THE CALL OF THE PAST!

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

Complete Stories for ALL, and Every Story a GEM.

The GEM LIBRARY 1D

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OLD CHUMS! TALBOT MEETS MARIE RIVERS!

PUBLISHED IN TOWN AND COUNTRY EVERY WEDNESDAY MORNING

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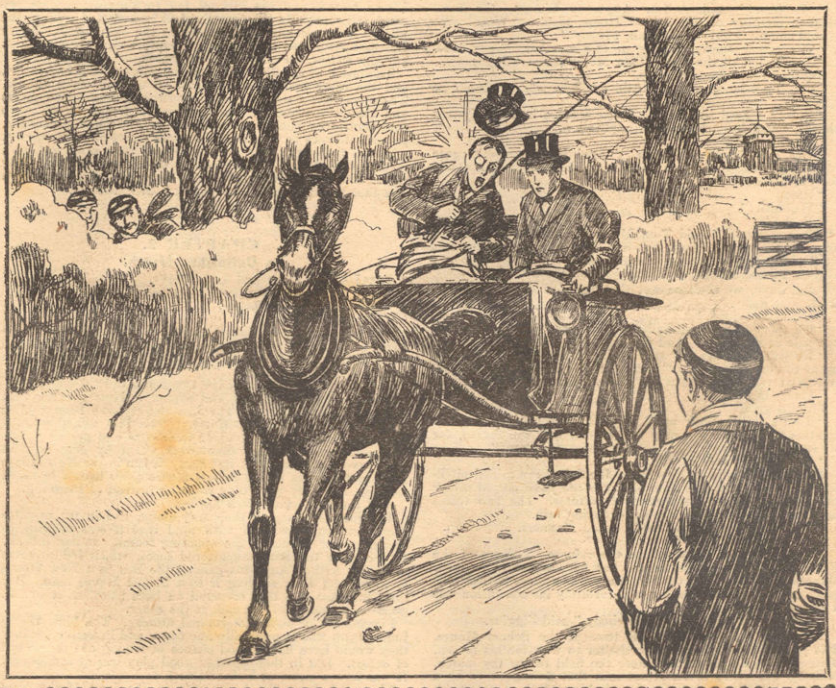
COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

THE CALL OF THE PAST!

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

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Whiz! Whiz! From behind the edge came two squashy and muddy snowballs, with deadly aim. Arthur Augustus gave a yell. One of them caught his silk hat, and sent it flying, and the other landed in his neck, with ruinous results to his beautiful collar. "Ow! Wow! You awful wettahs!——ow!" (See Chapter 1.)

CHAPTER 1.
Figgins is Obstinate.

"BLOW the rain!" said Figgins.

"Yes; but——"

"Besides, who's afraid of getting wet?"

"Nobody; but——"

"If you School House chaps are afraid of wetting your tootsies, you can go in and wrap yourselves up in cotton-wool!" snorted Figgins. "And you can call it a win for the New House."

To which Tom Merry & Co. retorted with a general snort.

Certainly the weather was not promising. It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and a junior House match was fixed for that afternoon. But the rain, which had been threatening all the morning, was coming down at last in earnest. There was a steady drizzle in the old quad, and the leafless old elms were simply weeping. And the footer field was, as Monty Lowther remarked, in an excellent state for making mud-pies, but not much use for football.

Naturally, Tom Merry & Co. deemed it only advisable to postpone the match. But Figgins, the junior skipper of the New House, was intractable.

Figgins was not usually obstinate, but he could be very obstinate indeed when he liked. Apparently he liked now.

Figgins wanted to play that match, weather or no weather. He had reason. In the last three matches the School House had beaten their old rivals. Figgy wanted to change all that. He had nigger-driven his team till they were at the top-notch of their form, and he anticipated victory. From the point of view of the New House team, all was calm and bright, so far as the prospects of that match were concerned. Now the

Next Wednesday:
"CAST OUT FROM THE SCHOOL!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

weather had taken a hand in the game, and the ground really wasn't fit for playing on. But, as Figgins declared warmly, it was as fit for one side as the other. If the blessed match were postponed, goodness only knew when it could be played. Most of the dates were taken up with regular matches, and the weather might play the same trick again any time. Figgins & Co. were keen to wipe out the galling record of defeat, and they wanted to go ahead, and "blow the rain!"

Tom Merry, with the collar of his coat turned up, surveyed the ground upon which the rain was falling. It was not a cheerful view.

"It's all rot!" said Tom, with a shake of the head. "You're an ass, Figgy!"

Figgins grunted.

"Oh, chance it and play!" he said.

"Twouldn't be footer——"

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the most elegant member of the School House team. "Wats! We should uttahly wuin our clobbah, Figgay."

"It's rather thick, playing in this weather, Figgy," remarked Talbot of the Shell, Tom Merry's best winger.

Another grunt from Figgins.

"Oh, don't be scared of a little wet," he said. "Don't be soft."

"Soft!" roared the School House juniors in an indignant chorus, much incensed at that imputation.

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Yes, soft!" sniffed Figgins. "Look here, we don't agree to calling it off, and if you shirk it we shall count it as a win for our House."

"Rats!"

"Wubbish!"

"Bosh!"

"That settles it," said Tom Merry, frowning. "You're a silly, obstinate ass, Figgy, but if you're going to call us soft we'll play, if it is raining in cartloads! We'd play if it was raining Prussian Uhlans. Come on, you chaps!"

"Bai Jove, we shall be wet thwough and smothahed with mud, you know."

"Can't be helped."

"Oh, play up!" said Talbot, laughing. "It's as fair for one side as the other. And the rain may go off."

"Doesn't look like it," said Blake of the Fourth, blinking up at the lowering sky. "But we'd play in a dozen thunderstorms at once rather than call it a win for the New House!"

"Hear, hear!"

Figgins grinned.

"That's right; buck up!" he said. "Who cares for the weather? Though you may as well call it a win for us, for we're going to lick you out of your boots this time!"

"Bow-wow!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry made up his mind. It might have rained pitchforks and 4.7 guns, and Tom Merry would have played rather than submit to the imputation of softness. The two teams came out of the pavilion into the dropping rain.

"Where's the giddy referee?" asked Manners.

"Bai Jove, he hasn't come!"

Tom Merry looked round for the referee. Lefevre of the Fifth was to referee the match, but he was not to be seen. Doubtless he concluded that his study was a more comfortable place in that kind of weather, and certainly his conclusion was a reasonable one.

"Cut off and call Lefevre, somebody," said Figgins.

Talbot of the Shell sped off towards the School House. The juniors crowded back into shelter to wait for his return. There was not a single soul near the field to see the match. Nobody was likely to come out into that downpour to be a spectator. The rain was simply splashing on the footer field, and the goal-posts were running water. But Figgins's obstinate face showed no signs of relenting, and Figgy's team backed him up loyally. Redfern was overheard to whisper that Figgy was a champion ass, but he backed his leader up all the same.

Talbot was not long gone. He was soon seen speeding back from the distant School House. But he came alone.

"Well?" exclaimed Tom Merry, as the Shell fellow came up dripping and panting. "Is Lefevre coming?"

Talbot grinned.

"No. He says he's not a duck, and this weather is only suitable for ducks to play footer. He says that if you're going to play this afternoon you must be ducks, or else——"

"Or else what, fathead?" said Blake.

"Geese!" said Talbot.

"Oh!"

"And he's right, too!" growled Kangaroo of the Shell. "You're an ass, Figgy. Where are we going to dig up a referee, if Lefevre won't come? I suppose we're not going to play without a referee?"

"A junior will do if we can't get a senior!" snapped Figgins. "You cut off, Kerr, and fetch one of the fellows."

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"Right-ho!" said Kerr. "You chaps agree?"

"Oh, anything for a quiet life," said Merry resignedly.

Kerr rushed off to the New House, and he did not come back alone. He brought Thompson of the Shell with him. Thompson had put on an overcoat, and a waterproof over that, and a cap with flaps which he pulled down over his ears. He looked more as if he had prepared to start on an aeroplane journey than merely to referee a football match.

"Ready!" said Figgins.

"Well, you are a set of blessed duffers!" growled Thompson. "You'll all jolly well catch your death of cold!"

"Well, you won't, with all that clobber on," said Figgins sarcastically. "Now, if you School House kids ain't afraid of a little rain, we'll start."

"Oh, pile in!"

And the teams went out into the field. Figgins and Tom Merry tossed, and the kick-off fell to Figgins, against the wind and rain. By the time the ball had started rolling, the players were already wet through to the skin. Still, Monty Lowther remarked that it was a comfort that they couldn't get any wetter, for what that was worth.

Thompson of the Shell blew the whistle, and the ball rolled, and the rainy match began, amid an unaccustomed silence. There was not a single spectator on the ground. The cheers and shouts that usually accompanied a footer match were conspicuous by their absence. But as the game proceeded, and the fellows in the houses became aware that it was on, windows that gave view of the ground were crammed with faces, to catch distant glimpses of them through the falling rain. And the general opinion in both Houses at St. Jim's was that twenty-two fellows were off their rockers.

CHAPTER 2.
An Unfinished Match.

"PLAY up!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Groh! On the beastly ball!"

Splash! Squash!

"Bai Jove!"

The rain was coming down harder. It was coming down so hard, in fact, that even Figgins thought that perhaps he had been a little too obstinate. But Figgy would not have admitted that for worlds.

In a drenching downpour the two teams did their best.

The ground was muddy and slippery. Nearly every rush led to falls and bumps. The ball might have been rubbed with lard, from its slipperiness. The two unhappy goal-keepers rubbed the rain out of their eyes and peered at the field. The players kept themselves warm by activity, and they were soon steaming; but Fatty Wynn in the New House goal, and Herries in the School House goal, hadn't so much exercise, and they were soon sneezing instead of steaming.

And the rain came down harder.

The juniors ploughed their way along, and in ten minutes they were so smothered with mud that it was difficult to recognise the colours of the opposing teams. It was difficult to recognise the mud-be-spattered faces, which led to some mistakes, Arthur Augustus passing the ball to a New House forward, and Kerr sending it to a School House man. But little mistakes like that occurred on both sides, so it was as good—or as bad—for one side as the other.

Figgins & Co. made determined attacks. The New House junior team was in unusually fine form, and in better weather they would have had a good chance of wiping out the record of defeat. But in that weather good play was at a discount. It was now a game of kick-and-rush and splash.

The wind drove the heavy rain in the faces of the New House, and they simply hadn't a chance in the first half, with all their determined rushes. Tom Merry & Co. came right down the field at last, and Talbot, beating the bewildered backs, sent in a swerving shot for goal. If Fatty Wynn had been as alert as usual, he would have saved that shot from the wing; but at that moment Fatty Wynn was nearly doubled up with a Gargantuan sneeze.

"Atchoo-choo-choo—chooo!"

The ball whizzed over his shoulder and lodged in the dripping net. There was a gasp of triumph from the School House side.

"Goal!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Atchoo-choo-choo!" sneezed the fat goalkeeper.

"Chuck out that ball, Fatty!" growled Figgins.

"Atchoo-choo-choo!"

"Oh, my hat! Don't catch a silly cold in the middle of a game!" howled the exasperated Figgins. "You might have a little consideration for your side, Fatty. Chuck out that ball!"

Fatty Wynn pressed his handkerchief to his nose with one hand, and grabbed at the ball with the other.

"I can'd helb gadging gold in this rain, you fadded!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It isn't a laughing madder," gurgled Fatty Wynn. "I'be got a frighdful gold in my dose!"

"Oh, blow your nose!" growled Figgins crossly.

"That's what he's doing!" grinned Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Atchoo-choo-choo!"

The teams lined up again. The first half was getting to its end, and only that one goal had been taken. But the School House piled in again, with the wind and the rain behind them, when the whistle went. They brought the ball down, and Talbot centred to Tom Merry, and Tom slammed it in. Fatty Wynn could have stopped that goal, too, at any other time. But at the critical moment he was blowing his nose. The ball rolled over his head.

"Goal! Hurray!"

"Buck up, Fatty, you ass!" shrieked Figgins. "Have you come out goal-collecting?"

"I can'd buck ub with this gold in by head!" groaned the unfortunate Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Atchoo-choo-choo!"

"Oh, don't you begin sneezing, Blake!"

"Atchoo-choo-choo!"

"Keep moving!" gasped Lowther. "We shall be laid up at this rate. I hope Figgins will catch complicated pneumonia and pleurisy and lumbago and rheumatism!"

Figgins opened his mouth to retort, but the retort did not come forth. A tremendous sneeze came instead.

"Hallo! Figgy's got it! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Whad you gaggling at?" growled Figgins. "Blay ub."

They played up. Figgins & Co. succeeded in getting through this time, and he put the ball in unresisted. For Herries was in the throes of sneezing.

"Thad's wud for us, anyway," said Figgins, as they walked back to the centre of the field. "We'll bead bounders yet."

"My only hat!" exclaimed a sharp voice. "You silly young asses, what are you doing down here in this rain?"

Thompson of the Shell was about to blow the whistle for the restart when Kildare's voice was heard. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, had just come in, muffled up, and with an umbrella, and he had caught sight of the players in the distance, and hurried down at once to the football-ground.

"You young sweeps!" shouted Kildare. "What are you up to?"

"Catching colds!" replied Monty Lowther humorously.

"Blaying voodball," said Figgins. "Whad do you subbose we doig?"

"Playing football! Playing the giddy ox, you mean! Come off that field at once!"

"Whad!"

"Get indoors, and rub yourselves dry instantly!" shouted Kildare angrily. "My only hat, the whole lot of you will be laid up! Get a move on you! Do you hear?"

"Weally, Kildare, we haven't finished the game!"

"Get in, I tell you!"

The juniors looked at one another. The word of the captain of the school was law. As a matter of fact, most of the players were not sorry that Kildare had chipped in. The moment they stood still they shivered, and it was pretty certain that most of them were booked for bad colds.

They marched off the field sheepishly.

Figgins & Co. disappeared in the directions of the New House, and Tom Merry & Co. followed Kildare, in a draggled crowd, to the School House. As they came in, leaving mud and pools of water as they trod, Mr. Railton met them. The Housemaster gave quite a jump at the sight of them.

"Bless my soul! What—what is this, Kildare?"

"The young duffers have been playing footer, sir, and I fetched them in," said the Sixth-Former.

"Playing football in this dreadful downpour! Go to your dormitories at once, and rub yourselves dry and get to bed."

"To b-b-bed, sir!" stammered the juniors in dismay.

"Yes, at once. I will have hot-water bottles sent to you."

"B-b-but we're all righd, sir," said Blake. "We don'd feel at all ligge gatching golds, sir, nod at all. Atchoo-choo-choo!"

"Blake!"

"Atchoo-choo-chew-ew-ew!" sneezed Blake. "We're quide all righd, sjr—atchoo!"

"Go to bed at once, all of you!"

And the unfortunate footballers went to bed.

Rubbed dry, and tucked in, with hot-water bottles at their feet, they had plenty of time to meditate on that disastrous football-match. Over in the New House, Figgins & Co. were suffering a similar fate, with the addition of a hundred lines each from Mr. Ratcliff, their Housemaster. And among all the heroes of that footer-match, the principal observations were "Atchoo-choo-cheo!" and "Groooooooggh!"

CHAPTER 3.
On the Sick List.

THE next day there were vacancies in the Form-rooms of the Fourth and the Shell.

All the twenty-two, fortunately, were not "down."

But a large proportion of them had paid severely for Figgins's recklessness. Figgins himself had a glorious cold, which the other fellows agreed was only just. Kerr had a cold, too, and Fatty Wynn was in a pitiable state. Redfern and Owen and Lawrence were all laid up. In the School House, Blake and Herries, Kangaroo and Clifton Dane and Bernard Glyn, Manners and Digby were sad sufferers. Of all the School House side, only Tom Merry, Lowther, D'Arcy, and Talbot had escaped. Seven in the School House, and six in the New House, made an extremely unlucky thirteen. And that day the dreadful word "influenza" was whispered.

"Influenza!" growled Tom Merry, when he heard Dr. Short's report after visiting the unlucky juniors in the sanatorium. "Lucky for them it isn't pneumonia. Of all the duffers that ever duffed, I think Figgins takes the cake!"

"Thirteen blessed invalids!" said Talbot, with a whistle. "Laid up for days—perhaps for weeks. Poor old Figgy! And if it's influenza it may spread."

"Oh, don't be a horrid Jonah!" said Tom Merry, with a shiver. "I've had influenza once. I don't want any more."

"Wathah not," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a shudder. "Bai Jove! What's the mattah with you, young Fwayne?"

"Atchoooooh!" said young Frayne.

"Got a cold?"

Frayne of the Third blinked at them with watery eyes.

"I feel as if I've caught something," he said. "Perhaps I've got it from Wally. He's snuffling and gurgling like anything."

"Bai Jove! is my minah goin' to be ill?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus in distress. "Weally, you fellows, this is too bad of Figgins."

An hour later, D'Arcy minor and Joe Frayne were in the sanatorium with the other sufferers. There was no doubt that it was influenza, and that it was going the rounds. On the following day, Reilly and Hammond of the Fourth followed the others, and then Mellish and Blenkinsop and Lumley-Lumley. In the New House, too, there were more sufferers—Diggs and Clampe, and Thompson and Koumi Rao, the Indian, and Sefton and Baker and Monteith of the Sixth.

The St. Jim's fellows were in a decidedly uneasy state by this time—just the state to catch whatever was going, as a matter of fact. Gore and Skimpole were the next to follow, and after them went Cutts of the Fifth, and St. Leger and Gilmore. Rushden of the Sixth and Darrel went the same way.

"It's going the rounds," said Tom Merry gloomily. "Whether it started in that blessed footer-match, or whether it didn't, it's going round the giddy school."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus dismally. "It's wotten bein' in Studay No. 6 all on a chap's lonely own, you know. And they won't let me go and see Blake or Hewwies or Dig, in case I catch it, too."

"And we can't go and see poor old Manners!" said Lowther.

"I'd like to give Skimmy a look-in," said Talbot; "but it isn't allowed." Talbot shared a study with Gore and Skimpole, both of whom were on the sick list.

"You'd better dig with Lowther and me while your study-mates are away, Talbot," said Tom Merry. "And you come, too, Gussy. You don't want to have a study to yourself. We'll make it a foursome—until some more of us go."

"Thank you, deah boy!"

It was not cheerful with influenza "going the rounds." The school sanatorium was pretty nearly full now. Two nurses had come from the cottage hospital in Wayland, but two were not enough. It was understood that the Head had sent for more nurses; but there was a hitch somewhere, probably owing to the demand for nurses for the wounded in the war.

Tom Merry and Lowther were a little glum in these days. They missed their chum and study-mate Manners. Talbot and D'Arcy shared their study with them for the time, in Manners' place. Fortunately, none of the four showed any sign of catching it.

But one evening, as he came into the study, Tom Merry had an alarm. Talbot of the Shell was sitting there alone, with a wrinkle in his brow, and an expression of deep gloom upon his face.

"Talbot, old man——"

Talbot looked up quickly. He had a newspaper in his hand.

"You've got it?" gasped Tom.

"Eh? Got what?"

"The flu!"

Talbot smiled.

"No, I've not got that! I'm as sound as a bell, thank goodness!"

Tom Merry drew a breath of relief.

"Jolly glad of that! You were looking so down in the mouth I was sure you'd got it coming on. The only way to dodge the flu is to keep cheerful, you know. Don't worry! What the deuce are you worrying about? Thinking of the footer matches we sha'n't be able to play till this is over? I've had to scratch with the Grammarians already."

"No, I wasn't thinking of that. Levison has just given me this paper. There's something in it that concerns me—in a way——"

Tom Merry looked uneasy.

"You remember that man who came here as science master?" said Talbot quietly. "He called himself Mr. Packington here. He came with forged testimonials to the Head. He was really a cracksman; they called him the 'Professor' in the gang. Well, when I found him out I gave him the chance to clear. And he tried to rob the Head, as you know, and was collared. He said when they took him that the lock wasn't made that could hold him. It seems it was true. He's got away."

"Got away!" said Tom.

Talbot nodded.

"But—but if he has he can't hurt you," said Tom Merry uneasily. "It is a bit rotten, Talbot, old man, that you should be worried about what's long past and done with. But that man can't come back here, at all events."

Talbot was silent.

Tom Merry sat on the edge of the table regarding his chum anxiously. It was evident that the news of the Professor's escape from the police worried the Shell fellow.

"What's the trouble, Talbot, old chap?" said Tom. "You can tell me, I suppose?"

"You know my story," said Talbot, in a low voice. "But—but I haven't talked to you much about it. It's not a pleasant subject, you know. But I'll tell you now. You know I was a cracksman's son, brought up in the gang of which my father was the leader. You know the life I led before I came here—a thief among thieves." Talbot shivered a little. "It seems too horrible now to think of, but there it is! The Professor—his name is Rivers—was Captain Crow's right-hand man in the gang—and Captain Crow was my father. He knew me from my childhood, the Professor did; and—and I was brought up with his daughter Marie."

"He had a daughter!" said Tom Merry slowly. "The rotter! That ought to have been enough to keep him straight!"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"Marie was one of the gang," he said. "A better girl never breathed, and I was very fond of her; she was just my age. But she was brought up to help her father in his work—and you know the kind of work it is—just as I was brought up. I've thought about her very much since I've been here, and wished I could get a chance of finding her and helping her to do as I've done—throw the past behind, and make a fresh start."

"A girl—brought up to be a thief!" said Tom.

"Yes. And yet a better girl never lived—except for that. And how was she to learn better?" said Talbot bitterly. "I've had my chance; but she never had a chance. And her father is the biggest rascal in the swell mob—the chief of the Thieves Club now. And she's fond of him; he's her father."

"It's rotten!" said Tom. "Rotten! But, old chap, all that's done with now, as far as you are concerned. Everybody at St. Jim's knows your history, knows that you reformed, and suffered for it; and knows that you nearly lost your life, too, in stopping a German spy from blowing up a troop-train, and got the King's pardon for it. Everybody knows you're as straight as a die. They used to call you the Toff—and you've proved yourself a toff, and no mistake! The gang can't hurt you now. They did their worst against you when you chucked up the old life, and they can't do anything more."

"I hope so."

"But——"

"The Professor isn't a man to be beaten easily," said Talbot. "He wants me back in the gang. Kid as I am, I was the best cracksman in the three kingdoms, and he knows it. I should be worth a fortune to them. When he was here in disguise under a lying name I gave him a chance to get out, for the sake of old times, and for Marie's sake. Then he was arrested—at my word! The Professor doesn't forget! I have not heard the last of him, I know that!"

"But the police want him still; and if he should trouble you a word will be enough to get him sent to prison," said Tom.

Talbot's face was almost haggard.

"There's Marie," he said, in a low voice.

"His daughter?"

"Yes, and my old chum. I denounced him when he was here because he had robbed Glyn's pater—and he was here to rob the Head. After what Dr. Holmes has done for me I—I couldn't be silent, even for Marie's sake. But so long as he only tries to injure me I—I'm helpless. Whatever he does at me, I can't hurt him without hurting Marie. And she's fond of him. He's her father."

Tom Merry set his lips.

"And you expect to see him again?"

"I fear it!" Talbot's lips quivered. "He won't leave a stone unturned to get me back into the old gang. And he's cunning—cunning as a fox! What he will do I don't know—try to disgrace me here somehow, perhaps, and make it necessary for me to give up my scholarship and get out. Then I should be without resources, and he would think I should turn to the old life for bread."

"But you wouldn't," said Tom quietly. "I know you, Talbot; you'd starve before you would steal."

"You're right there, Tom. I've seen the light now," said Talbot quietly. "But I've never been afraid in my life before; but now—— You don't know that man's cunning and resource. Before I didn't fear him; he did not know where I was—he had no suspicion that I was here, you see. When he came here under a false name he knew me at once; and he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him when I found out his disguise and knew him. He knows where to find me now; and he will lay his plans, and——"

Talbot broke off.

"What a cad I am to bother you with all this, Tom! You've had enough to put up with on my account already."

"I'm glad you've told me," said Tom Merry. "You know you've got a pal to stand by you through thick and thin, anyway, Talbot. And if that scoundrel should try to trouble you again he'll have two to deal with, instead of one."

But the cloud did not leave Talbot's face.

It was a hard struggle the Toff had made to throw off the influence of the dark days of the past and face life afresh. But he had made it, and he had won. But the shadow of the past was still over his young life. In the blackness of the past, when he looked back upon it, there was one bright spot. It was the face of his girl chum—a laughing face, with clear eyes of blue—a face he knew that he would never forget.

Marie—sweet, kind-hearted Marie—was still in the toils the Toff had escaped from. Her devotion to her father blinded her to everything else. And her father was the Professor—John Rivers, the cracksman and forger! To save Marie, to lead her to tread a new path—as he had done—that had been the Toff's dream. And with the Professor safe behind prison bars it might have been possible.

But the Professor was free. And could Talbot raise his hand against the father of his old chum—the girl who in those old days had nursed him through a dangerous illness, and perhaps saved his life? He knew that he could not!

A wily and unscrupulous foe, who would hesitate at no cunning device, was already scheming against his honour and his happiness. He knew that. And in the struggle with that wily enemy the Toff was disarmed.

CHAPTER 4.

The Polite Thing!

"PUT on your best bib and tuckah, deah boys!" Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the weather, having done its worst, had turned over a new leaf, and a keen winter sun was shining down on St. Jim's. Football practice was going on, but with so many members of the junior team laid up, the Grammarian match had been scratched for that afternoon. But Arthur Augustus was not thinking about football.

The swell of St. Jim's was resplendent. Never had his trousers been so beautifully creased—never had his necktie been quite so natty, or his silk hat so beautifully polished. There was evidently something "on."

"Hallo! What's the game?" asked Monty Lowther, with a yawn. "Wherefore this splendour? Excuse me if I shade my eyes; you dazzle me!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Why this thusness?" asked Tom Merry. "Is Cousin Ethel coming?"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"No, deah boy. But somebody is comin', and I wathah thought it was up to us to do the polite thing, you know.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "Playing football in this dreadful downpour! Go to your dormitories at once, and rub yourselves dry, and get to bed! I will have hot-water bottles sent to you." The juniors gasped with dismay. (See Chapter 2.)

I've come for you fellows to twot along with me to the station!"

"Who's coming?"

"I have just heard it fwom Mr. Wailton," explained Arthur Augustus. "He is sendin' the twap for her, and I thought it would be wathah a good ideah to go in the twap, and give her a gweetin' in the name of the school. You fellows and Talbot had bettah come along with me!"

"But who is it?" yelled Lowther.

"Miss March, deah boy."

"And who in the name of thunder is Miss March?" demanded Tom Merry. "I've never heard the name. One of your blessed cousins?"

"Certainly not. Miss March is the new nurse."

"Oh, a nursey!" grunted Lowther.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass severely upon Monty Lowther.

"You are pwobably awah, Lowthah, that there is a shortage of nurses, owin' to the wah. The Head has been wathah bothahed to get enough of them to look aftah the chaps in the sanatowium. There is a new one comin' today fwom an institution of young lady nurses in London—the Little Sisters of the Poor, they are called. Wathah a nobbay title, isn't it? Well, one of the Little Sisters is comin' heah to-day, and I considahed it would be wathah decent for some chaps to meet her at the station. As they don't take any pay for nursin' people, it's vewy decent of them, and I wathah think we ought to testify some gwatitude to the Little Sistah—what?"

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther. "I'm going down to the footer, but you can testify my gratitude for me!"

"Lowthah, you ass——"

But Monty Lowther sauntered away, and D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Tom Merry and Talbot. He was full of his new idea.

"I twust you fellows are comin'," he said. "It might look wathah pushin' if a chap went alone. And this nurse is a wathah young one. Those who are alweady heah are vewy good persons, of course, but wathah leathewy. But the Little Sisters of the Poor are quite kids. Vewy likely she will be wathah nervous, and a kind gweetin' will buck her up, you know. You are comin', Tom Mewwy?"

"Well, there's the footer, you know."

"But the match is off!"

"Footer practice," said Tom. "It'll be dark by the time you get back from the station On reflection, I think I can safely leave it in your hands, Gussy. You can do the honours for the whole school. Put in a word for me, of course!"

"You uttah ass! Pway don't walk away while I'm talkin', you duffah! Talbot, deah boy, I twust you are comin'. I don't want to go alone, you know. I have bwibed and cowwupted Taggles to let me dwive the twap and fetch Miss March. It stands to weason she would wathah be met by some nice fellows like us than by a cwusty old boundah like Taggles. Come along, deah boy!"

Talbot cast a glance in the direction of the football-field, and then gave in. He was always a good-natured fellow.

"Right-ho!"

"Bettah put on a toppah," said Arthur Augustus anxiously.

"As many as you like, old chap," said Talbot affably.

"Weally, Talbot——"

The Shell fellow went in for his topper, and came out look-

ing quite satisfactory, from Arthur Augustus's point of view. They walked across the quad in great style, and found Taggles with the trap at the gates. Arthur Augustus was a first-class driver, and the trap was quite safe in his hands; and Taggles, who disliked work of any kind, and was quite impervious to the charms of any member of the feminine gender, old or young, was glad to get out of going to the station. And five shillings, which had formerly belonged to Arthur Augustus, were now reposing in Taggles's pocket, and that had decided any doubts that he might have had.

"All wight, Taggy, deah boy!"

The two juniors climbed into the trap, and D'Arcy took the reins, and they bowled away down the lane towards Rylcombe. It was a bright, keen winter afternoon. Behind the hedges snow was banked up from a late snowfall. The ride was most enjoyable.

The two St. Jim's fellows were not destined to reach the station without mishap.

Half-way to Rylcombe three persons were sighted, sitting in a row on a stile. They were Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, and Wootton major, of the Fourth Form at Rylcombe Grammar School, and at the sight of Arthur Augustus driving the trap they exchanged a merry grin.

Gordon Gay jumped down from the stile, and held up his hand in the road to make Arthur Augustus halt, and at the same time Wootton major and Frank Monk slipped down on the other side of the stile, where the snow lay thick behind the hedge.

Arthur Augustus had to pull in the horse, for Gay was in the middle of the road in front of him.

"Halt!" said Gordon Gay cheerfully. "Fancy meeting you, Gussy! What have you been scratching the match today for—what?"

"Most of the fellows laid up with influenza, deah boy. Pway don't delay me, as I am wathah in a huwwy——"

"No larks, Gay," said Talbot. "We're going to the station!"

"Larks!" said Gay solemnly. "Do I look as if I were larking? I want to inquire after the health of the poor little invalids. How are they getting on with their gruel, Gussy?"

"Weally, Gay——"

Whiz! Whiz!

From behind the hedge came two squashy and muddy snowballs, with deadly aim.

Arthur Augustus gave a yell.

One of them caught his silk hat, and sent it flying towards the road, and the other landed in his neck, with ruinous results to his beautiful collar.

"Ow! Ow! You awful wottahs! Ow!"

Whiz! Squash! Squash! Squash!

Wootton major and Monk were going strong. The sight of Arthur Augustus, with all his war-paint on, was irresistible. They didn't snowball Talbot; he did not look so tempting. But muddy, watery snowballs squashed all over Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gordon Gay. "Gussy, you look wet! You look muddy!"

Arthur Augustus dropped the reins and dabbed at his face, which was streaming with half-melted snow. Talbot caught the reins and drove on, to get out of the line of fire. Gay jumped out of the way, and the trap went bowling on down the lane. Snowballs whizzed after it in vain, as it rushed along at top speed.

"My hat!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"We're out of fire now!" gasped Talbot.

"But my hat——"

"Your hat?"

"Yaas, it's left behind. Pway halt!"

Talbot drew in the horse. Arthur Augustus looked back along the lane. Three festive Grammarians were playing football with his silk topper in the distance. Arthur Augustus shook an infuriated fist at them.

"Oh, the wottahs! The uttah beasts! Oh cwumbs!"

"Never mind; we've got through," said Talbot consolingly.

And he drove on at a more moderate speed.

"Yaas; but look at me!" gasped D'Arcy.

Talbot looked at him, and he could not help smiling. Hatless, Arthur Augustus was simply smothered with snow and mud. The half-melted snow that had been kneaded into snowballs had contained a good proportion of mud. The state of the swell of St. Jim's was deplorable.

"It's howwid!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "I don't see anythin' at all to gwin at, Talbot. I can't possibly meet Miss March in this shockin' state. How can I pwesent myself befoah a lady without a hat, and smothahed with howwid mud?"

"Oh, I dare say she won't mind!" said Talbot, laughing. "I don't see how it's to be helped now, anyway?"

"Wats! You must dwop me in the village, and go on alone," said Arthur Augustus. "I suppose I can twust you to meet the lady, Talbot?"

"Yes, if you like."

"I will dwop in at Mr. Bunn's, and get myself cleaned," said Arthur Augustus, with a shudder. "I am in a most disgustin' state. He may be able to lend me a hat—or a cap, at any wate. I twust you will be able to meet Miss March without makin' any blundah, deah boy!"

"Well, I'll try," said Talbot good-humouredly. "It won't really be a very hard bizney."

"Yaas; but a certain amount of tact is wequired in intwoducin' oneself to a young lady—a charmin' young lady," said Arthur Augustus doubtfully.

"Perhaps she isn't charming," suggested Talbot.

"All ladies are charmin', deah boy, to a pwopahly-constituted mind," said Arthur Augustus severely.

"I stand corrected," smiled Talbot. "However, I'll do my best. I'll keep in mind exactly what you would do, and do it!"

"Yaas, that's the best thing you can do," agreed Arthur Augustus unsuspiciously. "Pway stop at Mr. Bunn's as you come back, and if I look all wight by that time, I will join you again—see?"

"Right-ho!"

And Arthur Augustus descended from the trap at the shop of the village tailor; and Talbot, smiling, drove on to the station alone.

CHAPTER 5.
Old Pals.

"MARIE!"

Talbot panted out the name.

He had left the trap outside the station, and gone upon the platform. The train was in, and the passengers were coming towards the exit. Talbot was there to meet Miss March, the nurse. But all thought of Miss March, the nurse, was suddenly driven from his mind at the sight of a face he knew well—a face he had not seen for a very long time, but which he was never likely to forget.

A girl of about his own age, with a charming, candid face, and clear blue eyes. She wore a long raincoat, and carried a bag in her hand. Talbot met her face to face as she came down the platform.

He stopped dead.

"Marie! What are you doing here?"

The girl stopped too.

Talbot did not even raise his hat. He stood dumbfounded. His face had turned white, his hands clenched hard till the nails dug into his palms. The cool, iron-nerved Toff seemed to be completely "knocked over" by the sight of that fresh, pretty face, with the clear blue eyes that had a mocking light in their depths.

"The Toff!" murmured the girl.

"Marie!"

The girl nodded, showing a glimpse of white, even teeth.

"You came to meet me?" she said.

"N-no! I—I did not know you were coming here. I came to meet somebody else!" stammered Talbot.

"But you are glad to see me?" smiled Marie.

Talbot did not reply. He looked round among the passengers for the nurse he had come there to meet. But there was no sign of her. All the other passengers, beside Marie Rivers, were men. The nurse had evidently not come by that train.

Talbot was glad of it.

"Well?" said Marie, gazing at him with her mocking eyes. "Well, Toff? You look as if you were in a dream."

"It seems like a dream, to see you again, Marie," said Talbot, in a low voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Cannot you see? I have come by the train."

"And the Professor?" panted Talbot. "Is he here?"

Marie laughed.

"You did not see him?"

Talbot started violently, and looked round. But the passengers were gone from the station now; the two were left alone on the platform.

"He was there—among them?" asked Talbot.

"You did not see him?"

"No."

"Good!" said Marie calmly. "He has more luck this time than when he came to St. Jim's as Mr. Packington—and you betrayed him."

Talbot winced.

"Marie, what does this mean? What are you doing here? What is your father doing here? Tell me, Marie."

"I will tell you, if you like. Let us sit down—the porter is already staring at us," said Marie lightly.

They went into a deserted waiting-room. Talbot seemed to be dazed. The blow he had feared, as he had told Tom Merry, had fallen! The Professor had come back! What did it mean—for him? Wherever John Rivers went, evil dogged his steps. He had come back, as he had threatened that he would. Why? And why was Marie there? Talbot smiled bitterly. He thought he knew! Marie was her father's defence. While she was there, at least, Talbot could not raise a hand against his old associate. He must stand idly by, while the Professor carried out his nefarious work—whatever it was! A look of deep gloom settled over the Shell fellow's handsome face.

Marie's mocking face softened, and she touched the Toff lightly on the arm.

"What is it?" she said softly. "Are you so sorry to see me again, Toff? And we used to be such pals, you and I."

"Marie! You know I'm glad to see you," said Talbot desperately. "Even though it means harm to me, your coming here, I'm glad to see you. But—but what is the game? What is your father here for? He means harm to me, I know that."

Marie shook her head.

"It is you who have done the harm, Toff. You have forgotten your old friends; you have betrayed an old pal. What change has come over you? In the old days you were the most reckless and daring of all; and now—now you have changed—now you are not even true to your old friends. You betrayed my father——"

"I did not," said Talbot. "You don't understand, Marie. I tell you I've given it up! I've done with the past! I've thrown it all behind. The Professor came to St. Jim's in disguise, with forged papers to show the Head. When I knew at last who he was I gave him a chance to go. I would have begged him on my knees to go rather than give up your father to the police. But he would not. He trapped me, and remained to carry out his scheme of robbing the Head. You don't know how much Dr. Holmes has done for me, Marie. He has been like a father to me. If I had stood aside then, I should have been an ungrateful villain. I could not. I gave the Professor a chance, and he would not take it. Then I did what I had to do—my duty. And I am not sorry! Though, for your sake, I was glad to learn afterwards that he was free again. I knew what a blow it would be to you."

"You cared for that?"

"I did care for that, Marie."

"Yet you gave him away!"

"I had no choice, I tell you," said Talbot huskily. "I could not let my benefactor be robbed. What sort of fellow do you think I am?"

"I think you are a fool, Toff!" said Marie, the mocking light in her eyes again. "What are you wasting your life at the school for? You who might be rich, as rich as you could desire, working as a schoolboy on a poor scholarship, in want of money! Bah! What life is that, compared with the old life? Toff!"—Marie's voice became very earnest—"you are playing a fool's game here; it cannot last. Sooner or later you will grow sick of the dulness of it; you will grow tired of poverty and hard work. Why not throw it up and come back to your friends?"

Talbot shook his head without speaking.

"They would all welcome you," said the girl eagerly. "They miss you—they resent your deserting them. But they'd forgive it all if you'd come back. Think of the life—danger, excitement, wealth—compare it with what you lead now. What does your present life offer you in comparison?"

"Honour!" said Talbot.

Marie laughed.

"Honesty!" said the Toff steadily. "A clear conscience, Marie. Better poverty—yes, even hunger—and honesty with it than wealth that is not mine, Marie. When I came to St. Jim's it was like the scales falling from my eyes. I had never seen things in their true light before. I was what I had been taught to be. If you knew the fellows—Tom Merry and the rest—you'd understand. They've been so decent. They know what I have been, and it makes no difference to them, because they have confidence in me; they know I am straight now. I would die rather than betray their confidence—a thousand deaths."

"And you are satisfied?"

Talbot sighed.

"It isn't so easy to forget," he said. "I don't keep any secret from you, Marie; I do miss the old life sometimes—the danger and the excitement—but—but I've made a right choice, and I mean to stand by it."

Marie's lip curled.

"Then we are enemies?" she said.

"Never that," said Talbot.

"My father's enemies are mine," said Marie proudly.

"I am not your father's enemy. I only ask him to let me alone!" exclaimed Talbot passionately. "Why cannot he leave me in peace?"

"You are too valuable, Toff. We've fallen on bad days since you left us. You must come back."

"I cannot come back!"

"Not even for my sake?" said the girl softly.

Talbot's lips twitched.

"Not that, even for your sake, Marie. I—I hoped—I thought that I might have a chance of seeing you, to—to bring you to my way of thinking, Marie. It has haunted me—the thought of you among those rascals; and the future, too. Marie, it can only end one way—prison, disgrace, lower and lower depths of crime! Marie, think of it! Throw it all behind—you can do it—and——"

"And desert my father!" said the girl contemptuously.

"Your father has no claim on you if he persists in following a life of crime. He is clever enough to make his way in the world honestly—there is no excuse for him. And he has no right to drag you down with him," said Talbot fiercely. "Give him his choice of throwing up his way of life, or parting with you."

"Never! He is my father."

"But—but for that, Marie, you would——"

Marie gave a shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"Perhaps! Who knows? But he is my father, and his wish is law to me. I will never desert him, and I will never disobey him. He has enough enemies and false friends without his own child turning against him."

Talbot gave a groan. What was he to say before that blind devotion, a devotion noble in itself, though felt towards a worthless and unscrupulous criminal? He knew that nothing he could say would turn the girl from her purpose. For good or ill, she was devoted to her father.

There was a long silence. The girl watched curiously the working of the handsome face of the St. Jim's fellow. Talbot broke the silence at last.

"Why is he here?" he asked hoarsely. "He has come—for me?"

Marie nodded.

"He hopes to induce me to return, or to force me——"

"We miss you so much, Toff."

"It will never be. You can remember, in the old days, Marie, that I was always a fellow of my word."

"Then"—the blue eyes gleamed—"then you are my father's enemy, Toff?"

"Not his enemy, for your sake, Marie. But I will not serve his purpose. I will have nothing to do with him. Let him go; the world is wide, and he need not cross my path. But if he attempts to renew his game at St. Jim's, then I will denounce him, come what may."

"If he goes to prison, Toff, I go with him."

"Marie!" groaned Talbot

"Betray him and betray me!" said the girl disdainfully. "Well, I am here, at your mercy. You have only to call the police now—they will be glad of the chance. I am in your hands."

Talbot's face was deadly white.

"You know I shall not do that, Marie. What are you torturing me for?" he muttered.

Marie rose to her feet.

"Bah! It is useless to talk, you have lost your senses." She paused, a slight smile breaking out on her face. "What did you come to the station for, Toff? You came to meet someone?"

"Yes—a nurse," said Talbot, rising heavily. "It does not matter, she has not come——"

"One of the Little Sisters of the Poor?"

"Yes," said Talbot, in surprise. "How did you know?"

Marie laughed, a clear, silvery laugh.

"How good! Then you can take me to St. Jim's."

"To St. Jim's!" said Talbot.

"Yes, as that is what you have come here for."

Talbot looked at her blankly. Marie laughed again.

"I am Miss March," she said. "I am the Little Sister!"

CHAPTER 6.
The New Nurse.

TALBOT staggered back.

"Marie!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

He had not dreamed of that. Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, the nurse who was coming to St. Jim's—it was Marie, the cracksman's daughter! It was a stunning blow to the unhappy boy. That was the Professor's game, then. Marie was to be placed in the school—for what, he could guess only too easily. The Professor, lurking in the village in his cunning disguise, would always be at hand, to help her, to counsel her. That was the game.

Talbot could not speak. He could only gaze at the girl in anguish. That was the game, he knew it now, and there was only one way of baffling it—to denounce the girl who had been his best chum, to hand over Marie to the police—and that, he knew, he could never do. Never that!

His brain was in a whirl. What was he to do? That was the question that hammered in his mind. To stand aside while the Professor's work was done and his benefactor plundered—it was impossible! To denounce Marie—that was still more impossible! To endeavour to persuade her to abandon her worthless father—he knew that it was hopeless!

"Bai Jove! Heah you are!"

An elegant figure loomed up in the doorway of the waiting-room.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, resplendent as ever, with a brand-new silk topper—a thing of beauty and a joy for ever, from the crown of his shining hat to the tips of his elegant boots.

Arthur Augustus raised his shining silk topper to Miss March, with the elegance that was all his own.

"I've been waitin' for you, Talbot, deah boy, and I came on to the station," he said cheerily. "So Miss March has awwived?"

"Yes," stammered Talbot—"yes! This—this is——"

The words died on his tongue. The crisis had come unexpectedly soon.

He had to present Marie Rivers to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as Miss March, the new nurse, or he had to betray her as the cracksman's daughter. That was his choice, and he had only an instant in which to make it.

Marie was smiling. She knew the struggle that was going on in the Toff's mind; she knew her danger. But not a sign of it appeared in her smiling face.

Arthur Augustus looked a little surprised. He could not help seeing that something was "on," though he was not particularly observant.

"Miss March," stammered Talbot, at last, "this—this is Gussy—this is D'Arcy, one of my pals at St. Jim's. We—we've come to take you to the school, if you will allow us."

The die was cast!

"You are very kind," said Marie sweetly; "I thank you very much. It is really kind of you."

"Not at all, my deah young lady," said Arthur Augustus. "It is an honah and a pleasuah. The twap is waitin' outside. Is there anythin' I can do——"

"I think my trunk is on the platform," said Marie.

"Wighto! I'll look aftah it at once."

Arthur Augustus, glad to be useful, hurried out on to the platform. Marie looked at Talbot with her insouciant, mocking smile.

"Well done, Toff! You have answered for me now—I enter St. Jim's on your responsibility."

Talbot gave a groan.

"Marie! It's not too late—have mercy on me! You—you can't go to the school——"

"But I am going."

"Marie——"

Marie walked to the door. Talbot followed her with heavy, stumbling footsteps. All the light was gone out of his handsome face.

"You will go, Marie—you will go there as a nurse?"

"I am a nurse," said Marie calmly; "I am a member of the Little Sisters of the Poor. They do not know my name; but they know I am a good nurse. You should know that, too, Toff; but you have a bad memory."

"I remember it, Marie, and I have never ceased to be grateful. But——"

"There was a time, when you told me that you would do anything for me," said Marie mockingly. "You told me I had saved your life, and that your life belonged to me. You told me that, Toff. You do not choose to remember it now."

"I remember it only too well, Marie; and you have just had proof of it," said Talbot huskily. "But tell me, Marie, you will go to St. Jim's simply as a nurse—you will not—you will not——"

He broke off.

"I shall do as my father directs me."

"Then—then I also must think what I must do," Talbot said desperately. "Come what may, my benefactor shall not suffer."

"Why did you not take your chance a few minutes ago, then?" asked Marie mockingly. "You had only to tell this boy D'Arcy my name, and the rest——"

"Marie!"

"It isn't too late. Tell him now——"

"You know why I am silent!" groaned Talbot.

Marie came back towards him and put her little hands on his shoulders, and looked him in the face.

"Toff," she whispered, "you can't help it now. I am here, and you must help me. You can't betray me, and if I come to the school, we must sink or swim together. Make up your mind to it, and stand by your old friends. For my sake, Toff!"

It was hard to resist the sweet, earnest face, the winning voice. For a moment, perhaps, Talbot's resolution wavered. What was the use of the struggle? After all his efforts to free himself from the past, the toils were closing round him again. He was in a net from which there was no escape. What was the use of the struggle? Marie saw the signs of weakness in his troubled face.

"For my sake, Toff!" she repeated.

Talbot pulled himself together.

"No!"

"Not for my sake?"

"Not even for your sake," said Talbot steadily. "Not for the sake of life itself!"

The girl drew back, offended, cold, disdainful.

"As you choose, then!"

She walked out of the waiting-room. Talbot followed her slowly, miserably. The problem was hammering in the unhappy boy's brain—what was he to do? To denounce Marie or to allow her to carry out the Professor's orders unhindered? The choice was terrible—yet it had to be made, and delay only made matters worse. Yet delay was his only resource; he must have time to think.

The little leather trunk had been placed in the trap, and Arthur Augustus was waiting for them. The swell of St. Jim's helped Marie into the trap with his inimitable grace. He did not notice Talbot's harassed looks—Arthur was a ladies' man, and all his attention was bestowed upon Miss March. Talbot stumbled into the trap, and sat silent and troubled. D'Arcy gathered up the reins, and they bowled away down the village street.

In the lane Gordon Gay & Co. spotted them again; but there were no snowballs this time. At that charming vision beside the swell of St. Jim's the Grammarian juniors raised their caps with great respect and admiration. The trap bowled on towards the school, Arthur Augustus driving elegantly, and chatting with his fair companion. Talbot sat behind in grim silence.

A man passed them in the lane sauntering along carelessly—a man with a dark-brown beard and moustaches, and an eyeglass, well-dressed, debonair. He paused to look at them; and Talbot's eyes fell upon him, and he started. The man smiled a little; Talbot turned his eyes to stare at him as the bowled on.

It was the Professor. No one recognised him now. But Talbot's eyes had penetrated the disguise. The man with the eyeglass sauntered on towards the village, humming a tune. He knew that Talbot recognised him, but felt certain he would not say anything. Marie was the security for that.

They arrived at the school, and the trap was handed over to Taggles, and the two juniors conducted Miss March to the Head's house. Tom Merry and Lowther had come off the football-field, and they spotted them in the quad, and raised their caps. Monty Lowther expressed the opinion to his chum that the new nurse was "stunning." Indeed, he said that he envied Manners now.

"Talbot seems to look down in the mouth," said Tom Merry.

"Catching the flu', perhaps," said Lowther carelessly. "By Jove! I've a jolly good mind to catch it too! Not half a bad idea."

Miss March disappeared into the Head's house. Talbot and D'Arcy came back to the School House—the latter smiling with great satisfaction, the former moody and silent.

"Did you see her, deah boys?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "Sorry we didn't come."

"Serve you wight," said Arthur Augustus severely, "though of course I should have gone just the same, even if she had been a little bit leathewy like the othahs. Quite a wippin' young lady. I've been thinkin——"

"Go hon!" murmured Lowther.

"I've been thinkin'," repeated Arthur Augustus firmly, "that nurses have wathah a bore of a bizney, you know, lookin' aftah beastly invalids. They wequire a little change and excitement. All work and no play, you know, makes Jack a dull boy. I've been thinkin' that it's up to us, you know, to see that Miss March has a little amusement while she is heah—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any weason for wibald laughtah," said the swell of St. Jim's freezingly, "I wegard it fwom a point of view of dutay."

"What about the other nurses?" grinned Lowther. "You haven't bothered your mighty brain about them, so far."

"Ahem! They are oldah, you know—fwightfully old, some of them—and—and of course they don't need amusin'. But Miss March isn't much oldah than I am, and it stands to

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weason that she will be bored to death with beastly sneezin', coughin' invalids in the beastly sanatowium. It's up to us to see that she has a pleasant time, if poss., while she is at the school. Besides, the Little Sistahs of the Poor do this kind of thing for nothin', you know—they don't have any fees. I wegard that as vewy wippin' of them, considewin' that invalids are such beastly bothahs. I twust we shall be allowed to make things a little bwightah for Miss March. What do you think, Talbot?"

"Eh?" said Talbot confusedly. "Yes, certainly. Tea ready, you fellows?"

"Tea!" said Arthur Augustus scornfully. "Bai Jove, you're thinkin' about tea! I wegard you as an insensible ass, Talbot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He was sittin' in the twap without speakin' a word all the way back," said Arthur Augustus. "Lookin' like a boiled owl, bai Jove! Anybody would think that Miss March was a Gorgon, instead of bein' vewy neahly as nice as my Cousin Ethel. I am surpwised at you, Talbot."

Talbot smiled faintly, and went into the School House.

The four juniors were soon gathered at tea in Tom Merry's study; but in spite of Talbot's inquiry after that meal, it was noticeable that he ate hardly anything. And he spoke scarcely a word. The Toff had one of his "black moods" on again evidently.

CHAPTER 7.
Frayne's Trouble.

MANNERS blinked at Tom Merry with watery eyes.

It was the day after Miss March's arrival at St. Jim's, and Tom Merry had obtained permission to visit his old chum in the sanatorium, with Lowther, for a few minutes.

Nearly all the beds in the school hospital were occupied, and the nurses had plenty to do. Manners was glad to see his chums again.

"How are you getting on, old man?" asked Tom Merry sympathetically—keeping well away from the bed, as he had been instructed by the head nurse.

"Rotten!" said Manners.

"Poor old chap!"

"It's beastly. But I'm on the mend. I'm going to massacre Figgins when I get well. All that fathead's fault! My head's buzzing like a beehive. Ow!"

"Hard cheese!" said Lowther.

"Why the dooce couldn't you catch it instead of me, Monty?" groaned Manners. "Ow! I'm fed-up with it! I say, have you seen the new nurse?"

"Miss March? Yes."

"She's a giddy angel," said Manners. "Makes it much nicer for a chap when a nice girl comes and has a jaw with him for a few minutes. I hope you haven't mucked up the films I left in the study."

Tom Merry smiled.

"They're all right, old son. I hope you'll soon be back. Talbot and Gussy are digging in the study at present."

"Next week!" groaned Manners.

The nurse made a sign to the juniors, and they nodded to poor old Manners, and passed on, to exchange a word or two with the other invalids. They came to Frayne's bed, and found the Third-Former looking decidedly bad. The head nurse signed to them not to stop there.

"Is he very bad?" whispered Tom Merry.

"He was best of all at first," said Miss Pinch, the head nurse; "but to-day he seems to be worse, for some reason I cannot understand. He seems to be troubled in his mind."

"Troubled in his mind?" repeated Tom.

"Yes. He is rather an odd boy," said Miss Pinch. "He speaks very differently from the others—quite an odd boy."

"He's a splendid little chap," said Tom Merry. "He had hard luck before he came here, nurse. He was a waif in a London slum, and had an awfully bad time, and my uncle sent him to St. Jim's. He's as good as gold."

Miss Pinch nodded.

"He has been asking to see somebody named Talbot to-day," she said. "Is that a great friend of his?"

Tom Merry started.

"Talbot! That's a fellow in the Shell—my Form. He knew Frayne in his bad days, a good time ago. They don't see much of each other here. Talbot would come like a shot if he knew that Joe wanted to see him."

"He is in too feverish a state for seeing anybody," said Miss Pinch. "He has been mumbling most strangely about someone he speaks of as the Toff."

"That's a—a nickname for Talbot," said Tom Merry, colouring. He did not feel inclined to explain further on that subject.

"Oh, I see. He has been repeating another name, too—a girl's name," said Miss Pinch. "Has he a friend at the school, or near by, named Marie?"

"Marie?" said Tom. "Not that I know of. There's nobody about St. Jim's with that name that I've ever heard of." Then Tom gave a start, remembering Talbot's confidences. "Yes, now I think of it, he knew somebody of that name, long ago, when he was a kid in Angel Alley."

"He has repeated the name many times," said Miss Pinch, "quite feverishly. Indeed, he called one of the nurses Marie when she came to the bed to give him his medicine."

"Poor little kid!"

"But what the deuce can be worrying him like that?" said Monty Lowther, in wonder. "If you think he might see Talbot, nurse, Talbot would come at once."

"The doctor's instructions were that he was to see no one," said Miss Pinch. "But when Dr. Short comes again I will speak to him about it. I suppose Master Talbot could come at any time?"

"Any minute," said Tom. "I'll tell him to be ready."

"Thank you!"

The two Shell fellows left the ward, a little worried in their minds. They were concerned about poor little Joe. He was such a happy-go-lucky, careless little scamp, as a rule, that it seemed extraordinary that he should have any trouble on his mind in addition to his illness.

They found Talbot in the study when they came back. He noticed their expression at once.

"None of the fellows worse, I hope?" he exclaimed quickly.

"Only Frayne," said Tom Merry.

"Frayne of the Third. Poor kid!" said Talbot, with feeling. "I hope it's not going to be serious. I suppose his constitution isn't quite so fit as the others—he must have had a lot of under-feeding in the old days. That sort of thing tells when you have to go through an illness."

"I don't know if it's that," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "Miss Pinch, the head nurse, says he got worse to-day—either he's feverish, or there's something on his mind. He wants to see you."

Talbot did not seem surprised.

"I'm ready to go to him," he said.

"They're going to let you know if you can go when the doctor comes. He'll be here again this afternoon. You remember you mentioned a name to me the other day—a girl's name——"

Talbot turned pale.

"I—I remember," he said, in a low voice. "Marie! It doesn't matter if you speak before Lowther, Tom."

"Well, that kid knew Miss Marie, I suppose, as well as you?" said Tom.

Talbot nodded.

"Yes. She did a lot for the poor—a lot more than people who would be horrified at a cracksman's daughter," said Talbot, with a slight curl of the lip. "She was like an angel. She looked after Frayne when he was knocked down by a cab, and laid up. Goodness knows how he'd have lived if she hadn't taken care of him!"

"He seems to have got her name on his mind now, the nurse says," said Tom Merry. "I dare say it's being ill makes him think of her, if she nursed him when he was ill before. Miss Pinch says that he called one of the nurses Marie when she came to do something for him."

Talbot started.

"Which nurse?" he exclaimed.

"Blessed if I know—I didn't ask—one of them," said Tom. "It shows the poor kid is feverish."

"I—I think I ought to see him," said Talbot uneasily. "You know, I've got a lot of influence over him. He used to like me when I was the Toff, and he hasn't forgotten a few trifling things I did for him then. I'd like to see him."

"It depends on the doctor."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came into the study with a smiling face.

"Tea weady?" he asked. "I say, you chaps, she is weally wippin'!"

"Who is?" asked Talbot.

"Miss March. She has just been takin' her constitutional in the quad," Arthur Augustus explained. "I took the liberty of joinin' her. I apologised for my cheek, but I explained that I thought she might like to be shown wound St. Jim's. She looks a beautiful picture in her uniform, don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes!" said Talbot absently.

"You haven't an eye for beautay, you boundah. But she is weally wippin'—awf'ly intelligent for a gal, too!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have had quite a cheewy talk, and I hope I have cheered her up a bit. She has been lookin' aftah young Frayne, my minah's chum, you know—lucky little beggah! She's awf'ly intewested in the school—asked all sorts of questions about the place, you know. She laughed like anythin' when I told her about the way we get

out of the box-room window sometimes aftah lights out, and made me take her wound the School House and point out the window, and how we climbed up to it ovah the outhouse. Bai Jove! What's the mattah with you, Talbot?"

"N-n-nothing!"

"You had quite a queeah expwession on your face, old scout. I twust you are not sickenin' for the flu!"

"Fit as a fiddle," said Talbot.

"Well, you don't look vewy fit. Keep your peckah up, deah boy, or you'll be in the sanatowium befoah you can say 'Jack Wobinson!' Not that it would be so vewy wuff to be in the sanatowium just now, with that weally wippin' Miss March to look aftah you!" added Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "I should not have a vewy stwong objection to havin' flu in a vewy mild form at pwesent!"

And Arthur Augustus sat down cheerfully to tea. He kept up a cheery chat all the time, without noticing Talbot's silence.

But Tom Merry noticed it, and wondered. It was not like Talbot to be silent and downcast. Did it mean that his anticipations had been realised, and that his old enemy had come back? Was the Professor already lurking in the neighbourhood? Had the Toff seen him? Tom Merry would not attempt to force his chum's confidence, but he felt very troubled.

There was a tap at the door as they finished tea, and Toby the page looked in.

"Master Talbot!" he said.

Talbot rose from the table at once.

"Dr. Short says that you can see Master Frayne now, sir."

"Thank you," said Talbot.

He left the study at once. Arthur Augustus accompanied him as far as the school hospital, in the hope of catching another glimpse of the charming Miss March. Tom Merry and Monty Lowther were left alone in the study.

"Something's up with Talbot?" said Lowther.

Tom nodded.

"It isn't a secret from you, Monty, though it's not to be jawed about, of course. Talbot thinks that scoundrel the Professor—you remember the man who came here calling himself Mr. Packington—Talbot thinks he's coming back to make some attempt to get him back into his old life!"

Monty Lowther gave a low whistle.

"Talbot's only got to dot him in the eye, or hand him over to Inspector Skeat," he said. "Old Skeat would be glad to bag him a second time!"

"His daughter—the girl we were speaking of—is Talbot's old chum. He can't hurt her father without hurting her. He won't do anything against the rotter. Look here, Monty, Talbot's our pal, and it's up to us!"

"Any old thing," said Lowther. "If I come across the villain, I'll jolly soon put the bobbies on him, I know that. His daughter isn't my chum!"

"Nor mine," said Tom. "I'm sorry for the poor girl! She seems to be a good sort, by Talbot's description, but under the thumb of her rascally father. It's hard to blame a young girl for being led where her own father leads her; but what an utter villain he must be!"

"Awful rotter!" agreed Lowther.

"Talbot's hands are tied, but ours are free," said Tom Merry quietly. "Look here, Monty, if the fellow is hanging about here, we ought to be able to spot him. Strangers are pretty quickly noticed in a quiet country place like this. We'll find out if there's a stranger staying in Rylcombe, and if there is——"

"Bump him on suspicion!" grinned Lowther.

"No, ass; find out if he's the man. And if he is, we'll put Inspector Skeat on him, without saying a word to Talbot."

Monty Lowther regarded his chum admiringly.

"Tommy, old man, you're a giddy genius. I'm with you. Let's get a pass out of gates from Kildare, and take our bikes down to Rylcombe now. If there's a stranger in the village, we shall find it out at the bunshop, and then we can investigate."

"Good egg!" said Tom.

"And not a word to Talbot about it?"

"Not a syllable."

Ten minutes later the chums of the Shell were riding down to the village. The Professor had only foes to deal with, beside the junior who for Marie's sake he held in the hollow of his hand.

CHAPTER 8.
Honest Injun.

"TOFF, you've come at last!"

It was a faint voice from Joe Frayne's bed as Talbot of the Shell halted by his side.

The waif of the Third was very pale, save for a bright spot that burned in either cheek, and his eyes were feverishly bright.

Talbot's face was very kind as he bent beside him. He knew what was in the mind of the one-time outcast of Angel Alley.

"I came as soon as the doctor would let me, Joe," he said.

"You've seen Marie?"

"Hush!"

"That is the name he has been muttering and repeating, Master Talbot," whispered Miss Pinch. "Calm him if you can."

"I will try," said Talbot.

Joe's eyes wandered to the nurse.

"Lemme alone with Master Talbot," he said. "I wanter speak to the Toff, and I don't want nobody else to 'ear!"

"Joe, old chap!" murmured Talbot.

But Miss Pinch nodded and smiled, and left them to themselves. Marie was not visible in the ward.

"She's gone?" muttered Joe.

"Yes, kid."

"Nobody can 'ear me?"

"Only myself," said Talbot.

"That's orl right, then. You know as Marie's 'ere, Toff?"

"Yes," said Talbot.

"You've seen 'er, then?"

"Yes, old chap. Don't you worry about that. There's nothing to worry about," said Talbot, with an effort. "You'll make yourself worse if you worry, kid!"

"I ain't got nothin' agin Miss Marie—Miss March they call her 'ere," whispered Joe. "Which she was like an angel when I knowed her in Angel Alley. You remember the time, p'r'aps, when that bloke who called 'isself my father—which he never was my father at all—you remember 'im bein' drunk in the garret, and me lyin' with my legs 'urt owin' to that keb knockin' of me over. Miss Marie, she looked arter me like an angel; and you remember you used to come in and give me money for the things I needed, Toff. Which I know 'ow you got the oof in them days, but I was grateful all the same. And Marie was an angel, Toff. But——"

"She was always good, Joe."

"So you understand I ain't got nothin' agin her," said Joe. "But—but wot's she doin' 'ere, Toff? You remember when you first came, I told you if you was up to the old game, I wouldn't stand it 'ere—not even arter all you'd done for me. It's the same now with Miss Marie. Wot's she doin' 'ere, Toff?"

"She has come to help nurse," said Talbot.

Joe smiled.

"Yes, I know; and I know that in them days she went to 'elp nurse in other places, and I know wot 'appened in them places, Toff. You know too. You was in the thick of it in them days!"

Talbot shuddered. "Them days," as poor Joe expressed it, were not so very far behind him, but whole oceans of time seemed to have flowed between his old life and his new.

But what he had been Marie still was, and the evident suspicion of the little waif was well founded, and not all his gratitude for old kindnesses would keep Joe Frayne silent if he found that the "old game" was afoot at St. Jim's.

The Professor, with all his cunning, had not counted upon that. In the few days he had been at St. Jim's in the character of Mr. Packington, the science master, he had not come into contact with Frayne of the Third; he had never noticed the little fag among a hundred others. Joe had known nothing of him till the day he went away in charge of the police.

But he knew Marie, and he suspected the truth. Where Marie was, her father would not be far distant, and it meant that little Joe's benefactors were to be deceived and robbed. No wonder the poor little chap had taken a change for the worse since he had seen the new nurse in the school sanatorium.

The feverishly bright eyes were watching Talbot's face. Joe seemed to be seeking to read his thoughts.

"Toff," he went on, "you wouldn't let them go for to do it—you wouldn't, arter all that's been done for you 'ere. I know as Marie was your pal; but you couldn't do it, Toff—you couldn't let the Professor carry out his game 'ere. You couldn't!"

"You can rely on that," said Talbot quietly. "Never!"

"He won't be fur off—the Professor," said Joe. "I know what Miss Marie is 'ere for—I ain't a fool! All ready for the Professor to get his whack in, Toff. They'll get you into their 'ands if they can; but, anyway, the Head's safe is their game. And it ain't going to 'appen, Toff—not even if I 'ave to give Miss Marie away!"

Talbot drew a quick, almost sobbing breath.

"Don't do that, Joe!"

"Which I don't want to," groaned Joe. "But the game ain't goin' to be played 'ere, Toff. Not while I'm alive!"

"You can rely on me, Joe," said Talbot, sinking his voice. "I know it all, and I am on guard. I promise you that what you're afraid of shall not happen. You know I'm a fellow of my word. I'll stop it, even if it means ruin to me—as it may. On my word, Joe, there's nothing to be feared."

"Honest Injun, Toff?"

"Honest Injun!" said Talbot.

Joe stretched a feeble hand over the coverlet, and Talbot took it in his own strong palm.

"Honest Injun!" he repeated. "I know what I've got to do, Joe. You can trust me. Don't think anything more about it. Don't worry; you'll only make yourself ill. Leave it in my hands."

Joe's feverish face was already calmer.

"That's all I wanted to know, Toff. I know I can trust you. But—but Miss Marie—I don't want her to be 'urt, neither."

"When she is no longer needed here, Joe, she will go; and I promise you that until then I shall see that the Professor does not carry out his plans."

"Good enough, Toff."

Joe Frayne sank back on his pillow. The nurse approached. Talbot pressed Joe's hand and left him. He left him reassured. The faith of the little waif in Talbot was complete.

Talbot left the ward. Marie was arranging a pillow for Blake as he passed out. She came away from Blake's bed and gave Talbot a smile and a nod. He whispered a word in passing.

"I must speak to you."

"I leave at eight," she whispered, in reply, and passed on.

Talbot left the building.

It was dark in the quadrangle, and Talbot did not return to the School House. He paced to and fro under the old elms, thinking.

The interview with Joe Frayne had introduced a fresh factor into the problem—a new complication. It was not all in the Toff's hands now. If there were a robbery at the school there was another tongue to speak—and that would speak. Did Marie know her danger? If she did not know, he would tell her; and the Professor, at least, would understand that it would not do.

The intervention of the little waif might, indeed, solve the problem—cut the Gordian-knot that had baffled Talbot.

He paced to and fro in the dark quad till eight o'clock rang out from the tower. Then he hurried away to meet Marie.

The girl came away from the sanatorium with her coat on, glad to breathe the fresh air of the quadrangle after the warmth of the wards. Without a word she followed Talbot towards the Head's garden, where it was quiet and secluded, and their interview was not likely to be seen.

"I have only a quarter of an hour, Toff," murmured Marie. "Have you decided?"

"I decided long ago; I have not changed my mind."

Marie smiled.

"Then why have you asked me to come here?"

"I have just seen Frayne."

"Yes, he has been asking for you. He knew me."

"He knew you at once, Marie; and if there is anything here—you understand—he will speak. Even if I keep silent, he will speak."

"It is a new complication," smiled the girl. "But Joe is a good boy; he likes me. He will not hurt me if he can help it. And if anything happens here he will not know until too late. No one is allowed to carry disturbing or exciting news into the wards. You are aware of that. And if he speaks afterwards—after I am gone—it will not matter, will it, Toff?"

"Marie!" muttered Talbot wretchedly. The new hope that had risen in his breast died away again.

"Joe will know nothing until it is too late," smiled Marie.

"I have given him my word that I will see to it," said Talbot, in a choking voice. "I've given him my word of honour that he may be easy in his mind—that I will see that the Professor does no harm here."

"Keep it, then!" said Marie scornfully. "I am here at your mercy. You have only to go to Dr. Holmes and speak a word." She held up her pretty wrists. "You can place the handcuffs here with one word, Toff."

"Don't, Marie!"

"You will not do it?"

"You know I cannot!" groaned Talbot. "But—but I swear that—that I will keep my word to Joe, at any cost. I know you have begun already—you have been gaining information for the Professor——"

"As I used to gain it for you, Toff."

"I know it! No need to rub that in. But it won't do, Marie—it won't do. Promise me this, at least—see your father and try to make him give up his design. You might do that at least for me."

"On one condition, Toff?"

"And that?"

"That you come with us."

"Impossible!"

"Then there is nothing more to be said," said the girl coldly. She looked at her companion. A ray of starlight fell upon his face and showed it white and strained with misery. "Toff, don't look like that!" There was a quiver in her voice. "I don't mean to hurt you. But——"

"There's nothing more to be said," muttered Talbot drearily. "There's only one thing for me to do—to go. But if I go I shall not go back to the old life. I will break stones on the road for my bread before I do that."

"You must, Toff! If you leave here you must come to us. You must live."

"The world is wide," said Talbot bitterly. "Wide enough to let me keep as a distance from the Thieves Club. There is always work for honest hands to do."

"Honest?"

"Mine are honest now, and will always remain so. Do your worst, Marie. You will see that I can keep my word."

"I—I want to do my best for you," faltered Marie. "I—I will see my father, Toff. I will go to him. On my word, if I can make him give up this scheme I will do so. I promise you! And I, too, can keep my word."

Before Talbot could reply the girl turned and left him.

"Marie!"

But she was gone.

The Toff drove his hands deep in his pockets and strode away towards the School House.

Marie would keep her word. But what influence would she have upon the cold, hard, unscrupulous cracksman?

Talbot had little hope. Before him was a dark and dreary prospect; which ever way he looked there was no light.

CHAPTER 9.
Marie's Father.

TOM MERRY and Monty Lowther wheeled their bicycles up to the Rylcombe Arms and leaned them against a tree and walked to the inn. The chums of the Shell had been busy; they had been investigating, and they had learned at least a little.

In a village like Rylcombe a stranger who stayed more than a day was certain to be remarked and commented upon. If the Professor was there, whatever his disguise might be, his presence, at all events, would be a subject for discussion among the villagers. And the two juniors had set themselves to discover whether there was a stranger staying in the village. They had dropped in at several places—Mrs. Murphy's tuckshop and Mr. Bunn's, and the confectioner's and the bunshop. But it was from their old acquaintance Grimes, the grocer's boy, that they had learned that there was a gentleman staying at the Rylcombe Arms, who had arrived the previous day. A regular nob, according to Grimes, with no end of beard and whiskers and a heyeglass. His name was Judd, and he was a very generous gent with his money, as the boots of the Rylcombe Arms, who was a special friend of Grimes's, had testified.

As Mr. Judd, at the Rylcombe Arms, was the only stranger in the village that the two juniors could hear of, they had resolved to have a look at Mr. Judd. Beard and whiskers suggested disguise, at all events. They remembered that Mr. Packington had been so adorned, and he had worn spectacles. A different colour in hirsuite adornments, and an eyeglass instead of spectacles, would make a very effective change of appearance. It was more than probable, of course, that Mr. Judd was a quite harmless person. A commercial traveller was what Grimes supposed him to be. But as the only discoverable stranger in the village, he was the only possible object of the juniors' investigations, and they were there to investigate!

So they proceeded to the Rylcombe Arms finally, though it was getting towards the time when their leave would be up. They did not want the expedition to be wholly in vain.

They entered the old-fashioned inn, where they knew the proprietor. That plump and rubicund gentleman told them that Mr. Judd was in the reading-room.

To the reading-room the two juniors immediately proceeded. Mr. Judd was alone there. He was seated in an armchair, reading the latest war news in the latest paper obtainable at Rylcombe. He glanced up carelessly as the juniors came in, and then resumed reading his paper.

Monty Lowther eyed his companion humorously. Mr. Judd looked a perfectly ordinary, respectable gentleman of about forty. He bore not the slightest resemblance to Mr. Packington, who had posed as a science master at St. Jim's. He looked a bigger man—though that might have been due to the cut and make of his clothes. Certainly he looked at least twenty years younger. It was even difficult to know if his eyes were of the same colour; for at St. Jim's Mr. Packington's eyes had always been covered by his glasses, and the juniors had never noted their colour.

The only thing against Mr. Judd was the fact that he was a stranger in Rylcombe, and, of course, that was nothing at all. The juniors were at liberty to observe him as much as they liked, but all they could observe was that he did not look in the least like a suspicious person.

Tom Merry sat down at the table opposite Mr. Judd, and while affecting to look over an illustrated paper he eyed the man.

Mr. Judd did not appear to observe it. He read his paper calmly and in the most commonplace manner.

The two juniors strolled away to the deep bay-window, and stood looking out into the lighted street. Monty Lowther nudged his companion.

"Well?" he whispered.

"Looks all serene!" admitted Tom Merry.

"Can't very well ask him if he's a giddy cracksman in disguise," murmured Lowther, "and I suppose you can't pluck a perfect stranger by the beard to see if it's genuine—what?"

"Fathead!"

"Hallo!" murmured Lowther, with a nod towards the street. "There's Miss March."

Tom Merry looked down from the window. Miss March had just appeared in sight, coming down the old High Street with her light, graceful walk. To the astonishment of the juniors, she turned into the porch of the Rylcombe Arms and disappeared into the inn. It was no business of theirs, of course, but the juniors could not help wondering what the Little Sister would have to do in the village inn at that hour in the evening.

They looked round as the door of the room opened.

Miss March came in, and, without noticing the two juniors in the deep window, crossed at once to the man seated by the table.

"I am sorry I am late!" she said, in her clear, sweet voice.

Mr. Judd rose to his feet. He made a gesture, and the girl turned towards the juniors. Tom Merry and Lowther advanced at once.

"Top of the evening, Miss March!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully.

"You are late out of gates," said the Little Sister, in surprise. "I thought juniors had to be indoors by locking-up!"

"We've got a pass out," explained Tom Merry. "We've got to be in by half-past eight, though, and it's close on that now. If you are going back to the school——"

"Hardly safe in the lane at night, you know, Miss March," said Lowther. "It would be a real pleasure to see you back."

Miss March smiled.

"My uncle will see me as far as the school," she said.

"Your—your uncle?"

The juniors felt inclined to kick one another. This brown-bearded gentleman with the eyeglass, whom they had suspected of being a possible criminal, was the uncle of Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor. His business in Rylcombe was explained; he had come there to see his niece!

"Yes." The girl turned to Mr. Judd. "These two young gentlemen belong to the school, uncle."

Mr. Judd bestowed a nod on the two juniors. Tom Merry and Lowther beat a rapid retreat from the reading-room.

Outside the inn they looked at one another grimly before they mounted their bicycles. Tom Merry was frowning, but a grin lurked about Lowther's face. He could see the humorous side of the matter.

"What a disgusting sell!" growled Tom.

"Horrid!" said Lowther. "We've spotted the only stranger in the village, and he turns out to be nursey-nursey's tame uncle."

"Then the Professor can't be in Rylcombe, at all events," said Tom.

"If he's come here, he may have put up in Wayland," remarked Lowther. "It's farther off, but—— Ahem! Rather a big order to spot and examine all the strangers in Wayland—a market-town. And we've only got five minutes left."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" growled Tom Merry. "Let's get back!"

And the chums of the Shell rode back to St. Jim's.

In the room they had left Miss March was in conversation with the man she had called her uncle. Marie's quick wit had not failed her, unexpected as the meeting with the juniors was to her.

Mr. Judd scowled as the door closed behind the boys.

"What were they doing here, father?" asked Marie.

Mr. Judd, alias the Professor, shrugged his shoulders.

"Staring at me chiefly," he replied. "Only interested in me because I am a stranger here, I suppose—they cannot suspect anything. I don't look much like Mr. Packington now, Marie, do I?"

Marie laughed.

"No, dad. But—but it's odd that they should be here, all the same!" Her pretty brows wrinkled for a moment. "The Toff cannot have told them anything."

The Professor made an impatient gesture.

"Never mind them. Have you any news for me?"

"Yes," said Marie.

"The Toff—what has he said?"

"That he will never come back under any circumstances. And he means it, father—he means every word of it. He is in earnest."

The man with the eyeglass sneered.

"He will change his mind; I shall see to that."

"It is useless, father."

"Nonsense! Don't argue with me," said the Professor harshly. "Why has he not already given me up, then? He knows I am here. It is for your sake, Marie. And for your sake, too, he will come back. If he does not, there are ways and means—ways and means." The Professor smiled cruelly. "We shall see."

"Father, there is more news than that. Do you remember a little fellow in Angel Alley—a boy with a drunken father, named Frayne?"

"What of him?"

"He is at the school."

The Professor started, and knitted his brows.

"I remember. Hookey Walker told me something of that. I had forgotten. I did not notice the boy when I was there; he had changed probably. Certainly he did not know me. I had forgotten. What of him? He is there—he has recognised you!" The Professor gritted his teeth. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"He has spoken?" exclaimed the Professor.

"No. He is ill. I nurse the poor little fellow. You know he used to be devoted to me—and he has not forgotten. He has spoken to the Toff, and to calm him Talbot has promised him to see that—that—you understand. Joe knows why I am there."

"If he is ill, then he need not be reckoned with," said the Professor coolly, "and if he has left it all in the Toff's hands, it will be safer still. The Toff will not speak."

"But——"

"You are seeking trouble!" exclaimed the Professor, with a sharp look at the clouded face of the girl. "Come! What is in your mind? Tell me!"

Marie's lips quivered.

"Father, I—I can't bear this!" The tears rose to her eyes. "If you saw the Toff now, you would pity him—you would have mercy on him. If he wishes to leave our ways, father, why not let him go? Let us leave him in peace. Let us——"

The girl paused as she saw the bitter sneer on the hard face before her.

"I expected something of the sort," said the Professor grimly. "First the Toff, and then you, Marie. He has deserted his old friends, and he is inducing you to desert your father."

The Professor stepped into the train in Rylcombe station, and Talbot, with a bag in his hand, stood on the platform and watched him go. The baffled plotter shook a savage fist at him from the train window. "I go now!" he muttered. "I go, Toff, but I shall return—don't doubt that. You have not heard the last of me! You shall remember——" The shriek of the whistle drowned his voice. (*See Chapter* 14.)

"I will never desert you, father," said Marie firmly. "Whatever your fate may be, I shall always share it. But—but I beg you to give up this scheme—leave the school in peace—there is plunder elsewhere. Leave the Toff to lead his new life. If he chooses to come back to us, let him come; if he does not, leave him alone. Father!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"That is all!" said Marie, with a sinking heart.

"Very well; now I will give you your instructions," said the Professor coolly. "As for Frayne, since he is ill and in your charge, there is no danger in that quarter. And since you are his nurse, you can take care that he does not get well in time to interfere with our plans!"

"Father!" It was a cry of horror from the unhappy girl. "What are you saying? Do you think I could—that I would——"

"Bah! Leave him out of the discussion," said the Professor contemptuously. "I tell you there is no danger in that quarter. As for the Toff, we shall see." The Professor set his teeth for a moment. "It is between him and me—man and boy—and we shall see. But you have your work to do, Marie. I must have money."

"Money!" faltered Marie.

"Money!" said the Professor sarcastically. "Does that astonish you? What else am I in my profession for? I am in need of it. Have they taken any special precautions at the school since I was there? It is likely enough!"

"I—I do not know——"

"You do not know!" exclaimed the Professor fiercely. "You have been in the school twenty-four hours, and you do not know! Take care, Marie! Has the Toff persuaded you to follow his new path, to the extent of allowing your father to fall into a trap?"

"Father!"

"I do not think so, Marie. But until you can give me information I cannot get to work at the school. But you can, Marie; you are free to act, and every little helps." The hardened rascal grinned. "I tell you I am in need of money. Owing to the Toff, I have spent, and have gained nothing in return. My stay at St. Jim's was a dead loss to me. At this moment I have not five pounds in my pocket."

"What do you want me to do, father?" said the girl dully.

"I want you to do what you are there to do," said the Professor savagely. "There are rich boys there—there is money to be had—plenty of it. You know what you are to do. Enough of this. Before you were five years old, I had taught you your business, and you could pick a pocket with any professional in London. You know what you are to do. I order you to do it!"

Marie stood silent.

"What does this mean?" said the Professor harshly. "Why do you not answer me? Has the Toff influenced you so much then in one day? At his word you will abandon your father——"

"Never!" said Marie; but her voice had lost all its sweetness, and sounded dull, lifeless. "I will do as you tell me."

"I have told you what to do. Now do not stay longer; you do not wish to cause remark and suspicion, I suppose?" grunted the Professor.

Marie shivered, and drew her coat more closely about her. Without another word she quitted her father.

The Professor threw himself into his chair again, and lighted a cigar. Through the darkness the girl was hurrying back to St. Jim's—alone.

CHAPTER 10.
The Watch That Went.

"BAI Jove! This is vewy wemarkable!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's expression, also, was remarkable, as he made that statement.

"What's the trouble?" yawned Levison of the Fourth.

It was Monday, and lessons were over. The rain was falling in the quadrangle, and most of the School House juniors were in their studies or the common-room—those who were not "down" with influenza.

It was in the common-room that Arthur Augustus stated that it was very remarkable. Two or three fellows turned their heads to look.

The swell of St. Jim's was examining the pockets of his beautiful waistcoat. He seemed to expect to find something there which was missing.

"Lost something?" asked Smith minor.

"Yaas."

Arthur Augustus went through his waistcoat pockets again.

"Anybody seen a watch?" he asked.

"Yes," said Monty Lowther.

"Oh, good! Pway hand it over!" said Arthur Augustus, with great relief. "I was afraid it was lost."

"Hand it over?" asked Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But why should I hand you my watch?" queried the humorist of the Shell, in surprise.

"You uttah ass! You said——"

"I said I'd seen a watch—so I have. Mine."

"I wegard you as a fathead, Lowthah. Has anybody seen my watch? Some silly ass has taken my watch off me, and I want it."

"Oh, rot; you've left it somewhere!" said Kerruish.

"I have not left it anywhah, Kewwnish. Somebody has taken it off me," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I suppose this is one of your twicks, Levison."

Levison started.

"I! What do you mean, you silly ass?"

"I wefuse to be called an ass, Levison. You are always playin' some wotten conjuwin' twick, and you took my watch once and hid it in my hat, you know you did."

"Well, that was a lark," said Levison. "I did it to watch your silly face."

"Yaas, and now pway hand ovah my watch——"

"Rats!" said Levison. "I've seen nothing of it."

"Then where has it gone?" demanded Arthur Augustus.

"How should I know, fathead?" said Levison irritably. "I pwesume it is one of your twicks. Anyway, I want my watch."

"Go and find it where you left it, then, you duffer. You're always leaving something somewhere," growled Levison.

"I had it on an hour ago," said D'Arcy. "I wemembah when I went to the sanatowium to see old Blake, Miss March asked me the time when I went in. I took out my watch to tell her. So I must have had it on, you see. And I haven't looked at it since I took it out of my pocket on that occasion. So somebody must have taken it for a silly joke, I pwesume."

"I don't see how anybody could take your watch, Gussy," said Monty Lowther. "Perhaps you've dropped it."

"How could I dwop it, you duffah? It was fastened on the chain, of course, and the chain was fastened on my waistcoat. It has been unhooked, and the watch and the chain are gone. I keep a soveweign purse on the end of my chain—a little metal purse with two or thwee soveweigns in it—and it it all gone. Now, I couldn't possibly dwop the whole bizney, could I?"

"I guess it wouldn't be easy," said Buck Finn, the American junior. "Somebody has hooked it off you for a jape, Gussy."

"Yaas, wathah, and Levison is the only chap who could do it," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass severely upon the black sheep of the Fourth. "Levison is the only beastly conjuwah in the house. Where's my watch, Levison?"

Levison jumped up, red with anger.

"I tell you I don't know anything about your silly watch," he shouted.

"Oh, wats! Pway hand it ovah, and don't play the gidday goat!"

"Can't you take my word, you dummy?"

"I wefuse to be called a dummay. And you can hardly expect me to take your word, Levison, when you know what an awful fibbah you are."

"Hear, hear!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Hand it over, and don't be an ass, Levison," said Kerruish.

"A joke's a joke, but enough's as good as a feast," said Curly Gibson of the Third. "Give Gussy his watch, you ass."

Levison stared round at the juniors in the common-room. His face was red, and his eyes were gleaming. Truly, he could not blame the fellows for not taking his word, for his disregard for the truth was well known. It was true that Levison had shown much improvement of late, and seemed to have dropped many of his old bad ways; but an evil reputation was not easily lived down.

"I tell you I don't know anything about it," said Levison savagely. "The silly ass has left it somewhere and forgotten all about it."

"Wats!"

"Have you changed your waistcoat lately, Gussy?" asked Monty Lowther, with a magisterial air.

"Certainly not!"

"You have worn the same waistcoat for a space of an hour and a half?"

"Yaas, you fathead!"

"Then I move that you are called upon to explain this departure from your usual habits," said Monty Lowther severely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, pway don't be an ass, Lowthah! I want my watch. And I want my soveweign-purse—there are two or thwee soveweigns in it."

"You don't know exactly how many?" grinned Kerruish.

"How should I know, Kewwnish, when I have not looked in it?"

"Well, I generally know how many quids I have," said the Manx junior. "I can usually count 'em quite easily, and remember the total in my head."

"If you want to keep a purse and a chain safe, Gussy," said Lowther, with the solemnity which implied that a joke was coming, "there's a really safe way. You should keep a watch on it."

"Pway keep your wotten puns for the 'Weekly,' Lowthah. You can put that wot in the comic column," said Arthur Augustus crossly.

"I'm doing the comic column now," said Lowther cheerfully. "I'll read you out a bit, if you like——"

"Oh, wats! I want my watch."

Lowther had been scribbling with a pencil on a sheet of impot paper. There might be influenza in the school, and war on the frontiers; but Monty Lowther's Comic Column for Tom Merry's "Weekly" was never failing. And the humorist of the Shell was very pleased with his latest effort.

"Listen to this, you fellows," he said, unheeding Arthur Augustus. "'Latest War News, as passed by the Censor—'"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

But Monty Lowther went on cheerily.

"On the —— of ——, the —— regiment arrived at ——. Towards —— o'clock in the evening, they were engaged with the —— battalion of the ——. The engagement lasted —— hours, when owing to the arrival of —— and ——, the —— were forced to retire to ——. We regret to report the loss of ——, but on the other hand our gallant —— have gained ——, and —— not to mention ——. The general advance of the ——, in the direction of ——, had been highly successful, and we report the capture of three hundred ——, two hundred ——, and a large supply of ——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"I have also been perpetrating a conundrum," said Lowther, with great satisfaction. "A rather good conundrum. When is a censor not a censor?"

"Lowthah, you silly ass——"

"When is a censor not a censor?" repeated Lowther.

"Give it up!" yawned Kerruish.

"When he's no sense, sir," replied Lowther.

"How do you make that out?" asked Kerruish, puzzled. "Is that a conundrum?"

"Of course it is, and a jolly good one," said Lowther indignantly. "Blessed if I oughtn't to put footnotes to my comic column to explain to silly asses. When is a censor not a censor—when he's no censor—when he's no sense, sir—see?"

"Take your word for it," said Kerruish.

"Why, you thumping ass——"

"Well, I can't say fairer than that," said Kerruish. "I'll take your word for it, on condition that you don't explain it any more."

"I wepeat that I want my watch. I want——"

"Oh, blow your watch!" growled Lowther. "Listen to this——"

"I wefuse to listen to your wot. My watch has gone——"

"Well, wasn't it made to go?" demanded Lowther.

"You uttah ass!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I wefuse to listen to your beastly old puns. Levison, will you hand me my watch, or will you not?"

"Fathead!" was Levison's reply.

And he swung out of the common-room with an angry brow.

"Well, bai Jove!"

"Perhaps it wasn't Levison," suggested Crooke of the Shell, with an ill-natured grin. "Levison wouldn't keep it if he took it, anyway. Ask Talbot if he's seen it."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy strode towards the cad of the Shell, his eye gleaming behind his monocle.

"Are you makin' a beastly, cowardly insinuation against my fwiend Talbot?" he asked, in measured tones.

Crooke backed away a little.

"Oh, I didn't mean—I only said——"

"You said a wotten, beastly, cowardly thing, Cwooke!" said Arthur Augustus disdainfully. "You know that old Talbot is as stwaight as a die!"

"Well, we all know what he was!" sneered Crooke. "And if your watch is really missing, what's become of it? Levison says he hasn't taken it. And I suppose nobody but a professional thief or a conjurer like Levison could take your watch and chain off you without knowing it!"

"That's right enough," said Smith minor.

"Oh, wats! It must be one of Levison's beastly jokes, of course!"

"But he says——"

"Wubbish! We all know he tells lies!"

And Arthur Augustus walked away with a frowning brow. The loss of his watch, which had been a present from his noble pater, worried him; and the possibility that, if it were not found, suspicion might fall upon Talbot, worried him still more.

For Crooke's remark was just. It was no easy matter for a watch and chain to be detached from D'Arcy's waistcoat without his knowledge.

Levison, who was a clever conjurer, could have done it easily enough. He had often played such tricks. But if Levison had not done it, it was evidently the work of a professional pickpocket, and such a person, of course, was hardly to be expected within the walls of St. Jim's—for which reason it was quite clear to Arthur Augustus's mind that Levison of the Fourth had done it. He remembered Levison's old enmity towards Talbot too. He might have done it with the intention of throwing suspicion upon the Toff.

True, Levison had backed up Talbot since then, and had been friendly with him; but there was no reliance to be placed on the black sheep of the Fourth. Whether with bad intentions or with a mistaken idea of humour, it was Levison who had "lifted" the watch; Arthur Augustus was convinced of that.

CHAPTER 11.
Not the Toff!

KILDARE, the captain of St. Jim's, looked into the junior common-room a little later. There was a frown upon his usually good-natured face.

"Which of you young rascals has been larking in my study?" he demanded, addressing the remark to everybody present.

"Larking!" said Monty Lowther, in a shocked tone. "Us! Oh, Kildare!"

"None of your cheek," said Kildare, who was evidently not in a humour for Monty Lowther's little jokes. "Some young ass has been larking in my study—in a specially silly way, too! Who was it?"

"Not guilty, my lord!" said Lowther.

"But what's happened?" asked Buck Finn.

"Somebody has taken the silver Challenge Cup," said Kildare. "I suppose it is an idiotic lark, and I'm going to warm the larky person when I find him!"

"What an inducement for him to own up!" murmured Lowther.

"I say, that cup's worth ten guineas," said Kerruish. "Somebody has pinched it, Kildare!"

"Nonsense!" said the captain of St. Jim's sharply. "It's a silly joke, of course!"

"Gussy's just lost his watch, too," said Crooke.

"D'Arcy! His watch!" exclaimed Kildare.

"Yes; and his sovereign-purse along with it, with two or three quids in it. He says it was taken off him without his knowing it!"

Kildare started.

"That's very odd. I suppose there's some precious practical joker at work. I'll jolly well find out who it is, too, and stop his joking!" said the St. Jim's captain angrily; and he strode out of the room.

The juniors looked at one another curiously. The loss of the silver cup—a very valuable trophy, won by St. Jim's First Eleven—following upon the loss of Arthur Augustus's famous gold "ticker," which was well known to have cost twenty-five guineas, impressed the juniors strangely. If it was the work of a practical joker, he was a fellow who dealt in valuables, evidently.

Kildare strode away to Mr. Railton's study. He found the Housemaster with an unusually serious expression on his face. Kildare did not notice it for a moment.

"What is the matter, Kildare?"

"Somebody has taken the silver trophy from my study, sir," said Kildare. "I can't get at who has done it. If you would order an inquiry, sir——"

The Housemaster started.

"Do you mean that it has been stolen, Kildare?"

"Oh, no, sir! It must be a lark, of course. But the young rascal who has done it ought to be caned. He might damage it or lose it!"

"I hope it is a lark, as you say, Kildare. But it is very odd. Have you heard of anything else being missed in the house?"

Kildare looked surprised.

"Yes; Crooke of the Shell mentioned to me that D'Arcy has lost his watch. I suppose it is the work of the same practical joker."

"The fact is, Kildare, I also have missed something from my study," said Mr. Railton gravely. "I had only just made the discovery when you entered."

"By Jove, sir!" said Kildare, startled. "Anything serious?"

"A number of currency notes, amounting to ten pounds," said the Housemaster quietly.

"Phew!"

Kildare could not help looking surprised. It was not like Mr. Railton's usually careful habits to leave money where it could be handled. The Housemaster understood his look.

"I am not usually careless with money, Kildare, as you are aware. I was doing the House accounts, and had taken the money from my desk, where I keep it locked, when I was called away to see the Head, who wished to speak to me. I put the notes, with my papers, in the table-drawer. When I came back, a few minutes ago, they were gone. The papers are just where I left them, but the notes have been taken!"

Kildare knitted his brows.

"That doesn't look like a practical joke, sir. It must have been a theft."

"I fear so."

"I—I say, sir! That's rotten—a thief in the house!" said Kildare, with a worried look.

"It is very serious. I am afraid it may cause some of the boys to think unpleasant things on the subject of poor Talbot! In a matter like this, he is certain to be thought of in connection with it. I am perfectly convinced of his honesty, of course. Suspicion fell upon him once before, when Tresham of the Fifth was the guilty party. The poor boy will always have that difficulty in connection with his past. However, in this case, probably the matter may be cleared up as far as he is concerned. I was not absent from my study more than a quarter of an hour—from seven to a quarter past. I shall ascertain at once where Talbot was at the time. Do you know where he is now?"

Kildare shook his head.

"I understand that he shares Tom Merry's study while his study-mates are in the sanatorium," he said. "He is not in the common-room; I have just come from there. He may be in Merry's study."

"I will go there at once. Pray wait for me here till I return."

"Certainly, sir."

Mr. Railton proceeded at once to the Shell passage. He tapped on the door of Tom Merry's study.

"Come in!" sang out Tom's cheery voice.

The Housemaster entered, and Talbot and Tom Merry, who were there, rose to their feet at once.

The Housemaster's expression showed them at once that he had come on a very unusual errand, and they waited uneasily for him to speak.

"I wish to speak to you, Talbot," said Mr. Railton quietly. "There has been a very unpleasant happening—some Treasury notes have been taken from my study!"

Talbot turned white.

"Oh, sir!"

"Don't imagine that I suspect you for one moment, Talbot," said Mr. Railton kindly. "My object is to ascertain at once where you were at the time, so that your name cannot be dragged into the matter."

"You are very kind, sir," stammered Talbot.

"I find you in this study," pursued the Housemaster. "How long have you been here, in company with Merry?"

"I don't know, sir—about half an hour."

"About that, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Whoever went into my study must have done so between seven and a quarter past," said Mr. Railton. "During my absence, you understand. You see the importance of the matter, Merry. Can you assure me that Talbot was with you here before seven o'clock?"

"Yes, rather," said Tom Merry promptly. "I heard seven o'clock strike while I was talking to Talbot, sir."

"Very good! I heard seven o'clock strike before I left my study," said Mr. Railton. "Talbot has been here ever since?"

"Yes, sir."

"He has not left the study?"

Tom paused.

"He went out to get a map, sir—only into his study. It's next door, sir. We were talking about the war in Flanders, sir, and Talbot fetched his map to show me Dixmude. But he only popped into the next study and back again—two minutes at the most."

"You are quite sure of that, Merry? He could not have descended to my study and returned in less than five minutes."

"Two minutes at the most, sir. I just stirred the fire while he was gone, and then he was back again."

Mr. Railton nodded.

"That settles that point, then. I am very glad of this. You must not suppose, Talbot, that suspicion regarding you entered my mind for a moment. My desire simply was to prevent suspicion entering other minds, and that is accomplished now. Merry's evidence is quite sufficient."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Railton gave the juniors a kind nod and left the study.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Jolly lucky you were with me, Talbot, old man!" he said. "Not that any of the decent chaps would have said a word about you; but there are some of them—Crooke and his set—who might have tried to make capital out of it. It's lucky, isn't it?"

Talbot did not reply. He had sunk into his chair. His face was white as death, and his eyes had a hunted look.

"Talbot, old man, what's the matter? You can't think that anybody would suspect you now?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

Talbot shook his head.

"It's not that!"

"Then what's the matter?"

"Heaven help me!" groaned Talbot. "It's come at last!"

Tom Merry regarded him in amazement and alarm.

"Talbot, what's come at last? What do you mean?"

Talbot did not reply.

Tom Merry put his hand on his shoulder.

"Talbot, I say! What's the matter with you? It's a beastly unpleasant thing to happen, but it needn't worry you. It's nothing to do with you. Where are you going?"

Talbot had risen to his feet.

"Don't talk to me now, Tom," he muttered. "I—I—I want to think this over."

He quitted the study without another word.

Tom Merry did not follow him. He stood rooted to the floor. It was impossible that the Toff could have done that—impossible! But what was the cause of his strange emotion—of the horror that Tom had read in his stricken face?

The captain of the Shell felt a chill at his heart. His faith in his chum did not waver. But—but what was the matter with Talbot?

CHAPTER 12.

Levison on the War-path.

MR. RAILTON returned to his study with a thoughtful brow. Kildare gave him an anxious, inquiring glance.

"Talbot is quite cleared of possible suspicion," said the Housemaster quietly. "He has been with Tom Merry in his study since before seven o'clock. I have Merry's word for it."

"That quite clears him, then, sir."

"Yes. It remains to find the guilty party. There is a possibility that the affair may turn out to be a foolish practical joke. In any case, it is a matter for inquiry and severe punishment. The fact that the notes were taken from here between seven o'clock and a quarter-past narrows down the inquiry considerably. It must be ascertained who passed along this passage in that time, and each person who can be found to have done so must give an account of himself."

"You saw no one, sir?"

"No one, excepting one of the nurses, who was with the Head when I went to see him. Miss March must have come out this way. I saw no one in the passage, save Langton. Of course, Langton is above suspicion—a prefect of the Sixth. Still, I will speak to Langton, as a matter of form; he may have seen someone too."

Kildare coloured a little. Langton of the Sixth was his chum, and as straight a fellow as ever breathed; but there had been a time when Langton had been reckless, and had got himself into a scrape with a bookmaker. If the thief were not discovered it might mean some unpleasantness for Langton.

Mr. Railton did not waste time. He proceeded to make inquiries at once.

In a very short time the School House was in a buzz with the news.

There had been three distinct thefts, all within a short space of time—D'Arcy's watch, the silver cup, and Mr. Railton's banknotes. If it was indeed the work of a thief, the rascal had made a haul of close upon fifty pounds. But the idea that there was a thief in the School House was scouted by most of the fellows, especially when the alibi of Talbot was clearly proved. Tom Merry's evidence proved conclusively enough that it couldn't have been Talbot—though few of the fellows would have suspected him, in any case. The Toff had made an impression upon his schoolfellows that was not easily shaken; they believed that, whatever he had been in his unlucky early days, he was straight as a die now.

Even Crooke had nothing to say on that point after hearing of Talbot's alibi. The cad of the Shell did not venture to cast doubt upon Tom Merry's word.

"It's not a thief at all!" Arthur Augustus announced, in the most decided manner. "I wefuse to believe anythin' of the kind. It's a wotten pwactical joke; and the beast who has done it means to let the things be found somewhah, and laugh in his sleeve at us aftahwards."

"I hope it's so," said Tom Merry. "It's a jolly queer sort of a joke though! And if it's a joke, who's the joker?"

Arthur Augustus sniffed.

"There's only one fellow who's cunnin' enough to play wotten jokes like that! You all know him!"

"Me, of course!" exclaimed Levison furiously.

Arthur Augustus looked at him steadily.

"Yaas, you, of course!" he said. "Nobody but you could have whisked off my watch and chain without my seein' it. You've done it before, for a wotten joke; and you've done it again for a wotten joke."

"Fool!"

"Why, you wottah——"

"Look here, Levison," said Tom Merry seriously, "if this is one of your queer jokes, the best thing you can do is to own up before it goes any further!"

"Make a clean breast of it, and get off with five hundred lines," urged Monty Lowther. "If it goes on you'll be set down as a thief."

Levison panted.

"You—you fools! You idiots!" he shouted.

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"Bettah language, you wottahs!"

"I tell you I know nothing about it!" shrieked Levison. "Of course, you are all down on me! I expect that from you!"

"I don't want to be down on you," said Tom Merry. "But it's plain enough that you are the only chap who could have got Gussy's watch without his knowing it. You can play those beastly conjuring tricks, and you've done it lots of times. Who else in the House could have done it? There are no professional pickpockets here."

Levison sneered bitterly.

"Are you trying to make me say something against Talbot? I know that it wasn't Talbot any more than it was me."

"We all know that it wasn't Talbot," said Tom hotly. "That's been proved, if it wanted proving. But it hasn't been proved that it wasn't you. Nobody suspects you of being a thief; but this is just the kind of rotten joke you've played before."

"I give you my word!" said Levison.

Tom Merry was silent. It went against the grain to doubt anybody's word, with him.

But Arthur Augustus broke out wrathfully:

"You gave me your word last time when you took my

tickah and hid it in my toppah. And you were telling whoppahs!"

"I'm telling the truth now," said Levison desperately.

"Wats!"

"You don't believe me?" demanded Levison fiercely.

"No, I don't!"

Levison advanced upon him.

"Then put up your hands, you rotter!"

"What?"

"Oh, cheese it, Levison!" said Tom Merry. "This isn't a matter for fighting! Chuck it!"

The juniors all looked at Levison in surprise. He was not a fighting-man as a rule; but he was fairly on the war-path now.

"D'Arcy will take back what he's said, or he's going to fight me here and now!" said Levison between his teeth.

"I wefuse to take back a single word."

"Then take that!"

"Ow—wow!"

"That" was a dot on Arthur Augustus's aristocratic nose, which brought the water to his eyes.

He staggered back; but only for a moment. The next instant he dropped his eyeglass, pushed back his cuffs, and went for Levison like a whirlwind.

"Shut the door," grinned Lowther; "we don't want any prefects hopping in. Go it, Gussy! One for his nob!"

Kerruish hastily closed the door of the common-room. Arthur Augustus and Levison were "going it" hammer and tongs. The juniors gathered round in a ring, cheering on the swell of St. Jim's.

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Give him beans!"

"Mind your tie!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tramping to and fro, panting, glaring, the two juniors hammered one another. Levison soon had "bellows to mend"—cigarettes in the study were not good for the wind. But he put up an unexpectedly good fight.

Arthur Augustus's Greek nose began to resemble a Roman one; it was, as Lowther humorously declared, changed into a Romo-Greco boko. His left eye blinked painfully. But Levison was getting very severe punishment. At the end of six or seven minutes a terrific right-hander swept the black sheep of the Fourth off his feet, and he bumped heavily on the floor.

"Well done, Gussy! Right on the wicket!"

"Buck up, Levison!"

Levison lay panting. He was evidently "done."

"Get up, you wottah!" shouted Arthur Augustus, whose noble blood was up. "I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Ow!" groaned Levison. "Ow! Ow! Hang you! Ow!"

"Time!" chirped Kerruish.

"I'm done!" growled Levison savagely.

Arthur Augustus unclenched his warlike firsts.

"Vewy well, Levison; if you are done, that's all wight. But I expect you to own up."

"You rotter!" groaned Levison. "I don't know anything about your beastly watch. I hope you won't find it, that's all!"

"Weally, you wascal——" Arthur Augustus seemed inclined to begin again, but Tom Merry yanked him back.

"'Nuff's as good as a feast, Gussy. Besides"—he hesitated—"I—I can't help thinking that Levison is telling the truth."

"For once!" murmured Lowther.

"Oh, wats!" said Arthur Augustus. "I pwesume that you are not duffer enough to suppose that I have made a mistake, Tom Mewwy?"

"Impossible, of course!" remarked Lowther blandly.

"I give you my word I don't know anything about it," said Levison. "If that's not good enough for you, you can go and eat coke!"

And Levison limped away to bathe his eye, which needed it badly. Even Arthur Augustus was a little impressed by the way he spoke.

"But—but it must have been him, deah boys!" he exclaimed. "If it wasn't Levison, Tom Mewwy, who was it?"

"Oh, don't ask me!" said Tom.

The captain of the Shell was puzzled and perplexed. He did not believe that Levison was the culprit. But if it was not Levison, who was it?

CHAPTER 13.
The Toff's Resolve.

"MARIE!"

The girl started.

Marie had come out of the school hospital, looking a little pale and tired. The rain had ceased, and the stars glimmered in the dark sky. As the girl came down the path towards the quadrangle, a dark figure detached itself from the blackness of the trees, and stood before her.

"You startled me, Toff," said Marie, with a catch in her breath.

"I have been waiting an hour for you," said Talbot.

"You want to see me?"

"Yes. You know why?"

Marie peered at him in the dark. She could see that Talbot's face was deadly white. Her own look was uneasy.

"Why, Toff?" she asked, in a low voice.

"I know what you have done, Marie."

"What have I done?"

Talbot made a weary gesture.

"It has come at last, Marie. You have done what the Professor ordered you to do. I am not condemning you. Heaven knows that six months ago I should have acted as you have acted. I have no right to judge you, to condemn you. But I know what I must do, Marie, and I am going to do it."

The girl's face hardened.

"What are you going to do?" she asked quietly.

"I am going to keep my word to Joe Frayne," said Talbot steadily. "I am going to do my duty by the Head."

"You are going to betray me?"

Talbot shivered.

"No. Never that! I am going to see the Professor, and unless he goes I am going to denounce him to the police."

"You will never——"

"I shall!"

There was a short silence. Talbot's tone rang with grim determination.

"He has left me no other resource," he said. "Even for your sake, Marie, I cannot keep silence now. And—and what has been stolen must be returned, Marie. And you must leave the school."

"You are too late!"

"Too late?" said Talbot, with a start. "How too late?"

Marie gave a little mocking shrug.

"Did you think that I should carry the loot about with me, or place it in my room? It is already in the Professor's hands."

"But—but—— So soon? How—how——"

"Oh, you are dull!" said the girl. "The Professor has been here——"

"Within the gates? Impossible! The gates are locked at dark, and the thefts were not committed till after dark."

"Not within the walls," said Marie.

"You mean that——"

"I mean that I have done what I was commanded to do—as you would have done before you deserted us," said Marie scornfully. "The Professor was in waiting outside the walls after dark—waiting for my signal. An hour ago I gave the signal, and he answered it, and a bag was tossed over the wall. Do you understand now?"

"Then—then the plunder—what you have taken—is no longer in the school?" said Talbot, drawing a long breath.

"No."

"I—I did not expect that." Talbot knitted his brows gloomily. "But it is all one. He shall return it."

"He will not!"

"Then he shall take his choice between that and arrest!" said Talbot, between his teeth.

"And I?" said Marie bitterly. "Is that your friendship, Toff? Where my father goes, I go. You know that?"

"You can leave in safety."

"I cannot. When he is arrested, it will be known that I am his daughter. Two of your friends already have seen me with him, and I called him my uncle, to deceive them. Even if I keep silent, it will be known. And the stolen things—it will be known that they were stolen by someone inside the school. You will send me to prison, Toff, as well as my father."

Talbot gave a groan.

"I cannot do that, Marie."

"You must, unless you keep silent."

"Marie!"

"I—I could not face that, Toff," whispered the girl. "I—I could not! Toff, you won't bring that on me?"

"I must keep my word to Frayne. I must do my duty here, or feel myself an ungrateful villain!" said Talbot dully.

Marie's eyes flashed.

"You will send me to prison?"

"No, no, no!" gasped Talbot. "Never that! There is some way—there must be some way—— I will think——"

"There is no way. What I have taken—I make no secret of it to you—let it be found upon my father, and my guilt is proved. Even you could not save me then from disgrace, ruin, prison!"

"Marie!" groaned Talbot.

"What is the use of fighting against your fate?" said the girl softly. "Break with it all, Toff, and come back to us."

"Never!"

"Then do your worst!"

"My worst, Marie—to you!" said Talbot bitterly. He pressed his hand to his throbbing brow. "There must be some way to save my honour, and yet to save you—there must!"

"There is no way but silence."

"Marie! You don't understand—you can't understand! The House is full of it now—the thefts! Someone may be suspected—someone who is innocent! I cannot keep silent—I cannot!"

"Then betray me!" said the girl.

"And that I cannot do."

Marie laughed softly.

"But one or the other you must do, Toff—and you must not betray me. That I know!"

"You know it only too well, Marie!" said Talbot wretchedly. "You know I would die to save you, if need were. I must save you—and I must do my duty. Ah!"

Marie looked at him curiously, peering at the white face in the dark. A sudden light had come into Talbot's eyes.

"What are you thinking of, Toff?" muttered the girl, vaguely uneasy.

"There is one way—the only way."

"And that?"

"I am going to the village now. Unless the Professor returns the stolen things to me, and leaves by the evening train, I shall denounce him. That I have resolved upon. Nothing shall alter that. But as for what has been stolen, it shall never be known that it was by your hand."

"It must be known——"

"No! The innocent will suffer for the guilty," said Talbot quietly. "It will not be difficult to make them believe that the Toff has broken out again, and resumed his old ways—that it was I who conveyed the plunder to the Professor. It is ruin for me; but I shall save you."

"You!"

"Enough said, Marie. Good-bye! You will not see me again."

The girl caught him by the arm as he was turning away.

"Toff! You don't mean that! You—you will confess——"

"I shall confess."

"It will be ruin!"

"I know it."

"They will send you to prison——"

"Better send me than you, Marie."

Her grasp upon his arm tightened. Her eyes looked into his—wet now with tears.

"Toff! You would do that? You care so much as that?"

"You shall see."

"But—but it is madness!" panted Marie. "Toff! They will send you to prison—what of your new life—your good name? Have you forgotten all that?"

"I have not forgotten," said Talbot dully. "Better keep my honour than my good name, if I cannot keep both. Let me go, Marie."

"But—but——"

"There's nothing more to be said. You shall not suffer; that I promise you. After all, perhaps the end was bound to come—the fight's been too hard for me. You shall be safe, Marie. Your father will be silent—he will be glad enough to see me suffer in your place," said Talbot, with a bitter smile. "Let me go!"

"But—but——" moaned Marie.

Talbot drew himself away. Marie stood unsteadily, looking after him in the darkness, panting. She reeled against a tree, wet with rain, her brain in a whirl. Her father would never yield—she felt sure of that. And—and Talbot was to suffer in her place—to save her. That was his return for her share in the plot against him. The girl's heart ached with misery.

"Toff!" she called out. "Toff!"

But there came no reply. The Toff, the sport of the strange Fate, whose struggle for right and honour had come to a tragic end at last, was gone. The black night had swallowed up the hurrying figure, and Marie was alone—alone in the darkness, weeping.

CHAPTER 14.

Beaten at the Finish.

"WELCOME!"

Mr. Judd, alias John Rivers, alias the Professor, spoke the word with a sarcastic smile. Mr. Judd, the only guest in the Rylcombe Arms, had the reading-room to himself that evening. He had been using the telephone in the corner, and as he laid down the receiver the door opened, and Talbot strode in.

The Shell fellow of St. Jim's closed the door behind him, and came directly towards the Professor.

"They told me you were in here," he said.

"Yes—and glad to see you, Toff," said the Professor.

"Welcome! You have decided at last?"

The Professor rubbed his hands.

"Good!" he said. "Good, my boy! I knew how it must end—you were bound to come back, Toff! You'll get a warm welcome—all bygones will be forgotten, what? They won't bear any malice for your desertion, Toff—they will be too glad to have you back. But I'm glad you've decided."

Talbot laughed harshly.

"I have decided," he said. "But I have not yet told you my decision."

John Rivers looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean? You are coming back?"

"No!"

"Then why are you here?" demanded the Professor savagely. "Has anything gone wrong at the school? Has Marie——"

"Marie is safe—and will remain safe. She has carried out your orders, and you have the stolen property. That is what I have come for."

The Professor laughed.

"You are joking, of course."

"You will find that I am not joking." Talbot looked at his watch. "I have broken bounds to come here. It is a quarter to nine. There is a train that leaves Rylcombe at nine-five. You are going to take that train, and I am going to see you take it."

"Really?"

"And before you go, you are going to hand me the things that Marie took from the school at your orders."

"You are quite amusing," yawned the Professor.

"Or else," said Talbot, his voice deepening, his eyes gleaming—"or else you will be handed over to the police now—at once."

The Professor yawned.

"I am in earnest!" said Talbot.

"And Marie?" said the Professor, watching him narrowly, in spite of his assumption of indifference. "You seem to have overlooked, my friend, that it was Marie who handed to me these trifles—now in my possession. Are you prepared to send Marie to prison?"

"Marie need not suffer, unless you choose to betray her," said Talbot, with white lips. "Villain as you are, you will not do that."

"It will not rest with me. It will be known that those articles were stolen inside the school, and that I cannot have done it. It will be known that the thief was in St. Jim's."

"That is true."

"Yet you say that Marie will not suffer."

"She will not suffer—for I shall confess to the theft," said Talbot huskily. "Now do you understand?"

"You!" gasped the Professor. "You are fooling me."

"I am in earnest."

"You lie!" said the Professor fiercely. "You think you can deceive me—an old hand! You will go to prison—you will lose your liberty—lose everything—for the sake of restoring these wretched trifles, worth fifty pounds at the most——"

"I shall suffer to save Marie. That is, unless you come to my terms. Will you go?"

"I will not go!"

"You do not believe that I am in earnest?"

"Hardly."

"Very well," said Talbot, with a deep breath. "You refuse?"

"I refuse."

"Then all is said."

Talbot crossed the room, and took up the telephone-receiver. The Professor watched him with burning eyes. Was it possible that the boy was in earnest after all, he wondered savagely. Talbot spoke into the receiver

"Number one-nought-one, please!"

"What number is that?" asked the Professor, with a mocking smile, as Talbot stood like a statue, receiver in hand, waiting for his number.

"The police-station," said Talbot quietly.

John Rivers clenched his hands.

"You are bluffing me," he said, between his teeth. "You dare not call up the police!"

Talbot did not answer. His resolve was taken; and he was past argument now. He waited in grim silence.

The bell rang.

Talbot spoke again, clearly and calmly, the Professor watching him with clenched hands and burning eyes.

"Is that Rylcombe Police-station?" asked Talbot clearly.

"Yes."

"I wish to speak to Inspector Skeat?"

"I am Inspector Skeat! What is wanted?"

The Professor had approached—he strained his ears to listen, and caught the reply. His face went white.

"Toff!" he muttered thickly. "You—you dare not——"

And Talbot replied:

"Will you go?"

"No!" snarled the Professor.

Talbot gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"What's wanted?" came the inspector's sharp voice again.

And Talbot replied:

"I have information to give. The cracksman, John Rivers, alias the Professor, is now in Rylcombe——"

A savage curse dropped from the Professor's lips. He grasped Talbot's arm, and dragged the receiver away.

"Enough! A thousand curses! I will go!"

"You have decided only just in time!" said Talbot grimly.

"I will make you repent this!" hissed the cracksman. "You shall suffer for it—you shall suffer——"

"You have none too much time to catch the train, and Inspector Skeat knows now that you are in Rylcombe," said Talbot quietly. "You have no time to lose."

The professor realised that. He made a movement towards the door.

"Where is what I have come for?" asked Talbot calmly.

"In my room, curse you, Toff!"

"I will come with you."

Two minutes later the Professor stepped into the train in Rylcombe Station, and Talbot, with a bag in his hand, stood on the platform, and watched him go. The baffled plotter shook a savage fist at him from the train window.

"I go now!" he muttered. "I go, Toff; but I shall return—don't doubt that. You have not heard the last of me! You shall remember——"

The shriek of the whistle drowned his voice. The train glided out of the station, and the Professor disappeared from Talbot's sight. Quietly the junior turned and left the station.

. . . . . .

"Toff!" The whispered voice in the dark quadrangle made Talbot start. He had climbed in over the school wall. Marie, her white face wet with rain, caught him by the arm.

"Marie! You here!"

"I have been waiting—waiting and watching for you!" panted the girl breathlessly. "Toff, you have seen him? I know he will not go! Toff, I shall confess everything. You shall not suffer for me! If he will not go, Toff, you shall not suffer!"

Talbot smiled gently.

"It is finished, Marie. He is gone."

"Gone!" murmured Marie. She reeled; the reaction was too much for her. Talbot caught her in his strong arm.

"Yes, Marie. He has gone, and in this bag I have all that was—was taken. I shall leave it where it can be found in the morning. It will be supposed that it was taken for a joke, and it will be forgotten. There is nothing to fear, Marie. Dear Marie, calm yourself. The danger is over now."

A long shudder ran through the girl.

"I—I have been waiting—so long—for you to come back," she whispered. "I would not have let you suffer, Toff. And—and he is really gone?"

"I watched him into the train."

Marie gave a sob.

"And you are saved, Toff, and I am safe—safe! But they will miss me in the ward. I must go back. But before I go, Toff, you have my word, so long as I am here, there shall be nothing more—nothing more of that. You understand?"

Talbot drew a deep breath, and his face grew very bright.

"Thank you, Marie. Heaven bless you!"

"Whatever my father says, there shall be nothing more of it here! Nothing. I—I am ashamed, Toff, and yet that has never come to me before. I have never cared. It is you who have made the difference, Toff."

Talbot pressed her hand silently.

Marie flitted away into the darkness. A quarter of an hour later Talbot entered his study in the School House. Tom Merry and D'Arcy were there finishing their preparation, and Monty Lowther was busy upon his Comic Column for the "Weekly." They all looked inquiringly at Talbot.

"Where have you been, you boundah?" asked Arthur Augustus. "You haven't done your pwep. You will get into a wow in the mornin'."

Talbot smiled. He could smile now.

"What about supper?" he said cheerily. "I've had a walk, and I'm hungry. Never mind prep. for once. I'll chance it with Linton."

Tom Merry gave him a silent look. The Toff met his eyes with a smile. And Tom Merry understood that the trouble, whatever it was, that had weighed like a black cloud upon his chum, was lifted. He asked no questions; he was only too glad to see Talbot his old self again. And supper in Tom Merry's study was a merry meal that evening.

. . . . . .

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made a surprising discovery the next morning.

He went into Study No. 6, so long deserted, for a book to lend Talbot, and there, upon the table, he beheld a startling sight—nothing less than Kildare's silver cup, his own watch and chain and sovereign-purse, and ten banknotes for one pound each, set out in surprising array.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Augustus. "Look heah, you fellows!"

"My hat!"

"The giddy plunder!"

"And a note with it, bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, taking up a slip of paper that was pinned round his watch-chain. On the paper was written, in block-letters, evidently for the purpose of leaving no clue in handwriting, "RETURNED WITH THANKS!"

"Then it was a silly, practical joker after all," said Tom Merry, with a deep breath of relief.

"Yaas, wathah! You fellows will wemembah that I told you so all along!" said Arthur Augustus triumphantly.

"Wonders will never cease," remarked Lowther. "Gentlemen, I call upon you all to witness the fact that the one and only Gussy Adolphus has been right for once!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Better call Mr. Railton to take those things," said Tom Merry. "I'm jolly glad it's turned out to be only a rotten joke, though I don't envy the joker if Railton gets hold of him."

Mr. Railton, too, was very glad to discover that the purloining affair was evidently only a practical joke. The Housemaster made some efforts to discover the unknown practical joker, but in vain. However, the missing property was restored to its owners, and there was no harm done, so the matter soon dropped. The fellow who remembered it longest was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The swell of St. Jim's, in fact, was never quite tired of reminding his chums that he had said all along that it was simply a practical joke.

Arthur Augustus was very satisfied with the perspicacity he had shown on that point. There was another point, however, upon which he was not quite so satisfied. And that was the fact that Miss March, who was still on duty in the sanatorium, and very popular there, especially with Joe Frayne, and who had now made a good many acquaintances among the juniors, seemed to like Talbot the best of all. Of course, as Gussy admitted freely, old Talbot was a splendid chap; but he would really have expected the Little Sister to show a little more favour in another direction—weally!

THE END

THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF OUR GRAND NEW SERIAL STORY.

OFFICER AND TROOPER.

An Enthralling New Story of Life in the British Army.

Specially Published for Patriotic British Boys.

By BEVERLEY KENT.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a Hussar regiment known as the "Die-Hards." Bob accidentally overhears some officers plotting to "rag" another officer's rooms. He informs Lieutenant Groves, the intended victim, and the scheme is frustrated, but as a result Bob is given a heavy punishment. His comrades resent this, and become mutinous. Just then General French appears on the scene. An inquiry is held, and Bob is acquitted, while the officer who caused all the trouble is turned out of the regiment. During riding-drill Private Cole, a bitter enemy of Bob's, unseats him while his horse is taking a difficult jump, and Bob is flung heavily to the ground, where he loses consciousness.

(Now go on with the story.)

A Terrible Revenge.

Cole gave one malicious glance at his enemy, and then, with his thin lips parted in a cruel smile, he leisurely dismounted and bent over the lad.

"Guess I've about done for you this time," he muttered savagely. "A good job, too, that you're out of my way."

As he bent his wicked face still closer, the lad opened his eyes, and the coward started back. Bob's expression was full of meaning. He said nothing, but struggled to rise, and Cole involuntarily held out his hand to help him. The lad ignored the proffered assistance, managed slowly and painfully to rise to his feet, moved both his arms to see if they were sound, and then stumbled off after his horse. He climbed into the saddle with a big effort, and, without as much as a look at his enemy, but with a face pale and terribly stern, he jogged back towards the squadron. Cole followed slowly behind.

The drill was over, and the squadron was forming up as Bob rode up, so without delay he took his place in his troop. In silence he rode back to barracks, and when he reached the stables he groomed down his horse, keeping an eye on Cole all the while. Having attended to the wants of his mount, he crossed the yard and entered the stall where Cole was still busy. No one else was there. Cole looked curiously at the lad, but held his tongue.

"You tried to do for me," Bob began sternly. "Well, Cole, I give you your choice. Which shall it be, a stand-up fight, or a ragging? You can bully and bluster as much as you like, but you know well that none of the chaps would believe your solemn oath against my word. I've only to speak, and every man in D Squadron will be against you."

Cole was a good soldier, in the sense that he was a perfect horseman, an accomplished swordsman, and that he knew his drill better than nine-tenths of the troopers; but he had no taste for hard knocks, and he went deadly pale as Bob spoke. Still, like all bullies, he tried to bluster.

"Garn! I was only having a game!" he growled, with an attempt at a grin, as he wiped his horse's heels. "I thought that as——"

"That's a lie!" Bob interjected, in a matter-of-fact tone. "What's more, I'm not going to bother arguing with you. If you don't consent to stand up to me, I'll tell the chaps what you did. If you haven't the pluck to——"

"I'll meet you to-night," Cole muttered.

"All right. If you fail I'll tell Dent and Hosty. I'd sooner have the handling of you alone, and—well, I won't spare you, if I'm fit to give you a hiding, that's all; and you may take all the change you like out of me, if you know how. It's a fight to a finish, mind that!"

Bob strode away, and Cole, chewing a straw, stood in the stall, sulkily scowling after him.

"Private Cole—Private Cole!"

As the trooper heard the call he stepped out of the stall and into the yard, in surprise. Lieutenant Haines was gazing eagerly around.

"Here, sir!" Cole cried, saluting.

"Ah, that you? I've just heard some bad news. Sergeant Davenport has gone sick, and has been carted off to hospital. That knocks our play out to-night. He was to appear with you in the last scene, you know, and have that duel with the foils. You're both well-matched, and I calculated on that 'business' bringing down the house. Nothing like a clever bit of fencing or boxing for a military audience, but now——" Haines stopped abruptly, and his boyish face was troubled.

"It's hard lines on you, sir, who've gone to no end of work to make a success of the entertainment," Cole suggested commiseratingly, for he was a toady by nature, and never lost an attempt to ingratiate himself with the officers. "I don't suppose, though, it will matter so much if we're left out, after all," he continued; "you act so well yourself, sir, that——"

"Rot!" Haines cut in disgustedly. "We were to have a sparring match in the first act, and a clever bit of trick-riding as the curtain goes down on the second act, just as the villain is bolting off. Oh, hang! I thought the piece was going to end up fine, but now—— Tell you what, Cole, I'm not licked yet. We'll have that last scene, and we'll have to find someone to stand up to you. It won't, of course, be as realistic as if Sergeant Davenport could take the part, for both you men know one another's play so well that——"

"Have you thought of anyone, then, sir?" Cole suggested.

"No; the chap, who ever he is, won't have much time to pick up his part, and most of the fellows——"

"There's Private Hall, sir. He's smart, and he's not at all bad with the foils."

Cole spoke meditatively, and an odd look had come into his face. He was staring up at the sky, and his face was soft.

"Hall? I didn't know he was any good!" Haines cried in surprise. "What made you think of him? I never heard——"

"He's in the gym whenever he gets the chance, and he's awfully keen on sword and foil practice," Cole continued dispassionately. "I've had some bouts with him, and I've taught him a good deal of what I know. Yes, he's about the mark, sir, and he knows my play. I'd have him if I were you—that is, of course, if you don't think well of getting someone else."

"I'm at my wits' end, and I know of no one!" Haines cried excitedly. "I'm much obliged to you, Cole, for your suggestion. I'll see Hall at once, and coach him up. Hurrah!

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We'll make a success of the play yet, and thank goodness for that, for all Aldershot is coming to see it! The C.-O. has been sending out invitations wholesale."

The young lieutenant hurried off, and the private turned back into the stall. His hands trembled slightly as he threw the rug over his charger and strapped it; but the cruel smile on his coarse lips told of the evil thought that had prompted his suggestion to Haines.

"There'll be no slip this time!" the villain muttered. "He's been handed right over to me, and he can't escape! I hate him that bad that I'd take any risks sooner than be baulked; but risks won't be necessary. No; you knocked up against the wrong man, Mister Private Hall, when you dared me, and now I'll pay you out! Yes, I'll go through with this, and finish you once and for all!"

Leaving the stables, Cole went over to the gym and took down a foil. Casting a hasty glance over his shoulder to see that none of the men noticed his action, he slipped into a small workshop and closed the door. In five minutes' time he returned, availed himself of the general hubbub to replace the foil unobserved, and then he went away as unnoticed as he had entered.

It was now dark, and he grinned malevolently, and rubbed his hands together gleefully, as, crossing the square, he mounted the stairs, entered the barrack-room, flung himself on his cot, and began to read a book. And for the rest of the afternoon he was silent.

The hour for the theatricals approached, and from all parts of Aldershot a fashionable throng crowded to the barracks. Carriages, traps, and motor-cars rolled up in ceaseless succession; officers of high rank, ladies dressed in shimmering toilettes, subalterns, civilians, non-coms, and privates, all crowded into the theatre in one happy, laughing, and expectant audience.

Bob, peeping out from the drop-scene on the stage, was amazed at the mighty concourse, the rows and rows of faces, the dazzling uniforms of countless colours, the brilliant scene of rank and fashion and enjoyment. His knees almost knocked together as he realised that he was to appear on the stage, and for the first time in his life, too, before such a stupendous gathering.

Haines was rushing about giving his final instructions, seeing that the stage was properly arranged for the first scene, hurrying up the actors, coaching the scene-shifters, directing everything and everyone. All those behind the curtain had in the wings were in a state of suppressed excitement, and as the band of the Die-Hards struck up the overture a flutter of expectancy swept over the theatre, and the laughter and chatter which had continued intermittently became suddenly hushed. Then the curtain went up, and the play began.

It was a stirring military melodrama, and from the first its success was assured. Haines played the part of a misjudged officer, and his splendid acting quickly won the approval of the audience. From the first he had their goodwill. As the play went on loud cheers greeted him whenever he entered the stage, and in the middle of the piece, when he successfully turned the tables on the villain who had plotted against his honour, a storm of applause broke forth again and again.

He was ably seconded by the other actors, and as the curtain went up on the third and last act, the huge audience settled down in a state of rapt silence to witness the culmination of the drama.

So far Bob had not appeared; but his turn was now to come, and much depended upon the way he played his part. He represented a faithful servant, and he was to make his entrance through an open window, as Cole, who played the part of the villain's confederate, was about to destroy the proofs of the hero's innocence. Bob had not many words allotted to him, but on the vigour with which he acted and overcame Cole the swing of the last act largely depended.

Haines had explained this, and had urged him to engage Cole with the foils as strenuously as if in reality he was fighting for his life.

Bob stood by the window, waiting for his "cue," and as Cole, amidst a breathless silence, searched in an escritoire for the document he sought, the lad could almost feel the tense excitement of the audience. With a cry of evil joy, Cole sprang to his feet with the papers in his hand, gazed at them for a moment, and then dashed across the stage to fling them on the fire.

One bound, and Bob was through the window with rapier drawn, and he stood, calm, stern, pitiless-looking, between the villain and the fireplace. The lad's pose was splendid, and from boxes and circles, from pit and gallery, went up such a wild cheer as had never been heard even at Aldershot before.

Like a flash Cole had drawn his rapier, and steel clashed on steel. The audience swayed from side to side, carried away by the reality of the contest. Once a woman's startled cry broke forth as the seconds fled, that was all; otherwise, one could have heard a pin fall.

Up and down, backwards and forwards, the antagonists stamped, their faces set, their muscles taut, a strange gleam in their eyes. And all the time the crowd of onlookers gazed spellbound, enraptured by what they thought was a perfect semblance of reality, and little realising that a veritable tragedy was being enacted before them, for one of the players was fighting desperately for his life.

It was as Cole drew his rapier that Bob realised that his own life was in danger. The sneer on Cole's face was not assumed; no actor could possibly express so much, only bitter hatred could create the depth of passion in his small eyes, and the suppressed grunt with which he made his first lunge told better than words could of the deadly manner in which he sought for vengeance.

The quick thrust from Cole's wrist was quickly parried by Bob, and as they disengaged and again closed like lightning, a metallic clink caused the lad to start. The tiny button had fallen from Cole's rapier, as Bob convinced himself next second in tierce.

Cole, a splendid fencer, flung all the science he knew into his attack, lunging and returning, feinting, now over the arm, and again cutting and disengaging, bringing his strong wrist into play in riposte, dazzling the lad by the quickness of his attack and the catlike nimbleness with which he sought for and found an unexpected opening.

To those who have not learnt the foil, it is difficult to convey the deadly peril to which the slightest laxity of the muscles exposes a combatant. A hesitating lunge, an awkward parry, an irresolute foothold, and one antagonist is at the mercy of the other.

Fortunately, Bob had learned already that the foils demand the utmost nerve and the most audacious play, and so, almost without thought, he flung himself from an attitude of defence into one of attack, and fought as strenuously as if he was the equal of his villainous opponent. Therein lay his only hope of saving his life.

Taken aback, Cole instinctively got on his defence, retreating slowly and steadily, whilst the pent-up audience broke spontaneously into round after round of applause. Somehow, the acclamations steadied Bob. He fought even more fiercely; his one aim and object was to disarm the scoundrel, and hurl the naked rapier away.

Little did the cheering crowd know that every lunge Cole made was meant as a death-stroke; little did they guess the lad's sensations as time after time he successfully parried those venomous thrusts. Now, however, he was tiring. Cole's wrist seemed like a band of steel. Do all he could, Bob was unable to twist the rapier from his clutch.

The lad's eyes began to swim, his feet began to falter, the applause seemed to come from afar, the lights around him flickered through black streaks of space. And still—still, like the venomous tongue of a snake, that deadly point of steel thrust itself forward, ever seeking to enter his chest.

Back across the stage Cole pressed Bob again, whilst the audience rocked in the seats deliriously. The villain had now the upper hand, but the moment had not yet arrived when he meant to strike. Slowly the lad retreated, his chest heaving, his breath coming in great gasps, his eyes almost fascinated by the baleful look on the villain's face. Still Bob parried, but the tension behind Cole's sword-arm had lessened, and the lad knew well that the thrusts were not meant to get home.

Back, back, step by step, Bob retreated, and Cole followed. There was a harsh wrench of steel on steel, wild thrusting and wild parrying, a red rush of sparks, a pause, a tumble, and a groan, and Bob fell, whilst the audience, rising to its feet, yelled itself hoarse with delight.

"Encore—encore!"

For answer Haines, pallid and terror-struck, rushed from the wings across the stage; and the curtain fell with a thud.

In Which a Villain Appears.

The performance stopped abruptly when Bob fell, and the curtain dropped. For some moments the audience sat in tense silence; then an ominous whisper ran round the packed circles and the people rose in their seats.

Haines quickly stepped before the footlights, and raised his hand in a command for order.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to say that there has been an unfortunate accident," he began. "Trooper Hall has been wounded, but we hope not dangerously. A doctor is already in attendance. It will be impossible to conclude the play, and I must beg of you, therefore, to leave the theatre without any excitement, and I thank you heartily for the cordial reception you have given our performance."

"Quite right, Haines; of course, the play can't go on."

general in one of the large boxes cried out heartily. "I'm going home, and some night later on we'll have the performance again."

The general left the box, and the audience, following his example, flocked out of the theatre without panic.

Meantime all was confusion and alarm behind the curtain. Bob lay pallid and unconscious; Cole, pale and trembling, stood gazing down at him, and a doctor, bending over the lad, made a hurried examination.

"Badly hit, but not dangerous," said the doctor quietly. "Get bandages and a stretcher! He must be taken to hospital as soon as possible!"

Cole gave a gasp. It might have been taken for a sigh of relief.

"I'll never use a foil again!" he cried. "If Hall died I could never forgive myself. I——"

He raised the foil he held, and, as if in a paroxysm of remorse, he stabbed the boards again and again. The point broke, and remained embedded in the wood. Still Cole lunged at the stage, and the other actors, who had been crowding around Bob, turned and tried to soothe him.

"Don't lose your head; take a pull on yourself, man," one of them cried. "It wasn't your fault! Accidents can't be helped, and it might have been a great deal worse. Just you——"

"He's in my squadron, and he's a pal of mine!" Cole gasped again. "If anything happened to poor old Bob Hall——"

"Ah, he's coming round. Stand back there, and give him room!" the doctor commanded. "Don't be startled, my lad; it's nothing very serious. You've had a faint, but in a few days you'll be as fit as a fiddle again."

Cole hastily moved away a few paces as the doctor spoke, and Bob opened his eyes. The lad looked with surprise at the crowd of faces, all gazing down at him sympathetically.

"What's the matter?" he murmured. "Ah, I know!" He tried to rise, but the doctor firmly but gently held him prostrate. "My shoulder; it's scorching!" Bob groaned.

"Lie still. I've bandaged you up, and for some days you mustn't move. You'll be out and about again in less than a fortnight, though, if you take care of yourself, and follow my instructions. Here comes the ambulance. Steady there, steady! Lift him up without shaking him. All together! That's right! Now, quick march, off you go!"

As Bob was lifted up, a man in civilian attire, who during the performance, had been chatting with Haines, pushed his way through the throng, and gazed long and steadily at the wounded trooper. When Bob was carefully carried off the stage, the stranger turned and gazed at Cole in the same steadfast way, but now, as he tugged at his moustache, a cruel, cynical smile fluttered for a moment around his thin lips. Haines hurriedly returned from addressing the audience at this moment.

"What does the doctor say, Lascelles?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, the chap's all right," the other answered carelessly. "He's been run through the shoulder, that's all!"

"Lucky job it wasn't lower down."

"Yes, I s'pose so!"

"Rather an awkward incident on the first night you joined us," Haines remarked, in his kindly way. "It's an upset all round, but worse for poor Hall, of course, than any of us."

"Is he in my squadron?"

"No."

"Oh!"

Lascelles was still tugging at his moustache and eyeing Cole curiously.

"Well, I must be off to the hospital to see if I can do anything for Hall's comfort," Haines stated, as he bustled good-heartedly away. "I like the chap; he's a keen soldier and a decent sort!"

The actors were now hurrying to their dressing-rooms, and the lights were being lowered. Lascelles hastily bent down, and with some difficulty pulled the point of Cole's rapier out of the stage. He looked at the piece of steel carefully in the darkened light; then he, too, stood away, and came up with Cole, as the latter was disappearing through a doorway.

"I'm Captain Lascelles, of B Squadron, Die-Hards," he said brusquely. "I joined the regiment to-night. Change your togs, and then come at once to my rooms. You'll find 'em easily; they're the set Captain Meadow occupied last, I'm told. Don't delay, and hold your tongue, or you'll be sorry before the night is over!"

Cole had gone ghastly white. He looked at the hard, stern face, the cynical mouth, the dark eyes, full of a sinister meaning.

"Yes; you're right, I saw all," Lascelles continued, reading the villain's thought. "You'd better not try to shuffle out. If you do, I'll act at once!"

"I'll come, sir," Cole mumbled, holding on to the door handle for support. "Don't be too hard on me! I'm sorry for——"

"I'll hear what you have to say, at all events, before I take action," Lascelles interjected. "Don't fail me, or——"

He shrugged his shoulders, and, disdaining a second glance at the terror-stricken scoundrel, he walked nonchalantly out of the theatre, and sauntered back to his rooms.

Cole was shaking so much, that it was only with great difficulty he managed to fumble out of his stage dress and don his uniform again. Quaking with fear, and with his knees knocking together, he stumbled across the square, up the stairs, and tapped timidly at the rooms Captain Meadow used to occupy.

"Come in!" a harsh voice commanded, and, crossing the threshold, Cole saw the new squadron commander standing with his back to the fire, his face hard and determined.

"Close the door!" Lascelles rapped out.

Cole obeyed the order, and then turned again.

"Come over here!" Lascelles pointed to the edge of the hearthrug as he spoke, and Cole advanced timorously.

"Now, what have you to say for yourself?"

"It was an accident, sir," stammered Cole.

"Don't lie to me!" Lascelles thundered. "Far from being an accident, it was a deliberate plan on your part to do for that other trooper. I watched the whole fight; there was nothing of a stage trick about it. From the start he was battling for his life. I never saw a man in more deadly earnest than you were, and the wonder to me was that he was able to stave you off as long as he did."

"We both got hot as we went along, sir," Cole pleaded. "Hall and I are chums, but we're quick-tempered. We've often fenced together before, and it's always ended the same way—in both of us losing our tempers."

"Liar!" Lascelles retorted contemptuously. "That rot won't do for me! You took the lad unawares, and I noticed the surprise that came into his face when he saw the way you began. I tell you, man, that you looked like a fiend. Are you going to own up or not? If you don't I'll report the matter at once to the colonel!"

Cole was completely baffled, as well he might be. Lascelles spoke as if full of indignation, and yet the expression on his face, and every inflection in his utterance was at variance with his apparent scorn. Instinctively Cole felt that he was slipping into a morass, out of which it would be impossible for him to extricate himself later on. Lascelles was not sincere, Cole felt sure of that, and yet he could not for the life of him understand what object the officer could have, except to see that justice was done.

"Will you own up?" Lascelles repeated harshly.

"I've nothing to confess," Cole repeated doggedly. "I stick to what I say, and what you fancy about the business

ain't proof, anyhow! You thought I looked vicious; well, perhaps I did. I can't help my face. But I didn't mean any harm, and it was an accident that I injured Hall!"

Lascelles smiled grimly. He puffed his cigarette for some seconds, never taking his glittering eyes off Cole's for the while. Then he laughed mirthlessly.

"Proofs! You want 'em?" he chuckled. "You're a cool hand, anyhow!"

"Yes, sir, I say I didn't mean mischief, an' there's no one who can prove that I did!" Cole continued, as he grew bolder. "If that's what you wanted to see me about——"

"You're a fool!" Lascelles rapped out angrily. "It's not likely I'd tell you to come here if I wasn't certain I could prove what I said. Well, I've played with you long enough, and now I'll crush you! Look at this, and then persist in your innocence, if you dare!"

As he spoke, he dived his fingers into his vest pocket, and drew out the top of the rapier. He held the inch of metal between his fingers gingerly.

"Sharp as a dagger!" he cried. "The point carefully filed down! Why did you do that?"

"The button broke off!" Cole gasped.

"No; the button dropped off! It was carefully glued to the top of the foil, that's all! If the button had broken off, there would be a jagged end; but this is bright and pointed. It's been sharpened carefully, there's not a doubt about it! Now, come along to the adjutant!"

Cole was shaking, his face had turned a dusky grey, beads of terror had broken out on his forehead. He put out his hand involuntarily, and clutched Lascelles by the coat-sleeve.

"Spare me, sir—spare me!" he groaned. "I own up—I admit all! I did try to wound Hall, but I was mad—mad! He riled me time and again, so much that flesh and blood couldn't stand it any longer! But I'm sorry, and if only you let me off, I'll——"

"What would you do?" hissed Lascelles.

"I'd do anything you asked! I'd slave for you all my life; there's nothing you wanted I wouldn't get for you! I'd——"

Lascelles caught Cole by the tunic collar and held him at arm's-length.

"I want a man to obey my instructions implicitly, and to ask no questions," he said, in a hollow voice. "He must go and come like a shadow; he must see everything, and yet remain unseen himself; he must be my slave, my dog; and, whilst I will pay him well, I will hound him to gaol if he dares to turn on me. Do you understand? I have you in the hollow of my hand. Will you be that man, or now will you suffer for your crime?"

"I'll do whatever you ask, sir," Cole muttered hoarsely. "I'll be your servant—yes, your slave, if you want!"

Lascelles dropped his hand and grinned. Lighting a fresh cigarette, he returned close to the fire, and, with both hands behind his back, he nodded his head approvingly, and chuckled softly.

"I thought I'd bring you to your senses," he remarked. "Well, that's all settled; so you needn't fear any punishment any longer. Bah! Why do you think I spoke as I did? What is young Hall to me that I should care whether you did for him or not? But you bungled the job when you took it on, and that's what disgusted me so much."

"Disgusted you?"

"Ask me no questions, but listen to what I say," Lascelles hissed. "I hate young Hall, and I mean you to be the instrument by which I get quit of him for ever! Go, now, and remember every hour of your life that I keep that rapier point in my possession, and that at the least sign of disobedience I will see that you are sent to penal servitude!"

Glad to get back to his chums, Bob hurried away, when he got his discharge from hospital, and flung open the door of Barrack-room 10 with a grin on his face.

"Hallo, chaps! How goes life?" he cried. "Yes, I'm out of hospital, and jolly glad to see you."

The troopers welcomed him with a hearty cheer. Dent and Hosty jumped to their feet, and were the first to warmly grasp his hand; nor was he allowed to take his seat till he had exchanged a hearty grip with all his other messmates. Then he looked round the room.

"Where's Cole?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard?" Dent cried. "He's been transferred to B Squadron."

"Why?"

"They've a new squadron commander, a Captain Lascelles, and Cole's gone as his servant."

Bob frowned; then he laughed.

"I knew a chap called Lascelles, but I don't think it's likely he's the new captain of B Squadron," he remarked. "It's many years since I last saw the man I mean, and I never heard what happened to him. I was only a nipper at that time."

Most of the men in the barrack-room were dispersing as Bob had entered, and now he was only with Dent and Hosty.

"'Tain't likely he's the cove as you knew," Hosty assented. "Now, Bob, we're alone, though, and Dent and I want to ask you a question. Was that fight on the stage a bit of gag, or did Cole mean mischief?"

The lad's face grew grave as Hosty spoke.

"Why do you ask?" he inquired.

Hosty knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"'Cos we have our suspicions. There's been a lot of talk whilst you've been in hospital, and Cole ain't over popular. He never was much liked, but the chaps think he had another object in exchanging besides just getting made Lascelles' servant, and they're all death on him now."

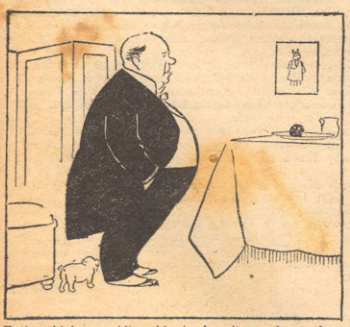
"You chaps mustn't mind if I keep my own counsel," Bob replied slowly, after a long pause. "I've had plenty of time to think things over whilst I was laid up, and I've decided how I'm going to act. I owe Cole a big grudge, and he may be spitefully inclined towards me; but I don't need any assistance, and I'm certain that I'm more than a match for him. Of course, you can form your own opinions. I can't help that. But suspicion is not proof; and, Hosty, old man, I won't answer your question one way or the other."

"That means that Cole meant mischief!" Dent rapped out. "All right, Bob; we'll keep an eye on him. "Don't speak unless you want to; but we're your particular chums, and I think we're entitled to know if——"

"Hall, you're wanted!"

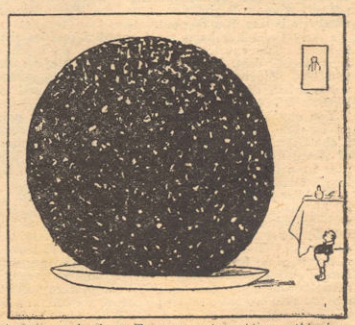
The three troopers sitting over the fire turned their heads simultaneously. Cole, of all men, was standing in the middle of the room, an evil grin on his face. The same thought occurred to the three friends—how much of the conversation had he heard?

(Another grand instalment of this story will appear next Wednesday. ORDER IN ADVANCE!)



Father thinks a pudding this size is quite good enough—

What Happens at Home During the Christmas Holidays!



—but you can only please Tommy by givin him one this size.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 361.

NEXT WEDNESDAY: **"CAST OUT FROM THE SCHOOL!"** A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

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. 14.— A NIGHT WITH THE GURKHAS!

I wish you could see me writing these few lines to you; you'd say at once it was a finer sight than ever you'd seen in a pantomime.

I feel like Robinson Crusoe himself, now that they've served us out goat-skin jackets to wear over our tunics during the cold snap we're having just now. I'm not the only picture on the wall. There are hundreds of Robinson Crusoes in the dug-outs and trenches and parading the rear of the British firing-line.

How our lads have laughed and joked over this new equipment! It takes little to make Tommy laugh when potting Germans is the game. But if the authorities had ordered the goat-skins just merely to put heart instead of warmth into us, they could not have hit upon a better device.

Don't misunderstand me. We need those goat-skins out here. They're jolly fine! I wouldn't part with mine for a mansion and a thousand a year. Bravo, the War Office, not forgetting our great chiefs, General French and Lord Kitchener! I salute 'em both.

Very well. I'm like Robinson Crusoe in general appearance. The Tipperary Hotel in which I am "putting up" for the night has been dug in the wall of the trenches, and though old Robinson Crusoe probably had a more spacious and lofty apartment for his home on the deserted island, I'll warrant he didn't have such warmth, such smells, and such jollity as we of the King's Dragoons.

I'm writing on a box in the light of a candle, while near by is our cook frying some unearthed eggs—deposited underground by some careful hen certainly before the war started—in a pan with some portions of pork that was only two or three days before squealing in my arms, in the shape of a plump pig we were fortunately able to buy from a Belgian peasant.

This, with some onions strong enough to lift the roof off, with half a dozen troopers puffing out clouds of shag-smoke in the mistaken effort of trying to suffocate me because I'm the only one present not smoking—this despatch requiring all my attention—will give you some idea of the flavours and of what life is like in a dug-out.

Lately there has been more snowball battles than actual fighting. The cavalry, of course, can't do much with the snow inches deep in the roads. We take our turns in the trenches, relieving the infantry, and in our moments of rest we snowball each other as merrily as a crowd of school kids.

You ought to see about thirty stalwart chaps going along an ice-slide, one after the other, laughing and shouting, as if the German squareheads were not within a thousand miles of them, and then hear the roar that goes up when some flier from the rear shoots into the line and sends the sliders into a struggling heap in the snow!

We hear that the Kaiser has got a very bad hump through all his plans going wrong, but I'll wager he'd split his tunic with laughing if he saw Tommy Atkins & Co. at play.

Still, we're not greedy. We let the Germans have some of our fun. The other day we were ordered to leave a trench that was of no further fighting value. The lager-swillers had had frightful losses trying to get it, and only that day had made two assaults upon us. Our chaps were loth to go. It seemed as if we were retiring because we couldn't hold them back.

"Let's see how long we can keep 'em out," I suggested. "Let's make some snow figures, and prop 'em up in the trenches, with a few old caps on their heads."

The idea was taken up at once. A dozen of us left the trenches, and came back rolling huge snowballs. In a short time we had rigged up about twenty snow "Tommies," all leaning forward with their snow rifles at the ready, as life-like as you please.

We thought we should have given the game away to the Germans by the laughter we had got out of it. Well, we cleared out of the trenches after a time in dead silence. Our new position enabled us to watch the trenches we had left.

The next morning opened with bright sunshine, though it was bitterly cold. A couple of enemy aeroplanes were out almost immediately. They hovered over the trenches we had left overnight, and retired to their own lines.

Then the German band soon began to play. How we grinned when we saw the shells bursting in the neighbourhood of our snow figures! All day long they kept it up, wasting scores of shells, occasionally sending infantry volleys, and wondering, I dare say, at the dogged British pluck that remained unmoved under this terrific assault.

Darkness fell again, and then our colonel came to me with our lieutenant. The latter is quite a youngster, only just out of his teens, but as fearless a horseman as ever jumped a fence. Next to the colonel, our lads would do anything for him.

"The colonel has been very amused about the troopers we left behind in the trenches," smiled the lieutenant. "There's no doubt that the enemy will follow up their bombardment with a night attack. We've taken them in splendidly, and I've been wondering if we couldn't prepare another surprise for 'em. Would you help me?"

"Rather!" I agreed at once. "Certainly, sir!" I corrected myself.

"Good lad!" said the colonel. "But it's very risky."

"So much the better, sir," was my answer.

Still, I felt like whistling when I heard the scheme. It was to take as much gun-cotton and high explosive as we could carry into the trenches which the snow figures were guarding. There would be a nice old mess if we got hit on the way, or stumbled and fell on some of the stuff!

"We'll start at once, corporal," said the lieutenant. "I've got all the material ready."

I shall never forget that little job. Both of us were loaded with as much explosive as we could carry. We had to cross about half a mile of flat, open country, where our figures stood out in black outline against the snowy ground. The night was fairly light, too.

The wind, blowing into our faces, carried the noise of movement in the German trenches. Evidently they were getting ready for a night attack—perhaps were already on the way.

The tramp of feet grew more distinct as we cautiously crept out into the open and made our way back to the safety of our own lines.

Scarcely were we in shelter than we knew the fun was commencing. A horde of dark shapes could be seen rushing the old trenches. Torches and fire-balls suddenly illumined the blackness. With hoarse shouts, the sausage-eaters rushed to the attack.

Suddenly there was a strange silence. The crowds of figures disappeared into the trenches.

"They've twigged the joke!" cried a trooper near me.

(Continued on Page iii of Cover.)

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"They've just found out they've been bombarding snow men!"

"The best part of the joke's got to come," I grinned. "Listen!"

Our boys checked their laughter. A minute, two minutes, passed. Had the lieutenant's plan failed? I thought. We strained our eyes as well as our ears. We could see and hear nothing.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Just as if a battery had got to work, there was a series of explosions from the old trenches. The darkness was split up by flashes of light. After the explosions died away there was a storm of groaning and yelling.

A platoon of us went over there the following morning. The mousetrap we had set had been completely successful. Directly the Germans had started to move about in the trenches the gun-cotton we had lightly buried had exploded, sending scores of the squareheads instantly to kingdom come. They were lying in heaps everywhere. But I won't sicken you with a description. You can well imagine it all.

"It was a ripping, tip-top wheeze!" grinned our lieutenant, who was not long ago a Sixth-Former at a big public school. "Corporal, we'll try that biz on again one of these times. What a giddy sell for the Germans!"

Now, if you'll permit me, I'll tell you about an experience I had with the Gurkhas.

I'm sorry that I have to use so much of the capital "I," being a modest chap—so they used to tell me—but I don't want you to think I'm any more of a hero than the thousands of my comrades out here. Each and every one of them could tell you stories such as I have written home to you. We're only doing our "little bit," and doing it as well as we can, for the safety and future welfare of our dear ones at home.

Having got that off my chest, let me say that I was engaged a couple of days ago in conveying and guiding a battalion of Gurkhas to the trenches, as well as batches of their officers and their transport.

As it was over a tricky route of five miles, in pitch darkness—we having started at about 7.30 p.m., and the whole business completed by about 3 a.m., and there was the fear that at any moment the Germans might be getting to work through their spies, and hurling Jack Johnsons at us—you will realise that it was something of a responsibility.

However, I didn't take a single wrong turning, no blunder occurred anywhere, and our fire-eating, brave pals from India got safely into the trenches. When the job was over, I snuggled down to get a few winks before dawn; but sleep was out of the question.

The Gurkhas were itching to get to business. Reluctantly their officers consented to about a score of them going out. That's the trouble with these plucky chaps. There's no holding them back while there's any of the Kaiser's lambs within reach.

I can understand why the Germans hold them in holy terror. They gave me an eerie feeling as they left the trenches, their skin and garb making them practically invisible as they glided forward with lithe movements towards the German lines.

They disappeared behind a thin line of trees. We waited with bated breath. For five or ten minutes there was absolute silence. It was only when I discovered that the main body of the Gurkhas had followed their score of scouts that there came the sound of a few shots, a splutter of musketry, intermingled with cries and groans from the enemy's lines.

Three or four light balls were flung into the air. During their moments of illumination a grim scene was disclosed. Some six hundred yards from our front there was a mass of wild and struggling men, the gleam of steel, and the whirling rush of the rifle-butt.

It was the Gurkhas at their deadly work. For about a quarter of an hour they hacked and slew amongst the half-awake and bewildered squareheads, who, it appeared, were resting before making a night assault on the British trenches.

You can guess what a slaughter there was. It was terrible, but it was a grand bit of daring, splendidly carried out. It only ended when the Kaiser's beauties, scared out of their wits, bolted and ran for their lives, leaving dozens of slain behind them.

Then, just as silently as they had left, the Gurkhas came back to the trenches. Only three of them suffered with wounds. There was not a single one of them killed. They moved back into the trenches as calm and passive as if they had just been for a walk round after supper.

The Germans tried to get their own back as soon as it was daylight. They poured out a hail of shell and shrapnel into the Gurkha's trenches. It was a poor attempt at revenge. The Indians only nodded in their direction, as much as to say, "Just you wait till we meet again!"

I tell you honestly there's no fiercer or more fearless soldier living than the Gurkha. I'm jolly thankful he's on our side!

(Next week's GEM Library will contain another stirring despatch from our chum at the front. Order your copy in advance.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"CAST OUT FROM THE SCHOOL!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next Wednesday's magnificent, long, complete school tale is packed with incidents of a most thrilling character. John Rivers, the cultured cracksman, realising that Talbot will never be persuaded to rejoin his former associates, proceeds to kidnap the Shell fellow, who is taken to London and kept under strict watch and ward. Great consternation prevails at St. Jim's, and in the days that follow Talbot's disappearance several burglaries of a daring nature are perpetrated. The general assumption is that Talbot, hiding in the district, is the thief, and when at length the unhappy boy breaks his bonds and hastens back to St. Jim's, it is only to find himself

"CAST OUT FROM THE SCHOOL!"

the scorn and derision of his former comrades. Tom Merry alone stands loyally by his old chum, and Tom's friendship is the only reed upon which the expelled junior can lean.

The story is a masterpiece, and is written in so powerful and irresistible a style as to rivet the reader's attention from start to finish.

OUR NEW COMPANION PAPER.

The latest addition to our select little circle of journals has sprung into immediate popularity, and there is every indication that ere long

"THE DREADNOUGHT"

will be firmly established in the front rank of British periodicals. Perhaps the most valuable asset to its striking popularity is the inclusion of the Harry Wharton stories each week. These tales set forth in characteristic fashion the early adventures of Wharton and his chums at Greyfriars School, and in publishing them I am meeting the demands of many thousands of "Gem" and "Magnet" readers.

The next number of "The Dreadnought" will be on sale at all newsagents' to-morrow—Thursday—and the fine Greyfriars story it contains is entitled

"HAZELDENE'S TREACHERY!"

A powerfully-written yarn this, and one which should find its way into every home.

And now I ask you, my chums, without reserve, to devote your interests to the advancement of my new journal, that it may circulate in every quarter of the universe in the same way as its ever-famous companions.

Your Editor will be pleased to welcome any suggestions relative to the welfare of the paper; and, so that my readers may know exactly what journals come under my control, I append a list of them, together with the day of publication:

THE MAGNET LIBRARY
On Sale Monday.

THE GEM LIBRARY
On Sale Wednesday.

THE DREADNOUGHT
On Sale Thursday.

THE PENNY POPULAR
On Sale Friday.

CHUCKLES
On Sale Saturday.

THE BOYS' FRIEND 3d. LIBRARY
First Friday in Every Month.

I thank you, one and all, for your whole-hearted support in the past, and, if I may still rely upon such unwavering loyalty, the future holds very high promise indeed.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

"Dolly."—Thanks for your card of appreciation. The matter you mention is one for your own discretion.

Osmund Nicholson.—The senior boys of St. Jim's and Greyfriars are Kildare and Wingate respectively.

Miss Evelyn Danwood.—Very many thanks for your letter. Figgins & Co. are all about fifteen, and Cousin Ethel is the same age. Best wishes to yourself and brothers.

G. Neuman (London, E.C.).—Your suggestion is already under consideration.

THE EDITOR.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE

NO ENCOURAGEMENT.

The following notice is posted up in a public-house in the neighbourhood of Denver, America:

"NOTICE.—A man is engaged in the backyard to do all the cursing and bad language required at this establishment; a dog is kept to do all the barking; our potman (or chucker-out) has won seventy-five prize-fights, and is an excellent revolver-shot. An undertaker calls every morning for orders."—Sent in by J. Henshall, Gillingham, Kent.

QUITE ELIGIBLE.

Recruit: "I want to join a Highland regiment."
Sergeant: "Were you born in Scotland?"
Recruit: "No."
Sergeant: "Were your parents?"
Recruit: "No."
Sergeant: "Have you any property in Scotland?"
Recruit: "Yes."
Sergeant: "What property?"
Recruit: "A pair of trousers, sir, being cleaned at Perth Dye Works."—Sent in by J. W. Heeps, Chelmsford, Essex.

NO NEED THEN!

A tourist was on holiday in Ireland, and as he was travelling along the road noticed a dilapidated house, with many holes in the roof. Seeing a man leaning against the doorway, and being surprised at such a tumble-down house being occupied, he strolled up to the man and inquired:

"I say, why don't you mend those great holes in the roof, my man?"

"Shure, yer honour wouldn't have me go out in the rain to mend 'em?"

"Well, you needn't go out in the rain; you could do it when it's fine."

"Bedad, what's the good? There's no need then!"—Sent in by S. Harvey, Bayswater, W.

HE SHOULD WORRY.

Two prisoners had just stepped into the Black Maria, to be conveyed to prison. One was a bigamist, and the other a thief.

"Wot are yer snivelling about?" asked the bigamist of the thief, who was crying pitifully.

"I was thinking of my wife, and having to leave her!" sobbed the thief.

"Oh, chuck it!" retorted the bigamist. "I'm not a-snivelling, and I'm leaving four of 'em!"—Sent in by J. Stow, Blackfriars, S.E.

RUNNING DOWN KING JOHN.

Papa was putting his little daughter through her paces. It was her first term at day school.

"Now, Alice," he asked, "who was the wickedest King of England?"

"Oh, King John!" was the prompt reply. "He was a horrid man! He used to run people over with his motor-cars."

"My dear," exclaimed her parent, "surely you were never taught that?"

"Oh, yes, daddy! She said King John ground down the people with his taxis."—Sent in by Donald Chisholm, Nairn, Scotland.

MARVELLOUS!

First Neighbour (whose soldier son has sent her a telegram from the front): "Yes, they be wonderful things, they telegraphs!"

Second Neighbour: "Just fancy, all the way from Belgium—all those miles! And so quick, too!"

First Neighbour: "Quick ain't the word for it! Why, when I got it, the gum wasn't dry on the envelope, even!"—Sent in by J. Harris, Chasetown, near Walsall.

SAVING THE TYPEWRITER.

City Man (dictating a letter): "My dear Mr. Schankel-hausenheimer——"

Typist: "How do you spell that name, sir?"

City Man: "S-c-h—— Oh, by the way, I think you had better begin 'My dear sir,' and save the wear and tear of the machine!"—Sent in by H. Israel, Newbridge, South Wales.

NO WORDS WASTED.

The following story is told of two settlers in the wilds of America, who, as a result of their lonely life, had a habit of saying as few words as possible. They met on horseback one day at the river, and the following dialogue took place:

"Mornin', Zeb!"
"Mornin', Zy!"
"Say, whatcher give yer horse when he's sick?"
"Turpentine."
"Turpentine?"
"Yep."
"Git ap!"
"Git ap!"

The next time they met this is what they said:

"Mornin', Zeb!"
"Mornin', Zy!"
"What did yer say yer give yer horse when he was sick?"
"Turpentine."
"Killed mine."
"Killed mine."
"Git ap!"
"Git ap!"—Sent in by F. Dennis, Camberwell, S.E.

SUBMARINE STORY.

Submarine stealthily steered south. Suddenly submarine sighted ship. Ship steaming surprisingly slow. Submarine saw suspicious signals. Submarine swiftly submerged. Ship suddenly spotted submarine. Ship soon sent shell sailing submarine-wards. Submarine somehow 'scaped. Submarine subsequently sent shot ship-wards, successfully striking ship. Slowly stately ship sank.

Sea smooth, so ship's sailors swam shorewards safely. Successful submarine stealthily steered south.—Sent in by S. Roscoe, Manchester.

QUITE SAFE.

Coal Merchant: "I say, Premium, I want to insure my coal-yard against fire. What's the cost of a policy for £10,000?"

Insurance Agent: "What kind of coal is it—the same as you sent me last time?"

Coal Merchant: "Yes, kitchen k-nuts."

Insurance Agent: "Oh, then there's no need to insure it; it won't burn!"—Sent in by H. Lyons, Edinburgh.

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.