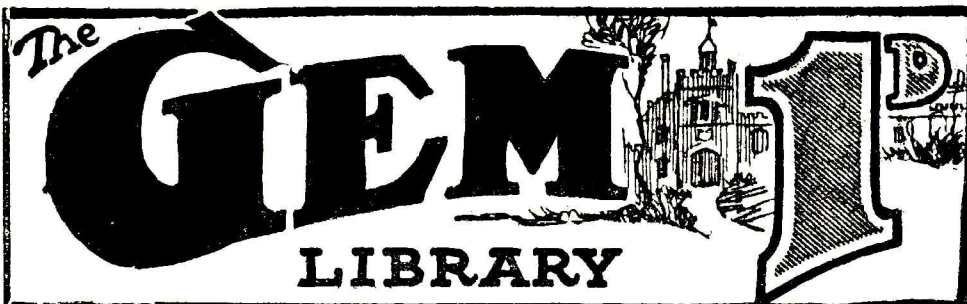


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Talbot turned the handle of the door and pushed it silently open. Hookey Walker was working with the drill upon the safe, and the Rabbit was holding the lantern, while Nobby stood by with a bludgeon in his hand. The schoolboy cracksman realised what it meant—his old associates were taking the law into their own hands! Should he give the alarm and betray them? Or should he allow the old school that had sheltered him to be robbed?

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THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

A Magnificent Long, Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co. and Talbot, the
Schoolboy Cracksman.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



Talbot lighted a match, and peered into the dark recess. Tom Merry followed his glance, and uttered a sudden exclamation. "Hallo! What's that?" (See Chapter 11.)

CHAPTER I. Taken to Tea.

"WHAT'S the mattah with old Talbot?"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's propounded that question suddenly in Study No. 6.

There were six other fellows in the study, and they were discussing tea and cricket at the same time. But Arthur Augustus was not joining in the chat. There was a thoughtful expression upon his noble countenance.

The fellows in the study were Blake and Herries and Digby of the Fourth, who shared that famous apartment with

D'Arcy; and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, who had come to tea.

"What's the matter with Talbot?" Tom Merry repeated.
"Nothing that I know of," answered Herries. "Didn't he pile up ninety runs, and help us to beat the New House hollow in the last House match?"

"Yaas, his cwicket's all wight," admitted Arthur Augustus. "But there's somethin' the mattah with old Talbot, all the same."

"Oh, rot!" said Jack Blake. "Pass the jam!"

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Blake instead of passing the jam.

"Pway don't chawactewise my remarks as wot, Blake."

Next Wednesday:

"**MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!**" AND "**A BID FOR A THRONE!**"

No. 337. (New Series), Vol. 3.

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"Pass the jam!"
 "Blow the jam! I wepcat—"
 "Pass the jam!" roared Blake. "Do you want it all?"
 "Wats! This is not a time for guzzlin' jam, when an old pal is in twouble," said Arthur Augustus severely. "You fellows don't notice things. I suppose it is only natuwal for you youngstahs to be wathah thoughtless; but weally—"
 The youngsters glared at Arthur Augustus. As he was almost the youngest person in the study, it was rather cool; but Arthur Augustus had always a fatherly manner when he was serious and in great earnest. And he was in deadly earnest now, as the wrinkle in his aristocratic brow fully showed.

"Ass!" said Blake.
 "Fathead!" said Herries.
 "Chump!" remarked Digby.
 Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther did not express their opinion, being guests in the study. But they nodded assent to the remarks of the Fourth-Formers.

But Arthur Augustus went on. He had been thinking it out, and he was determined to communicate the result of his cogitations.

"I'm wathah a keen chap myself," he said. "I notice things. Talbot has been in a state of wetched low spiwits for days. He hardly speaks a word. Somethin' is wowyin' him. As he is a pal of ours, I think we ought to see about it. He's only a new fellow, I know, but you chaps all know he's the wight sort."

"Hear, hear!" said Tom Merry.
 "Well, what's the matter with him?" yawned Blake.
 "Perhaps he's suffering from a pain in his little inside. Perhaps Linton's been down on him, or Levison may have been chipping him again. Pass the jam!"

"I have asked him to come to tea—"
 "Well, isn't he coming?"
 "He declined the invitation with thanks. He said he wasn't feelin' cheerful enough for comin' to tea. Got the blues."

"Well, chaps have the blues sometimes," said Monty Lowther. "Besides, he may have thought you were going to sing a tenor solo after tea. You do sometimes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You uttah ass, Lowthah—"
 "Thanks!" yawned Lowther. "Are you always as polite as that to your visitors, Gussy?"

"Ahem! I—I withdwaw the wemark, Lowthah." Arthur Augustus was very punctilious, but he had forgotten himself in the heat of the moment. "I will not call you an ass. If you were not a guest in this study, howevah, I should chawctewise you as a cwass ass. But to return to Talbot—"

"Good idea!" said Blake, brightening up. "Return to Talbot, and give us a rest."

"Wats! I mean to return to the subject of Talbot. The chap is wowed about somethin', and is suffewin' from depression of spiwits. I weally think it is up to his fwiencls to look aftah him a bit, undah the cires. I wegard you chaps as failin' in your dutay as pals."

"Oh, rats!"
 "Bosh!"
 "Go and talk to him like a Dutch uncle, Gussy," suggested Digby. "Sit beside him, and take his hand in yours, and smooth his brow with a gentle hand—"

"And then bring him to tea," said Blake. "Tell him we've got ham, and poached eggs, and sardines, and two kinds of jam."

"I have told him."
 "And won't he come?"
 "No. He is alone in his studay, and lookin' as if he had all the twoubles in the world on his shouldahs."

"Blessed if I understand it!" said Tom Merry. "Now you speak of it, I've noticed that old Talbot's been a bit off colour the last few days. It's since Levison started that yarn about his being seen going into the Blackbird Inn at Wayland. I don't see why that should worry him, though. He

explained about it, and he knows we believe him. And we all know that Levison is a cad and an Ananias."

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Well, it ain't good for a fellow to be moping in his study," said Blake, rising to his feet. "It's bad, in fact. Talbot's a good sort, and he's not going to miss a good feed. Let's go and fetch him."

"But he wefuses to come, deah boy."
 "He can't refuse the lot of us," grinned Blake. "If two of us take his head, and two his feet, and the rest leid a hand, he can't refuse to come."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Not a bad idea," said Tom Merry, also rising. "He may be thinking that some of us take notice of Levison's rotten insinuations. We'll show him that we don't. Come on!"

"Jollay good ideah!" said Arthur Augustus heartily. "Follow me, deah boys!"
 And the tea-party quitted Study No. 6.

They made their way to Talbot's study in the Shell passage. In spite of Arthur Augustus's concern, they did not believe there was anything seriously the matter with Talbot of the Shell. Talbot was a new fellow, but he had jumped into popularity at once in the School House at St. Jim's. He was a good cricketer, and had helped Tom Merry's team to win some hard matches. He was well up in his class, and his Form-master looked on him with a kindly eye. He was in the good graces of the Head, and he had made a host of friends in both Houses during his few weeks at the school. So far as Tom Merry & Co. could see, he oughtn't to have had a trouble in the world. But "blue devils" visit everyone at times, and at such times what a fellow wanted was company, not solitude. So the juniors marched upon Talbot's study to save him from himself, as it were, with the best intentions in the world.

Herries kicked the study door open with a heavy boot, and the juniors marched in.

Talbot was there. He was alone in the study, Gore and Skimpole being out just then. The handsome, athletic-looking fellow was standing by the table, with a letter in his hand. He thrust the letter into his pocket as the juniors crowded in. There was a cloud upon the handsome, clear-cut face, a troubled look in the clear, dark eyes.

"Hallo!" he said.
 "Same to you, and many of them!" said Blake affably. "Had your tea?"

"No. Not yet."
 "Good! We've got a feed going in Study No. 6, and we specially commissioned our tame lunatic, Gussy, to fetch you—"

"Weally, Blake—"
 "Gussy came back without you, so we've all come," said Blake. "This way to the feed! Hop it! March!"
 Talbot smiled faintly.

"You're awfully good," he said, "but—but I'm feeling a bit rotten just now, and, if you'd excuse me, I won't come to tea."

"That's just it. We won't excuse you," said Blake cheerfully. "You've got to come. There are ham, and poached eggs—"

"But—"
 "And sardines—"
 "Yes; but—"

"And two kinds of jam!" said Blake temptingly.
 Talbot laughed.

"Thanks; but—"
 "No 'buts'! Come on!"
 "I—I'd really rather not come," said Talbot. "To tell you the truth, I'm not feeling up to any kind of company just now. I'd really rather be alone a bit, if you don't mind."

"You'd rather be alone?" said Blake thoughtfully.
 "Well, yes. Excuse me, you know?"

"And you're going to mope here on your own?"
 "Well, I—"
 "And you won't come?"

"Thanks, no."
 "That's all right," said Blake. "Collar him!"
 "Here, hold on! Don't play the giddy goat! Let go—"
 "March him along!" said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 Tom Merry and Manners had seized Talbot by the shoulders, and Blake and Herries grasped his legs, and he was swung off his feet. He struggled a little in the grasp of the juniors, but they did not heed him. He was rushed out of the study into the passage.

"Let me go, you fellows!" gasped Talbot. "I tell you—"
 "That's all right! You're not going to mope! We'll cure you. It's a ripping tea, and we're not going to let Gussy sing any tenor solos after it."

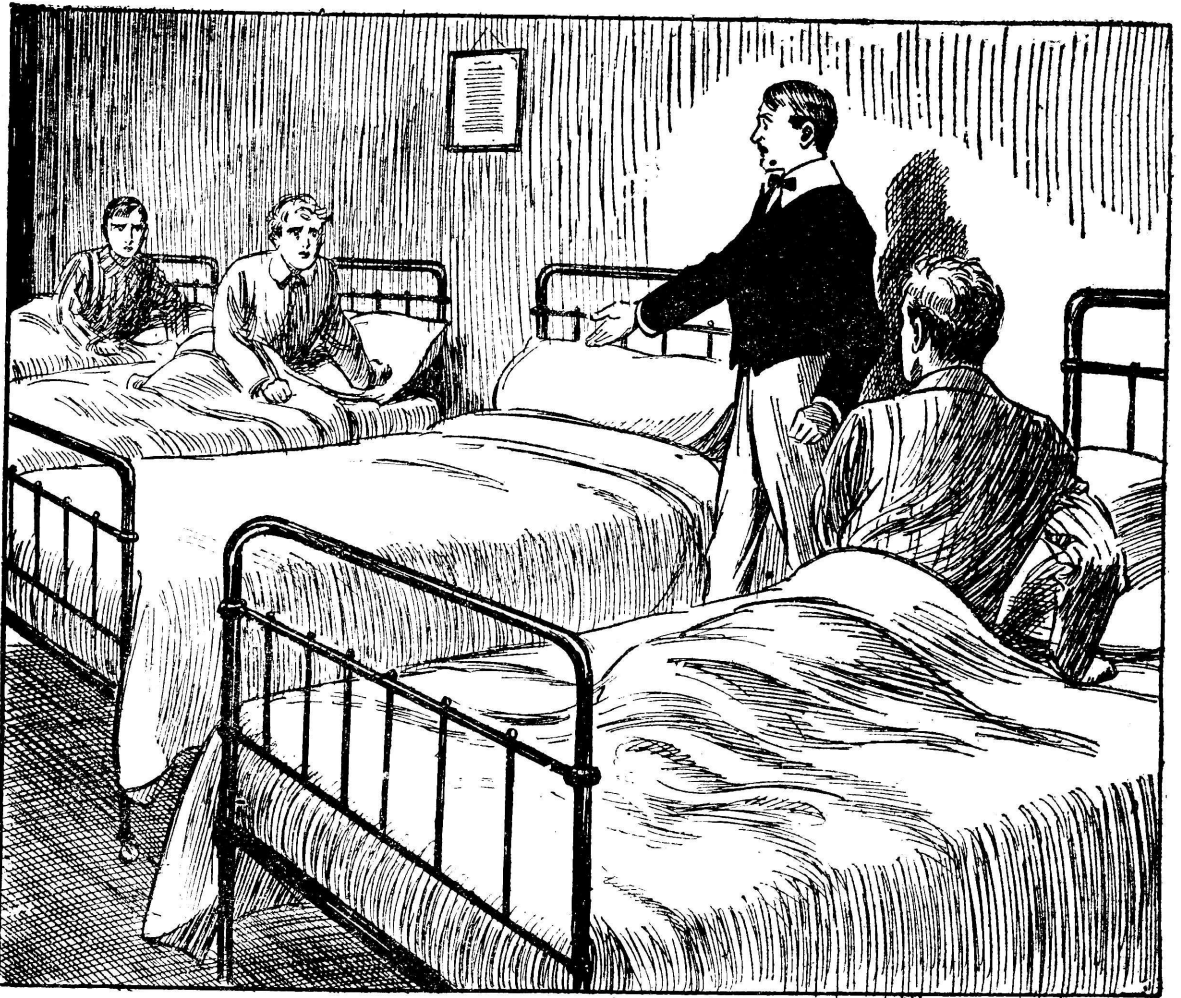
"You uttah ass, Blake—"

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See column 2, page 26, of this issue.



The dormitory was suddenly flooded with brilliant light. All the Shell fellows were awake now. "Look at Talbot's bed!" said Levison grimly. "My hat! Where's Talbot?" (See Chapter 5.)

"Kim on!"

And the laughing juniors rushed Talbot along the passage and into Study No. 6, and plumped him down on the study carpet. Talbot jumped up rather breathlessly.

"Really, you chaps—"

"Sit down!" said Blake, pushing him into a chair. "That's right! Pour out Talbot's tea, Dig. Pass the ham, Herries. This way with that dish. How many lumps, Talbot?"

Talbot laughed; he could not help it.

"That's better," said Tom Merry approvingly. "You see, when you get the blues, you have to drive 'em out—no good giving way to them and moping. Now talk!"

"Yaas, wathah—talk away, deah boy."

It was impossible to avoid catching the infection of good spirits in Study No. 6. Talbot laughed again, and his clouded brow cleared, and he was soon chatting away as cheerily as anyone over the hospitable board. Talbot could talk on many subjects, especially cricket—and cricket just then was the great subject at St. Jim's. Tea in Study No. 6 was a merry meal that afternoon, and Talbot seemed the merriest of the crowd of juniors there.

And when tea was over, and the Shell fellows departed, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy smiled the smile of complete satisfaction.

"We've cheered old Talbot up, aftah all deah boys—what?"

"What-ho!" said Blake.

But if they could have seen Talbot when he was alone once more the cheery juniors might have had their doubts. Talbot had gone out into the quadrangle, and he was pacing under the old elms, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and his brows wrinkled in a deep frown. He muttered to himself, inaudibly, as he paced.

"If they wouldn't be so decent to me—if only they wouldn't be so decent, then I could stand it better! What's come over

me? This can't go on—it can't! I shall have to chuck up St. Jim's—or chuck the—the other? And what then?"

And the cloud upon the handsome face grew blacker and blacker.

CHAPTER 2.

The Woes of Wally.

TOM MERRY! I've been waiting for you." Wally D'Arcy—D'Arcy minor of the Third—was in Tom Merry's study when the Terrible Three came in after tea with Blake & Co. They came in looking very cheerful, feeling quite satisfied with the good service they had rendered Talbot. But the sight of the fag somewhat changed their expression. Wally, who was generally the cheerfullest and cheekiest fag in the Third Form at St. Jim's, was looking utterly woebegone. His face was pale, his eyes looked red, and his looks expressed a strange mingling of anxiety and suppressed fury.

"What's up, kid?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "More trouble with Selby?" Mr. Selby was the Form-master of the Third, and Wally had had many rubs with him.

Wally shook his head.

"I'm all right," he said.

"You don't look all right," said Tom, scanning his pale and troubled face.

"It's about Joe!" said Wally desperately. "Old Selby is a—a rotten beast! No, he isn't going for me. Oh, the rotter!" And to the surprise of the Shell fellows, Wally, who was never known to "blub," burst into tears.

"My hat!" ejaculated Lowther. "Chuck that, kid. What on earth's the matter?"

The Shell fellows surveyed him with some alarm. They

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"MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"

knew that it must have been a very serious cause to affect the hardy little scamp of the Third in that way. Wally, it is true, had hardly been his old self ever since his chum, Joe Frayne, had run away from school.

"Hold on, Wally," said Tom soothingly. "Tell us all about it. What's happened?"

Wally dug his knuckles savagely into his eyes.

"I can't help it," he stammered. "It's about Joe. You chaps know what a straight kid he was, don't you? You know he'd never touch anything that wasn't his own. Yes, I know you found him in a London slum, Tom Merry, and before you took him up, I dare say he did things—he didn't know any better then. But he's been as straight as a die ever since he came to this school, I know that. A chap never had a better pal than Joe. I don't know why he ran away from school; but—but I know it wasn't that!"

"Wasn't what?"

"What old Selby says!" gasped Wally.

"But what does he say?" asked Tom Merry in perplexity. "You haven't told us yet."

"He's been to the Head about it—he thinks—or pretends to think—" Wally's voice broke. "I know it isn't true, though. You remember old Selby's collection of coins—a lot of silly rot, I call it—dashed Roman and Greek coins and things—somebody took them out of his room, and hid them for a joke on him, two or three weeks ago. It turns out that the rotten things are worth five hundred pounds, though nobody would have thought it—so they'd be worth stealing. Well, you know they haven't turned up, and Selby has had his hair off about it ever since."

"It was a bit of a loss," said Tom. "Selby has been collecting those coins for twenty years, they say, and he must have spent a lot of money on them."

"Well, why can't he be decent? It was some chap he's been ragging who's taken them away and hidden them," growled Wally.

"I suppose so. But now—"

"Well, now Joe Frayne's cleared off, Selby's got the idea into his silly head that Joe was the chap who boned that numismatic collection, and that he's cleared off with it."

"Phew!"

The Terrible Three looked very grave.

They had not thought of it before; but now that it was put into those words, they could not help seeing that it looked likely enough to anyone whose faith in the missing fag was not so loyal as Wally's.

And poor Joe's past told against him. Tom Merry had found that unhappy little waif in a London slum, and in the kindness of his heart he had befriended him. Tom Merry's uncle had induced the Head to give the lad a chance at St. Jim's, and paid his fees there.

There was no doubt that in his earlier days Joe had earned a precarious living by "ways that are dark." He had been brought up to it in vile surroundings, and knew no better. But after he had come to St. Jim's he had changed utterly in that respect. He had learned honesty—and never forgotten the lesson. In that new world the best in little Joe's nature had come to light.

Mr. Selby did not like the waif in his Form; but the other fags took to him very well, especially D'Arcy minor. Joe Frayne had seemed happy enough at St. Jim's; and certainly he had seemed "straight" enough. His sudden unexplained flight from the school had puzzled everyone. But no one had thought of connecting it with the disappearance of Mr. Selby's valuable collection till now. But now—

Wally looked with almost haggard eyes at the grave faces of the Shell fellows.

"You don't believe it, too?" he shouted.

"No, no, of course not," said Tom Merry hastily.

"Of—of course not," said Manners, rather haltingly. "But—it does look rather queer. The collection disappeared, and it's never turned up—and a few days afterwards Joe Frayne cleared off without a word."

"He wrote to me," sobbed Wally. "He told me that something underhand was going on here, and he couldn't stay to be a party to it."

"Yes, I know; but that sounds awfully lame. Why couldn't he say what it was?"

"Because he'd have to give somebody away—somebody who had done him a good turn," said Wally. "You know what a grateful little ass he was for the least thing. He almost worshipped Talbot, because Talbot saved me from breaking my neck in the tree at Glyn House—you remember. He was grateful for the least thing. His explanation was good enough for me."

"It wouldn't be good enough for Mr. Selby," said Tom, with a shake of the head. "And—and I'm surprised this hasn't been thought of before, as a matter of fact. It's weeks now since Selby's coins were taken away, and it was believed that some fag had hidden them for a joke on Selby. But they

haven't turned up, Wally—and it really looks as if they've been taken clean away."

"But Joe hasn't taken them."

"No; I feel sure of that; but I must say it does look suspicious."

Wally clenched his fists.

"Old Selby was always down on Joe," he said, between his teeth. "He never liked having him in the Form, because he came from a slum—the snobbish old brute. Joe was good enough for me to pal with, and I suppose I'm as good as Selby. Blow him! There's dozens of men like Selby in livery in my father's house."

Tom Merry smiled. Wally was the youngest son of Lord Eastwood, a tremendously great man, and one of the Governors of St. Jim's. And Wally had "palled" on with Joe Frayne without a single thought of any inequality existing between them. He had punched Joe's head for addressing him as "Master Wally." But Mr. Selby was more snobbish than the son of the Earl of Eastwood.

"Better not tell Selby that," grinned Monty Lowther. "But what is he going to do about it, Wally?"

"He's seen the Head about it. The Head's had me in his study, asking me questions about Joe—about his character and so forth. I gave him the straight tip, I can tell you. I said that only a rotten beast would suspect Joe of being a thief."

"My hat!"

"But—but Selby has asked him to have the police search for him—for Joe, I mean. He wants to have detectives hunt for Joe, to get his rotten collection back—a lot of grimy old, silly Roman coins and things. Joe doesn't know anything about them. But—but, you see it will all tell against Joe. He was up against Selby, and he was—was rather shady before he came here, and—and he ran away from school. They'll find him, and send him to prison if they can't find the coins.

The police will be down on him at once, of course. As soon as they know he came from Angel Alley, and was brought up among pickpockets, they'll jump to the same conclusion as Selby at once! And—and Selby's rotten, silly coins are hidden somewhere about St. Jim's all the time."

"I suppose they are!" said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "But what do you want us to do, Wally?"

"Go to the Head! Tell him straight that Selby is a silly old fool—"

"Ahem! I shouldn't like to put it quite like that—to the Head!"

"Well, tell him you know Joe is straight—you do know it, don't you?"

"Yes; but—"

"If you fellows speak up for him, it may make some difference. He hasn't decided yet about the police. Go to him, and tell him what you know about Frayne."

The Terrible Three exchanged glances. They were concerned about poor Joe; but they did not think a visit to the Head would be likely to have much result. But Wally was so anxious and agitated that they were willing to risk it to satisfy him. After all, it could do no harm if it did no good.

"You'll go?" exclaimed Wally. "I tell you it may make a difference, and I'll ask my major to go too. All the fellows ought to go—they all know Joe was straight. Why, if he wanted to steal, he could have stolen from Gussy dozens of times, couldn't he? The ass is always careless with his money, and always has lots of it."

"Something in that!" agreed Manners. "Let's make up a deputation to the Head, Tom. All the fellows who believe in Joe Frayne to go in a body and put it to him. It can't do any harm."

Tom Merry nodded.

"It's a go!" he said. "We'll gather the chaps, and go in a crowd. After all, it ought to have some effect on the Head, if he sees that everybody in the School House believes that Frayne was the right sort."

"It's sure to," said Wally eagerly. "Anyway, it will show that we don't take Selby's word for it. Get all the chaps together, and make a deputation of it."

"Right-ho!"

And the Terrible Three set to work at once. Study No. 6 joined them heartily, as soon as they knew what was "on," and Kangaroo and Clifton Dane and Glyn of the Shell, and Reilly and Kerruish and Lumley-Lumley of the Fourth, and several other fellows, joined it, and Talbot was looked for and found, and the matter hastily explained to him. Talbot looked more concerned even than Tom Merry, though he had known very little of Frayne at the school.

"Is it much use my going, when I'm a new fellow?" he asked dubiously.

"Yes, you most of all," said Tom Merry. "You knew Frayne before he came here, you know."

Talbot reddened a little.

"I hardly knew him," he said. "When I was slumming in

London with my uncle, I happened to come across him, and helped him a bit."

"Yes, he knew you when you came," said Lowther. "He called you by some queer name—what was it? I forget—"

"I forget," said Talbot.

"The Toff," said Blake. "Don't you remember, Talbot?"

"Yes, I remember now," said Talbot carelessly. "I suppose they called me the Toff in Angel Alley, because I handed out some money to the poor brutes there. But what I know of Frayne at that time wouldn't do him much good with the Head. I'm afraid he was something in the line of a kid pickpocket then."

"Ahem! Then you needn't mention his early days," said Tom hastily. "Of course, we all know that Frayne was brought up horribly by a wicked brute who called himself his father, and who's been sent to prison since. We're not down on him because of that."

"Wathah not. He nevah had a chance, you know."

"I agree," said Talbot. "But, under the circumstances, it would be judicious not to mention to the Head that I saw him before he came to St. Jim's. It would come out that he was—well, not exactly honest at the time, and it wouldn't do him any good now."

"Quite right, and it's thoughtful of you!" said Tom. "You always do think of things, old chap. Just come along with the deputation, and don't mention anything about having known Frayne before he came here."

"Right-ho!"

And, the deputation being now considerable in numbers, Tom Merry led the way to the Head's study and knocked at the door.

CHAPTER 3.

Talbot has an Idea.

DR. HOLMES, the reverend Head of St. Jim's, was talking to Mr. Selby, when the knock came at his door.

Mr. Selby was very earnest and very angry, though he tried to keep his anger under control. The Head had an objection to having any of the affairs of St. Jim's mixed up with the police in any way; but the master of the Third was thinking only about the loss of his numismatic specimens. Certainly he could not be expected to pass over such a serious loss in silence. For twenty years the Third Form-master had been adding to his collection, and he had spent four or five hundred pounds upon it in that time—a sum which his salary would hardly allow him to replace in a lump. It was not surprising that the numismatist was angry and exasperated, and that he had come to the conclusion that his collection had not, after all, been hidden for a practical joke on him, but had been stolen. Nor was it surprising that Joe Frayne's flight from St. Jim's had turned his suspicions upon the waf of the Third, especially with what he knew or suspected of Joe's early life in Angel Alley and Murderers' Row.

"Come in!" called out the Head; and Mr. Selby looked round impatiently.

The door opened, and Tom Merry & Co. walked in, or, rather, crowded in. There were a good many of them—the Terrible Three, and the chums of Sturdy No. 6, and Kangaroo, and Dane, and Glyn, and Reddy, and Kerruish, and Lumley-Lumley, and Talbot, and five or six others.

They were all School House fellows. Figgins & Co. of the New House would probably have been equally willing to speak up for Joe Frayne; but, being in a different House; of course their knowledge of him was slighter; so Tom had considered it best to confine the deputation to School House fellows who had known the fag well.

The Head looked at the juniors over his glasses in surprise. Mr. Selby frowned darkly. He glanced at Wally with a far from amiable look. Wally had followed the deputation in.

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. "What does this mean? What do all you boys want?"

"We're a deputation, sir," said Tom.

"Dear me!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir! We've come—"

"Leave it to Tommy!" whispered Blake.

"Wats! I'd better put it to the Head— Ow—wow!"

What beastly wottah is that tweadin' on my foot? Ow!"

"It's about Frayne, sir," said Tom Merry, plunging into the subject. "We've heard that Mr. Selby suspects him of having taken the collection of coins away from St. Jim's, sir."

"That is true!"

"As fellows who knew Joe Frayne jolly well, sir, we think it's our duty to speak up for him."

"Yaas, wathah, sir. We considah—"

Dr. Holmes raised his hand.

"Does any boy here know what has become of the coins that were taken from Mr. Selby's study?" he asked.

"Well, no, sir. They're hidden about the school somewhere, I suppose!"

"The strictest search has been made," said the Head. "They have not been discovered. Mr. Selby concludes that they have been taken out of the school."

"I have not the slightest doubt upon that point!" snapped Mr. Selby.

"Then came the disappearance of Frayne, without any adequate explanation, and his curious refusal to let his present address be known," said the Head. "I am afraid, my boys, that this looks very black against Frayne, though I commend you for your faith in the boy."

"He couldn't have done it, sir," said Wally.

"We all think—we all know he was perfectly honest, sir," said Tom Merry.

"I would have trusted him with untold fivahs, sir." "But if the police get on his track, sir, and find some things about his early life in the slums, they'll take it for granted he's guilty," said Tom Merry. "That's what we're afraid of. And we're all sure that the coins are hidden somewhere about the place all the time. But Joe might be sent to prison, or a reformatory, all the same!"

"He is undoubtedly guilty," said Mr. Selby.

"Weally, Mr. Selbay—"

"Silence, D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir; but I considah—"

"Silence! My boys, your faith in this unfortunate lad does you credit," said the Head slowly. "But I am afraid there is nothing to be done but what Mr. Selby requests. I am very reluctant to call in the police; but Mr. Selby cannot be expected to submit to such a very considerable loss while a chance remains of recovering his property."

"May I make a suggestion, sir?" said Talbot.

"Certainly, Talbot, if you can suggest anything that would throw light upon this subject," said the Head, with a kindly glance at the new junior.

"We all think, sir, that Mr. Selby's property is hidden about the school somewhere by someone who wished to worry him. We think that the fellow, whoever he is, is afraid to own up, now that the matter has gone so far. May I suggest that Mr. Selby should allow the matter to stand over for twenty-four hours, before the police are communicated with, and in that time all Joe Frayne's friends will search for the missing articles—"

"But the search has already been thorough, Talbot." "Yes, sir; but there are many nooks and crannies where such small articles might be hidden. If a hundred fellows thoroughly ransacked the place, they might be found—if they are here. We are all willing to take any amount of trouble, and spend every spare minute in helping."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Dr. Holmes glanced at Mr. Selby.

"There is something in what Talbot suggests," he remarked.

"I do not think it would be of the slightest use, sir," said the master of the Third. "I do not believe the coins are still within the precincts of the school."

"But twenty-four hours would not make much difference," said the Head, in a somewhat decided manner. "I think the boys are entitled to a chance of proving that their faith in Frayne is not misplaced."

"It is as you please, sir, of course," said Mr. Selby, not very graciously; but he could see that Dr. Holmes had made up his mind.

"Very well. My boys, you may do as Talbot suggests, and twenty-four hours' delay will be granted. But if by this time to-morrow Mr. Selby's property has not been recovered, I must accede to Mr. Selby's desire to call in a detective to search for Frayne."

"Very well, sir," said Tom Merry. "Thank you, sir!" And the deputation retired from the study.

In the passage outside they looked at one another rather doubtfully. Talbot had made his suggestion "on his own," and the other fellows were very doubtful whether it would make any difference in the long run.

"I don't see much use in it," said Kangaroo. "The whole blessed place has been ransacked for these giddy coins!"

"We've gained time," said Talbot quietly.

"Yes; but—"

"You see, we all believe Joe Frayne to be innocent. Well, then, somebody else must have taken the collection and hidden it. He's afraid to own up now. But as soon as it spreads through the school that Frayne is to be hunted for by the police, on suspicion of having stolen the coins, don't you think the joker, whoever he is, will let the coins be found? My idea is that he won't own up, for fear of getting Selby down on him; but he may trot out the coins where they can be found by somebody else. Unless he's an utter rotter, he won't let Frayne suffer simply to keep old Selby wriggling over his loss."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 337.

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

"Talbot, old man, you're a giddy genius," said Tom Merry. "It's jolly likely. And, anyway, we can hunt for the coins. There has been plenty of searching, but the fellows haven't done any—nobody cares for old Selby, and nobody cares twopence whether he finds his coins or not. But now it will be a search in dead earnest, and very likely they will turn up, even if that practical joker doesn't want them to. Talbot's right, you fellows."

"Yaas, wathah! Talbot's a bwick!"

"He is a brick," said Wally gratefully. "I'll have all the Third out to help, or punch all their blessed heads! If the rotten things are inside the walls of St. Jim's we'll find them!"

"We'll ransack every corner," said Blake. "But if they're not found after that, it will look jolly black against Frayne, and no mistake."

"They must be found!" said Wally, between his teeth.

And the juniors did not lose time. It was still daylight, and they started the search at once. In the quad, and the old tower, and the clock-tower, and the ruined chapel, in the box-rooms and the lumber-rooms, the search went on indefatigably. The news spread over the school, and a hundred fellows joined in the hunt. Nobody had cared very much for Mr. Selby, whose bad temper made him very unpopular; but when it was a question of saving an innocent lad from an imputation of theft, the fellows joined in the search with the utmost zest. Figgins & Co. searched in the New House with great assiduity, and Tom Merry & Co. in the School House, and parties of juniors in every corner of the buildings and the grounds. The search was thorough; but, so far as that evening was concerned, it was in vain.

But the juniors were not to be begotten. When they gave up the hunt for the night, it was with the intention of renewing it with more energy than ever on the following day.

Certainly, if the collection was still within the precincts of St. Jim's, it was not likely to escape so many searching eyes.

CHAPTER 4.

Levison's Suspicions.

LEVISON of the Fourth sat in his study.

Levison knew that the search was going on, but he did not join in it. His study-mates, Lumley-Lumley and Blenkinsop and even Mellish, had joined in the search. Levison remained alone in the study.

Levison of the Fourth was busy.

He sat at the table with a pen in his fingers and a sheet of paper covered with writing before him. But he was not working—not, at all events, at any work that was included in the St. Jim's curriculum. If anyone else in the House could have seen that paper as it lay before Levison, the contents would have caused very great astonishment.

Levison read it over with a glint in his eyes. Dark suspicions were brooding in the mind of the cad of the Fourth.

It was his dislike of Talbot that was at the bottom of it. Why he disliked Talbot, in the first place, he hardly knew himself. Perhaps because he seemed to be open and frank and above-board—qualities that did not commend themselves to the cad of the Fourth in the least. And then Talbot was very "thick" with Tom Merry & Co., with whom Levison was on the worst of terms. And Talbot had replied to Levison's first insinuations against him by giving him a sound licking. And he had caught Levison spying in his study, and had thrashed him with a cricket-stump, with such effect that Levison had ached for days afterwards.

A vague dislike had turned to the bitterest hatred in Levison's breast. But he would not admit to himself that it was merely hatred for Talbot that actuated him now. He represented it to himself as a sense of duty and love of justice. And a desire to prove that he was right, and the other fellows wrong, was strong in his breast. And he would prove that he was right, thoroughly enough, if he could prove that Talbot of the Shell was a "wrong 'un." But the proof—that was what he wanted. Suspicions he had in plenty—circumstances that favoured his theory; but proof—actual proof—was lacking. And yet the circumstances, as he had written them down on the paper before him, pointed infallibly to the correctness of his dark suspicion. The paper ran:

1. Talbot comes to St. Jim's. Nobody knows where he comes from. Supposed to have lived in Australia, but avoids talking about Australia to any of the Australian fellows here and at the Grammar School. Got the Head to have him here by helping the Head when attacked by foot-pads—possibly a put-up job.

2. Was recognised by Frayne of the Third, who called him THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 337.

"The Toff." Frayne came from a slum, from living among criminals. Talbot explains that he met him when slumming in London with his uncle, during a visit from Australia. Frayne never said anything on the subject, and refused to answer questions. Why?

3. Some footpads who tried to rob D'Arcy called Talbot the "Toff," when he chipped in and stopped them. Looks as if he is well known among Angel Alley sort of people.

4. Has no known relations or connections—never receives visits and hardly ever letters.

5. Was called away one Saturday to meet a friend in Wayland. Was seen going into the Blackbird—the lowest pub in the place. Explained that his friend didn't know the place was that sort, and arranged the meeting there by telegram. I have seen the telegram, and know that there was no mention of the Blackbird in it. Meeting evidently arranged with perfect knowledge of the character of the place. Talbot lied.

6. Epidemic of burglaries immediately after Talbot's coming here. Mr. Selby's collection of coins disappears; supposed to have been hidden by some fag for a joke on Selby. Not turned up after several weeks. Collection worth £500. Followed by burglary at Glyn House. Talbot sleeping in the house at the time, as guest of Glyn of the Shell. Followed by burglary at Rylcombe Grammar School. Talbot there at time, on a rag with Tom Merry and a crowd of fellows.

7. Talbot has a desk with a patent lock in his study. Secret place in it. Saw him open it and take out something made of steel. Query: Was it some kind of burglar's tool? If all above-board, why the patent lock? Cracksmen use steel implements for cracking safes.

8. Frayne of the Third bolts from the school soon after the burglary at Glyn House. Writes to D'Arcy minor that something underhand is going on, and he can't be a party to it, but can't give the unknown rotter away, because of a debt of gratitude to him. Frayne overflowing with gratitude towards Talbot for having saved D'Arcy minor's life.

9. Frayne suspected of having bolted with Selby's coins. Talbot suggests delay of twenty-four hours before calling in the police, to give the fellow a chance of finding the stuff. Query: Does he know where it is, and intend to let it be found, to save young Frayne from being arrested—to keep the police out of the school at any price?

So ran the paper Levison had drawn up.

It was circumstantial evidence, but trifles light as air were enough for Levison, in weaving his net about the junior he hated and suspected.

If the other fellows had seen that precious paper they would have been amused or indignant, as the case might be.

But Levison knew very well that if it had been shown to a professional detective he would have considered it grounds enough for keeping a watchful eye on Talbot of the Shell, and looking into his antecedents.

That, however, Levison himself could not do, and until he had something more than suspicion to go upon he dared not make his suspicion public. He knew how Tom Merry & Co. would have handled him, if he had accused the chum they liked and trusted of being a thief and a secret criminal.

But Levison was satisfied in his own mind. Levison was certain that Talbot of the Shell was a kind of schoolboy "Raffles," and all he wanted was proof.

"And I'll get the proof!" Levison muttered, setting his lips. "I'll show him up—I'll make him sorry for laying that cricket-stump about me. And I can get the proof. It was Talbot suggested the delay for searching for the collection, and that means that if he took it he means to make it turn up. He must do it to-night—after lights out—he couldn't risk it in the daytime. He will have to get out of the dormitory to take the coins from where he's hidden them, and put them where they can be found. If he does get out, that's proof positive. And I'm going to keep an eye on him to-night. Rotten bad luck that we're in different dormitories; but I'll manage it! I'll manage it, and I'll bring the scoundrel to book!"

The study door opened, and Lumley-Lumley came in. Levison caught up his paper, and thrust it hastily into his pocket.

Lumley-Lumley eyed him curiously.

"Hallo! Some more of your hopsy calculations?" he said. "What's the odds on Nobbled Geegee for the Swindling Handicap?"

Levison scowled.

"It's nothing of that sort," he said. "Some little calculations I'm making, that's all. Mind your own business!"

"You haven't been helping in the search," said Lumley-Lumley.

"No," said Levison, yawning; "I haven't! I fancy the coins will turn up without my assistance!"

"You think they'll turn up?"

"I fancy so."

"I guess you're talking out of your hat!" said Jerrold Lumley-Lumley. "I don't see how you can know anything about it! Rats!"

Levison would have been glad enough to explain his reasons, but he knew that he would receive no belief or sympathy from Lumley-Lumley. The latter would have laughed at his suspicions, and immediately told the other fellows of them. And that would not have suited the plans of the cad of the Fourth. Levison kept his own counsel, and walked out of the study.

He met a crowd of tired fellows coming in after a vain search.

"No luck?" asked Levison, as Blake & Co. came along the passage.

"No," grunted Blake. "Try again to-morrow."

"Yaas, wotah! I feel pweety suah that we shall find the wotten things to-morrow!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "It would be only decent of you to help, Levison."

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps I have been helping," he said coolly. "There are more ways than one of killing a cat, and more ways of showing up a thief than routing round in dusty corners looking for things that aren't there."

"There's no question of theft in the case," said Blake warmly. "The rotten things have simply been hidden somewhere, and we've got to find them."

"I'll bet you ten to one in bobs that they're found easily enough to-morrow," said Levison.

"Rats! I don't make rotten bets." And Blake went into his study.

"If I were a bettin' chap, Levison, I'd take you on," said D'Arcy. "But as I wegard bettin' as low and wotten I wufuse to do anythin' of the sort. I must wemark that you are a wottah, and I wufuse to speak to you. Go and eat coke!"

Levison shrugged his thin shoulders again, and walked on. All the fellows who were friendly with Talbot were down on Levison, since his insinuations against the new junior, on the score of that visit to the Blackbird. But it was something worse than "pub-haunting" that Levison suspected him of now, and he consoled himself with the reflection that when his proofs were complete the juniors would have to sing a very different tune. When those proofs were complete. And Levison was determined that before long they should be complete enough.

CHAPTER 5. The Accusation.

THERE was sound slumber that night in the junior dormitories. Tom Merry & Co. did not do things by halves, and they had searched for Mr. Selby's missing numismatic collection until they were tired out. Tom Merry & Co. slept the sleep of the just, and in the junior dormitories in the School House only two were wakeful—one fellow in the Shell and another in the Fourth. In the Shell dormitory it was Talbot whose eyes remained sleeplessly open while the hours passed slowly, ten and then eleven striking out and finding him still awake. The hour of midnight boomed dully from the clock-tower, and Talbot was still awake. Another half-hour he lay silent, and then he moved. It was very dark in the room, with hardly a glimmer at the high windows, and even if any of the juniors had awakened they would hardly have discerned Talbot as he dressed himself, and certainly they would not have heard him. His movements were as quiet as a cat's.

The dormitory door opened soundlessly under his cautious hand. His rubber shoes made not the slightest sound. He stepped out into the passage, and closed the door gently behind him.

The passage was intensely dark. All lights had long been turned out in the School House. Talbot felt his way to the stairs, and then for a moment he paused, his eyes glinting in the dark, his head bent, his ears strained to listen. His quick ear had caught a sound in the blackness that surrounded him.

For several minutes he stood listening, but the sound was not repeated. He concluded that it was a rat behind the wainscot, and stepped cautiously on, down the stairs. At the foot of the stairs he paused, and listened again. Then he went to the hall window. The window, being on the ground floor, was locked, and the key taken away. But that seemed to present no difficulties to the curious junior. His hand glided over the lock, and the casement came open under his touch. Talbot lifted himself out of the window, and dropped to the ground beneath, and closed the window after him.

A minute later a dark shadow stood within the window, feeling over the lock.

Levison of the Fourth ground his teeth.

"Locked, by gum! But he went out that way. Hang him! Hang him! How did he get it open, then? Has he got a key?"

If Talbot had known that the cad of the Fourth was out of bed and on the watch he could hardly have baffled him more effectually. The window was locked now, and Levison could not open it without a key.

Levison's eyes glinted.

"If that isn't proof, what is?" he muttered. "They can't have left the window unlocked. Besides, it's locked again now. How did Talbot get through it? Railton has the key. He always takes it at night. Talbot must have picked the lock, and a schoolboy who can pick locks isn't an ordinary schoolboy."

Levison stood thinking it out.

There were other ways of getting out of the house, of course, but it would take several minutes, and already Talbot had disappeared in the darkness of the quadrangle, and the spy had no knowledge of the direction he had taken.

It was impossible to get on his track again. If he had gone to unearth the hidden coins, or if he had gone to meet the unknown associate whom he had met once at the Blackbird in Wayland, it was impossible for Levison to follow and watch him. That had to be given up, as Levison realised as soon as he discovered that the window was locked.

Was it Talbot who had gone out? He was sure of it. No other fellow could have opened a locked window, nor Talbot, unless Levison's suspicions regarding him were correct. But there was a chance that it was some other Shell fellow breaking bounds, and that he had purloined Mr. Railton's key for the purpose by some means. It was not likely, but it was possible.

Levison made up his mind. He ascended the stairs again to the Shell dormitory. If Talbot was gone, his bed would be empty. Would not that fact, and the fact that he had evidently picked a lock, be proof enough against him, proof enough to cause the House-master to insist upon the opening of Talbot's mysterious desk, in which Levison was convinced the Shell fellow had hidden his cracksmen's tools? If Talbot should be proved to have burglar's tools in his possession his game was up. And Levison was certain of it. Had he not watched Talbot in his study from behind the screen, and seen him open the secret receptacle in the desk, and take out a steel instrument of some kind? And then Talbot had explained that he kept old letters in the desk. Old letters were not made of steel. It was all quite clear in Levison's mind. If he could only make others think as he did! The picked lock of the window was enough to go upon, if it was Talbot who was absent.

The hour had come to strike.

Levison had thought out and written down his suspicions, all the circumstances that pointed to the terrible conclusion that Talbot of the Shell was at St. Jiri's for a nefarious purpose; that he was not the schoolboy he pretended to be, but a member of a criminal gang. Levison had waited for proof. What more proof could he ever obtain than that which was now in his hands?

The hour had come!

Levison entered the Shell dormitory quietly. Before he awoke the fellows there to witness that Talbot was absent he must make sure that Talbot was really gone. He did not want to discover a mare's-nest.

He knew which was Talbot's bed, and he crept silently towards it in the darkness. He bent over it, and peered in the gloom, and listened for a sound of breathing. There was no sound. Encouraged by the silence, he groped over the bed. It was empty!

Levison's eyes glittered with triumph.

Careless now of making a noise, he strode across the room to the electric light switch by the door, and turned it on.

The dormitory was suddenly flooded with brilliant light. Two or three of the fellows had awakened at the sound of Levison's footsteps, and they set up, blinking dazedly in the sudden blinding light.

"Hallo, what's the matter?"

"Who's that?"

"What's on?"

"Levison!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Levison!" ejaculated Lowther. "What are you doing here?"

Levison regarded the chums of the Shell with eyes that glittered like a cat's.

"Wake up!" he said.

"We're awake," said Tom Merry angrily. "What the deuce do you mean by coming here in the middle of the night and turning the light on? Are you dotty?"

"Chuck a boot at him!" said Kangaroo sleepily

"Get out, Levison!"

"Collar the cad and bump him!"

"Look at Talbot's bed!" said Levison grimly.

"My hat! Where's Talbot?"

All the Shell fellows were awake now. They sat up in bed, all staring towards Talbot's bed, now vacant. Tom Merry had jumped out.

"Have you been playing any trick on Talbot, you rotter?" he demanded.

"No."

"Then where is he?"

"Gone out!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I watched him go!"

"Spying again!" growled Manners.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a chap's duty to keep his eyes open when there's a thief and a criminal skulking in the house, pretending to be a schoolboy like the rest of us," he said.

The Shell fellows stared at him. Their first impression was that Levison of the Fourth had taken leave of his senses.

"Thief! Criminal!" repeated Tom Merry. "Who's a thief and criminal?"

"Talbot!"

"You lying cad!"

"I don't know whether Talbot's his real name," said Levison deliberately. "I dare say it isn't. It's a respectable kind of name he would naturally take for a job like this. Among his friends in the criminal classes he seems to be known as the Toff."

Tom Merry had clenched his hands, but he unclenched them again, and stared at Levison in blank astonishment.

"Are you mad?" he said.

"I know what I am saying. I have suspected Talbot for some time, and now I've got proof against him I'm going to show him up. You can keep your fists to yourself, Tom Merry. I'm going to call the House-master."

"The House-master!"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"To tell him that a thief and burglar is living at St. Jim's, and to prove it to him."

Tom Merry set his teeth.

"Talbot seems to be gone out," he said. "He's broken bounds, but he's got some reason for going, which I dare say he will explain to us when he comes in. Most of us have broken bounds at one time or another, for some reason or other. You are not going to sneak to Railton about Talbot's going out."

"This isn't a matter of sneaking. If you knew that a fellow here was a thief and a burglar, wouldn't you tell Railton, and have the rascal arrested?"

"I suppose I should; but, as it's impossible, we needn't talk about it. You want to get Talbot into trouble for going out to-night, and you're not going to be allowed to do it." Tom Merry crossed quickly between Levison and the door.

"Stand where you are!"

"I'm going to the House-master!" said Levison between his teeth.

"You're not!" said Tom Merry. "You're going to keep this dark. You wouldn't know anything about it if you hadn't been spying, as usual."

"But I say," exclaimed Gore, "what has Talbot gone out for, anyway?"

"No business of ours," said Tom. "He may be gone down to the tuckshop in the village, or to set night-lines, or for a jape on the New House—anything. He hasn't gone out to do anything rotten, I know that. But even if he had, it's not Levison's business to give him away to the House-master. Levison's going to hold his tongue."

"I tell you he is a criminal!" said Levison.

"And I tell you that you are a liar and a fool!" said Tom Merry contemptuously.

"I will tell you what he has done," said Levison. "I was in the passage when he came out of here. He went downstairs, and picked the lock of the hall window, and went out, and locked it behind him. You know that Railton locks that window of a night, and takes away the key. How did Talbot unlock it if he can't pick locks?"

"I wouldn't take your word for it that he did! Railton may have left it unlocked."

"It's locked now."

"Talbot may have got hold of the key."

"I'm willing to call Mr. Railton, and ask him whether he still has the key," said Levison, with a sneer. "The risk is mine."

"And a jolly big risk, if you accuse Talbot of being a thief," said Monty Lowther. "You'll be flogged for it, you utter idiot!"

"I'm going to prove it."

"But you're dotty!" exclaimed Manners. "If he's a thief, what has he stolen?"

"I'll tell you," said Levison deliberately, and with enjoy-

ment of the shock he was about to give the fellows whose faith in Talbot was unbounded. "In the first place, he stole Mr. Selby's collection of coins—"

"What!"

"In the second place, he has robbed Glyn's father."

"My pater!" ejaculated Bernard Glyn.

"Yes. Talbot was the thief who broke open your father's safe at Glyn House, and robbed him of fifteen thousand pounds' worth of stuff."

"You're mad!"

"Talbot was there!" said Levison.

"So were we there!" gasped Tom Merry, more amazed than angry now. "You mad idiot! A whole crowd of us were there for the cricket match. Do you think that we robbed Glyn's pater, too? This is getting funny!"

"In the third place," went on Levison, "Talbot robbed the Grammar School."

"The—the Grammar School!"

"Yes; he stole Dr. Monk's picture, worth two thousand quid, and some money. He was there for a jape on the Grammarians with you fellows, and that was his chance."

"We were there too!" yelled Lowther. "Did we steal anything?"

"No; but Talbot did."

"He's as mad as a hatter!" said Bernard Glyn. "Why, the day Talbot was at my place he risked his life to save young Wally from breaking his neck! And that mad idiot pretends that he committed a burglary afterwards! He's raving!"

"And you all know," continued Levison, with the same deadly coolness, "that Talbot has a specially strong desk in his study with a patent lock on it. What does a schoolboy want with a patent lock on his desk?"

"Perhaps he doesn't want a dirty spy named Levison to look over his letters and things," Monty Lowther suggested.

"And in that desk," continued Levison, "he keeps burglar's tools."

"What!"

"I've seen them—or one of them. He took it out when I was watching him in his study, the day before the burglary at the Grammar School. He was muttering something about getting the things ready for the morrow night. And on the morrow night the burglary at the Grammar School took place, and Talbot was there."

"Go on!" said Lowther. "This is as good as a newspaper serial story. I didn't know you were a humorist, Levison! Keep it up!"

"Joe Frayne knew who and what Talbot was. He called him by his criminal nickname when he first came to St. Jim's. My belief is that Frayne knew that Talbot had robbed Glyn's pater. That's why he ran away."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Draw it mild!"

"And why didn't he say so if he knew it?" asked Kangaroo.

"Because Talbot had saved Wally's life, and Frayne was grateful to him for it. You know he said in his letter to Wally that something underhand was going on, and he couldn't stay here to be a party to it, and that gratitude prevented him from giving the fellow away."

"Oh!"

"And it was the day after the burglary at Glyn House that Frayne bolted."

"By Jove," said Gore, "Levison's got it all worked out! After all, nobody knows Talbot, or where he comes from. Locks as if there's something in it."

"He's supposed to come from Australia," sneered Levison. "But Noble has never been able to get him to talk about Australia—have you, Noble?"

"Don't appeal to me!" growled Kangaroo. "I believe you're simply mad, and that Talbot is thoroughly decent."

"I think the case is clear!" said Levison. "I take the credit for ridding the school of a scoundrel and a criminal. If I'm wrong, I take the risk."

"If you're wrong, you rascal!" shouted Tom Merry, his eyes blazing with indignation. "Of course you're wrong! Talbot is thoroughly decent. As for all you've said, I wouldn't take your word against a mangy dog. We all know you are a liar, and we all know you hate Talbot. Your word's worth nothing!"

"Less than nothing," said Clifton Dane.

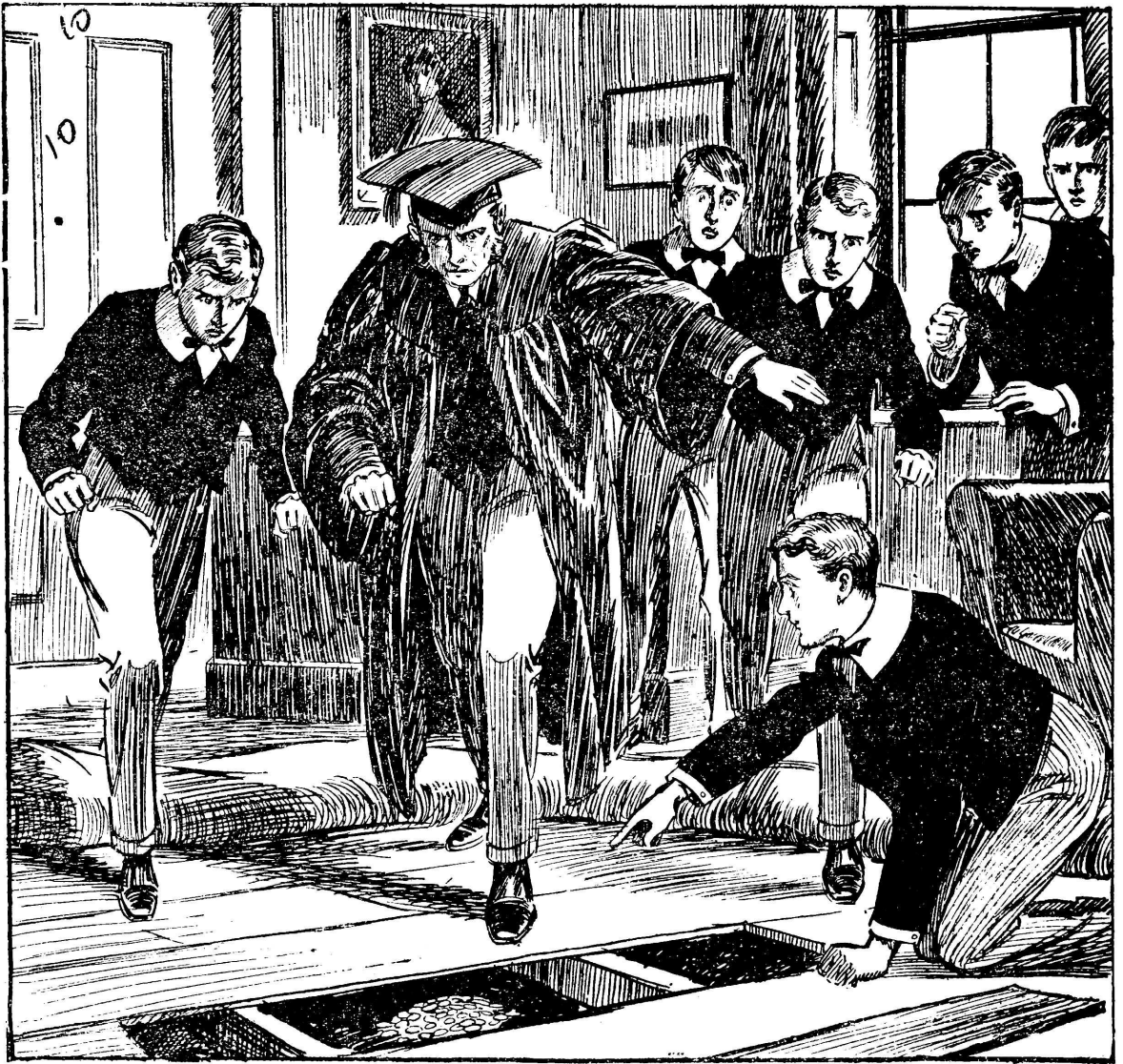
"It isn't only my word," said Levison calmly. "I've been waiting for proof, and now I've got it, Talbot picked a lock to get out to-night! That's proof."

"Rubbish!"

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"And I believe he's gone out to put old Selby's collection somewhere where it can be found to-morrow," pursued Levison. "Talbot suggested that delay of twenty-four hours



The juniors dragged the board back, and a dark space, thick with dust and cobwebs, was revealed. There was a yell of excitement: "Found!" "Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Selby. (See Chapter 9.)

before the police were called in. He did it in order to have the things found. He doesn't want the police here at any price—or perhaps he isn't quite villain enough to let Frayne be caught and sent to prison for nothing. My belief is that the coins will be found to-morrow morning—simply because Talbot has gone out to-night to put them where they can be found."

"Well, my word!" said Gore. "If we find them to-morrow, blessed if it won't look like it!"

"Jolly like it!" said Croke.

"Nonsense!" said Tom Merry. "We expect to find them to-morrow, anyway. Ain't we turning the whole place inside out to find them? If they turn up, Levison might as well say that you or I put them where they could be found!"

"Of course he might!" said Manners, with a breath of relief, for he had been staggered for a moment by Levison's last statement.

"And all this rigmarole of silly rot," said Tom Merry scornfully, "is your reason for wanting to give Talbot away to Railton for breaking bounds to-night?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to do it!"

"Mind," said Levison, his eyes glinting, "if you stop me, you take the responsibility for helping to shield a criminal."

"Bosh!"

"And anyway, I shall go to Mr. Railton in the morning—you can't stop me then."

"You mean that you are going to sneak about Talbot anyway?" demanded Tom Merry, clenching his fists.

"I mean that I'm going to denounce a member of the swell mob who has wormed his way into a public school for the purpose of robbing it."

"Oh, you're mad—mad as a hatter!"

"If there's nothing in my accusation, I shall get it in the neck," said Levison. "You all know that I'm taking risks."

"Yes; but Talbot will be given away for breaking bounds, and he'll get it in the neck, too," said Tom Merry.

"If he has gone out for anything innocent, it only means a caning and gating for a few half-holidays," said Levison. "I shall get quite as much as that if I don't prove my case against Talbot."

"That's so!" said Gore. "It's an equal risk. You've no right to stop him, Tom Merry."

"No right at all," said Croke. "Even if there's nothing in it, it ought to be thrashed out, for Talbot's own sake. This yarn will be all over the school to-morrow."

Tom Merry knitted his brows. He knew that Levison's accusation, wild as it seemed, would be the talk of St. Jim's in the morning. It was bound to come to the ears of the masters, even if Levison himself did not go to Mr. Railton.

"You see, you can't stop me," said Levison. "I am going to demand to have Talbot's desk opened and searched. I shouldn't wonder if stolen property is found there. But I am quite certain that burglar's tools will be found there,

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unless Talbot is given time to get them out of sight. I suppose that would convince even you?"

"It would convince me if it happened," growled Tom Merry. "But it won't happen. You are either mistaken, or lying from beginning to end."

"A little mistake, and a big lie," grinned Monty Lowther. "More lies than mistakes," grunted Manners. "We all know Levison."

"Now will you let me pass, Tom Merry?" said Levison, unheeding the remarks of the Shell fellows.

"No!"

"Then I shall go to Mr. Railton as early as I can in the morning."

"You won't!" said Tom. "We can settle this matter among ourselves. You shall wait here till Talbot comes in, and then repeat to him what you've said to us. Then I'll ask him to open his desk in the presence of half a dozen fellows, to prove that you are a liar!"

"He will refuse!"

"If he refuses, you can go to the House-master afterwards," Levison grinned.

"I agree to that!" he said.

"Turn' out the light, then," said Kangaroo. "Somebody will spot it from the windows, and we shall have Railton here whether we like it or not."

Tom Merry turned off the light.

The Shell fellows, too excited now to think of sleep, waited for Talbot to come back. Levison sat on the empty bed, calmly patient. He felt now that he held his enemy in the hollow of his hand, and he could afford to be patient.

CHAPTER 6.

The Toff's Resolve!

MEANWHILE, where was Talbot? After quitting the School House, the Shell fellow had crossed the quadrangle, and climbed the school wall, and dropped into the road.

He gave a quick glance about him, and then tramped down the road in the direction of Rylcombe.

His handsome face was dark with troubled thought, as he strode on through the night.

The black expression that had weighed on Talbot during the past few days seemed to have reached its climax now. There was trouble, anxiety, misery in the handsome face of the schoolboy as he tramped on.

He stopped at the stile in the lane, and gave a low whistle. A dark figure came out of the trees at the other side of the stile.

"That you, Toff?"

"I'm here," said Talbot.

"Wot did you want to fix this 'ere for?" demanded the blue-chinned, roughly-clad man who had emerged from the trees discontentedly. "Wot's the good of it, when there ain't a job on? Why couldn't you come to the Blackbird agin'?"

"I couldn't, Hookey. I was seen going in there last time, and a fellow who has his knife into me spread it about the school."

"By gum! They don't know that you came to see me?" muttered Mr. Hookey Walker, in alarm.

"No; they think I was pub-haunting, as they call it, some of them," said Talbot bitterly. "I explained it away; but I can't risk it again. This is the only safe way."

"Well, orl right," said Mr. Hookey Walker. "Don't mind me. Wot's the news, Toff? What's the night for cracking the crib at the school?"

Talbot was silent. A curious shiver ran through him, and he winced. Hookey Walker was watching his face closely in the dimness.

"It's a good crib at the school," went on Mr. Walker in a low voice. "Pal of mine who tried it once saw the stuff before he was lagged. It's worth thousands, Toff. And you've got the lay of the place by this time. It will be as easy as easy. You let us in, and open the safe, and it's done in a few minutes."

"I can't, Hookey."

"Can't!"

"No!"

"And why not?" said Mr. Walker, a very ugly look coming over his stubbly face. "It ain't as some of the coves have been saying, is it, Toff?"

"What have they been saying?" said Talbot wearily.

"As 'ow, now you're a gentleman at a public school, you want to give the gang the go-by," said Hookey Walker significantly, "as 'ow you 'ave forgotten that you're the Toff, and the son of old Captain Crow, who used to be our captain, and thinks yourself a feller there like the rest. That wouldn't do, Toff. You know why you was fixed up to go to St. Jim's. I don't say as you haven't played up well. Only the coves

are beginning to ask when the sharing-out is taking place. We ain't seed anything of the loot so far."

Talbot did not speak.

"There was that coin collection, to begin with," went on Hookey Walker. "That's worth 'undreds of quids, as you've told us, Toff. Then the job at Glyn House, and then agin at the Grammar School. We took you for our captain, Toff, after your father 'opped the twig, 'cause you was as skilful a cracksmen as any man twice your age, and you was useful. We left it all in your 'ands. We trusted you, and 'elped you. But what are you keeping the swag back for? When is it to be handed out? That's wot the fellers want to know, and that's wot I want to know too! Why ain't it 'anded out?"

"I suppose I'd better speak out," said Talbot.

"You 'ad!" said Hookey Walker grimly.

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Hookey. When I took my father's place with the gang, I meant to stick to you. I'd never thought of anything else. I intended to get into St. Jim's, simply to have a better position for serving the gang."

"And it was a good idea," said Mr. Walker; "and I will say as 'ow you look as if you was born for the part, Toff."

Talbot gave a short laugh.

"Well, that was a mistake!" he said.

"As 'ow?"

"I can't go through with it. I don't suppose you'll understand—but there's been a change. I'd never known wot honesty was until—until I went to St. Jim's. I was the son of a cracksmen, and brought up to follow in his footsteps. I had a gift for that kind of thing, and my father gave me a good education, so that I could keep up appearances on one side, while I was a thief and an outcast on the other. But—"

"But—"

said Mr. Walker, his look growing uglier and uglier. "I suspected somethin' of this sort, Toff, from your puttin' off sharin' out the swag, and puttin' off cracking the crib at the school. But go on. Let's 'ave it all."

"You won't understand. I went there as an enemy, and they made a friend of me. I've made friends—fellows I like—fellows who like me—honest and open as the day—and they trust me! I don't know why it should have made a change in my feelings. I struggled against it at first. I thought it was simply cowardice and weakening; but—but—but I can't stand it any longer, Hookey."

"You can't stand wot?"

"Being what I am, and not what they think I am. I've thought it all out, Hookey. I can't be such an infernal villain. At Glyn House I was a guest, and I robbed the man whose bread I ate. At the Grammar School the fellows there treated me decently, and I robbed the place. I felt like a crawling worm afterwards—"

"It's business, for the likes of us!" said Hookey sullenly.

"I know! I looked at it the same as you do—until I was at St. Jim's. But—since then, Hookey, I'd be cut in little pieces before I'd let Tom Merry know that I am a thief!"

"He needn't know, whoever he is."

"Whether he knows or not makes no difference. I can't be a thief, and look him in the face!"

Hookey Walker uttered an oath.

"I thought you was weakening, but, blow me, if I thought it was as bad as this!" he said. "'Ave you forgot who you are—the son of Captain Crow, wot was killed in a fight with the police? 'Ave you forgot that you'll starve unless you steal?"

"I can work!"

"Work!" repeated Mr. Walker dazedly. "Work—when you're the cleverest cracksmen in the three kingdoms, kid as you are! Work!"

"Yes; work!"

"And wot can you earn workin'?" snorted Mr. Walker. "Fifteen bob a week—and you can make fifteen thousand quid at a time cracking safes."

"Better dry bread and honesty together than to be a thief rolling in money."

"There's lot of millionaires as don't think so," said Hookey Walker. "'Ow do they get their money? Is cracksmen cribs any worse than swindling on the Stock Exchange, I'd like to know?"

"Perhaps not; but I'm done with it."

"Done with it?"

"For good!" said Talbot.

A savage look came over Mr. Walker's face.

"You mean to say as you're done with the gang?" he muttered.

"Yes; unless—"

"Unless, wot?"

"Hookey, old man, we've been pals together in this rotten line—let's try it together in another line."

"Wot! Workin'?" sneered Mr. Walker.

"Yes. Honesty—"

"Don't talk that piffle to me," said Hookey Walker, his voice quivering with rage. "No poor-but-honest business on my plate, thanks all the same. I ain't lookin' for a job as extra 'and in a factory at my time of life. You must be mad, Toff. Wot's come over you?"

"I hardly know. But I know I can't be a thief any longer. I never understood before—I suppose I was a rascal—I was brought up to be one. But I can't go on. If the fellows like to follow my example, we'll stick together yet; but otherwise, I'm done with the gang for good."

"You can bet on it they won't follow no Sunday-school example like that!" sneered Mr. Walker. "And wot about the swag? Where's that?"

"Safely hidden."

"You don't mean," said Hookey Walker, speaking with difficulty—"you don't mean as 'ow you're thinking of keeping it and cheating us, Toff?"

"I mean that it's going to be given back to the owners."

"What!"

"There's no help for it, Hookey. I must do it!"

"You—you—your villain!" gasped Mr. Walker. "Why, it's a fortune. And another fortune to be made by cracking the crib at St. Jim's."

"That shall never be done!"

"You mean as you won't 'ave a 'and in it?"

"Never; and I shall prevent it if it is tried without my knowledge."

"Toff, 'ave you gone mad?"

"No; I've come to my senses, I think," said Talbot wearily. "Listen to me, Hookey. I told you of that kid Frayne—he bolted from the school, because he knew what I was doing, and he couldn't give me away. Well, they suspect him now of having bolted with those coins; they're going to put the detectives on him, unless the things are found. I'm going to see that they are found."

"Wot does he matter to us?"

"Well, if he were arrested, he would give me away, in the first place. I must see that he is safe, for my own safety—if for no other reason."

"P'r'aps that's so!" admitted Mr. Walker, after some thought. "But we could find the kid, and put him where he couldn't talk, easy enough."

"Never!"

"Then you're thinking of going on at the school, arter you've chucked up the gang?" said Mr. Walker.

"Why not? I can feel decent there if I'm not a thief. My fees have been paid for this term, and I can stay to the end. Then I may get a scholarship, and stay on. I've been looking that out already, and I can do it. Why shouldn't I have a chance of leading a decent life?" said Talbot bitterly. "I've never had a chance yet. Besides, there's a day boy at St. Jim's who works in his spare time, and earns his own living, and studies at the school all the same—I could do that."

Hookey Walker ground his teeth.

"You want to set up as a gentleman, and leave the gang in the lurch?"

"Setting up as a gentleman doesn't make any difference to me. I want to be honest and decent. Any fellow can be that."

"And you think that we'll leave you there in peace, arter you've given us the chuck?" snarled Hookey Walker, "when we've 'elped you to git there. No blooming fear! You go back on the gang, and the gang will go back on you."

Talbot eyed him calmly.

"You mean that you will betray me at the school?"

"If you give us the go-by, yes."

"Look out if you do! I know enough of you and Nobby and the Rabbit to send you all to penal servitude, if I choose to speak!" said Talbot coolly. "Make any trouble for me at the school, Hookey, and you make me an enemy instead of a friend. Give me away to the Head, and I give you away at Scotland Yard. You'll get the worst of it."

"You—you'd turn on your old pals?"

"If they turn on me, certainly."

"My word! we'd scrag you—we'd—"

"Don't threaten, Hookey. You know I'm not afraid of you. And if one of the gang should put a bullet through me, I don't know that I wouldn't be grateful to him. I'd rather have that than what I've been having lately."

Mr. Walker changed his tone. Well he knew that the strange lad before him was utterly insensible to fear. And he knew, too, that he and his associates were far more in the Toff's power than Talbot was in theirs. There were a good many gentlemen at Scotland Yard who would have been glad to lay their hands upon Hookey Walker and his gang, with information that would lead to their conviction for offences innumerable.

"Toff! If you mean this—and I can 'ardly believe it—

but anyway you won't swindle your old pals. 'And out the swag, and we'll call it square."

Talbot shook his head.

"I can't! I can't stay at St. Jim's with my hands soiled with theft. You've done very well out of me, Hookey—you and the others. Before I came to the school—"

"You was a good pal in them days."

"Yes—and you did very well out of me. There were a good many jobs you couldn't have brought off without my help, and you know it."

"I don't deny it," said Mr. Walker. "You was a fortune to us."

"Then call it square now."

There was a long silence. Mr. Walker eyed the junior with a wolfish gleam in his eyes. But he was powerless against the schoolboy cracksman, and he knew it. If Talbot chose to "chuck" the gang, there was nothing to stop him. Mr. Walker realised it, and he tried to conceal the rage that was surging in his breast.

"We'll talk about this 'ere agin, Toff," he said, at last. "You've surprised me—though I won't say as 'ow I wasn't fearing something of the sort. But you'll come round—you will come round all right. This can't last."

"It will last!" said Talbot. "I mean it. My tools are at the bottom of the river already."

"We'll see," said Hookey Walker. "I'll git back to London, and tell the fellers—and we'll talk it over agin. Let me see you agin—say a week from now."

Talbot gave him a searching look.

"No tricks, Hookey?"

"My 'and on it," said Mr. Walker, and he held out a stubby hand.

Talbot shook hands with him, and they parted. Hookey Walker gazed after him with burning eyes as he strode away towards the school.

"So that's the end of it!" he muttered savagely. "Is it? Not if I know it! That there crib is too good not to be cracked, and if the Toff won't 'elp, it can be done without his 'elp. But what a facer this 'ere will be for Rabbit and Hobby—what a blooming facer!"

And Mr. Walker tramped discontentedly away along the dark footpath. Talbot strode towards the school, feeling his heart lighter than it had been for many days. He had made that break with his old associates at last; it was done—for good! His path lay clear before him now. He had come to St. Jim's under false pretences; but at all events his hands were clean now; his honesty dated from the day he had entered the school, when the proceeds of the robberies were once handed back—and he could look Tom Merry & Co. in the face without fear. It was done—and he seemed to be walking on air as he strode towards St. Jim's. He would find Frayne as soon as he could, and explain to him, and the fag would return—henceforth he would fear no man, strong in honesty and the determination to keep to the straight path. Frayne had outlived the influence of his early days—why should not the Toff, with so many more advantages, do the same? And the hateful shadow of what he had once been should no longer darken his days.

CHAPTER 7.

Face to Face!

"HERE he comes!"

The door of the Shell dormitory opened softly and quietly.

"He's come back!"

"Is that you, Talbot?"

The dark figure that had glided silently into the dormitory halted, with a quick catching of the breath.

It was Talbot.

For a moment he stood quite still, as the whispers from the various beds reached him, struck by the sudden discovery that his absence was known to his Form fellows.

In that moment Levison struck a match.

The glimmer showed on Talbot's face, suddenly pale.

"It's Talbot!" said Manners.

Talbot made a quiet effort, and pulled himself together. The sight of his enemy, Levison of the Fourth, prepared him for trouble.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly. "How does it happen that all you fellows are awake?"

"Levison woke us."

"What is Levison doing here?"

Levison smiled, a cat-like smile.

"That's what you're going to find out," he said. "Shut the door, unless you want the masters here—not that I mind. Tom Merry is very particular not to have the House-master on the scene."

Talbot closed the door.

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

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"

"Thank you," he said, looking at Tom Merry, who was out of bed now. "Of course, I don't want Mr. Railton to know that I have broken bounds."

"Of course not," agreed Tom, "we're keeping that cad quiet for that reason. He has been telling us a cock-and-bull yarn about you, and nobody here believed a word of it."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Crooke. "It's up to Talbot to prove that it isn't true."

"This is rather a queer time for Levison to choose to make accusations," said Talbot. "We should all get into a row if we were found up at this hour."

Several of the juniors had lighted candle-ends, which shed a glimmer through the lofty room. It was not safe to turn on the electric light.

Talbot was quite cool and collected now; quite master of himself, and ready to meet his danger. For he knew that there was danger. He remembered the sound he had heard in the passage as he went out, and knew that the cad of the Fourth must have watched him leave the dormitory and quit the School House by the hall window. He groaned inwardly. That night he had broken with his old associates—to lead a straighter and better life. And at the very time when he was trying to throw criminal associations behind him he was called upon to meet Levison's accusations—to lie, and lie again, to these fellows who trusted him, and believed his word. Yet there was no other way out—no other way, unless he admitted the truth about himself, and saw horror and scorn and disgust grow in every face that was now looking at him with faith and cheery confidence. And that was an ordeal which it was no wonder the unhappy boy shrank from.

"Speak up, Levison!"

"Yes, if you're not afraid to tell Talbot what you've told us."

"Pile in, you spy!"

"Tell your rotten yarn!"

There was certainly no encouragement for Levison from the Shell fellows. But the cad of the Fourth was quite cool and determined.

"I'm ready to speak up!" he said. "I accuse Talbot of being the thief who stole Mr. Selby's coins, who robbed Glyn House and the Grammar School!"

It sounded preposterous to the Shell fellows. They all looked at Talbot to see how he took it. But the son of Captain Crow had been in too many tight places in his chequered youthful career to be taken aback now; and he had had time to collect his faculties. What Levison had been about to say he did not know; and undoubtedly he did not expect this. But not by the flicker of an eyelid did he betray how the blow told.

Only surprise, with a trace of amusement, was visible in the handsome face.

"Excuse me," he said, "would you mind saying that again, Levison? I don't think I can have heard you quite correctly. You accuse me of—what?"

"Being a thief, a burglar, and a criminal," said Levison.

"Anything else?"

"I think that's enough."

"Well, it's certainly a big order," agreed Talbot. "Any reasons to give, or did you simply dream it?"

There was a laugh from the Shell fellows. If they had had any doubts of Talbot, the doubts were dissipated now. Surely a criminal suddenly accused of his crimes could not thus have lightly laughed it off!

"I'll prove it," said Levison. "You picked the lock of the window when you went out. How did you come to be able to pick locks?"

"What lock?"

"The hall window."

"You were there, I suppose?"

"I wasn't a dozen feet behind you."

"Spying, as usual?"

"Call it what you like. I was watching you because I suspected you. How did you pick that lock, unless you're practised at that kind of thing?"

"Perhaps you went to sleep watching, and had a dream?" suggested Talbot, with a smile. "I certainly did not pick any locks."

"Did you have the key?"

"What key?"

"Mr. Railton's key to the hall window."

"No; I have no key."

"Then how did you undo the lock unless you picked it?"

Talbot looked round at the eager Shell fellows. All eyes were upon him. The juniors believed in him—believed that he would rebut this amazing accusation. But they were very keen to hear him do it.

"Hold on a minute," said Talbot. "I have broken bounds to-night. I can explain that to the satisfaction of my friends, and I intend to do so. I am not bound to be questioned by a

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boy younger than myself, belonging to another Form, and who is my enemy, and has been my enemy ever since I came to the school. I don't recognise Levison's right to come here at this hour and ask me questions."

"I'm quite willing to ask them in the presence of the Housemaster, if you prefer that," said Levison. "I'm keeping Railton out of it for the present, because Tom Merry insisted on it. You'd have to answer Railton."

"You'd oblige us by answering, Talbot," said Tom Merry earnestly. "I know how you feel. The accusation is simply an insult, and you don't want to take any notice of that worn at all. But it's been made, you see, and the fellows will all be talking about it to-morrow. We don't believe a word of it, but some fellows might. We want you to prove right here and now that Levison is lying. We know you can do it—and we want you to, so that even that evil brute can't go on with the yarn!"

Talbot nodded.

"If you ask me, Tom Merry, I'll answer," he said. "If you want me to answer Levison, I'll do it. Does all this depend only on Levison, then?"

"Yes, rather."

"You don't think anybody here would be watching you?" exclaimed Tom indignantly. "Nobody here even knew you were gone out till that cad came in and woke us!"

"You ought to know him better than to take his word!"

"We do—we does!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"We wouldn't dream of taking his word against yours, of course," said Tom Merry at once. "But, you see, he wants to go to the Housemaster about it. We don't want a regular inquiry into the business by Railton. It would end in proving Levison to be a liar, of course; but it would make too much talk—and it would let Railton know that you've broken bounds to-night. Levison wants that, of course. So answer up, old chap, and don't give him an excuse for sneaking to the Housemaster!"

"Very well; I see now how it stands. You can ask me anything you like, Levison—it being understood that I'm answering to satisfy these fellows, and that I look on you as a liar and a sneak and a slanderer!"

Levison bit his lip hard, while the Shell fellows chuckled.

"Pile in, counsel for the prosecution," said Kangaroo.

"I've asked Talbot how he picked the lock of the hall window, if he isn't a lock-picker by profession," said Levison. "That's only one point; but that's the one he's got to answer first."

"Very well," said Talbot. "Prove that I went out by the hall window, and I'll show you how I did it."

"What?"

"To satisfy the other fellows—not you—I'll explain that I got out of the house by climbing down from the box-room window," said Talbot, with icy coolness.

Levison gasped. It was curious that, false as he was himself to the very core, he somehow never expected Talbot to lie.

"You—you—you liar! I was watching you!" he stut-tered.

"Don't call names," said Talbot, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes, and coming nearer the Fourth-Formers. "I'm answering these questions to please the fellows; but I don't allow anybody to call me names!"

"I tell you I watched him get out of the hall window!" almost shrieked Levison.

"Liar!"

"Spoofee!"

"Rotter!"

"Rats!"

It was a chorus from nearly all the fellows there. Levison was suffering the fate of the boy in the fable, who cried "Wolf!" so often when there was no wolf that he was not believed when the wolf really came.

Levison was known to have a thorough disregard for the truth when it suited his purposes to lie. His evil reputation stood him in ill stead now. He had lied so often that he could not be believed when he was telling the truth.

He gazed round almost wildly on the faces of the Shell fellows. Unbelief and contempt was plainly written on nearly all of them.

"I tell you I saw him—I watched him—I—" Levison was almost stuttering with rage. "I followed him when he came down from this dorm, and he—"

"Liar!"

"Rats!"

"Chuck it!"

"It's the truth!" screamed Levison. "The truth! I—"

"When did you start dealing in truth?" inquired Monty Lowther. "My dear chap, it's not in your line at all!"

"You may as well chuck it, Levison," said Tom Merry roughly. "Nobody would dream of taking your word against Talbot's!"

"I tell you he picked the lock of the window!"
 "And I tell you you lie!" said Tom Merry savagely.
 "And if you repeat the lie, we'll jolly well give you a dormitory ragging!"

"Hear, hear!"
 Levison made a rush towards the door. Tom Merry sprang into his path, caught him by the shoulder, and swung him back, with blazing eyes.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.
 "Hang you! I'm going to Mr. Railton! I'll have this out! I'll call him—"

"You won't!"
 "Hold the cad!"
 "Put a pillow over his head if he squeaks!"
 "Jam a cake of soap into his mouth!"

Levison, in desperation, had opened his mouth to yell, with the intention of waking the house. Kangaroo jammed a chunk of soap into it promptly, and the spy of the Fourth spluttered wildly, half-choked.

"If you try to yell out," said Tom Merry, "we'll gag you. We've had enough of your rot, Levison—more than enough!"

"Groogh—groogh!"

CHAPTER 8.

Proof!

TALBOT looked on coolly. Levison was surrounded by the Shell fellows now, nine or ten of whom were out of bed and round him. Talbot's explanation had been received without the slightest doubt of his word, and in consequence Levison's case had fallen to the ground, so far as the Shell fellows were concerned.

Levison spat out the soap furiously.
 "Mind, don't yell!" said Tom. "We mean business. You're not going to give Talbot away!"

"I don't know that I should mind much," said Talbot lightly. "Mr. Railton would not be very angry if he knew that I could explain about my reason for breaking bounds!"

"I know where you've been," said Levison, between his grinding teeth. "I've told these fellows already. You've been out to put the coin collection where it can be found, so as to clear young Frayne!"

"Rather a peculiar proceeding for a burglar, that!" smiled Talbot. "Burglars don't generally steal things to give them back again!"

"Oh, I know your game! You don't want the police called in here at any price. They might recognise you as the Toff, as young Frayne called you!"

Talbot laughed.
 "When you get a little calmer, you may go on with your questions, if you've got any more to ask," he said. "We may as well have it all out!"

"What do you keep in that desk in your study?"
 "Papers and things."

"You have a secret place in it?"
 There was a hush of interest now among the excited juniors; but Talbot's answer came clear and prompt:

"Yes."
 "You admit that?" exclaimed Levison.
 "Certainly. Those old desks often have secret places in them. I bought the thing second-hand; I didn't make it. There is a secret place in it."

"And what do you keep there?"
 "Some old books are there, I think," said Talbot, with mild surprise. "I don't remember putting anything in particular into the secret place. I may have used it for some books or papers."

"You don't keep burglar tools there?"
 "Burglar tools!" ejaculated Talbot.

"Yes."
 "I will hand you a five-pound note for every burglar tool that could be found in my desk," said Talbot.

"Are you willing to let us look?"
 "Certainly!"

"What!" Levison was fairly staggered now. If Talbot allowed his desk to be searched, there certainly could not be burglar tools there. But Levison was convinced that he had seen at least one—a steel instrument, at all events. Was he mistaken after all? Was his accusation an egregious blunder? But Talbot had lied. If he was innocent, why did he lie? That reflection encouraged the amateur detective.

"Anybody can look into my desk who likes," said Talbot calmly. "I keep it locked up, because I have some private letters I don't want read by spying cads like you, Levison. But in my presence I would allow the desk to be examined, if it was necessary. But I don't consider it necessary."

"Ah, you refuse, then?" Levison's eyes gleamed.
 "I refuse you. I will let Tom Merry and any of my friends

examine the desk if they choose to take the trouble to-morrow morning."

"And you'll sneak down before morning and get the things hidden in another place!" sneered Levison. "Not good enough!"

Tom Merry's brow clouded a bit.
 "Talbot, old man, would you let some of the fellows see into your desk to-night—at once?"

"It's the only way of shutting up that cad, and keeping the Housemaster out of it!" said Monty Lowther.

Talbot looked thoughtful.
 "I don't know whether I shouldn't prefer the matter to go before the Housemaster," he said. "Levison has made a pretty serious accusation against me. I really think Mr. Railton ought to be told of it. Levison ought to be flogged by the Head unless he can prove his words. And he would be flogged."

"I run that risk," said Levison. "I've done it with my eyes open, to show up a criminal who had sneaked into the school to rob the place. You don't dare to allow the fellows to see into your desk now. But I warn you it will be done, for when I leave this dormitory I go straight to Mr. Railton."

"Let him go!" said Talbot.
 "But—but then Railton will know that you broke bounds!" faltered Tom Merry.

"I'll chance that!"
 "You mean you can explain that to him all right?"
 "Easily."

"Why did you go?" demanded Manners.
 "I intended to tell you in the morning," said Talbot calmly.

"A new place occurred to me where the collection of coins might be hidden, and I was thinking about it in bed. You remember when we were searching the ruined tower some of you fellows remarked that some of the stones in the floor were loose?"

"I did," said Lowther.
 "Yes. I was lying awake to-night, and it occurred to me all of a sudden that perhaps the chap who hid Mr. Selby's coins might have taken up one of the big stones and hidden them underneath. I had the idea of looking there, and giving you fellows a surprise in the morning if I found them. That's all."

"Didn't I tell you?" shouted Levison. "He went out to find the coins, as I said—to put them where they could be found."

"Did you find them, Talbot?"
 "He will say he did," sneered Levison. "He jolly well know where to look. Those who hide can find."

Talbot smiled.
 "I'm sorry to knock your beautiful theories on the head, Levison," he said. "But, as it happens, I didn't find them. I pulled up a good many of the stones and looked under them, but I found nothing."

Tom Merry laughed.
 "Well, if you'd found them, we should have believed you, not Levison, of course. I don't think Railton would quite approve of your getting out at night to search for Selby's property, though. Better not tell him."

"I leave it to Levison," said Talbot, with a shrug of the shoulders. "He can go to Railton or not as he pleases. Let him pass!"

"All serene!" Tom Merry stepped aside from the door.
 "There's the door, Levison!"

But now it was Levison who hesitated. Talbot's willingness to let the matter go before the Housemaster proved to all the fellows that he was innocent. It did not prove that to Levison; but it proved to him that Talbot had an impregnable defence—that, innocent or guilty, he had covered up his tracks thoroughly, and could not be convicted. And if Levison once carried the matter to the Housemaster and failed to prove his accusation, he would find himself in a very serious position indeed. Only the clearest proof could have justified so terrible an accusation against a schoolfellow.

"Well, why don't you go?" asked Talbot.
 Levison paused, biting his lips.

"You say you're willing to open that desk in the presence of the fellows?" he asked.

"Quite!"
 "Do it, then, and we'll leave the Housemaster out of the matter for the present."

"Climbing down—eh?" said Talbot, with a laugh. "You were very keen to go to Mr. Railton a short time ago. But I don't want to make trouble. Only can we get down to the study without risk of being spotted?"

"No need for a crowd to go," said Tom Merry. "Two or three fellows will be enough. Mind, Talbot, we all believe you; this is only to shut up Levison, and prove to everybody that he has been lying from beginning to end."

A shade crossed Talbot's face.
 "I understand!" he said.

"If burglars' tools are not found in the desk, and we all know they won't be, we shall know what to think of Levison," said Lowther.

"Yes, rather."

"Who's coming?" said Talbot quietly.

All the fellows could not go without risk of discovery. The Terrible Three and Kangaroo and Gore and Crooke were settled on. Gore and Crooke were not on the best of terms with Talbot, but Tom Merry considered it best to have his enemies as well as his friends there. The fellows could not deny the evidence of their own eyes.

The candles were put out, and the little party of juniors cautiously descended the stairs to the Shell passage. Half-past one had struck; the House was deep in silence and slumber.

They crept down to Talbot's study in the Shell passage. They crept in, and Tom Merry closed the door. There was a glimmer of starlight in the room. Talbot drew down the blind before he struck a match. Then he lighted the gas.

Levison looked at the handsome face of the junior he suspected. It was calm and cool. What did this mean? Levison was as sure that burglars' tools were hidden in the desk as of anything on this earth. If Talbot had had warning, he could have removed them, of course; but he had had no warning. This accusation had been sprung suddenly upon him, and since then he had been in sight of all the fellows. He had not even tried to make an excuse to visit the study alone. What did it mean? Did it mean simply that he was depending upon the secret receptacle in the desk remaining undiscovered—that he was "bluffing," and that there was some recess so well hidden in the desk that he was confident it would never be found? He had offered to show one secret place—was it possible that there was a second, so well concealed that it defied discovery?

That was the only possible conclusion Levison could come to; and he bitterly resolved that, for all Talbot's confidence, the secret should not escape him.

Talbot unlocked his desk, and opened it.

"Look in!" he said. "Find the secret place if you can."

The juniors examined it in turn. Levison scanned the interior with wolfish eyes. He could discover nothing.

Talbot smiled, and pressed a hidden spring, and the bottom of the desk opened up, revealing a dark cavity beneath. It was a large space, and there were several old papers and books lying in it—nothing else.

"That's the secret place," said Talbot.

"Jolly well made!" said Tom Merry. "I should never have found it. Well, Levison, look in and find the giddy burglarious implements."

"They're not there," said Levison sullenly.

"And they never were there!"

"They were there the day I watched Talbot in this study. He took out something made of steel, muttering something about wanting it the next night—the night of the burglary at the Grammar School!"

"You ought to be a reporter, Levison," said Monty Lowther admiringly. "Your imagination would make your fortune!"

"It's the truth!"

"Cheese it!" said Tom Merry. "Are you satisfied now?"

"I'm not satisfied," said Levison, furious with rage and disappointment. "I believe there's another secret place in the desk that Talbot hasn't told us about."

"Hardly room for one, I should say," said Manners.

"I'll make Levison an offer," said Talbot, laughing. "I gave three pounds for that desk. If Levison will hand me three quid, he can have it, and break it up looking for secret places. He's welcome."

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"That's a good sporting offer!" chuckled Gore. "It's up to you, Levison!"

"I have got no money to waste," said Levison sullenly.

Talbot closed the desk.

"Have I satisfied you fellows?" he asked.

"We didn't need satisfying," said Tom Merry quickly.

"We knew Levison was lying. This was only to clear you from any possible suspicion from anybody. Levison must own up now—that he is satisfied."

"I'm not. The things may not be here. Talbot may have got nervous, and got rid of them. But he lied when he said he didn't pick a lock to-night, and if he's innocent he wouldn't lie!" said Levison sullenly. "All he's said to-night only makes me feel more and more certain that I am right!"

There were angry exclamations from the Shell fellows. Talbot raised his hand.

"Your can keep your own opinion, Levison," he said.

"But if you say one more word against me, I shall go directly to Mr. Ralton, and demand to have it all out before the Head. That's all I've got to say!"

And Talbot left the study. The juniors followed him out, Levison biting his lips with rage and chagrin. Tom Merry & Co. returned to bed, and Levison made his way back to the Fourth-Form dormitory, but not to sleep. He lay sleepless almost till morning, turning restlessly in his bed, a prey to bitter thoughts.

He had been beaten all along the line.

His accusation had fallen to the ground, and his only reward was that he was regarded as a reckless and unscrupulous slanderer.

And he knew that he was right.

For it was not a case of suspicion now—it was a certainty. Levison realised that. Talbot had picked the window-lock—he knew it. Talbot had denied having had any steel instrument hidden in his desk, and Levison had seen it.

The fellows would not believe him. He had only himself to blame for that. For the first time, Levison understood that it does not pay in the long run to lie, whatever temporary purpose it may serve.

He was telling the truth now, and nobody would take his word. He was making a true accusation, and it was regarded as a callous slander.

If Talbot had been innocent, he would not have lied. There would have been no need to lie if he had been innocent.

He was guilty!

But the very words by which he had proved to Levison that he was guilty had convinced everybody else that he was innocent.

Levison was certain now, but he dared not take the matter to the Housemaster. Every proof of guilt had been got rid of; there was no proof, only Levison's word, which was not as good as Talbot's. He knew that he would be punished severely if he accused Talbot and could not prove his statements; and he knew that he could not prove them now, though he knew them to be true. In the guise of an ordinary schoolboy at St. Jim's there was a criminal in the school, whose plans and intentions he could not know, but could guess, and he could not speak. Levison, as he lay, restless and sleepless, turned the matter over in his mind in every aspect; but under every aspect it was the same—Talbot was guilty, but Talbot had succeeded; Talbot had won all along the line, and the mouth of the one fellow who knew the truth was closed!

CHAPTER 9.

Those who hide can find.

TOM MERRY & CO. were up early on the following morning, without waiting for the clang of the rising-bell.

NEXT WEDNESDAY:

Monty Lowther's Mistake!

Another Splendid Complete Story
of Tom Merry & Co. of St.
Jim's.

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Gran



Nobby and the Rabbit bolted for the window, and tumbled out into the night; but Hookey Walker made a bound for the boyish figure on the stairs, jemmy in hand. "You first!" snarled the ruffian. "You traitor—you nark! You first!" (See Chapter 13.)

Some of them were looking very sleepy, from the interruption of their slumbers the previous night.

But all the fellows were keen to continue the search for the missing collection of coins. If it was not found by tea-time that day, the Head was to accede to Mr. Selby's demand, and set the police on the track of Joe Frayne. Very few of the fellows thought it possible that Frayne knew anything about the missing coins, but it was only too likely that the police would think so. They would judge poor Joe by his early record, and by the fact that he had bolted from the school soon after the coins had been taken from Mr. Selby's room. The fact that he was in his Form-master's bad books would tell against him too; the motive of revenge might be added to that of greed. In the early sunlight, while the rising-bell was ringing, Tom Merry & Co. pressed on their search.

Levison did not join in it; but he remarked sneeringly, when he came down, that he knew that the coins would be found. And when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy asked him how he knew, he replied that Talbot had been out of his dormitory the previous night, and had put them somewhere to be found, because those who hide can find. D'Arcy looked at him in blank amazement, and then walked away. He did not understand Levison's remark till he heard an account of what had happened in the Shell dormitory the previous night. Then his indignation was great. That strange scene in the dormitory, of course, could not be kept a secret. In a short time all the juniors knew, and there was general amusement, mingled with indignation, at Levison's unheard-of accusation against Talbot. Levison, as Blake observed, was always accusing or suspecting somebody of something; but this, his latest, fairly took the cake.

"The utter rotter!" said Blake indignantly. "He knows that now we're hunting for the things in dead earnest they're very likely to turn up. And if they're found, he can say Talbot put them where they're found. He could just as easily say I did it, if he had his knife into me instead of Talbot—or you, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard him as a disgustin' beast! If I were Talbot, I would go to the Head, and have Levison up before him, and make him wepeat his wascally words there. Old Talbot a burglah—bai Jove!"

"The fellow must be simply off his rocker!" cried Herries. "Fancy accusing a fellow like Talbot of being a criminal! It does take the biscuit, and no mistake!"

"It's a vile thing to do," said Tom Merry. "For though nobody believed anything of the kind for a single moment, it will make a lot of unpleasant talk about Talbot, and put it in the power of rotters like Mellish and Crooke to make rotten insinuations. If you chuck enough mud at a chap, some of it is bound to stick."

"Yaas; and that is Levison's wotten method," said Arthur Augustus wrathfully. "Bai Jove! I've a great mind to give him a feahful thwashin'."

The contempt and aversion with which he was regarded on all sides probably punished Levison more than a thrashing. Cold and averted looks, contemptuous glances, words of scorn and dislike, greeted him on all sides. Everyone, or nearly everyone, believed that in his hatred of Talbot he had deliberately concocted that accusation, hoping that some of it at least would do Talbot harm. They remembered and repeated his former unscrupulous actions—how he had imitated the hand of Brooke of the Fourth, and had nearly been sacked for it; how he had lied on a score of occasions.

against fellows he disliked. This was only one more sample of his reckless unscrupulousness in attacking a fellow he hated; that was the almost unanimous opinion. And Levison found himself avoided on all sides, as if he had been a leper. It was not suggested to send him to Coventry; but it came to that, for nobody would speak to him. Even his own friends, of his own kidney, Mellish and Crooke, looked the other way when they saw Levison.

Every spare minute until morning lessons was devoted to the search, without result. After morning lessons it recommenced. It was a half-holiday that day, and there had been a House match arranged, but Tom Merry's team and Figgins & Co. cordially agreed to postpone it, and devote the afternoon to the hunt. After dinner very nearly all the juniors of St. Jim's were ransacking the place right and left and round about, and a good many of the seniors joined in the search. If Mr. Selby's precious collection was hidden within the precincts of St. Jim's, it seemed almost impossible that it could escape so many eager eyes in quest of it.

Wally had turned out with the whole of the Third Form. D'Arcy minor was keenest of all, most indefatigable of all. He was fighting for the honour of his chum, and he was tireless. He ransacked every likely and unlikely place. It was close upon tea-time when Tom Merry & Co. paused for a rest, still unsuccessful. They were beginning to give up hope now. They adjourned to the tuckshop for refreshment in the shape of ginger-beer and dough-nuts, and discussed the matter. Tom Merry was beginning to think that who ever had hidden the coins had hidden them outside the walls of St. Jim's, and in that case the search, of course, was hopeless.

"They might have been buried somewhere, perhaps in the wood," said Tom despondently. "Might be a mile from here, for all we know. I'm afraid you judged the rotter wrongly, Talbot, in thinking he would let the things be found to save poor old Joe."

Talbot looked thoughtful.

"Well, any fellow of ordinary decency would do as much," he said. "But perhaps who ever hid them hasn't the nerve to go near the place again. But I've been thinking—"

"Hear, hear!" said the Co. all together. "Let's have it."

"Go it, Talbot!" said Figgins encouragingly.

"We seem to have searched everywhere," said Talbot, with a smile. "But what about Mr. Selby's own room?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Nobody's thought of looking there," said Tom Merry. "But how could they be there? That's where they were taken from. If they were in Selby's study, he'd have seen them."

"I mean, they might have been hidden in his study," explained Talbot. "Suppose, for instance, the chap who took them shoved them into his chimney? They'd be quite safe from being found there, and nobody would think of looking for them there. At least, we haven't thought of it so far. They're only coins, you see, and could be chucked into a small space."

Tom Merry whistled.

"It's a chance," he said. "My hat! Just imagine old Selby sitting within a few feet of his giddy treasures and not knowing it. Of course, it's as likely as not; it would be the handiest place to hide them. The fellow needn't even have risked taking them out of the study at all. What asses we were not to think of that!"

"Let's go and see Selby," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors hastily finished their ginger-beer, and made their way to the Third-Form master's study. Mr. Selby was there, and he frowned when there came a knock at his door, and it opened, to reveal a crowd of Fourth-Formers and Shell fellows.

"You have not found the coins?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, sir," said Tom Merry; "not yet."

"Then what do you want?"

"It's occurred to us that the fellow who took them might have hidden them in this room itself, sir," said Tom respectfully.

"Nonsense!"

"It's quite possible, sir," said Blake. "It would have been quite easy to do."

"I believe they have been stolen!" said Mr. Selby snappishly. "And I certainly do not see how they could have been hidden in this room, which I occupy every day, without my seeing them. Pray do not talk nonsense!"

"Would you mind our looking, sir?" said Tom. "You want to get them back. They might be in the chimney."

"Stuff!"

"There's a loose board in the floor, too," said Talbot, feeling with his boot. "It creaked as I came in."

"Yaas, wathah; I noticed that."

"I believe it is utter nonsense," said Mr. Selby crossly.

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"I am convinced that Frayne has stolen my coins, and taken them away from the school with him. However, if you choose to make a search, I do not object."

"We'll try the floor first," said Tom Merry, and he rolled back the study carpet. "Now, where's the loose board?"

"'Tain't quite loose," said Blake, kneeling down. "There are nails in it. But—my hat—look at these nails! They're twisted over."

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors were excited now. Even Mr. Selby lost his expression of contemptuous indifference, and peered down through his glasses. There was a short length of board nailed down to the joists underneath. But the nails, instead of being driven into the head, were turned over and flattened down, so that the board was scarcely attached to the supports below. They could not, of course, have been originally in that condition. It was proof enough that the board had been raised some time; and whoever had raised it had not cared to make a sound of knocking by driving in the nails again.

"My word!" said Digby. "You see, the board's been prised up, and then the johnnie couldn't hammer the nails in again—it would have wakened the whole house."

"We're on the giddy track! We'll soon have this board up!" said Tom Merry, opening his pocket-knife. The board was very loosely fixed, and with his strongest blade Tom Merry soon prised it up. The juniors dragged it back, and a dark space, thick with dust and cobwebs, was revealed. There was a yell of excitement.

"Found!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Selby. He was on his knees beside the opening in a twinkling, pushing back the eager juniors.

In the dust and cobwebs lay a little heap of ancient gold and silver—Roman coins, Greek coins, Byzantine coins. Mr. Selby's glasses almost dropped off in his feverish excitement as he grabbed at them. They were dragged out. The Form-master counted them, his fingers trembling—he knew their number well, and they were all there, to the last piece.

"Got 'em all, sir?" asked Wally.

"Yes, yes!"

Mr. Selby rose to his feet, and placed the coins on the table. Expressing gratitude or any gentle emotion came awkwardly to the crusty Form-master, but he felt that he had to thank the juniors for their services.

"I—I am much obliged to you, my boys," he said. "It appears that they were here all the time, and—and Frayne certainly cannot have taken them."

"Perhaps you'll say you're sorry for suspecting Joe now, sir," said Wally resentfully.

"Don't be impertinent, D'Arcy minor. But—but certainly I am sorry I suspected Frayne. Apparently he had nothing to do with this—anyway, it is clear that the coins were merely hidden, and not stolen. You may go. I am obliged to you all."

"Oh, don't mench, sir," said Arthur Augustus.

And the juniors trooped joyfully from the study. The numismatic collection was found, and Joe Frayne was saved. Tom Merry and Co. rejoiced. Levison of the Fourth met them as they came away from Mr. Selby's study, and he smiled sneeringly as he saw by their looks that the long search had been crowned with success at last.

"You've found them?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tom Merry shortly.

"Where were they?"

"Hidden under the floor in Selby's own study!"

"Who thought of looking there for them?"

There was a moment's silence. Talbot had thought of looking in Mr. Selby's study for the missing collection; and Levison could guess it, from the look of Tom Merry.

"Talbot?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What did I tell you? What—Oh! Oh! Ow!"

Tom Merry did not trouble to speak. He hit out from the shoulder, and Levison of the Fourth rolled along the floor of the passage.

"Now, if you want some more, you've only got to say another rotten thing about Talbot!" said Tom Merry grimly.

Levison picked himself up. But he did not say another word; he only scowled blackly, and the juniors turned their backs on him and left him.

CHAPTER 10.

Before the Housemaster.

DURING the next few days the depression of spirits which the fellows had noticed about Talbot seemed to have disappeared.

The Shell fellow had regained his old cheery manner, his old sunny smile.

It was as if a weight had been taken from his mind; but the juniors little dreamed what was the weight that had been removed.

The schoolboy cracksmen had broken with Hookey Walker and Co. With one resolute effort, he had thrown his black past behind him.

He only waited a favourable opportunity for restoring the booty he had taken, and thus clearing his conscience.

No wonder his heart was lighter.

No wonder, too, that Hookey Walker had been astonished by the change in him. For Talbot himself was astonished when he reflected upon it.

He had been at St. Jim's only a few short weeks, and those weeks had made a complete revolution in his thoughts, his feelings, and his way of life.

He had been brought up a kind of outlaw; his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him.

And in earlier days he had rejoiced in that way of life, exhilarated by the incessant danger, the incessant need of resource, of courage, and of cunning. He had never thought of any other way of life. But new surroundings had brought new ideas. School life seemed to have given him back his boyishness, which he had lost in his criminal surroundings. His former ambition had been to crack a "crib" that defied less skilful hands—now his ambition was to pull a good oar, or to knock up a century in a House match. It was as if long, heavy years had rolled from him, leaving him younger, fresher, better in every way.

To throw behind him all criminal associations, to live a decent life like the chums he had made at the school, to keep his honour unstained—that was the dream now of the lad who was the son of a desperate criminal, and had been leader of a dangerous gang.

A month earlier he had not shrunk from theft and falsehood; now, the fact that he had lied to Tom Merry and Co. troubled him more than all his previous crimes.

It had been unavoidable, if he was to stay at St. Jim's. If Levison had only let him alone, it would not have been needed. It was strange that the Toff, who had led a life of crime, should trouble about that. But it was so. For the reform in his character, suddenly as it had come, had been complete.

And he realised, too, that, curiously enough, it had come only in time to save him. For if he had refused to have his desk searched, and Levison had called in the House-master to insist upon it—what then? Only twenty-four hours earlier Talbot had consigned his cracksmen's tools to the deepest part of the river, and so he had been able to show the interior of that mysterious desk with a cool confidence that confounded Levison. For Levison, of course, cunningly as he had made out the case, had made no allowance at all for a possible repentance in the criminal. It was that repentance which had saved the schoolboy cracksmen from discovery.

And that seemed to the Toff a good omen for the future. It was as if Providence had given him his reward.

And, for the future, there was hard work and honesty. Brooke of the Fourth earned his living, and Talbot could do the same. Redfern of the New House was at St. Jim's on a scholarship he had earned by hard work, and Talbot had an equal chance of winning one of the many scholarships belonging to the school.

The future seemed bright enough. He would not have the wealth that might have been his by pursuing the old evil courses; but he would have freedom from care, freedom to enjoy honest friendship, a clear conscience—worth more than wealth.

It came into his mind at times that the past could not be so easily got rid of—that sooner or later his past would find him out.

But he put that thought resolutely from his mind, and set his face towards the future with a determination to do right, whatever the cost.

And so his heart was lighter than it had been for long, weary days, his look was more cheerful; he was able to throw himself into the games and the occupations of the juniors with a breast free from care.

Meanwhile, Levison was almost an outcast in his House.

His wild accusation against Talbot had been talked over throughout the school; and from the juniors it came to the seniors, and from them to the masters. Such a story was hardly likely to remain a secret.

A few days after the recovery of Mr. Selby's collection, Levison was sent for by his House-master.

The spy of the Fourth guessed easily enough what he was wanted for, and it was with fear and trembling that he made his way to Mr. Railton's study. He had to justify himself, and he knew that it was impossible. He found Mr. Railton with a stern, grim brow. The House-master fixed his eyes upon the sullen face of the junior.

"A very strange story has come to my ears, Levison," he

said. "I understand that you have accused Talbot of the Shell of dishonesty, theft—in short, of being a criminal, who has entered the school with ulterior motives. That is a most extraordinary accusation to make. Why have you done this?"

"I believe it, sir," said Levison. "I thought it my duty to show him up. I believe that he is going to rob this school, as he robbed the Grammar School and Glyn House."

"Then you adhere to your belief?"

"Yes, sir!" said Levison, stubbornly.

"Give me your reasons. I will try to be patient with you."

"There are my reasons, sir."

Levison laid on the study table the paper he had drawn up. Mr. Railton read it through carefully, his brow growing darker and darker.

"This is mere nonsense," he said; "all these circumstances can be explained away. I understand that Talbot has explained everything satisfactorily to his friends."

"They don't know him as I do!"

"How can you know him better than the other?"

"I can see through him," said Levison. "He has deceived the others. He can't deceive me. A detective wouldn't think all that was nonsense."

"I am not a detective, so I cannot say," replied Mr. Railton. "But I will say this—you have made a terrible accusation against a boy you appear to dislike, without offering the slightest real proof in support of your assertions. You say these burglaries have all occurred since Talbot came to the school. They have occurred since Blenkinsop came, for that matter, but you would hardly suggest that Blenkinsop was liable to suspicion. Talbot was on the scene when they took place—so were a great many other juniors. Talbot possesses a desk which he would never allow anyone to look into; but I learn that, on this accusation being made, he immediately threw it open to inspection. I have spoken both to Talbot and to Tom Merry, on this subject. Every circumstance has been fully explained."

"About Frayne—"

"It seems that Frayne knew Talbot before he came here. Talbot explains that he came across him in a London slum and befriended him. Tom Merry had done the same thing, but you attach no suspicion to him. It appears, Levison, that this ridiculous theory you have formed is coloured all through by your personal dislike of Talbot."

"Let him explain what part of Australia he comes from, what people he knows there, sir," said Levison. "He always avoids talking about where he came from."

"I have questioned him, Levison, and he has explained to me. He lived in a back-country township in Australia, and had few acquaintances. I am not a detective, Levison; to make searching investigations on the ground of this absurd accusation. You have done Talbot a serious wrong."

Levison bit his lips, and was silent.

"I should report this matter to the Head, and you would be severely punished," went on the House-master. "But I understand that your schoolfellows have taken their own method of making you feel the wrong you have done. But I forbid you to repeat anything of the kind in the future, Levison. If you do so, I shall immediately acquaint the Head with it, and you will be asked to leave this school. Now you may go."

And Levison went.

After he had gone Mr. Railton remained with a thoughtful frown on his brow. He looked again over the paper Levison had laid on his table, conning it over point by point. Then he carefully destroyed it. But the frown remained on his brow. Was it possible that the House-master felt a lingering doubt? He shook his head abruptly, as if dismissing the matter from his mind. But when he met Talbot again he gave the boy a searching look, as if he would read his very heart. But the cheery, sunny-looking junior, chatting carelessly with the Shell fellows, looked like what all St. Jim's believed him to be—a happy, careless schoolboy. And the House-master smiled at the lingering doubt that had found a place in his mind, and dismissed it.

CHAPTER 11.

The Scouts Find!

TOM MERRY came downstairs in his Boy Scout garb, and put on his wide-brimmed hat as he stepped into the quadrangle. It was Wednesday afternoon, and the Curlew Patrol were going for a "run." There were already seven members of the Curlew Patrol—the Terrible Three and the chums of Study No. 6. But Talbot had joined it, making the total eight. All the fellows wanted Talbot in the Curlews, and he had been very glad to join. He had taken up scouting very keenly.

Talbot looked very handsome in Boy Scout rig, with his big hat shading his handsome, clear-cut face. Tom Merry looked over his patrol.

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"Ready?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, adjusting his eyeglass with care. "Pway, give us the pwo-gwamme."

"I'm going ahead, and you fellows have got to follow the giddy track in the wood," said Tom. "Talbot's coming with me. If you catch us we stand you a feed at the tuck-shop when we get in. If you don't, you fellows stand the feed. Savvy?"

"Good egg!" said Blake. "Lead on, Macduff!"

And the Curlows marched out.

At the stile in the lane they separated. Tom Merry and Talbot plunged into the wood with five minutes' start. Talbot glanced round him curiously, wondering what Tom Merry would think if he had known of that meeting with Hookey Walker in that very place a few nights ago. But all that was a sealed book now.

"We'll give 'em a jolly good run," said Tom Merry, as they tramped through the shady wood. "It was a good idea of yours, Talbot, to have a scout run this afternoon. You'll soon get into the way of it. Your experience in the bush in Australia will be useful to you."

Talbot bit his lip.

Every reference that was made to Australia—a country he had never seen—reminded him of the fact that he had come to St. Jim's with a lie upon his lips.

And yet, now it was impossible to escape from the net which he had spread around his own feet. His conscience was growing strangely acute of late. Sometimes he felt a strong impulse to tell Tom Merry the whole truth, and throw himself upon his mercy. But always he thought better of it.

Even if Tom's friendship had stood that strain, it would have burdened him with a guilty secret to keep, which would have brought a shadow into his happy life. Talbot felt that it would not do. And yet, every reference to his supposed early life in Australia made him wince.

"This way," said Tom, without noticing the momentary cloud that had passed over his companion's face. "Right through the wood."

"I've heard you fellows speak of an old hut in the wood somewhere," said Talbot. "Shall we make for that?"

"As good as any other point," agreed Tom. "We'll stop there for a rest. It's a good step from here. Tread lightly, and don't leave a trail."

"Right-ho!"

Taking care to leave as little "sign" as possible the two scouts pursued their way through the wood. In half an hour they reached the old hut on the edge of the glade, where once a poacher had lived, or had been supposed to live. The hut was a tumbledown ruin now. The spot was very lonely, deeply shadowed by great trees. A rabbit skipped out of the old hut, and vanished as the scouts came in.

Tom Merry looked back from the hut. The woods were very silent round them.

"No sign of the hounders yet," he remarked.

"They don't know which direction we've taken," said Talbot. "They won't pick up our trail in a hurry, either."

"Rather not. We can afford a bit of a rest. I've got a bottle of ginger-beer in my haversack and a couple of buns."

"Good!"

The juniors sat down on the displaced beams in the old hut, keeping their eyes on the open doorway, ready to steal away at a sign that the pursuers were at hand.

The buns and the ginger-beer were very welcome after the tramp through the wood. Talbot was looking very curiously about the place.

"I've heard the fellows say that there is a cellar under this floor," he remarked.

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's so, and a secret passage to the old castle on Wayland Hill. We'll explore it some day. It wouldn't be quite fair on the pack to get out that way now."

Talbot laughed.

"No; but I'd like to have a look at it. Lots of time. They're nowhere near us yet."

"Right-ho!" said Tom, after a cautious glance at the circling woods. "I'll show you the place quick enough. It's not hidden."

He dragged away a heap of old brambles and twigs, and a square stone in the floor was disclosed. There was an iron ring in the stone, and Tom Merry seized it, and pulled.

A dark aperture was disclosed, and a stone step could be seen.

Talbot lighted a match, and peered down into the dark recess. Tom Merry followed his glance, and uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Hallo! What's that?"

"What's what?"

"There's something there. Looks like a bundle."

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"Somebody's been here lately, then."

"Looks like it."

Tom Merry stepped down into the opening, and struck another match. The light gleamed upon a large bundle, fastened up in brown paper of a common kind. The paper was quite dry, showing that it had not been long in the recess.

Tom Merry lifted the bundle up into the hut.

"Somebody's hidden that there," he remarked. "Jolly queer, isn't it? I suppose it's no business of ours."

Talbot regarded the bundle with a curious glance.

"Jolly queer!" he agreed.

"Shall we open it?" said Tom doubtfully. "I suppose it belongs to somebody, and the owner has hidden it here for some reason or other. I suppose we'd better leave it where we've found it—what?"

Talbot looked thoughtful.

"It's queer for anybody to hide a thing in that place, if he came by it honestly," he said. "I should say that it was something that's been stolen, and hid there for safety."

"I suppose that's most likely," agreed Tom Merry, after a moment's thought. "There have been two robberies in this neighbourhood lately—at Glyn House and the Grammar School, you know. Rather a find if we came on the plunder, not that it's likely. The giddy crackman wouldn't hide his swag here. I think they call it swag."

"I don't know," said Talbot. "I think we should be justified in looking into the bundle, anyway. It's not sealed."

"No; only a string round it."

"Well, see what it is, and then tie it up again if there's nothing fishy about it," suggested Talbot.

"Good idea!"

Tom Merry untied the string, and opened out the brown paper. He was naturally curious to know what might be in the mysterious bundle, so strangely found in that unexpected place. As the paper opened out Tom Merry gave a gasp.

"My only hat!"

"A picture!"

"What is it?"

"Queer place to find a picture," said Talbot. "Wasn't there a picture stolen from the Grammar School?"

"Yes; Dr. Monk's Leonardo da Vinci," said Tom Merry excitedly; "and, my hat, this is it!"

He unrolled the canvas, which showed plainly where it had been ripped out of the frame with cuts from a knife. An Italian face—that of a smiling woman—was disclosed. Tom Merry gave a shout of glee.

"It's it."

"You know the picture?"

"I've seen it at the Grammar School a dozen times!" said Tom Merry exultantly. "Great Scott! We've come on the place where the thief hid his giddy loot. No doubt about that. I suppose he thought nobody else knew of this place—naturally—and thought it was a safe place to hide things, till the hue-and-cry was over. Look here, here's the money, too—quids, wrapped up in paper!"

"By Jove!"

There was another parcel as well as the rolled picture, that had been contained within the brown paper. Tom Merry opened it with fingers that trembled with excitement. There was a sudden gleam of precious stones in the light.

"Diamonds!" ejaculated Talbot.

"Yes, rather! That's Miss Glyn's diamond necklace! And these blessed papers—they must be the bonds that were taken from Mr. Glyn's safe! I shouldn't wonder if the whole shoot was here. It was the same chap who robbed the Grammar School, as everybody supposed. This proves it."

Tom Merry's eyes were dancing. It was a glorious and unexpected find to make while on a run with the Scouts. The two juniors examined their prize eagerly, and forgot all about the Scouts who were on their track. There was a sudden shout as Jack Blake broke from the trees, and ran up and touched them on the shoulder, one after the other, with his staff.

"Caught!" yelled Blake.

And the other Scouts came running from the trees.

"Caught!" said Tom Merry. "Blessed if I hadn't forgotten all about you! We've made a find! Look!"

"My hat!"

"Gweat Scott!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, coming up breathless. "What have you got there, deah boys?"

"Loot!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!"

"Where did you find it?" exclaimed Manners.

"In the cellar under the hut. I was showing the place to Talbot when I spotted the bundle. It's all the stuff that was taken from Glyn House and the Grammar School, and the thief must have hidden it here."

"What gorgeous luck!" said Monty Lowther. "Old Monk will dance when he sees his picture again. Gordon

Gay told me that he's going round in sackcloth and ashes on account of it. And Glyn's pater will be pleased."

"Yaas, watahah!"

"We are entitled to claim something for finding it," said Talbot, with a smile. "But we won't do that, Tom?"

"No fear! Never mind scouting now, you fellows; we've got to get these things to the police-station," said Tom Merry. "We'll go straight to Rylcombe and hand them over to Inspector Skeat."

"Yaas, watahah!"

And in great delight the Scouts marched off to Rylcombe with their prize, and Inspector Skeat almost fell down in astonishment when they brought them into the police-station.

The inspector had a full list of the stolen articles, of course, and he went over the recovered property, and announced that every article was there.

"This was a good day's work for you young gentlemen," said the inspector. "Who was it found them?"

"Tom Merry," said Talbot quickly. "He was showing me the cellar under the hut, when he spotted the bundle."

"Then Dr. Monk and Mr. Glyn will be very much obliged to you, Master Merry. This lot altogether is worth close on twenty thousand pounds."

"Bai Jove!"

"Jolly lucky find," said Tom Merry. "I'd like to see the face of the thief when he comes back for his plunder, and finds it isn't there."

"Bai Jove! It would be a wippin' ideah to keep a watch on the place, and nab the wascal when he comes back!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The inspector smiled.

"You may be sure we shall have our eyes open for him," he said. "The swag is found, and I hope we shall have the burglar, too, before long."

And the juniors returned to St. Jim's in great spirits. They left the inspector in great spirits, too, feeling that he had a chance at the mysterious cracksmen at last. And the news of the great find caused considerable excitement at St. Jim's. Bernard Glyn immediately dashed off on his motor-bike to carry the news home. And Levison, when he heard the news, felt sick at heart. What became of his case against Talbot now? True, he could surmise that Talbot had placed the plunder there—that he had intentionally led Tom Merry there to discover it. But why should Talbot, if he were the thief, restore his plunder to the last jot and tittle? That was a question that Levison found it impossible to answer, and for the first time a chill of doubt entered his breast, and he asked himself whether he had made a mistake, after all.

"What price that feed?" Jack Blake asked, after the news had been imparted and the excitement had died down a little. "We caught you, you know?"

Talbot laughed.

"Quite right!" he said. "It's up to us, Tom. We were caught. This way to the tuckshop!"

And Tom Merry good-humouredly assented, and the Curlews gathered in the school shep, and Tom Merry and Talbot stood the feed.

CHAPTER 12.

The Parting of the Ways.

DARKNESS lay upon St. Jim's.

In the Shell dormitory Talbot stirred restlessly in his bed.

It was a warm summer's night, and though the dormitory windows were open little air entered, and many of the juniors were restless in their slumber.

Talbot was not asleep.

Many times of late Talbot had been restless and wakeful at night. In the midst of his new-found peace of mind a troublesome thought had haunted him.

Hookey Walker had set his mind upon "cracking the crib" at St. Jim's, well knowing the valuable loot that was to be secured there. Since Talbot had refused his aid, had the ruffian abandoned the scheme? Talbot hardly dared to believe so. Hookey had said that the Toff would hear from him soon, but he had not heard. How the "gang" had taken his defection from their select society the boy did not know. But he knew that they must be bitterly angry and disappointed, especially at his determination to restore the fruits of the previous robberies. Would Hookey Walker & Co. abandon that promising "job" because their former comrade said them nay?

Talbot hoped so, but he feared. And the thought that lurked under the shadows of the night the cracksmen might be lurking about the old school often disturbed his slumbers. More than one night, while the rest of the dormitory slept, Talbot had heard some faint noise in the House or the quadrangle, and had descended to make sure that all was safe. But as yet there had been nothing, and his hope was

growing stronger that Hookey Walker had given up the idea.

For if the cracksmen had attempted the robbery, Talbot knew what he must do. He must stop them. At any risk to himself, and at the price even of betrayal, he must not allow his benefactor to be robbed.

It was the last and most terrible test of his repentance, but if the trial came he was determined not to shrink from it. And he was determined, too, that if the cracksmen came they should not find him napping.

This particular night he was very sleepless. In the street of Wayland that afternoon he had caught a glimpse of a rascal who seemed like the Rabbit, and who had avoided him at once. If it was the Rabbit, it meant that the gang were in Wayland, and that would mean that they had a "job" in the neighbourhood. He might have been mistaken, but a trifle light as air was sufficient to make him sleepless. And at midnight there had been the bark of a dog in the quadrangle. Taggles's dog sometimes barked at night, and there had been but a single bark, followed by silence. But Talbot knew of old Hookey Walker & Co.'s method of dealing with troublesome dogs. A piece of drugged meat would have silenced the dog soon enough.

His alarm was vague, but he could not sleep.

In the silence of the night he lay listening for some sound. But no sound came; the school had long been asleep, and the old House was soundless.

But the silence itself alarmed the boy in his present feverish state of mind. He resolved to descend, and make sure, as he had done several times before, since his last meeting with Hookey Walker at the stile in Rylcombe Lane. He slipped out of bed without waking the other fellows, and hastily put on a few clothes. With bare feet, he stole silently to the door.

He opened it, and listened.

There was no sound below. He stepped into the passage, and pulled the door shut behind him.

The House was dark, but a full, round moon sailed high over the quadrangle, and shafts of light came in at the many windows, cutting like bars of silver across the darkness inside.

Talbot descended the stairs, and stood in a flood of white light that streamed in through the window in the hall.

Still there was silence round him.

That small window, half-hidden by the stone porch outside, was a favourable spot for making an entry into the House, if indeed thieves were at work. Talbot stepped to it, and examined it. The casement came open in his hand.

The lock had been forced.

The boy stood quite still, his heart thumping.

In spite of the dead silence round him, he knew now that there were thieves in the House. They had entered by that window, closing but not fastening it behind them, as a way of escape in case of discovery.

Hookey Walker had come.

He would not have come alone. Probably, almost certainly, Nobby and the Rabbit were with him. Where were they now? In the Head's study, probably, where the safe was situated, with the historic school silver in it—a rich prize for the gang as they well knew.

Talbot stood motionless—thinking.

He would not allow the robbery to take place—that was impossible. But to give the alarm, which would be easy—what then? The thieves, if arrested, would denounce him at once as a former accomplice, that was certain—and they would prove it at their trial, even if the accusation was pooh-poohed when it was made. But that was not the only consideration that made the Toff hesitate. These men, thieves and rascals as they were, were his old comrades and associates—they were engaged upon a rascally robbery, but it was a piece of rascality that he would cheerfully have shared with them a few weeks previously.

Rascals as they were, he could not betray them.

To go to them, to warn them to desist and go—that was the only alternative. But would they go? Hookey Walker was more likely to lay him senseless with a jemmy, than to yield to his order to desist from robbery.

It was a fearful risk, for he knew that he had nothing but hostility to expect from his old friends now, especially if he sought to balk them in their present purpose. But Talbot soon resolved.

Indeed, there was a dark and bitter thought in his mind that Hookey Walker's jemmy might solve all his difficulties for him, and cut through the tangle of his life. He knew no fear.

With quiet steps, the boy made his way towards the Head's study.

Outside the door he paused and listened. Not a glimmer of light came from within. But there was a low, steady sound—a sound that was familiar of old to the ears of the Toff—the sound of a drill working upon iron.

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"They were there! A rug was laid along the inner side of the door, to keep in the dim light by which the thieves were working.

With a hand that did not tremble, Talbot turned the handle of the door and pushed it silently open.

So silent was it, that the three men in the study did not observe it, and Talbot saw them before they saw him.

Hookey Walker was working with the drill upon the safe, and the Rabbit was holding the lantern for him to work by. Nobby stood by them with a bludgeon in his hand, his eyes upon the progress of Hookey's work.

Talbot watched them quietly for a full minute. Hookey Walker paused in his labour, and muttered a curse.

"The Toff could 'ave opened this easy as winking," he muttered. "And it's a good two hours for me with the drill, hang him!"

He moved as he spoke, and his movement made him aware of the open door. He swung round, with a startled oath.

Nobby and the Rabbit turned at the same moment. The sight of the boy standing there, half dressed, his eyes fixed upon them, his face pale but calm and steady, seemed to petrify the ruffians for a moment.

"The Toff!" muttered Hookey Walker at last. "You've come to lend a 'and, Toff?" said the Rabbit, in a whisper.

Talbot shook his head. "You ain't going back on your old friends, Toff?" murmured Nobby, taking a tighter grip upon his bludgeon.

Talbot spoke at last. "You've got to chuck this."

Hookey Walker breathed hard. "You ain't bearin' a 'and, Toff?" he asked.

"No!"

"Then you'd better git back to bed, and leave us alone. We don't want to 'urt you, though you've gone back on us. Get back to bed."

"I can't leave you here."

"You don't mean as you've come down to give us away?" said Hookey Walker, taking up a steel jemmy that lay among his other tools, with a very ugly look on his stubbly face.

"No!"

"Wot do you mean, then?"

"I mean that I cannot let you rob the school. I don't want to betray you," said Talbot steadily. "But you must go! I came here to warn you to go!"

"And if we won't?" sneered Hookey Walker.

"If you won't go, I shall give the alarm."

"And wot will 'appen to you arter that?" said the Rabbit. "If we're took, you'll be took along with us. We'll jolly soon tell 'em who you are!"

"I understand that. But better than allowing you to rob this place. Leave it alone. There are other cribs for you—leave this place alone. I served you well when I was with you—leave me in peace here, for old times' sake," said Talbot.

"You give us the go-by," said Hookey Walker. "We got to work without you. You ask us to leave you alone. Leave us alone, and we'll leave you be. But we ain't lettin' up on this 'ere. This 'ere is a plum, and we're bagging it."

"You bet!" said the Rabbit tersely.

Talbot made a backward step to the open door.

"I give you two minutes to clear off," he said. "If you're not gone then, I shall wake the house, at any risk."

"Will you?"

Hookey Walker's hand jerked forward, and the steel jemmy whizzed suddenly through the air, direct for Talbot's handsome face.

CHAPTER 13. Denounced!

RASH!
If the murderous weapon had reached its aim, Talbot would have fallen to the floor, stunned, if not killed outright.

But he had been watching the ruffian. He knew what was coming, and he had sprung back in time.

The jemmy crashed upon the wall behind him, shattering the glass of a picture, and dropped heavily to the carpet.

The crash rang almost like thunder through the silent house.

Talbot made one spring into the passage outside. Then his voice rang out sharply and clearly through the School House of St. Jim's.

"Help, help! Thieves! Help!"

"By gum," muttered the Rabbit, "you've done it now, Hookey! We got to clear!"

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"He's waking the house!" snarled Nobby. "Come on! No time for the safe now! Lucky if we git clear at all!"

Hookey Walker swore a fearful oath. "Him first! I'll out him afore I go!"

They ran into the passage.

Talbot had reached the hall, and was on the lower stairs, still shouting. There was a sound of opening doors above. The alarm was spreading through the house. Voices called, and a light flashed in the upper passages. Talbot had switched on the electric light in the hall now, and the three ruffians ran into dazzling light.

Nobby and the Rabbit bolted directly for the unfastened window, and dragged it open, and tumbled one after the other out into the night.

Hookey Walker made a bound for the boyish figure on the stairs. His face was almost convulsed with rage.

The jemmy was in his hand again, and there was no doubt of his intention. Talbot, on the stairs, faced him with grim coolness.

"Better cut it!" he said, without a quiver in his voice. "You first!" snarled the ruffian. "You traitor—you mark! You first!"

And he hurled himself forward and upward at the boy. Talbot dodged the murderous blow, and closed with the ruffian, and hurled him backwards. The jemmy clanged on the stairs, and Hookey Walker went back with a crash down the stairs to the floor below.

"Well done, Talbot!" shouted a voice above.

Mr. Railton came dashing down, half-dressed. He had seen Talbot's action in the glare of the electric light.

He passed the panting boy and leaped upon the cracksmen as Hookey Walker was struggling dazedly to his feet.

Mr. Railton was an athlete, and in his grasp the cracksmen, strong as he was, had no chance. He struggled fiercely, but the Housemaster held him with a grip of iron.

Talbot looked on, with a white, set face.

The revengeful, murderous attempt of the ruffian had cost him his liberty. There was no escape for Hookey Walker now. Kildare and two or three more of the Sixth were already rushing downstairs to the Housemaster's aid.

Hookey Walker was a prisoner, and Talbot, with sick misery at his heart, waited for what would follow.

He had repented of his evil doings, and he had stood by his repentance; and now he was to pay for it. The past was not to be so lightly shaken off as he had hoped. Hookey Walker, burning for revenge, and with a prospect of a long term of imprisonment before him, had no motive for keeping silence concerning the Toff. As soon as he was secured the torrent of denunciation would come pouring forth.

Talbot knew it, and he was prepared for it.

"Got him, sir!" exclaimed Kildare, as he laid his strong grasp upon the struggling ruffian. "Safe as houses! Get a rope, somebody!"

"Safe enough!" said Darrel of the Sixth, as he inserted his fingers in Hookey Walker's collar and seized him. "He can't get away. Are there any more here?"

"Did you see any others, Talbot?" asked Mr. Railton, panting.

"They are gone," said Talbot dully.

"Ah! The window is open! Never mind, we have secured one. We must see if there has been any robbery effected."

"That is all right, sir. I interrupted them before they had finished drilling the safe. Nothing has been taken."

"My dear lad," exclaimed the Housemaster, "you have rendered a great service to-night! But for you there would have been no alarm! Ah! Here is the Head!"

Dr. Holmes came hurrying up, in dressing-gown and slippers. His face was startled and alarmed.

"It is all right, sir," said the Housemaster. "We have secured the ruffian. It was an attempted burglary, but, thanks to Talbot, no harm has been done."

"Bless my soul! You heard them, Talbot—you came down—"

"Yes, sir."

"This ruffian attacked him most savagely," said Mr. Railton, with a gesture towards Hookey Walker, who lay panting breathlessly, and still feebly struggling, in the grasp of Kildare and Darrel and several other seniors. "Talbot threw him, luckily, and then I arrived. The boy might have been murdered!"

"Secure the scoundrel!" said the Head.

"Here's a rope," said Tom Merry, bounding downstairs with a cord in his hand.

The juniors were swarming out of the dormitories now. And Tom Merry bound the hands of the captured cracksmen, while the Sixth-Formers held him, unable to resist. Then they released him, and Hookey Walker sat dazedly on the floor, panting for breath, and glaring at the crowd round him, his wrists securely fastened together.

"Bai Jove! And it was Talbot spotted the wascal!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in the midst of the crowd on the stairs. "What has Levison to say about that, I wondah?"

"I think this will shut that cad up for good!" grinned Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mr. Railton looked out of the window.

"I suppose the other rascals are clear by this time," he said. "Fortunately, we have this desperats scoundrel. The police had better be called in at once, sir!"

"At once," said the Head. "Let him be kept secure until they come."

Hookey Walker burst into a bitter, sardonic laugh.

"The perlice!" he repeated. "Yes, send for 'em—let 'em 'ave me! They've been wanting me for a long time now. Quite a 'andsome present for the peelers. And the Toff can go along with me. We'll be company for one another, Toff, same as we used to be!"

And he grinned leeringly at the pale, rigid junior.

"What does he mean?" said Dr. Holmes, in surprise. "Do you know this man, Talbot?"—for there was no mistaking Hookey Walker's leering glance.

"Yes, sir," said Talbot quietly.

"Know me!" said Hookey Walker, with a hideous chuckle. "I bet you! The Toff knows me, and I know the Toff! I was his father's pal, and his pal arterwards—a good pal till the Toff turned goody, and rounded on me—eh, Toff? You call 'im Talbot 'ere, but in Angel Alley he was the Toff, the son of Captain Crow, and the best cracksmen in the three kingdoms, kid as he is! Isn't that so, Toff?"

There was a sudden hush.

The cracksmen's accusation, bearing out as it did the accusation that Levison of the Fourth had made, struck upon the hearers with a strange shock.

For there was no doubting the malicious earnestness of the ruffian.

"What rascally, wicked nonsense are you talking, man?" said the Head sternly. "Do you dare to say that Talbot ever had anything to do with you?"

Hookey Walker chuckled again.

"Ask him! He won't deny it, 'cause he knows that I can prove it. That kid Frayne, who was 'ere, he knew it, and he could 'ave proved it. Bless you, old gentleman, there are a dozen coves in Angel Alley that knew old Captain Crow, and knew his son—'im that you call Talbot! Look at me, old gentleman. I'm one of the gang that went for you the night the Toff 'elped you. It was a put-up job to get the Toff into your good graces, and get him admitted into the school. The Rabbit and Nobby would tell you the same if they was 'ere!"

"Talbot!" The Head, his face suddenly pale and worn, turned to the boy he had trusted. "Talbot! I cannot believe this! But—but deny it! Why are you silent? Why do you not say that this scoundrel is lying in revenge for your brave conduct in baffling him? Talbot! Do you hear me?"

Talbot smiled—a haggard, terrible smile that struck a chill to the hearts of the fellows standing round him. It was the smile of a lost soul. What was the use of denying it now, and being believed, only to have it dragged up again, with the proofs that Hookey Walker could furnish without limit? What was the use of more and more lies to stave off the inevitable for a few hours? Talbot did not speak.

Tom Merry gave him a strange, startled look, and caught him by the arm in almost a fierce grip. His face had gone white.

"Talbot!" Tom muttered huskily. "Talbot! Speak up, man! We don't believe a word of it! We know he's lying! Say he's lying!"

Talbot shook his head.

Dr. Holmes's face grew stern and hard.

"Talbot, you must speak! Cannot you tell me that this evil man is lying?"

"I cannot, sir," said Talbot.

"But—but—"

"It is true!"

CHAPTER 14.

More Sinned Against than Sinning!

DEAD silence followed Talbot's words.

It was broken by a ghoulsh chuckle from Hookey Walker. The captured ruffian had had his revenge now glutted to the full. The misery in Talbot's face might have touched any heart but that of a baffled and revengeful criminal.

The fellows round Talbot looked at him as if they could scarcely believe their ears. It seemed like a horrible dream to Tom Merry and his comrades.

"Talbot!" Tom Merry was the first to find his voice.

"Talbot! You can't mean it! That was what Levison told us, and you said it was lies!"

"But it was true."

Mr. Railton broke in sternly.

"And if you denied it before, why do you not deny it now, Talbot?"

The unhappy boy made a gesture towards Hookey Walker.

"He can prove it."

"It is—is true?" stammered the Head.

"Quite true!" Talbot looked round at the horror-stricken faces of the St. Jim's fellows. "I'm sorry, you chaps. You trusted me, and I tried to deserve it. But luck has been against me, and the game's up!"

"You bet! It's up for you, Toff, as well as me!" snarled Hookey Walker.

"Silence, ruffian!" said Dr. Holmes sternly. "Take that man away, and lock him up safely till the police come for him!"

Hookey Walker was hustled away, none too gently. He had told the truth, but there were many fellows there who resented that more bitterly than his attempted robbery at the school. Talbot had been—whatever he had been; but they could not forget all at once that they liked him—that he was their pal.

The Head fixed his eyes upon the pale, handsome face with amazement and pity in his glance.

"You admit the truth of what this ruffian has stated, Talbot?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You have been the associate of thieves? When you helped me, on the occasion that I was attacked by footpads, you were in league with them?"

"I was in league with them," said Talbot dully.

"And your purpose?"

"To get into the school."

"With the intention of committing a robbery here?" demanded the Head sternly.

"Yes."

"Good heavens!"

"Talbot!" murmured Tom Merry, his voice breaking.

"Talbot, old man, you're mad! Don't say such things! It's madness!"

"Yaas, wathah!" muttered Arthur Augustus, half-crying. "I don't believe you, Talbot—I don't believe a rotten word of it!"

"He's dotty!" said Blake. "It can't be true!"

"And the story you told me of having lived in Australia, of your uncle who brought you to England and abandoned you—that was false?" went on the Head, his look and tone growing sterner and sterner.

"Lies!" said Talbot bitterly. "Lies from beginning to end!"

"Then who are you?"

"My father was a professional cracksmen," said Talbot, in a low, even voice, that gave hardly a sign of the terrible stress in his breast. "He was called Captain Crow among his associates. I was brought up to follow in his footsteps. I was given a good education, but only with the view of helping me to get an entry among decent people, where I could be of more use to the gang. My father was killed in a struggle with the police, and I was too useful to the gang for them to let me go—I became their leader. I have been their leader since—till I came here, and after. I was born a criminal, among criminals, and until lately I never thought of being anything else. That is my story, sir. All else that I have told you is lies. I should lie now, only that that scoundrel can prove what he has said. Frayne knew it; he recognised me when I came here. He knew that I had cracked the safe at Glyn House!"

"Frayne knew!" exclaimed the Head. "And he did not—"

"He could not. Because I saved his chum's life, he felt that he could not betray me. That is why he left the school; he would not stay here and see it going on. He felt that that would make him my accomplice!"

"The unfortunate boy!" exclaimed the Head.

"It's all rot—rot—rot!" exclaimed Bernard Glyn. "You never cracked my pater's safe, Talbot. You're mad! He's mad, sir, and don't know what he's saying. Why, only yesterday he and Tom Merry found all the stuff, and it was taken back!"

"Of course; he's wandering in his mind," said Tom Merry.

ANSWERS

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 337.

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

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"

"It was through Talbot I found the plunder hidden under the old hut, sir."

Talbot smiled faintly.

"I placed it there to be found," he said.

"You—you did!"

"Yes. That was why I proposed a scouting run, and got you to show me the cellar under the old hut, so that you would find it."

"Talbot!"

"And I placed the coins under Mr. Selby's floor, and led you there to find them," said Talbot wearily. "You may as well know all. I intended to keep them, of course, when I took them; but—"

He broke off.

The Head scanned his face intently. Tom Merry fell back from him with a groan. It was all true. He could not doubt it now; he could not comfort himself by a wild belief that Talbot was wandering in his mind. Levison—the cad and spy Levison—had been right, and Tom Merry and his friends had been wrong. It was a bitter discovery. The fellow he had liked and trusted and chummed with was a liar and a thief—a professional criminal! Tom Merry groaned in anguish of spirit.

"You have been very frank, Talbot," said the Head quietly, "but there is one thing you have not explained."

"I will tell you everything, sir. It is not much use keeping secrets now," said Talbot, with a bitter smile.

"If you stole these things, why did you replace them? What benefit was it to you to steal and to restore? Why did you interrupt these thieves to-night, and thus bring about your own denunciation and ruin?"

"Because I had repented, sir," said Talbot steadily. "I don't suppose you will understand, any more than Hookey Walker understood. But—but after I was here, somehow I changed. I couldn't go on with it. It was Tom Merry's influence as much as anything. I hardly understand it myself; but—but I couldn't keep it up. When I heard that Frayne was suspected of stealing Mr. Selby's coins, I put them where they could be found, and made the fellows find them. I met Hookey Walker, and told him I had decided to break with the gang. I placed the plunder from Glyn House and the Grammar School for Tom Merry to find it. I intended to keep a clear conscience after that. I hoped that I had done with the past, that I might win a scholarship, and stay here honestly, and have a decent

future to work for and look forward to. I should have done it, too, but for what has happened to-night."

"Talbot, old man," panted Tom Merry, "I—I knew you weren't so bad as you made out. I knew you were the right sort, after all."

"Thank you, Tom!" said Talbot quietly. "You have been a good pal to me—better than I ever deserved."

"But—but you knew that this man would turn upon you if you interfered with him?" the Head exclaimed.

"I knew that, sir."

"Then why did you not leave him to do as he wished?"

"Because I would not let them rob you, sir—that is all. I went to them in your study and warned them to go, and they would not, so I gave the alarm."

"My dear lad," said the Head softly, "you have told me a terrible story, but I can see that you have been more sinned against than sinning. And you have proved, only too well, the sincerity of your repentance. You have chosen the straight path, and you have followed it at a cost many honest men might have shrunk from. That proves that you are at heart an honest and noble lad, as I have always believed you. It is, of course, impossible for you to remain in this school after what has happened, but so long as I live you shall never want a friend. Follow me to my study. I must talk to you further. Boys, you may go back to bed."

Talbot looked at Tom Merry & Co.

"Good-bye!" he said.

"Talbot!" Tom Merry held out his hand. "Give us your fist!"

"Yaas, wathah—and me too!"

"After what you know?" said Talbot.

"We know you're a good sort," said Tom Merry steadily. "I don't care what you have been, I know what you are now: Give me your fist."

And Talbot shook hands with his old friends before he followed the Head. Then slowly and sadly the juniors made their way upstairs. Talbot's revelations had astounded them and shocked and grieved them, but there were few who did not feel compassion for the unhappy boy. There was one who was glad, one who was triumphant. It was Levison of the Fourth. And Levison, in an ill moment for himself, triumphed openly and exultantly.

"What did I tell you?" he exclaimed. "You will believe me now. I knew it all along. I told you fellows so. He is a liar, and a thief, and a criminal—"

"Hold your tongue!" said Tom Merry savagely.

"I tell you I was right! I found him out—"

"Whatever he is, he is worth a thousand of you, you spying cad!" howled Blake, his eyes gleaming with rage. "If you say another word I'll hammer you!"

And, without waiting for Levison to say another word, Blake promptly hammered him, and the cad of the Fourth was groaning dismally when he crawled into bed again. Levison had been right, but there was no credit for him. The fellows knew only too well that his motives had been bad, and their scorn for him was not lessened by the discovery that he had been right in his denunciation of Talbot.

Talbot was not seen again at St. Jim's.

When Tom Merry & Co. came down in the morning he was gone.

Hookey Walker, in the hands of the police, told his story, and at his trial it was in the papers. And the police would have been glad to find the son of Captain Crow, but he had vanished without leaving a trace behind.

At St. Jim's the fellows missed him, and remembered him with kindness. Whatever he had been, he had repented—repented only too sincerely—and brought about his ruin by his repentance. And they could not forget his noble qualities. Wally of the Third could not forget that Talbot had risked his life to save him, and he was sorry that he had gone. The scamp of the Third was comforted, however, by the return of his old chum, Joe Frayne. For Frayne had seen the case in the papers, and knew that Talbot was no longer at the school, and he promptly returned to St. Jim's, to be forgiven for his escapade, and to take his old place in the Third Form.

Tom Merry & Co. missed Talbot sorely, and they did not forget him. Whatever he had been, he had wiped out all offences at the last, and they remembered him as a good chum, and they hoped to see again some day the lad who had been forced to make so terrible a choice between good and evil, and had chosen the right when he came to the "parting of the ways."

THE END.

(Our amusing, long, complete story for next Wednesday is entitled: "Monty Lowther's Mistake!" by Martin Clifford. Order in advance. Price one penny.)



STOLEN HONOURS

A thrilling melodrama of the South African War, telling how a lieutenant—a man who was coward and bully both—robbed his brother of hard-won honour and glory by a dastardly trick, and also attempted to steal away from him the love of a beautiful girl. The outcome of this wicked treachery is recorded in "STOLEN HONOURS," the story of the famous film of the same name produced by the Phoenix exclusives—which appears in this week's

PLUCK Out on Friday **1d.**

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FERRERS LOCKE, DETECTIVE, is the principal character in one of the complete stories contained in **CHUCKLES, 1d.**

OUR GRAND NEW SERIAL.



Stanton, adventurer and ex-convict, looked almost regal as he stood by the dais of the Throne Room with raised sword, saluting the multitude who had made him king! (See this page.)

READ THIS FIRST.

Jem Stanton, a clever criminal, is sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on the strength of the evidence given against him by Paul Satorys, formerly a nobleman in the State of Istan. Stanton is the exact double of Satorys, and, escaping from prison, meets and strikes down his enemy. He exchanges clothes, and leaves Satorys lying in convict's garb, to be found by the warders. Stanton is aware that Satorys is the rightful heir to the throne of Istan, and determines to impersonate him, and make a bid for the throne himself. So exact is his impersonation, that even Satorys' fiance, Grace Lang, is deceived. She urges him to push his claim to the throne, which he decides to do. His plans prosper, and one evening he sets sail for Istan in the yacht Bella, in company with Duvigny, Satorys' most trusted adviser, and Grace. In the meantime Satorys has recovered and proved his real identity, and is in chase of the impostor. Grace Lang also discovers the deception, but is helpless. Stanton lands in Istan without opposition, and prepares for a decisive coup.

(Now go on with the story.)

King of Istan.

In her place of captivity Grace heard much of what was passing, for the women who looked after her talked in her presence of the great events which were occurring.

Stanton had to walk over to the throne which he was to usurp, but the nearer he came to the realisation of his dream, the more secure he felt as to ultimate success.

He had had time before leaving London to realise on the scrip which had been handed to the man he had supplanted, and he was enabled to act generously to those who supported him.

For the rest, Duvigny, who had his doubts, but was prudently silent about them, for Stanton was showing himself strong and relentless, had managed things well, and a couple of days after landing the claimant to the crown found himself at the head of a vast number of faithful, and, what was more to the point, well-armed followers.

Istan City, the seat of the Republican Government, woke one fine morning to find itself practically in the hands of the insurgents, and the representatives of the tottering Government, well hated now, were driven back to the Presidential Palace, where they entrenched themselves with the remnant of the army, which remained true to the falling regime.

There was desultory fighting in the streets, but Stanton's cause was destined to triumph by reason of the support of the majority of old military men, some of whom recalled the old days.

Stanton was no coward, and as he led those who seemed devoted to him to the charge, as street after street was cleared of the foe, he felt as though he were indeed the rightful king, as though the past were a dream, and it was only after the

A Bid for a Throne.

A Thrilling Tale of Adventure and International Intrigue.

By CLIVE R. FENN.

entrance to the palace was reached, and he stood panting, sword in hand, by the side of Duvigny, while way was made for the little party which emerged from the frowning gateway bearing the flag of truce, that he was brought back to the truth by a word Duvigny let fall.

"It is well done, sir," said the other, "but after your stern refusal to accept the crown it amazes me."
"Oh, one can always change one's mind," said Stanton quietly. "I had had time to weigh things in my mind, that was all. Ah, see they are coming to sue for peace."

Duvigny went forward to meet the bearer of the white flag. Firing had ceased, the people were cheering the new ruler as they deemed Stanton, and old Peter Mardyke, who during those days of conflict had kept in the van, looked oddly at the man who was now king. The old fellow thought of the girl and of her story, and he wondered for a second whether it was true, or whether she were not speaking under a delusion, as the false Satorys had declared.

There was no time for more then. The overtures of the bearers of the request for peace were being informed that the palace must be evacuated within the hour, and this was done. The ex-president was permitted to leave under escort for the port, where he was placed on board a ship due to leave, and by evening the new ruler entered the palace whose riddled walls showed the severity of the fighting, which had lasted three days.

Stanton seemed as though to the manner born. Duvigny, as he accompanied his new chief into the dismantled reception chambers of the old palace, found his doubts growing none the less, for the new king acted in a stern, unbending way, which little accorded with what Duvigny knew of the real Satorys, the dignified individual who had lived like a king, although merely a private personage, and who had always considered the feelings of others.

Peter Mardyke was one of the advance party which swept with Stanton through the gardens to the palace entrance. Outside the mob was cheering, flags were flying from windows, and hour by hour the traces of the fighting were vanishing amidst the popular rejoicings.

And Stanton, adventurer and ex-convict, stood by the dais of the Throne Room, looking almost regal as he raised his sword and saluted the multitude, which was being kept in the outer courts by the soldiery.

"He may be a king, sir," said Peter to Duvigny, by whom the old sailor was standing; "but I am sure certain he isn't, for all his uniform. The lady is right. But I don't see what we are to do."

Duvigny nodded. He knew now that he had been too eager, too ready to smother the doubts which had crept into his mind, but as he replied to Peter he realised quite well that it was too late.

He did not know that the real Paul Satorys was even at that hour landing at the port fifty miles south of Istan City, for the captain of the liner had deemed it wiser to keep clear of the fighting zone.

"Peter," said Duvigny, "you are right, my lad. I have been tricked. That man is not Count Satorys, but a man so like him that anyone might have been deceived."

"Yes, sir; and now I want to know what's to be done."

NEXT
WEDNESDAY—

"MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"

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

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"Nothing."

The answer was cold and bitter. Duvigny was looking at distinguished leaders of the Istan Army who were going forward one by one to make obeisance to the new king. The air was rent with cries of enthusiasm. No, there was nothing to be done. The power was now in the hands of the man who had been helped forward to the throne, and he would never cede it because of a fancied right.

And now Duvigny, who found himself playing a modest part as a mere spectator of the triumph, saw the king giving orders, orders which resulted in a squad of men marching out. What did it mean? Duvigny and Peter were soon to know. From where they stood, wedged in a corner of the vast hall, they saw the escort returning, and walking in their midst was Grace Lang.

The girl looked dazedly around her, saw the man she hated standing on the dais surrounded by his new adherents. She had been brought there to be a witness of the power of the man who had tried to trick her, and her bosom heaved with indignation, but she could do nothing. She was permitted to sit down, but the soldiers at her side shut out the view of Peter and Duvigny. It was the old sailor who managed to edge his way to her side.

The girl gave the old man a look of pleasure and relief.

"Are you going to help me get away, Peter?" she said breathlessly.

"I only wish I could, miss; but it isn't possible not just yet. That chap is no king, but he knows how to look after himself, which is one thing kings are for, I suppose. But you stand firm, miss, and the time will come!"

Duvigny felt a growing disgust. He and those who had come with him from England were placed in a subordinate position now. He saw the hall emptying, saw the new ruler advance escorted by his new guards. Stanton nodded to Duvigny, and smiled at Peter, and then approached Grace.

"I wish to speak to you," he said.

The soldiers of the escort fell back. The two were alone, and the girl faced her captor with flashing eyes.

"When shall it be?" asked Stanton.

"I do not care to understand!" she cried.

Stanton caught her wrist.

"It will be better for you that you should understand," he said harshly. "I have held back, but it was with the thought that you would be sensible in a little while, and recognise what had to be. You will marry me. The people here expect it, and then it is my will."

"I despise you too utterly!" cried the girl.

"Come, come!" said the usurper. "This is no time for heroics of that sort. You tell me I am not Satorys. Well, what if I am not? I am King of Istan, and your future husband."

"The last you will never be!" said Grace desperately.

She darted a glance at her two friends, Peter and Duvigny, who had always treated her with studious politeness. Was there no escape? The answer was—None.

Stanton held her hand, and now, despite her recoil of dislike and repugnance, he raised it to his lips.

"You will think better of it," he said quietly. "My marriage with you will crown my triumph. I have given orders. You are to be lodged in the palace. The women you have been with will look after you!"

He made a sign, and Grace saw her former custodians approaching her, those native women who had treated her with respect certainly, but who had never permitted her the least liberty. She gave a despairing sigh as she felt herself being led away.

Paul Satorys Arrives.

Satorys landed in Istan. He was well provided with funds, and though the country was disturbed, he managed to get a horse, paying an exorbitant figure. He learned the great news as he pressed forward. The people at the inn amidst the mountains where he stopped to rest his nag told him of the fierce fighting in the capital, and he groaned in spirit as he thought of the plight of the girl who was in the power of his rival. He tried to drive the thought away. It was impossible. The country he loved had been thrown into war, and hundreds must have perished.

As for his precise plan of action when he reached the capital he could determine nothing. He knew his position was hazardous in the extreme, but he hoped to find some of those who would know him, and as events shaped he was not disappointed, for after riding hard till nightfall, he left his horse at a posada in the outskirts of the city, and walked into the centre of the town on foot.

It was a strange position to be in—an outcast in his own land! He found the city given over to rejoicing, the cafes filled, and he walked slowly down the principal streets, hoping that some of his friends might be found.

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He paused at a corner of the Grande Place, where the newspapers were being sold. At the far end of the white expanse rose the walls of the palace, and as he stood there a company of foot soldiers swung by.

"You!"

Satorys turned sharply, to see Duvigny at his elbow. The two gripped one another's hands.

"Am I too late?" asked Satorys.

There was a shake of the head.

"I had hoped, but it seemed useless," said Duvigny. "The new king has stifled the news which was cabled from London as to his real identity. He is strong, and though, so far, he does not suspect me, yet I am not in the position I was."

"And Grace?" asked Satorys huskily.

"Miss Lang is held a prisoner in the palace until she consents to become the wife of the man who has impersonated you."

Satorys gave a gasp of relief.

"Then I am not too late. Duvigny, as you know, I held out against this plot, for I loved my country, and would not hurl her into war, but now it is war. This scoundrel Stanton, who deceived you all, shall be seized, and——"

Duvigny touched him on the arm.

"Come this way!" he murmured. "See that fellow there?" He indicated a man in a black cape, who had stooped down ostensibly to pick up a letter he had dropped. "He is a spy. The city is thronged with such. When it is known that you are here your life will not be worth a moment's purchase!"

He led Satorys down a side street, and together they lost themselves in a labyrinth of small thoroughfares which surrounded the markets. There was no more sign of the spy, but as he listened to Duvigny's explanations Satorys began to see more clearly than before the myriad difficulties and dangers which surrounded him. Stanton would have no mercy. He was governing with a vengeance, and the army, delighted to have a strong leader, seemed enthusiastic on his behalf, while Istan, although it had been shaken by internal strife, was yet a powerful country with a fleet which was numerous and well equipped; and, moreover, it possessed an aeroplane flotilla ready for action.

Duvigny drew his companion to the entrance of a little cafe. The two men sat down under the trees.

"I was in the Council Chamber yesterday," he said.

"There is talk of attacking England."

Satorys nodded. He still had confidence, and he spoke with resolution.

"I am here to save that poor girl," he said. "And then this vile wretch must be made to pay for all his crimes. If I faced him in the palace——"

Duvigny shook his head.

"You could not get there, for one thing. The palace is guarded well. The only hope is to save Miss Lang, and then make a dash for the mountains."

He leaned forward, and began to speak in a low, excited tone.

The Letter.

Duvigny had much to tell his chief. Satorys listened with growing impatience, his eye roving round the shady garden of the cafe. At last he broke in.

"Not a bit of use talking about my rights, Duvigny," he cried. "For the time they are dead. I am thinking of that poor girl. She is a prisoner in the palace, you say. You can, of course, get a note to her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give me something to write on."

Satorys seized the sheet of paper the other drew from his pocket-book, and began to dash down a few lines.

The letter finished, he handed it to Duvigny.

"You will give this to Miss Lang?"

Duvigny nodded, and slipped the missive into his pocket, and, rising to his feet, made a sign to a man who had just stepped into the garden.

Duvigny swung round on Satorys, who was gazing with wonderment on the stranger.

"This is Peter Mardyke, sir," he said. "He has been my shadow ever since I set foot in Istan, and you can rely on him to the death."

Peter saluted gravely.

Satorys gave a growl.

"I see," he said; "my other adherent. It seems I have two, and yet this is my own country!" he went on bitterly.

Peter came closer.

"I wouldn't talk so loud, sir, if I was you. This place is chockful of spies, and I would like to wring the neck of each one, but there's nothing doing at present. Mr. Duvigny has told me about you, and I may say I am very glad you are here, for the chap as calls himself king is a

mean sort of varmint, and for myself I don't believe he has all his change."

"Dare say not," said Satorys sharply. He turned to Duvigny. "You will try to get that letter to Miss Lang? Peter here will take me to your lodgings. You are not living at the palace? Good! Maybe Peter will also get me a disguise, as it is madness for me to be showing myself as I am in the city."

It was settled that Duvigny should meet the others at his own rooms in a few hours' time. They separated, Duvigny leaving the cafe at once, and Satorys, accompanied by Peter, a minute or two afterwards.

It was only a short distance to the house where Duvigny had taken up his quarters.

The two men passed down street after street, through crowds of people who seemed to have given themselves up to pleasure. The white lines of the lofty houses stood out vividly against the sky of the deepest blue. Peter led the way through one of the myriad courtyards which surrounded many of the buildings, and Satorys followed his conductor into the shady interior of a handsome residence, and up interminable flights of highly-polished stairs.

Peter was a guide of the most resourceful kind. In the well-appointed apartments where the old sailor seemed perfectly at home, Satorys was provided with fresh clothes, and after performing the services of a valet, Peter set about preparing a meal.

"Oh, if I was you I wouldn't say 'No, thank you,' sir, to a bit of victuals. I know all about what is happening, for Mr. Duvigny and me has been close pals since we got here. Care killed the cat, sir, asking your pardon; but you are not a cat. There are worse disasters at sea, sir. We'll get the young lady safe, only give us time. That chap as calls himself king is no more like one than the tame monkey I had who took a stroll in the Sargasso Sea and lost his life according, and no insurance coupon either; but that's neither here nor there."

Satorys tossed off the glass of light wine the sailor brought him, and lit a cigarette.

"You say you know the palace? You come and go as you like? You often see Miss Lang?"

"No, sir; very seldom. The young lady is guarded too carefully; but I have seen her. But don't you worry too much, sir. We've got to go cautious, like. The chap who calls himself you is as clever as they are made."

Satorys strode to the end of the room and back again, to stand looking out of the window. Inaction was killing him. Suddenly he started and dashed to the door, thinking he heard Duvigny returning, but it was a false alarm. He stood there, fingering nervously the revolver which Peter had handed to him, and the old sailor watched him thoughtfully, his brow wrinkled up. He did not venture to say anything further just then. There was something in the manner of Satorys which awed him somewhat.

Satorys suddenly turned on the sailor.

"He does not return. There must be something wrong."

"No, sir—no. It might be hours before he got a chance to hand his letter to the lady."

"Humph! I suppose you can enter the palace right enough? You know something about it all?"

"Yes, sir; of course."

"Then why shouldn't I go there?"

"Can't be did, sir. You would be arrested at once."

"I don't know so much about that," said Satorys grimly. "Anyhow, I am going to try. We might get through the gardens and never be seen, and it is the only way. Maybe, Duvigny has been arrested—been found out."

"Maybe the Pope of Rome has corns on his toes," said Peter. "You can go on 'maybeing' till all's blue, but I don't think—" He stopped suddenly, and pulled out his revolver to examine it carefully. "I see you mean going, sir, and it aren't for a chap like me to try to prevent you."

Satorys was devoured with a feverish impatience, and he smiled bitterly as he caught sight of his reflection in a mirror.

He had allowed a short beard to grow since he had left England, and he felt certain that he would pass unrecognised once more.

He left the house, Peter, who was strangely silent for him, at his side. They reached the big park which stretched up to the palace gardens, and then, proceeding cautiously, gained the boundary walls of the Royal demesne.

Evening was coming swiftly on by that time, and the widening shadows on the grass looked black by contrast with the dazzling rays of the sinking sun.

Well did Satorys know the madness of his scheme. But something drove him on, making him utterly reckless of the consequences so that he saw the girl he loved, the girl who was in deadly peril.

"Your only chance is to wait for night, sir," whispered Peter, as they glided on amidst the trees.

There was a sign of assent from Satorys. The place was THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 337.

NEXT WEDNESDAY— "MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"

well guarded, he knew, and there would be no mercy if he were found trying to enter the palace even as a stranger.

Peter suddenly touched the other's arm.

"Look there," he said.

Satorys turned his head. The sailor was pointing to a long, low shed which stood in a glade sheltered by trees, and Satorys made out the spars of an aeroplane projecting through the open doorway of the building.

"What of it?" he asked irritably.

"Oh, there's a great deal of it, sir!" said the sailor. "Them things sometimes comes in very, very useful; but never your mind, let's get on."

Night came with a rush. From the city was heard the chiming of many bells, then a snatch of military music.

It was a mad enterprise indeed. Satorys crept forward, and reached the wall of the gardens where it sank owing to an inequality in the ground. Satorys was clambering up, and Peter faced about revolver in hand. It would have gone hard with anyone who had attempted to interfere just then.

"All right, sir?" sang out Peter.

Satorys was mounted on the top of the wall.

"Right it is!" he cried. "Now, you."

Walls did not make any difference to the sailor. He went up like a cat. The next minute the two companions were creeping forward towards the towering building which rose shadowy now in the faint light of the vanished day.

Satorys gritted his teeth as he thought of the past. He had been hasty, maybe, in making a dash for Istan, but was there a man in his place who would have acted otherwise?

He was asking himself what his plans were. Plans! He had none—only to reach the girl who was held a prisoner in the palace ahead of him, and try to get her away.

"Stop!" said Peter, in a low whisper. "See the sentry there? This side is as well guarded as the other. But never mind," he went on, after a pause, "the beggar's got his back to us."

They went on once more, and it was thanks to the sailor's knowledge of the palace that they were able at last, after threading their way through the dark, green labyrinth of endless gardens, to reach one of the marble terraces giving on the chief reception-rooms. Satorys was first, his hand on his revolver, for well he knew that discovery meant death.

Keeping in the deep shadow, the two men glided on, to stop at last in a place where the terrace widened out. Here was a little Dutch garden, with dumpty shrubs and quaint statues, trim walks, and low, red walls almost covered with lichen and moss. But of these things Satorys saw nothing as he stood back, screened from the sight of a stalwart sentry; one of the men of the native army, who stood, rifle in hand, at the alcoved entrance to a room, which was lighted with many coloured lamps.

Satorys turned his head and gazed at Peter. He was afraid lest the old man should speak, but the sailor crouched just behind the rightful King of Istan, motionless, as if he had been carved out of marble, like the grotesque figure near which they were standing.

(A thrilling, long instalment of this grand serial next Wednesday.)

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ST. JIM'S JINGLES.

No. 7.—BERNARD GLYN.

What fun the famous Glyn provokes—
The leader of inventors—
When planning weird and wondrous jokes
To crush his chief tormentors!
The products of his busy brain
Have often caused a panic,
And fearful threats profusely rain
Upon the great mechanic.

So vast is Glyn's inventive power,
That all his friends and neighbours
Must be prepared at any hour
To cease their earthly labours.
A dose of deadly dynamite,
Without a word of warning,
May send them swiftly out of sight
And plunge the world in mourning.

When making plans within his lair,
Our hero hates intrusion,
And barricades the door with care,
Creating great confusion.
Then comes the tramp of many feet,
And voices crave admission;
But Bernard, from his safe retreat,
Explains the whole position.

The clever youth contrived to form
A new device for bowling,
And players, with exertion warm,
Agreed 'twas most consoling.
But soon the wretched thing went wrong,
And balls flew helter-skelter,
Compelling all the startled throng
Swiftly to flee for shelter!

The crowd disdained to stay its hand,
And Glyn was bruised with bumping;
But soon he set the irate band
With jubilation jumping.
He formed the finest of designs
'Mid universal pleasure,
For writing all the fellows' lines,
What time they romped at leisure!

The impositions set in Greek,
Which, as a rule, are reckoned
To occupy about a week,
Were written in a second!
But soon the "beaks" unearthed the wheeze
(Which never was repeated),
And certain boys were ill at ease
When in the class-room seated!

What wondrous bliss for every lad
Who, doomed to dull detention,
Devours, with eager eyes and glad,
The humours of invention!
Then muster in triumphant might,
Each youthful Tom and Tony,
And praise with unsurpassed delight
This juvenile Marconi!

"THE GEM" LIBRARY FREE
CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns are those of readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl; English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons, one taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column must write to the advertisers direct. No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C."

K. Whittle, 187, Lake Street, Perth, Western Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl interested in photography.

F. Muir, Main Street, Greytown, North Island, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 13-15.

Harry Jackson, Bull's Chambers, 14, Moore Street, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 15-16.

W. Anderson, 84th Bty. R.F.A., Jubbulpore, India, wishes to correspond with girl readers, age 20-24.

Miss W. Green, 1, Alma Lane, off Tory Street, Wellington, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with a boy reader interested in postcards, age 15-16.

A. J. Wyeth, Bradford House, Blenheim, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with readers living in Elgin (Scotland), age 17-18.

C. R. Russell and R. M. C. Russell, 15, Armadale Street, Croxton, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers living in America, South Africa, Scotland or Ireland, age 16-17.

B. J. Hughes, 372, Park Street, South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in America or Canada, age 15-17.

C. H. James, 273, Brunswick Road, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in America or England, age 16-18.

S. Evans, 94, Fletcher Street, Essendon, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with girl readers living in the British Isles.

K. Greene, 105, Humffray Street, Ballarat, East Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with college readers interested in sports, age 15-17.

Miss I. Black, 84, Glenferrie Road, Hawthorne, Melbourne, Australia, wishes to correspond with boy readers, age 16-17.

Fred. J. Lewis, P.O. Box 232, St. John's, Newfoundland, wishes to correspond with readers interested in stamps.

H. Tharratt, High Street, Northcote, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 14-16.

T. Johnson, Corra Lynn Bay, View Street, Northcote, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 14-16.

J. Monk, 39, Wilson Street, Brighton, Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in the British Isles, age 14-16.

J. R. Jenson, c/o Castle Salt Co., Birkenhead, Port Adelaide, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in the British Isles, age 16-18.

Thomas Lavery, 27, Beach Street, Hartford, Connecticut, United States of America, wishes to correspond with readers interested in postcards, age 13-20.

Next Week

KERR.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.**THE WAITER'S PRICE.**

It was a banquet where a notable gathering of politicians had assembled. A certain aspiring young attorney was among the number, and as he espied an influential judge at the far end of the room, he called the head waiter, and slipped five shillings into his hands.

"Just take this," he whispered, "and put me next to Judge Spink at the table."

Upon being seated, however, he found he was at the other end of the room from the judge. He called the head waiter to explain.

"Well, sir," replied the official, "the fact is that the judge gave me ten shillings to put you as far from him as possible."
—Sent in by L. Bromley, Lancs.

UNAPPETISING.

"Jones," said a hotel-manager to a waiter, "what did that gent. from Table No. 7 leave so suddenly for?"

"Well, sir," replied the waiter, "he sat down and asked for sausages, and I told him we were out of them; but if he would care to wait a few minutes I could get the cook to make some."

"Well," said the manager, "and what then?"

"I went into the kitchen," resumed the waiter, "and accidentally trod upon the dog's tail, and of course it yelped out. And suddenly the gent got up and left."—Sent in by C. Angel, Brixton, S.W.

THEN SILENCE REIGNED.

A youthful barrister looked somewhat contemptuously at a simple-looking labourer in the witness-box, evidently regarding the rustic as too "small" for his cross-examining skill. However, he began:

"Have you ever been married?"

The witness said he had.

"And whom did you marry?"

"A woman, sir."

The barrister turned to one of his confreres and murmured:

"Village idiot."

"Come, come, my good man," he said to the witness, "of course it was a woman! Did you ever hear of anyone marrying a man?"

"Yes, sir," replied the rustic. "P-please, my sister."—Sent in by D. Challacombe, Barnstaple.

"PATIENCE."

The incident is related of a Scotch doctor, new to the gun, who adventured upon a day's rabbit-shooting.

Chased by the ferrets, bunny was rather a quick-moving target, and the medico was not meeting with the success he anticipated.

"Hang it all, man!" he exclaimed impatiently to the keeper who accompanied him. "These beasts are too quick for me."

"Ay, doctor," the pawky keeper replied. "But, sure, ye didna expect them tae lie still till ye kill them, like yer patients do!"—Sent in by Thos. J. Butler, Dublin.

"HEY—WHAT?"

A comedian was taking a walk the other day, when he was accosted by a bootblack.

"Shine, sir?"

"Yes, I think I will," said the comedian.

And while the boots were being cleaned he asked the boy a few questions about his home.

"What's your father's trade?" he asked.

"He's a farmer, sir," answered the boy.

"Oh!" said the comedian. "So he makes hay while the son shines."—Sent in by C. Adams, Bristol.

FALSE SOAPS.

Mother: "I want you to go on an errand for me."

Son: "My legs ache awful!"

Mother: "Too bad! I want you to go to old Mrs. Stickleby's sweet-shop and—"

Son: "Oh, that isn't very far to walk! I can go there."

Mother: "Very well. Go there, and just beside it you will see a grocer's shop. Go in and get me a bar of soap."—Sent in by Miss L. Sims, Hants.

JACK'S MISTAKE.

A burly Jack Tar was escorting his best girl across the tram-lines, when a car came bowling around the corner and nearly upset the two.

"Hi, there, ye landlubber!" yelled Jack to the conductor. "Can't yer see where ye're going? Do yer want to knock us down?"

"Who are you jawin' at?" cried the conductor. "I ain't drivin', am I?"

"No!" roared the indignant sailor. "But ye're steerin', ain't yer?"—Sent in by Harry Hulmes, Liverpool.

'ARK AT THAT!

Algy (running after 'bus): "I say, conductor, is this Noah's Ark full yet?"

Conductor: "All except the monkey. Jump in!"—Sent in by Geo. G. Murray, Edinburgh.

TRY THESE.

Question: Which peer wears the largest hat?

Answer: The one with the largest head.

Question: Which is the left side of a plum-pudding?

Answer: The one which is not eaten.

Question: What will turn without moving?

Answer: Milk.

Question: Why is the National Anthem of the masculine gender?

Answer: Because it's a hymn (him).

Question: What pen ought never to be used for writing?

Answer: A sheep-pen.

Question: Describe an old suit of clothes in two letters?

Answer: C D (seedy).

Question: What word may be pronounced quicker by adding a syllable to it?

Answer: Quick.

Question: How many ants make a landlord?

Answer: Ten-ants.—Sent in by E. Reynolds, Limehouse.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED.

Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the sender will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED—The Editor, "The Gem" Library, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

THIS OFFER IS OPEN TO READERS IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.

No correspondence can be entered into with regard to this competition, and all contributions enclosed in letters, or sent in otherwise than on postcards, will be disregarded.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to
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OUR ·· THREE ·· COMPANION ·· PAPERS!
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For Next Wednesday.
"MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"
 By Martin Clifford.

In this splendid complete story of Tom Merry & Co. the attention of the juniors of St. Jim's is principally occupied with preparations for the great play they are going to perform on Speech Day, at the end of the term.

Monty Lowther, who is in his element as an actor and comedian, has a grand idea for rendering his "part" a screamingly funny one, and forthwith proceeds to put his plan into action, in spite of his chums' protests. He amazes Herr Schneider, the portly German master, by his sudden affection for the weird language of the Fatherland. Monty Lowther laughs up his sleeve—until the arrival of the Fraulein at St. Jim's suddenly changes all his ideas.

Too late he realises his mistake. He tries hard to rectify it, and for a time succeeds. But in the end, when the school-boy actor is once "on the boards," the artiste in him is too strong for his better self; he lets himself go—with dire consequences. To the sensitive lad, it is a severe punishment which follows on the heels of

"MONTY LOWTHER'S MISTAKE!"

WHAT EVERY "GEMITE" WANTS!

The following letter is typical of many to be found in my postbag this week:

"Dear Editor,—I feel I must write to you and let you know that I love your tales. They are the best school tales anyone can possibly read. I have six chums that also worship them, and we have formed a club called the 'Gem' Club, and we engage in all kinds of sport like the 'Gem' boys. We have a library of your books, and we are getting as many new readers as we can for you. I have a favour to ask you, and that is that you will write another 'Threepenny Library' about St. Jim's. I am anxiously looking forward to another threepenny number being published, and hope you will oblige by so doing. I heartily congratulate you on your fine tales. My chums are calling me now to come and have tea, so I must say good-bye for the present. I and my friends remain your staunch chums,
 J. F. H."

Many thanks for your support, J. F. H. It is very pleasant to hear from such staunch enthusiasts as you and your chums. As for your request, I think you will have noticed that I have dealt with this matter more than once in "Replies in Brief." It is safe to say that every "Gemite" would like to see another "Threepenny Library" written dealing with the adventures of Tom Merry & Co. I myself would like nothing better, while Mr. Martin Clifford would be only too pleased to do it. Unfortunately, however, even this gifted author is only human; there is a limit to the amount of work he can turn out, and at present, as is only natural in the case of a writer of his immense popularity, Mr. Clifford is working well up to his limit. To write a "Threepenny Complete Library" is a big task, even for Mr. Clifford. Urrah, therefore, he has a little time to spare from his incessant labours, I am afraid my chums must content themselves with Tom Merry & Co.'s adventures as they appear every week in "The Gem" Library and "The Penny Popular." As soon as anything turns up to make it possible, I shall set Mr. Clifford to work on a long, complete story again without a moment's unnecessary delay; that you may rely on.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

C. A. (Wimbledon, S.W.)—It all depends on how far back you want copies of "The Gem" Library. The Christian names of Herries and Digby are George and Robert.

William Stuart, who desired to dispose of a number of copies of old issues of "The Boys' Friend" 3d. Library, writes to me to state that the requests he has received are so numerous that he is unable to reply to all. The copies have now been disposed of.

GUARDING THE KING.

A Case of Mistaken Identity.

On one occasion during the reign of King Edward VII. a small, dapper little Frenchman, with a very sunburnt face and carrying a small portmanteau in his hand, rushed on to the platform just as the train, by which the King and Queen were travelling, was about to start. He jumped into a carriage as the train began to move, and was followed at once by a man who was apparently a railway official. "Ah, that was a narrow squeak!" remarked the little man; then, looking at the official, who was the only occupant of the carriage beside himself, he smilingly said: "I have got a ticket, you know, all right."

The railway official nodded, and then to the man's amazement, remarked, "I must place you under arrest." "Arrest!" exclaimed the other; "but what have I done?" But the railway official, who was, as a matter of fact, a detective, merely shook his head, and observed that he would be given an opportunity of explaining matters later on.

At the first stop the detective put his head out of the window, and in a few minutes two men came up to the window, and the three held a consultation, whilst the little man vehemently protested against the detective's action. "I am M— B—," he exclaimed, "I am the travelling representative of Messrs. — of St. Petersburg. There is my card. I must get out at the next station, where I have an important appointment."

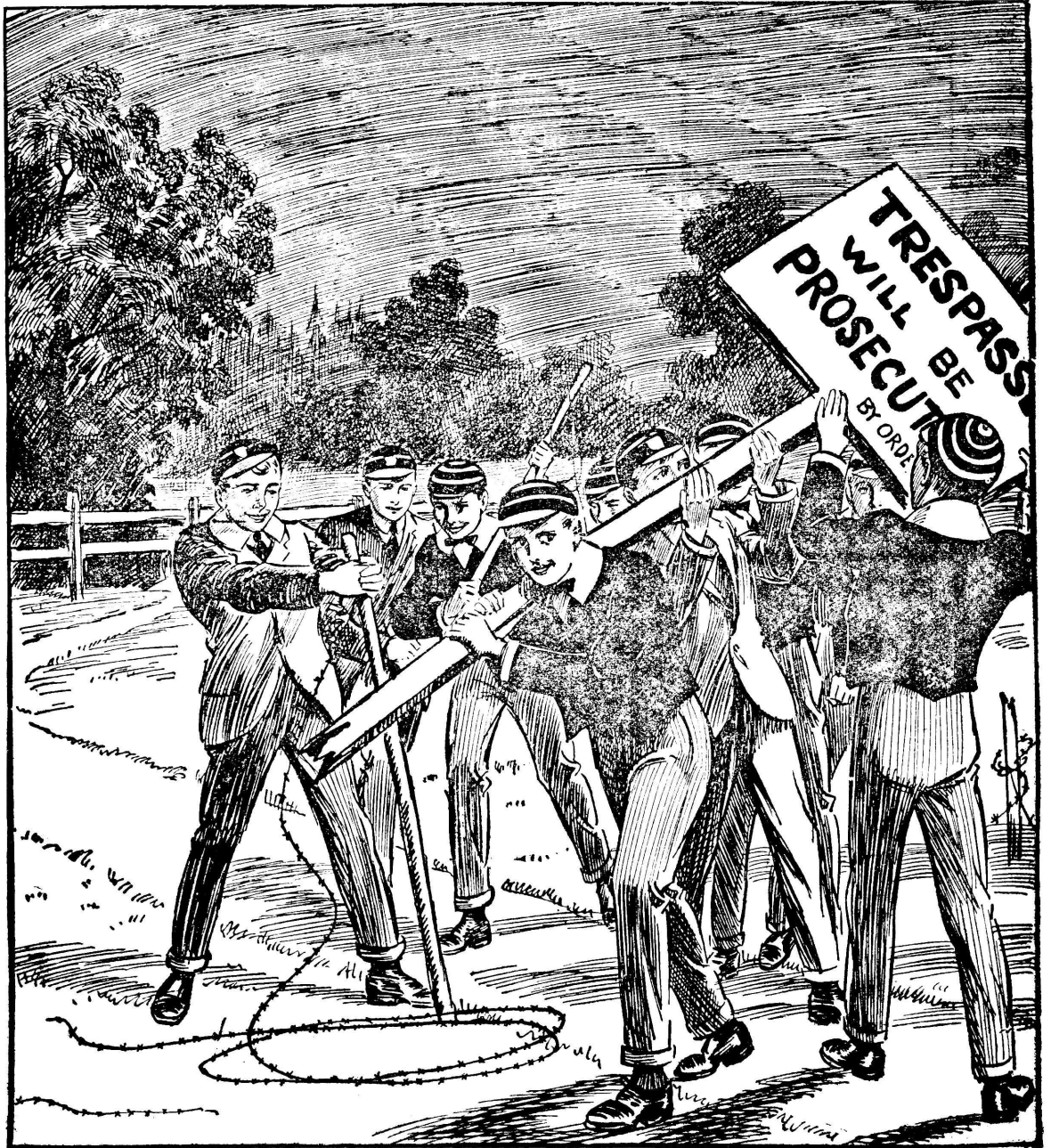
At this juncture a fourth detective appeared on the scene, looked at the little man and smiled. "It is a mistake," he said quietly; "but you are exactly like an individual whom it would be our duty to put under arrest, but this individual, I learn, is not in England. I am sorry if you have been put to any inconvenience." Then the detective got out of the carriage as the train began to move, and the little man, greatly relieved at the discovery of the mistake, insisted on shaking hands with him and exclaimed, "My friend, when you say I am like the man you want, you may greatly insult me. I do not know, but I forgive you."

Sometimes people travelling by the same train as the King are kept under observation throughout the journey, and there is usually one detective in each compartment of the train. A pilot engine is, of course, always despatched ahead of the train by which the King travels, and special arrangements are made to keep the line clear and to avoid a stop anywhere, except at the arranged stopping-places. When the King travels by a special train there is no stop until the train reaches its destination, and no one is ever allowed on the platform at its departure unless by special permission of the railway authorities.

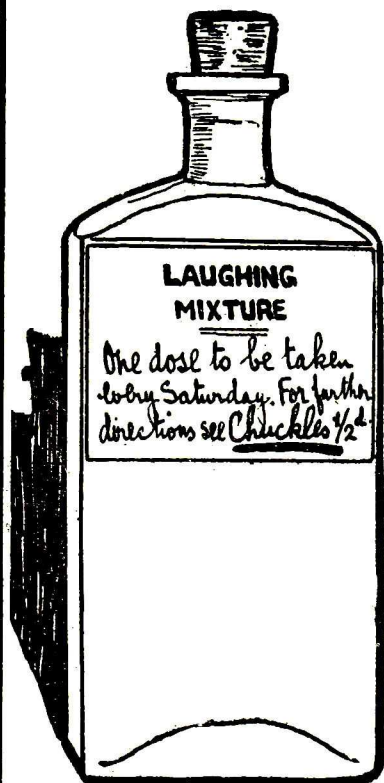
(Another Splendid Article
 Next Wednesday.)

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