a good 'un!"

The crowd once again pressed forward, cheering wholeheartedly, and Bob would have been overwhelmed by the storm of congratulations from his thousands of admirers, had not a large reinforcement of police arrived by this time. Other engines now dashed up to the scene of the conflagration, great sheets of water rose and fell in tons upon the burning building, and the brave firemen, mounting to the roofs of the adjoining houses, kept back the flames as they licked their way along the street.

Lascelles lay motionless, his head resting on a fireman's knee, a doctor hurriedly diagnosing the senseless man's condition. Bob, held up by Dent and Hosty, grew stronger every moment, and at last, shaking off the friendly support on either side, he walked to the spot where his cousin rested. The doctor rose at this moment and cast a swift glance around on the dense mass of humanity which engirdled the spot.

"This man must be conveyed at once to hospital," he said. "We must get him to a cab, but—"

"Room, there—room!"

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"MASTER MARIE!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 370.
A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The police, acting at once on the doctor's hint, forced a way through the crowd. Lascelles was lifted up and carried away from the scene. On the outskirts of the thronged mass of spectators he was put into a cab, a policeman took his seat next him, and the cab was rapidly driven away. Bob had followed through the laneway the police had made, and now he stood alone with his comrades.

"How did it happen, Bob? What ever made you risk your life like that?" Dent cried, in tones of admiration.

The young lance-corporal smiled as he saw the eager, friendly faces of his old chums. He had won them back to his side, anyhow; there was no mistaking the cordiality of their feelings. In that tense moment when his life had hung in the balance, Dent's and Hosty's true nature had sprung uppermost. They had always liked Bob; now both knew that he was their superior in grit and character. As Bob looked at them kindly, they turned their eyes away for a moment; they felt ashamed that they had ever harboured an ill-natured thought against a comrade so honest and so true.

"You know who it was that I saved?" the lad suggested.

"Lascelles! What was he doing here? I thought he was in London!"

"So he was until to-day. This is a bad business, and there's no concealing Lascelles' rascality any longer. I'm not feeling very grand at the present moment, but there's work to be done at once. I'd like if you chaps would help me, but you can manage that. I'll cut along now. I'm not going back to barracks until I've got some information that is vital."

"Help you! Of course we will!" Hosty cried quickly. "See here, old chap, we're awfully sorry for what—well, you know what we mean. We didn't quite understand you. Chaps said a lot of queer things, and at first Dent and I denied them, and then they brought evidence, and then Cole showed us a letter from Lascelles which did look fishy, and then—"

Bob grinned.

"I've just heard about Cole," he chuckled. "I wondered why the regiment kept up the spite against me for so long, but now I understand. Cole helped to keep the ill-feeling at a full glow. He circulated all sorts of lies, and you fellows swallowed them. Cole has always been an enemy of mine, but it wasn't on that account solely that he tried to injure me this time; he's been the tool of a greater villain."

"Who?"

"Lascelles!"

"What, your swagger cousin? Why, it's on account of him that we chaps turn rusty. Cole made—"

"Lascelles is my worst enemy," Bob interjected gravely. "He's done all he can to ruin me. I've held my tongue so far, because I'm game to tackle him where I'm concerned myself, but the time has come when he must be shown up. There were a couple of scoundrels in that house yonder with him, plotting mischief, and they bolted when—the fire broke out. I'm going after them now. I guess they're not far away, and I'd know 'em anywhere. Come along!"

Instead of walking away, the lad returned towards the crowd, and eagerly scanned the faces of all he could see. Followed by his chums, he slowly worked his way, up and down, backwards and forwards, whilst Dent and Hosty followed in silence, leaving him to his own devices, and confident that he was acting wisely. Suddenly Bob paused and whispered over his shoulder:

"This way!" he said. "One of the scoundrels is here. I guessed he wouldn't be able to keep away, but that he'd hang on, attracted by the excitement. Perhaps he ran off first, and has only just plucked up courage to return. If so, he's wondering very likely whether Lascelles and I escaped. Keep close, and when I lay my hand on his shoulder, do you chaps get each side of him. He won't show fight, I think, but if he does, we'll hand him over to the police. Stick close together."

Dent nodded to convey that he understood, and Bob moved round towards the outskirts of the crowd. He stood for a second behind a bull-necked man, who, with straining eye-

balls, was gazing at the blazing building. Quickly and firmly the young lance-corporal laid his strong hand on the man's shoulder.

"The game is up, Braggs!" he murmured. "I'm Bob Hall, and I know everything. It was I who fell in through the skylight when you were plotting your villainy. Which will you do at the eleventh hour? Will you own up and help the cause of justice, or must I hand you over to the police yonder? You can't get away. There are three of us here."

As Bob spoke, Dent and Hosty stepped one to each side of Braggs, and gripped his wrists. The coward went ashen pale; beads of perspiration started on his brow, his breath came quickly, his nostrils were dilated with fear, his eyes pleaded for mercy.

"I'll do whatever you like!" he gasped. "I'll go wherever you wish! Only spare me, spare me!"

"Follow us, then!" Bob said firmly. "Your fate depends upon yourself!"

"No, Haines, my mind's made up! I'm going to send in my papers."

It was Hamshaw who spoke firmly, but without bitterness, and Haines gave a groan of despair.

"Will nothing change you?" he gasped. "Why should you suffer for my folly, my crime? Yes, it was nothing short of a crime; I see that now. I'd no right to gamble, and to gamble beyond one's means is dishonourable, it's caddish! Lascelles lured me on, and I couldn't give in, the sneering way he leered at me. I forgot everything in my desire to beat him. And now—and now, you're to have your prospects ruined, just because you helped me. Oh, I've been an awful ass; but I'm not such a rotter as to stick in the regiment, as if I was a decent sort, and let you leave for befriending me!"

"You shouldn't have gambled, even if you reckoned on your gov'nor to pay your debts," Hamshaw argued, with his strong, manly smile. "He's a rich man, and he's been kind to you always, but it doesn't follow because he's wealthy that he ought to encourage extravagance. He was quite right to refuse to help you on this occasion. Of course, you thought he would have done so when you asked me to back the bill. You're not the sort, I know, to get a friend into a hole. Well, things have turned out badly. Spriggs has come down on me, and he won't change his mind. I don't know why he's so bitter, and there's no use trying to guess riddles. The fact remains that I have to pay him to-day, and that leaves me unable to carry on here. So I'm going to clear out; I must!"

"Then I go, too!"

"What's the use of that?" Hamshaw asked, laying his hand on the youngster's shoulder. "That wouldn't help me. You've had a bitter lesson, and you'll act more wisely in future. You're very young, and you've been misled by a thoroughpaced villain of the world. Men can easily forgive you, my lad, for one slip such as you have made. I know that I do, and it would only add to my worry if you chucked your chances away."

Haines tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. He moved to the window to hide his emotion, and Hamshaw, seating himself at the table, took up a pen. He was about to write out his request for permission to resign his commission as an officer in the King's Service.

A loud cheer broke forth below in the square, followed by the quick rush of feet and shouts renewed in ever-increasing volume.

Hamshaw paused with the pen in his hand.

"What's that?" he inquired.

A Villain Unmasked.

Haines brushed his eyes with one steady movement, and kept his head steadily turned away.

"Bob Hall is coming in through the gate. The men seem to have gone mad with delight. No wonder. I wish I'd half Hall's pluck! He did a splendid thing last night, and I— They're all coming this way. Hall is shouting to them to keep back. He's looking up here. I do believe—yes; there's no mistake. He's coming to see you."

"I'll be glad to see him before I go," murmured Hamshaw, as he dipped the pen into the ink. "He's a fine young chap, and some day, perhaps, he'll have the position I've held. I shouldn't wonder if—"

A sharp tap at the door, and Bob entered and saluted. Then he quickly closed the door again, crossed to the table, drew a pack of cards from his tunic-pocket, and flung them on the table.

"Those are the cards with which Captain Lascelles gambled with Lieutenant Haines," he said hurriedly. "They're a fraud, sir. Examine them, if you like. Lieutenant Haines owes nothing, therefore, to Lascelles. That villain must return the money, or else be exposed. I've seen his con-

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federates—one a scoundrel called Braggs, another a rogue named Bell. There's their written confession. I down-faced Spriggs, and he knows he'll go to chokie for the part he's played, if he doesn't look to Lascelles for his money. Spriggs was in that card fraud, too; I've proof of that. It's one of the ways he makes his living, and—"

Hamshaw had risen to his feet, and Haines had rushed back from the window.

"Can this be true?" the adjutant cried. "I was about to send in my papers. I—"

"I know that, sir," Bob interjected quickly. "Well, I hope you'll be our adjutant for many years to come, sir. I must be off now. I promised the men I wouldn't delay, and—"

"And what, Hall?" Hamshaw asked hurriedly.

"And I must see Cole, sir. Dent has arranged the job, and I've got a chance to punch his head on the quiet."

And, with a look on his face that made Hamshaw grin, Bob clanked out of the room.

Bob strode down the stairs, out across the square, and into a field towards a shepherd's hut. A head was protruded from the doorway, and quickly withdrawn as he approached, and as the lad, a few seconds later, entered the ruin, he saw half a dozen of his old chums gathered in a group, and Cole, nervous but defiant, with his back to the farthest wall.

Bob quickly unbuttoned his tunic and handed it to Hosty. Cole did not stir.

"You'd better get ready. I want to give you every chance," Bob said sternly to Cole, as the latter still hesitated. "This is going to be a fight to a finish. Ever since I joined the regiment you've done all you could to blacken my name, and it's only by a bit of luck that things have come straight at last. I could have you drummed out of the Service if I liked, but there's no use in that. We mean to keep you in the Die Hards, and to make you run straight. Peel off, I'm waiting."

Cole slowly got ready. He was a powerful man, and looked bigger in his shirt-sleeves than when in uniform. There was no trace of fear in his eyes, and his face still kept its ruddy colour; yet he hesitated to face Bob, and his large nostrils were strangely dilated. It was difficult to say what his thoughts might be. He was cool, yet reluctant, in spite of the taunts of the other troopers.

"I reckon we can't have the fight here; there ain't room," Dent remarked. "There's a nice square of ground between this hut and the hedge, and it's out of sight of the public. You blokes had better leave your togs here, and come along. Buck up, Cole; there's no good hanging back!"

Cole shrugged his shoulders, and walked out after the other troopers. Bob had taken his stand, with fists clenched, and waited for him to approach. Next moment both combatants were facing one another.

"Time!" Dent called.

Bob at once set to work. He jumped lightly round his big adversary, feinted, jumped back, and then let out with his right.

The blow landed straight on Cole's nose, and, with a hoarse cry, the latter hit back with his full force, Bob ducking, so that the blow passed over his shoulder, and caught his adversary a terrific smash on the ribs.

Cole staggered back, Bob following up right and left; then they clinched, and suddenly broke away.

All hesitation on Cole's part seemed now to have disappeared. Bob's first blow had warmed him into action, and it was with the light of battle in his eyes that the trooper again advanced towards the young lance-corporal.

Nor was the lad destined to score an easy victory; that was made plain at once. Bob, again trusting to science, stepped lightly round and round, seeking for an opening, and as he feinted again Cole's arm shot out, caught him on the point of the chin, and sent him with a thump to the ground.

The lad was quickly on his feet, and, fighting more warily, he guarded the slogging blows which Cole now delivered rapidly, and, as the latter grew exhausted with the violence of his efforts, Bob changed defence into attack, and hit back steadily and fiercely.

A terrific rally followed, both pugilists fighting desperately for supremacy; whilst Dent, holding the timepiece, eagerly watched for the moment when he could declare the round at an end. The punishment on both sides was too terrific to last.

The clatter of horse's hoofs and the grating of wheels over a layer of stones had fallen on dull ears, so absorbed were all the troopers in the struggle taking place; nor did they even take their eyes from the pugilists as a man burst his way through the hedge and sprang towards the group.

"Hallo! Stop that row at once! Lance-corporal Hall, I place you under arrest!"

It was Lascelles who spoke, and all turned and gazed at him in mute surprise. Not a hand was raised to the salute, "Clear off, the lot of you!" Lascelles commanded. He

was looking pale and ill, and sickness only seemed to make his face more sinister. "As for you, Hall, I'll see that you're properly punished for fighting with a private, and forgetting what's due to your rank," Lascelles continued. "Cole, go to my rooms; I want to speak to you!"

The troopers as Lascelles spoke trembled with wrath and disgust. Dent did not seek to conceal his feelings.

"Why, Hall's the chap as saved your life last night! Is this the sort of return you make him?" the gallant trooper cried.

"He went into that blazing building after you, when you must have perished for certain in a few minutes if he had stayed away; and now—now— Bah! Call yourself a man! I don't, anyhow!"

Lascelles had positively grown green. He knew that his life had been saved by a soldier, for so much had been told him when he had recovered consciousness in hospital, but he was not aware till now that Bob had been his rescuer.

The other privates closed in round him, and the contempt on their honest faces stung his mean heart to madness.

Remembering his power as an officer, and casting aside all thoughts of gratitude and remorse, he asserted a domineering tone, like all cowards who seek to shield themselves.

"I'm going to do my duty, in spite of my feelings!" he cried curtly. "I tell you men to get back to barracks at once, and to remember what's due to your superior officer. Hall is under arrest. Cole, follow me!"

Dent drew a pace closer to Lascelles. The private's eyes were blazing with indignation.

"You're here, and you won't get away, either, till you know what we think of you!" he muttered hoarsely. "I don't care if I get drummed out of the regiment and have to do two years' hard labour besides. I'm not going, for one, to let a cur like you walk rough-shod over everything that's decent. Luck an' money made you an officer, but, by gum, we're men, an' if you don't promise to hold your tongue about Hall I'll give you a hiding that will cripple you for a month, so there!"

"Ay, ay!"

The other troopers, getting their cue from Dent, gruffly signified their approval of his speech, and closed right round Lascelles, who was trembling with rage.

Bob sprang forward, and stood before Lascelles.

"Let him go, chaps!" he cried. "He can't hurt me, for all his talk. Remember the honour of the regiment. That's more to us than getting satisfaction out of a coward and a cur!"

"There's one here who knows what's due to his superior officer, at all events!" Lascelles gasped, as he shook violently.

"You'll smart for this, you ruffians! Come back, Cole; I want you as a witness!"

With clenched fists the troopers wheeled round to face the private, but, to their amazement, he pushed his way through them, and stood glaring at Lascelles.

"I'll be no witness!" He seemed with difficulty to get command of his voice. "I'll not help you, nor back you up, nor say a word to stop these chaps if they care to kill you where you stand! You got me in your clutches, you mean fiend, and night and day my 'ife has been a torture! You knew as how I tried once to do for Hall because I hated him, and you held the threat over me that you'd expose me if I didn't work your wicked will! You've bullied me and trampled on me, and made me do acts such as I shuddered at! It's not your fault that Hall is in no dead now by means of me, and all the time I couldn't help seeing that he was straight and honourable, whilst you—you are the lowest hound I ever even heard tell on. I didn't want to fight him to-day. I felt that I'd sooner that he'd licked me till he was tired, and then I'd have felt more as if I could have looked him in the face. You can do your worst. You can have me gaoled, you can—"

Cole stopped. Lascelles, his lips drawn tight as parchment, was showing his white teeth in a convulsive smile, as if struggling to throw an air of derision over the private's speech.

Cole read at a glance the meaning of the rascal's attitude, and the blood rushed to his head. His temples throbbed as if they would burst, his sight became hazy. Through the mist he saw that ashen face and that hateful sneering grin. All else seemed blotted out—the sky, and the fields, and the forms of his companions.

With a cry like a wild beast he raised his fist, and putting every ounce of his herculean frame into the blow, he struck at that white face as if it was a hideous spectre that mocked him.

Lascelles fell like a log, and Cole, trembling as if seized with the palsy, wiped his eyes and grunted hoarsely. Then he stretched out his arm and leant heavily on Hosty for support.

"You've killed him!" Dent gasped. "He's finished! No mortal man could stand that blow!"

(Another instalment of this fine yarn next week. Order your copy of the GEM now.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 370.

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THIS WEEK'S CHAT



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For Next Wednesday—

"MASTER MARIE!"

By Martin Clifford.

Gemites are given a rare treat in our next grand, long complete story of St. Jim's. Mr. Selby, the master of the Third, becomes suddenly indisposed, and the Head has considerable difficulty in finding a deputy who can keep anything like order among the inky-fingered fray. Monsieur Morny is the first to try his hand, but Wally D'Arcy and his comrades upset the French master's equilibrium, and he has to resort to desperate measures. Herr Schneider is next given the control of the class, and he goes further and fares worse than his colleague. Finally, Marie Rivers, whose duties in the sanatorium have considerably relaxed, is allowed to supervise the unruly fags, and

"MASTER MARIE,"

after passing through stormy times with her charges, proves herself to be a very capable disciplinarian, and harmony takes the place of confusion in the ranks of the Third.

YOUR EDITOR IN HARNESS!

A Typical Interview With One of His Readers.

'Twas a busy day in the "Gem" office. Diminutive printers' devils flitted hither and thither, and ever and anon came the tap-tap of the "Remington" typewriter, manipulated with consummate skill by "Chuckles" office-boy.

As I was sitting in my sanctum, evolving a great plot for our coming Bumper Number, a sprightly lad in uniform hailed me from the doorway.

"Mister George Greenberry!" he announced.

"Author or artist?" I queried.

"He says he is a 'Gem' reader, sir!"

"H'm!" I exclaimed. "'Gem' readers are an excellent set as a rule—excellent. Tell Mr. Greenberry I will see him with pleasure!"

At this juncture a red-faced youth broke in upon the scene. He smiled at me with a face like unto a full moon, and at my bidding he took possession of the luxurious armchair provided for the use of visitors.

"Well," he said jovially, "so you're the Editor, sir?"

"With becoming dignity I informed him that I was.

"Really!" he exclaimed. "Quite a youngish-looking chap. Different to what I expected, you know, sir."

"I presume you did not anticipate your Editor as being a wheezing octogenarian?" I observed.

"Well, not exactly, sir. Matter of fact, I reckon most of your readers would prefer a young chap to edit their papers. He enters into the spirit of things more. How's Tom Merry?"

"First-rate!" I replied, taking up a letter bearing the Rylcombe postmark. "I heard from him this morning."

"And Manners?"

"Manners is also going great guns," I said.

"And that funny chap—what's his name?—Lowther. Is he in the pink?"

I nodded.

My visitor remained silent for some time, till he turned to me with a grandfatherly air, and said:

"I don't like the old 'Gem' so much as I used to."

"And why not?" I ventured.

"Because Tom Merry's not the champion he was. Talbot cuts him out."

"Don't you care for Talbot as a character, then?"

"Not much. I think Martin Clifford should stick to the old firm."

"You must remember," I said, with a smile, "that there

are many hundreds who do. I have to study the majority—not individuals. But hurry up and finish your criticism of the 'Gem,' and then I really must bid you good-day."

"Finish!" he cried, aghast. "Why, I haven't started yet! I want to give you some advice on how to run the 'Magnet'—"

"Very good of you!" I interjected.

"And the 'Penny Pop'—"

"Indeed!"

"To say nothing of the 'Dreadnought'—"

"Go on!"

"And 'Chuckles'—"

"Really!"

"Likewise 'The Boys' Friend.' I can suggest some startling improvements for each of these papers."

"So startling," I said, "that I should probably lose nine-tenths of my readers. It is a curious fact, Mr. Greenberry, but every person seems to have his own fixed ideas as to how a paper should be conducted. I am afraid I cannot see my way clear to make any drastic changes at present. If you have any really big grievance, please state it at once, and pray don't be too long-winded!"

"My greatest grievance," was the reply, "is in connection with the 'Gem' Storyette Competition. I've sent in four jokes at different intervals, and not one has been published."

"My dear fellow, that's nothing. Some readers have sent in ten, and had no success. There again you must remember that about two hundred storyettes arrive at Gough House daily—consequently prizes can only be won by the few. Yours is a common complaint. A reader sends in a joke, and if it isn't published right away he gets his back up, and abuses the whole paper. Those who have won prizes will tell you that in many cases their success was only the outcome of patience and perseverance. Anything worth winning in this world is only to be won by constantly pegging away. Continue to send in your jokes, making each effort better than the last, and you are practically certain, in the long run, of reaping a reward. That's my advice to you, Greenberry."

He rose from the armchair and bowed his acknowledgments.

"I'll act on it," he said shortly. "You might give my kind regards to that clever artist who draws for the 'Gem' each week. Who is he?"

"Mr. Macdonald."

"He's a brick! So's Mr. MacClifford, and Beverley MacKent. Likewise Mr. MacHayward, whose Double Number covers are ripping. What's become of that Johnnie who gave us the 'St. Jim's Jingles'?"

"He's still very much alive," I replied. "Shall I convey to him your good wishes?"

"Do. And ask him, if he isn't too busy, to write me a 'Sonnet to an Expiring Frog.' I'll keep it as a souvenir of his work. How's the staff getting on?"

"Four are with the Colours. The former Sub-Editor—Lieutenant C. M. Down—has returned home wounded, but I am thankful to say it is not too serious. He was up to see me a week ago. Meanwhile, my assistants and I are drilling regularly in our spare time in the Home Defence Corps."

"That's good! The old 'Gem' has always breathed the spirit of patriotism. Glad to see someone's staying behind. We must keep the flag of the Companion Papers gaily flying. Good-day, sir!"

I instructed the office-boy to show Master Greenberry out, and returned with a smile to the preparation of the "Gem" Double Number—a number which will bid fair to beat all records, and which will grace the bookstalls early in April.

(H. A. H.) YOUR EDITOR.

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