

TOM MERRY'S ENEMY!

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

He was only a new boy, but he had a big idea of himself. That's how it was he became TOM MERRY'S bitterest enemy—and a desperate rival for the junior captaincy of St. Jim's!

CHAPTER 1. Ominous News!

TOM MERRY came into Study No. 10 in the School House at St. Jim's with a rather rueful grin on his sunny features. He found his study-mates, Lowther and Manners, seated at the table—Lowther scribbling out an impot, and Manners putting a fresh roll of films in his camera.

"I can see trouble ahead, you men!" he remarked.

"Let it rip, then!" suggests Manners, without looking up.

"What's wrong, anyway?" said Lowther.

"Trouble on the giddy horizon!" grinned Tom Merry. "You've heard there's a new chap expected this afternoon?"

"Eh? Yes, I did hear something about it," said Lowther, staring. "But how does a dashed new kid concern us?"

"Blow new kid!" sneered Manners.

Both Manners and Lowther spoke witheringly. To such important "men" in the Shell as Tom Merry & Co. new fellows were very "small beer" indeed.

"It doesn't really concern us at all—yet!" grinned Tom. "But, as I say, it might. The trouble looms on the horizon as yet. You see, this new kid's name happens to be Knox."

"Knox!" gasped Manners then together.

"Just so!" chuckled Tom Merry. "You see, he's a giddy relation of dear old Knox of the Sixth—a giddy cousin."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Trimble's just told me," smiled Tom Merry. "The fat ass overheard Knox speaking to Railton about the kid, it seems. And as the kid's coming straight into the Shell—"

"Phew!" murmured Lowther. "Fancy having a relation of dear old Gerald in the Shell!"

Bound to meet Manners. runted

"That's what I thought at once!" said Tom Merry, scratching his curly head meditatively. "You see, the kid may be like his cousin—"

Bound to be!" agreed Lowther.

Perhaps worse!" said Manners, frowning. "He'll be a crawling little worm, you know! He'll be spying

round, and running off to Knox with tales all the time."

"Getting us continually into trouble!" said Tom Merry.

"It'll be: 'Please, Gerald, Tom Merry's just kicked me,'" grinned Lowther. "And 'Please, Gerald,' this and that all the giddy time. I can see a warm time ahead."

"Phew! Yes, rather!"

"If he does, we'll make things warm for him, of course," said Tom.

"Yes; and dear old Knox will make it thundering warm for us—with his ashplant!" growled Manners.

"Yes; that's the trouble, of course!"

"Stands to reason," said Tom Merry, shaking his head, "that this new chap will be no end cocky having a cousin in the Sixth, and a prefect at that. And he's almost certain to be like his Cousin Gerald. We know what Knox is—a beastly bully!"

"And a dingy blackguard!" added Manners.

"Hear, hear!" said Lowther. "Knox is all that, and more!"

"Thank you very much!"

It was a voice from the doorway—a voice that made the Terrible Three jump.

The study door, which had been slightly open, now swung wide, revealing a tall senior, who stood eyeing the three startled juniors with a grim, ominous smile on his face.

It was Gerald Knox, of the Sixth Form.

"Thank you very much!" repeated the prefect pleasantly. "So glad to hear your invaluable opinion of me—charmed, in fact! So I'm a beastly bully and a dingy blackguard—what?"

"Oh crumbs!"

The Terrible Three gave each other dismal glances; they were "for it" now, with a vengeance! Gerald Knox was scarcely the fellow to overlook a thing like this.

"Oh dear!" groaned Tom Merry. "Sorry, Knox!"

"I'm sure you are," agreed Knox. "You'll be sorrier still presently."

"We didn't know you were listening, or we wouldn't have said it," went on Tom.

This was candid enough; but it did not seem to please Knox. His eyes glittered.

"That's enough, Merry!" he said. "It seems that you three fags are lacking in due respect to a prefect. I will endeavour to rectify that at once. There's a cane on the table in my study, Merry. Fetch it!"

Tom Merry nodded and left the room. It was no good refusing to obey a prefect. He brought the cane, and Knox gave the Terrible Three four of the best each. They were not light ones, and the hapless juniors were wriggling and groaning when he had finished.

"That's a little lesson in the respect due to a prefect from scrubby little fags," said Knox, tucking the cane under his arm. "And now we'll discuss what I came about, Merry. Have you anything on this afternoon, kid?"

"Ow—ow!" gasped Tom Merry. "Yow! Yes, you—I mean yes; it's footer practice."

"Good! Then you can postpone the footer practice, Merry. I want you to trot down to the station to meet a new fellow. His train gets in at three-thirty. See you get there on time, kid!"

Tom Merry blinked at him.

"New fellow!" he gasped. "Meet a new kid?"

"Exactly!" smiled Knox. "I know," he added, with heavy sarcasm, "that you are a very big man in the school, Merry, and that meeting a new fellow is a bit below your dignity. But, all the same, it is my order—see? You'll obey me—or you'll smart for it."

"But—but look here, Knox!" spluttered Tom Merry. "That's a bit too thick! The Greyfriars match is next week, and—"

"The Greyfriars match doesn't interest me," said Knox calmly. "I suggested to Mr. Ralton that a Shell

fellow should meet this new chap, and he left it to me to choose a fellow. I decided upon you, Merry, because this new fellow happens to be a relation of mine, and so I'm particularly keen that he should be looked after properly."

"Oh!"

"I've got a sort of an idea," resumed Knox grimly, "that because this new chap happens to be a cousin of mine, you little scrubby fags will try to get a bit of your own back by taking it out of him. I want to make it quite clear from the beginning that I'm going to see nothing of the kind happens."

"Nothing of the kind will happen if the kid's a decent chap, Knox," said Tom Merry warmly, "and you know that well enough."

"It had better not!" snapped Knox, his eyes glinting. "Anyhow, you can cut off to meet him now, Merry. I shall hold you responsible for his comfort and all the rest of it."

"Oh, my hat!"

"That's the programme!" said Knox cheerfully. "You'll meet him at the station, and you'll bring him to St. Jim's and show him round after he's seen the Head, Merry. And mind you're kind to the kid. No bullying, remember, and no ragging!"

"Bully--bullying?" stammered Tom.

"Just that!" said Knox. "Any bullying by you, Merry, and I'll come down on you with my ashplant! Be decent to him, and see he comes to no harm."

"Can't somebody else go?" snorted Tom Merry.

"Nobody but you will do!" said Knox, allowing his cane to slide down into his hand again. "Do I take it that you will meet the three-thirty, Merry?"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed for a moment, but the sight of the cane decided him. An order from a prefect—just, reasonable, or otherwise—was an order to be obeyed.

He nodded after a moment.

"Good!" said Knox. "I thought you'd agree to oblige me, Merry. Mind you're kind to the kid, now!"

And, with a peculiar grin on his face, Gerald Knox tucked his cane under his arm again and strolled out of the study.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry as he departed. "If that isn't the giddy limit, you chaps! Didn't I tell you so?"

"It's a good beginning, right enough!" murmured Lowther, with a rueful grin. "And a licking each to kick off with! And he thinks a licking will make us kindly disposed to the kid! My hat!"

"Be kind to him—eh?" gasped Tom Merry. "Yes, I'll be kind to him! Why, I—I'll—"

As if to give vent to his feelings, Tom Merry took a running kick at the half-closed door, sending it crashing to. And as he did so the door was brought up short with a crash, and a familiar voice rang out in a howl of woe:

"Yawwoooooogh!"

CHAPTER 2.

Arthur Augustus is Firm!

"YAWWOOOOOOGH!"
Bump!
"Oh, my hat!"

The Terrible Three rushed to the passage, and then they grinned.

Seated in the passage was an elegantly dressed junior, and he was clutching his nose with both hands and groaning. Evidently that nose had come into violent contact with the door as Tom Merry had kicked it with his boot. Behind Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Blake, Herries, and Digby were standing, and they wore broad grins.

"Gussy!" grinned Tom Merry. "Come in, old fellow!"

"Don't sit there in a draught!" advised Monty Lowther kindly.

"Gwoooooogh!"

Blake, Herries, and Digby kindly

helped their groaning chum to his feet. Lowther carefully examined the door.

"No damage done!" he reported reassuringly. "All serene, Gussy! You haven't even scratched the oak, old chap!"

"Ow! Yow!" gasped Arthur Augustus, blinking at Lowther with watering eyes. "Ow! You uttably careless dummies! Ow! Bai Jove! You have neahly busted by dose!"

"Your own fault, you know!" said Manners severely. "You should have knocked before entering. I'm surprised at your lack of manners, Gussy!"

"He did knock before entering!" said Blake. "He knocked with his nose!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake——"

"Cheese it, old chap."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus subsided with an indignant sniff, and resumed hugging his damaged nose, which looked decidedly red and swollen.

"You chaps just going down to footer?" asked Tom Merry.

"Well, yes; we're ready!" said Blake, grinning. "But we called in to see if you chaps have heard who the new chap is. Trimble says——"

"It's quite right!" said Tom Merry grimly. "The new chap's name is Knox, and he's a giddy cousin of our dearly beloved Gerald. If you've come to talk about that, you couldn't have arrived at a better moment. I was just showing my feelings in regard to Knox and his blessed cousin when I slammed that door on Gussy's boko!"

"We thought you'd feel like that about it!" chuckled Blake. "Thank goodness, he's not coming in our Form!"

"You'll see and hear plenty of him, never fear!" warned Tom Merry. "There's going to be trouble over that kid, you mark my words! He's bound to be a smaller edition of his cousin!"

"Bound to be!" assented Blake. "We think that—at least, all of us do except Gussy. That silly fathead thinks we ought to meet the kid at the

station and fall on his neck and kiss him just because he's Knox's relation!"

"Just like Gussy!" grunted Digby.

"Bai Jove! I think nothin' of the kind, Blake!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus warily. "I certainly suggested wallyin' wound and meetin' the new fellah, but I nevah suggested kissin'——"

"No, but you were jolly near it!" snorted Jack Blake. "You said a picked selection of the most influential fellows in the Shell and Fourth should go to meet him. Great Scott! Fancy going out of one's way to meet a relation of Knox's! B-b-b-brrr!"

"Wats!" retorted Arthur Augustus indignantly. "You are puttin' an uttably w'ong constwuction upon my view of the mattah, Blake!"

"You said——"

"I said that the new fellow is entitled to faiah play even if he is a relation of Knox's!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "He may be a vewy decent fellow, you know. I have met cousins who are uttably unlike each othah in chawactah. And I maintain it is quite w'ong to imagine in advance that this new fellow is a wottah just because his cousin is."

"Well, that's right enough!" grinned Tom Merry. "But——"

"There is a 'but'—a very big 'but'!" growled Blake. "I can see trouble ahead——"

"Wubbish! I see no weason why there should be twouble."

"Well, I do, Gussy," said Tom Merry calmly. "In fact, it's started already, my dear man. Knox was in here just before you came laying down the giddy law about his cousin. He says we've got to toe the line and eat sugar out of his hand, or we'll get it in the neck from him!"

"Bai Jove!"

"He spoke words to that effect, anyway," said Tom. "And I've got to meet the new kid this afternoon myself or take a licking from him. How's that for a start?"

"Phew!"

"Is that a fact, Tommy?" demanded Herries.

"Yes. It just shows the way the wind's going to blow," said Tom.

And he told the Fourth Formers of the prefect's visit.

"Just what I expected, said Blake, shaking his head. "He picked on you, Tommy, to show us what to expect."

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus, a trifle taken aback. "That certainly does show Knox expects twouble. Howevah, that only pwoves what I maintain, deah boys. Knox knows we are vewy much up against him, and he guesses we shall be pwejudiced against his cousin at the start on his account. That would be vewy unfair against the new fellow."

"Well, that's so!" grunted Tom Merry, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. "But that's no reason why we should fall on the giddy kid's neck, fathead! We shan't worry him if he doesn't worry us, of course. If he proves a decent sort, then—"

"That is all vewy well, deah boy!" argued Gussy. "But it is highly pwobable that Knox has already told his cousin what to expect, and my ideah is to show the fellow frowm the vewy beginnin' that the impvession that we shall be pwejudiced against him is a mistaken one."

"Fathead! Let the new kid rip!" sniffed Blake.

"I have no intention of lettin' him wip, Blake."

"But, you silly ass," roared Blake, "do you think we've the time to bother with footling new kids? Let him rip, I tell you! I vote Merry let's him rip, too, and be thumped to Knox!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I've a jolly good mind to do it, too!" snapped Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming. "Blow Knox! We can't muck up footer practice just to please him! Look here, if Gussy wants to go, let him go instead of me! Are you game to go instead of me, Gussy?"

"I have already quite made up my mind to go, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus firmly.

"That's good enough, then," remarked Tom, setting his lips. "Wait here a sec. I'll do that rotter Knox yet!"

And Tom Merry hurried from the room. He was absent some seconds only, and when he returned he was grinning cheerfully.

"All serene!" he said. "I've just seen Railton, and he said Gussy can go and meet the new fellow instead of me. He seemed rather surprised that I had bothered him to ask," added Tom, with a chuckle.

"You didn't tell him Knox insisted that you should go?" grinned Herries. Tom Merry smiled.

"Not likely!" he said. "I just asked if he minded D'Arcy going in my place. He said it was certainly all right."

"Oh, good!"

"One in the eye for Knoxy-woxy!" chuckled Lowther. "Well, you'd better be getting off, Gussy. Mind you are kind to the new fellow! Kiss him fondly, and wipe his tears away if he's feeling home-sick!"

CHAPTER 3.

A Coughdrop!

"TWIMBLE, bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sighted Baggy Trimble of the Fourth on the platform of Rylcombe Station.

As he stood by the station platform, Arthur Augustus looked quite a dazzling sight. The swell of the Fourth was always very well dressed, but on this occasion he had taken a great deal of care with his attire. From the crown of his gleaming "topper" to the soles of his natty shoes he looked the picture of Bond Street elegance.

He certainly presented a striking contrast to Baggy Trimble, whom he now found ambling about the platform. Baggy, in addition to being the fattest junior at St. Jim's, was also the laziest and most untidy,

Arthur Augustus blinked at him in

surprise through his celebrated monoco. Trimble was obviously waiting for someone.

"Bai Jove, Twimble, deah boy, he remarked, "what are you doin' here?"

Trimble stopped his aimless mooching and grunted. He did not seem at all pleased to see D'Arcy.

"Come to that, what are you doing here, Gussy?" he inquired independently. "You haven't bought the blessed station, I suppose?"

"Weally, Twimble, I was only askin' you a civil question," said Arthur Augustus mildly. "I do not mind tellin' you why I am here at all. I have come to meet Knox, the new fellow."

"I thought as much!" snorted Trimble. "Look here, Gussy, you keep off the grass, you know. No need for you to butt in. I'm meeting this new chap, not you."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus looked very hard at Trimble now. He understood why Trimble was there, and he frowned. Trimble was a borrower who never paid back if he could help it, and a cadger without shame or principle. This was well-known at St. Jim's, and Trimble found it very difficult either to borrow or cadge successfully from his Form-fellows.

But with new fellows it was different. New fellows, not knowing Trimble's failings, often fell victims to his greed and craft. For this reason Trimble always made a point of meeting them at the station, to get what he could out of them before they discovered his little ways and customs.

Arthur Augustus understood now, and he frowned.

"Weally, Twimble, you fat wollah," he said warmly, "it is you who had bettah keep off the gwass, you know. I have taken young Knox undah my wing, and I shall certainly not allow you to exploit him. Wathah not, bai Jove!"

"Yah! Who's going to exploit him?" snorted Trimble, glaring. "Nice thing to say about a chap! You clear off, D'Arcy! I'm looking after Knox; his

cousin in the Sixth especially asked me to meet him."

"Bai Jove! You fat libbah, Twimble! I am perfectly suah that Knox did not ask you to meet him—wathah not!"

"Look here, you interfering rotter —"

"I have no desiah to look at you, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus disdainfully. "You are a scwubby little wascal, and you are here for the expwess purpose of wookin' the new fellow. I warn you that I shall not allow you to play any of your wotten twicks upon him, so wun away!"

"Shan't! Yah! I know your little game," jeered Trimble. "Soaping round Knox of the Sixth—getting round a blessed prefect! I suppose you think —"

"Bai Jove! If you dare to suggest such a wotten thing to me, Twimble —"

"Well, what have you come to meet him for?" jeered Trimble. "You must think you're going to get something out of it. That's not like me, though. I've just come out of natural kindness of heart, you know. Knox says we must be kind to the kid. He's bound to be a simpleton, and so— Hallo, here's the train! You shove off, Gussy!"

The local train from Wayland steamed in just then, and Trimble rolled along the platform, eagerly scanning the compartments as they rumbled past.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I weally must stop that little wascal's game!"

He was about to follow on Trimble's heels, when the door of a carriage flew open, and a youth jumped out on to the platform.

He was a tall, bony youth, with strong, hard features, and he was dressed in a lounge suit and a bowler hat. In his hand he carried a suitcase.

With an expression of disgust on his harsh features he glanced about the little platform, and then his eyes fell upon Arthur Augustus, and he grinned. It was not a pleasant grin.

"I say, old fashion-plate,

marked, "do you happen to live in this awful hole?"

"Bai Jove!"

"I'm bound for St. Jim's," explained the stranger coolly. "If you happen to know the place, perhaps you'll tell me how to find it, what?"

"Gweat Scott!"

Arthur Augustus forgot his wrath in his surprise. From Knox's injunction to "be kind" to the new fellow, he had naturally expected Knox minor to be a timid, forlorn youth, who would arrive in a sad state of snivelling home-sickness.

If this were Knox's cousin, then he had been sadly mistaken in his expectations.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "Are you Knox, the new fellow?"

"Eh? Yes, I'm Knox!" was the surprised reply. "Great pip! Don't say you're from St. Jim's?"

"Yaas, I am fwom St. Jim's," said Arthur Augustus, in his most stately manner.

"But I thought St. Jim's was a school for boys, not for tailor's dummies!" ejaculated the new fellow.

"Bai Jove!"

"Run away and play," continued Knox minor. "Go and look at yourself through your silly eyeglass, you footling fop! Go and play draughts on your giddy waistcoat, old—Great pip! What's this object?"

Apparently the new fellow was referring to Baggy Trimble, who came rolling along just then. Having seen no one else resembling a boy alight from the train Baggy evidently guessed the fellow talking to Arthur Augustus was his intended victim.

"Hallo, here you are!" he observed, smiling affectionately at Knox minor. "You're the new kid, what?"

"Another of them!" groaned Knox minor, eyeing the fat and fatuous Baggy in disgust. "Well, what a pair of hopeless freaks! Look here, have you been sent to meet me, too?"

"Eh? Yea, I've come to meet you, old chap," said Baggy Trimble. "But, look here, don't you be cheeky, or—"

"Then it's a practical joke!" snapped Knox minor. "An animated lard-barrel, and a dashed tailor's dummy sent to meet me, eh? We'll see about that, my pippins. Here, I'll deal with you first, old fashion-plate!"

And, raising his fist, the extraordinary new fellow hit the crown of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's best silk hat a smashing blow, sending it down like a crushed concertina over the elegant junior's eyes.

"Yawwoogh!" wailed Arthur Augustus. "Gweat Scott! Oh, you feahful wuffian! I will give you a feahful thwashin' for that!"

For a moment the astounded Arthur Augustus danced about, struggling madly to wrench his crushed hat off his head, and then, finding it useless, he made a furious rush at the new fellow, who stood roaring with laughter.

As he did so, Knox minor, who seemed to be a very cool customer indeed, stepped swiftly aside, and his arms swept round the irate Gussy's slim waist.

The next moment Arthur Augustus was swept up into the air, struggling furiously.

"Yawwoogh! Gweat Scott! Lemme go, you feahful wuffian!" shouted the swell of the Fourth.

"Certainly, old chap!" assented Knox.

He swung the struggling Gussy as if he had been a child, and then let go.

"Yoccoop!" yelled Arthur Augustus. "Oh, cwumbs!"

Crash!

The bewildered Arthur Augustus found himself lying on his back in the compartment of the train in which the new fellow had travelled.

Slam!

The carriage door slammed, and at that identical moment the train began to move on again.

"Oh cwikey!" gasped the swell of the Fourth.

Realising what was happening, Arthur Augustus leaped to his feet, and tore at the carriage door frantically.

But it was held on the outside in a

strong grasp by Knox who was running alongside the moving train with a cheerful grin on his face.

"Leggo!" roared Arthur Augustus. "Oh, gweat Scott! You feahful ass! I shall be taken on to Melford! Oh, you—"

In desperation Arthur Augustus leaned out of the window and struck frantically at the grinning Knox; but Knox ducked deftly, and Arthur Augustus merely succeeded in striking his head a fearful blow against the side of the window as he overbalanced.

The next moment the new fellow dropped from the footboard of the moving train as it reached the end of the platform.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The new fellow doubled up and roared with laughter as the red and furious face of Arthur Augustus appeared suddenly at the window again.

"Good-bye, Bluebell!" he called. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You feahful wascal!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

For another brief instant his red face and mildly waving arms were visible at the carriage window. Then they vanished from sight as the train disappeared round the bend.

And Knox minor roared with laughter, what time Arthur Augustus dropped, panting, on the carriage-seat in a state of mind bordering on the hysterical. Once again the kindly meant but misguided efforts of Arthur Augustus had resulted in dismal failure.

CHAPTER 4.

Baggy's Turn!

O H crumbs! M-m-my hat!" Baggy Trimble stared blankly from the laughing new fellow to the train as it vanished round the bend. He was just as astonished as the hapless Arthur Augustus must have been

And he was also dismayed. He had anticipated an easy victim in the

cousin of Knox of the Sixth. That autocratic prefect had ordered Tom Merry to be kind and gentle to the new fellow, and from that fact Trimble had looked forward to the extraction of an easy loan from him, with a good feed possibly to back up the transaction.

But now he saw it was not going to be an easy matter at all—or a safe one. This new fellow was just a little too cool and self-possessed for Trimble's liking, and certainly far too big and hefty. The way he had handled Arthur Augustus—who was no duffer—was an eye-opener.

"Mum-my hat!" repeated Trimble to himself. "What a giddy coughdrop! I—I think I'd better leave the beast alone! He might try his games on with me, even!"

And Trimble was just about to amble disgustedly away when the new fellow was too quick for him. Apparently he desired more entertainment—at the expense of Trimble this time.

His hand closed on the fat junior's collar, and Trimble wriggled and twisted in vain.

"Leggo!" he gasped, in great alarm. "I—I say, I didn't really come to meet you—not at all! It was a mistake! Leggo!"

"That's right!" said Knox minor pleasantly. "A mistake that isn't going to happen again, old fat man! I'm going to see that it doesn't. Like this!"

"Leggo!" roared Trimble.

He yelled and struggled furiously as the new fellow took a firmer grasp of his collar, and half-dragged, half-lifted him across the platform.

By the railings of the platform a porter had evidently been busy pasting posters on the notice-boards. The porter was not there now—having apparently retired to the porter's room to recuperate from his strenuous efforts in seeing the local train in and out. But the bucket of paste and the posters were still there.

Suddenly, pinning Trimble's arms to his side, the new fellow lifted him up and twirled him over; heavy-weight as Trimble was he handled him with ease.

"Leggo!" roared Trimble. "Oh, criekey! Yarooop!"

Trimble shrieked as he suddenly realised the new fellow's intention.

But Trimble's head was already over the bucket of paste now, and, despite his frantic struggles, the next instant it was fairly in the bucket.

Splish!

The slimy paste splashed over the sides of the bucket as Trimble's bullet head was plunged in.

Three times Trimble's head went under, and then Knox minor dropped Trimble with a chuckle. Trimble flopped to the platform, gurgling and gasping and coughing paste from his eyes and mouth.

Knox minor picked up one of the posters and calmly wrapped it round Trimble's head.

"There you are," he remarked. "Just a little warning, fatty! I knew you hadn't come to meet me out of kindness; you'd some little game on, you fat frog! Well, perhaps that'll teach you not to come any games on Percy Knox. See?"

"Gug-gug-gug! Grooooooh! Oh, criekey! Oh, you—Groooooo!—awful beast! Mum-mum-mummmum!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Percy Knox roared as Trimble sprawled on the platform, with paste streaming down him the while he tore at the clinging poster round his head. Then the new boy planted his foot behind Trimble as he sat there, and, turning away with a chuckle, he picked up his bag and started to leave the station.

But before he had taken a couple of strides a heavy hand dropped on his shoulder and he was swung round.

"Hold on, my pippin!" said a grim voice. "Not so fast! Bullying a St. Jim's chap—what? We'll see about that!"

The new fellow saw three fellows before him, all of them wearing St. Jim's cap. The one who held him in a strong grip was a rugged-featured junior, big and burly. Unlike his two companions, who were grinning broadly at Trimble's

plight, he was looking very grim and serious indeed.

"Hold on!" he repeated sternly. "What d'you mean by bullying a St. Jim's chap, you cheeky cad?"

Knox minor smiled at him.

Are you a St. Jim's chap, then?" he inquired.

"Eh? Yes, of course I am, snorted the rugged-faced youth, who happened to be none other than George Alfred Grundy of the Shell. "I'm Grundy—Grundy of the Shell!"

Grundy spoke as if that stood for a very great deal. The new fellow did not seem impressed.

"Oh, you're Grundy, are you? Son of old Mother Grundy, suppose—what?"

"Why, you—you——" Grundy's face went red, and he spluttered.

"And a St. Jim's chap, too!" repeated Knox, in a tone of wonder.

"Well, I'm blowed! I've only met three St. Jim's chaps up to now, and all three were freaks. The first had a chunk of glass in his eye, and was dressed like a tailor's dummy; the second was this fat freak here; and you're the third, Grundy. But you're the biggest freak of the lot, old chap!"

Wilkins and Gunn chuckled; but their leader did not chuckle. He almost foamed at the mouth.

"Well," he spluttered—"well, you— you cheeky outsider! Put your dashed fists up, you rotter!"

"Certainly, old chap," said Knox.

He lifted his fists up hard; one of them caught Grundy under the chin, and the other caught him a fearful thump in the chest.

"Yarooooop!" roared Grundy.

He staggered back, gasping, releasing his grasp on the new fellow as he did so.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Wilkins and Gunn; though they were far from approving such treatment of their leader they could not help roaring.

"That what you mean?" inquired Knox innocently.

George Alfred did not answer in words, but in deeds. He rushed at the

new fellow like a mad bull, his rugged face red with wrath.

Smack!

"Yooop!"

Bump!

It was not Knox, but Grundy who was down; somehow Grundy's wildly waving fists were swept aside, and a fist hard as iron took him under the chin, sending him down on the platform with a heavy thump.

He sat there dazedly, the crimson streaming from his nose.

"Ow-ow!" he gasped. "Oh, crumbs! Oh, just you wait, you rotten outsider!"

For a moment they were at it hammer and tongs.

What followed was rather an eye-opener to Wilkins and Gunn. Grundy was a burly fellow, and though far from being a skilful boxer he certainly was a hefty fighter.

But the new fellow handled him with seeming ease. He was obviously a very rough handful, and his methods of fighting were none too merciful. His face was hard now, and his eyes glittered.

Again and again Grundy went crashing down, and at last he stayed down, whacked to the wide.

"Chuck it, Grundy, old chap!" called Wilkins. "The cad's too good for you!"

"Grooogh! Oh, my hat! I—I'll smash him!" panted Grundy.

Game yet, the burly Shell fellow tried to stagger to his feet again; but he fell back gasping.

"He's licked!" jeered Knox, with an ugly grin. "What about you chaps?" he added, turning on Wilkins and Gunn. "Like to have a go, what? I've a few good punches left."

But Wilkins and Gunn declined the offer of a few punches. If Grundy had deemed it his business to fight the stranger they saw no reason why they should. He was obviously an ugly customer, and they did not like the look of him—little dreaming as yet that he was the much-discussed new fellow.

"Funky, what?" sneered Knox minor, as Wilkins and Gunn helped Grundy

to his feet. "Well, perhaps this will show you chaps what to expect. My cousin warned me the chaps would be up against me, and I'm going to show I can look after myself."

"Great Scott!" gasped Wilkins, eyeing the new fellow queerly. "You're not Knox's cousin—the new chap?"

"Yes, I am," grinned Knox minor, mopping a cut lip. "Nice surprise for you—what. You expected a muff, I expect—a chap you could take it out of, eh? Well, this'll show you I'm not to be played with. I tell you, I'm going to make things hum at St. Jim's; no flies on me, I might tell you. Got that?"

"You've got plenty of gas, anyway," said Gunn quietly. "But you won't get all your own way at St. Jim's—let us tell you that, you swanky cad!"

The new fellow looked ugly, and he took a threatening step towards Gunn. Gunn did not move.

"So you want a licking, after all?" said Percy Knox.

"No, I don't—not from you," said Gunn calmly. "I'm just giving you a word of advice; you seem to need it badly. You won't find bragging and swanking go down at St. Jim's—whether you can use your rotten fists or not."

The new fellow took another step towards Gunn and raised his fists; but he dropped them again as Wilkins stepped forward by the side of his chin.

"Two to one, eh?" jeered Knox. "Is that how they fight at St. Jim's?"

"Only when dealing with bullying cads!" said Wilkins grimly.

"Oh, all right! I'll remember you!" said Knox savagely.

"You can go and eat coke!" said Wilkins.

The new fellow hesitated, and then he turned away, scowling. Taking a packet from his pocket, he took out a cigarette and lit up with careless and seeming indifference. If his intention was to impress the St. Jim's juniors the act was a failure; Wilkins and Gunn

turned their backs in disgust. The new fellow hesitated again, and then with a shrug he picked up his bag and walked from the platform.

Wilkins and Gunn stared after him, their faces showing eloquently what they thought of Gerald Knox's cousin. Grundy was too busy attending to his many damages to stare, while Trimble was still too busily engaged with the paste and paper that enveloped him.

"Well, my hat!" remarked Gunn, with a low whistle. "So—so that's Knox's cousin! What a blessed specimen! That merchant's booked for trouble at St. Jim's, Wilky!"

"And the cad will cause plenty of trouble, too!" said Wilkins grimly. "Jingo! He can scrap, though! But—but he's a howling cad!"

"Yes, rather! A smoky cad, too—like his blessed cousin! Great pip! What will the fellows think about him? Feeling better now, Grundy?"

Grundy, who was leaning up against the railings, ceased mopping his nose and blinked at his chums out of a rapidly closing eye.

"The—the—cad!" he gasped. "The awful rotter! He's—he's actually licked me—you know! What do you fellows think about that? But you wait—you just wait until I get a go at him again. I'll show him—the swanking cad!"

"You'd better leave him alone, Grundy," said Gunn grimly. "A fellow like that's best left alone. What started it, Trimble?"

Trimble groaned as he rubbed at the paste in his hair. The fat junior had succeeded in getting rid of most of the sticky paper; but he still looked a fearful sight for all that.

"Ow!" he groaned. "The—the awful cad! He went for me just for nothing at all, and did this to me! After me coming all this way to meet him, the ungrateful beast! Grooogh!"

"But I thought D'Arcy was meeting him," said Wilkins. "I heard Tom Merry say—"

"So he did!" gasped Trimble, with

another groan. "But that beast—him all the way to Melford!"

"What?"

"Played a rotten trick on him, you know," mumbled Trimble. "He bashed Gussy's hat in, and then he shoved him in the train just as it was starting!"

"And the train's taken D'Arcy off to Melford?" gasped Gunn.

"Yes."

"Oh, my hat!"

Despite their feelings towards the new fellow, Wilkins and Gunn could not help grinning.

"So he's a joker as well as a swanking cad!" said Wilkins. "My hat, I can see high old times ahead! But—but fancy poor old Gussy getting that for looking after the new chap so kindly."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gunn. He could not help it; the thought of the well-meaning Arthur Augustus being whirled away to Melford was certainly funny. And Wilkins joined him. But Grundy snorted.

"It's nothing to laugh at, you silly asses!" he snorted. "That cheeky, swanking rotter wants putting in his place, and I'm the man to do it!"

"But he's just licked you," murmured Wilkins.

"That was a fluke!" snapped George Alfred, setting his jaw squarely. "I admit the cad can punch, and he certainly licked me for the moment. But next time he won't; next time I'm going to hammer him to a jelly. Come on!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Wilkins, in alarm. "Aren't we booked for the pictures in Wayland? Train will be in in a sec, you ass!"

"Blow the pictures!" snorted Grundy. "I'm going after that swanking cad, and I'm going to lick him this time. Cheeky rotter! Come on!"

"But look here—"

"Come on!" roared Grundy ciously.

He started off for the platform exit, and Wilkins and Gunn looked eloquently at each other, and groaned as they followed. Like the rest of the juniors at St. Jim's, they had antici-

pated trouble when it became known that a cousin of Knox of the Sixth was coming into the Shell; they knew now for a certainty that there was going to be trouble—for Knox minor himself as well as for others.

CHAPTER 5.
Knox Insists!

"STOP!"

"What the dickens——"

Tom Merry, who was bearing down on goal with the ball at his toes, stopped short in his stride and glanced round.

Footer practice was in full swing on Little Side, between picked sides of School House and New House fellows, skippered by Figgins and Tom Merry respectively. Both sides were playing up well, and, so far, there had been no score; but when that authoritative shout rang out, Tom Merry had certainly looked like scoring.

That shout did it, however.

As Tom stopped, George Figgins nipped in like a flash and lifted the ball almost from his toes. The next moment the New House forwards were speeding towards the School House goal with it.

"Blow!" panted Tom Merry, while a howl went up from the School House fellows.

"Tom, you ass!" bawled Monty Lowther.

"Merry, you footling fathead!" yelled Talbot.

Tom Merry groaned and nodded towards the touchline. The tall form of a senior was just starting across the ground. It was Gerald Knox. Tom Merry had recognised the voice, and he had stopped, guessing at once what Knox was after.

"Blow him!" snorted Lowther.

"Let him rip!" snapped Talbot angrily. "What the thump does he want chipping in like——"

"Look out, chaps!" yelled Lowther.

"On the ball, Tommy, you fathead!"

Herries and Manners, the School

House backs, had managed to stop Figgins' rush, and as the ball came swinging upfield again Talbot and Lowther made a rush for it.

Talbot trapped it neatly, and, being challenged by Kerr and Redfern, he got rid of it by swinging it back to Tom Merry.

"Wake up, Merry!"

It was a howl from all round the field, and Tom Merry suddenly woke up. Redfern and Lawrence were bearing down on him in a combined rush, and Tom Merry trapped the ball, steadied himself, and swung round and kicked.

His intention was to send the ball out to his wing, but he had forgotten that Gerald Knox of the Sixth was bearing up behind him.

Biff!

Like a shot from a gun the whizzing, muddy football hurtled full into Knox's chest, and he sat down with a heavy thump on the muddy ground.

"Yoooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Had the match been an important fixture that roar would have probably been a roar of rage; as it was, it was a roar of laughter from the spectators. Only the School House footballers themselves were angry.

"Yah! Get off the field, Knox!"

"You clumsy chump!"

"Groooooogh!"

Gerald Knox sat on the muddy ground and gasped and glared round him.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom Merry.

"Sorry, Knox! It was an accident."

The prefect staggered to his feet; his face was red, and he was in a towering rage.

"Accident!" he hissed, glowering at Tom Merry. "I'll give you accident, you little sweep! You heard my shout, and you knew I was coming up behind. Hang you! I'll make you sit up for this, you little cad!"

Lefevre of the Fifth, who was refereeing the match, came hurrying up to the group.

"It was your own fault, Knox!" he snapped. "Dash it all! What d'you want buttin' in on a match like this for?"

"You shut up!" snarled Knox. "This young hound did it purposely! I'll make him smart for it! Merry, get off the field!"

"Here, hold on!" said Lefevre, flushing. "You can't come those games here, Knox! It was your own fault. Get off the field yourself, and let Merry carry on!"

"You seem to forget that I'm a Sixth-Former and a prefect!" said Knox furiously.

"You never give anyone the chance to forget that," said the Fifth Form skipper, his lip curling. "That's no reason why you should stop a footer match and order fellows off like this!"

"Merry knows why I am ordering him to leave the field!" gritted Knox. "I ordered him to go to Rylcombe Station this afternoon. He's seen fit to disobey the order of a prefect and to play footer instead. I'm saying nothing about his assaulting me just now—"

"Rubbish! That was an accident—brought on by your own clumsy interference!" said Lefevre hotly. "I know nothing about your giving Merry orders, and I care less. But I know you've stopped the dashed match, and now you're holding it up."

"Confound the match!" was Knox's furious retort. "Think I'm going to allow a fag to disobey me like this? Merry, leave this field at once and go to the station. I shall report the matter to Railton if you don't."

"Don't go, Merry!"

"Let him go hang!"

There was a murmur of voices, but Tom Merry set his lips. He was not afraid of Knox reporting him to the Housemaster on such a matter—far from it. But he did not wish to cause trouble between Knox and Lefevre—or cause trouble at all. After all, he had really promised Knox that he would go in the first place.

"Look here, Knox," he said quietly,

"there's no earthly reason why I should have to go instead of anyone else, and you know it. D'Arcy has gone to the station in my place. He'll do, I suppose?"

"No, he will not do!" said Knox, showing his teeth. "I've ordered you to go, Merry, and you'd better go. And you'll come to me for six over this accident, as you call it."

"It was an accident, Knox; I'm willing to be reported to Railton for that."

Knox bit his lip; he certainly did not desire to report that matter to Mr. Railton—far from it. There were too many witnesses to prove that it was an accident.

"I can deal with the matter myself," he said, his eyes glinting. "Are you going to the station or not, Merry?"

Tom Merry nodded slowly.

"Oh, all right!" he said. "Talbot you'd better get hold of Glyn to fill up, if Figgy agrees; he's about the ground somewhere."

Talbot looked angry, but he nodded, and Tom left the ground, with a good many remarks—uncomplimentary either to himself or Knox—ringing in his ears.

He hurried straight to the changing-room, and was very quickly changed and out again, and within ten minutes he was striding at a good pace for the station. He took the path through the woods—a short cut—realising that Arthur Augustus would be almost certain to bring the new fellow that way, for it was already past time for the train to arrive.

Tom was savagely annoyed at having to leave the footer, after all, and he was not feeling at all kindly disposed towards the new fellow, which was scarcely surprising in the circumstances. But he meant to do as he had promised, and he was anxious to get the job over in order to get back to see the finish of the match.

As he reached the village green, however, he halted. A kick-about match was in progress on the green between two sides of village youths. Tom Merry's

face cleared, and he grinned as he recognised Grimes & Co.

Grimes was the grocer's boy from the village shop, and he and his stalwarts were great friends with Tom Merry & Co.—friends and sporting rivals.

For some moments Tom watched with interest a stiff tussle round the ball, and then he was just moving on again when a voice called to him:

"Hallo, you! Hold on!"

Tom turned and stared. Standing by the rails, also watching the villagers, was a youth of his own age or near, but much taller and wearing a lounge suit and a bowler hat. Tom had noticed him as he came along, but it had been merely a casual glance.

It was Percy Knox, who was now on his way from the station, though Tom Merry was far from guessing that.

"Did you address me?" asked Tom.

"Yes, old bean—I did address your giddy royal Highness!" said the new fellow, without removing his cigarette from his lips. "You're a St. Jim's chap, I see."

Tom Merry eyed him rather coldly. The supercilious glance and the cigarette did not appeal to Tom, nor did his mode of address, which was certainly irritating.

"I'm a St. Jim's chap, right enough," he said briefly.

"Good! You're not such a freak as the other St. Jim's chaps I've met so far," grinned the new fellow. "You look pretty hefty, too, I must say. Are you fairly strong, might I ask?"

Tom stared still more. He wondered if the stranger was a trifle "loose" in the head.

"I think I'm fairly strong," he answered, smiling.

"Good!" remarked the stranger again coolly. "Then you'll be able to carry this dashed bag to St. Jim's for me. I was just hoping a chap like you would blow along. Here you are!"

"Well, I'm thumped!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "You—you checky rotter! You can go and eat coke and chop

chips, my friend! And if you want silly nose punched—"

Tom Merry paused suddenly, the truth dawning in on him.

"Great pip!" he exclaimed, eyeing the cool Percy curiously. "You're not the new fellow, are you—Percy Knox?"

Knox nodded with a chuckle.

"I'm the very chap!" he said. "Surprised—what?"

"Yes, in one way, though not in another," said Tom calmly. "I certainly didn't expect such a cool customer; but I did expect a smoky rotter, or something of the sort! Better chuck that fag away, my pippin! Smoking isn't allowed at St. Jim's."

"Asking for a licking?" asked Percy Knox pleasantly.

"Not from you—nor would I expect one," said Tom, his lip curling. "Look here, you've got a trifle too much bounce for a new fellow. I'd advise you to sing small for a time at St. Jim's, or you're booked for heaps of trouble!"

"Thanks no end!" yawned Percy Knox. "As it happens, I'm pretty chock-full of advice already. My dear cousin in the Sixth has already primed me with advice—heaps of it. He advised me for one thing to mind my eye at St. Jim's, as the fellows would be up against me on account of him. I'm going to mind my eye. I've already licked one fellow at the station, and put it across two others. I'm ready to start on you if you like. I might tell you that I'm going to make things hum at your rotten school!"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed, but he was more disgusted than angry. He faced the new fellow calmly.

CHAPTER 6.

Looking for Trouble!

"SO that's your programme, is it?" he said quietly. "Well, if your programme ends up in fireworks for you, it's your own look-out, I suppose. Look here"—Tom suddenly

remembered Arthur Augustus—"what's happened to D'Arcy, the fellow who came to the station to meet you?"

"You mean the walking fashion-plate with the eyeglass?"

"Yes," said Tom, smiling grimly.

"Blessed if I know. I just shoved him in the train I came out of, and off he went with his topper bashed over his eyes."

"You—you shoved D'Arcy in the train gong on to Melford?" gasped Tom.

"Yes. The other freak who met me—a fat sort of worm—I ducked in a bucket of paste and wrapped a poster round him. The other fellow—fellow with a face like a broken brick, who said his name was Grundy, is in the hospital by now, I expect. He asked me for some trouble, and, being an obliging sort of chap, I gave him some."

"Phew!"

Tom gazed blankly at the new fellow. So this was the chap Knox major had asked him to be kind to! Tom fancied he saw all sorts of trouble ahead. Certainly, he was a smoky cad and a braggart; but—but he was evidently also a bit of a coughdrop—that much was clear.

"Well," Tom managed to get out—"well, you've made a pretty good start, anyway, Knox."

"I meant to make a good start, and go on as I've started," said Knox minor meaningly. "And now, my curly-topped friend, are you going to carry my bag to St. Jim's, or have I to start on you?"

Tom Merry set his lips; the fellow was obviously out for all the trouble he could find; but Tom had no intention of satisfying him so far as he was concerned.

"Look here, Knox," he said calmly. "I happen to be junior skipper of the School House, and it's up to me to give you advice, whether you want it or not; you certainly need it. You may be a funny joker, and you may be able to use your fists a bit. But too much of that won't go down at St. Jim's, I warn you. You'll find plenty of fellows who are

handier with their fists than Grundy is."

"Thanks, old curly-napper!"

Tom Merry flushed and bit his lip. The fellow was clearly not to be advised, Tom began to lose his temper a bit.

"As for carrying your bag, you cheeky cad," he snapped, "I'll see you hanged first! If it wasn't your first day, I'd mop up the thumping earth with you—or try to. But I'll show you to St. Jim's for all that. Your cousin ordered me to meet you and bring you here, and I shall carry out his orders. Come on!"

He was about to start away when a football dropped just in front of Tom, and outside the rails of the green. At the same moment Grimes, with Pilcher and another villager at his heels, came racing up to the rails.

"All serene, Grimey!" called Tom cheerily. "I'll see to it!"

He ran after the bouncing ball, and, trapping it smartly, lifted his boot to kick it back to the village youths beyond the white-painted rails.

But even as he did so a foot was interposed, and the ball was neatly and deftly hooked off his toes.

It was Percy Knox, and the new fellow chuckled as he juggled with the bouncing ball.

"How's that?" he grinned. "I think I'll see to it, not you, old curly-nut!"

With that Knox minor kicked the ball; but not in the direction of the players, however. It was a pretty dropping shot, a shot Tom would have admired at any other time, and it dropped with a soft splash in the exact centre of the village duck-pond.

"Well, you mean cad!" exclaimed Tom, flushing with anger.

"Good shot, what?" grinned Knox. "Now, let's see those scrubby little beasts fetch it out again!"

Just then the "scrubby little beasts"—as Knox minor termed Grimes & Co.—came ducking under the rails, their faces red and furious.

"Here, what did you do that for, you rotter?" shouted Pilcher.

"That chap a pal of yours, Master Merry?" asked Grimes, his eyes gleaming.

"Not at all, said Tom promptly. "He's no pal of mine, Grimey."

"That's good enough, Master Merry," said Grimes grimly. "He's kicked our bloom'n' ball in, and he's got to get it out again!"

"That 'e 'as!" bawled Sidney Pilcher. "If he don't get it out'er that pond, in 'e goes after it!"

The villagers surrounded Percy Knox in a yelling swarm. He stood his ground, and simply stared at them coolly and sneeringly. Smoky rotter and braggart as he was, he certainly did not lack pluck or nerve—or so thought Tom Merry.

"Better get the ball for them!" snapped Tom. "You're for it, if you don't; these chaps won't stand any nonsense!"

"Do I look the sort of chap to funk this dashed swarm of hooligans?" sneered Percy. "I'll be hanged if I fetch it!"

"You won't fetch you rott " yelled Grimes.

"What was that you called me?" said Knox pleasantly.

"A rotter!" shouted Grimes excitedly. "And you are one to kick that there ball like that just for nothing, like. You — Ow!"

Smack!

It was a punch like the kick of a mule, and it caught Grimes clean under the chin, lifting him back against the rails with a crash. The grocer's boy yelped, and slid down to the ground, holding his chin.

But he was on his feet again the next second, his blue eyes blazing. With a rush he went for Percy Knox, who laughed and put his hands up.

"Hold on, Grimey!" called Tom Merry; he saw at a glance that Grimes, plucky as he was, stood no chance against Knox, who was nearly a head taller, and obviously hefty to boot. But Pilcher and his comrades had already seen that, too.

They rushed forward, and the fuming Grimes was hauled back, protesting angrily.

"Let me get at the rotter!" he yelled.

"No fear!" said Sidney Pilcher. "He looks a bit too good for you, Grimey. We'll deal with the sweep. Collar him!"

"What-ho!"

There was a rush of village youths, and, despite the fact that he sent several lads reeling away with hefty punches, Percy Knox was collared and held fast.

The new fellow was looking a trifle uneasy now; he had obviously not anticipated such a situation, though he might have expected it.

"Back me up, Merry!" he panted. "We'll soon smash this rabble between us!"

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Tom Merry. "You fairly asked for it, you silly ass! If you don't want to get it, you've only got to get that ball for them."

"I'll be dashed if I will! Let me go, you howling cads!"

"Not likely!" grinned Sidney Pilcher. "You got to get that ball out'er that pond first."

"That's the programme."

Knox minor glared round him desperately. All the footballers were on the spot now, and he was surrounded by angry, threatening faces. Then his glance fell on the duckpond, and he shuddered. It was quite a large pond, and it was covered with slimy weeds and green scum. In the centre reposed the ball.

"Look here," he gasped, "you can easily get your ball by throwing stones at it, you low cads!"

"Easily," assented Pilcher. "But we're not going to get it, see? That's your job. You can chuck stones at it if you like, but you've got to get it. If you don't, we'll sling you in arter it, neck and crop!"

"Better get it," advised Tom Merry.

"Hang you! Shut up!" snarled Knox furiously.

The new fellow's jaw set s

The duckpond did not look at all inviting; but on the other hand, the thought of giving in to the villagers—and in front of Tom Merry—made him grit his teeth with rage.

As if he had made up his mind not to do it, he started to struggle furiously.

"Help me, you funky rotter!" he panted to Tom Merry. "I'm a St. Jim's fellow now, aren't I? Back up your own school, hang you!"

"Get that ball for them, and I'll back you up soon enough," said Tom coolly. "Right's right, and you're in the wrong, Knox."

"Hang you!"

"Rats!" said Tom.

The new fellow ceased to struggle suddenly, his eyes gleaming.

"All right, you sweeps!" he snapped.

"Let me go and I'll get it."

"You'll get that there ball back?" demanded Pilcher.

"Yes."

The village lads let him go instantly; they had had plenty of dealings with St. Jim's fellows, and they did not dream of suspecting the fellow now that they knew he was a St. Jim's chap.

"Get it, then!" grunted Pilcher.

Percy Knox, breathing hard, picked up his bowler hat from the ground. He glanced from his bag to Tom Merry, and then he started down to the margin of the duckpond.

When a yard or so from the water he turned suddenly and took to his heels.

So unexpected was his treacherous action that the villagers and Tom Merry simply stared after him for a moment, then a perfect howl of wrath went up from Grimes & Co.

"After 'im!" roared Grimey.

There was a rush of the village footballers after the new fellow. But he had a good start now, and he could run. And he would undoubtedly have escaped, but for three St. Jim's fellows who came along just then in the distance.

They were Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn. In his desperation, Percy had not thought of direction, and he had

fled back the way he had come from the station.

They stared as they saw the flying figure pelting towards them.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Grundy. "It—it's that rotter! Stop him, you men!"

Grundy jumped out to meet the flying figure, his jaw set grimly. What Knox had been doing to get that yelling swarm of villagers after him he did not trouble to wonder. Grundy wanted to meet Knox minor again, and he wanted to meet him badly. Grundy was still feeling sore and bruised all over after the terrible hammering he had had at the hands of the new fellow; but Grundy was never satisfied—he never knew when he was beaten or when he had had enough.

"Let the rotter rip, Grundy!" snorted Gunn.

"Help me stop him!" yelled Grundy in reply. "Here he comes! Got you!"

Crash, crash!

Grundy certainly had "got him." Both he and Knox minor crashed together, and then they rolled over, struggling furiously. But they did not struggle for long. Just then Grimes & Co. pounded up, and they grasped Knox and fairly wrenched him from Grundy.

Grundy scrambled up wrathfully.

"Here, hold on, Grimey, you cheeky ass!" he snorted, panting. "Let him go!"

"Look 'ere, Master Grundy——"

"Let him go!" bawled Grundy. "Stand aside and make a ring, you village chaps. I'm going to smash that cheeky rotter to little bits!"

"Oh, are you?" gasped Pilcher. "My heye!"

He was evidently surprised at Grundy's remarks, but he was not impressed.

"He's licked me once—by a fluke," explained Grundy. "But it won't happen again. Make a ring, you fellows. Tom Merry, you can referee."

"Thanks," grunted Tom.

"Hold on!" snorted Grundy. "You

ain't goin' to fight 'im yet, Master Grundy; he's gotter get our ball outer that duckpond where he kicked it, the bloomin' sneak!"

"Eh? Did the cad kick your ball in there?" demanded Grundy, glancing towards the pond.

"That 'e did, just for nothin' at all!"

"Is that right, Merry?" demanded Grundy magisterially.

"That's right," grinned Tom, nodding.

"Well, that's all right, then," said George Alfred. "You can go ahead with it, kids. I'll lick him after he's got your ball out."

"Look here——" hissed Knox.

But Percy was not listened to. He was collared by the irate villagers, and he was propelled and dragged towards the pond, fighting and struggling furiously. He gave Tom Merry a bitter glance as he was dragged away.

"Serves him right!" snorted Grundy to Tom. "That cad needs a lesson—too cheeky by half, kid."

"Like you," assented Tom.

"Look here——" began Grundy. But he stopped and hurried after the crowd, eager to see what happened. Tom also followed. They found Knox struggling madly at the edge of the pond in the grasp of several villagers, all of whom showed the marks of Knox's fists on their faces. Undoubtedly Knox minor was game.

"In with 'im, if he won't go on 'is wn!" yelled Sidney Pilcher.

"Ere, 'ere!"

Apparently Percy had no intention of wading in on his own, however. He fought and kicked savagely, but the villagers were too many for him, and suddenly there sounded a heavy splash.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "He's in!"

Knox minor was "in" right enough. Propelled from behind, he had stumbled suddenly, and an unexpected push from behind had done the rest.

He sprawled face downwards in a couple of feet of slimy mud and water.

For a moment he floundered there, struggling desperately, and then, as he scrambled to his feet, a shout of laughter went up.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The new fellow was a most awful sight. Green scum and slimy weeds hung from him in festoons. He gasped and panted, his face—or what could be seen of it—was fiendish with uncontrollable rage.

"It were your own fault!" gasped Grimes, looking a trifle alarmed. "If you'd tried to get that there ball yourself, this wouldn't 'ave happened."

"You—you—you——"

Knox minor spluttered and gasped incoherently.

It had certainly been his own fault. If he had waded in instead of struggling, it certainly would not have happened.

But this was small comfort to the new fellow. He struggled ashore, leaving his bowler hat floating on the pond. He was dripping with water, and literally shaking, partly with the cold of the water, partly with rage.

"Now you can 'ave him to yourself, Master Grundy," grinned Sidney Pilcher, who did not seem to share the good-natured Grimes' alarm. "We won't insist on 'is gettin' the ball out arter this. We'll chuck stones at it and get it ourselves."

"Go it, Grundy!" called Wilkins, with a chuckle. "Let him have it hot and strong, old chap."

But Grundy's enthusiastic desire to "lick" the new fellow fled as he gazed at the slime-covered object he now presented. Not for worlds would he have tackled him in his present state.

"No fear!" he grinned. "Great Scott! He fairly hums! Let's get away, you chaps, I think I'll lick the rotter another time."

"I think I should," grinned Wilkins.

And he and Gunn followed Grundy as that great man strode away after a grinning glance at the hapless new

fellow, who was wringing the water from his clothes.

Tom Merry hesitated, and then he stopped.

In a way, the good-natured skipper of the School House juniors felt sorry for Knox minor, or for the plight he was in. At all events, it had been his own fault from beginning to end without a doubt. But he was a new fellow for all that, and Tom wondered if he had done right in refusing to do anything to stop the villagers. A word from him, he knew, would have made Grimes & Co. get the ball themselves, though they would have done so reluctantly.

Moreover, Tom had come to see the new fellow safely to St. Jim's.

"Better get a move on, Knox," he said quietly, trying to suppress a smile. "No good kicking against the pricks like this. It was your own fault, and you can't say I didn't warn you."

"Shut up!" hissed Knox.

He glanced about him, evidently looking for his bag.

"I'll see to your bag now," said Tom. "Come on, let's get to St. Jim's."

The junior picked up the suitcase and started to walk away. Knox minor followed, his eyes glinting with the fury that consumed him. He did not look round at the grinning faces of the villagers. The two tramped off the village green, and reached Rylcombe Lane without a word being spoken, Tom keeping a few yards distant from his companion. This was really necessary from Tom's point of view—and sense of smell.

Knox minor suddenly stopped.

Tom Merry glanced at him. He saw at a glance that the new fellow meant further trouble.

You—you sneaking, howling cad!" hissed Knox minor, through white lips. "I knew I should hate you the moment I set eyes on your smug face, you snivelling sweep! You put those low brutes up to it all. I know who you are now" My cousin wrote about

you. I'm going to give you the hiding of your life for this!"

"Look here——" began Tom.

"You refused to back me up—you encouraged them, you rotter!" said Knox furiously. "I blame you for it all, Merry! Hang you—hang you! Put your dashed fists up, and we'll have it out now. You're top dog at St. Jim's, I believe; you're not going to be top dog now I've come! Put your fists up!"

"Look here, you silly ass——" Tom was beginning again; but he halted and sprang back, for the new fellow was coming on with a rush.

Tom hesitated for the briefest part of a second. Then he dropped the bag and bolted, pelting off schoolwards as hard as he could pelt. Knox followed, his boots squeaking dismally as he ran. But he soon gave it up; he was not in a suitable state for running. He stopped, and then he returned for his bag, and, picking it up, he started after Tom Merry at a walk, his face showing the savage state of his mind.

But Tom Merry did not stop running. He did not funk a scrap with the new chap by any sort of means, but he certainly did funk coming into close contact with him in his present state.

CHAPTER 7.

Chucked Out!

BEFORE tea all the Lower School was buzzing with the circumstances under which Percy Knox had arrived at St. Jim's.

The story, naturally enough, caused no little amusement, and no little alarm.

Certainly Percy had made rather a bad start for a new fellow. In the ordinary way new boys "blew in" blissfully disregarded by the "old men," who had other important matters to occupy their attention. But, being the cousin of the most unpopular prefect at St. Jim's, made all the difference in the case of Percy Knox.

The Lower School had looked upon his coming with many misgivings. In

the past Gerald Knox had managed very well to make himself decidedly unpleasant to the juniors of the Shell and Fourth; with the advent of a relative who would be in constant touch with the juniors, they felt it more than likely he would become intolerable. They had taken it for granted that a relative of Knox' must, in the nature of things, be a smaller edition of him.

Now they had good reason to believe that their forebodings were only too well-founded.

Monty Lowther and Manners heard the news as they came off the footer field, and they hurried to their study immediately after changing. As they expected, they found Tom Merry there.

He gave them a feeble grin as they tramped in, ruddy and breathless, from the footer field.

"You've heard the news, then?" asked Tom, noting their excited faces. "What d'you think about it, chaps?"

"Just as we expected!" said Manners. "There's going to be trouble with that merchant, Tommy."

"Tell us all about it," suggested Lowther.

Tom told of his afternoon's adventures.

"Phew!" whistled Lowther, as he finished. "What a giddy coughdrop! He's made a good start, and no mistake. Thank goodness he got it in the neck over the duckpond affair, anyway. And he's a smoky rotter, too."

"Seems a regular goer by the way he talked," grunted Tom.

"Can't be much good at sports, or anything, then," said Lowther.

"I don't know that he's a duffer—it's pretty clear he isn't," said Tom, frowning. "It takes a good man to lick old Grundy in a rough-and-tumble scrap. And he's jolly strong. I've had good proof of that already."

"That's why he wanted you to meet him!" growled Manners. "I noticed how Knox grinned when he told you to be kind to his dashed cousin. He was grinning up his sleeve when he said that."

"He wanted me to get a licking from him, I expect," said Tom. "I think I see his game. He thought——"

Tom was interrupted. There came an authoritative rap at the door, and it opened revealing Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House. Behind was none other than Percy Knox. There was a smirk on the new fellow's face.

Tom Merry set his lips.

It occurred to him at once that the visit meant trouble—that either Knox had reported the matter, after all, or that the new fellow had "sneaked" to the Housemaster.

But it proved to be nothing of the kind; it proved to be something far worse from the point of view of the Terrible Three.

"Ah, Merry," exclaimed Mr. Railton, motioning Knox to follow him into the room. "I believe you have already made the acquaintance of Knox, who joins the school to-day. His cousin, Knox of the Sixth, tells me you were kind enough to meet him at the station."

Tom Merry stared—his chums stared. From Mr. Railton's genial words it was quite clear that he knew nothing of what had happened that afternoon. Apparently Knox senior had told no details; possibly he had deemed it best not to tell any; the story was not to the credit of his young cousin.

"Yes, sir," stammered Tom. "I—I met him at the station."

"Very good!" said the Housemaster, smiling. "For the present Knox will join you in Study No. 10 until I can make fresh arrangements. He will probably be allotted to one of the other studies in a few days."

"Oh!"

It was an exclamation from the Terrible Three, and it held a world of meaning.

They were flabbergasted, and utterly dismayed. The problem of which study Knox minor would be allotted to had not even occurred to them. It was a staggering blow. Even had the fellow

been a decent sort they would hardly have been pleased.

"We—we're rather cramped in here already, sir!" Tom Merry managed to stutter.

"I am afraid that is the case with most of the junior studies just now, Merry," said Mr. Railton. "It is only for a few days, however. I trust you will make the new boy as comfortable as possible, and that you will all get on well together."

And with that the Housemaster took his departure. Tom Merry let him go without attempting to make further protest. In any case, there had been a note of finality in Mr. Railton's tone, and he knew it would have been useless.

There was a silence in the study—an uncomfortable silence for the Terrible Three. They looked at each other rather eloquently. Knox minor came farther into the study and grinned at them coolly, and evidently quite unconcerned at their looks.

"Rotten hole, this!" he remarked blandly. "Like a blessed pigsty, in fact!"

The Terrible Three glared; they were very proud of their cosy little study, and the new fellow could not have said anything more calculated to get their backs up. As a matter of fact, Tom Merry saw from the grin on his hard face that he had said it purposely to offend them.

"So you think it's like a pigsty?" said wther, an ugly gleam in his eye.

I do—beastly little show!"

"Then it will just suit you—the right place, in fact!" said Lowther grimly. "So make yourself at home."

"I'm going to," said Percy Knox, with a grin. "You'll find I'm a fellow who likes, and generally gets, his own way. Got that?"

Tom Merry said nothing. With the changing of his clothes, Percy Knox had evidently changed his attitude somewhat. But Tom felt he preferred him showing bitter animosity and

hatred than this grinning, superiority.

"We might as well come to some understanding at once now I'm booked for this study," said Percy coolly. "I've already met Merry; we've got a little matter to settle yet. I'm going to settle it, but it can wait for the present."

"It's no need to wait," said Tom Merry, his eyes glinting. "I'm ready to settle it any time, you swanking cad!"

"So am I," agreed Percy calmly. "But I want my tea just now. I rather got the worst of that affair this afternoon, I admit. But I don't often get the worst of things, I might tell you. Now, look here, I'm booked for this study, and I mean to make myself comfortable here. Got that?"

"Rats!"

"If it's uncomfortable for me," went on Knox, unheeding. "I shall make it dashed uncomfortable for you chaps! I'm not the fellow to stand nonsense from anybody. Start any games, and I'll make it dashed hot for you!"

"Will—will you?" ejaculated Tom.

"Yes. You may be a thundering big man here, Merry; but you're neither going to boss me in this study nor out of it. See?"

"I see," said Tom. "Your idea is to be boss here—is that it?"

"Something like that," assented the new fellow calmly. "I like being top dog—and usually I am."

"You've got a good opinion of yourself, haven't you?" asked Manners, with heavy sarcasm.

"Oh, quite!" agreed Percy grimly. "It's backed up by ability, though."

"And brag!" added Lowther. The new fellow looked at him.

"Say that again!" he said.

Lowther said it again, a grin on his face.

Smack!

Knox minor's fist smacked home under Lowther's chin. It was a powerful drive and lifted the astonished Lowther clean off his feet. He fell with

a terrific crash and clatter into the fender.

There was a silence.

"That," remarked Percy Knox coolly, "is just a hint of what to expect when you come up against me. Now, perhaps, you'll— Here, none of that! One at a— Ow!"

But Tom Merry and Manners ignored his shout; they came on two at a time. Tom Merry's fist hit the new fellow in the mouth, making him yelp.

"Out with the howling cad!" snapped Tom Merry, his eyes blazing. "We'll show him whether he can come those bullying games here! Pitch him out on his dashed neck!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Hold on!" yelled Knox.

But Tom Merry and Manners drove him round the table, and he defended himself desperately. Then Lowther jumped up and joined them. Big and strong as he was, the new fellow had no chance whatever against the Terrible Three—who had not got their nickname for nothing. His fists were struck aside, and strong hands gripped him and whirled him towards the door.

"Out with him!" panted Tom.

He released one hand and tore the door open. Knox minor, struggling and fighting like a wild cat, flew through the doorway and fell crashing in the passage.

The Terrible Three returned to their study, and closed and locked the door after them. They had scarcely done so when a terrific hammering and kicking sounded on the panels. Evidently Knox minor was not done yet.

The juniors ignored it and started to get tea ready. They had had enough of Knox minor for a bit. But suddenly they heard a knock and the well-known voice of Mr. Linton.

"Merry, open this door at once!"

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Tom Merry.

He opened the door. Mr. Linton came in, with Knox minor, looking very

much the worse for wear and with a savage face, behind him.

"Merry," exclaimed Mr. Linton, "I understand that you refuse to admit Knox to this study. Are you aware that he has been placed with you temporarily?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then cease this foolishness and allow him to enter!" said the master of the Shell sharply. "I am surprised at you, Merry! This is scarcely the way I should have expected you to treat a newcomer to St. Jim's!"

"Very well, sir."

The master hesitated, as if about to say more; and then, with rather a sharp look at Tom Merry, he whisked out of the room.

"Done you, after all!" hissed Knox minor, his eyes glinting spitefully. "Here I am again, and here I mean to stay! Any more— Here, where—"

"You can stay," said Tom Merry, his lip curling, "but we shan't stay! Come on, you fellows, we'll invite ourselves to tea with Blake and his lot. Knox can have the pigsty, as he terms it, to himself!"

And with that Tom led his chums from the room, while Knox minor glared after them, his face showing his savage rage.

CHAPTER 8.

Poor Old Gussy!

"POOR old Gussy!" said Jack Blake. And there was a chuckle in Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage.

Blake & Co. were at tea there, and with them were the Terrible Three—only one member of the two famous Co.'s being absent. And that was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

There was a glowing fire in the study, and a most delicious smell of fried sausages there also. There were no signs of sausages, however, for the company had just finished tea.

"Poor old Gussy!" repeated Jack Blake. "But it's really no joke, you fellows. There isn't a train back from Melford before seven, and poor old Gussy will have to hoof it about seven giddy miles."

"He'll be raving!" grinned Lowther. "Thirsting for the new fellow's giddy gore!" added Digby.

"It was a bit thick, though!" grunted Herries. "Gussy isn't the sort to get a fellow's back up—and we know what a cad Knox is. He must have done it out of sheer ill-natured mischief."

"Hard lines for Gussy after tramping there and dropping the footer for the purpose of meeting him."

"Just like Gussy," said Manners.

It certainly was just like Gussy. And, though Tom Merry & Co. could not help smiling at the fate that had befallen Arthur Augustus, they also did not lose sight of the fact that it was a mean trick on the new fellow's part. Gussy was one of the kindest and best-natured fellows going, and they knew he was the last fellow to provoke a stranger.

"He should be back by this time, in any case, I should think," said Blake. "If you fellows have all finished tea, what about strolling down to the gates to wait for him?"

"Right-ho!"

The juniors rose to their feet from the table; but, as they did so, the door opened, and an eyeglass gleamed in the doorway. Behind the eyeglass showed the red, perspiring and decidedly angry features of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Oh, good!" said Blake. "Here he comes!"

"The merry old wanderer!"

Arthur Augustus entered the study; he almost tottered in, and he collapsed immediately into the nearest chair.

"Whacked?" inquired Blake sympathetically.

"Oh, bal Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I am vewy much whacked, deah boy. I have had a most feahful

expewience; I have twamped all the way fwom Melford, you know!"

"We know, old chap!" said Blake.

"Bal Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, starting up. "Then you have heard what that feahful wuffian did to me?"

"Yes; it's all over the place, old chap."

"Oh, dear!" Arthur Augustus went pink and groaned. "Oh, cwumbs! I was hopin' that fwithful wascal would say nothin' about it. Howevah," went on Arthur Augustus, his noble eye gleaming, "they would have got to know, for I intend to give that wottah Knox the thwashin' of his life! I—I—I—"

Arthur Augustus almost exploded in his emotion.

"Never mind, old chap!" murmured Lowther. "The cad got it in the neck himself afterwards."

"Better have tea now and tell us all about it, old chap!" said Jack Blake. "The sosses are all gone, but there's a couple of boiled eggs—"

"I do not wequiah eithah sosses or eggs, Blake," said Arthur Augustus grimly. "All I wequiah is a cup of tea, and then I shall be weady to give that feahful wottah the thwashin' he wichly deserves!"

"You're going to scrap with him now?" ejaculated Blake.

"Yaas; the mattah cannot wait, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus, his eye gleaming behind his monocle. "He has uttally wuined a new toppah. He has played a wotten twick on me, and made me look a fool before ewevybody, bal Jove!"

"Better leave the cad alone, Gussy," advised Tom Merry. "He's a rough handful!"

"That does not intewest me, Tom Mewwy!"

"Better wait until you've got over your tramp, anyway," said Herries. "You look whacked to the wide!"

"And you'll be whacked to the wide if you tackle the beggar now," said Lowther.

Arthur Augustus laid down his cup

and rose to his feet. His eyes were gleaming with determination.

"Do you fellows happen to know where I can find Knox?" he asked.

"He's in our study—or was," grunted Tom, looking uneasy. "But look here, Gussy. Let the rotter alone! He's not worth touching, for one thing, and he's too much for you to handle for another—in your present state, anyway."

"Wubbish! I uttahly wefuse to allow the mattah to stand ovah anothah hour," said Arthur Augustus. "Blake, may I enlist your services to see faih play?"

"Fathead!" snorted Blake. "If you mean to fight the chap, why not wait until morning and have it out in the gym with the gloves on?"

"I do not wequiah gloves, and I wefuse to wait until mornin', Blake!"

With that the irate Gussy marched out of the study.

"Come on!" groaned Blake. "Better look after the ass!"

In a far from easy frame of mind, Blake led his chums after Arthur Augustus. It was clear that nothing on earth would move the swell of the Fourth from the task he had set himself.

And the rest of the chums shared Blake's uneasiness. Knox minor was undoubtedly a rough handful, and though a clever boxer and no duffer, Arthur Augustus was plainly not in the state to tackle such a task. Certainly Knox was something of a dark horse as yet, but he had licked Grundy, and Lowther, at least, had good reason to know he could punch.

The chums reached Study No. 10 just as Gussy was entering. They followed him, and found Knox minor seated in the armchair, with his feet up on the mantel. There was a haze of cigarette-smoke in the room.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed as he saw the cigarette between the new fellow's lips.

Without a word, he stepped swiftly before Arthur Augustus, and with a sweep of his hand he sent the cigar-

ette flying from between the lips of the new fellow.

Knox minor leaped to his feet, a dull flush of red tinging his cheeks.

"You—you cheeky cad!" he shouted, turning on Tom in a fury. "What in thunder did you do that for?"

"You're not the cock of the walk here yet, Knox!" snapped Tom. "There's going to be no smoking in this study while I'm in it!"

Knox minor clenched his fist. His eyes were glittering.

"You—you cheeky hound!" he hissed. "Pick that cigarette up for me, or I'll smash you!"

"Get on with the smashing, then," said Tom calmly. "You seem determined to cause all the trouble you can here, Knox. I'm ready to give you all you want."

"Hold on, Tom Mewwy!" snorted Arthur Augustus, pushing the junior captain aside. "Pway allow me to settle this frightful cad first!"

"Look here, Gussy—"

"Chuck it to, Gussy!" implored Blake. "Leave it to Tom Merry."

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus.

He carefully peeled off his jacket, and just as carefully turned back his cuffs. Knox watched both operations with a faint grin on his face. Apparently the preparations Gussy was making amused him.

"That merchant going to fight me?" he asked, his rage seeming to have vanished now.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Lowther. "You won't find it such a grinning matter, Knox."

"It's the chap—the freak I shoved into the train," jeered Knox. "Great pip! Fancy old fashion-plate showing fight!"

The aristocratic face of Arthur Augustus went pink. He breathed hard.

"Put your fists up, you wottah!" he said, his eyes gleaming with a warlike gleam. "And get weady for a feahful thwashin'! You have wuined my toppah, and you have bwrought widicule upon me."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Knox.

"You cacklin' wottah!" shouted Arthur Augustus, going pinker than ever. "Put up your fists!"

"What for?" asked Knox. "I've only got to blow, you blessed tailor's dummy, and you'd fall down!"

Arthur Augustus kept his temper well in hand, though he was boiling with rage at the new fellow's insolent scoffing.

"Push the table aside, you fellows!" he gasped. "Hewwies, do you mind lockin' the door?"

"Not at all," said Herries, grinning.

The table was pushed aside, and Herries locked the door. It was clear that Knox thought Arthur Augustus a duffer, and they felt that was in Gussy's favour. There was a surprise in store for the new fellow.

It came quickly.

Arthur Augustus went at him with a rush, and he scarcely troubled to guard himself. The next moment a stinging drive from Gussy's fists took him between the eyes, and all but floored him.

"Good man, Gussy!" called Blake.

Biff! Smack! Biff!

Right! Left, right!

Swift as lightning, Arthur Augustus followed up his first drive with three more. The first jarred every tooth in the new fellow's head, the second connected with his left eye, and the third took him clean under the chin.

Crash!

Knox minor was down, the most surprised and hurt fellow in St. Jim's.

There was a chorus of chuckles. Arthur Augustus stepped back lightly on his feet, his guard up. Knox staggered to his feet, with a dazed and astonished look on his face.

But he was under no delusion now as to Arthur Augustus being a duffer. When Arthur Augustus came on again he side-stepped neatly, and as the elegant junior's fist grazed his head he drove a powerful jab into D'Arcy's ribs that made that junior gasp aloud.

"Steady, Gussy!" called Blake anxiously.

It was clear that the new fellow could use his fists now, and the chums watched with no little anxiety. He was taller than Gussy, and he was certainly much stronger; in quickness and agility, however, Arthur Augustus had the advantage.

But he was obviously not at his best to-night by any means. That long tramp from Melford had sapped his endurance and energy. The new fellow scented this, and he swiftly took on the offensive, relentlessly pursuing the swell of the Fourth with drives, hooks, and hefty jabs.

Arthur Augustus stood up well to him, but it was very soon seen that he was tiring.

"No good!" groaned Tom Merry, in a whisper. "Gussy's off the map to-night."

Blake nodded gloomily. It was necessarily a rough-and-tumble fight, no round being called or expected. This was to the advantage of Knox, and he made the most of it, giving Gussy no rest. Arthur Augustus—it could be easily seen—was the better boxer; but Knox could fight, and he could take punishment. The pace was getting hotter every minute now, and, though little noise was made, anxious eyes continually turned to the door, the knob of which had been tried several times, whilst several fellows had shouted, asking what was on.

It was almost a relief when the end came. The juniors had seen that Gussy could never win in the present circumstances. He had already been sent crashing down three times in the last few seconds, and suddenly a terrific right-hander sent Gussy spinning round like a top, and he collapsed amid the fire-irons in the hearth.

He lay panting, his chest heaving; then he strove to rise. But Tom Merry jumped forward.

"That's enough!" he snapped. "Chuck it, Gussy! You're licked this time!"

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus gasped faintly. "Bai Jove! I'm not! I—I'm not done yet!"

He scrambled somehow to his feet. Both Blake and Tom Merry stepped before Knox, whose eyes were glittering with triumph. Herries, Digby, and Lowther grasped Arthur Augustus and held him fast.

"You can have a go at him again some time, Gussy," said Tom. "You've had quite enough for the present. Knox, you'd better clear!"

Knox grinned, his bruised face looking uglier than ever.

"I'm ready to start again," he said, with a jeer. "What about you, Merry? We've got to square our account yet."

Tom Merry gave him a grim look. The new fellow was certainly game enough. And though Tom would have been glad enough to oblige him, he knew it would be unfair to the fellow after the scrap he had just put up.

"Don't talk rot!" he snapped. "Kick the cad out if he won't go, chaps!"

"We'll jolly soon do that," id Lowther.

Knox shrugged and put on his coat, which he had ripped off during a lull in the scrap. Manners unlocked the door, and he went out, giving vent to a sneering laugh as he did so.

"Chuck it, Gussy!" said Blake, as Arthur Augustus tried to follow him. "It's no good! You're not up to him to-night. You'll have your chance again—if the fool's still alive! By the way he's going on, he'll soon need a hospital or a funeral!"

Luckily the rumpus seemed to have attracted no one in authority, and after making sure the coast was clear, Blake, Herries and Digby led their damaged study-mate back to Study No. 6 for much-needed repairs. Tom Merry whistled when they had gone.

"Well," he said, "that merchant is the limit!"

"A regular fire-eater!" said Lowther. "But he'll burn himself yet!" said Tom grimly. "He'll be meeting his

Waterloo. Anyway, we're standing n nonsense from him in this study. That's settled!"

"Yes, rather!"

Tom Merry & Co. were determined upon that if they were determined upon nothing else!

CHAPTER 9. The Plotters!

"JUST a minute, Merry!"

It was a few days later, and the Terrible Three were crossing the quad just after dinner. Looking round, Tom Merry saw with some surprise that it was Knox, the new fellow, who had called to him.

Tom Merry frowned.

He was on the worst possible terms with Percy Knox—as were all of the chums of the School House.

Since the first day of his arrival, there had been heaps of trouble in the School House—and even in the New House—with Knox minor.

The bragging and domineering cousin of Knox of the Sixth seemed to live on trouble, and he found plenty to occupy him at St. Jim's. Naturally enough, the fellows objected to his manners and customs—they were not likely to submit to being bullied and hectorated by a new chap—whether a "rough handful" or not. In those few days Knox had fought with at least a dozen fellows in the Shell and Fourth, and he had licked ten out of the dozen.

He was undoubtedly a "coughdrop."

Grundy had insisted upon satisfaction the very next day—he forbore to administer his licking so soon after D'Arcy's eclipse—but the next day he had looked for Knox minor, and he had found him and started in to lick him.

Unfortunately for Grundy's plans, it was Grundy who got the licking.

But though Knox was decidedly unpopular, he had earned no little amount of respect—on account of his fists. A fellow who could stand up and

lick a chap like Grundy was bound to earn a certain amount of respect.

And very soon Knox minor had realised that it didn't pay to brag, and that his "cock-of-the-walk" manner was a mistake. For reasons of his own, he wanted to be popular, and after the first two days he changed his methods and started in to become popular.

He soon grasped the fact that the chief stumbling-block to the consummation of his desires in that direction was in the mere fact that he was related to Gerald Knox of the Sixth.

On realising this, he gave up all ideas of making capital out of the relationship. It did not pay, and—with Gerald's secret approval—he gave his cousin a wide berth.

But he very quickly made friends; and as Tom Merry & Co. had expected, it was in Racke & Co.'s set that he became friendly. It was, as Lowther put it, a case of birds of a feather!

In Study No. 10 there had been trouble again—as was only to be expected. Coming into the study on Knox's second day, the Terrible Three had been astounded to find their group photographs taken down and some of Knox's own substituted.

They had pitched the photos out, and their owner with them, after a furious struggle with him.

On the following day, happening to return to the study unexpectedly, they had found a little smoking-party composed of Percy Knox and Racke & Co. assembled there.

Like Knox's photos, Racke & Co. had been pitched out into the passage, and Knox himself after them.

Nor did Percy Knox come back again—except to fetch his belongings—for, with Mr. Railton's permission, he had joined Racke and Crooke in Study No. 7—greatly to the joy of the Terrible Three, who felt they almost liked the new fellow for going!

They had seen very little of Percy since then—had ignored his very existence as far as was possible with a

fellow in their own Form. Tom Merry especially had avoided him, knowing as he did that the new fellow's intention was to force a fight on him if he could.

Tom Merry did not intend to gratify him in that respect. He simply did not wish to have anything to do with him. Moreover, the Greyfriars match was perilously close, and Tom did not want a fight on his hands until that was over, at all events.

So Tom frowned now as he heard Knox minor call to him. Knox wore his usual supercilious grin; behind him were Racke, Crooke, and Scrope, and all three were grinning also.

"Well?" said Tom quietly.

"I hear you're the junior footer skipper here, Merry?" said Knox.

"You know very well I am," said Tom. "What about it?"

"Just this," said Knox grimly. "I've been here some days now, and you haven't asked me yet if I can play footer."

"I never thought of asking you, said Tom.

"Why?" asked Knox coolly. "Didn't want to, I suppose. Afraid I might prove to be a better man than you, as I happen to be at a good many other things, Merry!"

"You can certainly beat me at bragging," said Tom.

"I only brag, as you call it," retorted Knox, unmoved, "when I can back up my statements with ability. I happen to be able to play footer."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Tom. "I noticed you failed to turn up for footer practice yesterday, though; too good, I suppose?"

"Exactly," assented Knox. "I've no use for practice, or practice matches. I want something better. It's the Greyfriars match to-morrow, I believe?"

"It is!" said Tom, staring. "But that won't interest you."

"It does interest me. I want to play in the Greyfriars match to-morrow, Merry," said Percy Knox coolly.

"Wha-at!"

"Oh, my hat!" gurgled Lowther.

"What awful cheek!" snorted Manners.

Tom Merry fairly blinked at him.

"You'll want to play in the Sixth match with Rookwood next week!" said Tom, with biting sarcasm.

"I fancy I'm good enough for that," remarked Percy gravely. "But it's the Greyfriars match to-morrow I'm set on for the present. I don't want to brag—"

"Don't you?" ejaculated Lowther.

"No. I'm merely stating a fact when I say that I can lick any fellow in your team at the game. If I can prove my words, I suppose you won't refuse to play me to-morrow, Merry?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"There's something seriously wrong with your supposer, then," he said.

"You won't?"

"Certainly not, you silly ass!" exclaimed Tom, laughing. "You must be potty, Knox! Even if you proved you could play, I wouldn't risk an unknown quantity in an important match. I want men I know and can rely on. Besides—"

"Go on," said Knox, his lip curling. "Besides, I'm not a pal, am I?"

Tom's eyes gleamed; but he kept his temper.

"No, it isn't that," he said quietly. "It's this—a fellow like you, who smokes and generally acts the giddy goat, isn't likely to be a player at all. I suppose this is a bit of leg-pulling, Knox. You can go and eat coke, you silly ass!"

With that Tom walked away with his chums, both of them grinning. Percy Knox looked after them, his face savage. Racke hid a covert grin. Tom Merry had not taken the new fellow seriously; but Racke, looking at Knox's savage face now, realised that he was in earnest and that he had intended to be taken seriously.

"The jealous cad!" hissed Knox. "I might have known he wouldn't give me my chance, though!"

He paused, his brow reflective.

"Come along to the study," he said, after a moment. "I'm going to play in that match to-morrow—I've set my mind

on it. And I think I see a way of wangling it. I mean to show the chaps here what I can do."

Racke stared.

"You silly fool!" he gasped. "What on earth—"

"Shut up!" snarled Percy. "I've stood about enough lip from you, Racke; any more cheek, and I'll punch that long nose of yours!"

"No need to get huffy," said Racke sulkily. "I'm only warning you—"

"Keep your dashed warnings until they're asked for!" said Knox. "I've told you I mean to play in the match to-morrow. I'm going to work the thing somehow, and I don't care how!"

"But—but Merry—"

"Hang Merry!" said Percy Knox, his eyes gleaming with determination. "I'm going to get square with that rotter! I'm going to lick him at footer, and then I'm going to lick him with my dashed fists! That's the first part of the programme. The rest will follow quickly enough, I fancy. Come on!"

And he led the way indoors. And Aubrey Racke winked meaningly at Crooke and Scrope and started to follow. Racke evidently felt either that Knox minor was a bit "batty," or else he was swanking, as usual. Racke was wrong on both counts, as it happened. Aubrey Racke was to find out—as was Tom Merry—that Percy Knox was a force to be reckoned with!

CHAPTER 10.

Where is Tom Merry?

"FEELING fit, you chaps?" Jack Blake asked the question cheerily as he came into Study No. 10 the following afternoon. Behind him were D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby, and all three looked as cheery as Blake did. Dinner had been over at St. Jim's some time. It had not been a very big or hearty dinner for Tom Merry and his fellow-footballers, for it was the afternoon of the much-discussed

Greyfriars match at last. It only wanted half an hour to kick-off.

"Fit as giddy fiddles!" grinned Tom Merry, without looking up from the footer boots he was looking over. "We'll lick Greyfriars this time!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Mustn't take 'em too lightly, though," warned Tom Merry. "I believe they've a jolly strong team."

"They usually have," said Lowther. "It's going to be a stiff tussle."

"We'll lick 'em, though," said Tom confidently.

"I hear Racke's laid two to one against us with that new chap, Knox," grinned Blake.

"Let me catch the cads betting on a school match!" said Tom grimly.

"I'm rather surprised to hear Knox puts his giddy money on us, though," chuckled Monty Lowther. "Rather a compliment—what?"

"He must know a bit about footer after all," chuckled Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. seemed to find humour in that remark.

"The chap isn't exactly a fumbler with a ball, though," said Tom Merry. "He booted that footer of Grimey's into that duckpond rather neatly, I thought, the other day. If only he could play and could be relied on, he'd make a useful player, I should think."

"Pretty hefty, anyway!" said Blake carelessly. "Blow him! What about getting down to the changing-room now?"

"Right-ho!" assented Tom, glancing at his watch. "I— Hallo! What's this?"

He stooped and picked up an envelope from the floor. It was a small, square envelope, with Tom's name on it in typed letters, and it had evidently been pushed under the door.

"From Kildare!" said Tom, in surprise. He tore open the note, wondering why the note had not been brought to him, instead of being shoved under the door. "Some lazy fag, I suppose!"

He scanned the typed note inside. It

was signed by Kildare, as he had expected. Kildare possessed a portable typewriter, on which he usually typed notices and official sports correspondence.

"Dear Merry," ran the note,—"I'd like a word with you before the match if you can manage it. Shan't keep you a minute.—ERIC KILDARE."

That was all.

"Wonder what he wants?" murmured Tom to himself. "A few tips about the game, perhaps." He turned to his chums:

"Kildare wants to see me a sec, chaps," he said aloud. "I'll join you in the changing-room presently."

"Right-ho!"

Tom hurried away to Kildare's study, and his chums strolled down to the changing-room, discussing prospects for the afternoon. Tom was astonished to find Kildare's study empty.

Hurrying out again, he almost barged into Percy Mellish of the Fourth.

"Seen Kildare about, Mellish?" asked Tom.

"Fancy I spotted him going round by the chapel when I came in a moment ago," said Mellish promptly.

"Thanks!"

Little dreaming that Mellish had been hanging about Kildare's door for the sole purpose of giving him that answer, Tom Merry hurried out of doors. It struck him as strange that Kildare—who was most considerate, even to juniors—had sent him that message and then gone out of doors. But he gave little thought to it at the moment.

Out into the frosty quadrangle he hurried, and round by the chapel. It did not occur to him to wonder what Kildare could be doing round there at that hour of the day. Kildare was not in sight as he approached the fine building, and Tom hurried round to the back.

He had scarcely taken a dozen steps round the corner when an astonishing thing happened.

There sounded the quick rush of feet, but before he could swing round, some-

thing was whirled round his head, effectually blindfolding him.

It proved to be part of an old sack, and before the astounded junior could raise a hand, the sack was swiftly pulled down. It was too late to struggle then. More footsteps sounded, and then, as he began to struggle furiously, the sack tightened round his waist. Next his wrists were bound tightly together.

Then he was hustled, still struggling, away.

But his struggles, with his hands helpless, availed him little.

Many hands grasped him, and one pair at least were strong, and he was propelled along, despite his efforts to make a stand.

"You rotters!" panted Tom, almost choked in the dark sacking. "Let me go!"

He kicked out backwards, and there sounded a muffled howl. But that was all the sound his captors made. It was also all the damage Tom was able to do to his captors. Stone flags rang under his feet now, and the next moment the stone flags seemed to fall away from him, and he stumbled and went rolling down stone steps.

There were not many of them, however, and he stopped rolling, bruised from head to foot, and all but suffocated. Then he was dragged to his feet and urged on again.

But this time for only a few steps; and then he was released suddenly, and there sounded the thud of a heavy door closing. There followed a silence as of the tomb.

But Tom knew only too well where he was—the dank, musty smell and the icy chill of the air told him that. He was in the vaults beneath the old part of the college. And in a flash the reason for it all came to him. It was obviously to keep him away from the match.

Who was responsible for it, however? Into Tom's mind there suddenly flashed Blake's remarks concerning Knox and Racke betting on the match.

There was a motive, at all events; and at the thought Tom gritted his

teeth and started struggling to free himself with savage fury.

But it was useless—his bonds were too strong for that, and he desisted at last, exhausted and utterly dismayed. The icy chill of the vaults struck into his heated body, but he dare not walk about to keep himself warm, fearing to lose himself in the blackness. So he flung himself down to wait in smouldering fury and despair for his release, which he knew must come sooner or later.

And meanwhile, in the changing-room, Tom's chums were waiting impatiently for him to turn up.

"Where the thump can the ass have got to?" snorted Lowther.

"Only wants three or four minutes," grunted Herries.

"Like you blessed School House fat-heads!" grinned Figgins. "It's time Tom Merry turned over the job of skipper to a New House chap."

"Oh, rats!" said Manners crossly. He was beginning to feel rather alarmed, as were several other fellows. Time was getting on.

Darrell, who was refereeing match, came hurrying in.

"Come along, you kids!" he snapped. "Time to be getting on the ground. Hallo! Where's Merry?"

"Goodness knows!" said Blake. "Kildare sent for him, I believe—wanted to speak to him."

"Kildare's gone to Wayland," id Darrell.

"Oh!"

"You fellows had better get on the ground," said the Sixth Former. "Gore, you might hang on here and hurry Merry up when he does arrive."

"Right!" said Gore.

The footballers hurried out, and it was Talbot, the vice-captain who led the St. Jim's team on to the field that afternoon. The Greyfriars fellows were already on the ground, and the rival fellows exchanged greetings cheerily. Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars were well-known at St. Jim's.

"Only three minutes more," snapped Darrell, looking annoyed. "Where can that young ass have got to? Talbot,

you'd better tell off a reserve, in case — Hallo! Who the thump's this merchant?"

Amid a clamour of voices round the ropes a figure in footer attire had just run on to the ground. It was Percy Knox, and the St. Jim's juniors stared blankly as they recognised him.

"What the merry dickens——" ejaculated Lowther.

Knox, a queer grin on his rather heavy features, ran up to the juniors. He looked a heftier figure than ever in footer togs. He handed a note to Talbot.

"From Merry, I believe," he said coolly. "He sent a note to me, too, saying I was to play in his place."

"What?" It was a howl.

CHAPTER II.

A Personal Triumph!

TALBOT took the note and tore it open. He jumped as he read it aloud.

"Go ahead with match, Talbot," he read out blankly. "'I'm detained, blow it! But I'm sending this new fellow along. I've just learned he's a good man. Go in and win!"

"TOM MERRY."

"Well," ejaculated Talbot, staring at Percy Knox's smug face—"well, I'm blown!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Great pip!"

There were expressions of utter disgust and amazement on every side. From the ropes round the ground fellows were yelling madly.

"Where's Merry?"

"Get off the field, Knox, you footling imbecile!"

"Kick the idiot off, Talbot! What's this idiotic game?"

Darrell rushed up just then, his face wrathful. Talbot handed him the note. He read it, but did not seem concerned. As a matter of fact, he fancied he had heard Knox of the Sixth say something

about his youthful cousin being a player.

"Oh, ail right," he grunted, glancing at Percy Knox. "That's good enough, but that young idiot Merry's run it jolly close. Line up, there! Shove that new chap somewhere, for goodness' sake!"

"I'll go in Merry's place at centre," called Talbot, making his mind up swiftly. "Knox, you go in my place at outside-right."

Talbot's mind was in something of a whirl, he could only accept Tom's statement in the letter; there was no time for anything else. As for the rest of the St. Jim's players, they simply did not know what to think. Tom Merry was the last fellow in the world to play a practical joke with a match, and he was the last fellow, also, to take any risks with his team. But—but—

There was a terrific "but" about the extraordinary affair. The juniors would certainly have felt more comfortable had it even been a duffer like Aubrey Racke in the team. They did know what he could do, if it was only to get in the way of the other players.

"Oh, my only Sunday topper!" groaned Lowther. "What the—— Hallo!"

Pheep!

It was the whistle. Talbot had already won the toss, and the next moment the ball was in motion.

There was a roar from the crowd.

Talbot had the ball, and he was taking it down the field. There was a rush of Greyfriars fellows, and Talbot got rid of the ball at the right moment, sending it sailing over to Levison at outside-left, who was unmarked.

Levison went along the touchline like a hare.

"Go it, Levison!" roared the St. Jim's crowd. "Go—— Oh, blow!"

Levison had been a trifle too eager for once. He tripped suddenly, and his sprawling foot sent the ball almost on to the toes of curly-headed Bob Cherry of the Greyfriars Remove. Bob whanged the ball over to Harry Wharton, and that junior took it up the field again.

It was the turn of the Greyfriars contingent to roar, and they roared.

Their enthusiastic excitement came to nothing, however. Harry Wharton was soon tackled, and though he came out on top of the scrimmage that followed, someone came along like a flash of lightning and neatly lifted the spinning ball from his foot.

It was Percy Knox. It was then St. Jim's began to get their surprise.

The new fellow was off like a shot, showing a wonderful mastery over the ball as he took it along at a turn of speed that made the St. Jim's juniors gasp.

But the next moment they were yelling wildly.

In swift succession Percy Knox beat two Greyfriars defenders, and then he was racing along just within the touchline with the precision and confidence of a Hulme.

"Great Scott! He'll do it!" gasped Lowther, racing along with Blake. "Who'd have dreamed— Oh, good shot!"

Almost to the corner-flag the new fellow took the ball, and then he sent it in with a low, oblique shot.

Whiz!

The next second the net behind the Greyfriars goal was shaking violently.

"Goal!"

It was a roar from all round the packed ground.

"Oh, good man, Knox!" yelled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove! I couldn't have sent a better shot in myself, Blake."

"You jolly well couldn't!" agreed Blake, with a chuckle.

Despite their personal dislike of the bumptious new fellow, Tom Merry's chums were only too ready to give credit where it was due. It certainly was due now.

"Good man, Knox!" called Blake quite genially, as Knox minor came back up the field with them. "A jolly good start, old chap."

"Oh, that's only a beginning," said Knox minor loftily but breathlessly.

"I'll show you fellows something before the afternoon's out."

The bragging note in the new fellow's remarks grated horribly on the footballers' ears, but they could not help but admit that he had some excuse to brag now.

And as the game proceeded they had to admit it still more. That goal certainly was only the beginning. The fellow had shown in that brief run that he could "handle" a ball, and that he could shoot. He very soon proved that he was a born footballer.

Certainly he stuck tight to the ball when he got it, but he did something useful with it every time. The crowd lost sight of his selfish playing in the wonderful exhibition of personal achievement.

"He's a blessed wonder!" gasped Gunn, who was standing at the rails with Grundy. "Who'd have thought it?"

"He's not so dusty," admitted George Alfred Grundy with rather lofty tolerance. "Not quite my style, of course."

"Not quite!" agreed Gunny, winking at Wilkins.

"He sticks to the ball too much, though," said Grundy, shaking his head. "It's selfish, you know, and it's not good play."

Grundy seemed to be near the truth for once.

"But he's a rattling fine player— better than Tom Merry even," said Gunn reluctantly. "Great pip! We're pretty certain to win now."

"If I were only playing—" began Grundy enthusiastically.

"It would be ten goals to the good at least—"

"That's right!" said Grundy.

"For Greyfriars, I mean, of course went on Wilkins blandly.

"That's cheek!" snorted Grundy. "Look here, Wilky, I'll— Hallo! The beggar's off again! Bravo!"

"Go it, Knox!"

There was an anticipatory howl as the new fellow trapped a spinning ball skilfully, and in the twinkling of an eye, he was off along the touchline.

Again he took the ball almost up to the corner-flag, and then he sent it goalwards.

Biff!

There was a howl of disappointment as the ball, caught by a sudden gust of wind, lifted and crashed against the crossbar, and Hazeldene, the Greyfriars goalie, cleared it thankfully.

But his thankfulness was short-lived, for as the ball dropped, a slim figure darted in and hooked it deftly off the toes of Vernon-Smith.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and with a brilliant short pass—for he had no opportunity to shoot successfully himself—the swell of the Fourth sent it out swift and sure to his outside-right.

And Knox was ready for it. He trapped it, and the ball left his foot like a shot from a gun.

Goal!

Hazeldene, once again, was beaten to the wide—beaten by a shot that would have got past any goalkeeper.

"Bravo!"

"Good man, Knox!"

"Two up for St. Jim's!"

"Hurrah!"

Percy Knox's face was blazing with triumphant satisfaction as the roar of voices acclaimed him. He grinned as Talbot thumped him on the back.

"Ripping, Knox! You can play, and no mistake! Let's have some more, old chap!"

Greyfriars were getting badly rattled now. Most of their men seemed helpless against Percy Knox, though Harry Wharton got the best of more than one encounter with him. At half-time the score was still the same—two to none against Greyfriars. And Greyfriars were looking very glum during the interval.

"Not over yet, though, by a long way," said Talbot to Harry Wharton, laughingly. "What d'you think of our new outside-right?"

"Where's Tom Merry?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Goodness knows," said Talbot, winking. "The silly ass seems to have himself detained, or something.

Anyway, I fancy you haven't gained much by us losing Tommy, what?"

"Your new man's a scorcher!" grinned Bob Cherry ruefully. "He makes me feel I want to chuck footer and take to hops-cotch."

"He's brilliant!" said Harry Wharton. "But—but—well, I think I should choose Tom Merry between the two. He's steadier, and I should think he's more reliable, and he doesn't hang on to the ball."

"Knox made you fellows trot round a bit, anyway," grinned Talbot.

"Game isn't over yet—as you reminded me," said Harry Wharton grimly. "There's time yet for a lot to happen."

But Harry spoke with more hope than confidence. And his private misgivings were more than justified during the second half. St. Jim's took the field confident, and they started again with irresistible dash and energy.

Within three minutes of play the Saints had registered another score, again through the brilliant play of Knox minor. His shot for goal was fisted out by Hazeldene, but Talbot sent it in again with a thud that shook the rigging behind the dazed Hazeldene.

St. Jim's were almost hysterical with joy. The match with Greyfriars was about the most important on the calendar, and St. Jim's were three goals up!

But the Friars were playing a desperate defensive game now, and, try as they would, the Saints did not get through again, until just within a minute of the final whistle.

By this time Percy Knox was tiring visibly, and all the fire seemed to have gone out of his attack; but just in that last minute a chance came, and he showed that he had not by any means shot his bolt.

It was Blake who gave him his chance this time. The ball came trickling out of a particularly hot scrimmage in midfield, and Blake got it. He took a swift glance round, and, seeing Knox unmarked, he sent it out to him in a high, dropping kick.

CHAPTER 12.

Another Triumph!

Knox woke up. He hooked it round, and sped off with it like the wind, this time deserting the touchline for an inside place.

There was a roar of voices, and Talbot, who saw an open goal before Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, running level with Knox, shouted wildly to the new fellow:

"Let Gussy have it, Knox—pass!"

Knox ignored the yell. He went on. A back tackled him with desperate vim, but Knox simply left him standing still, and then he shot for goal.

There was a sudden silence, and then a wild roar from hundreds of throats as the ball was seen to be rolling at the back of the net. Hazeldene was blinking down sideways at it with a ludicrous expression of surprise on his face.

"Goal!"

A shrill, sharp pheeep from Darrell's whistle denoted the fact that another goal had been scored, and then almost the next second came a still longer blast, drowned in a roar of cheers from St. Jim's.

"St Jim's wins! Hurrah!"

"Good old Knox!"

"Up with him!" howled a voice—it was Racke's voice—and the cry was taken up as a swarm of enthusiastic fellows rushed on to the field.

Percy Knox's brilliant and spectacular "fireworks" had taken the excited juniors by storm, and in a flash he was lifted shoulder-high and swept away off the field amid rousing cheers.

In that exciting moment even Blake & Co. forgot the new fellow's bumptious manner and shady practices. They only acclaimed the brilliant footballer at that moment.

It was certainly a triumphant moment for Percy Knox, and the new fellow's eyes were glittering with triumph. He was ambitious—little the fellows dreamed then just how ambitious—little the fellows dreamed how he had gained his first point in his ambitious bid for notoriety.

TOM MERRY stirred restlessly on the stone floor of his gloomy prison beneath the ancient ruins of the monastery of St. Jim's.

He had tramped to and fro in a confined area, and he had stamped about to keep his feet warm, and to bring some sort of circulation to his body. But he had to fling himself down at last on the stone flags, damp and mildewed as they were, weary and exhausted with his efforts and the close, horrible atmosphere.

His head ached abominably, and he was chilled to the bone with the icy cold of the vaults. Indeed, he felt quite ill, and his constant sneezes were sufficient to tell him he must expect a bad cold as a result of his imprisonment in that damp and unhealthy place.

Moreover, he was sick at heart with dismay and disappointment. He had looked forward to the Greyfriars match for weeks, and he had slaved, to bring his men up to scratch for the day.

Now it had arrived, and here he was a helpless prisoner. He had succeeded in tearing the sack from his head; but he could not release his hands, and he knew that escape was hopeless. In any case, the match would be over now, he felt certain.

It would result in a severe trouncing for St. Jim's, he felt certain of that. In all modesty, Tom Merry knew he couldn't be spared from the team, and he believed there wasn't a fellow to replace him.

Tom Merry very soon got tired of sitting on the flags—indeed, it was almost impossible to remain sitting on them for long—and he was just getting to his feet again when there came a sound at the great oaken door of the vaults.

The door suddenly swung open on creaking hinges, and Tom fancied he glimpsed forms in the gloom.

He jumped forward towards them, bound as he was.

The forms vanished, and Tom heard their owners run up the steps without. Their running feet on the flags above died away.

Tom's legs were not bound, luckily, and he hurried up the steps with heartfelt relief. To his surprise he found it deep dusk outside.

The junior hurried from the ruins and round by the chapel. After hesitating a moment by the steps of the School House he turned away and made for Taggles' lodge. He knocked, and after a moment Taggles blinked out at him.

"What—Master Merry!" he ejaculated. "Ere, what's this mean?"

"Cut me loose, Taggy!" snapped Tom. "I'll see you to-morrow about this."

In the little lighted porch of the lodge Taggles blinked in great amazement at Tom's white face with the smudges of grime on it. He fairly jumped as he saw Tom's bound wrists.

"Cut them!" said Tom. "I want to get at a couple of bob in my pocket, Taggy."

It was enough for Taggles—the mention of the two bob had done it, so to speak. He took out his knife and cut the cords round the junior's sore and bruised wrists.

"My eye!" he gasped. "Who done this, Master Merry? Some of the New House young raskils up to their Jarks agen, eh?"

Tom did not say "Yes" or "No." He took out a florin and handed it to Taggles, and then he started off at a run for the School House. Reaching the building he hurried up to his own study. He found Manners and Lowther there, and they fairly gaped as they spotted his grimy, haggard features and dishevelled attire.

"Great pip!" gasped Lowther, in great alarm. "What the thump—"

"Where the dickens have you been, Tommy?" demanded Manners.

"Never mind your questions now," said Tom briefly. "How did the match

"Four to none," said Lowther. "But—"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom. "You mean to say they licked us by four goals to none?"

"Eh? Certainly not!" said Manners, staring. "We won, of course."

"We won?" yelled Tom.

"Yes. You were right, Tommy. That chap, rotter or not, is a thundering good man!"

"Who is?" exclaimed Tom blankly. "What are you gassing about?"

"About Knox, of course," said Manners, staring. "He played a great game. Scored three on his own practically."

"Knox did!" almost shrieked Tom.

"Of course! You sent him, didn't you? You said he was a good man in your note! He was. No doubt about that, Tommy."

Tom's head was swimming. He felt as if he were dreaming.

"I'm blessed if I can make head or tail of this, you fellows," he said, holding his throbbing head in his hands. "Tell me all about it, and afterwards I'll tell you my yarn."

Lowther told him all about the match, Manners helping him. Tom Merry gaped like a stranded fish as he heard how Knox had played. He was at first overjoyed at the discovery of a new footballer of such talent in the Shell. But the discovery was tinged with no little dismay at the knowledge that it was Knox, the fellow who hated him so bitterly, and who was hopeless from a disciplinary point of view.

And then quite suddenly the truth dawned upon Tom.

"Oh, the—the cad!" he hissed, his eye glinting with rage. "So that's it. He worked this kidnapping game in order to get himself in the match!"

"Eh? What's that?" demanded Lowther, not comprehending.

Tom told his chums of his adventures, and they gaped.

"Then—then those notes were forgeries?" stuttered Monty.

"Of course they were!" said Tom thickly. "It's all a plot to enable that hound to play in my place. I might have guessed something of the sort."

"Well, the rotter!" gasped Manners.

"I'm thundering glad we licked Greyfriars!" said Tom grimly. "But I'm not the fellow to overlook this. I'm going to have a reckoning with Knox, and I'm not waiting for it!"

"Better wait until you feel better," said Lowther. "Man, you look positively ill!"

"I'm going to have a settlement now!" snapped Tom. "You fellows can please yourself about coming!" he added bitterly. "Perhaps you don't want to upset the triumph of the hero of the hour, though!"

With that Tom Merry strode from the room, looking very far indeed from his usual cheery self. Monty and Manners looked at each other and whistled. It was rare they saw Tom in such a bitter, savage mood as this.

But they followed, determined to back him up, come what might. Percy Knox was not in his study, nor were Racke & Co. The Terrible Three tracked them down at last to the junior Common-room.

They were lounging round the fire among a crowd of fellows, all of them excitedly discussing the great match. In the centre of them, hands in trousers-pockets, feet apart, stood Percy Knox, his back to the blazing fire. It was only too clear that he felt himself monarch of all he surveyed. He seemed to be on the best of terms with the crowd in the Common-room for all that.

Tom Merry's face flushed as he sighted him, and he strode over to his enemy.

There was a yell from the rest of the juniors.

"Here he is!"

"Here's Merry at last! Where the dickens have you been, Merry?"

"Sneaking off, and leaving the team in the lurch!" said Racke. "If it hadn't been for old Knoxy——"

"School would have been hopelessly licked," added Croke.

"What happened, Tom?" asked Talbot quietly.

Tom Merry planted himself before Percy Knox, his eyes only showing the rage that consumed him. The rest of the fellows stared at his white, haggard face in some astonishment. Knox eyed him quite calm and coolly.

"You cad!" said Tom thickly. "Have you told these fellows of the dirty trick you played me?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Merry!" said Knox, in pretended surprise.

"I'll tell you, then—chiefly for the benefit of these other chaps," said Tom: And he told of his strange adventures that afternoon. The story caused a sensation in the Common-room.

"And you expect us to swallow that yarn?" said Knox, raising his eyebrows. "Have you any proof of this? And why on earth should you think I had a hand in it?"

"Have you got that note that was supposed to be from me, Talbot?" demanded Tom.

"I'm afraid I chucked it away—goodness knows where!" said Talbot, frowning.

"And I chucked away the note I got from Kildare—or that I believed was from Kildare!" said Tom, biting his lips with vexation.

"And you've no proof of your laughed Percy Knox.

"He can easily write another," said Croke, grinning.

"You can see the state I'm in, and you can see the state of my wrists," said Tom. "And Lowther and Manners know I had a note telling me to see Kildare. It's no good coming the innocent game, Knox! You played the whole trick to get my place in the match, you impudent rascal!"

Knox minor looked serious.

"That's rather a strong statement to make, Merry," he said. "I can very easily explain how I came to be in the team. I got a note from you—I be-

lieved it was from you, anyway—telling me I was to report to Talbot to play. You said in the note you had heard I was a good man at the game."

"Where is that note?"

"Goodness knows!" said Percy Knox coolly. "I just handed that to Talbot. If somebody else has played a trick on you, you can scarcely blame me, can you? And, in any case," said Percy steadily, "I won the match for St. Jim's. Fellows have told me it wouldn't have been won if I had not played."

Tom Merry flushed crimson. Only he saw the bitter enmity and hatred in Percy Knox's eyes. In that moment Tom realised for the first time what the new fellow had in his mind. He was "out" to do Tom all the harm he could—possibly to shift him from the leadership of the junior school at St. Jim's. He had already scored heavily. Tom realised. His chums had told him of the enthusiasm of the crowd—of the wild scenes as they carried the hero of the hour shoulder-high.

It was bitter knowledge to Tom. He was far from being a jealous junior; but he was human, and, moreover, the way in which Knox had attained his objective made the junior skipper inwardly seethe with fury.

"You—you howling cad!" said Tom thickly. "You can deny it as much as you like; but I know it was you and your shady pals who kidnapped me. And I'm going to smash you to a jelly for it!"

"Really?" said Percy Knox coolly. "That's good news! I've been wanting to have a go at you since my first day here. What about settling the matter now—with gloves, or without?"

"I don't feel up to scrapping now," said Tom. "I'll meet you where and how you like to-morrow!"

"To-morrow never comes!" jeered Racke.

"That's it, Racke," smiled Knox, though he was far too keen a young man to know that Tom did not funk him. "He's always got an excuse why he should

not fight me. I think I'll settle the matter myself."

With that he stepped swiftly forward and struck Tom a flat-handed blow across the face. It was a nasty smack, and it left a vivid patch on the white skin.

"How's that, Merry?" asked Knox calmly. "What about having it out now?"

"You howling cad!" shouted Lowther. "You can see Merry's ill, and that's why you're provoking him now, you sweep!"

"Don't let the cad get what he wants!" said Manners, his own eyes blazing. "Can't you see his game?"

Tom Merry could see it; but he was not in a reasonable mood. He scarcely heard his chum's words. Without a word he peeled off his coat.

"It'll do in here now as well as anywhere or any time," he said, his eyes glinting dangerously. "Lock that door, somebody, and shove those forms back!"

"Chuck it, Tommy!" muttered Jack Blake. "Don't be an ass!"

"Bal Jove! Don't allow the schemin' wottah to draw you!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus anxiously.

Tom took no notice. He flung his coat away and turned back his sleeves. Percy Knox did the same unconcernedly. He was certainly a very cool customer.

Tom's chums groaned; they knew of old that look on his face, and they knew it was useless to plead with him.

A ring was formed, gloves were produced, and the rest of the juniors crowded eagerly round. They did not think Tom was unwell at all—they took his white, strained face for passion. Scarcely one of them expected Knox minor to prove the victor. Tom Merry had the reputation of being the best boxer in the Lower School.

Only Tom's own personal chums were anxious. They knew he had a bad headache, and they knew he was chilled yet and far from being in a fit

condition for a gruelling fight with a fellow like Percy Knox.

But it had to be—they saw that, and they could only hope for the best.

The first round opened with a rush on the part of Knox minor. That crafty youth knew full well that Tom was far from being at his best—indeed, he had forced the fight now for that very reason. And he was going to rush things now for that same reason.

Tom Merry sprang back and side-stepped, sending out a swift right as he did so—at least, he intended it to be swift; to the spectators and to Knox himself it seemed pathetically slow.

Tom's glove slid harmlessly past Knox's ducking head, and an iron-hard fist smacked home under Tom's ear.

It almost rocked Tom off his feet, and there was a gasp. But the junior managed to steady himself with a desperate effort, and he countered swiftly—with more success this time, for the blow caught Knox a nasty jab in the jaw.

He shook his head, laughed aloud, and came on again.

"Steady, Tom!" called Lowther anxiously.

He felt instinctively that Tom was beaten already. There was no mistaking the fatigue and lack of energy in Tom's movements, despite that last jab.

"Wake up, Tommy, you born idiot!" bawled Grundy. "What in thunder is the matter with the chap?" he asked all and sundry. "Wake up, for goodness' sake, or let someone else have a go!"

There was a laugh—apparently the fact that he had already been licked by Percy Knox made no difference to the great George Alfred; he was quite ready to go on again.

As a matter of fact, the blunt and good-hearted Grundy was in a state of agony lest Tom Merry should be "licked" by Knox. At every blow registered on Tom's anatomy Grundy winced as though it had landed on his own.

He yelled repeatedly, and appeared to Tom to "wake up" until the rest of the juniors had to threaten to throw him out neck and crop if he made any more row. There was always a certain amount of noise proceeding from the Common-room in the evening; but Grundy's powerful voice was making the noise a trifle too risky.

Crash!

Tom Merry was down, sent there by a powerful drive in return for a light body blow from Tom that Knox scarcely felt.

Monty Lowther groaned and bent over him.

"Chuck it, Tommy!" he pleaded. "You're no more fit to scrap with him than old Gussy was the other night. You advised Gussy to chuck it then; why not take your own blessed advice now?"

"I'm going on," said Tom in a panting, husky whisper. "I'm not letting that cad think I funk him any longer!"

Tom staggered on his feet again.

"Come on!" said Percy Knox tauntingly. "Come and take a few more prize packets, Merry!"

He backed carelessly before Tom's savage rush; he regretted his carelessness the next moment, for Tom beat back his guard by sheer fury, and a right rocked him on his feet, and then Tom's left connected with his jaw with a smack that resounded throughout the big room.

Crash!

For the first time Percy Knox was down—and he went down hard. A murmur of delight went up from Tom's supporters.

"Do it again, Tommy!" yelled Grundy. "Oh, good man!"

Tom tried to do it again. He came on with another savage attack, forgetting his fatigue and aching head. It was forgetfulness that cost him dear.

Blow after furious blow Tom registered on Knox's face, head and body, and Knox backed, defending himself desperately before the sheer fury of Tom's attack.

"Steady, Tom!" cried Manners.

He saw that Tom was wasting precious energy—and Tom himself saw it when too late.

Quite suddenly he seemed to falter, and his attack petered out feebly. A nasty jab stung Tom's lips, and another struck him on the temple. Knox laughed, and came on like a whirlwind.

Smack, smack, smack, smack!

Right and left, the new fellow drove Tom before him, dazed, bemused and utterly helpless almost to defend himself from a single blow.

"Tom's whacked!" groaned Manners.

"Chucked it away!" said Blake, his brow dark.

"He was whacked before he started," said Cardew grimly. "He was an ass to fight at all."

Tom himself was realizing that fact only too well now. The end came swiftly.

Backing stumbly before the hurricane attack, defending himself with almost ludicrous efforts, Tom Merry suddenly caught his heel in a hole in the linoleum.

In a flash Percy Knox had darted in closer, and his right and left shot out in two smashing blows to the face.

Tom rocked, and crashed down; and he remained down. It was ended—the rottenest, most unsatisfactory scrap, as Levison put it, that any of the juniors had witnessed.

"Licked!" snorted George Alfred Grundy. "Licked to the wide, by jingo! Here, lemme have another go at the rotter!"

And George Alfred flung off his jacket and would have "gone for" the victorious and grinning Percy had not a dozen fellows dragged him back by sheer force.

"You awful idiot!" snorted Wilkins. "Hasn't he had enough as well as Merry? Where's the game in scrapping with a chap who's only just gone through a stiff mill! Scrap him when he's as fresh as yourself if you must, you footling ass!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Grundy. "I never thought of that!"

And Grundy put on his jacket again.

Monty Lowther and Manners, with Blake & Co., helped Tom Merry to the nearest bath-room, and there they helped him to bathe his injuries and to clean himself up. Tom scarcely said a word to any of them. He knew he had asked for the licking—had been a fool to take on such a tough handful as Percy Knox in his present enfeebled state. With a punishing headache, a cold brewing, and stiff and aching from his unpleasant imprisonment in the icy vaults, Tom should never have tackled such a task, and he knew it.

What would happen now? he wondered. Knox had licked him in a stand-up fight—a thing Tom knew he should have avoided at all costs. The fellow was undoubtedly out to do him all the injury he could—to ruin his prestige and popularity in the House and school. He had already scored on the footer field—scored heavily. And he had now licked him—licked the best fighter in the Lower School. After this his swank and brag would be utterly unbearable. Moreover, his possibilities of making mischief would be trebled. He would feel himself "cock-of-the-walk" indeed now.

Tom Merry felt very sick and very dismayed about it all. He would have been still more disturbed in mind had he heard the conversation in Racke's study some minutes later.

After treating the assembled juniors to a thrilling account of his last fight at his former school—Knox did not say where it was—he had strolled out of the Common-room with the gleeful and admiring Racke & Co. for a quiet smoke behind a "sported oak." Seated in the best easy-chair, showing few signs of his combat, Knox puffed at his cigarette contentedly.

"So you've done it, Percy!" grinned Aubrey Racke. "My hat! I never thought you would!"

"Nor did I, old chap," said Scrope.

"I knew I'd get him sooner or later," remarked Percy, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "I generally do get what I go for, I might tell you!"

"You've licked the best man in the Lower School," said Racke admiringly. "You've licked him at scrapping, and you've shown you can lick him on the footer field!"

"I meant to," said Percy Knox complacently. "And I haven't finished yet. I'm rather ambitious, you know!"

Racke eyed him curiously, and took out his cigarette.

"Look here," he grinned. "What's your little game, Knox? You aren't going to all this dashed trouble just to get your own back out of Merry because you hate him."

"My game," said Knox, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Well, I don't mind telling you, Racke. As I say, I'm ambitious. I'm out to get Merry booted from his job as captain of the Lower School, and as captain of footer and cricket here! Killing two birds with one stone, you know. I shall pay out that pie-faced sweep, and I shall also pave the way for myself to step into his shoes, what?"

"You've got a nerve for a new chap, who's scarcely been here five minutes," grinned Racke.

"I've already done quite a lot since I came, what?" said Percy Knox coolly. "I'm going to do much more, and you kids can help me. Are you game?"

"What-ho!" chortled Aubrey Racke.

"Yes, rather!" said Croke and Scrope together.

"That's good enough, then!" grinned Percy.

And, crossing his legs, Percy Knox puffed out another cloud of cigarette-smoke.

CHAPTER 13.

Percy Scores Again!

AS Tom feared, his cold was much worse when he got up the next morning, and he went into classes feeling wretchedly ill. Mr. Linton soon noted the signs, and he

suggested a visit to the matron. But Tom made light of it, determined to stick to the day's work. A whispered aside he happened to overhear from Aubrey Racke that it was "cold feet" and not a cold he had, stiffened his resolve in that direction.

Moreover, Tom was determined to be on Little Side at three o'clock that afternoon. It was compulsory games practice, and Percy Knox had stated that he had no intention of attending; Tom was determined that he should attend—willingly or unwillingly.

Tom knew perfectly well that all the fellows knew of Percy's determination not to obey Tom's order, and he was resolved not to show weakness at the beginning of what he saw was going to be a bitter struggle between himself and this domineering, ambitious new fellow.

So, despite the pleading of his chums, Tom turned up promptly at three on Little Side. A glance told him that Percy Knox was absent.

"Knox not here, I see!" he said grimly. "Any fellow know whether he means to turn up or not?"

"Not!" called Croke; and there was a laugh.

"Right!" said Tom calmly. "Blake, Levison, Clive, D'Arcy, Herries, and Lowther, come with me!"

"Let the rotter rip!" murmured Lowther uneasily.

Tom walked on without answering. Blake grimaced and led the others after Tom. They found nobody in at Study No. 7, but from Cardew—who had been excused practice—they learned that Knox of the Sixth had "yanked" him off to his study.

It was a poser for Tom, but he did not hesitate long. He set his lips hard, and led his men along to the Sixth Form quarters.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Jack Blake, as Tom knocked on the prefect's door.

"Now for it!"

"Come in!"

It was Gerald Knox's voice, after a long pause, and, pushing open the door, Tom entered, his chums remaining in the doorway.

There was a haze of cigarette-smoke in the room, and, on seeing who the visitors were, Percy Knox brought a cigarette from behind him and stuck it between his lips again. Knox senior had evidently pitched his hurriedly into the fire.

He fairly glowered at the juniors.

"Hallo! What the deuce do you kids want?" he said angrily. "Clear out!"

"We've come for Knox minor," said Tom quietly. "It's compulsory games practice to-day, Knox. As junior captain, it's my job to see Knox minor turns up."

"I've given him permission to cut practice this afternoon," said Knox senior. "Now get out, you cheeky young sweeps!"

"Knox must come," said Tom steadily. "Only Kildare and myself have the right to let a chap off games practice."

"Do you know whom you are talking to?" hooted Gerald Knox. "Are you forgetting that I am a prefect, you impudent little worm?"

"Not at all! But I've my duty to do, Knox. Your cousin must come, or I shall be obliged to report him to Kildare."

Knox fairly fumed.

"Get out!" he hissed, giving Tom Merry a deadly look. "As a prefect I excuse—"

"Hold on!"

The interruption came from Percy Knox. That junior slid from the table and threw his cigarette into the fire.

"Hold on, Gerald!" he said coolly. "I think I will attend practice, after all!"

"You silly young fool! Don't I tell you that you needn't?" blared Knox senior.

"But I want to do so," said Percy calmly. "I'll explain my reasons afterwards. Cheerio, old top!"

He nodded and winked at his cousin, and then he nodded insolently to Tom Merry.

"I'm ready!" he said. "I'll run along to the changing-room and be with you on the footer field in two ticks!"

"You'd better!" said Tom Merry.

Knox minor left the room, and Tom and the others followed. Tom was looking perplexed, but he decided to trust the new fellow to turn up as he had stated he would.

"He's diddling you, Tom!" grunted Louth, as they walked back to the ground.

"We'll see!" said Tom grimly. "Kildare is in charge this afternoon. Perhaps he's unaware of that!"

They found Kildare already in charge.

"Knox minor coming?" he snapped, as Tom came up.

"He says he's coming," said Tom.

"He'd better!"

All doubts were set at rest a minute later as Percy Knox came running on the field. He looked perfectly fit—in striking contrast to Tom Merry.

"Funked it, after all?" whispered Aubrey Racke as Knox eyed him. "You ass!"

"Not at all!" murmured Percy Knox. "When I spotted Merry's giddy chivvy I saw he was thundering seedy. It struck me it's a good chance to make him look a fool! If I can only get playing against him I'll make the sweep look small, you see!"

Little dreaming why Percy Knox had changed his mind so abruptly, Tom Merry dropped the new fellow from his mind—for the time being. Sides were picked swiftly—Tom Merry captaining one side and Talbot captaining the other. Tom Merry ignored Percy Knox, and it was at Kildare's suggestion that Talbot picked the new fellow and placed him at centre-forward. From Darrell and also from Knox senior Kildare had heard a lot about the new fellow's abilities, and he was anxious to try him out.

More than one fellow grinned in anticipation on noting that Tom Merry was opposed to his enemy. Tom himself did not like it at all; had he been fitter he would have relished the trial of strength and skill.

It could not be helped, however, and Tom resolved grimly to do all he could,

despite his aching head and streaming eyes and nose.

From the very start he spotted Knox minor's game.

At the kick-off Tom got the ball and started off with it. But he lacked his usual dash and spirit—a fact he was only too well aware of himself. Before he had gone a dozen yards he stumbled over the ball, and as he did so a figure nipped along and lifted the ball off his toes almost.

It was Percy Knox, and he went away like greased lightning, the ball like a living thing at his toes.

Tom Merry stood staring after him, and a laugh of derision went up. Tom flushed to the roots of his hair.

"Wake up Merry!" called Kildare.

But it was easier said than done to Tom Merry that afternoon.

Lowther should have gone off after Knox, but he stopped to speak to Tom.

"Tom, you awful ass!" he said earnestly. "Can't you see you're playing right into that cad's hands? He's out to show you up—to make you look silly if he can. Chuck the game and get off the field—you're not fit to be out, never mind playing!"

"I'm playing!" said Tom through his teeth. "I'll be better presently."

"But, you ass—"

"I'm playing!" said Tom stubbornly.

Lowther shrugged his shoulders and ran off. There was a strain of obstinacy in Tom's nature, and he knew it was useless to argue. But Lowther's face was glum as he went after the speeding new fellow. He saw plainly now why Knox minor had changed his mind and decided to play.

He had abundant reason to think so as the game progressed.

Tom Merry was hopeless—he fumbled the ball, and he missed chance after chance. Kildare came across to him presently.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Merry?" he snapped. "Great Scott! You might never have seen a ball before!"

"I'm not up to the mark—got a bit of a cold, Kildare," said Tom.

"Then get off the field, you young ass!"

"I'll be all right presently. I'd rather stick it out!"

"Oh, all right! You know best how you feel, kid! But—"

Kildare shrugged and turned away. He saw the signs of the cold on Tom's face, but did not dream how the junior was actually feeling, and what an effort it was for him to play at all. He could not help suspecting—as many others did—that Tom's curious behaviour was entirely owing to the fact that he was opposed to Knox.

From the beginning Talbot's team had it all their own way. And Percy Knox had his own way with Tom Merry. He seemed to go out of his way to seek a tussle with the junior skipper, and he bested him practically every time.

By half-time Percy Knox had scored the only two goals, and by half-time also Tom Merry was feeling more shamed and humiliated than he had ever done in his life before, while his own chums were seething with wrath and chagrin. They could see as plainly as could Tom himself that Percy Knox was out to make him a laughing-stock.

The new fellow's play was brilliant. He left the hapless Tom Merry standing still again and again, and he went speeding through the opposing defence like a knife through cheese.

To the few spectators the game was more comical than anything else. Tom Merry's face was burning as he came off the ground when the whistle went for half-time. He knew only too well what a pitiable figure he had cut, and he also knew that had not the redoubtable Fatty Wynn been in goal for them the slaughter would have been appalling.

"For goodness' sake chuck it, Tom, old man!" pleaded Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! Pway wetiah from

the game, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head gravely. "That beastly outsiders is takin' advantage of your wotten seediness! The fellows seem to think you're only pwe-tendin' to be wocky because you feah that cad's play will be bettah than yours."

"That's it, right enough!" said Blake gloomily. "For goodness' sake chuck it, Tommy!"

"And won't they think so all the more if I do retire?" said Tom bitterly, his face scarlet. "I'm sticking it right through to the end! Hang the fellows, and hang Knox!"

But Tom was counting without Kildare.

"There's been enough of this, Merry!" he snapped, coming up behind the juniors. "It's pretty clear you're not yourself to-day. Dress and get back to the school at once!"

"Is that an order, Kildare?" asked Tom, his voice thick.

"Yes. I order you to retire from the game and get indoors! You're making a perfect fool of yourself!"

"Very well, Kildare!"

There was nothing else for it—the captain's orders had to be obeyed. Tom Merry went back to school, biting his lips in his effort to keep back the tears of mortification. Once again the ruthless and crafty new fellow had scored.

Tom went back to the study and flung himself into the armchair, his thoughts black and bitter. The luck seemed against him all along the line. He was still crouching there when Kildare looked in after the practice game.

"You are here, then, Merry?" he said grimly.

"Yes, I'm here!"

"I looked in to tell you that the game ended with the score at five to one for Talbot's side," he said.

"To rub it in, you mean," said Tom, his eyes glinting.

"Not at all!" said Kildare quietly, ignoring the "cheek" of the reply. "Knox was responsible for four out of

the five goals. You must have seen," he added dryly, "that the new fellow is a rattling good man."

"He certainly did show up well against me," said Tom bitterly.

"You were not yourself," said Kildare. "You should not have been playing at all. But the fact remains that Knox played a jolly good game."

Tom was silent.

"I admit," said Kildare, "that he plays a selfish game, and that won't do. But that can be altered; he must be taught to play for the good of the team, Merry. That's up to you."

"Me?"

"Yes; after this I suppose you won't hesitate to play this new kid in the Grammar School match?" said Kildare, his voice rising a little. "We want all the good men we can get—and Knox is undoubtedly a good man!"

"I haven't decided on the team yet."

"Well, when you do decide you'll include Knox's name!" snapped Kildare.

"Is that an order, Kildare?"

"Yes; I don't often interfere with you, Merry," said Kildare, his tone kinder. "But I really must in this instance. It seems to me that you have taken an unreasonable dislike to this new chap, Knox. It has influenced you in your attitude to him as a footballer, though I am sure you do not realise it yourself, Merry!"

"Very well!" said Tom Merry, though his face was flushed with anger. "I am bound to do as you order me, Kildare. I'll put Knox's name down."

"Right!" said Kildare. "I don't think you'll have reason to regret it as far as footer is concerned, Merry."

And with that Kildare went out. Knox had indeed scored.

CHAPTER 14.

Ginger Burke!

"HALLO! What the thump's coming?"

Lumley-Lumley of the Shell asked the question in startled tones,

It was the following day just after afternoon lessons. In the old gateway of St. Jim's quite a number of fellows were standing chatting together in various groups, for though there was a nip in the air, it was fine and sunny, even in the late afternoon.

Then Lumley-Lumley asked that question, and his startled exclamation drew everyone's attention to the lane outside the gates.

"Great Scott!" gasped Levison. "What the dickens is it?"

Approaching the school gates from the direction of Rylcombe was a quaint and grotesque form. At least, in the distance, and from the strange manner of its approach, it certainly did look quaint and even grotesque.

It was a boy, undoubtedly; and he was staggering along in a curious series of twists and turns and short hops. As the juniors' glances fell upon him he suddenly stumbled and fell full length in the roadway.

"Looks like a giddy escaped monkey," grinned Aubrey Racke.

"Or a giddy frog!" chuckled Gore. "Hallo, he's up again!"

"And down again!" roared Racke. "Great pip! Look at him! Ha, ha, ha! I believe it's old Skimmy!"

But few of the fellows joined in Racke's laughter.

"It is Skimmy!" said Levison, frowning. "The poor kid's got himself in a mess, or something. Come on!"

He started off at a run for the distant figure, who had sprawled once again in the roadway. After him went Cardew and Clive, and several more of the decent fellows in a rush. Racke and his companions followed at a more leisurely pace.

They arrived on the scene to find Levison and Clive just dragging the hapless Herbert Skimpole to his feet.

Skimpole was the scientific genius of the Shell—or, at least, he fancied himself a scientific genius. He had a very weedy body; but a large head crammed with queer knowledge and cranky

notions surmounted it. But though his frail body was of little use, and his big head of less—according to his fellow-juniors—he possessed a good, generous heart, and he was popular enough at St. Jim's. Few fellows—if any—had reason to dislike "Old Skimmy!"

The faces of Levison and the rest were dark as they lifted Skimpole up now; for he certainly was in a "mess." He was plastered from head to foot in icy, slimy mud, and his thin hands were tied behind him. His feet were tied together loosely, leaving him just room to move them a few inches at a time. His spectacles—without which Skimpole was lost—were missing from his face altogether.

"Skimmy!" snapped Levison. "Who's done this?"

"Ow! Ow-yow! Groooogh!" groaned Skimpole. "Oh, dear me! I am exceedingly hurt—I have suffered the most acute distress and—groooogh—pain! And I have been deprived of my spectacles, without which I am completely—groooogh—helpless and inconvenienced! Ow! Yow!"

"Who's done this, Skimmy?" repeated Levison angrily, cutting the hapless scientist's hands and legs free, "What brute's treated you like this, kid?"

"Not the Grammarians?" demanded Clive.

"Grooogh! No!"

"Then who? Tell us and we'll smash 'em!" snorted Blake, who had just run up with his chums.

"Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus. "Pway who has committed this wotten outrage, Skimmy, deah boy?"

"Grooogh! Oh dear, dear. I can scarcely stand, my dear fellows! It was a great, hulking individual who used very bad language, and who had very red hair. He—"

"Ginger Burke!" shouted Herries. "Oh, the cad!"

"I believe that is the unpleasant youth's name," groaned Herbert Skimpole, rubbing his thin hands together.

to restore the circulation. "I was rash enough to return from the village alone by the path through the woods. The rude fellow was seated on the stile with a couple of his companions. They refused to allow me to pass, and when I remonstrated with them they rolled me in the ditch, and tied me up. They were also exceedingly rude in their expressions to me, and they kicked and cuffed me. Ow! Ow! They have—groooogh—hurt me exceedingly!"

"Bal Jove!"

"The cads!"

The juniors looked at each other very grimly. Ginger Burke was not unknown to them by any means. He was a great, hulking youth, with fists like legs of mutton, and he had a far from enviable reputation. His home seemed to be in Wayland, but he had recently obtained employment in Rylcombe.

The St. Jim's juniors had very good reason to know him. He had come "up against" George Alfred Grundy, to begin with, and he had soundly trounced even that mighty fighter. Since then he declared war in no light measure on the St. Jim's juniors.

Unfortunately, he seemed to prefer to bestow his unwelcome attentions on the weaker element—fags and fellows like Trimble and Mellich and suchlike. Now, seemingly, it was the luckless Skimpole's turn. For more than a week now nothing had been heard of him; but apparently his reign of terror was not ended in the district.

Racke & Co. were looking on, with grins; but Percy Knox, who was with them, was looking perplexed.

"What's the rumpus?" he demanded, in his domineering manner. "This queer object's in the Shell, isn't he?"

"Yes; it's old Skimpole," chuckled Racke. "Doesn't he look a sight?"

"Who's this chap Ginger Burke you're talking about?" snapped Knox, his eyes glimmering. "I think I've heard of him before. Sort of bully of the village, isn't he?"

"Something like that," agreed Clive. "Looks as if he's been bullying Skimmy, doesn't it?"

"And he's done this sort of thing before?"

"Several times," said Gore.

"Skimmy isn't the only one."

"And nobody's stopped him?"

"Yes—at least, they've tried to stop his games. Grundy happened to meet him once, but he fairly put Grundy to sleep in no time."

"That clumsy fool!" sneered Percy Knox. "What good is he? I licked him myself in next to no time; I could have licked him with one hand if I'd wanted."

"Why didn't you, then?" said Cardew, yawning. "I noticed you were very careful to use both of them, anyway. You needed them, too."

"I shouldn't need them both to lick you, anyway, you sneering cad!" said Knox, looking Cardew's slim and elegant form up and down. "If you want a scrap—"

"I don't!" said Cardew cheerfully. "Not before tea, anyway. But I tell you what, old sport—why not trot off an' tackle this ginger-headed merchant? You're just about his weight and—ahem!—disposition!"

"You cheeky cad—"

"Hallo! Here's old Thomas!" interrupted Cardew cheerily. "Seen anythin' of our old friend Ginger Burke, Thomas?"

Tom Merry, with Manners and Lowther, came along the lane from the direction of the village, and they stopped and stared at the scene. Tom Merry had his overcoat collar buttoned over a thick muffler. His nostrils and lips showed red against his white face.

"Seen that brute? No!" said Tom, staring at the hapless Skimpole. "Why—what—? Has that ruffian done this to Skimmy?"

"Yes; and sent the poor kid home with his hands and feet tied!" said Levison. "It's getting a bit too thick, Merry! Something will have to be done about this!"

"If I were junior skipper," said Percy Knox, with a sneer, "something would be done—and jolly quickly, too! Perhaps Merry has done something, though—perhaps he's already licked the chap?"

"Not likely!" chipped in Crooke scoffingly. "This looks like it, doesn't it? Merry gives Ginger a wide berth—what?"

"That's enough, Crooke!" snapped Lowther, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "Merry's already been out looking for the brute more than once. You know that!"

"But he's never found him," murmured Racke, winking at the sky. "I wonder why?"

There was a laugh, and Tom Merry's face flushed. He could already see what this was leading up to.

"Dry up, Racke! As the biggest funk at St. Jim's, it's scarcely for you to criticise anyone," said Levison. "I know for a fact that Merry's hunted for that brute; I've been out on the trail with him myself. The cad only goes for duffers, and he keeps clear of trouble."

"It's queer that he's kept clear for so long," said Percy Knox, his lip curling. "I like the idea of Merry as champion of the oppressed—what? Look here, the chap can't be far away. Why doesn't Merry go after him now?"

He looked straight at Tom Merry as he spoke, and it was clear to all that this was a challenge.

"I don't choose to go after him now," said Tom quietly.

"Why not?" asked Knox, lifting his eyebrows. "Dear me! Has our highly respected skipper got cold feet?"

"You would not understand if I explained," said Tom, steeling his voice to calmness. "But I'm not seeking a fight with anyone to-night."

"Tell us why," said Knox blandly. "It would be interesting, I'm sure!"

All eyes were on Tom Merry now. Actually even Levison was a trifle surprised at Tom's attitude.

challenge you to go out and fight

that chap," said Percy Knox coolly. "I think I've heard you say that, as skipper of the Lower School, you had certain duties and responsibilities, Merry. Isn't it your job as skipper to stop bullying inside or outside the school?"

"It's my job to try," answered Tom.

"Then here's your chance, being such a dutiful chap," said Knox. "Show the fellows that you're up to your job."

"I'm not risking a fight to-night," said Tom. "There are two fights I am very keen on, though—I'm keen to fight Ginger Burke, and I'm keen to fight you again, Knox, you cheeky cad! But not yet!"

Knox laughed.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you one reason; the other reason I won't explain," said Tom, flushing. "It's the Grammar School match to-morrow. We'll need all our fitness and energy to win. I'd advise you to steer clear of scraps also to-night, Knox, as you're in the team."

"Bunkum!"

"Yah! Cold feet!" called Crooke, from the fringe of the crowd.

Tom Merry turned away abruptly.

CHAPTER 15.

Knox Minor's Challenge!

MONTY LOWTHER and Manners followed Tom Merry towards the school; but none of the others did, for as the crowd was about to disperse Percy Knox held up his hand.

"Hold on, you fellows!" he said grimly. "I've got something to say before you go. Just a minute!"

"More hot air?" asked Levison curtly.

"Or more slander and back-biting?" said Blake.

"Not at all!" said Percy Knox regardless. "I mean real business. For the good of the school this sort of thing can't go on!"

"A lot you care for the good of the school," grunted George Herries. "Dry up!"

"It's the duty of the junior captain to put down bullying," said Knox coolly. "As our respected junior captain refuses, then someone else must do the job for him."

"Who's going to do it, then?"

"I am!" was the cool reply. "Merry seems to funk the job; but I'm going to show him that there's one fellow in the Lower School who isn't afraid to stand up for the weaker chaps."

"Good man, Knox!" called Racke.

"It's rather thick, though, that a new fellow has to do Merry's dirty work for him," said Crooke.

"Not at all!" said Knox, planting his feet apart and glancing round very much as the mighty Grundy was wont to do. "I suppose he just funks it, knowing his dashed limitations. He's a poor sort of skipper, I must say, and I wonder you chaps put up with him. But now a better man's come along—"

"Bow-wow-wow!" said Blake.

"D'you want your dashed head punched, Blake?"

"Not by you, old chap!" said Blake cheerily. "I'm rather particular, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Allow me to point out that we're wastin' time gassin'," remarked Cardew casually. "If dear old Knox means to administer a few hard knocks to the Burke merchant, I suggest he gets a giddy move on. Possibly he'd rather give Ginger time to wander away, though?"

Percy Knox took a step towards Cardew, his eyes gleaming pugnaciously. He shook his clenched fist under Cardew's nose.

"I've already warned you, you stuck-up tailor's dummy!" he said threateningly. "Any more cheek from you, and you're for it!"

Cardew neither retreated nor turned a hair. With his hands still in his over-

coat pockets, he bent his head and scrutinised Knox's fist curiously.

"H'm! Quite a useful article!" he remarked. "Have you ever tried soap on it?"

"You—you cheeky——"

"A death in the family accounts for your nails bein' in mourning, I presume?" inquired Cardew, looking up blandly. "Try constant work with a nail-brush."

There was a chuckle; but Levison dragged his chum away.

"Chuck it, Cardew, you ass!" he said uneasily. "Stand back, Knox! No need to want to fight every chap who tries to rag you a bit! If you mean to have a go at Burke——"

"I'll fight this chap first, if he likes!" snapped Knox, glaring at the smiling Cardew. "I'm not standing——"

"Why not tackle Burke first? You'll need all you've got in you for him!" said Clive grimly. "And Burke might clear off!"

"He'll be hanging on that stile yet, I fancy!" said Glyn. "It's a favourite resting-place of the lazy wastrel. This way—if you mean it, Knox!"

"I do mean it!" growled Knox.

"Then come along!"

Glyn led the way, smiling. Knox stalked after him quickly enough, his square jaw set hard. The rest swarmed after the two in eager anticipation. A scrap between such a "coughdrop" as Percy Knox and a terror like Ginger Burke was more than likely to be worth watching.

That Knox was in earnest none of them doubted—even the cynical, humorous Cardew did not doubt that. The new fellow's swank and blustering vain-glory amused him; but he did not doubt that Knox would come "up to scratch" when the time came. The main body of the juniors, however, were not amused—they had come to know that Knox could back up his bragging with deeds, and they overlooked it; indeed, the new fellow was already something of a hero in the

eyes of the more easily influenced element at St. Jim's.

It was not a far cry to the stile in Rylcombe Woods, and when near the spot Levison called a halt.

"Hold on, chaps!" he said. "No good rushing in and giving the chap time to bolt—and he'll certainly bolt if he sees a crowd! I suggest Knox and two chaps go straight to the stile while the rest of us scout round and surround the spot." *

"Good wheeze!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

This was promptly decided upon, and with Levison and Blake—who volunteered to back him up—Percy Knox strode on through the trees towards the stile.

The stile came into view suddenly through the bare trees, and Levison gave a grunt of satisfaction. Seated on the stile was a big, burly youth in rough clothes, and wearing a scarf round his thick throat. His hair was a fiery ginger in colour, and like rope almost in texture.

"That's the chap!" said Levison grimly. "Like the look of him, Knox?"

"I'll make mincemeat of him!" id Knox, his eyes glinting.

He stalked on towards the stile—whatever else could be said of him, he did not lack pluck. Two other youths were lounging round the stile, and all three were smoking "fags."

They jumped up as the three St. Jim's fellows swung into their view. Ginger Burke's companions seemed to hesitate; but Burke spoke to them, and they stopped.

"Ere's some blokes from the skool out for a ta-ta!" he grinned. "Shall we let 'em pass if they ask us nicely?"

The three juniors stopped.

"We don't want to pass, Burke!" said Levison calmly. "We've come specially to see you."

"Ho, 'ave you?"

"Yes. You've just been ill-treating a St. Jim's kid, you cad—a fellow not half

your size!" said Levison. "We've come to see you about that. There's a chap here who intends to knock the stuffing out of you, you cowardly brute! You've got to be taught to leave St. Jim's fellows alone."

"And I'm the man who's going to do the trick!" said Knox, stepping up to Ginger Burke.

"Oh!" ejaculated Ginger Burke. "Oh, are you, by crikey!"

He seemed not a little taken aback by the announcement. But after eyeing Knox for a moment his small eyes glittered and he swiftly threw off his jacket and spat on his hands.

Knox took off his own jacket and cap and handed them to Levison.

"Hold on!" said Jack Blake. "Not here—no good asking for trouble, Knox; there's a nice quiet little clearing a few yards in the woods. If a master or prefect comes along——"

"This 'ere spot's good enough for me." said Ginger Burke, showing his teeth. "It won't take me more'n two ticks to knock that swank-pot inter the middle of next week!"

"But it's not good enough for us," said Levison. "This way, chaps!"

He started off, and Knox started after him. Burke did not follow. As a matter of fact, Ginger Burke did not like the look of things at all. He was used to terrorising, and to be faced so coolly like this rather frightened him. There was not a little of the coward in his nature.

He gave his companions a swift look.

"Run for it!" he hissed.

He started off with a rush.

"Look out!" howled Blake.

He made a clutch at the fleeing Burke, but one of Burke's companions tripped Blake up, and he went crashing down. Burke and his friends went crashing amid the trees.

They did not get far. There came a shout, and suddenly the woods seemed alive with fellows wearing St. Jim's caps. Burke went crashing down in the grasp of Cardew, Clive and Herries. His com-



"Rush 'em!" howled Ginger Burke. "Never mind that there dorg!" When the rush came, Harries had the biggest surprise of his life, for Tom Merry suddenly turned and, easily dodging the outstretched arm of Ginger Burke, bolted for his life.

panions met with a similar fate at the hands of a swarm of St. Jim's juniors.

"Bring the cads along!" called Levison, hurrying up. "I might have expected something like this, the sweeps!"

The three roughs were dragged up and forced towards the clearing. Burke's face was savage and frightened now.

"I knowed it!" he yelled furiously. "I knowed it were a trap! Fair play, blow you!"

"You'll get fair play all right!" snapped Blake. "These fellows have only come to see the fun, Burke! This chap here wants to fight you, and we're going to see you fight him, my pippin!"

"Look 'ere—" yelled Burke.

"You needn't fear that we shall chip in!" snapped Levison, his lip curling. "It's going to be a fair fight, as far as we're concerned. We shan't interfere, and your men mustn't, either!"

"Oh!"

Burke looked relieved. He eyed the juniors suspiciously, and then, as if he decided to accept the challenge, he grinned—a nasty grin.

"All right!" he snarled, looking Knox's figure up and down. "I reckon as I can make mincemeat of that bloke! 'Ow do I know you won't chip in if I licks 'im, though?"

"You've got our word for that," snapped Levison. "If Knox fails to lick you, then someone else will have a go at you, until you learn to leave our fellows alone."

"By crimes!"

The burly rough looked still a bit suspicious; he evidently could not understand why the juniors did not "go for" him and thrash him—as he and his friends would doubtless have done had the position been reversed.

But he threw his jacket—which he had snatched up on bolting—down again, and spat on his hands and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

Knox rolled up his. His face was hard and very determined as he stepped back, ready for the business.

"One of these chaps can be your second, and we'll have the u a!

rounds," said Levison, who seemed to have constituted himself master of ceremonies.

He took out his watch, and Racke stepped forward, apparently anxious to be his pal's second.

"You shove that there watch back!" snarled Ginger Burke, his big jaw protruding. "I wants no rounds, and I wants no seconds for this job. I'm going to fight, not dance round like a bloomin' cat!"

"As you like!" said Knox. "A rough and tumble will suit me. I fancy I'm going to show you—"

"Look out!" yelled Blake.

Just in time Knox stepped back and put his hands up, for Ginger Burke came at him with a mad rush, his big arms waving like the arms of a windmill. He had apparently got tired of waiting.

Crash!

Knox staggered back, his guard raised too late, for Ginger's left jolted on his chin, sending him reeling, and then Ginger's right smashed to the side of his jaw with sickening force.

The new fellow slewed round, pitched sideways, and went crashing down.

He picked himself up, dazed, hurt, and enraged.

"Less gassing, Knox!" exclaimed Gore. "Fight, you idiot!"

CHAPTER 16.

Victory!

FROM his savage expression Knox was determined to fight. The sudden onslaught had taken him unawares. He had intended to make a bit of a speech before starting, being a fellow who loved dramatics. But he dropped that idea now.

As he picked himself up Burke came at him again, in a bull-like rush, and his massive, bunched knuckles swung round in a mighty punch.

The punch never connected—luckily for Knox. That youth slipped neatly under the arm, and drove his own right

with a smashing thud into the bully's unprotected solar plexus.

Ginger Burke choked, doubled up, and Knox followed his first blow with a tearing, jabbing upper-cut.

"Bravo!"

"Good man, Knox!"

Ginger Burke tottered, and then Knox went at him like a tornado, slamming, jabbing, and punching mercilessly. Ginger Burke obviously had little idea of boxing, and his defence was pathetically inadequate.

Crash!

"Bravo! He's down!"

"Go it, Percy!"

Percy Knox stood back, breathing hard, his face still hard. He knew only too well that the hulking Ginger Burke could stand any amount of such punishment, and that he would be up again quickly enough.

He was right. Ginger leaped to his feet, snarling, his eyes glittering at his younger adversary. The rough realised now that, though he was bigger and stronger, he would have his work cut out to win the battle.

Knox had strength, too; his hefty blows had "rattled" the bigger fellow, and he was more active, and he certainly had more knowledge of boxing—far more.

"Knox's fight!" murmured Ralph Reckness Cardew. "Unless the ass is silly enough to run right into old Ginger's fist too many times—like that!"

Smack!

Ginger Burke had caught the over-eager Knox napping with a mighty slam in the region of the heart that all but doubled up the St. Jim's fellow. He followed it up with a volley of furious blows that Knox parried desperately, backing, ducking, and twisting, as he did so.

"Is this 'ere a runnin' match?" sneered Ginger Burke savagely. "Stand up to me, you bloomin' snake!"

It was Burke's turn to be over-eager now. He followed up recklessly, slamming blow after blow, most of which Knox, rattled and dazed as he was, easily guarded.

Suddenly Knox stood firm under the fusillade of blows and landed a swift, jolting right full on the bridge of Burke's nose.

It was a nasty smack, and Ginger yelped, a thin stream of crimson spurting from his nasal organ.

"You little rat!" hissed Ginger. "I'll smash you for that!"

The blow had stung furiously, as a blow on the nose always does, and Ginger lost his temper badly.

"Look out now, Knoxy!"

There was need for the warning. The hulking Ginger came on raging, his small, beady eyes glittering menacingly.

The next moment the two were at it hammer and tongs, Ginger following up furiously as Knox gave ground steadily, countering, guarding, and jabbing when he could.

It was an onslaught that could not last, as Knox well knew. But it was an onslaught that few could have stood up against.

Crash!

Knox tripped suddenly and crashed down. Ginger bent as if to hammer him as he lay, but a howl of wrath from the crowd made him jump back again.

"You'd better not!" said Levison. "Stand back!"

Knox minor was on his feet again now, swaying unsteadily, his eyes blinking rapidly. That last blow—a smashing hook, that sent his head jerking back—had shaken him up considerably. But he was up again.

"He's game, anyway!" said Jack Blake, with reluctant admiration. "I can't stand the conceited blighter, but, by Jove, he's game!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good old Knoxy!"

The new fellow's strong personality had undoubtedly taken a firm hold on the minds of the more easily influenced fellows. That shout proved that Percy Knox was already well on the way to popularity with the crowd. As he heard that shout his lips met and he faced Ginger Burke again with a twisted grin on his bruised face.

He was determined, come what may, to increase that measure of popularity. That shout of encouragement gave him new courage, courage which, in that stage of the fight, he was sadly lacking. That last furious attack had bemused and staggered him, shaking his nerve and grit.

But he seemed a different fellow as he faced the crouching bully. Ginger came on again, a little over-confident now. Percy Knox stalled off the rush, and then, with a clever feint, he drove his way through his opponent's defence with a terrific upper-cut.

Ginger Burke crashed to the frosty grass.

"Good man, Knox!"

Knox grinned again, and waited for his opponent to rise, ready to knock him down again—for he was not the fellow to grant an enemy the slightest advantage.

Ginger Burke clawed himself to his knees, and was getting up when Knox floored him again with a swinging hook. Burke swore, his beady eyes glimmering with hatred. He started up again, and then swiftly and unexpectedly he flung himself bodily at his adversary's legs.

Knox minor crashed down on his back as the rough's powerful arms dragged his legs from under him.

There was a howl, and once again Burke drew back when about to jump on the prostrate junior. He was evidently not used to modern methods of warfare.

But his drawing back gave the dazed and half-stunned junior a chance to rise. He staggered to his feet, and as Burke drove in again Percy Knox stepped swiftly back, and, quick as thought, shot out his foot.

Crash!

The burly rough tripped over the foot and went crashing down full on hands and face.

"Oh!"

It was a gasp of surprise—amazement and dismay from the St. Jim's fellows looking on. Burke had played a cowardly and unfair trick—but that was no reason why Percy Knox should do

likewise. Two blacks never made a white to St. Jim's fellows where sportsmanship was concerned. It was a thing none present could have imagined a fellow like Tom Merry doing.

But Knox had done it; and he seemed proud of the trick.

"Tit for tat, you cad!" he panted. "Two can play at those games! Come on, you hound!"

"That's the game, Percy!" roared Racke. "Give it him back!"

"Bai Jove, that was wathah wotten!" murmured Arthur Augustus, in dismay.

The crowd was silent—but not for long! They very soon forgot Knox's lapse in the excitement of the next few whirling moments.

"Now the band will play!" murmured Levison. "They've both lost their giddy tempers this time!"

"Knox has it!" remarked Cardew. "Get your giddy shoulders ready to chair the giddy conquerin' hero home again!"

There was deep sarcasm in Cardew's remark; but scarcely anyone heard him, so engrossed were they in what followed.

As Levison opined, the band did play, so to speak. And, as Cardew had added, Knox certainly "had it."

With both their tempers gone, and with science and skill—what little had been used in the fight—thrown to the winds, it was just a case of pluck and wind and endurance.

Percy Knox certainly had the pluck; and in regard to wind and endurance he certainly had the advantage of the burly wastrel. Ginger Burke was strong, undoubtedly; but—as the juniors had already suspected—there was a yellow streak in his make-up.

The big fellow couldn't stand much punishment—and Knox gave him plenty during the hurricane attacks made just then. Scarcely giving him time to get to his knees, Knox darted in and fairly rained down blows on the bigger fellow, who turned sideways, defending himself dazedly, his face evil in its fear and hatred.

"Give it him, Percy!" howled Racke, in a fever of excitement.

"Yes; give it him!" shouted Clive. "Let the brute taste a bit of pain—give him some for old Skimmy!"

Knox gave him plenty—not to avenge Skimmy or anyone else; Knox would never have lifted a hand to save or avenge Skimpole, for he was not that sort. But he was avenging his own hurts, and—his one burning desire—he was fighting for popularity, and to "show up" Tom Merry, the fellow he hated.

The end came swiftly. Ducking desperately before a merciless shower of punches, Ginger Burke suddenly darted in and clinched. Percy Knox grinned an ugly grin, and, knocking one arm swiftly upwards, he shot out his right with all the force he had left behind it.

The smack took the big bully full in the throat, and as he fell back, gasping, Knox's left hit him neatly under the chin.

Crash!

Once again Ginger Burke was down, and this time he made not the slightest effort to rise. He lay, panting, his eyes burning as he glared up at the triumphant new fellow.

"Had enough?" panted Knox.

"Yes, hang you!" came in a gasping croak. "I—I'm done!"

"Going to leave St. Jim's fellows alone after this, what?" demanded Knox, his chest heaving as he stood over his fallen enemy.

"Yes, hang you!"

"If you don't," said Percy Knox threateningly, "I shall come and seek you again, my pippin! And next time I'll make a hospital case of you! You've terrorised this district long enough, but it's going to stop now I've come. See?"

"Cheers!" murmured Cardew.

The whimsical Fourth Former was speaking sarcastically, as usual, but he was not taken sarcastically by the crowd.

"Good old Knox!" bawled Racke. "Hurrah!"

There was a roar that could have been heard at St. Jim's. Racke & Co., and a dozen other fellows swarmed round

Knox and shook his hand with admiring enthusiasm.

Blake, Clive, Levison, and several others turned away, smiling.

"Hold on!" drawled Cardew. "Aren't you fellows goin' to stay to do honour to the conquering hero? Herries, run back for your cornet! What about a tenor solo, Gussy?"

"Ass!"

"I don't think I'll stay to do homage, either," remarked Cardew, yawning. "I must say I admire you fellows' good taste in the matter."

"He showed pluck," said Blake. "But then—"

"Tom Merry would have licked the chap in four minutes," said Levison quietly. "I would have tackled him myself if I'd known just what he was made of. He's a fighter, is Ginger Burke, but only when he's up against someone he knows he can lick. He can't stand punishment, and he soon crumples up."

"He might easily have been knocked out in the first minute," grunted Herries. "And that's the chap who had the reputation of being a bruiser—the giddy terror of the neighbourhood! B-r-r-r!"

"The other chaps seem to think Knox's done something great, anyway!" growled Jack Blake, looking back. "Just hark to them!"

Behind the juniors, through the trees, came a roar. Knox, his bruised face flushed with pleasure, came through the trees, with an admiring crowd swarming round him.

"Rotten!" said Digby. "I'm glad that brute Burke's been laid by the heels at last, but—but—"

"It means unpleasantness for old Tommy," said Clive, shaking his head. "This new chap's done what Tommy didn't do—and what the fellows seem to think he ought to have done."

"It'll do Merry a lot of harm, I'm afraid," said Levison. "I believe Knox's sole reason in fighting Burke was to belittle Tom, and gain popularity for himself."

"Of course it was!" said Herri "It —it's rotten, really!"

And that, indeed, was the opinion of Tom's friends. In his ruthless campaign of hatred against Tom Merry, and in his burning ambition to become "cock-of-the-walk," Percy Knox had undoubtedly scored yet again. He had done what Tom Merry had refused to do, and what most of the fellows had felt Tom Merry ought to have done.

CHAPTER 17.
Crossed Off!

TOM MERRY heard the news of Percy Knox's victory over Ginger Burke with something like dismay. He knew the blow it would be to his own prestige in the Lower School, but he could do nothing, and he kept silent and a stiff upper lip.

But Fate was not finished with him yet. Tom heard Percy Knox boasting that he had got a bet on the Grammar School match! He had backed St. Jim's to win, with one of the Grammar School fellows. That did it!

Tom went straight down to the notice-board in the Common-room, and, to the surprise of the fellows there, he calmly crossed Knox's name off the list, putting in Redfern's in its place.

Then, leaving the room in a buzz, he went off to Kildare's study. Kildare was there alone.

"Well, Merry," he said, "what's the trouble now?"

"I've just crossed Knox's name off the list for to-morrow's match, Kildare," he said quietly. "As you ordered me to play him, I thought I'd better report to you what I've done."

"I should think so!" said Kildare, staring. "Why have you done this, Merry?"

"I'd rather not say, Kildare," said Tom steadily. "It is not a personal matter, however. I think you know me well enough to believe me when I say I am perfectly justified in refusing to play

Knox. If you insist upon him playing

"I do!" said Kildare grimly.

"Then I resign the captaincy!" said Tom.

Kildare jumped.

"What?"

"You mean that, Merry?"

"Yes; in my view Knox is not fit to play for St. Jim's. I should be wanting in my sense of duty and right if I played him. You would be the first to refuse to play him if you knew the facts, Kildare!"

Kildare regarded the junior captain grimly. He spoke after a few moments' reflection.

"Very well, Merry!" he said gruffly, at last. "I will accept what you say, kid, and I'll withdraw my order to play the chap. I'm sorry you have taken up this attitude, for I believe Knox will prove a very good man indeed. However, I don't want you to resign from the captaincy—far from it! You're the best man for the job, in my opinion. I leave it to you."

"Thanks, Kildare!"

Tom left the captain's study. He had gained his point, but he knew Kildare was far from being the only fellow who would not approve. Tom knew that his decision not to play Knox minor would raise a storm of protests from all quarters. And Tom knew it would not add to his popularity, either—quite the reverse!

But Tom Merry knew what he ought to do—his conscience told him he was doing the right thing, and he meant to do that, whatever the cost.

But Fate had further blows in store for him on the following day—the day of the match.

After dinner Tom had a message from Mr. Railton to go and see him in his study.

Mr. Railton looked at him searchingly.

"You look very seedy, Merry; I have noticed that you have seemed unwell for the past few days. Did I see your name down for the football match this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"You must not think of playing," said the Housemaster firmly. "In your present state it would be madness. I definitely forbid you even to go to the ground!"

"Oh, sir!"

"I am sorry, Merry, but I could not allow you to take part in such strenuous exercise as football when you are suffering from a cold," said the Housemaster. "In any case, you would certainly never do yourself justice on the football field, my boy. You will go at once to the matron and report to her for treatment. You may go!"

The Housemaster nodded a dismissal, and Tom Merry fairly tottered out of the room. It was bad luck upon bad luck. He had refused to allow Knox to play in the match, and now he himself was debarred from playing. What would the fellows say? Perhaps they would be glad, thought the junior bitterly.

Instead of going straight to the matron, Tom went to Talbot's room. He found Talbot seated on a chair. On the floor was a bowl of water. Talbot had one foot up on the edge of another chair. The foot was bare, and Talbot was busy winding a bandage round his ankle.

Tom Merry fairly blinked at him, his feelings too deep for words.

"Just sent Trimble looking for you, Tommy," said Talbot, his voice showing clearly his disgust. "I'm crocked, old chap. Sorry, but it was a rotten accident. That gammy three-legged chair there let me down. I was reaching up—"

"Has it just happened, Talbot?" said Tom, smothering the impulse to call Talbot a "careless ass."

"Five minutes ago," said Talbot, groaning. "What dashed rotten luck! You'll have to play Cardew, Tommy."

"Oh crumbs, what a mess!" groaned Tom. "And Railton's just forbidden me to play, Talbot!"

"Oh, great pip!"

"But that's not making much difference, really," said Tom grimly. "I was

just wondering if it would be better if I kept out of it when Railton sent for me. Anyway, I'd better trot over and see old Figgins, and fix it up with him."

"You're still determined not to play Knox, Tom?"

"Absolutely!"

"I think you're quite right," said Talbot quietly. "Never mind the fellows, Tom—they don't think. And keep a stiff upper lip, old chap. Knox will overreach himself yet."

"I'm trying to," said Tom, smiling. "Well, I'll run in and see you again when I've fixed things up with Figgy. It can't be helped, and we must make the best of things."

Tom Merry hurried out, and made his way towards the New House. He had assured Talbot that he was trying to keep a stiff upper lip, but he found it very hard to do so in the circumstances. Tom had no false modesty, and he knew that Talbot and he were the best men in the team, and he saw a slashing defeat before St. Jim's from Gordon Gay and his men from the Grammar School. And he knew it would mean yet another score for his enemy if that did happen. The fellows would blame him entirely for the defeat, having refused to play the fellow whose brilliant play was the talk of the school. But he did not even think of changing his mind—that was not Tom Merry's way.

CHAPTER 18.

The White Feather!

"HALLO! Herries and old Towser!"

And Tom Merry smiled as he hastened his steps to catch up Herries and his beloved bulldog, Towser.

Tom Merry had been to the matron, and in addition to plenty of good advice—which Tom Merry, being a normal schoolboy, was unlikely to take—the matron had given Tom a dose of medicine. His temperature had proved to be little above the normal, and, be-

ing satisfied that it was a cold which Tom would soon shake off, the matron had allowed Tom to go for his walk.

So, after spending most of the afternoon with Talbot, Tom had started out. Tom had been forbidden to go near the ground—the match was being played on the Grammar School ground—but Tom saw no reason why he should not go to meet the players as it was nearing time for the match to end.

He took the short cut by the towing-path, and he took it easy. The fresh air seemed to clear his head wonderfully, and he soon began to feel better. He sauntered on, his gloomy forebodings and depression slipping from him with every step he took. It was just as he reached the outskirts of Rylcombe that he sighted George Herries and Towser.

Tom Merry smiled at sight of the two. Herries cared more for his beloved dog than he did for his bosom chums; he certainly looked after his pet better than he looked after himself. The way Herries walked along, his eyes ever on his pet, amused Tom. He remembered hearing Herries saying that Towser was "off his feed," and he guessed that Herries had been with Towser to the vet at Wayland on that account.

"Cheerio, Herries!" called Tom as he came up to him. "Towser any better?"

He stooped and patted the big, ugly head of the bulldog. Towser sniffed at Tom's hand, and buried his nose in Tom's palm. The junior captain and he were old friends.

"The vet seems to think he's right as rain," grunted Herries, eyeing Towser anxiously. "But I'm not so sure myself. I think I'll try to persuade the fellows to let me have him in the study for a few nights, so that I can keep my eye on him this damp weather."

Tom chuckled. He wondered what Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would say to that.

"I should," he murmured. "There's no big risk, though."

"What's that?" demanded Herries eagerly.

"He might get indigestion after chewing up Gussy's topper and bags," grinned Tom. "You know old Towser can't resist Gussy's clobber. I suppose it's the aristocratic scent of them that appeals to him."

"Don't talk rot!" snorted Herries. "It's hardly a thing to joke about, Tom. Oh, my hat!"

Just in time, Herries took a firmer grip of the strong chain that held Towser, for at that moment a cat emerged leisurely from a garden gate scarcely a couple of yards away.

The cat vanished back into the garden like greased lightning, and but for the combined efforts of Tom and Herries, Towser would have followed like a thunderbolt.

"Hold him!" gasped Herries, throwing his weight on the leash. "Oh, my hat! Towser, you old fathead! Good dog! Lie down, you silly ass!"

Herries often boasted of his pet's remarkable obedience, but just now it was conspicuous by its absence. Herries might have spoken to the garden gate.

"Great Scott!" panted Tom Merry. "I thought old Towser was delicate, Herries?"

"So he is. He's just screwed up with excitement now. It's bad for him, though. Hold him!"

"Slung the chain round that post, you ass!" snorted Tom.

Towser was still tearing and tugging at the chain. As Herries dragged on it, Tom slung the end of the chain round the post and clipped the spring catch at the end through a link.

"That's fixed him!" he chuckled. "Now let him cool down a bit."

"I'm not sure that we ought to let him strain like that," said Herries, wrinkling his brows. "He might easily strain his heart or some—"

"Look out, Herries!" said Tom abruptly. "Back up!"

At Tom's startled cry, Herries wheeled, and then he looked alarmed as he saw that from the narrow open-

ing along the towing-path four hulking youths had lounged, and were coming towards them.

All the four were hefty chaps, but one was bigger than the rest, and he had red hair.

"Ginger Burke!" said Herries. "Oh, my hat!"

Herries was terrified at the sight of them—not on his own account, but on account of Towser! Had Towser not been there, tied to the post, Tom would have given the word to bolt, strategy being much wiser than a bold front with such odds to face.

But there was no time to free Towser, and in any case Towser always made a point of wanting to do the exact opposite to what his master wished him to do—despite Herries' fond delusion to the contrary.

"They may leave us alone—after what happened yesterday," whispered Tom. "Ignore them!"

But Burke & Co. were not to be ignored; apparently the thrashing had by no means cured Ginger Burke. His beady eyes glimmered with spite and malice as he sighted the St. Jim's juniors.

"By crimes!" he ejaculated. "Here's two of the hounds now, lads! Go for 'em! Smash 'em!"

"Old on, Ginger!" exclaimed one of the others. "They got a dog! Mind your eye!"

"Can't you see 'e's chained up?" growled Ginger Burke. "Ere, I'll soon settle 'is 'ash!"

And he took a running kick at the chained Towser, who was growling ferociously as he tugged and strained to get at the unwelcome newcomers.

At least, he intended to take a running kick at Towser; but Herries had other ideas about that. His eyes blazed and he jumped in front of his beloved dog.

Thud!

Herries' fist lashed out, and Ginger Burke staggered back under a jolt beneath his chin that must have rattled every tooth in his head.

"Come on!" hissed Herries. "Come on, you brutes!"

"Yes, come on!" said Tom Merry, through his teeth.

He jumped to the side of Herries' fists ready.

"Rush 'em!" howled Ginger Burke, hugging his jaw. "Never mind that there dog! He's an old 'un, and he's chained up. Rush 'em!"

The wavering youths plucked up courage and followed Ginger in a savage rush.

What happened next came as the biggest surprise George Herries had ever had in his life.

As the rush came, Tom Merry suddenly turned, and, easily dodging the outstretched arm of Ginger Burke, bolted for his life.

He vanished up the narrow entry, some yards away, and what happened to him after that the astounded Herries had no chance to see. He went crashing down under the rush of the four, too startled even to offer any resistance for the moment.

When he did start to struggle, it was too late. He was pinned down by cruel, grinding knees, flat on his back on the cinders. A yard away, poor Towser was frothing at the mouth, and all but frantic in his raging desire to come to his master's aid.

But the chain was strong, and though the post shook and jerked under the dog's desperate tugging and tearing, it held. Ginger Burke snatched up a big stone and flung it savagely at the dog.

"Old your row!" he shouted. "Put your boot inter the tyke, 'Erb!"

But 'Erb wasn't keen to get within reach of Towser, who, never a gentle-looking animal, looked positively fiendish now as he gave tongue to his rage through bared fangs.

Ginger Burke snorted, and, snatching up another stone, he sent it whizzing—this time, unfortunately, with better aim—into the hapless Towser's ribs.

Herries gave a gulp as he heard a strangled yelp, and he renewed his

struggles, fighting like a wild cat. Tom Merry and his cowardly retreat—if it was that—forgotten for the moment.

There came a sudden rush of feet, however, and Herries yelled with delight as he heard a shout.

"Rescue!" he yelled gaspingly. "Rescue, St. Jim's! Oh, good man, Knox!"

Crash!

Ginger Burke went crashing down and rolled over and over. Over him stood Percy Knox, his fists clenched, his eyes glinting. Ginger's three cronies were flying along the towing-path.

"Good man!" gasped Herries again.

He staggered to his feet, and, falling on his knees, he started to fondle and quieten Towser. That excited animal licked Herries' flushed face in a whirl of canine delight.

Racke, Cooke, Mellish, and Scrope, who had been with Knox, had held back at first; but now, as they saw the three louts fleeing, they became remarkably courageous, and they joined Knox.

"Into the dashed river with this lout!" snapped Percy Knox. "That lesson I gave— Ah, would you?"

Ginger Burke kicked savagely at the junior's ankle, and as Percy Knox staggered back he leaped to his feet and made a bold bid to escape.

Percy Knox was too quick for him. He sprang forward, sending Racke staggering out of his way, and his foot just caught Ginger's flying heel.

Ginger lurched forward, and as he did so Knox's fist shot out. It was a clean blow, and it sent the burly rascal spinning. Madly the fellow tried to recover himself, and then he slithered down the sloping bank with a savage yell.

Splash!

Unable to stop himself, Burke slid down the bank, tripped at the bottom, and overbalanced into the river.

"Good egg!" chortled Racke. "Good for you, Percy! Look at the cad!"

Ginger Burke soon reappeared; but he made no attempt to climb ashore.

He was already swimming, and, turning, he swam across the river, slowly and laboriously, his face—or what could be seen of it—fiendish in expression.

He reached the farther side after a desperate struggle, and, clambering out with difficulty, he shook a furious fist at the St. Jim's fellows and took to his heels.

It was just at that moment that Blake, followed by a dozen or more fellows, came hurrying along the towing-path. They had sighted the trouble some distance away as Knox & Co. had done. And, like Knox & Co., they were just returning from the match.

"What the thump's been happening here?" panted Jack Blake. "Herries! Great Scott! And Towser! Have these louts been at you?"

Herries nodded, his face growing grim as he suddenly remembered Tom Merry.

"There was another chap here when we spotted you," said Knox, wiping his knuckles. "He bolted just before we came up. Who was it, Herries?"

Herries was silent for just a moment, and then his eyes glinted as he looked at Towser.

"It was Tom Merry!" he said.

"What!"

"It was Tom Merry!" repeated the junior deliberately. "The cowardly sweep left me in the lurch—at the mercy of those brutes! He thought only of his own skin!"

"Herries!" gasped Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove! Weally, Hewwies, deah boy—"

"It's true! I wish it wasn't!" said Herries through his teeth. "But the fellow you saw was Tom Merry. We were talking together when Burke and his pals came along. Merry knew I couldn't bolt myself—he knew Towser was chained to the post. He chained him up himself, the cad!"

"And he ran away and left you to it?" demanded Blake in sheer unbelief.

"Dash it all—"

"I've told you it's the truth!" said Herries, almost angrily. "Tom Merry

showed the white feather—not the first time lately, it strikes me, after this!”

“Phew!”

“Gweat Scott!”

“What about Merry now?” bawled Racke. “Yah! Wait until we see the funk! Nice chap to have for skipper—I don’t think!”

“I don’t think I shall ever acknowledge him as skipper after this,” remarked Percy Knox. “I wonder what would have happened to Herries and his dog if I hadn’t come along?”

“Let’s get back and tell the fellows!” yelled Mellish. “We’ll make him sit up after this!”

“Oh, dry up!” snorted Blake. “This is sickening, you chaps!”

“Wotten, bai Jove!” groaned Arthur Augustus D’Arcy. “I can scarcely believe it of Tom Mewwy!”

“Let’s get back!” said Herries irritably.

He had already unfastened Towser, and the chums of the Fourth started off along the towing-path. They had been gloomy enough before they had come upon Herries and heard his story, for the Grammar School had beaten St. Jim’s by five goals to one, a really slashing defeat. With Tom Merry and Talbot absent from the team, they had expected nothing else but defeat. But five to one was worse than they had expected.

And the general feeling was one of anger against Tom Merry—bitter disappointment and anger. They considered Tom Merry had let them down very badly. They did not look at the matter through the eyes of Tom Merry. If he was seedy, then well and good. But Knox wasn’t seedy, and it was personal jealousy and dislike that made the junior captain keep Knox out of the team. Had Know been playing, it would have been five to one in the other direction.

That was the general view, and Blake & Co. knew it only too well. And now this had happened—a far worse thing for Tom Merry to face. The fellows might forgive stubbornness and personal antipathy in their junior cap-

tain; they would certainly not forgive cowardice. Blake & Co. returned to St. Jim’s in a very miserable frame of mind. And when they saw Manners and Lowther in Rylcombe Lane and told them the amazing news those youths were thunderstruck. They simply refused to believe it, and there was trouble between Herries and them in consequence. But it did not affect the issue.

CHAPTER 15.

The Reason!

TOM MERRY ran hard—harder than he had ever run in his life before. He went like the wind.

But it was not to get away from the bullying Ginger Burke & Co. Tom Merry had never “funked” that unpleasant personage. He had taken his measure long ago, and only opportunity had prevented him dealing with the ruffian—or attempting to deal with him. And, though the odds were four to two against them, Tom Merry was far from funkng a scrap, though he realised it would be no light affair.

As he faced the oncoming roughs, fists ready, his head well back, Tom Merry certainly did not look as if he funkng the fight; indeed, he looked as if he intended to enjoy it.

But in that critical, dramatic moment Fate stepped in to deal the junior captain of St. Jim’s yet another blow.

Both juniors were guarding Towser—Herries facing one way and Tom the other, and this explains why Herries failed to see what Tom Merry suddenly saw.

The garden fence against which they had been standing ended a few yards farther on at a stretch of waste ground. Beyond this, at something approaching right angles, was a row of cottages, their fronts facing the river as it twisted at that spot. The cottages had long gardens with low fences, and Tom could see into them from where he stood.

In that moment, as he awaited the onslaught of the roughs, Tom glimpsed something happening in the first garden. Like a scene flashed swiftly across a cinema screen, Tom glimpsed it out of the corner of his eye.

From an opened cottage door a child came dashing, screaming in fright, the white smock he wore just bursting into flames.

Tom Merry simply didn't stop to make a decision, or to do anything else. Something had to be done mighty quickly, and the junior did it instinctively.

The next instant, swiftly dodging Ginger Burke's outflung arm, he was tearing across the waste ground with every ounce of speed and energy he could muster.

He was at the low fence almost before he knew it, and he fairly flung himself over it. His feet scarcely touched the rough ground, and then he was racing up the garden, the screaming of the youngster—drowned until then by Towser's outcries—ringing shrilly in his ears.

Tom was tearing off his overcoat now, and with a bound he reached the shrieking youngster and whirled his coat round him. Then he flung the child down and rolled him over and over, pressing, thumping, and smothering out the flames as best he could with his bare hands.

Luckily, only the smock had had time to get firmly alight, and in a very few seconds Tom had torn it away, and was ripping off the rest of the youngster's clothes, pressing out the burning cloth.

He had just put the last smouldering spark out, and the youngster was fairly bellowing in his arms, when a woman came running from the house next door. She reeled and almost fainted at sight of Tom with the youngster in his arms.

She covered her face with her hands, and then she snatched the bellowing child from Tom.

"I think he's all right, ma'am!" panted Tom, rubbing his scorched and blackened hands, and wincing as he did

so. "I'll now if all's well inside, shall I?"

Without waiting a reply, Tom ran into the cottage and glanced swiftly about him. The fireguard that should have been before the kitchen fire was lying on the hearthrug, leaving the fire unguarded. Apparently the youngster had dragged it away and managed to get his loose smock to the flames.

Tom went out again, nodding his head reassuringly.

"He must have stumbled against the fire, or something like that!" he gasped. "The fireguard was dragged away."

"It was my fault! I shouldn't have left the child!" gasped the woman, hugging the howling youngster. "It's all my fault!"

"He doesn't seem to be much burned," said Tom. "I should take him along to a doctor, ma'am, though, for all that."

"Oh! Yes, yes—"

The woman seemed to have lost her head in her agitation and distress. Tom took the youngster from her again, though she let him go unwillingly.

"I'll take him along. Luckily, Dr. Short's house is near, ma'am. Leave him to me."

Tom hurried through the cottage into the lane beyond. Whether the child was burned badly or not he could not tell; he certainly was if the noise he was making was anything to go by. With the woman and a neighbour following, talking volubly, Tom hurried along with his yelling, wriggling burden. It was a task few at St. Jim's— if any—would have tackled.

But Tom Merry had a heart of gold, and he cared nothing whether anyone saw him or not. He reached the doctor's house at last—glad enough to do so—and glad he was to hand back his charge to the mother.

She took the child, and, too agitated to thank the junior, she hurried up the steps of the house and rang the bell. A moment later both woman and the

child vanished indoors, and the door closed.

Tom put on his coat again—it was badly scorched, but not burned—and then he looked at his hands ruefully. They were blackened and coarse, and they felt as if a thousand red-hot needles had been driven in the flesh.

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Tom. "I shall not be able to hold a dashed pen for— Oh, my hat! Herries!"

It was just then that the junior suddenly remembered the plight in which he had left Herries and Towser.

Anxious as he was to know if the youngster was all right, Tom realised he was now in safe hands, and without hesitating longer the junior started back at a run for the river. He crossed the waste ground with a rush, and then he stared.

Ginger Burke & Co. had gone, as had Herries and Towser. In the distance along the towing-path he glimpsed several figures that he guessed were St. Jim's fellows.

They were too far away for him to distinguish them, but Tom sighed with deep relief as he saw them.

"Oh, good!" he muttered. "Some of our chaps must have come along—coming from the match, I expect! Wonder how it went?"

Tom was soon to learn that. As he came out into Rylcombe Lane he saw three familiar forms just ahead of him. They were Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn, and Grundy was speaking—or, rather, bellowing.

"I tell you Merry wants kicking out of his job!" he was roaring angrily. "No good you telling me he knows best, George Wilkins."

"But look here! that chap Knox—"

"Dry up! I tell you Knox may be a swanky cad—I'm not denying it; he is—but he knows a good footballer when he sees one!"

"Referring to yourself, I suppose!" grunted Gunn.

"Mostly! Knox says that if he were footer captain he'd see I got the place I'm entitled to on my form."

"Pulling your leg!" sniffed Wilkins. "He's out to get on the right side of everybody—born idiots included!"

"If that's cheek—"

"Not at all! Plain facts, old chap!"

"Look here," said Grundy, not quite grasping Wilkins' meaning. "Tom Merry's no good! I'll admit, mind you, that I can't stand this chap Knox—my opinion is that he's a smoky sweep! But he can play footer after a fashion, and he knows a good man when he sees one. Now Tom Merry's let the school down—he's a back-number, and he'll have to go."

"Thanks, old chap!" called Tom cheerfully.

Grundy wheeled round.

"Oh, here he is!" he snapped. "Now, my pippin, what about it?"

"How did the match go, Wilkins?" asked Tom.

Wilkins growled, and avoided Tom's look.

"We got licked by five to one," he said.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tom.

"You ought to have shoved in Knox minor!" said Gunn bluntly. "The fellows blame you for the licking—a licking we shall never hear the last of, Merry. After all, the school record is the main thing, and you ought to have played the new chap."

"I don't think so even now," said Tom Merry.

"You wouldn't," said Grundy bitterly. "Lot you care whether school wins matches or not! You'd have had me in the team long ago if you had!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Hallo! Look at the crowd at the gates," said Wilkins. "Waiting to welcome you, Tom Merry—I don't think!"

"It doesn't worry me," said Tom, setting his lips.

But it was to worry him—as he soon found out.

As he walked up to the gates there rose a yell.

"Yah! Funk! You rotten coward, Merry!"

"Who'd leave a pal in the lurch and save himself?"

"What about old Towser, you funky cad?"

Tom Merry jumped.

He understood now, in a blinding flash, what the crowd meant.

It was not merely that they were angry over him in regard to the match! Herries had obviously told how he had bolted at the critical moment.

He was being called a funk—a coward who had left a chum in the lurch.

Tom went white.

He could clear himself easily enough; but the charge made him furiously angry, for all that. He opened his mouth to speak, and then he closed it again tightly and started to walk past the crowd.

"Hold on!" called Percy Knox. "I think Herries wants to speak to you—wants to tell you what he thinks of you!"

"I don't wish to speak to Merry!" said Herries angrily. "Quite the reverse!"

"Weally, Hewwies—" D'Arcy's voice was quite distressed.

Tom Merry stopped and faced Herries, a dangerous glint in his blue eyes.

"You think I ran away and left you to have it out with those brutes alone, Herries?" he demanded thickly. "You've known me all this time and you can't put more trust in me than that?"

"What else am I to think?" snapped Herries, giving Tom a look of scorn. "I don't mind so much for myself, Merry. But there was poor old Towser—practically at the mercy of those brutes. And you bolted—actually bolted! How can you explain it, Merry?"

"I—I—"

It was on the tip of Tom's tongue to explain matters—he would certainly have been sensible to have done so without further delay. But he did not. He was already angry—bitterly

mortified at the thought that all the fellows blamed him for defeat. And now this on top of it—all the fellows, even Blake & Co. believing him capable of an act of miserable cowardice.

It was too much. He seethed inwardly at the thought. Had he been in a different mood he would, doubtless enough, have stated the plain facts—facts that could easily have been proved correct. But he was far from being his real self—the looks of scorn increased his bitterness and obstinacy. If the fellows believed him a hopeless funk then let them, and be hanged to them!

"I'll just say this, Herries!" he said, his voice trembling. "I left you in the lurch right enough. But I had a good reason for doing so. I did not funk those brutes!"

"Rot!"

"What?"

"Liar, if you like that better!" said Herries, his eyes blazing. "You know you funk'd it—you bolted, showed the white feather if anyone did!"

Tom Merry clenched his fists hard—his swollen, raw palms giving him agonies of pain as he did so.

He took a step towards Herries, and Herries swiftly put his hands up. But just as abruptly Tom drew back again. He was in less condition for scrapping than ever now with his scorched and burning palms and fingers. He would only be making a bigger fool of himself. His time would come—as in the case of Percy Knox.

"I'll fight you later, Herries," he said grimly.

"Any Herries." snapped Herries.

Without another word Tom Merry turned his heel and went indoors, a howl of derision following him.

"Yah! White feather again! And that's our skipper!"

"Let's kick him out!" bawled Racke.

"Hear, hear!"

Lowther and Manners said nothing at all. They were too dazed and bewildered and horrified. They had heard the story, and on reflection they had

smiled, knowing Tom Merry would have some good reason to give.

But he had had his chance to give a reason, and he had failed to give it. Lowther and Manners walked slowly indoors after their chum, feeling as if the world had come to an end.

CHAPTER 20.
Knox's Triumph!

"TOM!"

"Tom, old fellow——"

Lowther and Manners almost crept into Study No. 10. They were both looking exceedingly distressed, and it was plain they felt their chum's disgrace keenly.

Tom Merry was standing by the window looking out into the frosty quadrangle. He did not look round.

"Tom," went on Lowther, "what does it all mean? Why don't you speak and throw the lie that you funk'd in the dashed teeth of those cads? We know you didn't funk—you couldn't!"

"The fellows seemed to think so," said Tom bitterly, leaving the window. "How did the match go, you fellows? I hear it was worse than I had expected—five to one!"

Lowther nodded.

"It was a frost for us from beginning to end," he said. "Our chaps missed you and old Talbot, and they seemed to have no heart for the game. Even poor Fatty Wynn was completely off!"

"The fellows seem to think I should have played Knox," said Tom.

Lowther and Manners were silent for a moment.

"You did right, Tommy," said Manners at length. "But the fellows won't see it. They blame you for the defeat, and they're dashed sore about it. They can't forget how Knox won the Greyfriars match."

"That was his dirty trick again!"

"We know, but the fellows don't, or won't, believe it. Tom, it's no good. You'll have to start the same sort of

game somehow, if you're going to keep your job," said Lowther soberly.

Tom Merry stared at him.

"You—you mean play the sort of dirty tricks he plays?" he ejaculated.

"Not at all. I mean that you'll have to begin to humour the silly fools—get round them a bit. Knox is doing it—standing them feeds and making all sorts of lying promises. You won't do that sort of thing, I know. But you can wheedle round the chaps a bit."

"I'll be hanged if I will!" snapped Tom.

"I don't think you realise how far matters have gone, Tommy," said Manners. "They're shouting for a new election for the captaincy now."

"Let them!"

"Tom——"

"If the fellows are not satisfied with me as skipper, they can get someone else!" snapped Tom, his eyes gleaming. "I've stood as much as I mean to stand from them! In any case, it's too late to think of electioneering now, if that's what you mean. They're shrieking for my blood now."

"If you'd only speak, Tom——"

Crash!

Manners was rudely interrupted. The door crashed back, and a crowd of fellows—Fourth and Shell—crowded into the room.

"Here, outside!" snapped Tom, his eyes glinting.

"Not yet," said Gore, who was in the forefront with Knox minor at his elbow. "We've come to talk to you first, Merry."

"Go on!"

"The fact is," said Gore bluntly, "we're fed up with you as House captain, Tom Merry!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes. And we're fed-up with you as junior captain, too, both here and in the New House!" said Gore deliberately. "You're mucking up the footer. You've lost us the match to-day, and made us a laughing-stock for the Grammar School. That sort of thing won't do!"

"Won't it?"

"No!" shouted Gore, his temper rising. "But that isn't all, Merry. We don't want for our skipper a fellow who'll play the coward as you did this afternoon."

"You seem pretty certain that I did play the coward," said Tom Merry, his voice calm. "Can you prove it?"

"We're asking you to prove that you didn't play the funk," said Lumley-Lumley in a more reasonable tone. "Look here, Merry, it seems piffle to think that you did funk it. But the matter can't be allowed to remain as it is. If you can explain I'd advise you to do so now."

"And if I don't?"

"We shall demand your resignation, Merry," said Gore grimly.

"And if I refuse to resign?"

"We'll find some other method of shifting you!" snapped Racke from the fringe of the crowd. "We've already got a better man to take your place."

"Better at smoking and betting?" id Lowther, his lip curling.

"No: just better at playing footer and using his fists, and standing up for chaps weaker than himself," said Gore deliberately.

Tom Merry winced. His face went white, and he seemed to control himself with a mighty effort.

"Are you going to give an excuse or not, Merry?" snapped Gore.

"Not!" said Tom Merry savagely.

"I'm hanged if I'm going to be brow-beaten like this! You fellows know my reputation: you know I've never shown the white feather. I've asked you to take my word that I did not funk. If you can't, then there's an end of it."

"You won't explain?"

"Not to you—no!"

"And you won't resign?"

"Not to please you—no!" said Tom Merry.

"That's good enough, then!" said Gore, who had evidently made himself the spokesman of the deputation. "Come on, you fellows! We'll show his

lordship that he can't rule the roost as he likes!"

"Hear, hear!"

The deputation withdrew amid a buzz of excitement. Monty Lowther pulled a wry face as he looked at Tom's grim, determined face.

"You're an ass, Tommy!" he said.

"A double-barrelled one!" added Manners in disgust. "You've done it now!"

"You fellows still back me up, then?" said Tom Merry, his voice bitter again. "I haven't given my reason yet, but you don't give me the cold shoulder. Why?"

"We know you have a good reason, Tom."

"You'll still believe in me if I refuse to tell you my reason for bolting from Herr's this afternoon?"

There was just a moment's hesitation. Then Lowther nodded, and at the same instant Manners nodded.

"I'm quite ready to take your word that you did not funk, Tom," said Lowther seriously, "and I don't wish to hear your reason at all."

"Same here!" said Manners promptly.

"Right!" said Tom, his eyes shining.

"Then I don't mind telling you it!"

"Oh!"

"It's not a thing a chap wants to gas about," said Tom, flushing a little. "That's the main reason why I did not tell those raging idiots. A fellow can't talk about it."

"Go on!" said Manners curiously.

Tom Merry hesitated. Even to his chums he found it difficult to explain. He had probably saved that youngster's life—undoubtedly he had, in fact. It was not a thing a decent chap would want to make a song about. But he felt he owed it to his bosom chums to explain—if only for their loyalty.

"It was just as we were waiting Ginger Burke's rush," said Tom. "I happened to see a kid rush out of a cottage with his clothes on fire—one of those cottages standing back from the towing-path. Herrles did not see it,

but I did. And the kid's shrieks were smothered by Towser's snarling and growling.

"Oh!" gasped Manners. He was beginning to guess.

"Well, I just did what any other fellow would do," said Tom quietly. "I left Herries to it—there was nothing else for it—and I rushed to the cottage and managed to put the flames out. The kiddie did not seem to be much burned, but I took him to the doctor's house in the lane there. When I got back Herries and the rest had gone. I suppose it was Knox who saved him?"

"Yes," stammered Lowther. "Knox knocked Burke into the river and his pals bolted."

"Phew!"

"You—you old ass!" breathed Lowther. "And you'd let the fellows believe you a coward before you'd speak?"

"Yes; they should take my word."

"And you'd risk losing the friendship of Blake and his lot rather than speak?"

"Yes. Herries should have taken my word, and he should not have called me a liar."

"You'll explain to them, though? You'll want all your friends now, Tommy."

"No! I don't want friends who don't trust me!"

"You old ass!"

"Perhaps I am. But I'm sticking to my guns over this."

Manners and Lowther exchanged hopeless glances. They had never known the sunny-tempered, level-headed Tom Merry in such an unreasonable mood as this—and they could not help seeing that it was unreasonable. There was a glum silence, and just then came another knock at the door. Wally D'Arcy of the Third put his head round the door.

"Merry wanted in Kildare's study," he said cheerily. "Hope it's a licking for him! Yah!"

With that, the cheery Wally departed

—just missing a whizzing Liddell and Scott as he went.

"That's done it!" said Lowther, as he retrieved his book. "You know what that means, Tommy."

"I can guess."

"It means that those cads have been to Kildare. Be prepared, old son!"

Tom Merry nodded grimly, and went to Kildare's room. Kildare was seated at the table, looking over a list of names on a sheet of paper. He looked up and eyed Tom curiously as the junior captain entered.

"I want to speak to you, Merry," he said gravely. "You're still looking seedy, kid."

"I feel seedy," said Tom. "It will pass, though."

"But the trouble in the Lower School doesn't seem to pass, Merry," said Kildare grimly. "I've noticed things have not been going well for some days. What is the matter? I cannot understand why you seem to have become so dashed unpopular all at once."

Tom said nothing.

"I can only think this new fellow has something to do with it," said Kildare. "At the same time I've heard rather curious stories about you, Merry."

Tom Merry flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I don't propose to repeat them or mention them," said Kildare. "I do not believe them myself."

"Thanks, Kildare!"

"At the same time," said the captain dryly, "you've got yourself entirely to thank for a lot of it. Against my express wishes you declined to play Knox, who would have saved the match no doubt this afternoon."

"I suppose it would!" said Tom.

"It won't do," said Kildare. "No use putting the fellows' backs up like that, Merry. Anyway, it appears to have come to a head. The fellows want a new captain for the House and for the Lower School, Merry. I'm sorry, but there it is!"

"I understand."

"You refused to resign, I beli

said Kildare. "But you know the rule—if a third of the fellows demand an election for a new captain, I'm obliged to arrange a new election."

"Yes, I know the rule."

"Very well. Here is the list. It seems that Knox is the man selected to stand against you, Merry," said Kildare, pursing his lips. "Have you any objection to raise, Merry?"

"None!"

"Then it will go through," said Kildare grimly. "I shall be sorry if you lose the captaincy, kid. You've backed me up well—you've proved yourself a sound man, and I've no complaints personally to make whatever. I don't think we have a man to better you."

"Thanks, Kildare!"

The skipper of St. Jim's nodded, and Tom Merry went out. He knew he would hear further about it very soon. He walked away to Study No. 10, feeling curiously careless about it all. But the feeling did not last long.

When Lowther and Manners came in the study a little later they found him slumped in the easy-chair, glum and moody. He knew only too well that—unless a miracle happened—the result of the election would be a foregone conclusion. Percy Knox's bitter enmity and hatred had borne its fruit. His underhanded scheming had succeeded—the Greyfriars match, the Grammar School match, the affair of Ginger Burke, and this last affair of Herries and Towser had all been big nails in "Tom Merry's coffin," as Knox himself put it.

And so it proved.

The following Wednesday, when the election was held, Tom Merry was hopelessly beaten by the new fellow. Tom had fully expected to be beaten—he had been just determined not to resign of his own accord. As he still refused to defend himself against charges, and as he refused to do any electioneering of any kind, or to allow his chums to do any, the result was just what might have been expected.

Blake & Co. did not vote at all—they were not on speaking terms with the Terrible Three, and they kept out of it altogether. Figgins & Co., over in the New House, did not feel the matter so strongly as did Blake & Co., and they voted en masse for Tom Merry.

But their votes and the votes of the few fellows who still stuck to Tom counted for little against the votes. Percy Knox polled.

Percy Knox had attained his ambition—he was captain of the Lower School at St. Jim's, and captain of footer, and "cock-of-the-walk" in general!

CHAPTER 21.

Tom Merry Agrees!

"MAY I come in?"

Reginald Talbot asked the question as he looked in at the doorway of Study No. 7 in the Shell passage a couple of days later. There was a grim expression on Talbot's handsome face; but his tone was quiet and polite—Talbot was invariably polite, even to fellows whom he disliked.

Percy Knox, to whom he spoke, was standing before the fire, with his hands behind him. He nodded coolly to Talbot.

"Yes, trickle in, old bean!" he said. "What's the trouble? Come to see me about the match—what?"

Talbot nodded. Talbot was vice-captain of the junior footer, but he had found no pleasure in his post since Knox minor had been captain; on the contrary, being still a great chum of Tom Merry's, he had found it distinctly unpleasant and distasteful.

"Yes; I was wondering if you had forgotten about the Rylcombe match this afternoon altogether, Knox?" he said shortly. "The list isn't even on the notice-board yet, and the fellows are getting impatient."

"Let 'em!" remarked Knox lessly.

"But this won't do, Knox!" said Talbot sharply. "You can't keep fellows on tenterhooks until the last minute like

this; they want to know who's playing and who isn't."

"Let 'em wait and see!" smiled Knox.

"They won't do much more waiting!" said Talbot, in a significant tone. "Your fouling at the practice match the other day hasn't done you any good, Knox. It's no business of mine, but they won't stand much more of it!"

Knox set his lips.

"They'll have to, my pippin!" he said, showing out his square jaw. "I'm skipper, and I'm going to let 'em know it. I've been pretty easy all round to start with; but let there be any nonsense, and I'll show 'em who rules the roost. I'm ready to give a record hiding to the first fellow who starts showing dissatisfaction with me as skipper. Get that?"

"I understand," said Talbot, showing no signs of the disgust he felt. "But those methods of ruling won't do at St. Jim's, you know. You can't lick the whole Lower School, Knox!"

"I've already licked the best man in the Lower School, and that's just as good!" grinned Knox, showing his big fists. "Why don't they come to me if they're dissatisfied? They know better!"

Talbot shrugged. He could not help contrasting in his mind the difference between the new skipper's brag and swagger with the quiet, modest, yet efficient manner in which Tom Merry had wielded power and authority.

"You're quite mistaken if you think the chaps are afraid of you, Knox!" said Talbot steadily. "But I've come about the match. Have you made the list out yet?"

Knox nodded towards the table, on which was a slip of paper.

"There it is," he smiled. "I was just about to take it along, as a matter of fact. Just run your peepers over it, and see if you approve."

Talbot scanned the list, and as he did so he gave an exclamation.

"What's this mean, Knox?" he said blankly. "You're not playing twelve men, remember!"

"Hardly!" agreed Knox. "What's

the matter with it? Your name's down all right."

"My name's down right enough. But yours is not!" said Talbot, looking at him.

"I know," drawled Knox carelessly. "I'm not playing, you see—got another engagement."

Talbot frowned, and looked at the captain in amazement.

"You're not playing?" he gasped. "But—but, hang it all, you're skipper! The fellows will be wild!"

"My dear man, does that matter? I've just had an urgent wire from an uncle of mine. He's passing through Wayland, and he wants me to meet him at Wayland Junction," explained Knox, smiling. "He's rather an important old Johnny, and I simply can't refuse—even at the risk of letting the team down."

Talbot gazed at Percy Knox hard. That iron-nerved youth gazed back at him calmly; and then, as if he read his thoughts, he took a telegram-form from his pocket and passed it over.

Talbot read it. It was a genuine telegraph-form, and the message had been handed in at Wayland General Post Office. There was no doubting that it was genuine. He read as follows:

"Meet me at Grand Hotel, Wayland, at three.—UNCLE JACK."

The telegram was addressed to Percy Knox, at St. Jim's, and Talbot's frown vanished as he read the message.

"Can't be helped, then, Knox!" he said glumly. "No getting out of it, I suppose?"

"Not a bit! My uncle wrote days ago saying he might be passing through Wayland, and would expect me. He's rather a special uncle, you know—got heaps of tin. So—"

"I understand," said Talbot, nodding glumly. He did not doubt that the telegram was genuine—as it certainly was. Nor did he suspect that there was trickery behind it, as he would possibly

have done had he seen the wink that Knox exchanged with Racke across the table. "That's rather rotten luck altogether."

"It scarcely matters at all," said Knox. "It isn't an important fixture, I understand—in fact, I'm blessed if I can understand a decent school playing footer with a lot of beastly, scrubby village louts!"

"Grimes and his pals aren't louts!" said Talbot coldly. "They're decent kids, and we're proud to meet them and play them. They play the game, and they play clean!"

Knox's eyes glittered, but he affected not to notice the obvious meaning in Talbot's retort; yet his foul at the practice match was too recent for him to miss seeing the hint.

"Well, I shall not have the pleasure of meeting them, at all events," he sneered. "You've run down the list?"

"Yes. It won't do, Knox!"

"You don't approve of it?"

"Certainly not! You've left out at least three of our best men—Merry, Blake, and Figgins, to begin with! If we go over to Rylcombe with that team we shall be asking for a record licking. Those village kids can play, I might tell you!"

"Rot! That list is going to stand!"

"You won't change it?"

"No!" said Knox, showing his teeth.

"Very well," said Talbot, quietly but firmly. "You can cross my name out also, Knox. I refuse to take a team like that over when better men are available."

Knox bit his lip hard.

Despite his careless words and manner, he knew very well that it behoved him to go warily in his handling of his job. To be absent himself, and for his vice-captain to be absent also, would mean only one thing—defeat; and that would spell trouble for him, he knew.

"Oh, all right!" he said, pretending to treat the matter lightly. "Please yourself, I give you a free hand.

There's the list, anyway. Do what the thump you like with it!"

"I will!" said Talbot.

He drew out a pencil, and, crossing out at least five of the names on the list, he wrote five other names over them. Knox watched him with glinting eyes and a black brow. Then, without another word, Talbot left the study, taking the list with him.

Racke chuckled when he had gone.

"I knew he wouldn't stand for that list, Percy," he grinned. "You were an ass to expect it."

"Hang him!" gritted Knox. "As I wasn't playing myself, I wanted the dashed school to be hopelessly licked. If Merry plays—"

"He won't!" said Crooke. "You needn't worry about that, old man. Merry had to turn up at practice, but he'll refuse to play as all the fellows are up against him."

Knox's brow cleared a little at that.

"Well, the cad didn't suspect anything, anyway!" he grunted, picking up the telegram. "This giddy wire did it. I'd better let as many see it as possible, I think."

"If it comes out that you sent that wire to yourself?" grinned Racke.

"It won't come out," smiled Knox grimly. "Who the thump's likely to inquire at the post office whether I sent it myself or not? Rot! Anyway, I'm going to win Lacy's fiver this afternoon."

"You're the limit, Percy!" said Crooke. "But, by jingo, you're booked if it comes out that you've cut a match just to play a game of billiards at the Green Man with a Grammar School chap. You were an ass to take Lacy on to-day!"

"I'd forgotten the match when I took Lacy on," admitted Knox. "But that telegram will put things right with the chaps. Anyway, so long as that cad Merry doesn't play I don't care a hang about the thumping match."

"He won't!" said Crooke.

But Crooke was wrong there—as he often was.

After leaving the study Talbot went straight along to Study No. 10 to see Tom Merry. He doubted himself whether Tom would play, and he meant to make sure before posting up the list. He found the Terrible Three at home together.

"Knox isn't playing this afternoon, Tom," said Talbot, coming straight to the point. "He's got to meet an uncle in Wayland."

"What a yarn!" said Lowther, with a sniff. "The rotten slacker's starting well, by jingo! It's spoof!"

"It's right enough, as it happens," said Talbot, smiling. "I've seen the telegram his uncle sent. It's quite genuine, though I doubted myself until I saw it. Anyway, I'm taking the team over, and I'm choosing my own men. I shall want you, Tom, if you'll play—and Lowther."

"I'd rather not play," said Tom.

"If Tom doesn't I won't," said Lowther briefly.

Talbot frowned.

"You don't feel up to playing?" he asked.

"I'm fit enough," said Tom. "It isn't that. You know well enough why I'd rather not."

"I'm asking you to back me up, and for the sake of the school," said Talbot quietly. "And I'm also asking you for your own sake, Tom Merry. You know well enough what my views are. You said you had not funk'd the other day, and I believed you, whether the evidence points the other way or not. I know you couldn't funk it if you tried. I fancy you had a good reason for what you did."

"I did," said Tom.

"That's enough about that, then. Now look here, Tommy, if this sweep Knox is in charge much longer the footer will go to pot. The sooner he's booted out of his job and the sooner you're back in it, the better for St. Jim's. It's up to you to make a better fight—not only for your own sake, but for the school's sake. If you play this afternoon we'll win. I'm asking you to

forget the way the fellows have treated you, and to play up for St. Jim's. You'll be putting a spoke in that swanking, swashbuckling sweep's wheel, too. Shall I put you down?"

Tom was silent for a moment, and then he nodded.

"Right!" he said quietly. "You're right, Talbot, old man. I'll play! Put me down!"

"Good man!"

And Talbot put him down, and went out smiling.

CHAPTER 22.

The Challenge:

"TALBOT, deah boy!"

Reginald Talbot stopped as Arthur Augustus called out to him after dinner that day.

"Well, Gussy?" he asked cheerfully.

"What's the trouble this time?"

Arthur Augustus joined Talbot, his slender, aristocratic fingers toying with the monocle jammed in his eye. D'Arcy's expression was very grave, and he was obviously nervous and ill at ease.

"I—I—the fact is, deah boy—" Arthur Augustus faltered, and paused. Whatever the fact was, it was evidently very serious, and that Arthur Augustus hesitated about divulging it. "The— the fact is—"

"Go on, old chap!" said Talbot encouragingly. "It's a half to-day, so you've plenty of time; but allow me to remind you that the match starts at three—"

"Pway don't wot, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "The mattah is wathah sewious. I am afwaid I have wathah bad news—"

"Not a death in the family, I hope?" said Talbot, becoming serious.

"Nunno. The fact is—"

"Hat-makers gone on strike?" asked Talbot, with grave interest. "Or is it only a rise in the price of neckties?"

"Bal Jove, no! I am afwaid you are

twyin' to pull my leg, Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus reprovingly. "The fact is, I have wathah disappointin' news for you, deah boy—especially as I know you are very keen indeed upon winnin' the match this aftahnoon. Howevah, it cannot possibly be helped, and—"

"Oh, it's about the match, " said Talbot.

"Yaas! I have just discovahed that you have put me down to play, deah boy."

"That's so," said Talbot, smiling. "But if you really feel I'm risking the match by putting you down to play—"

"Bai Jove! Not at all, Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus, giving him a sharp look. "Quite the contwawy, in fact. I am vewy wowwied indeed at the decision I am obliged to come to in weward to that. Like you, I was vewy anxious that we should win this aftahnoon. Now, howevah, I fear that it is out of the question, and I feel I shall be wathah lettin' the school down, bai Jove! I am vewy, vewy sowwy, deah boy, but I feah I shall be quite unable to play for St. Jim's this aftahnoon."

It was out now, and Arthur Augustus looked very anxiously at Talbot. Apparently he expected Talbot to look aghast—possibly he expected him to tear his hair in grief and dismay. But Talbot did neither; he just grinned.

"That's all right, Gussy!" he said cheerily. "I can easily get another chap to fill your place—I've at least a dozen to choose from."

"Bai Jove!"

Talbot was rather exaggerating there; Arthur Augustus was speedy, a sure shot, and a very useful man indeed at footer, and there were very few fellows in the Lower School indeed to come up to him. Naturally, Arthur Augustus was not pleased.

"Wcally, Talbot," he said stiffly. "Then I twust you will find one easily, bai Jove! I was not aware that I could be so easily wplaced! How-

evah, the fact wemains that I cannot play, and I shall be obliged if you will cwoss my name off your list."

"Sorry, Gussy!" said Talbot, laughing. "I was only pulling your leg, fathead. We shall miss you, of course, and it won't be easy to replace you. But if you mean it—"

"I am afwaid it is necessawy, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, unbending a little. "You see, I have an appointment with my tailor in Wayland this aftahnoon."

"Oh!" remarked Talbot solemnly. "If it is so very important as that—"

"It is wathah important, isn't it?" said Gussy innocently. "I have already been obliged to cancel the appointment once, and I feel it would be vewy wude and ill-mannahed to cancel it again. Mr. Twuft's time must be vewy valuable, you know. I made the appointment for this aftahnoon, feelin' vewy certain that Knox would not put me down to play. As you know vewy well, the wottah has stated that he would not play either me or Blake—simply because he knows we do not like him, I pwesume. As he has changed his mind, howevah—"

"He hasn't changed his mind!" chuckled Talbot. "I changed it for him. Well, that's all right, Gussy, old chap. You trot off to see your tailor, and I'll shove old Reddy in. All serene!"

And Talbot walked away, smiling.

Arthur Augustus walked slowly in the other direction, shaking his head gravely. He did not feel at all that it was "All serene!" He could only hope for the best, however. But, after all, a footer match was feally not so important as a solemn conference with one's tailor, he reflected.

"Well?" demanded Blake, as Arthur Augustus entered Study No. 6. "Did Talbot let you off, Gussy?"

"Yaas; it is quite all wight, but—"

"He didn't tear his hair and gnash his teeth, or go on bended knees and beg you to reconsider your decision

Gussy?" asked Digby, in pretended astonishment.

"Pway do not be wedic," said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "It is wathah we remarkable, howevah; Talbot did not seem at all disturbed when I told him I could not play."

"Go hon!"

"I am afwaid he is not takin' his duties sewiously enough for once," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "He did not even beg me to wecondisah my decision. Howevah, as I told him, we must hope for the best."

"We must!" agreed Blake, with a nuckle.

"And I weally hope," said Arthur Augustus firmly, "that you fellows will play up for all you are worth, bal Jove! You must show that unspeakable person, Knox, that we can win matches without his aid. Yaas, wathah!"

"What's the matter with Knox?" grunted Herries, flushing. "He played the cad on the field at practice, I'll admit; but he's not a funk, anyway, and he saved me and Towser when a pal—or a fellow who called himself a pal—let us down."

"Well, that is quite twue, I suppose," admitted Arthur Augustus, glancing uneasily at Herries. "None the less, I do not considah that Knox makes a good captain frowm my point of view. He is a wank outsidah! It would be bettah for St. Jim's and the footah if Tom Mewwy were back in his job. Do you not think so, Blake?"

Blake hesitated, with one eye on Herries' flushed face. As a matter of fact, D'Arcy had only said what both he and Digby believed. But he knew that such an opinion only irritated George Herries—there had already been discord in Study No. 6, owing to disagreements on that point. Whether Herries really believed Knox made a better captain, than Tom Merry they doubted exceedingly. They realised that he felt bound to support Percy Knox in gratitude for his action in saving him from the hands of Ginger Burke.

"Oh, what's the good of talking about it?" growled Blake. "It's a rotten business altogether, and I wish to goodness Knox had never come to the school—been nothing but trouble since he came. As for Tom Merry——"

"Tom Merry's a bigger cad than ever Knox is!" snapped Herries.

"I wish I felt certain about that, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, shaking his head again. "The more I think about the wotten affiah, the more I wondah if we are not makin' a vevy big mistake in condemnin' Tom Mewwy!"

"Don't talk rot!" said Herries, his face angry. "Facts are facts! Tom Merry played the coward—he, ran away and left me and Towser to face the music. He's a cowardly cad!"

"He may have some good weason——"

"What reason could he have?" shouted Herries, his face red. "I tell you he funked, and I'm going to fight the sweep as soon as his hands are better. My only dashed fear is that he'll funk that——"

"Wubbish! Hewwies, deah boy——"

"Oh, drop it, for goodness' sake!" said Blake glumly. Arthur Augustus was not the only one in Study No. 6 who wondered if they were not making a big mistake in condemning Tom Merry. Blake and Digby, like Gussy, had felt bound to support Herries, and they had, at first, been angry and disgusted with Tom, and had refused to speak to him. But since, having had more time to think things over, they were beginning to wonder if there might not be something else behind it all. Yet Blake did not wish to quarrel with Herries. They could scarcely blame Herries for his attitude in the matter in any case. "Drop the whole subject! And there's no need to fight, as far as I can see," added Blake rather lamely.

"I'm fighting him!" snapped Herries doggedly. "I tell you I'm——"

Herries broke off just then as the

door opened, and Curly Gibson of the Third stepped into the room and threw an envelope across the table towards Herries.

"From Merry of the Shell!" id briefly. "Any answer?"

Herries tore open the envelope, and, as he read the contents his jaw set grimly, and he tossed the note across to Blake.

"That settles it!" he said.

Blake read the note, guessing beforehand what it contained. It read as follows:

"To George Herries,—We can settle our affair immediately after the match this afternoon, if it suits you. As we're both playing we shall be in the same boat physically. What about the old hut in Rylcombe Woods?"

"TOM MERRY."

"That tears it!" groaned Blake. "I suppose his hands are better—though I'm blessed if I can see how they could be!"

He handed the note to Digby and D'Arcy, who likewise groaned.

"Wotten!" was D'Arcy's comment. "I was hopin' that fight would nevah come off, bal Jove!"

"I knew Tom Merry wasn't the fellow to hang back for long," grunted Digby, "hands or no hands! Going to meet him, Herries?"

Herries nodded slowly.

"If his hands are really better I certainly am!" he snapped. "What do you take me for? We'll both be in the same boat after the match, as he says, so that doesn't matter."

He tore a leaf from an exercise book and scribbled on it. Then he handed the folded note to the grinning Curly Gibson.

"That's the answer, kid!" he snapped.

"Right-ho!"

Curly Gibson departed, grinning. From what had been said the fag

realised it was a fight, and he made a mental note to be on the spot when it came off. He hurried to Study No. 10, and handed the note to Tom Merry himself. Then he scudded off to tell the news to his fellow fags. There was likely to be an attendance of fags at the fight, at all events!

Tom Merry soon read the note, and, as he did so, Lowther and Manners eyed him anxiously.

"Well?" demanded Lowther.

"It's all right!" said Tom grimly. "He says he's on if my hands are quite better. It's a go, then—after the match, by the old woodman's hut!"

"But your hands aren't better!" said Manners bluntly. "You're an ass, Tommy!"

"Yes, rather!" agreed Lowther gloomily. "Don't do it, I tell you."

"I'm going through with it!" said Tom Merry doggedly. "My hands are fit enough to lick Herries, and I'm not putting it off any longer. The fellows are already sneering and saying I funk Herries!"

"Cads like Racke and Crooke, you mean!"

"Yes—well, it makes no difference. I'm feeling fit enough, and I'm going to give Herries the licking of his life," said Tom Merry, his blue eyes gleaming with determination. "And after I've licked him I'm going to take on a bigger job: I'm going to lick that cad Knox—or have a jolly good try. Now, what about getting ready to start for Rylcombe?"

"But, old chap—"

"That's enough!" snapped Tom. "Nothing will make me change my mind!"

Lowther and Manners said no more. The thought of the coming fight between two such old friends as Tom and Herries made them feel miserable—just as it did Herries' own personal chums. But both principals were determined upon it, and it seemed useless to try to stop the fight.

CHAPTER 23.

Cardew Amuses Himself!

"WELL, cheerio, old chap!"
 "Cheerio!" answered Harry Manners grimly. "Mind you fellows play up—especially you, Tommy! Let that swanking cad Knox know he's not the only fellow who can play footer! Put your beef into it to-day!"

"I mean to!" said Tom Merry quietly. "Sure you won't come along and see the game, Manners?"

"Yes, blow your giddy camera!" snorted Lowther. "Come along!"

Manners grinned and shook his head.

"I'm making the most of this bit of sunshine—we have little enough these days, goodness knows!" he said. "I can see a bit of footer any old time, and I haven't been able to get a snap for ages. I'll turn up in time for the scrap, though, never fear!"

"Fathead!" said Lowther.

And Lowther and Tom Merry parted from their chum and walked on towards the village. Manners slung his camera over his shoulder and made for the stile that gave admittance on to the footpath through Rylcombe Woods.

He had almost reached it when he jumped as he heard his name called. He recognised the drawling voice, but it was only after looking about him blankly for a few seconds that he saw the owner.

It was Ralph Reckness Cardew of the Fourth, and he was seated on an old fence just beyond the stile.

"Oh, you!" said Manners, jumping the stile. "You gave me a start, you silly ass! What the thump are you sitting there for?"

"I'm just amusin' myself," said Cardew airily, "in my own simple way. Goin' snappin', I see?"

"Yes."

"Why this thushness?" asked Cardew. "Why forsake the footer and the fight, may I ask—especially as dear old Tommy—"

"I'm not forsaking the fight, any-

way," grunted Manners, "but I'm giving the footer a miss. I want to get a few snaps in this afternoon."

"Amusin' your giddy self in your own way, like me, what?" said Cardew. "I'm just detectin', you know. Care to join me?" he added, looking reflectively at Manners' camera.

"Detectin'! What the thump—"

"That's the word!" said Cardew. "It's another word for mindin' another chap's business, you know. That camera may come in useful."

Manners stared at the elegant Fourth Former. At the best of times it was rather difficult to understand Cardew.

"What's the giddy game?" asked Manners.

"I'm interested in a certain fellow—that's all!" drawled Cardew. "Our mutual friend Percy states that he is going to meet his dear nunky this afternoon. I've got an idea that he isn't!"

"Oh, you mean Knox!"

"The very man!" smiled Cardew. "I'm rather interested in Knox, you know. An' I'm goin' to find out whether he really does go to meet nunky. I can't help feelin' it's all spoof!"

"But he had a telegram!" said Manners, eyeing Cardew fixedly. "Lots of fellows have seen it!"

"Quite so!" agreed Cardew blandly. "But some fellows send telegrams to themselves; it's rather convenient at times—especially when a fellow prefers billiards in a pub to his irksome duties as footer skipper. Get me, dear man?"

"Oh!" said Manners. He had never thought of that.

"I'm rather keen to find out if the dear man is spoofin'!" drawled Cardew. "Bein' a new fellow, I feel it my duty to find out and to point out to him the error of his ways. Besides," went on Cardew, stroking his nose thoughtfully, "friend Knox punched my nose yesterday. I let it go at that for the moment. The blighter is just a little above my weight. But—"

Cardew paused meaningly, and Manners chuckled. He understood. There were a goodly number of fellows at St. Jim's who had had their noses punched by Percy Knox. And though not usually a vindictive fellow, Ralph Reckness Cardew evidently had not forgotten or forgiven—if other fellows had.

"You don't love Percy, then?" asked Manners, grinning.

"He's a poisonous blighter in my humble opinion!" remarked Cardew. "I don't pose as a shining model of virtue—like dear old Thomas, frinstance—but I do think that the sooner friend Knox is shifted off his giddy perch the better it will be for St. Jim's, morally and sportively, so to speak. And then there's dear Thomas——"

"What about Tom?"

"I don't wholly approve of Thomas as captain," said Cardew, shaking his head. "He's a bit too strenuous—makes a fellow work when he'd rather not, you know. Still, I fancy he's the best man for the job, an' I'm goin' to do my humble little bit to shift Percy and leave the way open for Thomas!"

"You don't bar Merry like the rest of the rotters, then?" muttered Manners, eyeing him suspiciously. "Looks to me as if you know something——"

"My dear man, I know nothin'—but I suspect a lot!" said Cardew, smiling. "When dear Thomas himself tells me he funk'd, I'll swallow it—not before! When I've finished detectin' friend Knox I propose to turn my abilities to discoverin' just why Thomas had urgent business elsewhere when friend Ginger turned up. But the most urgent task is to bowl out friend Knox, and the question is, are you goin' to back me up, dear man?"

"But—but what's the good——"

"Lots of good! The fellows are already fed up with Knoxy—they'll go off at the deep end when they discover he's cut the match to go off on the giddy loose. It will give Knoxy the knock-out, I fancy!"

"It—it seems like spying on a chap!" said Manners.

"Detectin', I call it—not such an unpleasant word!" said Cardew, dropping his half-joking, half-mocking manner. "It's like this, Manners—in my humble view, the end more than justifies the means. Unless he's stopped, Knox will about muck up the footer for the season, and he'll also bring the giddy tone of the school down. He's a strong chap, with personality; and his giddy influence isn't for the good of St. Jim's. An' then, as I say, there's dear old Thomas——"

"You're right, Cardew!" said Manners, setting his lips. "I'm on!"

"Then fall in an' follow me—when the time comes," smiled Cardew. "I'm just waitin' to discover—— Hallo! Here's the one and only Gussy!"

From where they sat, though well screened from the lane themselves, the two juniors had a good view of anyone approaching from the school. Along the lane now an elegant figure was sauntering gracefully. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and, as usual, he was a beautiful picture from the crown of his glimmering silk hat to the toes of his natty, shining shoes that peeped from a pair of natty spats.

With a chuckle, Cardew dislodged himself from the fence and strolled to the stile. As Arthur Augustus came abreast he called out to him.

"Cheerio, Gussy!"

"Bal Jove!"

Arthur Augustus stopped, and, jamming his monocle farther into his eye, he glanced round him. Then he suddenly saw Cardew and frowned.

"Weally, Cardew, deah boy," he remarked mildly, "you have put me into quite a fluttah, bal Jove! I wondahed if——"

"Never mind what you wondered, old chap!" said Cardew. "I hear you're bound for Wayland, Gussy. The tailor-man—what?"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"Care to get somethin' for me?"

"I shall be vewy pleased to oblige you, Cardew," said Arthur Augustus doubtfully. "But I weally twust you will not ask me to cawwy back any twoublesome parcels—"

"Not at all. What I want you to get me is a bit of information, Gussy. Will you do that, old chap?"

"I shall be vewy pleased to do that, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, smiling.

"Right! There's a fellow who's supposed to have an appointment in Wayland this afternoon—like you, Gussy," said Cardew calmly. "I'm rather keen to know if that fellow keeps his appointment."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, staring curiously at Cardew. "You mean Knox, deah boy?"

"The very man!" smiled Cardew. "I'll be no end obliged if you'll keep your optics open this afternoon, Gussy. I'd like to know if Knox is on the train you go by; if you happen to see him in Wayland; and if he returns by the train you do. I fancy you won't see him at all, but you never know. Well, is it a go, Gussy?"

"Weally, Cardew, I do not quite like

"My dear man, what's the odds? Knox amuses me, and it'll be very entertainin' to know if he goes. No reason why I shouldn't amuse myself, dear man—"

"Yaas, but—"

"That's settled, then!" said Cardew blandly. "Thanks so much, Gussy! I'll expect the information when you return, old chap. Cheerio! Better buzz off, or you'll miss your train."

"Bai Jove!"

Leaving Arthur Augustus staring, Cardew dropped from the stile and returned to Manners, smiling. Arthur Augustus turned and trudged away, frowning. He was quite mystified as to why Cardew wanted the information.

"Cardew is weally a most wemarkable fellow!" he murmured as he trudged on. "Howevah, I see no

weason why I should not oblige him—though I wish he had stated his weason for desiw'n' the information."

And, shaking his head doubtfully, Arthur Augustus walked on to the station.

Manners had not shown himself—not being on good terms with Arthur Augustus. He grunted as Cardew joined him.

"Blessed if I can see why you asked D'Arcy to do it," he said. "Knox may cycle, for that matter."

"I just wanted to make sure he doesn't go by this train," said Cardew. "I know he didn't catch the earlier one. If he fails to catch this, he'll miss his appointment. See?"

"Yes, but—"

"I was goin' to wait here and see if he does—follow him, you know," smiled Cardew. "But now Gussy will do that for me, and we can carry our giddy investigations elsewhere. You see, I happen to know that Knox is booked to play a game of billiards with Lacy of the Grammar School for a fiver. Where, or when, I don't know. But I fancy it's this afternoon, and I've a good idea it'll be at the Green Man. That's where we're goin' now. See?"

"Oh!"

"Come on!" smiled Cardew.

He led the way along the woodland path, and Manners followed promptly enough now. They reached the spot where the footpath through the woods branched off from the short cut to the village, and, after walking for some minutes, they came out on to the towing-path of the Rhyl.

They were just about to climb the stile to reach the towing-path, when voices sounded, and Cardew dragged Manners back into the shelter of the hedge. The next moment several forms passed the gap above the stile.

Cardew chuckled as he recognised them.

"Racke, Croke, Lacy, and dear old Knox!" he murmured. "So that settles it! Hold on a sec!"

The two juniors waited until the footsteps ceased, and then they slipped over the stile on to the towing-path.

Ahead of them were Racke & Co; and, carefully keeping out of sight, the two "investigators" watched Racke & Co. suddenly stop at the Green Man Inn. Then, after looking stealthily about them for some moments, the little party of juniors vanished.

"Gone through the garden," drawled Cardew. "Rather a pity; I wanted to get there first, before they turned up. It means that we'll have a long wait, old bean."

"But why?" grunted Manners. "What's the idea, Cardew?"

"Can't you guess?" grinned Cardew. "We've got to wait until they finish their little game, and then I want you to snap them as they come out. That's where your giddy camera comes in."

"Oh!" said Manners understanding. "But they may be hours——"

"That is the trouble," admitted Cardew. "It's one of the drawbacks to detectin', and it's rather a fag. But it's worth it. An' we can be studyin' Nature until the time comes for you to make a camera study of the distressin' follies of human nature. Come on!"

Ralph Reckness Cardew started off for the Green Man Inn, and Manners laughed and followed him, hugging his precious camera. After all, it was scarcely wasting the afternoon, and he would be sure of one interesting snap, at any rate.

CHAPTER 24.

Gussy's Discovery!

"**B**AI JOVE!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave vent to that startled exclamation, and then, as if it were scarcely strong enough to express his astonishment, he gave vent to another:

"Gweat Scott!"

The swell of the Fourth was seated in the waiting-room at Wayland Junction, waiting for the train to take

him back to Rylcombe. Arthur Augustus had spent a delightful hour or so at his tailor's, discussing men's fashions as they affected him personally with Mr. Truffit. He had then sauntered gracefully back to the station. There was heaps of time before the local train was due out, and Arthur Augustus took things very easily.

But, despite this, he had found himself at the station with ten minutes at least on his hands. And, though it was a bright, sunny afternoon, there was a keen nip in the air, and on the station platform it was very unpleasant and draughty.

So Arthur Augustus had sauntered gracefully into the waiting-room and seated himself. He had then picked up, quite carelessly, a copy of the "Wayland Observer" that happened to be lying on one of the chairs.

It was the previous week's issue; but as Arthur Augustus rarely looked at a newspaper of any kind, it was none the less interesting.

And while glancing casually down the columns the noble eye of Arthur Augustus had alighted upon a paragraph—a paragraph that had made him give vent to those exclamations of astonishment.

It was of local interest, and it ran:

"PLUCKY RESCUE FROM FIRE.

"Yesterday afternoon Albert Rance, aged 8, of Riverside Cottages, Rylcombe, had a narrow escape from almost certain death by fire; but was saved by the pluck and prompt action of an unknown schoolboy, whose age is believed to be fifteen, or thereabouts. The child had evidently fallen into the fireplace, and, with his clothes ablaze, had rushed, screaming into the yard at the back of the cottage. At the time the child's mother was visiting a neighbour; but, hearing screams, she rushed out, to find the plucky unknown rescuer rolling the child in his overcoat and beating out the flames with his hands. Fortunately, the child was not severely

burned, and, after carrying him to the surgery of Dr. Short, the rescuer disappeared without giving the agitated mother an opportunity of thanking him, or of ascertaining his name. A neighbour states, however, that he was a well-dressed boy, and that he wore the school cap of St. James' College, Rylcombe."

Arthur Augustus read the paragraph again, jamming his monocle more firmly into place, as if to aid him in taking it in.

But he did take it in! Arthur Augustus was not noted for quickness of perception as a general rule—quite the contrary, in fact. But he would have been very dull indeed had he failed to note the significance of that paragraph.

So that was how Tom Merry had got his hands burned!

And they had called him coward and cad—practically the whole school had called him coward and cad!

"Oh, bai Jove!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "What a wotten shame! Poor old Tommy! And Hewwies is goin' to fight him this aftahnoon!"

The thought made Arthur Augustus jump up and glance at his watch anxiously. The train was due in two more minutes.

"Oh, good!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I must be in time to pprevent that fight at all costs! Yaas, wathah! What a weally wippin' stwoke of luck! It is vewy, vewy fortunate indeed that I was obliged to vist my tailor's this aftahnoon, bai Jove!"

And Arthur Augustus hurried out of the waiting-room to make sure of catching the local train whatever else happened.

On the way to Wayland Arthur Augustus had duly noted that Percy Knox had not boarded the train, nor had he seen that youth in Wayland, though he had kept a look-out for him. But Arthur Augustus forgot Cardew's request now, and the moment the train rumbled to a stop

at Rylcombe Station he jumped out and, throwing his ticket to a porter, rushed from the station.

In the High Street, however, Arthur Augustus paused, a sudden thought striking him.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured, shaking his head reflectively. "I think I had bettah make quite sure first. Tom Mewwy may pwobably wefuse to admit that he was the fellow who saved that youngstah. I had bettah get weal pwoof. Yaas, wathah!"

So, instead of keeping to the High Street, Arthur Augustus branched off down the narrow lane leading to the river. He emerged on to the towing-path scarcely twenty yards from Riverside Cottages.

Without hesitation, Arthur Augustus walked up to the first cottage and knocked on the door. A tired-looking woman answered his knock, and she stared and smiled at Arthur Augustus.

The swell of the Fourth raised his hat and bowed in his best Chesterfieldian manner.

"I am desiwous of speakin' to a lady named Mrs. Wance," exclaimed the swell of the Fourth politely. "I wondah if you would be so kind as to tell me which cottage—"

"Mrs. Wance—oh, Mrs. Rance!" said the woman, smiling. "Yes, I am Mrs. Rance."

"Oh, good!" said Arthur Augustus, beaming. "I undahstand that your little boy had a vewy nawwow escape fwom a dweadful—"

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Rance, her eyes shining as she stared at Gussy. "You—you're not the young gentleman who—"

"Bai Jove! Nunno!" Arthur Augustus hastened to explain. "I fancy I know the fellow, though. I wondah if you will be so good as to desewibe him to me, ma'am?"

"I was too-upset to notice what he was like myself," said the woman regretfully, "except that he was a school-boy of about your own size and age, sir. But Mrs. Cragg, next door, saw him, and she says he was a nice lad—"

sturdy, with a pleasant face, blue eyes, and curly hair. She says she'd know him again anywhere."

"Bai Jove! That is Tom Mewwy, without a doubt!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Thank you vewy much, ma'am! You must excuse me bothahin' you like this; but I was vewy anxious for a vewy good weason, to discovah who the fellow was."

"Did you say his name was Tom Merry?" exclaimed Mrs. Rance eagerly. "If you could tell me where we could find him we should be ever so glad. My husband's been thinking of going up to the school and inquiring there. But there's so many boys there, and he thought it would be no good not knowing his name, like. We want to thank him—I ought never to have let him go without thanking him at the time. Only I was so—"

"I quite understand that, ma'am," said Arthur Augustus, smiling. "I am vewy pleased to tell you that his name is Tom Mewwy, and he is in the Shell Form at St. Jim's. At least, I have vewy weason to believe it was Tom Mewwy, for his hands were burned that aftahnoon. Also he answahs, to your desewiption, and I happen to know he was wound heah that aftahnoon."

"Then—then the young gentleman was hurt—"

"His hands were wathah badly burned, ma'am; but I undahstand they are almost bettah now," said Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, I am weally much obliged, Mrs. Wance. I must wush off now, as I have a vewy urgent mattah to attend to. Good aftahnoon!"

And, raising his hat gracefully, Arthur Augustus hurried away. For once the swell of the Fourth risked being thought impolite in his anxiety to reach the woodman's hut before the fight started. But his heart was thumping with excitement as he trotted along the towing-path. He had little doubt before—he had less now as to the identity of the fellow who had rescued Mrs. Rance's youngster.

"I feak Tom Mewwy will be watty with me for havin' given him away to Mrs. Wance," he chuckled. "But I am wathah glad I did. Howevah—Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus broke off as he heard his name called out. He almost jumped as he realised the fact that the voice came from the garden of the Green Man Inn which he happened to be passing at that moment.

As he stopped short and blinked at the hedge two juniors slipped out and showed themselves. Arthur Augustus jumped again as he recognised Cardew and Manners.

"Gweat Scott!" he gasped, aghast. "Whatevah are you sillay asses doin' in that place? Are you pottay?"

"Not at all, dear man!" chuckled Cardew. "Merely detectin', old nut!"

"What? Bai Jove! Weally, I do n't undahstand—"

"Don't try, old chip," advised Cardew solemnly. "You'll bust somethin' if you do. Well, did you see anythin' of dear old Knoxy, Gussy?"

"I didn't see him—he was certainly not on the twain goin', deah boy. But—"

"Somehow I thought he wouldn't be," chuckled Cardew. "Hurryin' to be in time for the fight, what?"

"Yaas—at least—"

"Then ask Tom Merry to give that fathead Herries a good punch from me," said Cardew seriously.

"Bai Jove! I shall do nothin' of the kind, Cardew," said Arthur Augustus. "On the contwawy, Cardew, I am wushin' like anythin' for the sole purpose of stoppin' the fight."

"What?"

"I have made a vewy important discovevy, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, smiling at Manners, to that youth's surprise. "I have discovahed the weal weason why Tom Mewwy wan away the othah day. As I suspect that you know it already, Mannahs, I will show this to Cardew."

And, taking the folded "Observer" from his pocket, Arthur Augustus

showed the paragraph to Cardew.

Cardew whistled as he read it, and then a bland smile came over his face.

"So that's it!" he said.

"Yaas, that's it, deah boy. I have just been to see Mrs. Wance, and she has confirmed my belief that the fellow weferred to there is Tom Mewwy."

"You—you've been to Mrs. Rance?" gasped Manners. "Told her it was Tom Merry?"

"Natuwally!"

"Oh, my hat!" choked Manners. "Tom Merry will bust you, Gussy!"

"I see no weason why he should," said Arthur Augustus. "I twust now that all will be mewwy and bwright, and that Tom Mewwy will forgive us for our wotten twreatment, and will shake hands and forget. And I twust," said Arthur Augustus, holding out his hand frankly to Manners, "that our wecent differences will now be ended, Mannahs!"

Harry Manners took the hand and chuekied.

"That's all right, Gussy!" he grinned. "But, don't be too sure that Tom Merry will forget and forgive! Hadn't you better rush off and try to stop the fight, though? You've none too much time."

"Gweat Scott! Yaas, wathah! Pwavy excuse me, deah boys!"

Arthur Augustus grabbed the paper from Cardew, and started off at top speed along the towing-path.

"What a life!" groaned Cardew, staring after him in mock disappointment. "Stumped, by gad! An' I was lookin' forward no end to solvin' the giddy mystery. An' now Gussy's done me, brown. Never mind? we'll have the giddy glory of bowlin' out friend Knox, Manners. We'd better seek our little hiding-place again, old chap!"

And Cardew slipped back into the shelter of the hedge, and Manners grunted and followed him. He would much rather have followed D'Arcy; but he had agreed to help Cardew, and he wasn't backing out now within sight of success.

CHAPTER 25.

Settling Up!

PHEEP!

It was the whistle that ended the match between Rylcombe Village and St. Jim's. As it shrilled out a roar of cheering came from the swarms of St. Jim's fellows round the ropes.

"Hurrah!"

"St. Jim's win!"

And St. Jim's had won after a grueling tussle between the old friends and rivals of school and village. Grimes & Co. were gallant fighters, and they had played up well as they usually did.

But the Saints had played up better—Talbot had led his men to victory, as he had expected to do. It would certainly have been otherwise had Talbot taken the field with the team chosen for him by Percy Knox.

The St. Jim's eleven had been practically as usual, and they had played to a man. But the most brilliant player on the field had been undoubtedly Tom Merry of the Shell. Tom Merry had been determined to play well, and he had given of his best. The game had ended with the score at four goals to two, and three out of four had been scored by Tom Merry, the Fourth having been netted by Talbot himself.

Yet, despite that fact, and the brilliance of his play, Tom had missed the roars of applause that he was wont to get from the crowd. It was only too clear that the fellows could not forget his recent disgrace. What little applause that had escaped them was half-hearted and grudging.

It was dispiriting and disheartening, and Tom's face was hard as he trotted off the field at the close of the match.

"You played the game of your life, Tommy," panted Talbot, as he trotted alongside his chum. "Never mind those silly asses. They'll be sorry some day for being such sulky idiots!"

Tom Merry said nothing, and it was not until he came out of the dressing-room with Lowther and Talbot that he spoke again.

"I wish this rotten fight wasn't booked to come off, Tommy," said Talbot bluntly. "It's a dashed pity!"

"And a footling game altogether!" growled Lowther. "Fancy a hefty scrap after a gruelling footer match? You were a born idiot, Tommy, to challenge him for this afternoon!"

"I'm feeling none the worse!" said Tom grimly. "No need to worry about me, anyway. I've had to keep Herries waiting; but I'm keeping him waiting no longer!"

"Look here, Tom," pleaded Lowther. "There's still time to call it off—"

"I'm not calling it off!" snapped Tom Merry, his jaw setting. "I'm going to see it through if Herries is. Besides," added Tom, glancing round him with a harsh laugh, "think of the disappointment to all the fellows. They're hoping to see me licked to the wide this afternoon. Looks as if half the dashed school will be there!"

It certainly did look like it. Instead of going schoolwards by Rylcombe Lane, the crowd of St. Jun's fellows—fags as well as juniors—were taking the footpath across the fields, obviously making for the woods.

"Blake's lot must have let it out," grunted Lowther, "or else that young imp Curly Gibson tumbled to it. I noticed the little beggar was grinning when he came back after taking your note. Anyway, it scarcely matters."

"Plenty of support for Herries, anyway," said Tom Merry bitterly.

"It was all over the school before dinner," said Talbot quietly. "I heard Trimble spreading the news. Never mind, Tom; you played well without applause this afternoon, and you can fight well without applause now. I wish it wasn't coming off, as I say; but if it has to, then go in and win!"

"I mean to," said Tom Merry. "It's jolly decent of you, Talbot, to back me up when you don't know the facts!"

"I know you—and that's enough for me!" said Talbot quietly.

Tom looked at him, but said nothing more. They tramped on into the

wintry woods, the frosty grass and ferns crackling beneath their boots and the boots of the fellows swarming in front and behind them on the woodland pathway. Just in front of them were Blake, Digby, and Herries with several other Fourth Formers. Blake and Digby were looking far from happy, but Herries merely looked dogged and determined.

The old woodman's hut came in sight through the leafless trees at length, and the crowd crossed the grass towards it, making a circle round Blake & Co. and Tom Merry and his two chums. Tom Merry looked round him, fully expecting Manners to be there, and his face clouded as he failed to see him.

Despite his words to Talbot, he would have been glad enough of another friendly face there, in addition to Lowther and Talbot. Figgins & Co. were there, and they nodded to him; but Tom Merry could not fail to see that even their nods were cool.

Herries was already taking off his coat and muffler, and Tom Merry swiftly followed his example, and made ready for the fray. Blake was acting as second for his chum, and Lowther for Tom Merry.

Levison of the Fourth had agreed to act as timekeeper—though it was plain enough he did not relish his job.

Swiftly the preliminaries were gone through, and then the two faced each other with the gloves on, while Levison stood aside, watch in hand.

The buzz of excited voices died down and a breathless silence came as the two touched gloves and sprang away.

"Time!"

It was Levison's calm voice; but even as it rang out another well-known voice rang out also—excited and impelling.

"Stop!"

There was a murmur of astonishment, and the crowd turned. Herries, who had been about to advance on Tom Merry, his gloves ready, stopped

abruptly, and his glance went towards the fringe of the clearing.

As he did so, a familiar form burst through the wintry trees, and his voice rang out again:

"Stop! Bai Jove! Stop them, you fellows!"

"What the thump——"

"It's old Gussy!"

"D'Arcy, you idiot——"

Arthur Augustus came up, panting, and pushed his way unceremoniously through the crowd of startled fellows. Then he sprang between Herries and Tom Merry, his hands outstretched.

"Pway don't start until you have heard me!" he panted. "Hewwies——"

"You silly chump!" roared Jack Blake. "What the thump does this mean? Are you potty?"

"Not at all, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus breathlessly. "I am quite suah that Hewwies, at least, will not wish to cawwy on with the fight when he has heard me, bai Jove! I have made a surpwisin' discovewy, and when——"

"You silly ass!" bawled Blake. "What do you mean by barging in like this, Gussy? Explain yourself, you silly ass!"

"Pway do not woah at me, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus coldly. "You are well awaiah that I stwongly object to being woahed at."

"You—you——"

"Kick the silly ass out!"

"Out of the way, D'Arcy!"

There was a roar of voices; but Arthur Augustus ignored them. He waited calmly until they had ceased.

"Hold on!" grinned Levison. "Let's hear what the ass has got to say. What's the matter, Gussy?"

Tom Merry stood back, his face expressionless. Lowther grinned a little—he fancied he could guess what was coming, though how Gussy could have stumbled on the truth he could not imagine. Herries was looking at his chum in amazement and anger.

"Befoah you stwike a blow at Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, taking

a folded newspaper from his pocket. "I wish you to wead that pawagwaph, Hewwies. It will explain the weal weason why Tom Mewwy wan away the othah day. If that doesn't furnish enough pwoof, then I can pprove it in anothah way. Yaas, wathah!"

Herries hesitated, and then he took the paper, and glanced at the paragraph. The crowd looked on, curious and breathless. Tom Merry's face was flushed curiously now. He stepped forward as if to snatch the paper from Herries' hand; but just as quickly he drew back again.

Herries read the paper slowly, his face changing in expression as he did so.

He finished reading it at last, and his face crimsoned as his eyes met Tom Merry's cold glance.

"So—so that's it," he breathed. "I—I'm sorry, Merry! Why didn't you explain? This would never have happened if you'd only explained."

"Why don't they get on with it instead of gassing?" roared Grundy excitedly from the fringe of the crowd. "What's the dickens is the matter, anyway?"

"Dry up, Grundy!"

Tom Merry's face was white now.

"I don't know what you mean?" he snapped, in answer to Herries. "At least, I don't know what's in that paper, and I don't want to know. I'm ready to get on with the job if you are, Herries!"

"Well, I'm not," said Herries calmly, handing over the paper.

He tore off his gloves and tossed them away. Tom Merry, after a moment's hesitation, had taken the paper and was reading it. The crowd looked on blankly, mystified and not a little exasperated.

"Is this a dashed conference or a fight?" snorted Grundy.

"Dry up, you burbling ass!"

Several fellows roared at Grundy—fellows who were more anxious to know what was "on" now than to see the fight start. Tom Merry's face had

gone crimson now—he very soon realised what the paragraph was.

"I—I can't see what difference that makes to our affair, Herries!" he said thickly. "You refused to take my word—"

"I'm dashed sorry!" said Herries impulsively. "If you care to shake and forget it, Merry—"

He held out his hand, and Tom Merry threw away his gloves, and after the briefest hesitation, the ex-skipper took it. The crowd watched in blank amazement.

"Good!" said Arthur Augustus, fairly beaming. "Good man, Hewwies—good man, Tom Mewwy! That's all wight now, bai Jove!"

"But what the thump does it mean?" almost yelled Blake. "Gussy, you ass—Herries—"

"I'll jolly soon tell you what it means," said Herries. "It means that we've all misjudged Tom Merry—we've treated him rottenly. He no more funk'd those louts than did old Towser. He left us in the lurch, yes; but it was to do a thing a jolly sight more plucky and useful than stopping to back me up. And whether Tom Merry likes it or not, I'm going to see that everybody knows."

And with that, Herries suddenly reached forward and snatched the folded paper from Tom Merry's hand.

"Hold him a sec, Blake," he snapped, with a grim laugh. "Listen to this, you fellows!"

Tom Merry, with a very red face, sprang forward; but just as quickly Blake, Lowther, and Digby grabbed him and held him, despite his struggles, whilst Herries read aloud the paragraph to the staring crowd. He read it in loud tones, and when he had finished there was a deep murmur.

"So that was the thumping truth of it, was it?" said Grundy. "Well, my hat! I knew there was something like that behind it."

"Why didn't you say so at the time, then?" remarked Wilkins.

"You shut up, George Wilkins!

Well, I'm blowed! And we've been calling Tom Merry a blessed funk! Good man, Merry!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for Tom Merry!" roared young Curly Gibson. "Hip, pip—"

"Hurrah!"

It was a cheer given with a will. St. Jim's fellows were often very quick to condemn a fellow; but they were just as quick to cheer him when they deemed it necessary.

They deemed it necessary now—they did not doubt for one moment that the paragraph was indeed the secret of Tom Merry's strange silence. Indeed, Tom Merry's blushing face alone was clear proof that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had, indeed, stumbled on the truth. And as they had been swift to misjudge their old skipper, so now they were eager to acclaim him and to make amends for their error.

Blake was the first to step forward with outstretched hand, and Tom Merry took it frankly enough. He was smiling now; he could not help smiling, and his eyes were shining strangely. The truth was out now, and nothing he could do or say would help it spreading over St. Jim's. It was scarcely a happy thought to a modest fellow like Tom; yet he could not help feeling strangely relieved and elated. His bitterness fell from him like magic—he was never a fellow to bear ill-will for things that were past. He was ready enough now to forgive and forget. After all, it was his own fault mainly—his own stubborn pride. But after a dozen fellows had shaken his hand he went on strike.

"That's enough," he laughed. "I'm sorry I've disappointed you chaps—sorry I brought you here for nothing. You came to see me licked. But if you like I'll don the gloves and you shall see me give a well-deserved hiding to another chap."

"Bai Jove! Who is that, Tom Mewwy?" asked Arthur Augustus, looking round.

"You, you silly chump!" said Tom Merry. "Stand aside, you fellows."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry made a rush at the swell of the Fourth, and that astounded junior gasped and fled. There was a roar of laughter. It ceased suddenly, however, as a shout came from the fringe of the crowd. Then sounded the crashing of hurried footsteps in the frozen woods. And as the crowd stared, three figures came bursting out of the clearing.

First came Harry Manners, panting and breathless, and hugging his precious camera; second came Cardew, likewise panting and breathless, and also grinning. And after them a moment later dashed none other than Percy Knox, the new junior captain of St. Jun's.

Manners dashed up to the centre of the crowd, followed by the chuckling Cardew. Knox stopped dead on the fringe of the clearing, his red face startled and full of baffled rage.

"What the merry thump——" gasped Blake.

CHAPTER 26.

More Settling Up!

THE crowd stared wonderingly at Cardew and Manners, and then they looked at Knox. That individual was certainly worth looking at. His eyes fairly glittered with rage and baffled fury.

It was very clear that the sight of the crowd gathered there came as a complete surprise to him. He stared at them blankly at first, and then with growing rage and fear. As a matter of fact, Knox had known, of course, of the impending fight at the old woodman's hut in Rylcombe Woods, but being a new fellow he had not known where that was. He had certainly traversed the woodland path several times, but he had never seen the hut before.

He understood now, however, as his

glinting eyes met the questioning glances of the crowd. He had been chasing Cardew and Manners, and he realised now that they had purposely led him to this spot, and he had good reason to guess why.

For a moment Knox seemed to contemplate a retreat back into the trees, and then just as suddenly he seemed to change his mind. The next moment he was making a rush for Manners, his eyes gleaming with savage desperation.

"Back up!" roared Manners, clasp- ing his camera to him in alarm. "He wants to smash my camera! Stop him, for goodness' sake! Tom—Lowther——"

But it was Cardew who acted first. He stepped swiftly forward, and his foot shot out swiftly in the nick of time. Knox blundered headlong over it and went crashing down on his face. He was up the next moment, however, blazing with passion.

"You—you howling sweeps!" he panted. "I'll smash you for that afterwards, Cardew!"

And leaving Cardew for the moment he made another savage rush at Manners.

But Tom Merry and Lowther jumped before him, while Blake & Co. also lined up. Once again the two "clans" stood up together against the common enemy.

"Hold on!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Hold on, Knox!"

"Let me go!" snarled Knox, struggling furiously.

"What's this mean, Cardew?" demanded Levison. "What's the game, anyway?"

"Perhaps our friend Knox will tell you," yawned Cardew. "And perhaps he won't. Hark to his language! Naughty, naughty!"

"You—you——" Percy Knox fairly gritted his teeth with baffled rage. But he made no attempt to explain, though he struggled furiously in the grasp of Tom Merry, Lowther and Blake.

"Well, I shall have to explain myself, though it's a beastly bore," re-

marked Cardew coolly. "It's like this, you fellows: Manners and I have been spendin' the afternoon studyin' Nature with the aid of Manners' camera. We only got one snap, though; we saw some giddy gay birds enter a giddy nest, and we spent nearly the whole afternoon waitin' for 'em to come out again. But we got them when they did come out—didn't we, Knox? One of the gay birds seemed to object strongly to bein' snapped, an' he chased us—wantin' to smash the camera, I fancy."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, staring at Knox. "So that was why you fellows were hidin' in the garden of the Gween Man Inn, was it?"

"Just that," assented Cardew.

"Blessed if I understand what the thump this means!" snorted Grundy. "Why the dickens don't you talk English, Cardew, you fool?"

Most of the fellows looked puzzled, but Manners soon made matters clear.

"I'll soon tell you in plain English," he said, his eyes fixed scornfully on Percy Knox. "You fellows have heard from Knox why he couldn't be at the match this afternoon. He claimed that he had to meet his uncle at the Grand Hotel in Wayland."

"It—it was true, hang you!" gritted Knox.

"It was spoof!" said Manners calmly. "You had a telegram right enough, but it was sent by you yourself. There was no uncle at all. It was just a rotten excuse to give you the chance to go playing billiards at the Green Man Inn."

"Bai Jove!"

There was a murmur. All eyes turned to Percy Knox, who ground his teeth with fury.

"It's a rotten lie!" he hissed. "My uncle sent the telegram, and I did go to Wayland. I went by the two-thirty train!"

"That is a wotten untwuth, Knox!" said Arthur Augustus coldly. "I went by that twain myself, and Cardew

asked me particularly to make sure if you went by it and to look out for you. You were not on the twain at all, nor did I see you in Wayland."

"I did, I tell you! I—I——"

"Can't you see he's lying?" said Manners, his lip curling. "I was there when Cardew asked D'Arcy. And Cardew told me he suspected what Knox was really up to. Cardew had heard that Knox was booked to play Lacy from the Grammar School at billiards for a fiver. He guessed it was to come off at the Green Man, and he got me to go with him there this afternoon. It was about two-thirty, or barely that, then. We saw Knox with Racke, Lacy, and Crooke enter the Green Man from the towing-path. And we waited all the afternoon until ten minutes ago, when they came out."

"Oh!"

"That's the truth!" said Manners. "Let the sweep deny it if he can! He saw me taking the snap—caught me in the act—and he chased me here. I suppose he didn't dream we were leading him purposely to you chaps. Anyway, here he is, and I've got the proof in this."

And Manners tapped his camera.

"And that's the sort of chap we've got for a captain!" snorted George Alfred Grundy in intense disgust. "Cutting matches to play dashed billiards in a filthy pub, the smoky cad!"

"And lying about it like the black-guard he is!" snapped Blake. "Some-how I thought it queer about that telegram!"

"Smash him!" roared Grundy excitedly. "Let him see we don't intend to be spoofed and tricked like that! Kick him out of his job! What about that rotten foul at the practice match? Hacked Tom Merry's ankle like a blessed hooligan! Bah! The fellow makes me sick!"

"All right, Grundy!" hissed Knox, his eyes glinting with spite and vengeful hate. "I've licked you already; I'll make you a dashed hospital case next time. I'll make you all sit up for this.

you see if I don't. I'm skipper yet, and I'll make some of you squirm before I've finished. I've licked the best man in the Lower School—or the chap who was supposed to be best man," he added, his lip curling as he glared at Tom Merry. "And I'll dashed well show the lot of you who rules the roost!"

"Will you?" bawled Grundy valiantly. "Out of the way, you fellows! Let the cad go! I'm going to have another go at him! He's licked me already, but I'm going to keep at the brute until I lick him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean it!" bellowed Grundy turning back his cuffs. "Out of the way there!"

And Grundy was about to rush at Knox, when Tom Merry stepped forward between them. Tom Merry's face was set and his eyes were gleaming.

"No, you don't, Grundy!" he said calmly. "I'm the man who's going to tackle Knox if anyone is. You fellows have come here to see a fight, and you're not going to be disappointed after all. If Knox is quite willing I'm ready to take him on here and now. He took me at a disadvantage last time. I was seedy, and he made the most of it. I'm fit enough now."

"Tom——"

"Stand back, Lowther!"

"But your hands, Tom——"

"My hands will see me through all right," said Tom Merry, ripping off his jacket again. "Make a ring, you fellows! This brute has bullied and ruled the roost quite long enough. And he and I have more than one score to settle. I'm going to do my best here and now to settle them."

"You'll need a dashed sight more than your best to do that," sneered Percy Knox. "But I'm on—there's nothing I'd like better, Tom Merry!"

He tore off his coat—Blake and the others had reluctantly released him now—and the Juniors willingly made a ring. They had looked forward keenly

enough to a "mill" between Herries and Tom Merry; but they knew they were to see something better—or worse—than that now.

Levison agreed to be timekeeper, cheerfully this time, and Gore agreed to second Knox. The crowd closed in, breathless with anticipation and excitement. There was a sudden silence as, with gloves donned, the two enemies faced each other. Levison had his watch out now.

"Time!"

It came at last, and as it rang out Knox gave a growl and came on with a rush.

"Look out, Tommy!"

It seemed as if Tom Merry would be overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught. But Tom was on his guard, cool and steady as a rock. He knew he had no light task before him—his former fight with Percy Knox had taught him that only too well. He was determined, at all costs this time, to keep cool and take no risks. His chance had come at last—the chance he had longed and waited for to "settle" matters between his enemy and himself.

CHAPTER 27.

Tom Merry's Triumph!

CRASH!

Percy Knox was down—he had fairly rushed into a straight punch to the jaw that rattled him from head to foot and deposited him on his back in the frosty grass. Too eager, the new captain had fairly asked for a fall, and got it.

"Good man, Tommy!"

"Go it, Merry!"

"Smash the cad!"

"Let him have a few more like that!"

Almost every shout was for Tom Merry, and the junior smiled grimly as he reflected how quickly the fellows had changed their tune. Only an hour or more ago they would have greeted

that mor with icy silence.

But the scene was changed now. Used as he was to popularity, Tom Merry could not help feeling a thrill of happiness as he heard the cries.

Yet Tom kept his head—he knew only too well that Knox would not act so rashly again. That punch had certainly shaken him up; but it would also undoubtedly bring him to his senses and make him take more care.

"One—two—three——"

Knox was up at the count of three, and his eyes were gleaming as he slid back a step, his guard up. Tom did not follow up his advantage, however—he waited, and Knox growled and came on again.

This time more warily, however. But it was a hot attack, for all that, and Tom Merry retreated, fighting steadily, giving hard-fought ground.

But suddenly Tom stopped him with a terrific drive at the deadly solar plexus that Knox only just managed to smother.

"Time!"

It was clear that Knox was only too thankful for the call of "Time!" His chest was heaving, and though he had done most of the attacking, he had very plainly suffered the most of the two.

"I'm worrying about Tom's hands," grunted Manners. "They haven't warmed up to it yet, though!"

"Tom's round!" murmured Lowther, with satisfaction. "Dash it all, they must hurt him!"

But if they did Tom Merry showed no signs of the fact. His face was flushed and his eyes bright. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Towels and everything necessary for the fight had been brought in readiness, and Lowther and Gore were soon busy on their principals.

"Time!"

Levison's voice brought Tom Merry and Knox out into the ring, stepping lightly. Knox was looking grim now. He had discovered that this was not

the same Tom Merry who had faced him before and whom he had so easily licked. He was looking a trifle anxious as well as grim. He knew only too well now that Tom Merry was the cleverer boxer of the two. Certainly Knox was taller and stronger. And it remained to be seen who had the better staying power.

On the previous occasion Tom had fought like a tired fellow, lacking fire and agility. He certainly lacked neither now, as Knox had already found to his cost.

But the battle had scarcely started yet.

Again Percy Knox opened the round with a fierce attack. He forced Tom to retreat, his gloves flashing fire and body; but each time the blow was parried, or allowed to slip harmlessly by. Then, with a smart counter to the head, Knox succeeded in forcing open Tom's guard, and planted a hefty jab in the region of the heart.

But a swift spring backwards saved Tom from the full force of the blow, and, leaping again, Tom got home a stinging right on the bridge of his opponent's nose.

It brought a thin stream of red trickling from the junior captain's nasal organ, and it brought a roar from the crowd.

"Good for you, Tommy!"

"First blood to Merry!"

Knox shook his head, and his eyes glittered vengefully as he followed Tom up. That blow had rattled him, obviously. He drove hard at Tom Merry, and, despite Tom's defence, he inflicted heavy punishment. It was Tom's turn to be relieved when the second round ended.

"Don't worry, old chap," smiled Lowther, as he waited his towel vigorously. "Let him go it as much as he likes—only mind those dashed straight lefts of his. The chap's got a punch like the kick of a mule."

"Don't I know it!" murmured Tom.

"Make the most of your footwork," advised Manners.

And when the third round opened Tom Merry found he needed to make all he could of his footwork. It was clear that, knowing he would be out-boxed, Knox was determined to finish the fight as soon as he could by a knock-out—if he could be lucky enough to get it.

Tom Merry, however, saw to it that he got no chance of that. He kept himself well covered, and he kept his head finely. He realised that Knox's aim was to bewilder him by a succession of rushes and fierce onslaughts that would open the way for a finishing blow.

Again and again the heavier fellow rushed in, impatient to "mix it," but Tom was always well inside the "mix," his right and left working, guarding, now and again getting home stinging upper-cuts and half-arm jabs.

Tom was cool as an iceberg, and his guard was unerring.

In a swift exchange of blows, sparkling to watch, Knox got home three times in swift succession with punishing body blows that shook Tom up not a little; but not once did he lose control of himself, and he fought on coolly.

The end of the third round found both panting and gasping. If anything, Tom Merry was the most exhausted of the two; but Knox was the worst off in another way. A last stinging right from Tom had caught him full in the mouth, and beside losing a tooth, Knox had lost something more important—his temper. That last blow had upset his fighting completely. His eyes glistened savagely as he came up to scratch for the fourth round.

Tom smiled as he noticed the obvious signs.

To begin with, the camera affair had brought Knox on the scene in a savage, vengeful mood, and he was far from having recovered from it. There were many in the breathless crowd that noted the signs also, and there was a tense feeling of excitement in the air as Knox jumped from his corner.

They were not disappointed in what they expected to see.

Knox came on like a cyclone with a furious left and right that would have put paid to Tom's account then and there had either reached its mark.

But Tom was not there to receive them. With a dazzling display of swift footwork, and side-stepping, he eluded Knox like a will-o'-the-wisp. Then, springing forward, he brought his left across with a wicked hook that spun and dazed the furious junior skipper.

"Tom's got him!" murmured Blake, with a chuckle. "Now for fireworks!"

And the fireworks came soon enough. Tom Merry had very plainly got his enemy "weighed up," and he proceeded to show that he had come to the conclusion it was time for him to do a bit of hitting.

Not only was Knox dazed, but the sheer fury of his attack had spent and exhausted him. Undoubtedly he had a splendid physique; but just now, when he needed every ounce of vitality and scrap of wind, Knox found both failed him. Surreptitious smoking of cigarettes and carelessness in general were exacting their toll. It was the beginning of the end for Knox, and the captain of the Lower School of St. Jim's realised it, and strove desperately to stave off defeat by desperate defence until the round ended.

But the round was not nearly ended yet, and Tom Merry gave him no rest. Despite his strenuous efforts that afternoon on the footer field, Tom was feeling fine—he was only just warming up to the battle. His exercise in the open air on the footer field seemed to have added to his energy; but Knox's afternoon, spent in the smoky, unhealthy atmosphere of the Green Man billiards-room had had just the reverse effect on him. The end of the round just then might have saved him; but Tom Merry saw to it that it did not.

Following that wicked punch, Tom Merry sailed in in real earnest. There was a roar of voices in the wintry clearing as Knox retreated before the

damaging whirlwind, vainly trying to cover himself under a rain of blows to face, ribs, and head, all of them registered with deadly force and skill.

Tom Merry—usually the most merciful of fighters—showed his opponent little mercy now. He had suffered more than enough at Knox's hands since that youth had come to St. Jim's. From the very beginning the new fellow had shown unreasonable enmity and hatred, and Tom remembered his wrongs now—he also remembered how Knox had shown no mercy to the fellows whom he had bullied and thrashed in the Fourth and Shell.

Tom meant to make a thorough job of it this time—to point out quite clearly to the overbearing bully just how and where he would stand in the general scheme of things at St. Jim's.

Another of those devastating left hooks struck the bemused and panting junior skipper clean under the chin.

Crash!

Knox went down—flat on his back on the frosty, trampled grass. There was a gasp—a quick indrawing of breath from round the ring. Tom Merry waited, his chest heaving, his face hard and set; but his enemy failed to rise.

"Time!"

Levison snapped his watch shut. A roar went up from the crowd.

"Tom Merry has it!"

"Good man!"

"Licked, by jingo!" gasped Blake, rubbing his eyes. "Well, I'm blowned! I never expected it—and I never expected the fight to end so soon, either!"

Nor did the others. Knowing Tom Merry as they did, the crowd had hardly expected him to lick the redoubtable Percy Knox. They were staggered—but they were overjoyed. Knox's brilliance on the footer field, his undoubted pluck and success with his fists, his strength and strong personality, had taken the popular fancy—for a time. But they all realised now that in Tom Merry he had met more than his match. In that moment of

victory, with Tom's recent vindication fresh in their memories, they realised what fools they had been to exchange his steadfast honesty and straightforwardness for the trickery and crookedness of the bullying Knox.

"Three cheers for Tom Merry!" bawled Grundy. "Now, chaps, let him have it hot and strong!"

And as Tom Merry was helped into his clothes by his relieved chums, the cheers rang out through the frosty woods again and again.

It was a bitter moment for Percy Knox as he lay gasping and panting on the grass, and his eyes glinted with helpless malice and chagrin as he eyed Tom Merry's battered, but cheery face. But nobody took much notice of Knox—only Gore remaining with him as the fellows swarmed from the clearing discussing the fight excitedly.

As Tom Merry walked back to St. Jim's surrounded by his old friends, his face was bright—despite the ugly bruises and marks of battle. He was aching in every limb and muscle, and he felt as if he had been under a steam-hammer. But he was happy. Percy Knox was still captain; but Tom was not troubling about that. He had got back his old chums, and his name was cleared. Moreover, though his enemy still had the power of his lofty position—for what it was worth to him now—Tom knew he had the popularity, and for the time being he was willing to let it go at that.

But others were by no means willing. That evening the Lower School at St. Jim's was in a buzz of excitement. Things could not be allowed to remain as they were in the view of both Fourth and Shell. After prep that night an overflow meeting of the Lower School was held in the junior Common-room. Knox was absent, and Tom Merry was absent. But Tom Merry very soon knew what had happened at the meeting when a swarm of fellows invaded Study No. 10, and demanded that he should put up for the captaincy of the Lower School again.

"But, my dear men. Tom Merry blandly pointed out, "you've already got a skipper. Knox is our skipper, and you'll have to make the best of it, I'm afraid."

"Will we?" bawled George Alfred Grundy. "You'll jolly soon see if we will, Tom Merry. We're fed-up with that cad—fed up to the back teeth, and more. He's going to be booted out of his job—jolly quick, too!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We want you back as skipper, Tom Merry!" yelled Herries.

"That's it!" said Levison grimly. "Knox is a sweep—a howling slacker and bullying cad! We've finished with him for good and all. We want you back, Tom Merry, before the footer and everything else goes to pot. We'll see you get in all right."

"What about it?" demanded Blake. "If you refuse, Tom Merry, we're going to scrag you bald-headed until you agree."

"Well," smiled Tom Merry, "in that case I think I'd better agree. If you can get a new election arranged, I'll stand. That's all. Now kindly clear out—my head's buzzing like a beehive, and I can't stand much more row."

"Good man!" grinned Lowther. "I knew he'd agree, chaps. Now come along and see old Kildare."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the deputation went along to see Kildare. That great man stared blankly as the swarm of juniors invaded his den. He set his lips grimly and picked up an ashplant from the bookshelves. His intention was obvious, and Blake held up his hand.

"Hold on, Kildare—it's important!" he gasped quickly. "We're a deputation."

"Oh, are you?" said Kildare, lowering his cane. "Well, let's hear the trouble—sharp!"

"It's about the junior captaincy," said Blake. "We're fed-up with Knox—fed up to the chin, Kildare. He's

proved himself unfit for his job, and we all want Tom Merry back."

"Oh!" said Kildare, smiling grimly. "I wondered how long you kids would put up with the existing state of affairs. I've heard quite a lot about your new skipper. However, as it happens, you need not have troubled to come to me at all. There is to be a new election on Saturday evening."

"Oh!"

"Gwreat Scott!"

"What happened on the footer field at practice the other afternoon was more than enough for me," said Kildare. "And I've only this evening heard something quite by accident that settled the matter as far as I was concerned. I've seen Mr. Railton, and assured him that Knox is quite unfit for his position. Mr. Railton has accepted my assurance, and has deprived Knox of the captaincy. As I say, there is to be a new election on Saturday evening. I'm just going to shove a notice on the board to that effect."

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!"

"And if you young idiots will take a tip from me," said Kildare blandly, "you'll vote for your former captain. You won't find a better man for the job. Now get out!"

The deputation got out hurriedly. But they did not need Eric Kildare's advice in regard to Tom Merry, and before departing they told him so.

CHAPTER 28.

Knox Loses His Temper!

BOYS!

There was a shuffling of feet on the Form-room floor, and the members of the Shell Form at St. Jim's stood up to a man—or, rather, to a boy.

They were surprised—very much surprised. It was rather unusual for Mr. Railton to enter their Form-room at that time of the morning, and it was

certainly unusual for him to bring a visitor.

Yet he had brought one now, and even Mr. Linton peered through his spectacles in surprise.

The visitor was a somewhat unusual visitor, too. He was rather a shabby little man, although clean and tidy, and with a kindly face. He looked exceedingly self-conscious as he found scores of curious and youthful eyes upon him, and he twirled his cap nervously in his hand.

"You may be seated again, boys," said Mr. Railton quietly—"all, that is, with the exception of Merry. You will kindly come out into the front of the Form, Merry."

"Ye-e-es, sir!" gasped Tom.

He left his seat, and staggered rather than walked between the lines of desks, his face going curiously white. Somehow he had a dreadful suspicion as to whom the stranger was and what his business was.

He was not the only fellow, either, who had a suspicion of that. Manners chuckled softly and murmured to Lowther.

"Oh, crumbs!" he breathed. "I bet my last coughdrop it's the giddy pater of that youngster Tommy saved! Oh, my hat!"

"Silence!"

Mr. Railton coughed, and then spoke to Mr. Linton, who nodded and smiled. The Housemaster also smiled very kindly at Tom Merry. It served to increase Tom's dreadful foreboding. He would have been delighted to see Mr. Railton scowl at him just then.

But the Housemaster smiled.

"A few days ago, Merry," he began, "Mr. Linton reported to me that your hands were scarred and blackened, evidently by fire. I instructed him to order you to go to the matron for treatment. Mr. Linton also reported that you refused stubbornly to explain how you came to have such injuries, and I decided not to press the matter, believing that it had been caused by some reckless and unlawful experi-

ment. This morning, however, I have learned what I believe to be the truth of the matter."

Tom Merry looked uncomfortable. The whole class was grinning now. They could understand just how Tom Merry was feeling.

"Why," went on the Housemaster gently, "did you not explain the facts, Merry?"

No answer.

"I have good reason to believe," said Mr. Railton, glancing round the Form, "that you did not explain to your schoolfellows, either, Merry. And that is my main reason for making the truth public now."

"Oh, dear!" groaned Tom inwardly.

"I have noticed for some days," resumed the Housemaster, "that there has been unpleasantness between Merry and other juniors, and a curious story has come to my ears to explain the meaning of it. I will not repeat it here and now, as I am quite sure every boy here is familiar with it. This morning, however, this gentleman called, in order to see you, Merry, and he related to me another story—a story which I am quite convinced will prove Merry to be not the coward he has been called recently by thoughtless juniors and others. On the contrary, it will prove him to be plucky and resourceful to a degree."

Tom Merry's face crimsoned.

"Under the circumstances, I feel it my duty," resumed Mr. Railton, his eyes roaming over the class, "to relate the story fully, as I have no doubt your Form-fellows are quite ignorant of the truth. Modesty is praiseworthy at times; but, in my view, you have carried it too far, Merry, my boy."

"It's all right, sir!" gasped Tom Merry, in an agonised attempt to prevent the sad story being detailed again. "It's all right. The fellows already know all about it. They discovered it yesterday afternoon."

There was a chuckle, and Mr. Railton smiled.

"They know that your hands were burned while rescuing Mr. Rance's son from almost certain death, Merry, and it was to effect that rescue that you left a chum to fight an unequal battle alone against odds?" said Mr. Railton.

"Ye-e-es, sir. It—it's quite all serene; they understand now!" gasped the hapless hero.

"Yes, sir, we know all about it now," called Grundy. "We know Tom Merry didn't play the funk."

Mr. Railton coughed and smiled grimly.

"I'm exceedingly glad to hear it!" he said. "All that remains now, then, is for Mr. Rance to speak to Tom Merry personally—for which purpose he came here this morning. I hope, however," said Mr. Railton, glancing round the Form, "that you boys fully appreciate what Merry has done. Apart from his plucky action, he has shown remarkable courage and fortitude. Though he must have been suffering agonies of pain from his burned hands, he steadfastly refused to make a fuss and thus claim credit for what he had done, preferring to suffer in silence. It was foolish, no doubt; but, none the less, it shows fine spirit, and I am proud to have such a boy in my House!"

"Hear, hear!" came Grundy's voice; and it was Grundy who led the ripple of clapping that went round the room.

"That is all!" said Mr. Railton.

And after Mr. Rance had shaken hands with the blushing Tom Merry and thanked him gratefully, the Housemaster led the visitor out.

Mr. Linton shook hands warmly with Tom Merry as the door closed.

"I will not add to your embarrassment, my boy," he murmured kindly. "You may go to your place now. I consider, however, that you are a credit to my Form!"

"Rot!"

Mr. Linton jumped. The smile left his face as if by magic. He wheeled round abruptly and glanced with scandalised eyes over the class.

"Who dared to say that?" he thundered, his face going crimson with wrath. "Stand forward the boy who spoke!"

There was a dead silence. With the exception of one or two fellows, every face in the room was angry and disgusted. They knew who had called out, if the master of the Shell did not.

But they did not wish to sneak—though a goodly number felt like sneaking just then. It was evidently just what the fellow who had called out was relying upon. He did not move in his place.

The master of the Shell was not deceived, however. He had not failed to note the angry glances that were shot towards Percy Knox, who was seated on the rear form, his face showing ugly bruises, and wearing a still uglier scowl. Moreover, Mr. Linton knew much more than the fellows could guess of what went on in his Form outside lesson-time. He had already heard much, and the state of Tom

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Merry's features and the features of Percy Knox told him more.

"Knox!" he snapped, a dangerous note in his voice. "Stand out before the Form!"

Knox hesitated, and then he stepped out and strolled insolently to the front of the Form. From the juniors came a low hiss.

"Knox!" thundered Mr. Linton. "I have very good reason to believe that it was you who was responsible for that insolent and contemptible exclamation just now. I presume you will have the temerity to deny it, wretched boy?"

Knox looked round him with a sneering leer. Since the previous afternoon scarcely a fellow, excepting his own pals, had taken notice of him, and he was full of seething rage and bitter hatred in consequence.

That it had been entirely owing to his own reckless folly and caddishness he was far from admitting to himself, however.

"I don't deny it," he said, after a pause, his voice vengeful and malicious. "It is rot—spooof from beginning to end!"

"Knox!"

"I don't care!" said Knox defiantly, his lip curling. "I don't believe a word of that yarn about Tom Merry saving a kid. It's spooof—a plot worked by Merry himself to save his face! He's paid that low bouncer of a workman to come here with the yarn!"

"Knox, how dare you?" thundered Mr. Linton, his eyes gleaming angrily behind his glasses. "How dare you, I say, make such a contemptible and uncharitable charge against Merry?"

"I don't care!" said Knox doggedly, his face sulky. "I know what I think about it, anyway. These fools can believe it if they like. It was only a few days ago they were praising me for having saved Herries from those village louts!" he added, with a bitter sneer. "Now Merry comes along with his rotten lies and spooof, and they swallow it and chuck me over!"

There was a deep murmur, and Mr. Linton almost exploded with righteous wrath and indignation.

"Knox!" he gasped. "Did I not believe that you are not yourself this morning, I would take you before Mr. Railton, and request him to report you to Dr. Holmes. As it is, I will deal with you myself. I shall cane you most severely for this impudence! Hold out your hand!"

"I won't be caned!" said Knox thickly.

"Wha-at!"

Mr. Linton blinked at the burly junior in utter and amazed wrath.

"He's off his chump!" breathed Lowther. "His giddy fall from power has turned his brain. Now for fireworks!"

The fireworks were not long in coming—though in a way the juniors were far from expecting. Mr. Linton stood for a moment in shocked indecision, and then he snatched up his cane. The next moment it was lashing across the burly shoulders of the ex-captain of the Lower School at St. Jim's.

Lash, lash, lash!

Three times the cane rose and fell—but no more than three. For suddenly an unlooked-for and startling thing happened.

With a low growl, Percy Knox suddenly seemed to lose control of himself in his blind passion, and with a jump, he snatched at the cane in the master's hand.

He grasped it, and there was a brief, amazing struggle for possession of it. Then—how it happened nobody saw clearly—Mr. Linton seemed to stumble suddenly, and went down with a heavy thump on the Form-room floor.

"Good heavens!"

Snap!

Percy Knox had snapped the cane clean in two, and in a blind fury had thrown the two pieces at his prostrate Form-master.

"You howling cad!"

There was a roar in the room—a roar of anger—and even as it rang out

something like a thunderbolt struck Percy Knox.

It was Tom Merry—he was out of his place like an avenging sword, and his fist connected with a sharp crack just under the point of the young ruffian's chin.

Percy Knox crashed to the floor like a log.

"Good man, Merry!"

It was a chorus of approval from the whole Form. Half a dozen fellows leaped out to help raise Mr. Linton to his feet.

And at that moment Mr. Railton bustled into the room. He stopped dead as his eyes beheld the amazing scene.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, his brow going like a thundercloud. "What—what—"

He was just in time to aid in lifting the dazed Shell master to his feet. Tom Merry was still standing over the prostrate Knox, his fists clenched, his eyes blazing.

"Mr. Linton!" ejaculated the House-master. "What ever can have happened? Are you hurt?"

Mr. Linton felt his head dazedly. Then he gasped and pointed a shaking forefinger at Knox, who was just staggering to his feet, hugging his aching jaw.

"That—that boy!" he articulated huskily. "That young hooligan has dared to attack me, his Form-master! He refused to be caned, and he pushed—actually struck at me!" went on the master, trembling with righteous indignation. "And then—then, even as I lay prostrate on the floor, he broke my cane and threw the pieces at me!"

"Mr. Linton—"

"These boys," gasped the Shell master, "are witnesses of that young ruffian's behaviour! They have shown their indignation at Knox's insubordination and rascality in an unmistakable manner."

"I can see that, Mr. Linton," said Mr. Railton grimly, his eyes on Tom Merry. "This—this is unheard of! I

have been of the opinion for some days that Knox is no fit person for this school. Dr. Holmes will know how to deal with him. If you would care to lie down for an hour or so, Mr. Linton, I will send Kildare to take charge here."

"Very good! I—I think I had better!" mumbled the Shell master.

He left the room slowly, without a glance at the sullen Knox. Such a fall to a man of Mr. Linton's years was not a light matter, though the fact that one of his pupils had attacked him was a matter that hurt him far more than physical pain or distress.

There was a short silence in the room. Mr. Railton looked at the sullen, defiant Percy Knox with stern, hard eyes.

"Merry and the rest of you boys will return to your places," he said quietly. "I will send Kildare here presently. Knox, you are aware, I presume, of the enormity of your offence? You have not only refused to obey your master, but you have actually assaulted him, wretched boy! No words of mine can express my scorn! The least you can expect as punishment for your offence is expulsion. You will accompany me to the detention-room. Come!"

Knox scowled; but he did not move. Mr. Railton's brow grew thunderous, and he took a quick step towards the mutinous young rascal. Even as he did so Percy Knox jumped back. Then, glancing round him like a hunted animal, he made a spring for the door.

"Knox! Come back at once!" shouted Mr. Railton. "Merry, Lowther, Talbot, Levison—go in pursuit of Knox! Bring him back! Good gracious! I believe it is the wretched boy's intention to leave the school precincts. Hurry, boys!"

"Yes, sir."

And, with a mad rush, Tom Merry, Lowther, Talbot, and Levison darted away from the room and raced in pursuit of the runaway—if runaway he was. They were seething with angry disgust at the cowardly attack on their

Form-master, and they were only too eager to do their very utmost to carry out the Housemaster's order to the letter—if they could!

CHAPTER 25.

The Unexpected!

MR. RAILTON'S fear that Percy Knox was making for out-of-doors was very soon clear to Tom Merry and the juniors racing at his heels. In a matter of moments they were tearing across the quad. On reaching the School House steps Tom Merry had just been in time to see the racing form of their quarry vanish through the gates.

"Come on!" snapped Tom. "Put your beef into it, chaps! We mean to collar that sweep!"

"Yes, rather!"

At top speed the juniors tore off along the Rylcombe Lane. Ahead of them they saw Knox speeding on, his boots clumping clearly on the frosted surface of the lane. It was an icy morning, with white frost on hedge, and road, and trees. But the juniors did not feel the cold, hatless as they were. They were too excited, for one thing, and for another the exercise warmed them quickly enough.

Knox was going out—he had long ago realised he was being pursued. What his object was in running away they could only surmise. Possibly he had completely lost his head at the thought of the dreaded punishment to come.

"Hallo! Oh, blow!" snapped Tom suddenly. "He's taking to the woods! We'll miss him!"

But though Percy Knox had certainly taken to the woods, it was not with the intention of taking hiding there—that much was soon clear! For he kept doggedly to the footpath, branching on to the bypath that led to the river.

A sudden fear clutched at Tom Merry, but just as suddenly he banished it as the reflection came to him that

Knox, more likely than not, was making for the Green Man, to seek sanctuary there—if he could. Such friends as Knox had made there were not the sort to turn to in times of trouble—quite the reverse!

The speeding form of Knox vanished over the stile on to the towing-path at last, and a few seconds later Tom Merry also leaped the stile, dropping lightly on the cindered path.

He glanced swiftly about him, expecting to see his quarry vanish into the Green Man Inn. But as he looked in that direction he gave a sudden cry—a cry of startled horror and alarm.

Knox was not on the towing-path at all. He was stepping slowly and gingerly across the ice over the frozen river—scarcely twenty yards from them.

"Good heavens!" panted Tom. "Look, you fellows! He must be mad—the ice can't be safe yet! I'll—Oh!"

Quite abruptly Tom saw something else—something that made him catch his breath sharply.

For Knox was not attempting to escape across the ice—he was not even attempting to escape at all. As he stepped gingerly across the treacherous ice his eyes were fixed with desperate determination on a black, gaping hole in the ice half-way across the wide river. From the gap black, ugly water swelled in swirling circles over the ice that still held good. And in the centre of the yawning gap showed a head and a frantic arm clutching vainly at floating chunks of thin ice.

"It's Burke—Ginger Burke!" yelled Talbot.

"So it is!" gasped Tom, sighting the well-known and hated red head of the village youth. "And—and Knox is going in to save him! Well—well—"

Tom was almost overcome with the startling and utterly unexpected sight. But he was not too overcome to act on the instant. He was down on the ice, yelling to his chums behind, even as a

heavy splash told him that Knox was in.

"Quick! Fetch ladders—fences—anything!" he roared. "I'm going!"

And Tom was off like a flash, sliding recklessly over the frozen surface. Even in that exciting and perilous moment he found himself reflecting on the strangeness of the situation. Knox, the bully, the trickster, and blackguard—the fellow who had savagely attacked a master—who had shown himself little better than a hooligan—had gone to the rescue of his enemy; for Ginger Burke was still his enemy.

Ready as he had been to lie and slander and show himself a blackguard—he was just as ready now to give his life for his enemy.

Splash!

Tom was under, and the icy chill that shot through his very vitals soon swept his reflections away.

It was the time for action—a desperate fight for life in the black, surging water that bit into one like an icy knife.

"Hold on, Knox!"

Knox was holding on—holding on to Ginger Burke whose head was drooping. He trod water desperately, the heavy village youth a fearful drag and burden. His face was white and drawn—white as a sheet, save for a thin streak of red that trickled down from a cut in his forehead.

A few powerful strokes took Tom to him, and he nodded.

"Leave him to me, Knox. I've got him. Save yourself, old chap!"

Knox obeyed as if mechanically. There was a strange, dazed look in his eyes, and it was clear that his head had been hurt—possibly by a jagged piece of ice.

Tom took the burden in his strong young arms; but even so the weight all but dragged him under. He got a good grip, however, and just at that moment there sounded above him an encouraging cry:

"Hold on, Tommy. Stick it, old

chap! We'll soon have you out of that!"

A long, strong ladder seemed to leap over Tom's head. Willing arms reached down and drew the unconscious Burke from the water, and willing hands passed him along the long ladder to those behind.

It was Knox's turn next—though it was a terribly close thing. He was on the verge of collapse when hands grabbed him, and then Tom himself was pulled out. What happened after that Tom Merry did not know—he was unconscious—as deeply unconscious as were Ginger Burke and Percy Knox.

Tom Merry woke up in the school sanatorium, and in the next bed he found Percy Knox. But he was a changed Percy Knox, in many more ways than one. He was thin and drawn and haggard—the bandage over his temple making him look much worse than he really was.

And he was changed in other ways. He shook hands with Tom, and he begged forgiveness—which Tom gladly gave. Ginger Burke was the first to get better of the three who had gone through the terrible experience. Tom Merry was fit in a few days, and his reinstatement as junior captain came as a matter of course, for at the election no other name was given in.

Percy Knox, however, was in the school sanatorium for three weeks, and at the end of that time he quietly vanished from St. Jim's. Expulsion—after that last gallant act—had been out of the question, of course; but his people saw it was better for him to leave St. Jim's, and he went, Tom Merry & Co. being the fellows who escorted him to the station.

Percy Knox parted on the best of terms with his one-time enemies, and as the train carrying him drew out of the station the juniors felt genuinely sorry that he had gone.

THE END.

CURIOUS CLUBS

WOULD you like a penguin from the Antarctic? Or a head-hunter's spear from Africa? Oh, perhaps, the bones of a prehistoric mammoth from the Steppes of Russia? Then the place to which you want to apply for it is the Adventurers' Club, in London.

Would-be members of this club have to swear, before they are admitted, that they will go anywhere to do anything for anybody. Anything, that is, bar crime. Already members have carried out many queer and risky jobs in odd corners of the world, and the club is ready to quote terms for any sort of task, no matter how hazardous.

Ugly Men Only!

The Adventurers' Club is only one of the hundreds of amazing societies in the world. There is one for practically everybody. Whether you're fat or thin, tall or short, silent or talkative, polite or surly, a rover or a stay-at-home, there's a club for you. Even if you are ugly, you can join a society of brother uglies.

That society is the "Ugly Club," but you've got to be really ugly, and have the kind of face that breaks mirrors, before you can hope to be admitted. All those in the club are described in the membership book, and from the following entry in that book you can get an idea of what a man must be like before he's admitted.

This is the description of one member's face:

"Little eyes, one bigger than the other, mouth extending from ear to ear not unlike a shark's jaw; visage long and narrow; looks haggard, odd, comic."

A Test of Fatness.

Addison, the famous essayist—you'll have heard all about him in school—tells of two famous clubs: "The Fat Men's Club," in Paris, and "The Humdrum Club."

The room where the Fat Men's Club met had two doors. One was specially wide, and anyone who wanted to join the club had to try to pass through it. If he could, he was turned down; if he couldn't, and got stuck, the other door, a wide folding one, was thrown open, and he was hailed as a worthy member!

The Humdrum Club was an amazing place. It was made up, says Addison, of "very honest gentlemen of peaceable disposition that used to sit together, smoke their pipes, and say *nothing* till midnight."

Politeness Barred!

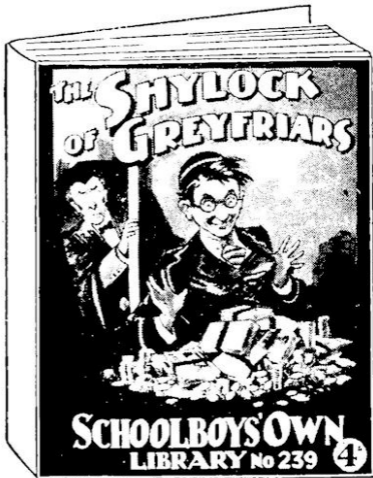
Just the opposite was the "Surly Club," composed of carmen, cabmen, and watermen, that used to have its rooms near Billingsgate Fish Market. As the name suggests, all the members had to be peevish souls, and had to be abusive to each other. Anyone found guilty of politeness was expelled, and marched out of the club amidst the most insulting language the others could lay tongue to.

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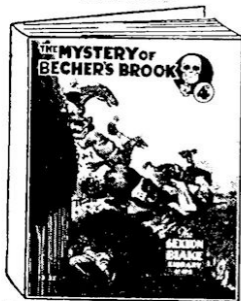
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