CAPTURED BY CIPHER.

A Grand Long, Complete School Tale of

TOM MERRY & CO. AT ST. JIM'S.

OFFICER & TROOPER.

The FIRST Instalment of our Grand New Serial Story of

LIFE IN THE BRITISH ARMY.

— Complete Stories for ALL and Every Story a GEM. —

The GEM 1D LIBRARY

— No. 355. — Vol. 9. —

AN AMAZING MESSAGE IN CIPHER

(A thrilling incident in the splendid complete school tale contained in this issue.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

"KEEPING IT DARK!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next Wednesday's grand, long, complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's concerns the welfare of Reginald Talbot, the handsome and popular junior of the Shell. Gerald Cutts of the Fifth, enraged by the expulsion of his chum Tresham, directs all his animosity against Talbot, and makes bitter allusions to that shadowy past which Talbot and his friends are so anxious to forget. Kildare takes upon himself the task of thwarting Cutts, but in doing so he causes suspicion of a very grave nature to fall upon him. Jack Blake is the first to suspect the St. Jim's captain of treading the downward path, and he and his chums succeed in

"KEEPING IT DARK!"

with disastrous results to themselves.

STORIES OF SPECIAL INTEREST.

I would draw the attention of all loyal Gemites to the current issue of our splendid companion paper, "The Penny Popular." The stories contained in this week's issue are such as will appeal to young and old, boys and girls alike. Those who are keen on detective tales will find plenty of exciting incidents in

"CAUGHT RED-HANDED!"

an enthralling story of famous Sexton Blake; while Mr. Martin Clifford's yarn of St. Jim's, entitled

"SPOOFING THE SCHOOL!"

will make a great hit.

Jack, Sam, and Pete, the comrades who have roamed the world together, come very much into the picture in

"CAPTAIN MASON'S COMPACT!"

and, altogether, the present issue of "The Penny Popular" can be described as "simply topping" from cover to cover. Your newsagent has a copy waiting for you. Secure it now!

THE RIGHT SPIRIT.

"Two Gemites" (Kingston) have asked me certain questions relative to joining the Army. I gather from their letter that my two chums are both eager and enthusiastic to serve with the Colours, but, as they are only sixteen years of age, I am bound to say that in my opinion they would find it difficult to enlist in any section of our gallant Army. Nevertheless, I may say in these pages that I much admire the spirit of patriotism which has prompted them to offer their services to King and country, and I think that if application were made to the authorities, they would be enabled to do their share for the cause in some other way. I wish my Kingston chums every success in their worthy enterprise.

THE ANTI-GEM SOCIETY.

The following precious communication has come to hand from an individual whose boast it is to be president of the "Anti-Gem" Society—that is to say, a little knot of discontented persons banded together to wage war on the "Gem" and all its works.

An Editor's life can hardly be described as a bed of roses, and communications of this sort do not render my task any the more pleasant. In fairness to Master Carlton, however, I am giving full publicity to his communication, and invite the opinions of my readers on the subject.

Here is his letter:

"Sir,—Having obtained my fellow-members' unanimous approval, I proceed to give a few reasons why we have formed our club.

"1. The stories are ridiculously impossible. Why? Because D'Arcy could not be so foolish. Fatty Wynn could not be such a glutton and yet a hero. The Head could not be so lenient to Levison, etc., etc., etc.

"2. The Editor's Column is too stinted, and one out of every sixty correspondents is answered, etc., etc. etc.

"3. The prizes for jokes are mainly awarded to persons living a great way out of England, etc.

"Therefore, we are urging everybody within our reach to give up the 'Gem,' etc. However, we agree to consider terms if you publish this letter in your columns, thus proving whether you are a coward or a Briton.—Yours respectfully,

"ROBERT CARLTON.

"P.S.—Our hesitating friends are awaiting your decision. We give you two weeks."

THE EDITOR

Applications with regard to Advertisement Space in this Paper should be addressed: Advertisement Manager, "Pluck" Series, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.

PUBLISHED IN TOWN AND COUNTRY EVERY WEDNESDAY MORNING

THE GEM LIBRARY 1D

COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

CAPTURED BY CIPHER!

A Grand Long, Complete School Story of the Chums of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "I pwopose a cheeah for Levison of the Fourth!" "Hurray!" And that cheer, heartily and spontaneously given, rang very pleasantly in the ears of the junior who had been sent to Coventry. (See Chapter 15.)

CHAPTER 1.
Most Mysterious!

"GWEAT Scott!"

D'Arcy of the Fourth uttered that exclamation in tones of the greatest amazement.

In his astonishment his eyeglass dropped from his eye. He gathered it up again, and polished it, and jammed it into his eye, and regarded blankly the object which had called forth his surprised exclamation.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the first fellow down that morning in the School House at St. Jim's. The big door of the School House had been unfastened, but it was not yet opened, when the swell of St. Jim's came downstairs, and Arthur Augustus swung it open himself.

Then he stood transfixed.

He stood, with his eyeglass in his eye, regarding the outside of the big oaken door in blank amazement.

"Bai Jove!"

The early housemaid in the hall looked at Arthur Augustus in surprise. Tom Merry of the Shell, who was just coming down the stairs, stared at him.

"What's the row, Gussy?"

"Gweat Scott!"

Next Wednesday:

"KEEPING IT DARK!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

No. 355. (New Series). Vol. 9

"What the dickens——"

"Extwaordinawy!"

"What on earth's the matter with the chap?" asked Monty Lowther, coming down with Manners, and joining Tom Merry. "What are you blinking at, Gussy?"

"I am not blinkin', Lowthah. I am wegardin' this most extwaordinawy thing."

"Something on the door, I suppose," said Tom Merry, puzzled. And the Terrible Three of the Shell, perplexed by D'Arcy's attitude of amazement, hurried to join him in the doorway. Then they exclaimed, all at once, as they beheld the object that had caused D'Arcy's surprise:

"My hat!"

It was indeed surprising. The door had only just been opened, and nobody belonging to the School House had yet been out in the quadrangle. But on the outside of the door was an extraordinary inscription in chalk.

The juniors stared at it blankly. Who had put it there was a mystery; and what it meant was a greater mystery still. Upon the oaken surface of the big door a number of figures had been chalked. They ran, in order:

"18 15 1 1 20 15 16 10 16 7 18 66 4 24 60 10 4 20 4 7 9 2 5 9 66 9 9 14 4 20 16 12 24 14 4 2."

No wonder the juniors stared.

For some moments they stared in silence, their breath almost taken away by their astonishment.

"Well, this beats the band!" said Monty Lowther, at length. "What silly ass has been chalking those figures there?"

"What on earth can they mean?" said Manners.

"Can't mean anything," said Tom Merry, wrinkling his brows over the puzzle. "Must be a joke of the New House chaps, I suppose."

"Where does the joke come in?"

"Blessed if I know!" confessed Tom Merry. "But, as they don't mean anything, I suppose it must be a joke."

"Pewwaps they do mean somethin', deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Rats! What could they mean?"

"Pewwaps it's a cwyptogwam?"

"A which?"

"A cwyptogwam," said D'Arcy firmly; "that's what it looks like."

"Oh, a cryptogram!" said Tom Merry. "What would anybody want to chalk a cryptogram on the door of the School House for, fathead?"

"I wefuse to be called a fathead, Tom Merry. I think it must be a cwyptogwam. It can't be anythin' else, you see. Pwobably some wotten joke of the New House boundahs. When we work it out, we shall find it is some diswespectful message."

"Oh, very likely," said Tom Merry. "Then we won't work it out. We'll rub it out instead."

"Hold on, deah boy; don't wub it out! Let's work it out first. I'm wathah good at cwyptogwams, you know—quite a dab at them, in fact."

"Hallo! what have you got there?" asked Blake of the Fourth, coming down with Herries and Digby. "Hallo! what on earth's this?"

"My hat!"

"What's the joke?"

More and more fellows were coming down now, and they joined the group of juniors in the doorway, staring at the strange inscription.

There were exclamations of surprise on all sides.

"Must be a cryptogram," said Levison of the Fourth, eyeing the chalked figures very curiously. "The figures stand for letters, you know; and when you get the right letters you can read it off quite easily."

"Read it off, then," said Blake.

"Ahem! I haven't got the right letters."

"I wathah think I can work it, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, with the smile of superior knowledge. "Pway don't wub it out. Of course, it must be some cheeky message fwom the New House boundahs. Now, suppose you numbah the letters of the alphabet, you know, fwom beginnin' to end, and use the figgahs instead of the lettahs, then you get 1 for A, 2 for B, 3 for C, and so on. Pway wait a minute, till I scwibble it down."

Arthur Augustus, deeply interested in the mysterious cryptogram, hastily took out his pocket-book and a pencil, and scrawled down the alphabet from A to Z, and wrote under each letter its appropriate figure, from 1 to 26.

"Now, then, it won't take long——"

"Hold on!" said Blake. "One of the numbers is 66. Which is the sixty-sixth letter of the alphabet, Gussy?"

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pewwaps there's a catch," said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully. "Anyway, we'll twy to numbahs one to twenty-six. That would make the first part of it read R O A A T O P—ahem!"

"And what does R O A A T O P spell?" asked Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! It weally doesn't seem to spell anythin', deah boys, unless it's in a beastly foweign language."

"Must be a jolly foreign language, if it spells anything," said Lowther. "Sanskrit, I should say, or American, or something like that."

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Blessed if it's worth the trouble of working out," said Tom Merry. "It must be a joke of Figgins & Co. Instead of working it out, we'll go and look for the New House boundahs, and bump them for their cheek."

"Hear, hear!"

"Perhaps it wasn't Figgins & Co.," said Levison of the Fourth, who was eyeing the inscription with keen curiosity. "It doesn't look to me like a joke. I'm going to take a copy of it, anyway, and work it out, if it's a cryptogram."

And Levison proceeded to copy down the strange figures into his pocket-book.

"Oh, rot!" said Tom Merry. "'Tain't worth the trouble; and perhaps it doesn't mean anything at all. It may be only a jape, to make us try to work it out for nothing. Then the bounders will have the laugh of us. Come on, you chaps; let's go and bump the bounders for their cheek, instead of working out their blessed cryptogram. Where's Talbot?"

"Here I am!" called out Talbot, coming downstairs.

"What's on?"

"A rotten joke of the New House bounders," said Tom Merry. "We're going to bump them, and we want you to help."

Talbot laughed.

"I'm on!" he said cheerily.

"Come on!"

"Hallo! What's this——" Talbot paused, as he saw the chalked figures on the door, and started violently. "Who's written this here?"

"Figgins & Co.," explained Tom Merry. "It's some rotten joke up against the School House—at least, we suppose it is. Come on, Talbot!"

But Talbot did not move. He seemed rooted to the floor, and he stared hard at the chalked figures. The colour had faded out of his cheeks. Then, as he caught the keen eyes of Levison of the Fourth turned curiously upon him, he flushed.

"Odd idea," he said calmly. "I suppose it's some sort of a cryptogram—what?"

"Can you read it?" asked Levison, his eyes still on Talbot's face.

"How should I be able to read cryptograms at sight?" said Talbot carelessly. "I'll take a copy of it, though."

"Oh, don't waste time," said Tom Merry. "I've just spotted Figgins across the quad——"

"I'll come after you," said Talbot.

"Oh, all right!"

Tom Merry & Co. crowded out of the house. Talbot made a copy of the chalked figures on the door. Only Levison of the Fourth remained with him, and he was watching the Shell fellow with an odd expression in his eyes.

"Might as well rub this rubbish out," said Talbot, when he had finished making his copy.

"Why?" asked Levison.

"Oh, of course it doesn't matter!"

Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, came along the passage, and he frowned as he saw the chalk-marks on the door.

"What's this?" he exclaimed. "This kind of thing isn't allowed. Rub that chalk off the door at once, Levison."

"Right-ho!" said Levison.

He borrowed a duster from the housemaid and rubbed the old oak clean. Talbot of the Shell drew a deep breath, and, without a glance at the curious face of Levison, he went out into the quad.

CHAPTER 2.

A Little Too Hasty.

FIGGINS, Kerr, and Wynn, the famous Co. of the New House, had just come out of their House as the rising-bell ceased to clang over St. Jim's. In the keen November morning they were taking a trot round the quadrangle to freshen their appetites for breakfast, though Fatty Wynn's appetite, at least, did not require any aid of that sort. The three chums of the New House halted as a crowd of School House fellows bore down upon them with a rush.

"Look out! School House cads!" exclaimed Kerr.

"Collar them!" roared Tom Merry.

Figgins & Co. made a rush for their own House. But the School House fellows crowded in the way, and the New House trio were promptly surrounded.

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Figgins. "Fair play's a jewel, you know. What are you on the war-path for so early in the morning?"

"Looking for cheeky bounders who chalk up cryptograms on the door of our House," said Tom Merry.

"What!"

"Collar them!"

"Here, I say——"

But Figgins had no time to say anything. The crowd of the School House closed in upon the three, and they were promptly collared. Figgins & Co. resisted manfully, but in the grasp of so many pairs of hands they had no chance at all.

"Bump them!" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Bump the boundahs!"

"Yow-ow!" roared Figgins. "What the dickens——"

Bump!

"Yarooh!"

"Now explain what it means!" howled Blake. "We're not taking the trouble to work out your rotten cryptograms. Tell us what it means!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Explain it, you boundahs!"

"Blessed if I know what you're driving at!" gasped Figgins. "Are you gone off your silly rockers?"

"Explain!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, bump him again!" said Tom Merry. "We'll bump it out of him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins came into rough contact with the quadrangle again, and he roared.

"Yow-ow-ow! You silly asses——"

"Now will you tell us what it means?" demanded Tom Merry.

"What what means, you frabjous ass?"

"The cryptogram!"

"What cryptogram?"

"Oh, he doesn't know!" grinned Lowther. "Give him another bump, and freshen his memory!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Figgins. "Chuck it, you asses! Yarooh! Leggo! I'll slaughter you! Rescue, New House! Oh, my hat!"

"Now will you explain?" demanded Blake.

"I don't know what you're burbling about!" yelled Figgins. "I don't know anything about any silly cryptogram!"

"Honest Injun?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, fathead!"

"Then it was Kerr," said Tim. "Bump Kerr!"

"Hold on!" yelled Kerr, as he was bumped on the hard, unsympathetic earth. "Hold on! Chuck it! I don't know anything about it either!"

"Oh, rats! Give him another bump for not knowing anything about it," said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh crumbs! You fatheads—— Oh!"

"It must have been Wynn, then!" said Tom Merry. "Now then, all hands to the mill! Fatty's a heavy-weight!"

"Leggo!" gasped Fatty. "I don't know—yarooh!—anything—oh, my hat!—about it either! Oh! Oh!"

"Now, look here!" said Tom Merry, wagging his forefinger at the gasping heroes of the New House. "If it wasn't you, it was some bounder in your House. Who was it?"

"You—you silly ass!" gasped Figgins. "It wasn't. We're the first out of our House this morning, you burbling jabberwocks!"

"And we don't know anything about it!" roared Kerr.

"Bai Jove, we have been wathah hastay, deah boys!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind. A bumping will do them good, on general principles," grinned Kangaroo of the Shell. "But if it wasn't those bounders, who was it?"

"It's a giddy mystery, then!" said Tom Merry. "Somebody must have got in over the school wall in the night, and chalked that rot on our door. I suppose it couldn't have been old Taggles. Then it must have been somebody from outside St. Jim's."

"It's extwaordinawy!"

Figgins & Co. were released. They were a little dishevelled, and somewhat flustered, and a very great deal exasperated. But their curiosity overcame their exasperation.

"What's the giddy mystery?" asked Figgins, as he dusted himself down. "What are you burbling about, you School House fatheads?"

"Weally, Figgins——"

Tom Merry explained, and the New House chums listened in great astonishment.

"Well, that takes the cake," said Figgins. "Honour bright, it wasn't us—or anybody in our House, either! We were the first out of the House, and we should have seen it if any New House chap had done it. Besides, some of you were out before us. I saw your door open. Must have been a School House chap playing the giddy goat!"

"Wats! I opened the door first, Figgins, and I found it there."

"Let's see it," said Kerr.

Figgins & Co. walked towards the School House with the crowd of fellows. In their curiosity concerning the strange message in figures they had quite forgotten the bumping. But their experience was like that of the celebrated Mother Hubbard. When they got there the door of the School House was bare.

"My hat! It's been rubbed out!" said Blake.

Figgins looked at him suspiciously.

"I say, I suppose you're not pulling our leg?" he said.

"Honest Injun!" said Tom Merry. "It was there right enough. We all saw it. I didn't take a copy of it, though. Did any of you fellows?"

"I was goin' to," said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "But I didn't. It's wotten, because I'm wathah a dab at findin' out cwyptogwams."

"Levison took a copy of it," said Herries. "I saw him doing it."

"Good! We'll hunt up Levison."

There was a search for Levison. The Fourth-Former was discovered in a quiet corner of the quadrangle, wrinkling his brows over the strange set of figures in his pocket-book.

"Heah he is!"

"Found it out, Levison?"

Levison shook his head.

"I can't make head or tail of it," he said.

"Let's see it," said Figgins. "I dare say I can tell you what it means."

"Weally, Figgins, as I have not been able to guess the meanin', I hardly cousidah——"

"Depends on a chap's brains," explained Figgins. "You wouldn't be able to, you know."

"You uttah ass——"

"Blessed if I can make it out!" said Figgins, staring at the queer set of figures in Levison's pocket-book. "Looks as if some silly ass has jumbled up the figures simply to puzzle us. They can't mean anything."

"Each figgah stands for a lettah, deah boy——"

"Or a word," said Lowther.

"Yaas, possibly. But how to find out what lettahs or words—that is wathah difficult."

"Beats me," said Figgins. "You try it, Kerr. You're a blessed Scotchman, and you've got a head for this kind of thing."

Kerr grinned. He was already scanning the figures with deep interest. But he could make nothing of them.

"I'll take a copy of it, and try to work it out," he said.

A good many of the fellows took copies from Levison's, and set to work trying to decipher the weird figures. But they tried in vain, and most of them gave it up before breakfast-time. When the bell rang, and Tom Merry & Co. went into the School House, they met Talbot.

"Found it out?" asked Tom Merry.

Talbot started.

"Eh—what?"

"You took a copy of the cryptogram, didn't you?" asked Tom. "If it is a cryptogram, I mean."

"Yes, I took a copy," said Talbot carelessly. "I've thrown it away since. Let's get in to brekker."

"Right-ho! I'm hungry," said Tom Merry cheerily.

They went into the dining-room, and at that time it did not occur to Tom Merry that Talbot of the Shell had not, in point of fact, answered his question. But Levison of the Fourth, who was following them in, noted it, and he smiled in his curious way.

After breakfast, when the juniors came out, Levison of the

Fourth touched Talbot lightly on the arm as he went out into the quadrangle. Talbot's brow was wrinkled with thought, and he started irritably as he looked round at Levison.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Only a word," said the Fourth-Former—"about that cryptogram."

Talbot looked annoyed.

"Oh, don't bother me about it!" he said.

"I haven't been able to read it," explained Levison. "I thought you might have spotted what it meant."

"I don't see why you should think so."

"Oh, it was only an idea! I know you are a keen chap."

"Thanks!" said Talbot drily. And he turned away.

"Hold on!" said Levison. "You haven't answered me yet. Have you found out what it means, Talbot?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Talbot brusquely. "I wish you wouldn't bother me about the rot, Levison."

Without a word further, he walked away. Levison smiled.

— —

CHAPTER 3.

The Shadow of the Past.

TOM MERRY & CO. were particularly cheerful that day. The afternoon was a half-holiday, and the School House juniors were playing a House match with Figgins & Co. And the weather was unexpectedly good. There had been a mist in the morning, but it cleared off in the afternoon, and the sun shone down on the football-ground very brightly for November. Tom Merry & Co. were looking forward to the match with especial keenness, because they had a "rod in pickle" for the New House.

Talbot of the Shell, the scholarship junior, short as was the time that he had been at St. Jim's, had proved himself a tower of strength in the junior eleven.

In all the more important matches played by the St. Jim's juniors, the new winger was sure of a place in the team; and with his aid in the House match, Tom Merry confidently expected to give Figgins & Co. the "kybosh," as he expressed it.

After morning lessons, the juniors were thinking of nothing but the House match; the chalked figures on the School House door had been dismissed from their minds. One or two fellows were still puzzling over them, but that was all. How they had come to be chalked on the door was a mystery. Every fellow who had been asked declared that he knew nothing of the matter, and it was pretty clear that some outsider must have got in over the school wall, and chalked the figures on the door. Why anyone should have done such an extraordinary thing was a mystery. Some absurd practical joker had done it to create a mystification, was the general opinion, and so the subject was dismissed.

Football was the subject in all minds now. After dinner, most of the fellows sauntered down to the playing-fields. There was a senior match on that afternoon, too—Kildare and the mighty men of the first eleven playing a visiting team of Big Side. But to the Lower School the junior House match was the event of the day.

"Time we got down to the ground," Tom Merry remarked, looking at his watch. "Where's Talbot? Has he gone down?"

"I haven't seen him," said Lowther.

"I'll look in his study."

Tom Merry ascended the stairs to the Shell passage. He was a little surprised that Talbot needed looking for; the new fellow was usually very keen about footer. Talbot shared a study with Gore and Skimpole, next to Merry's, in the Shell passage. Tom tapped at the door, and opened it, and looked in.

Talbot was there, alone.

He did not look up. He was sitting in a chair, with his hands driven deep into his jacket pockets, and a deep wrinkle in his brow, his eyes fixed on the carpet. It was evident that he had not heard the tap on the door, and had not heard the door open.

Tom Merry's cheery face clouded a little as he looked at Talbot, silent, immobile, his face half-turned away, buried in a gloomy reverie.

Talbot was subject to those deep fits of despondent thought at times, and Tom Merry well knew the reason. But of late they had seemed to leave him, and Talbot had seemed to be as lighthearted and cheery as the rest of the Co. Apparently this afternoon the old black mood had returned once more to take possession of the junior whose past had been so strange and so shadowed.

"Talbot, old chap!"

Talbot started at the sound of Tom Merry's voice, and flushed red.

"Yes. Come in, Tom!"

"Nothing wrong, old fellow?"

"I—I was thinking," said Talbot. "Are you ready for me? I—I'd forgotten about the match. I won't keep you waiting."

Tom Merry dropped his hand on the Shell fellow's shoulder.

"Look here, Talbot I can guess what you were thinking about. Chuck it! All that's all over now."

Talbot smiled—a curious smile.

"You can guess?" he said.

"Yes," said Tom Merry bluntly. "You're thinking about things that are over and done with, and can't be helped. You shouldn't. Look forward—not back. It's best."

"I know it is," said Talbot quietly—"I know. But sometimes a fellow can't help looking back, especially when he's had a past like mine. I can't help thinking how short a while ago it was I came here—and what I was——"

"Don't," said Tom, with a pained look. He did not like to think of what his chum had been in those black, wretched days.

Talbot smiled bitterly.

"And I had no shame then," he said. "When I first came here I was the 'Toff,' the confederate of Hookey Walker and his gang of cracksmen. Then—then came the change. I know you believe in me now, Tom; I think I've proved that I'm sincere."

"Of course you have," said Tom. "You let your old pals denounce you rather than let them rob the school. After that you did a jolly plucky thing, and earned the King's pardon. Nobody has a right to say anything to you after that; and nobody will! Why, even Levison, who was always against you, has turned round, and he stands by you now. You have the gift of making friends with everybody. Nobody ever expected to see Levison play the game at any time—he was reckoned an out-and-out cad—but you have found some good in him, and brought it to light. That's something for you to set against the past that can't be helped, Talbot."

Talbot nodded.

"There's good in everybody," he said; "it only needs getting at. When I was known as the 'Toff,' when I was a cracksman, nobody would have supposed I was good for much; but——"

"But they'd have been wrong," said Tom Merry. "But what's made you think about all this now, Talbot? I thought you were getting over all that, and putting it right out of your mind?"

"I was," said Talbot slowly.

Tom Merry had an anxious look.

"Do you mean that something has happened to bring it all back?" he asked. "Some of the fellows have——" His eyes gleamed as he spoke.

"No, no!" said Talbot. "The fellows have acted like bricks, considering what they know about me. Crooke and Mellish sometimes sneer—let them! It doesn't hurt me. It isn't that."

"It's something, though," said Tom "I haven't seen you like this for a long time. I read in the papers some time ago about that burglar scoundrel who tried to break into St. Jim's, and denounced you because you wouldn't help him. What was his name—Hookey Walker?"

"That was the name."

"I read that he escaped," said Tom. "But he can't bother you, Talbot. He can't say anything more about you than he's said already; and your pardon covers all. You're not afraid of him?"

"No."

"Besides, he couldn't show up anywhere without being arrested and sent back to chokey," said Tom.

"I know. But——"

"Is it that man Hookey Walker you've been thinking of?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"But—but why?"

Talbot paused before he replied. His handsome face was clouded.

"I—I don't know if you'll understand," he said. "I—I was that man's companion. My father—Captain Crow, as they called him—was the leader of the gang, and he was killed, and I took his place, because I was useful to them. If I hadn't come here, and known you fellows, I should be in the same boat still."

"Rubbish!" said Tom. "You chucked it all overboard the first chance you had."

"Yes, I think that's true," said Talbot, with a sigh. "I asked Hookey to do the same, and he laughed at the idea; and then he attempted to rob the school. Now he's being hunted by the police. Tom, I know he's a thief and a villain, and he never cared a straw for me. But—but he was my comrade in those days."

"Talbot! You don't mean to say that you're thinking—

that you want to help that villain?" exclaimed Tom Merry, aghast.

"The question is whether I ought to," said Talbot miserably.

"Certainly you ought not to," said Tom warmly. "You've been pardoned, and that covers all you've ever done against the law. But if you renewed your connection with Hookey Walker again, you'd have Mr. Foxe of Scotland Yard on your track once more. You'd be breaking the law, and you'd be liable to prison."

"I know."

Tom Merry closed the door of the study. His face was agitated now. This had to be settled, and he meant to settle it. That Talbot, who had fought so hard to throw his black and miserable past behind him, and who had a chance at last to lead a new and brighter life, should think for a moment of risking all that he had won, from a mistaken sense of loyalty, alarmed Tom Merry greatly. He knew that the "Toff" was fearless; he knew that he was loyal; and the thought that Talbot might plunge back into the morass of crime he had so barely escaped from, for the sake of an unscrupulous and callous ruffian like Hookey Walker, filled Tom with uneasiness.

"Look here, Talbot. We'll have this out," he said. "We're not leaving this study till it's settled."

"The footer match——" said Talbot.

"Never mind that—Figgy won't mind waiting a few minutes. You're thinking of this wretched brute Hookey Walker; what has he ever done for you, excepting keep you as long as he could in a life of crime?"

Talbot winced.

"Nothing else," he said.

"And when you wanted to reform, he tried to keep you there still?"

"Yes."

"And when you refused to help rob this very school, he turned on you, denounced you, and did you all the harm he could. If you hadn't won the King's Pardon, you'd be in danger from the police now, and all through him."

"Yes."

"And he is an utter rascal—a criminal who had a chance to reform, if he had liked, and refused to take it?"

"Yes."

"Then what do you owe him? Listen to me, Talbot. All you've got, all you've won, you'd lose, if you broke the law again. And you're thinking of doing it for such a man as that, who would turn on you like a reptile if it served his purpose. You know he would!"

"I know he would," said Talbot.

"Then you've got to put the idea right out of your mind. I know you too well to suspect you; but I warn you, if the other fellows heard you talking like this, they'd very likely think it was a hankering after the old life that was troubling you."

Talbot turned crimson.

"Tom, you don't think——"

"No, I don't!" said Tom Merry. "But I want you to promise me, on your word of honour, that you won't try to see Hookey Walker, or to find out where he is, or have anything to do with him, or help him. I want you to promise to keep clear of him. Will you?"

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"You're right, Tom! He has no claim on me. He has no right to make a claim. Yes; I promise! If he asks me for help, I shall refuse him! I promise!"

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright!" said Talbot quietly.

Tom Merry's face brightened.

"I know you won't break your word," he said. "I won't ask you any questions. I dare say you know, or can guess, where the villain is hiding; but I won't say you're called upon to go to the police and denounce him. Simply keep clear of him. You promise that?"

"I promise!"

"Good! And now drive the matter out of your mind, and don't think anything more about the rascal," said Tom cheerily. "He can't trouble you here, anyway. Now let's go down to the footer. Hallo!"

The study door had opened softly, without a knock, and Levison of the Fourth stood in the doorway, startled, his face flushed.

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CHAPTER 4.

Levison on the Track.

THE two Shell fellows stared at Levison of the Fourth.

Levison had opened the door quietly, stealthily, evidently intending to enter the study quietly; and it was equally evident that he had not known that the room was occupied. The confusion in his face showed that.

Tom Merry frowned darkly. Of late he had begun to entertain a more favourable opinion of the cad of the Fourth, Levison had been won over by Talbot, from a foe he had changed into a friend, and his friendship had at least been very useful to the one-time "Toff." Levison, at a good deal of risk to himself, had saved Talbot from a false accusation, and Talbot and his friends had not forgotten it. But all Tom Merry's old dislike of the cad of the Fourth came back as he looked at the flushed and guilty face in the doorway, and he could not repress the scorn in his look.

"Well?" he snapped.

"I—I thought you fellows were gone down to the footer?" stammered Levison. "It's past the time for kick-off!"

"We were just going," said Tom Merry. "What were you sneaking into Talbot's study for?"

"I—I—I——"

"You thought there was no one here, and you were coming in like a thief!" said Tom contemptuously. "What did you want? Spying, as usual?"

"No; I—I was going to borrow Talbot's Virgil! I've got some lines to do, and—and I've lost mine!"

Levison's late reform had evidently not extended so far as learning to tell the truth. It was quite plain to both the Shell fellows that he was lying. Tom Merry's lip curled with scorn.

"You were spying!" he said bluntly. "Though what there is to spy on, I'm blessed if I know!"

"Nor I!" said Talbot.

Levison bit his lip hard.

"There's nothing to spy on now," he said, emphasising the last word spitefully.

Talbot coloured.

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry roughly. "Come on, Talbot; you'd better lock your study door, if you don't want a spy here."

"I don't mind," said Talbot quietly. "Levison is welcome to turn my study inside out if he likes. I can't imagine what he wants here."

The two Shell fellows passed out of the study, and went their way without looking back, leaving Levison standing in the doorway, his face still flushed, and his eyes glinting.

He hesitated for some moments.

Then, as Tom Merry and Talbot disappeared down the stairs, he made up his mind, entered the study, and closed the door.

His next actions were very curious. He searched the waste-paper basket, turning over every scrap of paper it contained, with the minutest care. His expression, when he had finished, showed that he had not found what he sought. With a grunt, he carried his mysterious search further. He scanned the grate and the fender, and then hunted round the study. Every scrap of paper he came upon he picked up and examined carefully, and threw them aside again.

It was more than half an hour before he gave up the search, with deep disappointment in his face.

"He's too jolly careful," he muttered. "Too jolly careful! It's no good. He must have written it out—if it's him—if—but I'm sure—I'm sure of that! But if he wrote it out, he's destroyed it, or he's got it about him."

His eyes lighted up at that thought. He crossed to the window, from which he had a view of the junior football-ground. On Little Side, the House match was going strong. He could see Talbot on the wing of the School House team, threading his way through the New House halves and backs. There was a roar, that came to his ears as he stood looking from the study window.

"Well saved, Fatty!"

Talbot had sent the leather in, but the Welsh junior in goal had fisted it out. Owen cleared, and the struggle went away to the half-way line again. The crowd of juniors round the field were shouting; but Levison did not listen; he was not interested in the footer. It was Talbot only that his eyes were upon. Talbot was in his footer rig, of course; he had changed in the dressing-room, and Levison was thinking—thinking hard—perhaps in the dressing-room, in Talbot's pockets, was what he had sought in vain in his study.

Should he chance it?

He knew the kind of usage he had to expect from Tom Merry & Co. if they caught him rifling the pockets in the dressing-room. They would not be surprised to find him so engaged; he would only be living up to his reputation as a spy and a sneak. Levison smiled at the thought—a bitter smile! The good opinion he had won lately from Tom Merry & Co. had become dear to him. He did not want to lose it. This time, whatever might be said of his methods, his motive was not bad. An insatiable curiosity—that was his prime motive—but there was a better one—a desire to help the boy who had befriended him, and whom he believed now to be in difficulties. Levison tried to think that that alone was his motive. But, however good his object might be, he could not explain it to Tom Merry & Co.; and if they had known

it, they would not have forgiven his stealthy and underhand methods.

He was thinking the matter out, with wrinkled brow, when the study door opened. Levison started. He did not want to be caught in Talbot's study. A youth, with a bulging forehead and a large pair of spectacles, came in. It was Skimpole of the Shell, one of Talbot's study-mates.

He blinked inquiringly at Levison.

"My dear Levison, do you want anything here?" asked Skimpole. "Are you looking for the book I offered to lend you?"

"The—the book?" stammered Levison.

"Yes," said Skimpole benevolently. "You remember I offered to lend you the great volume of Professor Balmycrumpet on the subject of Socialism. I——"

"Exactly!" said Levison coolly. "I—I was looking for it."

"I will lend it to you with pleasure, my dear Levison," said the brainy man of the Shell. "Indeed, I will explain it to you, if you like, in simple language suitable to your understanding."

"Thanks!" said Levison, who was not at all disposed to spend his half-holiday listening to an explanation of any of Skimpole's weird and wonderful "isms." "Another time, Skimmy, old man. By the way, have you tackled that cryptogram? A brainy chap like you ought to be able to see right through it."

Skimpole nodded. Skimpole was a youth of tremendous genius, and what he didn't know about Socialism, Determination, and Darwinism, and all sorts of "isms," wasn't worth knowing. But he never could see when his leg was being pulled—his scientific knowledge did not extend so far as that.

"Certainly, my dear Levison; I have no doubt that, with my scientifically-trained mind, I should decipher it at once; but I have no time to waste on such trifles. I hope this afternoon to complete chapter three hundred and sixty-seven of my book——"

"Did you see Talbot working it out?" asked Levison carelessly. "He brought a copy of it up to his study to work out this morning, I think."

"Yes, before breakfast," said Skimpole. "I was here, and I remember I asked him if I could help him; but he declined my assistance. I have no doubt I could have saved him all the difficulty at once. But Talbot is very self-willed. He never listens when I try to explain to him that Professor Balmycrumpet——"

"Did he work it out?" asked Levison.

"Really, I do not know, my dear Levison. I was not paying any attention to him," said Skimpole. "He seemed annoyed when I glanced at what he was jotting down, though I could not see why he should object to my seeing a crowd of absurd figures and some lines from Shakespeare. I have noticed that his temper is not always reliable, because when I have tried to explain Determinism to him——"

"Lines from Shakespeare," said Levison eagerly, his eyes gleaming. "He had written down some lines from Shakespeare."

"Yes. As I was saying——"

"In connection with the cryptogram, Skimmy?"

"I really do not know, Levison. He had written the lines down on the same sheet of paper, and seemed to have numbered the words—or the letters—I forget which. It was a matter of no importance. Ah, here is the volume you were looking for! I hope you will read it from beginning to——"

"Do you remember the lines, Skimmy?"

"Really, Levison, I did not note them. I am not very well acquainted with Shakespeare—I prefer Professor Balmycrumpet as a writer. I——"

"What play were they from?"

"Let me see—I think from 'Julius Cæsar.' Yes, I am sure; but——"

"And the lines?"

"I cannot remember. Now, about this book, Levison!"

"Try to remember the lines, Skimmy," urged Levison.

Skimpole shook his head. His mind was a beautiful blank on that subject.

"I really cannot, Levison. I do not see why you should be interested in such a very unimportant thing. Now, this book——"

"He was numbering the words in the lines?" asked Levison.

"Yes, I think so."

"Or the letters in the words—which?"

"I really did not notice. I only observed that he was covering them with figures, and then he looked cross, and I did not look at the paper again, of course."

"Did he say anything when he had finished?"

"Not that I remember," said Skimpole, surprised by Levison's persistence. "Yes, now I recall; he said something—yes, he said, 'The hound! Never!'—which surprised me very much. But he left the study before I could ask him what he meant!"

Levison snapped his teeth.

"Now let me show you where you should begin the study of this valuable volume, Levison. I say, Levison, where are you going, my dear fellow?"

Skimpole blinked after Levison in astonishment as he strode to the door. But Levison turned in the doorway; he had another question to ask:

"What did he do with the paper when he had finished, Skimmy?"

"The—the paper?"

"Yes; the one he had written the lines on."

"I really do not remember. Yes, I remember, he threw it into the grate."

"Was there a fire?"

"My dear Levison, there is never a fire early in the morning."

"Then the paper ought to be there now!" exclaimed Levison.

"I have no doubt it would be there now, Levison, but Talbot picked it up again—I am sure I do not know why—and put it into his pocket. Then he went out. You seem to be very curious about it, my dear Levison."

"Oh, not at all!" said Levison. "Which pocket did he put it in, Skimmy?"

"In his jacket-pocket," said Skimpole, in astonishment. "Really, my dear Levison—I say, Levison, you haven't taken the book—the book I'm lending you——"

But Levison of the Fourth was gone. Skimpole blinked after him in amazement.

"Dear me! How very queer Levison is!" murmured Skimpole. "He came here specially for Professor Balmycrumpet's book, and he has gone away without it. How very curious!"

But the genius of the Shell dismissed the matter from his mind as he sat down to get to work upon the three hundred and seventy-seventh chapter of his great book—the tremendous volume which was to electrify the world when it was published—perhaps!

CHAPTER 5.
Caught in the Act!

"GOAL!"

The School House fellows were shouting and clapping as Levison came down to the football-ground.

The first half of the House match had ended with nil to either side; but in the second half the School House were going ahead at last.

The new winger was showing his value. The ball had gone into the net from Talbot's foot, in spite of Fatty Wynn's heroic efforts to save, and the School House were one up.

"Bravo, Talbot!"

Tom Merry clapped the winger on the back, as Fatty Wynn grumpily tossed out the leather.

"Good for you, Talbot! We've broken our duck, anyway!"

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "That was weally a wippin' goal, Talbot, deah boy. I could not have done that bettah myself!"

Talbot smiled.

The teams lined up again, Figgins & Co. looking very grim. There were only twenty minutes more to go, and prospects were not bright for the New House. But Figgins & Co. meant to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, if it was possibly to be done, and from the rest the play was fast and furious.

Levison stood watching the game for a few minutes, and then sauntered to the pavilion, to the dressing-room where the players had changed.

No one had eyes for Levison; every eye was on the footer-field, where the struggle swayed to and fro, now in the School House half, now close up to Fatty Wynn's goal.

"Play up, School House!"

"Go it, Figgins!"

"On the ball!"

"Hooray!"

Figgins & Co. came on with a rush. Tom Merry had the ball, and Figgins charged him off it, and Arthur Augustus went rolling from Redfern's shoulder. Two or three of the players, in the press, stumbled over Arthur Augustus; but Herries cleared, and the ball went away to midfield, with the players trooping after it.

Tom Merry was on his feet in an instant; but Arthur Augustus, after a vain attempt to rise, rolled over on the ground with a sharp ejaculation.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus forgot all about his bruised ankle for the moment. A junior in the dressing-room swung round from the pegs where the jackets were hanging, and stared at him with a flushed and startled face. It was Levison of the Fourth. "Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus. "What are you up to, Levison, you wottah?" (See Chapter 5.)

Phip!

The whistle went, and play stopped, and the fellows gathered round the swell of St. Jim's. D'Arcy was looking very white.

"Hurt?" exclaimed Tom Merry breathlessly.

"Yaas, a little," said D'Arcy cheerfully. "My beastly ankle has been twodden on. Some silly ass twod on it with his hoof. I think it was you, Hewwies!"

"Sorry!" said Herries.

"Oh, it's all wight, only I can't stand up," said Arthur Augustus. "Nevah mind me; I can hop off!"

"Hard cheese, Gussy!" said Tom Merry.

"It's all in the game, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "I shall be all wight pwesently. The twouble is that I can't go on!"

One of the linesmen came and helped Arthur Augustus off the field. In spite of his cool cheerfulness, D'Arcy's pallor showed that he was hurt. Hammond helped him towards the pavilion.

The whistle went for the resumption of play, and the two teams were hard at it again, Tom Merry playing a forward short; but Talbot, in the front line, was almost as good as two men, and the New House failed to break through. Arthur Augustus limped into the pavilion, leaning heavily on Hammond's arm.

"I 'ope it isn't bad, D'Arcy," said Hammond anxiously.

"Only a beastly big bwuise, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "You can wub it with embwocation for me if you like!"

"You bet!" said the Cockney schoolboy.

He helped Arthur Augustus into the dressing-room.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus forgot all about his bruised ankle for a moment.

A junior in the dressing-room swung round from the pegs where the jackets were hanging, and stared at him with a flushed and startled face.

It was Levison of the Fourth.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus, in astonishment and scorn. "What are you up to, Levison, you wottah?"

"N-n-nothing!"

"You had your paw in the pocket of that jacket. Whose jacket is it? Talbot's!" said Arthur Augustus. "What are you goin' thwough Talbot's pockets for, you cad?"

"I—I wasn't!"

"Don't tell whoppahs, Levison. I saw you. Did you see him, Hammond?"

"What-ho!" said Hammond, with a contemptuous glance at the cad of the Fourth. "I seed him plain enough. He 'ad his 'and in Talbot's inside pocket!"

Levison panted.

"I—I—I——"

The cad of the Fourth made a movement to leave the dressing-room. Arthur Augustus limped in his way.

"No, you don't, you wottah!"

"Let me pass!" muttered Levison.

"Wats! You're goin' to stay heah till the fellows come in," said Arthur Augustus. "I'm goin' to tell Talbot that

you've been at his pockets, and he can see what you were aftah. You've been takin' somethin'!"

"I—I haven't! Do you think I'm a thief?" hissed Levison.

"I certainly think it looks like it," said Arthur Augustus. "What do you think, Hammond, deah boy?"

"Course he is," said Hammond, at once. "I s'pose he wasn't going through Talbot's pockets for nothin', was he? He was arter something."

"You Cockney rotter!" exclaimed Levison furiously "I'll——"

"Well, wot will you do?" asked Hammond, pushing back his cuffs, as Arthur Augustus sank into a seat.

"I—I wasn't taking anything," said Levison sullenly.

"Then what were you doin'?" demanded Arthur Augustus. "If you weren't takin' anythin', you were playin' some twick on Talbot!"

"I—I was not. You don't understand——"

"I understand wight enough, you wottah. It's some of your old twicks, I suppose, and Talbot is goin' to know about it!"

Levison breathed hard. The match would be over soon, and the footballers would come trooping in. If Levison had to face them, under the circumstances, he knew that he had rough handling to expect. Worse than that, too, was the general contempt he had to expect.

"Look here," said Levison, in a low voice, "it—it isn't as you think, D'Arcy. I—I was going to do Talbot a good turn."

"By goin' through his pockets and spyin'?" asked Arthur Augustus caustically.

"You don't understand. I—I can't very well explain——"

"I wathah think you can't, you wottah!"

"But—but I'm acting as Talbot's friend. Hang it, I think I've proved that I'm his friend," said Levison savagely. "Didn't I prove it at the time Tresham of the Fifth accused him——"

D'Arcy's face softened a little. It was true enough; he remembered that. Levison of the Fourth had certainly played up unexpectedly well on that occasion. Talbot had done him a good turn, and Levison had repaid it with interest.

"That's all vewy well," said Arthur Augustus. "But what were you goin' thwough Talbot's pockets for?"

"I—I can't explain; but—but——"

"Playing some rotten trick," said Hammond.

"I was playing no trick," said Levison sullenly. "I don't choose to explain. But—but I don't want Talbot to know. He—he would think the same as you do, and—and I——"

There was a trampling of feet, and a crowd of flushed footballers came in, with gleeful faces.

"All serene, Gussy!" chortled Blake. "We're one to nil—beaten them to the wide—— Hallo, what's Levison doing here? What's the matter?"

CHAPTER 6.

Friend or Foe?

LEVISON backed away, breathing hard.

He had been fairly caught, and there was no escape. He had to go through with it now.

"What's the matter here?" asked Tom Merry.

"We caught 'im," said Hammond, beginning to chafe D'Arcy's swollen ankle. "See that he don't get away. That 'urt, D'Arcy?"

"Ow! No—go on, deah boy!"

"What was he doing?" asked Blake.

"Goin' through Talbot's pockets."

"What!"

"The rotter!"

"What beastly tricks have you been playing now, Levison?" demanded Tom Merry, with an angry glance at the cad of the Fourth.

Levison's face set sullenly and defiantly.

"I've been playing no tricks. I've done no harm, and I've got nothing to say. You can do as you like."

"We'll jolly well rag you, if you've been playing any tricks on our things here!" said Herries wrathfully.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look at your things, Talbot, and see if there's anything wrong," said Tom Merry.

Talbot nodded, and examined his pockets. He had given Levison a quick and very curious look. He went through all his pockets carefully.

"Anything missing?" asked Blake.

"Nothing," said Talbot.

"And nothing put there that doesn't belong to you?" asked Monty Lowther, remembering the trick that Tresham had played on Talbot some time before.

Talbot shook his head

"Nothing," he said.

"Then what did you want with Talbot's pockets, Levison?"

"Find out!" said Levison.

"That's what we're going to do," said Tom Merry grimly. "I don't know what your little game is, but it's pretty plain that you're up to your old tricks again."

"And before you leave this room, you're going to explain," said Blake. "You made us believe that you were dropping your rotten caddish ways. Spoofing as usual, I suppose. What were you going through Talbot's pockets for?"

"Speak up, you cad!"

Levison shrugged his shoulders, and made no reply. The footballers gathered round him with angry looks.

"Now, look here, you've got to explain yourself," said Tom Merry. "You didn't come here and go through Talbot's pockets for nothing, I suppose?"

"Find out."

"What was your object?"

"I've got nothing to say."

"You don't deny that you were doing it?"

Another shrug of the shoulders. A lie would have cost Levison nothing; but it was useless to deny what Arthur Augustus and Hammond of the Fourth had seen.

"And you won't explain?" demanded Blake.

"No, I won't."

"It doesn't matter," said Talbot mildly. "Whatever he wanted, there's no harm done. Nothing has been taken from my pockets. Anyway, I can't believe that Levison would have taken anything valuable. That's all rot. He's not a thief."

"Thank you!" said Levison.

"But he must have had some reason for doing what he did," said Blake, "and he ought to be made to explain. We all know Levison; he's as full of mean tricks as a monkey."

"Yaas, wathah! Make the wottah explain."

"Now, Levison——"

"I've got nothing to say," said Levison sullenly. "I was doing no harm, that's all. You can make the best of that."

"You were spying, I suppose?" said Manners.

"Find out!"

"I don't see——" began Talbot.

"Oh, ring off, old man!" said Tom Merry. "You're too jolly easy with the cad. He was spying, of course. I suppose you've got some letter there that he wanted to read. We all know Levison."

"There's nothing in my pockets that anybody mightn't see," said Talbot, with a deep flush.

The ci-devant Toff could not help recalling that there had been a time, not so very long ago, when he had secrets, dark secrets, to keep. The other fellows were thinking of that, too. And their natural conclusion was that Levison believed that the Toff was in communication with his old associates, and was seeking to "bowl him out" by spying into his correspondence. And that suspicion made them extremely "ratty."

"You've got to explain, Levison," said Tom Merry. "You came sneaking into Talbot's study this afternoon. Now we find you going through his pockets. You'll have to learn that we don't allow that kind of thing here."

"Put it how you like," said Levison. "Talbot knows I'm no enemy of this. You fellows ought to know it. I've got nothing else to say."

"Will you tell us what you were going through his pockets for, then?"

"No, I won't!"

"Then we'll jolly well rag you, and teach you to leave our things alone!" burst out Jack Blake angrily.

"Yes, rather! Collar him!"

Levison made a spring for the door. But there were half a dozen fellows in the way, and he was promptly collared and dragged back. The cad of the Fourth struggled in the grasp of the incensed juniors.

Talbot came quickly forward, a troubled expression on his handsome face.

"Let him alone, you fellows! Chuck it!"

"Rats!"

"Look here, it was my things he was meddling with. If I don't mind, you fellows needn't!" urged Talbot.

"Bosh! He's going to have a lesson. Bump him, and kick him out!" said Merry.

Bump—bump!!

"Oh!" roared Levison. "You rotters—ywooowoh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, then—all together!"

Levison was swung to the door, and half a dozen football-

boots were planted behind him. He shot out like a bullet from a gun.

As he rolled outside, panting, three or four of the footballers rushed after him, and the cad of the Fourth was fairly "dribbled" off the premises. The footballers came back grinning. Levison of the Fourth had had a severe lesson, and they felt that they had done their duty.

Levison picked himself up and limped away, his face white with rage. He limped into the School House and went to his study.

There he flung himself into a chair, gasping; but he quickly rose again. Sitting down was not very comfortable for him just then.

"What rotten luck!" he muttered. "What rotten, rotten luck! And it wasn't there, after all; he must have destroyed it. What rotten luck!"

When Levison's study-mates came in to tea, they found him with a sullen and savage face. Lumley-Lumley looked at him curiously.

"Same old Levison!" he remarked. "Same old game! Same old spying tricks! You'll find yourself sent to Coventry, my infant!"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Levison.

But Lumley-Lumley's prediction was correct. Levison was not exactly sent to Coventry; but when he came down into the common-room he could not help observing that all the fellows were giving him a very cold shoulder indeed. Tom Merry & Co. made it a point to ignore his existence.

They were, as Monty Lowther put it, fed-up. They had been willing to believe that the cad of the Fourth was trying to turn over a new leaf, and they had treated him accordingly; but the discovery of the young rascal going through Talbot's pockets in the dressing-room made a complete revulsion in their feelings. As Lumley-Lumley said, he was the same old Levison; and the School House fellows meant to let him know what they thought of him.

Levison came towards the Terrible Three in the common-room; and they promptly turned their backs on him. Levison stopped, a deep flush coming into his face. But he did not speak. Without a word he turned and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 7.
Early Birds!

TOM MERRY stirred in his bed and awoke.

It was night, and the stars glimmered in at the high windows of the Shell dormitory in the School House.

From the other beds came the deep breathing of the sleeping juniors.

Tom Merry turned his head on his pillow. He wondered what had awakened him. It seemed to him that he had heard some unaccustomed sound in the silence of the dormitory.

He started suddenly.

In the silence there came an unmistakable sound. It was a soft footstep, and it was followed by a creaking of a bed. Tom Merry sat up.

"Hallo! Who's there?" he exclaimed.

There was no reply.

"Some of you fellows out of bed?" demanded Tom Merry.

Deep silence.

Tom Merry looked round in the dimness of the dormitory. The glimmer of the starlight at the high windows did not dispel the darkness, and he could barely make out the next beds.

"Hallo!" yawned Lowther's sleepy voice. "Who's that jawing?"

"Me," said Tom Merry. "I thought I heard somebody moving about."

"Oh, rot! You're dreaming!"

The silence was unbroken, and Tom concluded that his imagination had played him false, and settled his head upon his pillow again. He had suspected for a moment that it might be a raid of the Fourth-Formers; but there was no alarm, and he soon dropped off to sleep.

He did not awaken again until the rising-bell was clanging out in the dim morning light of November.

He sat up in bed. One fellow was already up, and nearly finished dressing. It was Talbot. Tom Merry rubbed his eyes and looked at him.

"Hallo! You're an early bird!" he remarked.

"Yes; I was awake early," said Talbot carelessly.

"Might have given me a call," said Tom.

"You were sound asleep."

"Well, I'm up now," said Tom, jumping out of bed. "Going down? I'll be with you in two ticks."

"Right-ho!" said Talbot. "I'm going into the quad."

The Shell fellows turned out of bed, and Talbot, having finished dressing, quitted the dormitory before the rising-bell had ceased to ring.

He was first down of the Shell; none of the others were likely to follow for ten minutes at least. The House-door was not yet open. Talbot hurried downstairs, as if he had some reason for haste that morning. He started a little as he saw that he was not the first fellow down.

Levison of the Fourth was in the lower hall.

Talbot looked at him in surprise. Levison was by no means an early riser, as a rule. He was generally a slacker, and stayed in bed as late as he could. But on this particular morning he must have been up and dressed long before Taggles began to ring the rising-bell, as he was down before Talbot.

He nodded to the Shell fellow.

"You're down early," he remarked.

"Yes," said Talbot curtly; "so are you, it seems."

"Perhaps we're both down early for the same reason?" suggested Levison.

"I don't understand you."

"I thought there might be some more chalked figures on the door," said Levison coolly. "Did you think so, too?"

"Why should there be?" said Talbot; and Levison smiled at the evasive reply.

"Well, it's possible. The fellow who put those figures there yesterday morning may have had another message to deliver," said Levison. "It's possible, anyway. I'm going to look as soon as the door's opened—before anybody has had a chance of rubbing them out, you know."

Talbot bit his lip.

"Why should anybody be in a hurry to rub them out, if they're there?" he asked.

"One never knows," said Levison.

Toby the page came yawning along the hall, and removed the chain from the door, and inserted the big key and unlocked it. Levison swung the door open.

"My hat, I was right!" he exclaimed.

"My word," said Toby, looking in astonishment at the row of chalked figures on the door, "somebody's been at them tricks again."

Levison scanned the figures eagerly.

They were not the same figures as on the previous morning. If it was a message, the message was shorter now. The figures were in two distinct rows—the upper row neatly written—the lower row roughly scrawled. It looked as if the two rows had been chalked there by different hands, as Levison noted at once.

The upper row of neatly-written figures ran:

5 9 3 18 3 7 3 10 60 9 7 7 3 45 24 4 18 11 24 45 9 18

Below them, in scrawled chalk:

3 10 16 7 18 7 4 4 20 15 16 20 15 16 10 16 7 18 66 4 24 60 10 4 9 2 6 3 4.

Talbot's eyes were fixed upon the lower row of figures, as Levison noted instantly.

"Can you read them?" asked the Fourth-Former.

"They are plain enough," said Talbot.

"I mean, can you make out what they mean?"

"That is not so easy."

"Of course, it's a cryptogram," Levison observed, his eyes still upon Talbot's face.

"I should say so."

"If one had the key, it would be easy enough," said Levison. "Of course, the figures represent letters."

"No doubt, if it is a cryptogram."

"A certain set of letters, each with a number," said Levison, "easy enough to send messages in a cipher like this. All you need is for both parties to have a copy of the key—the set of letters to which the figures correspond."

"Yes, I suppose that's the usual way."

"I see you're taking a copy," said Levison.

"Why not?"

"You're going to try to work it out?"

"Yes."

"I say, you're only copying down the lower row!" said Levison maliciously. "Don't you want the upper row, too?"

Talbot coloured.

"Yes, of—of course."

He copied down the upper row of figures also upon a leaf of his pocket-book. Levison did the same.

By that time several fellows were coming downstairs. It did not appear to have occurred to anyone beside Talbot and Levison that there might be another chalked cipher on the door, and no one had come down for that purpose. But by the time the cipher had been copied down by the two juniors, several "early birds" had descended, and there were loud exclamations of surprise at the chalked figures on the door.

"Hallo!" said Blake of the Fourth. "The giddy joker has been at work again!"

"Looks like it, don't it?" said Levison.

"Dash it all, this ought to be looked into!" said Blake. "We can't have a stranger scouting into the school grounds of a night, and chalking up figures on the door. What the dickens can it mean?"

"Bai Jove," said Arthur Augustus, joining them, "at it again, the boundah! Anybody guessed what it means yet?"

Talbot quietly left the group of juniors gathering at the door.

"Well, this beats the band!" said Tom Merry, when the Terrible Three came down. "Who the dickens can be doing this?"

"It isn't the New House boundahs," said Arthur Augustus, with a shake of the head. "It must be somebody fwom outside St. Jim's."

"Looks like it. Perhaps the Housemaster ought to be told," said Tom Merry thoughtfully.

Levison started a little.

"No good bothering Mr. Railton with it," he said. "Better rub it out before he comes down."

"Why?" asked Blake.

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Kangaroo of the Shell as Levison suddenly took out his handkerchief, and rubbed at the chalk marks on the door. "Stop him! We want to copy that down!"

"I've got a copy," said Levison.

"But what are you rubbing them out for?" demanded Tom Merry. "Why shouldn't the Housemaster see them?"

Levison made no reply. The figures were quite indecipherable now, and it was too late to stop Levison. He finished rubbing the door clean.

"Like your beastly cheek, I think, Levison," said Herries. "Why couldn't you let it alone?"

Levison made no reply. He walked away, and the juniors stared after him in surprise and exasperation.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Why doesn't Levison want the Housemastah to see that ewyptogwam? There's somethin' wathah fishay in this."

"I've got it!" exclaimed Blake, a sudden idea coming into his mind.

"Got the cipher, deah boy?"

"No, ass. I think I've guessed it. It's one of Levison's silly tricks," said Blake. "Levison's the chap who chalked it on the door."

"Gweat Scott!"

"It's a trick to mystify us, though I don't see where the joke comes in," said Blake, nodding his head emphatically. "As soon as he thought the Housemaster might start looking into the matter, he rubs the blessed figures out. What would it matter to him if Railton saw them—unless he put them there himself?"

"Bai Jove! I think you're wight, deah boy. It's one of Levison's twicks."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I shouldn't wonder," he assented. "He's as full of tricks as a monkey, and it's just like him to try to pull our leg in this way."

"But the figures were there yesterday morning before Levison came down," said Digby.

Blake sniffed.

"He could have sneaked out of the dorm in the night to write them there, fathead. Any fellow could get out of the dorm, couldn't he?"

Tom Merry started. He remembered the movement he had heard the previous night in the Shell dormitory. That certainly could not have been Levison, as Levison slept in the Fourth-Form quarters. But it might very easily have been some practical joker—Brooke, for example, who was a fellow after Levison's own heart.

"Hallo! What have you got in your noddle, Tommy?" asked Lowther.

"Somebody was moving about in our dorm last night," said Tom Merry, with conviction. "I called out, but he didn't answer."

"Bai Jove!"

"I remember," said Lowther. "I answered you. I didn't hear anybody moving, though."

"Well, I did, and if he wasn't up to some trick, why couldn't he answer?" said Tom Merry. "It's some blessed practical joker, I think; he came down and scrawled this on the door, and came back to the dorm."

"Then it couldn't have been Levison," said Blake, puzzled.

"No, it couldn't, if it was a Shell chap," said Tom. "Crooke, perhaps——"

"Rats," said Crooke. "I don't know anything about it; and I didn't get out of bed last night. I know that. Perhaps it was Lowther."

"I!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Yes, you—you're a funny merchant, and it's just what you might do," said Crooke. "It seems you were awake when Tom Merry woke up too."

"You silly ass!" exclaimed Lowther. "Tom woke me up calling out."

"Bai Jove! I should not be surpwised if it was Lowthah! Lowthah is an awf'ly sillay ass, and full of twicks——"

"Fathead!"

"I wefuse to be called a fathead, Lowthah. You are ass enough to put glue in a fellow's Sunday toppah, so you are ass enough to wite these sillay figgahs on the door."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry glanced curiously at his chum. Monty Lowther was the humorist of the Shell, and some of his little jokes took extraordinary shapes and forms.

"I—I say, Lowther, it wasn't you, surely?" exclaimed Tom.

"No, it wasn't," growled Lowther gruffly. "I don't know anything about it. I think it's the work of some silly practical joker, and I think it's Levison, myself."

"Rats!" said Mellish of the Fourth. "It's you right enough, Lowther. I advise you to stick to the comic column in the 'Weekly,' and chuck this kind of thing."

"I tell you it was not me!" shouted Lowther.

"Bow-wow!" said Mellish.

"Honour bright?" asked Blake.

"Yes," growled Lowther.

"That settles it," said Tom Merry. "No good asking Levison; his honour bright isn't worth much! I think it's a rotten joke, myself, if it is a joke. And if I catch any joker playing this little game, I shall give him a thick ear."

"Same here!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah, and so will I!"

"Good," said Lowther. "Then he'll have three! And I'll give him one to make four."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd in the doorway broke up, puzzling over the queer incident; but the general opinion was that the figures on the House door were the work of a practical joker, whose object was to mystify them. But there were two fellows at least in the School House who did not think so. One was Levison of the Fourth, and the other was Talbot of the Shell.

CHAPTER 8.

Figgy's Little Joke.

"HA, ha, ha!"

Thus Figgins of the Fourth.

Figgins & Co. of the New House were strolling in the quadrangle after morning lessons, when George Figgins suddenly broke into that merry cachinnation.

The Co. looked at him in surprise. They could see no reason for that sudden outburst of merriment on the part of the chief of the New House juniors.

"What's the joke?" asked Kerr.

Figgins chuckled gleefully.

"They've been finding some more ciphers this morning on the door of their giddy casual ward over there," he said, with a nod in the direction of the School House. "I heard about it from Skimpole."

"I heard it from Mellish," said Kerr. "They think it's some practical joker trying to mystify them. Some of them think it was a New House chap; but we know that it isn't."

"No reason why we shouldn't take a hand, though," said Figgins.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, as they're looking for giddy cryptograms, and trying to work them out, we might provide 'em with another one," grinned Figgins. "We can make up an easy one—a cipher that they can spot quite easily—and then they can read it—a complimentary message from the New House. See?"

Kerr and Wynn chuckled.

"Good egg!" said Kerr. "It will be worth a guinea a box to see their faces when they work it out. Must make it pretty easy, though—School House brains ain't up to much."

"You bet! Make it as easy as falling off a form, and leave 'em to puzzle it out," Figgins.

And the Co promptly set to work.

Figgins wrote out the alphabet from A to Z, and numbered the letters. Then he proceeded to make up a sentence, using the figures instead of the letters—thus 1 for A, 2 for B, up to 26 for Z. It was the simplest form of a numeral cryptogram, and certainly presented no great difficulties in unravelling.

When Figgins had written out his specially-constructed sentence, however, it certainly looked extremely mysterious, simple as the cipher was.

19 9 12 12 25 1 19 19 5 19 7 15 1 14 4 5 1 20 3 15 11 5 19 9 7 14 5 4 6 9 7 7 9 14 19.

Figgins & Co. surveyed their handiwork with considerable satisfaction.

Simple as the cipher was, the cryptogram looked to the full as mysterious as those which had been found chalked up on the door of the School House.

"No, we can't shove this on the School House door," remarked Figgins. "They'd spot us. Better put it somewhere where they can find it——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Got a piece of chalk!"

Kerr had a piece of chalk. Figgins quitted his chums, and sauntered towards the School House. Certainly it would not have been easy to chalk an inscription on the House door without detection.

But Figgins was not thinking of that.

He sauntered into the House. Most of the fellows were out of doors, and Figgins found the passages deserted.

He walked quietly along to the junior common-room.

The door was closed, and there was no one in the passage just then. Figgins took out his chalk, and the copy of the cryptogram, and proceeded to chalk the figures in a row along the middle of the common-room door.

It did not take him many minutes.

Then, putting chalk and paper out of sight, the great Figgins sauntered away. But he was not to get out of the School House undetected. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy met him in the hall, and turned his eyeglass upon him suspiciously.

"Hallo, you New House boundah!" he remarked.

"Hallo!" said Figgins cheerily.

"What do you want on the wespectable side of the quad?"

"How's your foot getting on?" asked Figgins affectionately.

"Bai Jove! It's weally vewy good of you to come ovah and inquire aftah my foot, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, who was still limping a little. "It's goin' on all wight, but there's a beastly big bruise on my beastly ankle, you know. Hewwies has vewy big feet, and he came down wathah heavily, you know."

"Too bad," said Figgins. "I suppose it interferes with your running."

"Yaas: I sha'n't be able to wun for some time," assented Arthur Augustus. "It's all wight for walkin', but I can't wun."

"Couldn't run a foot race with me now?" suggested Figgins.

"Wathah not."

"Oh, good! If I bolted now, you couldn't run after me?"

"Certainly not. My ankle—ow-ow-ow—yawooh—you ass—you wottah—great Scott—oh cwumbs!"

Arthur Augustus staggered back in astonishment as Figgins jerked off his necktie, rumpled his hair, tore out his collar, and pushed him against the wall. Then the merry Figgins took to his heels. He had acted so suddenly that the astounded swell of St. Jim's had no time to resist. But he made a bound in pursuit, and then his ankle brought him up short.

"Ow! You wottah! Gwoooh! Oh! Yah! Oh, you awful spoofah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, realising at last the reason why the playful Figgins had asked him all those affectionate questions about his damaged ankle.

"Hallo! What's the row?" asked Blake, coming along. "What on earth are you going about like that for, Gussy? Trying to look like Tired Tim or Dismal Dutchy?"

"Gwooh! That beast Figgins—he asked me whethah I could wun, and then tweated me in this diswespectful mannah!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"Weally, Blake, I see nothin' whatevah to laugh at——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake evidently saw something to laugh at; and he laughed. Arthur Augustus started for the common-room, to put his collar and tie straight before the glass. He stopped short at the door, forgetting all about his collar and tie.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

Blake looked round.

"Blake, deah boy—Bai Jove! This weally beats evewythin'! It's anothah cwytogram."

"My hat!"

Blake was on the spot in a moment, staring at the cipher on the door of the common-room. And in a few minutes more a dozen fellows were gathered on the spot.

CHAPTER 9.

Signed—Figgins.

"IMPOSSIBLE!"

"But it's there," said Tom Merry.

"Impossible!" repeated Talbot. "How could it be there? I—I mean, it's extraordinary, anyway. Let's go and see."

He hurried along the passage with Tom Merry, who had called to him the news of the latest crytogram. He pushed his way through the crowd of juniors, and stared at the figures chalked on the door of the common-room. There was a startled, almost dazed expression on his face.

"This is getting thick," remarked Monty Lowther. "Who could the fellow have been? And what do these idiotic figures mean?"

"How could he have got here without being seen?" said Blake. "It must be some practical joker, as I said."

Levison came quickly up the passage. He stared at the inscription on the common-room door, and his jaw dropped in his astonishment.

"Who's done that?" he exclaimed.

"Nobody knows."

"It—it can't be the same chap!" exclaimed Levison. "It can't! He couldn't come here in the daylight—it's impossible——"

"How do you know?" growled Blake. "What do you know about it, anyway?"

Levison coloured.

"I—I mean, a stranger couldn't come here without being seen. I can't understand this, Talbot——"

"I don't understand it, either," said Talbot curtly.

"You've taken a copy of it," said Levison.

Talbot nodded, and walked away. But the other fellows remained scanning the queer row of figures, trying to work some meaning out of them. Levison made a hasty copy of the cryptogram, and then followed Talbot. The Shell fellow had gone to his study; and Levison thought he could guess what he had gone there for.

Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, came along the passage, and he paused at the sight of the crowd of juniors, and blinked at them through his glasses.

"Dear me! What is the matter?" he exclaimed. "What is all this crowd for? Is somebody hurt?"

"No, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Bless my soul! What is this?" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, catching sight of the row of figures on the common-room door.

"It's a cryptogram, sir," said Blake. "Somebody's chalked it up, and we can't make out what it means."

"Dear me, what an extraordinary idea!" said Mr. Lathom. "The doors should not be chalked upon in this way. Such an exercise for the ingenuity, my boys, is quite commendable—but such things should not be chalked upon the doors. Who did this?"

"Nobody knows, sir," said Tom Merry. "This isn't the first we've found. The others were on the house door. Perhaps you could help us see what it means, sir."

Mr. Lathom smiled benignantly. He was always good-natured, and he was not averse to showing the admiring juniors his superior brain powers. He took out a pencil and a paper.

"Certainly, my boys; I have very little doubt that I can decipher it," he said. "I do not suppose that it is a—ahem!—very abtruse cryptogram, as it is the work of a schoolboy. We will see! Ahem! Now, in a case like this, it is best to begin with the simplest method, and then proceed to more difficult methods if required. The simplest method, of course, is to take the alphabet numbered in order of the letters, from one to twenty-six."

"I've twied that, sir," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—"at least, I've twied it on the othah cwyptogram, and I suppose this is on the same system."

"Well, well, we will see," said Mr. Lathom benevolently.

The juniors stood round respectfully while Mr. Lathom methodically wrote out the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, and numbered them from A to Z. They did not think that so simple a key would be found to the cipher; but as Mr. Lathom was a Form-master, it was necessary to give him his head, so to speak. The master of the Fourth scanned the row of figures on the door again.

19 9 12 12 25 1 19 19 5 19 7 15 1 14 4 5 1 20 3 15 11 5 19 9 7 14 5 4 6 9 7 7 9 14 19.

"Now," said Mr. Lathom, in his methodical way, "1 is A, 2 is B, 3 is C, and so forth. At that rate, taking the figures from the commencement, 19 is S, 9 is I, 12 is L, 12 repeated makes double L, 25 is Y, 1 is A, 19 is S, nineteen repeated makes double S——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" suddenly yelled Blake.

Mr. Lathom broke off his calculation, and gave Jack Blake an exceedingly frigid glance.

"What is the matter, Blake?"

"N-n-nothing, sir," stammered Blake, turning very red.

"Then pray do not interrupt me by foolish laughter."

"N-n-no, sir."

Mr. Lathom went on with his calculation. The juniors

looked in surprise at Blake. The Fourth-Former looked sheepish, but his eyes were twinkling.

"Weally, Blake," murmured Arthur Augustus, "it was wathah wude to intewwupt Mr. Lathom like that, and I weally do not see any cause for mewwiment."

"Fathead!" murmured Blake.

"Weally, you ass——"

"Take the letters already done, and see what they spell," whispered Blake.

Arthur Augustus did so.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "I—I—silly ass—— Ha, ha, ha!"

"D'Arcy!"

"Ya-a-a-s, sir."

"Pray be silent!"

"Certainly, sir."

"There, I have finished," said Mr. Lathom, showing the interested juniors his written rendering of the cryptogram. "The letters, placed in the place of the figures, run as I have written:

"SILLYASSESGOANDEATCOKESIGNEDFIGGINS.

"It is now a question of spacing the letters out into words," said Mr. Lathom sagely. "If that can be done, it shows that we have hit on the correct solution of the cipher, my boys."

"Oh, yes, sir!" said the juniors, gathering round.

"I will now ascertain if the letters can be so spaced out," said Mr. Lathom.

He dabbed at the line of letters with his pencil, and suddenly a frown came over his brow.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed irritably.

And Mr. Lathom threw the paper on the floor angrily, and walked away.

The juniors looked after him in surprise.

"Hallo! What's he got his rag out for?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"What are you cackling at?"

The juniors hurriedly gathered up the sheet Mr. Lathom had thrown on the floor, and stared at it. Tom Merry spaced out the row of letters into words.

Then there was a yell. For the line, duly spaced out into separate words read:

SILLY ASSES GO AND EAT COKE SIGNED FIGGINS.

"My hat!"

"Figgins!"

"The cheeky rotter!"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "That's what that wottah was doin' heah when I spotted him goin' out. Figgins!"

The School House juniors looked at one another, with feelings almost too deep for words. The New House chief had put up that ridiculous cryptogram, and given them the trouble of reading it, and when deciphered it contained that absurd message.

"The—the cheeky beast!" growled Tom Merry, at last. "Let us catch him shoving any more beastly cryptograms in our House, we'll—we'll——"

"Squash him!" grunted Blake.

"The cheeky wottah!"

And the crowd of juniors dispersed. They understood now why Mr. Lathom had looked so cross when he interpreted the mysterious message. Some of the juniors went out into the quad to look for Figgins: but the astute Figgy was far away, in his own quarters. Tom Merry looked for Talbot, to tell him the result of the deciphering of the figures.

He found Talbot in his study. The Shell fellow was standing at the grate, with a piece of paper in one hand, and a lighted match in the other. He was just applying the match to the paper when Tom looked in.

"Hallo!" said Tom. "We've found out the giddy cipher this time. Is that what you've been doing?"

Talbot laughed.

"Yes. It wasn't difficult. It was a message from Figgins, after all."

The lighted paper fluttered from his hand into the grate, and burned away. Talbot turned away from the grate.

"I dare say the other ciphers were shoved on the door by some New House bounder," growled Tom Merry. "Not Figgy—he told us it wasn't him—but some of the cheeky rotters. And if we'd bothered to find them out, it would have turned out to be something of this sort."

Talbot did not reply to that remark.

"Let's get down and get some footer practice before dinner," he said, quite abruptly.

"I'm your man," said Tom at once.

And the chums went down the passage together.

Levison of the Fourth looked out of his study, and watched them go downstairs. Then he looked cautiously this way and that way, and saw no one; and then, with a quick and quiet step, he hurried along to Talbot's study.

CHAPTER 10.

Part of a Clue.

LEVISON stepped quickly into Talbot's study, and closed the door behind him.

Talbot had gone down to the football-ground with Tom Merry, and so far as he was concerned, the spy of the Fourth was not likely to be interrupted. As for Gore or Skimpole coming in, he had to take his chance.

He did not lose an instant.

He was upon the same quest, whatever it was, that had brought him to the study the previous afternoon, and that had caused him to search Talbot's pockets in the dressing-room, with such painful results to himself.

He searched through the study rapidly and thoroughly.

Suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation. His eyes had fallen upon the fragment of charred paper in the grate.

In a second he was on his knees at the fender, his eyes glittering at the burnt sheet, of which only a tiny corner remained unconsumed.

On that tiny unburnt corner there was no writing. But on the burnt part it was evident that there had been writing in ink, and as the piece, though crumpled by the heat, was still whole, it was not impossible to trace the black letters on the burnt paper.

Levison's heart thumped.

Talbot had been careful—very careful—but he had not been careful enough. That burnt fragment was sufficient to put the spy of the Fourth on the track, if he could but decipher the letters upon it.

He did not touch the paper. He knew that it would crumble to powder at a touch, almost at a breath.

He bent down till his face almost touched it, holding his breath in his eager anxiety. Dark on the burnt fragment appeared the letters, in Talbot's hand, but each letter written unconnectedly: "Friends." And under each letter of that word was a number:

F R I E N D S
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Levison's eyes gleamed with exultation. It was the key—the long-sought key to the cipher!

That word was not all, of course. There had been a dozen words or more written upon the burnt paper, most of them completely obliterated by the burning.

But further on Levison distinguished another word, with the numbers written underneath the letters in due order:

B U R Y
45 46 47 48

Rapidly the junior transferred the letters and numbers, with his pencil, to a leaf in his pocket-book. His heart was beating with excitement and the fear of interruption at any moment.

More obliterated words, but a little further on he found a single letter, with the number under it—"R," the number under it being 54.

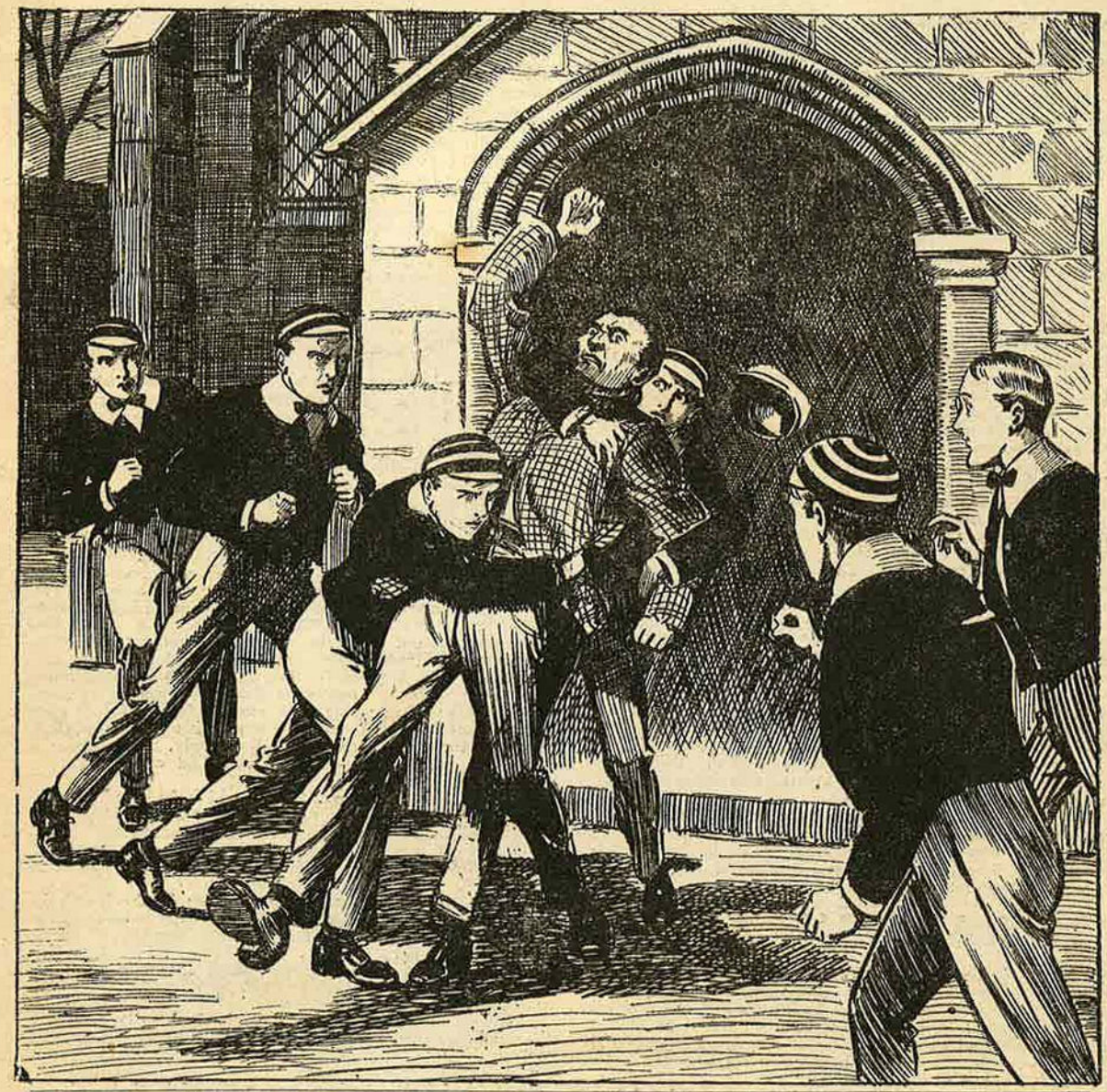
Then, at the end of the lines on the burnt paper, he was able to distinguish:

S E H I M
64 65 66 67 68

That, he could see, was the conclusion of the lines of writing and numbers. The whole of the key, therefore, contained 68 letters.

Levison, still taking the utmost care not to disturb the burnt fragment, scanned it for more letters with puckered, anxious brows and glistening eyes. In the middle of it he succeeded in tracing another letter, with a number below:

C
49



"That you, Toff?" In the deep silence, the husky voice thrilled the juniors. They knew that it was Hookey Walker, and that he was expecting Talbot. Levison did not reply; but, guided by his voice, he made a sudden rush. "Come on!" (See Chapter 14.)

That was all! So far, he had copied down in his pocket-book the extent of his discoveries. But if he could take the burnt fragment away to his study and examine it at his leisure, there was a chance that more might be distinguished. He rose to his feet, and looked round for some receptacle in which to convey the burnt fragment. An empty biscuit-tin served his purpose. With sedulous care Levison placed the open end of the biscuit-tin on the hearth beside the burnt paper, and gently, with his breath, wafted the letter into the tin.

It was wafted in without breaking. Carefully he lifted the tin to carry it away. He bore it carefully to the door, and stepped into the passage, and almost ran into Gore of the Shell, who was about to come into his study. He had to stop, and Gore stared at him in surprise.

"What the deuce are you doing in my study?"

"I—I came to speak to Skimpole," muttered Levison. "He—he's going to lend me a book——"

"You came to scoff my biscuits, you mean," said Gore wrathfully, as he caught sight of the biscuit-tin. "Hand that over, you cheeky rat!"

"It's not biscuits."

"Hand it over!"

"It's an empty tin, you duffer——"

"Yes, I believe you've sneaked into my study to collar an empty tin!" jeered Gore. "Hand it over, I tell you!"

And, without waiting for further argument, George Gore rushed at Levison, and collared the biscuit-tin, wrenching it away. Levison gritted his teeth with rage. Gore stared at the fragment of paper, which fluttered to the floor, crumbling into tiny pieces.

"Hallo! It's really empty!" exclaimed Gore, in astonishment.

"You fool! You imbecile!" said Levison, hardly able to control his rage.

"Well, I thought you were scoffing my tommy," said Gore. "You're such an awful liar, you know. Here, you can have the tin if you like. I don't want it."

"Go and eat coke!" growled Levison; and he strode away.

It was not the biscuit-tin he wanted, and the crumbled fragment of burnt paper was useless now. Gore looked after him in surprise, shrugged his shoulders, and tossed the tin into a corner.

Levison hurried to his own study, and locked himself in. He did not want to be interrupted in the work he had now

to do. He opened his pocket-book, and took out his fountain-pen, and drew towards him a sheet of impot paper. Although Gore's unfortunate intervention prevented the possibility of discovering further clues, he had made enough discoveries to give him a start.

He was certain that the lines Talbot had written out, of which he had numbered the letters, furnished the key to the cryptogram that had been chalked on the School House door. Otherwise, why should Talbot have written them out?

He would not write out lines by chance, and number the letters. His writing them out and numbering them showed that, as Levison had suspected from the first, Talbot was in possession of the key to the cipher. Talbot knew what letters were represented by that apparently meaningless array of figures on the School House door; but, of course, he could not carry them in his memory. Each time that he had to decipher a message he had to write out the words of the key, number them, and then compare the numbers with the numbers written in the cryptogram.

Levison had already deciphered and thrown aside the cryptogram chalked by Figgins on the door of the common-room. That had not taken him long. He had been astounded to find it there, but he had guessed almost at once that it was the work of a practical joker, trying to mystify the School House fellows. He grinned as he reflected how Figgins had unconsciously helped him.

For he had calculated at once that Talbot would decipher the new cryptogram—that, for that purpose, he would write out the key of the cipher and number the letters—and then he would discover that the cryptogram did not correspond with his key, and would tumble to Figgy's little joke. But the key he would write out. Levison had hoped to discover that.

He had tried to find it before, and had failed. Convinced as he was that Talbot possessed the key to the cipher, and wrote it out for guidance whenever it was a question of reading the chalked message, the Shell fellow had been too careful in covering up his tracks for Levison to make any discovery. The search in Talbot's study, the search in his pockets in the dressing-room, had been in vain. Evidently Talbot was cautious enough to destroy what he had written when it had served him his purpose.

But this time Levison had partly succeeded. Talbot had burnt the paper he had written, but the remaining fragment had furnished a clue.

Was that clue sufficient to read the cryptograms? That was what Levison now had to find out.

He added together the numbered letters he had distinguished, and found that he possessed a list of seventeen, as follows:

F R I E N D S B U R Y R S E H I M
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 45 46 47 48 54 64 65 66 67 68

If it was indeed the key, there was something to work upon. Seventeen letters should furnish a clue to at least part of the cryptogram. Levison took a copy of the original cryptogram which had first been seen on the door of the School House, and wrote it out fresh, inserting letters in the place of the corresponding numbers where he possessed them.

The original ran as follows, in figures:

18 15 1 1 20 15 16 10 16 7 18 66 4 24 60 10 4 20 4 7 9 2 5 9 65 9 14 4 20 16 12 24 14 4 2.

Underneath that apparently meaningless line, Levison wrote the same figures, with the letters inserted where he possessed them, so that the line now ran:

18 15 F F 20 15 16 10 16 S 18 H E 24 60 10 E 20 E S 9 R N 9 H 9 14 E 20 16 12 24 14 E R.

Or putting in dots where the letters still wanting were represented by figures, Levison obtained the following:

. . F F . . . . . S . H E . . . E . E S . R N H . . . E . . . . . E R.

Levison wrinkled his brows over that somewhat meagre result. Certainly it was not easy to detach any meaning from it. There was not a single complete word, and the letters, as they stood, although they doubtless formed parts of words, gave no clue to what the words might be.

But Levison was not beaten yet. He ruminated deeply.

"I know this was addressed to Talbot. I am sure of that. He gave himself quite away when he saw the first cryptogram. The other fellows didn't see it, but I did. Besides, who but Talbot should be receiving such a message here? Only Talbot could be in connection with the kind of people who use secret ciphers. It was a message to Talbot, from some member of the old gang, who knows he's here, but dares not come—and dares not write—hunted by the police most likely—Hookey Walker, perhaps! He wants Talbot for something—to help him escape—to help him rob the school—to join in some villainy—goodness knows what!"

Levison nodded with satisfaction as he thought that out. He was convinced that he was on the right track.

"Now, there's a double F in the first word, and two blanks in front of it," went on Levison, his eyes gleaming. "Those rotters always called Talbot the Toff—that was his name in the gang. That's how they'd address him now, if they addressed him in a secret cipher. 'Tain't very hard to guess, then, that the two blanks in front of F F will be filled by the letters T O. The first word is TOFF. And that gives me two more letters to go on with—if it's right, and I think it is. 18 stands for T, and 15 stands for O."

And Levison went over the line again, putting in T and O wherever he found 18 or 15. The result was:

T O F F O . . . . S T H E . . . E . E S . R N . H . . . E . . . . . E R.

Levison pondered over that perplexing result. That he was upon the track he was certain, but he had to confess that he could not yet read the message. He laid it aside, and turned over to the leaf where the second cryptogram, discovered that morning on the School House door, was written out.

The original ran: 5 9 3 18 3 7 3 10 60 9 7 7 3 45 24 4 18 11 24 45 9 18. This was the first part of the second cryptogram, which Levison had noted was written in neatly-chalked figures, very different from the sprawling figures of the rest. He proceeded to put in the letters, so far as his key furnished them, putting in dots to mark where the rest were missing. It read when he had finished:

N . I T I S I . . . S S I . . E T . . B . T.

Levison grinned.

"T-dot-dot-B-dot-T," he muttered. "If that doesn't make Talbot, I'd like to know what it does make. It's clear enough. Talbot read the first message; and the next night he came down while the other fellows were asleep. Tom Merry woke up, from what I hear, and heard him; but he doesn't guess that it was Talbot who was up. He came down, and got out of the house, and chalked his answer on the door in the same cipher. He knew that the man, whoever he is, was coming for his answer. No doubt that's their rule in using the cipher, to put the answer in the same place. That accounts for that row of figures being done neatly. Talbot did them. That was his answer—signed. And then the man, having read that reply, wrote under it the rest of the figures—the big, scrawled ones. I've got them here!"

Levison, with great excitement, which he tried to suppress, scanned the rest of the chalked inscription that had been found on the School House door that morning. It ran in the original figures:

3 10 16 7 18 7 4 4 20 15 16 20 15 16 10 16 7 18 66 4 24 60 10 4 9 2 6 3 4.

Levison went over it carefully, putting in the letters he was in possession of, as in the previous cases, and marking the blanks with dots. The result was surprising:

I . . S T S E E . O . . O . . . S T H E . . . E . R D I E.

Levison started violently. The flush of excitement died out of his face, and he became pale.

"Good heavens!" he muttered.

He stared at the last three letters he had written. Those three letters, taken by themselves, formed a word—the word "Die."

Die!

What fearful threat, then, was conveyed in that ciphered message?

Was Talbot's life in danger?

"Good heavens!" muttered Levison again. "Good heavens! Die! And it must be that! It must be!"

He sat staring at the papers before him blankly. If only he had had the rest of the key! He figured it out in his mind. Talbot had read the first chalked message on the door. The next night he had gone out and chalked his reply there. The unknown had written this under it—dissatisfied, evidently, with Talbot's message. Talbot had come down early in the morning to see if there was an answer from the Unknown—intending to read it, and rub it away before anybody else came down.

Levison had forestalled him in that. But for his own going down early, he was quite sure that no eyes but Talbot's would have seen the second inscription on the door. And the peril that hung over Talbot—for Levison was convinced that peril threatened him—what precaution was the reckless fellow taking against that? None!

The dinner-bell was ringing now. Levison hastily rose, and crumpled the papers into his pocket. Later on he would work at them again—in time, perhaps to discover what Talbot's peril was. And what then?

He smiled grimly as he left the study. The other fellows were already in the dining-room, in their places, and Mr. Lathom, at the head of the Fourth-Form table, frowned at Levison as he came in. Blake was beside him, and he ostentatiously turned his shoulder to Levison. D'Arcy was

on the other side, and he ignored Levison's existence completely.

The bitter smile came on Levison's thin lips again.

He was ignored—cut—sent to Coventry! And it was he—and he alone—who could step between Talbot of the Shell and the hidden peril that threatened him.

CHAPTER 11.

Down on Levison.

"WHEREFORE that worried look, Skimmy?" asked Monty Lowther, jovially, smiting the genius of the Shell upon the shoulder with a mighty smite.

Skimpole of the Shell had an extremely thoughtful expression upon his face, and he did not notice the approach of the Terrible Three until Monty Lowther humorously smote him. Then he gave a yell and stumbled forward, and fell upon his knees.

"Ow!"

Skimpole blinked round at Lowther in surprise, as he scrambled up.

"My dear Lowther, what ever——"

"That was only a friendly greeting," explained Lowther.

"Ow! Really, I should prefer you to be unfriendly, Lowther," said Skimpole, dusting the knees of his trousers. "I consider——"

"But why the worried brow?" asked Lowther. "Have you struck upon a specially knotty point in the thousand-three-hundred-and-sixty-eleventh chapter of your tremendous book?"

"Really, Lowther——"

"Or are you trying to work out what Professor Balmy-crumpet really means?" asked Lowther. "My dear chap, give it up! What's the good of trying to work out what a Determinist means? You will tie your mighty brain up into a knot!"

"I was thinking of Levison, my dear Lowther. He has been questioning me again, and really he is so persistent that he has driven weightier matters from my mind," said Skimpole. "It is really ridiculous of Levison, for how can he expect me to remember such trivial matters as lines from Shakespeare, when——"

"Lines from Shakespeare?" said Tom Merry, in astonishment. "What on earth does Levison want you to remember lines from Shakespeare for?"

"It is in connection with the cryptogram," said Skimpole. "But, for my part, I do not see any reason to suppose that Talbot has the key to the cipher, and really I do not feel inclined to trouble my mind about it."

"Talbot!" repeated Manners.

"Yes. In fact, I have spoken to Talbot about it, and he simply requested me to depart, and masticate a substance which is certainly not intended for human provender—I mean, coke! Talbot was quite snappy, in fact; and really I shall lose patience myself with Levison if he bothers me any more." And Skimpole shook his head solemnly.

The Terrible Three exchanged glances.

"Levison again?" murmured Lowther. "And going for old Talbot, as usual. What lines from Shakespeare are you burbling about, Skimmy, old man?"

"I really do not know, Lowther. I know that Talbot had written down some lines from a play of that writer, when he was trying to work out the cipher, but, of course, I did not make a note of them. Why should I? How can I retain such trifles in my mind, when I am occupied by weightier matters? Besides, why should Levison suppose that the key to the cipher is contained in a quotation from Shakespeare, even if Talbot happened to write it down on the same paper? Really, Levison is absurd. There is no reason to suppose that Talbot has the key to the cipher."

"So Levison supposes that Talbot has the key to the cipher, does he?"

"Apparently he does, Merry; and he has urged me to try to remember the lines that were written on Talbot's paper, which he put into his pocket afterwards, yesterday. Really, it is a great bother. I was thinking out the subject for my four-hundredth chapter, and Levison has quite driven it out of my mind with his nonsense."

"The rotter!" said Tom Merry wrathfully.

Skimpole blinked at him in surprise.

"It is certainly inconsiderate of him, my dear Merry; but I should not exactly call him a rotter, although he has completely driven from my mind——"

"Ass! I wasn't thinking of your rubbish!" said Tom, and he walked away with Manners and Lowther, leaving Skimpole blinking after him in surprise.

Tom Merry's brows were knitted.

"You see, the cad is at his old tricks again!" he exclaimed. "He's making out now that Talbot has the key to the cipher, and is trying to find it out from him. That's why he was going through Talbot's pockets in the dressing-room, I suppose."

"But why should the ass think that old Talbot knows anything about it?" said Manners.

Tom made an angry gesture.

"Don't you see? He's got an idea in his beastly suspicious head that that cipher message on the door was intended for Talbot."

"Oh!"

"It must have been put there for somebody to read," said Tom. "My idea is that it was a silly practical joke—like Figgy's cryptogram on the common-room door—only we don't know yet who did it, or what it means. But that theory isn't good enough for Levison. He's working it out to his own satisfaction that there's something shady in it, and that Talbot knows about it. I shouldn't wonder if he thinks that Talbot is still in connection with the old gang, and that that is a message from some of the cracksmen."

"Phew!" said Manners.

"I—I say, it does look rather queer, now one thinks of it," said Monty Lowther, with a soft whistle. "Dash it all, Tommy! A message in a secret cipher, unless it's a jape, it looks—it really looks——"

Tom Merry uttered an angry exclamation.

"There you go! You're Talbot's chum, and you think that! What will the other fellows think when Skimpole has babbled this all over the school?"

"Oh, don't scalp me, old chap!" said Lowther good-humouredly. "I don't think anything against Talbot. Still, I must say it might look as if some of his old pals are trying to get into communication with him. Putting it quite plainly, messages in secret cipher are only used by criminals."

"I suppose that's Levison's dodge," said Tom, clenching his hands. "Once that gets started in the House, the fellows will jump to the conclusion that Talbot is mixed up with the old gang—Hookey Walker and the rest."

Lowther started.

"That rotter, Hookey Walker, is out of prison," he remarked in a low voice. "He might try to get into touch with Talbot. I'm blessed if I like the look of this, Tom!"

Tom Merry frowned.

"Don't be an ass, Monty. Talbot has given me his word of honour that he will not have anything to do with Hookey Walker or the rest of the rotters, that he won't see them or help them, or have anything to do with them."

"Well, that's all right. We know his word is as good as gold."

"But the other fellows don't," said Tom, frowning. "It looks to me as if Levison is taking advantage of this rotten cipher bizney to revive all those rotten stories about Talbot, and start the fellows suspecting him. And I'm jolly well going to see Levison about it."

"Go easy," said Lowther. "Levison acted very well for Talbot once. No good forgetting that—the time he was accused——"

"I haven't forgotten it. But he's beginning his old tricks again," said Tom Merry savagely, "and the sooner he's stopped the better."

Tom Merry strode away with knitted brows in search of Levison. Manners and Lowther, perplexed and uneasy, went with him. The Terrible Three did not find Levison in the quad or in the School House, and when they went up to his study they found the door locked. Tom Merry rapped on it sharply.

"Hallo! What's wanted?" came Levison's voice from within.

"I want to speak to you!" called back Tom Merry.

"Sorry! I'm busy."

"Unlock the door!"

"I tell you I'm busy!"

Tom Merry breathed hard through his nose.

"I shall wait here for you, Levison, if you don't open the door," he said.

"Wait as long as you like," answered Levison. "I'm not coming out till the bell goes for classes."

"Why can't you let me in?"

"I've told you I'm busy. Besides, you haven't been so jolly anxious to talk to me lately," said Levison sneeringly. "What's the hurry now?"

"Very well; I'll wait."

"Wait and be hanged!"

Tom Merry waited, his temper growing sharper with every minute of waiting. Fortunately, it was not long to afternoon lessons. The first bell began to ring, and he heard a movement in the study, and the sound of papers being put away. Then the door opened, and Levison appeared.

He gave the Terrible Three a sneering look.

"Well, what do you want with me?" he asked.

"I want to speak to you," said Tom Merry, striding into

the study and forcing Levison to give ground. "I've been talking to Skimpole."

"Indeed! I hope you had a good time," said Levison, with a yawn.

"He's let out the reason why you were spying into Talbot's pockets."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Tom, his eyes flashing and his anger growing with Levison's contemptuous nonchalance. "You've got an idea in your beastly suspicious mind that Talbot has the key to that ciphered message on the door."

"Well?"

"Well, that means that you believe that the message in figures was addressed to Talbot."

"Suppose I do?"

"Well, if you do, from whom do you believe that the message came?" demanded Tom.

"That's my business."

"It's my business, too, as Talbot's chum," said Tom Merry. "If this begins to be talked about there will be a general idea that Talbot still has something to do with that cracksman gang—Hookey Walker and the rest. I suppose that is your object."

"No," said Levison quietly. "That isn't my object."

"Then what is?"

"I may tell you some time—when it suits me," said Levison coolly. "At present I don't intend to be questioned."

Tom Merry clenched his hands hard.

"You can bully me if you like, but you won't get a word out of me," said Levison. "You have made up your mind that I am Talbot's enemy——"

"You have always been that, except on one occasion——"

"But not since that occasion," said Levison quietly. "And now I am not his enemy; I am his friend—and a better friend than you are."

"Was it as a friend that you came spying into his study, and turned out his pockets in the dressing-room?" said Tom scornfully.

"Yes."

"Wha-a-at!"

"I did it as a friend," said Levison. "Now I've answered your question. Are you satisfied?"

"No, I'm not satisfied. A friend doesn't spy on a chap and turn out his pockets secretly. It's a queer way of showing friendship, anyway."

"I have some queer ways, you know," yawned Levison. "Anyway, I'm not answerable to you. Go and eat coke!"

Tom Merry made a fierce stride forward, but Manners and Lowther caught hold of him and pulled him back. Levison surveyed them with a bitter look.

"Hold on, Tommy!" said Lowther. "After all, there may be something in what the fellow says. He can't help doing things in his own caddish way, and we know he helped Talbot once. Let him alone."

"The bell's gone for classes," said Manners. "No good getting old Linton's hair off. Come on, Tom!"

Tom Merry paused. Never had his desire been stronger to take Levison by the scruff of the neck and wipe up the floor with him. The mere thought that Levison should take advantage of the cipher affair to spread unpleasant talk about Talbot exasperated the captain of the Shell. Was the Toff never to be suffered to live down the past, and to see it consigned to oblivion?

Manners and Lowther drew their angry chum out of the study. Tom Merry allowed himself to be persuaded.

"I won't handle him," he muttered, "but—but the cad ought to be sent to Coventry! It's his old rotten tricks over again! He's not fit for a decent chap to speak to, and I won't speak to him, for one!"

"And I can make up my mind to forgo the pleasure of his conversation," said Monty Lowther, with a grin. "Leave him to stew in his own juice, my son. That's the best way to deal with a chap like Levison."

And that was what the Terrible Three resolved to do, and their example was followed by others. Levison had been generally cut since the incident in the dressing-room, but now it became more acute, and that afternoon the cad of the Fourth made the discovery that he was sent to Coventry by nearly everybody in the House. And, hardened as Levison was, he did not find it pleasant.

CHAPTER 12.
In Coventry.

"WILL you lend me your Shakespeare, D'Arcy?" Levison asked the question when the Fourth Form had come out after lessons.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was about to reply benignantly, "Yaas, deah boy," when he suddenly remembered himself. So, instead of thus replying, he jammed his eyeglass into his eye, surveyed Levison from top to toe with a freezing stare, and turned upon his heel.

Levison flushed crimson.

"You thumping ass!" he exclaimed wrathfully.

Arthur Augustus spun round angrily.

"Weally, you wottah——"

"Shut up, Gussy!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake, I wefuse to allow that wottah to apply oppwobwious epithets to me, even if he is in Coventry!"

"Kim on!" said Blake cheerfully; and he linked his arm in that of the swell of St. Jim's, and walked him away.

"What's the matter with the duffer?" said Levison, turning to Reilly of the Fourth.

Reilly stared at him, and walked off.

Levison bit his lip hard. He realised that the sentence had gone forth—he was in Coventry.

He went moodily along the passage. A group of Shell fellows were chatting near the doorway, and they ostentatiously turned their heads away as Levison came by. The cad of the Fourth paused, and gave them a bitter look.

"So this is your little game, Tom Merry?" he exclaimed.

No reply.

"And you're all in it, I suppose, you rotters?"

Freezing silence.

Levison stalked out into the quadrangle. He spotted Talbot of the Shell there, and bore down upon him.

Talbot gave him a curt nod.

"Are you in it too?" asked Levison bitterly.

"In what?" asked Talbot.

"I'm sent to Coventry!"

Talbot coloured a little.

"No," he said, after a pause; "I'm not in it. I think you have acted in a beastly, mean way, Levison. But I can't forget that you did me a good turn once. It was a jolly good turn, and I'm not likely to forget it in a hurry; and, whatever you do, I sha'n't turn my back on you, for one!"

Levison drew a deep breath.

"That's decent of you!" he said. "And it may mean that I can do you another good turn, too—better than you think!"

Talbot smiled slightly.

"I don't see how you can!" he said.

"You don't feel inclined to take me into your confidence?"

"On what subject?"

"You can guess that! On the subject that's been in your mind for the past two days!" said Levison meaningly.

Talbot's handsome face hardened.

"I won't ask you what you're driving at," he said; "but I suggest that you mind your own business, Levison. That's all I've got to say!"

And Talbot sauntered away towards the School House. There he was pounced upon immediately by the Terrible Three.

Monty Lowther shook a warning finger at him.

"You've been talking to Levison!" he said.

Talbot nodded.

"He's in Coventry!" said Tom Merry abruptly. "Let him alone, Talbot. A week or two in Coventry will do him a heap of good."

"But why?" asked Talbot. "Because of that affair in the dressing-room, do you mean?"

"Yes; that—and other things. The fact is, Talbot, his tongue has got to be stopped. There's a rumour starting already that you know something about that cipher on the door, that it was addressed to you from some unknown person—and it was started by something that Levison said to Skimpole, and Skimpole has babbled about. Mellish and Crooke have got it out of Skimmy, and they're making a tale of it. It means all that rotten old story being dragged up into the light again—and it has all started from Levison! Nobody but Levison thought of connecting you with that cryptogram—and, of course, we know that you don't know anything about it!"

Talbot did not reply.

"So the cad has been sent to Coventry," said Tom. "The proper place for him too! And you, least of all, ought to have anything to do with him."

"So take your kind uncle's advice, and let him alone!" chimed in Monty Lowther.

"I—I can't cut him!" said Talbot awkwardly.

"And why not?"

"Because he did me a good turn."

"He is doing you an ill one now!"

"I don't know; he mayn't mean any harm," said Talbot. "He never can mind his own business; and he is as inquisitive as a monkey. I don't bear him any ill-will. And I can't cut a chap who has done me a good turn, even if he shows the cloven hoof afterwards!"

"Look here, Talbot——"

"Shush!" said Lowther. "Don't you begin to rag, for goodness' sake! I think Talbot is an ass; but a wilful duffer must have his way."

"I'm sorry to disagree with you," said Talbot, "but——"

"Oh, you're an ass!" said Tom Merry irritably. "However, you can do as you like!"

"I only want to do what I think is right," said Talbot, in a low voice. "I can't forget what Levison did for me once, when I needed it. That's all."

Tom Merry's face relaxed.

"Well, that's right enough. Still—never mind, talk to the cad, if you like; but I shall jolly well let him alone!"

Talbot nodded, and the subject dropped at that. Meanwhile, Levison had gone into the school library, to secure the volume of Shakespeare which he had been unable to borrow. He carried it with him to his study. Lumley-Lumley was there; but, as Levison came in, he rose to his feet, and walked out without a word. Levison smiled a bitter smile, and closed the door after him. He turned the key in the lock, and sat down at the study table—to work!

CHAPTER 13.

The Secret.

LEVISON could work hard, and think hard, when he chose. Slacker as he generally was, he had a great power of concentration of mind, when it pleased him to exert it. And he was working now—hard. The ciphered message still puzzled him; and, with the sheets spread upon the table before him, he worked at the puzzle, with the determination to penetrate the secret.

The clue he had obtained from the burnt fragment of paper in Talbot's study had stood him in good stead. It had enlightened him, at least, as to part of the message; it had confirmed his suspicions that the message was addressed to Talbot of the Shell, under his old nickname of the "Toff."

And the last word of the second message from the Unknown had buried itself into his mind. For he knew that the word "die" must stand by itself in the message. It was not the conclusion of another word. There was no word ending in the letters "RDIE." The last three letters had to be taken by themselves—and they hinted of a terrible threat.

Levison's activity had been taken by the chums of the School House to mean that he was working against Talbot, as of old. They little dreamed what was in the mind of the strange, wayward junior, who had been called—and who had deserved to be called—the cad of the Fourth.

He pondered deeply over the figures for a long time, and raised his head at last, with a sigh. It was necessary to renew the attempt in a different direction.

His thoughts were busy. There was another direction to work in that offered a chance of success.

"Skimpole—the idiot!—said that Talbot had written lines from Shakespeare." So Levison's thoughts ran. "He numbered the letters in the lines; those lines were the key to the cipher! But how to find them?" He cast his eyes upon the volume of the works of the great poet. "Tens of thousands of lines to choose from! I might take a month—or a year. And if Talbot is in danger——" He shrugged his shoulders. "But the fool said he thought the lines were from Julius Cæsar, though he can't remember them. I'll try Julius Cæsar first. I've got the first and the last letters in the lines, anyway, and that is the clue. They begin 'FRIENDS,' and they end 'SEHIM'; and the total number of letters is sixty-eight. I've got to find a passage in Shakespeare containing sixty-eight letters—probably a couple of lines—and beginning with the word 'Friends.' I'll try Julius Cæsar first; and if it isn't in that, I'll read the whole volume from end to end, and every time I come on a line beginning with 'Friends,' I'll test it with the cipher!"

It was a heavy task—a task that might prove lengthy, and troublesome enough. But Levison was ready to work.

He started with Julius Cæsar, reading the play carefully from the beginning. At the line "And, friends, disperse yourselves," he paused, and referred to the cipher; but the letters did not tally. Again, at "Good friends, go in, and taste some wine with me," he paused—again to shake his head and continue. Then again, "Friends am I with you all and love you all!" Useless again. Then he came to the beginning of Mark Antony's great oration—"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!"

Levison's eyes blazed.

"Eureka!"

He counted the letters with a trembling finger.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!
I come to bury Cæsar, not to praise him."

In the two lines there were sixty-eight letters! And they began with "Friends," and ended with "sehim."

Levison closed the volume with a snap. He had found it—he knew now that he had found it.

The key to the cipher was in his hands.

Carefully he wrote out the two lines, and under each letter he placed the number, in order, from 1 to 68.

Then he simply had to place the letters where their numbers stood in cryptogram, and in a few minutes he had done so.

The messages read off easily then.

Levison read them as he jotted the letters down, and the colour wavered in his face.

The cryptogram which puzzled Tom Merry & Co. hopelessly was deciphered. And Levison read it from beginning to end.

He had been right. Talbot was in danger!

And he alone, beside Talbot himself, knew of the peril; he alone could intervene and ward it off.

Levison smiled at the thought.

He gathered up the papers, as he heard a step in the passage, and put them into his pocket. The handle of the door was tried.

Levison rose and unlocked it. Mellish came in. He sniffed, expecting to scent tobacco-smoke, as the door had been locked.

But there was no tobacco-smoke. The black sheep of the Fourth had not been indulging in a cigarette.

"What were you locked in for?" asked Mellish.

Levison grinned.

"You can speak to me here," he said. "Downstairs I thought you'd forgotten you knew me."

"Well, you—you're in Coventry, you know," stammered Mellish. "A chap can't go against all the fellows. I—I don't mind speaking to you in the study."

"You needn't trouble, however," said Levison coolly, and he walked out of the study.

He went into the quadrangle with a thoughtful brow. Now that he was in possession of the secret of the cipher, it was necessary to decide what to do. That required very careful thinking out.

Levison burst into a chuckle suddenly.

Some scheme had evidently been born in his fertile brain. The clouds cleared from his brow. He sauntered into the Form-room, and secured a fragment of chalk from the cupboard, and slipped it into his waistcoat-pocket. After that, he went into Hall to tea, the atmosphere of his own study being decidedly chilling.

During the evening Levison remained in that unpleasant quarter known as "Coventry," but he did not seem to mind.

When the Fourth Form went up to their dormitory, he was left severely alone, even Mellish forgetting to say good-night to him, in the presence of the rest of the Form.

Levison turned in without a word.

But he did not sleep.

When half-past ten chimed out from the clock-tower Levison sat cautiously up in bed and listened.

The Fourth Form dormitory was buried in profound slumber.

After listening a few moments Levison slipped out of bed, and quietly dressed himself in the darkness. There was no sound, save that of steady breathing from the other beds. With a stealthy step Levison crossed to the door, opened it quietly, and slipped out. He had put on rubber shoes, and he made no sound as he moved.

The light had been turned out in the dormitory passage. Levison felt his way along to the corner, where there was a recess by a window. In the recess he ensconced himself, and waited.

The night grew older. But Levison had the patience of a cat. Midnight had sounded, when a slight sound from the direction of the Shell dormitory came to his ears.

Levison smiled in the darkness, and drew back closer into the recess.

In the darkness he could see nothing, he could hear little, but he knew that someone had passed him in the gloom, and he knew that it was someone from the Shell dormitory.

He waited. Half an hour slowly passed; the minutes seemed to crawl. Then there was a soft step in the passage again, and a slight sound from the door of the Shell

dormitory. Whoever had gone out had returned, and was now in the dormitory again.

Then Levison, at last, left his hiding-place. He softly descended the stairs, made his way to the lower box-room and opened the window, and in a few minutes was on the ground. He stole softly round the great mass of the School House. Not a single light gleamed from a window. The whole House was buried in darkness and slumber.

Quietly, softly, he made his way into the porch of the School House. There, hidden in the porch, he turned on the light of a little electric flashlamp. On the old oaken surface of the door appeared a row of figures.

Levison smiled, and copied them down into his pocket-book. They ran:

3, 6, 4, 1, 20, 20, 9, 15.

Levison took out his handkerchief, and rubbed the chalked figures out. Then he took the fragment of chalk from his pocket, and carefully chalked in a new row of figures, as follows:

10 4 4 18 10 4 9 5 18 65 3 7 7 60 9 18 11 5 65 9 32 33 45 4 1 9 2 4 6 11 16 5.

Then he turned off the light instantly.

Before quitting the porch he scanned the dark quadrangle carefully. There was no sound or sign of a movement in the shadowy expanse.

With stealthy steps he moved away, and hurried round the house, and in a few minutes more he had climbed in at the box-room window, and was stealing back to the Fourth Form dormitory.

CHAPTER 14.
Caught!

JACK BLAKE started in his sleep.

"Grooh!" he murmured drowsily.

Then he became aware that someone was shaking him, and he lifted his head from the pillow, and blinked round him in the darkness.

"Grooh! Lemme alone! 'Tain't rising-bell."

"Wake up!"

Blake jumped. He was wide enough awake now; for the whispering voice in the darkness was Levison's.

"Levison! What the deuce——"

"Hush!"

Blake sat up in bed, and peered at Levison in amazement. Levison was fully dressed, as Blake could see even in the gloom.

"What are you waking me for?" demanded Blake.

"I want your help."

"How—why—what's happened? What blessed trick are you playing now?" muttered Blake.

"Shut up and listen. Do you want to save Talbot's life?"

"Talbot! Save his life!" gasped Blake. "What on earth——"

"If you do, you'd better get up, and not make a row. It will be dawn in less than an hour and a half," said Levison. "If we don't act at once, Talbot may be murdered before the morning."

Blake caught his breath. Levison's voice was low and quiet, but it was intensely earnest. Blake peered at him, almost dumbfounded.

"But—but who is Talbot in danger from?" he stammered.

"You have heard of the man Hookey Walker?"

"Of course."

"He is here."

Blake started violently.

"Here! Levison!"

"Outside the house," said Levison quietly. "Don't be alarmed! Look here, there's no time to talk. I'll explain afterwards, if you like. I'll tell you this. Hookey Walker has threatened to kill Talbot unless he helps him, and Talbot has refused. And an hour before dawn the man will be waiting in the porch outside. You know the kind of man he is, and whether he is likely to try to carry out his threat or not."

"How—how do you know?"

"I've told you, I'll explain afterwards. Will you call some of the fellows, and come with me and collar him?"

"Collar him!" muttered Blake.

"Yes, and hand him over to the police. It's the only way to keep Talbot safe from him."

"Have you told Talbot?"

"No. He would not help to seize the rotter. He won't help him, but he would not help against him. He's running the risk of being murdered, all the same. I tell you, the man has threatened to kill him."

"I—I suppose you know what you're talking about?" muttered Blake. "You—you don't sound for once as if you were telling lies. But if you are pulling my leg——"

"If you won't come with me, I shall go alone," said Levison coldly. "And as he is sure to be armed, it will be risky. You take the responsibility if I have bad luck."

Blake slipped out of bed.

"I'll take your word for it, and I'll come," he said. "If you're spoofing, I'll settle with you afterwards. I don't see how you know anything about it. But I'll take your word. We can call Tom Merry——"

"We can't do that without waking Talbot; and he's best left out of it. No need for him to come into the matter at all. But for that, I should have called Tom Merry instead of you," said Levison.

"Oh, would you?" growled Blake. "Still, there's something in what you say. I'll come, and some of the chaps, too."

"Don't wake the whole dorm."

"Bow-wow! Leave that to me."

Blake promptly awakened Digby and Herries and D'Arcy, Reilly, and Lumley-Lumley. He explained to them in whispers what Levison had told them. There was a good deal of incredulity among the juniors; but they turned out of bed willingly enough. As Arthur Augustus said, it was better to turn out on a false alarm, than to risk the happening of a tragedy while they were lying in bed asleep.

The half dozen juniors dressed themselves quickly. They left the dormitory without waking the other fellows. It was intensely dark; the darkest hour coming before the dawn. Levison led the way to the lower box-room, and the juniors slipped one by one out of the window, and to the ground.

They were feeling uneasy enough. If it turned out to be one of Levison's monkey-like tricks, they were running a good deal of risk by getting out of the house at that hour of the night. But they had made up their minds now to see the matter through.

"Careful now," said Levison. "I'll get ahead and scout, and you fellows can follow; only don't let him hear you. He's got seven years' penal servitude before him when he's caught, and he'd shoot you as soon as look at you. We've got to take him by surprise."

"Bai Jove!"

"If anybody is funky, he can turn back," said Levison sarcastically.

"You uttah wottah——"

"Don't jaw," said Blake sharply. "Nobody here's funky, unless it's yourself, Levison. If the man's there, we'll collar him fast enough. Jolly glad of the chance of laying him by the heels, too."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Sure, but we ought to have brought some cricket-stumps with us," said Reilly.

"I've got a life-preserver," said Levison; "and there are enough of us to collar him, if we take him by surprise. You fellows keep behind me, and rush up when you hear me speak. It's too dark for him to see you, and if you don't make a row——"

"That's all vewy well, Levison; but it appeahs to me that it would be bettah for me to take the lead——"

"Cheese it!" said Levison roughly. "I'm taking the lead now. And you fellows can send me to Coventry again to-morrow—after I've saved Talbot's life!" he added bitterly.

"Bai Jove! I——"

"'Nuff said. Come on!"

Levison led the way, and the Fourth-Formers, with mingled feelings, followed him.

It was deeply dark in the quadrangle, but they knew the way well enough. Levison passed ahead of the juniors, approaching the shadowy porch of the School House. As he came up to it there was a hoarse whisper in the darkness.

"That you, Toff?"

In the deep silence, the husky voice thrilled the juniors. They knew that it was Hookey Walker, and that he was expecting Talbot.

Levison did not reply, but, guided by the voice, he made a sudden rush.

"Come on!"

There was a sharp, fierce exclamation from the shadowy figure in the porch. But before Hookey Walker could resist, four or five pairs of hands were upon him, and he was hurled violently to the earth. He struggled furiously under the juniors, seeking to get out a weapon, but Levison had his right wrist in a firm grip. There was a silent, furious struggle for several minutes, and then the efforts of the ruffian relaxed. He was powerless under the weight and the strong grasp of the juniors.

"Hold him!" muttered Levison. "I've got a cord here."

"You young 'ound!" panted Hookey Walker. "Toff, you've sold your old pal! I—I——"

"The Toff isn't here," said Levison coolly, as he passed a slip-knot over Hookey Walker's wrists, and drew it tight. "You're not sold—you're caught! Tie his feet too."

A couple of minutes more, and Hookey Walker, bound hand and foot, lay panting in the porch, a helpless prisoner. Levison turned on the light of his flash-lamp, and Blake uttered an exclamation.

"Look—on the door——"

"Bai Jove! It's anothah cwyptogwam!"

Levison smiled, and rubbed out the chalked figures. In the gleam of the light, the bound ruffian glared from face to face above him. He was searching for the face he expected to see there, but it was absent.

"Where's the Toff?" he muttered. "Where's the young 'ound who's sold an old pal?"

"You're mistaken," said Levison coolly, looking down on the ruffian with grim satisfaction. "The Toff knows nothing of this. He's in bed, asleep."

"It's a lie!" said Hookey Walker savagely. "A durned lie! Nobody but the Toff and me knows the cipher, now old Captain Crow is dead——"

"It might be found out," said Levison—"by me, for instance."

"You?" muttered Hookey Walker.

Levison nodded.

"Yes. I found it out, and I wrote that message on the door for you. Talbot knows nothing of it. I fancy he'd be ratty if he knew that I had chipped in. He told me to mind my own business when I asked him about it. You knew him well enough, you rascal—you knew he wouldn't betray you, for the sake of old times. But, you see, he's got friends to look after him, whether he likes it or not."

"You?" said Hookey Walker, with a baleful glance at Levison of the Fourth. "Then I owe this to you? I'll remember this, young gentleman!"

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Remember it as long as you like! You'll be pretty well taken care of for the next seven years, anyway."

The ruffian relapsed into sullen silence.

"Well, we've got him!" said Blake cheerily. "Now, what are we going to do with him?"

"Hand him over to the Housemaster."

"Bai Jove! Wailton will be surpwised——"

"And he'll rag us for being out of the dorm," chuckled Digby.

"Well, he can't rag us very much for catching a burglar," said Blake. "Anyway, we can't leave him here. Here goes!"

And Blake rang the House-bell loudly.

CHAPTER 15.

Levison Explains.

ST. JIM'S was astonished the next morning.

Most of the fellows knew nothing about the night's happenings until they came down in the morning, and then they gasped when they heard the astonishing news.

Hookey Walker, the cracksman who had long before attempted to rob the school, the rascal in whose power the "Toff" had been, and who had so long eluded the police, had been captured, and the capture had been effected by half a dozen juniors of the Fourth Form.

The School House buzzed with the news.

A crowd of fellows saw Hookey Walker marched off to the station by the police in the early morning light. He went to receive his deserts, and he did not even see the Toff, Talbot avoiding seeing him. Talbot had received the news with surprise and a painful shock, but he could not help feeling relieved. Well he knew the desperate and relentless character of the ruffian who had threatened him, and that he was not secure so long as Hookey Walker was outside prison walls.

Blake & Co. were surrounded by an eager crowd of inquirers after the ruffian had been removed. The chums of Study No. 6 were elated. They had effected that great capture, and it was a feather in the cap of their famous study. Mr. Railton had reprimanded them for coming down in the night to deal with the man, but his reprimand had been very gentle, and then he had complimented them on their pluck. He had inquired how they knew that he was there, and they had to call on Levison to explain that, and Levison remained alone with the Housemaster to explain. And when he left Mr. Railton's study, the juniors saw with surprise that the School House master shook hands with him Evidently Levison of the Fourth was in high favour.

"How did you know the rotter was there, Blake?" demanded the Terrible Three at once.

"Ahem!" said Blake. "I—I suppose we must give Levison the credit of that? It's jolly queer. He woke us up in the night and told us. That's all we know. Then we came down and bagged the rotter! We bagged him—rather!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But how did Levison know?"

"Haven't the slightest idea," said Blake. "Better ask him."

"Here he is!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "Levison, you bounder, explain——"

"Can't!" said Levison coolly.

"Why not?" demanded a dozen indignant voices.

"I'm in Coventry!"

"Oh!"

And Levison walked away, in spite of the beseeching questions of the juniors, who were quite willing to let him out of Coventry, in order to have their curiosity gratified.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "The boundah! He's got the uppah hand now, you know. I weally think, deah boys, it's time to let Levison off."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, after what he's done, he ought to be let out of Coventry," said Monty Lowther. "And he's got to explain, anyway, or we'll bump him baldheaded!"

"Hear, hear!"

The Terrible Three and Study No. 6 and half a dozen more fellows surrounded Levison in the quadrangle. Levison regarded them with cool nonchalance. Certainly he had the upper hand now.

"Now you're going to explain," said Blake. "As for the Coventry, that's off. We let you off, in consideration of what you've done."

"You needn't trouble," said Levison coolly.

"Ahem! We—we——"

"Still, I'll explain, if only to show you what silly, thumping asses you were!" said Levison unpleasantly. "I've only done what any of you might have done if you'd had brains enough."

"Bai Jove!"

"How did you know the man was there at that special time?" asked Monty Lowther.

"I told him to be there."

"You—you did?"

Levison nodded.

"But—but why—why should he be there because you told him?" gasped Tom Merry.

"I'll explain. It was through the cipher."

"The cipher! But you don't understand that?"

"I found it out."

"You found it out?" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! Why, I couldn't find it out! Weally, this is vewy astonishin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison took the papers from his pocket, and the juniors gathered round eagerly. As a matter of fact, Levison was not averse to displaying his cleverness. He enjoyed the limelight, and he had a full share of it now.

"In the first place," he said, "I knew that the first cipher message was addressed to Talbot——"

"To Talbot?" ejaculated Blake.

"Yes. He was the only fellow here who was likely to get a message in a secret code—that kind of thing is only used by criminals——"

"Take care what you say about Talbot, Levison!" said Tom Merry fiercely.

"I'm not saying anything against Talbot," said Levison composedly. "He used to have criminal associations, you know that. I noticed—you fellows didn't, but I did—that Talbot was struck all of a heap by the cipher message on the door—the first time it was found there. For that and other reasons I concluded that it was addressed to him; and, therefore, that he had the key to it. But I did not, as some silly fools have supposed, believe that Talbot was hand-in-glove with the old gang. I believed that some member of the gang was trying to get at him, and threatening him. And I made up my mind to find out the cipher and help him."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry.

"As I believed Talbot had the key to the cipher, I knew he must write it out and number the letters when he wanted to decipher a message. As the simplest way of finding out the key, I tried to find the paper Talbot had written it on. I looked in his study, and I looked in his pockets in the dressing-room——"

"Bai Jove!"

"I questioned Skimpole, who told me something — and might have helped me more, if he hadn't been such a thumping ass——"

"My dear Levison!" murmured Skimpole. "You really——"

"Finally I found a bit of burnt paper in Talbot's study, with part of the key on it. It didn't help me to read the cryptogram; but it showed me enough to know that the man who wrote out the cipher message was theatening

Talbot's life. And while you fellows were sending me to 'Coventry,'" went on Levison, with a curl of the lip, "I was cudgelling my brains to find out the whole of the cipher, so that I could save Talbot from being murdered."

"I—I see now," said Tom Merry slowly. "Why couldn't you tell us?"

"You wouldn't have approved of my methods," sneered Levison. "Talbot told me to mind my own business. You would have minded your own business."

"Ahem! I—I suppose I should."

"Talbot refused to have anything to do with the fellow—and risked his revenge."

"I knew he would do that!" said Tom Merry.

"I knew he would do it, too," said Levison, "and that's why I was determined to lay the rascal by the heels, and get him put where he couldn't do any harm. And I did it by finding out the cipher."

"But—but how—— What is the cipher?" asked the puzzled captain of the Shell.

"A couple of lines from Shakespeare's Julius Cæsar. 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Cæsar, not to praise him,'" said Levison. "Take those words, and number the letters—use the figures instead of the letters, and you can read the cipher messages."

"My hat! You mean to say that that ruffian, Hookey Walker, used lines from Shakespeare?"

"Fathead!" said Levison. "He didn't invent the cipher. It was used by him, that's all. I fancy it was made out first by Talbot's father—in fact, Hookey Walker said as much last night when we caught him. It's a good cipher, too—easy and simple, and yet impossible to guess, unless one had the key. Well, I found the key to it. Now look at this."

Levison held out the sheet upon which he had written the two lines, with the letters numbered from 1 to 68.

"Now take the first cryptogram. Put the letters instead of the figures that correspond with the letters in the key."

The juniors eagerly scanned he sheet.

F R I E N D S R O M A N S C O U N T R Y M E N
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23

L E N D M E Y O U R E A R S I C O M E T O B U R Y
24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48

C A E S A R N O T T O P R A I S E H I M
49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68

There was the key, as Levison had written it out. And the figures of the first cipher message ran: 18 15 1 1 20 15 16 10 16 7 18 66 4 24 60 10 4 20 4 7 9 2 5 9 66 9 14 4 20 16 12 24 14 4 2.

Changing the figures into letters, as was easy by reference to the key, they ran:

TOFFYOUMUSTHELPMEYESORNOHOOCEYUALKER

Spaced out into words, it made:

TOFF YOU MUST HELP ME YES OR NO HOOCEY UALKER.

"You see, the key does not contain the whole alphabet," explained Levison. "There is no K, and there is no W. So in signing his name, Hookey Walker had to use a C for a K, and a U for a W. Of course, it's equally easy to read."

"Toff, you must help me. Yes or no. Hookey Walker!" repeated Tom Merry. "My hat! It's simple enough—now we know!"

"Yaas, I'm wathah surpwised that I did not hit on that at once, you know," Arthur Augustus remarked, with a puzzled shake of the head. "It is weally vewy wemarkable; but I nevah thought of it."

"Go hon!" murmured Lowther.

"Then comes the second cryptogram," said Levison. "There were two rows of figures, you remember. Here's the top line: 5 9 3 18 3 7 3 10 60 9 7 7 3 45 24 4 18 11 24 45 9 18. Now look at the key, and you make NOITISIMPOSSIBLE TALBOT—or you can space it out into 'No. It is impossible. Talbot.'"

"Bai Jove!"

"Good old Talbot!" said Blake. "So that was written by Talbot, for the rascal to find when he came back for his answer the next night."

Levison nodded.

"Exactly. And when he read that reply, he wrote under it this: 3 10 16 7 18 7 4 4 20 15 16 20 15 16 10 16 7 18 66 4 24 60 10 4 9 2 6 3 4. That's the rest of the second cryptogram—now read it with the key."

IMUSTSEEYOUYOUMUSTHELPMEORDIE.

"I MUST SEE YOU. YOU MUST HELP ME OR DIE."

"So, you see, it looked as if he meant business," said Levison, while the juniors exchanged startled looks. "Well, I guessed that Talbot would answer that—telling the rotter to go and eat coke, or something to that effect. And last night I cleared out of the dorm, and heard him go down——"

"Talbot?"

"Exactly. And after he'd gone back to bed I got out, and red-chalked on the door these figures: 3 6 4 1 20 20 9 16 IDEFYYOU. Space it into words, and it makes——"

"I DEFY YOU," said Blake.

"Good old Talbot! He defied the rotter," said Tom Merry. "I knew he would. But he ran an awful risk. I suppose he can't be blamed for not calling in the police; but—but it was frightfully risky——"

"I thought it was rather too risky," said Levison coolly. "So I rubbed out his message and wrote another in the same cipher."

"My hat!"

"This is what I wrote: 10 4 4 18 10 4 9 5 18 66 3 7 7 60 9 18 11 5 66 9 32 33 45 4 1 9 2 4 6 11 16 5. Put that through the key, and it makes, MEETMEONTHISSPOTANHOUR BEFOREDAUN. Spaced out—'MEET ME ON THIS SPOT AN HOUR BEFORE DAUN.' I had to use the U for the W, the same as Hookey Walker had done. And an hour and a half before dawn I woke up Blake and the rest, and we came down and nobbled him."

"My hat! He must have believed that that message was from Talbot!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Of course we did, that's what I wrote it for. He knew that Talbot wouldn't betray him, and he was taking a rotten advantage of it, to threaten him into helping him to escape from the police. He's been hiding in this neighbourhood, of course, on purpose to get help from Talbot. He wanted clothes and money, and help generally to get clear. He couldn't come here, and couldn't write, and so the only thing he could do was to chalk his message on the door in cipher—Talbot was bound to know of it and to read it," said Levison. "What he would have done when he found that Talbot refused to help him under any condition whatever you can guess. But when he read my message he thought the Toff was giving way to his threats—he waited there at the time I specified—and we bagged him. He thought no one but he and Talbot knew the cipher, and so he felt safe. He knows different now!" And Levison chuckled.

The juniors looked at Levison with real admiration.

He had solved the mystery that had puzzled them all, and he had turned the cracksman's cunning contrivance against Hookey Walker himself, and led him into a trap. And it was quite probable that he had saved Talbot's life—for the desperate ruffian would certainly have attempted, at least, to carry out his savage threat.

There was a long silence.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, at last. "I can't say that I appwove of all Levison's methods of findin' out things—that would be goin' wathah too fah—but, weally, I must say that we have wonged him. He was weally playin' up jolly well, to help old Talbot out of a beastly fix, and we—we—we——"

"You sent me to Coventry!" said Levison.

Tom Merry coloured.

"Well, we didn't know—and you were so jolly secretive about it," he said. "Still, I'll admit for one that we were in the wrong; and—and I ask your pardon."

"I apologise, deah boy!"

"Same here," said Blake. "Even Study No. 6 makes mistakes at times. It's rare—but it occurs. Sorry, Levison!"

"And if anybody evah pwoposes to send Levison to Coventwy again," said Arthur Augustus emphatically, "I shall wegard it as an impewative dutay to give him a thick yah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Bai Jove! Heah's Talbot!"

Talbot had been looking on quietly, unnoticed by the eager juniors. He came forward, with a quiet smile.

"Levison's quite right," he said, "and he's got me out of a bad scrape. Perhaps it would have been better if I'd told you chaps about it all." He coloured. "Only—only I hoped the man would clear off, when he found I wouldn't have anything to do with him—and that would have saved any talk about it."

"You uttah ass!" said Arthur Augustus severely. "You ought to have confided in me at least. You have been wunnin' a feahful wisk."

"I think I have," said Talbot. "If I have, Levison has saved me from it."

"Yaas, wathah! Gentlemen, I pwopose to cheeah for Levison of the Fourth."

"Hurrah!"

And that cheer, heartily and spontaneously given, rang very pleasantly in the ears of the junior who had been sent to Coventry.

THE END.

(Make sure of getting next Wednesday's "Gem" Library. It contains another grand complete tale of the Chums of St. Jim's, entitled "Keeping It Dark.")

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CHAPTER 1.
Bob Takes the Plunge and Enlists.

Clang!

Bob Hall, a fine strapping young fellow, flung down his pen impatiently.

"I'm sick of it all!" he muttered. "It's a dog's life, and it's only poverty that drove me to it. But flesh and blood can't stand—— Hallo! Keep your wool on, and I'll be with you in a jiffy!"

Following the clang of the bell had come a harsh order from the inner room of the shabby office where the lad was working. In three long strides Bob reached the threshold and popped his head in. From the tone he adopted it was evident that the young fellow had but small respect for his employer.

"What's up?" he inquired.

A long, cadaverous-looking man, sitting at an untidy table, had been hastily opening a pile of letters just arrived by the post. He had stopped when halfway through the correspondence, his attention arrested by the communication he had just read.

"Hooper says he can't pay!" he gasped.

"Well, I never thought he could," Bob rejoined. "The poor chap has been out of work for the last eight months, he's got a wife and six kids, trade is bad, he's been ill, too, and the doctor——"

"But my money," the other shrieked—"my good money! It will be lost if we are not quick. This is a lie, and Hooper is a rogue! Ach! They are all rogues, and though I struggle and pinch and help them all I can, and do not charge more interest than they can pay if they work hard, yet——"

"Hooper's straight enough," Bob cut in brusquely. "He's done all a fellow could to get himself out of the mess ill-luck landed him in. You advanced him fifty pounds twelve months ago, but since then he's paid you thirty-seven in interest alone, and now——"

"Poof! You are like the rest, you have no gratitude," the moneylender groaned. "Is this the way you talk to me when such great trouble falls upon me? I am poor and——"

Bob chuckled.

"Poor!" he ejaculated, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Why, bless my life, Hellberg, you're worth every penny of a hundred thousand quid, and you've made it all by squeezing——"

"Na, na; I am poor!" Hellberg shrieked. "I cannot afford such a heavy loss. I do feel ill at the dreadful thought, and——"

"You'll have to grin and bear it," Bob interjected. "Hooper can't pay now, that's a cert; but, if you give him time, he may be able to later on."

"I will not give him one minute—no, not one second!" the other snarled. "I will have my good money from the scoundrel!"

"How are you going to manage that?" Bob asked, with some amazement.

"He has sticks—he has tables and chairs and beds, and——"

"You'd sell him up?"

"I will do what is legal. I will seize his sticks, and I will send to Houndsditch and buy flash goods and put them in his house, and I will have an auction, and the public will think that all the furniture is going cheap because there is a sale, and so I will get more than I pay at Houndsditch, and thus I will earn what I have lost through my kindness to that scoundrel of a Hooper!"

The moneylender was almost sobbing by this time. Bob's face grew scarlet with indignation.

"And what's to happen to Hooper and his wife and kids?" he almost shouted. "You'll turn 'em out on to the streets, cold and hungry, without a place where they can rest their heads! They'll have to wander about the Embankment, or go into the workhouse, or——"

"I mind my own business. What is Hooper to me?" the callous extortioner retorted acidly. "Do not talk so much; it is not for that that I engaged you. Get your hat, and go to Hooper's house, and take care that he plays no tricks. You are the broker, and the law will be on your side."

"I'll see you hanged first!" Bob cried, clenching his fists. "I'm here as your bookkeeper, not as bailiff to do your dirty work!"

"You will not go—you will not obey my commands?" Hellberg cried, aghast. "Then you leave my employment, and you starve, as you were doing when I took pity on you!"

Bob stepped across the room, his fists still clenched, his eyes blazing with contempt and wrath. The moneylender pushed his chair back nervously as he gazed at the lad's strong, open face and fine athletic figure.

"You took pity on me, did you?" the lad demanded. "Well, Mr. Hellberg, I don't want pity from any man, least of all from you. Bob Hall is able to take care of himself. I'm stony-broke, as you know, and I said I'd do your bookkeeping for the miserable pittance you offered; but there's been no favour in the matter, and I'll trouble you to keep a civil tongue in your head, or else I'll——"

"But you will not do as I order?" the moneylender protested. "You will not go to Hooper's house and——"

"Not likely! I came here as a clerk, and not as one of your cringing bailiffs. Bah! Though the work I undertook is straight and above-board, yet I'm sick of it all. To be mixed up in any way with a mean, miserly, heartless money-grubber is more'n I can stand any longer. I won't go to Hooper's! I couldn't face the poor chap on such a horrible errand; and, what's more, I'll chuck the job I had. Get someone else whom you may be able to browbeat and bully. I'm going to clear out!"

Hellberg sprang to his feet.

"There is no one I can get who will do my work as well as you!" he cried. "You are honest, and you work hard. You need not go to Hooper's; I will arrange that otherwise. Stay with me, Hall, and I will raise your salary by one shilling and sixpence a week. Think of that! Ach! If you save, you will be able before long——"

"I wouldn't stay if you raised my wages by a pound a week!" Bob scoffed, as he took his hat from the peg. "I was a fool ever to take on office life, and this day I chuck it for ever! It may suit lots of chaps, but it don't agree with me. I want to see life, to chum with a manly lot of fellows, to live in the open air, to ride, shoot, travel, and share in adventure and excitement. Since I was a kid my feelings have always been dragging me that way, and now—yes, now I answer the call!"

"Then you will lose your week's wages. You have not given me proper notice, and so——"

Bob grinned scornfully as he turned at the threshold.

"What does a chap care about a week's screw when he's taking a big plunge that will change the whole of his life for ever?" he cried. "My mind's made up! Keep your money! Though I haven't a stiver, I won't be without a bed to-night."

The lad dashed down the stairs and out into crowded Holborn. The street was bright with sunlight; overhead a few fleecy clouds drifted lazily across the blue sky. Around him was the clatter of the human hive, and a feeling of exultation swept over Bob as he turned and took a last look towards the City to which he was bidding farewell.

"I'm free—free!" he murmured, as, buttoning up his coat, he strode away towards Trafalgar Square. Shortly afterwards he turned into Orange Street and walked down towards the gate of St. George's Barracks.

He felt a tap on the shoulder, and, turning, he saw the smiling visage of a recruiting sergeant.

"Thinking of enlisting?" the latter inquired.

Bob looked at the smart, trim figure of the Hussar and the pleasant face under the gold-laced cap.

"Yes. I want to join a cavalry regiment."

The sergeant looked approvingly at the athletic lad.

"Well, I'm here recruiting for the cavalry," he replied. "My name's Gibson, and it's my business to rake in all the chaps I can get, and in the ordinary way I'd just take you along and say nothing. But you look the right sort, and you mean business, so I'll be straight with you. The cavalry is about three times as hard as the line. Now, what do you say?"

"I'll join the cavalry."

"Bully for you!" the sergeant grinned. "It's the cream of the Service, my lad, and I've no fear of a chap who'll follow his own line, even when he's warned that the graft is a bit tough. There's more fun with us than with the others, though, and a fellow can't expect play without work. I'm jolly glad you turned up; the 'receiving-room' is packed full of wasters!"

Bob fell into step with the sergeant, and the two strode into the barracks. Pushing open a door, Bob was ushered into a large, bleak room, crowded with civilians of every class, age, and description. The room was thick with tobacco-smoke, and through the haze he gazed around in astonishment.

Men were there whose wan faces spoke of starvation, and who were far on the seamy side of thirty. Sickly youths were there who had not the remotest chance of passing the medical examination. City clerks, costers, country bumpkins, gaol-birds, and young fellows with means, all jostled together, some timid, some with an air of bravado, some laughing, some downcast, and all standing in small groups, talking to half a dozen non-coms., who were kept busy answering an endless string of questions.

"Do all these chaps hope to join the Service?" Bob gasped.

Gibson chuckled.

"Some of 'em come here fully determined, and then they're seized with a panic and scoot," he replied. "Others want to join, poor chaps, because they can't get work; but they're often too old, and we can't take 'em on. More, again, hope to dodge the police. I tell ye, it's not an easy job to get the right sort; but if a chap only has soldiering in his blood it's the grandest life and the grandest—— Now's your chance. In you go!"

A door close by had been opened by a corporal, and the sergeant, grasping Bob by the shoulder, pushed him over the threshold.

"A good 'un—look after him, Casey," he whispered to the corporal; and the latter, nodding, closed the door.

Bob found himself in a small room. At a table was an officer in uniform, with a sheaf of blue papers before him.

"Attestation sheet!" said the officer; and therewith he began to read at a tremendous pace from the paper.

The officer mumbled about pains and penalties, from sentence of death to confinement to barracks, about the Regular and Auxiliary forces, marriage, prisons, ignominy, and invalids until Bob's head began to swim. The corporal looked on stoically. He had heard the same droning fifty times a day for the last six months. Bob gave up trying to follow the sense of the document, and he was gazing round the room, when suddenly a shout brought his heart jumping into his mouth:

"Sign!"

Bob scribbled his name at the end of the document.

"Right wheel!"

The corporal tapped Bob on the shoulder, opened the door, and thrust him into the arms of the sergeant who was waiting outside.

"Come along. The doctor is here, and you'd better be one of the first afore him," Gibson hurriedly explained.

He conducted Bob into an ante-room, where he stripped for the inspection. The sergeant tapped at the inner office.

"Come in!" shouted a stern voice.

Bob walked in and closed the door. Another officer, dressed in the uniform of the medical staff, advanced with a stethoscope and began to sound Bob's heart and chest.

"Hop!" he commanded.

The lad hopped about the room, first on one leg, and then on the other, all the time struggling to keep from laughing.

"Halt! Look at this board. Read what's on it."

The doctor had held up a printed form, with all sorts and sizes of letters, from large capitals to the smallest print.

Bob read the sentences off rapidly.

"Nothing the matter with you," the doctor grinned. "Why, man, you're in the pink of condition, and you're all bone and muscle. That'll do. You can go."

The lad made his exit rapidly, and donned his clothes again. He followed the sergeant to a third room where a grave man in civilian attire was seated at a table. As Bob entered the room, a staff officer handed him a Bible.

"Oath of allegiance before a magistrate!" the staff officer rapped out. "Silence and attention!"

The magistrate arose. He repeated the sacred oath earnestly, whilst Bob listened with rapt attention. His heart was thumping with pride.

"You do make oath that you will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his Majesty, his heirs and successors, and that you will, as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend his Majesty, his heirs and successors, and all generals and officers set over you. So help you God! Kiss the book!"

Bob reverently kissed the Bible, and laid it on the table, Bowing to the magistrate, he left the room, and closed the door. Gibson's face was full of good-fellowship and fun as Bob turned and looked at him.

"You've come through with flying colours," he laughed. "Shake hands, chum! We're both soldiers of the King. God bless him!"

CHAPTER 2.

Bob Joins His Regiment, and is Taken in Hand.

Bob Hall walked through Aldershot on the way to the barracks where the 27th Hussars were stationed. A series of manœuvres had just been completed, and the town was alive with the tramping of feet, and gay with the hues of multi-coloured uniforms. Road trains, drawn by engines, and packed ten feet high with stores, fodder, and ammunition, rolled in ceaseless succession across the plains. Soldiers of the line swung along, singing soul-stirring choruses as they tramped back to barrack life again; artillery rattled and clattered at a gallop, and high above all were the bugle-calls and the strains of half a dozen bands.

A cavalry regiment trotted past the lad, the thunder of the horses' hoofs drowning all other sound. Coal-black were the eight hundred chargers; dazzling were their caparisons. Eight hundred plumes nodded proudly from the tops of eight hundred shining helmets as the regiment rode past, each man a splendid figure in red and gold and silver facings. It was a glorious sight of martial splendour, bound to quicken the pulse of every patriotic Britisher, and Bob's eyes shone with admiration as the regiment cantered into the barracks, and formed into squadrons at the word of command.

The lad paused at the barrack gate amongst the crowd, and looked in.

"What regiment is that?" he asked a bystander.

"The Die-Hards—the smartest lot at Aldershot. Folks say as General French got 'em here purposely to show the other fellows what soldiers should be like, an' they're the cream of the Service, anyhow."

"Can you tell me where the 27th Hussars are quartered?" Bob inquired.

"Why, them's they! The Die-Hards is the nickname for 'em. If I was a youngster, and thought of enlisting, I'd——"

Bob pushed his way through the crowd, and reached the sentry-box. His face was flushed with pleasure.

The sentry's carbine was resting in the hollow of his left arm, but he brought it quickly to his shoulder as he wheeled round and faced the lad.

"Get back, there—get back!" he commanded. "No one is allowed in barracks except on business. Clear off at once, or else——"

Bob produced his enlistment papers for the other's inspection.

"I've joined the Die-Hards," he explained. "I've just arrived. Can you tell me where I must go, and to whom I am to report myself?"

"Hallo! So you're one of us, then! You've only just joined in time, my son, for we've almost stopped recruiting. Hi, Bill, here's a young shaver as has come along."

In answer to the call, another private appeared, emerging from the guard-room, his spurs clinking at every stride he

took. He was a fine fellow, about a year Bob's elder; and, as the two looked at one another, a sudden friendship seemed to spring up between them.

"How do? Glad to meet you," the soldier began. "My name is Bill Dent. Let's have yours."

"Bob Hall is my name."

"Well, Hall, you're welcome to the Die-Hards. We'll do what we can to help you to settle down. How did you manage to hit on this regiment, though? I can tell you we're jolly particular as to whom we take."

"Sergeant Gibson, up at St. George's Barracks, advised me to join."

"Good old Gibson!" Dent chuckled. "He's paid you a big compliment, Hall, for he had strict instructions from the adjutant not to send on anyone who wasn't the right sort. You'll do, though, I'm sure, when we lick you into shape a bit. You'll have plenty of hard knocks, but they'll all be for your good, as you'll see for yourself, later on, so keep a stiff upper-lip, and remember that you've joined the smartest and best behaved regiment in the whole of the Service. Now come along. I'll pilot you."

Dent led the way across the barrack square, and tapped at the door of the orderly-room.

"Come in!" a sonorous voice shouted.

Dent stepped across the threshold and saluted, Bob following him in. Seated at the table was an officer about twenty-six years of age, one of the tallest and handsomest men Bob had ever seen. Strength of character was stamped on every feature of his sunny face; yet his eyes were kindly, and his manner to the private was pleasant and cheery.

"A new recruit, sir!" Dent explained. "He didn't know his way about, so I took him in tow."

The officer shot one swift look at Bob, and then turned to a group of non-coms. standing around his chair.

"Sergeant-major!" he rapped out.

A stout, middle-aged man moved with wonderful celerity, considering his bulk, round to the front of the table, and saluted.

"What squadron shall we post this recruit to?" the officer inquired.

"F Squadron, room ten, sir. There's a vacancy there."

"All right. Private Dent, take him away, and hand him over to the colour-sergeant."

Dent saluted again, and withdrew, followed by Bob.

Dent flung a door open, and Bob walked into the long, whitewashed room, which was to be his future home. Some twenty cots were ranged along the walls. A shelf ran the circuit of the room about five feet or so from the ground, and on it were ranged plates, knives, and forks. Above the cots hung the soldiers' equipment and carbines. The floor was bare, and a long table resting on trestles ran down the middle.

The privates were busy hanging up their belongings and preparing for dinner, and Bob was struck by their fine build and manly bearing. He was wondering could he ever hope to attain their alert, smart appearance, when he received a sharp tap on the shoulder, and a rough hand chucked him under the chin so violently that his teeth rattled in his head.

"Now, then, my half-baked caricature of a militiaman, keep your head up, and don't stand as if you were ashamed of yourself. Hands to the sides—so, chest out, eyes right, 'tenshun! Get ready!"

The words came rapidly in a gruff voice, and Bob, obeying the commands they enjoined, saw that he was being addressed by a lad apparently his own age.

"I'm the flag!" he explained curtly. "I'm Colour-sergeant Baxter, and I've got charge of this room, and you've to obey me whenever I order you about, or else I'll warm you up pretty considerable! I'm known as F Company's flag, and I got promotion through jolly hard work and strict attention to discipline. Just you do the same, and promotion will come to you, too, in time. But you try any games on with me, and I'll make you feel sorry that you ever were born!"

As the colour-sergeant rapped out his speech the men in the room turned and grinned good-humouredly. In spite of the sergeant's fierce utterance, Bob fancied that he detected a twinkle in his eye, and he was about to say something in reply when Baxter's hand shot out again, and Bob's head was jerked back.

"Keep your chin out!" the sergeant yelled. "Every time you let it drop you'll find someone close by to knock it up for you, so the sooner you stand as if you feel you had a right to live the better it'll be for you. We don't half drill recruits in the Die-Hards, I can tell you. Now, come along with me; I have to get your kit."

As Bob was following the sergeant out of the room he got into his civilian stride again. A private who had been busily folding his cloak, suddenly hit Bob a rap under the chin for the third time. The lad started back with an angry exclamation, and all in the room burst out laughing. Baxter wheeled round, curtly beckoned to Bob to leave the room, and then followed him, and closed the door.

"Don't you start getting wild, young fellow," he said, with a kindly change of voice now that he and the recruit were alone. "The next few weeks will make or mar you as a soldier, and you must always remember, whatever happens, that no one meddles with you, except to help to smarten you up. We're all as keen as mustard in our resolution to keep the regiment at the top of the Service."

"It's all so sudden, though," Bob protested, laughing, in spite of his anger. "If every chap keeps on hitting my chin and thumping me because I don't carry myself properly, why——"

"In three days' time you'll hold your head up, and you'll have the cavalry stride," Baxter grinned. "In the old days recruits were set apart and drilled by themselves, and all that sort of rot, but our c.o. won't have any of that. When a new chap joins he just calls on all ranks to lick him into shape, and the work is done in no time. It's a bit rough on the recruit, but he gets over his troubles the quicker. There, your chin is down again! If you don't——"

Bob pulled himself together quickly. He had no desire to get another of those irritating knocks. Already he was beginning to walk like a soldier, and he held his head high as he marched into the tailoring department.

Here he was fitted out with all the necessaries and clothing to which a soldier is entitled, free of charge, under the King's regulations. The quartermaster was in the depot, and personally criticised the lad's uniform after he had donned it. Bob noticed that Sergeant Baxter almost trembled in the presence of this high functionary, who treated all under him with undisguised contempt. The quartermaster in a regiment, from the nature of his duties, never unbends before his subordinates, and is usually more severe and autocratic than the colonel himself.

"What's your name?" he rapped out, as he eyed the lad dubiously.

"Bob Hall, sir."

"Ah, glad to see you've learnt already how to answer your superior officer! That's a trifle in your favour, anyhow. Sakes, what a guy the chap looks, though, in the King's uniform! He's for all the world like a stuffed dummy! Sergeant Baxter, just show him how to fasten his spurs on. There, stand up, Private Hall! Quick march! Off you go!"

After half an hour's drill the lad had learned much, and as he returned to the barracks he had already acquired something of the easy stride that stamps the smart hussar.

The bugle had sounded, and Baxter explained that it was calling the men to dinner.

"You'll learn all the calls time enough," he grinned. "Even the horses know most of 'em. Now get along, or your chums will have the best cut off the joint, and you'll have to put up with the worst. Get to know the men in your room, and make friends with 'em if possible; they can do a lot to help you or to make your life miserable. You'll find 'em all decent chaps, barring a couple, with whom you'll have to hold your own."

As Bob entered the barrack-room once more the orderly man and his assistants were returning from the cook-house with the rations for the mess, and the plates were quickly pounced upon. The lad had grasped one, and was about to carry it to the table, when a long arm shot forward, and the plate was pulled away. Bob turned angrily.

"Half a mo'!" he cried. "I've a right to my dinner the same as anyone else, and——"

"Garn!" the older soldier cried, as, helping himself to salt and mustard, he began his meal. "You're only a recruit, and it ain't likely that you'll have the pick of the joint the first day you join. You'd better start by being civil, young fellow, or else——"

The lad hesitated for a moment. He did not desire that his first day in the regiment should be made memorable by a quarrel; yet he felt that if he once submitted to any bullying it would be all the more difficult for him to make good his footing later on. He made up his mind quickly, and, stepping forward, he grasped his despoiler by the back of the neck and tried to drag him away from the table.

(Another grand instalment of this story, describing Bob Hall's first fight, will appear next Wednesday. ORDER IN ADVANCE!)

FROM THE FIRING-LINE!

A Series of Letters of Enthralling Interest received direct from Corporal Charles, of his Majesty's —th Dragoons, who is an old reader of "The Gem" Library, and is now on active service on the Continent with the British Expeditionary Force.

(Exclusive to "The Gem" Library.)

No. 8.—

COMRADES IN PERIL!

You lucky people in Great Britain, who sit down to meals with white cloths on the tables, with knives and forks and plates, and the other little luxuries of civilisation, would have a bit of an eye-opener if you came across to France and saw how Tommy Atkins dines and sups at the front.

You soon learn out here to dispense with everything—except the grub. If you're in luck's way, you might be able to use an old box for a table, but more than likely you'll squat down, tailor-fashion, your plate on your knees, grateful to be far enough away from the spot where the "Jack Johnsons" are falling and sending up a shower of earth as condiments.

Nor are you particularly finicky about taste. What does it matter to a hungry chap whether the tea or the stew has been boiled in a can that had just before contained petrol! My word! I used to make a fuss in the old days about using a fishy fork with meat; but now——

The mention of grub reminds me of an adventure the King's Dragoons had a few days back.

I was superintending the cooking of bacon for brekker, frying it a glorious golden-brown, and incidentally assuring one or two boys who had the boldness to grumble that it was no intention of mine to poison them—that, in fact, the purple streaks showing on the "back rashers" were only the marks of my indelible pencil, which I was using in place of a fork to turn 'em in the pan, when the colonel's orderly came for me.

"Another job for you, corporal," smiled the dear old chap, as I entered his tent and saluted. "One of the air scouts, returned from a reconnaissance, has reported the presence of a lengthy line of German transport waggons moving towards So-and-so. From what he could see, they've rather a strong convoy of cavalry with them. It occurred to me that the King's Dragoons would like to make their acquaintance."

We laughed together. Everything had gone splendidly for the Allies. Our boys were in fine fettle after the cave-like existence they had spent in the trenches, and the marching and the action had put them in great heart. As for the cavalry, we had been scrapping all the time, and had given the Kaiser's ewe-lambs the hiding of their lives.

The colonel knew far better than I did how demoralised the Germans were becoming. Ragged, unwashed, haggard, and half-starved, they began to look more like a mob of scarecrows than soldiers.

"If these are the food-waggons they're expecting, sir," I answered, "our lads won't be satisfied with making their acquaintance—they'll want to dine with 'em."

"You mean, after you've made the lot prisoners," grinned the colonel. "That's just Tommy's way. Ha, ha! Get ahead, corporal! I can only spare you forty men, though."

"I'll try to bring 'em all back, sir," was my reply.

When I was outside the tent, though, my jaw dropped. According to the air scout's report, there were about forty lorries, heavily loaded, and at least a squadron of cavalry convoying them. Against about three hundred Uhlans and fifty to a hundred infantrymen on the lorries I was to take out forty dragoons!

Still, it wasn't my place to argue. The colonel thought forty of us were a good enough match for the four hundred Germans. We'd show him he had good reason for his confidence in us.

I hastened towards the breakfast party.

"Never mind about that French toast!" I cried to a fellow who had a piece of bread held over the coals on the end of a bayonet. "We'll have German ewe-lambs on toast presently. Saddle up!"

The boys had spent eighteen hours out of the previous twenty-four in the saddle, but, though many of them hadn't had a clean shave for over a week, they were as bright-eyed as a packet of new needles, and as sharp.

The band was still playing—that is to say, the howitzers and batteries of both the Allies and the foe were making the usual day-and-night music, and throwing crotchets and quavers in the shape of shells as generously as ever—as we trotted off through the lines.

Where we were precisely I am not allowed to tell you, but I might hint that it was not more than a hundred miles from the frontier posts that separate France from Belgium.

I'd looked up the position on my map. The German convoy, in some way, had got off their main track. Possibly the severe dressing-down and the quick movements of our cavalry, especially the Indian section, had flurried them, and caused them to choose another route. The dragoons had, in fact, been harassing the enemy's lines of communication day after day.

There was the usual procession through deserted villages, past burned-out cottages and farmhouses. Refugees we still found in pitiful groups hurrying forward, terror in their eyes, their few belongings in wheelbarrows, children crying and clinging to their mothers' skirts.

"The hated Bosches are coming!" they cried to us. "They are mad—wine-soaked! They are still burning and robbing!"

Those who had food in their knapsacks pressed it into the eager hands held up for it. Big Bill Barlow, the squadron's heavy-weight boxer, had tears in his eyes as he gave up, not only his day's food, but also his emergency rations, to a haggard-cheeked peasant woman who had three little children, one in arms, with her.

"This'd be our fate if once we let the Kaiser's butchers invade England," he said to me, with a quiver in his deep voice. "They'd burn our villages and towns. They'd treat our women, children, and old men just the same."

All our chaps had the hump, and a minute before we were laughing merrily and singing all the songs we knew!

"They won't get the chance, my son," I assured him. "We've got to stop that game right now, as the Yanks say. By the time we've finished with them they won't want to come over to our tight little island for 'the same medicine as before.'"

That put them in better spirits. A few minutes later we were grinning for very joy. We had taken a short cut through a wood, and, there at the top of the lane, two hundred yards away, was a patrol of half a dozen Uhlans, in the saddle, each one with a cigar between his lips.

We broke into a gallop at once. But the Germans were not pleased to see us. They wheeled round their horses and bolted like rats in the direction of the river.

We reached the bank, and stood staring about us for a few seconds, wondering what had become of them, when we saw a huge punt being pushed off at the bend of the river.

We galloped to the spot. The punt was in mid-stream now. In it were the six Uhlans and their horses, besides an old, white-bearded man, who was obviously the ferryman.

(Continued on page iii. of cover.)

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whose sign above a house on the bank was plain for all to see.

"Surrender!" I shouted. "We can pick you off easy as winking!"

The sweet little creatures understood the first word, if they didn't the rest. For answer we had a couple of revolver-shots over our heads.

I was on the point of giving our boys the order to empty a volley amongst them, when I was surprised to hear the old ferryman shout in French:

"It is all right, m'sieu! Old Jacques will settle with them!"

One Uhlan, rendered suspicious, turned to aim a blow at the old man, when, of a sudden, the punt upset, and horses and men were pitched into the depths of the swirling river.

We saw the brave old ferryman's idea the instant we went to his rescue. He had steered his craft to the spot where he knew there was a dangerous eddy, and had purposely overturned it. For a moment we gazed on the terrified German faces; then, hampered by their heavy kit, they sank to the bottom. Not one of them was saved, the horses being carried away, despite our efforts at rescuing them.

I questioned the old fellow. There could be no doubt we were on the right track. I decided to do what the Uhlans had intended to do.

"We want to meet the Germans," I told him. "Will you ferry us across—safely this time?"

"M'sieu has no need to fear," the ferryman smiled. "The Anglais and the French are brothers now. Old Jacques will not fail."

We were soon safely ensconced. The enemy came along, obviously unconscious of the welcome awaiting them. The air scout had observed well. We counted forty-two motor-lorries. The cavalry were a mixed lot, and a big crowd. The chaps grinned when I explained my idea.

We waited till the head of the column began to straggle past us on to the bridge before, opening out to as wide a front as possible, we sent a shower of cold lead into them from our carbines.

My word, there was a panic! Taken completely by surprise, the Germans didn't know what to do. Their horses reared and plunged, backing into a cluster, who were sent hurtling into the stream. The confusion was indescribable. In the midst of it all, the motor-lorries, which could not be stopped in time, had collided and jammed the entrance to the bridge and the roadway before it.

Into this disordered, terrified mass we charged from two different points, yelling and kicking up enough row for a whole army corps.

It was a daisy of a fight. We completely bluffed them. The Uhlans at the head of the column were cut up as easily as chopping firewood. They were a miserable lot. They didn't attempt to make a fight of it. After about ten minutes their officer, shivering and yellow-faced, gave me his sword. I could hardly believe my ears when he said they surrendered.

There was still the rearguard to settle with. About half our boys had galloped down to tackle them. Though they had not the excuse of being surprised, and their strength was quite five times that of our boys who went to meet them, they did not put up anything like a scrap.

The chief difficulty that now lay before me was as to how I should get back to the British lines with forty-two waggons, about fifty wounded, and a hundred-and-twenty prisoners. At least forty had been killed or drowned in the stream. Six of the King's Dragoons were also wounded.

Help was at hand, as it happened. I was still puzzling out the problem, when the noise of motors reached my ears. As luck had it, the Germans had been driven back from the main front. Coming now towards us to take up a position, and so cut off the retreat, were a company of Cameronians crowding a dozen lorries, and cheering like kids on their way to a Sunday-school treat.

With their help we quickly rounded up the Kaiser's brave and gallant stalwarts! They didn't look on us as "General French's contemptible little Army," I can tell you!

When we looked into the German lorries we found that every one of them was a supply waggon, chock full of grub. How many men the stuff would feed it's impossible to say. Anyway, a few thousands of the enemy went to by-by hungry that night.

How the good old colonel laughed when I reported to him.

"Bonnie lad!" he cried, gripping my hand. "You and your forty brave lads have worked wonders! I'm proud of you! I believe you'd have won through if I'd only given you twenty lads!"

"We'd have done our best, sir," I answered. And the dear old fellow laughed, and wrung my hand again.

THE END.

(Another of Corporal Charles' stirring adventures next Wednesday. Order in advance.)

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE

NOT TO BE MISLED.

As a steamer was leaving the harbour of Athens, a well-dressed young passenger approached the captain, and, pointing to the distant hill, inquired:

"What is that white stuff on the hills, captain?"

"That is snow, madame," replied the captain.

"Well," remarked the lady, "I thought so myself, but a gentleman has just told me it was Greece."—Sent in by M. Rudkin, Surrey.

A DUTIFUL SON.

"Oh, Mister Policeman," gasped the boy, "there's a orful fight going on over there!"

"Who's fighting?" asked the stolid constable.

"Farver an' another bloke."

"'Ow long 'ave they been at it?"

"Over arf an hour."

"But why didn't you come before?"

"'Cos dad was gettin' the better of it up to ten minutes ago."—Sent in by J. D. Mack, Manchester.

WHAT HE WANTED.

"You have scarcely spoken to me all this evening," she said, in tones of reproach.

"I—I beg your pardon," her fiancee returned apologetically. "I was trying to think of something to say."

"Is there anything on your mind?"

"Yes, to tell you the truth, there is."

"Can't I help you in some way?"

"You might if I could suggest it without your becoming angry."

"Tell me about it. It is my duty to sympathise with you, you know."

"On my birthday you gave me a fountain-pen."

"Yes. And you are going to say that it makes a horrid mess, and you don't want to write with it."

"I am not going to say anything of the kind," he replied stoutly. "I am going to write with that pen every day of my life. But there is one favour I would like to ask."

"What is it?"

"Please make me a suit of overalls to go with it!"—Sent in by Harry Thom, jun., Aberdeen.

HARD HIT!

"What's that you have in your hand?" asked Mrs. Parker of her husband, as he brought home a roll of manuscript.

"Brains, my dear!" retorted Mr. Parker pompously.

"Are you surprised at the fact?"

"Not in the least!" she replied. "I knew you didn't carry them in your head!"—Sent in by Maurice Porter, Leicester.

QUITE LIKELY.

Visitor: "I hear your son is in the college football eleven."

Mrs. Jones: "Yes, he is, indeed."

Visitor: "What position does he play?"

Mrs. Jones: "I'm not sure, but I think he is one of the drawbacks."—Sent in by Miss C. Tate, Brentwood, Essex.

DOUBLE DUTCH.

The following was supposed to have been found one morning in a Rocky Mountain station soon after the West-bound train had left:

"Schamkayvoo,
"April der five.

"Deer Kusin August,—Vat I vill take der pen in mine hand unt let you know vat yure deer Unkel is ded. If he vould have leeved he vould be chust six months ded. After yure deer Unkel was ded the Doktors gave up all hopes of saving hees life.

"You are the only leeving relative besides two kusins vat vas killed by the Filipeens.

"The reason I vas not write sooner is bekause we dont leeve vere ve did, ve moofed vere ve are.

"If you vas not got de letter let me no und I vill ritten you unuder-vun.

"Hoping to see you by de next mail, I stay youre Kusin,
HANS VANSHE.

"P.S.—Plese don't oben this letter bekause dere iss sad news in id."—Sent in by T. J. Hopwood, Nelson, B.C.

SOLD!

He saw her sitting in the dark corner, and knew that his chance had come.

Noiselessly he stole up behind her, and before she was aware of his presence he had kissed her.

"How dare you!" she shrieked.

"Pardon me," he bluffed readily. "I thought you were my sister."

She stepped out into the light.

"You idiot!" she giggled. "I am!"—Sent in by A. Cohan, Sydney, N.S.W.

WHEN THEY QUARRELLED.

"Overcrowding!" said the man who was being squashed to death in a tramcar. "Why, this is nothing—nothing at all! I have seen five families living in a cellar—one in each corner and one in the middle."

"Dear me! Five families! But how did they agree?"

"Pretty well, until the family in the south-west corner began putting on airs; but even then they didn't quarrel."

"What caused the break-up?"

"Oh, the family in the middle went too far. They began taking in lodgers."—Sent in by J. E. Slater, Hyde.

MERCY!

The pupil-teacher was taking the geography lesson, and was finding the density of one or two of the scholars rather more than she could cope with. She was questioning them on the peculiarities of the British seaports, and at last she pointed to Liverpool on the map, and asked:

"Now, boys, why is the river at Liverpool always thick?"

Dead silence. Then suddenly something popped into little Willie Smith's mind, and his eyes twinkled.

"Please, miss," he said, "because the quality of the Mersey is not strained."—Sent in by James Sumner, Liverpool.

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.