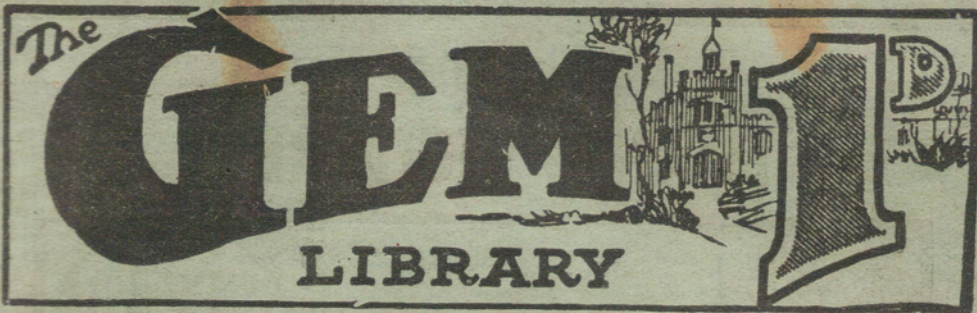


LOYAL TO THE LAST!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of the Chums of St. Jim's.

Complete
Stories
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and
Every
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a
GEM.



No.
363.

Vol.
9.



Tom Merry ran forward. "Talbot!" The tattered figure swung round, with a startled cry. The light of a lamp flared on his face—showed it thin, wan, emaciated—a face of death. Tom grasped the boy's arm, his hand trembling. "Talbot! I've found you at last, old man!" (A dramatic incident in the splendid complete school tale contained in this issue.)

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LOYAL TO THE LAST!

A Grand Long, Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., Talbot, and Marie Rivers.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



"Father!" exclaimed Marie Rivers appealingly. "I have nothing to say! Leave me to my fate." "I cannot!" The girl turned her streaming eyes upon Tom Merry. "Let him go free! He is my father!" she said.
(See Chapter 12.)

CHAPTER 1.

By Order of the Head.

"TOM MERRY!"

"Where's Tom Merry?"

It was Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, who was inquiring for Tom Merry, in an angry voice, and with a frowning brow.

Kildare came down the passage from the Head's study, and the crowd of fellows in the hall looked at him curiously, but made no reply.

If they knew where Tom Merry of the Shell was, apparently they did not intend to give any information upon the point.

Kildare looked round him angrily.

"Do you know where Tom Merry is?"

No reply.

"Has he gone out?"

Silence.

"The Head wants him at once!" exclaimed Kildare

sharply. "Lowther—Manners—do you know where he is?"

Lowther and Manners, as Tom Merry's special chums and study-mates, might have been supposed to know where he was; but they did not answer.

"Do you hear me?" rapped out Kildare.

"Yes, I hear you," said Monty Lowther.

"Not deaf!" murmured Manners.

"Tell me where Tom Merry is at once!"

"Haven't seen him for some minutes," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Kildare," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, "what is the mattah, deah boy? What has Tom Mewwy done?"

"He has got to report himself to the Head at once!" growled Kildare.

The captain of St. Jim's threw open the big door, and looked out into the dusky, misty quadrangle.

It was dark night outside. The leafless old elms loomed up like spectres through the darkness and the winter mist.

Next Wednesday:

"THE ST. JIM'S RECRUIT!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

No. 263. (New Series), Vol. 9.

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"Bai Jove! Heah he is!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. A junior came from the darkness of the quadrangle. His handsome face looked very pale and worn as he came into the radius of light from the open door. It was Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell.

"Merry!" snapped Kildare.

"Yes, Kildare."

"Where have you been?"

"In the quad," said Tom Merry quietly.

"You are not allowed outside the house at this hour!"

Tom Merry did not reply.

"The Head sent for you, and you could not be found," went on Kildare. "He asked me just now to find you and send you to him. Go to the Head's study at once!"

"Very well."

Tom Merry came in, very pale and very quiet. The usually cheery and sunny face of the Shell fellow was darkly overcast. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave him a sympathetic look. Monty Lowther and Manners joined him as he went down the passage to the dreaded apartment of the headmaster.

"Buck up, Tommy!" murmured Lowther. "And—and mind you don't cheek the Head, whatever you do!"

"Mind your eye, Tommy, you know," muttered Manners.

Tom Merry nodded to his chums, but his look was not reassuring. He tapped at the door of the Head's study, leaving Manners and Lowther looking uneasy. They did not like the expression on Tom's face, and the Head was too majestic a personage to be "cheeked." And any expression of a difference of opinion from a junior to the headmaster would be accounted "cheek."

"Come in!"

Tom Merry entered the study.

Dr. Holmes looked at him—not with his usual kind glance. The benevolence was quite gone from his face. His expression was cold and severe.

"Merry, I sent for you a quarter of an hour ago! You could not be found!"

"I am sorry, sir."

"I desired to speak to you," said the Head, "upon the subject of the unfortunate and dishonest boy who has been expelled from the school—Talbot of the Shell. I understand that, in spite of the clear proofs of this wretched boy's guilt, that you hold the opinion that injustice has been done him."

The Head's voice was very severe, but Tom Merry did not flinch. It was not like him to flinch in the defence of a chum. He met the doctor's stern eyes fearlessly.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Dr. Holmes frowned.

"So it is as I thought. As you hold this obstinate opinion, Merry, I sent for you to tell you that, whatever views you may hold, you are forbidden under any circumstances to have any dealings with that boy. You are forbidden to communicate with him in any way, either personally or by letter. His career at St. Jim's is closed—it is a sealed book. He has gone, and I hope he will be forgotten. You understand me?"

"I understand, sir."

Tom Merry spoke heavily, dully. It was all that he could do to keep control of his voice, which threatened to break in spite of himself.

Talbot of the Shell had been his chum, and Tom Merry could not so easily forget a chum, even if everybody else was down on him.

The suffering in the boy's face could not escape the Head's keen eyes, and his expression softened a little as he noted it.

"My dear Merry," he went on, in a more kindly tone, "I do not desire to be hard upon you. I admire your loyalty to your friend. But it is misplaced; that is what you must understand. This wretched boy Talbot is not worthy of it. It is unworthy of you to continue to feel this regard for a boy who has disgraced himself and his school—who is a criminal and a thief!"

Tom Merry's cheeks burned.

"I don't believe it, sir."

The Head frowned again.

"I will be patient with you, Merry. You know what Talbot was. He was brought up in the criminal classes; he was a crackman while still a young lad. When he first came to this school he deceived me—he deceived us all. Afterwards, he appeared to repent. Perhaps his repentance was for the time sincere—I truly hope so. By an act of great courage he won the King's pardon, and was free to lead a new life. And he was allowed to stay here; he was awarded a Founder's Scholarship; he was given every chance. Even his unhappy past was beginning to be forgotten; few, if any, of the boys remembered it against him. Yet, after all this—"

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"He was sincere, sir, and he has never changed since!"

"Listen to me, Merry! He quitted the school without a word of explanation. Afterwards, the house was broken into at night—my safe was opened and rifled. Talbot's penknife was found where he had dropped it after using it to force the window. Personal belongings, of no value to anyone but himself, were taken from his study. After this, how can you persist in your belief that he was not the thief? This is mere obstinacy, Merry!"

"But, sir—"

Tom Merry's voice broke. Against that mass of overwhelming proof, what could he say in defence of his chum? Only that he trusted him—that his faith in him was unshaken by the blackest evidence.

"The police are satisfied of his guilt. A warrant has been issued for his arrest," said the Head. "By this outbreak of inherent dishonesty he has undone his own work in winning a pardon. There is no hope for the boy. The force of old associations, the attractions of a criminal life, have proved too strong for him. You must forget him, Merry!"

"But—but he came back, sir," stammered Tom Merry. "If he had been guilty, he would not have come back!"

"He came back, hoping to deceive me once more—to impose upon me, as he has done before!" said the Head sternly.

"He—he told you he had been kidnapped, sir—"

The Head made an impatient gesture.

"A shallow falsehood!" he said. "I should not be likely to believe his unsupported statement; and, even so, it would leave the proofs against him untouched. Whether he went with his old associates freely or not, he committed a robbery in this school, and for that crime the prison doors are open to receive him. Any connection between him and the boys of this school henceforth is impossible, and cannot be permitted. That is what I wish you to understand, Merry. You must never think of holding any communication with Talbot again!"

Tom Merry was silent.

"I am trying to be patient with you, Merry," said Dr. Holmes, with a glint in his eyes. "I make allowance for your feelings, but I will be obeyed. Answer me—why could you not be found when I sent for you? Had you followed that wretched boy to speak to him again?"

"I went after him, sir, to say good-bye," muttered Tom.

"I thought so. Now he has gone?"

"He has gone, sir."

"Very well," said the Head, compressing his lips. "In doing this, Merry, you know you were acting against my wishes; but as I had not then issued commands, I will take no notice of the matter. But understand me clearly—that if you should make any renewed attempt to communicate with Talbot, I shall ask you to leave this school!"

Tom Merry started.

"You know now what is expected of you, and what will be the result if you disobey me," said the Head. "You may go, Merry."

Tom Merry turned to the door. With his hand upon it, he stopped, and looked back. The words broke from him passionately:

"Oh, sir! He is innocent—I know he is innocent! I—I can't—"

"That will do, Merry! Go, and remember my commands!" The door closed on Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 2.

A Difference of Opinion.

TOM MERRY went blindly to his study.

He flung himself into a chair, and tried to think.

His heart was aching; his head dull and throbbing.

His chum had been driven from St. Jim's, cast out from the school—cast out in shame and disgrace. And what would become of him now? The schoolboy crackman, who had once been known as the Toff, who had repented and had paid so dearly for his repentance, what would become of him now that he was driven forth into the world again—penniless, friendless, hunted?

And innocent!

Tom Merry's faith in him did not waver. He knew, better than anyone else, what a hard fight the Toff had had in his determination to do what was right, to stick to the straight path. At St. Jim's, Talbot of the Shell had always played the game. He had been a good chum, a loyal comrade. Had he thrown it all up, to fall back into the mire of crime in which his early years had been passed?

Tom Merry could not—would not believe it!

Talbot was loyal and true, and the proofs against him, what were they but the cunning machinations of his old associates,

who had determined to drive him from honesty because the schoolboy crackman's services were too valuable to them to be lost. The Professor, Hookey Walker, some of the gang, somehow, they had done this with diabolical cunning. How, Tom Merry could not say; but he was sure of it. Talbot was innocent—Talbot was true. He was sure of that.

But how to prove it—how to save his chum, to let in the light through the darkness that surrounded him? Tom Merry groaned as he realised his helplessness.

The whole school believed as the Head believed. Even D'Arcy and Blake, Herries and Dig, believed it. Manners and Lowther stood by Tom, but he could not help thinking that it was their friendship for him, not their faith in Talbot, that made them take his side. The boy's brain whirled as he thought of it, with a bitter, maddening thought that perhaps he, after all, was wrong, and the others right. Who was he to pit his belief against the whole school—against the experience of the Head, the conviction of masters and boys alike?

But he drove that thought away. If his faith in Talbot was misplaced, he could never believe in a human being again.

Monty Lowther and Manners came into the study. They were looking worried and disturbed. They had liked Talbot, too. He had been their chum, and his fall and his disgrace had hit them hard. They hoped that he was innocent, and that if he was innocent the truth would come out; but they had dark doubts, for the evidence was overwhelming.

Tom Merry looked at them with haggard eyes.

"What did the old sport have to say, Tommy?" Monty Lowther was referring to the Head of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry smiled bitterly.

"We are ordered to have nothing to do with old Talbot any more," he said.

"We're not likely to," said Lowther. "He can't come back here again. He will have to hustle to keep from being arrested."

"He is innocent," said Tom.

"I—I hope so."

"And I am going to back him up. I'm going to find out, somehow, the truth of it, and clear him."

"We—we'll help you, old man," said Manners doubtfully. "If—if there's anything to be done."

"Something's got to be done," said Tom grimly, "and we've got to do it. We're not going to desert a chum, I suppose?"

"H'm! No, certainly not."

"He's innocent, I tell you. And, Head or no Head, I'm going to help him if I can!" said Tom Merry determinedly.

"I—I say, you'll get into a frightful row if you try to see him again," said Lowther uneasily. "It will be a flogging—it might be the sack."

"It will be the sack," said Tom. "The Head told me so."

"Then you can't risk it!" exclaimed Lowther.

"I can—and shall!"

"Look here, Tom—"

"What is he going to do?" exclaimed Tom Merry passionately. "I tell you he was kidnapped, and has been kept a prisoner in some den in London. They let him go after fixing this on him here. He told me so."

"I—I suppose it's possible," said Manners hesitatingly.

"It's true," said Tom. "They kept him a prisoner, and cleared him out. He's got no money—nothing. Their game is to force him to join them again. They want him to be a crackman, as he was before. What's he going to do? He's going to have help. I'm going to help him."

"But how, Tom?"

"He can't be gone far," said Tom. "He was weary and worn-out when he got here—hungry, for all I know. I'm going to look for him!"

"Tom!"

"I tell you he can't be far away—"

"But—"

"Shush!" murmured Manners, as a knock came at the study door. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth came in. The swell of St. Jim's turned his eyeglass upon Tom Merry commiseratingly.

"Sowwy to see you cut up like this, deah boy," he said. "It's weally howwid about old Talbot, his turnin' out like that!"

Tom Merry started up fiercely.

"Turning out like what?" he demanded.

"Pway don't be excited, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus soothingly. "I assuah you that I feel wathah cut up myself. I had the gweatest faith in Talbot; but pwoof is pwoof, you know—"

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"If you've come here to run down Talbot, you can get out!" growled Tom Merry, who was too miserable to be polite. "I don't want to hear any of it."

"I wegard that remark as vewy wude," said Arthur Augustus composedly. "Howevah, I can make allowances for you, undah the circs. I came heah to ask you whethah you had heard anythin' about Miss March?"

"Miss March! Hang Miss March!"

"That is a wotten remark, Tom Mewwy. Miss March is a wippin' gal, and a splendid nurse, and she had done wondahs in the sanatorium while the fellows were laid up with the flu. Mannaahs can beah witness to that."

"Hear, hear!" said Manners. Manners was one of the fellows who had been laid up in the recent outbreak of influenza at St. Jim's, and he had owed much to the kind ministrations of Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, who, young girl as she was, was the best nurse in the school hospital. "Don't be a beast, Tommy! Miss March is a brick. It'll be a blow to her, this. She was very chummy with poor Talbot."

"Pewwaps that is what's the mattah," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "I heah that Miss March has been off duty for some time now, and is not well. Pewwaps this beastly affaih has wovvied her. I was goin' to inquire if you fellow had heard how she is gettin' on?"

"Rats! No!" said Tom Merry. Miss March was a brick, certainly; but Tom Merry was not in a mood just then to think about her.

"She was vewy chummy with Talbot," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps this has wovvied her. In that case, it is up to us, deah boys, to look aftah her a bit, and make up for Talbot's wotten conduct."

"You silly ass!" shouted Tom Merry. "Haven't I told you I won't listen to that! Hold your silly tongue!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly.

"And I wegard you as a wottah, Tom Mewwy. I wefuse to hold my silly tongue—I mean, my tongue—and I wefuse to be bullied. Wats!"

"Ass!"

"And unless you immediately apologise for the appobwious epithets you have applied to me, Tom Mewwy, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'!" exclaimed the swell of the School House, pushing back his spotless cuffs. "I can make allowance for your feelin's, because Talbot has turned out to be a wottah—oh, bai Jove!"

"Here, hold on!" roared Lowther, as Tom Merry, excited and furious, rushed at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Gweat Scott! Stand aside, Lowthah!" yelled Arthur Augustus, putting his hand to his nose. "Oh, you wottah, to punch my nose! I will thwash you!"

"Get out, Gussy!" urged Manners.

"I wefuse to get out! I am goin' to thwash Tom Mewwy!"

The uttah wottah! Take that—and that!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Lowther, as Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus went at it hammer and tongs. "Chuck it, you asses! Drag 'em apart, Manners!"

"Hallo, what's the row?" asked Blake of the Fourth, looking into the study in great astonishment.

"Get your tame lunatic away!" panted Lowther. "I'll hold the other idiot!"

"Looks more like a wild lunatic at present!" chuckled Blake, grasping Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with forcible hands.

"Kim on, Gustavus!"

"Welease me—"

"Kim on!" said Blake. "Hold the other fathead, you fellows. None of this in the family circle! I'm shocked at you! Kim on!"

"If you do not welease me I shall stwike you! I am goin' to thwash Tom Mewwy—"

"You're coming out of this study," said Blake coolly; and he yanked the warlike swell of St. Jim's to the door.

"I say, Dig, Herries, lend a hand—"

Lowther and Manners had captured Tom Merry, and were holding him. Arthur Augustus, intent on vengeance, struggled with Blake. But Digby and Herries lent a hand, and he was marched forcibly off to Study No. 6.

There his three chums plumped him down in a chair, and Blake wagged a warning finger at him.

D'Arcy gasped wildly.

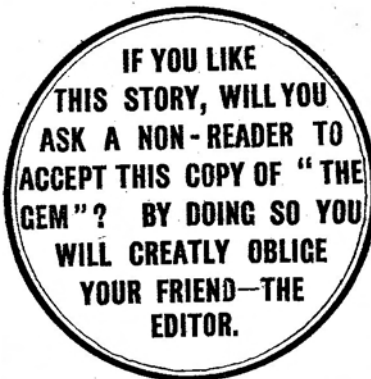
"Gwooh! Gwooooh! Oh, you beasts—gwooooh!"

"Keep its 'ickle temper," said Blake soothingly. "This isn't a time to go for Tommy, when he's cut up over that"

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blackguard turning out such a rotter! You must keep your temper with Tommy for a bit, Gussy."

"He tweated me with gross diswespect, and I am goin'—"

"No, you're not going; you're staying!" grinned Blake, shoving the elegant junior back into the armchair, from which he had risen like a jack-in-the-box. "I'm shocked at you, Gussy! You must go easy with Tommy these days."

Arthur Augustus calmed down a little.

"Pewwaps I was wathah hastay," he confessed, after a pause.

"Perhaps you were," agreed Blake. "Perhaps you're a blithering ass! But you're going to stay in this study now—there's no perhaps about that!"

And Arthur Augustus stayed.

CHAPTER 3.

One True Chum.

TOM MERRY was very silent when the Shell fellows came up to their dormitory. The rest of the juniors were in a buzz of talk.

Talbot's unexpected and dramatic return to St. Jim's, and his crushing reception, formed the sole topic. Gore declared loudly that it was like his thumping cheek to come back; and Crooke remarked that the Head ought to have detained him and telephoned for the police.

Tom Merry said nothing. He was feeling miserable and subdued. The scene with Arthur Augustus in his study weighed on his mind, too. D'Arcy had always been loyal to Talbot, had always stood by him, and now he had turned with the rest. Tom felt that he was "up against" what all the other fellows regarded as indisputable facts. It was useless—worse than useless—to rag every fellow who made disparaging remarks concerning his former chum. He would soon have found himself fighting all his old friends one after another.

Yet his inward faith and determination did not waver. His belief in Talbot was founded as upon a rock.

He went to bed, but not to sleep. After Kildare had put out the light in the Shell dormitory there was a buzz of talk from bed to bed, and it was all upon the same subject—the Toff, and his unexpected return to St. Jim's, his yarn that he had been kidnapped, and speculations as to whether he would succeed in escaping the police.

It was no wonder, under the circumstances, that the Head desired that Talbot should never be heard of again at St. Jim's—that he should be forgotten there.

But Tom Merry could not forget. As he lay sleepless in bed he thought of the unhappy junior, who had gone forth alone, friendless, in the winter night, to face alone a bitter struggle. He should not want for a friend if Tom Merry could help him.

Manners and Lowther were sleepless, too. They were wondering uneasily what Tom Merry intended to do. That he had some plan in his mind they were certain. And if he sought to find and help his old chum there was expulsion from the school hanging over his head. Dr. Holmes had given him warning.

Monty Lowther sat up in bed as he heard the captain of the Shell moving. Tom Merry was slipping out of bed a quarter of an hour after Kildare had gone.

"Tom!" said Lowther softly.

"It's all right, Monty!"

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"But, Tom—"

"No good talking, Monty. I think I shall find him. I shall try, anyway. I'm going to help him if I can."

"Oh, Tom! Think of the risk!"

"He wouldn't think of the risk if I needed his help," said Tom.

"I'll come with you," said Lowther. He knew that it was useless to argue.

"No good, Monty. If there's anything to be done, I can do it, and you couldn't help. It's all right."

"Hallo! What's that mumbling about?" came a drowsy voice from Noble's bed.

"Who's that going out?" asked Gore.

"Mind your own business!" said Lowther.

"Going out to look for that rotter—what?" said Gore, with a sneer. "Well, serve you jolly well right if a perfect nails you!"

"Oh, dry up!" said Manners.

Tom Merry took no notice of Gore. He dressed himself, and slipped quietly from the dormitory, leaving his chums in a very anxious frame of mind. They did not insist upon accom-

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panying him; one fellow was less likely to be spotted than three. He was safer alone.

Tom was in a reckless mood, in one way—he was facing a great risk, and he knew it. If the Head learned of his escapade his wrath would be great, and Tom knew what he had to expect. But he was careful.

He took his boots in his hand, and crept away softly down the dark passage. In the box-room he stopped to put on his boots, and then climbed from the window, over the outhouse, to the ground. There was a bitter wind outside, a slight drizzle of rain. Tom Merry cut across in the shadows to the school wall, and in a few minutes he dropped into the road.

Talbot had tramped away in the direction of Rylcombe. Tom knew that, and he hurried in the same direction. It was two hours since the disgraced junior, cast out from the school, had gone.

Was there a chance of finding him? If he had gone away at once there was no chance. But Tom Merry remembered how footsore and weary the boy had been. All the previous day he had spent in tramping from London. He had been at the end of his tether when he reached St. Jim's. It was not likely that he had gone. He would have to rest before he could recommence his weary tramp back to the great city. He could not go to the station even if he had money; for now he knew that the police were looking for him, to show himself in public meant to seek arrest.

Where was he likely to be?

Sheltering in some spot from the drizzling rain, waiting for dawn before he resumed his weary tramp, that was most likely.

Now that he was outside the school walls Tom realised the difficulty, the almost hopelessness, of the task he had set himself. But it was some comfort to be trying to help his chum; better than lying in his warm bed while Talbot was facing the bitter winter night.

He tramped down the road towards Rylcombe, his collar turned up, his head bent to the wind. He paused as he reached the stile in the lane.

Which way had Talbot gone?

Probably not through the village, where he would have been seen and recognised. By the footpath, perhaps, towards the moor, through the dank, dark wood.

A sudden thought came into Tom Merry's mind, and he sent forth a shrill, echoing call—the call of the Curlew. Talbot had belonged to the Curlew Patrol when he was at St. Jim's. If he was within hearing, he would recognise the old signal of the scouts.

Was he near, or was he, perhaps, miles away on the road to London?

Again and again Tom Merry sent out that call through the silence of the night.

He gave a sudden start as an answering call came back—an echo this time. It was the scout signal!

Tom's face lighted up.

"He is still here!" he muttered joyfully.

The Curlew call came ringing eerily over the dark, wet fields. Tom Merry remembered the old barn in the field, a hundred yards from the hedge. He plunged through a gap in the hedge and tramped across the sodden grass. The call came again—it came from the old barn. It was there that Talbot had taken shelter.

A glimmering match showed in the darkness. Tom Merry caught a glimpse of a white face in the dark doorway of the deserted barn. It was Talbot.

"Tom Merry!"

"Thank goodness I've found you, Talbot!"

"Tom!" repeated Talbot, in amazement. In the light of the glimmering match his handsome face showed pale and worn and troubled. The match went out.

Tom Merry came into the barn. Through the doorway fell a faint glimmer of starlight through the drizzling rain; he could dimly make out the form of his chum in the gloom.

"I—I thought you mightn't be gone," said Tom Merry breathlessly. "I came out to see if I could find you, old chap."

"It's good of you, Tom. I'm dead beat," said Talbot. "I couldn't have tramped much further. And in the rain! I got in here for shelter and to get a rest. There's straw here. I was trying to sleep when I heard your signal. I couldn't understand it at first; then I guessed, and answered. Tom, what have you run this risk for? You'll get into a fearful row if they—"

"That's all right," said Tom. "Nobody knows I'm out; they won't know. I shall get back all serene. I had to see you again, Talbot. What are you going to do?"

"Get away from here as soon as it's light," said Talbot quietly. "I mustn't be seen about here, where I'm known by sight. I shall start tramping at dawn, and I shall be safe enough. It will be quite like old times." He laughed bitterly. "Dodging the police! I had thought that that

was done with! The Toff has come to life again; Talbot of the Shell is dead and gone."

Tom Merry felt a throb at his heart. This was what he had feared—this reckless, desperate mood, which might throw his chum back into his old ways, into the hands of the rascals who had plotted to drive him back into crime.

"That's what I was thinking of, Talbot," he said. "I—I want to speak to you about that. I—we—we're going to do what we can to find out the truth, to clear you. It must be possible; somehow we shall manage it."

Talbot did not answer. His silence told eloquently enough that hope was dead in his breast.

"But at the worst, Talbot, you mustn't think of letting those villains have their way," whispered Tom. "The truth must come out some day, and then you will be cleared. But—but if you should fall back—then it will be useless to clear you. At any price, you've got to stick it out, old chap!"

"You needn't be afraid, Tom. I shall never see the Professor again. I shall not go back to the rookery in Angel Alley. I am going to earn my bread honestly or starve."

"I knew it, old chap; but—but I was afraid. I know you mean it."

"Honour bright, Tom!"

"But what are you going to do? You've got no money?"

"No. They cleared me out when they collared me," said Talbot. "The Professor thinks I shall have no resource but to go back to the gang. He doesn't know me. Resource or no resource, I shall not go back."

"That's what I thought, Talbot. And I've brought something for you," said Tom.

Talbot started back.

"No!" he said.

"But—old chap—"

"No, Tom! I can't!"

"You must," said Tom. "I've put together all the tin I could raise, and I've brought it here. It isn't much—a couple of pounds. But it will keep you from starving at first. And I've got a bundle of sandwiches. And you are going to take my coat. You've got no coat. You must be frozen."

"Tom!" said Talbot huskily.

"Don't think of refusing, old chap—this is hard enough for me, as it is!" said Tom. "Don't make it worse for me. Let me do the little I can."

There was a short silence.

"Very well," said Talbot, at last. "I won't refuse. You're a good pal, Tom. If I'd known you years ago all this mightn't have happened. But I suppose it was to be!"

Tom Merry slipped off his coat, with the money and the sandwiches in the pockets. He put it on Talbot, and as he did so he could feel the boy shivering. It was all he could do, and it was little enough. But the proof of loyal friendship was worth much to Talbot in that dark hour. So long as there was one loyal chum who believed in him, and trusted him, he felt that he could face the hard fate before him with courage, strengthened by Tom Merry's faith in him.

"Now you must go," whispered Talbot. "You're running a fearful risk for me. If the Head knew—"

"You must let me know how you get on," said Tom. "You must send me news—somehow. You can't write to the school—that's forbidden. But—but you must let me hear from you sometimes, Talbot."

"I'll try, Tom. There's one other thing. Have you"—Talbot's voice faltered—"have you seen Marie—I mean Miss March lately—the nurse, you know?"

"She isn't well," said Tom. "She's not on duty in the sanatorium now. I haven't seen her for a day or two!"

Talbot groaned.

"Poor Marie! Tom, when you see her, tell her that you've seen me—that I'm safe, that I'm all right. You will?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"That's all. I—I can't tell you about it," said Talbot, his face flushing in the darkness. "But—but she will be troubled about this. I want her to know that I'm safe. That's all, Tom!"

"I'll tell her," said Tom.

A few words more, a grip of the hand, and Tom Merry was gone. He tramped back to the school, sad, but his heart lighter. In the old barn the outcast threw himself into the straw, to sleep if he could. But his heart, too, was lighter—his courage was higher. For he felt that so long

as there was one faithful pal who stood by him and trusted him, the future, dark as it looked, held at least a ray of hope.

CHAPTER 4.

The Cracksman's Daughter.

"**B**AI Jove! It's the inspectah!"

It was the morning at St. Jim's. A crowd of juniors had come out of the School House, when the stolid figure of Inspector Skeat of Rylcombe was seen crossing the quad. He passed into the House.

"It's about Talbot, I suppose," said Blake. "They telephoned that he had come back here, and the giddy inspector is after information. I—I hope they won't get him."

Arthur Augustus nodded thoughtfully.

"Yaas, I hope they won't," he agreed. "He has acted vewy wottenly; but, considewin' all the circs, I trust that the poor bwute will get away."

"Same here," said Herries. "It's a beastly surprise Talbot turning out like that. But, of course, there can't be any doubt now."

"Of course there can't," said Digby. "I'm blessed if I can understand Tom Merry. He don't seem to know what evidence is."

"I am afwaid Tom Mewwy is wathah an ass," remarked Arthur Augustus. "It is quite touchin' the way he sticks to Talbot. I am wathah sowwy, on reflection, that I gave him a feahful thwashin' last night. It was wathah wuff, considewin'— Heah he is!"

The Terrible Three came out of the School House. Tom Merry had been the last down for once. He was tired from want of sleep. He had returned to the Shell dormitory the previous night without discovery, but at a very late hour. And little sleep had visited his eyes after he had gone to bed.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bore down on the captain of the Shell, with a somewhat hesitating manner. Tom Merry's look was grim.

"Good-mornin', deah boy!" began Arthur Augustus.

"Good-morning!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Pway, don't be watty, deah boy!" said the swell of St. Jim's pacifically. "I have considered the matter, and I feel that I owe you an apology."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom.

Arthur Augustus coloured. It was not a very encouraging reception.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, don't bother!" said Tom.

"Ahem! Undah the circs, I feel it is due to myself to pwoffah an apology," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"I do not agwee with your vewy remarkable opinion, but I admit you have a wight to think as you like, and I am sowwy I made a wemark in your studdy which was somewhat wantin' in tact. That's all. Fwom one gentleman to another, I pwesume that an apology sets the mattah wight."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You're a good little ass, Gussy!"

"Weally, I object to bein' descwebed as a good little ass. Howevah, I will ovahlook your wemark, makin' allowance for your state of feelin's," said Arthur Augustus gracefully.

Tom Merry walked away with his companions. His brow was moody. He had seen the inspector enter the House, and he knew what it meant. Mr. Skeat was very anxious to lay hands on Talbot. Probably he had never believed in the Toff's reformation, and had been expecting something of this kind.

"He won't get Talbot," said Monty Lowther. "He'll have had sense enough to clear off and put a good distance between him and this place, Tom."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, I think very likely he'll keep clear of that," he said. "But—but suppose he does keep free—that isn't all. He's got to be cleared. How's that going to be done?"

Lowther gave a hopeless shrug of his shoulders.

"Blessed if I can see, Tom. What can we do?"

"He was suspected before," said Tom. "And he was cleared."

"That was different. Then it was a St. Jim's fellow who'd gone to the bad, and tried to put it on Talbot, and Levison bowled him out. But—but this is different. If it wasn't Talbot who cracked the Head's safe last week it was some cracksman who's never likely to come near St. Jim's again."

"Not likely," said Manners.

"I don't know," said Tom. "Look here. There was fifty pounds taken from the Head's safe. There's often more money than that there. The rotter, whoever he was, made a vewy poor haul. He might try again for something better;

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ANSWERS

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it's clear that he's a man who knows the ins and outs of the place."

Lowther and Manners were silent. The fact that the thief was someone who knew the ins and outs of the place was another point against Talbot.

"I'm going to think it out," said Tom. "Something's got to be done. I'll never rest till Talbot is cleared."

"You can depend on us, if there's anything to be done," said Manners. "But I'm blessed if I see anything that can be done myself."

The Shell fellows went into their Form-room. Tom Merry forced himself to work—there was no choice about that under Mr. Linton's keen eye. But his thoughts were with his absent chum—tramping wearily through the countryside, almost penniless, friendless, and alone.

After morning lessons, Tom went out into the quad by himself. He remembered Talbot's message for Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, and he hoped to see her. He knew that she often walked in the Head's garden, which was overlooked by the school sanatorium. He was not disappointed. Under the leafless trees, he caught a glimpse of the graceful figure, pacing to and fro. The Head's garden was "taboo" to juniors; but Tom Merry did not hesitate. He vaulted over the gate, and approached the girl. Miss March was looking pale.

Tom Merry raised his cap. The girl looked at him eagerly. "I have heard," she said, before Tom Merry could speak. "He came back last night—Talbot?"

"Yes," said Tom. "Where is he now?"

Tom Merry told her quietly of the meeting in the barn. He could see the signs of suffering in the girl's face, and he wondered why she should care so much about Talbot. He knew nothing of the secret history of the cracksman's daughter, or that she had known the Toff in the old days, before he had come to St. Jim's. That Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, was the daughter of John Rivers, the Professor, was a secret Talbot had never confided to his chums.

"Then he is safe at least," said the girl at last. "I think so—I hope so," said Tom.

"And everyone believes that he is guilty?"

"Not everyone," said Tom quietly. "I believe that he is innocent, Miss March. I am sure of it. And I'm going to try to do what I can to prove it."

"What can you do?"

"I have to think that out. The scoundrel who robbed the Head's safe has got to be found," said Tom between his teeth.

The girl grew very pale. "You are not well," said Tom quickly, making a movement towards her. It seemed for a moment as if she would fall. But she recovered herself quickly.

"No—no! I am all right! It is nothing! You—you think that—that the man can be found—the man who committed the robbery?"

"I hope so. He's got to be found. And I know who it is, too."

The girl gave a cry. "You know? How can you know?"

"I will explain. Before you came here, Miss March, there was a man here—a rascal who passed himself off on the Head as Mr. Packington, a science master. Talbot found out that he was really a cracksman, called the Professor among his associates. He was arrested, but he escaped. I know that after that Talbot expected to hear something more of him. The Professor was a member of the gang Talbot had belonged to in the old days. You know his story?"

The girl nodded, with a faint smile. She knew the story of the Toff only too well—better than Tom Merry did. She wondered what the eager junior would have thought if he had known that it was the daughter of the Professor that he was speaking to. But Tom Merry had no suspicion of that.

"Well, this is my idea of it," said Tom. "Talbot was kidnapped by the Professor—the villain's real name is John Rivers—and he tried to make Talbot join him again. Of course, he wouldn't. Then, I am certain, the Professor carried out the robbery here. Having been here as a master for a short time, he knew the place perfectly well, of course. He not only robbed the Head's safe, but he left Talbot's pen-knife where the window had been forced. He took some small things that belonged to Talbot. All those idiots take that as a proof that it was Talbot who did it. But I am quite sure that it was the Professor, and he did it especially to make suspicion fall on Talbot."

"Oh, no—no! I cannot believe that!"

"You don't know what a cunning villain he is," said Tom, unconscious that every word he uttered was a dagger to the heart of the girl listening to him. "His aim was to force Talbot back into his old ways. That was the way he did it."

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Having made it appear that Talbot committed the robbery, he let his prisoner go, and poor old Talbot came back here to find himself condemned unheard. Now he calculates, of course, that Talbot will make the best of it by going back to the gang. But he doesn't know him. Talbot will starve first. And somehow or other I'm going to prove what I know to be true. I don't know how yet, but it's got to be done. As soon as that scoundrel Rivers is arrested, the truth will come out."

"And not till then?" faltered the girl.

"Not till then, I suppose. But he may come back here for another haul. I hope he will."

The look on Tom Merry's face made the girl shiver. It was upon her lips to cry out: "He is my father!" But she checked herself. That miserable secret had to remain a secret. And it would have made no difference to Tom Merry. Whoever should suffer, the truth would come to light if he could contrive it.

Miss March made a sign of adieu, and moved away, slowly and heavily, towards the House. In her own room she drew out a letter—a letter she had received that morning. It was in the hand of John Rivers the cracksman.

"I must see you. I shall wait for you at eight o'clock by the boat-house. YOUR FATHER."

If Tom Merry had only known!

CHAPTER 5.

The Professor is Disappointed.

DAWKNESS had fallen upon St. Jim's. There was a powdering of snow on the walls and the trees. The Ryll, which bubbled and sang among the green rushes in the summer days, was frozen hard and silent. The boat-house was deserted, buried in gloom. Close by the shadowy building a dim figure moved to and fro, wrapped in a heavy overcoat, muttering words of impatience.

A light step came along the path from the school, and the man waiting by the boat-house started.

"Marie?"

"Father?"

"You have not been seen to come?" muttered the man, peering at her in the gloom, dimly revealing a hard, cold face and glinting eyes.

Marie shook her head. "I was careful," she said. "I have a key to the gate. Father, why are you here?"

John Rivers smiled.

"It is some time since I have seen you, Marie. And I want news—news that you can tell me. What of the Toff? He came back?"

"He came back," said Marie.

"And now—"

"Now he has gone," said the girl dully. "He came back to find himself condemned and in danger. He has gone, and I have not seen him."

The Professor rubbed his hands.

"Good! It has gone exactly as it should have gone. The young fool, to pit his brains against mine! Now all will be well, Marie. There is no need for you to stay longer at the school. Do not leave in a hurry. You must not excite suspicion. But the Little Sister of the Poor can find work in other directions now."

He laughed again. The Professor had cause for satisfaction. "You must be growing tired of it, Marie. You will be glad to come back to the old life—with the Toff, too. What?"

"Talbot will not be with us," said Marie.

"Where will he be?" sneered the Professor. "He must come back! Only with his old friends now can he find bread to keep him in life—even safety. He must come to us! Everything will be as it used to be, Marie, before he took this crazy idea into his head of leading a new life."

"It will never be, father. I have learned that much. The Toff changed from our ways, but he will never change back to us. He will never change again."

"I do not believe it! He must join us or starve!"

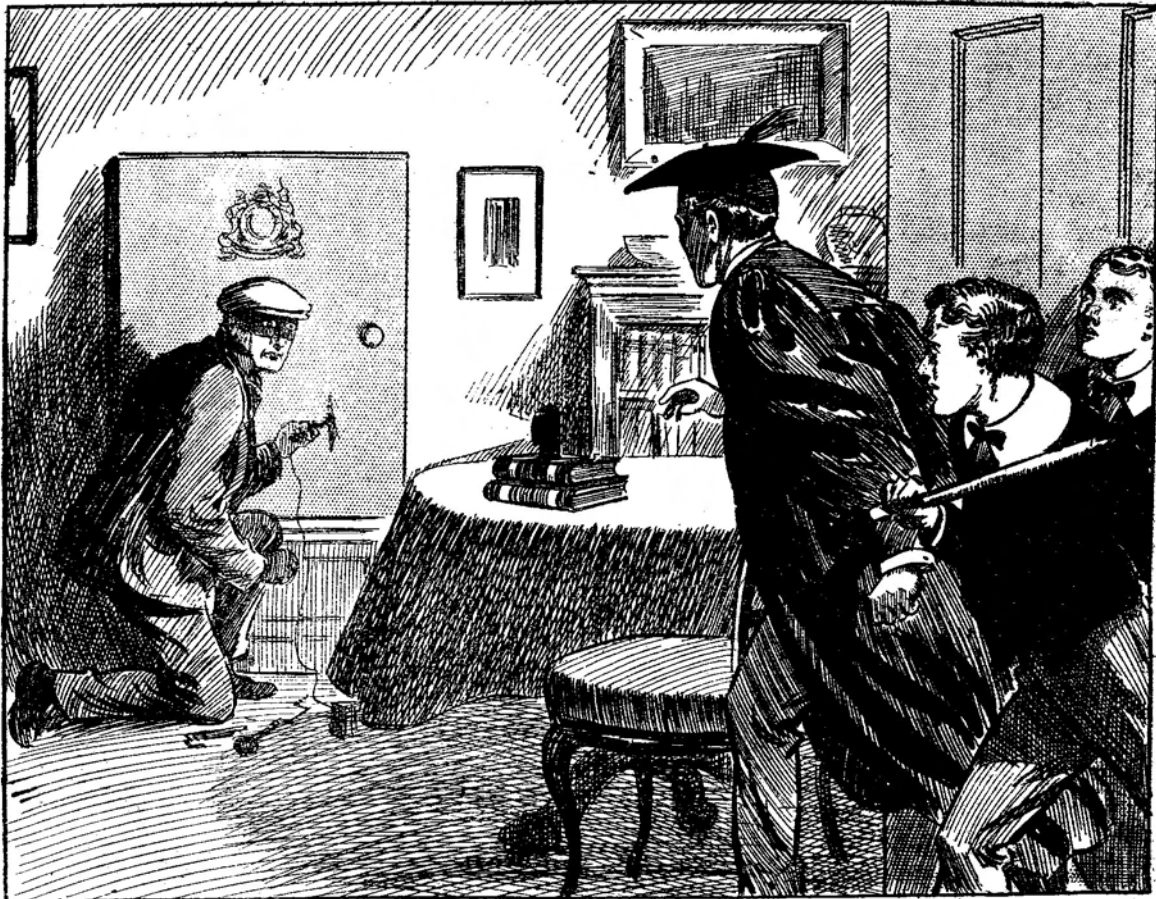
"He will starve, then."

"Bah!" The Professor gritted his teeth. Perhaps he felt an inward doubt himself. "If he is an obstinate fool, then let him starve! Let him die in a corner in disgrace! That will be his punishment for deserting us! If he will not come back, he will suffer for it, and we can do without him!"

The Professor looked sharply, inquiringly at the girl's pale face.

"What is in your mind?" he exclaimed roughly. "Why do you not speak?"

"Father"—Marie spoke with an effort—"it can never be



Kildare turned on the electric light in the study as he followed Mr. Railton in. The room was flooded with light. "Surrender!" exclaimed the House-master. The cracksman uttered a hoarse oath. His hand was already in his pocket for a weapon, but the House-master was upon him before he could draw it. (See Chapter 10.)

as it used to be. I cannot go back to it any more than the Toff. I have changed, too."

The Professor muttered an oath.

"You also! You wish to desert me?"

"I cannot go back to that," said Marie. "I did not think before. I knew only what you had taught me. But since—since, father, it is impossible. That life is finished for me. I have changed, too. Honesty—"

"So this is the Toff's work!" said the Professor bitterly. "Instead of leading him back to us, Marie, you have let him lead you away from us."

The girl was silent.

"And what will you do?" said her father. "What will you live on? Have you thought of that?"

"I am a good nurse, and I have been offered a permanent place here, in the sanatorium," said Marie.

"And you wish to stay?"

"Yes."

"To desert me?"

"I will not desert you, father. I—I want you to think—to think it over, and—and to do as the Toff has done, as I have done. It is not too late."

"Don't preach to me!" said the cracksman savagely. "I was not born to be a poor man. Give me honesty and five thousand a year, and I will be as honest as the day. Until that time I remain what I am—and you will help me, Marie."

"I will never help you again in dishonesty," said the girl quietly. "I have thought it over. I cannot."

"Have you forgotten that I am your father?" exclaimed the Professor, as much surprised as enraged by the unexpected declaration of the Little Sister.

"I have not forgotten. But even my father has no right to command me to do what is wrong," said Marie. "I know what is wrong now. I knew it before, but I had never thought—I had never realised it. The Toff has made me understand. Now that I understand there is no going back for me."

"This—from you!" said John Rivers bitterly. "Bah! You will forget all this! The Toff will be one of us again soon!"

Marie shook her head.

"That will never be, father. Father, I—I want you to spare him." She caught the man's arm in a trembling hand. "Father, won't you have mercy on him? Let it be known that he was innocent; let his good name be given back to him."

The Professor laughed harshly.

"Give myself up to the police, do you mean? It is likely!"

"You need not do that. But let it be known that Talbot was innocent. Father, what do you think I feel when I know that it was your deed that he is condemned for, when I could clear him by speaking a word?"

"And betraying your father!" sneered John Rivers.

"Speak, then! You are welcome to do so."

The girl wrung her hands.

"You know that I cannot. But—but if you would go to a place of safety, and then write to Dr. Holmes and tell him—"

"You are talking childishly. Besides, I am not finished here yet."

Marie looked at him in terror.

"Not finished! What do you mean?"

The cracksman made an angry gesture.

"I did not come at an opportune moment," he said. "What did I take—a trifle of fifty pounds? Yet, as I learned when I was staying in the school, there is sometimes hundreds in the safe, and the securities that are sometimes there, if one came at the right moment. I depended upon you for information, Marie—you could find out for me—"

"Never!"

"You disobey me!" exclaimed her father furiously.

"In that—yes!"

John Rivers clenched his hand. It seemed for a moment THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

as though he would strike the shrinking figure before him. Marie did not move. The incensed rascal lowered his hand. "You will come to your senses!" he muttered.

"I will never repay the kindness I have received with ingratitude and treachery!" said the girl, in a trembling voice. "There has been enough of that—there has been too much. I must keep your secret, and let the Toff suffer unjustly, because you are my father; but further than that I will not go."

"I shall do without your aid!" said the cracksmansullenly.

"Father, there is danger for you here," said Marie. "One of the boys—Tom Merry—has told me. He is working to clear Talbot—he believes in him still, and he—"

"So there is one who believes in him still?" sneered the Professor. "Not more than one, I warrant! As for danger, do you think I fear a schoolboy? And if there should be danger, it will be because you refuse to help me! Listen to me. I will repeat my visit at the school—"

"You must not!"

"But I shall. And if I am taken because you do not help me, you will know that you have sent your father to end his days in a convict prison."

The girl gave a moan.

"Father, you are cruel! Even if you will not give up this dreadful life, keep away from this place. There are other places—"

"Not so easy—not so well known to me!" said the Professor coolly. "I did not come here for nothing. What I have learned I shall put to use. Through the Toff, the whole business has been rather a loss than a gain to me, I have to make good. I ask you once more, Marie—will you help me?"

"I cannot."

"Enough said!"

The Professor turned, without another word, and strode away into the darkness. Marie clasped her hands.

"Father!" she called softly, and then more loudly. "Father!"

There was no reply; the cracksmans was gone. With a sob, the girl turned and hurried away towards the school.

CHAPTER 6. The Outcast.

TA-RA-RA-TA!
Pom-pom!
Talbot started.

Down the road, through the winter sunlight, they came, a long stream of them—recruits on a route march.

Talbot stood aside from the road to let them pass, to watch them. The Toff was "on tramp," on his way back to London—avoiding towns and villages, tramping through country roads and lanes, sleeping in barns or sheds where he could—keeping his face steadily towards the great city which was his only refuge, where he could hide himself from pursuit in the crowd of humanity—where he might find work to earn his bread.

He looked on that marching mass of men with kindling eyes as they swung along the frosty roads to the scanty music of a couple of instruments.

Boys of nineteen and twenty, men of thirty-five and forty, beardless lads and bearded men—some in khaki, some in ordinary clothes—new recruits for the great army that was destined to roll back the flood of Prussian barbarism—men who had given up everything at the call of their country, to rally round the old flag in the hour of danger.

The boy's heart beat high as he watched them tramp by with sloping rifles, with keen, healthy, resolute faces.

If only he had been older, he thought, with a sigh. The Toff was an outcast—shunned by those who had known him, hunted by the police—but his heart, like every British heart, was with the brave lads facing fearful odds on the shell-swept fields of Flanders.

How gladly he would have welcomed a chance of taking his place in the deadly trenches—to add one more unit to the sorely-tried heroes in need of help from their countrymen.

But that was not for him!
The recruits marched on cheerily, and the tramp, tramp, tramp died away down the hard, frosty road.

Talbot resumed his way.

The sight of the soldiers had put the thought into his mind—why should he not try his luck? He was but a boy, but he was big for his age, strong, and well-made. With luck, there might be a chance for him.

He tramped into the little village that lay upon his road. Outside the village inn a grey motor-car was halted. Near at hand a crowd of villagers had gathered round a big man

in khaki, with a little cane under his arm, and a plump, brown, weather-beaten face. Talbot paused on the edge of the crowd. It was a recruiting-sergeant, looking for recruits, addressing the villagers in a rough, homely way.

"Out there"—the big sergeant waved his hand vaguely towards the South—"out there, they're burning villages—villages like this, my lads, with old women in them who can't get out in time! That's what they're doing, and that's what we're going to put a stop to, please God! Who's going to help?"

A man in motor-cap and goggles came out of the inn, and stopped beside the grey car, looking on. He caught sight of Talbot on the edge of the crowd, and started. A sneering smile came over his face as he saw the boy approach the sergeant. The big man in khaki looked down at the lad with a good-humoured smile.

"Any chance for me?" said Talbot.

The sergeant shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're too young, my bantam! You'll come in later for the march into Berlin, if it lasts long enough!" he said. "Look at that, you young fellows, here—here's a kid of fifteen wants to go! Are you going to hang back?"

And the worthy sergeant proceeded to do quite a brisk business in recruits.

Talbot, colouring under the gaze of the crowd, walked on. The man in the motor-goggles stepped into the car, and set it in motion, and moved off slowly after the boy. Talbot tramped on down the country road, and at some distance from the village the car overtook him and stopped.

"Toff!"

The junior started.

He knew that voice. It was the Professor who was looking at him from the driving-seat of the car. John Rivers pushed up his goggles, and fixed his eyes upon the boy.

"You here!" said Talbot.

"I saw you—back there," said the Professor. "So you have thought of joining the new Army, Toff?"

Talbot made a hopeless gesture.

"They won't have me," he said wearily. "It's no use. If I were older—"

The Professor laughed.

"So that's the life you'd prefer, to ease and comfort and riches, that are within your grasp if you choose to take them—"

"Yes," said Talbot. "I prefer to fight."

"To fight—for what?"

"My country," said Talbot.

The Professor shrugged his shoulders.

"To defend the politicians who will have to be hounded and driven into giving you bread to eat if you come home crippled!" he sneered.

"To fight for Britain, if I could!" said Talbot. "I've just passed a lot of them on the road—splendid fellows! What do they care about money? Lots of them have given up good jobs to take a soldier's rotten pay—they don't think about that. And the politicians will be driven at last into providing for them decently—the whole country will see to that. If I could only go—just to strike one blow—I wouldn't care then if a German bullet bowled me over!"

He sighed.

"But you can't go, Toff," said the Professor. "I am glad that I have met you. Jump into the car!"

Talbot shook his head.

"Where are you going, Toff?"

"To London."

"Let me give you a lift, then?"

"No."

"You haven't come to your senses yet?" smiled the Professor. "Here you are on your uppers, or very nearly so. What are you going to do?"

"Work—if I can find it."

"And if you cannot?"

"Starve!" said Talbot quietly.

"You will soon get tired of that—when the shoe pinches."

Talbot did not answer.

"When you change your mind, Toff, remember there is always a welcome for you at the Rookery."

"I shall never come."

"Think of it, Toff. Wealth, ease, adventure. With your gifts, you will be the head of your profession—the prince of cracksmen. Your good name is gone, you cannot recover that. You are called a thief—you are hunted by the police. You have lost all that honesty can give you—your road is marked out for you. They call you a thief, Toff. Why not have the game as well as the name?"

"Through you," said Talbot bitterly. "What have I done to you that you should have blackened and ruined my life?"

"It was for your own good—if you would see it."

Talbot made an impatient gesture.

"That is enough. Leave me in peace, at least—that is all you can do now. At St. Jim's, they believe me to be a thief

—the Head believes that I have been ungrateful—” Talbot’s lips twitched. “But at least I have one satisfaction—I drove you from there—I saved the doctor from your dishonesty. What you have stolen since is nothing to what you would have taken if you had been able to remain there and choose your time. I have that satisfaction.”

“Which may not last,” smiled the Professor. “Perhaps I have not done with St. Jim’s yet, Toff.”

Talbot set his lips.

“But you will not come?” asked the Professor.

“I will not come.”

“Then I will wait till you come to your senses. You can come to the Rookery when that time comes.”

The Professor set the car in motion again, and it disappeared down the road. Talbot tramped on.

The temptations held forth by the cracksman had not moved him for a moment. But the words of John Rivers lingered in his mind—perhaps he had not done with St. Jim’s yet. What fresh rascality was he planning? The Toff was driven out in disgrace, but his heart was still with his old school. He thought it over as he tramped on. And in the next village, he entered the post-office, and a letter was written and sealed and posted, addressed to Tom Merry at St. Jim’s. Then the outcast tramped on again. He had done what he could to baffle any scheme that the Professor might yet have in mind.

CHAPTER 7.

Arthur Augustus Does His Best.

“WELL?” Blake and Herries and Digby uttered that inquiring monosyllable together, in a sort of chorus. There had been silence in Study No. 6 for a time. Arthur Augustus D’Arcy was sitting with a frown on his brow, evidently deeply buried in thought.

And his study-mates watched him, grinning at one another, and waiting patiently for the idea that was working in that mighty brain to be delivered.

And as it was not delivered they proceeded to inquire after it, so to speak.

Arthur Augustus started as the three “Wells?” sounded together.

“I’ve been thinkin’, deah boys,” he said.

“I thought there was something unusual going on,” said Blake, with a nod. “Does it hurt?”

“Weally, Blake—”

“Has it given you a pain?” asked Digby, with solicitude. “These sudden changes, you know—”

“Pway don’t be an ass, Dig. I have been thinkin’ about Tom Mewwy,” said Arthur Augustus, with a serious shake of the head.

Blake yawned portentously.

“He seems to be vewy cut up,” said D’Arcy seriously. “He still sticks to his absurd belief in that unfortunate chap, you know, and it is keepin’ on his mind. It is fighwfully unweasonable of him, I know.”

“The chap’s an ass,” said Blake decisively.

“Yaas, I am bound to wegard him as an ass—he disagwees with my opinion entirely,” assented Arthur Augustus. “Howevah, I feel wathah concerned about him. I don’t like to see him mopin’ about, you know. Chap nevah gets any good fwom mopin’. I’ve been thinkin’ that pwayaps it is our duty to cheer him up.”

“Good!” said Blake. “You can do my little bit. I’ll get on with my prep.”

“That is wathah unfeelin’, Blake. Don’t you think that if we insisted upon keepin’ him company, and talkin’ cheerfully, it would be bound to buck him up.”

“More likely make him throw things at you,” said Herries.

“I should wefuse to have things thrown at me. Suppose you fellows come along with me now, and we’ll exert ourselves to cheer him up.”

“Bow-wow!”

“If you will not back me up, I shall twy it alone. I feel that it is my duty to cheer the poor chap up a little.”

“Go ahead!” said Blake. “Call for help if you need it.”

“Weally, Blake—”

“We’ll be ready to come to the rescue if he starts on you with a ruler.”

“Oh, wats!”

Arthur Augustus walked out of Study No. 6, leaving Blake and Herries and Dig grinning. Tom Merry had been like a bear with a sore head lately, as Blake described it, and they were quite willing to leave the cheering-up process to Arthur Augustus. The swell of the Fourth was really concerned about Tom Merry.

Ever since Talbot’s expulsion the captain of the Shell had been nothing like his old sunny self. He had set himself against the rest of the school on the subject of Talbot; and he hardly spoke to anybody, excepting Manners and Lowther.

Arthur Augustus felt that it would not do. Tom Merry wanted bucking up; and, after due consideration, Arthur Augustus had decided that he was the fellow to buck him up.

He tapped discreetly at Tom Merry’s door and opened it. Tom Merry was alone in his study. He had got through his prep, somehow, and he had declined to go down into the common-room with Manners and Lowther.

He was seated before the fire, thinking, and the cloud on his brow showed that his thoughts were not pleasant ones.

Ever since the night when Talbot had been driven from the school, Tom had been cudgelling his brains for a way out of the tangle—a way to prove that Talbot was innocent, to reinstate him in his old place.

And there seemed to be no way. With the best will in the world, he felt himself helpless.

His impotence to help his chum exasperated him. Talbot was a fugitive, disgraced and dishonoured, and he could not lift a finger to help him. It was no wonder that the sunny smile had deserted his face.

He looked up a little impatiently as D’Arcy came in. He was in no mood for company just then. He had to wrestle with the problem he had set himself—the problem he could not solve, and yet which he had determined to solve.

Arthur Augustus bestowed upon him an agreeable smile, determined not to notice his decidedly unwelcoming expression.

“All alone, deah boy?” he began.

“Yes.”

“Like a little company—what?”

“No, thanks!”

“Ahem! What about the pwspect for the Gwammah School match?” asked Arthur Augustus.

If any subject could interest the captain of the Shell, surely it was footer. But even footer failed to “draw” Tom Merry then.

“Blow the Grammar School match!” was all he said.

“Yaas; but it’s got to be played, you know. It was postponed owin’ to the flu; but we’ve got to play the boundahs, you know.”

“Oh, rot!”

“What about the eleven?”

“Hang the eleven!”

“Ahem!”

“I’m going to leave it to Blake or Figgins to captain the team for a week or two,” said Tom Merry shortly. “I’ve got other things to think of.”

“Bai Jove!”

“And now—if you’ll excuse me—I’d rather be alone.”

“Wathah wotten to be mopin’ alone, deah boy,” said Arthur Augustus, calmly taking a chair. “I’m come heah for a little chat.”

“I don’t want to chat.”

“Feelin’ wotten and mumpy, and wantin’ to be left in solitude, and all that, deah boy??” asked Arthur Augustus sympathetically.

“Yes.”

“Then that shows that you oughtn’t to be left in solitude, you see,” said D’Arcy. “I’m goin’ to cheer you up a bit.”

“Oh, rot!”

“How would you like a game of chess?” asked Arthur Augustus, after a little further thought.

“Bosh!” Tom Merry rose to his feet. “I’m going to take a turn in the quad.”

Arthur Augustus rose, too.

“I’ll come with you, deah boy.”

“Please don’t.”

“No twouble at all, Tom Mewwy,” said Arthur Augustus, as he followed the captain of the Shell from the study. “I’m not goin’ to leave you to yourself, to mope in low spiwits. Don’t say a word, deah boy—I’m comin’.”

And he came. Tom Merry bit his lip with impatience. He wanted to think—not that thinking seemed to do much good. But he was not at all in a mood for being cheered up anyway.

Arthur Augustus affectionately linked his arm in Tom Merry’s as they went out into the dusky quadrangle. Tom jerked his arm away.

“Look here, Gussy, I don’t want to be bothered,” he exclaimed.

But Arthur Augustus, full of benevolent intentions, was impervious to rebuffs.

“That’s all wight, deah boy—I won’t bothah you,” he said cheerily. “I’m goin’ to chat with you and cheer you up, you know.”

“Oh, rot!” said Tom Merry. “I don’t feel cheerful, and I don’t want to be cheerful, and you can go and eat coke!”

And he strode away into the gloom.

Arthur Augustus rushed in pursuit. His good intentions were not to be baffled quite so easily as that. He stumbled over a foot in the darkness, and came down on his hands and knees with a bump and a yell. Tom Merry disappeared.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus jumped up, considerably muddy and quite furious. "Tom Mewwy, you wottah, you ungwateful beast, you fwightful wottah, you have wuined my twousahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a laugh from the darkness of the quad. Arthur had succeeded in cheering Tom Merry up, for a moment at least. The swell of St. Jim's shook an unbenevolent fist in the direction of the laugh, and returned wrathfully into the School House. He was fed up with the cheering-up process. Blake and Herries and Digby looked at him with grinning inquiry as he came back into Study No. 6. Arthur Augustus began to brush down his trousers savagely.

"Cheered him up?" asked Blake.

"Oh, wats!"

"Jolly quick work," said Dig. "You haven't been a quarter of an hour cheering him up, Gussy. Is he quite cheerful now?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wubbish! I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I weward Tom Mewwy as an ungwateful beast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Arthur Augustus brushed away furiously, while his chums chuckled. There was no further mention in Study No. 6 of cheering Tom Merry up. He could be as cheerless as he liked, and Study No. 6 would be absolutely unmoved.

CHAPTER 8. Talbot's Warning.

"MERRY!"

"Yes, Kildare."

"You're wanted in the Head's study."

The Shell had just come out after morning lessons. Tom Merry nodded as the captain of St. Jim's rapped out that information.

"Righto!"

"What the deuce?" muttered Monty Lowther, as Kildare strode away. "More trouble, I suppose. They can't have found out; no blessed sneak would have given away about your getting out the other night, surely!"

Manners clenched his fists.

"If they have—"

"I don't think so," said Tom, with a shake of the head. "Even Crooke would stop short of that, I should think. But I don't care much. Anyway, I've got to face the music, whatever it is."

And he went to the Head's study. He found Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House with Dr. Holmes, and both the masters were looking very grave. Dr. Holmes had a letter in his hand.

"You sent for me, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, Merry. This letter has come for you," said the Head.

"For me, sir?" said Tom, wondering what the Head was doing with his letter. As a rule, the correspondence of the boys was not interfered with, though, of course, the headmaster reserved a right of overhauling it when he thought fit.

"Yes. Since that unhappy boy Talbot was sent away I have exercised a supervision on this subject," said the Head. "I feared that he might attempt to communicate with some of the boys. This letter is addressed in his hand, and therefore, by my instructions, it was brought to me."

"From Talbot, sir?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in surprise and satisfaction.

"You did not expect a letter from him, Merry?" asked the Head, with a searching look at the Shell fellow.

"I did not expect one, sir, but I hoped to hear some time how he was getting on," said Tom.

"I desire you to open this letter in my presence, and hand it to me, to judge whether it is suitable for you to read, Merry."

Tom Merry flushed.

"Very well, sir. I know jolly well that Talbot wouldn't write anything that the whole school couldn't see."

Dr. Holmes passed him the letter. Tom opened the envelope, took out the letter, and laid it on the Head's table. He could see that it was a few lines scribbled hastily in pencil.

"You have no objection to my reading this, Merry?"

"Certainly not, sir."

Dr. Holmes took the letter and glanced over it, and an expression of surprise came over his face. He passed it to Mr. Railton.

The Housemaster read, and coughed.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

"May I have it, sir?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

Tom took the letter from Mr. Railton, and read it hurriedly. It ran:

"Dear Tom,—I have met the Professor. He has tried, as I expected, to get me to go back with him, you know where, and for what. I need not tell you that I have refused. You can always rely upon it that, come what may, I shall never do anything that would make you ashamed of having been my friend. I hope some day that the truth may come out, and I may be able to see you again; but, at all events, I shall never forget you, and so long as you believe in me it will help me to keep decent. But that is not what I was going to say. From some words dropped by Rivers I suspect that he has some plan of further robberies at the school. I dare not write to the Head; he would not believe what I might say, though Heaven knows I shall never forget his kindness to me when he did believe that I was honest. I am telling you; it may be in your power to stop that villain if he should make any further attempt. At least, you will be on your guard. Good-bye, old chap! R. TALBOT."

"Good old Talbot!" said Tom Merry. "Oh, sir, this letter—can't you see by this letter that old Talbot is as true as steel?"

"You may put it in the fire," said Head.

"Mayn't I keep it, sir?"

"Do as I have told you."

The letter dropped into the flames.

"Now, Merry, if you should receive any further communication from that boy without my knowledge I expect you to bring it to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

"You will remember that. You may go."

Tom Merry left the study.

"That letter is very curious, sir," said Mr. Railton thoughtfully. "If the evidence against Talbot were not so absolutely overwhelming it would lead me to suppose that there had been some dreadful mistake."

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"Nothing would delight me more than for it to prove to be so, Mr. Railton. But I cannot help thinking that that letter was probably written to meet my eyes. The wretched boy calculated upon its effect upon me."

"It is possible."

"I trusted him once, in spite of his past," said the Head. "I cannot trust him again. Henceforth he is dead to us."

Tom Merry rejoined Manners and Lowther in the passage.

"Another row?" asked Manners.

"No. A letter from Talbot," Tom Merry explained.

"Rotten to make you burn the letter," said Lowther.

"I suppose the old sport thinks it was all bunkum."

"I suppose so. But I don't think so," said Tom, in a low, eager voice. "Talbot wrote that because he believes the Professor means to have another try here. I thought of it myself, too; he didn't make much of a haul, and he might have better luck if he tried again. Oh, I hope he will try!"

"What idea have you got in your head now?" asked Lowther uneasily.

"Don't you see? Suppose he came here again, and we nailed him."

"But—"

"Then Talbot would be cleared," said Tom eagerly. "Even that brute would have the decency to own up, I should think, when it wouldn't hurt him to tell the truth."

"More likely to keep silent, and let Talbot suffer."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"Well, he would get his deserts, at any rate," he said. "Look here, we're going to do our best. If he comes—"

"If he comes he'll come when we're asleep in the dorm," said Manners. "I suppose you're not thinking of keeping watch for him?"

"That's just what I am thinking of," said Tom.

"Tom, old chap—"

"I mean it."

"But—but if he comes he may not come for weeks; he is sure to wait till it has blown over a bit."

"I shall keep watch."

"But you can't, Tom," urged Lowther. "How are you going to keep watch every night, night after night? It's impossible."

"It's not impossible," said Tom, in a low, earnest voice. "I don't say I can keep awake all night every night; I know that's impossible. But that's not necessary. If a thief gets into the house it won't be till after midnight, after everybody's in bed. And he won't come after a certain hour in

the morning. I can keep watch for a few hours every night, from midnight till five."

"You can't, you ass! What about your health?"

"Blow my health!"

"You'll be found out."

"I'll chance that!"

"I—I say," muttered Manners, "now the Head's seen that letter, he's bound to take some steps, you know—so—"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"He doesn't believe the letter. I could see in his face what he thought. He thinks it's a trick of Talbot's to get into favour."

"Oh!"

"He doesn't know old Talbot," said Tom bitterly; "but if there's a chance—if there's a ghost of a chance—of setting him right, I'm going to take it. I don't care if it knocks me up. Let it."

"You're not going to chance it alone," said Lowther. "If you mean this, we'll take it in turns, Tom."

"Turn and turn about," said Manners decidedly, "then it will be only one of us every third night, and we can stand that."

Tom Merry hesitated.

"I'd rather—"

"Never mind what you'd rather," said Lowther coolly, "we're going to have our whack—and if you don't agree, we'll tell Railton, and have the whole blessed scheme knocked on the head."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You won't do that. But—but you can take your turns if you like—that's agreed."

"Done!" said Manners and Lowther together.

"And if he comes—if you spot him—wait till you're sure of him before you give the alarm—he mustn't have a chance of getting away," said Tom. "If either of you spot him, come and call me before you make a sound."

"Done!"

"And not a syllable on the subject to anybody else," added Tom Merry. "Shush! Here comes Gussy!"

"Bai Jove! What are you boundahs, confabbin' about?" asked Arthur Augustus, turning his celebrated monocle inquiringly upon the Terrible Three.

"I'm trying to work out a problem," said Monty Lowther seriously.

"Yaas, deah boy. Go on—pewwaps I can help you," said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "I am wathah a dab at mathematics."

"Suppose there were a million and a half Germans in Belgium—"

"Yaas?"

"And suppose the newspaper correspondents killed ten thousand a day—"

"Yaas?"

"Then how could there be a million of them left after a hundred and fifty days?"

"You uttah ass!"

And Monty Lowther walked away smiling, leaving Arthur Augustus to work out that problem if he chose.

CHAPTER 9.

A Thief in the Night.

TOM MERRY'S face was brighter that day. Hope—ever so light a hope—was enough to raise his spirits.

There was a chance now, a slim chance, that Talbot's name might be cleared. It would be something, at all events, for the real criminal to be caught—and Tom Merry had not the slightest doubt that the real criminal, who had thrown suspicion so cunningly upon Talbot, was the Professor. Even if the whole truth did not come to light, at all events Talbot's enemy would have to pay for his crime, and that was something. And Tom Merry hoped that, once the rascal was in the clutches of the law, he might have a rag of decency left that would make him do justice to the boy he had wronged—or he might seek to make matters better for himself by telling the truth.

That night the secret scheme of the Terrible Three was carried into effect.

Tom Merry was to take the first night's watch. There was not much doubt that he would wake at the appointed time. It was more likely that he would not sleep until then. The Terrible Three went to bed as usual with the Shell; and when midnight rang out from the clock tower Tom Merry was awake and alert. He slipped out of bed and dressed himself in the dark.

The rest of the Form were fast asleep.

He left the dormitory quietly. The whole house was in

darkness—the last of the seniors and the masters had gone to bed; not a single light glimmered in the great building.

Tom Merry, in rubber shoes, descended the stairs silently.

He knew where to take up his watch. At what point a burglar might enter the house he could not be certain—probably by the box-room, as before—perhaps in some other place.

But wherever he entered, his object would be the Head's study, where the safe was. It was upon the Head's study that the wakeful junior had to keep watch and ward. In the deep darkness Tom Merry groped his way along the passage, to the recess near the Head's door. There, in the recess of a deep window, was a window-seat, deep and cushioned. Tom Merry sat down, his coat wrapped about him for warmth, and waited.

It was a weary vigil.

There was little danger of his absence from the dormitory being discovered. He had made up a dummy in the bed, in case of a chance visit there. And nobody was likely to suspect that a junior was downstairs, in the darkness, keeping watch and ward through the winter night.

The hours passed slowly; he heard each hour strike dully from the old clock-tower. He knew that he was probably watching in vain.

If the thief came, he might not come for some time—perhaps not for a long time—yet, on the other hand, he might come this night. A single night passing unwatched might mean failure instead of success.

His eyes were heavy with sleep, but he did not close them. It was for the sake of his chum, to undo a bitter wrong—to clear the innocent. That thought was enough to sustain him.

Slowly the dark night dragged by. And there was no sound, save a rat scuttling behind the old wainscot—no alarm! As five o'clock struck from the tower, Tom Merry knew that the first night's watch had been in vain.

He made his way back to the dormitory. It was not yet light. He undressed hastily and slipped into bed.

When the rising-bell clanged out in the morning, he was fast asleep. He woke up, to find Monty Lowther shaking him.

"Time!" said Lowther, with a faint grin.

"Turn out, slacker!" said Kangaroo.

Tom Merry rubbed his eyes, and turned out. The loss of sleep had told upon him, strong and healthy as he was. But he could have stood more than that for his chum's sake. He was dull and heavy in the classroom that morning. Mr. Linton was sharp with him several times. But he got through his work somehow.

It was a Saturday, and in the afternoon the St. Jim's juniors were meeting a team from Rylcombe Grammar School. Tom Merry, naturally enough, did not feel very fit for footer. But Jack Blake of the Fourth cheerfully undertook to captain the team. Figgins & Co., of the New House, quite restored to health after their spell in the sanatorium, were fit as fiddles, and it was a strong team that turned out for St. Jim's. Tom Merry did not even see the match. He was asleep most of the afternoon in the armchair in his study.

He was dozing there when the door was thrown open, and Manners and Lowther came cheerfully in, bringing a breezy gust of fresh air with them. Tom Merry sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Hallo! Who's won?" he asked.

"They have," said Lowther. "Two to one against us."

"We wanted Talbot," said Manners. "We miss him, you know—and you staying out, too, you boulder!"

"Better luck next time," said Tom Merry. Even football and the school record had taken a secondary place in his thoughts now.

"You look a blessed sleepy hedgehog," said Monty Lowther. "Too sleepy to help get tea? I'm as hungry as a hunter."

"No," said Tom, laughing. "I'll help. Have the Gram-marians gone?"

"Yes, rather. Gone off as cheery as crickets, after licking us," said Lowther. "Whose turn to play the giddy ox tonight—you or me, Manners?"

"Toss up for it," said Manners.

They tossed up after tea, and the lot fell to Manners. He grunted.

"You'll be careful, old chap," said Tom Merry anxiously. "You won't fall asleep. I—I wish you'd leave it to me, you know."

"Fathead," said Manners, "if you keep awake every night, you'll have to go to sleep every day—and you'll jolly soon be spotted."

There was no doubt about that; and Tom Merry had to submit to the inevitable. That night it was Manners who took up his post, secretly and silently, in the window-recess in the passage close by the Head's study, and watched until the small hours of the morning. But he watched in vain.

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On Sunday Manners was glad that it was a day of rest. He slept like a top most of the afternoon.

Lowther took his turn cheerfully the next night; but when Monday morning came there had been no alarm. Lowther was decidedly drowsy in class on Monday morning, though he did his best to conceal it.

He was glad when lessons were over, and he could take a "nap" in the armchair in the study. He felt better after that, in the afternoon.

"Your turn again to-night, Tommy," he said, as they sat at tea that evening. "Fill yourself up to the neck with tea—it helps to keep you awake. How long are we going to keep up this game?"

"Until we succeed," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, my hat!"

"But I don't want you fellows to bother about it," said Tom hastily. "I'm quite willing to take it on my own—"

"Rats!" said Lowther.

"Likewise bow-wow!" chimed in Manners.

That night Tom Merry found himself on the watch again. It was the fourth night since he had received Talbot's warning. As he sat in the window recess in the deep darkness he was thinking of the outcast junior. Where was Talbot now? What had become of him? Would he ever see him again?

Hour after hour struck dully through the night. Wearily but grimly Tom Merry kept his vigil. Three o'clock! Silence, deep and still, followed the chime.

Tom Merry started. Was it a rat in the wainscot, that slight, sudden sound he heard? He sat up, breathing hard, his heart throbbing as if it would burst. It was not a rat. A soft, stealthy sound in the passage—the sound of a cautious footfall.

Tom Merry's heart throbbed almost to suffocation. He scarcely dared to breathe as, in the dense darkness, that stealthy footfall passed the recess, the unseen intruder passing within a couple of feet of him. The stealthy sound stopped outside the door of the Head's study. There was a breathless silence, then a click. The locked door had been opened. Tom Merry, straining his ears, heard the soft sound as it was closed again.

He started to his feet, trembling in every limb with excitement.

At last!

In the Head's study was the man who had wronged Talbot. He had come again, like a thief in the night. And Tom Merry knew what to do.

CHAPTER 10.

Capturing the Cracksman.

TOM MERRY crept silently from the recess in his rubber shoes, and stood in the wide passage, listening.

The door of the Head's study was closed, and not a gleam of light came from under it. He guessed that the midnight intruder had placed a rug inside the door to hide the light, for from the keyhole there came a faint glimmer.

The cracksman was at work.

Tom Merry bent his head outside the closed door and listened. There was a faint sound within—the sound of a drill at work on iron.

The junior, with beating heart, crept away.

The man was there. How long he would remain Tom could not guess—but long enough for the junior to take measures for his capture. Tom Merry had no thought of facing the ruffian alone. The rascal was not to be given the slightest chance of eluding capture this time.

Tom made his way to the stairs, treading softly, and to Mr. Railton's room. He opened the door of the Housemaster's bedroom, and called softly. He was at a sufficient distance from the scene of the cracksman's operations to be sure that he would not be heard by the thief.

"Mr. Railton!"

His whispering, throbbing voice sounded strangely, eerily, in the dark room.

"Mr. Railton!"

There was the sound of a sudden movement, then a startled voice:

"What—who is that?"

"Wake up, sir! It's I—Tom Merry! Don't call out, or he will hear you!" said Tom hurriedly.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

"He? Who? What do you mean, Merry? What are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

"The cracksman, sir!"

"What?"

"He is in the Head's study."

"Merry!"

"He is drilling the safe now, sir!"

"Good heavens! Merry, you are sure—"

"Yes, sir."

"You have been down?"

"He passed within a couple of feet of me, sir."

"You should not have run this risk. But never mind now. Go back to your dormitory, Merry, and leave this to me."

Mr. Railton was already out of bed, dressing himself hurriedly in the dark. Tom Merry glided away to the Shell dormitory, as the Housemaster directed him. Not that he intended to remain there. He did not mean to be "off the scene" when the cracksman was taken. He crept into the dormitory and shook Lowther. Monty woke up with a start.

"What—wharrer marrer? Yaw-aw!"

"Wake up, Monty! He's come!"

"My hat!"

"Manners, old man—"

Tom Merry shook Manners.

"He's really come?" muttered Lowther excitedly.

"Yes. Railton's going down. I expect he'll call Kildare. We're going to be on in this scene too."

"You bet!" murmured Manners.

"Don't wake the others; we don't want a crowd."

The two juniors dressed quickly. The rest of the Shell were fast asleep. Leaving them undisturbed, the Terrible Three crept out of the dormitory and down to the next floor. Mr. Railton had come out of his room and gone to Kildare's room, and then to Darrel's. In the faint starlight that came in through the hall window the Terrible Three saw them come out of the Sixth Form passage—the Housemaster and the two stalwart prefects, each of them with a poker or a cricket-stump in his hand. They made their way quietly to the Head's study.

"We bring up the giddy rear," murmured Monty Lowther. "I say, Tommy, you're quite, quite sure—eh?"

"Yes, ass! Come on!"

"Is it the Professor?"

"I suppose so. I couldn't see him in the dark. I don't know that I should know him by sight, anyway, as he was disguised when he came here under the name of Packington. But I'm pretty sure it is he."

The juniors crept on, keeping their distance, for they knew that the Housemaster would send them back if he spotted them.

But Mr. Railton was not thinking of them just then. He reached the door of the Head's study with the two excited seniors, and the glimmer of faint light from the keyhole struck upon his eyes in the darkness. There was no doubt that the cracksman was there. Faintly, almost inaudibly, in the silence came the steady sound of the drill.

"You are ready, my boys?" said Mr. Railton, in a low voice.

"Yes, rather, sir!" said Kildare.

"Follow me in, but leave him to me," said the Housemaster.

Kildare and Darrel grinned in the darkness. They were not likely to leave all the risk to the Housemaster.

Mr. Railton turned the handle of the door, and threw it open.

He rushed into the study, with the two Sixth-Formers at his heels.

A man, who was bent before the safe, working by the concentrated light of a small electric lamp, sprang round, with a panting cry.

Kildare turned on the electric light in the study as he followed Mr. Railton in. The room was flooded with light.

"Surrender!" exclaimed the Housemaster.

The cracksman uttered a hoarse oath.

His hand was already in his pocket for a weapon, but the Housemaster was upon him before he could draw it.

In the powerful grasp, the smaller man struggled in vain.

The cracksman was head and shoulders shorter than the Housemaster, and Mr. Railton had not been a lifelong athlete for nothing.

The rascal had no chance.

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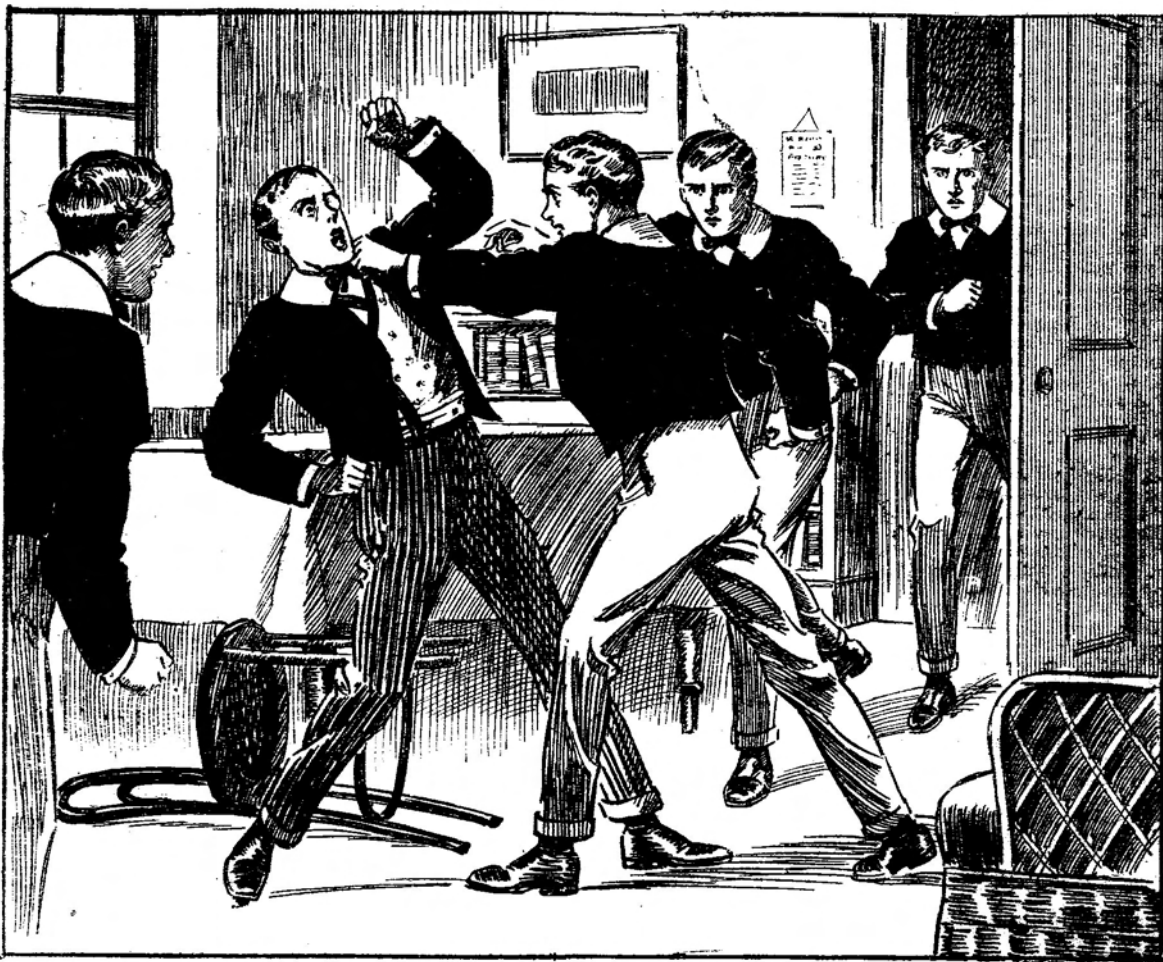
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"Oh, my hat!" gasped Lowther, as Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus went at it hammer and tongs. "Chuck it, you asses!" "Hallo! what's the row?" asked Blake, looking into the study in great astonishment. "Get your tame lunatic away," panted Lowther. "I'll hold the other idiot!" (See Chapter 2.)

He panted fiercely behind the mask of black crape that covered his face, fighting wildly for his liberty.

But the Housemaster's grip bore him backwards to the floor, and he went down on the carpet, and a heavy knee was planted on his chest.

It had passed so quickly that Kildare and Darrel, keen as they were, had no chance of helping. But now they grasped the man's arms as he struggled, and held him helpless.

Outside the open doorway, three juniors blinked into the lighted study. The Terrible Three were there in case they were wanted. But the cracksman was already a prisoner. Mr. Railton wrenched a revolver away from him.

"Let's see his face," said Kildare; and he jerked the crape from the hidden features of the cracksman.

A hard, clean-shaven face was revealed. But in the features, in the eyes, there was something familiar to them.

"I've seen him before somewhere," said Darrel.

"Fasten his hands, my boys," said Mr. Railton. "A handkerchief will do."

The cracksman gave a sudden low groan, and stretched out inert under their grasp. His eyes were closed, his jaw had dropped; he seemed hardly to breathe.

"Fainted, by gum!" said Darrel. "Not quite enough nerve for the business, I should say."

The man lay inert.

The grasp upon him relaxed, and they drew back. And as he was released the apparently unconscious man made a sudden spring to his feet.

"Collar him!" roared Kildare. "Shamming, by thunder! Hold him! My hat!"

The cracksman was through them in a flash, knocking Kildare aside, and eluding Darrel and the Housemaster. A desperate bound carried him through the doorway.

It had been a clever trick—a desperate attempt—and it would have succeeded if the way had been open. But the

desperate man, bounding through the doorway, rushed directly into the arms of the Terrible Three.

They fastened on him like cats and dragged him down.

Before he could even attempt to struggle free from their grip, Mr. Railton was upon him again, and Kildare and Darrel were clutching at him.

With six pairs of hands upon him, he was dragged back into the room.

"Not this journey!" chuckled Monty Lowther breathlessly.

"Not this time, my infant!"

Kildare bound the rascal's hands with a twisted handkerchief. The cracksman lay panting on the carpet.

"Thank you, my lads!" said Mr. Railton. "You should have been in your dormitory, but certainly you have been very useful here. Keep hold of that rascal Kildare for the present."

"I've got him, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's cheerfully. "He won't play that trick on us twice."

"Malediction!" muttered the cracksman between his teeth.

Tom Merry looked down upon him keenly.

In the hard, clean-shaven face he sought for a resemblance to the Professor, the man who had been known once at St. Jim's as Mr. Packington the science master. And he knew that he was not mistaken.

"At last, you villain!" said Tom Merry. "Do you not recognise him, Mr. Railton?"

"Recognise him?" repeated the Housemaster.

"Yes, sir. You have seen him before."

Mr. Railton looked puzzled.

"There is something familiar to me in his face," he said; "but—"

"It is Mr. Packington."

"Bless my soul! Yes, I know him now."

"The Professor!" exclaimed Kildare. "The man Talbot

denounced when he was here, passing himself off as a sentence master. I know him now."

"Yes," said Tom Merry steadily; "the man Talbot denounced, and the man who committed a robbery here last week, and left evidence behind him to make suspicion fall upon Talbot."

"Merry!" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"I am sure of it, sir! Ask him. He may tell the truth now."

Mr. Railton fixed his eyes upon the baffled, panting cracksmen.

"You hear, man?" he said. "You are a prisoner now; you will get your deserts. It will do you no harm—it may do you good in your position—to tell the truth. Was it you who came here in the night a week ago—?"

The Professor laughed sardonically.

"I?" he repeated.

"Yes, you—who robbed this safe, which you have attempted to rob again; who took articles belonging to Talbot of the Shell, and left Talbot's penknife—"

"A pretty story!" said the Professor.

"Do you confess it?"

"Hardly. This was my job, because the Toff made so small a haul last time," said the Professor coolly. "The Toff, whom you call Talbot, is one of us now. He had better luck than I have had."

"It is a lie!" exclaimed Tom Merry fiercely.

The Professor laughed again.

"It is useless to expect the truth from him, I fear," said Mr. Railton, with a sigh; "but I begin to think, Merry, that you may be right."

"A pretty story!" repeated the Professor sneeringly.

"Why, it was from the Toff that I learned all I needed to know about this place—about this safe—"

"That at least is false," said Mr. Railton quietly. "You had no need to learn anything from Talbot. When you were here as Mr. Packington you had ample opportunity to learn all you wished to."

"This is the man who kidnapped Talbot," said Tom Merry between his teeth. "You can see now how Talbot's penknife came to be here. It was easy enough for that scoundrel to take it from him when Talbot was his prisoner. And he took Talbot's things away to make it look blacker because Talbot had denounced him when he was playing his game here. Mr. Railton, you must see that it is the truth—"

"I see that it is possible," said the Housemaster guardedly. "But this is not a time to discuss that. Take this rascal to the punishment-room, my boys. He can be kept securely there for to-night, and handed over to the police in the morning."

And, with strong hands grasping him, the cracksmen were marched away.

CHAPTER 11. A Startling Meeting.

THE house was still silent; there had been no alarm. The capture of the cracksmen had been effected with little noise. The sleeping-quarters were at a distance from the Head's study. In their dormitories the School House fellows were sleeping, little dreaming of the dramatic scene that had passed below.

The punishment-room in the School House—Nobody's Study, as the juniors called it—was a small room, with a little barred window, plainly furnished. In the older days of the school, recalcitrant schoolboys had been confined there on bread and water for days at a time—in the "good old days" when discipline was iron, and punishments hard and frequent. In latter times the punishment-room was seldom used, and the bread-and-water diet had long been a thing of the past.

The cracksmen glanced round him quickly and eagerly as he marched into Nobody's Study.

It was clear that he was calculating his chances of escape, but a glance was enough to tell him that there were none. There were strong bars to the window, and outside was a drop of forty or fifty feet. And the door was solid, the lock big and strong. And the cracksmen was thoroughly searched, and every kind of instrument or weapon taken from him before he was left. Mr. Railton, too, had sent one of the juniors for a cord, and the man's hands were bound behind him—loosely enough to allow him personal comfort, but securely enough to prevent him from using them.

A bed with a mattress was in the corner of the room, and Mr. Railton pointed to it.

"You will remain here for to-night," he said. "Sleep if you can. I will send you some blankets. I do not wish you to suffer."

The cracksmen shrugged his shoulders, and made no reply.

The door of the punishment-room closed upon him.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

"He is safe!" said the Housemaster. "You may return to bed now, my boys. There is no need to cause an alarm in the house at this hour; the man is safe. One moment, Merry. It was you who discovered this man's presence in the house. How did that come about? You could not have been in your dormitory."

"I was not, sir."

"Then where were you?" asked Mr. Railton, a little sternly.

"I was keeping watch, sir."

"Keeping watch!"

"Yes, sir. I may tell you now," said Tom Merry calmly. "Ever since Talbot wrote to me that warning that you saw, sir, we have been keeping watch—one or another of us. We knew the villain would come sooner or later."

Mr. Railton knitted his brows.

"Then it's Talbot who's really caused this rascal to be arrested?" exclaimed Kildare.

"Yes," said Tom.

"By Jove! It looks—"

"It looks as if Talbot has been wronged," said Tom Merry bitterly. "Yes, I'm glad you're beginning to see it now."

"You may go to your dormitory," said Mr. Railton, without passing any comment upon Tom Merry's confession.

The Terrible Three returned to their dormitory. The Housemaster and the prefects went back to bed; but in the Shell dormitory Tom Merry did not turn in. He sat on his bed in the darkness, thinking.

"Better turn in, Tom," said Lowther, in a low voice.

Tom shook his head.

"It's all over," said Manners. "We've got our man.

There's nothing more doing, Tom."

"We've got the man," said Tom; "but he hasn't done what I hoped. It hasn't come out that he was the thief, and that Talbot was innocent."

"Not much good expecting him to own up, I'm afraid," said Lowther. "Still, this makes it look better for Talbot. It can't be denied that it was owing to his warning that the Professor was collared."

"That's something," said Manners.

"That's something," said Tom Merry; "but that's not enough. 'Look here, we got that man; he's our prisoner, isn't he?'"

"I—I suppose so," said Lowther uneasily. "What are you thinking of, Tom?"

"He's our prisoner," repeated Tom Merry; "and he's going to clear Talbot. If he makes a confession, and clears Talbot, I don't care what becomes of him. He can go free, or go to the deuce, for all I care!"

"Tom!"

"I'm going to see him!" said Tom Merry determinedly.

"But—but it's no good, Tom," said Manners, in a startled whisper. "The fellow would say anything to get free—he would write anything—sign anything. Unless he was to make a personal confession to the police, it wouldn't be taken any notice of."

"I don't see that. If he writes out a confession, stating how Talbot was kidnapped, where he was kept, and so on, we can jolly soon find other evidence to prove it," said Tom. "Others must have seen Talbot when he was a prisoner, and they can be found, arrested perhaps, and made to confess. If we once get the true story, we may be able to prove it; but if that villain is taken away by the police to-morrow morning, he will keep silent, if only for revenge upon Talbot."

"But—but—"

"He's our prisoner, and we're going to do it," said Tom.

"There'll be a row—"

"I don't care for that."

"But—but he's locked up in the punishment-room, Tom. You can't get at him—"

"We've still got the key—the other key," said Tom.

"You remember when I was shut up there once you fellows got a key for the door, and I've kept it. It's in my box now."

"But I say, Tom—"

"Nuff said, old chap. As soon as Railton's fast asleep I'm going down."

There was no moving Tom Merry from his resolution. In the darkness he hunted in his box for the key. Half an hour was allowed to pass. By that time it was pretty certain that the Housemaster and the prefects were asleep again.

"We're coming with you," said Lowther.

"Just as you like."

The Terrible Three left the dormitory silently. Manners and Lowther were feeling extremely doubtful and uneasy; but, as Tom said, the cracksmen was their prisoner. They had kept watch and ward for him, in the hope of helping Talbot by means of his capture. Tom Merry was acting within his rights, whatever view the "powers that were" might take of the matter.

DO NOT FORGET THERE IS A GRAND LONG COMPLETE TALE OF ST. JIM'S IN 'THE PENNY POPULAR.'

The three juniors crept down the passage. All was silent and dark about them. But as they came upon the lower landing Tom Merry suddenly paused, with a deep breath.

"Hold on, you fellows!" he whispered.

"What?"

"Listen!"

A sound had come from below—from the dark hall. It was a slight sound, but they knew what it was. It came from the little window in the hall.

"My only hat!" murmured Lowther. "Lucky we didn't go to bed. There's another. He must have had a confederate outside, and we never thought—"

Manners chuckled softly.

"All serene! We'll nab him like the other. Wait till he's got inside."

"What-ho!"

The juniors—forgetting all about the prisoner in the punishment-room for the moment—crept silently down the stairs to the ground floor. In the darkness of the hall they watched the little window. Outside was a glimmer of starlight, and against it a form showed dimly at the window. There was another faint creak. Then creak—creak again. The juniors stood with bated breath. They had no doubt now that the cracksmen had had an accomplice who had remained outside the house, and, of course, by the light in the Head's study, and then a light again in the punishment-room, the rascal outside had guessed what had happened. He was seeking to enter the house to release the Professor—perhaps to carry out the interrupted robbery. That, at least, was how it appeared to the Terrible Three. And they waited grimly and silently for the new-comer to enter—to cut off his escape when he was fairly inside the house.

The minutes passed. Evidently the new-comer was not so skilled a cracksmen as John Rivers or the Toff. To them the casement window would have presented few difficulties. But minute followed minute, and the shadowy figure without was still at work. The juniors waited, wondering.

"I say," murmured Lowther, when a quarter of an hour had passed, "that can't be a giddy cracksmen—it can't be! More likely some fellow who's broken bounds, and is trying to get in again. Anybody who knew the bizney would have had that window open long ago."

The same thought had come into Tom Merry's mind.

"Might be Cutts of the Fifth," chuckled Manners. "Been on the randan, perhaps, and found that he couldn't get in again. Railton found a window open, and fastened it, you know. Cutts might have got out before the Professor got in."

The chums of the Shell laughed silently. If the black sheep of the Fifth had been out of bounds, and had found his return cut off, they could guess what a blue funk he would be in. He would have to get into the house somehow, and he might have tried the hall-window as the easiest way. Little as they liked Cutts of the Fifth, it was not their business to give him away if he had been on the "randan," as Manners expressed it; and if the figure outside proved to be a St. Jim's fellow, they had no intention of interfering with him. But it was necessary to be sure.

The creaking at the window continued.

"We'd better make sure before we bring Railton on the scene," murmured Lowther. "It might be Cutts or St. Leger, or Knox, or Levison of the Fourth—and we don't want to get a fellow sacked—'tain't our bizney."

"Let him get in, and we'll see who it is," said Tom Merry, in a whisper. "As soon as he gets in we can see there's enough light here. Keep in cover."

The juniors kept back in the shadow of the banisters. Thence they had a view of the dim hall, into which the starlight was falling. Dim as the light was, it was enough for them when they had a clear view of the intruder to tell whether he was a St. Jim's fellow or not.

The window swung open.

A dark figure appeared in the opening for a moment, and dropped lightly into the hall. The window was closed again.

The juniors remained still, scarcely breathing.

A figure, certainly not so tall as themselves, stood in the starlit hall, and they could hear a subdued, panting breath. The figure was wrapped in a coat from head to foot, but there was something in the outline that brought a strange and startling suspicion into their minds. Under a closely-drawn cap, there was a glint of light on coiled hair.

Lowther grasped Tom Merry's arm. It was not a man—it was not a boy. It was a woman—or, rather, a girl—from the stature evidently a young girl—who had forced a way into the School House in the dead of night.

The Shell fellows were dumb with amazement.

Who was it?

A girl—evidently. But who? Back into Tom Merry's mind came a remembrance of something that Talbot had

told him once—of a girl-chum he had had in the old days—the Professor's daughter!

Tom Merry thought that he understood. The Professor's accomplice was not a member of the gang—not a male member, that is—but his daughter! It was Marie Rivers—that was the name; he remembered it now.

There was a scratch in the darkness—a match flared out. It showed up a white, scared face.

A cry of amazement burst from the three juniors uncontrollably, for they knew that face.

The girl who had entered the School House was Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor; the young nurse who had served so well and so bravely in the sanatorium during the influenza epidemic—Miss March!

Tom Merry sprang forward.

"Miss March! What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER 12.

Father and Daughter.

THE match went out. There was a low, strangled cry, and the girl reeled; and Tom Merry had just time to catch her as she fell.

She lay heavily in his arms, scarcely conscious, scarcely breathing. The shock had been too much for her.

"Good heavens!" muttered Manners. "Miss March, what—"

"The Little Sister!" gasped Lowther. "But—but what is she doing here?"

"Goodness knows!" said Tom.

The girl struggled free.

"Miss March, don't be afraid!" whispered Tom Merry. "We're your friends here—only Manners and Lowther with me. There's nothing to be afraid of!"

The girl gave a sob.

"But what are you doing here?" said Tom, in wonder.

"Oh, I—I—" In the starlight he could see the tears running down her cheeks. "I—I had to come—I had to—"

"But why? Why aren't you in bed at this time of night?" said Tom, in utter wonder, mingled with a half-formed suspicion. "Why did you come here?"

"I had to! Have pity on me—help me!" sobbed the girl.

"Of course we'll help you!" said Manners. "But what's the matter?"

"My father!"

"Your father! I don't understand—"

Tom Merry understood. He could not doubt any longer. Indeed, now that the flash of truth came into his mind he wondered that he had not guessed something, at least, before. The friendship between Talbot and Miss March—many of the fellows had remarked that they seemed to have known one another all their lives. And the shock little Frayne of the Third had received when he saw Miss March in the sanatorium, and Frayne had known Marie Rivers in the old days, when he was an outcast of the slums. When first the Little Sister had come to his bedside, Frayne had been heard to call her "Marie." It had been supposed that he was feverish, and wandering in his thoughts; but Tom Merry understood now.

"My father!" the girl was repeating.

"But your father—he's not here!" said Monty Lowther.

"He is here! Help me to find him. Listen! I saw the light in the Head's study, and then I knew—I knew—" She sobbed again. "Then he did not come out, and there was a light in the punishment-room, so I guessed—"

"But—but—but—" stammered Lowther blankly. "That's a burglar; that's the cracksmen. It's the Professor—he's come back, and we've caught him!"

"I know—I know!"

"He is your father?" said Tom Merry.

She sobbed.

"Yes."

"You are Marie Rivers?"

"I am Marie Rivers."

"Good heavens!" muttered Lowther.

"But—but—but—" stammered Lowther blankly. Manners.

"No, no—never! I had told him I would not—I could not; but—but I knew that he would come. Ever since I have been unable to sleep. I have been doing no duty. I have slept in the day and watched at night. I knew he would come. And—and to-night I did not see him, but when I saw the light I knew—" She choked.

"Poor kid!" muttered Lowther. "That awful villain is your father!"

"He is my father. I came here to save him. I knew that he must be a prisoner now, as he was not taken away. I—I must save him! He is my father!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

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

The juniors were silent. Villain as John Rivers was, he was her father, and she sought to save him. They understood now why the poor girl had forced her way into the School House at that hour. It was to save the cracksmen before the morning came—before the police closed their grip upon him and hope was lost.

He was her father!

And the devotion of the unhappy girl went straight to their hearts. They understood that she was no confederate of the villain—she had watched for him to attempt to turn him from his purpose. But when she found that he was a prisoner, her devotion had led her to this. It was wrong—yet it was noble. He was her father. It was not for a child to set up in judgment upon a parent.

"You will help me?" breathed the girl.

"Help you!"

"I must save him! Afterwards I will go away—I will leave the school—I will do anything you choose! But you will let me save him?"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Goodness knows I'm sorry," he said; "but—but it was that man who robbed the school, Miss March. It was he who threw suspicion upon Talbot. Talbot's name has to be cleared. The innocent cannot suffer for the guilty."

"Let me see him. I will plead with him. I will make him tell the truth. Talbot shall be cleared," whispered the girl.

"Now, in this strait, he will yield. I am sure of it."

"You can see him," said Tom Merry. "But—but as for letting him go, I—"

"Let me see him!"

"That much, yes."

"God bless you!"

The chums of the Shell, still in a state of amazement, led the girl to the punishment-room. What to do in that amazing emergency they simply did not know. Their hearts ached for Marie. They knew what she must be suffering. But in their thoughts Talbot came first. The innocent must not suffer for the guilty, even if a girl's heart were broken.

Tom Merry silently unlocked the door.

There was a low, startled exclamation from within. They heard the cracksmen roll off the bed. He had not been sleeping.

Tom Merry struck a match, and lighted a candle-end that Lowther produced from his pocket. The flickering light showed up the room, and the cracksmen, with his hands behind him, bound. His face was haggard. He gazed at the stricken girl as she came in with amazement.

"You here!" he muttered.

The juniors followed the girl into the room and closed the door. The cracksmen did not look at them. His eyes were fixed upon the colourless face of his daughter. For once remorse had awakened in the Professor's hard heart.

"You!" he repeated.

"Father!"

"Hush!"

"They—they know," said the girl. "I have told them that you are my father."

"Marie!"

"They have let me see you. I—I tried to come to save you," muttered the girl, with white lips. "Now it does not depend on me. Father, why did you come here? I—I watched for you—every night I have watched from the quadrangle, in the cold and darkness, to stop you when you came, to turn you back, and—and when you came I did not see you. I did not know until you were a prisoner," she sobbed.

"And you came to save me?" said the cracksmen, in wonder.

"Yes."

"You are a good girl, Marie," said the Professor, in a softened tone. "I have not been a good father to you. Perhaps—if it were over again—things might be different; but it is too late now. Go back. Don't you understand that you are risking your liberty in coming here?"

"I do not care."

"But you must care! Go back while there is time. These boys will keep your secret. Save yourself, you foolish child!"

Marie turned her wet eyes on the chums of the Shell.

"You will let me save him?" she pleaded. "It is nothing to you if he escapes; but he is my father."

"Let him confess, then," said Tom Merry steadily. "Let him confess that he was guilty and that Talbot was innocent. Let him prove it, and—and we'll take the law into our own hands and let him go."

"Father! You hear?"

"I hear," said John Rivers.

There was a strange expression upon his face. The white, stricken face of his daughter had deeply moved him, hard-hearted criminal as he was.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

"You will do justice to the Toff?" said Marie. "It will cost you nothing now, father. That is not much to ask."

"And my liberty?" said the Professor, with a gleam in his eyes.

"You shall go free if you can clear Talbot," said Tom Merry. "But he must be cleared beyond the shadow of a doubt."

The Professor shrugged his shoulders. Even at that moment he hesitated. His plans, so carefully laid—to get the Toff, the prince of cracksmen, into his hands again—they had to be thrown aside and abandoned. His face hardened again.

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"I have nothing to say," said the Professor sullenly.

Marie uttered a cry.

"Father—father!"

"You have made your choice, John Rivers!" said Tom Merry, setting his teeth. "You will remain here till the police come, then!"

The Professor did not reply. The thought was working in his mind that his daughter would yet contrive to save him. He knew that the girl would not abandon him.

"Father!" exclaimed Marie appealingly.

"I have nothing to say! Leave me to my fate!"

"I cannot!" The girl turned streaming eyes upon Tom Merry. "You will let me save him? Say that you will let me! Let him go free! He is my father!"

"Miss March—"

"Let me save him! I will save him! You shall not stop me, unless you send me, too, to the police!"

The juniors looked at one another helplessly. To let the girl share the fate of her rascally father through them was not to be thought of. Was, then, the cunning villain to escape after all, and Talbot uncleared, still an outcast? Yet to resist the pleading of the weeping girl was a harder task than Tom Merry was equal to.

There was a silence in the room, broken only by the sound of Marie's sobbing. In the silence there came a heavy step without, and the door was flung open. Mr. Railton strode in. There was an angry frown upon his brow, and angry words upon his lips, but they were checked at the unexpected sight of the weeping girl.

"Miss March! You here! Tom Merry, what does this mean?"

CHAPTER 13.

Light at Last.

TOM MERRY stood silent.

The matter was out of his hands now.

The juniors had taken it a little too readily for granted that the Housemaster had gone back to sleep. Evidently he had remained very much awake. As a matter of fact, the Housemaster had thought of the possibility that the cracksmen had not come alone, and he had decided to watch for the remainder of the night. He had come to look at the punishment-room to be sure that all was safe, and he had seen the light and heard the voices. But the sight of the weeping, troubled girl had taken him utterly aback, and the vials of his wrath were not poured out upon the juniors.

"What does this mean?" he repeated.

The cracksmen flung himself sullenly upon the bed. The hope that had risen in his breast was gone now.

"Miss March—" began the bewildered Housemaster.

"How did you come here? What—"

"I am not Miss March," said the girl dully. "That is not my name. My name is Marie Rivers, and I am his—his daughter."

"Good heavens!"

Mr. Railton almost staggered.

"I knew he was a prisoner, and I came to set him free," said Marie. "Now—now it is all over, and you may send me to prison with him."

"Marie!" muttered the cracksmen.

"That man, John Rivers, is your father?" said Mr. Railton.

The girl sobbed.

"Yes."

"But—but you had nothing to do with this—this—with his coming here?" the Housemaster said, hesitatingly. "I cannot believe that!"

Marie shook her head.

"I will not keep the secret any longer," she said wearily. "I have been no better than he—no better than Talbot was in the old days; but—but since I came here, since I saw the Toff again—I—I changed, even as Talbot had done. After that, it was my only object to prevent this. I would have stopped him if I could, but now I—I could not abandon him. He is my father."

"It was Talbot who showed you better things, a better way of life?" said Mr. Railton.

"Yes; it was Talbot."

"And yet he has—has gone back——"

"He has not gone back," said Marie. "Father, the truth shall be told now. If you will not tell it, then I will tell it." The cracksman did not speak.

"It was not Talbot who robbed the Head, sir; it was my father. It was his plan to make suspicion fall on the Toff, to force him to go back to his old life."

"You knew it?"

"I knew it."

"And you allowed that unhappy boy to be driven from the school in disgrace when you could have saved him with a word!" exclaimed the Housemaster, in agitated tones.

The girl moaned.

"Could I betray my father? Now it does not matter. He is a prisoner. But while he was free I could not give him up—I could not, though my heart was almost broken. I have suffered——"

"My poor child," said the Housemaster softly, "I understand. Poor Talbot! But why did he not speak? If he had told us that you knew the truth you could not have concealed it then."

Marie smiled faintly.

"Talbot would never have uttered a word to harm me," she said.

"And he has suffered for his silence," said the Housemaster, deeply moved. "The unhappy lad! But there, at least, reparation shall be made."

"But my father—my father——"

Mr. Railton knitted his brows in thought. The misery in the girl's face touched his heart, as it had touched the hearts of the juniors. The sullen cracksman deserved, a dozen times over, the punishment that was in store for him, but——

"I must speak to the Head," said the Housemaster at last. "In this I cannot act on my own responsibility. But if this man will write out a free and full confession it is possible that something can be done. I promise nothing."

"Father!" whispered Marie.

The cracksman gave a hard laugh.

"Bah! After you have told all it is not much use for me to keep silent," he said. "I will do as you wish."

Mr. Railton made a gesture to the juniors.

"Go back to your dormitory," he said. "Kindly do not leave it again until the morning. Miss March, go back to your room; you may leave your father with me."

"But—but——"

"At dawn I shall consult the Head. You may be present. I cannot promise you more than that. But you shall see the Head before anything is decided."

"Thank you, Mr. Railton," Marie moved towards her father timidly. "Father, you will do what is right now. It is your only chance; you see that."

"You can rely on me to see which side my bread is buttered," said John Rivers, with a sneering laugh.

Tom Merry & Co. quitted the room.

"How did you enter here, Merry?" asked Mr. Railton.

"I—I had a key, sir," stammered Tom.

"Kindly give it to me."

Tom Merry handed over the key, and the three juniors returned to the Shell dormitory. They turned in.

"Well, this has been a night!" said Monty Lowther, as he drew the sheets about him.

"It means everything for Talbot," said Tom Merry, with a deep breath. "He will be cleared now—through Marie Rivers."

"Poor girl!" said Manners. "I—I say, we'd better keep all that dark, you know. No need for anybody else to know that she is that villain's daughter."

"Yes, rather."

It was some time before the juniors slept.

They were up before the rising-bell clanged out in the morning.

Tom Merry was very keen to know what had happened since the cracksman had been left with Mr. Railton.

He had a strong suspicion that John Rivers would be allowed to escape, after signing a confession, for the sake of the Little Sister.

The rising-bell was beginning to clang when the juniors came downstairs in the grey dawn. They made their way first to the punishment-room. The door was unfastened; the room was empty. There was no sign of John Rivers.

"Gone!" murmured Lowther.

They strolled out into the quadrangle. In the grey dawn a light streamed from the window of the Head's study. Dr. Holmes had evidently been down very early. A slight, graceful figure came away from the School House, and hurried across towards the sanatorium. Tom Merry ran to intercept the Little Sister.

"Miss March!" he exclaimed, "It is all right?"

The girl stopped and smiled at him through her tears.

"Yes," she said, "I have been with the Head. He was very kind. There is a full confession, signed by my father, and witnessed by Mr. Railton and the Head. It is going to be made public to-day. Talbot is cleared."

"Thank goodness! But—but your father?"

"He is gone," said Marie, in a low voice. "He—he was placed in the punishment-room again, but—but the door was not locked, and—and he escaped."

Tom Merry smiled.

"I am glad," he said.

"And—and he is not so bad as you have believed," said the girl, with pathetic eagerness. "He has promised to amend. I—I hope he will keep his promise."

"I hope so," said Tom.

"I shall help him all that I can," said Marie. "I shall join him."

"You are leaving here?"

Marie smiled a little.

"After—after what has happened, could I remain?" she said.

"Why not?" said Tom. "Nobody will know about—about your connection with him. You don't think we shall chatter, surely? And Talbot, when he comes back——"

Marie shook her head.

"I must go," she said. "I'll stay a few days, that is all. I—I am not well enough to go at once, but then—— And—and you will tell Talbot that I have done all I could for him, and I was sorry to let him be wronged, but he will understand that I could not sacrifice my father; he is always generous."

"I will tell him," said Tom.

Marie hurried on. Tom Merry was very thoughtful. All had gone well so far, but Talbot remained to be found. Where was Talbot?

There was a surprise for St. Jim's that morning.

After prayers the whole school was assembled in Big Hall, and the Head came in, with a grave face, to address the school.

There was a hush of expectancy. With the exception of the Terrible Three, no one had the faintest idea what was coming.

"Somethin' wathah unusual on this mornin'," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy whispered to Blake. "I wondah——"

"Silence!" rapped out a prefect.

"All wight, Dawwel, deah boy!"

There was deep silence as the Head began to speak, and then a buzz of wonder as the juniors heard what he had to say. Dr. Holmes, with emotion in his fine old face, told them in concise words of the discovery that had been made of the plot against the Toff, his former confederate, of the rascal's confession, and the complete clearing of Talbot from all suspicion. The St. Jim's fellows listened in blank amazement. The plotter had confessed, and not only confessed, but given proof, for sewn up in his clothes had been found some of the banknotes which had been taken from the Head's study on the occasion of the robbery that had been attributed to Talbot. Of Marie Rivers the Head had made no mention. The girl's secret was to be kept.

"Bai Jova!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, in utter wonder.

"I must remark, deah boys, that this beats the band, you know. It appears that Tom Mewwy was wight all the time. That is not 'so surpwisin'; but it appears also that I was w'ong, and I wegard that as vewy surpwisin' indeed. Astonishin', in fact!"

"Shurrup!" murmured Blake. "The Head's starting on another lap."

"My boys," resumed the Head, "I have explained this to you that justice may be done to that unhappy lad who has been so cruelly wronged. I need not say that search will instantly be made for him, that he will be found and brought here to take his place once more among us in all honour. And I can rely upon you all to give him a hearty welcome."

"Hurrah!" shouted Lowther.

And the cheer was taken up.

"Hip-hip, hurrah!"

There was no doubt of the kind of welcome Talbot would get when he returned to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 14.

Through the Valley of the Shadow.

TALBOT had been cleared!

St. Jim's was eagerly waiting to welcome his return. But where was Talbot?

Search for him had immediately been started, but day

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followed day, and there was no news of him. The unhappy boy, penniless, alone, unfriended, hunted as he believed by the police, had disappeared.

That he had gone to London was assured, but in that vast, overgrown city, where was he to be sought? In what den of poverty, if not of crime, had the once happy Shell fellow of St. Jim's hidden himself?

Tom Merry & Co. waited anxiously for news.

But news did not come. Day followed day, and the detectives the Head had employed to seek the unhappy boy made ever the same reports—nothing.

Talbot had disappeared into the labyrinths of the modern Babylon. He might already, as Tom Merry felt, with a sickening sense of misery, have fallen a victim to cold, to hunger, to want. Had his justification come too late? Was the Toff, after all, to fall a victim, still more terribly a victim, of his old associate's scheming, although the truth was known, and all his old friends were anxious to repair the injury that had been done him?

A week had passed, and still there was no news, and Tom Merry made up his mind what he must do. He went to the Head's study to ask leave to look for Talbot himself, fully resolved to take French leave if it were not accorded. But the Head was kind; his own heart was heavy with anxiety for the missing junior. If he thought of a refusal, it died upon his lips as he looked at Tom Merry's pale, careworn face.

"But what could you do, my dear lad, where others have failed?" said Dr. Holmes, kindly enough.

"I can try, sir," said Tom restlessly. "I—I can't bear this, sir. He may be dying of want; he may be dead!" Tom's voice broke, and he tried in vain to keep back his tears. The picture of Talbot, once so strong and hearty and handsome, stretched upon a pallet in some frozen garret, haunted him.

"You may go, you and your friends," said the Head, with a sigh. "I give you leave for a week, but you must obtain permission from home."

"Thank you, sir!"

Permission from home was obtained easily enough, and the Terrible Three prepared for their forlorn hope. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy expressed his sympathy, but he was doubtful, owing to the Terrible Three having forgotten to ask permission for him to accompany them, and direct operations. But he nobly hoped for the best. Before they started Tom Merry sought Marie Rivers to tell her they were going. He found the Little Sister pale and troubled.

"Heaven grant you success!" she said. "I have almost given up hope!"

"And you?" said Tom. "Will you be here when Talbot comes—if he comes?"

Marie smiled faintly.

"I shall be here," she said. "I—I have had a letter from my father. He has left England. He has promised me again to keep the promise he made to the Head—to repent and reform. I think he will keep his word. And—and Dr. Holmes wishes me to remain in my post here, and I have consented. He has forgiven me, and trusts me! Oh, I shall be happy here, if—if—"

"We will bring him back," said Tom. He knew she was thinking of Talbot. "We won't come back without him!"

And the Terrible Three started with determination, if with faint hopes.

Mr. Foxe of Scotland Yard met them at the London terminus. The detective, who had once hunted Talbot as a victim, was seeking him now to restore him to honour; but even Mr. Foxe had failed so far.

For several days the juniors, sometimes with Mr. Foxe and

sometimes alone, pursued their search. They had put up in an hotel near the station, and every day they were at their work—searching, searching. But as the days passed they realised the hopelessness of it.

At St. Jim's it was easy to think of searching for Talbot in London. In London, they realised what it meant. In that vast desert of bricks and mortar, where millions came and went, a single human being could disappear like a drop of water in the ocean.

In the wintry, misty streets, in parks and commons, where recruits were drilling, under the shadows of night in darkened thoroughfares, they wandered and sought in vain.

They found themselves scanning strange faces, peering into crowds, in the hope of seeing the well-known face of their chum among the thousands—among the tens of thousands—while hope died lower and lower in their hearts.

Into many strange places they penetrated, where poverty, and the vice that comes of poverty, covered for shelter from the bitter winter. Many a heartbreaking sight came under their eyes—the grim, gaunt, unnecessary suffering of an ill-governed city—but still they did not find what they sought.

At night they went without fail to the Embankment, that last hideous refuge of the homeless poor, and peered at the shivering, wasted figures shrinking pitifully on the seats, in the hope—the dreadful hope—that their friend might be among those unhappy, crushed victims of a faulty civilisation. And still they did not find him.

"We won't give in," said Tom Merry, when the week of leave was up. "I'm going to write to the Head for leave to stay longer. He must let us. Come what may, I'm not going back without Talbot. To think of him here—on the Embankment, perhaps at night, in the rain!"

"And those others," said Monty Lowther miserably. All the cheery humour had gone out of Lowther's face now. "It's horrible! It keeps me awake at nights thinking of them! Surely something could be done?"

"Yes," said Tom bitterly; "when the country wakes up, if it ever does, and elects men to do things, instead of politicians to babble. But to think of Talbot among all that—we must find him—we shall find him!"

"We must!" said Manners; but there was little hope in his voice.

But they were determined, hope or not, to succeed—to find their chum, to get him away from that noisy, roaring, heartless desert of bricks, back to the green country, where Nature was still as God had made it.

The night came on again—night dark and chill and misty, with a drizzle of rain, and the three chums turned up their coat-collars, and pulled down their caps, and went on their pilgrimage once more along the cold, shining river—the great river that flows unchanging through so much of woe and despair.

Even in the drizzle of rain there were wretched outcasts upon the seats, huddled in their rags. With heavy hearts the juniors walked on, peering at the bleared faces, brutalised by suffering.

A figure was leaning on the stone balustrade, looking down at the river—a ragged, tattered figure, only too familiar to their eyes now in its misery.

Tom Merry paused. There was something in the fixed gaze of that outcast, bent upon the water, that startled him. Well he knew that to many of those hopeless wretches the deeps of the river were the only refuge from suffering. Was this another poor wretch about to seek release in the icy waters?

But even as he paused the figure turned away, and Tom saw him shake his head. He moved on; and in the shivering form it seemed to Tom Merry that there was something familiar. His heart bounded. Was it possible? At last!

He ran forward.

"Talbot!"

The tattered figure swung round with a startled cry. The light of a lamp flared on his face—showed it thin and wan, emaciated—a face of death. But even in that changed and frozen face Tom recognised the once handsome and healthy face of his old chum. He grasped the boy's arm, his hand trembling.

"Talbot, I've found you at last, old man!"

Talbot reeled.

"Tom Merry!" he muttered thickly.

"Talbot! Oh, old chap!" chuckled Lowther. "Here, take my coat; wrap it round you. Oh, Talbot, to find you like this!"

Talbot was reeling unsteadily. They wrapped him in Lowther's warm coat, and Tom led him to the nearest seat.

They held his frozen hands. Talbot could not speak. But it was Talbot—it was the Toff—and they had found him.

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"You—you've been looking for me?" muttered Talbot at last.

"Yes, yes!"

"But—but why—how are you here?"

"Don't you understand? It's all come out. John Rivers has confessed—you're cleared. You've got to come back; we're all waiting to welcome you!"

"Oh, Tom"—Talbot closed his eyes for a moment—"it—it seems more like a dream! And—and you've been looking for me, and I—I've been hiding and starving!"

Tom chafed his frozen fingers in his own warm hands.

"What have you been doing, Talbot, all this time?"

"Starving and freezing," said Talbot bitterly. "I had no chance. I wouldn't go back to—to—you understand?"

"I knew it!"

"And there was nothing else. I tried to get work; but, unknown, without a character, and these are hard times," said Talbot. "I got a job here and there every now and then—an odd job. But jobs are not easy to get these days. And when my money was gone—the money you gave me, Tom—I had to sleep under arches, in brickyards—anywhere I could get for shelter. And that soon settles a fellow's clothes. You can't even get clean with that kind of life. They talk about the poor being dirty. How are they to keep clean, Tom? They talk about their being drunken. Goodness knows, I was tempted often enough, when I had a few pence, to swallow something that would keep out the cold, if only for an hour! But I never did; I had sense enough not to. But I've learned, and those poor wretches haven't, and— Have you got something to eat about you, Tom? I haven't tasted food for three days."

"We'll be at the hotel in five minutes," said Tom.

He signed an empty taxi that was crawling by. Talbot, weak and faint with hunger and suffering, could scarcely step into the vehicle. They helped him in, and drove off. And the outcast devoured ravenously a chunk of toffee that Lowther found in his pocket. Tom Merry could scarcely keep back his tears.

"Oh, it's like new life to see you fellows again!" said Talbot, with a catch in his voice. "You don't know what it's like. I'm not soft, but—but I've been through it—hard! In my first lodging my coat was stolen, and some of the money you gave me was in the pocket. But I couldn't blame the poor wretch who robbed me; he was freezing and starving too. And sleeping in the open in this weather takes it out of a fellow. Did you—did you see me—"

He stumbled in his speech.

"I saw you looking at the river," said Tom, in a choked voice.

"The thought came into my head," said Talbot. "I suppose it was a cowardly thought; but after starving for weeks—but I didn't do it, all the same. I meant to fight it out to a finish. The finish wouldn't have been far off if you hadn't found me!"

There was a terrible dread in Tom Merry's breast that it might not be far off now, as he looked at the outcast's emaciated face. Had they found him in time?

And he had cause to fear, for in his room at the hotel, when food was brought, Talbot could eat little—starving as he was—and there was a fearful greyness in his face that brought a sickening dread to the hearts of his chums.

Manners had slipped out to call in a doctor, and the medical

man when he came ordered the boy immediately to bed. And in the morning Talbot did not wake in his senses—he awoke with wildly-staring eyes and babbling tongue, not knowing where he was or what he said. It was evident that he was ill—that he was going to be very ill—and he could not remain where he was.

Unconscious of what was done to him, the unhappy boy was carried down, warmly wrapped, into an ambulance car, and, with his three chums caring for him, was carried swiftly away from the cold, grim city where he had known so much suffering.

The journey was swift, but Talbot saw nothing—knew nothing of it. He did not know when they arrived at St. Jim's; he did not see the kind, anxious face of the Head bending over him. For that day and for many days he was dead to his surroundings.

There was a hush of sadness in the school during those dark days, while it was known that Talbot lay between life and death in the sanatorium, under the care of the girl who had been his childhood's chum, and whose face now he did not know. They were dark days for Tom Merry. The chilling fear was in his heart that he had found his chum too late to save him.

But a strong constitution pulled Talbot through the crisis, and there came a day at last when his eyes opened with meaning in them, and he looked about him in wonder, and recognised a sweet, kind face that watched by his bedside. Talbot stretched out a thin, feeble hand.

"Marie!" he whispered.

The girl's pale face lighted up.

"Toff, you know me again!"

"Where am I now?" Talbot's eyes wandered about him. "This is—is—"

"The school," said Marie. "They found you and brought you back."

"And I never knew! Have I been very ill?" asked Talbot.

"Very ill," said Marie softly. "But you are better now; you will be well soon."

"I'm very happy now," said Talbot.

From that day he mended fast. In a few more days his chums could come in and talk to him; and the other fellows came in to chat with the invalid—to tell him they were sorry they had doubted him. And Talbot listened to them with a smile.

He was very happy now. The dark days of the Toff were over, and the future stretched bright and golden before him. The Professor was gone—the wide sea rolled between him and the boy he had persecuted—but Marie remained. And when Talbot at last emerged from the school hospital, the rousing welcome he received from the St. Jim's fellows was more than enough to banish from his heart the bitterness of the past.

Talbot of the Shell was once more in his old place at St. Jim's, with his chums who had been loyal to the last!

THE END.

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SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a famous hussar regiment known as the Die Hards, where he incurs the enmity of Private Cole, who causes an accident to befall him during riding-drill. Bob afterwards challenges Cole to a fight to square matters up, but before this can be carried out the villain takes a murderous revenge upon Bob. Captain Lascelles, a ne'er-do-well cousin of Bob's, uses his knowledge to make Cole, whom he takes into his service as officer's servant, do Bob an injury. Captain Lascelles affects to be friendly with Bob, but has arranged that Cole should hide a valuable diamond ring in Bob's kit. Lascelles accuses Bob of theft, and also insults the memory of his dead father. Unable to restrain himself, Bob knocks the villain down, and at that moment Captain Hamshaw enters the room.

Ruin swift and certain was before Trooper Bob Hall. He had struck an officer!

(Now go on with the story.)

Bob Avenges an Insult.

Though Bob had knocked Captain Lascelles to the floor, and though Hamshaw, the adjutant of the Die Hards, had witnessed the deed, yet the lad did not act as one who had been detected in a crime. Lascelles had basely insulted the memory of Bob's dead father, and the lad's blood still boiled with indignation.

As the adjutant pulled him back across the room, he shook himself free, and advanced again towards Lascelles, who had struggled to his feet.

"Do you want more?" Bob cried hoarsely. "Will you retract what you said, or—"

Lascelles, a strong, muscular man, his face bloodless, and his eyes dark with hatred, hit out, and caught Bob flush on the mouth.

"Captain Lascelles!" the adjutant thundered. "Don't dare to continue this unseemly quarrel. If you do you place yourself in the wrong."

Bob had staggered back. Again he rushed in, and Lascelles, a baleful smile distorting his swarthy face, struck out once again with all his force. Bob ducked, and, in return, his fist crashed on to his antagonist's chin.

Hamshaw shrugged his shoulders; then he stepped to the door, locked it, and stood leaning against it. He was the tallest and the strongest man in the regiment, and, had he so wished, he could easily have separated the pugilists. Apparently he had resolved to let things take their course, for he now stood with folded arms, a silent spectator of the conflict.

It was a strange scene, truly! The officer, the man whom Bob should always salute and obey, drawing his breath sharply, glared like a tiger at the private, whilst, with hands lifted, he waited for another rush. The private, taught that an insult to an officer was an unpardonable offence, nevertheless nimbly stepped around his squadron commander, watching an opening when once again he could fell him to the floor. The faces of both were drawn, their eyes flashed hatred, as man to man they thirsted for revenge. All else was obliterated; in that mad moment of passion they had no thought of discipline, or social distinctions, or military codes. Their bare fists alone were to decide the quarrel and adjudge the victory.

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"You cur!" Bob gasped, as he fainted and jumped back again. "You low scoundrel! You defame the dead and try to ruin the innocent! Have you no shame? No sense of pride? What kind must you be when you act thus towards your own flesh and blood?"

Again the lad rushed in, receiving a smart smack on the side of the head, and answering with a tremendous upper-cut. Lascelles staggered back; and Bob, availing himself of the chance, sent his fists right and left full on to the officer's face. With a hoarse yell, Lascelles again dashed forward. The twain clinched and broke away, again they hit out, slogging desperately and defiantly; up and down, backwards and forwards they swayed; chairs were broken, ornaments clattered to the floor, one of the legs of the table gave way, sending a shower of writing materials, photograph frames, and nick-nacks to the carpet.

Bob, springing forward, caught Lascelles a tremendous blow on the jaw. The officer reeled back, stumbled against the sloping table, vainly endeavoured to steady himself, staggered for a moment, and then fell backwards, and the table, already damaged, gave way beneath his weight. It sank down with the sound of rending wood, flattened out like a pancake, and Lascelles stretched his length amidst the debris.

Panting, his eyes gleaming, his fingers twitching, Bob Hall again stood over him, only waiting for him to rise. But now the conflict was at an end, for Hamshaw so willed it. Two long strides took him from the door to where Bob stood. He seized the lad by the middle, lifted him up, and put him on his feet a couple of yards away. Then, standing between the pugilists, he bade Lascelles arise.

"Get up! There's been enough of this!" he remarked coldly. "Private Hall, if you don't come to your senses and desist, I'll drag you myself to the guard-room. Captain Lascelles, if you forget what's owing to your brother-officers, I'll remind you of your duty in a way you'll find unpleasant. Cool down, the pair of you, else I'll summon the guard!"

Lascelles rose slowly and painfully. Bob's last blow had sobered him. Standing with his hands on his hips, blood trickling from a cut on his cheek; he drew his breath heavily, his face the colour of ivory.

"You've seen what this scoundrel did!" he gasped. "He deliberately assaulted me! I'm glad you're a witness, Hamshaw, for now he's certain to be convicted, as he richly deserves. One moment, old man, till I get my wind, and then I'll send for the sergeant-major. By the way, where's Cole?"

Lascelles gazed around the room in astonishment as he asked the question, for Cole had disappeared.

"I met him hurrying down the stairs as I came up, little thinking what I was to see," Hamshaw replied scornfully. "Well, is this disgraceful exhibition at an end? Do you both realise what you have done?"

Neither answered, but the passion had died out of their eyes. Hamshaw had walked over to the window, and for some seconds he stood looking down on the square, his broad back turned to officer and private. Then suddenly he wheeled round and faced them.

"Captain Lascelles, I'm now ready to hear your explanation," he rapped out. "And understand that I'm acting in my official capacity of adjutant!"

Lascelles started, and the colour stole back to his face. "I—er—don't quite follow you," he replied evasively. "The case is quite simple. Surely you saw how that villain

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behaved? There's—er—nothing to be done, of course, except to place him under arrest."

"And then?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"What about yourself?"

"Oh, I'm all right! Of course, I was obliged to defend myself. But I'm not badly marked, so—"

Hamshaw's open, manly face was full of a contempt that expressed his feelings better than any words.

"Do I understand, then, that it is your intention to send in your papers?"

He raised his eyebrows as he spoke.

"Send in my papers! Not likely! Why, old chap, I'm jolly glad I joined the regiment, and—"

"Please to remember that I'm the adjutant, and address me accordingly!" Hamshaw thundered. "You've disgraced yourself, disgraced your brother-officers, and brought a stigma on the Die Hards. I'm thoroughly sick of you after the way you've behaved, and so would every fellow in the mess be if they heard of your conduct. Do you want them to know? Come, sir, pull yourself together! Is it not bad enough that we have to discuss this matter in the presence of a private?"

Lascalles glared.

"Then you disapprove of my action? You think I should tamely have taken a blow from this villain, and—"

"Enough!" Hamshaw interjected.

In his indignation and scorn he drew himself to his full height, and even at that tense moment Bob could not but admire his splendid bearing.

"What do you mean?" Lascalles snarled.

"You have not yet told me why Private Hall struck you. He said something a moment ago that startled me, though. May I ask if you and he are relations?"

"Yes," Lascalles admitted reluctantly.

"Did you speak badly of his father?"

"I said what is, unfortunately, the truth."

"Then, Captain Lascalles, I'm more sorry than I can express that you ever joined the regiment. Decent chaps hold their tongues when words are bound to hurt the feelings of another. This row began evidently over a family matter. With that I have nothing to do; but I saw Private Hall knock you down, who are his superior officer, and now I want to know whether you wish for a court-martial, in which case I will take care that the whole truth comes out unreservedly, or whether you prefer that this wretched business shall be kept a dead secret for ever. That can be done if you so wish, and in making this suggestion I am thinking solely of the good name of our regiment."

"And if I insist on a court-martial, what then?" Lascalles demanded doggedly.

Hamshaw wheeled around and addressed Bob, ignoring Lascalles as if beneath his notice.

"Private Hall, have you any excuse to make for your conduct?" he inquired, with military sharpness.

"Yes, sir. I struck Captain Lascalles under great provocation. He called my father a gaolbird, and he accused me of theft. If he or any other man dares to insult me so grossly as that, I'll knock him down if I'm able, and chance a court-martial any day. I'm not made of plaster; I'm a man."

"He has been guilty of theft; I can prove that!" Lascalles cried. "Get Cole in here, that's all."

Hamshaw unlocked the door. Cole was standing outside.

"Come in!" Hamshaw rapped out. "Now, Captain Lascalles, please prove your charge."

"I accuse Private Hall of stealing a diamond ring that belongs to me," Lascalles explained. "Private Cole found it in Hall's kit."

"Do you deny this accusation?" Hamshaw asked Bob.

A sudden thought had come to the lad, and he was quick to use it.

"Yes, sir; I deny it absolutely. There's one question I should like to ask Private Cole, if you will allow me?"

"Certainly!"

"You say you found the ring in my kit," Bob began, turning to Cole.

"Yes."

"You say, in presence of the adjutant, and you are prepared to stick to your statement, that you went to Barrack-room No. 4 and found the diamond in my kit on the rack over my bed?"

"Yes."

Bob gave a sigh of intense relief.

"That's all I want to ask, sir. That proves I'm not a thief!"

Lascalles and Cole started. Hamshaw's eyes grew round.

"Explain yourself," he commanded.

"Yesterday Captain Lascalles had me transferred to B Squadron from D Squadron. After seeing Captain Las-

celles in this room, and being acquainted with this fact, I went to Barrack-room No. 4 and slept there the night. I was allotted the cot which I was told this morning had been used by Private Clayton, who went sick yesterday morning, and is now in hospital."

"Well, what does that prove?"

"It leads up to what I am going to say now, sir. My kit is still in Barrack-room No. 10, and the kit that Private Cole searched in Barrack-room No. 4 is the one belonging to Private Clayton."

Lascalles and Cole gazed blankly at one another, as well they might. Their plot to ruin Bob had failed.

"Private Cole, leave the room," Hamshaw ordered. The adjutant's eyes were bright. "Now, Captain Lascalles, you see, beyond doubt, that you brought a false accusation against Private Hall," he continued, as the door closed behind Cole.

"I allowed this fight to continue because I felt that Hall had been wronged. I've watched his behaviour since he enlisted, and I would have been surprised if he had struck his superior officer except under the greatest provocation. He has had that provocation, and, as a man, I can't say I blame him for what he did. He's within his right now if he insists upon an inquiry as to the mysterious disappearance of that diamond; and, if he does, I'll back him up."

Lascalles' face went livid.

"I don't want an inquiry, sir!" Bob cried. "I've no desire to have a scandal. I hope I'm too true a soldier for that!"

Hamshaw tugged at his moustache.

"Hall has set an example you'd do well to follow in future, Lascalles," he remarked icily. "Very well, we three men will hold our tongues, and then the fracas will not leak out."

"I should like to go back to D Squadron, though, sir," Bob suggested.

"Certainly. You can do that at once. Make any explanation you think well."

Bob saluted the adjutant. Wheeling round, he looked at his cousin. The latter hesitated to hold out his hand, and when at last he offered it gingerly, Bob pretended not to see the action. He gave the military salute to Lascalles, looking over his head as he did so, and then he tramped out of the room.

Hamshaw paused a moment. Then, without casting a glance at his brother-officer, he followed Bob; and Lascalles, clenching his fist, shook it savagely after the departing adjutant.

"You've seen too much!" he muttered hoarsely. "I'm at the mercy of you and that young cub Hall from this on. All right! I'll pay you both out the first chance I get."

"So we've got a smooth-tongued scoundrel in the regiment," Hamshaw murmured, as he walked to his quarters. "I'll try to get him exchanged as soon as possible. But I wonder why Hall didn't expose him? That's a fine lad! I'm glad he whacked the cur."

Lascalles Encounters a Strange Acquaintance.

Bob hurried to Barrack-room No. 10, glad to rejoin his old friends again. After what he had gone through their cheery welcome would be doubly pleasant. He wanted friends—wanted them badly, he fully realised, if he was to hold his own and thwart the plots which Lascalles would weave for his destruction.

For the lad was in no doubt whatever as to that villain's character. Already he had nearly succeeded in ruining Bob. It was only Hamshaw's straightforwardness that had saved the lad. Had the adjutant sided with his brother-officer, then Bob would have been court-martialled for a certainty, and no military jury could have pardoned his assault on Lascalles, though, as soldiers, they might have felt that they would have done the same.

Barrack-room No. 10 was in a state of boisterous merriment as Bob entered. A dozen troopers, laughing heartily, were standing in a group gazing at a new recruit, who, sitting on his cot, was giving them back joke for joke as they crowded around him. So interested in the fresh arrival were the soldiers that they did not notice Bob's entry until he pushed his way amongst them.

"That you, Bob?" Dent cried at last, turning his head. "Where have you been, lad? We heard you'd been transferred to Squadron B."

"Yes, that's true; but I'm back here again now, I'm glad to say. I'll tell you about it another time. What's the fun?"

"See the bloke sitting on the bunk—eh? He's not half a rum 'un! Says he's nothing to learn about soldiering! That it's all as easy as cracking nuts! Just you wait till he gets up and starts walking, though! Why, there's not a sergeant-major in England as could lick him into shape!"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

"What's his name?"

"Alf Payne."

"Where does he come from?"

"Well, if you can believe him, he's been pretty nearly everywhere. The yarns he's been spinning are enough to make your hair rise up straight. He's seen a thunderin' lot, anyhow, and—"

Colour-Sergeant Baxter suddenly stamped into the room whilst Dent was speaking. The Flag's face wore that important look he always assumed when he had particular business on hand.

"Hallo—hallo there! Where's that new recruit?" he shouted. "We're getting full up of all sorts of— Criekey! Is that the chap?"

"Same to you, gov'nor!" the new recruit replied affably, as he shifted his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other. "Glad to make your acquaintance! We'll be pals afore long, I'm sure. Alf Payne is not a cove to stand on ceremony. Give us your flipper, and introduce yourself proper now, as you knows my name."

The Flag's jolly face flushed scarlet.

"Stand to attention!" he bawled. "Don't try any sauce at the start, or I'll soon break you in, and pretty roughly too. Get up on your legs, hold your hands to your sides, throw out your chest—"

The new recruit slowly took his pipe out of his mouth and very gingerly tapped the bars of the grate with the bowl. Having made certain that the pipe was empty, he blew through the stem to clear out any stray ashes, and then put the pipe in his pocket. Then he hugged his knees, winked at Baxter, and surveyed the group of privates confidentially.

"Who's he gettin' at?" he chuckled. "He fancies hisself a lot, don't he? Think he's a blessed boatswain or summat! Alf Payne isn't easily drawn, though! Go on, young fellar, I like yer style."

Baxter strode two steps forward, gripped the new recruit by the coat-collar, and jerked him to his feet. The latter growled, hitched up his trousers, and turned angrily.

"Belay there!" he grunted. "A joke's a joke, but I'm dead fagged, and ain't having any. Mind yer luff, or ye'll run into shoals, I tell ye. When I'm in the fo'castle I do as I like—do ye hear?"

"March out of this at once! Right—left—off you go! Quick!"

"Tain't my watch, so I stays here," Payne replied doggedly. "If ye have any fault to find, go up on the bridge and complain to the skipper. Show us your credentials, anyhow. I'm not going to move for any toggle-bolted, jump-joined—"

"I'm a sergeant!" Baxter thundered. "I'm your superior officer! I've come here now to start licking you into shape, and a tough job I'll have of it. Seems to me you've been dragged up mighty funnily, but you've a chance of becoming a man now, if you like, and if you jib—"

"You're my superior officer!" Payne cried, his eyes growing round with wonder. "A blessed petty officer, I s'pose! I never could hold with the likes of 'em. All right, if you're over me, I make no bones about carryin' out yer orders. I'll go aloft and close-haul the muslin when you blow the whistle. What's in the wind now, though?"

Baxter turned and walked towards the door.

"This way!" he commanded. "I'll show you a thing or two when I get you out on the parade-ground!"

Payne lurched forward, rolling from side to side. Baxter went first, the new recruit followed like an ambling elephant, and the privates, anxious to see the fun, brought up the rear in a body. Down the stairs and out into the open air they all clattered, and when they had reached a quiet spot Baxter wheeled round and proceeded to instruct Payne in the first lessons of drill.

"Stand to attention!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

As he spoke, Payne hitched his trousers, spat on his hands, and looked as if he was about to break into a run. Bob and his comrades burst into peals of laughter.

"Stand to attention! What do ye think you're doing?" Baxter jeered. "Bring your heels together, straighten your shoulders, arms to the sides, hand—"

"I'm waitin' for the whistle!" Payne growled. "This is fire-drill, ain't it? The davits are supposed to be right there, and the boat's crew is comin' up on deck as fast as they know how. When—"

"He's a blessed sailor!" the Flag cried, aghast. "How's any chap to turn him into a Hussar. I'd like to know? See here, Payne, you've got to forget all you ever knew. I see I've got three months' hard work ahead before I'll be able to straighten you out. Hi, Hosty! Just stand before him, will you, and show him the drill according as I give the command."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 363.

Now, Payne, watch that other trooper and do as he does. Don't ask questions, but just loosen your joints a bit."

Hosty sprang to attention facing the new recruit. Baxter quickly reeled off half a dozen different commands, and the trained soldier executed them with brilliant celerity and exactness. The sailor tried to follow Hosty's example, and the effect was so ludicrous that Dent, Bob, and the other troopers could hardly stand with laughing.

Payne's jaw dropped, and his eyes bulged out of his head. Up went his right hand, then his left, then he stepped to one side, and back again. Hosty was always a couple of movements ahead, and Payne struggled desperately to keep pace. His evolutions got mixed, he did a bit of two or three at a time; still he persevered. At last he was prancing about like a dervish, and waving his arms like a windmill. All the time he kept his eyes glued on Hosty, and so earnest was he in his efforts not to be outdone, that he did not notice the storm of laughter his antics evoked. Baxter entered into the absurdity of the situation after a time, and grinned as he still kept Payne gyrating like a Red Indian on the warpath.

A stern voice caused the merry crew to stiffen up to attention in an instant:

"What's all this rot about? Sergeant, have you nothing better to do than play the fool with a mountebank? Drill that man properly, or—"

Bob knew the voice. It was Lascelles who spoke.

But the effect on Payne was electrical. He stopped abruptly, gazed long and earnestly at Lascelles, and then he bounded forward with a whoop of delight.

"Why, it's Sammy! Blowed if it ain't Sammy!" he yelled. "How do, ole pard? Give us your flipper! Crumbs! I thought ye were wiped out that time—"

Lascelles' face had gone livid, fear was stamped on every feature, beads of moisture stood out on his forehead. He turned as if to run away, then he pulled himself together, and a sickly smile of recognition flitted around his thin lips.

"I'm glad to see you don't forget me!" he began, speaking hoarsely. "You're a grateful sort of chap, and there there's many who wouldn't have remembered such a small act of kindness as I was able to do you years ago. Say no more, my man. I assure you I don't want that sort of thing spoken about. So you've joined the regiment—eh?"

Payne drew his hand across his mouth nervously. He had never taken his eyes off Lascelles, and the first glance of recognition had now been succeeded by a hungry, questioning look, in which also there was marked evidence of suspicion. All the troopers were watching the twain closely; such an extraordinary meeting as this they had never seen before.

Lascelles did not give the recruit time to answer his question before he addressed him again:

"Come to my rooms for a few minutes till I inquire what you've been doing since I happened to meet you," he said. "Sergeant, you can postpone the drill. I know this man for a worthy fellow indeed, and you'll find he'll make a good soldier when he settles down. Now come along!"

Lascelles and Payne strode off, the officer leading the way hurriedly, and seemingly speaking in anything but a friendly way to the recruit when he had hastened out of earshot. Bob drew a long breath. Mystery seemed to be growing on mystery! The lad plucked Dent by the sleeve and drew him apart from the puzzled, silent group.

"That's the most bewildering business I ever clapped eyes on," Dent began. "Do you mark the way Payne spoke to Lascelles? He took him quite as a chum! I thought Lascelles was a great big pot, and—"

"See here, Bill, I'm going to confide in you," Bob interjected gravely. "I've found out a lot in the last few days, and yet I'm sure I'm only at the beginning of a puzzle that I must solve. I'm certain it means everything to me. Promise me that you'll always be dumb about what I'm going to tell you."

"Fire away; wild horses wouldn't make me split on a pal, Bob," Dent replied quietly. "What do you know?"

"Lascelles is my cousin!"

"What!"

"Fact! Don't stop walking or look so surprised. The other chaps are moving this way. Let's saunter on as if we've nothing particular to talk about. Yes, Lascelles is my first cousin, and, Dick, he is a scoundrel."

Dent whistled.

"What do you know about him, Bob?"

"Well, not much. I met him when I was a nipper, and I never saw him again until yesterday, when he sent for me. I'd no idea that any of my relations had enough money to be able to join a crack regiment as an officer. I don't know what his life's been like so far, but you see for yourself that Payne and he must have knocked about together on terms of equality at one time. Payne could tell us a lot if he would, but he'll be silent after to-day, I bet. Lascelles will square him when he gets him to his rooms."

"Why did Lascelles send for you?"

"It wasn't to do me a good turn, I assure you. I'm in his way, somehow, Bill; I'm certain of that."

"How?"

"I don't quite know, but suppose, for instance, that the money he has should belong equally to me—eh? I know nothing of my family, for my parents died when I was young; but doesn't it seem queer that Lascelles should have all the money and I should have none when we both came of the same stock? And why should he want to get rid of me if he's nothing to hide? There's a big mystery, Bill, and I'm going to keep on working till I find it out. What's more, I want you to help me, for you're the best friend I've got. Will you do that for me?"

Dent wheeled round and held out his hand.

"Put your fist there, old man! I'll help you all I know. I've liked you since the day you joined the Die Hards, and Bill Dent is not a chap to slink off when a pal wants him. Pl— Hold on! Here's Lieutenant Haines calling to us. I wonder what game he's up to now? His face looks full of fun!"

The Die Hards Triumph, and Receive Good News.

Haines was standing at the door of the gymnasium, and he led the way inside when Bob and Dent joined him. Another young officer, dressed in mufti, was sitting on a table.

"You know Lieutenant Gleadow, of the Speckled Greys," Haines chuckled. "We knocked up against 'em on Laffan Plain a while back, when we were going through squadron drill, and—ahem!—we didn't come off second best. Lieutenant Gleadow and I agreed, you may remember, that we'd have a cut in again the first chance we got—all in fun, of course—and he's come along with a challenge. He wants to take us on in a regular competition between the regiments—gymnastics, fencing, boxing, all that sort of thing. Our C.O.'s have given permission, so we'll have the fun to-night."

"To-night, sir!"

"Well, it's short notice; but we can't delay, for reasons the colonel will announce before we turn in. Now, I'm getting my team together. Lieutenant Gleadow says he's going to wipe the floor with us; but, at all events, I mean to put up a big fight."

Gleadow grinned.

"We'll knock you into a cocked hat!" he assented confidently. "Consider yourself beaten! I've got something big up my sleeve!"

"All right! You ought to lick us, for it's my belief you've had your chaps in training, and you've sprung this on us as a surprise at the last moment. Still, don't be too cockahoop. There's many—"

"Who's your pet pugilist?" Gleadow inquired.

"We haven't got one. Still, we'll make a show. This man, Bob Hall, will represent us in the middle-weight. Light-weights and middle-weights—isn't that the idea? Neither of the regiments are heavy."

Gleadow got up, nodded his head, and walked to the door.

"Ta-ta! You're hopelessly hammered!" he laughed gleefully. "One of our boxers is our trump-card!"

Then he vanished.

"Now, let's get to work," Haines began. "Dent, here's a list I've made out. Go round and get the chaps I've named. We'll have some practice at once. Hall, you'd better start on that punch-ball. A lot depends on you to-night!"

"But I don't know, sir, that—"

"The adjutant and I have agreed that you'll do all right. He says he likes your style, though I'm sure I don't know when he could have seen you sparring. We've chosen you, anyhow, and we look to you to pull the chestnuts out of the fire!"

Bob changed into his flannels, grinning as he remembered the circumstances under which Hamshaw had seen him using his fists. Soon the gymnasium was filled with a keen, excited crowd of Die Hards, and, amidst a scene of great enthusiasm, the men practised for the coming contest. All were grimly determined to struggle to the end rather than admit defeat at the hands of their soldier comrades in the rival regiment.

News of the contest spread like wildfire, and the Die Hards during the afternoon were in a state of hilarious excitement. Those selected to represent the regiment were relieved of all fatigue duty, the officers came in numbers to the gym and personally coached the contestants, and as the evening closed in, officers, non-coms., and privates from all the various troops quartered at Aldershot flocked into the barracks with earnest appeals for tickets. Three hours before the gym was opened

to the public there was not a seat or even standing room to be procured.

A ringing cheer greeted the gallant representatives of the Speckled Greys as they drove in waggonettes into the square. Down the Wellington Avenue hundreds of twinkling lights denoted the huge influx of visitors bent upon seeing the contest, and before the proceedings began the barrack square was blocked with motors, carriages, and traps of all sorts, so much so that men had to leave their vehicles a quarter of a mile from the gates and thread their way as best they could through the crush of traffic to their seats.

From the moment that the band ceased playing and the first item on the programme began a tense silence fell on the huge multitude, packed like bees in a hive. All in the gym were soldiers, all understood the feats of arms to a nicety, all were unstinting in their criticisms and applause. It was a trying audience for any youngster to face, and Bob, whose match was last on the programme, went hot and cold by turns as he gazed out from the dressing-room on to that great sea of faces.

The programme was made up of seven competitions, and opened with a musical ride. As the Die Hards trotted in the arena, whilst the band struck up a march, a burst of applause complimented Blyth, the riding-master, on the superb horsemanship his men displayed. In a bewildering maze in perfect time, without halt or stumble, the troopers rode in and out, backwards and forwards, now in a cluster, now breaking off into a long line, now meeting and passing in a chain. Then they drew up in two lines, galloped like a flash across the tan, and reined in suddenly a yard distant from the dais where the officers were grouped together. It was a splendid performance; but, to the dismay of the Die Hards, it was even surpassed by their rivals. The Speckled Greys had the better trained chargers; they won the first event, with the general approval of the audience.

The second was the jumping contest. It, too, fell to the visitors, and they also carried off the tug-of-war on horseback. By this time the Speckled Greys did not conceal their joy; they were elated with success, whilst the Die Hards sat silent and glum.

Next was the fencing bout. It was keenly contested, and for a long time the verdict hung in the balance. It was finally awarded to the Die Hards, but they had only the heart to raise a feeble cheer. In the gymnastic display they cleared the board with ease, and their faces began to glow brighter as all settled down comfortably in their seats to witness the two great events of the evening. With the light-weight and middle-weight boxing competitions the programme was to come to a close.

Hosty, the light-weight representative of the Die Hards, soon put his comrades at ease as to the upshot of his bout. He sparred beautifully, showed far superior science to his opponent, and wound up by knocking his man over the ropes. "Hurrah! Hurrah!" Dent shouted, jumping to his feet. "We're even now! The odd trick decides the game!"

The Die Hards were on their feet, waving their caps, shouting and cheering lustily; and the Speckled Greys, not to be outdone, broke also into round after round of defiant applause. For some minutes the stewards vainly strove to restore order, the officers ran amongst the men, shouting to them by name to sit down and keep cool, and it was only when the band struck up a few bars, and Bob Hall and his opponent were seen emerging from the dressing-room, that the great crowd of privates at last desisted, and resumed their seats.

Bob's face was a trifle pale, as well it might be. He knew that owing to circumstances he had never contemplated the honour of the regiment now reposed in his keeping. Each regiment had won three events; this one was to decide the victory.

Amidst a breathless silence, the two antagonists faced one another. Bob was an inch taller than his opponent, but he was also slighter by half a stone.

"Good ole Kemble!" the Speckled Greys yelled.

"Good ole Bob!" the Die Hards retorted vociferously.

Kemble turned and nodded cheerily in response to the encouragement, but Bob only clenched his teeth the more.

"Time!"

Bob started perceptibly as he heard the voice; it was Lascelles who held the watch. Before he could recover from his surprise Kemble had let fly, and caught him napping. The lad staggered backwards, his opponent followed up, and with a right-hand lead sent him to the tan.

An instant's silence, and then the Speckled Greys roared themselves hoarse. The victory now was theirs; no one could possibly win after such a disastrous start! So they reasoned.

But they were mistaken.

(Another grand instalment of this story will appear next Wednesday. ORDER IN ADVANCE.)

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



FROM THE FIRING-LINE!

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No. 16.—

A BELGIAN GIRL'S COURAGE.



We are on the move again. Hurrah!

While we have been making merry at the rest-camp, our officers have been enjoying a few days' leave in Old England. It was a grand sight to see them come in, in the middle of one afternoon.

Fifty London motor-buses brought them in, after a trip that would make even a hustling Yankee's hair curl. The trip between Victoria Station in London and the French port took less than four hours, so our captain told me. So fast did the transport vessel cross the Channel, that three-quarters of the military passengers were rendered hors-d'combat.

The flooded areas had been left behind. At any moment the news might come through that the Germans were in full retreat, and we lads of the cavalry brigades, who had been bucked up by our rest, would have the glorious opportunity of pursuing the Kaiser's pets and giving them a good old taste of good old British steel.

Up to the moment of writing that order has not yet come through; but we've not been idle, for all that.

Almost immediately our troop got busy. We were divided up into scout patrols, and, by the greatest good-fortune, our little patrol was the first to bring in a batch of prisoners.

It was in a little scrap at a forester's hut, on the borders of France and Belgium. And it was there I met the bravest and prettiest lass that ever wore a petticoat.

That's saying something, for amongst the refugees from the countries of our gallant Allies there are scores of brave women, old and young, as you'll guess from the accounts I've given you from time to time.

But this Belgian lass surpasses them all, as I think you'll agree with me when you hear my story.

I might say that at first we had a bit of a shock. We were moving cautiously through a wood, where the ground was covered with snow, and we'd not seen a single footprint of the enemy, when all of a sudden, as we came silently to a clearing, we found a slim, graceful, round-cheeked girl of about eighteen standing before us.

The moonlight was shining full on her golden hair. She was dressed roughly as a peasant's lass, but no West End lady had a better complexion, lovelier features, and such tender eyes. Ah, well, I'd better not say too much about her, or you'll be thinking things. Let it go that she's wonderfully pretty.

She stood so still that I, who was in front of our lads, drew rein and stared at her as if she were a statue.

"You are the brave British Tommies—eh?" she asked, in a voice that was like the ringing of silver bells.

I nodded, and asked if there was anything we could do for her. Her answer made us all jump.

"I have ten German soldiers in my mother's hut," she said, as calmly as if she were talking of logs of wood. "Would you care to have them?"

"Have 'em!" puffed one of the troopers. "Gee whiz, angel face, we'll have 'em on toast for breakfast!"

"You do not believe me!" cried the girl, shrugging her shoulders and extending her hands. "But it is true. I have come out only to look for someone to take them away. Ten Germans in a tiny forester's hut, where only two women live, are something of a nuisance, monsieur."

I was the monsieur, for she bowed to me.

"A nuisance!" I replied. "I should say so! Take us to your home, and tell us all about it on the way."

"It is some distance, monsieur," said the girl, with a coy smile. "Could I ride?"

She looked with a bewitching smile at my saddle. What could a poor corporal do? I lifted her up to a seat before me. She was like a piece of ice itself. I wrapped my great-coat about her. I can see her eyes sparkling now while I did it.

And then as we moved off she told the story of a brave and keen-witted girl—the story how she had protected her mother and herself from the violence of the Kaiser's barbarians, and, more than that, had set a trap for them, into which everyone of them had fallen.

She had been chopping wood just outside the forester's hut, where she lived with her widowed mother—her father had perished early in the war—when all of a sudden the bullets had begun to whiz about her ears.

It was evening-time, and she just got a glimpse of Prussian uniforms as she bolted within the hut and barred the door.

Her aged mother was terribly frightened, but Anita—that was her name—went on attending to the stew that was boiling over the fire when the Germans came to the door and hammered upon it with their rifles.

"Let us in, and give us food and shelter," they demanded, "or we will beat the door down and kill you!"

Anita did not doubt that they meant every word they said. She had seen evidence with her own eyes of Prussian cruelty and butchery.

Anita comforted her mother, and let the Germans in. There were ten of them. They were big fellows, but famished for want of food and worn out with fatigue.

"Set that stew before us!" bawled one of them. "Give us wine and more food—the best of everything you've got!"

The men swore, and threatened the girl. Anita did not even turn pale. She went about the place with a smile, attending to their wants, and when they ordered her and her mother to go out of the hut, and to spend the night, with snow on the ground, and freezing hard, without any shelter, she did not demur.

"I knew they had been sent to me," she told me. "My turn had come to avenge my poor father."

She and her aged mother shivered outside the hut for an hour, two hours, until the Germans were snoring in the little living-room, like the hogs they are. Then an idea came to the brave girl.

"Wait here, mother," she said, "and do not be afraid."

She slipped off into the darkness. Presently out of the silence there rang a number of shots. The little wood echoed with hoarse shouts.

Anita ran to the door of the hut and beat upon it with her fist.

"Let me in!" she cried. "The British Tommies have come! Let me in. I can save you!"

The Germans, roused by the shots and the shouting, were all excited and muddled. To them it seemed as if the distant woods were alive with a whole army corps.

"You must go down into the cellar," Anita told them.

"The British Tommies are sweeping forward in great numbers. You cannot fight them; you are too few. And if they find you here they will accuse me of harbouring you—of encouraging the enemy."

"The girl is right," said their leader. "We must go down into the cellars."

(Continued on page iii. of cover.)

FROM THE FIRING-LINE!

(Continued from page 24.)

One by one, tripping over each other's heels in their terrified haste, they stumbled down into the dark, stone-flagged cellar. Anita let down the trapdoor upon them, then fixed the iron bar, calling in her trembling mother to help her make the prisoners still more secure by putting heavy furniture upon the German's only way of escape.

"It was a trick, monsieur," she concluded. "There were no brave British Tommies. It was only my father's old shot-gun, which he loved to use in the days of peace. The echoing woods did the rest. My mother will be pleased to see you, monsieur."

Did you ever hear a pluckier story? Anita had left her old mother, no longer frightened, in her home, while she had set out for the British lines, which she knew were seven miles distant, and she was trudging through the snow when we met her.

Long before we reached Anita's home we could hear the beauties. They were yelling for all they were worth. The tune wasn't the famous "Deutschland Über Alles," neither. They had tumbled to the fact that they had been trapped, and were squealing like a horde of rats.

There was a grating—a small space in the bricks protected by iron bars—through which they were yelling, and occasionally sending out a volley of bullets—for they had taken their rifles down with them. We had to make a wide detour round to avoid their shots.

Anita went to the trapdoor, as soon as she had embraced her silver-haired mother, and called to the Germans in her sweetest voice.

"The British Tommies have come to take you away to where you will get better food and better quarters than you have had with your own wretched army, though you do not deserve them!" she called down to them. "But you must pass your rifles out of the grating, every one of you!"

For answer, the Kaiser's pets roared and raved like lunatics, and discharged their rifles again and again into the empty air. It was of no use. There wasn't a German anywhere near to hear them.

"We will never surrender!" they shouted.

"Very well," I said, "we'll see what we can do to help you change your mind."

I went outside the hut and looked round. Near by was a pump standing above a well. It was full of water, owing to the floods and the heavy storms.

"If we only had a hose-pipe we could easily flood 'em out," said one of my pals.

"Let's make a hose-pipe of our own," said I.

Along the top of the hut, and running down one side, was a great length of gutter-spout. It was not difficult to pull it down. After a struggle we managed to fix it up under the pump, and whilst the lads took it in turn to work the old handle up and down, I stood by the trapdoor, sending a stream of icy water down into their midst.

In vain they stormed up the creaky ladder, trying to fight their way out. About as useful were their attempts to plug me with their bullets. But they didn't give up without a struggle.

One or two of them got almost to the top before I knocked them back again with the butt-end of my carbine.

At length the beggars had sufficient water to satisfy them. "We're drowning!" they shouted. "We give in!"

One after the other they poked their rifles out of the grating. When we counted the ten weapons, we stood by while the trapdoor was raised, and the grey-garbed pets of Kaiser Bill came out of the black hole.

What a miserable crew they were! Every one of them was soaked up to his neck, and stood shivering, without a bit of spirit, their ugly faces the colour of boiled cabbage.

All they did was to whine and whimper as we bade leave of pretty Anita and her mother and took the prisoners back to camp. How our old colonel laughed when I told him how we'd flooded them out!

"That was a very plucky girl, corporal," he said when I'd finished; "and I'm thinking that cellar full of water will be very inconvenient for the lass and her mother. Perhaps you'd better go along in the morning and see if you can't help them to get dry again."

And you bet I'll take the dear old chap at his word!

(Corporal Charles relates another of his stirring adventures next Wednesday. Order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"THE ST. JIM'S RECRUIT!"

By Martin Clifford.

This, our next grand, long, complete tale of Tom Merry and his chums relates how Mr. Railton, the popular Housemaster at St. Jim's, is brought to a stern sense of duty, which prompts him to enlist in Kitchener's fine Army, in order to swell the "thin khaki line" extending over the shell-swept territory of France and Belgium. The sensation created at St. Jim's when the astounding news becomes known is truly terrific, and Mr. Railton, after signing on at the local recruiting-office as a private, is accorded a demonstration the like of which has seldom been witnessed at the old school before. But the greatest surprise is yet to come, for John Rivers, the one-time crackman, follows Mr. Railton's shining example and enlists in the same regiment. The Housemaster bears his blushing honours thick upon him, and when he leaves his comfortable position at St. Jim's to take up the more onerous duties of a soldier there is a most hearty and impressive send-off for

"THE ST. JIM'S RECRUIT!"

A FLIGHT TO FAME!

Our latest companion paper, the "Dreadnought," is flourishing apace. It has leapt into popularity with surprising suddenness, but the reason for this is not far to seek. Never yet was a Harry Wharton story written which did not claim its full complement of admirers, and I was fully aware, when I commissioned Mr. Frank Richards to write of Harry Wharton's early schooldays, that my chums would not be long in rallying round.

Only a few weeks have elapsed since Gerald K., of Southsea, voiced an earnest appeal that this important step should be taken, and I replied in the "Magnet" that I should need the co-operation of hundreds of readers before I could see my way clear to grant his request. I need not have wasted time in saying this, however, for no sooner was my Southsea chum's letter published in the "Magnet" than I was inundated with letters from all quarters of the kingdom, endorsing Gerald K.'s idea to a man. I then realised that something must be done in the matter, and that right quickly.

About this time the management of that well-known boys' weekly, the "Dreadnought," was placed in my hands, and I was thus enabled to satisfy my reader-chums at once.

The publishing day of our companion paper is Thursday, and to avoid disappointment you will be forearmed and find it a wise policy to have a standing order with your newsagent. Apart from the Harry Wharton stories, which have made the name of Frank Richards a household word throughout the Empire, there are many attractive features in the "Dreadnought"—twenty-eight pages, in fact, of good, wholesome, and entertaining reading matter.

I might mention that the stories of Greyfriars School now running in our latest journal are perhaps not so lengthy as some would wish; but my chums will be glad to know that steps are being taken to remedy this failing, if such it can be called, and that Mr. Richards' yarns will soon be of a length which will give my readers the fullest value for their money.

I confidently look to my loyal vanguard of Gemites to back me up in making this new venture a huge success; and you will be doing your hard-worked Editor an inestimable favour by commending to all your boy and girl friends that magnificent journal,

THE DREADNOUGHT!

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

F. Hartford (Durham).—I thank you most cordially for your support. The Anti-Gem Society has already been effectively crushed, thanks to the unwavering loyalty of my reader-chums. Best wishes.

"La Marquise" (South Devon).—Thank you indeed, "La Marquise," for your long and interesting letter. I wish you had given your address, that I might have written you fully. No. 304 of the "Gem," entitled "The Cockney Schoolboy," described how Hammond came to St. Jiri's. I was very pleased to hear of your successes, and hope they are but the prelude to many more. Good luck to you!

THE EDITOR.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.**LESS LIABILITY.**

Johnny's mother had instituted a fine of a halfpenny for every stain made on the tablecloth.

One day Johnny was seen to be rubbing his finger for a long time over a spot he had evidently made by his plate.

"What are you doing, Johnny?" asked his mother at last.
"Nothing, ma. I was just trying to rub two spots into one."—Sent in by D. Philpott, Tonypany.

EASY!

Several Jack Tars were sitting in the front row of the circus. A young lady lion-tamer, young and fair, in the lion's cage, beckoned to a lion, which came forward and took a piece of sugar from her mouth.

"Why, I could do that trick!" said one of the sailors.
"Oh, could you, really?" said the fair one.
"You bet your sweet life!" replied the gallant Tar.
"Just as well as the lion!"—Sent in by R. MacMillan, Cambuslang, near Glasgow.

THE SIGN THAT FAILED.

"A howling dog woke me up last night."
"Really? They say it's a sign of death when a dog howls in the night."
"Well, it wasn't this time. My revolver missed fire, and before I could pull again, the brute was gone!"—Sent in by W. Smith, Shirley, Southampton.

NO LABOUR WASTED.

A farmer, showing a prospective buyer over some potato-fields, informed him that he never troubled to water the ground.
"How is it that the ground is so damp, then?" asked the visitor.
"Well," replied the farmer, "I plant one row of potatoes, and then one row of onions, and the onions cause the eyes of the potatoes to water."—Sent in by John Cameron, Saltcoats, N.B.

SQUASHED!

A short time ago a heated discussion on the war took place between two parties in the North of England. Said one:
"By gosh, Georgie, they must have awful big guns, those Jarmins! They can fire a ton shell for thirty miles!"
"Why, man, that's nowt!" replied the other. "Armstrong's are getting a gun made to fire a two-ton shell for fifty miles, and what Jarmins it doesn't kill or wound it'll bring back prisoners."
Then the first speaker found it convenient to change the subject.—Sent in by F. Todd, Preston.

ANOTHER IRON CROSS.

Von Kluck: "I vos liek dese Pritish troops, sire!"
Kaiser Bill: "Ver' goot."
Von Kluck: "Ya, I vos make dem run."
Kaiser Bill: "Ver' goot."
Von Kluck: "Yes, I vos make dem run ver' quick!"
Kaiser Bill: "Petter und petter!"
Von Kluck: "But dey not catch me, 'cos I run faster!"—Sent in by Miss M. Clayden, Cambridge.

BEGONE!

"You look very sad, little boy," said a kind old lady.
"Can I be of any help to you?"
The little boy, who had been reading stories of the kind usually found in "penny horrors," struck an attitude, and exclaimed:
"Hist, old woman! Thou canst be of signal service to me an thou wilt. Seest yon tobaccony shop across the way? Take this bronze piece, and bid the scurvy knave within supply thee with two cigarettes and a match. Be secret, mother, and betray me not, or thy life shall pay the penalty! I will await thee here. Begone!"—Sent in by E. Gibson, Mirfield, Yorks.

COULDN'T BE HELPED.

"Why did you come off that horse?" rasped out the sergeant, with withering contempt.
The cavalry recruit ceased dusting himself, and answered:
"Couldn't help it, sergeant. There was nothing up in the air for me to hold on to."—Sent in by Thos. Muter, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

THE ONLY WAY.

An officer who was in charge of some raw recruits marched them, for the first time, through the city in which they were stationed.
Suddenly from the ranks rang out a loud "Halt!" In obedience to the command, the men wavered and came to a full stop.
"Who gave that order?" thundered the enraged officer.
"Potts, sir—Potts!" replied a dozen voices.
Every eye was turned upon the offending Potts.
"What did you mean, sir, by giving that order?" demanded the officer.
"Well, sir," said Private Potts, "I've been trying hard for some time to get this company to keep step with me; and they wouldn't do it, so I stopped them to begin all over again."—Sent in by Eric S. Gibson, East Kilbride, Scotland.

STICK TO IT!

"My boy," said a successful man, "if you wish to get on at all in life you must stick to things. Sticking to things wins in the end."
"Oh, I don't know!" retorted the youth. "Take for instance the postage-stamp. That sticks all right, but all it gets out of the deal is a smack on the face and a place in the waste-paper basket."—Sent in by F. Rudd, Theddlethorpe, near Louth.

HOW CRUEL!

Willie was on a visit to his uncle who lived in London. One day he was taken to the Thames to see the shipping. He was very interested in one incident. A small tug was towing a larger ship up the river, and letting off its siren at frequent intervals.
Willie watched this for some time, with a puzzled frown, and then, turning to his uncle, he exclaimed:
"Oh, uncle, look at that big boat! It's got hold of the little one by its tail and making it squeal!"—Sent in by F. Folds, St. Albans.

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.