GREAT NEW SCHOOL SERIAL INSIDE!

The GEM LIBRARY 1½D

No. 697. Vol. XIX.

20 Pages. Every Wednesday. June 18th, 1921.

"WHAT HAVE YOU AGAINST ME?"

Don't Miss Our Great New School Serial Starting This Week.

EDITORIAL.

My Dear Chums,—

This week you have the opening instalment of our new serial story of Millford College, and I shall anxiously await your letters to hear how you like it. The author of this splendid story has written many popular successes, and I have no doubt that he will also score with his latest yarn. I hope all my loyal readers will take this opportunity of introducing the GEM to their friends who are not already readers. Next week's GEM will contain another splendid instalment of the serial, which you must not miss, and also another fine story of St. Jim's entitled "Tom Merry & Co.'s Camp." This will be the first of a special series of camping and caravanning stories, and you are certain to appreciate them now that the glorious open-air days are here. Don't miss these magnificent stories of the popular heroes of St. Jim's. They are certainly some of the very finest Martin Clifford has ever written, and you will enjoy every line of them. Get next week's issue of the GEM and the following week's number without fail, or you will miss a good thing.

YOUR EDITOR.

ANSWERS TO READERS.

"A DUNDEE ENTHUSIAST" (Dundee).—Dick Brooke is one of the most skilful junior tennis players at St. Jim's. Langton of the Sixth is also a good hand at it. Leslie Owen is the best junior swimmer in the New House; Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, and Cardew, of the School House, are all very hot stuff. Kildare, Baker and Darrel are perhaps the three best swimmers in the Sixth Form. I can't give you the name of any boys especially good at diving. Mr. Railton still continues to give encouragement and instruction to the younger boys. He does not take such a leading part in the games as he used to, but I don't think it is because his wound prevents him.

"A YORKSHIRE PUDDING" (Yorkshire).—I will think over your idea concerning Wildrake, Dane, and Buck Finn. It is certainly a good one! I will endeavour to publish shortly a list of the Fourth Form studies. The age, colour of hair, and eyes of Cousin Ethel, Doris Levison and Marie Rivers are: 15, 2; 15, 5; 17, 10; black hair, brown eyes; blonde, with blue eyes; and brown hair, with grey eyes. I heartily enjoyed your liberal compliments about the Cardew number, and am very glad to inform you that an equally good special Levison number will appear in a week or so.

"J'AIME TOM" (Gravesend).—So you like Cardew least? Most boys think him one of the most interesting studies of human nature. What was your opinion of the last two stories dealing with him—"Chumming with Wildrake," and "His Chums Against Him"? I am afraid it would hardly be possible to reprint the old stories of St. Jim's again; at any rate, not in the paper you mention. For your questions: No. 1. Joe Frayne and Jimson are still at St. Jim's; Vavasour and Roland Ray are not. No. 2. Yes, the boys still continue the St. Jim's Parliament, but I think Tom Merry's Legion of Honour has been dropped. I am afraid I cannot give you a full list of all the double numbers which have appeared. They would take up too much space; there used to be two or three double numbers every year before the war.

FRED HODGSON (Wealdstone).—Kildare, Lefevre, Tom Merry, Noble, Talbot, Blake, Figgins, and Wally D'Arcy are some of the best boxers at St. Jim's.

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Lawrence is not related to the other character you mention. Neither is Dick Redfern related to Barbara Redfern of Cliff House. Talbot has no relations whatever at St. Jim's; his girl friend is Marie Rivers. The vaults are generally entered by the back staircase, but I cannot give you the names of all the other entrances. I will endeavour to publish a plan soon, which will give clearly all you wish to know.

PERCY H. (Haslemere).—Here is the full list of masters you want: Headmaster, Dr. Holmes; Sixth Form, Mr. Railton; Fifth Form, Mr. Ratcliff; Shell, Leslie M. Linton; Fourth Form, Philip G. Lathom; Third Form, Mr. Selby; Second Form, Mr. Percy Carrington; German Master, Herr Otto Gottfried Schneider; French Master, Monsieur Adolphe le Blanc Morny.

"WILFRED" (Southsea).—Yes, my chum, there is going to be another special number shortly. It will deal with Ernest Levison. You think "The Lad From the Lower Deck!" beats all records? Well, don't miss a single instalment, old chap, otherwise you'll have to beat all records to get hold of your copy. I have not forgotten Racke's sister; and will endeavour to publish a story dealing with Stacpoole & Owen in a swimming incident. Your idea concerning Bernard Glyn's invention, Gussy, and Gordon Gay is quite good. I might be able to use it this summer.

"MISS FLOSSIE T. (Andover).—Your list of favourite characters was select and well chosen. Almost every fellow at St. Jim's has one or more sisters. Racke has a half-sister, named Gladys Sylvaine. She went to America before her father died, and her mother married for a second time, to "Aubrey" Racke's father.

A Magnificent Story of Life at Millford College, by IVOR HAYES.

"THERE, I think that will do now."

Mrs. Mace laid down her son's coat, and rubbed her tired eyes wearily. She had been repairing the garment by the light of a smoky oil-lamp which stood on the small kitchen table.

"Yes, mother," said Tom Mace.

The boy raised himself from the plain, wooden chair upon which he had been seated, laid down his book, and crossed the room. He picked up the coat, and eyed it carefully where his mother had been industriously darning.

The coat was old and shabby. It had served Tom for a long while, and was part of the only suit he possessed.

"Anyway," said Mrs. Mace, "it will do, Tom, until your clothes come down from London."

The boy nodded silently.

"It will do splendidly, mother," he said. "The other clothes won't be long in coming."

There was a troubled look in the boy's eyes as he replaced the garment on the table.

"I wish the other clothes had arrived in time, though," he muttered. "I should have liked to start that grand school in new clothes. It will be a new life for me, and I want to start well."

Mrs. Mace nodded her white head.

"Yes, Tom," she assented. "It will be a new life there in the big school. You must make the best of it, though. Chances do not come to everyone."

"I will make the most of it, mother," said Tom earnestly. "I am going to make my way, and learn all I can, so that when I am old enough I can earn money enough to take you out of all this."

His mother sighed wearily, and looked round the dingy room—looked sadly at the carpetless boards and the bare table.

"Don't worry, mother," said Tom, placing a hand on his mother's shoulder. "I shall be home for the holidays, you know."

The woman wiped her eyes with the corner of her rough apron. Already the tears had started to her eyes.

"I know you won't forget your mother, Tom," she murmured, gripping his hand. "You've been a good lad to me. You're all I have in the world. You'll write often?"

The boy nodded silently, not daring to speak, lest his voice should betray his emotion.

"I will write, mother dear," he answered. "I will not forget."

For a moment the pair remained thus, the boy by the side of his mother, his hand on her shoulder. He was a finely-built lad, with clear-cut features and honest eyes that never flinched.

He was all his mother had, save——

Tap, tap! Bang!

As that insistent knocking came at the front door of what these two had learned to call home, Tom Mace dropped his hand to his side.

The woman started.

"Tom," she said, "it is your father! Quick! Go upstairs. You must not see him. He is sure to be in a bad temper."

In great agitation she hustled Tom from the room, and, heavy at heart, he went upstairs. He hated leaving his mother alone with Bill Mace, his father, a waster and ne'er-do-well.

The man's booming, harsh voice sounded in the downstairs room, and Tom clenched his hands angrily. Dearly would he like to take his father and punish him as he deserved. But he could not. For some reason that he could not fathom, his mother loved that slacking, loafing man whom he was compelled to call father.

"He has never been a father," muttered Tom, with set teeth. "Oh, why—why can't I hit him? Why can't I fling him into the street?"

Downstairs Bill Mace was shouting, and waving his arms angrily.

"That all you got for my supper?" he roared at the unfortunate woman he had married. "D'ye think that's enough to keep me alive, working—slaving all day?"

Mrs. Mace shook her head wearily. She had long since learned that with this tyrant of a man silence was the best policy.

"It's more than Tom's had," she murmured.

"Tom!" roared Mr. Bill Mace. "Tom! Shouldn't think that lazy young fool would want anything, stuffing his head into books! I left school when I was ten—ten——"

"Yes, dear."

"Bah! Don't talk to me! And what's all this rot about him having won a scholarship to a big school?"

"Tom's won a scholarship for Millford College," said Mrs. Mace proudly. "I'm sure you should praise the boy, for it's very clever. He'll get a good education——"

"Bah!" snorted the man, his mouth full of ham. "Eddication! Look at me! Never had an hour's eddication in me life——"

"Yes; but——"

"Ain't I as good as 'im?"

"Yes——"

"Very well, then!" said Bill Mace, resuming his mastication now that he had gained his point. He continued silently for some moments, then, placing down his knife with a sudden exclamation, he smacked his hands together.

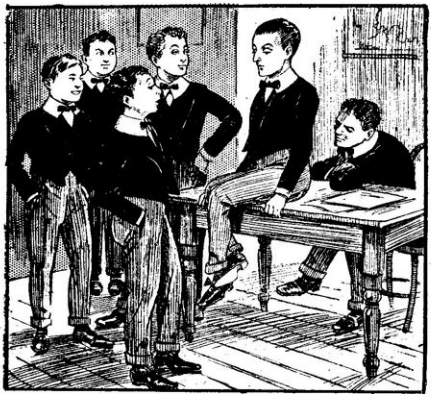
"My!" he shouted genially. "You didn't say Millford!"

The woman nodded.

"Yes, Millford College," she replied dully.

"By gum! If that ain't the luckiest thing ever!" chuckled

Simon Lundy stared almost through the new boy, and Tom dropped his head. Most of the boys were grinning. "Oh, my only aunt!" gasped Garnet. "Look what's come to Millford."



"I call it too thick for words!" said Simon Lundy. "Beastly awful!" added Luke Bradshaw. "What the dickens we want with a scholarship chap I can't understand!" "Hear, hear!" shouted the juniors standing around.

the man. "Fancy Tom at Millford! Luck! My stars! Where is he?"

"Upstairs."

The man leaned back in his chair.

"Tom!" he roared. "Tom!"

A voice sounded from upstairs, then footsteps. Presently Tom Mace, white-faced, stood in the doorway.

"Yes," he said quietly.

Bill Mace glowered at him.

"Don't speak to me like that!" he roared. "Speak up! You ain't at school now!"

The boy made no reply, but continued to gaze scornfully on his father.

"This right about your going to Millford?" asked Bill Mace, wheeling round in his chair, and placing his grubby, unshaven face on a still more grubby hand.

Tom nodded.

"Jumping goats! Ain't dumb, are you?" hooted the man. "If you're going, say so. I've got a job for you there."

"Job?" Tom Mace raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I don't understand you," he said.

"Orl right, orl right. Let me get on. Look 'ere. You ain't a dull sort o' chap, and I can put you on to pick up a bit o' cash, and earn a bit for yore old dad." Receiving no reply from the figure in the doorway, the man resumed. "Well, it's like this 'ere. Old Spikey—— You know Spikey Meadows o' the Plume of Feathers? Well, Spikey got on to a crib the other day——"

"A—a crib?"

"Crib! Yes! Ain't you 'eard the word?" shouted the boy's father scornfully. "You a scholard an' all! Jumping goats! Crib means a job—a job like the one wot we cracked last Thursday at the Manor House."

"Father! You mean a burglary—a place to burgle!"

Mrs. Mace went red and white alternately.

"That's what I mean!" sneered the man, noting the disgust in the boy's face. "Call it that. We ain't doin' no 'arm. Just takin' from the rich. Now, you'd make a good size crib-cracker, you would!"

"What do you mean?"

The boy drew himself erect, and his eyes blazed.

"Orl right, orl right!" said the man, waving his fist irritably. "Don't get on yer perch, me lad! Listen to yer old dad. You're going to Millford, ain't yer? Yes, I know you are. Good! Millford's just about the best crib to crack. Now, old Spikey Meadows knows the place. But 'e says we must 'ave an inside accomplice."

"An—an inside accomplice!"

"That's it. You're gettin' the idea orl right. Now, you can be the inside accomplice. See?"

"I see," said Tom Mace grimly. "Oh, yes, I see all right! You want me to become a dirty, low-down thief! You want me to rob the school where I am going to obtain a good education free!"

"'Ere, 'old on! Not so fast, young shaver!" Bill Mace rose somewhat unsteadily. "You keep yer wool on! Not so much of it!"

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Tom advanced towards his father, and the man drew back. Mrs. Mace clutched her son by the sleeve.

"Tom," she pleaded, "don't touch him, please."

"Touch me!" laughed the man mockingly, in crescendo. "Touch me! That whelp, that gutter brat, that charity schoolboy!"

Tom Mace did not move, although his face turned white with rage.

"Why, I'll—I'll smash every blinkin' bone in yer body!" roared the man viciously.

He snatched up a chair and half-raised it above his head.

His wife, with a sharp cry, sprang between him and her son.

"Don't!" she pleaded, clutching the man's arm. "Oh, don't, Bill!"

With a curse, Bill Mace threw her aside, and raised the chair above his head again. The woman clung round his knees, and, dropping the chair, he clawed at her arms to free himself.

"Let go!" Tom Mace, his cheeks burning, and his eyes blazing, strode forward. "Touch my mother, you brute," he said through his teeth, "and I will smash you!"

So surprised was the man at this outburst that he released the woman, and Tom helped her to her feet, and led her to a chair, where she sat sobbing.

The boy and the man faced one another, and neither moved. There was hatred in the man's eyes, but there was also fear—fear of this unknown strength before him. He had never matched himself against Tom; but now, as he eyed the youth up and down, he came to a quick decision—the decision of a coward.

With an oath and a savage kick at the chair that lay on the ground, he picked up his cap, and stamped out of the room.

Tom waited until the final slam of the front door told him that, for a time at least, his father had gone

Mrs. Mace was sobbing bitterly.

"Oh, Tom, Tom," she said huskily, "never, never listen to what he says. I tried to keep his criminal ways from you. I thought you would never know. But he has told you. It has been going on for months now, Tom."

The boy took his mother in his arms and comforted her.

"Don't worry, mother," he said. "I shall never be a thief. But I did not know of this. Mother, I can't leave you in his hands—I can't!"

The woman looked up at her son through tear-stained eyes.

"But, Tom," she said—"Tom, my darling boy, you must! For your own good you must go to school. I can stay here. I am used to it, and I have no future. But with you it is different. You must get away from all this. If you do not, your home will be against you all your life. Go away and forget it!"

"Yes, mother," said the boy gently, "I will forget it, but I shall never forget you—never!"

He stroked his mother's grey head tenderly, and there were tears in his eyes. He hated leaving her.

"Oh, mother," he said, "I wish that I could take you away with me!"

"No, Tom," she said gently. "Go, dear, alone. Learn all you can, and try to become a gentleman. That is all I want you to be. It is all that matters. Be a gentleman. Do right, for right's sake, my boy."

She drew him closer, and looked into his eyes.

"Your father has had a hard time, Tom dear," she said softly. "Do not judge him too harshly. He was a better man once. And he may become a better man again one day. But forget him now. Good-night!"

Reverently the boy stooped and kissed his mother. It was the last time for many months that he would kiss her good-night. To-morrow he would be in a new world.

Off to College.

NEXT morning dawned bright and sunny. The early-morning sun streamed through the window in Tom Mace's bed-room, making even that dowdy, ill-furnished room look bright and cheerful.

Through the open window came the sound of singing birds, and Tom, as he sat up in bed, felt almost happy.

It was going to be a new world. He could not imagine what life at a big school was like, for the only school he had ever known was a Council school. There, all the boys had been like himself, the sons of poor parents, and now he wondered idly how he would get on with the sons of rich men.

There was Simon Lundy, the squire's son—he went to Millford. Tom had often seen him in the little town of Darton, and had even seen him at the squire's house. For Tom, in his spare time, had delivered errands for the local grocer.

Of course, Simon Lundy had not noticed Tom, or, if he had, he had appeared not to. It was not for a squire's son to recognise the son of a local lounger.

But now Tom was going to the same school as Simon.

These thoughts ran through the boy's brain as he sat there in the sunlight, and he did not hear his mother's first call. At the second sound of her voice, however, he sprang out of bed.

"Right-ho!" he called. "I'm getting up, mother! I'll be down soon!"

He hastily dressed and washed. When he had donned his old coat, he eyed it reflectively. It did not look bad. Of course, it was not the same cut or quality as Simon Lundy's, but it did not look so bad on. True, there were one or two rather prominent darns, and there was a hole—but Tom did not say anything about that.

When he went down to breakfast his mother looked him up and down proudly. Then she frowned anxiously.

"I do hope that coat will look all right, Tom," she said. "I did try to make it look decent."

"Don't worry, mother dear," he said, kissing her cheek affectionately. "It'll be all right."

He sat down to his breakfast, and soon forgot his coat in talking happily of the life he was to lead.

Mrs Mace looked at the clock once or twice during the course of the meal, for she was anxious that Tom should not miss his train.

"It's time to go, my boy," she said. "You have a long journey."

Tom rose, and packed his few things into a parcel, together with a few sandwiches his mother had cut for him. The scholarship he had won provided him with a complete school outfit; but, unfortunately, it had not arrived, and would not arrive till the morrow. So, for the time being, the boy had to be content with the few things he had by him.

At last it was time to go, and, parcel in hand, he stood in the porch of the small cottage. His mother, trying to smile and keep back the tears that were forcing themselves to her eyes, shook his hand, and kissed him with motherly affection.

"Good-bye, dearest boy!" she said rather huskily. "Good-bye, and do not forget me. I want you to be happy, Tom."

Tom nodded and smiled, although there was a strange lump in his throat at the parting.

The woman watched him as he strode down the street, the brown-paper parcel under his arm.

As he turned the corner of the street she waved her hand, then disappeared. And now Tom Mace had set his feet on the new road. His mother and his home were behind him. His home he would forget, but not his mother. He did not dream that, at that moment, his mother was weeping bitterly. She had given her son, sent him out for his betterment, and rendered herself lonely, and her life loveless.

But Tom was feeling quite happy. He was an explorer on a voyage to a new world—a world he had read of, heard of, but never known

He wondered if he would meet Simon Lundy? He looked at the sky and smiled. The porter at the small but busy station gave him a cheery good-day. All the people knew Tom, and he was respected.

"Hear you be going to school," said the porter.

"That's right, Sam," said Tom, nodding. "I'm going by the next train, too."

The old porter nodded, and stroked his grey beard reflectively.

"Different from my days these be," he mused. "Well, well, well. Fancy old Bill Mace's son a scholard!"

Tom smiled, and passed on, crossing the bridge to the down trains. He looked at the clock. There were five minutes to spare, and he sat down on a seat by the station wall.

Save for a figure farther up the platform he was alone. On the other side, where the up train was already due, there was quite a crowd.

The figure at the other end of the platform turned round and walked down towards Tom, and the boy eyed him with idle curiosity.

The man passed, looking ahead along the line, and swinging a cane behind him. He was tall, with a keen, clean-looking face, a small black moustache, and cold, steel-grey eyes.

There was something impressive about the man, and Tom could not help looking at him. The man glanced at him quickly, then turned his eyes away, as though there was nothing about Tom to interest him.

As Tom watched the man he took in details. The man was nothing more than an ordinary passer-by to Tom, but to-day the lad was interested in everyone. He compared the man's clothes with his own. Yes, in the cut there was a perceptible difference. But Tom would not have chosen that material—for the man wore a sea-green suit.

But presently the boy's attention was drawn to an advertisement that had been pasted on the station wall. It told of the rise of a youth from a waif to a salaried official at some few thousands a year, and the boy's eyes narrowed. Why shouldn't he be such a man! Why should not he some day be worth a few thousand pounds a year. Then he could afford to keep his mother in comfort, as she deserved to be kept; then——But the train, with a rush and roar, was coming into the station, and Tom, parcel in hand, rose to his feet.

He walked along the third-class carriages, looking for an occupied one, for he wanted company. There was only one. In it was seated an ill-clad man, with a thick muffler round his neck. Tom eyed him casually. Here was a failure, he thought—one of the many who never got beyond the bottom rung. He wondered what the man might be, and what was his business. And the man returned his look. Tom flushed, and looked out of the window.

The guard's whistle sounded shrilly, and the train began to move. A figure passed by the carriage, looked in, then opened the door.

It was the man with the sea-green suit. He looked at Tom, then crossed the carriage, and sat beside the man with the muffler.

It seemed queer to Tom that when there were two vacant corner seats this man should sit right next to the rough-looking tramp. But the man's next action was even more surprising.

"Hallo, my old bird!" he said, eyeing the man with the muffler. "I thought you'd be on this train."

The man with the muffler started.

"Why, bless me 'eart," he ejaculated, "if it ain't Jim!"

He extended his hand, and the man in the sea-green suit took it, and gave it a friendly shake.

"Didn't recognise me?" he said.

"No, I'm blest if I did!" returned his companion. "Not with that moustache!"

The man with the sea-green suit glanced at Tom with a quick, penetrating look, but Tom was not looking at the moment, and the man was reassured.

But Tom was listening. He could not help it. For the man with the muffler had startled him. With that moustache! Was the man in the sea-green suit in disguise, then?

"Thought you was lying low," said the mufflered man hoarsely. He attempted to whisper, but his voice carried.

The man in the sea-green suit nodded.

"Off that now," he said. "I'm on the track of better fry!"

"Oh!"

Tom was trembling with excitement. After his father's statement of the night before, it was not surprising that the boy was suspicious. Then instantly it sprung into the boy's mind that this man was a detective.

The hoarse voice of the man with the muffler sounded again, and Tom heard the words distinctly.

"Not on a good thing?"

"Yes, Spikey," returned the man with the sea-green suit.

Tom started violently, then turned very red. Spikey—his father's friend! Spikey, the man who was leading his father into another rash venture! So that was Spikey Meadows—the man with the muffler!

The lad could almost have shouted. As it was, he glanced hurriedly at the men at the end of the carriage. But they were whispering now, heedless of him. Evidently they thought him of no account.

But Tom had heard enough.

He sat in the corner of the carriage silent, a prey to dark thoughts. Suppose his father, on some foolish venture in company with Spike Meadows, were to be caught? It would

The man with the muffler started. "Why, bless me 'eart," he said, "if it ain't Jim!" He extended his hand. "Didn't recognise me, eh?" "No!" returned his companion. "Not with that moustache!" Tom listened eagerly.

break his mother's heart, and—and it would ruin him, if it were ever learnt at the school. And how could it be kept a secret?

The train raced on through the glorious scenery of sun-soaked Kent; but the scenery meant nothing to Tom then. He who had been so happy was now plunged into the depth of gloom by the dark thoughts that had just entered his head.

He had not left his home behind him, then. He could not live it down. His father would be arrested. In his mind's eye, he could picture his mother's grief and the outburst the revelation would cause at the school.

They must never know about his father! He would keep that a secret. And he would write that night to his mother, to tell her to warn Bill Mace against this thief.

If his mother could keep the foolish man from the tentacles of Spikey Meadows, then all would be well.

But what if his father came to the school, burgled it, and were arrested. Tom shivered. He saw for the first time that his career was not to be a bed of roses. He would have to win his way at the school, and as yet he knew but one lad there—Simon Lundy. And he only knew Simon by sight and repute!

The Conspiracy Against Tom.

"I CALL it too thick for words!"

Simon Lundy sat on the table in the Junior Common-room at Millford College, and swung his legs. There was a bored look on Simon's face, and an almost vacant expression in his eyes. He was not a highly-intelligent youth, but as his father was wealthy and of good stock, Simon was regarded as one of the leading lights of the Fourth Form.

Two other juniors, as elegantly dressed as Simon, and as supercilious, nodded appreciatively as their leader spoke. They agreed with what he said, but their looks seemed to imply that they were too lazy to put it into words.

"Beastly awful!" said Luke Bradshaw, after a pause. Since he was the youngest son of an earl's brother, Luke felt he was called upon to back up his leader's remark.

The juniors who were standing round said nothing. Simon usually led the conversation, and retained it. His voice was not unpleasant, but it gave most pleasure to himself.

"What the dickens we want with a scholarship chap I can't understand," he said. "We've never had one before, and I don't see why we should begin!"

"Hear, hear!"

Simon waxed warmer.

"I expect he'll talk through his nose, and drop his aitches, and all that," he went on scornfully. "Blest if I don't ask the dad to take me away next term!"

"Hear, hear!" said a red-haired, freckle-faced youth in the corner.

"Who asked you to speak, Peel?" asked the lofty Bradshaw.

The freckled youth smiled.

"No one," he said. "But I felt called upon to support the worthy Simon's motion. But I wish to add an amendment."

The freckled youth rose to his feet. He was not handsome, and his features were inclined to be rugged, as though thrown together hastily. Yet his face always wore a cheerful grin. His clothes were in keeping with his face, and it was not surprising that he did not find favour with the Aristocrats of the Fourth.

"Well, my cheery urchin, what is it?" asked Lundy, with a half-sneer.

"Why, that you ask your father to take you away this term—not next, dear man!" chuckled Bob Peel.

"What!"

Bradshaw raised his eyebrows. And several juniors looked shocked that anyone should dare to pull the august leg of their honoured chief. But Simon Lundy merely sneered.

"I don't give a button—not a blessed bone button—for what you think, Peel," he said. "I'm rather annoyed that the Head let you come here, you son of a pauper parson!"

Peel's smile vanished at this reference to his father, but he said nothing, and Lundy's sneer increased.

"To get back to our mutton," he murmured. "I vote we show this new rat what we think of him. We didn't give Peel the lesson he deserved when he came, and you can see what a cheeky beast he is now!"

His companion nodded dutifully.

"That's the style!" chuckled Luke Bradshaw.

And Lionel Garnet nodded assent.

"Just tell him what we think——"

"That won't take half a minute!" interrupted Peel.

"An' chuck his jolly old baggage into the road—what?" went on the lofty Lundy, ignoring the interruption.

"Hear, hear!" chuckled the others. "You do get the ideas, Lundy, old man."

Simon Lundy fanned himself with a handkerchief.

"Yaas," he murmured. "I must pride myself that I do get the ideas! Well, if we're going to get him, we'd better come at once."

He slipped from the table, and drew a gold watch from his pocket.

"Just about time for the kid to arrive," he murmured.

He led the way from the Common-room, and his companions followed. There were nine of ten in his following, and Robert Peel glanced after them with an angry frown on his cheery freckled face.

He had a strong and not unnatural dislike for the Aristocrats of the Fourth. When he arrived, there had been unpleasantness, and he was sorry for this new boy. But he felt he could do nothing.

Lundy ambled leisurely down to the gates, his cap tilted over his eyes; while, in equally lounging attitudes, his companions followed.

They reached the gates. It was a splendid afternoon. The sun shone down upon the quadrangle, and the huge elm-trees threw long shadows. Everywhere was hot, and the Aristocrats leaned against the gates.

Some fellows were playing on the cricket-field.

"Hope he won't be long!" yawned Luke Bradshaw.

Simon peered out of the gate, then started, as his face went red.

"My hat!" he exclaimed.

The others looked at him in amazement. Then turned their glance towards the gateway. There stood Tom Mace, his parcel under his arm, looking awkwardly about him.

His face went rather red, as the Aristocrats turned cold stares upon him. He realised at once, what he had not before—in every way these were fellows different from him.

He looked at their clothes. Then he glanced at his own darned coat. The holes that his mother's loving hands had darned the night before assumed a new prominence. And as these realisations soaked into his brain, he turned a deeper crimson.

Simon Lundy was eyeing him, mouth open. Simon had never connected the new boy with Tom Mace—Tom, the grocer's assistant! The name of the scholarship lad had never interested him. But he knew.

"You——" he gasped.

Tom Mace, with a rather forced smile on his face, advanced.

"You—you remember me!" he stammered. "I'm Tom Mace. You—you're Simon Lundy, aren't you?"

Simon turned red, and stared at the outstretched hand.

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

Luke Bradshaw, his mouth open, gave a gasp. The other Aristocrats stared in amazement at the new boy and their leader. The contrast beween the two was remarkable and obvious. Simon's clothes, spotless, without crease, and of perfect cut, made him the mould of fashion at Millford. His trousers were always well creased, and he was a known faddist where dress was concerned.

Now he was faced with this new boy, with a darned coat and baggy, shabby trousers. And the boy knew him by name.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Luke Bradshaw, for the second time. "A pal of yours, dear boy!"

"What—what do you mean?" stammered Simon uncomfortably. "I don't know him!"

He stared almost through the new boy, and Tom dropped his hand. He looked from one to the other of the Aristocrats. Most of them were grinning, and Lionel Garnet sniggered, and pointed to a darned place in the sleeve of Tom's poor coat.

"Oh, my only aunt!" gasped Lionel. "Look what's come to Millford. "Oh, look at the darns!"

"I—I—I——"

He looked at Simon again. He could not believe that Simon had cut him. Perhaps the fellow did not remember him.

"I say," said Tom, turning once more to the snob of the Fourth, "don't you remember me? I used to bring the groceries——"

"What?" shrieked Bradshaw.

And there was a perfect roar of mirth. Several fellows from the other Form had drifted up.

"He—he used to deliver the groceries!" yelled Garnet, amidst a roar of laughter.

Tom Mace stared round him, scared at this reception.

"I did," he repeated. "Mr. Lundy—I mean, Simon Lundy——"

"Mr. Lundy! He—he calls Simon, 'Mister'!" sobbed Bradshaw, convulsed with laughter.

The crowd began to see the joke, and laughed with him.

"Oh, you funny chap!" chuckled Garnet.

Simon Lundy, with a pink spot in either cheek, was gazing wrathfully upon the unfortunate Tom.

"What the dickens do you mean?" he demanded. "Suppose you did deliver our groceries. Do you think that entitles you to my friendship?"

(This Gripping New Serial will be continued in Next Week's Splendid Issue of the "Gem." Order Early.)

THE PLOT AGAINST ST. JIM'S

A Grand Long Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Tom Merry's News!

CRASH!

It was Tom Merry, captain of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, who caused the trouble.

He came rushing into his study, where Manners and Lowther, who shared the room with him, were cleaning up after a "friendly" visit from George Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, their rivals of the New House.

The table was pushed nearer the door than was usual, and upon the table rested many articles which Figgins & Co. had strewn about the place. Books, ink-pots, fire-irons, jars, and ginger-pop bottles had been carefully placed upon the table by Manners and Lowther preparatory to their cleaning up the floor.

But the fates decided that the articles upon the table should not stop there, for Tom Merry, who had been out, came rushing into the study, collided with the table, and sent it flying with its contents to the floor.

Crash!

"Ow! Yoop!" gasped the luckless hero of the Shell. "Ow! You burbling dummies! What on earth do you want to put a table in front of a giddy door for—you fatheaded chumps!"

Manners and Lowther glared. Their feelings were too deep for words.

"Now look what you've done!" roared Tom Merry. "All the blessed ink's over the blessed carpet, you—you——"

"You—you—ass!" howled Manners. "We didn't do it, you burbling jabberwock! You did it!"

"Rats!"

"By Jove, if that's not adding insult to injury!" exclaimed the exasperated Lowther. "Collar the fathead, Manners!"

Manners did not speak—he acted! The incensed juniors rushed at Tom Merry, and in a moment he was being whirled round the study. Of course, they stumbled over books and ink in the process, but that didn't matter. Monty Lowther's foot banged upon a small puddle of ink, lifted, and then crashed upon Tom Merry's prep. That, also, from Monty Lowther's point of view, was of no account.

"Leggo, you—— Ow!" roared Tom Merry. "You chumps—lemme go—I've got news!"

"You'll want something new before we finish with you!" panted Monty Lowther. "Bump him, Manners!"

"What-ho!" gasped Manners.

It was no easy matter to bump the stalwart leader of the Shell, but Monty Lowther and Manners managed it at last. And by the time they had bumped Tom Merry three times upon the floor—right in that same puddle of ink—Manners and Lowther were showing almost the same amount of distress as their leader.

Tom Merry, panting with wrath, sat up on the floor and glared.

"You idiots!" he gasped. "Oh dear! I'm sitting in the beastly ink!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cackle, you dummies—like blessed hyenas!" growled Tom Merry, as he leapt to his feet. "Oh, my hat!"

He felt that portion of his trousers stained by the ink, and his hand came away black and wet. Monty Lowther and Manners seemed to think it funky, for they laughed until the tears rolled down their cheeks.

For a moment Tom Merry stood glaring at them furiously, then he, too, acted.

With a bound, his ink-stained hand shot out twice in rapid succession, and there came the sound of two distinct smacks, followed immediately by two still more distinct yells.

"You chump!" howled Manners.

"You fathead!" roared Monty Lowther.

It was Tom Merry's turn to laugh, and he did so right heartily. He had just smacked the faces of his chums, and their cheeks bore the imprint of his inky fingers.

"Think yourself lucky I didn't biff your chins, you dummies!" he said.

From the expressions on the juniors' faces, they would much rather have suffered a "biff" on the chin than have that uncomfortable, inky feeling on their cheeks.

"Of all the silly dummies," said Manners angrily, "commend me to Tom Merry!"

"Blessed if I can find words to express myself!" panted Manners. "I wish Knox—— Oh, you chump!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"And now you fatheaded idiots have calmed down a bit," he said, "I'll go and tell Jack Blake & Co. the news while you clear up."

Monty Lowther ran quickly to the door, closed it, and turned the key in the lock.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, ass!" he said politely. "You'll stop and help clear up Figgy & Co.'s mess!"

Tom Merry stared.

"Figgy & Co.? What the dickens are you talking about?" he demanded.

"They wrecked the study!" snorted Manners. "They were three to we two——"

"Then why on earth didn't you tell me when I came in?" asked Tom Merry.

Manners and Lowther glared.

"You didn't give us much chance, you fathead!" said Monty Lowther. "You come barging in here like—like a bull in a blessed china-shop—knock the blessed table over—upset all the clearing up we had done, and then—then ask why we didn't tell you about Figgy & Co. when you came in! Oh, you're a bigger chump than I thought you were!"

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry, with a laugh.

Then he became suddenly grave. His face, usually cheerful to look upon, assumed an expression of dismay.

"Chaps," he said solemnly. "I've rotten news!"

"Eh?"

"Rotten news!" repeated Tom Merry. "In fact, I think we'd better get the study to rights, and then fetch in Blake & Co. I'll give you the news then. It's about the most serious thing I've heard, and I might say there's a shock in store for the whole school—juniors and seniors, Dr. Holmes and the masters!"

Manners and Lowther forgot all about their resentment in their curiosity to know the news. Tom Merry would not be so serious unless something very much out of the way had happened.

"Too long to tell us first?" asked Manners quietly.

"Much!" answered Tom Merry briefly. "Let's get the work done, you chaps, and we'll send for Blake & Co."

It took the juniors, who worked in absolute silence, nearly half an hour to clean up the study. Figgins & Co. had done their work well—from their point of view. In different circumstances, Tom Merry & Co. would probably have left their study in its wrecked condition whilst they went over to the New House to interview Figgins & Co.

But Tom Merry's suggestion of the serious news he had to impart knocked all thoughts of retaliation out of their minds. Their one object was to get the study in some kind of order.

It was done at last, and Manners left the study to fetch Blake & Co. Blake, D'Arcy, Herries and Digby were Fourth-Formers at St. Jim's, but they were friendly rivals and firm chums of the Shell Co. For that matter, there existed a very warm friendship between Figgins & Co. of the New House and Tom Merry & Co., despite the frequency of study raids and rags.

It was not long before Manners returned with Blake.

"Hear you've got something to tell us, Tommy!" said

Blake. "Glad you know for whom to send when you want advice——"

"Don't rot, there's a good chap!" said Tom Merry seriously. "The news won't please you any more than it did me."

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy! I sincerely hope that nothin' has happened in the family, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy quickly. "I wegard family mattahs——"

"We're all in the family here, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "It's a family matter, sure enough—with St. Jim's as the family!"

"Bai Jove!"

"My hat!"

"Get it off your chest, Tommy," said Blake, seating himself in the most comfortable chair in the study. "We're all ears!"

"You look it!" murmured Monty Lowther, who had some reputation as a humorist.

But Tom Merry was not in a mood to listen to Lowther's humorous sayings at that moment, and as Jack Blake rose from his chair to discuss the matter of ears with Lowther, Tom gently pushed him back again.

"If we have any more of Monty's rotten jokes, chaps," said Tom Merry, "he'll go out of the study on his neck!"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy! I quite agwee with that method of pwocedure! Montay makes wotten jokes at the best of times!"

"Look here, you Fourth Form chumps——" began Lowther wrathfully. "I'll——"

"You'll shut up, ass!" roared Tom Merry. "This is a serious meeting, not a giddy pantomime!"

And Monty Lowther, in the face of the numerous hostile glances, shut up.

"Now, you chaps will know that I went to Wayland to buy some new flannels this afternoon——"

"Don't tell us you haven't got them!" interrupted Digby.

"Shut up!" roared Tom Merry. "Let me do all the talking now. Gussy generally does that, but for once I'm going to do it."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, if you mean to——"

"Rats! I——"

"Bai Jove, if you 'wats' to me——"

"Shut up!" roared the juniors in unison.

And D'Arcy, following the example set by Monty Lowther, shut up. But his aristocratic nose was thrust very high in the air, and his whole bearing was one of contemptuous indignation as he sat back in his chair.

"Well, I called in the hotel for tea—I did my prep before I went out—and whilst there I had to listen to a conversation between two stuffy-looking fossils. They were talking about St. Jim's, law courts, barristers, K.C.'s, and all the rest of it, and I don't mind admitting that I was interested. To boil the conversation down, chaps, I've learned that St. Jim's is going to be shut up!"

"Shut up?"

"S-s-s-shut up!"

For a moment there was silence in the study—a deep, impressive silence. Then Monty Lowther burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry turned round, his face flushed and angry.

"Laugh on, you dummy!" he said sarcastically. "I suppose you don't care a snap of your fingers if St. Jim's closes down, and we all get sent to different schools?"

"Eh?"

"You heard what I said!"

"You're—you're joking, aren't you, Tommy?" demanded Monty.

"Joking be jiggered!" snapped Tom Merry. "It's only too true!"

And again there was silence utter and complete in Tom Merry's study. The juniors were too flabbergasted to do anything but stare.

CHAPTER 2.
The News Spreads!

"BAI Jove!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who broke the silence. He sat bolt upright in his chair, his monocle gleaming, and his mouth wide open in his astonishment.

"You are not wottin', Tom Mewwy?" he demanded.

"Do I look as if I was, fathead?"

D'Arcy passed over the latter part of Tom Merry's remark. It was not a time for taking any notice of opprobrious expressions.

"M-m-m-my hat!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "Do you mean to tell me, Tom Merry, that there's going to be a law action for the possession of St. Jim's?"

"Only if the proofs the two fossils are bringing here are contested," said Tom Merry. "I take it that the two fatheads I saw are solicitors, and that they are bringing proofs to the governors of St. Jim's that this place belongs to somebody of the name of Maurice-Egbert. He's selling it to a company, and the place is going to be turned into a jam factory!"

"What!"

"That's—that's sacrilege!" gasped Herries. "My hat, I'll turn Towser on to the rotters when they come!"

"And they'll turn Towser into jam!" snorted Monty Lowther. "You keep your rotten mongrel away from the jam-makers, Herries, my son, or you'll be upsetting the digestions of half Great Britain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't joke!" said Tom Merry, who had had longer time in which to let the full portent of the news sink into his mind. "I suppose you haven't made a mistake, Tommy?" asked Manners.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"None at all," he replied.

At that moment there came the rapid patter of feet in the passage, and the door of the study was flung violently open. Figgins & Co. stood in the doorway, their faces depicting surprise, wrath, and incredulity.

"No rags!" said Figgins hastily. "We've brought you news!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Jack Blake & Co. exchanged glances.

"Come inside, Figgy!" said Tom Merry.

Figgins & Co. came inside, and closed the door behind them.

"St. Jim's is going to be shut up——"

"Going to be turned into a jam factory——"

"We'll all have to go to some other school——"

Figgins & Co. all tried to speak at once, and as their voices were excited and loud, the noise was deafening.

"Shut up, Wynn! Let me speak!" said Figgins wrathfully.

"You needn't trouble!" broke in Tom Merry. "We know all about it. In fact, we've talked it over."

Figgins & Co. stared.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Figgy. "Why, it's only two minutes since Baggy Trimble heard the news!"

Baggy Trimble was a Fourth-Former to whom eavesdropping was no crime against decency. He was thus generally the first to know anything that was happening, or about to happen, at St. Jim's.

"He sold it to us for a piece of cake," said Fatty Wynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors. "So you've got to go without supper, I suppose?"

"Not so bad as that!" said Fatty Wynn, whose appetite was of the never-satisfied variety. "We've got——"

"Never mind what we've got, you cormorant!" interrupted Figgy. "It's the news we've come to talk about! Baggy swears it's right, Tom Merry!"

"It is!" said Tom, and he explained how he had first come to hear of the matter.

When he had finished, the dismay depicted upon the faces of the New House Co. was as acute as that of the School House juniors.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" said Kerr, the junior from Scotland. "I suppose the Head won't take everything for granted, will he?"

"Goodness knows!" said Tom Merry. "I suppose we'll have to wait and see what happens!"

"Couldn't we kidnap the giddy solicitors?" said Blake.

"Bai Jove, Blake," exclaimed D'Arcy approvingly, "I wegard that as a wippin' ideah! Hold them to wansom, and all that!"

"Rot!" said Kerr. "Don't talk out of the back of your neck!"

"And why shouldn't we?" demanded Blake warmly. "We'd save——"

"You'd save nothing!" said Kerr sharply. "These johnnies of whom Tom's been telling us are only acting for principals. If we want to do anything in the kidnapping line, we should have to kidnap the entire crowd of people interested. And how can we do that when we don't know who they are?"

"There you are, Gussy! Another of your floppy ideas gone into empty air!" said Blake remonstratively.

"Bai Jove! You wottah! You suggested it!" said D'Arcy indignantly.

"Well, don't say anything more about it!" growled Blake. "So we come back to solid ground and sit tight!" said Tom Merry practically. "Old Kerr's right! We'll have to wait and see what turns up! Did you say you'd some grub in stock, Figgy?"

"I didn't," said Figgins, with a chuckle. "But Fatty did! Come over and have a bite?"

"We will!" said Tom Merry & Co. heartily.

"And, since we're stony, Figgy, we don't mind accepting your kind invitation," said Blake, rising from his chair.

Figgins & Co. grinned. They hadn't invited Blake & Co., but whilst there was a bun in the cupboard, the School House chums were welcome to share in with it.

"If Fatty doesn't mind being satisfied with half a dozen sosses, two pies, four cakes, six bananas, a couple of jellies, and a plum-pudding, there should be enough for all of us!" said Figgins. "Come on over now!"

"Right you are!"

And the juniors left the study, and made their way downstairs. On the way they passed more than one group of juniors who were excitedly discussing something of great interest, and so it became evident that the news was spreading quickly.

Questions were hurled at the juniors from all sides.

"Heard the news?" asked Harry Noble.

"Yes—milk's cheaper!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's serious news, you fathead!" said Lumley-Lumley of the Fourth.

"We've heard it ages ago—before Baggy got hold of it!" said Tom Merry. "Come on, you fellows, or it'll be bedtime!"

And the three Co.'s made their way across the quad to the New House, where they soon had the supper spread. And, of course, there was but one topic of conversation—the transforming of St. Jim's into a jam factory.

Fatty Wynn, with his mouth full of pie, suggested that it was not so bad as it might have been. St. Jim's might have been turned into a private dwelling. A jam factory, he maintained, was far more useful.

A suggestion which nearly robbed Fatty Wynn of his remaining share of the feed!

CHAPTER 3.
Strange Visitors.

"I AM at your service, gentlemen!"

Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's, signed to his two visitors as he spoke, and they sat down.

They were both between thirty or thirty-five years of age—which hardly justified Tom Merry's reference to them as "old fossils." But there was that about them which made them appear older than they were—there was a heavy air of solemnity about their expressions.

Dr. Holmes could see at a glance that his visitors belonged to the legal profession, and, as they leisurely sat down, he wondered what they could be wanting.

"The matter about which we have come, sir," said one, "is, unfortunately, not of a pleasant nature."

"Oh!" said the Head, and raised his eyebrows slightly. "Perhaps you would first of all tell me who you are?"

"I am Mr. Sopton, and this gentleman is my partner, Mr. Anson," was the reply. "We are solicitors acting for Mr. Maurice-Egbert."

"Thank you!" said the Head. "And now the reason for your visit, please? I trust none of my scholars have been up to mischief?"

"It is a matter far more grave than that, sir," said Mr. Sopton, and his partner nodded. "In short, we have come to tell you, sir, that this land and the school is required by the rightful owner, Mr. Maurice-Egbert."

"What!"

The Head gasped out that one word. He was far too astonished to be polite.

"I repeat, sir——" began Mr. Sopton.

"Of course, this is a joke, sir?" queried the Head sternly. "I do not care for jokes of this——"

"Far from being a joke, sir, it is most serious. Mr. Maurice-Egbert has placed in our possession papers which have just been found in an old cabinet, which prove, beyond all shadow of doubt, that the land upon which St. James's School stands, and all that land surrounding it, belongs to him!"

"B-b-bless my soul!" stammered Dr. Holmes, utterly at a loss what to say in face of such a statement as Mr. Sopton had made.

"Mr. Maurice-Egbert has therefore instructed us, sir, as his solicitors, to interview you with a view to ascertaining how long it will be before he can take possession?"

Dr. Holmes' lips became set in one straight line.

"Of course, I am not quite satisfied that this claim is genuine—please do not misunderstand me, gentlemen! I mean, this Mr. Maurice-Egbert might—er—might be assuming a great deal."

Messrs. Sopton and Anson shook their heads very solemnly.

"There can be no doubt, sir," said Mr. Anson gravely. "I myself have taken the trouble to find out how long this school has been built—by whom—and for whom. The monks of St. James were hitherto given the credit for the building of this magnificent dwelling, but I will admit that the proofs speak of but one building, whereas I distinctly saw two as I came in."

"The New House," murmured Dr. Holmes. "That is the New House—it was built by the governors of the school. You will please excuse me, gentlemen. I should like the advice of one of my Housemasters."

Messrs. Sopton and Anson nodded, and leaned back in their chairs as the Head pressed a bell-push on his desk. The page answered the summons after a few moments' silence.

"Tell Mr. Railton I should like him to come here, please," said the Head, in that well-modulated tone which had endeared him to pupils and servants alike.

Toby disappeared, and neither of the men spoke until Mr. Railton, the School Housemaster, knocked upon the door and entered the Head's study.

"You sent for me, sir?" said Mr. Railton, glancing quickly at the two solicitors.

"Yes, Mr. Railton," replied the Head, and, in a few terse sentences, he made known to the Housemaster the object of the solicitor's visit.

Mr. Railton's face assumed an expression of incredulity before the Head had got half-way through his narrative, but before he had been told all, Mr. Railton's incredulity had given way to absolute amazement.

"Preposterous, sir!" he said warmly. "St. Jim's belongs to us—there is no private owner!"

"You are surely not doubting the sincerity of my visit, sir?" demanded Mr. Sopton, half-rising from his chair.

"N-n-no—not at all," said Mr. Railton hastily. "But what on earth does a man want a place like this for?"

"I believe it is the intention of Mr. Maurice-Egbert—our client—to turn it into a jam factory!" said Mr. Sopton.

"A j-j-jam factory!" stuttered Mr. Railton. "These noble walls—this magnificent, ancient structure to be turned from a seat of learning into a jam factory! Goodness gracious me! I never heard of anything so absurd in all my life!"

Messrs. Sopton and Anson frowned.

"Absurd or not, gentlemen," said Mr. Sopton angrily, "I have come here to inform you that proof of our client's right to this property will be laid, if disputed, before the highest court in the land! We require to know, sir, how soon you can evacuate the premises—the work of converting the school into a jam factory will necessarily be a long job, and our client wishes to get to work at the earliest possible moment."

For a moment the Head hesitated, and it was to be noted that his face had grown visibly pale and haggard in the last five minutes.

"You must give me time, gentlemen," he said, in a low voice.

"I think it would be better if I went back to town with these gentlemen, sir!" said Mr. Railton gravely. "I could then examine the proofs myself, and, if they are all in order, we shall at least save an enormous amount of money in law costs."

"An excellent suggestion, Mr. Railton," said Dr. Holmes, with a faint smile of gratification. "Please do as you suggest."

Mr. Railton nodded, and signed to Messrs. Sopton and Anson to follow him. The solicitors rose at once, and, bowing to the Head, passed out of the study on the heels of the Housemaster.

It was not unnatural that a crowd of juniors should have collected in the vicinity of the Head's study, for they had

On the mat outside Dr. Holmes' study stood Messrs. Sopton & Anson, solicitors. Mr. Railton's back was turned to them, and as Tom Merry looked along the corridor he saw the two grave-looking gentlemen clasp each other's hands in a fervent grip. (See page 10).

heard that two solicitors had gone into Dr. Holmes' room. And, knowing as they did the meaning of the visit, the juniors were probably just as anxious to know what was happening as the Head was himself.

Mr. Railton came out of the room first, and the juniors darted away in all directions. Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther dodged into the nearest study as soon as they heard the handle of the door being turned.

Mr. Railton passed them, and they noticed that his face was white and tense. Tom Merry poked his head round the corner of the door to see if the coast was clear, and was just in time to witness an extraordinary incident.

On the mat outside Dr. Holmes' study stood Messrs. Sopton and Anson, the solicitors. Mr. Railton's back was turned to them, and as Tom Merry looked along the corridor he saw the two grave-looking gentlemen clasp each other's hands in a fervent grip.

"Excellent!" muttered Mr. Sopton.

"Top-hole!" murmured Mr. Anson; and there was nothing grave about the manner in which he said that!

Then they, too, hurried down the corridor after Mr. Railton, and Tom Merry dodged back into the study to allow them to pass without noticing him.

CHAPTER 4.
Extraordinary!

"WELL, my hat!"

Tom Merry gasped out the words as he stared dully at his chums, Lowther and Manners. They stared, too, in astonishment.

"What's the matter?" asked Manners quickly.

"The blighters—they shook hands with all the buck one feels when one gets an extra-fat remittance!" said Tom Merry hotly. "They're gloating, my sons—gloating because St. Jim's is going to be turned into a jam-factory!"

"The rotters!"

"The heathens!"

Manners and Lowther were as furious as their leader now that they knew the reason for Tom Merry's expression of disgust.

"We'll go after them and rag the lives out of 'em!" said Monty Lowther. "It doesn't matter; if we've got to go, we can do what we like!"

"Yes, rather!" agreed Manners. "Come on, Tommy!"

"Hold on a minute, chaps!" said Tom Merry hastily. "Let's go down and see Blake & Co. Perhaps they'll help us think of something!"

And the Co. hurried downstairs to Study No. 6, which was occupied by Blake, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The Fourth Form Co. were there, and they looked round from the fire as the chums of the Shell entered.

"Pax!" said Tom Merry. "Listen a minute, you chaps. We saw the solicitors just now——"

"Nothing extraordinary in that!" said Blake quickly. "I saw them myself, just before they went into the Head's study."

"Ass!" snorted Tom Merry indignantly. "Shut up, and let a fellow speak!"

"Yaas, wathah, Blake! I wegard it as wank bad form to intewwupt a fellah when he's speakin'!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remonstratively.

"You'll regard my fist in your eye if you preach to me, dummy!" said Blake darkly.

"Weally, Blake, I should nttahly wefuse——"

"Shut up!" roared Lowther. "Can't you keep that funny ass under proper control, Jack Blake?"

"Bai Jove, Lowthah——"

"Go it, ye cripples!" groaned Tom Merry, sinking down into an armchair. "I'll wait until you've all finished jabbering!"

"What's the trouble, any old how?" asked Blake. "If our prize chump interrupts again, Tommy, we'll send for Towser!"

That threat was quite sufficient to cause D'Arcy to lapse into silence. Towser, Herries' famous bulldog, had an uncanny liking for trousers, and D'Arcy's in particular, and as the elegant Fourth-Former was "sporting" a new suit that morning, he had no desire to see Towser in the study. So he shut up.

"Now, what I came to tell you was this," said Tom Merry. "Just now we were waiting outside the Head's study, when the door opened——"

"And Railton came out," said Blake. "We saw him, and bunked!"

"So did we," went on Tom Merry. "But we only bunked as far as the nearest room. When Railton passed, I looked out of the study to see if the coast was clear. What do you think I saw?"

"Baggy Trimble listening at the keyhole?" asked Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha! For once, he wasn't!" said Lowther.

"No; I saw those two blessed goats of solicitors standing on the Head's doormat, shaking hands and bubbling over with joy!" said Tom, his voice rising angrily as he went on.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "The wank wottahs!"

"The—the pigs!" exclaimed Blake. "Here, I say, you chaps, it's time we taught those johnnies a lesson!"

"Exactly!" said Tom Merry. "That's what Lowther and Manners said. Now, shall we go out and waylay the rotters, and bump 'em good and hard?"

"What-ho!" said the other juniors heartily.

"Wait a bit, though," said Digby. "If they were joyful, there's reason to believe that it's a fact that St. Jim's is going to be turned into a jam-factory, isn't there?"

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"Then, as we shall all be leaving—I expect only Fatty Wynn will stop to make jam here," went on Digby—"it doesn't matter very much what we do, as we can't be expelled!"

"What on earth is the ass rumbling on about?" demanded Lowther, mystified.

"I've got a top-hole stunt, ass!" roared Digby. "I mean, if the chaps want to see this place turned into a jam-factory, why not give them some jam to go on with?"

The juniors stared at Digby as if they believed he had taken leave of his senses.

"If you think I'm going to make a present of a pot of jam to the dummies, you're talking through the back of your neck!" growled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!" said D'Arcy warmly. "I quite agwee with Blake, Digbay. You're talkin' wot!"

"There's more ways of giving a chap jam than inside a pot, you blithering chumps!" howled Digby indignantly. "Plaster 'em with it, you chumps! Bung it into their hair, you burbling fatheads!"

"Oh!"

The juniors understood at last, and grins spread over their lips.

"Not so bad for a Fourth-Former!" said Manners approvingly.

"Let Figgy & Co.," said Tom Merry, "and everybody hunt round for jam! We'll probably get it in the neck, but who cares?"

"Nobody!" roared the juniors.

"What about classes, deah boys?" murmured D'Arcy.

The juniors started. They hadn't thought of classes, the bell for which would soon be ringing.

"Oh, let the lessons go hang!" snapped Tom Merry recklessly. "If St. Jim's is going to be turned into a jam-factory in a few weeks, what's the good of swotting now?"

"None!" said Blake heartily. "Hustle round, you cripples, and get hold of some jam!"

And, whilst Tom Merry went over to fetch Figgins & Co., the other juniors bustled hither and thither in their efforts to get a good supply of jam.

The result was seen a few minutes later, when, just as the bell was ringing for classes, ten juniors hurried out of the gates on to the Wayland road, each one carrying at least two pots of jam.

"It's a wicked waste of good stuff!" said Fatty Wynn thoughtfully. "But the cause is a good one, so I don't mind!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suggest we jam it all over them!" said Lowther humorously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, Lowthah! I wegard that as wathah funnay!"

In five minutes Tom Merry called a halt. They had reached a corner in the road, and they were hidden from the sight of anybody coming from St. Jim's.

"Tuck your caps in your pockets, chaps!" said Tom Merry briskly. "We needn't make ourselves too conspicuous."

"I suppose the johnnies haven't gone, Tommy?" asked Kerr.

"No, they followed old Railton downstairs to his room. I expect he's talking to 'em gently—trying to persuade them to let St. Jim's remain a school, p'r'aps!" replied Tom Merry.

"Hush!"

Jack Blake uttered a warning as he heard the sound of footsteps coming along the road.

"Fling the jam at them as they come round the corner, chaps!" whispered Tom Merry. "Here they come!"

The hidden juniors could hear the two solicitors talking in grave tones as they approached the bend in the road. They waited in tense silence.

"Now!"

Tom Merry gave a shout as he caught sight of the two men, and in an instant the air was literally full of jam. It simply rained jam—jam came down in torrents upon the clothes, hats, and persons of Messrs. Sopton & Anson.

"What the—— Yow! Yoop!" howled Mr. Sopton.

"Groooogh!" gurgled Mr. Anson, as he turned just in time to receive half a pound of best strawberry jam in his face.

"Bless my soul!" came in far sterner tones. "Boys, come here!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"R-r-railton!"

"B-b-bai Jove!"

Twenty empty pots dropped to the ground with a clatter, and ten flushed and astonished juniors crept into the middle of the road.

Mr. Railton's expression was as black as thunder as he surveyed the juniors, but a smile was forced to his lips as he turned to look upon the jammy faces and clothes of the solicitors. They looked like two naughty little boys who had been busy at the larder!

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the Housemaster severely.

"Me-e-meaning, sir?" stuttered Tom Merry.

"Yow! Gug-gug!" howled Mr. Sopton. "The young beasts! I'll break their blessed necks!"

"Groogh! The skunks!" hissed Mr. Anson. "Sir, I'll bring an action for assault against these unruly young blackguards!"

Mr. Railton frowned. He did not like to hear his pupils addressed as blackguards.

"I will settle this matter, gentlemen!" he said sharply, turning upon Tom Merry. "You—as senior boy present—I demand an explanation!"

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders.

"They want to turn St. Jim's into a jam-factory, sir," he said. "We've given 'em some jam to start 'em off!"

"Ahem!" coughed Mr. Railton. "A most extraordinary proceeding. You ought to be in classes, as you are well aware. Return at once to St. Jim's. I will deal with you when I return!"

Messrs Sopton & Anson, however, were not content to see the juniors get away so easily.

"Cane the young brutes!" snarled Mr. Anson. "Isn't that right, Sopton?"

"Right and just!" said Sopton warmly. "Mr. Anson is correct, Mr. Railton!"

"It is neither usual nor necessary to cane juniors in the middle of a public road!" snapped Mr. Railton. "Go back at once, boys!"

"Look here——" began Anson hotly.

"Please do not dispute my authority!" interrupted Mr. Railton. "Hurry up, boys!" he commanded, pushing Tom Merry gently.

"Y-y-yes, sir!"

And Tom Merry & Co. and the other juniors turned and walked off in the direction of St. Jim's, leaving Mr. Railton to calm the ruffled feelings of the two solicitors. But Mr. Railton could not remove the jam from their persons—a fact for which there was general satisfaction amongst the juniors, who would be looking forward none too keenly to the return of Mr. Railton.

CHAPTER 5.
Kerr's Idea!

"ANYBODY at home?"

George Figgins, the leader of the New House juniors, asked that question as he put his head round the open door of Tom Merry's study the evening of the same day.

Tom Merry & Co. were doing their prep, but they looked up as Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn came in. Tom Merry's hand sidled towards an ebony ruler, and Manners' fingers closed gently over the inkpot. Monty Lowther's hands grasped a big lexicon.

And Figgins & Co. grinned.

"Pax," said Figgins. "We've come here to jaw!"

The inkpot, ruler, and lexicon were released as if their owners no longer needed them, and three chairs were pushed back from the table.

"Come in and make yourselves at home, then!" said Tom Merry hospitably.

In a few seconds the six juniors were comfortably seated, and Figgins turned to Tom Merry.

"Tommy," he said seriously. "You know Kerr has a bit of a funny napper——"

"Eh? Look here, Figgy——" began Kerr warmly.

"Rats! I mean, that the ass has a habit of taking two and two, and making four out of 'em!" said Figgy.

"Yes; he's a bit touched that way!" said Tom Merry.

"Look here, you funny asses——"

"Whoa-back, Angeline! I'm doing all the talking, Kerr, and——"

"And you'll never get to business!" snapped Kerr. "The point is this, you chaps. Did it strike you that the language those johnnies used this morning, when we chucked the jam at them, was hardly the kind one would expect solicitors to use?"

Tom Merry & Co. stared.

"Come to think of it, Kerr, it wasn't!" said Tom Merry at last.

"Rather not!" assented Lowther. "Called us skunks, or something equally as sweet!"

"And unruly young blackguards!" added Manners.

"And this morning," went on Tommy excitedly, "when they were outside the door of the Head's study, they said 'tophole!'"

"Which was hardly in keeping with their grave and austere manner," put in Kerr. "Well, my idea is that the whole business is a big swindle—a huge swindle!"

"Oh, come off it!" said Manners. "That's a little bit too thick!"

"Yes, chuck it, Kerr. You surely don't ask us to believe that——"

"I ask you to believe nothing!" said Kerr. "Figgy said you ought to know of my idea, as he seems to think Tom Merry has got a little more sense than most juniors——"

"Thanks, Figgy!" laughed Tom Merry, and Figgy grunted.

"At the same time, it strikes me mighty hard that it's dashed funny we should have two solicitors here, pretending to be what they aren't—they wouldn't use the language they did if they were old hands at the law game—and telling the beak that St. Jim's belongs to some client of theirs."

"Well, Railton's gone to London with them!" said Tom Merry. "I heard Baggy Trimble say that he'd heard the Head tell Mr. Lathom so."

"Well, Railton's evidently gone to see the proofs!" said Kerr. "We'll see what turns up!"

For that matter, the juniors had not to wait long, for, before they went to bed that night, Baggy Trimble had secured information to the effect that Mr. Railton had wired the Head that the proofs were indisputable.

St. Jim's was going to be turned into a jam factory!

Once again the New House juniors were summoned to Tom Merry's study, and an invitation was also sent to Blake & Co. to attend "a conference." Needless to say, Blake & Co. turned up.

"We've about four minutes before we get turned out for bed," said Tom Merry, as he closed the door behind the last of his visitors. "Manners and Lowther agree with me that old Kerr is right in saying there's more in this business than meets the eye. There's nothing funny in there being a claimant to St. Jim's—but it's funny when two fossil-eyed, coarse-speaking solicitors come along and start swearing because they get a little jam chucked at them!"

"That's right enough!" said Kerr.

"Then I'm proposing that to-night Kerr and I do a bunk to London and see what we can find out!" said Tom Merry.

"My hat!"

"You'll get sacked, man!"

"Rats!" said Kerr. "That's a ripping stunt, Tommy! I'm just the bean to help you, too!"

"What-ho!" said Figgins and Fatty Wynn.

"But—but, bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, you are fairly askin' for twouble!" expostulated D'Arcy. "You'd bettah take me. What you want is a fellah of tact and judgment!"

"That's why I'm taking Kerr!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, if you mean to——"

"B-r-r-r-r!"

As the day wore on Tom Merry and Kerr took it in turns to watch at the door, so that they might know when their chums were coming to their rescue. Suddenly, whilst Tom was gazing out to sea, he spotted a motor boat making for their direction. "Here they come, Kerr!" he shouted eagerly. *(See page 15.)*

"Besides, it was Kerr's idea that there was something wrong in the first place!" said Figgins. "You chaps haven't got much to fear, at any rate. If the school is to be shut down, you'll get sacked in any case! May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!"

"Or a chump as an ass!" said Lowther.

"Rats! To-night, then——"

"Bed, you kids!"

Kildare, the genial captain of St. Jim's, opened the door and made that remark. He looked suspiciously at the juniors as he noticed the unusual number that was gathered there, but they looked back at him the very picture of innocence.

"No larks, mind!" said Kildare.

"Say, Kildare, what are you going to do when St. Jim's is turned into a jam factory?" asked Monty Lowther. "Are you going to paste labels instead of fags?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Get to bed!" laughed Kildare good-humouredly.

And the juniors trooped off to bed. At the top of the stairs, Tom Merry paused to whisper a few words to Kerr before going up to the dormitory, and Figgins and Wynn waited for their chum.

Then Tom Merry went up to the Shell dormitory, where he proceeded to undress as usual. There was nothing about Tom Merry to show that, in a few short minutes, he contemplated running to London.

Five minutes after the juniors had entered the dormitory, the door opened, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy appeared. For a moment, by the number of pillows that were raised, it looked as if Gussy was going to meet with a warm reception; but he held up his hand.

"Excuse me, deah boys," he said quietly. "I want to speak to Tom Mewwy for a moment!"

"Coming, kid!" sang out Tom Merry.

He thought at once that D'Arcy had come to beg to be taken to London; but he soon found out his mistake. For when he reached the door, where D'Arcy was waiting, he was gently but firmly pulled into the corridor.

"I thought, Tom Mewwy, that you might want a bit of cash, deah boy," said Gussy hurriedly. "I had a fivah fwom the patah this mornin', and Blake and Hewwies and Digbay agwee that we ought to put our whack towards your expenses, Pway take this, deah boy!"

And, before Tom Merry could quite understand what D'Arcy meant, he felt a crisp piece of paper thrust into his hand, and D'Arcy was gone.

For a moment Tom Merry stared after the Fourth-Former's retreating form, then a faint grin overspread his lips.

"Thanks!" he called out, and his heart warmed towards the kind-hearted and generous junior.

Two minutes later, and Knox came in to turn out the lights, and without a word of warning, he banged down the switch, leaving Tom Merry to get into bed in the darkness.

But Tom Merry did not get into bed. He got on to the bed, covered himself with a single blanket, and waited.

Two dark forms loomed up, and knelt beside the bed.

"Tommy!"

"Hallo!"

"You'll let us know what happens?"

"Of course, Monty!"

"Give us your fist, then, kid!"

And Tom Merry shook hands with Manners and Monty Lowther.

"If we prove that Kerr's right, chaps, and we're up against some dandy popgun merchants, we'll send a wire for you!" whispered Tom Merry. "We'll give the jam-makers something to think about!"

"Come on, then!" murmured Manners. "We're going to see you out as far as the gates!"

"Got to pack my bag yet!" said Tom Merry, in a low voice. "We don't know how long we'll be away! Gussy brought me a fiver from the Co. to help with the exes."

"Good old Gussy!" whispered Lowther. "Jump up, Tommy!"

Tom Merry crept out of bed, and the three juniors knelt on the floor whilst they packed the bag. Five minutes later they went on tiptoe from the dormitory, down the corridor, and out of the window on the stairs by the quad.

Across the quad they caught a glimpse of three shadowy figures, and they knew that Figgins and Wynn had come to see Kerr off. They all met at the corner of the quad farthest from the gates, where a short pause was called in the proceedings.

"Mind, you chaps, one sign of the enemy being too much for you, send for us!" said Manners. "We'll all come—and hang what follows!"

"Right!" said Tom Merry and Kerr.

Hands were shaken all round, and the two emissaries from St. Jim's were "bunked" up upon the top of the wall.

"Cheerio, and good luck!"

"Cheerio, boys!"

And Tom Merry and Kerr dropped into the road, called a soft "good-bye" to the juniors on the other side, and set out side by side along the road to the station.

"We're in for it now!" said Tom Merry lightly.

"Yes; and what's going to be the end of it?" asked Kerr quietly.

Tom Merry did not reply. He could not foretell what was going to happen.

And it was perhaps as well that that was denied them, or they might have turned back to gather Manners, Lowther, Blake & Co. and Figgins and Wynn into the quest.

CHAPTER 6.
London!

"LONDON!"

A porter called the name sleepily, for it was still early morning. But if the porter was sleepy, Tom Merry and Kerr, passengers on the slow night mail from Wayland Junction, were far from being in that state.

Keenness had kept them awake the whole night. Keenness to go through with the quest they had set themselves—finding out the meaning of the strange solicitors' visit to St. Jim's. They had secured a compartment to themselves, and so had been able to converse freely.

And while the train had rumbled slowly towards the great terminus, they had discussed their plans for the future. By the time the sleepy porter called the name of the greatest city in the world, Tom Merry and Kerr had made up their minds what to do.

Kerr had come on the journey with plenty of money—Figgins and Wynn, back at St. Jim's, were in a state known as "stony." Tom Merry had Gussy's fiver and the small change of Manners and Lowther. Between them they had over eleven pounds—sufficient to tide them over the first few days.

They got out of the train, and made their way to the restaurant, where they set about an early but substantial breakfast. They did not mention their business—as Kerr said, the least said about it the better it would be for them. Even walls had ears.

Breakfast over, they made for the nearest swimming-baths, where they changed into clothes they had brought with them—well-fitting lounge suits borrowed from the "props" of the St. Jim's Junior Dramatic Society.

Once more out in the open streets, they found it was nearly nine o'clock. And by that time London business life was in full swing. A policeman on point duty in Victoria Street directed them at their request to the nearest library.

And there they commenced the search for the address of Messrs. Sopton & Anson. It did not take them long, for under the heading of "Solicitors" they found an inked-in name and address which they sought.

"Ahem!" muttered Tom Merry thoughtfully. "Evidently Soppy and Ann are new to the game—at least, as far as London is concerned. The address is not even printed—it's written in."

"Proves that the librarian here is awake!" said Kerr approvingly. "Jot down the address, Tommy!"

Tom Merry wrote the address in his pocket-book, and the chums left the building to make their way to Gray's Inn Road, where Messrs. Sopton & Anson had their offices, if the directory could be believed.

It was half-past nine when they got off the omnibus at the Holborn end of the road, and it took them just ten minutes to find the offices of the solicitors. They paused outside, and looked at one another.

"Now for the bizz!" said Tom Merry. "I hope the beggars don't recognise me, Kerr!"

"They were covered with jam when they last saw you!" said Kerr, with a chuckle. "You look different now—jam for eyeglasses is a bit deceiving, you know!"

Tom Merry laughed, and nodded.

"Well, here goes!" he said. "If I'm not out in twenty minutes, Kerr, you'll know I've got a job with Soppy Ann!"

"Soppy Ann" was the name given to the firm Tom Merry hoped to serve. Probably he would have still gone on hoping had Messrs. Sopton and Anson heard that reference to themselves.

Tom Merry mounted a short flight of stairs, and knocked upon a door labelled with the name of the two solicitors. He was commanded to enter, and he did so quickly, with his head held high and his shoulders thrust back.

Mr. Sopton was seated at a desk in a far corner of a somewhat dingy office, and by his side sat Mr. Anson. The office furniture consisted of the desk, three chairs, and a small table upon which stood a soiled and much-worn typewriter. There was no carpet covering the floor, and no pictures on the walls. In Tom Merry's estimation, the office was as dingy-looking as its occupants.

Tom Merry removed his cap, and stood still, politely waiting for one of the solicitors to speak.

"What do you want?" asked Anson gruffly.

"Do you require any help, sir?" asked Tom briskly. "I'm looking for a job in an office of this nature."

Anson looked quickly at his partner, and Tom thought that they had probably been discussing the possibility of getting help.

"What school were you at?" demanded Sopton.

Tom flushed slightly.

"Ahem! I—I—I ran away from school, sir!" he admitted.

Again glances passed between the two solicitors.

"You're honest?" asked Anson.

"Quite, sir," said Tom Merry blandly.

"Can you type?" asked Sopton.

"Yes, sir," said Tom, but he did not think it necessary to tell them that the only typing he ever did was in connection with "Tom Merry's Weekly."

"When could you start?" queried Sopton.

"Now, sir!" replied Tom.

"Wait outside—what's your name?"

"Tom Merry."

Anson nodded, and Tom Merry turned on his heel and left the office. He ran quickly down the stairs, and found Kerr waiting on the pavement.

"Good as got it!" he said hurriedly. "Told them I'd run away from school—they liked it! So-long!"

Tom returned to the door of the office just in time to hear his name called, and he again entered into the presence of the solicitors.

"You understand, of course, that ours is a business where you must keep your mouth shut?" said Sopton.

"Of course, sir!"

"Can you keep your mouth shut?"

"Whenever it's necessary, sir, I'm as close as—as an oyster!" said Tom eagerly.

"Well, you're engaged. Two pounds a week to start with, and if we decide at any time to move our office, we'll probably give you a small sum to tide you over until you find fresh employment!" said Sopton.

"Thank you, sir!" said Tom Merry, and if Sopton thought the gleam in his eyes was the sign of eagerness he was sadly mistaken.

Tom Merry was certainly eager. But the gleam that came into his eyes was satisfaction. He knew at once that Sopton had as good as told him that theirs was but a temporary business. And since the profession is one which takes years to build up, why had Sopton signified the likelihood of this one being moved before long?

Tom Merry knew the answer, and so did Kerr. But Messrs. Sopton and Anson certainly did not suspect that he knew.

"What shall I start on, sir?" asked Tom briskly, as he took off his coat and hung it over the chair by the typewriter.

"We're engaged upon a case of great magnitude," explained Sopton. "All these written notes are to be typed out and sent to Mr. Maurice-Egbert, 142F, The Strand. Get busy!"

Tom Merry got busy, and he worked unceasingly until one o'clock, when he suggested he might be allowed to go to lunch. Permission was given him, and Tom hurried down the stairs to the street.

He saw Kerr walking on the opposite side of the road, but he did not cross over. He walked towards Holborn, and Kerr followed him until the great thoroughfare was reached. Then he joined Tom Merry, and they hurried to a small restaurant and ordered lunch.

"Well?" said Kerr, speaking for the first time.

"You were right," said Tom, in a low voice. "I've been typing notes all day, and amongst them was a report of Maurice-Egbert, of 142F, The Strand, telling him how things are going. Railton's conversation is there, practically word for word. Evidently one or the other of the two solicitors was hidden, and took down all that was said, in shorthand. Maurice-Egbert, I take it, is the principal—the claimant to St. Jim's."

"Then I'll go and get a job with him, if I can!" said Kerr. "If not, I'll watch the place all day until he leaves. I've found apartments—clean and comfortable, but not luxurious—in Gray's Inn Road. I'll meet you when you've done to-day, and take you there. Here's lunch!"

During the meal, the chums talked of anything but the business in hand, for the shop filled up rapidly, and other men shared their table. It was unsafe to speak even in whispers.

After lunch, they walked back to the corner of Gray's Inn Road, where they parted. Tom made his way to the office of Messrs. Sopton and Anson, and Kerr stepped out quickly for the Kingsway, down which he went to the Strand.

He found Mr. Maurice-Egbert had a small office at the address Tom had given him, but it was the most luxuriously furnished room Kerr had ever seen. The carpets alone must have cost a small fortune, and Kerr knew as soon as he sank into the soft fleecy material that his chance of a job there was very remote.

Mr. Maurice-Egbert, a flashily-dressed man, with close-set, steely eyes, thin face, and small military moustache, followed Kerr into the office almost before the junior had had time to look round.

"Well, young man, and what can I do for you?" asked Mr. Maurice-Egbert, as he seated himself at a desk.

"I'm looking for work, sir, and thought, perhaps, you might have some job for me!" said Kerr.

"Oh! Excuse me a minute. I have to telephone my solicitors!" went on the man.

And Kerr could hardly restrain a start as he listened whilst Mr. Maurice-Egbert peremptorily told Messrs. Sopton and Anson to send round the reports by special messenger in a taxi forthwith. Tom Merry would bring them!

CHAPTER 7.
Trapped!

"NOW I can attend to you!"

Kerr was brought back to earth as Mr. Maurice-Egbert banged down the telephone-receiver on its hook and spoke.

"Yes, sir!" he murmured.

For the next ten minutes Kerr had questions hurled at him in rapid succession by Mr. Maurice-Egbert.

Then suddenly the door opened, and Tom Merry appeared, a big envelope in his hand. Kerr glanced towards his chum, but Tom Merry stared back unflinchingly. They might never have met for all the recognition expressed in his face.

Mr. Maurice-Egbert smiled a little grimly, and held out his hand for Tom's envelope. Neither of the juniors saw him press a small button on his desk, or heard the slight click which came from the door.

"Thank you!" said Mr. Maurice-Egbert politely. "Sit down—and you, too, please!"

Kerr sat down upon one chair, and Tom selected one nearer the door.

"You two fellows are dashed fine actors!" went on the man calmly. "Anybody would think you had never met before!"

"M-my hat!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Tom Merry and Kerr leapt to their feet, but Mr. Maurice-Egbert never moved his fingers from the envelope which Tom had brought.

"I saw you two boys in Holborn, chatting together. I had been to Messrs. Sopton & Anson; I learned there of their new employee," he said calmly. "I followed you"—he indicated Kerr—"here, so I thought I would bring you together. Now, perhaps, you'll be good enough to explain to me this little game?"

Tom Merry stared blankly at Kerr. Had they made a mistake? Certainly, there could be nobody more polite than was Mr. Maurice-Egbert.

Gasping for breath, Kerr dragged himself to his feet and staggered to the door of the burning hut. He felt and found the handle, and turned it. But the door did not open. It was locked on the outside. "Oh, heavens!" panted Kerr, choking with the fumes and smoke. "Tom!" Tom Merry did not reply. He lay unconscious. **(See page 16).**

"We're from St. Jim's," explained Tom Merry, after a moment's hesitation. "We suspected that Soppy Ann—I mean, Sopton & Anson, were not genuine solicitors, and deduced that the claim being put forward for St. Jim's was a bare-faced swindle. We came to see!"

A shade of annoyance passed over Mr. Maurice-Egbert's features.

"And what made you suspect that Messrs. Sopton & Anson were not genuine solicitors?" he asked quickly.

Tom told him, and regretted a moment afterwards that he had. For Mr. Maurice-Egbert's face assumed an expression that was far from pleasant to see.

"You fools!" he snarled. "Did you think that two asses of schoolboys could beat a man of my experience?"

Tom Merry's lips tightened.

"We will yet!" he said, and sprang for the door. Kerr jumped after him, and crashed into his chum at the door.

For, though Tom Merry turned the handle and pulled, the door held fast!

"Bigger fools still!" snapped the man, who had not budged from his chair. "I locked that door immediately Merry entered. I don't go after property worth half a million without taking due precautions. You'd have done far more good if you had kept your noses out of this business!"

Tom Merry and Kerr stood still. They could not think what to do. They were prisoners. They had walked calmly into the trap laid for them. And they bit their lips in rage and helplessness.

"Now, I've got to keep you idiots until the business is settled!" said Maurice-Egbert angrily. "You fools! I've a good mind to put you out altogether!"

Kerr laughed grimly.

"You won't—you daren't!" he said.

"Why not?"

"They hang men for that!"

Maurice-Egbert bit his lip at the cool insolence in Kerr's tones.

"I'll have you taken to a nice little spot in the country," he said, as calmly as he could. "And there you will stop until I have had time to turn your school into a jam factory and sold it as a going concern. I should say that would take me at least four months, for your silly old fool of a headmaster and the governors might yet contest the proofs I have forged for their benefit. In four months' time, I and Soppy Ann, as you humorously called my partners, will be well out of the country! Bah! You're fools!"

"Perhaps not quite so big fools as we look!" said Kerr

Tom Merry started at the meaning in the Scotch junior's tones, and his heart beat high with hope. Kerr was probably the cutest junior at St. Jim's, and Tom Merry knew that, like as not, he had even now made some arrangements to act in any emergency.

"You fellows have the option of giving me your word of honour not to attempt to escape whilst being conveyed to your destination, or of being drugged into insensibility," said Maurice-Egbert, ignoring Kerr's remark. "Which is it to be?"

"We promise!" said Kerr. "If we're caught—well, I suppose we're finished!"

Maurice-Egbert nodded.

"Sensible lad!" he said. "I tell you straight out that I don't want to be rough. I was at a public school once myself. I was chucked out, and have been spurned ever since. I'm getting my own back now. I admire you for what you've done—though you've done it dashed badly!"

Had the man known the two juniors, it is to be doubted if he would have taken their acceptance of their defeat so lightly. He was up against two of the sturdiest juniors at St. Jim's—Tom Merry, the strong, resolute, fearless leader of the Shell, and Kerr, the quietest, most cunning member of the New House. As a combination they were hard to beat—as Maurice-Egbert was to find to his cost.

Tom Merry and Kerr were conducted to a small room at the back of the office, and there they stopped until Messrs. Sopton & Anson came for them at eight o'clock. The solicitors, as they called themselves, no longer made effort to assume the grave manner characteristic to the lawyer.

"You wait until you get down at the cabin!" snarled Anson. "We'll give you chuck jam at us!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Kerr. "You did look a pair of guys, didn't you?"

"What-ho!" said Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "I should think you two have had enough jam to last you for months!"

"And you'll get enough of us to last you a lifetime!" said Sopton darkly. "It's a jolly good job for you that you gave your words of honour not to try to escape. I'd have given something for a chance to biff you over the head!"

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry. "With such nice, amiable chaps for company, we're assured of a pleasant journey!"

"We are—we is!" chuckled Kerr. "But, mind you, we're not saying you won't get a chance to do the biffing stunt when we get down at the cabin! We might take it into our nappers to do a bunk, you know!"

Anson and Sopton laughed.

"Anybody is welcome to run away from Bigshott!" said Anson. "It's an island, kids!"

"Oh, my hat!" cried Tom Merry, in dismay. "That's properly put the lid on it, Kerr!"

"Get your hats on!" commanded Anson. "We've got a train to catch!"

Tom Merry and Kerr obeyed, and half an hour later they were seated in a train which was to take them to Cornwall. It was a long, tiring journey, and Anson and Sopton, not content with the promises given them by the juniors, took it in turns to sleep during the journey.

To refrain from nodding during a long journey is a very difficult matter. Anson found it so, and that was the chance for which Kerr was looking. As Anson's head sank upon his breast, the New House junior snatched a piece of paper from his pocket, quickly wrote a message, wrapped a few coins in it, and tossed it out of the carriage-window just as Anson woke with a jerk.

He looked suspiciously at the junior.

"What are you up to?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" answered Kerr. "In fact, I am just going to sleep!"

And he closed his eyes, and composed himself for sleep. Anson watched him for a few minutes, evidently still half suspicious. But Kerr was soon fast asleep, and, with a grunt, Anson decided to follow suit.

CHAPTER 8.

The Rescue-Party!

"ANY news, Monty?"

Manners asked that question in anxious tones as Monty Lowther came into the study after breakfast on the Saturday morning following Tom Merry's departure for London.

Monty shook his head.

"No," he said glumly. "I hope the silly asses are all right!"

"Trust Tommy!" said Manners hopefully. "He can look after himself!"

"Any news, deah boys?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy entered the study as he asked that question, and his chums, Blake, Herries, and Digby, followed him a moment later.

"None whatever," answered Manners. "Monty's just been down to the Hall to see if there are any letters. I—I—I suppose they've not been collared, or run over, or something?"

"Oh, you chump!" snorted Lowther. "You just told me to trust Tommy, and now you go and cackle about accidents!"

"Yaas, I wegard that as wathah widic, Mannahs!" said D'Arcy. "If Tom Mewwy had been killed, he would have let us—ahem——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Gussy! Talking out of the back of his neck, as usual!"

"Weally, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus angrily. "You know perfectly well what I was goin' to say! Pway stop that wibald laughtah, deah boys, or I shall have no wesource but to administah a feahful thwashin' all wound!"

"Rats! You couldn't thrash a paralysed ant!" snorted Monty Lowther.

"Oh, weally, Lowthah! Pway hold my coat, Blake, deah boy——"

"Do you usually quarrel with a chap in his own study, Gussy?" asked Manners slily.

"Oh! Bai Jove! I will postpone the feahful thwashin' I intended to give you, Lowthah!" said D'Arcy, with a flush of embarrassment. "I forgot myself for the moment!"

"I was going to suggest we went over and saw Figgy," said Blake. "Perhaps they have had news."

"We'll go, but any news would have come here first," said Manners. "Tommy would have seen to that!"

Fatty Wynn and George Figgins would probably have said that it was more likely that they would have had the news first. Kerr, their chum, was with Tom Merry, and he would naturally write them as soon as anything happened.

But as the juniors walked across the quad on the way to the New House, they met Toby, the page. And Toby's eyes were starting from his head in terror, and his hair was wildly flying in the wind.

"Don't go over there, young gents!" he gasped. "Master Figgins—he's gone off his dot! Don't go over, gents!"

Blake grasped the page by the shoulder and shook him.

"What's the matter, Toby?" he demanded. "Have you been getting at Taggy's refreshment?"

"Which I ain't seen Mr. Taggles with nothin', sir," said Toby warmly. "He's a teetotal, he is!"

"Yes, but not a total tea drinker!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the matter with Figgy, Toby?" asked Manners.

"I took him a telegram, sir, and he opens it and reads it.

Then he fair goes off his dot, catches hold of me, dances me round the room, and dots me on the boko!" said Toby, his alarm returning.

"A telegram?" said Blake. "Come on, you chaps, he's got news!"

And in a moment Toby was left standing in the quad alone. The juniors had followed Blake at top speed into the New House. Toby watched them until they disappeared from sight, then he hurried to tell Mr. Taggles, the school porter, that half the juniors at St. Jim's were stark, staring mad.

Figgins and Fatty Wynn could be heard in their study long before the juniors got to them. They were shouting, and, by the sound of their feet, they were dancing.

But on opening the door, Blake found that they were not dancing. They were both fighting imaginary enemies, and Fatty's face was, to say the least of it, ferocious. His eyes were glaring at nothing in particular, and his huge hands were thrashing at the empty air. Figgins was dancing as if in the boxing-ring, his fists shooting out at imaginary figures like streaks of lightning.

"Wh-wh-what on earth's the matter, Figgy?" gasped Blake.

"I think Toby was wight!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Have you gone off youah dots, deah boys?"

"Come inside!" said Figgy hastily. "We've just had a wire from Kerr——"

"From Kerr!"

The School House juniors crowded into the study, and Digby closed the door behind them.

"Yes. I'll read it," said Fatty Wynn, and, taking a telegram from his pocket, he straightened it out and read:

"Some island off Cornwall. Can't write. Unsafe. Join us. KERR."

"M-m-my hat!" exclaimed Blake. "That means they've been collared! Oh, the silly dummies!"

"Perhaps it wasn't their fault, deah boys," said D'Arcy. "It takes a fellah of tact and judgment to keep out of the clutches of the wascals in London!"

"Yes, that's why we've been after you on two occasions!" snorted Digby.

"Ahem! Howevah, of course, we'll go!" said D'Arcy hastily. "Shall we get permish from Dr. Holmes, deah boys?"

Figgins glared.

"You prize ass!" he said witheringly. "Do you think the Head would let us go after chaps right down in Cornwall, and do you think he'll believe the yarn about the faked claim? Rot!"

"Yes, utter unadulterated lukewarm rot, Gussy!" said Monty Lowther. "We'll have to bunk, like Tom Merry and Kerr did!"

"We were getting into form for tackling Soppy and Anson," explained Fatty Wynn. "No good going without loosening our muscles a bit!"

"The question is, where and how are we going?" asked Herries. "Off Cornwall, as Kerr puts it, is rather a big order. And we shall want funds—railway fares are mighty high, you know!"

That was a puzzle for the juniors, and one which took some time to solve. And it was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who offered the solution.

"I would say it would be a good ideah to ask Lumley-Lumley to come with us, deah boys," he said softly. "He's plentay of cash."

Jerrold Lumley-Lumley, once known as the Outsider of St. Jim's, was the son of a millionaire, and generally had plenty of funds, as D'Arcy said.

"Gussy's had his think-box oiled during the week-end!" said Monty Lowther, with a wise shake of his head. "Blessed if I don't agree with him for once!"

"Weally, Lowthah!" said D'Arcy. "You know perfectly well that I always come to the top when a difficult pwoblem is before us!"

"Yaas, wathah—I mean, yes, rather!" said Lowther, with a grin. "I'll go and ask Lumley-Lumley, chaps."

It was at that moment that the door was cautiously opened, and Toby appeared.

"Come in, my son!" said Blake. "We'll see that Master Figgins doesn't dot you on the boko again!"

"Which there's another telegraph for Master Manners, young gents," said Toby, holding out the buff-coloured envelope at arm's length, but not venturing inside the study.

Manners took the telegram with a word of thanks, and opened it.

"'St. Walton's. Hustle. Tom,'" he read out.

"That's settled that!" said Lowther briskly. "Look here, Figgy, if I whistle three times down in the quad, you'll know Lumley-Lumley is ready to foot the bill. Meet us at the gates ten minutes after!"

"Right!" said Figgy. "No bags, of course?"

"No," answered Manners. "The Head and Railton have already got their sails out on account of Tom and Kerr being away. If they should spot us going out with bags, they'd hike us back like one o'clock!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy.

Three minutes later Figgins and Fatty Wynn heard three shrill whistles down in the quad, and with grim faces they put on their coats and hats and sauntered down to the gates. There they were joined by Blake & Co., Manners, Lowther, and Lumley-Lumley.

"Say, Lumley-Lumley," said Figgins, in his blunt way, "hope you don't mind being asked just because you've got some cash?"

"Not at all, Figgy," said Lumley-Lumley, with a laugh. "I'm glad to be asked at all!"

Thus the rescue party of nine set out from St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 9.

The Fight For St. Jim's!

"GOSH! This is lonely!"

Kerr made that remark in accents of deep disgust. Tom Merry, who was sitting in the tiny hut on the island of St. Walton with his chum, nodded.

"It's a go!" he admitted. "But the chaps will be here soon!"

"I hope so!" said Kerr. "I'm wanting a change of clothes and a jolly good feed!"

"Same here! But we'll keep our peckers up, and hope for the best!"

Tom Merry and Kerr had been brought from the mainland to the island in a smart little motor-boat by Anson and Sopton, the psuedo solicitors, and they had found their surroundings as lonely as they were picturesque.

The cabin contained a small cupboard, in which the juniors had found a quantity of plain, wholesome food. Anson and Sopton had warned them to go carefully with it, because they would not get any further supplies for a few days.

And with that remark, the two conspirators had left the juniors to look after themselves. That was a day ago, a day after Tom Merry and Kerr had sent off wires to their chums at St. Jim's. Awaking whilst the others were nodding in the train, Tom had done exactly the same as had Kerr—he had written out his telegram, and dropped it out of the train.

"If there'd only be a little excitement to while away the time!" said Kerr moodily.

"There'll be some excitement when the boys arrive!" said Tom Merry, with a chuckle.

"Then the sooner they come the better!" said Kerr.

For the rest of that day the juniors slept and dozed, or sat by the door of their cabin and gazed out at sea. And as the day wore on, they took it in turns to watch at the door so that they might know when their chums were coming.

It was about four o'clock when a motor-boat was spotted in the fast-gathering darkness. Tom Merry was at the door of the cabin, and he gave a shout of delight.

"Here they come, Kerr!" he roared. "Hurrah for St. Jim's!"

Kerr joined his chum, and they stood on the edge of the island, frantically waving their handkerchiefs to the boat. But as it drew near they turned to each other in dismay.

"There are only four fellows there!" said Tom, in amazement. "My hat! If we come up against Soppy Ann, we'll have to fight hard to get away!"

The four fellows, however, were not from St. Jim's. One was the engineer of the fast motor-boat that had brought Tom and Kerr prisoners to the island, the second man was Mr. Maurice-Egbert, the claimant to St. Jim's, and the other two were Sopton and Anson.

"Oh, rotten!" said Tom, as the motor-boat disappeared round the corner of the island. "I thought it was Manners and Lowther!"

"And I thought it was Figgy and Fatty Wynn!" growled Kerr.

And the two juniors disconsolately returned to their cabin and lit the oil-lamp which had been provided them. It seemed to them as if the juniors were never coming.

But they were soon proved wrong, for five minutes after the lamp had been lighted, the door of the cabin was flung violently open, and Maurice-Egbert, his face demoniacal in its ferocious expression, burst into the little cabin. Anson and Sopton followed their partner, looking none the less grim.

"You—you—you little rats!" snarled Maurice-Egbert fiercely. "You've split on us!"

"Why shouldn't we?" asked Kerr, as calmly as he could.

"Why shouldn't you?" echoed Maurice-Egbert. "Do you think you're going to get away with it, you young fools?"

"We have hopes!" said Tom Merry, with an attempt at bravado.

"Your hopes will follow you to the bottom of the sea!" snarled Maurice-Egbert. "I saw your cursed schoolfellows down at the coast, offering pounds and pounds for a boat and

a dozen men to man it! Their money spelt my ruin—and, hang you, they're on the way here now!"

Tom Merry and Kerr gave a shout of delight.

"Hurrah for St. Jim's!" they yelled. "Rescue, St. Jim's!"

Anson and Sopton sprang forward and grasped the yelling juniors round their necks in a far from affectionate embrace. And the juniors, encouraged in the knowledge that their chums were coming, fought with the ferocity of tigers.

Maurice-Egbert, his face ashen white, watched the struggle.

"Down them!" he cried.

"Stick—it—Kerr!" gasped Tom Merry, as he lashed out with his right and struck Anson on the point of the jaw.

"I—am!" panted Kerr, but he was having a harder struggle with his opponent.

Anson recoiled under the force of the blow Tom dealt him, and the junior, swinging round, lashed out straight and true for Sopton. The scoundrelly swindler had lifted his hand to strike Kerr, but he diverted his arm in a frantic attempt to ward off the blow that he saw coming from Tom Merry.

He failed utterly and completely, and a moment later he saw more stars and comets than have ever been discovered by professors of astronomy.

"Good old Tommy!" panted Kerr. "I was nearly done!"

Tom did not speak; he saved his breath for the fight. He left Anson, who was struggling to his feet, to Kerr, and tackled Sopton, now swearing and cursing with all the power of his lungs.

"You utter rotter!" said Tom, between his teeth.

He lashed out again, but this time the blow was pushed aside, and Tom received one behind the ear which made his head sing. He staggered to one side, and would have fallen had he not stumbled against Maurice-Egbert.

Instinct told Tom that here was another enemy, and he lashed out again even as he stumbled to the floor. His fist caught Maurice-Egbert a glancing blow in the face, and the swindler winced.

"Ow! Yowow!" he howled. "Take that, you little fiend, and that!"

"That" was a heavy kick in the ribs, and Tom Merry groaned and grunted. The next moment Maurice-Egbert was sprawling over the top of him, for Kerr had seen the cowardly kick, and had hit out straight from the shoulder.

His fist caught the swindler full on the side of the chin, and it was no glancing blow. Down went Maurice-Egbert, feeling as if every tooth in his head had been knocked loose.

Anson and Sopton had now settled down to the fight in very grim earnest, and Kerr soon had all his work cut out to keep away from the powerful arms that would encircle him and crush the breath from his body.

Tom Merry jumped to his feet, panting for breath, his face as white as a sheet from the pain of the kicks he had received. Maurice-Egbert lay where he had fallen, the fight completely knocked out of his cowardly body.

Sopton's fist shot out as Tom got to his feet, but Tom just managed to dodge the blow, and his own fist banged between the eyes of the swindler. Sopton staggered back, and again Tom's fist shot out, catching his enemy on the point of the jaw, and Sopton joined Maurice-Egbert on the floor of the cabin, there to lie and groan.

But the fight was over in another second. Kerr had received a knock-out blow at the same moment as Tom had lashed out at Sopton, and the New House junior collapsed to the floor. Then Anson snatched up an enamel jug from the table, and struck at Tom Merry's unprotected head.

"Ow! You coward!" gasped Tom, and with his hands to his head, he fell to the floor.

For a moment Anson stood staring down at the four huddled figures, panting and gasping for breath. He was mad with pain and anger, and kicked out as his foot came in contact with something on the floor.

It happened to be Maurice-Egbert's leg, and the kick roused him more than a douch of cold water would have done. He sat up, howling, to rub his injured leg.

Then came the climax. Desperate as had been the fight, Tom and Kerr could not have hoped to defeat the two fully-grown men. True, Tom Merry had accounted for one—Maurice-Egbert did not count, for he was too cowardly to fight after one slight blow had been dealt him—but Kerr had had too great a handful in Anson, and the swindler had turned to the aid of his partners in the very nick of time. Another minute, and Tom would have been the aggressor.

Anson seized Maurice-Egbert by the legs, and dragged him, still howling, from the cabin. He returned a moment later, and assisted the groaning Sopton outside.

Then he came back to the cabin, deliberately knocked over the oil-lamp, and went out, shutting and locking the door behind him!

Tom Merry and Kerr were trapped again!

Kerr sat up, his head aching and his jaw as stiff as a piece of board, and glanced dully round the cabin. Tom Merry was there, lying full length and silent. But of the others there was no sign.

Then Kerr became aware of something else. Smoke was filling the little room, and as his aching eyes became used to the flickering light in the cabin he saw the broken lamp upon the floor.

Around the smashed glass chimney of the lamp the floor was stained with oil, and already the greedy flames had caught the sodden wood.

"Tom! Tom!" gasped Kerr. "Wake up, man! The cabin's alight!"

And even as he spoke the flames burst out more fiercely than before, and the smoke became thicker and thicker in the little room. Gasping for breath, Kerr dragged himself to his feet and staggered to the door. He felt and found the handle, and turned it. But the door did not open. It was locked on the outside!

"Oh, heavens!" panted Kerr, choking with the fumes and smoke. "Tom!"

Tom Merry did not reply. He was still unconscious from the terrible blow he had received. And Kerr was too weak to do more than stagger beside his chum and kneel down.

He tried to lift Tom Merry, but he never even succeeded in moving the unconscious junior. Then Kerr dropped across Tom Merry's body, beaten to the world!

* * * *

"Put some beef into it, you chaps!"

Manners shouted that out to the men who were rowing them from the mainland to the island of St. Walton.

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"We'll be there soon, sir!"

Lumley-Lumley uttered a cry of horror.

"Fire! There's something on fire there!" he shouted. "Work, you chaps!"

The men—there were four of them—worked at the oars of their boat as they had never worked before.

Lumley-Lumley was right. Flames were bursting across the windows of the little cabin that stood on the very edge of the little island, now only a few hundred yards away.

Silently the men worked at their oars, and slowly but surely the boat drew near to the island.

Bump!

The boat crunched into the rocky "shore" of the little island, and nine figures leaped out and dashed frantically up the cliff to the hut.

"Altogether!" gasped Figgins.

"The door's locked!" exclaimed Lowther.

The next moment a body flew past him and banged against the door, burst it from its hinges, and Manners toppled into the cabin.

"Get 'em out!" he cried, even as he struck the floor.

The juniors needed no bidding. They staggered through the smoke and flames, taking not the slightest notice of the fact that the roof might collapse at any moment.

Tom Merry and Kerr were dragged out into the open air not a moment too soon. For the roof collapsed in a roar of flames and thousands of sparks before the juniors and their burdens had proceeded ten yards from the cabin.

Nobody spoke. Their hearts were too full. They had arrived only just in time to save Tom Merry and Kerr, and more than one pair of eyes were moist from other reasons than smoke as the flames devoured the roof and floor of the cabin in which their chums had been but a few seconds before.

The men in the boat took Tom Merry and Kerr from the juniors and laid them gently on the floor of the boat.

"We're going to look for Soppy and Ann!" said Figgins grimly. "Make our chums comfy!"

But the juniors might have expected that Anson, Sopton, and Maurice-Egbert would have disappeared. And, although they reported the affair to the Cornish police as soon as they got back, the juniors never heard of either of the swindlers again.

Tom Merry and Kerr were taken to a hospital, and the juniors returned to the school. There they related the whole story, and the mystery of Tom Merry and Kerr's disappearance was cleared up, so far as the school was concerned. The three Co.'s had known from the beginning.

Needless to say, the claim for St. Jim's was not proceeded with, and, in his relief and his admiration for Tom Merry and Kerr, Dr. Holmes ordered a whole holiday at St. Jim's on the day the two came back from Cornwall, and personally met them at the station.

The drive to St. Jim's was one long procession, for everybody—including Knox, the prefect, who would have given almost anything to see Tom Merry in disgrace, made his voice heard above the rest—shouted themselves hoarse.

And even Fatty Wynn could find no complaint as to the quantity or quality of the food which was bought the heroes by the admiring school!

THE END.

(The first of a grand series of camping yarns begins in next week's issue of the "Gem Library," entitled: "TOM MERRY & CO.'S CAMP," by Martin Clifford. Be sure you order your copy EARLY.)

The INVISIBLE HAND

JOHN SHARPE.

Vitagraph

IRON HAND.

New Readers Start Here.

John Sharpe, the great analytical detective, is engaged by Chief Burnett, of the Secret Service, to track down the band of organised and dangerous criminals operating under the guidance of Iron Hand, a fearless, clever man of dominating personality. Marna Black, one of the band of crooks, is captured, and Burnett induces Anne Crawford, a woman agent of the Secret Service, to assume Marna's identity and get into the confidences of Iron Hand.

She is instructed to keep her real identity a secret even to Sharpe; but she often assists him and sends him information concerning the movements of the gang, and he is puzzled to know just where it comes from.

Iron Hand has a number of hiding-places in different parts of the country, which are referred to as "Nests," the most important of which is Eagle's Nest, situated on a deserted cliff. The leader's chief assistants are Potsdam and Black Flag. John Sharpe has had many big tussles with the gang, and has foiled many of their deepest schemes. Iron Hand has robbed Colonel Bledson, the Cattle King, of a casket of valuable jewels, and he takes them to his assistant in Chinatown, Wong Li, to take care of.

After a great struggle Sharpe succeeds in getting them back, and he deposits them in a safe in Colonel Bledson's room.

Iron Hand makes a determined effort to secure them again, but he is foiled repeatedly by Sharpe. The gang next turn their attention to a collection of valuable Russian furs, and they decide to hire a room in the building in which they are stored in order to secure them.

(Now read on.)

Anne's Message.

THREE men were highly impatient and worried over the failure of the long-expected furs to arrive. They were Iron Hand, Potsdam, and Black Flag.

The fourth member of this little party was Anne Crawford, or, as she was known to them, Marna Black, the woman crook.

Suddenly their attention was aroused by a sound of approaching footsteps.

"Ah," thought the three men, "the furs at last."

But they were doomed to disappointment again. The new arrival was Red Sam, and it was at once apparent to the others when they saw the alarmed look on his face that there was something wrong.

"Detective Sharpe arrived on the scene, and had the barrels driven to the police-station!" he stammered out between breaths.

Iron Hand was filled with rage. So were the other two men, but Anne was really highly elated over Sharpe's success.

Turning to the others, Iron Hand said: "There is not a minute to lose. They'll find this place if one of that gang who were captured squeals. We must get away from here at once. Curse that man Sharpe! He is always in the way."

The men realised the truth of their leader's advice, and that it would be dangerous for them to delay their departure. They at once sprang into action, and seizing their hats they made their way to the hall.

Anne rushed out also, purposely leaving her hat on the table. The men had already reached the door outside when the girl stopped suddenly, calling attention to the fact that she had forgotten her hat.

Iron Hand told her to hurry and get it, and Anne hurried back again. She soon reached the room, and seized her hat, then pausing an instant she lifted the newspaper from the table, and with a stealthy glance towards the door, she wrote a message in the dust with her finger. Then she replaced the newspaper, and, coolly putting on her hat made her way to the door again.

Iron Hand and the others were waiting impatiently at the door for her. Then when she joined them they hurried away.

In accordance with his promise after lunch, Sharpe paid another visit to the police headquarters.

"What success have you had?" he asked the Chief.

The officer handed a paper to Sharpe.

"One of them was very useful," he said; "there's the address where Iron Hand and his party are staying, and where they were to return to him with the furs."

Sharpe glanced eagerly at the paper.

"I'll get a number of good men to accompany you there if you wish," said the Chief.

But the detective shook his head.

"No, I'll go alone," he said; "but you might have some men within call, in case I want their assistance."

Sharpe then hurried away, and the Chief gave instructions to his assistant to have some men ready for an emergency.

The detective hastened to the house which had been temporarily occupied by Iron Hand, and with his revolver drawn he entered the room in which the gang had been sitting but a short time previously. He entered very cautiously, expecting to find the gang present, but he soon came to the conclusion that there was no one inside, and after a complete search of the room his attention was finally directed towards the paper on the table.

Sharpe casually moved this, and much to his astonishment he saw a message traced in the dust. He looked closely at it, and made out the letters S T R. L O S. A.

Its significance soon came to him, and he smiled to himself, for he believed that the same mysterious helper must be responsible for this information. He rubbed out the message, and hurriedly left the room.

The Plot Succeeds.

IN Los Angeles harbour a large steamer was preparing to cast off, and start on her voyage. The crew were already removing the gang plank, across which the passengers walked in order to board the vessel.

Standing in an inconspicuous place in the stern of the vessel were Iron Hand, Potsdam, Black Flag, and Anne. They were evidently watching to see who else got on the boat, and it was a great relief to them when they knew it was too late for Sharpe to get aboard.

Just at that moment, however, when the boat was finally ready for departure, a figure came dashing along the wharf, hurrying to catch the boat. As the gang plank was being raised the man rushed towards it.

One end had already been raised from the edge of the wharf, but the man, greatly daring, leaped on to it, and catching hold of the side drew himself on board the steamer. It was a risky thing to do. But then this man had done many other risky things in his life. It was no other than John Sharpe.

There was great consternation when Iron Hand and the others noticed that the detective had got on board.

The leader was enraged beyond words, and he ordered the others to hide themselves from view at once, and the whole party made their exit slily towards their cabin.

John Sharpe at once asked for the captain of the ship, and he stated his mission to him.

The captain sent for an assistant, and he presently appeared, carrying with him a list of passengers who were on the ship.

Sharpe eagerly examined them, but failing to see anything of importance there, he said, addressing the captain:

"Well, I suppose my enemies would naturally register under faked names. All I can do is to watch carefully the dining-room to-night."

The captain agreed that this would be the best thing to do.

In the cabin, Iron Hand and his assistants were already discussing ways of getting rid of the hated Sharpe.

"He'll stick close to our cabin, no doubt," said the leader.

Then the vindictive chief of the gang outlined a scheme to Black Flag to assassinate Sharpe in his sleeping bunk. Black Flag nodded in acquiescence. He was prepared to do the worst.

That night at eight bells, when the ship was wrapped in slumber, Black Flag, with knife in hand, walked stealthily towards Sharpe's cabin. He quietly turned the handle of the door

and found that it was unlocked. Then he pushed open the door and entered.

Inside there was a dim light, and Black Flag at once made his way to the bunk, where he could just discern the sleeping man. Black Flag paused a moment, nerving himself for the foul deed he was about to perform. Then he tiptoed to the bunk again and raised the knife.

Once more he paused an instant while he gazed nervously at the sleeping form. Then the murderous villain fulfilled his task, and swiftly departed, closing the door after him.

"Gee, that was a narrow escape for me!" declared John Sharpe, as he smilingly climbed from under the berth in his cabin. He looked around the room, then walked over to his bunk.

He picked up the dummy, which he had placed there, and withdrew the knife which Black Flag had plunged into it.

"Well, I don't suppose the gentleman will pay me another visit to-night!" he muttered, as he went over to the cabin door, locked it, and placed a chair against the handle, in order to make it doubly secure.

Then he crawled into his bunk in order to secure a much-needed night's sleep. He had had a very busy day, and there was a great deal of work for him to do in the morning. But, as he laid his head down, he felt that at last the net was being drawn around the villainous gang, and he hoped that in a very short time he would have Iron Hand and the rest of his crew in captivity. A moment later the detective fell off into a profound slumber.

What had to-morrow in store for him?

(To be continued.)

MY READERS' OWN CORNER.

Half-a-crown is paid for all contributions printed on this page.

A WAY OUT.

The new porter at a station in North Wales could not possibly get the name off by heart. The first day or two he shouted a hopeless jumble of syllables as the train steamed in. He gave this up on the third day. He was heard yelling to the passengers:

"All you that's in 'ere for 'ere, gerout!"—A. R. Denne, 49, High Street, Balby, Doncaster.

WHAT HE WANTED.

The excited speaker was shouting and gesticulating wildly.

"I want land reform," he said, "I want house reform, and I want—I want——"

"Chloroform!" came a voice from the crowd.—Miss Janey Pilling, 26, Hamilton Street, Bury, Lancs.

THE MISSING HENS.

Lizzie went to London from the farm, and her mother told her to be sure to buy some fowls and send them home. Lizzie did so, but later received a letter from her mother which ran:

"If you send any more hens have them packed in a more secure crate, as the ones you sent got away, and, though I've scoured the country, I've only found eleven."

"Phew!" muttered Lizzie. "And I only sent six!"—E. R. Franklin, 141, Antill Road, Bow, E. 3.

SOCIABLE,

1st Motorist: "I say, I thought you said that if I were sociable with the magistrate I should get off light."

2nd Motorist: "So I did. What happened?"

1st Motorist: "Well, I went into the court, and, remembering your tip, said, 'Good-morning, your worship! How are you getting on?' The magistrate answered, 'Fine—£5.'"—E. Maddock, 40, Talworth Street, Cardiff.

SEAFARING ADVICE.

How many fellows say, "Oh, I wish I was a sailor!" Speaking from my experience, I would advise all boys who want to try the life to get a job on a river tug or small coasting-vessel as cabin-boy. There one is among sailors, and can pick up valuable hints. You can chum up with one of the crew, and get him to teach you how to box the compass, steer, tie knots, splice rope, etc. Should you show that you are willing to work you may be sure the skipper will take notice of you. He will very likely try to get you rated as an ordinary seaman before you are of age.—Philip Kitto, 1, Toledo Paddock, Balmoral Road, Gillingham, Kent.

A SLASHING CATCH.

Smart: "I see one of the window-slashers has been caught."

Slow: "Go on! Who was he?"

Smart: "Well, they only know he's a Scotsman. When he was asked why he did it, he explained that he want to see Glasgow (glass go)."—L. White, 12, Priory Place, Well Street, Hackney, E. 9.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

A man who was charged with shooting a gun in the street was fined one pound and costs.

"But, your worship," exclaimed the defendant, "I fired the gun in the air!"

"Two pounds and costs!" said the Bench, raising the penalty. "It might have been an angel!"—W. Midgley, 3, Dudley Street, Colne, Lancs.

TAKING THE CHAIR.

Servant: "Please, there's a gentleman wants to see you on business."

The master: "Well, ask him to take a chair."

Servant: "He's taking 'em all, and the table, too! He comes from the furniture shop."—Miss F. Hall, 99, Tonna Road, Caerau, South Wales.

GONE TO SEED.

Someone went into a seed store, and asked the new clerk for some sweet potato seeds. The clerk hunted all over the shop, and finally appealed to the boss, who replied that he was being made fun of. A few days later a lady popped in and asked for bird seed.

"Aw', go on," said the clerk, with a grin, "you can't fool me! Birds is hatched from eggs!"—Frank le Boutillier, 257, Bleury Street, Montreal, Canada.

ARITHMETIC.

Farmer to passer-by: "How many cows should you imagine there are in that herd?"

Passer-by: "Oh, 120!"

Farmer: "Just the number. Now, how did you reckon that?"

Passer-by: "Easily. I counted the legs, and divided by four."—A. Mayler, 92, Thorneycroft Road, Sefton Park, Liverpool.

THE SUBSTITUTE.

An old country dame was recommended to use marmalade as a substitute for butter, but on her next visit to the village stores she complained to the shopman that the experiment was an utter failure.

The shopman asked for a reason.

"Well," said the customer, "the first time I tried marmalade to fry the fish in for breakfast it resulted in an awful mess!"—Harold Lock, 15, Hartington Place, Eastbourne.

DICK TURPIN.

Richard Turpin was a gentleman highwayman and adventurer, and was born at Hempstead, in Essex, in 1706. He started as apprentice to a butcher, but robbed his master, and went to London in quest of excitement. He fell in with Tom King, the highwayman, whom he afterwards accidentally shot. Dick owned Black Bess, whose descendant recently performed in London. Turpin would often ply his "trade" as near town as Islington. He was captured at York, in 1739, and hanged.—F. Short, 57, Gamm Street, Brighouse.

Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription rates: Inland, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Abroad, 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; and for Canada, The Imperial News Co., Ltd.—Saturday, June 18th, 1921.

CHAT ABOUT ST. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS.

Having been unfortunate enough to be stranded in a tramcar which was held up by a breakdown on the road, I could hardly help hearing the following conversation, which took place between a young boy and girl who were seated in the opposite seats to me. "What did you think of this week's story in the GEM?" asked the diminutive owner of the large straw hat. "Topping!" came the answer of her companion. "'Tis the finest story I've ever read. And, what's more, the Editor says that there is an even better story to come next week." Sure, and 'tis true, too! Next week appears the first of a series of fine camping yarns. Most of you know well enough the delights of camp life, so will anxiously await these magnificent stories.

At last I am able to present to you our grand new serial entitled: "What Have You Against Me?" Now, I'm not saying that one good turn deserves another, but I leave it entirely to you to introduce this most appealing of stories to your many pals. They will look upon it as a real good action of yours.

I am repeatedly asked if William George Bunter will ever get the postal-order he speaks so much about. Well, I feel I ought to question the fat fraud; but, there, you know well enough what an inventor he is. In fact, he is so gifted in the art of falsehoods that really he wouldn't even believe his own word.

"What will become of Levison if things go on this way?" I thought I should be able to solve the problem this week, but I fear I have again drawn blank. The track we thought we were on has proved a failure. Our troubles will be rewarded ere long, though, I feel sure of that. Where can Ernest Levison be?

Latest news from the quack's quarters at St. Jim's says that Baggley Trimble, the Paul Pry of St. Jim's, is suffering from buzzing noises in the ear. I have heard that this is a common complaint of those who "add-ear" to key-holes.

The opening of the fishing season happens this month. I hear that Billy Bunter has already baited his line in the hopes of catching a few more small fry.

A large number of my readers write asking me for full particulars of entry into the Merchant Service. All these and others who are interested in a life on the ocean wave should make a special effort to get a copy of this week's "Boys' Herald" and read the opening chapters of the rollicking fine serial entitled: "The Lad From the Lower Deck!" This is only one of the many splendid attractions in the best of all boys' papers.

LESLIE OWEN (An excellent swimmer of the New House.)

Another Splendid Portrait Study Next Week.