# Grand 50,000-Word School Tale

## OF TOM MERRY AND TALBOT.

MONSTER SPRING DOUBLE NUMBER

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**Some of the Characters in the Great Tale of School Life at St. Jim's in this issue :—**

*(Reading from left to right.)*

Skimpole. Monty Lowther. Manners. Dr. Holmes. Wally D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus. Figgins. Blake, *(Sitting)* : Talbot. Marie Rivers. Tom Merry. Cousin Ethel. Fatty Wynn.

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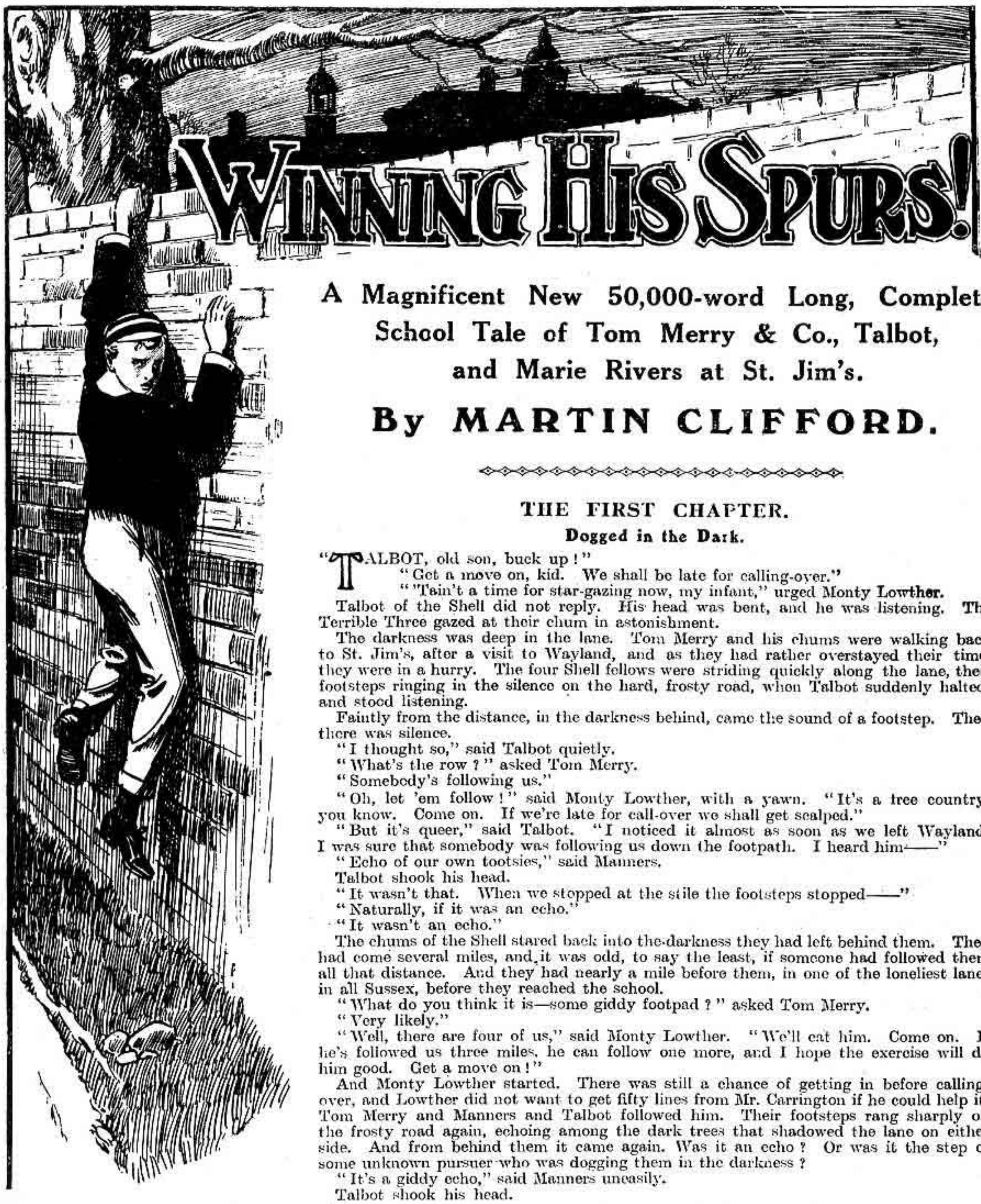


**A Magnificent New 50,000-word Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co., Talbot, and Marie Rivers at St. Jim's.**

## By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### Dogged in the Dark.

"TALBOT, old son, buck up!"

"Get a move on, kid. We shall be late for calling-over."

"'Tain't a time for star-gazing now, my infant," urged Monty Lowther.

Talbot of the Shell did not reply. His head was bent, and he was listening. The Terrible Three gazed at their chum in astonishment.

The darkness was deep in the lane. Tom Merry and his chums were walking back to St. Jim's, after a visit to Wayland, and as they had rather overstayed their time, they were in a hurry. The four Shell fellows were striding quickly along the lane, their footsteps ringing in the silence on the hard, frosty road, when Talbot suddenly halted, and stood listening.

Faintly from the distance, in the darkness behind, came the sound of a footstep. Then there was silence.

"I thought so," said Talbot quietly.

"What's the row?" asked Tom Merry.

"Somebody's following us."

"Oh, let 'em follow!" said Monty Lowther, with a yawn. "It's a free country, you know. Come on. If we're late for call-over we shall get scalped."

"But it's queer," said Talbot. "I noticed it almost as soon as we left Wayland. I was sure that somebody was following us down the footpath. I heard him——"

"Echo of our own tootsies," said Manners.

Talbot shook his head.

"It wasn't that. When we stopped at the stile the footsteps stopped——"

"Naturally, if it was an echo."

"It wasn't an echo."

The chums of the Shell stared back into the darkness they had left behind them. They had come several miles, and it was odd, to say the least, if someone had followed them all that distance. And they had nearly a mile before them, in one of the loneliest lanes in all Sussex, before they reached the school.

"What do you think it is—some giddy footpad?" asked Tom Merry.

"Very likely."

"Well, there are four of us," said Monty Lowther. "We'll eat him. Come on. If he's followed us three miles, he can follow one more, and I hope the exercise will do him good. Get a move on!"

And Monty Lowther started. There was still a chance of getting in before calling-over, and Lowther did not want to get fifty lines from Mr. Carrington if he could help it. Tom Merry and Manners and Talbot followed him. Their footsteps rang sharply on the frosty road again, echoing among the dark trees that shadowed the lane on either side. And from behind them it came again. Was it an echo? Or was it the step of some unknown pursuer who was dogging them in the darkness?

"It's a giddy echo," said Manners uneasily.

Talbot shook his head.

"Stop suddenly and listen," he said.

"Oh, all right!"

The four juniors tramped on a little distance, and then halted suddenly. As they halted, the echoes of their footsteps died away in the trees. But from the road behind them came ringing clearly the sound of footfalls.

Clearly through the silent dusk came the footfalls—but only for a moment or two. Then they suddenly ceased.

Silence reigned once more.

The juniors looked at one another in the gloom, with startled expressions. There was no further doubt of it. Some unknown was dogging them in the lonely lane, stopping when they stopped, starting again when they started. It gave them an eerie feeling.

"What the dickens does it mean?" muttered Monty Lowther, forgetting all about calling-over this time. "He stopped a minute after we did. He didn't want us to hear his hoofs. Can't be an ordinary johnny, or he'd come straight on. He's dogging us!"

"I was sure of it, ever since we left Wayland," said Talbot.

"Blessed if I can make it out!" said Tom Merry, peering back into the deep shadows. "He's keeping out of sight, whoever he is. Must be some blessed footpad. A chap was stopped on this road yesterday by a footpad, who took his spare cash. One of the kids from the Grammar School. I heard about it."

Silence still reigned. The unknown, whoever he was, was keeping still—doubtless waiting for the sound of footsteps before he recommenced his pursuit.

"I don't like this!" said Talbot. "That chap is just keeping pace with us. He doesn't want to overtake us yet."

"But what do you think?"

"There may be some more of them ahead on the road, and he's waiting till we're right in the trap before he comes up."

"My hat!"

The juniors stared round them uneasily. But the dark trees that shadowed the lane were all that they could see.

Talbot's suggestion was not a pleasant one; but it seemed to be the only way of accounting for that mysterious pursuit. If the footpad—for the pursuer could scarcely be anything else—was not trying to overtake them, what could be his motive? It could serve no purpose to dog their footsteps at a distance till they reached their destination.

The only possible explanation was that there were other rascals on the road, and that the footpad was waiting till the juniors came up with them; and then, doubtless, he would give a signal. It was not a pleasant position. There was no habitation within a mile of the spot, and high hedges and trees shut in the narrow lane, with ploughed fields beyond them.

"Lucky you spotted him, Talbot!" said Tom Merry, after a pause. "I shouldn't have noticed it. You've got sharp ears."

"I needed to have in the old days," said Talbot quietly. "Look here, if we're walking into a trap—and it looks like it—the best thing we can do is to deal with this fellow at once, while he's alone."

"Good egg!" said Manners. "But how? He won't come on till we start."

"No good going back for him," said Tom Merry. "He's only got to keep quiet, and we should never see him in the dark."

"I know that. There's another way. You fellows go on, and leave me here," said Talbot. "Make as much row as you can with your boots, and he won't notice that there are only three, instead of four. I'll take cover here, and wait till he comes by, and nail him."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, we're likely to leave you to handle a footpad all on your lonesome—I don't think!"

"No fear!" said Lowther. "Two of us can stay."

Talbot shook his head.

"He would notice the difference in the footsteps then. I shall be all right; you needn't go far! As soon as he comes by I'll give the Curlew call, and you can come back at top speed."

"But——"

"Oh, get on!" said Talbot. "Do you think I can't handle a tramp? You saw me tackle a bargeman once!"

"Yes, but——"

"There's no time to waste. You needn't go far. When you've covered about fifty yards you can just mark time on the road, so that he'll still hear your boots, but you won't be getting any further."

The juniors chuckled. The idea of taking in the footpad by that simple device tickled their sense of humour.

"I'll give the signal before I tackle him, and you can come back at once," added Talbot. "You could do fifty yards under the minute, I suppose?"

"Well, all right!"

Talbot stepped back into the thicker cover of the trees. In the middle of the lane a dim starlight fell, but under the trees was dense blackness.

The Terrible Three started on again, clattering with their boots on the hard road. As they tramped on they certainly made noise enough for four. They disappeared in the shadows; and Talbot, silent under the trees, listened intently. A grim smile came over his handsome face as he heard the sound of the footfalls behind once more. The trick had succeeded, and the unknown pursuer was coming on again. Talbot waited.

The footsteps of the Terrible Three sounded fainter as they tramped on. The footfalls of the mysterious pursuer came sharper and sharper to Talbot's ears as he waited and watched. Closer and closer; and the junior's eyes were fastened on the strip of starlight down the middle of the road. A figure loomed up—the form of a man in tattered clothes, with a battered bowler hat, and a stick under his arm. He came within a few feet of Talbot, and then the Shell fellow made a sudden spring into the road.

"Stop!"

The footpad or tramp, or whatever he was, halted suddenly, with a sharp exclamation. In the dim starlight a hard, stubbly, desperate face peered at Talbot. Instantly a grin of satisfaction overspread the desperate face, and the ruffian muttered huskily:

"The Toff!"

Talbot gave a cry.

"Hookey Walker!"

Faintly in the distance still sounded the footfalls of the Terrible Three. They were not going on; they were marking time on the road, waiting for the signal from Talbot. But Talbot did not give the signal.

In the dim starlight the man and the boy stood looking at one another, and Talbot's face was as pale as death.

## CHAPTER 2.

### A Spectre from the Past.

TALBOT of the Shell gazed at the tattered figure, the hard, desperate face, like a fellow in a dream.

He was unable to speak for some moments.

The man watched him—savagely, intently. Like a shadow from the past—the almost forgotten past—that savage face came to the Shell fellow of St. Jim's.

It brought back to his mind so much that he would gladly have forgotten—the old black days, when Talbot, now one of the most popular fellows at St. Jim's, had been—what he scarcely cared to think of now. Whole oceans of time seemed to have rolled between his old life and his new.

Yet the days were not far behind him when Talbot of the Shell had been known as the "Toff"—when he was called the prince of cracksmen, when the Professor and Hookey Walker had been his comrades in a life of crime.

If sincere repentance, if steady honesty and integrity, if a life as straight as that of any fellow at St. Jim's could atone for the past, Talbot had atoned for it. More than once suspicion had fallen upon him—helped by what was known of his unfortunate early days, when he had been brought up to be a cracksman among cracksmen. But suspicion had rolled by, leaving him unstained. The Toff had had wealth at his command—the prince of cracksmen had never known want; but Talbot of the Shell, the scholarship boy, knew the pinch of poverty. But he had never flinched from his new path.

Once his feet had been set on the path of honour he had never looked back.

All he desired now was to forget the wretched past, and already it was fading; it seemed like a dream that was half unreal. The future was bright before him.

John Rivers—the Professor—repentant of his crimes, had joined the new Army, and was doing his duty for his King and country. Marie Rivers, Talbot's old playmate and chum, was at St. Jim's, loved by all. Hookey Walker, baffled in his savage attempt to revenge himself upon the Toff, had disappeared behind prison walls.

And now here was Hookey Walker, like a ghost risen from the blackness of the past, to confront the Toff in his new life.

The boy could not speak.

The sight of that hard, criminal face brought back a flood of miserable memories, and he was dumb.

It was the cracksman who broke the silence. His voice was husky.

"Toff, I've been watching for this chance! I wanted to speak to you, Toff."

"If you cannot believe Talbot's word, Tom Merry, I have come here for nothing. I thought you were mistaken, and that if I should explain, you would know that you had wronged Talbot, and would speak to him frankly and tell him so——" "So I would, if—if——" "You need say no more," said Marie, with a flash in her eyes. "Your friendship is not worth very much to Talbot if you cannot trust him. Good-bye!" (*See Chapter* 18.)

Talbot was silent.

"I've been watching for days," muttered the cracksman—"looking for a chance of catching you alone, Toff. I spotted you coming away from Wayland, with them others. I followed—I 'oped I could catch you alone to speak to you. My luck's in, Toff! Have they gone on?"

Talbot found his voice at last.

"They are not far away," he said. "They may return any minute. We—we thought there was a gang of you on the road—footpads—and——"

"'Tain't that. I'm alone."

"What are you following us for?"

"To speak to you, Toff."

Talbot understood now. Had he dreamed that the mysterious pursuer who was dogging the juniors' footsteps was Hookey Walker, he would have understood the reason of that strange pursuit. It was not a footpad—there was no gang of footpads on the road. Hookey Walker had been dogging their steps in the hope of getting an opportunity of speaking to the Toff alone. It was all clear now.

"What are you doing here?" muttered Talbot dully. "You were in prison. You escaped once, but——"

"And I got away agin," said Hookey Walker. "There ain't a prison in the country that will hold me long. But don't you be afraid, Toff——"

"Afraid!" said Talbot disdainfully. "Of you!"

"No, I always knowed you was a plucked 'un," said Hookey Walker huskily. "And you could 'andle me now, Toff, easy. When a man's been starving for weeks, 'he ain't 'ard to handle."

"You had your chance," said Talbot. "When I threw it up, I asked you——"

"I knows it. I was a fool not to foller your advice," said Hookey Walker. "I've 'ad time to think about it since. Toff, I ain't what I was—I give you my davy! Toff, when I got out afore, I came 'ere, and I asked you for 'elp, and I'd have scragged you if I could. I own up—honest. I was mad at your deserting the gang—I own it. I'd 'ave scragged you, and I was caught. You hadn't a hand in it, I know; but I was nailed. Well, 'ere I am agin. You won't turn your back on an old pal, Toff!"

Talbot started.

"You scoundrel! Do you think that I will help you?"

"You must, Toff!"

"Must!" Talbot laughed scornfully. "Must! So you



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are threatening me again! You shall see how much your threats are worth!"

"Toff, I ain't threatening! Listen to me!" muttered the wretched man hoarsely. "Do you know why I risked it and bolted? It wasn't easy to get away, and a bullet clipped my ear when I bolted. Toff, I 'ad news in prison, and then I had to chance it. The kid—Toff, she's ill—she's starving, Toff, and—and me in prison!" The rough, stubbly face was working, and Talbot stared at the ruffian in amazement. "When I got loose, I went back to the old rookery in Angel Alley. But the gang's broken up, Toff; they was all gone. I couldn't get track of them. Where is the Professor, Toff?"

"Where you will never seen him," said Talbot. "John Rivers has given it up, even as I did. He is in the Army now!"

"In the Army—the Professor!" muttered Hookey Walker dazedly.

"Yes."

"You—you mean to say he's chucked the old game?"

"Even as I have done."

"And Miss Marie?"

"The same."

Hookey Walker passed his hand over his brow.

"I reckoned as 'ow the police had him," he muttered. "There wasn't one of the old gang left in the rookery. That's finished—for good! No 'elp for me there! And—and the kid, Toff. I tell you I've 'ad time to think it over. Toff, I give you my davy that, if I get a chance, I'm going straight!"

"Straight! You!"

Hookey Walker winced.

"For the kid's sake, Toff."

"There was a robbery on this road a couple of days ago," said Talbot icily. "A Grammar School boy was robbed of a few shillings. I know now——"

"When a man's starving, Toff——"

Talbot made a weary gesture.

"It's no good, Hookey. But the kid—what is the matter with the kid? You must clear off. I sha'n't say that I've seen you; but to have any connection with you is impossible. The police must be searching for you——"

"They don't know I'm 'ere," said Hookey Walker. "They think I'm drowned. They ain't looking for me 'ere, Toff—they ain't looking for me at all, I give you my davy!"

"But how——"

"I worked it," said Hookey Walker. "I got this clobber from a tramp what was drowned in a canal. I reckon he was tipsy and pitched in. I found him there, and changed clothes with him, and they've found the body with my convict's clothes on—arter days in the canal. They think it's me. I'm safe, Toff, if you don't give me away. You won't give away an old pal!"

"I won't give you away," muttered Talbot; "I can't do that. But you must go—you must go! And there is no time to lose. My friends are waiting for a signal from me to come back!"

"You won't give it, Toff! I can't go—there's the kid!"

Talbot looked at him hard. In the old days, he had known of the "kid"—the one soft spot in the ruffian's hard heart—he had known of that. He had never seen Hookey Walker's child. He had known that the little girl was with a relation in the country somewhere, and that the cracksman sent money for her support, that was all. In the grim, hard, unscrupulous life of the criminal, there had been that one bright spot—his affection for the kid.

"Where is she?" asked Talbot abruptly.

"She's 'ere!"

"Here!" muttered Talbot.

"In a cottage near Wayland. And she's ill, Toff, and starving. I wouldn't 'ave troubled you—I wouldn't 'ave seen you agin, I give you my davy—but there's the kid. I must have help. Toff, I swear that I ain't the man I was—I've 'ad enough of it. Prison has took it out of me. And—and the kid! Give me a chance, and I'm going straight. I'll get out of 'ere, and take her with me; only give me a chance! But I'm starving, Toff—starving, and she's starving! You ain't going to desert an old pal like that, Toff!"

Talbot compressed his lips. His first impression had been that the ruffian had returned to renew his threats, and in that case the Toff would have dealt with him easily enough; he was insensible to fear. But Hookey Walker's appeal touched him strangely. If the man was repentant—if he sought to throw the past behind, as the Toff had done, was it not up to his old pal to help him? Had he a right to stand safely upon the shore while one who had been, at least, his comrade, was still battling in the waves? But to renew his connection with the old gang—to risk exciting the suspicion of his chums, to break the law—for it was breaking the law to help an escaped convict—to risk everything he had won at so hard a cost!

It was a terrible problem. Yet the misery and desperate suffering in the hard face of the cracksman touched his very heart.

"Toff, you'll 'elp an old pal——"

There was a sudden rush of feet. Tom Merry's voice rang out:

"Collar him! Hookey Walker, by gum! Collar him!"

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## CHAPTER 3.

### The Escape of the Cracksman.

TOM MERRY and his comrades came up with a rush. They had waited for Talbot's signal, but it had not come.

And, alarmed at last for their chum, as they heard no sound, they had returned to the spot, running silently on the belt of grass beside the road.

They recognised the cracksman at once, as he stood there with the starlight on his stubbly face.

"Collar him!"

Hookey Walker sprang back with a fierce oath.

The stick slid down into his hand, and he whirled it into the air and struck out savagely as the Terrible Three sprang upon him.

"Tom!" panted Talbot.

Tom Merry uttered a cry; he caught the blow on his arm, and saved his head, and his arm dropped numbed. Hookey Walker turned and darted away. Before Manners and Lowther could grasp him he was fleeing down the road.

"After him!" panted Tom Merry.

"You're hurt, Tom!"

"It's nothing. After him! Don't let him get away!"

The Terrible Three dashed in pursuit. Tom Merry's arm was aching from the blow, but he did not heed the pain. Hookey Walker—Talbot's old enemy—had come back! The chums of the Shell had only one thought—to lay the rascal by the heels. They did not heed, they did not even hear, the voice of Talbot as he called to them to stop.

The three chums, not even realising that Talbot was not with them, raced away down the road after the fleeing cracksman.

Talbot stood in the road, breathing hard.

What was he to do?

Help his chums to capture the escaped cracksman—as they expected him to do. But for the wretched tale Hookey Walker had told him, the Toff would not have hesitated. Had the ruffian returned with threats upon his lips, as he had done before, Talbot would have had no mercy upon him. But now——

The Toff groaned.

Was he never to be free from the grip of the past? Was some spectre incessantly to rise thus to blacken his new life?

He stood motionless. He could not help to capture the wretched man, whose one good trait—his affection for his child—had placed him in peril. Yet he could not abandon his chums in a struggle with a desperate ruffian.

Talbot hurried after them at last. But they had already vanished.

The Terrible Three were on their mettle. Their only thought was that Talbot's old enemy had come back, and it was a chance to seize him. They understood now why he had dogged them—to get at Talbot. And they did not mean to let him escape. The ground fairly flew under their feet as they raced in pursuit.

The footsteps of the fleeing man rang ahead of them in the gloom. They were gaining. Hookey Walker, weakened by hunger and exposure, was not his old self. In desperation, the wretched convict left the road, plunging through a gap in the hedge, and taking to the fields.

"After him!"

On the open fields, out of the shadow of the trees, the starlight fell clearly; and the moon was coming up. The juniors were pursuing him by sight now—they could easily see the gaunt form leaping away before them. Hookey Walker had dropped his cudgel in leaping through the hedge. His hands were empty now. He leaped on desperately, his breath coming and going in heavy throbs.

"We're gaining!" panted Tom Merry.

"Hurrah for us!" gasped Lowther.

Across the muddy field they plunged, as hard as they could go. The going was hard and heavy; but it was as bad for the fugitive as for the pursuers. They were scarcely a dozen feet behind the cracksman when he left the field, and sped away along a narrow, sunken lane. After him rushed the juniors.

"Stop, you villain!" roared Manners.

Hookey Walker panted on.

He was keeping his distance now. Fear lent him strength.

But he was not gaining ground. Easily, in sight of him, the juniors hung on his track.

"He's making for the moor," muttered Tom Merry. "We'll have him now!"

On the open moor the rising moon glimmered in a sea of silver. The dark figure, bounding on among the gorse, was plainly in view. And now the juniors were drawing closer once more.

"Got him!" murmured Lowther. "He can't get away now. Where's Talbot?"

"Dropped out, I suppose. We three can tackle him."

"What-ho!"

A light gleamed through the dimness of the wide moor. It came from the window of a little cottage. The cracksman disappeared into a mass of thickets. After him came the Terrible Three, running hard. They came out through the thickets. Beyond lay the open moor, bright in the moonlight. The cracksman was not to be seen.

"He's taken cover," said Tom Merry. "Rout him out!"

They searched the thickets. But the cracksman was not there. And the wide, open moor showed nothing but grass and gorse to the eye.

Tom Merry gritted his teeth.

"The villain! Where is he hiding?"

The juniors looked round, scanning the wide expanse, broken only by the lonely cottage, from the window of which the light faintly gleamed.

"He can't be there," said Manners, pointing to the light.

"Hardly. He couldn't hide there; unless——" Tom Merry paused. "Let's go and see. He must be somewhere."

The three juniors hurried towards the cottage. Unless the cracksman had dodged into the little building, it was difficult to tell what had become of him. The moonlight now made the wide moor almost as light as day.

Silent and dark, save for the solitary light gleaming from the window, lay the little cottage, as the juniors ran towards it. It was a wretched little building, evidently with only two rooms in it, both on the ground floor—rather a hut than a cottage. But the little garden that surrounded it was very trim and neat.

Tom Merry threw open the garden gate, and the chums hurriedly searched round the cottage. But in the garden, and the shed at the back, there was no trace of the cracksman. If he was hiding there, he was in the cottage itself.

"Well?" said Lowther, as they paused.

"We've got to look inside," said Tom Merry resolutely. "If he's got an accomplice here hiding him—it looks like it—we're going to have him."

Tom Merry knocked at the cottage door.

It was opened at once.

The dim light streamed out, and the figure of a woman stood in the doorway—a woman with a pale, careworn face, whose garb, clean and neat and carefully mended as it was, showed only too plainly the signs of a bitter poverty. She held a finger to her lips.

"Hush!"

"What?" began Tom Merry.

"Hush! The child—she is sleeping, and ill."

The three juniors looked in, a little abashed. In a little cot a child lay sleeping—a little girl, whose pale and emaciated face told a story of want and suffering. The child was moaning in her sleep.

The juniors drew back.

"What is it?" the woman whispered. "Why did you knock? Hush!"

"We—we were looking for somebody," stammered Tom Merry. "I—I'm sorry I disturbed you—very sorry! It's all right. Good-night, ma'am!"

And the Terrible Three raised their caps and beat a retreat. The door closed softly.

"Rather a bloomer—what?" murmured Monty Lowther. "Looking for a giddy cracksman, and finding a sick kid! We're off-side this time."

"He can't be there," said Tom Merry. "Where the dickens has he got to? Hiding in one of the old pits, perhaps."

He swept the moonlit moor with an angry glance; but there was no sign of the cracksman.

"He's done the vanishing trick," said Manners. "It's N. G., Tommy. We've done our best. Let's get back, for goodness' sake. We shall get into an awful row with the Housemaster."

"That'll be all right, when we tell him we were after that villain," said Tom Merry. "Still, I suppose we'd better get back. I wonder where Talbot is?"

Talbot was not to be seen. He had long lost track of his chums. The Terrible Three tramped away towards St. Jim's in no good humour. They were tired, and they were unsuccessful. Talbot was not to be seen, and they took the shortest cut possible back to the school, concluding that Talbot had done the same, and that they would find him at St. Jim's.

As they came in sight of the old school a dark figure was visible in the moonlight, outside the gates.

It was Talbot. He was waiting for them.

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## CHAPTER 4
### A Divided Duty.

TALBOT hurried towards the Terrible Three as they came up, breathing hard.

"Did you——"

"No."

"He got away?"

"He did, the rotter!"

Talbot drew a deep, deep breath.

"But it's all right," said Manners. "We've only got to report it to the Head, and he'll telephone to the police at once. They'll have him, as safe as houses."

"The—the police?" muttered Talbot.

"Yes. Old Inspector Skeat will be glad to get a chance at him. It's queer how he got away. Must have the luck of the gentleman in black," said Tom. "He dodged us on the moor, hang him!"

Tom Merry told how the hunt had ended. Talbot listened in silence, his brows contracting as Tom mentioned the woman in the lonely cottage and the sick child in the cot. He could guess that the child Tom Merry had seen was the "kid."

"And—and what are you going to do now?" asked Talbot.

"Report to the Head at once. Nothing more we can do ourselves."

Talbot shivered a little. That was Tom Merry's plain duty, but—— A few days before Talbot would have approved, but—there was a "but." To set the police on the track of the wretched man—the result was certain—the rearrest of Hookey Walker, his return to the prison he had evaded. And the kid? What of the kid? Had the man told the truth? Was it real repentance, or only misery and despair that had led him to play thus on the feelings of the Toff?

Talbot could hardly say. He remembered the man as a hard, unscrupulous ruffian, who had made an attempt upon the Toff's life, when the boy cracksman turned his back upon the path of evil. Yet the ruffian had seemed to be in earnest; and there was the kid. Talbot pressed his hand to his brow. He could make up his mind to spare his old comrade and enemy, but how could he ask the Terrible Three to spare him?

"What's the matter with you, Talbot?" exclaimed Tom Merry, who was watching the working of the Toff's face, in astonishment.

"Tom, I—I want to ask you a—a favour!" muttered Talbot in a low voice.

"Pile in! Any old thing," said Tom in wonder.

"You—you fellows trust me," said Talbot in a choking voice. "You haven't forgotten when things looked black against me, and I was turned out of the school, you hunted for me, you found me starving and freezing on the Embankment, and saved my life——"

"We're not likely to forget," said Manners. "What are you talking about that now for, Talbot? I don't like thinking of that time."

"It's that villain Hookey Walker," said Tom, clenching his hands. "He's brought it all back. But we'll get rid of him."

"Let me finish, Tom. I'm not speaking about that for nothing; goodness knows I don't like thinking of that time. But you know that I froze and starved, and I kept my word to you; I never went back to the old life."

"Of course we know it"

"Then you can trust me? What I'm going to ask you—it won't make you think that I've got any—any desire to have anything to do with the—the old gang——"

"What are you going to ask?"

"I want you to be silent."

"Silent!"

"About Hookey Walker."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"I might have guessed it!" he exclaimed. "You soft ass! He's come back here to threaten you—attack you perhaps——"

"No, no! I talked with him——"

"He is your enemy. He attempted your life once."

"He has changed. Tom, he must have had a hard time in prison. I can't help remembering that, if I'd had my deserts in the old days, that's where I should have been."

"Don't!" said Tom sharply.

Talbot's face was white and strained.

"You know the Professor turned, Tom; you didn't believe that at first, did you? But he's a soldier now, doing his duty. I—I think Hookey Walker is fed up with the old life. Goodness knows he has reason to be, with prison, danger, and starvation as the pay for dishonesty. He told me——"

"A lie, of course," said Tom contemptuously. "He found threats were no good, and tried to get round you."

"He has a child—a kid he is fond of——"

"You have seen the kid?" asked Tom incredulously. "I can't fancy that brutal ruffian being fond of a kid."

"I've not seen her, but I remember——"

"Bosh!" said Tom Merry. "It's a yarn. He wants you to help him get away from the police. Don't you understand that if you help him you're breaking the law? I believe it's against the law even to keep silent if you know there's an escaped convict somewhere; you have to give information to the police. You're jolly well not going to get yourself into new trouble for that villain."

"Tom, I—I want you to let me have my way in this. I believe his story——"

"I don't," said Tom.

"Blessed if I do, either," said Monty Lowther decidedly. "It's a bit too thick. He would have murdered you once, Talbot, and you know it. On the top of that, to spring a yarn of a kid and a tender heart—— Oh, draw it mild!"

"Yes, it won't wash, you know," said Manners. "Look here, Talbot, you can keep mum if you don't want to give away a villain you knew once upon a time. But we know what we've got to do."

"And as soon as I know where to lay hands on him, I'll see that he's taken at once," said Tom Merry.

If Talbot had thought of telling his chums whom he believed to be the occupant of the lonely cottage on the moor, Tom Merry's exclamation froze the words upon his lips. He stood looking pale and wretched. Tom's face softened a little. He had a very strong regard for his chum.

"Look here, Talbot, this won't do. If—if we say nothing, that villain will try to see you again. He'll try to get you to help him. Sooner or later he'll get at you. Suppose it came out, what would the Head say?"

"It won't do, Talbot," urged Lowther.

Talbot did not speak. He drew a deep, quivering breath. The Terrible Three exchanged uneasy glances. It went sorely against the grain to refuse what their chum asked, as he set so much weight upon it. They dimly understood, too, the feelings that were working in the Toff's breast. If he had never come to St. Jim's—if he had never known Tom Merry & Co.—he might never have seen the light; Hookey Walker's fate might have been his also. What right had he to be hard upon an old associate who was still deep in the mire of crime?

There was a long and painful pause. Nine o'clock struck within the walls of St. Jim's, and Tom Merry started.

"We're frightfully late. We must get in."

"Tom!" muttered Talbot huskily.

"Look here, Talbot, if we—we hold our tongues, will you undertake not to see that man or have anything to do with him in any way? We're willing to let him go, if he clears off from here. Give us your word that you won't see him or deal with him, and we'll keep mum."

Talbot did not reply.

"You hear me, Talbot?"

"Yes."

"You—you don't mean to say that you're actually thinking of seeing him again—of helping him?" exclaimed Tom fiercely.

"Don't be too hard on me, Tom!" muttered Talbot. "I will get him to go——"

"You sha'n't see him! If the Head knew, it would mean the sack for you. Dash it all, Talbot, I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" exclaimed Tom Merry angrily. "It wasn't so easy to get out of all that, and now you want to get into it again. Well, you won't be allowed to. Will you give me your word, as I've asked?"

"I can't, Tom. I—I feel I ought to help him," said Talbot thickly.

"Help him, the ruffian who threatened your life, who would have attacked you a second time, too, if Levison hadn't spotted him and got him caught."

"He's changed——"

"Rot! It's a trick."

"I—I suppose you would think so," said Talbot. "I—I only half-believed him myself. But give him a chance——"

"It's a trick to get a hold on you, to drag you back into what you've tried to leave behind for ever," said Tom between his teeth. "Why, if you met him of your own accord he would be able to say so to the Head if he liked, and get you into disgrace. You're a silly ass, Talbot, but you've got pals to see that you don't make a fool of yourself. As for that villain, he's going to chokey."

Tom Merry strode towards the school gates. He rang a loud peal on the bell. Lowther and Manners looked unhappy and worried.

Taggles, the porter, came grumbling down to the gates and opened them.

"Come on, Talbot."

Talbot had remained standing in the road, his brows knitted. He did not move, and the Terrible Three paused at the gate. They did not understand.

"Talbot, come in!"

"Which you're to report yourselves," came the grumbling voice of Taggles. "Nice hower to be coming in. Which I says——"

"Talbot!"

"I'll come in later," said Talbot. "Don't wait for me."

He moved away down the road. The Terrible Three ran back towards him, leaving Taggles staring and grumbling more emphatically than ever.

"Look 'ere, are you coming hin, or are you stayin' hout?" demanded Taggles.

Tom Merry caught Talbot by the arm and stopped him. His face was flushed with anger. Talbot's was white and set.

"Where are you going, Talbot?"

"You can guess," said Talbot in a low voice. "I'm sorry, Tom, but I must do what I think right. I think this is right. Go in, and I——"

"You'll go to find that villain——"

Talbot nodded.

"To warn him?"

"Yes."

"You know where to find him?" muttered Lowther.

"I think I can guess."

"Where, then?"

No reply.

Tom Merry set his teeth hard.

"You'll do this, Talbot—you know at what risk—unless we agree to say nothing about having seen that man?"

"I must."

"Must! You ought not to—you know you ought not to!" exclaimed Tom passionately. "I won't argue with you! Rather than let you get yourself into trouble like that, we'll hold our tongues about the scoundrel. You fellows agree?"

"Yes," said Manners and Lowther at once. They did not see what else was to be done. They understood only too well what trouble it might mean for Talbot if he were discovered to have gone to meet Hookey Walker. They would save him from that.

"You mean that, Tom?" said Talbot, with a catch in his voice.

"I'm a fellow of my word," said Tom gruffly. He dropped Talbot's arm, and strode away towards the gate. This time Talbot followed him. The four Shell fellows went in, and Taggles clanged the gate shut, and retired, grumbling, to his lodge. The juniors crossed the dark quadrangle towards the School House in grim silence. The Terrible Three had been forced to let Talbot have his way, but Tom Merry's look showed how angry he was. They reached the School House.

"Tom!" said Talbot, in a strained voice. "Tom, old fellow, don't——"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Tom Merry shortly. "You've had your way. You've forced me to give in. You're doing wrong, and you know it."

And, without waiting for Talbot to reply, Tom Merry strode into the School House.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Arthur Augustus is Quite Concerned.

"WHAT have you boundahs been up to?"

Arthur Augustus looked into Tom Merry's study in the Shell passage as he asked that question. The Terrible Three were there, hurrying over their preparation at top speed. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his celebrated eyeglass upon them curiously. He knew that the Shell fellows had come in later than nine o'clock, and that they had had an interview with their Housemaster. Then they had bolted off to their study to get as much preparation done as possible.

Having agreed to keep silent about Hookey Walker, they had been unable to give the Housemaster any explanation of their late return. They were late, that was all—very late. Mr. Carrington had naturally been angry at the idea of four juniors staying out till nine o'clock. The quartette had

**A figure in an overcoat came in. He held a silk hat in his hand. The collar of his coat was turned up about his neck. His head was covered with grey hair. His face was hidden under huge bushy whiskers and beard, and his eyes disappeared behind an enormous pair of spectacles. Talbot stared at him blankly. "Good evenin', deah boy!" said this strange visitor.** (*See Chapter* 13.)

received two hundred lines each, a lecture, and were "gated" for the next half-holiday. It was a pretty severe punishment, but no more than they had expected.

But Tom Merry and his chums were not in a good temper. Staying in for a half-holiday, with two hundred lines each to write, was not an agreeable prospect. It added to the exasperation they already felt. And as they had no time left to do their preparation, there was likely to be trouble with Mr. Linton, their Form-master, in the Shell the next morning.

As they were working against time to "mug up" as much as possible before they were called away to the dormitory, it was not surprising that they did not reply to the inquiry of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They did not even look up.

D'Arcy of the Fourth waited for a reply, but it was not forthcoming. Three frowning brows were bent over the study table.

"I made a wemark, deah boys."

No answer.

"We were gettin' quite alarmed about you," went on Arthur Augustus. "I suggested to Blake that you might have met with an accident, and he suggested that pewwaps Lowthah had opened his mouth and fallen into it—a weally widiculous suggestion."

"You silly ass!" jerked out Lowther, without looking up.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Shurrup!"

"I twust you have not been licked, deah boys."

"No. Shut up!"

"Was Cawwington watty?"

"Yes. Shut up!"

"Weally, deah boys, I cannot chawactewise your wemarks as polite," said Arthur Augustus, with a frown. "When a pal who has been anxious about you comes to inquiah what's the mattah, you might be wathah civil. I have wemarked befoah that the mannahs of this studay leave much to be desiahed."

"Ass!" shouted Lowther. "We've only got a quarter of an hour to mug up this Latin piffle, and it takes an hour. Run away and play! Can't you see we're busy?"

"That is no excuse for wudeness, Lowthah. What made you stay out so late?"

"Rats!"

"You should have thought of your pwep then, you know. I twust there has been no accident."

"There'll be an accident here, if you don't buzz off," grunted Lowther—"a fatal accident to a howling ass!"

"Aftah that wemark, Lowthah, I wefuse to continue the

conversation with you," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I will go and inquiah of Talbot."

"Good! Serve him right!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Monty Lowther picked up the inkpot and glared round. The swell of the Fourth retired somewhat hastily from the doorway. The door closed with more force than was actually required.

Arthur Augustus moved on to the next study, which Talbot shared with Skimpole and Gore. He tapped politely at the door, and looked in. Talbot was at the study table, slogging at work, with a moody brow. Gore was roasting chestnuts and eating them, and the brainy Skimpole was perusing a wonderful scientific work.

"Oh, heah you are, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus cheerily. "You came in fwightfully late, Talbot."

"Yes," said Talbot.

"Anythin' happen while you were out?"

"Excuse me, old chap, I'm trying to get some prep done before bedtime," said Talbot.

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Yaas, wathah! I am vewy pleased to observe, Talbot, that you are wathah more polite about it than those boundahs in the next studay. They are like thwee bears with thwee sore heads."

Talbot frowned a little, but made no reply to that remark.

"Pewwaps I can help you, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus generously.

Gore of the Shell indulged in a snort.

"Yes, you help him," he said. "I remember you construed 'arma virumque cano' as 'Arms, the man, and the dog!' Linton would like that."

"Weally, Goah——"

"It's all right, old chap," said Talbot. "I'm getting on like steam. I've been over this before, really."

"Cribs!" grunted Gore.

"I never use a crib," said Talbot.

"More duffer you, then," said Gore. "What else is a chap to do when he's left his prep late, I'd like to know?"

"I object to usin' a cwib, Goah. It's not playin' the game."

"Bow-wow!" said Gore.

"Bai Jove, you are goin' it, Talbot, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus admiringly, and apparently oblivious of the fact that conversation was not an aid to brain work. "I weally wish you weren't so busay, because I want to speak to you about Saturday aftahnoon, you know. I want to get you to join a little partay. I am suah you will come, as Miss Mawie is comin'."

"Miss Marie?" said Talbot.

"The Little Sistah, you know. There isn't much nursin' to do now, as the fellahs seem to be keepin' wathah fit; and Miss Mawie has been doin' an awful lot of knittin' for the soldiahs. I am goin' to ask her to show me how to knit. I don't see why a fellah shouldn't knit, you know, when knitted things are wequired so much. I pointed out to Miss Mawie that she could take the knittin'-hooks, or whatever they are, in the twap, and knit all the time, so—— But pewwaps I am intewwuptin' you, Talbot?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"That only just occurred to you?" asked Gore, with a chuckle.

Blake and Herries and Digby came along the passage.

"Oh, here you are!" said Blake, giving his elegant chum a slap on the shoulder that made him jump. "Don't you know it's bedtime?"

"Wow! Pway don't be a wuff beast, Blake! I was just talkin' to Talbot about Saturday aftahnoon——"

"I can't come out on Saturday," said Talbot. "I'm gated, for missing call-over."

"Bai Jove! That's wotten!"

"Silly ass to get gated!" remarked Jack Blake. "What on earth did you stay out to such a giddy time of night for?"

"That'll have to do," said Talbot, rising and leaving his work unfinished. "I shall have to chance it with Linton in the morning. Can't be helped."

The juniors of the School House were coming up to bed now. The Terrible Three came out of their study, also leaving their preparation unfinished. They were not in a good humour. They came right on Talbot in the passage as he stepped out of his study. There was rather a painful pause. After what had happened outside the school gates the chums of the Shell might try to feel that they were on the usual terms with one another, but they could not quite succeed. The Terrible Three were feeling very sore about it, and Talbot was awkward and constrained.

"Done your prep?" asked Tom Merry, making an effort to speak casually—an effort which was quite apparent to the group of Fourth-Formers, who looked at him and then at Talbot curiously.

"Not quite," said Talbot. "The same with you, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I—I'm sorry about those lines and the gating, Tom. I didn't think about that, you know."

"Never mind."

Talbot opened his lips—and closed them again. He could not talk in the presence of the other fellows about what was to be kept secret. Secret! He was tormented already with remorse. In the old days the Toff had had plenty of secrets to keep. He had hoped that that was all over. Now there was again a secret, and his chums were dragged into it. They had a secret to keep, and not a pleasant secret, either. And he knew that they felt that he was in the wrong. Was he in the wrong? He hardly knew; but the desperate, wretched face of the cracksman haunted him, and he only knew that he could not go back on that hunted, hopeless wretch.

The Terrible Three walked on down the passage, and Talbot did not join them as usual. There was constraint between them now, even if it should blow over later. The chums of Study No. 6 looked after the three, and then looked at Talbot, who avoided their glance. Blake and Herries and Digby, with curious expressions on their faces, walked away without a word. There was something up, they could see that; but it was no business of theirs, and they knew that an outsider chipping into a difference among friends was only likely to make matters worse instead of better.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, however, had never realised that great truth. Arthur Augustus was kindness itself, and he had a great faith in his own tact and judgment. It occurred to him very forcibly that he was just the fellow that was wanted here.

"I twust you youngstahs have not been quawwellin'?" he remarked.

"Oh, no," said Talbot, going down the passage.

Arthur Augustus kindly accompanied him.

"Of course, I quite undahstand," he remarked.

"Do you?" said Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah! Boys will be boys," said Arthur Augustus, with his most fatherly air. "You young duffahs have been havin' a tiff about somethin', and that's what made you so late. Pway tell me all about it, deah boy You can speak to me just as if I were your uncle."

"Or my granduncle," suggested Talbot, with a smile.

"Yaas, or your gwanduncle," said Arthur Augustus unsuspiciously. "Make a clean bweast of it, deah boy, and I will see it put wight. You can always wely on a fellow of tact and judgment. Now, pile in!" said D'Arcy encouragingly.

"But I haven't anything to tell you."

"Oh, wubbish! Of course, if you'd wathah I did not chip in, I will not do so," said D'Arcy, with a somewhat stately manner.

"Thanks!" said Talbot. "Good-night, old chap!"

And Talbot hurried away to the Shell dormitory. Arthur Augustus stood for a moment or two rooted to the floor. Kildare's voice was heard along the passage. The captain of St. Jim's had to see lights out for the Fourth that night.

"Are you going to your dormitory, D'Arcy, or shall I come and help you?"

"I do not wequire any help, Kildare."

"You'll get some if you don't buck up, all the same."

Arthur Augustus went to his dormitory.

## CHAPTER 6.
### Chums Parted.

TOM MERRY & CO. turned out at the clang of the rising-bell the next morning. There were four faces in the Shell dormitory that were not quite so cheerful as usual. The Terrible Three were unusually silent, and Talbot was looking sombre.

He glanced towards his old chums, but as they did not speak to him he did not speak to them. Under his calm, cool exterior, his sensitive nature was quivering. What did they suspect him of? he wondered bitterly. He had given proof enough that the past was dead and done with—he had come near to dying of hunger in the streets of London rather than go back to the old ways. Was it such a crime, after all, to feel a gleam of sympathy for an old associate—a man who was a scoundrel, and had always been a scoundrel, true——

But how much better had the Toff himself been in the old days? He had been better, perhaps. He had thrown behind him the black and stained life of the Toff at the first chance. But had not Hookey Walker declared that he was prepared to do the same—for the "kid's" sake, if for no other reason?

He felt that his chums might have been a little more patient with him. Yet he would not allow his breast to harbour resentment. After all, they had never had his experience—his miserable experience. Into their sunny lives the shadow of crime had never entered. To them a thief was as a thing unclean—a leper—a thing hideous. All they knew of Hookey Walker was that he was a ruffian, that he had attacked Talbot when the repentant Toff threw over his old life, that he had come back once with murderous hatred in his heart. That he was now using falsehoods instead of threats—that was their natural conclusion. Perhaps they were right, for Talbot knew only too well the unscrupulous character of the rascal. Desperate and in extremity, his old associate had come to him with lies upon his lips—it was only too probable.

Talbot dressed in gloomy silence, and left the dormitory first of all. Kangaroo of the Shell glanced after him, and then at the Terrible Three.

"Anything up?" asked the Cornstalk.

"What should be up?" said Tom Merry.

"Talbot looks as if he's got the blue devils bad, and you chaps don't look much more cheerful," said Noble. "Don't bite a chap's head off, anyway."

Tom Merry made no reply, but he left the dormitory as soon as he could. There was a rift in the lute, there was no denying that, and the other fellows had begun to notice it already. Tom Merry drove his hands deep into his pockets as he strode out into the keen frosty air in the quadrangle.

He was feeling depressed, angry, and restless. He could not feel towards Talbot as of old, try as he would. Talbot had no right to act as he had done. He was doing wrong, and he was deliberately setting himself against his chums, who wanted to do right. And he had burdened the Terrible Three with a secret to keep. A dozen fellows had asked them already what on earth had kept them out so late that night, and they had been compelled to make evasive replies. It was not pleasant.

Talbot was pacing aimlessly in the quadrangle. He looked up quickly as he heard Tom Merry's footsteps grinding on the frost.

After a moment's hesitation, he came towards the captain of the Shell. Tom Merry stopped. He did not speak, and his look was grim.

"Tom!" said Talbot, in a low voice.

"Well?"

"I—I—— Well, I'm sorry about the lines and the gating! I didn't think about that. It's rough on you," said Talbot.

Tom Merry looked him squarely in the eyes.

"The lines and the gating don't matter a rap, and you know it," he said. "I don't care about it, and Manners and Lowther don't. If it were only that, it wouldn't matter. You're forcing us to keep silent about a thing we ought to report. That's where the trouble comes in."

"I'm not forcing you, Tom."

"You're going to do what may mean ruin to you if we don't hold our tongues," said Tom angrily. "I call that forcing us."

Talbot's lips quivered.

"I—I asked it of you as a favour, Tom. There are very few things I wouldn't do for you if you asked me."

"A jolly good many things, I think!" said Tom sharply. "Having nothing to do with that villain Hookey Walker is one of them. I've asked you that, and you've refused."

"I—I know. But——"

"And there's no excuse for it," said Tom moodily. "The man is an utter ruffian. He tried to rob the school. He would have attacked you, perhaps murdered you, if Levison hadn't got him collared. You know that."

"I know it."

"And he's a dangerous character. He robbed a Grammar School kid the other day—it's pretty certain that it was that rascal. And we've got to keep his secret—the secret of a criminal and a convict. I don't know whether we're breaking the law, even, but I do know that we're doing what isn't right. And that's not agreeable."

"I suppose it isn't," said Talbot bitterly. "You were reckless to make friends with a fellow like me, Tom. You might have expected that the Toff would drag you into his disgrace sooner or later."

"Don't talk like that," said Tom, biting his lip. "I know you're straight—if I didn't know that; but I do know it. I can't believe that you have any hankering after what you've given up—I can't!"

"Then the thought has crossed your mind?" said Talbot very quietly.

Tom made an angry gesture.

"How could I help it crossing my mind, when you're willing to risk getting sacked from the school, and perhaps arrested by the police, for the sake of that criminal?"

"And—and you think——"

"No, I don't. After what you went through in London to keep straight, I can't think you'd fall back now. If any fellow suggested it to me, I'd smash him!" said Tom savagely. "But—but you know you're doing wrong, Talbot. You know you've no right to ask us to keep a rotten secret like this."

"I don't ask you."

"You make us, and that's worse. And that isn't the worst. I can see plainly enough that you mean to meet that villain—to help him. Isn't it so?"

Talbot did not reply.

"A pretty position for us!" said Tom Merry, his face flushing with anger. "We've got to know that you are meeting a man the police are after, we've got to know that you're breaking the law, and hold our tongues. Do you think you've a right to expect anything of the sort?"

"No," said Talbot, with a catch in his voice. "I've no right to ask that."

"Well, then, let that man drop. We'll agree to say nothing about him if he keeps away from here, but give me your word to have nothing to do with him."

There was a long silence.

"You won't?" said Tom.

"Don't be hard on me, Tom. I—I——" Talbot faltered. "Goodness knows I owe you too much to want to hurt you, Tom, in any way; but—but I——"

He broke off miserably. What could he say? He might have talked for hours, and he would never have made the St. Jim's fellow understand the point of view of the reformed cracksman.

Tom Merry set his lips.

"You won't?" he said.

"I can't."

"Then all is said."

"Tom! You—you mean"—Talbot's voice was husky—"you—you mean—it's all over—you don't want me?"

"Oh, let it drop!" said Tom wearily. "I'll try to feel the same as before, if that's what you mean. It isn't easy. I shall be thinking every minute that something will come out—something that will cause disgrace and talk——"

Talbot caught his breath.

"I understand, Tom. I've no right to expect you to stand that—or the others, either. Don't be afraid of that. Whatever happens to me, I can stand it alone. You shall not be in any danger of disgrace from me. I won't give you rotten secrets to keep. I understand, and it shall be as you like."

"I don't mean——" began Tom.

Talbot made a gesture.

"It's all right. Don't think I resent it—I don't! I don't want you to be mixed up in my shady past, for that's what it amounts to. And, as you say, there may be trouble—disgrace. I don't think I could ever forgive myself if you should be mixed up in that, for my sake. I'll keep my distance!"

"You'd rather drop my friendship than drop that ruffianly criminal?" said Tom Merry, with a bitterness he could not repress.

"I was a criminal once, Tom; no fit companion for you, then or now. I sha'n't forget what a pal you've been to me, but I sha'n't trouble you any more."

Talbot walked away. Tom Merry stood irresolute. It was on his tongue to call after his old comrade—to call him back, to tell him that, whatever happened, whatever he did or left undone, he was his pal still. But the words died on his lips.

If Talbot, of his own accord, renewed those criminal associations, he had no right to expect his friends to follow him into the mire. He did not expect it; he was willing to go his shadowy way alone, with a heavy heart. Tom Merry hesitated long, but he did not speak.

He turned, and strode away towards the School House. Unless Talbot gave his word to see nothing of Hookey Walker, their friendship could not continue. It was useless to pretend that nothing was changed, when all was changed. But Tom Merry's heart, as well as Talbot's, was very heavy that day, and his brow was sombre.

## CHAPTER 7.

### The Last Chance.

THAT the rift between Talbot of the Shell and his best chums did not escape the notice of the other fellows in the School House goes without saying.

In the little world of school, where everybody knows everybody, such a departure from the normal was certain to be

noticed. And Tom Merry and Talbot filled a goodly space in the public eye.

The Terrible Three were the leaders of the School House juniors; Tom Merry was captain of his Form. Talbot was one of the best footballers in the House, and one of the most popular fellows there, and his strange story made him an object of unusual interest. There was hardly a fellow in the School House who would not cheerfully have staked a year's pocket-money that Talbot was straight as a die, whatever he might have been in his earlier, unfortunate days. He had given bitter proof of it.

The fellows had not forgotten how Talbot had been brought back to St. Jim's, more dead than alive, to be nursed back to life by the Little Sister, and what he had suffered because he had been distrusted, and because he preferred hunger and cold to rejoining his old associates. After that, even carping fellows like Crooke and Mellish held their tongues.

The four Shell fellows being, therefore, among the most prominent personages in the life of the Lower School, the trouble that had arisen in the camp was soon the talk of the House. It was soon known over in the New House, too, and Figgins & Co., who liked Talbot immensely, were greatly concerned about it.

But if any good-natured friend of both parties chipped in, with the idea of making peace, he had his trouble for his pains.

Neither party had anything to say. They hadn't quarrelled, and they didn't want to jaw—that was the inevitable reply. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who felt that it was up to him to pour oil upon the troubled waters, had no better success than the rest.

Talbot declined to say a word, and Tom Merry was so exceedingly brusque that Arthur Augustus very nearly forgot his role of a peacemaker in his indignation. He confided to Blake that he had been on the point of giving Tom Merry a fearful thrashing, only it had occurred to him at the last moment that that really wouldn't improve matters, and was not quite in keeping with his role as peacemaker.

And Blake chuckled, and agreed that it wouldn't, and it wasn't. He added a friendly suggestion that Arthur Augustus should henceforth mind his own business; but D'Arcy received that suggestion with a sniff. He regarded this painful matter as his business.

If Talbot was worried about the new state of affairs, he did not show it much. That day, certainly, his brow was very sombre. His manner was very quiet. But that was all.

What he felt he locked up in his own breast. From of old the Toff had learned the lessons of self-control, of keeping his thoughts and his emotions concealed under an impassive exterior.

After lessons that day the Terrible Three strolled out moodily enough into the quadrangle. They were chatting under the elms, when Talbot came out of the School House. He had a bag in his hand, and his overcoat on. He walked directly down to the gates, without a glance at his former chums.

Tom Merry's glance followed him bitterly. Manners and Lowther looked decidedly uncomfortable. They had, of course, backed up Tom Merry in the division that had arisen.

Tom was an older friend than Talbot; and, besides, Talbot was wrong—hopelessly wrong, from their point of view. Indeed, it was with difficulty that they could banish dark and miserable suspicions from their minds. Was it not a longing for the old, exciting life—the life of a cracksman—that had drawn the Toff towards his old associate? If the thought came into their minds, Talbot had only himself to thank for it.

"You know where he's going?" muttered Tom Merry, with a clouded brow.

"I—I suppose so," said Lowther.

"He might be arrested for it—he would be, if the police knew what we know," said Tom Merry. "It's rotten! It's disgraceful! After all he's been through—caused by that villain as much as anybody—to run such risks!"

"What about stopping him?" said Lowther. "It would serve him right to collar him, and simply make him stay in the school!"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"And then he would dodge out of the dormitory at night very likely."

"Oh!" said Lowther.

"I'm not going to interfere with him," said Tom savagely. "He's chosen to throw us over. It's his own business, I suppose. He's his own master, and we've no right to interfere. Let him go his own way!"

"It's rotten!" said Manners. "He was a good pal!"

"It's his own choice."

"I—I suppose it is."

It was easy enough to say that Talbot should go his own way, and that it was not their business. It was not so easy to feel indifferent. Now that the friendship was broken off, Tom Merry should logically have ceased to bother his head about what happened to Talbot.

But he could not.

Into what trouble was the reckless junior plunging? Tom Merry had no doubt as to the Toff's destination, or what the bag was for. He was helping his old associate. The mere thought of it made Tom sick with apprehension.

Talbot had won the King's pardon by an act of bravery that had won him also the admiration of St. Jim's. He had saved himself from the law. But now he was breaking it again. It might be only a misplaced generosity, but the law would not take that view of it. Suppose a discovery was made?

What would happen then? Tom Merry almost groaned as he thought of it—of the Toff taken away on a charge of helping an escaped convict, all the brave fight he had fought going for nothing.

Was there nothing that could stop him—could make him see the folly of what he was doing? His old chums had no influence over him; they realised that only too bitterly. Indeed, in his bitterness, Tom Merry was almost inclined to throw the matter from his mind—to let the Toff go to ruin his own way.

But Talbot had been too good a pal for that. Tom Merry remembered that heart-sickening search for him in the frozen slums of London, at the time when Talbot had been in disgrace and under suspicion. After that, friendship could not die. Whatever might be said, whatever angry and bitter words came from his lips, his heart could not change. Was there no way of influencing the Toff for his own good?

Marie!

The thought of the Little Sister came into Tom Merry's mind suddenly, and he started.

If anybody could influence Talbot, it was Marie Rivers. Of all the St. Jim's fellows, only the Terrible Three knew Marie's secret—the fact that the Little Sister of the Poor, the devoted nurse, was the daughter of John Rivers, the cracksman, now a corporal in Kitchener's Army, and leading a new life of duty.

Marie! Tom Merry could have struck himself in anger at not having thought of her before. She, and she alone, might be able to turn Talbot from the path he was following to his own ruin.

The captain of the Shell hurried out of the School House, and made his way to the Head's garden. He knew that Marie Rivers walked there in the evening, after her duties were over, and he hoped to find her out of doors.

"Miss Marie!"

The girl was in the little summer-house, knitting. She looked up with a smile as Merry came up and raised his cap. Marie's face was very sunny now; her life in the school was happy. The former days were fading from memory, and the cracksman's daughter looked forward instead of back, and the future was bright.

"Come in!" she said cheerily. "I am busy, you see. D'Arcy made me show him how to knit, and he spoiled a whole sock. You do not want to learn?" Then her face became grave, as she noted Tom Merry's expression. "Is anything the matter?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"My father?" breathed the girl.

Always at the back of her mind was that lingering thought—that some discovery might come which would prevent John Rivers from carrying out his plan.

If the authorities had known the real identity of "Private Brown," it was hardly doubtful but that they would have dispensed with his services. And the new soldier in Kitchener's Army was in hopes of being sent out to Flanders soon.

"Talbot," said Tom Merry, understanding at once the dread that had come into the girl's heart. "It's Talbot!"

"He is not in trouble?"

"Yes."

Marie laid down her knitting.

"Tell me," she said quietly.

"I'm going to tell you, because I think you may influence him," said Tom. "I can't. We—we're not on good terms now. But—but I can't see him going to ruin without trying to stop him. He was my pal, if he isn't now."

Marie caught her breath.

"You have not quarrelled with Talbot? I thought you were great friends."

"Not exactly quarrelled," said Tom. "I—I don't know exactly how to put it. But—but he's getting himself into awful trouble. You know Hookey Walker——"

"I did know him."

"Yes, yes, I mean that. Well, he's come back."

"He was in prison," said Marie, her face paling

"He must have got away again. He's here—somewhere near. Last night we met him, and Talbot——"

"What did he do?"

"Oh, Talbot isn't in danger! It isn't that. That cunning rascal had got over him somehow, I hardly know how, and he's persuaded Talbot to help him. You know what that means, if it's found out. It's against the law. All that Talbot's done will go for nothing, if that's found out. He's got to be stopped. I can't stop him. He won't listen to me. I thought that perhaps you——" Tom Merry broke off.

"The man is his enemy," said Marie. "But—but the Toff was always generous He would help his worst enemy if he was in trouble. It was always so."

"But you see what it means. It may mean his arrest and ruin."

Marie shivered.

"I understand."

"Hookey Walker is fooling him somehow. It may even be a trick to get Talbot into disgrace; another trick like the Professor's." Tom Merry stopped, as he realised that he was speaking to Marie of her father. "Pardon me! I —I didn't mean—— But you see how it is. Unless Talbot can be stopped——"

"I will do my best," said the girl. All the sunshine was gone out of her face now; her voice was dull and heavy.

"I knew you would," said Tom eagerly. "I—I wouldn't have said a word to you, but—but it's for Talbot's sake."

"You may trust me," said Marie. "Leave it to me. If I can turn him from it, I will. But—but he was always so. He never stopped to count the cost when his help was asked, by friend or enemy. If you knew him as I know him —the bravest, best, kindest of friends——"

"It's because I know he's all that, that I want to save him," said Tom.

"I know—I know. I will do all I can."

The girl sat silent, with a clouded brow, after Tom Merry was gone. Her knitting lay idle in her lap. Her hands were clasped, and the white fingers worked restlessly. The spring sunshine was no longer bright for the cracksman's daughter. Once more the grim shadow of the past had fallen across her path. Would it ever be lifted?

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## CHAPTER 8.

### Hookey Walker at Home.

TALBOT was tramping across the moor.

The sun was setting, tinging the gorse with golden fire. The junior tramped on, unseeing. His face was dark, and his mind was black with bitter thoughts. What was he doing? For whose sake had he parted with the chums whose friendship meant so much to him? He almost laughed at the thought. For the sake of a criminal —of an enemy who had once sought his life. But that criminal, that enemy, had been his comrade in the old days, and he had fallen upon cruel luck. The claim of the past was not to be denied.

Whether he was doing right or wrong, Talbot hardly knew. His tired brain could not think it out. But he knew that, right or wrong, he could not abandon a man who had been his comrade, even in crime, when that man was in a desperate extremity. If Hookey Walker had been his old self—if he had threatened—that would have been different. A menacing ruffian Talbot could have dealt with, as shortly and sharply as Tom Merry could have wished. But a famished, tattered outcast, held back from flight by his affection for the "kid," that was a different matter. It was up to the Toff to help him, and he could not deny the claim, right or wrong. His life had grown up in wrong. If he was doing wrong now, it was a wrong he could not help, bred from the hopeless wrong of the past.

He tramped on with downcast face wearily. He remembered how he had tramped over that wide moor before, when the police were on his track. Things had changed since then. But had they changed so much, after all? The police! They would have been very interested in his present mission. But it was useless to think of that. At least, whatever happened, if disaster came, and disgrace, his chums would not be dragged into it.

At any cost to himself he would make sure of that. He stopped at last at the lonely cottage, where the Terrible Three had given up the chase the evening before. He had little doubt, or, rather, none at all, that he would find Hookey Walker there. He knocked at the door. It was opened instantly He guessed that he had been seen coming across the moor

A woman's careworn face looked at him inquiringly. Talbot's glance went past her, to the child in the cot, near the empty grate. There was no fire, and the bitter March wind was sweeping across the moor. If this was the cracksman's refuge, he had told the truth in saying that he was in bitter want. The worn face of the woman told its own story of hard privation.

Talbot looked curiously at the woman. He had never seen her before, but he guessed that this was Hookey Walker's wife—the wife the cracksman had neglected in his more prosperous days, the mother of the "kid" whose baby fingers were twined round that hard and desperate heart. She was looking at him inquiringly, with a haunting look of fear in her troubled eyes. Well the junior understood the cause of that look. That frozen, famished cottage was the hiding-place of the cracksman.

"Do not be afraid," said Talbot softly. His kind heart went out to the careworn woman, who had known so many trials. "I have come here as a friend. If Hookey Walker is here——"

"No one is here."

Talbot smiled patiently.

"If Hookey Walker——"

"I do not know the name."

"If he is here, he has spoken to you of me He would call me the Toff."

The woman's expression changed. She evidently knew that name.

"Come in," she said dully.

Talbot stepped in upon the cold brick floor, and the woman closed the door. She crossed to the inner room, and called out:

"Hookey! He has come!"

The inner door opened, and Hookey Walker peered out. His harsh face lighted up at the sight of the Toff.

"Toff! I knew you'd be a pal. You ain't deserting an old friend in trouble."

"As you see," said Talbot.

"It's like you, Toff—it's like you," said Hookey Walker. "You can't say as I wasn't a good pal till you turned your back on us, Toff. Crimes! To think of the swag that was in our 'ands, and you handed it all back—thousands——"

"I haven't come here to speak of that," said Talbot sharply. "You told me that you had done with that. That you intended to lead a decent life. Unless you mean that, I'll have nothing to do with you. Understand that!"

"I do mean it, Toff!" muttered Hookey Walker. "She ——" He made a gesture towards the silent woman. "Henriette wouldn't have anything to do with me if I wasn't going on the square, Toff. She never would. Would you, Henny?"

"No," said Henriette dully.

"All the better," said Talbot. "If you mean business, Hookey, I am going to help you. I will do all I can. You know I am poor now. I am on a scholarship at the school, and I have only the allowance that is given with it."

"You never kept——"

"Nothing!" said Talbot sternly.

Hookey Walker sighed.

"It was thousands!" he muttered. "A cove can't help thinking of it, Toff. But you're right. It's a mug's game. I know wot it's led me to. I ain't much to boast of now, arter twenty years of it." He shivered with the cold. "Toff, if I could only get away from 'ere safe, with Henny and the kid, I give you my davy I'd go straight—straight as a die. You done it, the Professor done it, and I can do it. But—but we're starving, Toff, we're freezing. 'Ow did you find us 'ere, Toff? I 'adn't time to tell you where I was."

"I guessed. They told me that you had disappeared near this cottage, and that there was a sick child here," said Talbot. "That was enough for me to guess the rest. How is the little girl now?"

He crossed to the cot, and looked down at the child. From a wan face two hollow eyes looked up at him. Talbot felt a lump in his throat. The "kid" was suffering for the sins of its father.

"What is the matter with the kid?"

"Hunger," said the woman's dull voice. "Hunger and cold."

Talbot shuddered.

"When I was took, Toff, it was 'ard on these 'ere," whined Hookey Walker. "Henriette wouldn't never touch my money. She worked—sewing and such. I used to send money. You knew I did, Toff; you'll own that."

"I knew that," said Talbot.

"But she wouldn't touch it, because—because—— You catch on, Toff. She give it all away into the poor-box, 'cause it wasn't come by honest. And—and these are 'ard

times. And the kid's ill. I don't know 'ow they come through the winter. Give me a chance, Toff, and I swear I'll work my fingers to the bone—honest. There's room in the Colonies for a man who's willing to work; and nobody to ask questions. And I give you my davy I'm going straight."

Talbot looked moody.

"You'll 'elp me out, Toff?"

"I'll do all I can. I've very little money," said Talbot, with a sigh. "I'll try what I can do to raise what you need. But for the present I can help you. There is food in that bag and old clothes. I bought them at Wayland as I came. I have a sovereign here." He laid it on the table. "That is all I can do now, Hookey. But you can depend upon me to help you all I can."

"God bless you!" said the woman.

"It's understood, Hookey, if you can get the money raised you get out of here and out of the country and keep straight."

"I give you my davy."

"It's a go! I'll do my best."

"You always was a pal, Toff," said Hookey Walker. "But—but them others—they've seen me——"

"They will keep silent; I have their word." Talbot did not add that it had cost him their friendship. "You are safe—if you are careful. Keep indoors—and mind"—Talbot's voice grew stern—"none of what has happened once. I tell you plainly that if you break the law again, to my knowledge, I will lead the police here myself, and hand you over to them."

"Straight as a die, Toff."

Talbot nodded, and emptied the bag. Hookey Walker eyed the food with ravenous looks.

"That is all I can do now," said Talbot. "It is all the money I have at present. But—but I'll think it out. I'll do my best for you, for the sake of old times, Hookey—old times that I'd be glad to forget if I could." He bent over the cot and kissed the pale, thin cheek of the kid. "Good-bye, little 'un!"

"You'll come ag'in, Toff?" muttered Hookey Walker.

"Yes, as soon as I have something for you. Until then keep in cover."

"Heaven bless you, Toff! You was always better'n me," said Hookey Walker.

He nervously held out a rough hand as the Toff turned to the door. Talbot smiled faintly, and grasped it. Then he hurried away.

Right or wrong? Would Tom Merry, if he could have seen him, have said that he had done wrong? In the wind-swept cottage on the moor the Toff left gratitude and hope behind him.

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## CHAPTER 9.
### Talbot's Task.

SATURDAY afternoon was not a happy half-holiday for the chums of the Shell.

It was bright and sunny, and most of the St. Jim's fellows were in great spirits.

But the Terrible Three and Talbot were "gated." They finished their lines early, and took them in to the House-master. Then they had the afternoon to themselves. There was nothing going on on the playing-fields, and the juniors had to keep within gates.

Study No. 6 had gone out in a trap—Arthur Augustus's treat. Much to the disappointment of Arthur Augustus, the Little Sister, after all, had declined to join the party. Arthur Augustus had looked forward to that drive in company with Miss Marie, but apparently the girl could not come. Most of the other fellows were out of doors, and the Terrible Three were rather at a loss. Talbot avoided them. They had nothing to say to one another.

Gating, even when there was no game on within the precincts of St. Jim's, would not have worried the Terrible Three so much at any other time. They had many resources. But just about this time they were not feeling equal to taking any of them up. The break with Talbot weighed upon their spirits, and, in spite of the break with him, they were concerned about him.

A "rag" with the New House juniors did not appeal to them at all in the present state of their spirits; neither did they feel inclined to work on the next number of "Tom Merry's Weekly," long overdue.

Manners settled the matter by starting to work on his films; Manners could always find occupation there to keep him busy and contented. Monty Lowther finally decided that the comic column ought to be got ready for the "Weekly," though he wasn't in much of a comic mood. So Monty settled down in the study with pen and ink and a sheaf of impot paper, and proceeded to produce his celebrated funniosities.

Tom Merry declined to help, and refused Manners' invitation to lend a hand in the dark-room. He tried a book, and pitched it aside. He took a turn in the gym, and came out in disgust. And then he sauntered about with his hands driven deep into his pockets, thinking. It was not what could have been called a happy half-holiday for the captain of the Shell.

Talbot, after he had finished his lines, strolled away to the Head's garden, and in the summer-house he found Mario Rivers knitting. Mario was seldom seen when she was not knitting, as a matter of fact. She was busy making a supply of woollen things for her father, who was in hopes of getting into the next draft for the front. It was a proud and happy thought to the girl that John Rivers, the Professor, was in khaki, and that his ambition was to get out to the fighting-line. It was an ambition that the Professor's old associates in the Rookery would never have dreamed him capable of. And she tried to drive from her mind the thought that out there on the shell-swept plains of Flanders deadly perils awaited him. He was going to do his duty, and the future was in the hands of a Higher Power.

Marie looked up with a smile, but her fingers kept busily working, as Talbot came into the summer-house. The Shell fellow's face was very grave.

"You wanted to see me, Marie?"

"Yes, Toff." The old name came naturally to Marie's lips. "I—I know you are in trouble."

Talbot smiled faintly.

"Nothing new for the Toff," he said.

"I had hoped that it was all over," the girl said, with a sigh. "Will the past never die? Toff, yesterday Tom Merry spoke to me. You are not friends with him now?"

"No. Why did he speak to you?"

"About Hookey Walker."

"He has told you?"

"Yes."

"Why?" asked Talbot.

"He thinks I may be able to influence you for your good—for your safety," said Marie. "Toff, I have been thinking about it; it has troubled me greatly. Tom Merry was greatly troubled too."

"He is a good fellow," said Talbot softly; "the best pal a chap could have. I shall never forget that. But I did right to break with him. I cannot drag him into my troubles, even if he were willing. The shadow of crime is on me; it should not be allowed to fall upon him. He doesn't understand how I am bound. You understand, Marie. Hookey Walker has changed. All he seeks is to escape, to lead a new life, to take his wife and child away where he can work honestly for them. If I did not help him, I—I—— Marie, you can see that I cannot desert him."

"But is it true? Is he deceiving you, Toff?"

"I am sure not. They are starving. Last night I saw them. His wife would never have anything to do with him while he was a thief, and they are in want. For years she has lived and supported the Kid by sewing—a hard life, Marie, and in these times harder. If Hookey can once get clear with them it means everything to them. How can I stand aside and desert them? How can I forget that a few months ago I was no better than Hookey, and that if I hadn't found good friends to help me I should be no better now? Marie, if Tom Merry had lost faith in me that time when I was suspected and driven out, I think I should have fallen back. It was his friendship that pulled me through. Knowing that, how can I desert Hookey?"

Marie's lips quivered.

"You would not ask me to desert him, Marie?"

"I—I cannot," said Marie, but her brow was clouded. "But—but the risk, Toff. If it should be known—the danger—the danger for you——"

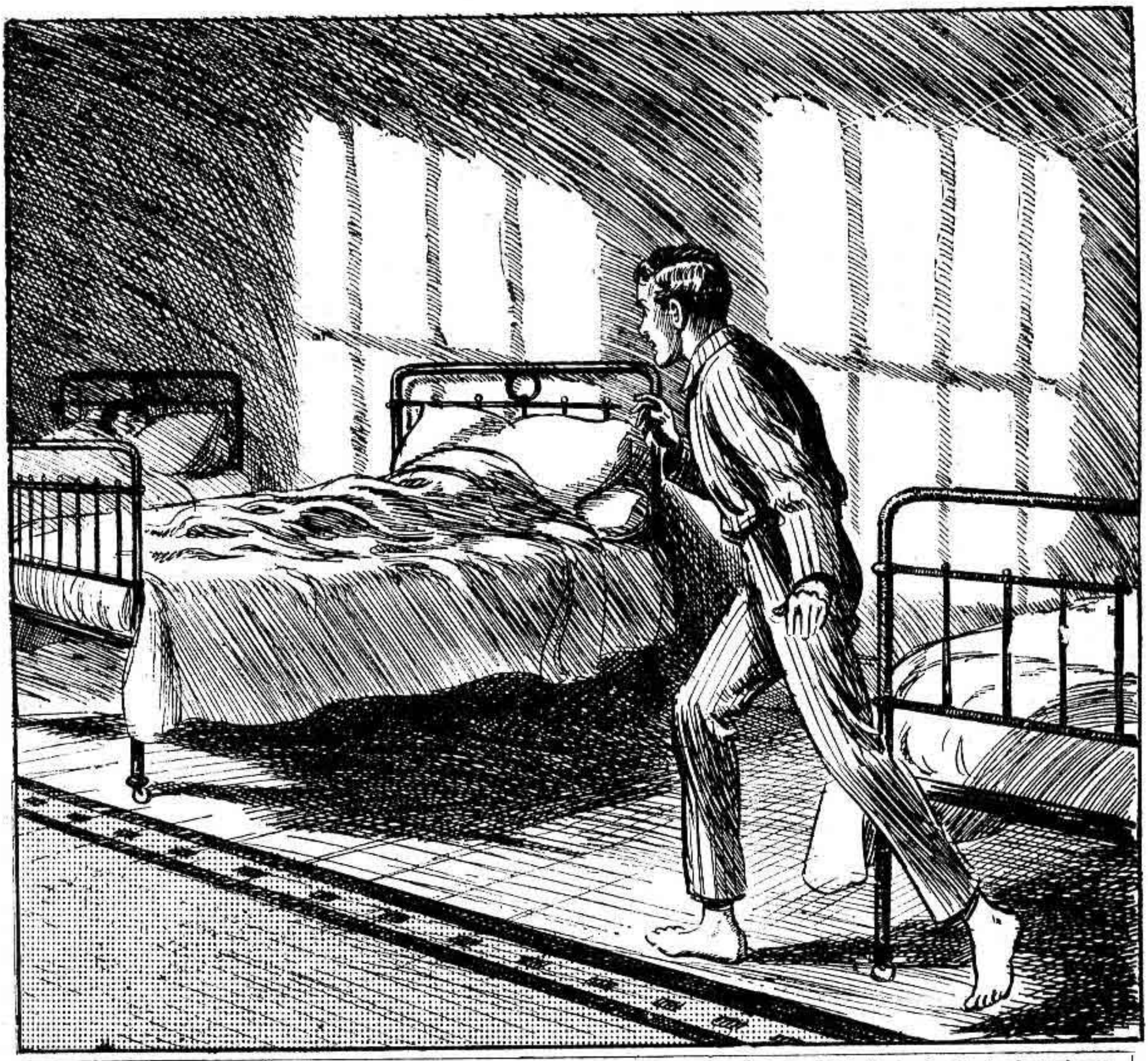
"Danger and I are old friends," said the Toff moodily.

"I know you fear nothing. I know you are generous, Toff. But—but I tremble for you. Yet I suppose you are doing right. But the man will not stay here?"

"He must stay till I can help him to go. He cannot go without money. Money!" The Toff smiled bitterly. "I must raise the money somehow. And there was a time when I could raise thousands if I had chosen. Now I am hard put to it to raise a few pounds. But until he has money Hookey cannot go."

"How much?"

"Twenty pounds at least. That is what I have to think out. And meanwhile he must live. I have been very careful with my scholarship allowance. I have five pounds in the post-office. I have some things I can sell, too, to raise money. For the rest, if I cannot raise the sum, I must borrow it. Not of the fellows, of course." Talbot smiled again—a hard



"Talbot!" whispered Tom Merry. There was no answer. Tom moved softly to Talbot's bed. He had made up his mind—he would speak. He could bear this no longer. "Talbot!" No answer—no sound of breathing. Tom Merry, with a sudden icy throb, bent over the bed—it was empty! The Toff was not there! (See Chapter 15.)

smile. "There are plenty of them who would lend me money, but I shall not begin that. But there are other means."

"But—but how?"

"Moses, in Wayland," said Talbot briefly.

Marie looked startled and alarmed.

"The moneylender?"

"Yes."

"But—but if it should come out that you have had dealings with a moneylender, Toff, it—it would mean disgrace, trouble—ruin perhaps!" the girl exclaimed breathlessly.

"I know it."

"You must not do it, Toff!"

"I must keep my word to Hookey," said Talbot quietly. "I shall be able to settle up next term. I hope to win a money prize I have entered for—the Northcote. And then there is my next allowance. There is a fellow owes me some money too, and it is barely possible that he may pay up. Moses will pile on interest, of course, because he will know that I dare not let it be known that I have had dealings with him. But I shall pay up and get clear at the earliest possible moment. Don't look worried, my dear kid. You know the Toff always had a knack of getting out of a scrape. You will make me sorry that I confide in you."

Marie smiled sadly.

"I know you will never keep secrets from me, Toff. We are too old chums for that."

"Never, Marie."

Talbot gave a sudden start, and looked out of the door of the summer-house. A rustle in the shrubbery had caught his ear. But there was no one in sight. He turned back, and dropped on the rustic seat, and for a long time he chatted with the Little Sister, the clouds clearing from his brow. The girl's face was brighter when he left her at last and walked away slowly towards the gate in the quadrangle.

He started a little as he came to the gate. On the other side of it a junior was leaning. It was Levison of the Fourth. He looked round at Talbot's footsteps, and moved from the gate, and the Shell fellow opened it and came through. Levison seemed about to speak, but Talbot hurried directly towards the School House.

In the doorway he passed Tom Merry. The captain of the Shell kept his eyes on the ground, and Talbot passed him without a word.

He went to his study. Gore was out, but Skimpole was there, poring through his big spectacles over a huge volume. Talbot got out his books, and sat down to work. He had learned that recipe for trouble—hard work. That could drive black thoughts from the mind when nothing else could. Skimpole of the Shell blinked at him. Skimpole, the brainy youth, was anxious to find a listener to some startling new theories he had thought out on the extremely important subject of evolution. But Talbot seemed to be afflicted with sudden deafness when Skimpole started, and after a time the genius of the Shell gave it up, and wandered forth with

his big volume under his arm, seeking another victim. In the study Talbot remained alone, his brows bent over his work, fixing his thoughts by an effort of will upon Latin syntax.

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## CHAPTER 10.

### Levison Remembers.

"STILL ratty?"

Tom Merry started out of a brown study as the remark was addressed to him. He was leaning on the stone balustrade outside the School House, in moody thought. The old quad was almost empty. Manners was still in the dark-room, and Lowther was grinding out comicalities for the "Weekly" in the study—rather lugubrious comicalities as a matter of fact. Tom Merry was alone with his thoughts, which were not agreeable. The vision of Talbot passing him with bent head and averted looks haunted him. It had come to this—this was the end of the friendship that it had seemed that nothing could break!

The somewhat unpleasant voice of Levison of the Fourth came disagreeably to his ears. Tom looked at him coldly. He did not like Levison, and he did not take any trouble to conceal the fact. He made no reply.

But Levison had stopped on the steps, and evidently intended to speak. Tom Merry made a movement to go. He never could stand Levison. Once—under the influence of the Toff, strangely enough—the cad of the Fourth had seemed to show a better side of his nature, but he had soon fallen back again. Levison, the smoker, the "dog," the breaker of bounds, and reckless blackguard generally, was not the kind of fellow Tom Merry could pull with. But the cad of the Fourth put out his hand, and stopped him as he was moving away. He wanted to speak, and he was not to be denied. But his look did not indicate that his remarks were to be of a friendly nature—rather the reverse.

"Don't buzz off," said Levison. "Can't you speak? I asked you a question."

"I don't choose to answer it," said Tom Merry. "Mind your own business. Is that plain enough for you, Levison?"

"Quite. All the same, I've got something to say. Since Thursday you've been on bad terms with Talbot."

"What business is that of yours, hang you?"

"None at all," said Levison calmly. "None at all, excepting for the fact that Talbot is duffer enough to care about it. You were down on me once, when Talbot first came here, because I was down on him. Well, Talbot did me a good turn after that—goodness knows why, excepting that he's a better bettor than I, or you either. I had been slanging him, throwing up his past in his face——"

"Like a rotten cad, as you are!" said Tom Merry.

"Like a rotten cad," agreed Levison, unmoved. "Call me what you like. I'd bite out my tongue for what I said to him if that would do any good. I was in a frightful fix, and Talbot helped me out of it—you know all about it. He gave me five pounds—all he had, I believe—and saved me from getting shown up to the Head, and very likely sacked. I haven't been able to pay him—he knew that I wouldn't be able to. He knew he was simply giving the money away, and every shilling of it was wanted for his own needs—I knew that. Well, I may be a rotter, as you say, but I haven't forgotten that, and I don't mean to forget it. And whatever Talbot should do, I'd stand by him. And that's more than you will do, though he prefers you to me."

Tom Merry was silent. The words touched a chord within him somewhere. This fellow, the cad of the Fourth, a fellow who had done enough to be expelled from the school a dozen times over, if the truth had been known—was his friendship stronger under the test than Tom Merry's own? It was not a pleasant thought.

"What are you talking to me for?" exclaimed Tom at last. "You don't know what the trouble is."

"I don't know, and I don't want to know; but if I had the luck to be Talbot's chum, I wouldn't go back on him when he's in trouble."

"How do you know he's in trouble?"

"Never mind how I know that; I do know it."

"Only if you have been spying again!" exclaimed Tom Merry, clenching his hands

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't talk to me," muttered Tom. "You make me sick! Let me pass!"

He pushed Levison aside and strode away. The cad of the Fourth looked after him with a bitter look, and then went into the School House. He made his way to Talbot's study, and knocked at the door.

"Come in!"

Talbot looked up from his work. He was not pleased at the sight of Levison, but he was always civil. Talbot was probably the only fellow who had been able to extract any good from Levison's peculiar nature; but he could not like him. But he was always civil to him—which Tom Merry & Co. were not always. Talbot had been an "under-dog" long enough to learn to give every fellow a chance.

"Interrupting you, I suppose?" remarked Levison.

"Well, yes."

"Nothing like being candid," said the Fourth-Former, laughing. "Well, I'm going to interrupt you for a few minutes." He closed the door and came into the study, and Talbot, in some surprise, laid down his pen. Levison saw a cloud gathering on his brow, and went on hastily: "Don't worry. I'm not going to chip into your bizney, and borrow D'Arcy's role of peacemaker. I know how to mind my own business, I hope."

"Thanks!" said Talbot.

"You don't feel inclined to tell me what it's about?"

"No," said Talbot bluntly.

"Right. Nothing like frankness. Not that I care very much. I'm blessed if I ever could understand what you could see in Tom Merry—"

"If you say a word against Tom Merry, Levison, there will be trouble," said Talbot, very quietly, but with a gleam in his eyes.

"Lucky that I'm not going to, then," said Levison coolly. "I haven't come here hunting for trouble. I've come here because, whether you like it or not, I feel friendly towards you. You're about the only chap I ever did feel friendly towards, and it won't make any difference even if you chuck me out."

Talbot burst into a laugh.

"I'm not likely to chuck you out," he said. "No reason why we shouldn't be friends, so far as I can see."

"Good!" said Levison. "Some time ago you lent me—or, rather, gave me—five quid. You knew I couldn't pay it—or, rather, to be quite frank, since we're indulging in so much frankness, you knew that I wouldn't. I did get some money once since then, and I ought to have paid you, but I blued it all in riotous living—playing the giddy goat, you know. The sharpers at the Green Man soon relieved me of it. You see, I'm built that way. I couldn't keep what you'd call straight if I tried."

"No reason why you shouldn't try," said Talbot. "I've had to live down worse things than that."

"I'm not built your way," said Levison, with a shrug. "Besides, I don't know that I'd choose to be, either. I like my own way best. Perhaps there's a kink in me, you know, and it can't be got out. But never mind that. I was in the Head's garden this afternoon."

Talbot's brow grew very stern.

"I thought I heard someone!" he exclaimed. "Have you come here to tell me that you were listening?"

"Don't fly out," said Levison coolly. "What I heard I couldn't help hearing. I got away as quickly as I could, so as not to hear any more. Not my usual custom, I admit," he added, with a bitter sneer. "But it's the fact, all the same, in this case. You see, I'd gone there for a quiet smoke—a little way I have. Then Miss Marie came along to the summer-house, and I had to get out of sight. They don't allow me the run of the Head's garden—especially for smoking purposes. I couldn't get off without being seen—and then you came. Then you began to talk, and I thought it was time to clear. I had to pass quite close to the summer-house to get away, and so I heard what you said about——"

"About what?" asked Talbot, his heart sinking. He believed Levison's statement, that he had not heard more than he could help; but it was wretched to think that the cad of the Fourth knew the secret of the lonely cottage on the moor.

"About being hard up, and going to old Moses to raise some money."

Talbot breathed more freely.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else," said Levison. "I'll repeat your exact words, all that I heard—'Moses will pile on interest, of course, because he will know that I dare not let it be known that I have had dealings with him.' That's all. You believe me?"

"I believe you," said Talbot. "It's decent of you to tell me about it, Levison. Of course, you won't talk about it?"

"You can rely on that. But"—Levison hesitated—"you're hard up. You needn't mind telling me. I'd help you if I could." Talbot made a movement, and Levison sneered bitterly. "You wouldn't accept help from me—what? You'd pile favours on me, but you wouldn't let me help you when you're in trouble?"

"I—I would," said Talbot, with an effort. "You've a right to help me, Levison, as I've helped you once. But you can't. You've got no money, have you?"

"I never have any, since my pater had bad luck," said Levison. "They keep me pretty short, I can tell you. There's a regular row if I ask for an extra half-crown."

"Then you can hardly help a chap who's hard up."

"I owe you five pounds."

"Never mind that. You can't pay it, and I don't want to bother you. Besides, to be quite candid, I never really expected you to settle."

Levison laughed.

"I know that. But look here, Talbot; you're off with your own friends, and I—I'd like to help you if I could. I might be able to. Tell me how you're fixed. You know that I can hold my tongue."

Talbot hesitated. Levison of the Fourth was not the confidant he would have chosen, by any means. But he could not help being a little touched. His own pals had broken with him, and the cad of the Fourth, with all his faults, was evidently in earnest in wanting to help him if he could. And in spite of the sneering curve to Levison's thin lips, Talbot could read the emotion that was half-hidden behind the sneer. Somehow or other, he had touched that hard heart.

"I'm not asking for your secrets," went on Levison. "But you're in a fix. You want some. How much do you want?"

"Twenty pounds."

"My hat!" Levison stared at him. "Talbot! It isn't possible that you—you—nothing in my line, surely?"

"No, nothing in your line, Levison," said Talbot, laughing in spite of himself. "I haven't been playing cards or getting into debt. I want the money to help somebody."

"As you helped me?" said Levison. "Yes, I might have guessed that. Well, look here, Talbot, you're not going to old Moses for the money. He would lend it to you fast enough—he'd be glad to get a St. Jim's fellow under his thumb, and squeeze interest out of you month after month, and year after year. If you want twenty quid, it's got to be raised without that. I'm going to help."

"But——"

"Don't throw my help in my face. I let you help me, and was jolly glad of it."

"I won't, Levison—I'll let you help me if you can," said Talbot. "But you can't! You've got no money."

"Never mind that. How are you off, so far—how much can you raise towards it? I'm going to raise the five quid I owe you, anyway. But how much can you do. Let's go into it. Let me be a pal for ten minutes. I won't bother you afterwards."

"I don't mind," said Talbot. "I've been working it out, as a matter of fact. I've got five pounds in the Post Office—I'm getting that out. I can get five pounds from the Housemaster in advance of my scholarship allowance—he knows a scholarship kid feels the pinch sometimes, and he has offered it to me if I should want it. I've simply got to mention it to him that I'd like it now, and that will be all right."

"That makes ten," said Levison. "What about the rest?"

"There's my bike—the Professor sent that back to me some time ago, after——" Talbot paused. "You remember? Well, I know it will fetch five pounds. I can do without a bike all right."

"That makes fifteen," said Levison. "And the rest?"

Talbot shook his head.

"That's where I'm stumped," he said. "I get my regular allowance weekly, but that I need—partly for myself, and partly for—for the chap I'm speaking of, to keep him going from day to day. I want five pounds in a lump, and I'm afraid there's nothing for it but Mr. Moses. You see, I shall clear it off next term all right—with about another five in interest, I suppose. He will want cent. per cent."

"Yes, if he lets you off as lightly as that," said Levison. "You know what moneylenders are. He might keep your paper, and make you pay interest for years on it—all the time you're at St. Jim's. He's a thorough rogue."

"That would be rather thick," said Talbot, with a troubled look. "I hardly think—— Anyway, there seems no help for it."

"There is help for it. You need five quid, and I owe you five quid. Well, if I pay up, that sees you through."

"But you can't do it," said Talbot.

"You're a queer beggar," said Levison. "Most chaps in your position would be ragging me like thunder for the money."

"To tell the truth, it did cross my mind that you might be able to stump up," said Talbot frankly. "But I should not have asked you."

"I know you wouldn't, but I'm going to, and I'm jolly glad I've got on to this, and know that you want it. I'll try my people first—not much chance there, I'm afraid—I've got a rich uncle who could help me no end if he liked, but he doesn't take to me. But I'm going to raise that five. You can rely on it. When do you want it?"

"I shall have the fifteen by next week," said Talbot. "But——"

"Next week you will have my five, too," said Levison. "Mind, I'm not talking out of my hat. I can raise the money at a pinch. I've got resources. You can rely on that five, honour bright!"

"It's awfully decent of you," said Talbot gratefully.

"Well, it's about time I paid up," said Levison carelessly. "I was a bit of a worm not to square up before. But now you can rely on it, and you won't think of going to Moses."

"I sha'n't need to now."

"Good!" Levison rose. "That's settled. Now you can get on with your Latin, and I'll go and have a smoke."

Levison quitted the study before Talbot could reply. The Shell fellow picked up his pen, but he did not immediately resume his work. He sat with a thoughtful expression on his face. The hardest of his difficulties was gone—and it was Levison, the cad of the Fourth, who had removed it. Long ago he had done Levison that good turn, never dreaming of any outcome. Truly, he had cast his bread upon the waters, and it had returned to him after many days!

## CHAPTER 11.
### Awfully Deep.

"BAI Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy paused in the passage on Wednesday afternoon, and turned his eyeglass upon the notice-board.

There were two or three notices there from the Head, masters, or prefects. But the swell of the Fourth was not interested in them.

His celebrated monocle was turned upon a strip of paper pinned on the board, with a few lines on it in a handwriting he knew—that of Talbot of the Shell. And the few lines ran:

"Bicycle, good condition, back-pedal brake, Dunlop tyres, two speeds, complete with lamp, pump, etc., for sale.—Apply, R. Talbot, Shell."

Arthur Augustus was surprised. If he had seen a notice on the board announcing the sale of Herries' famous bulldog, it would scarcely have surprised him more.

"Come on, fathead!" said Blake. "What are you blinking at the notice-board for?"

"I'm not blinkin', Blake."

"Well, come on!"

"Pway wait a minute. Look at this notice, deah boys!"

"What is it—Smith minor selling his blessed white rabbits?" grunted Blake, as he came back along the passage. "He's always selling those rabbits."

"Wubbish! This isn't wabbits!"

"Hallo, that's Talbot's fist!" said Herries, in surprise. "What the dickens is he going to sell his bike for, with the summer coming on, too? Must be an ass!"

"Must be hard up," said Digby.

"Had an accident with it, perhaps," suggested Mellish of the Fourth, joining the chums of Study No. 6 at the notice-board.

"That is a wotten suggestion, Mellish. Besides, he says it is in good condish. I wathah think that Talbot is playin' it low down on us, deah boys. If he's hard up, why can't he bowwow some cash fwom a pal?"

"May be giving up biking," said Digby. "It's a good jigger. I'd buy it myself, only I don't suppose he'd take ninepence for it. That's as far as I could do."

"He can't be givin' up bikin'," said Arthur Augustus. "He is a vewy good widah, and vewy fond of bikin'. Must be hard up, that is the only explanation. Let's go and see him."

"What for?"

"Pway come along with me, deah boys, and don't ask questions. You can wely on me doin' the wight thing, as a fellow of tact and judgment."

"Bow-wow! We're going out."

"We are not goin' out just yet. I have somethin' wathah important to say to you chaps. But first let's go and see Talbot. Know where he is?"

"In the quad, I believe," said Dig. "I saw him go out after dinner, by himself; he isn't speaking to those Shell duffers now, and he doesn't seem inclined to speak to anybody else."

"Vewy well, we will go out, then."

Study No. 6 accordingly went out. They had arranged a long walk for that afternoon, as it was a half-holiday, and fine spring weather; but evidently the long walk had to be put off for a little. It was quite useless to argue with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, so the other three resigned themselves to their fate.

Talbot of the Shell was seated on one of the old benches

under the elms, with a book on his knee, and a pencil in his hand. He was using most of his spare time now to work up for the prize examination he meant to enter the next term. But he cheerfully looked up from Livy as the chums of the Fourth bore down on him. Not all the troubles that had so suddenly shadowed his life could have any effect upon his cheery good-temper.

"Oh, heah you are!" said Arthur Augustus sternly. "I have a bone to pick with you, Talbot. I wegard you as not playin' the game."

"Sorry," said Talbot, with a smile, "what have I done, Gussy?"

"I have just wead your notice on the board. You are sellin' your bike."

"Yes, if I can get an offer."

"That means that you are hard up, I pwesume?"

"You've hit it, Gussy. With your usual—I mean unusual—brain-power, you've got it right first time!"

"Yaas, I concluded so. Well, what do you mean by it? Can't you bowwow somethin' of a fwiend when you are stonay?"

"Oh, good!" said Blake. "Yes, quite right! Why couldn't you come round to Study No. 6, Talbot, and tell us you had fallen in a stony place."

"But I want five pounds for the bike," said Talbot, laughing. "Five pounds can't generally be borrowed in the Fourth."

"Ahem! No. I've got fifteenpence," said Blake, thoughtfully. "Dig's got ninepence. I dare say Herries has a bob or two. But Gussy rolls in money—slides in it—fairly skates on it. Besides, he can raise money as easy as falling off a form. If he sold off his silk hats at a tanner a time, he would raise hundreds of pounds——"

"You uttah ass, Blake! Pway don't be widiculous on a sewious subject. Talbot, deah boy, I will telegwaph to my patah at once, and scwew a fivah out of him."

Talbot shook his head.

"Thanks awfully, Gussy. But I don't want to borrow—really. I shouldn't be able to settle up till next term. It's different borrowing a bob or two till a chap's allowance comes along. But I'm not going to borrow a sum of money. I'm going to sell the bike. Thanks all the same!"

"I wegard you as an obstinate ass, Talbot."

"Thanks again."

Talbot returned to Titus Livius, and the chums of Study No. 6 left him to his work. Blake and Herries and Dig were heading for the gates, when Arthur Augustus called them to order.

"Pway come up to the studay, deah boys."

"The study!" howled Blake. "What are we to go up to the study for?"

"It's a meetin'."

"Oh, rats!"

"Pway come on, deah boys! I assuah you it is wathah important. I twust you are goin' to back me up in helpin' a chap in a fix."

"What have you got in your silly napper now?"

"I will explain in the study."

Blake and Herries and Dig indulged in three separate and emphatic groans, and followed the swell of St. Jim's to study No. 6. Arthur Augustus closed the door in a very mysterious manner.

"It's up to us, deah boys," he said impressively.

"What is?" demanded Herries.

"Talbot's sellin' his bike because he's hard up. Well, it's up to this study. We're goin' to buy it."

"But we've all got bikes."

"I don't mean buy it to wide, ass!"

"To eat?" asked Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Or to stick on the mantelpiece as an ornament. The pedals would be in the way——"

"Look heah——"

"Besides, we've got jam-jars on the mantelpiece——"

"You uttah ass!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "Will you be sewious? We're goin' to waise the tin and buy Talbot's bike, and then weturn it to him by cawwiah with a label on—'A Pwesent fwom an Unknown Friend.'"

"My only hat!"

"He would be waxy," said Dig.

"Wats! I should wegard it as an action of gweat delicacy."

"But he'd know we bought it, if we bought it," said Blake. "He'd guess who was the unknown friend, wouldn't he?"

"Yaas; but I've thought that out. I'm wathah deep, you know," said Arthur Augustus, with considerable satisfaction. "We won't appeah in the mattah ourselves. All we've got to do is to waise the money. Then I will disguise myself——"

"Wha-a-a-at!" stuttered Blake.

"You know what a wippin' hand I am at disguisin' myself. I will put on some false whiskahs——"

"Oh dear!"

"And a wed wig——"

"Help!" gasped Blake

"And call on Talbot as a bicycle dealah, and explain to him that I have heard that he has a bike for sale, and I want to buy it for a particulah fwiend. He won't know me, of course——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothing to cackle at. Then I shall wheel the bike away, and send it back to him by cawwiah——"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Blake and Herries and Digby, as if they would never stop. Study No. 6 rang with merriment. Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass a little more tightly into his eye, and surveyed his hilarious chums sternly.

"I uttahly fail to see any weason for this wibald laughter."

"Ha, ha. ha, ha!"

"Will you back me up? Where are you goin'?"

"I'm going out," gasped Blake. "I want some fresh air after that. Oh, my hat! Oh, my solitary unique aunt! Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake staggered out of the study. Herries and Dig staggered after them. They were in hysterics.

Arthur Augustus snorted. It was not merely a sniff—it was a snort, an emphatic snort. Deep as his scheme was, Machiavellian in its cunning, it was evident that he would get no help from his study-mates in carrying it out.

But Arthur Augustus was not easily beaten. When he had an idea in his noble head, it was a fixture there. Backed up or not backed up by Study No. 6, Arthur Augustus was going to carry out his little plot.

## CHAPTER 12.
### Raising the Wind.

TALBOT'S notice on the board attracted the attention of other fellows, as well as the chums of Study No. 6. Most of the fellows were not surprised that a scholarship-boy should be "stony" for once, so there was not much remark on the subject. But the Terrible Three read that notice with gloomy brows.

It was not a case of "hard up," with Talbot, they knew that. His scholarship allowance was more than sufficient for him, and he had no expensive tastes. He was not the kind of fellow to pile up debts it was difficult to pay. They knew what the money was wanted for—Hookey Walker.

If they had needed any proof that the Toff was in communication with his old associate, there it was. But they needed no proof. More than once they had seen Talbot leaving the school alone, carrying a bag. They did not need to ask what his destination was.

It was no business of theirs, of course. Since the break, Talbot had not spoken to them. They avoided one another's presence. The "rift in the lute" had ceased to be remarked upon, much remark as it had caused at first. It was understood that Talbot no longer "palled" with the Terrible Three, that was all.

But Tom Merry's look was dark as he saw that notice on the board, and afterwards saw Crooke of the Shell carefully examining Talbot's bike. If Crooke was the purchaser, he was pretty certain to get value for his money. Tom knew that the Toff was attached to his bike, and that if he sold it, it was not likely that he would get another very soon.

But Talbot's old chums could not interefere. They were not on speaking terms—so they could scarcely offer to lend him money. Besides, could they have lent him money, knowing that it was to be taken to Hookey Walker? Tom felt that it could not be done. They were keeping silent about the man; but to provide money to help an escaped convict to get clear of the police would have been a little too "thick." Not that Talbot would have accepted it from them, for that matter—they knew that, too.

Tom Merry's heart was heavy. His old pal was very dear to him, but it began to be clear that things could never be as they had been. Talbot was so quiet and reserved, that it was difficult to say whether he felt the break as much as Tom Merry did.

He kept to himself—he did not seek to replace his lost friends with others. There were many fellows who would willingly have palled on with Talbot. He was friendly with Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn—but no more so than before. Study No. 6 would willingly have made him a fifth in their select circle, but Talbot showed no desire that way.

If he showed more cordiality to anybody than usual, it was to Levison of the Fourth. In Tom Merry's eyes, that was the unkindest cut of all. Levison, the cad and rank outsider. What a friend for Talbot! But they were never likely to be pals.

The Terrible Three were doing their preparation that evening, not in a cheerful mood, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came in.

"Got any money, deah boys?" he asked.

"How much?"

"I want two pounds fifteen shillings and sixpence."

"Well, you've got it exact," said Monty Lowther. "What is the odd tanner for?"

"I'm waising a sum of money," explained Arthur Augustus. "I have a wathah deep scheme I am cawwyin' out. I won't tell you chaps, as you are not on good terms with old Talbot."

"Talbot!" said Tom, with a start. "What about Talbot?"

"Nothin', deah boy. I am weally keepin' this awf'ly dark. But I wequiah seven pounds. I had two pounds of my own, and I have sewewed five shillings out of the boundahs in my study, though they wefuse to back me up in the scheme. I have bowwowed five shillings each fwom Kangy and Dane, and a soveweign fwom Glyn. I had got a soveweign fwom Koumi Wao, the Indian chap, and half-a-crown fwom Weilly, and eighteen-pence fwom Kewwuish, and sixpence fwom Blenkinsop. So I wequiah two pounds fifteen shillings and sixpence to make up seven pounds."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cacklin' at, Lowthah?"

"Try it again," said Lowther. "Put a wet towel round your head, and put your beef into it, and then you may work it out that four pounds nineteen and six requires two pounds and sixpence to make it up to seven pounds. Don't take my word for it. Go and work it out. It will keep you busy till bedtime."

Arthur Augustus rubbed his aristocratic nose thoughtfully.

"Pewwaps you are wight, Lowthah. I nevah was vewy good at beastly awithmetic. Bwainy chaps nevah can do sums—not weally bwainy chaps. Howevah, if I wequiah only two pounds and sixpence, that makes it all the easiah. Can you fellows lend me two pounds and sixpence?"

"Put me down for the sixpence," said Lowther generously.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

The Terrible Three went through their pockets. The sum of eleven shillings was raised, and Arthur Augustus accepted it gracefully.

"I will weturn this next week, deah boys," he assured them. "How much do I need now, Lowthah, to make up seven pounds?"

Monty Lowther kindly worked out that problem in his head.

"One pound nine-and-six, ass!"

"Vewy well, I'll go and look for Lumley-Lumley. I want to make it up to seven. You see, the bike is worth seven, and it would be wotten to let it go for five."

"So you're going to buy Talbot's bike?"

"Pway excuse me if I do not weply to that question, deah boy. You see, I'm keepin' this awf'ly dark."

And Arthur Augustus quitted the study in search of Lumley-Lumley and one pound nine shillings and sixpence, leaving the Terrible Three smiling. Arthur Augustus's system of keeping his enterprise awfully dark had had the effect of chasing the clouds from their brows.

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## CHAPTER 13.

### Sold.

"COME in!" said Talbot.

Gore and Skimpole had finished their preparation, and gone down to the common-room. Talbot remained alone in the study. He was not in a mood for company. He was giving Q. Horatius Flaccus a turn, when a tap came at his door.

Talbot was not easily startled, but he very nearly jumped as he saw his visitor, a figure in a long overcoat that reached the floor came in. He held a silk hat in his hand. The collar of his coat was turned up about his neck. His head was covered with grey hair. His face was almost hidden under huge, bushy whiskers and a long beard. His complexion was ruddy. His eyes disappeared behind an enormous pair of spectacles. At the first glance he looked like a man of about fifty; at the second glance he looked like Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form, wrapped up in about half the property of the Fourth Form Dramatic Society.

Talbot stared at him blankly.

"Good-evenin', deah boy!" said this strange visitor.

"G-g-g-good-evening!" stuttered Talbot.

"Master Talbot, I pwesume?"

"Eh?"

"I undahstand that this is Master Talbot's study?"

"Yes," gasped Talbot.

"Vewy good. Then I will come in. I desiah to see you on a little mattah of business. Pway allow me to intwoduce myself."

"Wha-a-t!"

"Henwy Wobinson, bicycle-dealah."

"Eh?"

"I heah that you have a bicycle for sale, Master Talbot."

Talbot sat and stared. His first impression had been that Arthur Augustus was trying on some new rig for private theatricals, and had come to ask his opinion about the costume. He realised now that the swell of the Fourth reposed in blissful ignorance of the fact that his disguise was as transparent as a plate-glass window.

Talbot repressed a yell with difficulty. Arthur Augustus was evidently keenly desirous of not being recognised, so the good-natured Shell fellow decided to give him his head.

"You pwobably did not expect a call fwom me?" remarked Mr. Robinson.

"Nunno!"

"May I take a chah?"

"Oh, do!"

The visitor sat down. He was careful to keep his face away from the light, which showed up the unmistakable profile of his aristocratic nose to great advantage.

"As a bicycle-dealah, Talbot—I mean, Master Talbot—I am pwepared to purchase your bicycle, and to offah you full value."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You will find me quite an honest dealah. The fact is, I wequiah a bike about that size for a particulah fwiend of mine."

"Oh dear!"

"I twust you are pwepared to do business with me, Talbot—I should say, Master Talbot. I can assuah you that Henwy Wobinson has quite a gweat weputation for faih dealin's. Your bike has a back-pedal bwake, I undahstand?"

"Yes," gasped Talbot.

"And a two-speed geah?"

"Yes."

"Tyahs in good condish?"

"Pretty good," murmured Talbot, almost suffocating.

"Vewy well. I will give you seven pounds for it, deah boy."

"I'm only asking five."

"Yaas, that's all vewy well, but you don't know anythin' about business, deah boy. The bike is well worth seven, and I'm goin' to see that you have the pwopah value."

"Oh dear!" gasped Talbot. "Oh dear!"

"Hurts you wathah to part with the bike?" asked Mr. Robinson sympathetically. "Wathah attached to it—what? Sort of old and faithful fwiend, I pwesume? Well, it is poss that you may see it again, you know."

"See it again?" said Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah! I am buyin' it for a vewy particulah fwiend. I am not at liberty to say any more at pwesent, as I am keepin' the whole scheme awf'ly dark. I twust you will accept my offah of seven pounds for the jiggah?"

Talbot controlled his feelings with a heroic effort. He understood now Arthur Augustus's benevolent design in purchasing the bicycle. Not for worlds would he have revealed the fact that he had recognised the kind-hearted swell of the Fourth the moment he had entered the study. Arthur Augustus deserved to be left in the blissful delusion that he was disguised beyond recognition.

"I'm sorry!" gasped Talbot. "I can't——"

"You can't accept my offah of seven pounds?"

"No. You see——"

"Bai Jove! That's wotten! You see, I've only got seven pounds. I could have waised anothah quid fwom Lumley—ahem!—I mean, pewwaps we can come to terms. How much do you wequiah for the bike?"

"Five pounds. But——"

"Then we can easily come to terms. I was undah the impwession that you were goin' to name a largah sum. I shall insist upon your weceivin' seven pounds, because the jiggah is well worth that second-hand. I—I have seen you widin' it, you know. Heah you are, deah boy. Pway come and hand the jiggah ovah to me."

The bicycle merchant deposited seven pounds on the table. It was quite a curious collection of money. There were sovereigns, and pound notes, and ten-shilling notes, and half-crowns, and florins, and shillings, and sixpences. The composition of that little pile of wealth revealed how it had been raised, and Talbot understood that "Mr. Robinson" must have had a long peregrination up and down the School House before he had finished raising the purchase-money.

"Pway count that," said Mr. Robinson. "I think you will find it all wight. Lowthah says—I—I mean, I am suah it is quite all wight. But pway count it. I always make it a point to be extwemely business-like in my twansactions."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ahem! I fail to see any cause for laughtah in a business ansaction, deah boy—I mean, Master Talbot. Pway count e money," said Mr. Robinson. "I have to be goin'. Vewy important business this evenin'."

"I'm afraid I can't——"

"Pway excuse me if I huwwy you, deah boy."

"But I can't sell you the bike, Mr. Robinson," gurgled the Shell fellow. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I've sold it already."

"Bai Jove! Sold it alweady?"

"Yes. I've sold it to Crooke for five pounds."

"Gweat Scott! The uttah wottah! It was worth more than that."

"Yes; but that's a fair price, selling in a hurry," said Talbot. "And I really only needed five pounds."

"Pewwaps Cwooke would listen to weason on the subject?" said Mr. Robinson thoughtfully. "Pewwaps he would sell it to me for seven pounds? I will see."

"You—you're going to see Crooke?" ejaculated Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"Pway excuse me, deah boy! I wish you a vewy good-evenin'!"

Mr. Robinson rose, bowed over his silk hat, and retired from the study. Talbot lay back in his chair and laughed till the tears streamed down his cheeks. He had not had the heart to undeceive Arthur Augustus. But it was pretty certain that he would be undeceived as soon as he entered Crooke's study in that extraordinary guise. But that could not be helped.

Crooke of the Shell was in his study, and Gore and Mellish were with him. When Mr. Robinson presented himself, the three juniors stared at him blankly.

"My only hat!" said Crooke. "What's the little game? Got up as the Wild Man from Borneo, Gussy? Or are you doing Kaiser Bill?"

Mr. Robinson jumped.

"Is it a joke?" asked Gore, in wonder.

"Bai Jove! You—you are labahin' undah a—a—a misappwehension, Cwooke. Pway allow me to intwoduce myself as Henwy Wobinson——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A—a—a bicycle merchant."

"Oh, my hat!" yelled Crooke. "The blithering idiot doesn't know we know him! Come here, you fellows—come and have a look at D'Arcy!" yelled Crooke along the passage.

"What the thunder——" came Blake's voice.

"Gussy!" yelled Dig. "Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter in the passage. Mr. Robinson gazed round him in dismay. Reilly caught hold of his beard, and there was a fresh yell as it came off.

"Bai Jove! You wottahs!"

Blake seized his chum and rushed him away down the passage, followed by howls of laughter. He rushed him into Study No. 6, and hurled him into the armchair. Mr. Robinson collapsed there, gasping.

"Gwooh! You wuff ass!"

"Get that rubbish off!" roared Blake. "You thumping ass! You howling dummy! Do you think a blind donkey with half an eye wouldn't have known you at once?"

"Talbot did not know me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I assuah you that he did not know me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He did not show the slightest sign of wecognition——"

Blake and Herries and Digby yelled. They seized Arthur Augustus, and dragged off his disguise. Only the thick make-up on his face remained, and it gave the swell of St. Jim's a very peculiar appearance.

"You uttah asses! I took a lot of twouble with that, and now you have spoiled it all. It was all wight with Talbot. He has sold his bike to Cwooke, and I was goin' to buy it from Cwooke, you know——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I weally don't know how Cwooke spotted me. Talbot didn't wecognise me in the least. And I do not see anythin' whatevah to cackle at."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you do not cease that widiculous cacklin'——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors did not cease—they couldn't. They laughed and wept by turns, till the incensed Arthur Augustus seized the poker, and drove them, gasping, from the study.

## CHAPTER 14.
### Paid in Full.

"IT'S all right, Marie."

Talbot spoke cheerfully under the trees in the old garden. He had reason to be satisfied. It was the day following the visit of Mr. Robinson to his study. The Toff's difficulties, so far as money was concerned, seemed to be over. That night he was to see Hookey Walker for the last time. The cloud remained between him and his former chums. But it was something to be rid of the cause of the trouble, and to feel that his old associate and the "kid" were in safety.

"I can't think it's all right, Toff, if you have been to the moneylender," said Marie wistfully.

"But I haven't," said Talbot brightly. "I've managed without that. The fellow I spoke of—he's going to pay up to-day, Marie. I've raised twenty pounds in all, and that's enough to see Hookey clear. He can get out of the country with his wife and the little girl; poor people travel pretty cheaply, you know. As for the things they need before they go, I've been able to see to that too."

"You have given up everything you had, you mean."

"Well, it has cleared me out, and no mistake," admitted Talbot. "But I gave Hookey's wife the three pounds from you, Marie, and that helped."

"I wish I could have helped more," said the girl, with a sigh; "but these days are not like the old days, Toff. Then——"

"You never think of regretting the old days, Marie?"

"No—a thousand times no." The girl shivered. "I don't like even to think of them, Toff. Then it is all right now? Hookey Walker can go?"

"I shall make the last arrangements with him to-day. He is in real earnest, dear, and in a few days more he will be in safety. Afterwards I shall send him a little when I can, but I'm pretty sure of the Northcote prize next term. I'm working for it pretty hard, and it's twenty-five pounds in money. That will see me clear, and get me a new bike, perhaps."

"You have sold the other?"

"Yes, it had to go," Talbot laughed. "I had a better offer too late." He related the visit of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and Marie laughed.

"He is a dear boy," she said. "But, Toff, you are still on the same terms with your old friends?"

Talbot's brow clouded.

"Yes. That can't be helped. It's only one more thing to stand. What hits me rather hard is that Tom thinks I'm doing wrong—that I've set myself against him. He wouldn't be able to understand the position. It can't be helped. Perhaps things will work out all right afterwards—after Hookey is gone."

But there was no hope in Talbot's heart. The breach had been widening, and he knew it. With every day that passed, reconciliation became more difficult; the juniors were dropping into their new ways.

"I hope so," said Marie.

"Anyway, I always have one pal who will never change," said Talbot affectionately. "We shall always be chums, Marie, though the skies fall."

"Always," said Marie softly.

It was a week since Talbot had spoken to Tom Merry. He came into the common-room, after leaving Marie, and looked about him. He was not looking for his old chum. It was Levison of the Fourth he was seeking.

But Levison was not there, and Talbot went to his study. There he found the black sheep of the Fourth waiting for him.

Levison had promised him the repayment of the loan for that day. Talbot knew that he had written home, and that he had had a reply earlier in the week. But if any money came with the reply, Levison did not mention it.

Talbot did not ask questions. He had faith in Levison's word, and Levison had told him that there was no doubt about the matter. It was not his business to inquire into the junior's private concerns.

He greeted Levison with a friendly nod. Levison was looking a little pale and troubled. Talbot thought he understood.

"Never mind, old chap," he said. "It can't be helped."

Levison laughed, a little harshly.

"I've got it," he said.

"Oh, I—I thought——"

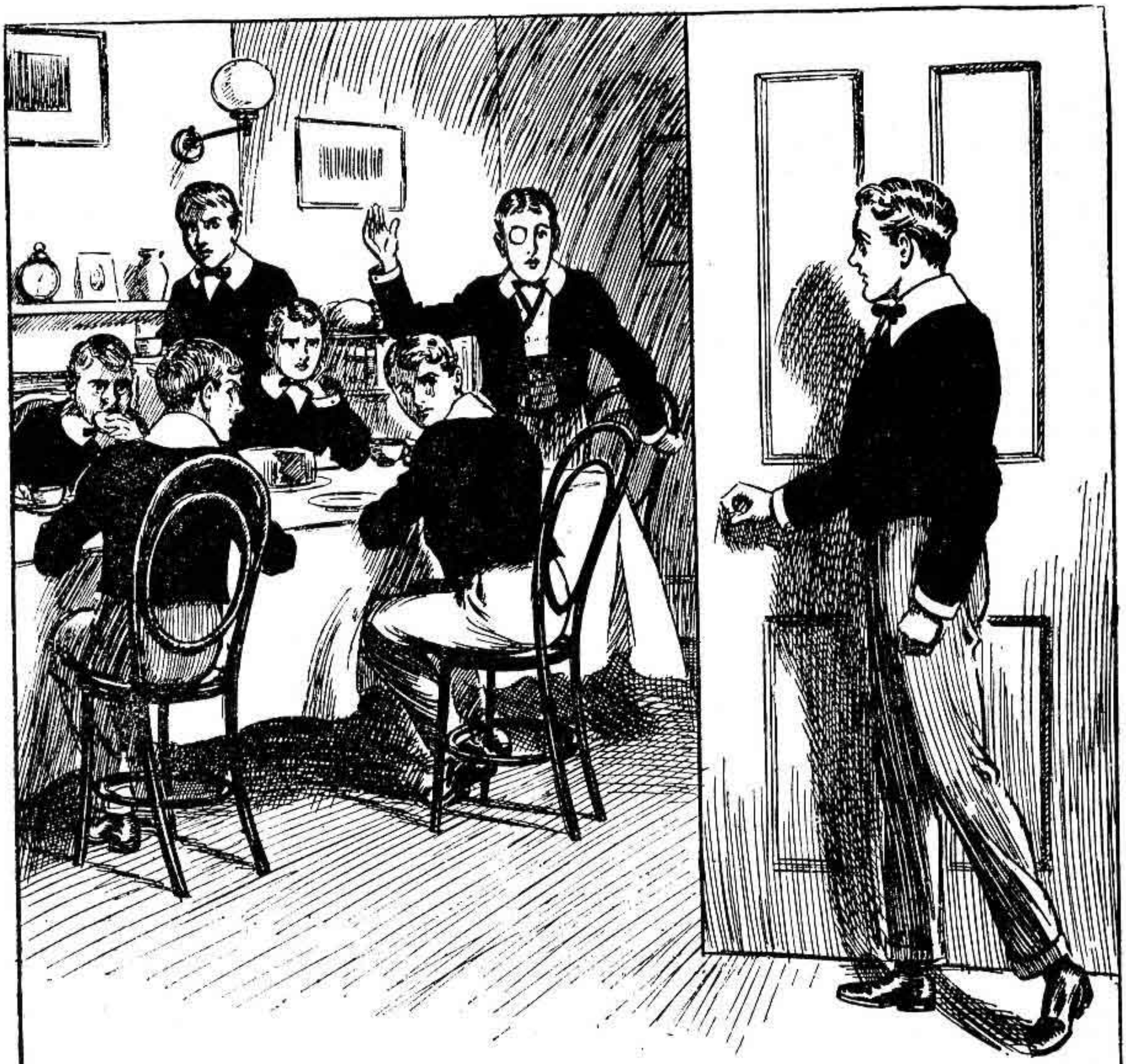
"Look here!"

Levison laid a greasy, crumpled five-pound note on the table.

"There you are, Talbot."

Talbot did not pick it up. He fixed his eyes on Levison's harassed face. There was something about the Fourth-Former that troubled him.

"I don't want to ask you questions, Levison," he said



**Talbot of the Shell came into the study. His handsome face was grave in its expression, but he smiled in response to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's cheery wave of the hand. "Come wight in, deah boy. Quite a little partay, you see—some old fwiends of yours——" Talbot stopped dead.** *(See Chapter 17.)*

abruptly. "But would you mind telling me how you got this?"

"What does that matter?"

"I'm afraid you've been worrying yourself over it, that's all," said Talbot. "I don't want to plant my troubles on your shoulders."

"I owe you the money."

"That's neither here nor there. I don't want you to settle up if it's a lot of trouble."

"Well, it isn't. I borrowed the fiver," said Levison. "It's all right. I can pay it all right next term, and I sha'n't be asked for it till then."

"Borrowed it?" said Talbot.

"Yes, from a man I know, not one of the fellows here. It's all right," said Levison. "Nothing to worry about. I—I was only worried because I couldn't let you have it sooner."

"Oh, that's all right."

"All serene for the rest?" asked Levison in a cheerful tone.

"Yes, that's all right. Five from the bank, five from the Housemaster, five for the bike, and this five," said Talbot. "I'm really obliged, Levison."

"Anybody would think I'd done you a tremendous favour in paying what I owe you," said Levison. "But, of course, you never expected me to be square."

"I didn't mean it like that," said Talbot. "Don't take offence where it isn't intended. Of course, I knew you'd square up if you could. I'm jolly glad you've been able to, that's all."

"All serene," said Levison.

He left the study, whistling. He ceased to whistle, however, as he came down into the lower hall, and the harassed look came back to his face. He gave an impatient shrug of the shoulders, as if dismissing unpleasant thoughts.

"One good turn deserves another," he muttered.

"Hallo! what are you mumbling about, kid?" asked Mellish of the Fourth, joining him.

"Nothing. Come and have a smoke."

"What-ho!"

Mellish regarded his companion curiously as they made their way to the woodshed for that delectable enjoyment.

"In funds?" he asked.

"I've got some smokes, if that's what you mean," said Levison sourly. "I've got nothing to lend."

"Didn't old Moses stump up, then?" asked Mellish, with a chuckle.

Levison started and turned white.

"Moses!" he stammered.

Mellish chuckled again.

"All right; I'm not going to jaw about it," he said reassuringly.

"About what?" demanded Levison fiercely.

"I saw you this afternoon," grinned Mellish. "You didn't see me; you were looking as if you'd got all the world's troubles on your shoulders, and thinking about 'em all at once. In Wayland, I mean."

"In Wayland!" muttered Levison.

"Yes, coming out of old Moses's office," said Mellish coolly. "I thought you'd been trying to raise the wind for another little flutter."

"Well, there was nothing doing," said Levison, recovering himself. "At the present moment I've got tuppence and a packet of cigarettes. You're welcome to some of the smokes, but don't jaw."

Levison did not seem inclined to "jaw" himself while those smokes were disposed of. Mellish did not find his company cheerful, and he soon left him. Levison, left alone, smoked cigarette after cigarette, till the packet was empty. Then he sat with a gloomy frown on his brow.

Mellish had seen his visit to the moneylender's. That did not matter. Mellish and Levison had too many shady secrets in common for his pal to think of giving him away. That did not matter. What did matter was that Levsion had done the most reckless thing of his reckless career—he had written his name upon a paper now in the possession of Mr. Soloman Moses, a paper valueless in a court of law, certainly, but extremely valuable to Mr. Moses, all the same, as a means of drawing money out of a fellow who dared not let his headmaster know that he had dealings with moneylenders.

Why had he done it? Levison hardly knew. One good turn deserved another; but Levison had received a good many good turns in his time, and had never troubled to testify any special amount of gratitude. Why had he done that for Talbot?

Talbot had saved him when he was in a tight corner; Talbot had always had a kindly word for him when other fellows were down on him—there were many reasons. Anyway, he had done it, and he was glad that he had done it, and Talbot would never know!

## CHAPTER 15.
### Tom Merry's Last Word.

DARKNESS lay thick on the old moor.

The hour was late.

There was a light drizzle of rain. Through the rain and the dark Talbot was tramping over the wet grass.

At St. Jim's every light was out, every fellow was in bed and fast asleep. It had been no difficulty for the Toff to keep awake till a late hour, and to leave the dormitory silently without waking his Form-fellows. The Toff was accustomed to being a night-bird, in the old days that were not so very old.

It was necessary to see Hookey Walker for the last time that night. The cracksman had made all his preparations for departure. On the morrow he was to leave the lonely cottage—to vanish for ever from the troubled life of the Toff. It had been impossible for the Shell fellow to make his last visit in the day. Levison had not brought him the five-pound note till close on locking-up time. Talbot did not know it, but the black sheep of the Fourth had had to go over to Wayland after lessons to obtain the money.

But it was easy enough for the Toff to leave the dormitory and the house secretly in the night. He shrank from doing it, easy as it was. There was little or no fear of discovery.

But the reformed prince of cracksmen was almost morbidly anxious to keep within the rules—never to overstep the line by a hair's-breadth. But there had been no help for it. To get away in the evening for two hours without being missed was impossible. There was nothing for it but to break bounds that night for his last visit to the cracksman.

It was for the last time, he told himself, as he tramped through the wet grass. On the morrow Hookey Walker would be gone, and with him would vanish the last shadow from the Toff's old life.

There was a single glimmer of light from the shuttered window as the Toff drew nearer to the cottage. He knocked softly at the door, and it was opened by Henriette. A single candle burned in the low room. In the cot the child lay sleeping soundly.

Hookey Walker closed the door quickly after the Toff as he came in. The remains of a fire burned in the grate.

"Waited up for you, Toff," said Hookey Walker. "I knew you'd come."

"I couldn't come earlier," said Talbot. "But I've got the money together."

"Heaven bless you!" said the woman, breaking silence.

"You are a toff, and no mistake!" said Hookey Walker, with a deep breath. Hookey Walker was looking better now. His clothes, though poor, were clean and respectable, his face was shaven, and his cheeks had lost the hollowness of grim want. "I'll be glad to get away, Toff. Every day I expect to 'ear a peeler's 'and on the door. T'other day I saw that fat inspector walkin' over the moor—I tell you, I was in a blue funk. We're all ready, Toff. If you've got the shiners, we're going at daylight. My word, I'll be glad to get out o' this! Look at the kid, Toff. Don't she look better?"

The rough face of the cracksman softened as it turned towards the cot. Talbot looked at the sleeping child. The little face was plumper, rosier, healthier. The junior drew a deep breath.

If Tom Merry had known all, if he had understood all, would he have blamed him so much? To this wretched hovel he had brought life and hope. The life of the "kid" probably had been in the balance.

"She looks better," said Talbot.

"You've saved her life, Toff," said the cracksman huskily. "I sha'n't forget this. I give you my davy, I'm going straight arter this! By hokey, I've 'ad a 'ard lesson, Toff! But the shiners, Toff—the shiners!"

Talbot opened his cheap little leather purse, and poured the money on the table. A five-pound note, and the rest in currency notes, gold, and silver. Hookey Walker's eyes glistened, and the silent woman drew a deep, deep breath.

"Twenty pounds!" said Talbot. "That will see you through till you get out there. I can send you something later to help. You'll write to me at the post-office in Wayland—not to the school. Keep straight, Hookey, and you have my word that I'll do all I can till you're on your feet again!"

"Heaven bless you, Toff!"

Talbot held out his hand.

"We sha'n't meet again, Hookey. We've been through some queer times together, and we part friends. Good-bye!"

A few minutes later Talbot was tramping through the wet grass again, his head bent to the rain, his face turned towards St. Jim's.

His heart was lighter.

It was all over now, and in the future days perhaps matters might come right between him and his chums—he would hope so, at least.

Alas! he little dreamed of what was passing at that very moment in the dormitory, where he believed that his Form-fellows were sleeping soundly.

* * * * * * * *

Tom Merry turned restlessly in his bed.

He had awakened as midnight boomed out from the clock-tower, and he could not sleep again.

Moonlight streamed in faintly at the high windows of the dormitory. Tom Merry turned in his bed, but sleep would not come.

His heart was heavy; his mind was not easy. The thought of his old chum was in his mind—the thought of those days of anguish, when he had sought him in the purlieus of poverty and crime, and found him at last. And now? Had he been, after all, hard on Talbot? The claims of the Toff's old life—had he been, after all, hard in his judgment upon his chum, because they did not see eye to eye?

If only Talbot would have come round—if he would have given a sign! Or was it that the Toff cared no longer for his chum, and that his thoughts and wishes were straying back to the life he had left, under the influence of his old associate?

Tom would have driven the dark, miserable thought from his mind, but it would not leave him. What if that ruffian's influence and the call of the past should prove too strong—what then? Then more than ever his friendship was needed to save the wayward lad on the brink of destruction, and he was holding back!

A sudden impulse came to the boy, and he slipped out of bed.

"Talbot!" he whispered.

There was no answer. He moved softly to Talbot's bed. He had made up his mind—he would speak. He could bear this no longer.

"Talbot!"

No answer—no sound of breathing. Tom Merry, with a sudden icy throb, bent over the bed. It was empty. The Toff was not there!

For a moment the dormitory swam round Tom Merry. Talbot was not there! His bed was empty—he was gone! Whither? Where was the Toff at that hour of the night? Why had he stolen like a thief from the school?

Tom Merry moved unsteadily back to his bed. He slipped

in, shivering. The Toff was gone out—at an hour past midnight. Where?

The junior lay and shivered, as dark and terrible thoughts forced themselves into his mind. He drove them fiercely away. It was impossible. Whatever were the faults of the Toff, he was straight as a die. But why had he gone to meet Hookey Walker? There could be no other reason, at that hour.

The junior was calm at last. Let it be so, then! Talbot had made his choice—he had chosen his way; and as he had made his bed, he must lie on it. From that moment Tom Merry steeled his heart.

There was a creak at the door. Tom Merry smiled bitterly in the darkness. Talbot had come back, thinking he was unheard. His head was laid on the pillow. His deep breathing soon showed that he slept. He could sleep, but there was no more sleep for Tom Merry that bitter night. The grey dawn, stealing in at the windows, found him wakeful still—wakeful, worn, but hard as steel.

He rose as the rising-bell clanged out—quietly, without a glance at Talbot. For him the Toff had no existence. Henceforth no word or look passed between the parted chums.

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## CHAPTER 16.
### D'Arcy is Diplomatic.

JACK BLAKE gave a whistle as he came into Study No. 6 in the Fourth Form passage in the School House. He was surprised.

Herries and Digby, who were following him in, looked surprised too.

The table in Study No. 6 was laid as if for a feast. A spotless tablecloth, evidently specially borrowed from the House-dame, covered the table, concealing all the blotches of ink and jabbed initials which were generally on view. And on that spotless cloth were ranged crockeryware in unusual numbers—dishes containing tarts, cakes, and meringues, and a whacking currant-cake of huge proportions.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the most elegant youth in the Fourth Form, was surveying the table through his famous monocle with great satisfaction. A fat junior was bent over the fire poaching eggs galore.

Blake and Herries and Dig were surprised and pleased. D'Arcy had told them he would have tea ready when they came in, but they had never dreamed of such a spread as this. And as they had just come in from a long walk, they were even more pleased than surprised.

"Well, my hat!" said Blake.

"Topping!" said Digby. "This is really very thoughtful of you, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus beamed.

"Yaas, deah boys, isn't it? A wippin' ideah, I think."

"Ripping!" said Blake. "Why, it's top-hole! I'm as hungry as a hunter! All ready, I hope?"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Just in time for us," said Herries heartily.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Best idea you ever had, Gussy!"

"Yaas; I wathah think it will be a decent feed. And Fatty Wynn has vewy kindly come ovah fwom the New House to help with the cookin'. How are the eggs gettin' on, Wynn, deah boy?"

Fatty Wynn turned a scarlet face from the fire.

"Nearly finished. The rashers are done to a turn. The sausages are simply lovely! Just look at 'em!"

"Sosses, too!" said Blake, in increasing astonishment. "My hat! You are going it, Gussy! We've brought in a set of appetites all ready—first-rate!"

"What-ho!" said Herries and Dig together.

"Hold on, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in alarm, as the three juniors drew chairs up to the table.

"Eh? What for?"

"Not weady yet."

"Oh, that's all right! Fatty can finish cooking while we start," said Blake. "I've brought home a topping appetite. This was very thoughtful of you indeed, Gussy. Just like you to look after your old chums in this ripping way."

"Weally, Blake, don't begin yet, deah boy! You are labahin' undah a slight ewwah——"

"No error about this ham being topping, and likewise the eggs," said Blake, with his mouth full.

"But they haven't come yet, deah boy."

Blake stared.

"Eh? Who haven't come?"

"The guests."

"What guests?"

"That's what I was goin' to explain. It's a wippin' ideah—simply wippin'——"

"Topping!" said Fatty Wynn, looking round from the fire poaching eggs galore.



frying-pan for a moment. "Best idea Gussy ever had in his natural. Bound to do the trick."

"Blessed if I know what you're driving at, the pair of you!" said Blake rather testily. "Didn't you get this feed ready for us, Gussy?"

"Wats! No!"

"You didn't?" roared Blake.

"Certainly not!"

Jack Blake looked at his noble chum more in sorrow than in anger. His knife and fork did not rest, however. As he had stated, he was hungry.

"I'm surprised at you, Gussy," he said; "not to say shocked. You got this feed ready for somebody else?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You hear that, Herries?"

"Yes. Pass the ham," said Herries.

"You hear it, Dig?"

"Yes. Pass the eggs."

"I put it to you," said Blake, "after that we can't do less than scoff the feed, the same as if it was meant for us."

"Hear, hear!"

"You uttah asses——"

Blake waved his hand—or rather his fork.

"Not a word, Gussy. We are shocked at your unchummy conduct, but to show that there's no ill-feeling, we'll polish off the feed just the same. I can't say fairer than that."

"Shove those sosses this way!" said Herries.

"Here you are, old son. Let's have the toast."

"You misappwehend me, you asses!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Of course, the feed was for you too, but I have awwanged it specially for anothah weason. I weally wish you would wait till the guests come!"

"Oh, blow the guests!" said Blake. "I don't suppose they're so hungry as we are. Who are they, anyway, and what's the little game? I'll have some more of those sosses. The way you cook sosses, Fatty, is simply a treat! You're wasted in the New House."

Arthur Augustus looked at his watch.

"They'll be heah in a few minutes," he said reproachfully. "It would have a much bettah effect if you waited for them, you know. I want Tom Mewwy to undahstand that it's a special occasion."

"I'll explain that to him, if you like," said Blake affably. "Anything to oblige—anything but postponing tea. What the dickens is there special about Tom Merry coming to tea? No need to stand on ceremony with Shell bounders that I can see."

"That's my wippin' ideah, you duffah! You know that Tom Mewwy and Talbot have fallen out?"

"Out of where?"

"Fathead! They have fallen out with each other."

"Not out of a window, I hope?"

"They are no longah on speakin' terms, I mean. You know vewy well what I mean, you ass! Well, I don't like to see two old pals on bad terms, so I have hit on a nobbay ideah to make it up between them."

"Oh, my hat! Some more of your giddy peacemaking! Toast this way, Dig."

"You see," pursued Arthur Augustus, evidently very much taken up with his idea, "they used to be fwightfully chummay, and they nevah speak to one anothah now. Lowthah and Mannahs are sidin' with Tom Mewwy, and they nevah even look at old Talbot. But my ideah is that when youngstahs quawwel they only need the assistance of a fellah with some tact and judgment to make it all wight again. Now, if they all come to tea with us, they can't sit glarin' at one anothah, can they?"

"Well, it wouldn't be polite," agreed Blake.

"They will have to talk to one anothah—what? That's my ideah! That will bweak the ice."

"Oh!"

"And once the ice is bwoken they will go on, you know, and make it up. It's only necessawy for them to bweak the ice."

"Yes, ass, if they've had a tiff about nothing. But suppose they had some real reason for falling out!" grunted Blake.

"Oh, wats! What weason could they have? It's just one of those wows that youngstahs have, you know, and they're both too fatheaded to speak the first word. I'm goin' to make them—see?"

"Bet you they won't come!"

"They have accepted my invitation," said Arthur Augustus. "I have awwanged it diplomatically. You see, I did not tell Talbot that the Tewwible Thwee were comin'—and I did not mention to Tom Mewwy that Talbot was comin'. So they won't know till they meet in this study. Then they will have to speak civilly to one anothah, and the ice will be bwoken!" concluded Arthur Augustus triumphantly.

"Then we may as well pile into these sosses," said Blake.

"I'm pretty sure your special guests won't want them. And if they run into one another coming here——"

"They won't!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have awwanged all that. I have done the whole thing diplomatically. I have asked the Tewwible Thwee to come at six pwecisely. I have wequested Talbot to come at a quartah-past six."

"My hat!"

"I wegard that as vewy diplomatic. Mind, not a word to Tom Mewwy—— Ahem! Hallo! Twot in, deah boys!"

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther had arrived.

The chums of the Shell came in cheerfully. Fatty Wynn rose from the fire, his extensive labours finished at last. And the eight juniors sat down round the table to enjoy the substantial feed, upon which Blake and Herries and Digby had already made a goodly inroad.

## CHAPTER 17.

### Not a Success.

TOM MERRY had a cheerful smile upon his face as he sat down to tea. He chatted cheerily with the chums of Study No. 6. But his cheerfulness was a little forced; and the Fourth-Formers noted it, though they did not remark upon it. Those who knew him best knew that Tom Merry was cut deeply by the break with his old chum Talbot of the Shell. Yet, as he never made the slightest advance towards his old friend, it was clear that he did not seek to heal the breach. And friends of both parties, finding that their good offices in the matter were useless, had dropped the subject—with the exception of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus prided himself upon his tact and judgment, and so he had laid that innocent little scheme to pour oil on the troubled waters.

Blake and Herries and Digby were wondering how it was going to turn out. Fatty Wynn was fully of accord with Arthur Augustus. He was firmly of opinion that, if anything in the wide world was capable of softening a hard heart, it was a good feed. He had come over from the New House specially to render aid, and, of course, he stayed to the feed. He proceeded to do it full justice. His idea was that if a feed like that wouldn't make fellows feel friendly, they were past praying for. D'Arcy's idea was that a meeting in Study No. 6, thus putting both parties on their best behaviour, was certain to break the ice, and so lead to a reconciliation. It did not even occur to the good-hearted swell of St. Jim's that there might be some deep cause for the breach, which was past his powers of healing.

Tom Merry chatted as cheerfully as he could. But Monty Lowther kindly relieved him of most of the burden of conversation. Monty Lowther had recently compiled a new comic column for the next number of the "Weekly," and he was full of it. Manners was prepared to tell the Fourth-Formers all about his latest experiences in the dark-room. So when Tom Merry fell almost silent, there was still plenty of conversation. He was not so silent as Fatty Wynn. Fatty's jaws were too busy to wag in idle talk. He did not utter a word after he sat down; his feelings were expressed by the beautific smile that shone on his plump countenance.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was as cheery as a cricket. His chums were a little worried. They wondered what was going to happen when Talbot dropped in. They could not help feeling that Gussy, with the best intentions in the world, had put his foot in it. They were pretty certain that there was more than a schoolboy "row" between Talbot and his old chums, and that the meeting in Study No. 6 would be awkward for both sides, without producing anything in the nature of a reconciliation.

But D'Arcy had no doubts. D'Arcy was brimming with confidence and the milk of human kindness. Already, in his mind's eye, he saw the chums of the Shell restored to their old chummy footing, and patting him on the back for his tact and his judgment in thus breaking the ice.

And with the idea of putting the Terrible Three in the best temper possible, Arthur Augustus drew them out, and made them talk. He demanded of Monty Lowther a full account of his latest wheezes for the comic column. As a rule, threats of manslaughter were hurled at Monty Lowther when he persisted in retailing his wheezes. The fellows said it was bad enough to find them in the "Weekly." The humorist of the Shell could not help feeling pleased at this mark of appreciation, long overdue.

Manners, to his astonishment, was questioned about his films. Arthur Augustus had never taken an interest in photography before. Now he wanted to know all about it. And Manners told him—ad lib. Indeed, he promised to take D'Arcy into the dark-room next time, and initiate him into the mysteries of pyro and hypo.

Quite an animated conversation was proceeding, when a footstep in the passage outside stopped at the door of Study No. 6.

"Come in, deah boy," sang out Arthur Augustus.

"Another guest—what?" said Lowther. "Bit late! Only just in time for the last soss."

"More in the fender," said Fatty Wynn, emerging from his busy silence. "I've kept half a dozen hot for Talbot."

"For whom?"

Tom Merry half rose.

Talbot of the Shell came into the study.

His handsome face was grave in its expression, but he smiled in response to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's cheery wave of the hand.

"Twot wight in, deah boy. Quite a little partay, you see; some old fwiends of yours——"

Talbot stopped dead.

The Terrible Three had risen to their feet, flushing, and looking decidedly awkward.

They did not care to have tea with Talbot.

And it was abundantly clear that Talbot of the Shell did not care to have tea with them. A sombre shadow crossed his handsome face as he saw them there, and he stopped just inside the doorway, at a loss.

"Come on, kid," said Blake, turning a little red, too, and inwardly anathematising Arthur Augustus and his kindness of heart.

Talbot breathed hard for a moment.

"Excuse me, Gussy," he said quietly. "I sha'n't be able to stop to tea. I'm sorry."

"Weally, Talbot——"

But Talbot was gone.

Without taking any note of the existence of the Terrible Three, who had once been his closest chums, he strode from the study, closing the door after him.

A pin might have been heard to drop in Study No. 6. The silence was painful; it grew almost terrible. Only a slight sound broke it—the steady munching of the busy jaws of Fatty Wynn.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, in utter dismay.

"Fathead!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake," murmured the discomfited swell of St. Jim's—"weally, I am—am wathah surpwised! I——"

"Good-night, you fellows!" said Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! You haven't finished your tea, deah boy."

"I won't finish it, thanks!"

Tom Merry left the study.

"Oh deah! Mannahs—I say, Mannahs—Lowthah, deah boy!"

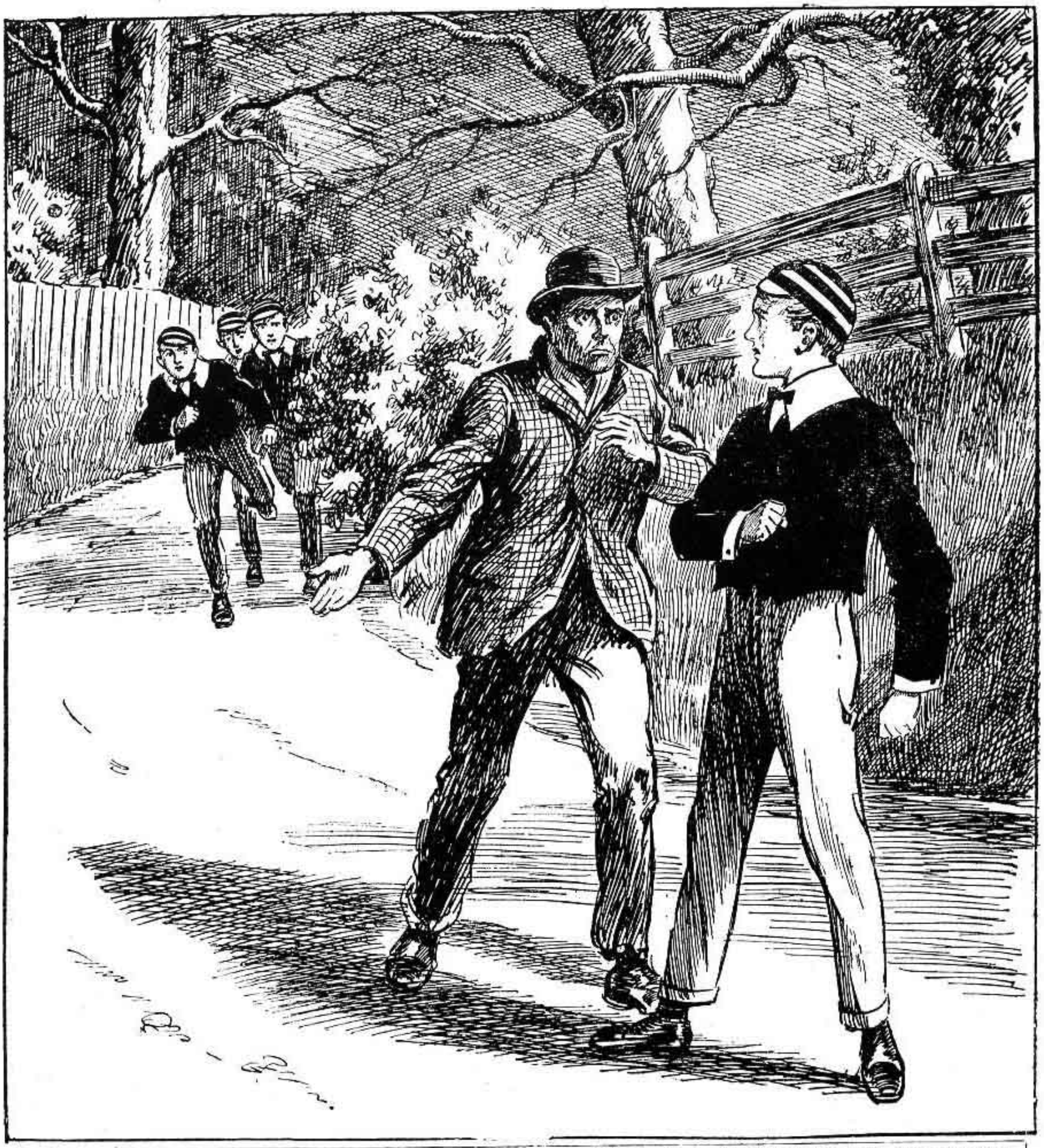
"Good-night!" said Manners grimly. "Thanks for the feed!"

"But—but you haven't——"

"Thanks awfully!" said Monty Lowther.

He followed Manners out.

The door closed behind them. Arthur Augustus's monocle dropped from his eye as he blinked at the door in utter consternation. Blake and Digby glared at him. Now that the guests were gone, they were at liberty to tell him what they thought of him. Which they proceeded to do with emphasis.



"Toff! You'll 'elp an old pal——" There was a sudden rush of feet. Tom Merry's voice rang out: "Collar him! Hookey Walker, by gum! Collar him!" *(See Chapter 2.)*

"Your burbling ass!" said Blake, in measured tones.

"You silly fathead!" said Herries.

"You chortling jabberwock!" said Digby.

"Weally, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus feebly, "I—I did not expect this, you know. My ideah does not seem to have been a gweat success aftah all. I wegard Talbot's conduct as unfeelin'. As for Tom Mewwy, he is a wottah. I wegard Mannahs and Lowthah as a paih of wude boundahs!"

"Ass!"

"Fathead!"

"Chump!"

Fatty Wynn rose to his feet. There was a thoughtful expression on his fat face.

"Bai Jove! You're not goin' too, Wynn?"

"I'm going——"

"Weally, deah boy, I quite fail to see what's the matter with you," said Arthur Augustus. "You're not on bad terms with Talbot, I suppose."

"No. But I——"

"You haven't finished your tea."

"No. Now Talbot's gone——"

"What diffewence does that make?"

"Well, he won't be having tea here, you see," said Fatty Wynn.

"No weason why you shouldn't finish, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway sit down."

"But I——"

"Oh, wats! Sit down and finish your tea."

"But I'm going——"

"Wubbish!" Arthur Augustus pushed the fat Fourth-Former into his chair again. "Finish your tea, and don't be an ass!"

"Oh, all right!" said Fatty Wynn in surprise. "There's plenty on the table, I'm sure. Only they'll get dried up."

At that remark the chums of Study No. 6 stared blankly at Fatty Wynn. They did not understand in the least what it meant.

"Who'll get dwied up, Wynn?"

"What'll get dried up?" asked Blake, in wonder.

"The sosses.'

"The—the what?"

"Better take 'em out of the fender, if you're keeping 'em for supper," said Fatty Wynn anxiously. "They're the best of the lot. Put 'em in the cupboard to get cold, and they will be all right. They'll dry up if you leave them in the fender much longer."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

Fatty Wynn's remark broke the tension in Study No. 6. Blake and Herries and Digby roared, and even Arthur Augustus grinned.

"What did you wise fwom the table for, Wynn?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"To get those sosses out of the fender, of course," said Fatty Wynn in surprise. "What did you think I got up for?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ahem! I misappwehended. I—I thought you were goin' out aftah those Shell boundahs."

"Why, how could I? I haven't finished my tea."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I thought we'd finished the sosses, as Talbot won't have them," explained Fatty Wynn. "But if you're going to keep them, put them in the cupboard. It's a sin and a shame to let such lovely sosses dry up and spoil!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! I was not thinkin' about the sosses, you ass. I thought you were wunnin' away like those wude wottahs. Blow the silly sosses!"

Blake reached the dish up from the fender. Fatty Wynn beamed.

"That's all right," he said. "Better to finish them while they're hot. They're a real dream, you know."

And Fatty Wynn piled in, backed up by Blake and Herries and Dig. The unpleasant scene in the study worried them a little, but had had no effect upon their appetites. But to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy the whole affair was a ghastly failure. His aristocratic face was very gloomy.

"Wathah wotten, isn't it?" he said.

"Fathead!" was Blake's sympathetic reply.

"I've weally taken a lot of twouble, and Wynn has taken a lot of twouble, too, and the feed is a wotten failure!"

"How do you make that out?" asked Wynn warmly. "Why, I've never cooked sosses better in my life!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was not weferrin' to the sausages, Wynn."

"The rashers, then?" asked Fatty. "Why, they were done to a turn. And they were the very best gammon-rashers—I saw to that. I looked at every one carefully."

"I was not weferrin' to the washahs!" roared Arthur Augustus, exasperated.

"Well, I don't see how you can find fault with the eggs. Didn't you find the eggs all right, Blake?"

"First-rate!" chuckled Blake.

"I was weferrin' to the object of the feed, Wynn, you feahful duffah! I have failed, somehow, to weconcile Tom Mewwy and Talbot."

"Oh," said Fatty Wynn, "never mind that. I dare say they know their own business best. Silly duffers, anyway, to miss a feed like this! Have this last soss, Gussy?"

"Wats! No!"

"Then I will! Blessed if I see what you see to turn up your nose at in these sosses! They're not German sosses. Shove that cake this way, Blake!"

There was at least one contented member of the party in Study No. 6. Fatty Wynn was highly contented. And when he had finished, and was taking his leave, he assured Arthur Augustus that if he planned any more feeds of reconciliation he could depend on him, Fatty Wynn, to come over at any time. Fatty nobly declared that he would put off any other engagement for the purpose. Arthur Augustus thanked him politely. But he was not thinking of any more feeds of reconciliation. One was enough.

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## CHAPTER 18.

### Marie Speaks.

THE Terrible Three were in their study. Tom Merry was beginning his preparation, Manners was doing his lines, and Monty Lowther was hard at work upon the Comic Column.

The chums of the Shell, by tacit consent, had not uttered a word on the subject of Talbot, or of the attempted reconciliation in Study No. 6. Their trouble with their former pal was not a matter to be talked about. It was a thing that could not be helped, and they did their best to forget all about it—not with much success, so far as Tom Merry was concerned. But if Tom Merry felt it deeply, he did not care to show it. He was not a fellow to wear his heart upon his sleeve.

There was a knock at the door, and Toby the page put his head into the study.

"Master Merry!"

"Hallo!" said Tom.

"Can you come down to the visitors' room, Master Tom?"

"A visitor for me?" asked Tom, in surprise. It was unusual for the juniors to receive visitors in the evening.

"It's Miss Marie, sir."

"Oh," said Tom, "I'll come at once!"

Toby disappeared, and Manners and Lowther looked curiously at their chum as he laid down his pen and rose from the table. But they offered no remark, and Tom Merry, with a thoughtful expression on his face, left the study. He made his way down slowly to the visitors' room.

He wondered what Miss Marie wanted with him.

The Little Sister of the Poor—the girl-nurse who had become so popular in the school during a late epidemic of influenza—was Talbot's chum. While Tom Merry had been Talbot's best pal, he had been very friendly with Miss Marie. Since his break with Talbot he had avoided seeing her, naturally. Of all the fellows, only the Terrible Three knew Miss Marie's secret—that the girl was the daughter of John Rivers, the reformed cracksman who had joined Kitchener's Army, and was already in a draft for the front.

The Little Sister rose as Tom Merry came into the room. Her sweet face was looking pale and troubled.

"Thank you for coming!" she said.

"Not at all," said Tom. "Is anything the matter?"

"Yes."

"Not—your father?"

Miss Marie shook her head.

"My father is getting on excellently. They made him a corporal some time ago, and he is the comrade of Mr. Railton, your old Housemaster, who is in the same company. They are under orders for the front now. I have to thank you and your friends for keeping my secret." Marie's face coloured a little. "I can think of my father now without shame, but I should not like the story to be known here."

"You may depend on it we sha'n't say a word," said Tom. "It's all forgotten, Miss Marie. Your father has acted rippingly."

"But—but it was not my father I came to speak to you about," said the girl. "It is another matter. It concerns you and Talbot."

Tom Merry's face clouded. He had half expected this. Arthur Augustus's attempts at reconciliation he had shut up shortly enough. He could not very well adopt the same methods with Miss Marie.

"You are not angry?" said the girl wistfully. "You know that Talbot is my best friend. We were children together—when he was called the Toff, and was in the gang of which my father and Hookey Walker were members. You have been his best friend here, and I know that he is troubled by his quarrel with you. He does not speak of it, but I know it. He does not, of course, know that I am here now. But—but I think you are making some mistake, Tom, and I should like to set it right."

"There is no mistake," said Tom.

"It is not possible that you are turning against him because of his past?" said the girl.

Tom started.

"Of course not! Surely he does not think so? It isn't that. We all know that he was brought up a member of that rotten gang, that he was a cracksman; but we know he threw it up and suffered for it. We know he was as straight as a die after that. When he was turned out of the school under suspicion of having fallen into his old ways, didn't I stand by him—the only fellow here who still believed in him?"

"I know you did," said Marie softly. "Then it is not that—it cannot be that. But you will tell me what it is?"

Tom Merry was silent.

"You will not tell me?" said Marie. "Then I will tell you what I know. Hookey Walker escaped from prison. He asked help of the Toff, and the Toff helped him. That is why you are angry with him."

"Well," said Tom, "suppose it is so? Talbot promised that he would have nothing to do with his old pals—the thieves and rascals. I suppose he has told you about Hookey Walker, so I can speak out. The rascal came back here. Instead of giving him up to the police, as he deserved, Talbot shielded him. He would not even agree not to see him. He practically forced us to keep silent, to let that villain escape justice. That wasn't pleasant for us, I suppose, after all the harm the man has done. Then he used to go and meet him—goes now, for all I know. I've stopped taking notice of anything he does. Ah—and——" Tom paused.

"Go on!" said Marie.

"It's no good talking about it," said Tom. "But I don't want to say anything against Talbot, though we're not friends now."

"Whatever you said would make no difference to me," said Marie, with a smile. "The Toff and I are too old friends for that. I know him to be the best and most generous friend that anyone could have. That is enough for me. You do not trust him now because he resumed his old acquaintance with Hookey Walker."

"How can I?" exclaimed Tom. "I may as well tell you all about it. I don't want you to think I've acted rottenly. One night last week—I had decided to speak; it was in the dorm, and I couldn't sleep—I made up my mind to speak. Well, I found that he'd gone out—was out of the dorm past midnight!—and that settled it. After that I decided to let him go his own way. If he chooses to throw up his friends for the sake of those rascals, it's his own business."

"You are wrong, Tom."

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders.

"You are wrong," repeated Marie. "Talbot had pledged his word to have no dealings with his old associates, and he kept it. It was because Hookey Walker had changed his ways that the Toff helped him."

"Yes; he told me the man had told him so. I didn't believe a word of it. Talbot believed it, I suppose. I knew that the rascal was lying."

"He was not lying."

Tom Merry looked impatient.

"You do not know what caused him to change," said Marie. "You would not listen to Talbot. While Hookey Walker was in prison, his child came very near to death. The little girl almost died of want. Talbot found them in the cottage on the moor, without food or fire in the house, in bitter weather. Hookey Walker's wife, who had refused to see him or speak to him while he was a thief, had taken him back, and was sheltering him. She believed in his repentance. Talbot believed in it. All they desired was to get away to safety, and Talbot helped them. He told me his intention, and I could not help approving. He made many sacrifices, and raised enough money to help them to go, and they have gone."

"Gone!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes; they sailed for America several days ago."

Tom Merry started.

"I—I did not know that. You—you are certain, Miss Marie, that Hookey Walker has left the country?"

"Quite certain."

Tom Merry's brain was in a whirl. He had parted with his chum because Talbot had refused to abandon the desperate ruffian who had thrown himself on his mercy. His firm belief had been that Hookey Walker was seeking to drag the Toff back into the old life, and Talbot's continual visits to the man had given colour to the belief that he was succeeding in his design. Was it possible, after all, that the ruffian had been really repentant, that the Toff had been sure of it, and—and, in short, that it was Tom Merry who had made a mistake?

It was not a comforting thought. The risks Talbot had run in meeting the one-time cracksman, the suspicions he had incurred—was it all for the sake of a kind and generous action, had he been perfectly straight all the time, and only erring on the side of generosity?

"But—but," stammered Tom at last, "why should he go to meet the man at midnight? There was no need for that, I suppose?"

"Talbot does not know that you are aware of that, but he has told me of it," said Marie. "It was the only occasion, and it was the last night before Hookey Walker was to go. Talbot had to take him money—a large sum for Talbot—twenty pounds. It was not easy for him to obtain it, as you may guess."

"Impossible, I should say. I remember he sold his bike last week——"

"A boy who owed him money—five pounds—paid it at the last moment," said Marie. "That made up the sum. It was too late that day to go, and it could not be left till the morrow. Talbot has no secrets from me—the next day he told me all. He believed that no one knew that he was absent that night."

Tom Merry set his lips. Once his faith in Talbot had been firm, as if founded on a rock. He had stood by the Toff when all others had turned against him, when even Manners and Lowther had wavered. But his faith had received a rude shock, and, once shaken, it was not easy to re-establish on the old basis. The captain of the Shell was not to be convinced all at once.

"Surely you believe me?" exclaimed Marie, startled by the expression on the Shell fellow's face.

"You cannot think that I would doubt your word, Miss Marie."

"Well, then——"

"But you may be mistaken, or——" Tom Merry paused. "You say that Talbot made up twenty pounds in a lump for that man. A fellow, you say, paid him five pounds at the last moment. Talbot has nothing but his scholarship allowance—not much to make fellows loans of five pounds out of."

"You do not think that Talbot deceived me?" exclaimed Marie, in amazement.

Tom was silent.

"Tom!"

"I know he couldn't make many loans of five pounds out of his allowance," he said. "I know once he screwed together a fiver to help a fellow out of a fix. But that fellow was the last chap in the world to pay him." Tom Merry was thinking of Levison of the Fourth.

"The Toff said that it came unexpectedly," said Marie. "He has not, of course, told me the boy's name. But if you cannot believe Talbot's word, Tom Merry, I have come here for nothing. I thought you were mistaken, and that if I should explain, you would know that you had wronged Talbot, and would speak to him frankly, and tell him so——"

"So I would, if—if——"

"You need say no more," said Marie, with a flash in her eyes. "Your friendship is not worth very much to Talbot if you cannot trust him. Good-bye!"

"Miss Marie," exclaimed Tom, taken aback, as the girl hurried to the door.

Marie Rivers did not answer, and did not look back. She quitted the room, and Tom Merry was left alone.

## CHAPTER 19.
### The Light on the Moor.

"COMING my way?"

Talbot of the Shell started a little. He had strode from the School House, after the awkward scene in Study No. 6. There was a dark cloud on his brow, and, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, he strode away towards the gates. The handsome Shell fellow was feeling out of sorts, and he wanted to be alone. It was Brooke of the Fourth who hailed him as he came down to the gates.

Brooke was a day-boy, and he was going home. He had a good distance to go, as his home was across Wayland Moor. Talbot was on good terms with Brooke, and he made an effort to banish the cloud from his face.

"Yes, certainly," he said a little confusedly. "I'm going out for a walk, anyway."

"Trot along, then," said Brooke cheerily.

Talbot walked out of the gates with the Fourth-Former. Brooke had left his departure a little late that evening, having been doing "extra toot" with Mr. Lathom in his study. The dusk was beginning to fall.

Talbot would have preferred to be alone, as a matter of fact—alone with his unpleasant meditations; but he tried to chat cheerily with Brooke as they walked down the lane. Brooke was very cheery. As a matter of fact, he had noted Talbot's worried look, and was trying to cheer him up. He succeeded, too, and the Toff's handsome face looked a good deal brighter, as they tramped down the footpath through the wood, and came out on the wide moor.

"You'll have to cut back now," said Brooke, "or you'll get locked out."

"That's all right. I've got a pass out," said Talbot. "I was going down to Wayland to see about my new bat, but I'd forgotten."

"Forgotten your new bat!" said Brooke, with a smile. "And you such a whacking cricketer. You'll be in the Junior School team this season."

"I hope so," assented Talbot.

"Look here, if you've got a pass out of gates, come home to tea with me, and you can call in at Wayland for your bat afterwards," said Brooke.

"I—I——"

"Have you had your tea?"

"No," admitted Talbot, smiling slightly, as he remembered the feed in Study No. 6, to which he had not stayed.

"Then come home with me. My mater and sister will be glad to see you. I've told them lots about you," said Brooke.

"Thanks, I will," said Talbot. "I'm hungry, now I come to think of it."

Brooke laughed.

"You're growing an absent-minded beggar," he remarked. "I'm sorry to see you on such rotten terms with your pals. If there's anything a fellow could do——"

"Nothing, thanks," said Talbot quickly.

"Right-ho! I am not going to swamp you with good advice!" chuckled Brooke; and he began talking cricket, and avoided the painful subject.

They arrived at Brooke's home—a rambling old house on the moor, all that remained of the once extensive possessions of Brooke's father. Brooke's mother and sister received Talbot cordially, and the Shell fellow brightened up very much over tea. He suspected Brooke's kindly intention of cheering him up, and he did not resist.

After tea, Brooke made him play the piano. Talbot was an excellent pianist. He soon found himself discussing Schubert's songs with Amy Brooke, and, in spite of himself, his troubles rolled away from his mind.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Talbot remembered that he had not done his preparation, and that he had a long walk before him back to St. Jim's. He took leave of his friends. Brooke offered to walk part of the way, but Talbot knew that the day-boy had work to do, and he shook his head.

"That's all right," he said. "I shall take the short cut, and trot most of the way. Good-night, old chap!"

And Talbot started across the moor.

Since he had been at St. Jim's the Toff had learned the lie of the surrounding country pretty thoroughly, and he knew his way well, though there was but the faintest glimpse of starlight upon the wide moor. He followed the footpath from Brooke's house for some distance, and then struck off across the rugged, unmarked waste, by a route that he knew would bring him into Rylcombe Lane.

He walked very quickly, making no mistake in the way, though round him the moor stretched wide and dark and apparently trackless.

His thoughts were much more cheerful now. In spite of himself and his black mood, the kindliness and cordiality at Brooke's place had cheered him. The black mood had passed.

The Toff had made up his mind now that his friendship with Tom Merry was a thing of the past. His recent conduct had shaken his chum's faith in him, and though he was satisfied himself that he had acted rightly, he knew that he could not expect Tom Merry to see it in the same light.

He did not blame Tom. There was no bitterness, no resentment in his breast If Tom had spoken a word towards reconciliation, Talbot would have met him half-way gladly. He could not forget how true and faithful a chum Tom had been once.

But though he had made up his mind to the inevitable, and though he felt no bitterness, he missed the old pleasant friendship, and when he thought of it he grew moody and troubled. The scene in Study No. 6 had been inexpressibly painful to him. The looks of the Terrible Three when they found that Talbot was the expected guest had been like a blow to him.

It was no wonder that he had gone out in a black mood, with a feeling of hopelessness in his heart. But his heart was lighter now After all, if he had lost his best pal, he had not lost everything. There was much left in life for the Shell fellow whose past had been so strange and lawless. That past was over and done with; its shadow could not fall upon him again.

It was strange enough how matters had ended. The Toff, once the prince of cracksmen, was a scholarship boy at St. Jim's; John Rivers, the master-criminal, was in the new Army, doing his duty for his King and country, a comrade-in-arms of Mr. Railton, the former Housemaster of the School House. Hookey Walker, whose hatred had once threatened the life of the Toff, had changed under the influence of the danger his child had passed through, and was on his way to a new country to lead a new life

All would have been well but for the breaking-off of his friendship with Tom Merry. Talbot sighed. But that could not be helped. That, it seemed, was the price he had to pay for what he had once been, though in the wretched past he had been more sinned against than sinning

Talbot started suddenly from his deep reverie as a light flashed before his eyes on the darkness of the moor.

He looked round him quickly. He was in the loneliest part of the moor, near the old quarries, where there was not even a sheep-track. Few pedestrians passed that way, even in the daytime. Whence came that sudden light?

Talbot stared at it.

A few hundred yards from him it shone out—a steady stream of electric light that rose from the ground; shining up into the dark clouds that rolled over the sky and almost hid the stars

The juniors halted.

The light had shone out suddenly, and as suddenly it was extinguished. Darkness fell like a cloud upon the moor.

There was no sound. All was silent save for the faint rustle of the night wind in the thickets.

Talbot did not move.

At any time the sudden light on the moor would have been surprising and suspicious. But at the present time it was more than that.

Talbot stared up at the sky.

Only the darkly-rolling clouds and one or two glimmering stars met his gaze.

Suddenly the light gleamed out again.

Now it was moving, and the bar of light that was reflected on the clouds swayed to and fro.

Talbot of the Shell drew a deep breath. He did not need telling that the light on the moor was a signal. It could not be anything else.

A signal to whom? Who was signalling to the sky in that lonely spot—and why? There was only one answer to the question.

There was no possibility that it could be anything but the work of a spy, and that the signal was intended for enemies who came in the air—in a word, for the airships of the German foe.

Yet there was no sound. Not an echo of the throbbing of an airship's engines.

Talbot stood quite still, breathing hard, and watching for the light again. The signaller, whoever he was, had chosen his position well. In the heart of the lonely moor there was little chance of his being observed. It was by chance that the schoolboy had found himself there.

Again the light. Talbot, with silent steps, picked his way across the rough ground in the direction of the light. It blazed out brilliantly, and he knew it must come from a large and powerful lamp. It almost blinded him with its brilliance as he advanced.

It was shut off again. Talbot found himself on the edge of a hollow in the moor, and he looked down the slope before him, trying to penetrate the darkness with his eyes, but in vain. He waited for the light, but it did not come. From the hollow he heard a sound of rustling in the grass and ferns. He realised that he was very close to the unknown, unseen man who had made the signals. A muttering voice came to his ears as he stood breathless:

"Noch nicht!"

Talbot understood the German words—"Not yet."

Not yet! The signal had been made to a Zeppelin, but the Zeppelin had not come. That was the only possible explanation.

There was another rustling, and he knew that the spy was departing. He made a movement, and then checked himself. In the darkness it was impossible to find the rascal. At the sound of a footstep he would have fled, and the blackness would have swallowed him up. To give the alarm and allow the rascal to escape was simply to put him on his guard, and cause him to choose another and safer spot for his nefarious work on the next occasion.

Talbot gritted his teeth, and stood still, listening. The faint rustle was all Silence followed. The German was gone.

Talbot listened intently for several minutes. Ten minutes passed, and there was no sound. The signaller had not passed near him. He might have gone in any direction. But he was gone.

Talbot drew a deep breath and turned away. He strode off towards the distant school. He knew that he would be late for bed now, but that did not trouble him. He was no longer thinking of his own troubles. That wild and lonely moor had been chosen by a foreign spy for his rascally work, and the quiet countryside was threatened by a raid of the "baby-killers." That was the only thought that was in Talbot's mind, and it was enough to banish all others

## CHAPTER 20.

### Dark Doubts.

TOM MERRY came into his study with a moody brow after his interview with the Little Sister in the visitors' room. He was greatly troubled. Manners and Lowther did not ask him any questions; but Tom wanted his chums' advice, and he explained to them.

Lowther forgot all about the comic column. His good-humoured face clouded over.

"It's rotten if we've been too rough on Talbot," he said. "But——"

"But——" said Manners, with a shake of the head.

"He can't blame us," went on Lowther. "He couldn't expect us to believe that that ruffian Hookey Walker had changed his spots like that. Of course, we didn't know anything about the kid. I should hardly have believed that a ruffian like that would care much for his kid, anyway."

**Talbot held out his hand. "We sha'n't meet again, Hookey. We've been through some queer times together, and we part friends. Good-bye!"** *(See chapter 15.)*

"I shouldn't, either. But you never know," said Tom. "If—if it was really true that the brute was in earnest, that he wanted to get clear and start afresh for the kid's sake, I—I suppose we couldn't very well blame Talbot for lending him a hand. But—but the fact is, I can't take it all in at once. Goodness knows once I'd have trusted Talbot against the whole world; but—— Yet he can't have deceived Miss Marie. What he told her must be true."

"I—I suppose so," said Manners.

"But how the deuce did Talbot raise twenty pounds for the rotter?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I know he could draw on his allowance in advance; I remember he mentioned once to me that Mr. Carrington had made him the offer. I know, too, that he had some money in the Post Office Bank. And then he sold his bike. That would account for a good bit of it. But—but that story of a chap paying him five quid at the last moment—that was the reason he was out that night—and Hookey Walker went off the next day with his wife and child, if Miss Marie has got it right. She is angry at my doubting Talbot, but I can't help it; it's too thick. What fellow could have paid Talbot five pounds last week? Who the deuce could he have lent as much money as that to?"

Manners gave a whistle.

"I can settle that," he said. "You remember Levison——"

Tom started.

"Levison!"

"Yes. Don't you remember the time Levison was in a fix over some of his rotten games, and owed money, and was afraid of being found out and sacked? He told us himself that Talbot had squeezed together five quid for him. That's what made him turn round and back up Talbot. He was always his enemy before then."

"I know—I know! But Levison can't have paid."

"He never has any money—and when he has any he freezes on to it," said Lowther, rather illogically. "Levison can't have paid him."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Let's ask Levison," said Manners. "There's just a bare chance that he did square up, and if he did, we can take that as proof of the whole story."

"We'll ask him," said Tom, not very hopefully.

The Terrible Three lost no time. They looked in at Levison's study. Lumley-Lumley and Blenkinsop and Mellish were there, finishing their preparation, but the black sheep of the Fourth was not to be seen.

"Seen Levison?" asked Tom Merry.

"I guess he's gone down," said Lumley-Lumley. "You'll find him in the common-room, I dare say."

The Shell fellows went down to the common-room. Levison was there, playing chess with Kerruish of the Fourth. The Terrible Three paused by the table. They could not very well ask Levison questions on the matter in the presence of other fellows.

Levison glanced at them with the sarcastic smile which made fellows feel inclined to punch his head.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"I should like to speak to you," said Tom.

"Well, there's no law against that. Speak away!"

"I'll wait till you've finished your game."

"Something awfully important?" grinned Levison.

"I'll wait," said Tom.

"Oh, wait as long as you like!"

Levison turned his attention to the game again. Levison was a first-class chess-player, and the Terrible Three did not think it would take him long to mate Kerruish. But the Manx junior was a good player, too, and he played slowly and carefully. Monty Lowther glanced at the common-room clock. Preparation had to be done, and the evening was getting on.

"Mate!" said Levison at last.

"My hat!" said Kerruish. "Blessed if I noticed your beastly knight! I'll try you again. There's time before bed."

"Certainly!"

The pieces were set out again on the chess-board. Tom Merry made a movement of impatience. Levison was grinning in his sarcastic, unpleasant way. He could see that the Terrible Three were anxious to speak to him alone, and he did not choose to gratify them. There was no love lost between Tom Merry and the black sheep of the Fourth. It was amusing to Levison's peculiar nature to keep the Shell fellows hanging about.

Tom Merry set his lips and walked out of the common-room. Manners and Lowther followed him, and they returned to their study. Preparation had to be done, and they proceeded to do it, but in a troubled frame of mind. The information they desired from Levison would have cleared up matters regarding Talbot. They hurried through their work, and succeeded in getting it finished by bedtime. They had to go directly from their study to the dormitory. There was no opportunity of speaking to Levison again, as his quarters, of course, were in the Fourth Form dormitory.

Kildare looked into the Shell dormitory. Tom Merry had already noted that Talbot was not there, and Kildare observed it at once.

"Not all here," said Kildare. "Where's Talbot?"

"I think he's out," said Kangaroo. "He had a pass out o' gates."

The prefect frowned.

"Not up to this time of night!" he exclaimed. "Well, turn in!"

Talbot did not appear before the Shell fellows turned in. There was a good deal of speculation among the Shell fellows as to what had become of him. It was very unusual for Talbot to break the rules in this way. Missing call-over was bad enough, but to be in late for bed was a serious matter.

Kildare, frowning, put out the light and left the dormitory.

He went down to report to the Housemaster that one of the juniors had not come in. Mr. Carrington received the information with a frowning brow.

"Send Talbot to me immediately he comes in, Kildare," he said.

In the Shell dormitory there was a buzz of talk on the subject. Crooke remarked that Talbot would get into a thumping row—a prospect that seemed to please Crooke. The other fellows, more good-naturedly, wondered what had become of him.

Tom Merry did not take part in the discussion.

Where was Talbot?

Had some accident detained him, or was it a fresh development in his new line of conduct? There was no reason why Talbot should be late, that Tom Merry could see. But Bernard Glyn remembered, on thinking it over, that he had seen Talbot going down the road with Brooke of the Fourth.

"He's gone home with Brooke," said Glyn, "that's all it is. He's left it late, and it's a jolly long way back."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Noble. "Brooke must be an ass to let him stay too late. It's no joke to stay out after bedtime."

Tom Merry wondered whether the reason of Talbot's lateness was that innocent one. He realised how much his faith in the Toff had been shaken. Was it possible that Talbot, whom he had believed to be the soul of honour, had taken up again with his old associates, to the extent of deceiving Mario Rivers on the subject? It did not seem possible; and yet—— If only he had been able to ask Levison that question, and get his doubts set at rest on that point! He felt that if Marie's explanation was substantiated on that point, he would be able to trust Talbot for the rest. For time would show. If Hookey Walker was really gone, and Talbot had no longer any connection with rascally acquaintances outside St. Jim's, time would prove it, for the Toff would no longer be slipping out of the school after lessons, and certainly he would never have any reason for breaking bounds at night.

If only Tom could have felt certain that Marie's story was true, that the girl herself had not been deceived, he would have been willing—more than willing—to ask his old chum's pardon for his miserable doubts.

Why did not Talbot come in? If Hookey Walker was gone, if he had indeed no ties outside the school, why was he staying out till this late hour?

The buzz of talk died away, as one by one the fellows dropped off to sleep. Ten o'clock rang out, and still Talbot had not come in.

By this time Tom Merry was the only fellow who was awake in the dormitory. His troublesome thoughts would not let him sleep. It came into his mind that, perhaps, Talbot was not coming back at all, that, after all, he had thrown in his lot once more with the gang of cracksmen among whom his early days had been passed. He shivered as he realised to what an extent his faith in Talbot had been shaken.

His eyes grew heavy. He dropped into sleep at last.

When sleep sealed his eyes, Talbot was still absent.

## CHAPTER 21.
### Out of Bounds.

TALBOT was tramping towards St. Jim's, but he was no longer hurrying.

As a matter of fact, the Shell fellow had forgotten all about bedtime—he had almost forgotten the school itself. His mind was busy with other thoughts. The light he had seen on the moor—evidently a secret signal to the skies—occupied his whole mind. What was he to do in the matter? that was the question.

The strange experience of the Toff had made him somewhat different from the other fellows. He had, in many matters, an old head on young shoulders. It was not yet forgotten at St. Jim's how the Toff, at that time a fugitive and an outcast, had won the King's pardon by discovering and frustrating the plot of a German agent to blow up a troop-train, and how he had very nearly lost his life to save five hundred brave fellows in khaki from a terrible fate. What was to be done? was the question now in the Toff's mind. When he had decided upon that, courage and determination would not be wanting.

The light-signals on the moor could mean only one thing—signals to an airship. In the recent Zeppelin raids Talbot knew that there was more than a suspicion that the German airmen had been assisted by light-signals from spies near the scenes of the raids. That the man with the electric light was a German spy there was not the least doubt. The words Talbot had heard him mutter in German were proof enough of that.

Somewhere in the neighbourhood the rascal lurked, under an assumed name, of course, and probably under a false guise. Doubtless he was not known in the neighbourhood as a German at all. But he must be living near Wayland somewhere. Talbot debated in his mind whether he should give information at the police-station.

He knew that there had been many stories of light-signals and wireless-spying, and so forth, and the police were not likely to take much notice of a schoolboy's story to that effect. Even if they kept a watch on the moor for the rascal, what likelihood was there of catching him? Talbot smiled slightly as he thought of Police-constable Crump of Rylcombe pitting his wits against those of a German spy. A single false step would save the rascal. If he discovered that suspicion was aroused, he would simply change to another quarter, where he would carry on his work unnoticed. To watch for him on the moor effectively would require the services of a number of men, and that step was not likely to be taken on a schoolboy's word. Village gossip had peopled the countryside with spies and signallers, and the police had discovered too many mare's-nests to be very credulous. Suspicious lights had turned out to be only cyclists' lanterns after all—indeed, Talbot remembered to have heard that a light which had been seen dodging about in the fields a week or two before had turned out to belonging to an unfortunate cyclist who had lost his way.

It was pretty clear that, if he wished his story to be listened to and acted upon, he would have to produce some more tangible evidence

How was that to be done?

Talbot, before he reached St. Jim's, had decided upon that point. If the secret signaller was not alarmed, he would pro-

bably return to the same spot to renew his signals. The words he had uttered—"Noch nicht"—were a proof that he intended to renew them. Probably that same night, perhaps some other night; but most likely the same night. Talbot paused in the road. That night, perhaps, a Zeppelin was to sail over that quiet countryside and shower down death and destruction upon the sleeping town, the slumbering villages—for the Prussians were not particular as to the victims of their raids. Their object was to strike terror, to excite panic, by bringing the war home to every man's door. They were not in the least likely to gain their object of creating panic, but in their stolid ignorance of the British nature they hoped and believed so.

Talbot would have chosen to keep his discovery to himself, to wait and watch himself for the secret signaller. He would not have hesitated to deal with him if once he could have got to close quarters with the rascal.

But the thought that that very night a Zeppelin might be hovering over the district deterred him. Whether his story wsa credited or not, he had his duty to do. He had to give the warning. That would not prevent him from taking his own measures afterwards, as he was fully determined to do.

He stopped in Rylcombe village, and went at once to the police-station. Inspector Skeat looked surprised when he presented himself. The inspector knew all the Toff's history. At the time when Talbot was under suspicion at St. Jim's Mr. Skeat had been looking for him—professionally. Mr. Skeat's experience did not lead him to place much reliance upon reformation, and perhaps it was natural that he should keep to his own private opinion on the subject of the Toff. Talbot was quite keen enough to know what Mr. Skeat's private opinion was.

The inspector, however, greeted him civilly enough, and listened civilly to his story. But there was a lurking smile on Mr. Skeat's fat face.

"You didn't see a bicycle there?" he asked, when Talbot had concluded.

"No!"

"The last secret signaller we captured turned out to be a man on a bike—the estate agent's clerk in Wayland," said Mr. Skeat humorously.

"I have reported this to you as my duty," said Talbot quietly. "It rests with you whether you take any steps in the matter or not."

"Oh, it will be looked into, of course," said Mr. Skeat. "But once a day, at least, we get stories like this. It was a wireless apparatus last time, and it turned out to be nothing more or less than a clothes-prop."

Talbot laughed.

"But I heard this man speak to himself in German," he said.

"What did he say?"

"Noch nicht."

"And what may that mean?" inquired Mr. Skeat, whose knowledge of German was limited to the words "sauer-kraut."

"It means 'not yet.'"

"Oh," said Mr. Skeat, "'knock neat' means not yet, does it?"

"Not knock neat—noch nicht."

"Sure he wasn't simply coughing?" asked the inspector. "It sounds to me more like a cough than a human language."

"Quite sure."

"You see, the light was probably a bike lantern, and what you thought was German was probably a cough. Talking German is very like a man coughing with a very sore throat," said Skeat. "Still, it's quite right to mention the matter to me, and it shall be looked into, like the rest. I'll get on the telephone at once and ask whether any Zeppelins have been seen or reported. You can be sure that everything necessary will be done, Master Talbot."

Talbot thanked Mr. Skeat, and left the police-station. He did not feel very sure, as a matter of fact. Mr. Skeat evidently classed his information with that he had received so much of lately, which in every instance had turned out to be a "scare."

The inspector was hardly to be blamed. After a secret light-signaller had turned out to be a lost cyclist, and a wireless apparatus a harmless and necessary clothes-prop, it was natural for Mr. Skeat to be sceptical.

Talbot had not expected much to result from his report to the inspector. He had made it from a sense of duty, and he had already decided upon his own course of action.

It was late when he reached St. Jim's; and Taggles looked very grim when he came in.

"Which you're to report to Mr. Carrington at once," said Taggles.

Talbot nodded, and walked on to the School House. It was nearly half-past ten, and the Shell had been in bed an hour, and he could imagine that the Housemaster would be feeling angry. Kildare met him as he came into the School House.

"Mr. Carrington's study," he said briefly.

"Right!" said Talbot.

He knocked at the Housemaster's door, and Mr. Carrington looked very stern when he came in.

"What does this mean, Talbot?"

Talbot explained quietly. Mr. Carrington looked at him very curiously. It was pretty evident that he was not inclined to attach much more importance to the mysterious light than the inspector had done.

"Very well, Talbot," he said. "You did your duty in reporting the matter at the police-station. You may go."

Talbot bade the Housemaster good-night, and went up to his dormitory. He did not intend to sleep, however. He laid down on his bed without undressing. One of his boots clinked against the bed, and a voice came from the gloom.

"That you, Talbot?"

It was Harry Noble's voice. The Australian junior had awakened.

"Yes," said Talbot.

"You're jolly late."

"Yes, it's rather late. Good-night!"

"Goo'-night!" murmured the Cornstalk sleepily.

The sound of voices had awakened Tom Merry from his uneasy sleep. The half-hour rang out from the clock-tower. It was half-past ten, and Talbot had just come in. Tom Merry noted bitterly that in answering Kangaroo Talbot had given no explanation of his lateness. The captain of the Shell did not sleep again. Talbot had come back—that was something.

Tom Merry would have liked to ask him the reason of his delay, but frozen silence reigned now between the one-time chums. They did not even nod to one another now; they made it a point to ignore each other's existence. Tom Merry lay silent, his thoughts dark and troublesome. He closed his eyes, and tried to get to sleep again, but sleep would not come.

Eleven o'clock sounded dully through the night. Most of St. Jim's was buried in slumber at that hour. Tom Merry turned his head wearily on his pillow, seeking the fickle god Morpheus, and seeking in vain. A sudden sound, slight but distinct, in the silence of the dormitory, came sharply to his ears. It was the creak of a bed, and it was followed by the soft but unmistakable sound of a stealthy footfall.

Someone was moving in the Shell dormitory; someone who had not taken off his boots.

Tom Merry did not need telling who it was.

Another faint, almost imperceptible sound. The door of the dormitory had opened and closed.

Tom Merry lay staring into the darkness.

Talbot had gone!

His return to the dormitory had been a mere pretence. He had not even undressed, and now he had gone out stealthily, like a thief in the night.

Tom Merry smiled bitterly, as he remembered the Little Sister's story. Hookey Walker was gone. There was nothing now to explain Talbot's action; nothing but the darkest suspicions that had been forced into Tom Merry's mind.

Tom lay for some time in bitter thought. There was no doubt that it was Talbot who had gone out; but he would not risk making a mistake. If it was Talbot, it meant the end of the new hopes that had been awakened in his breast. He would not risk the possibility of a mistake. He slipped from his bed, approached Talbot's, and struck a vesta.

The light flickered in the darkness of the dormitory, and Tom Merry started, as he saw the outlines of a sleeper in the bed. Talbot was there; he had been mistaken. The next moment he laughed savagely at his own credulity. It was a dummy in the bed. The pillows and bolsters had been arranged under the bedclothes, to give the appearance of a sleeping form there. Tom Merry turned back the coverlet. There was no doubt about it. The match went out.

He returned to bed with a bitterness in his heart he had never dreamed himself capable of. Almost he had been ready to trust the Toff again, on the word of the Little Sister. And Talbot had deceived her; he was not done with his old associates. Else why this cunning trick of a dummy in his bed and his absence from the dormitory? Where was he gone?

It was late that night before Tom Merry closed his eyes. But, late as it was, Talbot had not returned.

## CHAPTER 22.
### Talbot on Guard.

LITTLE dreaming that he had left Tom Merry awake in the dormitory, or of the dark and terrible suspicions working in his mind, Talbot glided silently away. Of old the Toff had learned to move with almost the silence of a spectre. In a few minutes he was in the lower box-room. In a few minutes more he was out of the window, and on the ground.

The sky was heavily overcast. Darkness lay thick upon St. Jim's. Talbot hurried away through the gloom, and a few minutes more saw him dropping from the school wall into the road.

He turned up his collar, and hurried away down the lane.

The countryside lay round him, dark, deserted, solitary. It was like old times to the Toff, and a smile flickered over his face as the thought came into his mind. All hours of the night had found him wakeful, in those wild old days, when he had been the prince of cracksmen, when his new life and its possibilities had not yet dawned upon him. Those dark days were never to return. But the experience he had gained under such strange conditions was useful to him now. He reached the footpath that led through the wood towards the moor, and followed it fast. Ere long he came out on the black expanse of the moor.

All was blackness there. The few stars were hidden by clouds. There was no moon; and well he knew that moonless nights were chosen by the baby-killers for their savage raids. That very night, perhaps, the Zeppelin was to come. There was no military camp in the neighbourhood. There were no military works that could give a pretext for an attack. If the attack came, it would be as it had been before—without any military reason that could furnish an excuse for it. The intention would be to "strike terror"—to leave a trail of death and desolation through the quiet Sussex countryside—as it had been left in Norfolk. Southampton harbour, perhaps, might be the principal objective, but all was grist that came to the mill of the Huns. If Rylcombe Church and Wayland market-place were blown to pieces—if a bomb dropped upon St. Jim's and destroyed sleeping schoolboys—it was all in the game, as played by the Kaiser and the Prussian war-lords.

And the dull Prussian understanding could not realise that such rascally outrages, instead of causing panic, only rendered more grim and unwavering the determination to see the war through to a finish, and never to lay down arms until Prussian barbarism lay humbled in the dust.

Darkness on the wide moor—no gleam of light to break the gloom. Talbot had reached the hollow, thick with furze, where the secret signaller had been at work. But there was no light to be seen. The German spy was not at work.

But Talbot was patient.

He crept down quietly into the hollow, as near as he could judge to the spot where the rascal had been at work. There, half buried in the furze, he waited. If the man came back to renew his signalling, Talbot was ready to deal with him. In the pocket of his coat he had a small loaded cane—his only weapon, but an effective one at close quarters.

That the spy would be armed, and that he would not hesitate at murder, Talbot knew. But he had no fear. He had no thought but to get to close quarters with the rascal, and deal with him hand-to-hand. The danger did not count.

He was patient, and he waited. It was a mild spring night; but if it had been cold he would hardly have noticed it.

Midnight was long past, but he was tireless. He did not intend to leave his post till dawn was at hand, leaving him just time to get back to St. Jim's and avoid discovery. For, of course, that was essential. He was doing what he had marked out as his duty. But he could hardly expect his Housemaster to take the same view of the matter.

There was a rustle in the furze—a sound of footsteps!

At last!

Was it the German?

Who else could it be at that hour, in that lonely spot? It was two o'clock in the morning.

Talbot scarcely breathed.

Whoever it was, the man was coming directly towards him. At that moment the stars gleamed once more through a rift in the clouds.

Within six feet of the junior a man in an overcoat, with a large bag in his hand, loomed up over the furze.

He caught sight of Talbot at the same moment, and gave a violent start.

Talbot's hand, in his pocket, gripped the loaded cane. Was it the German? The man did not look like a German.

"Waal, I guess you startled me."

It was a nasal voice, with a strong American accent.

The stranger came a little closer to Talbot, peering at him in the gloom. Talbot watched him intently. He saw dimly a thin, keen face, with a short grey beard in the "goatee" style, and two very sharp, narrow eyes.

"I guess I didn't expect to meet anybody hyer," went on the stranger. "But I kinder reckon I'm glad of it, young man. Perhaps you can tell me whether I'm on the right road to Wayland—what?"

"You are going to Wayland?" asked Talbot, deeply disappointed.

The man was evidently an American, and if he was not the spy, his coming there, and the sound of voices, might have scared the real spy away. Yet it was possibly a trick. It was not an uncommon practice for German spies to use American names and American passports obtained by trickery.

Talbot was on his guard.

"I guess I'm trying to," said the stranger. "But it looks to me as if I've missed the path. And this hyer's heavy, I can tell you!"

"Lost your way?"

"I guess so; and if you can put me right I'll call it real good of you. I came down by the last train to Rylcombe—that sleepy hollow yonder—and they told me it was an hour's walk to Wayland. If I haven't been three or four hours tramping on this durned moor you can kick me, sir—kick me hard! Not a signpost to be seen, not a signboard—nothing, sir. This isn't how we run things over the water, I guess! Yow, I reckon I'm tired, some!"

"I can show you the way to Wayland, if you like," said Talbot.

"You can! That's real good of you! Is it far?"

"A good hour."

"Oh, by gum!" said the American gentleman dismally. "You don't say! I suppose I've taken the wrong path—though I'm durned if I could see any path at all! Young man, if you'll show me how to get to Wayland I'll be ever so much obliged to you."

Talbot was watching the man carefully in the dimness. If he was not what he appeared to be, he played his part well. If he were the spy, masquerading as an American, of course he had his story all ready, in case of an encounter while he was at work on the moor. The large bag perhaps contained the lamp he had used for signals. Talbot would have given a good deal to see the interior of that bag. But that was scarcely possible.

"I guess we'll get on then—what?" asked the stranger.

"This way," said Talbot.

They tramped through the furze. Talbot had his own reasons for going to the market-town with the stranger—to ascertain whether he was really what he stated himself to be, and where he lived there.

"I guess this is real good of you!" said the stranger, as they tramped over the moor. "I might have wandered about all night on this moor. I wasn't even going in the right direction. But what are you doing out at this time of night—what? A bit late for a kid of your age, I should say."

"Yes, it is late," said Talbot, who had not the slightest intention of explaining. "Shall I carry that bag for you a bit?"

"You'll be careful with it? It's my samples, you know," said the other, passing the bag willingly enough to Talbot.

The junior felt his suspicion dying away. If the man had been a suspicious character, and the bag contained his signalling-lamp, surely he would not have relinquished it so cheerfully.

"I'll be careful," said Talbot. "It's not so very heavy."

"Heavy enough when a man's carried it three or four hours," said the American, with a chuckle. "I'm glad to get rid of it for a bit, but I'll take it again presently. You haven't told me what you're doing out here yourself. Excuse my curiosity. Americans always ask questions, you know."

Talbot laughed.

"I'm a schoolboy, and I've broken bounds," he said. "That's all. You are an American?"

"I guess so. Name of Gunn—Ephraim Gunn, drummer."

"Drummer?" said Talbot.

Mr. Gunn chuckled.

"I guess you call them commercial travellers in this country," he explained.

"Oh, I see!"

If Mr. Gunn was playing a part, he was certainly playing it well. He seemed to know the American language thoroughly.

Talbot tramped on, carrying the bag, and quite on his guard. He had left his watch, to show the American the way—and to "bowl him out" if he was not what he pretended to be. While he was absent the signaller might

be at work. But that had to be risked. It was evidently the best thing to do to satisfy himself of the bona-fides of this stranger who had cropped up at the very place where he was expecting the signaller.

Talbot was not blind to his peril. If this man was the spy, and was keen to get to his signalling, he might be at that very moment only watching for an opportunity of knocking the junior on the head.

But he made no suspicious movement. That, of course, was no proof of his genuineness. If his business was to remain in the neighbourhood and carry on his spying, knocking the boy on the head would be a little too risky. The boy would be missed, and searched for; and to excite general alarm and excitement close to the scene of his operations was not the spy's business. If he was the man whom Talbot had heard mutter, "Noch nicht," he had perhaps resolved to abandon his nefarious work for that night in order to escape exciting suspicion.

Mr. Gunn chatted on garrulously while these thoughts were passing through Talbot's mind. He told the junior his line of business, and the orders he hoped to get in Wayland, and other information of the same sort. He stopped at last on the footpath that led to the market-town.

"This lead to Wayland?" he asked.

"Yes," said Talbot.

"Then I guess I won't trouble you to come any further. You ought to have been in bed long ago."

"I'll walk the rest of the way," said Talbot. "It isn't far now."

"Oh, don't trouble."

Talbot paused.

"Very well," he said. "You can find the way from here easily enough. You've only got to keep straight on."

"Thanks! Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

Mr. Gunn took his bag, and tramped away towards Wayland. Talbot watched him out of sight in the gloom, and then walked away. He did not go far. If the American gentleman was, after all, the German spy playing a cunning part, he had got rid of his guide probably in order to double back, and get to his signalling work. And if that was the case, Talbot intended to know it.

## CHAPTER 23.
### At Close Quarters.

TALBOT halted a dozen paces from the footpath, and slipped into a thicket. There he waited. If Ephraim Gunn came back, it would be proof enough that his story was false, and Talbot would be sure of his man.

He waited patiently, watching the footpath, and listening. In the pale glimmer of the stars he could not have failed to see anyone who passed, and his keen ears would not have lost a sound.

But a quarter of an hour passed, and there was no sign.

Mr. Gunn did not come back.

Talbot left his post at last; but he did not start for the school. He tramped back over the moor in the direction of the hollow where he had met Mr. Gunn. If the man was the spy, he might have been cunning enough to make assurance doubly sure by making a detour, in case the boy should be lingering on the moor. In that case he might be already back at the hollow, at work with his signalling apparatus.

Talbot meant to know. The hollow was on the highest, and also the loneliest part of the moor, and was almost the only spot where the light-signals could be made without danger of being seen from Rylcombe or Wayland or the surrounding farmhouses. That, of course, was why the spy had chosen it, and if his rascally work was to be done that night it would be done in the same spot.

Talbot gave a violent start as he came near the hollow. For from the dark furze a light had suddenly flashed up.

The secret signaller was at work.

Talbot hurried his steps. Was it the American, who had doubled back by a different path, or had the spy arrived there while Talbot was showing Mr. Gunn the way to the town? It was impossible to tell, but evidently the man was at work now. Flash followed flash, with intervals of darkness. That the flashes were part of a code of signals Talbot could easily guess, though, of course, the meaning was not intelligible to him. He looked up at the sky, but the heavy banks of clouds, low down on the moor, shut off the stars.

A fleet of airships might have been a hundred yards above his head, and he would not have seen them, would not have known unless they were low enough for him to hear the throb of the engines.

They might be coming at that very moment—the spy evidently believed so. That was why he was signalling. To the German airmen, who selected moonless nights for their murderous raids, signals were very necessary. They did not want to waste their bombs in the fields, and they wanted to know very much whether British aeroplanes were to be feared. Those signals, which Talbot did not understand, conveyed intelligence to those who could read them, all the information the spy could impart as to any preparations in the district against air raids, and indications of the direction to be steered in order to drop the bombs with effect.

But no answering flashes came from the sky; there was no sound, no sign, from the rolling clouds above. The light-signals went on, however. It was possible that the German intended to keep them up for hours. He could not be certain at what hour the expected Zeppelin would arrive—possibly was not assured even as to the particular night chosen for the raid. His business was to be there ready.

Talbot came to the edge of the hollow, and looked down on the flashes. In the darkness he could see nothing else.

He drew the loaded cane from his coat, and gripped it hard. Then he trod softly down the slope. Well he knew that he might never leave that lonely hollow alive.

In dense darkness, broken only by the flashes of blinding light before him, he crept on, closer and closer.

His foot caught in a trailing root, and he stumbled. The sound he made was slight—very slight—but it reached the keen ears of the spy. There was a sharp, involuntary ejaculation from the unseen man.

"Wer da?"

The light disappeared instantly. Talbot heard a rustling sound. He sprang forward fiercely; concealment was useless now. He did not speak. He rushed straight in the direction of the sound, his weapon gripped in his hand.

But the blackness blinded him; he could see nothing. The loaded cane swept through the air, but it met with no resistance. Talbot half expected a pistol-shot, but it did not come. He heard a sound again—a distant rustle. The German was fleeing. Setting his teeth, he dashed in the direction of the rustle, slashing with the cane, but the man was gone. He halted, breathless, savagely angry, and listened, his ears strained for the slightest sound.

But no sound came to him.

The German was gone—the blackness of the night had swallowed him up.

The junior gritted his teeth with angry disappointment. He waited on the edge of the hollow, scanning the dark moor, while the minutes passed, but the German did not return. And there were no light-signals from any other direction.

From the high ground where he stood Talbot could have discerned them in any part of the moor. He waited long, with a faint hope that the rascal might return. But the spy had been too thoroughly alarmed by the interruption. Another hour passed, and there was no sign.

Talbot gave it up at last. It was nearly four o'clock, and he had none too much time to get back to St. Jim's before the first grey of dawn. It was pretty certain that no more signals would be made that night—the raiders would not come so late. With a frowning brow, the junior tramped away towards the school.

There was a glimmer of grey in the sky when he found himself once more in the Shell dormitory in the School House. The juniors were fast asleep. Talbot undressed hastily and turned in, and he was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow.

He was still sound asleep when the rising-bell clanged out over the school in the sunny spring morning.

He did not wake up at the sound of the bell. The rest of the Shell turned out, and the fellows turned surprised glances towards Talbot's bed. Talbot was not usually a slacker. Tom Merry did not look at him. He understood only too well why Talbot was fast asleep after the rising-bell had gone.

Kangaroo shook Talbot by the shoulder, and he awoke.

"Turn out, you blessed slacker!" exclaimed the Cornstalk. "Rising-bell's stopped."

Talbot rubbed his eyes.

"Has it? Oh, thanks!" He turned out at once.

"Sleepy?" chuckled Glyn.

"Yes, a bit."

"This is what comes of getting late to bed. What the deuce did you stay out till half-past ten for last night?" demanded Glyn.

"I went home with Brooke to tea, and stayed later than I ought to have done, and I didn't hurry coming back."

"You didn't! What did Carrington say?"

"He said 'Good-night,'" said Talbot, laughing.

"Lines, I suppose?"

"No!"

There was a general exclamation.

"You didn't even get lines?" growled Gore. "I call it rotten favouritism. I'll bet you must have told Carrington some thumping yarn to stuff him up, then."

Talbot made no reply to that remark. He was plunging his sleepy face into cold water.

"Must have been an awfully good yarn if it satisfied Carrington," said Crooke. "I didn't know you were such a good hand as an Ananias, Talbot."

But Talbot did not answer. He did not want to explain his adventure to the whole Form and cause it to become the talk of the school. His work was not done yet, and secrecy was needed. He did not even guess what conclusion Tom Merry was drawing from his silence—he did not know that Tom Merry, alone among the Shell fellows, was aware that he had gone out again after his return to the dormitory the previous night.

But Tom Merry did know it, and he was drawing his own conclusions from it, and from Talbot's silence on the subject. The fellow who would once have trusted Talbot against the whole world had lost the last vestige of faith in him at last.

## CHAPTER 24.

### The Benefit of the Doubt.

TALBOT was restless and thoughtful that day.

The want of sleep on the previous night told upon him to some extent, though his iron constitution enabled him to bear that better than most fellows could have done.

His mind was fully occupied with the strange adventure of the night.

He had eagerly scanned the morning paper for news of a Zeppelin raid; but there was not a word upon the subject.

Evidently the Zeppelin had not come. From which Talbot concluded that the light-signals would be made from the moor on the following night.

That night, therefore, there was work for him to do. So far as warning the authorities was concerned, he had done all he could. And he had done all he could "on his own," and with better luck he might have succeeded in laying the spy by the heels.

Luck had failed him there, but he was not finished yet.

Mr. Linton found Talbot, for once, inattentive in class, and he spoke to him sharply once or twice, and Talbot pulled himself together, and tried to fix his attention upon his work; but it required an effort.

His preoccupation did not escape notice; it was only too clear to Tom Merry that the Toff was worried and restless.

Tom was worried, too.

He had resolved that the old friendship should be dead and done with, that he would give no further thought to Talbot, and not trouble his mind about the Toff in any way. But it was easier said than done. To resolve to banish Talbot's concerns from his mind was easy; to carry out the resolution was another matter.

For it seemed to Tom Merry Talbot was on the brink, that the abyss of the past was open to swallow him up again, and that he was driving headlong to his ruin. Absence from the dormitory in the middle of the night, preoccupation and restlessness by day, all pointed to the same conclusion. If Miss Marie's story had been correct, and Hookey Walker was gone, why had Talbot left the dormitory in that secret fashion, leaving a dummy in his bed to deceive a master's eye if a chance visit were paid to the boys' sleeping quarters?

So deeply was Tom Merry's faith in his old chum shaken, so deep was his fear of what might have happened, that he would not have been surprised if there had been news that morning of a robbery in the neighbourhood. So his dark doubts had reached that point at last.

Talbot, ignorant of what was passing in the mind of the captain of the Shell, avoided Tom as usual that day.

But that day he felt more keenly than ever before the loss of Tom's friendship. He would gladly have related his discovery to his old chums, had taken counsel with them, and obtained their help in the task he had set himself.

But that was impossible now. He had to keep his own counsel. He could not speak to the Terrible Three, and there was an end of it.

He was keen to get away, and he was not at ease in his mind until lessons for the day were over. It was a half-holiday that day, and Talbot had made his plans for the afternoon. Gladly he would have shared them with his old chums, but that thought he dismissed from his mind with a sigh.

After dinner Talbot came out of the School House with his coat and cap on. The chums of Study No. 6 stopped him on the steps of the House.

"Hold on!" said Jack Blake. "Where are you rushing off to in a hurry?"

"I'm going out," said Talbot.

"All on your lonely own?"

"Yes," said Talbot, flushing a little.

"Then you can chuck it up and come with us," said Blake. "The one and only has had a whacking remittance, and we're going out on the razzle."

"Weally, Blake——"

"You're awfully good," said Talbot, "but——"

"Pway don't give us any buts, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We are goin' to have a cah out. And I've got a wippin' ideah. I have asked Miss Mawie if she can come for a wun, and it appeahs that she can't. But if you ask her, it is barely poss that she may be able to come—see?"

Talbot smiled.

"Gussy is bursting with good ideas," said Digby. "How do you do these things, Gussy?"

"Weally, Dig——"

"Tell Miss Marie I'll bring Towser," said Herries. If anything could have decided the Little Sister to come, Herries felt that that would do it.

"Weally, Hewwies, I uttahly wefuse to have that wotten bulldog in the cah. You can tie him on behind if you like."

"Fathead!" said Herries.

"Good!" said Blake heartily. "Tie him on behind the car with a chain round his neck, Herries."

"You silly ass! That would choke him!"

"Yes; that's what I mean," said Blake blandly.

"Why, you—you——"

Words failed Herries. A matter that Study No. 6 never could agree upon was the merits and demerits of Herries' bulldog.

"Pway wun away and ask Miss Mawie now Talbot," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy persuasively.

"I'm really sorry; I can't come," said Talbot. "I've got to get off. Ta-ta!"

And without making any further explanation to the Fourth-Formers, Talbot walked down to the gates.

Arthur Augustus indulged in a sniff.

"I wegard that," he said emphatically, "as wotten! I wegard it as vewy wotten!"

"Hallo!" said Monty Lowther, coming out of the House with Tom Merry and Manners. "Who has been offending your Serene Highness now, Gussy? Off with his head!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Who has dared," said Lowther solemnly, "to bring that frown to the august brow of the One and Only?"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah! I have asked Talbot to get Miss Mawie to come out in the cah with us. For some extwaordinawy weason I cannot compwehend, Miss Mawie thinks more of Talbot than any other chap in the school. And he won't! The silly duffah pwefers to go out by himself. I wegard it as wank lunacy for a chap to want to spend a half-holiday all by himself. I should think he would get wathah fed up with his own society—what!"

And Arthur Augustus gave another sniff, and walked away with his chums.

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"Coming out?" asked Lowther, with an uneasy look at Tom.

Tom shook his head.

"There's Levison," said Manners. "We could speak to him now if you like."

"Hardly necessary now," said Tom.

"Why not? Anything happened?"

"Yes."

"Get it off your chest."

Tom Merry did not speak, however, till they were out in the quad, and safe from other ears.

"Talbot was out of the dorm last night," he said abruptly.

"You mean he came in late?"

"I mean he went out again after eleven, and he hadn't come in at three o'clock. I heard three strike before I went to sleep again."

Lowther and Manners looked serious.

"And, according to Miss Marie, Hookey Walker's on his way to America," said Tom. "I suppose he has fooled her. I can't help thinking so."

"Well, I suppose it's no business of ours," said Lowther uneasily. "We've nothing to do with him now, and he can do as he likes."

"He means to, apparently," said Tom. "But isn't it any business of ours? I'm in two minds whether it ought to be reported to the Head."

Lowther started.

"Tom! We can't sneak about the chap! What are you thinking of?"

"What I'm thinking of is this. If Talbot is in the hands of the gang again, he is going straight on the road to prison. He ought to be stopped. Have we any right to let matters go on like this, and bring that disgrace on the school? Even for his own sake he ought to be stopped. Admitting that that isn't our business, as he's no longer a friend of ours, what about the disgrace when it comes out? It must come out sooner or later. Suppose we hear that there has been a robbery——"

"Tom!" exclaimed Manners, in a startled voice.

"What else can it mean?" said Tom.

His chums looked at him helplessly. If Tom Merry's faith in Talbot was gone, so utterly dead as this, what were they to think?

"I—I can't believe it," said Lowther. "He—he might have gone out for some other reason."

"What reason?"

"Blessed if I know! But——"

Tom Merry laughed bitterly.

"I don't know what to do, and that's a fact," he said. "It looks to me as if he has gone back to his old days, and even deceived Miss Marie."

"Hold on!" said Lowther. "Let's speak to Levison. We can settle that point, anyway."

"Not much use——"

"Rats! We'll see what Levison has to say. Don't be so blessed obstinate!"

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders, but he assented. Levison was in the quadrangle, and the Terrible Three bore down on him. The cad of the Fourth stopped as they came up, his usual sarcastic smile on his thin lips.

"We want to ask you a question," said Lowther. "You can answer it or not, as you think fit. Did you pay Talbot five pounds last week?"

Levison stared.

"I don't see how that concerns you," he said.

"Oh, come away!" said Tom Merry impatiently.

"Hold on!" said Levison. "I don't mind telling you. You know that Talbot was hard up last week, as he sold his bike. As a matter of fact, I did settle the five quid I owed him."

"You did!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes, I did! Surprising, ain't it?" said Levison, with a sneer. "Not what you would have expected of me. But, you see, as Talbot's own chums had left him in the lurch, it was up to me, and as I owed him the tin, I made an effort and got it for him. I'd have done it if I hadn't owed it to him, as a matter of fact, if he'd have taken it. We don't all turn our backs on a fellow when he's hard hit."

Tom Merry set his teeth. To be lectured by the black sheep of the Fourth was a little too much. But he kept his temper with an effort.

"Would you mind telling us what time you paid him?" he asked. "Was it late in the day?"

"Blessed if you're not a regular Inquisitive Jack!" said Levison, with a laugh. "But it was late in the day, since you ask. It wasn't easy for me to get the money. I handed it to him about calling-over, as near as I can remember."

"Thanks!"

The Terrible Three left Levison, who stared after them, evidently surprised by the questioning.

"Well," said Lowther, "that settles that point. What Talbot told Miss Marie was true enough."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, it looks all right. If he'd dropped breaking bounds at night I'd take it as settled. I'd be glad enough to believe the same as Miss Marie. But—but why was he out of doors at all last night? What has he gone off by himself for this afternoon? It's all rot about his wanting to go for a walk alone. He's got some engagement outside St. Jim's, that's plain enough. How can we believe that Hookey Walker is gone?"

"Well, it looks pretty bad, I admit," said Lowther, after some thought. "But there may be an explanation. We're not in Talbot's confidence now. Anyway, Tom, we're going to hold our tongues about him. It will be time enough to jump on him if we find that—that——"

"That the Toff has been at work again—that there have been cracksmen in the neighbourhood," said Tom bitterly.

"That would settle it, I suppose; but till then give the chap the benefit of the doubt, Tom. Dash it all, you stood up for him when the whole school was down on him! Give him a chance. You seem to want to look on the worst side of things now."

"Goodness knows I don't!" said Tom. "But I've given up hope, that's all. And—and I can't forget that he was a pal. I can't forget how we hunted for him in London that time, and found him frozen and starving. A fellow doesn't forget those things in a hurry. If Talbot is going to the dogs——"

Tom Merry broke off. His voice failed him. His words ended in almost a sob.

"Let's get out," said Lowther uneasily. "Come on; a walk will do you good. No good moping."

And the Terrible Three went out of the gates. But that afternoon's walk was not a pleasant one. In spite of themselves, black care dogged their steps, and they could not shake it off.

## CHAPTER 25.

### Levison Lends a Hand.

TALBOT of the Shell entered the little railway-station at Rylcombe, and looked round for Trumble, the porter. That old gentleman was seated upon a trolley, chewing a straw. Trains were few and far between at Rylcombe, and Trumble woke up, as it were, whenever a train came in. He touched his hat civilly to the St. Jim's fellow.

Talbot was there to make inquiries. He had been thinking over his meeting with the American "drummer," without being able to come to a decision

Whether the supposed American was the German spy in a cunning guise, or whether he was what he appeared to be, was what Talbot had to discover. After his unsuccessful surprise of the spy on the previous night, it was probable that the rascal would not return to the same spot to make his light-signals. In the dark he had not seen Talbot, and Talbot had not seen him. But the rascal would know that he was suspected now. He would fear that the hollow on the moor would be watched. And he would probably give that spot a wide berth.

What spot he would choose for signalling on the following night, Talbot, of course, could not guess.

But there was a chance of getting upon his track, through Mr. Gunn, the American commercial traveller. If Mr. Gunn's story was "straight," it was at least curious, that his haphazard wanderings on the moor should have brought him to the hollow where Talbot was watching for the signaller. The man's story had been plausible enough. He had come down to Rylcombe by the last train, and had started to walk to Wayland, and missed his way. Whether he was genuine or not, he had taken Talbot simply for a schoolboy, never suspecting that the lad was on the moor for the purpose of watching for the spy. And had Talbot known nothing of the spy, of course the plausible explanation would have satisfied him.

But as it was, he intended to put that commercial traveller's story to the test. It was easy enough to do so. That was what had brought the Shell fellow to Rylcombe Station.

"Arternoon, Master Talbot!" said Trumble.

"Good-afternoon! You were on duty here last night, Mr. Trumble?" asked the junior.

Trumble nodded.

"You saw the last train in?" asked Talbot.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm inquiring after somebody who came by that train," explained Talbot. "Did you notice an American gentleman among the passengers?"

Mr. Trumble shook his head.

"There was only three," he said. "I knows them all. Mr. Sands the grocer and his missus, and young George Williams, what's in the noo Army, and come 'ome on leave."

"That was all?"

"That was all, Master Talbot."

"Did you notice an American gentleman by any train in the evening—a man with a pointed beard, carrying a large bag?"

"No, sir. There wasn't any such man came to this 'ere station last night."

"You are sure?"

"I was 'ere all the time, and so I ought to be sure," said Trumble.

"Thank you, Trumble! Very much obliged."

Talbot left the station, his heart beating, and a glint in his eyes.

Mr. Gunn's explanation of his presence on the moor was false. He had not arrived at Rylcombe Station by the last train, or any train. It followed that he had not started to walk to Wayland, and missed his way. It was not by chance that he was on the moor at midnight.

If Mr. Gunn had been, as he stated, an ordinary American commercial traveller, there was no reason why he should have lied about it. Talbot's half-formed suspicion was fully confirmed now.

The man was not an American. And the bag, instead of

containing "samples," had contained the electric signalling apparatus. In Talbot's mind, there was not the slightest doubt of that now.

Talbot walked slowly along the village street, thinking hard. He had no doubt now that the pretended Mr. Gunn was the spy; that he had doubled back after Talbot had accompanied him half-way to Wayland the previous night.

It was a question now of getting on the track of Mr. Gunn. That was the only means of finding the secret signaller at his nefarious work; for that the rascal would change his ground. after that encounter in the hollow, was pretty certain.

Talbot, as he walked on with bent head and knitted brows, passed the Terrible Three in the village street, without even seeing them. They saw him, and watched him out of sight.

The Toff crossed Rylcombe Bridge, and took the shortest cut to Wayland. It was in that direction he had to look for Mr. Gunn. That the spy was hidden somewhere in the neighbourhood there was little doubt. But the junior realised that he had a very extensive task before him. Near Rylcombe the presence of any stranger would have excited remark. But Wayland was a market town, and there the matter was quite different.

The spy, in his character of an American commercial traveller, might be putting up at an hotel or inn, or in lodgings. And in Wayland town lodgings were innumerable. And Talbot had only his own efforts to depend upon. He knew that it was useless to go to Mr. Skeat with his suspicions of the commercial traveller. The conclusions he had come to would not be shared by the inspector. And there was no doubt that the rascal had his papers, and his passport, in order, to satisfy the police. To prove his guilt, it was necessary to catch him in the act. And that was the task Talbot had set himself. And to keep a watch upon him, it was necessary first to know where to find him.

"Penny for 'em!"

Talbot started as he was suddenly addressed. He stopped. It was Levison of the Fourth. Levison regarded him with a grin.

"Take the offer?" he asked.

"What—what——"

"I offered you a penny for your thoughts,' said Levison. "You must be thinking out some awfully deep problem, I should say."

"Yes—no!" muttered Talbot.

"Anything wrong?"

"No."

"Where are you going?"

"I—I'm going to Wayland just now."

"Good! I'll come with you."

Talbot nodded, not caring to tell Levison that his company was unwelcome just then.

"I saw you go off alone," Levison explained. "I thought I'd look for you, as you seem to have nothing on this afternoon. Why don't you tell me what you're trying to puzzle out? Perhaps I could help you."

Talbot coloured. It was not much use trying to conceal from Levison's keen eyes that there was something on his mind. He walked on for some minutes in silence, the black sheep of the Fourth watching him with curious, sidelong glances.

"Not hard up again?" Levison asked.

"Oh, no!"

"Not those old pals of yours bothering you—what?"

Talbot crimsoned.

"Certainly not!"

"Oh, all serene! Don't get huffy," said Levison easily. "I fancy there are some friends of yours in the school who think so." He stopped abruptly. "If you'd rather be alone, say so, and I'll cut off. I thought you might like even my company this afternoon."

"Perhaps you could help me," Talbot said, half to himself.

"I'd do anything I could," said Levison eagerly. "Hang it all, I think I've shown that I'm a friend of yours; though you naturally don't value my friendship very highly. If you've got into a scrape, I'd do anything to help you out of it. But you're not the sort of chap to play the giddy ox, as I do."

Talbot smiled.

"No, it isn't that. I'm not in a scrape, Levison. You've been much longer at St. Jim's than I have, and you know the neighbourhood better. I want to find a man in Wayland, and I don't know where he lives."

Levison looked astonished.

"My hat! Easy enough to inquire," he said. "What's his name?"

"Ephraim Gunn."

"Oh crumbs! What a name! What is he?"

"An American commercial traveller."

"Bound to be at one of the hotels, then. There's only two in Wayland, and three or four inns. It wouldn't take an hour to inquire at the lot."

"I think he's most likely to be in some very quiet spot; somewhere where he wouldn't be likely to attract attention," said Talbot. "Somewhere where he would be able to get out at night without being specially noticed."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Levison involuntarily.

Talbot looked at him.

"Not a burglar, by any chance?" asked Levison. Talbot made an angry gesture, and the Fourth-Former went on quickly: "Don't get ratty! I know it's all right. But if you had said that to any other fellow, I'll bet he would have jumped to the conclusion that it was one of your old pals you were looking for. But I know it's all right. I'll help you to find him, too, and without asking any questions."

"I don't want to explain the matter," said Talbot shortly.

"And I don't ask you to. I'll help you to find the man," said Levison. "I know a man in Wayland who can help us—Stubbs, the estate agent's clerk. He knows every lodging-house and every lodging-house keeper in Wayland, and he could find out as easy as falling off a form."

Talbot's face brightened up. They lost no time in getting to Wayland, and Levison called at once upon Mr. Stubbs, who was one of the "gay dogs" with whom Levison associated when he had any money. Talbot waited for him in the street. Levison rejoined him in about ten minutes

"Any news?" asked Talbot eagerly.

Levison laughed.

"Yes, rather! Stubbs knows him. 'Awfully keen business hand,' Stubbs says. He's trying to find an opening in this country for an American cutlery firm. Thinks there's a good chance of extending business during the war, you know. Stubbs has done some business with him—finding him customers, for a commission, and that kind of thing. He's booked a good many orders in Wayland, doing such good business that he's staying on longer than he had intended."

Talbot felt a chilling doubt for a moment.

Was it possible, after all, that old Trumble had been mistaken, and that the American "drummer" was genuine? If he was playing a part, he was evidently playing it with the greatest thoroughness.

"You've found out where he lives, then?" asked Talbot.

"Yes; the best hotel in the place—the new hotel," said Levison. "The Royal. He's got two rooms there, and has a little party sometimes—cards, you know; and Stubbs is one of the elect."

Again Talbot felt a chill of doubt. He had naturally concluded that the spy would seek to avoid observation. There was not much chance of avoiding observation in the glaring new hotel at Wayland. Certainly, for a man with an iron nerve it was the safest plan. He avoided suspicion by keeping well in the public eye. Yet he must run the risk of being spotted when he made his midnight excursions to the moor to send up the light-signals.

"You want to call on the man?" asked Levison, who was greatly puzzled, though he refrained from asking questions.

"Yes," said Talbot resolutely. He made up his mind to it. He had a pretext for the call—to inquire whether Mr. Gunn had got home safely, after all, that night. If the man was the German spy, he was not likely to suspect a schoolboy in Etons of keeping a watch on him. In the old days the Toff had played many parts, and he felt quite equal to dealing with Mr Gunn without awakening his suspicions. It was necessary for him to know whether the man had an easy means of leaving the hotel without attracting attention.

"Then I'll trot off," said Levison.

"I sha'n't be long," said Talbot. "Suppose you wait for me in the bun-shop, and we'll have tea when I've seen this chap."

"Right-ho!" said Levison, with alacrity.

They parted, and Talbot made his way to the Hotel Royal.

## CHAPTER 26.

### Talbot on the Track.

MR. GUNN'S name was well known at the hotel, and Talbot was informed that he was in his rooms. The St. Jim's fellow was shown up to the American gentleman's quarters. Mr. Gunn was reclining in an easy-chair by an open window that gave a view of the long garden behind the hotel and the river beyond it. He was reading an American newspaper. He laid it down and rose as Talbot was announced.

He took a large cigar from his mouth, and looked at the boy inquiringly.

"Mr. Gunn?" said Talbot.

"That's me," said the American gentleman. "I guess I don't quite recognise you, though." His manner was perfectly natural.

"You met me last night," said Talbot.

"My word! You're the kid who showed me the way on the moor!" said Mr. Gunn. "I guess I didn't see you in the dark, not very clearly. Very kind of you to give me a look in! Squat down, sonny!"

Talbot sat down. There was not a detail in the room that escaped the glance of the Toff, accustomed from of old to take note of his surroundings without appearing to do so. He had noted at once that Mr. Gunn's sitting-room looked on the garden; that there was a balcony outside the French windows, with steps down to the garden; and at the end of the garden was the towing-path beside the river. Nothing would be easier than for Mr. Gunn to come and go without the knowledge of the rest of the people in the hotel.

"You got home all right?" asked Talbot.

"I guess so—after you put me on the right path," said Mr. Gunn. "I was tired, though—waal, I swow! But how did you find me here? I don't kind of remember giving you my address, sonny."

"A friend of mine knows a friend of yours," said Talbot. "He told me. The fact is, I was rather anxious to see you."

"Yep?" said Mr. Gunn inquiringly. "Not doing anything in the American cutlery line, I guess?"

Talbot smiled.

"No. I'm a schoolboy, and I was out of bounds last night."

"I reckon that was so," assented Mr. Gunn.

"So naturally I don't want it mentioned," explained Talbot. "If my headmaster knew it would mean a licking."

Mr. Gunn laughed.

"I guess I savvy now!" he remarked. "You trust me to keep as mum as a clam, sonny. I'm not giving you away after the service you did me. I guess it was real good of you! I might have tramped about till morning."

"That's all right, then," said Talbot, rising. "Thank you very much, Mr. Gunn!"

"Not at all! Don't run away yet," added Mr. Gunn hospitably.

"My friend's waiting for me," said Talbot. "I—I thought I'd just run in and mention that, that's all. Thank your very much! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said Mr. Gunn, with an amused smile.

Talbot quitted the American gentleman's room and the hotel. He had discovered all that he came there for. And he flattered himself that Mr. Gunn was not likely to guess the real reason of his call.

The Shell fellow made his way to the bunshop, where he found Levison waiting for him at one of the little tables. He dropped into a chair, and they ordered tea. Levison was looking and feeling very satisfied. Talbot of the Shell was the only fellow Levison had ever felt any regard for, and he would have been glad to be Talbot's pal. Not that there was much likelihood of that coming to pass—their natures were too utterly unlike for that.

"Seen your man?" asked Levison, as they discussed muffins and tea and cake.

Talbot nodded.

"Not much in your line, I should have thought," said Levison. "Gunn is one of the boys, according to Stubbs. There's a little party on in his rooms this evening, and Stubbs asked me."

"You!" said Talbot. "How could you go?"

"There are ways and means," he explained. "But it's N.G. for this evening so far as I'm concerned. I'm stony. You'll have to pay for this feed."

"It's my treat," said Talbot, smiling. "So there's a little party in Gunn's rooms for this evening, is there?"

"Yes—poker," said Levison. "I'm afraid it would be a bit too high for me, even if I were in funds. But I mustn't talk about that to you. I shall shock you," he added, with his sarcastic smile.

"I suppose they keep it up pretty late?" said Talbot.

"Midnight at least," answered Levison.

Talbot was very thoughtful while they finished tea. When they left the bunshop and started to walk home to St. Jim's, a voice hailed them from a motor-car on the road:

"Goin' home, deah boy?"

Talbot looked round. It was the Study No. 6 party. The car came to a halt by the roadside.

"Yes, we're going back," said Talbot.

Blake & Co. looked rather queerly at Levison. They were surprised to find him on these apparently intimate terms with Talbot of the Shell.

"Well, jump in, deah boys, and we'll give you a lift," said Arthur Augustus. "We have had a wippin' wun, and you were a sillay duffah not to come with us. Miss Mawie might have come if you had. Howevah, jump in. You, too, Levison, deah boy."

"Thanks!" said Talbot. He stepped into the car with Levison, and the chauffeur started again.

The chums of Study No. 6 were in great spirits, and they talked enough for half a dozen, so Talbot's thoughtfulness was hardly noticed. When they arrived at St. Jim's, Talbot made his way to the Head's garden. As he expected, he found the Little Sister in the summer-house, knitting. Marie was always knitting in these days. She greeted the Toff with a bright smile.

"My father has written," she said. "I shall be able to see him before he starts for the front. Of course, he cannot come here. He goes next week. You will take me to see him, Toff?"

"Yes, rather!" said Talbot. "I shall be jolly glad to see him myself too! This is a change from the old days, Marie. The Thieves' Club would be surprised if they could see the Professor now in khaki."

"I am thankful he has done with that," said Marie, her face becoming very grave, "though I cannot help thinking of the danger he is going into. There will be many, many brave men who must fall before they march into Berlin."

"A man must die some day," said Talbot, "and who could wish for a better death than that—facing the enemy and fighting for the old flag? It's worth giving up a few years of life to die like a man. If I were older——" He broke off. "But we'll hope that he will come home safe and sound, Marie—and Mr. Railton too."

"There's something I think I ought to tell you, Toff. You will not be angry?"

"Not with you, Marie," said the Toff softly. "What is it, dear?"

"I spoke to Tom Merry yesterday."

"Not about me?" he asked.

"I knew that—that you were troubled about it, Toff," said Marie, in a low voice. "I—I thought that if I explained to him about—about Hookey, you know, it would make it all right. He is a good fellow. I thought that he would ask your pardon for having doubted you, and—and——"

"It has made no difference," said Talbot. "But I'm glad you have explained, Marie dear. He knows, then, that Hookey Walker is gone?"

"I told him so, and the reason why you helped that man, Toff. But—but——"

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"You shouldn't worry about me, Marie. It's all right. It hit me hard, but I am getting used to it. I can't help thinking that Tom has changed his mind about wishing to pal with a fellow with a past like mine, and I can't blame him, either. How can I expect him to trust me? Let it rest. I shall always have one pal who will never change, at least."

"Never," said Marie softly.

There was comfort for the Toff in that thought. Even if his chums had deserted him, there was one loyal heart that would never change.

## CHAPTER 27.

### The Clouds Roll By.

TOM MERRY was very silent that evening.

Manners and Lowther hardly succeeded in extracting a word from him.

He did his preparation like a fellow in a dream, and it was not likely that his work would meet with the approval of Mr. Linton in the morning. But Tom Merry was not thinking of Mr. Linton.

One thought—one terrible thought—hammered in his mind. Talbot, his old chum, was lost to him; and that he could have borne, but that was not the worst. The Toff, the one-time cracksman whose reform had cost him such a bitter struggle, was on the brink of irreparable ruin. For, so far as Tom could see, it could mean nothing else. If Hookey Walker was gone, if the old associates of his evil days no longer had a hold upon the Toff, why that mysterious absence from the dormitory? And if Hookey Walker was not gone, Talbot had lied to Marie, and only for one reason—to conceal even from her the fact that he was slipping back into the old ways.

What could come of it? What but discovery, disgrace, ruin? Perhaps the Toff did not care. Perhaps he was weary of the orderly life as a scholarship boy at St. Jim's after the excitement and adventure of his earlier days. The temptation had been too strong for him, and he had succumbed. And yet, under bitter temptation, he had held true before. If he was yielding now, was it not perhaps because he had been abandoned by the chums who had stood by him and helped him to keep to the straight path?

That was a question that lay heavy upon Tom Merry's

conscience. He had felt that it was right to break with Talbot; that he could not uphold him in what he was doing. But what if that break had removed the last restraint, if by his actions he had hurled his chum into the abyss of crime and lawlessness? What if the Toff might yet have been saved by a helping hand held out in time?

To speak the first words towards a reconciliation, perhaps to meet with a cold rebuff—that was not easy. But was it not worth while to put his pride into his pocket if there was a chance yet of saving Talbot from destruction? To urge him, to plead with him, if necessary—anything to keep him from the path that he seemed bent upon following?

Tom Merry glanced at Talbot when the Shell fellows went up to the dormitory. Talbot did not notice it, he seemed buried in thought. He turned in like the rest, and Tom Merry turned in. Knox, the prefect, put out the light, and, after the usual chatter, the juniors dropped off to sleep.

But Tom Merry could not sleep.

He felt, or rather knew, that Talbot did not intend to remain there. And if he should go, should he be allowed to go without a word? If he left the dormitory, for what purpose would it be? Tom almost trembled to think of that. Should he let his old chum go without a word? Could he not forgive him, even if he was sinking once more into the pit from which he had so hardly escaped? Could he not make excuses for the Toff, brought up among cracksmen from his earliest years?

He lay sleepless, in tortured thought. What if he should speak and be rebuffed? If the Toff had decided upon his course, he was not likely to listen to urging. Tom Merry lay in misery, sleepless, while the hours tolled out from the clock-tower. Half-past ten had sounded, when he heard someone move. He knew that it was Talbot. He lay quietly, listening. He heard the faint sounds of a fellow dressing quickly in the dark. His expectation had been fulfilled, Talbot was leaving the dormitory. Still Tom Merry lay silent, not knowing what he should do.

The door closed softly.

Talbot was gone.

Tom Merry started up in bed. He could bear it no longer. The Toff was gone—for what? He should be saved in spite of himself.

Tom Merry sprang from his bed and dressed with hurried hands. It did not take him many minutes. He quitted the dormitory. He knew the way that Talbot must have taken. He entered the box-room. It was empty.

But the window was unfastened. In a minute more Tom Merry was on the ground outside, peering about him in the gloom of the night. Talbot had vanished, but he could not be far away. Tom Merry cut away at a run towards the school wall, at the familiar spot where the slanting oak made it easy to climb the wall. That was the spot Talbot was undoubtedly making for; he could not be many seconds ahead.

All Tom Merry's doubts and hesitation had vanished now. He ran hard across the quad, careless of the risk of being seen. The lower windows of the house were yet lighted; masters and seniors were not yet gone to bed.

Tom Merry reached the old oak, panting. He caught a momentary glimpse of a figure on the wall as it dropped into the road.

"Talbot!"

The next instant he was climbing. He clambered hurriedly over the wall, and dropped to the ground.

"Talbot!"

The Toff had stopped. He had heard Tom Merry's voice as the captain of the Shell called to him, just as he dropped into the road. He had stopped. He looked at Tom Merry in the darkness with a startled face.

"Tom Merry! It is you?" muttered Talbot.

"Yes," said Tom breathlessly.

"Well?"

"I heard you go out——"

"Well?"

"I heard you last night——"

Talbot started.

"Did you? Well?"

Tom Merry panted.

"Talbot, are you mad? You can't go! Think what it means!"

Talbot looked at him more closely. Tom Merry's face was white, his lips were quivering. A softer expression came over the Toff's handsome face as he saw it. He did not speak; he stood quiet in the darkness by the school wall, in the shadow of the overhanging tree.

"Think what it means!" panted Tom Merry. "Are you going to lose everything that you've gained, Talbot? You must be out of your senses. And—and perhaps it's my fault—partly my fault." Tom Merry almost groaned the words.

Talbot looked at him curiously.

"What's your fault?" he asked.

"I can't help thinking, if I'd stuck to you—perhaps I ought to have—then you might have—might have stuck it out. I'm sorry! But—but even if we're not friends now, Talbot, you must listen to me. Come back!"

"Come back!" repeated Talbot.

"You must come back."

"Why?"

Tom Merry made a fierce gesture.

"Don't you understand? What hold have those scoundrels got over you? You were not like this before."

"I understand—a little too well, perhaps," said Talbot grimly. "You broke with me because I persisted in standing by a man I'd known in the old days. I did not blame you. His wife and child were starving, and I helped them. You didn't believe that, and I did not expect you to believe it. But it was true, and Hookey Walker gave me his word that he was keeping straight, and he kept his word. I did not blame you for not believing it, but it was true. And last week he went away. Marie told you so."

"That is true?"

"Quite true."

"But Hookey Walker was not the only one," said Tom. "I should have believed it all if you had stopped this. But if he is gone, why are you breaking bounds at night, the same as you did when he was here?"

Talbot smiled slightly.

"I repeat that he is gone. I have not seen him for nearly a week, he has started for America. I shall never see him again. And as for any other member of the old gang, I have not seen any of them. But it is useless to tell you so. There was a time when you could take my word—when you took my word against the whole school. I don't blame you, Tom. You've remembered the past, which you were always urging me to forget, and you don't want to pal with the Toff—it's natural enough. I've got sense enough to see that."

"You—you can't think that!" said Tom, in a quivering voice. "You know the past never made any difference to me. It's the present."

"What is the matter now?"

"The matter! I've come here to stop you—to save you."

"To save me from what?"

"You know what!"

Talbot's face hardened.

"I understand. You think I have lied to Marie—lied to you. You fear that this means that the Toff is himself again. You dread to read in the morning papers of a robbery which will compel you to announce me to the Head."

Talbot gave a bitter laugh.

"Well, I am not surprised. It's natural enough—quite natural. It happens that you are mistaken. But I don't blame you."

"Talbot"—Tom Merry's voice was hoarse and strained—"your word was always good enough for me. It's good enough for me now. Tell me that—that it isn't as I've feared, and I shall believe you."

"If my record were clean," said Talbot quietly, "I should refuse to answer you. If my whole life had been as straight as it has been since I came to St. Jim's, I should say nothing to you. But you have a right to doubt me. You have a good memory of what I was once, so I will answer you. Well, I am not a liar, I am not a thief. Is that enough for you?"

"Talbot!" muttered Tom Merry miserably.

"Hookey Walker went away last week, as Marie told you. I have not even heard from him since. Last night and to-night I have left the school secretly, as you know, for no reason connected with that man. A reason that I should have told you if we had been friends, because I should have asked your help in what I am doing."

"You—you would?"

"What I am doing is what you would do in my place. There is no danger of your hearing that the Toff has been at work at the old game," said Talbot bitterly. "There is no danger of that. I give you my word, if my word is good enough for you. If you are not satisfied, I will explain what I am doing."

"Talbot, old chap, you needn't—you needn't!" said Tom Merry, panting. "I believe you! I know you're straight! I was a fool—a fool to doubt you for one moment."

"I've said that I don't blame you," said Talbot very quietly. "It's natural enough. And I will tell you why I came out last night—why I am out to-night. There is a scoundrel making light-signals on Wayland Moor for German airships. I almost caught him last night, but he got away. To-day I

have tracked him out. To-night I am going to keep watch for him. That is my business now. Are you satisfied?"

Tom Merry did not reply. The relief he felt was too much for him. He could not speak. His eyes were thick with tears.

"Are you satisfied?" repeated Talbot.

"Yes," whispered Tom—"yes."

"Then you may go back and sleep easy in your mind," said Talbot. "I've explained to you, because you were once a good friend to me when, Heaven knows, I needed it badly enough, and I can't forget it; and I know, too, that my past gives you the right to doubt me. I've no more to say. Good-night!" He turned away.

"Talbot!"

"Well?"

"I—I'm sorry——"

"I've said I don't blame you," said Talbot. "You've nothing to be sorry for. I suppose I ought to thank you. You came out here to save me, I suppose, from crime; but that kind of suspicion doesn't make a fellow feel very thankful, though I admit I deserve it——" Talbot broke off suddenly. "Tom!"

Tom Merry was leaning against the old wall, his form shaken by a heavy sob. The relief which the truth had brought to his heart—the knowledge that he had wronged his chum, that his miserable doubts were unfounded—had been too much for him. Talbot's expression changed. The hard look vanished from his face. He sprang towards Tom Merry.

"Tom, old man—don't! What's the matter? Tom! I—I didn't know you cared so much, old chap! I didn't think this had hurt you as much as it has me! Goodness knows it hit me hard enough, but——"

Tom Merry made an effort and controlled himself.

"Let's forget all about it, Tom. I don't blame you for doubting me. I'm more than willing to let bygones be bygones. And I was in the wrong too——"

"You weren't," said Tom Merry. "I was a fool—a fool! I ought to have known you better, Talbot. But—but if you'll look over it——"

"Don't talk like that, Tom. It was all my fault. Don't say another word." Talbot held out his hand.

Tom Merry grasped it in silence. It was enough.

"You'll come with me now?" said Talbot.

"If you'll have me."

"You old duffer, of course I want you with me! There may be danger too."

"Come on!" said Tom Merry.

They started down the dark road together, and not a word more was said on their reconciliation. Words were not necessary. From that moment doubt and miserable suspicion were dead, never again to cast a shadow on the friendship of Tom Merry and the Toff.

## CHAPTER 28.

### Baffling the Raiders.

TALBOT'S heart was very light as he tramped on down the dark lane by the side of his chum.

The last cloud on his life had rolled away. And he was more than glad to have his old chum by his side on the perilous adventure that lay before him. They turned into the footpath through the wood, and as they tramped on Talbot told the story of the discovery he had made on the moor, and what he had learned of Mr. Ephraim Gunn that afternoon. Tom Merry listened, his conscience reproaching him. While he had been doubting his chum, it was this that had taken Talbot out in the dark hours—alone, when he had needed the help of his friends. Tom Merry was not so much to blame as, in that hour of remorse, he believed. Talbot explained the plan he had formed.

"It's certain that the rascal who calls himself Gunn is a German, and he is the spy who has been making light-signals. Of course, he has stolen an American passport. You remember the spy who was shot last year had an American passport that had been stolen by the spy authorities in Berlin from an American traveller? It's the same with this villain. But he's satisfied the police. It's no good denouncing him without catching him, too. That's what we're going to do."

"We'll try," said Tom Merry.

"He has rooms on the first floor of the hotel, with steps leading down from a balcony into the garden. From the garden he can get on to the towing-path; and that's the way he gets out of the hotel and in again at all hours of the night without being spotted. Of course, if he used the main entrance, and rang up the porter to let him in at four in the morning, they would soon spot that something was going on."

"I should say so!"

"So there's no doubt that he sneaks out and in by the garden and the towing-path. We're going to watch the gate. When he comes out, we're going to shadow him. We haven't trained as Boy Scouts for nothing, Tom. You see, after tackling me last night on the moor—though he didn't know it was me in the dark, of course—he will hardly go back to the same spot. He knows that somebody has spotted him there, and that will be enough to keep him away. The only way is to shadow him till he gets to the place he has selected to give his signals."

"Suppose he's gone already?"

"That's all right. I've found out that he has a party of friends in his rooms this evening. You see, he's keeping up appearance carefully. I rather think we shall have to wait a good time. We can do that."

The two juniors came out on the Wayland road, and took a short cut to the towing-path beside the river. They followed the towing-path to the back of the hotel garden. From the garden gate they could see lighted windows at the back of the hotel. Talbot pointed out Mr. Gunn's windows. They were brightly lighted.

"The little party is still on," whispered Talbot. "It's only a matter of waiting now. Well, we can wait."

The two juniors took cover in the deep shadow of a tree near the gate. The night was dark. There was no moon, and the stars were hidden by clouds. They waited, with grim patience. It was a long and weary vigil, for it was past twelve o'clock when the lights were extinguished in Mr. Gunn's windows. Then the two juniors were very much on the alert.

A quarter of an hour passed, and then the gate opened softly, and a figure wrapped in a thick overcoat came out, carrying a bag. The juniors did not need telling whom it was. Though they could not see the face in the darkness, there was no doubt that it was the German spy who was masquerading as an American commercial traveller.

The man strode away along the towing-path, and the two juniors followed. Their hearts were beating hard, but they were alert and cautious. Their experience as Boy Scouts stood them in good stead now. Silent as spectres, keeping in the shadows, they followed the spy as he tramped on.

The man kept to the towing-path for a good distance. It was clear that he was not making for the moor this time. Talbot had reasoned correctly. After the startling encounter in the hollow the previous night the German was afraid to return there to carry on his work. He knew that he could not have been seen by his unknown assailant, and so had no fear of being suspected; but the possibility that the hollow was watched was enough to keep him away.

He turned from the towing-path at last up a steep lane that led over the slopes of the Castle Hill. At the top of the hill was the ruined castle, well known in summer to picknickers from St. Jim's. Tom Merry caught Talbot's arm.

"The old castle!" he whispered. "That's where he's going!"

"No doubt of it."

They kept on. In the lane the German turned several times to scan the darkness behind him. But the juniors kept well in the shadows. It was merely habitual caution on the part of the spy, for he had no suspicion that he was being followed. Tom Merry and Talbot allowed him to get a little further ahead now, for there could be no doubt as to his destination. The ruins of the castle on the hill were a favourable spot for the light-signaller. The place was high, and it was lonely, and out of sight of any habitation. The rascal evidently knew the vicinity thoroughly, for the ruined castle was almost as favourable a spot for his villainous work as the hollow on the moor.

In that solitary spot, unfrequented even in the daytime, there was not a soul at the hour of midnight. The German disappeared into the ruins, and Tom Merry and Talbot paused in the shattered old gateway.

It was no easy matter to follow the man further, amid the masses of old masonry and crumbling walls.

"Wait for the light," whispered Talbot.

The light was not long in coming. From the darkness of the ruins a steady flare of white light streamed up suddenly into the darkness of the heavens.

For several minutes it streamed steadily, and then was shut off; but it had guided the juniors. Slowly, cautiously they stole closer and closer to the unconscious spy. He was kneeling beside his lamp in the old hall of the castle, and the juniors, who knew the ruins thoroughly, and could have found their way about in them blindfolded, moved without a fault in the dense darkness. They were too close to the rascal to be able to speak without the danger of alarming him, but Talbot made a sign which Tom Merry understood. They separated, to take the rascal on two sides—the two ends of the castle hall. On the other sides, the masses of the old walls shut him in. Once he was between them, he would

not be able to escape without a struggle. And about the result of that the St. Jim's fellows had no doubts.

The light was flashing again—dots and dashes, similar to the Morse code, but expressing no meaning to the juniors, though, as Boy Scouts, they were familiar with the Morse code. The spy was evidently using a code that was the secret of himself and his confederates. The signals were almost ceaseless now, as if the rascal were certain that there was someone, hidden by the clouds above, to receive them.

Flash after flash, blazing up into the velvety darkness—and suddenly there came a flash from the sky. The juniors' hearts thumped as they saw it.

Talbot set his teeth. He knew what that buzzing meant. The baby-killers were at hand. In the darkness, over the sleeping country, floated the Zeppelin with its murderous crew, only needing the guidance of the light-signals to rain down bombs upon the sleeping town. Talbot was close to the man now. The German's dark figure was between him and the light.

Flash, flash, flash!

Talbot made a sudden spring as the light flashed. This time there was no mistake; he was too close to miss. His hands closed upon the rascal's collar, and he dragged him over backwards.

The light, no longer covered, blazed out brightly, lighting up the old castle hall.

"Tom!"

Tom Merry did not need calling. He was on the scene almost as quickly as Talbot. The German—easily recognised now by Talbot as Mr. Gunn—was struggling fiercely in the grasp of the Toff. His right hand had slid into his breast—the Toff knew what for, and he did not wait for the revolver to be produced. His loaded cane was in his hand, and he had no more mercy for the spy than for a mad dog. The heavy leaded end crashed down full in the face of the German, and the man groaned and fell back heavily.

Crash!

The loaded cane came down on the electric lamp, and the ruins were plunged into instant darkness.

There were no more signals for the Zeppelin raiders.

Throb, throb throb! came from the blackness above. Flashes of light came darting overhead—signals calling to the spy, whose activity had so suddenly ceased. The two juniors watched them.

"The scoundrels!" muttered Talbot, between his teeth. "The villains! The light was guiding them—goodness knows what damage they've done already in other parts of the country—and the town yonder was to be attacked, too. But they won't have any guide now, at all events."

The signals from the sky had ceased, but the throbbing buzz was louder and closer, as the unseen Zeppelin swept on over the old castle.

Tom Merry and Talbot waited in silent anguish.

They had done all they could—the light-signals that were to have guided the assassins in their deadly work had been stopped. They could do no more. They could only wait and listen for the coming explosion.

Tom Merry grasped Talbot's arm in a convulsive grip as a deafening explosion sounded through the silence of the night.

It came from the direction of Wayland town.

"The demons! They're at it!" Tom muttered hoarsely.

Crash, crash, boom!

Then silence, as the throbbing of the Zeppelin died away in the distance.

There was a low groan from the German.

Talbot bent over him.

The rascal was coming to his senses. Talbot took a whip-cord from his pocket, and bound the man's wrists and ankles tightly.

"You wait here with him, Tom. The police will have to be fetched here to take his lamp—and to take him. I'll fetch them. Keep watch on him. And if he tries to get away, brain him!"

"You bet!" said Tom.

Talbot disappeared into the darkness, dashing away towards Wayland. Only four bombs had been dropped by the raiders before they swept on in search of other victims, but the town was in an uproar of excitement. But not a light gleamed out from the dark streets. Tom Merry waited in the ruins with the prisoner and his wrecked apparatus—waiting for Talbot to return. It was an hour before the Toff reappeared, and two constables came with him.

"It's all right, Tom!" said Talbot. "No great harm done. There were no lights in the town, and this scoundrel couldn't signal. The bombs dropped on the high-road outside the town and in the fields. There's a hole in the road big enough to put a motor-car in, but nobody killed, thank goodness! Let's get back."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath of relief.

"You young gentlemen have saved lives to-night," said one of the constables. "How many I don't know; but if those bombs had fallen into the town——"

Tom shuddered.

"Thank goodness we were here!" he said.

In silence the juniors tramped away towards St. Jim's. Their hearts were too full for words.

. . . . . .

There was news of the raid on the following morning.

Several towns besides Wayland, all along from the coast, had been visited by the raider of the skies, and a trail of death and destruction had been left in its wake. To the tale of dead, more would have been added but for the failure of the German spy to signal the airship. And from the morning papers it was learned that the Zeppelin, soon after passing Wayland, had been attacked and driven off by British aeroplanes—damaged, and probably to find a grave in the sea as it fled back to its lair.

Tom Merry and Talbot made their way to the Head's study that morning to make a clean breast of their share in the matter. Of course, their part had to come out, as they were wanted in the trial of the German spy.

Dr. Holmes heard them with amazement; but if he was inclined to be wrathful at the juniors taking matters into their own hands, and breaking bounds at night for the purpose, the knowledge that they had saved lives, and had captured a dangerous German spy, was more than enough to appease him. And, in fact, after chiding the two Shell fellows for their audacity, he shook hands with them, and complimented them on what they had done.

Monty Lowther and Manners met them as they came out of the Head's study. Manners and Lowther were in a state of astonishment, but their astonishment disappeared when Tom Merry explained to them. They were only too glad to be on the old footing with Talbot once more, and there was little need of words.

. . . . . .

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the first to notice that the four Shell fellows were "pally" once more, and quite on the old footing. He remarked to Blake that his feast of reconciliation had not been a failure after all, after thinking over it a week or two.

"The young boundahs have thought it ovah, you see, and made it up," said Arthur Augustus. "I felt all along that that was a wippin' ideah of mine, and you see how it has turned out. What are you gwinnin' at, Blake?"

"Bow-wow!" said Blake. "I'll tell you what, Gussy. You can have another ripping idea, and stand another ripping feed, to celebrate—let's see—oh, to celebrate the reconciliation. And to celebrate what Talbot's done, too. It isn't every fellow who knocks a rotten spy on the head and catches him. And there's good news, too—the rotter has gone to prison for life. It's in the paper. If I were President of the United States," said Blake severely, "I shouldn't allow rotten German spies to use American passports, and call themselves Yankee commercial-travellers. It's come out that the Berlin Foreign Office kept back a passport belonging to a real Gunn, and this rotten Prussian has been using it. I'd give your gold watch, Gussy, to be able to give him one on his Prussian boko before he goes to chokey! Is that feed settled?"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally think we ought to celebwate Talbot's heroic exploit; though he was wathah a wottah not to call me, and let me lend a hand. I have an ideah that if I had been on the spot, we might have capchahed the Zeppelin somehow."

"You would have put some salt on its tail?" suggested Blake.

However, the feed came off, and Fatty Wynn came over again to do the cooking, and did it in his usual irreproachable style. The Terrible Three and Talbot came in together, evidently on the best of terms—and, better still, Miss Marie came in with them—so it was quite a numerous and jolly party in Study No. 6. And Arthur Augustus confided to Miss Marie the story of his feast of reconciliation, which—after some delay, certainly—had had such happy results; and he was quite enchanted by the sweet smile with which Miss Marie heard his little confidence. And there were loud cheers when Arthur Augustus, holding aloft a glass of foaming ginger-pop, proposed the health of "Old Talbot, one of the bwavest fellows bweathin'," who had so splendidly succeeded in Winning His Spurs!

THE END.

***(Next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of Talbot and Tom Merry is entiled "The Path of Dishonour!" Order your copy of the "Gem Library" now.)***

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# OFFICER AND TROOPER.

**An Enthralling New Story of Life in the British Army.**

**Specially Published for Patriotic British Boys.**

**By BEVERLEY KENT.**

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a famous Hussar regiment, known as the Die Hards. After Bob has been in the regiment for some time his ne'er-do-well cousin, Captain Lascelles, joins also. Bob finds that, so far from being friendly, Lascelles is constantly endeavouring to get him into trouble, with the object of having him dismissed from the Service in disgrace. Bob, however, with the help of his many friends, is successful in defeating the villain's schemes. Bob comes into contact with the Earl of Dalkey, who finds that Bob is some connection of his family, and promises to have investigations made. It transpires that Bob is heir to a large fortune, of which Lascelles is in enjoyment. After plotting the downfall of two other officers in the regiment, and being exposed by Bob, Lascelles is compelled to send in his papers and resign his commission. Bob Hall is then promoted to the rank of sergeant, and, having to go to London on business, hears that Lascelles is arranging to marry the daughter of the Earl of Dalkey for the sake of her money. He wires to Lieutenant Haines, who, with Bob, appears just in time to prevent Lascelles eloping with the lady.

(Now go on with the Story.)

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### The Rescue of Lady Miriam.

Lascelles looked swiftly backward, and his two confederates hurriedly approached.

"There are some chaps here who want a word with you, Lascelles," Haines continued. "Perhaps you'd better see them at once. They're in that cab yonder, and as I have the pleasure of Lady Miriam's acquaintance, and as the brougham is here, I'll escort her back to her father."

Haines raised his hand as a signal as he spoke, and three men sprang swiftly out of the cab. At the same moment the young subaltern was dragged backwards by Gaspard and Barker, and Lascelles, gripping Lady Miriam by the arm, tried to hurry her away. But before the villain could move, his wrist was grasped as if by a band of steel, and Bob, despite his illness, had spun the coward round and sent him reeling against the railings. At the same moment Gibson had seized Gaspard, whilst another non. com. from St. George's Barracks caught hold of Barker and shook him till his face turned blue.

Once free again, Haines stepped forward, and, raising his hat again with his pleasant smile as if nothing unusual was taking place, he addressed Lady Miriam once more.

"This is no place for you," he protested cheerily. "I'll explain all as we drive to your home, and none but ourselves need know what's just happened. We chaps are all soldiers, and it's our business to help a lady in distress. When you know all you'll be glad we turned up as we did, so come along and let's drive away."

Helping the half-fainting girl into the brougham, the gallant young officer bade the coachman whip up his horse. As the brougham sped round the corner, Bob looked straight at Lascelles.

"There's a warrant out for your arrest at my instigation on the charge of attempted murder," he said. "I've told the police how you tried to do for me in Gwalior Street, and they're in your rooms now, waiting for your return. If you value your liberty you will make a bolt whilst you can. Come, Gibson, and you, too, Stennard; our work is done, and this cur can please himself."

"A warrant out for my arrest!" Lascelles cried hoarsely. "Gaspard, Barker, do you hear what he says? It can't be true! It's too terrible. If I'm caught I'll be tried and sentenced, for certain. You chaps must help me, you——"

But Gaspard was already hurrying away, and for a couple of seconds Lascelles and Barker gazed blankly at one another. Then, with a gasp of terror, they, too, fled, and the pavement was deserted except for Bob and his friends.

"A good morning's work!" Gibson remarked, as the trio tramped along.

"Yes," Bob agreed. "That's the last of Lascelles. He'll never cause trouble again."

"I ain't so sure of that," Gibson dissented. "These slippery coves have a knack of turning up when one least expects it. Poor Lady Miriam! I say, Bob, don't you think that Haines is——"

"Time will show," Bob grinned. "Haines is a good sort, and I'd like nothing better."

The idea entertained by Gibson and Bob came true. For some months later, when the lad was hale and strong again, he was standing on duty outside a church as the organ pealed forth a march. At the word of command the troopers of D squadron Die Hards, standing facing one another in two lines, drew their swords and formed an arch, and Sergeant Robert Hall, the non. com. in charge, brought his hand swiftly to the salute.

Out of the porch and into the open air came Haines and Lady Miriam, the latter leaning on her husband's arm, and the subaltern, as he eyed Bob, turned to his bride.

"Look at Hall!" he cried, with a happy laugh. "What a chap for discipline he is! He won't advance and shake hands because he is on duty!"

"My commanding-officer is present, sir," Bob suggested.

"Then stand at ease," Haines chuckled.

On the instant Bob shot his sword into its scabbard, whipped off his glove and stretched out his hand. And then, like a true man, he paid a soldier's compliment.

"Welcome to the Die Hards, Lady Miriam Haines," he cried. "We're proud to have you on the strength."

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### Bob Makes an Astonishing Discovery.

Six months passed, during which Bob was kept busily employed in his duties as a sergeant, and at the end of which he had become one of the most reliable and capable non-coms in the regiment. By steady work and resolution he had raised himself high in the estimation of the officers, whilst still retaining his popularity with the men.

His work now came easily to him; he had plenty of amusement; his pay was quite sufficient for his moderate wants; he was happy and contented, proud of the position he had attained by his own exertions, and glad to help on all those who wished to follow in his footsteps.

A cavalry regiment is a complex organisation, the officers and non-coms are frequently being detailed for a course of instruction in reconnaissance, sketching the lay of a country, signalling, or pioneer work. Bob, therefore, was not surprised when one day Haines came to him and told him that he was detailed for such instruction.

"We're to go to Chatham, you and I," Haines chuckled. "We've been selected to go through a fifteen-day course at the School of Military Engineering, so that we can put these chaps here through their paces when we've learnt a bit ourselves. From what they tell me, we'll be kept pretty hard at work; but still, the change is something, and I mean to slip up to London in the evenings for some fun, if I can."

"I'll be glad of a change, too, sir," Bob grinned. "Barrack life does get a trifle monotonous at times, and I'm not one who cares for furlough. I've nowhere to go, no friends to visit, or anything like that. So I never leave the regiment except on duty."

"Well, we'll combine business and pleasure this time," Haines replied cheerily. "In three days we have to turn up at Chatham, don't forget. I'm taking a couple of days off at once, but I'll meet you there. We'd better help one another to learn what is to be known, for the C.O. will expect great things of us when we return."

Haines nodded and strode off, and Bob, seeking out his chums, explained that he was ordered away.

The transfer of his special duties was easily accomplished, and so, bidding farewell to his mess, and with the keenness of a thorough soldier, he left Edinburgh behind, and in due course arrived at Chatham, and presented himself at the Engineering School at the time appointed.

The fifteen days passed quickly, and Haines found that his prospects of amusement were seriously at fault. Officers and non-coms from several other regiments were going through the same course, and the work was long and arduous. There was much to learn in the short time at their disposal. Practical lectures on forming roadways, bivouacs, and hutting, and the construction of trestle-bridges, were varied by scientific lessons on the powers of different explosives, and much else that the soldiers were compelled to master thoroughly, if they, in their turn, were to instruct their respective regiments.

Day and night Bob worked and studied, and so well did he acquit himself, and such keenness did he display, that the colonel commanding the department took special notice of him towards the close of the training.

Accordingly, on the last day of the course, and after the final lecture, Bob, as he was returning to his quarters, heard his name called, and turning, he saw the colonel standing with a group of elderly officers some distance away.

"Sergeant, come here!" the colonel commanded.

Bob advanced and saluted.

"This is the man I was telling you about, Craven," the colonel explained. "From the reports sent in, he's done remarkably well. What regiment are you in, sergeant?"

"The Die Hards, sir."

"Ah, a good lot—a very good lot! I served with 'em in the field years ago. And your name? I quite forget, you know; there are so many of you here."

"Robert Hall, sir."

General Craven, who had been staring at Bob fixedly through his eyeglass, laughed as Bob spoke.

"Funny thing that! I was about to say your name must be Hall," he remarked. "Now, isn't that a singular coincidence, Fleming?" he continued, turning to the colonel. "I knew the lad at once from his likeness to his father. Well, I'm glad to meet him. I hope, sergeant, you'll continue to work hard, and win your commission. It's very game of you to have joined the ranks, and when next I see your father, I'll congratulate him on the pluck you've shown. By the way, how is he now? Last time I met him I was pained to find that he was so badly shaken."

Bob stared in some amazement at the general.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, sir, and taken me for the son of an old friend of yours, which can't be the case. My father has been dead many years."

The general screwed his eyeglass more firmly into its place, and shot a hawk's-eye glance at the lad.

"Then how is it that you're like the son of my old friend?" he rapped out. "This is most extraordinary! When did your father die, my lad?"

"I can't tell you that, sir. He went to India, and never returned. There was a scrap out there in one of the tribal wars, and he was in it, and he never was heard of afterwards. I didn't know that till lately, when we were stationed in Dublin. Then Lord Dalkey told me so."

"What was your father's name?" the general demanded quickly.

"Alec Hall, sir."

The general took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. He was trembling with excitement, and his eyes were lit up with a bright light. He let his eyeglass fall, and it swung suspended from the string.

"Your father is alive," he said solemnly. "I saw him only a couple of months ago."

Bob's head began to swim, and the ground seemed to rise up as if it would strike him. The sensation he experienced was extraordinary. The sudden shock was greater than a physical blow. That he who thought he was an orphan should have a parent alive was the most astounding news imaginable. He couldn't reason, he couldn't even think; his wits had left him, and all he could do was to struggle to keep steady. Even in that he did not succeed, he swayed from side to side, until the colonel, noticing his dazed condition, seized him by the arm. The human touch helped to pull him together. He gazed dumbfounded at the general.

"There's some big mistake!" he gasped at last. "My father can't be alive!"

Again his senses became clouded, and he heard voices that seemed far away, speaking about him.

"Better take him into the mess and let him sit down," someone suggested. "The lad's badly shaken. This news has knocked him out of time. But are you quite sure you're right, general? It would be a terrible thing, you know, if——"

"Quite certain!" Craven replied. "I've been shocking clumsy, though, in the way I spoke. Poor chap! I'd no idea that—— Confound it, it's too bad, it's—— Here, Fleming, we'll lead him along together. That's right, my lad, you'll be better in a minute. By George, come to think of it, it is a bit of a startler to hear unexpectedly that one's guv'nor is alive. If my poor old dad were to turn up this way, I'd—— Tut, tut! What an ass I've been!"

Bob knew but little till he found himself sitting in an armchair in the mess ante-room, and Colonel Fleming proffering him a tumbler of water. The officers were standing around, some leaning against the wall, some whispering together, all gazing curiously at him, whilst the general was volubly explaining his knowledge about Bob's father to another elderly man, who was vigorously twisting a fierce, grey moustache.

"That's better!" Fleming remarked cheerily, as Bob sat up straight, and the dimness passed away. "You got a bit of a shock, my lad, and no wonder; but you needn't look so puzzled. The general knows what he's talking about. Talk of mysteries! This is one of those extraordinary occurrences that we read of in the papers and only half believe. They come home to us, though, when we see them for ourselves."

"But I don't understand," Bob murmured. "If my father is alive, why did he——"

"Here, general! Hall would like to know all you can tell him," the colonel cried. "He's puzzled, of course, and——"

Craven hastily stepped forward, and the others gathered in a ring round the chair on which Bob sat.

"Don't stir, my lad," Craven cried, as Bob struggled to rise. "Just sit still, and I'll tell you everything. Your father is alive, for I met him not long ago at the corner of Wellington Street, Strand. I knocked up against him unexpectedly, and I was startled, I can tell you; for, like everyone, I had concluded years ago that he was dead. He was so altered that I wouldn't have known him, except for the way he walked, which was always characteristic, and——"

"Then why did he never look me up? Does he know he has a son, or did he think that I was dead? I've always heard nothing but the greatest praise of him, and it's strange, it's hard, if he really is alive, and cares so little for me, that—that——"

The lad's utterance was husky, and he suddenly stopped. An awkward silence fell on all in the room, and Craven screwed his eyeglass into its place again, wrinkling up his face more than usual as he did so, and mumbling peculiarly.

"I—er—I don't know anything about that," he replied hesitatingly. "To tell you the truth, I didn't know of your existence, my lad, till I saw you just now; so, of course—er—I didn't inquire about you. Hang it all, how could I?" he continued desperately. "Besides, I wasn't speaking to your father for long. I had to go after him and stop him. I had called him by his name, and he wouldn't as much as look around. The fact is—er—he didn't want to meet any of his old friends. Er—it wasn't as if things had gone well with him. You see, he was down in his luck, and when chaps are like that, you know——"

Bob quickly rose from the chair.

"He's not well-off—he's having a bad time?" he suggested quickly.

The general carefully wiped the moisture from his eyeglass with his silk handkerchief.

"Well—er—he didn't say so, of course; he's deuced proud, is Alec Hall. He always was that sort of a chap. A dare-devil, plucky, confident sort of dog, don't yer know, well able to take care of himself, always helping a friend, taking hard knocks with a grin, never grumbling, and so——"

"You said he was looking badly?" Bob faltered.

"Why, so I did, bless my life!" the general replied, as if surprised at himself. "That's—er—a bit of an exaggeration, possibly. He's off colour, and he might be more fit, and, of course, he's older than when I saw him last, and so am I, as

I know only too well, and stiff and plaguey rheumatic at times, too. But I didn't quite mean—that is, I didn't——"

"He's ill! He may have died since you saw him. You're trying to hide something from me!" Bob cried excitedly. "Where is he? What's his address? I must go to him at once! Perhaps even now, whilst we're talking, he may be——"

"I don't know his address. Confound it, I believe he told me something about it, too!" the general growled, beginning to stride hurriedly up and down. "I've been a fool! I wish I'd had—— Oh, I say, Fleming, this is a bit more than I can stand. Here's this poor lad all anxiety to see his father, and I—I've been such a dunderhead that—— I'll tell you what I'll do, my boy," and the general wheeled round and gazed at Bob from under his shaggy eyebrows. "You and I'll go straight to London, and we'll hunt up Alec—your father, I mean—and we won't stop until we find him. No, I'm hanged if we do!"

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### Bob Sees His Father.

Bob looked around the room questioningly.

"I must go to Edinburgh; I'm due there," he groaned. "I haven't got an extension of leave, and——"

"I'll wire straight off to the colonel, and put that right," Craven interjected quickly. "Ah, here's Haines! I say, Haines, I suppose you're going back to the regiment? We've made an extraordinary discovery. Hall's father is alive, and in London. I want to take the lad on there, so you can explain to your C. O. how matters stand. Eh?"

Haines gazed in astonishment at Bob. Then he advanced and wrung his hand warmly.

"I am glad to hear this," he cried. "I can't tell you, Hall, how pleased I am at the news. It's amazing, and I can guess how you feel. Certainly, general. I'll see the colonel as soon as I get back. The adjutant will be delighted, too. Yes, all the Die Hards will be glad. Hall is one of the most popular non-coms. we've got."

"You were always a friend to me," Bob replied, as he looked at the subaltern's eager young face. "If you can explain everything to the colonel I shall be truly grateful."

"Oh, that'll be all right!" Haines remarked confidently. "Don't worry, Hall; just cut along to London."

Bob changed into mufti, and a couple of hours later he and the general took train from Chatham. The lad was lost in wonderment. Too amazed to speak, he lay back on the cushions and pondered over the extraordinary news he had heard. The father whom he had never seen, and of whom he had always heard such high praise, was alive, and in England! How could he greet his son? Would he be glad, or would he be indifferent? Had suffering made him callous, or was he warm-hearted and kindly? Would the meeting be a happy one, or the contrary? Bob and his father were strangers, and if they met casually in the street they would pass one another by. Perhaps that had often happened already. It was all so strange that the lad did not dare to hope that Fate had much in store for him.

And, following on these thoughts, came others which made the lad turn hot and cold by turns. Why was his father living almost in secrecy? Why did he shun his old friends? Why, seemingly, did he take no steps to discover his own son? There was evidently a mystery. What could be its nature? At last Bob could no longer bear the suspense, and so he determined to find out all that Craven could tell him.

"I'd be glad if you could explain some things to me that I don't understand, sir," he began. "It's many years since my father was given up for lost. Did he tell you anything of his life since then?"

The general laid down the paper, which in truth he had only been pretending to read, so perturbed was he by the events of that day and by the fear that, after all, Bob might be too late to see his father. For the latter had been more ill than even the general had hinted, and that was some months before. Now the general looked out of the window as he spoke, so as to avoid the lad's searching gaze.

"I can't say your father told me much," he began evasively. "He said that after the scrap in which he got knocked senseless he was carried off by the rebels back to their own lines across the frontier. India wasn't then as it is now, and a Britisher, once he was captured that way, could easily be kept prisoner. That's happened in other cases, you know. I'm afraid your father had a very bad time for several years, and then at last he managed to escape. His captivity had a very marked effect upon him. I could see that. He's not the man he was."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Well—er—if you must know—and you're right to get all the information you can, of course—I'm afraid that when you meet him you'll get a shock," the general explained bluntly. "His nervous system has suffered. He looked quite scared when I stopped him; in fact, he had the appearance of a hunted animal. I fancy he's got some delusions, that he's easily frightened, and that he shrinks from contact with other men."

A great pity came over Bob as the general spoke.

"My poor old father!" he cried. "He's been hounded down, and bullied and trampled upon, and there was no one to help him! I'm his son, and I didn't even know! It's awful to think about! He needs kindness and looking after, and he's all alone. How was he dressed, sir? I hope, at least, that he didn't seem hard up?"

"I'm afraid he's none too prosperous," Craven admitted ruefully. "Fellows are a bit sensitive that way when they meet old chums with whom they've mixed in better days, and I could see at a glance that your father was a case in point. I wanted him to come to my club. I wanted to get in touch with him; that's what I was at, for there's no use in beating about the bush," the gruff old soldier continued desperately. "But I saw it was no go, Hall. Your father wanted to be left alone, and I had to respect his feelings. I couldn't have hauled him along, you know, and make him partake of my hospitality by force, though it's the thing I would have liked to do. So I pretended not to notice anything, and I gave him my address, and begged him to look me up. He left me as soon as he could manage that without hurting my feelings, and that's the last I've seen of him, worse luck."

The train rolled into the terminus as the general concluded, and, alighting, he hailed a taxi. He and Bob were driven to his comfortable flat in the West End, and when there the old soldier telephoned at once to Scotland Yard. In an hour's time a detective reached the flat in answer to Craven's request, and, of course, undertook the search.

When the police-officer had retired Craven grinned, and tried to adopt a cheery tone.

"We've started the ball rolling, and that's something, anyhow," he began; "so we must wait patiently for the present, and give the detective a chance. Somehow, my lad, I think the case is not so difficult as it may seem at first sight.

"London is a mighty big place, and your father is only one of many millions in this huge city, but Scotland Yard knows by long experience how to set to work to trace out an individual. Besides, men like your father don't roam all over the place, they've got fixed habits; and as I met him in the Strand it's more'n likely that he comes that way every day. However, we must hope for the best, and now we'll make up our minds to be cheerful and have some dinner."

Though Bob tried hard to fall in with the general's suggestion, yet his efforts to be bright were not very successful, and he was glad when the meal was over and the old general, as was his custom, settled down for a nap. Telling him that he would leave him to have his snooze in peace, and that he'd take a stroll, the lad left the flat, and felt more happy when he was out in the air and alone once more. He had so much to think over that he could not sit still; he could bear anything but inactivity.

He strolled along Piccadilly, the traffic and bustle some-





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how soothing his tense feelings, and by its spirit of life and impulse harmonising with his eagerness for action. He wanted to be doing something, to feel he was helping towards the discovery of his father's whereabouts, to know that at least all that was possible was being attempted, and that nothing was being left to chance.

Men passed him by the hundreds on the crowded pavements, and he did not even look at them. Cabs and carriages and 'buses rolled by, carrying the seekers after pleasure to theatre and concert and music-hall; all was brilliancy and gaiety. In the rush and whirl he tramped along, lost in his own thoughts, seeing nothing of all that was around him, only thinking of the one great object which lay before him.

Instinctively he crossed Piccadilly Circus, and walking through Leicester Square he strolled down the Strand. And there he stood at the corner of the street where his father and the general had met, and there he paused and gazed at the passers-by. Might his father be one of them, he wondered? What an extraordinary thing it was that he would not know him from the crowd!

Suddenly he heard a jovial laugh behind, and he received a smart tap on the shoulder. Turning, he saw a round, merry face, wrinkled up in amusement, and a hand cordially extended for his grasp.

"Who'd ever think of meeting you here?" the man cried. "Yet isn't it a rum thing that you've been in my head all the day? Of all the chaps I know you are the one I most wanted to meet."

"Why, it's Dr. O'Rafferty!" Bob rejoined gleefully.

"That's so!" O'Rafferty chuckled. "I've left the dispensary to look after itself, or, rather, they've sent another chap to physic the patients, and I'm on a fortnight's holiday. Ay, man, but I always come to London on my holidays. The stir and fun makes me feel alive after the humdrum year I have in Wicklow. Ireland's a fine country, and proud I am to say so, but London's the place for a change. And now come along. I was wondering if I'd have time to run up to Edinburgh to see you, for I've got none too pleasant news to tell you."

"And I've news, too, O'Rafferty. Big news! Astonishing news!"

"Ah, it's the same, no doubt! Well, I think Lascelles can't be stopped, ruffian though he is. He claims the property, and the case is to be heard in Dublin next week. It's a Chancery suit, of course, and the lawyers say the money will be paid out to him. It's your business to prove that you're the son of Alec Hall, and as you can't do that the property goes straight to Lascelles. You wrote and told me he had cleared out of England. That was true, but he sneaked back and came to Ireland. If Scotland Yard knew he was there he'd be arrested, but that wouldn't interfere with his personal rights. He'd get the property when he came out of gaol."

"But I can prove now that I'm the son of Alec Hall—at least, I hope to be able to do so in a few days," Bob replied eagerly. "I've heard nothing about Lascelles, and at the present moment I don't care a rap about him. It's something altogether different, O'Rafferty. It's the most marvellous tale you ever heard. Why, would you believe that my poor father is actually——"

O'Rafferty's right hand had clutched Bob's arm, and the grip tightened like a band of steel. The doctor's face had grown rigid, his eyes seemed starting out of his head. Forgetful of all, of the crowded thoroughfare, of the curious gazers, of the extraordinary appearance he presented, he pointed with his hand down the street, and he tried to speak, but failed.

Down the Strand, from the direction of Fleet Street, a motor-car was rushing at such tremendous speed that the traffic gave way to it, amidst shrieks of terror, as if it was beyond the driver's control. It was only twenty yards from the twain as Bob turned and stared, and it flashed by in a twinkling. Holding the driving-wheel, sat Lascelles, and an old pallid man was sitting next him. Bob had time to notice that, and he started. But O'Rafferty now had mastered his voice, and, shaking Bob, he almost shouted.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "I'd know him anywhere! There's your father with Lascelles! That is Alec Hall."

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### Found and Lost.

Coarse imprecations, loud yells, the thunder of feet, the mad clatter of horses' hoofs followed in the wake of the motor-car as it was swallowed up in the gloom on its way towards Charing Cross. The crowd surged on, black figures, with here and there the helmet of a policeman, a mighty concourse, growing every moment in volume as it raced after the car, anxious to be in at the smash. Bob was flung against a shop door in the rush, whilst O'Rafferty was borne a dozen paces onwards, and the two struggled desperately to become reunited again.

"Come on!" the lad yelled, as at last he clutched the doctor's arm. "My father will be killed! Hurry! Hurry!"

Gasping, and with face still transfixed with amazement, O'Rafferty followed as best he could in Bob's wake as the lad buffeted his way onwards. The shrieks of terror had risen along the street, and from far off cries were still coming back but ever farther and weaker. On and on Bob raced until he was abreast of the foremost. The pace had told, the crowd was lessening, there was more room for those who still could hold out. The lad shot past Charing Cross Station, down into Trafalgar Square, and on to Whitehall, where excited drivers were yelling to one another, and pointing their whips backwards towards the Houses of Parliament. On and on he ran, gazing in terror ahead.

The motor-car had swung to the left and gone over Westminster Bridge. Bob quickly guessed that to be the fact, for even here men were looking backwards as they drove. He, too, at last turned the corner, and once again he stared eagerly.

All was quiet! The car had vanished; it had got through the traffic safely. Even as he gazed, taxis hummed by in the usual way, with the drivers seated unconcernedly at the wheel. The excitement had evaporated, for Lascelles had reduced speed, and so passed on unnoticed when he had left his pursuers behind.

Bob ran till he reached the bridge, and then, realising that pursuit was hopeless, he flung himself against the parapet, panting and exhausted, drawing his breath in great gasps.

"I'm not done yet," he murmured as he gasped; "but I must have a spell to get my wind before I can do anything."

He waited, and the burly figure of the Irish doctor appeared as he, too, hurried onwards. Bob shouted to him, and O'Rafferty, though almost exhausted, quickened his pace.

"You here?" he cried, as he lay against the bridge for support. "I thought you might have come up with the motor."

"No; Lascelles has got away. But I know the number of the car, and——"

"You do?"

"Yes. I saw it as the scoundrel flashed past. He's kidnapped my father! He must have known he was alive! What villainy can he be up to now? My blood is boiling, O'Rafferty, and if he dares to harm a hair on the old man's head I won't be answerable for what I do!"

"Let's find out where he got the motor," O'Rafferty suggested. "What's the best way to do that? I don't know London."

"We'll go to Scotland Yard; it's not far from here," Bob explained. "We'll walk back part of the way we came. That's right. You're a good chap to come along at once, for you must feel played out."

The two hurried back over the bridge, O'Rafferty, in spite of his fatigue, speaking volubly on the way.

"Then were you going to tell me that your father was alive when we were talking in the Strand?" he inquired eagerly. "I wouldn't have believed you if you had—no, I'm sure I wouldn't! It's years ago since I knew him, as I told you when you were in Dublin, and we'd all made certain that he must be dead, so that nothing less than a sight of him could have convinced me that he was alive. Yet I saw him to-night; I'd swear to it! His face is changed, but still the old expression is there. He had the same look as when he was facing danger, taking a jump in the hunting-field that everyone else funked, or anything like that. His face used to light up, and a scornful curl used to play about his mouth. I remember it well, and I never saw it on any man but him. He knows he's facing danger now, too. Yet he doesn't seem to be able to help himself."

"I thought he looked as if he was strapped hand and foot. He must be, or else he'd have struggled for his liberty!" Bob cried excitedly.

"More'n likely Lascelles managed to overpower him. But how did the ruffian drop across him? You haven't told me yet, either, how it was that you discovered that your father was alive."

"I only heard it to-day," Bob explained. "Here we are. Let's find out at once about the motor-car."

As soon as Bob explained the errand that had brought him to Scotland Yard the police were all alert. Telephonic messages had already come stating that the car had dashed at breakneck pace through London, and that the police had been unable to arrest the driver. His name had been demanded, but as none had yet reported the number, Scotland Yard, of course, could take no action.

No sooner had Bob given the necessary particulars than the books were examined, and the owner of the car identified.

***(Another grand instalment of this fine military serial will be published in next week's "GEM.")***

**A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.**

# Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

## VERY KIND.

Uncle (to Jacky, who has cleaned his bike for him): "Ah, thank you, Jack! Here's half-a-crown——"

Jack: "Oh, thanks, uncle; you are very kind!"

Uncle: "Just run round and buy a tin of bicycle oil, and you may keep a penny of the change for yourself!"—Sent in by F. Clarke, Colchester.

## A COOLING PROCESS.

Two Irishmen in a smart engagement were gallantly standing by their gun, firing in quick succession, when one, touching the barrel, noticed that it was very hot.

"Arrah, Moike," he said, "the gun's getting powerful hot. We'd better be after stopping a little!"

"Divil a bit!" said Mike. "Just drop the cartridges in a bucket of water before ye load to keep 'em cool!"—Sent in by James Street, Bury, Lancs.

## PATERNAL EXAMPLE.

"I hear, my boy, that you are in the habit of telling falsehoods. That grieves me to the heart. Always tell the truth, even though it may bring suffering upon you. Will you promise me?"

"Yes, father."

"Very well. Now go and see who is knocking at the door. If it's Bingley, say I'm not at home!"—Sent in by W. Starr, Pimlico, S.W.

## A HOPELESS SEARCH.

During a recent battle an officer was wounded severely in the thigh, and for four or five days several surgeons were engaged in probing for the bullet.

Their operations gave the officer excruciating pain, and on the fifth day he could bear it no longer, and cried to the surgeons:

"Gentlemen, for goodness' sake, what are you trying to do?"

"We are probing for the bullet," answered one of them.

"Then why didn't you say so at first?" cried the officer. "I've got it in my pocket as a souvenir!"—Sent in by Arthur Hawes, Bedford.

## HE WAS THERE!

A firm in Aberdeen engaged as an office-boy a country youth. Part of his duties consisted of answering telephone calls; but, as it happened, the telephone was not an instrument with which he was very familiar.

When the bell rang for the first time he approached the instrument, picked up the receiver, and heard a very faint voice say:

"Are you there?"

He nodded his head to show he was.

"Are you there?" said the voice again; and the new office-boy nodded once more.

When the voice asked whether he was there for the fourth time, he got exasperated, and yelled down the 'phone:

"Man, are ye blind? I've been nodding ma heid off for the last half-hoor!"—Sent in by E. G. Gilpin, Birmingham.

## AN IMPORTANT CUSTOMER.

It was Sunday morning, and as his tram rushed along, the conductor was perhaps not so wideawake as he might have been. At all events, he didn't observe a small boy who rushed out of an entry, shouting:

"Hi, there! Stop! Stop!"

The conductor looked doubtfully at the boy; but, seeing that he was holding up a penny, decided to stop, so he rang the bell.

"Now then, young shaver, hop on!" he said.

"Who are you calling a young shaver?" inquired the youth scornfully. "An' what do yer mean by runnin' away from yer customers? 'Ere, muvver wants two 'apennies fer this 'ere penny. She's waiting to go to church!"—Sent in by A. Hinkin, Stratford, E.

## SPOILT THE EFFECT!

The late Sir Henry Irving in his young days once played in a piece the first act of which required a dark stage. In this darkness he fought with an old earl, threw him heavily, and when he did not rise after the loud thud of his fall, Irving would call out:

"Great heavens! What have I done?"

One night he played this part in a small town in the Provinces. A stage-hand, standing in the "wings," was very much impressed with the realism of this scene. So much so that he forgot all about the theatre and the audience, and imagined the whole thing was real.

From his concealed position he watched the fierce struggle take place in the semi-darkness. The earl fell with a loud bump. Pause of intense silence.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Irving. "What have I done?"

"Strike a match, sir, and we'll have a look!" gasped the stage-hand.—Sent in by H. Murdoch, Stockport.

## JUST RIGHT.

Sandy had some old cheese, which, being old, was rather doubtful. When he had a party of friends to supper one night, therefore, he served up this cheese.

"Hoo's the cheese, lads?" said Sandy, after a time.

"Just right," said the spokesman.

"What d'ye mean by 'just right'?" inquired Sandy.

"Why, if it had been ony worse, we couldna ha' stood it!"

"Ay," replied Sandy; "an' if it had been ony better, ye wouldna ha' got it!"—Sent in by Alfred Baldwin, Manchester.

**As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,**

## THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,

**Published every Monday,**

**in order to give more of our readers a chance of winning one of our useful Money Prizes.**

**If you know a really funny joke, or a short, interesting paragraph, send it along (on a postcard) before you forget it, and address it to: The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND and GEM, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, E.C.**

**Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.**

## HAD HEARD OF IT.

An Irishman, strolling along the quays in New York Harbour, came across the wooden barricade which is placed round the enclosure where immigrants suspected of suffering from contagious diseases are isolated.

"Phwat's this boarding for?" he inquired of a bystander.

"Oh," was the reply, "that's to keep out fever and things like that, you know!"

"Indade!" said Pat. "Oi've often heard of the Board of Health, but, bejabers, it's the first toime Oi've seen ut!"—Sent in by A. J. Thirtle, Stratford, E.



**Next Wednesday's Number of "THE GEM" will be the usual price, 1d., and will contain a Splendid Long, Complete Story, entitled: "THE PATH OF DISHONOUR!" By Martin Clifford.**


**For Next Wednesday—**

**"THE PATH OF DISHONOUR!"**

**By Martin Clifford.**

Our next grand, long, complete story of St. Jim's concerns Gore of the Shell, known to all his schoolfellows as the rankest of rank outsiders. The presence of Tickey Tapp, a notorious card-sharper, in the vicinity of St. Jim's, leads Gore to resort to gambling, and he soon finds himself head-over-ears in debt. Driven to the wall, and well knowing that he must repay the rascally sharper by a given date, Gore descends to the level of a common thief. The consequences of his desperate action are particularly severe, and bitterly he repents him of having taken to

**"THE PATH OF DISHONOUR!"**

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## A RAMSGATE READER'S SUCCESS.

Few things please me more than to hear of the achievements of my reader-chums, and I have pleasure in recording this week the recent success of Fred Burton, a staunch reader hailing from Ramsgate. The following extract from a local newspaper speaks for itself:

"We are pleased to announce the success of F. J. Burton, a scholar attending St. George's Commercial School, Ramsgate, in the examination for male learners at the post-office. He secured the

FOURTH PLACE IN ALL ENGLAND,

obtaining 1,452 marks out of a possible 1,900. He was the only boy in England to secure the possible 500 marks for mathematics, a boy from Blackpool being second with 480. Burton is the editor of his school magazine."

I congratulate my seaside chum most heartily on his remarkable success, and hope that the future holds even greater honours for him. That Master Burton is a staunch supporter of the Companion Papers is shown by the fact that he has written to me on many previous occasions; and he tells me that he found our splendidly-written school stories a delightful relaxation from "swotting."

I hope other of my readers will not fail to keep me posted of any successes which may accrue to them from time to time.

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## WHAT DO YOUR PARENTS THINK?

The old, old story of the antagonism of certain parents towards the "Gem Library" crops up again this week in the following letter:

"Dear Mr. Editor,—I am writing to you in the hope that you will give me a little advice. I have been a constant reader of THE GEM since 1911.

"Last week my father saw me reading your paper, and gave me a 'talking-to' for buying it. He remarked that it was trash, and ended up by saying, 'I trust to your being a sensible boy, and not buying it any more.' What am I to do? He has not actually forbidden me to have THE GEM, but he evidently does not like my reading it. If you would give me some advice I should be very grateful.

"Wishing the 'Gem Library' all prosperity,

"Believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"IN-A-HOLE."

The best advice I can render my chum is that he should place this grand double number in the hands of his father, and ask him to glance through it. Even the most exacting parent will not fail to be struck by the high tone which prevails throughout the paper. The cover is interesting and perfectly harmless; the splendid school story nurtures a fine sense of honour and fair-play; while "Officer and Trooper," written by a gentleman who has spent his whole career in a garrison town, gives a true picture of military life in peace-time.

Where, then, can exception be taken in the contents of THE GEM? Surely not in the Chat page, for I always make it a point to be sincere in what I write; and so long as a man's work has the ring of sincerity there is little else that matters. It is not playing the game to condemn a paper unread: and I think, when the father of "In-a-Hole" has perused the present number, he will cheerfully give his assent for my chum to read THE GEM. If, however, the gentleman in question remains firm in his unfavourable opinion of this journal, "In-a-Hole" should hold himself ready and willing to give the paper up, since obedience to one's parents is always the primary consideration.

Speaking on the subject of parents and their attitude towards THE GEM it gives me great pleasure to reproduce an epistle which came to hand a short time ago from a suburban lady:

"19, Caroline Road, Wimbledon, Surrey.

"Dear Editor,—I was very pleased to receive a letter from you.

"I think many parents condemn boys' papers like THE GEM and 'Magnet' without reading them, which I consider very narrow-minded indeed. I think many homes would be happier if only the mothers would take a keener interest in their children's amusements and recreations. Mine is a very busy life, but I always find time to listen to all the little worries of my boys, and to give them a helping hand should need arise. I don't think they ever have a secret from me, because they are so sure mother will understand. I want them always to look on mother as their best chum.

"You will like to hear we lend your books out each week to different boys, and by so doing I hope we shall get you new readers.

"With all good wishes,—Yours respectfully,

"MRS CROWLEY."

I hope "In-a-Hole's" father will read this communication. If he does, he cannot fail to be influenced by the sound common-sense and logical reasoning which governs the mind of the writer.

I thank Mrs. Crowley most cordially for her kindness in spreading the fame of the Companion Papers.

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## REPLIES IN BRIEF.

H. J. J. (Ryde).—Cannot some of the girl members of your club undertake the task of providing badges? I think this would be the best plan. You have my sincerest wishes for your success.

"Enlightenment" (Paisley).—"The Boys' Friend" has been running for a considerable number of years now, but it did not come under my control until March 15th, when a gigantic penny number appeared.

"Two Gemites" (Clayton Bridge).—More yarns about Talbot? I should just think so! Some superb stories of this popular character and his girl chum are coming along shortly.

E. J. W. (Chiswick).—You will see that your timely proposal bore good fruit. Thanks for your offer to recommend the good old "Gem" at all times.

R. F. Brown (Cardiff).—I certainly do not agree with you that Talbot gets all the honours. Tom Merry is as popular a character as he ever was.

THE EDITOR.

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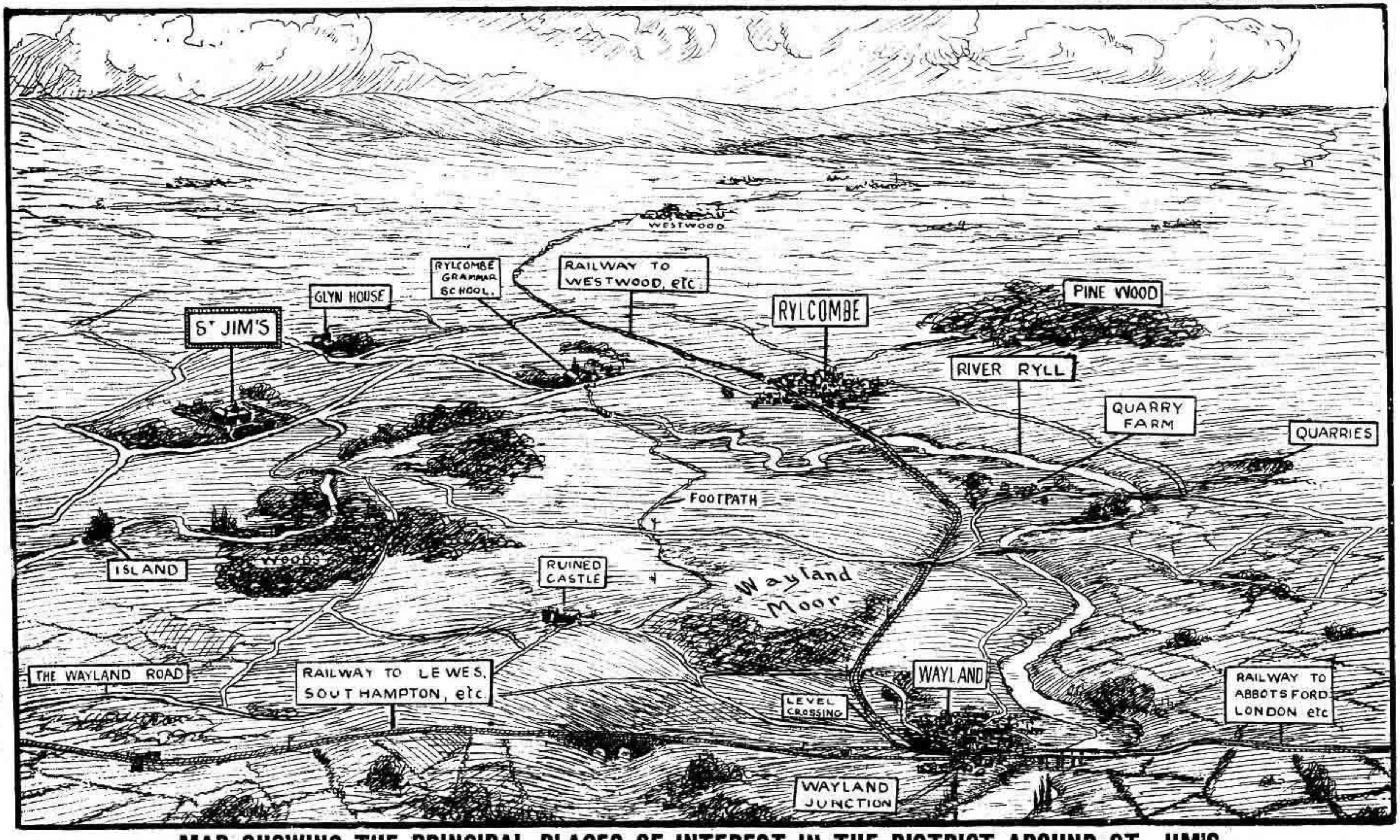


MAP SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL PLACES OF INTEREST IN THE DISTRICT AROUND ST. JIM'S.