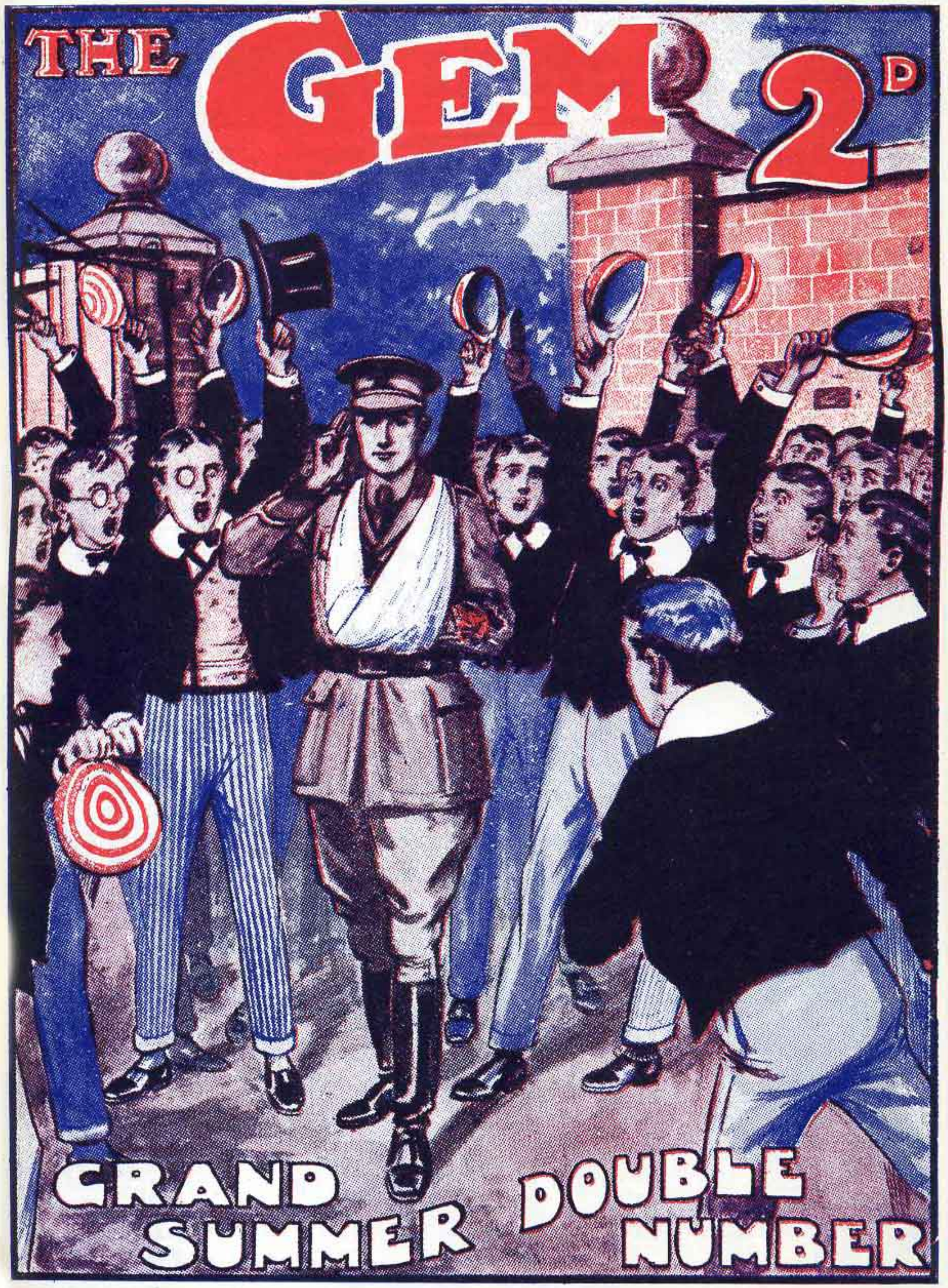
Grand 60,000-Word School Tale

OF TOM MERRY AND TALBOT.



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Martin Clifford

MONSTER SUMMER DOUBLE NUMBER.

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The Longest and Best School Story Ever Contributed to The "Gem" Library by

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The HOUSE-MASTER'S HOME-COMING!

CHAPTER 1.

Glorious News.

"WIPPIN' news, deah boys!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rushed excitedly into the common-room in the School House at St. Jim's.

His aristocratic face was flushed, his eye gleamed behind his eyeglass, and his manners were conspicuously lacking in the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. In fact, he was almost trembling with excitement.

Evidently something unprecedented had occurred to disturb in this way the equanimity of the most elegant junior at St. Jim's.

"Huwway!" chortled Arthur Augustus, taking his eyeglass from his eye and waving it over his head. "Huwway!"

Every fellow in the common-room stared at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Such a demonstration on his part was simply amazing. Tom Merry left off playing chess with Manners, Monty Lowther quitted the ripping

(*Continued on the next page.*)

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S ISSUE of The "Gem" Library will be the Usual Size and Price, One Penny.

joke he was compiling for the comic column in the "Weekly," Blake ceased to oil his bat, and Talbot of the Shell looked up from Latin composition.

And with one voice they inquired:

"What are you burbling about now?"

"Huwway!"

"Have the Germans landed?" demanded Blake. "And are the St. Jim's Scouts called out to push them off the earth?"

"Wats!"

"Has the Kaiser swallowed some of his own poisoned gas?" inquired Monty Lowther. "Or has Von Tirpitz blown himself up?"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Or are you off your rocker?" demanded Tom Merry.

"That's it!" said Crooke of the Shell.

"Wats! Wubbish! It's glowious news! Wippin' news! Huwway!"

"Get it off your chest, then, fathead!" shouted Blake.

"It's about Wailton!"

"Oh, Railton!"

There was keen interest on all sides at once. Everybody was interested in Mr. Railton. For had not old Railton, Housemaster of the School House, enlisted in Kitchener's Army as a private, and gone to Flanders to fight for his King and Country? Mr. Railton, Master of Arts and Housemaster, had become Private Railton, afterwards Sergeant Railton—and the last news St. Jim's had had of him, he was in the thick of it, among the shells and the shrapnel and the savage Huns.

"Roll it out, Gussy! What's the news?"

"Has he got the V.C.?"

"Has he captured the Kaiser?"

"Spout it out, you ass!"

There were loud inquiries on all sides. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy grinned with satisfaction. He had succeeded in rousing general excitement to a pitch equal to his own.

"It's wippin' news, deah boys! I've just heard it fwom Kildare. Huwway!"

"But what is it?" shrieked Blake.

"Kildare had it fwom Cawwington. It's twue, and it's wippin'."

"But what——"

"Reel it off, you chump!"

The juniors surrounded Arthur Augustus, and he seemed in danger of receiving a frontal attack in force. The St. Jim's fellows were anxious to hear the news.

"It's all wight, deah boys! Wippin' news! Wailton's wounded——"

"What!"

"Wounded!"

"Yaas, wathah! Shot, you know, by those wotten Huns——"

"You frabjous dummy!" yelled Tom Merry. "Have you come in chirruping because old Railton's wounded?"

"You crass ass!" shouted Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Unfeeling cad!" said Crooke.

"Weally, Cwooke, you wottah——"

"Bump him!" shouted Kangaroo of the Shell. "We'll teach him to chortle about old Railton being wounded."

"Collar the silly ass!"

"You uttah duffahs! You don't understand——"

"No, we don't," agreed Talbot. "I can't see any ripping news in Railton being wounded by the Huns. What the deuce——"

"Bump him!"

"Pway allow me to explain, deah boys. Wailton is wounded—he's been shot thwough the shouldah——"

"Collar the silly idiot!"

With a rush the exasperated juniors closed in on the swell of the Fourth. Arthur Augustus was seized by excited hands on all sides.

It was no wonder the juniors were exasperated. Mr. Railton had always been very popular. Since he had volunteered to fight in the ranks for his country, he had been quite an idol. St. Jim's was proud of him, from the Head down to the youngest fag.

As Jack Blake had observed, lots of schools had masters who had taken commissions, but old Railton had roughed it in the ranks, and taken on all the privations of a common or garden Tommy Atkins—and for that reason the old school had a special right to be proud of him.

Arthur Augustus's gleeful announcement that he had been wounded astonished the fellows, and it exasperated them, and they proceeded to impress upon Arthur Augustus their views on the subject. His good news seemed to them very bad news, and they would have been very glad to bump the Kaiser, who was responsible for old Railton getting wounded.

As that truculent old gentleman was not at hand to be bumped, they bumped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And they did it with a will. Arthur Augustus smote the floor of the common-room with a terrific concussion.

"Yawooh!" he roared.

"Give him another!"

"Yow-ow! Help!"

Bump!

"Ow! You are uttahly wuinin' my twousahs!" howled Arthur Augustus. "You do not undahstand——"

Bump!

"Oh! Ow! Yah! Yooop!"

"There," gasped Tom Merry. "Now, you won't chortle when old Railton gets wounded again, you fathead!"

"Gwoooh-wooh!" groaned Arthur Augustus, sitting on the floor in a breathless state, and blinking at the excited juniors. "You uttah asses! I wegard you as sillay fatheads! Ow! I considahed that you would be very glad to heah that old Wailton was comin' home. Ow!"

"Coming home!" exclaimed Talbot.

"Railton's coming home!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Yaas, you ass! Didn't I tell you there was wippin' news?" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "That's the wippin' news, you asses."

"You said he was wounded——"

"He wouldn't be comin' home if he wasn't wounded, would he, you fathead? You intewwupted me before I could finish," wailed Arthur Augustus. "Wailton has been wounded, but he is gettin' on all wight, and he is comin' home, with his arm in a sling, you know."

"Hurrah!"

A cheer rang through the common-room. The good news was understood at last. Arthur Augustus picked himself up limply. He had been a little too long-winded in communicating the glorious news, and he had suffered in consequence.

"Oh, deah! I have sevewal distinct pains, and my twousahs are wuined! I wegard you as a set of fwabjous chumps! Wow!"

"Serve you jolly well right," said Blake unsympathetically. "Why couldn't you tell us Railton was coming home?"

"I was twyin' to tell you——"

"Bow-wow!"

"I say, this is ripping news!" exclaimed Tom Merry, his eyes glistening. "Good old Railton! It will be jolly to have him back! We'll give him a good reception. When is he coming, Gussy?"

"Yow-wow!"

"When is he coming, fathead?" roared the juniors.

"I wefuse to be called a fathead!"

"Give him another bump!" shouted Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—keep off, you wottahs—he is comin' home to-mowwow," said Arthur Augustus hastily. "He was sent back, as soon as he could twavel, fwom the base, and he has been in the militawy hospital. He is comin' on to St. Jim's to-mowwow aftahnoon. It's a half-holiday to-mowwow, deah boys, and my ideah is to give old Wailton a wousin' weception."

"You bet!"

"I'll mug up 'The Conquering Hero' on my cornet," said Herries eagerly.

"You jolly well won't!" said Blake warmly. "You're not going to spring that cornet on a wounded man."

"Look here, Blake——"

"No; that would be rough on rats!" said Tom Merry. "Wait till he's quite well and strong again, Herries. We don't want him to have a relapse."

"You silly ass——"

"Hurrah!" shouted the juniors. "Railton's coming back! Hurrah!"

And in ten minutes the great news was carried into every study at St. Jim's, and the whole school rejoiced at it. The Housemaster in khaki was coming home from the war, and he was certain to receive an enthusiastic reception from every fellow at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 2.

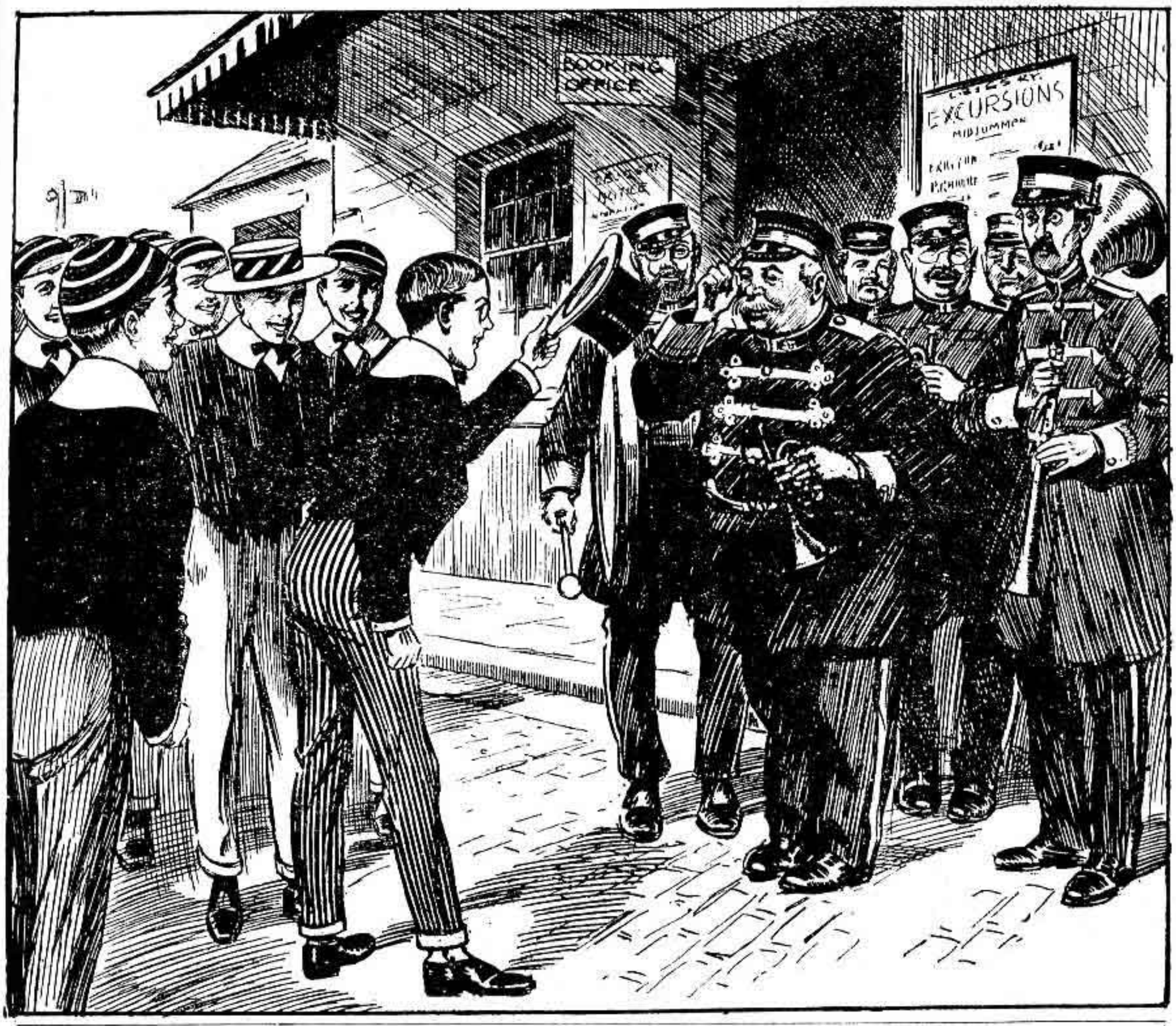
Planning the Reception!

THERE was a meeting in Study No. 6 in the School House after tea.

It was a crowded meeting.

The object of that meeting was important. It was to discuss the reception that was to be given to the conquering hero.

There was enthusiasm on all sides. Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, the owners of the famous study, were there, and the Terrible Three and Talbot of the Shell. Figgins & Co. had come over from the New House. As New House fellows, they really had no direct concern in the matter, Mr. Railton being master of the School House. But



Arthur Augustus raised his topper to the conductor very politely as he greeted him. "You are my band?" he inquired. "I am ze conductor, sare," said the gentleman in blue and gold braid. *(See Chapter 6.)*

they were almost as keen as the School House juniors. All St. Jim's were proud of the Housemaster in khaki.

There was much discussion on the subject of the reception. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, whose ideas were grandiose, suggested a triumphal arch and a brass band. The triumphal arch was generally sat upon, but the meeting consented to consider the question of a brass band.

"A brass band," said Tom Merry oracularly, "costs money."

"I was not thinkin' of gettin' a bwass band for nothin', deah boy," said Arthur Augustus loftily.

"We could save something by leaving out the cornet," said Herries. "I could take the cornet part."

"Rats!"

"Yaas, wathah! Wats! You weally cannot be allowed to muck up our bwass band, Hewwies."

"You fatheads!" exclaimed the exasperated Herries.

"We could dig up a band in Wayland," said Monty Lowther. "I've heard that lots of musicians are down on their luck owing to the war, and it would be doing them a good turn. That's patriotic."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Besides, it needn't be a brass band specially," said Blake. "Any old band will do, so long as it makes a row—excepting a German band, of course."

"It's a question of the oof," remarked Digby.

"That is wathah a slangy expwession, Dig——"

"We can have a whip round," said Tom Merry. "Gussy can go round with the hat, as it's his idea."

"Hear, hear!"

"I have no objection whatevah to goin' wound with the hat for a patwiotic purpose," said Arthur Augustus loftily.

"It is agweed, then, that we get a bwass band if we can waise the tin?"

"And we'll meet Railton at the station and play him home," said Manners. "That's sure to please him."

"It will show him what St. Jim's thinks of him," said Blake. "We'll make a regular triumphal march of it."

"Hear, hear!"

"And if we could have a twiumphal arch as well, deah boys——"

"Oh, blow the triumphal arch! The brass band will fill the bill," said Tom Merry. "I suppose Railton won't mind."

"Mind!" said Blake warmly. "I should think he would feel jolly flattered. 'Tain't every wounded soldier that's played home with a brass band."

"What do you think, Talbot?"

Talbot of the Shell was looking very thoughtful. The juniors all regarded him inquiringly. The Shell fellow, who had once been known as the "Toff," and whose past had been so strange and shadowed, had an old head on young shoulders, and his chums had great faith in his judgment.

"You think Wailton would be pleased, I pwesume, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus anxiously.

Talbot smiled.

"Very likely," he said. "Anyway, he would know we meant it as a compliment. But I understand that he isn't coming alone."

"No; a fwiend is comin' with him," said Arthur Augustus—"a colonel of his wegiment—Colonel Lyndon. What diffewence does that make?"

"Colonel Lyndon mightn't appreciate the brass band so much as Railton," said Talbot, smiling.

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am suah he would

think it wippin'. You see, we shall instwuct the bandsmen to play militawy tunes, and that sort of thing. He is sure to enjoy it."

"Anybody know anything about him?" asked Tom Merry. "What sort of a chap he is, I mean. If it's some stiff old martinet——"

"Nevah heard of him befoah Kildare mentioned that he was comin' home with Wailton, deah boy."

"He may have some relation here," said Lowther; "unless he's simply coming to see Railton home."

"I don't know the name," said Tom.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Lowther. "Crooke!"

"Crooke!"

"Yes, rather! Crooke of ours. I remember now he has been swanking about his uncle at the front, and he mentioned that he was a colonel in the Loamshires. This must be Crooke's uncle."

"Oh!" said all the meetin-g, rather disconsolately.

The discovery that Mr. Railton's companion was the uncle of Crooke, the slacker and black sheep of the Shell, had the effect of damping their spirits somewhat. If the uncle was anything like the nephew, certainly he was not likely to be a pleasant personage.

"Mayn't be the same," said Blake at last. "Let's go and ask Crooke. He will know."

"That's a good ideah, deah boy."

There was an adjournment of the meeting. It adjourned along the Shell passage to Crooke's study.

Tom Merry opened the door, and some of the meeting marched in, the rest gathering about the doorway.

Crooke of the Shell was alone in his study. He was sitting at the table with a letter in his hand and a deep frown on his face. He looked up in surprise at the sudden invasion of his study.

"Hallo! What do you fellows want?" he asked gruffly.

"Information," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Lowther says you've got an uncle in Railton's regiment."

Crooke nodded.

"Is it Colonel Lyndon by any chance?"

"Yes."

"Bai Jove!"

"Then it's your uncle that's coming with Railton to-morrow?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yes!" growled Crooke. "I've just had it in this letter, confound it!"

"Eh? You don't seem very pleased."

"Why should I be pleased?" grunted Crooke. "I ought to have had more notice of it. They shouldn't spring him on me like this. Why couldn't he let me know that he was coming?"

"Well, he's only just back from the front with Railton," said Blake. "What sort of a johnny is he?"

"A blessed old ramrod!" said Crooke savagely. "As stiff as a poker and as grim as a Hun. Looks at you with eyes like blessed gimlets. If he wasn't as rich as Croesus, I'd——"

Crooke paused.

"Bai Jove! That doesn't sound like the kind of chap who would appweciate a bwass band!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"A what!" ejaculated Crooke, with a stare.

"A bwass band, deah boy. We're goin' to have a bwass band to play old Wailton home fwom the station."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Crooke.

"What are you cacklin' at, Cwooke?"

"Ha, ha, ha! If you spring a brass band on my uncle! Ha, ha, ha! He isn't the man to take a joke, I can tell you."

"But it isn't a joke!" said Blake warmly. "It's a jolly big compliment."

Crooke chuckled.

"Well, you try it! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats! It appeahs to me, Cwooke, that you do not wegard your uncle with pwopah affection. If you do not like your uncle, that is a point in his favah, and he may be a vewy decent old chap aftah all."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, you silly ass——" began Crooke wrathfully.

"I wepeat, deah boys, that Cwooke's not likin' his uncle shows that there must be some good in him," said Arthur Augustus firmly, "and we are stickin' to the bwass band."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gussy works it out like Sherlock Holmes or Ferrers Locke," grinned Blake. "I plump for Gussy!"

And the juniors retired, chuckling, from the study, leaving Crooke scowling. The meeting returned to Study No. 6, where the brass band was duly resolved upon—the chance being taken of failing to please Mr. Railton's companion.

And that important point being decided, the question of ways and means was discussed; and Arthur Augustus went round with the hat—and he went round with a topper, to make sure of having room enough for the contributions.

CHAPTER 3.
Crooke's New Ambition.

CROOKE of the Shell came into Tom Merry's study when the Terrible Three were doing their preparation. Owing to the amount of time expended on plans for Mr. Railton's reception, the chums of the Shell were a little late with their prep, and they were working hard. But they politely suspended their labours to see what Crooke wanted.

Crooke wore a worried look. The three Shell fellows could guess that he was worried by the forthcoming visit from his military uncle—though why that should worry him was a mystery. Any other fellow would have been proud of having an uncle from the front—an uncle who was a colonel in a fighting regiment, and had been through the inferno in Flanders with credit. Tom Merry or Manners or Lowther would have felt six inches taller if they had walked through the old quad with such an uncle.

But evidently Crooke was not pleased. In many ways Crooke's tastes were not like those of the Terrible Three. He was a black sheep to the finger-tips—a smoker and a card-player and a slacker generally. He was never on good terms with Tom Merry & Co., especially since Talbot had come to St. Jim's. For the cad of the Shell had taken a special pride in being "down" on Talbot, on account of his unfortunate past. It was very odd for Crooke to drop into Tom Merry's study at all.

Three inquiring glances were fixed upon him. For once the chums of the Shell were prepared to make the best of Crooke—on account of his uncle in khaki.

"Busy?" said Crooke.

"Yes."

"Well, you can spare a minute, I suppose?" growled Crooke.

"Two if you like," said Tom Merry generously.

"You're playing a Form match to-morrow afternoon."

Tom Merry nodded, without concealing his surprise at the remark. The slacker of the Shell had never shown a sign before of caring two pins about cricket. When Crooke thought of cricket at all it was only to invent excuses for dodging the compulsory practice.

"Yes," said Tom. "We're going to make it a single-innings match, as the Railton reception will keep us busy early in the afternoon. But we shall play it, all the same. Why?"

"You've made up the Shell team?"

"Yes."

"No room for a new man?"

"Well, no. But if any chap who can play specially wants to play, I dare say another chap would make room for him," said Tom, quite puzzled. "It isn't a House match or a school match. Has somebody asked you to speak to me about it?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then what are you getting at?" asked Tom.

"I'm speaking to you because you're junior cricket captain."

"Well?"

"I'd like to play."

Tom Merry stared at Crooke. Manners stared at him. Monty Lowther, who was of a humorous turn, pretended to faint, and leaned heavily on Manners's shoulder for support.

"You'd like to play!" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yes, if I can."

"But you can't!" grinned Manners. "You don't know one end of a stump from the other."

"Water!" said Monty Lowther faintly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't be a funny ass!" growled Crooke. "I'm speaking seriously."

"Fan me!" said Lowther.

"If you're speaking seriously, Crooke, I'll answer seriously—or as seriously as I can," said Tom Merry, laughing. "I can't put you in the Shell team."

"Why not?"

"Because you're no good!" said Tom frankly.

"This must be an awfully deep joke of Crooke's," said Monty Lowther, recovering from his faint. "Is this where we laugh, Crooke?"

"Look here——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther.

"What are you cackling at, you idiot?" said Crooke savagely.

"Your little joke! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not joking!" roared Crooke.

"Oh, yes, you are! You must be! If you don't know it, it's simply unconscious humour," assured Lowther. "I always laugh at a fellow's jokes. It's polite. Ha, ha, ha!"

"I want specially to play to-morrow," said Crooke, looking

at Tom Merry. "Never mind that funny idiot. Will you put me in as a special favour? You will beat the Fourth, anyway. It won't hurt you."

"Well, we're not so jolly certain about beating the Fourth," said Tom. "Fatty Wynn's bowling is better than any we have in the Shell, excepting perhaps Talbot's. Still, we expect to beat them. But it wouldn't be a sure thing if I played a duffer like you, Crooke—excuse me. But this is rather sudden, you know. It wants some getting used to—you as a cricketer."

"You've told me often enough that I ought to take up cricket," said Crooke.

"That's so; and so you ought. It would do you more good than smoking fags behind the wood-shed. But there are ways of doing these things. If you want to become a cricketer, you have my best wishes, and I'll help you all I can. But you can't expect to start as a member of the Form eleven."

"It's only for this once."

"I dare say we might win with you in the team; but, you see, I should have to leave out a good man to make room for you. You can see for yourself that it's an unreasonable thing to ask," said Tom good-naturedly.

"One of the chaps might agree to be left out."

"It's not likely; and, as captain, I couldn't very well agree to it. You see, you've missed practice every time you could, and you're bound to be in rotten form. What the deuce do you want to play for? You don't care for cricket."

Crooke paused.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said. "You chaps have done a lot of gassing about patriotism, and backing up the fellows in khaki, and so on. Well, you know my uncle's just home from the front. I—I want to please him. He'd be jolly pleased if he saw me playing for the Form. He believes in the strenuous life, and all that rot. He would think me a slacker if—if——"

"If he knew you!" suggested Lowther.

Crooke did not heed that remark.

"Considering that he's fresh home from the front, and all you've talked about patriotism and so forth, I think you might be willing to help me do something to please him," said Crooke.

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Well, if you put it like that, there's something in it," he said. "I suppose you mean that you don't want Colonel Lyndon to know what a blessed slacker and smoky beast you are. Is that it? You want to make him think that you deserve to have a relation in khaki?"

"Well, put it like that. Anything that would please a man fresh home from the front—it's worth a bit of trouble, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but——"

"Suppose a fellow's willing to stand out for me. You'll let him do it?" asked Crooke.

"Well, yes," said Tom at last. "If one of the team chooses to give you his place, I'll put you in, and risk it. We can beat the Fourth a wicket short."

"Good!" said Crooke, looking relieved. "I'll ask some of them. Of course, the request would come better from you. You might leave out Talbot, for instance."

"Yes, I'm likely to leave out our best bowler, to make room for a slacking duffer," said Tom Merry disdainfully.

"The fact is, Talbot might as well keep in the background while my uncle's here," said Crooke.

"And why?" demanded Tom, his eyes beginning to gleam. Talbot's shadowy past was a sore subject with his best chum.

"You may know that Colonel Lyndon has been elected a governor of St. Jim's——"

"I didn't know it; and I can't see that it matters to me or to Talbot, now that I do know it."

"Considering Talbot's past, the less a governor of the school sees of him the better. If he comes under my uncle's eye at all, the colonel may want to know how such a chap is allowed at St. Jim's at all."

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"Another word like that, Crooke, and you go out of this study on your neck!" he said. "You'd better get out, anyway."

"But——"

"Shut up and clear!" said Tom Merry savagely.

"I didn't mean——"

"Oh, get out!"

Crooke got out. Tom Merry was within an ace of throwing him bodily out of the study.

Tom sat down with a frowning brow as the door closed on Crooke.

"I can't stand that rotter!" he muttered. "What a rotten cad to be always harping on that—as if poor Talbot can help his past. Even fellows like Levison and Mellish and Clampe have dropped it. I'm sorry now that I didn't punch his head!"

"Keep your wool on, old son!" said Lowther. "Crooke mustn't greet his uncle with a black eye to-morrow. He can't help being a worm!"

"After all, it's unusually decent of him to want to please the old boy in khaki," remarked Manners. "It must be rather a strain on Crooke to think of playing a decent game for once, instead of the blackguard, as usual."

Monty Lowther closed one eye.

"Bet you the bounder has an axe to grind," he said. "He's more likely thinking of a tip from his uncle than anything else."

"Blessed if I thought of that," said Tom Merry. "I suppose it's so—it's more like Crooke. I've a jolly good mind——" He paused. "Well, I've given him my word now, and if one of the fellows stands out for him, he can go into the team. After all, it may give him a taste for a decent game."

And Tom Merry, with his brows somewhat knitted, went on with his preparation. A few minutes later a loud voice was heard in the passage.

"I'll see you hanged first, Crooke!"

It was the voice of Harry Noble of the Shell, otherwise known as Kangaroo. The Terrible Three grinned. They could guess that Crooke had preferred his modest request to the Cornstalk junior. Kangaroo's reply was emphatic.

"Well, you needn't yell!" came Crooke's sulky voice in reply. "I was only asking you a civil question. If you'll——"

"Rats!"

That was all, and the Terrible Three chuckled as they went on with their prep. Crooke's quest of a place in the Form team did not seem to be prospering, so far.

CHAPTER 4.

Straight From the Shoulder.

TALBOT of the Shell was also at work at his preparation when Crooke came in. Talbot's study-mates—Gore and Skimpole—were working at the study table with him. There was a shade on Talbot's handsome brow—he had been very thoughtful that afternoon and evening.

He gave Crooke a genial nod as he came in. Talbot was always civil, though it cost him an effort to be civil to Crooke. It was the cad of the Shell who was a perpetual reminder to him of many things that he would have been glad to forget. If Crooke could have helped it, Talbot would never have been allowed to forget that he had once been the "Toff," and a member of Hookey Walker's gang, in the old days that now seemed so far behind him.

Not that Talbot had ever done anything at all to incur Crooke's enmity. It was the natural dislike of a crooked, carping nature for a frank and sunny one. Crooke, who had plenty of money and rich relations, and was much given to swanking, resented the fact that Talbot, a nobody and a scholarship chap, should be made so much fuss of by fellows who regarded him—Crooke—as of no account whatever. Then Talbot had chipped in sometimes when Crooke was bullying little fags, and on one occasion had given him a licking for carrying that amiable amusement too far. The two natures were as unlike as chalk and cheese, and there could never be good feeling between them.

But it suited Crooke to forget all differences just now, now that he had a favour to ask of the scholarship junior. It had never occurred to him that the time might come when he would want to ask a favour of Talbot. Even now that he had come to ask it, he could not quite dismiss the "swank" from his manner. He could not possibly forget that he had as many sovereigns as Talbot had shillings.

"I've just come from Tom Merry," Crooke began. "If you're finished, Talbot, I'd like to speak to you."

"I'm not finished," said Talbot; "I was rather late beginning. But you can go ahead."

"I don't know how I'm going to do my prep, if you fellows are going to jaw!" growled Gore.

"I sha'n't be long," said Crooke. "It's about the match to-morrow, Talbot. Tom Merry's offered me a place in the eleven, if a fellow will make room for me of his own accord."

Talbot looked astonished, as he felt. So did Gore. Even Skimpole blinked curiously at Crooke through his spectacles. Crooke had succeeded in surprising the whole study.

"You want to play cricket?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Why shouldn't I?" said Crooke, rather savagely.

"Oh, no reason why you shouldn't, if Tom Merry will put you into the team!" said Talbot mildly. "I'm glad you're taking up the game!"

"It's on my uncle's account—you know he's coming to-morrow—Colonel Lyndon."

Talbot's face clouded a little.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"He's an old martinet—as hard as nails, and down on slackers, and so on. I've got to please him. He will start asking questions about me. He thinks every fellow ought to go in for games and such rot. If he finds me playing in the Form eleven it will please him; and—and that's what I want, of course. He's just home from the front, and—and naturally I want to please him!"

Talbot gave the cad of the Shell a keen look. He did not require telling that Crooke must have some personal motive for wishing to keep in his uncle's good books.

"You don't mean to say you've got the cheek to ask Talbot for his place in the Shell eleven?" exclaimed Gore, in astonishment.

"It's Talbot's business, not yours, Gore. I suppose he can give me the place if he likes?"

"Silly ass if he does!"

"What do you say, Talbot? It would be a big favour to me," said Crooke. "I shouldn't forget it."

Talbot looked very thoughtful. He did not remark upon the fact that a fellow who had always been his enemy, without just cause, might have hesitated to come and ask a big favour of him. He seemed to be thinking it out.

"I know what I'd say if you asked me for my place!" grunted Gore.

"I'm not asking you—I'm asking Talbot!"

"Because he's a good-natured duffer," said Gore. "Don't do it, Talbot! You will be a silly ass if you do!"

Talbot smiled.

"I must ask Tom Merry first," he said. "Tom depends on me for the bowling, you know. If he can spare me——"

Crooke's lip curled.

"You're not so jolly indispensable as all that!" he exclaimed. "I can bowl, too—perhaps as well as you can!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Gore.

"I'll ask Tom Merry," said Talbot shortly.

Crooke's manner of asking a favour would not have caused his request to prosper with most fellows. But there seemed no end to Talbot's good nature.

"Wait for me here," added Talbot.

He left the study, and Crooke sat down in his chair. Gore gave him a glare. George Gore had been one of Talbot's staunchest admirers since the Shell fellow had extricated him from a very serious scrape some time before, into which Gore had been hurried by his own folly and recklessness.

"I think it's like your blessed cheek," said Gore. "You've no right to ask Talbot favours! You've never been a friend of his!"

"Bow-wow!" said Crooke. "I'm not a friend of his now, but I don't see why I shouldn't have his place for once!"

"You've always been down on him."

"I don't like reformed cracksmen, as a rule!" yawned Crooke. "It's an acquired taste, and I haven't acquired it yet!"

Gore frowned, and exhibited a formidable set of knuckles under Crooke's nose with such suddenness that the cad of the Shell started back.

"See that?" said Gore savagely. "You say another word against Talbot, you worm, and I'll smash you! See?"

"Oh, rats!" said Crooke.

But he did not say another word. Gore growled, and went on with his preparation, and Crooke waited in silence for Talbot's return.

Meanwhile, Talbot was interviewing the junior cricket captain. He came into Tom Merry's study rather hesitatingly, and he was greeted with welcoming looks. Talbot was always welcome there.

"Finished already!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "Now you pile in! Sit down and tackle the chestnuts while we're getting through!"

"I'm not finished prep. I've just seen Crooke," Talbot explained.

Tom Merry jumped.

"You don't mean to say he's asked you——"

"Yes."

"The cheeky cad! As if we're going to lose our only bowler on his account!"

"He says you told him he could have a place, if a fellow would stand out of his own accord," explained Talbot. "I'm willing——"

"Hold on! I did say that," agreed Tom Merry; "but I wasn't thinking of you! I thought you understood that you couldn't be spared. Dash it all, Talbot, I was relying on you, and you know it!"

Talbot coloured a little.

"I do know it," he agreed. "I told Crooke I would ask you. I sha'n't think of standing out if you need me."

"We've got Fatty Wynn bowling against us. You're the only fellow in the Shell who's a patch on him. We don't want to be licked."

"Well, I—I——" Talbot hesitated. "The fact is, Tom, I—I'd rather stand out of the match to-morrow, if it were all the same to you."

"Because you want to oblige Crooke, do you mean?"

"Yes, and—and because I'd really rather, for once."

"Do you mean you've got something else on?"

"I—I should go out on my bike."

"You want to try your new bike? Hardly worth while cutting a Form match for that, is it?"

"Well, no, but——"

"You mean you're a good-natured ass, and Crooke has got round you with a yarn of wanting to please his uncle!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Of course, it's in your hands," said Talbot. "I wouldn't think of leaving you in the lurch, you know that, Tom."

"But it isn't in my hands," said Tom. "I've told Crooke he can have a place, if any fellow offers to stand out for him. But I naturally thought you wouldn't offer, knowing that we can't spare you."

"That settles it," said Talbot. "I sha'n't offer."

"Of course, you must please yourself," said Tom. "I can't go back on what I've said to Crooke—confound him!"

"I shall please myself," said Talbot, with a smile; "and I shall stay in the team. It wouldn't please me exactly to leave you in the lurch."

And, with a nod, Talbot quitted the study, and returned to his own. Crooke gave him an eager look.

"Is it settled?" he asked, before Talbot was fairly in the study.

"Not as you want it, I'm afraid," said Talbot. "I can't stand out."

"Hurrah!" said Gore.

Crooke gritted his teeth.

"You mean you won't!" he exclaimed.

"I mean I can't. Tom Merry depends on me to bowl, and if I stood out, it would be leaving the team in the lurch. The Fourth are pretty strong in bowlers, and the Shell are not. Under the circumstances, I can't do it. I'm sorry."

Talbot sat down to finish his preparation. But Crooke did not go. He remained in the study, biting his lip, and he was silent for some minutes.

"Look here," he said at last, "I'm set on this. I've asked the other fellows, and they won't agree. I think you might oblige me in this, Talbot."

"I would if I could."

"You can if you choose. You're not a slave, I suppose—you can stand out of a cricket match if you like? I suppose the world won't come to an end, even if the Shell are beaten!" said Crooke, with a sneer. "Look here, it's no good beating about the bush. I'll make it worth your while to stand out."

"You needn't go on," said Talbot. "There's nothing more to be said."

"I can make it worth your while. You're pretty hard up—we all know that—and a quid's nothing to me. You catch on?"

Talbot rose.

"Yes, I catch on," he said, his eyes gleaming. "I suppose you are too big a cad to know that what you've said is an insult. But you'd better get out!"

"You're getting mighty particular!" sneered Crooke, his rage getting the upper hand, as he realised that the case was hopeless. "There was a time when you weren't so jolly particular how you got money. We haven't quite forgotten the Toff yet, you know."

"Will you go?" said Talbot quietly, though his lips were trembling.

"Not till I've finished. I can tell you that my uncle is a governor of St. Jim's, and if he found out what kind of fellow has been admitted here, there would be a row. You've got round the Head, but you couldn't get round my uncle like that. Suppose I tell him your interesting history——"

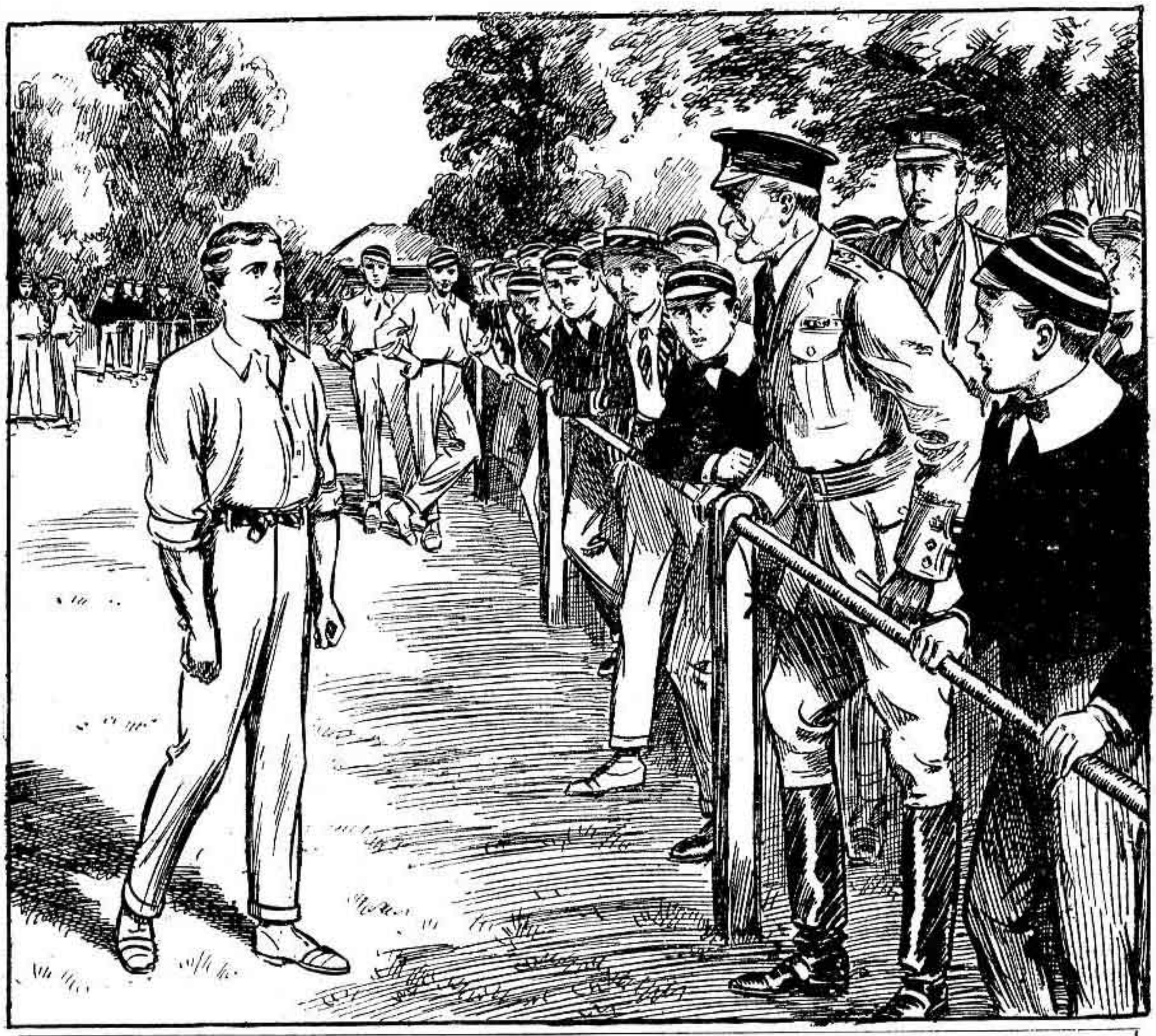
"You can tell him what you like," said Talbot. "But you'll leave my study now, or I'll throw you into the passage."

"I'll tell him fast enough! I'll tell him that the Toff—that's your name, isn't it?—if you've got a name at all—I'll tell him that you're a thief——"

Crash!

Talbot had been very patient, but his patience had its limits. Before Crooke could go further, Talbot's fist was planted full in his face, and the cad of the Shell went flying through the doorway. He crashed down in the passage with a wild yell.

Talbot looked down on him with gleaming eyes.



As Talbot came nearer, a curious expression came over the bronzed face of the colonel, and his eyes seemed to fasten themselves on the handsome, flushed face, as the Shell fellow stopped just inside the field of play. "By gad!" exclaimed the colonel. "Boy, where have I seen you before? Do you hear me? Where have I seen you?" *(See Chapter 10.)*

"Are you coming in again?" he said.

Crooke staggered to his feet. One of his eyes was closed, and his nose was streaming red. Talbot's blow had caught him between the eyes, and it hurt. He blinked furiously at the Shell fellow.

"I'll make you suffer for that! I'll——"

Talbot closed the door. Crooke, stuttering with rage and dabbing his nose with his handkerchief, went down the passage—he was not inclined to carry the affray any further just then.

"Why didn't you mop up the floor with him, you ass?" growled Gore, as Talbot dropped into his seat at the study table again.

Talbot made no reply. He went on with his work with his brow deeply clouded.

CHAPTER 5.

A Strange Mystery.

THE next morning there was a considerable amount of suppressed excitement at St. Jim's. All the fellows were looking forward to the afternoon, and the ripping reception of the conquering hero. Herries, in spite of persuasion, gentle reasonings and deadly threats, had persisted in "mugging up" that well-known tune on his cornet, and weird and fearsome blasts had been heard in out-of-the-way corners where he had retired to practise. But all the other fellows assured Herries that if he brought that cornet into public view when the reception was coming off, they would pitch it into the fountain, and Herries after it. Arthur Augustus declared that the "bwass band" would make all the row that was required.

The brass band had been successfully engaged, and was to be at Rylcombe Station early, before Mr. Railton's train got in. It came out that the Head was going in his car to meet the returning Housemaster and his companion at the station, to bring them to St. Jim's. A reception by juniors on the platform, therefore, had to be abandoned—that had to be left to the Head.

Outside the station, with the brass band, was where Tom Merry & Co. would come in. Blares from the band, and thunderous cheers from an army of St. Jim's fellows, would show Mr. Railton how highly the old school thought of him. Though his ear-drums might suffer, he could not fail to be pleased. Nearly every fellow, too, had provided himself with a flag or a piece of bunting to wave on the great occasion. It was to be a celebration such as St. Jim's had never known before. But the occasion was unique—it was the first time a St. Jim's Housemaster had been called away to fight the Huns.

Crooke of the Shell, usually a person of very little account in his Form or his House, found himself of some consequence just now—entirely on account of the fact that his uncle was coming down with Railton. It was agreed that Crooke, if he liked, should take a leading part in the great reception. But in the Shell Form-room that morning, Crooke did not look as if he would be in a fit state to take part in any reception.

Crooke's nose was swollen, and there was a dark, bluish

shade round his left eye, approaching black. It was evident that the cad of the Shell had been in the wars. From Gore it became known what had happened, and nobody blamed Talbot for having knocked Crooke down, but it was agreed that it was unfortunate. Crooke's uncle could not be favourably impressed by that black eye.

Mr. Linton looked very severely at Crooke in the Form-room. Crooke's eye and nose could not possibly escape notice, and the Form-master was shocked. At such a time, he felt justly that Crooke might have taken care to avoid scrapping.

"What is the matter with your eye, Crooke?" asked Mr. Linton, in his iciest tone, when he spotted the junior's new adornment.

"I had a knock, sir," said Crooke sullenly.

"You have been fighting!" exclaimed Mr. Linton.

"No, sir."

"Indeed! Then what caused this damage to your face?"

"I was attacked, sir," said Crooke, with a venomous glance at Talbot. "I did not fight, because I was anxious not to have my face marked when my uncle was coming to see me. The fellow who attacked me knew that he was safe in doing it, for that reason."

A hot flush came over Talbot's face. Tom Merry looked furious.

A very stern expression hardened Mr. Linton's severe features.

"Crooke, I insist upon your telling me the name of the boy who attacked you under these circumstances!" he exclaimed.

"I'd rather not, sir."

"I order you to do so!" snapped the Form-master.

"Go it, you rotten sneak!" whispered Gore fiercely. "Go it, and when you've told your lies, I'll get up and tell the truth."

"Do you hear me, Crooke?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give me the name at once."

"It was Talbot, sir," said Crooke, with apparent reluctance.

"Stand up, Talbot!"

Talbot stood up.

"You struck Crooke, knowing that his uncle, just home from the front, was coming to see him to-day, Talbot!" exclaimed the master of the Shell.

"I had forgotten about his uncle, sir," said Talbot quietly. "If I had remembered, I should have allowed Crooke to say what he liked, without touching him."

"You acted very inconsiderately, Talbot, whatever your provocation may have been."

Talbot's flush deepened.

"I feel that myself, sir, and I am sorry."

"Colonel Lyndon will naturally be shocked and displeased to see his nephew in such a state." Mr. Linton pursed his lips. "However, as you are sorry for what you have done, which I fully believe, I will say nothing more about the matter. You may sit down."

Talbot sat down, feeling and looking very depressed. He would have given a great deal to recall the hasty blow which had knocked Crooke out of his study, though certainly it had been fully deserved. Punishment he would not have cared for, but he felt that he had lowered himself in the opinion of the master of the Shell—and in his own, which was worse. Gore, who was looking very red, jumped to his feet, as Mr. Linton turned to his desk.

"If you please, sir——" blurted out Gore.

Mr. Linton looked at him.

"Well, Gore?"

"I was there, sir," exclaimed Gore. "Talbot kept his temper till Crooke fairly forced him to knock him down. If Talbot hadn't done it, I was going to do it myself, sir. It isn't fair——"

"That will do, Gore."

"Crooke hasn't told you how it happened——"

"I do not desire to know the details of the matter," said Mr. Linton icily. "You will take your seat, Gore."

Gore sat down, crimson and angry.

Nothing more was said on the subject, and the lessons proceeded. Tom Merry gave his chum an anxious glance once or twice during the morning. Talbot's face was grave and thoughtful, and Tom knew that he was a prey to one of those attacks of black despondency to which the "Toff" was sometimes subject. Tom felt greatly inclined to give Crooke another eye to match the one he had already.

He joined Talbot when the Shell came out of their Form-room.

"Don't be down in the mouth about it, old chap," he said. "We all know that you weren't to blame. Gore has told us about it."

Talbot nodded.

"I oughtn't to have struck him," he said, in a low voice. "I'd forgotten about his uncle coming, just at that moment. And—and I really didn't mean to hit so hard. I suppose I had lost my temper."

"And no wonder," said Tom Merry warmly. "I'd have mopped up the floor with the cad. He asked for it."

"But it's rotten, all the same. I suppose he won't come along to the station with that eye."

"He says he won't," said Monty Lowther. "Good riddance, as far as that goes! But don't worry over what can't be helped, kid. You've got to look merry and bright at the reception, you know."

"I'm not coming," said Talbot quickly.

"Rats! Of course you're coming!"

"I'd rather not. I—I don't feel in the humour for it, really," said Talbot, his cheeks flushing. "And, besides——" He paused.

"Well?"

"You see, Crooke's uncle will be with Mr. Railton, and—and I'd rather not meet him."

"Because you've blackened Crooke's eye?" said Tom Merry.

Talbot was silent.

"He won't know it was you. And, besides, you won't have to speak to him," said Tom. "You'll only be one of the crowd. There'll be a hundred or more chaps there, and you won't be noticed among the lot of us."

"No; but——"

Talbot hesitated, and coloured still more deeply as the eyes of the Terrible Three were turned curiously upon him.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question, Talbot?" asked Tom Merry, after a pause.

"Not at all."

"You've been a bit queer—excuse me—ever since it was known that Crooke's uncle was coming down with Railton. I couldn't help noticing it. I suppose it isn't possible that—that you know the man at all?"

Talbot did not speak.

"I don't see how you could ever have known him, or had any disagreement with him," said Tom. "But that's what it looks like. It just came into my head. Of course, we don't know much about you before you came to St Jim's. If you've got any reason for not wanting to see Colonel Lyndon, you've only got to say so, you know."

"I'd rather not see him," said Talbot, with an effort.

"That means that you've seen him before?"

"No; I've never seen him before."

"Then why——"

"I—I've heard about him," stammered Talbot. "I—I'd rather not go into it, if you don't mind; but—but, Tom, it's not pleasant for me to think about what happened before I came to St. Jim's. It's a part of my life that I want to forget all about."

"All serene," said Tom. "You know I'm not inquisitive. Of course, I shouldn't have dreamed that you could ever have had anything to do with Crooke's uncle."

"I didn't know that Colonel Lyndon was Crooke's uncle until yesterday," said Talbot. "I never supposed that he would come to St. Jim's—I mean, I never thought about it at all. I never expected to be brought into contact with him in any way. I needn't be brought into contact with him, either, for that matter. I suppose he won't stay long, and during that time I needn't see him at all. I'd rather not."

Tom Merry nodded. He was puzzled and mystified, but, as he had said, he was not inquisitive. He had always known that there were passages in the Toff's life that were a sealed book now, and he had never shown any curiosity as to Talbot's past. He knew more than enough already of that.

But it was puzzling. The Toff, the son of a cracksman, reared in a thieves' den, had fought his way from those black early surroundings; now he was Talbot of St. Jim's, the soul of honour, and the best pal a fellow could have. How, in those strange early days, could he have had anything in common with a colonel in the Loamshire regiment?

Tom Merry started suddenly, as a dark and chilling thought came into his mind. He lowered his voice, though there was no one at hand.

"Talbot, old chap, I'm not going to question you—you know that—but—but one thing——"

"Go on, Tom!" said Talbot, with a faint smile.

Tom Merry's face was crimson.

"I—I mean, in—in any of your adventures at that time—you know what I mean—was it in that way that you came into contact with Crooke's uncle?"

"No!"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath of relief. The dark thought had come into his mind that it might have been in a "professional" way that the one-time prince of cracksmen had come into contact with the colonel—that Crooke's uncle might have been one of the victims "visited" by the gang of rascals who had foregathered at the rookery in Angel Alley.

"It's nothing of the kind," said Talbot. "I've never seen him—never come into contact with him at all. Not in any way. He is known to me by name only, and I don't like him. But for him——" He broke off, with a bitter look. "I don't know, but it's possible that, but for him, I might never have been what I was; I might have a record as clean as yours, Tom"

"Yet you have never seen him!" exclaimed Tom.

"Never. But I'd rather not talk about it. I shouldn't have said a word, only—only, unless you understand, you will be wondering why I want to keep out of his way. I could see that you were wondering already."

"All right, old scout; you sha'n't see him," said Tom. "And don't think I'm going to bother you with blessed questions; I'm not. Not another word. You can stay in and do some bowling at the nets while we're gone, and get into topping form for the match."

"Right-ho!"

And not another word was said. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther could not help wondering a little, but they did their best to dismiss the matter from their minds. And the preparations for the reception of "old Railton" soon gave them plenty to think about.

CHAPTER 6.

Ready For Railton.

"LET 'his Nibs' get off first!" said Jack Blake.

It was by that term that Blake of the Fourth irreverently alluded to Dr. Holmes, the reverend and respected Head of St. Jim's.

The great welcome-party were ready to start There were a hundred fellows at least in the party. New House fellows had rolled up in crowds to join the School House army, but it was agreed that "his Nibs" should be allowed to get off first.

The juniors were not quite sure what the Head would have thought of the brass band and the reception. As Arthur Augustus sapiently remarked, "You know these blessed headmastahs, deah boys!" Upon the whole, it was more judicious to let the Head clear off the scene in his car before the army started.

The big car had come round to the Head's house, and Dr. Holmes and Mr. Carrington appeared in sight, on the steps. Mr. Charrington had been Housemaster of the School House during the absence of Mr. Railton. He was a kindly gentleman from Australia, and he was very popular in the House. He had filled Mr. Railton's place well, and Tom Merry & Co. were pleased to give him their hearty approval.

The Head and the Housemaster pro tem. stepped into the car, and the chauffeur "tooled" away to the gates. The juniors were glad to see the august personages go. They were now free to carry out their own little arrangement, now that "his Nibs" was safely off the scene.

"Weady, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus had constituted himself master of the ceremonies.

"Ready—ay, ready!" said Monty Lowther dramatically. "Lead on, Macduff! Up, Guards, and at 'em!"

"Pway don't be widiculous, Lowthah! This is a sewious occasion. Tom Mewwy, I wegwet to see that you are wearin' a stwaw hat."

"Did you expect to see me wearing a busby?" asked Tom Merry politely.

"I weally expected evewy fellah pwesent to sport a toppah undah the cires."

"Too warm," said Monty Lowther. "A chap can enthuse in a straw hat, can't he? Besides, a straw is easier to wave than a topper."

"Howevah —— Weally, Blake I twust you are not goin' out in that cap?"

"I am," said Blake. "I is."

"Let Gussy wear two toppers to make up for our deficiencies, like an old-clo' man," suggested Monty Lowther. "You can jam one into the other, Gussy, and ——"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah. If you are all weady we will start. Where is Talbot?"

"He's down on Little Side," said Digby. "He's in flannels, too. Can't be coming."

"Wubbish! He must come."

"He's putting in some extra practice," explained Tom Merry. "He's not coming. You see, we've got to play against your batting, Gussy, and we want our champion bowler to be at the top of his form, naturally."

"Yaas, pewwaps that's quite wight——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you wottah, if you are wottin'——"

"Is this a meeting to listen to speeches by Gussy Adolphus, or are we going to meet old Railton?" Monty Lowther inquired politely.

"I am weady to lead you, deah boys."

The army started. They marched out of the gates and down the leafy lane towards Rylcombe on the track of the Head's motor-car. The car was well out of sight now. Tom Merry looked at his watch.

"Railton's train gets in at half-past two," he said. "We've got a quarter of an hour—heaps of time, especially as there will be a bit of a jaw on the platform. Don't hurry and make yourselves dusty. I want you Fourth-Form kids to look as respectable as possible on an occasion like this."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"If you want an eye like Crooke's to take along with you, you've only got to say so, you fat-headed Shell-fish!" remarked Blake.

"Bow-wow!"

"Pway don't let your angwy passions wise at a time like this, deah boys. We do not want to pwesent ourselves befoah Wailton lookin' a set of hooligans like Cwooke. Lowthah, if you tip my toppah ovah my eyes again I shall give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus glowered at the humorist of the Shell, and moved off to a safer distance from him. In quite an orderly array the army marched down to Rylcombe—almost as orderly as if they were taking a walk with a Form-master.

They came into the old High Street and marched on to the station. Outside the little country station the Head's car was halted, but the Head and Mr. Carrington were not to be seen. They had gone in to greet the new arrivals when the train came in. The train was already signalled.

"Now, where's that bwass band?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Here they are!"

"Bai Jove, they look wippin'!"

The band were there—quite a numerous band, with fearsome-looking brass instruments, and in uniform. They had been refreshing themselves at the Red Cow, and there was a general odour of strong liquor about the band, and the man with the cornet seemed a little unsteady on his "pins." But it was hot weather, and doubtless the band had been very thirsty. Bandsmen do get thirsty.

Arthur Augustus raised his topper to the conductor as he greeted him. Arthur Augustus was polite to everybody.

"You are my band?" he inquired.

"I am ze conductor, sare," said the gentleman in blue and gold braid.

Arthur Augustus started a little.

"I twust that you are an English band?" he exclaimed. "If those uttah asses have sent me a German band by mistake, I shall make a feahful wow about it."

"Ve are all Engleesh, sare. Breetish to ze packbone, sare."

"Pray, what is your name?"

"Smeet."

"Smeet is not an English name."

"Yes, it is," grinned Tom Merry. "The native pronunciation is Smith, fathead."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, how can this man be an Englishman named Smith, if he does not know how to pwonounce the word?"

"There are lots of Englishmen in these days who can't pronounce English," grinned Monty Lowther. "This is only one more."

"I suppose the person means that he is natuwalised," said Arthur Augustus, frowning. "I do not like natuwalised Germans. I wegard them as wolves in sheep's clothing."

"Hear, hear!"

"I am Breetish!" protested the conductor. "All my men are Breetish as much as I am. We are the Hairts of Oak Breetish Band. Ask dis man wiz der cornet. Are you not also Breetish, Hans?"

"Ja! Ja, wohl!" replied the other Briton.

"And you, Karl—you are Breetish?"

"Ich bin," replied Karl—a truly British answer.

Arthur Augustus looked worried. That band to greet the conquering hero was his own pet idea, and he had arranged it with an agent in Wayland to send him that band, carefully specifying a British band. It was a painful discovery that all his British bandsmen were made in Germany, and were only as British as "scraps of paper" could make them. It was well known how much value Germans attached to scraps of paper.

"I wegard this as uttahly wotten!" said Arthur Augustus. "I wondah whethah there is time to get anothah band, deah boys?"

"The train's in, fathead!" said Tom Merry.

"Railton may come out any minute," said Blake. "Better tell 'em what to play, and chance it. They don't play in German, you know."

"Besides, the cornets and things may have been naturalised, too," suggested Monty Lowther.

"Wats! Pway don't be so funnay! Fancy old Wailton comin' home fwom killin' Huns, and being gweeted by a band of Huns!" said Arthur Augustus, in great distress. "It is vewy wotten that Huns are allowed in this countwy at all."

"Can't be helped now," said Tom Merry. "You can rag the agent for it. Lots of British bandsmen have gone to the war, you know, and they may be scarce. We shall have to make these Germans do."

"I am Breetish——"

"Well, give 'em instructions, Gussy, as you're running this show. Mind they don't start 'The Watch on the Rhine' or 'Deutschland uber Alles' by mistake."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus made up his mind to it. It was very exasperating, but it was too late to change the band, that was evident.

"Vewy well. Pway wait for my signal, Smith, and stwike up the 'Conquewin' Hewo' when I waise my hand."

"Yes, sare."

"And mind you do not utter a single word. If you speak in the pwesence of Mr. Wailton there will be twouble. He will be vewy surpwised and shocked if he discovahs that he is bein' gweeted by a German band."

"But I am Breetish—Breetish to ze packbone ——"

"Yaas, yaas; that will do. Bai Jove, heah they come, deah boys!"

"Hurrah!"

CHAPTER 7.

The Conquering Hero.

MR. RAILTON stepped out of the station. He walked between the Head and Mr. Carrington.

There was a tremendous burst of cheering from the St. Jim's crowd at the sight of the old School House master.

Mr. Railton looked a little older, a little thinner, and he was deeply bronzed. His left arm was carried in a sling. In his bronzed cheeks there was a slight pallor of recent illness. But his form was upright as ever, his stride full of energy and spring.

He paused at the sight of the swarming juniors, as the thunderous cheer burst upon his ears.

Evidently he had not expected that warm welcome. He looked surprised for a moment, and then a smile broke out over his handsome face.

"Hip, hip—hurrah!"

"Welcome home, sir!"

"Bravo!"

"Bless my soul!" murmured the Head.

Arthur Augustus made frantic signals to Smeet. The British band struck up with a crash of instruments.

A tall, thin gentleman in khaki stepped from the station after the Housemaster. This was evidently Colonel Lyndon.

The colonel was as stiff as a ramrod, his face was like unto mahogany in hue, and his white moustache contrasted sharply with the colour of his skin. He had a pair of glittering eyes looking out sharply from under shaggy grey brows. Those brows were set in a stern expression, almost a perpetual frown. That the colonel was a grim old martinet was clear at the first glance.

"Hah!" he ejaculated, as the blare of the band filled the street with thunderous noise. "Hah! What is this?"

"It appears to be a welcome home for Mr. Railton," said Dr. Holmes, hardly knowing whether to smile or to frown. "An idea of the juniors, I suppose."

"Boys will be boys," said Mr. Carrington, smiling, "and they are very glad to see you home, Mr. Railton."

Mr. Railton laughed.

"Not more glad than I am to see them again," he said. "By Jove, it is more than worth while going out there, for the pleasure of homecoming again. The young rascals! What an idea!"

"Hah!" snapped the colonel. "What a dreadful noise! This is worse than the shells."

Blare, blare! Crash! Loud cheers mingled with the roar of the German band, and the juniors waved toppers, caps, and straw hats enthusiastically. Arthur Augustus, in his enthusiasm, was waving his topper with one hand and his eyeglass with the other. The village folk gathered to the strains of the band, and joined in the cheering.

It was such a reception as might have pleased any returning hero, provided that his ear-drums would stand it.

"Huwwah, huwwah! Thwee more cheers for the conquewin' hewo, deah boys!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Down with the Kaiser! Hurrah!"

The four gentlemen stepped into the car somewhat hastily. Before the chauffeur could get into motion, however, Arthur Augustus stepped up to the car.

"Pway excuse me, Dr. Holmes and Mr. Wailton——"

"Please tell the boys to clear the way," said the Head.

"Yaas, sir. But we are heah to welcome Mr. Wailton. At the wequest of the fellahs genewally, I have a few words to say——"

The roar of the band drowned Arthur Augustus's voice and the Head's reply. But the car could not get on, for the street was thick with the crowd, and the chauffeur naturally hesitated to charge.

"Huh!" grunted the colonel. "Clear the way, there! Huh!"

Arthur Augustus signed to the British conductor to ring off. The band was going a little too strong. But Smith apparently did not understand. The instruments roared away with a deafening noise.

"Make that sillay ass wing off, Tom Mewwy!" shouted Arthur Augustus, shaking his fist at the conductor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry caught Smeet by the shoulder, and stopped his conducting very suddenly.

"Shut 'em up!" Tom roared in his ear. "This is where the speech comes in. Silence!"

"Ja wohl!" said the Briton.

And the band rung off.

Silence descended like sweet dew after the terrific uproar. Never had silence seemed so sweet and blessed to the ears of all present.

"Bai Jove, that's bettah!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Dr. Holmes, I twust you have no objection to my speakin' a few words?"

"Pray lose no time, then, D'Arcy," said the kind old gentleman, after a glance at the smiling School House master.

"Thank you, sir. Mr. Wailton, I have a few words to say in the name of the school. St. Jim's welcomes you back, sir." Arthur Augustus looked at his shirt-cuff, apparently for inspiration, and seemed puzzled. However, he went on: "We are all pwoud of you, sir, and we congwatulate you on having helped to lick the wotten Pwussians, sir. We think——" D'Arcy glanced at his cuff again. "Bai Jove, how uttahly wotten! I forgot when I changed my shirt."

"What?" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

Arthur Augustus crimsoned.

"I—I had a few notes pencilled on my shirt-cuff, sir," he stammered, "and just befoah startin' I changed my shirt, owin' to that ass Blake spillin' some ink on my cuff. Howevah——"

"You have made an excellent speech, D'Arcy," said Mr. Railton, laughing. "And now——"

"But I have not finished, sir."

"And now I will say a few words in return," said Mr. Railton, apparently deaf. "My boys, I thank you for the goodwill you have shown in giving me this reception. I am very glad to be back among you again. Now, please clear the way and let the chauffeur proceed."

"Vewy well, sir. I was goin' to wemark——"

Blake jerked Arthur Augustus away from the car, and Arthur Augustus's remarks were never made. The engine was throbbing, and the car moved on slowly through the crowd.

"Let go, Blake, you ass! Dr. Holmes, will you kindly instwuct the chauffeur to dwive slowly, as we are goin' to accompany the cab to St. Jim's with the band?"

"For mercy's sake——" began the colonel.

"Ahem! Pray do nothing of the sort, D'Arcy!" said the Head hastily.

"But weally, sir——"

"Shurrup!" whispered Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Drive on, Williams!"

"Oh, vewy well! Smith, 'Rule, Bwitannia!' next."

"Ja wohl," said Smith.

"Huh!" ejaculated the colonel, in his sharp, staccato tones. He leaned over the side of the car and beckoned to the conductor, who approached with his gold-braided cap in his hand. "Huh! Let me have a look at you. Hah!"

"Oh, bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy, in dismay.

"What is your name?" thundered the colonel.

"Smeet, sare."

"You are a German."

"Nein, mein Herr! I am Breetish to ze packbone."

"Huh! A German band!" snapped the colonel. "Huh! The country swarms with them still. A very left-handed compliment to your master, boys, to greet him with a German band. Huh!"

The car drove on, the juniors crowding back out of the way. The grim colonel had cast a chill upon them. His iron face had not relaxed into a smile for a single moment. It was evident that the grand reception had no pleasing effect upon him whatever.

Arthur Augustus stood rooted to the ground, jamming his eyeglass mechanically into his eye. The car glided away swiftly down the village street. The conductor touched Arthur Augustus on the arm.

"Vat sall ve blay?" he asked, in his truly British language. "Ze 'Rule, Pritannia!' or ze 'Gott Shave Der Keeng!'?"

"Oh, wun away!" said Arthur Augustus dispiritedly. "Wun away and play! Don't bothah! I say, deah boys, I wegard Cwooke's uncle as bein' quite as gweat a wottah as Cwooke. He has spoiled the whole thing. What did he want to speak to the conductah for?"

"But ve are here to blay, isn't it?" said Mr. Smith, puzzled.

"Wun away, you German! Don't wowwy! Play anythin' you like—'The Watch On The Beastly Rhine,' if you like. I'm goin', deah boys."

And, leaving the British band to their own devices, Arthur Augustus walked off, and the rest of the party followed him. They hardly knew whether to consider the great reception a success or a failure. But upon one point they were all agreed—that they did not like Crooke's uncle.

CHAPTER 8.

Uncle and Nephew.

"THERE'S the old johnny!"

Mellish of the Fourth was looking out of the window in Crooke's study. Crooke was in the armchair, smoking a cigarette. Crooke's face wore a worried look, as well as a swollen nose and a darkened eye. He was not feeling cheerful. It was very evident that the coming interview with his uncle worried him.

The Head's car had swung in at the gates. Crooke rose from the chair and joined Mellish at the window. He stared gloomily at the car as it ran up the drive towards the Head's house. He hardly glanced at Mr. Railton. His eyes were fixed upon the stern, unbending man who sat beside him.

"That's the merchant, isn't it?" asked Mellish.

Crooke nodded.

"That's my uncle."

"Not quite the uncle I'd like to show a black eye to," grinned Mellish. "I don't think I should care to be a Tommy in his regiment, either."

"His men are supposed to think an awful lot of him," said Crooke. "Blessed if I know why. I don't see it myself. I saw him last before he went away to the war. He's had a long spell out there, and this is his first leave home. He was as hard as nails then. Simply jeered me, in his beastly way. He thinks I'm a slacker. And he happened to catch me smoking at home once. I'll bet you he hasn't forgotten that. I believe he never forgets anything."

"What do you want to bother about him for, then?" said Mellish curiously. "You needn't worry about a tip; you've got lots of money."

"It isn't the tip, though a fiver isn't to be sneezed at, all the same. But the pater is anxious for me to be in his good graces. He has simply tons of money, and it ought to come to us."

"Lucky bargee!" said Mellish enviously. "I'd chuck smoking, and take up cricket and footer, or any old thing to please an uncle with tons of money. But they ain't numerous in our family."

"The pater's awfully particular about it, and I shall get ragged if I don't impress him all right," growled Crooke. "Besides, a chap must have an eye to the future. He's not married, and I'm his only nephew—so far as I know, at any rate."

"I suppose you know whether you've got any cousins or not?" said Mellish, in astonishment. "Why, I've heard you speak of your cousins."

"Yes, on my father's side. My mother is old Lyndon's sister. He had two sisters, years younger than himself, and they both disappointed him!" Crooke sneered bitterly. "Cheeky old fossil, you know! I dare say they weren't specially happy with him, if he always had a face like that. He had the cheek to be ratty because his sister married a City millionaire, as if my pater wasn't as good as any old fossil on the Army List!"

"Your pater doesn't seem to owe him a grudge for it, from what you've told me," said Mellish.

"Bet you he does, inside," said Crooke, with a grin. "But outside, no—that wouldn't be business. He's always as sweet as sugar to the old boy—the colonel stands him for his sister's sake, and he stands the colonel for his money's sake. It's give and take, you see. The other sister's dead—she came an awful mucker; married a man who went to the giddy bow-wows. That was when I was a nipper. But I used to hear things said about him; I believe he finished up in prison, or something. She was his favourite sister, and the pater says it soured him. Something must have soured him, that's a cert. He's as sour as an unripe lemon now. If he wasn't rolling in tin——"

Crooke grunted angrily, and lighted another cigarette.

"You'll be called down to see him," said Mellish. "Better not go down smelling of smoke, old man."

"Oh, he won't want to see me yet; he'll be jawing with the Head," said Crooke. "Very likely worming out of him what kind of a chap I am, and jawing to my Form-master, too. He wants me to go into the Army when I grow up. I'm jolly well not going into the Army. Too much like work. I'm going to have plenty of tin, and why shouldn't I have a good time about town?"

"I would!" agreed Mellish.

"And I'm jolly well going to. Perhaps a shell will drop on him over there," remarked Crooke charitably. "He is a dashed worry, and no mistake. But the pater wants to keep in with him, and I've got to play up, hang it. Blessed if I wouldn't rather face a Prussian Hun than that old merchant!"

And Crooke puffed savagely at his cigarette.

There was a knock at the door, and the black sheep of the Shell jumped up in alarm, and hurled the half-smoked cigarette into the grate. The door opened, but to his immense relief it was not the grim face of the colonel that appeared there. It was Toby, the page.

"Master Crooke——"

"Well, you silly fool?" snapped Crooke. Crooke could say what he liked to Toby, and he took full advantage of that privilege.

"Please, you're wanted downstairs, Master Crooke. Your huncle is in the visitors' room a-waitin' for you," said Toby.

And Toby departed.

Crooke snapped his teeth.

"I've got to go," he muttered. "I didn't expect it so soon. Does my eye look very bad, Mellish?"

"Well, it ain't quite black," said Mellish, scanning it with a grin. "Sort of art shade in purple."

"Oh, don't be a funny idiot. My nose——"

"That's all right—only a little over-ripe, with a slight list to starboard," said Mellish.

"You rotter! Do you notice any smell of smoke about me?" hissed Crooke.

Mellish sniffed at him.

"Yes, I do. Wash out your mouth with eau-de-Cologne, and put some on your hanky," he said. "If he spots that, put it down to a headache. What yarn are your going to pitch him about that eye? Accident with a punching-ball is the usual thing."

"N.G. I'd never dare to tell him a whopper; he'd spot it at once. Besides, I'm going to make Talbot sorry for giving me this eye, since I've got to go through with it," said Crooke, as he dabbed away with the eau-de-Cologne. "I suppose that's all right now. Hang him!"

And with that dutiful and affectionate remark, Crooke went down to meet his uncle. He went in great trepidation.

From his earliest boyhood Crooke had had a fear of his grim old uncle deeply implanted in his breast. The fact that he had never made a good impression on the colonel added to his dislike and dread of him. Great as were his expectations from his uncle, Crooke never saw him if he could help it. An interview with the colonel was always a trying ordeal.

Crooke's heart was beating as he entered the visitors' room. The colonel was there alone. He rose as Crooke came in, and looked at his nephew. The grim frown of disapproval that came over the iron face did not escape Crooke's nervous glance, and it added to his inward anger and uneasiness.

"How good of you to come down to see me, uncle!" said Crooke, as cordially as he could.

"Naturally, I have come to see you, as this is my first visit home since the war broke out," said Colonel Lyndon. "I did not expect to see you in such a state, however. What have you been doing?"

Crooke passed one hand over his darkened eye.

"It wasn't my fault, uncle. My Form-master will tell you so if you ask him. I was attacked by a beastly cad, who hit me without warning. I have not been fighting."

"No; you never were of the fighting sort, Gerald!" Crooke thought he detected a tone of sarcasm in his uncle's voice, and he bit his lip savagely.

"I couldn't help it," he repeated. "I didn't want to see you with a face like this, and I'd have been careful to keep out of a scrap when I knew you were coming, uncle. But that hooligan——"

"Huh!" grunted the colonel. "I was not aware that hooligans were admitted to this school, Gerald."

"He is a hooligan, all the same," said Crooke. "Perhaps you don't know the kind of fellows that are admitted here now, sir. No other school would have taken that ruffian in, considering his record."

"You are casting a reflection upon your headmaster, Gerald," said the colonel sternly.

"I don't want to do that, of course. But when a fellow has been a well-known thief and a member of a gang of cracksmen, I think St. Jim's isn't the right place for him."

The colonel stared at him.

"Do you mean to tell me, Gerald, that there is such a boy in this school?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; everybody knows his record, and he's not ashamed of it himself. Lots of the fellows have made friends with him, but I haven't. I don't like cracksmen myself. That's why he went for me yesterday."

There was silence in the room for some moments. Upon the stern brow of the colonel the clouds were gathering; and Crooke saw the signs of the coming storm with keen, inward satisfaction. For it was upon the Toff—upon Talbot of the Shell—that the storm was to burst.

CHAPTER 9.

Crooke Does His Worst.

COLONEL LYNDON was silent, gnawing his white moustache. Crooke waited for him to speak. He was not so sorry now that he had that black eye to show his uncle. It had brought up the subject of Talbot in the best possible manner. That the colonel would not let the matter rest there was quite clear.

"Sit down, Gerald," said the colonel, at last. "I must know more about this. I can hardly believe that you are not mistaken. What is this boy's name?"

"Talbot—at least, he's called Talbot," said Crooke, with a sneer. "Nobody knows whether it's his name or not. He used to be called the Toff by the criminals he associated with."

"How did he come here?"

"The Head let him into the school for some reason, and it came out afterwards that he belonged to a gang of cracksmen who tried to rob the place. One of the gang gave him away when he was taken by the police. Talbot's business here, as I understand, was to let them in, but there was some quarrel—about the plunder, I believe. Anyway, Hookey Walker rounded on him and gave him away, and then Talbot had to run."

"Yet he is here now?"

"He got back by a rotten trick—some theatrical dodge about saving a troop-train from disaster. He got the King's pardon for that, and so the police could not touch him afterwards. Then the Head persuaded the governors to let him have a scholarship here—as a reward for his heroics, I suppose. He's an awfully clever chap, and he could talk any body round. He made the Head think a lot of him, somehow. I suppose criminals are clever at that kind of thing."

"The other boys know all this?"

"Yes, rather."

"Was there no feeling against him when he was admitted to the school?"

"Certainly there was," said Crooke at once. "The fellows used to chip him, and lots of them talked about writing to their people, and getting them to speak to the Head about it. But he has a smooth tongue, and he can soap anybody over."

"Not you, apparently."

"Well, I know the kind of chap he is too well. You wouldn't like me to pal with a fellow like that, uncle."

"Certainly not!" snapped the colonel.

Crooke felt that he was getting on. He had given the worst possible turn to Talbot's miserable story, and he could see what an impression he had made upon the colonel.

Colonel Lyndon's brow was like thunder.

"Some of us think he ought not to be allowed to stay here," went on Crooke. "A reformatory is the proper place for a chap like that. We consider it a disgrace to the school."

"If what you have told me is correct, it is more than a disgrace—it is an infamy!" burst out the colonel. "I certainly had no idea that my nephew was expected to associate with such a rascal!"

He paused and tugged at his moustache.

"Yet there must be something decent about the boy if the others allow him to stay among them," he said.

"They can't help themselves, uncle!"

The colonel shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"They could make his life among them unbearable if they chose, and I am surprised that they have not done so. How is it that he has succeeded in making friends with such a record behind him?"

"He's awfully clever."

"Has he any personal friends here?"

"Oh, yes—fellows he's got round with his tongue. He's made them believe that he's a reformed character, and that he never had a chance, and all that. I never believed a word of it myself, and he's always been up against me for that reason. He gave me this black eye because he knew you were coming."

"Does he take part in the school games?"

"Yes. He happens to be a good cricketer, and he plays for the House. You see, the House is very keen to beat the other House, and the fellows would forgive a chap almost anything if he played a good game for his side, and gave the other House the kybosh."

"But in the other House, I suppose, he has no friends?"

"Well, yes, he talks them round, you see. Besides, he plays in the junior school matches, and both Houses are keen on them. It was really through his being such a good cricketer that he made his peace here."

"I understand. Boys are thoughtless, and that would naturally recommend him to them," said Colonel Lyndon, with a nod. "Yet it is curious that a boy with such associations should be a good cricketer at all."

"Of course, he mugged all that up on purpose. He's been educated, too, as a member of the swell mob," said Crooke. "His father was an awful character. He was called Captain Crow, and was killed in a fight with the police. At least, that's what I've heard. Talbot never talks about that, naturally."

"The Head must believe that his reform is sincere?"

"The Head would believe anything Talbot told him. He has a regular gift for taking people in. But even if he has reformed, he oughtn't to be here. St. Jim's isn't a home for reformed criminals!"

"I must think over this," said the colonel, after a pause. "You have astounded me, Gerald. I should never have dreamed that anything of this kind was possible. As a governor of the school, it is my duty to look into the matter, and I shall certainly do so. But the Head must have had the consent of the governing body in bestowing a scholarship upon this boy."

"They don't generally interfere with the Head, sir. They would take what he told them as being all right."

"Yes; that is so. I am very much surprised, however. I must think over this matter, and later I will speak to the Head about it. That the boy can be suffered to remain at this school is impossible! I have too much regard for my old school to allow such a thing! I shall go into the matter very thoroughly."

"It would be a jolly good thing for St. Jim's if he could be got rid of, sir!" said the delighted Crooke. "What I think about most is his influence over the other fellows. Who can tell what harm he might do them? There was a chap in the New House sacked the other day for robbing his Housemaster."

"Hah!"

"Of course, I don't say that Talbot had anything to do with it, but it's queer that it should happen after Talbot was here. My idea was at the time that his influence had been at work. Of course, there wouldn't be any proof—the fellow's too cunning for that!"

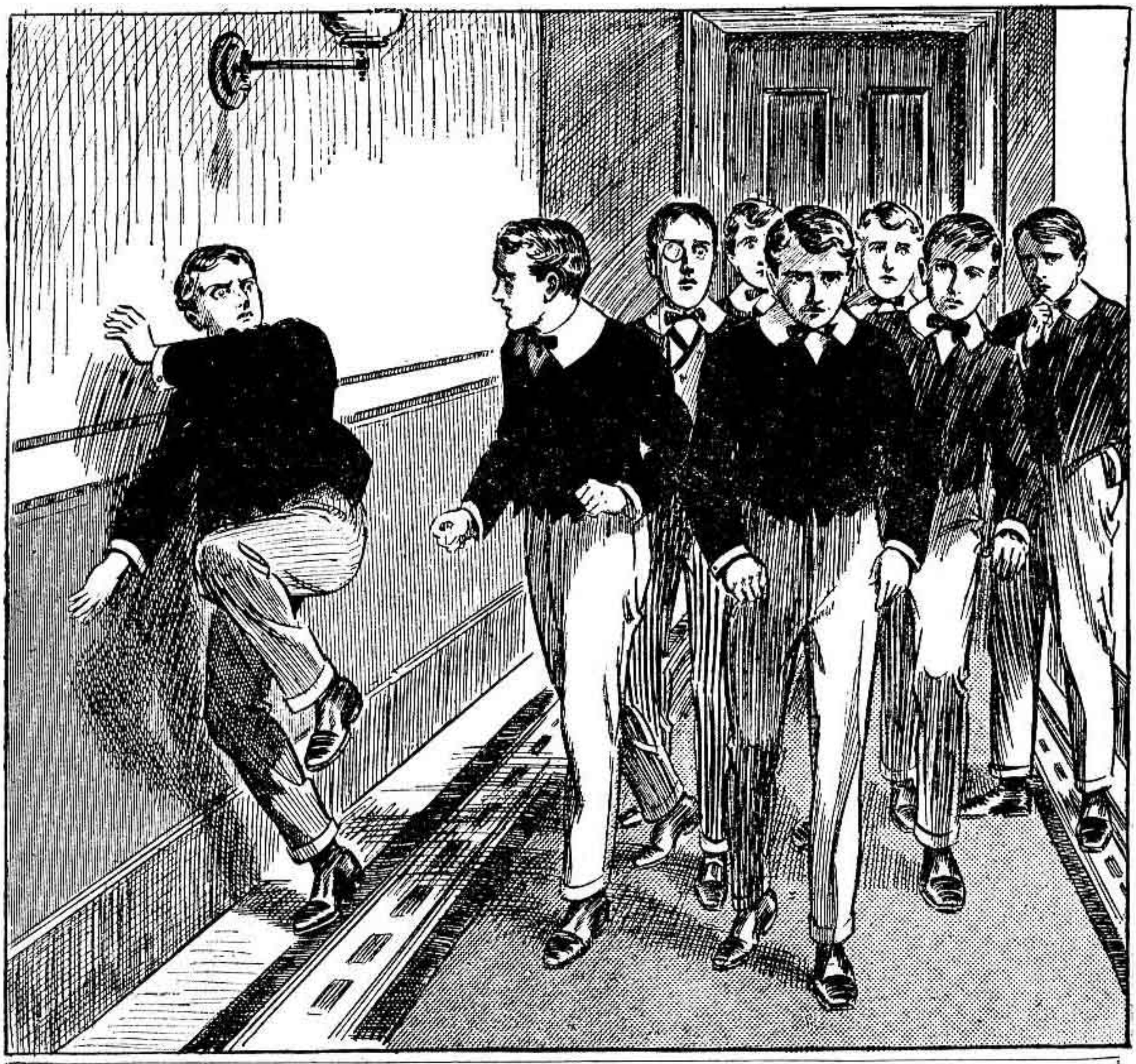
The colonel clenched his hand hard.

"It looks only too likely!" he exclaimed. "St. Jim's did not produce thieves in my time, I know. But I shall see the Head about it." He rose to his feet. "Let us have a look round the school now, Gerald."

They left the visitors' room, Crooke finding it hard work to conceal his delight. He had succeeded far better than he had dared to hope. Talbot would yet have cause to repent that hasty blow.

A crowd of fellows in flannels were going down to the cricket ground. Colonel Lyndon glanced at them with a somewhat kindly eye. An old St. Jim's boy himself, the sight of the young cricketers awakened old associations, and the grim frown faded from his brow.

"Is there a match on this afternoon, Gerald?" he asked.



"Sacked, what?" Crooke of the Shell asked the jeering question, as Talbot came down the passage, his head erect, his face pale but quite calm. Tom Merry shoved the cad of the Shell aside, so forcibly that Crooke staggered and fell against the wall. (*See Chapter* 13.)

"Only a Form match—single innings," said Crooke carelessly.

"Are you playing?"

That was the question Crooke had dreaded. If Talbot had served his turn he would have been able to reply in the affirmative.

"No, uncle."

"You don't play cricket?" growled his uncle.

"Yes, I do—rather!" said Crooke, trying to infuse enthusiasm into his manner. "I'm pretty keen on the game. But kissing goes by favour, you know. There's a place in the team I ought to have, but Talbot's got it. He gets a show every time. I don't say I'm as good a cricketer as he is; but a chap ought to have a chance sometimes. But the cricket captain has chummed with him, and Talbot can make him do anything he likes."

"Who is the cricket captain?"

"That fellow yonder with a bat under his arm—Tom Merry."

Colonel Lyndon glanced at Tom Merry, who was going out of the School House with Manners and Lowther. His grim face relaxed still more. Tom Merry, in his flannels, with a healthy flush in his face, fit as a fiddle, upstanding as a young pine, was a specimen of British boyhood that it was good to look upon.

"A fine-looking lad!" said the colonel.

"Oh, he's all right!" said Crooke. "That fellow Talbot works on his good-nature. He's too good-natured to say 'No' to anybody."

If Crooke had cast any reflections upon Tom Merry, a single glance at the sunny face of the captain of the Shell would have refuted them. But Tom certainly did look very good-natured, and the colonel nodded. It was easy enough to believe that that kind, good-natured schoolboy was imposed upon by a cunning character.

"Let us see them play," said Colonel Lyndon. "I shall be glad to see a game on the old ground again."

And Crooke dutifully piloted his uncle to Little Side.

CHAPTER 10.
A Strange Recognition.

TOM MERRY & CO. were in high spirits that afternoon. "Old Railton" was back again, and it was understood that he was coming down to see the Form match. The heroes of the School House felt that they would play the game of their lives under the eyes of their old Housemaster. As Arthur Augustus remarked, they would show him that they had not deteriorated while he was away in Flanders fighting the Huns.

As it was a Form match, the fellows of both Houses were mingled in both teams. Figgins, of the New House, captained the Fourth Form side, and his team consisted of

Blake, Herries, Digby, D'Arcy, Reilly, Kerr, Fatty Wynn, Redfern, Owen, and Koumi Rao.

Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell, had selected Manners, Lowther, Talbot, Gore, Kangaroo, Glyn, Dane, Thompson, and two more New House fellows.

Figgins had won the toss, and elected to bat, and Tom Merry & Co. were going into the field when Mr. Railton appeared.

The School House master came down to the ground with a cheery smile on his face, his left arm—shattered by a Hun bullet—reposing in its sling. It was likely to be a long time before Mr. Railton had the use of that arm again—if, indeed, it was ever again what it had been. The Housemaster had been a keen cricketer, but the Huns had stopped cricket for him. That was part of the price he paid for doing his duty to King and country, and he did not grudge it. "Discharged incapacitated" was the last sentence in Sergeant Railton's military history. He was no longer a soldier. But the St. Jim's fellows were prouder of him with that broken arm than if he had come home with a crowd of medals gleaming on his breast.

Whether "old Railton" had killed any Huns was a deep and interesting question among the juniors. Imaginative youths depicted him charging down on the shrinking barbarians, on a snorting war-horse, with sabre waving high—a really stirring picture, that was completely destroyed when it was recalled that Mr Railton had been in the infantry. He had, in fact, just "blazed away" with the other gallant Tommies, and, as he was known to be a crack shot, it was fairly certain that he had accounted for some at least of the surly followers of the Imperial Poisoner. But the juniors would have dearly loved to hear all the details.

The whole cricket-field burst into a cheer as Mr. Railton came up and joined Colonel Lyndon by the ropes. Mr. Railton nodded and smiled. Public demonstrations were not much to his taste, but he could not help being moved by the genuine satisfaction of the whole school at his return into their midst.

The field took their places, and Figgins and Blake went on to open the innings for the Fourth. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood resting his hand on his beautiful bat as he waited for his turn.

"Cwooke's bwought his uncle heah, deah boys!" the swell of St. Jim's remarked to the other waiting batsmen. "The old johnny appeahs to take an intewest in cwicket!"

"Not much like his nephew, then!" said Kerr.

"He can't be a bad sort, weally!" said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "He mucked up the weception a little by spottin' that it was a wotten German band. But he can't weally be a bad sort, considewin'."

"Considering what?" growled Herries. Herries was not in a good humour. The reception had been doubly mucked up, in Herries's opinion, for somebody had hidden his celebrated cornet just before the army started for the station, and Herries had hunted high and low for it in vain. Herries was firmly of opinion that if he had had his cornet there the reception would have been a marked success.

"Considewin' the way he chums up with Wailton, I mean, Hewwies."

Herries glared.

"Why, you fathead! Isn't it an honour to him, or to anybody, to know Railton?" he demanded.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then what the deuce are you driving at?" asked Digby warmly.

"Fathead!" said Reilly. "Sure it's a duffer ye are. Kitchener himself might be proud to know Railton."

"Yaas, but——"

"Oh, rats!"

"Pway allow me to finish my wemarks, deah boys! Wailton was a non-commissioned officah in the Loamshires, and the colonel is a commissioned officah. Therefore it would be impossible for them to chum up while in the wanks. It shows that the colonel cannot be a snob, or he would not have chummed with him."

"I suppose a St. Jim's Housemaster is as good as any blessed colonel, or general either," said Herries.

"Yaas; bettah, deah boy. But the colonel didn't know him as a Housemastah, but as a pwivate soldiah, and if he had been a snob——"

"Well, he looks a tartar, but not a snob," said Digby. "Not the kind of uncle to make you feel gay when he comes to see you. Crooke seems to look pretty chirpy, though, black eye and all."

"Tip in prospect, perhaps," remarked Fatty Wynn. "They say the colonel's rolling in money. If Crooke stands a feed after his uncle's gone, I think we might be decent to him. After all, a fellow can't be all bad when he has a relation at the front."

"And when he stands a feed," grinned Digby.

"Hallo! Talbot's bowling."

All eyes were on Talbot as he went to the crease for the second over. Glances generally turned on Talbot of the Shell when he was on the cricket-field, whatever he was doing there.

"He won't shift Blake in a huwwy, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus.

But Arthur Augustus was mistaken. Jack Blake's luck was out, and he had only taken 2 when Talbot had his wicket.

Blake came out, looking a little glum.

"Look out for that bounder, Dig," he said. "He's in topping form. He's taken my wicket. Nothing to grin at, you fathead!"

Digby went in, and his comrades watched him with some anxiety. Talbot was certainly bowling in his best style. But Dig survived the over, and then the field crossed, and Kangaroo was put on to bowl against Figgins.

It had leaked out that Colonel Lyndon was an Old Boy of St. Jim's, and that fact made the juniors feel more kindly towards him, in spite of his unsympathetic attitude at the great reception. Certainly the colonel seemed to be taking a keen interest in the junior cricketers.

He watched the field in silence for some time, scanning one fellow after another. The shout of "Well bowled, Talbot!" that followed the fall of Blake's wicket had made him start a little.

"Is that Talbot," he asked, turning to his nephew—"the bowler?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Huh!"

The colonel watched the bowler after that scrutinisingly. In spite of his prejudices he could not help being favourably impressed by his looks.

The handsome, athletic lad, whose whole soul was evidently in the game he was playing, and who was plainly a general favourite, did not look much like the kind of boy Crooke had described.

Yet in his main facts Crooke must have been right, the colonel knew that. And if Talbot's past had been so black, who could say that his present was not a cunning pretence—a continuation of his past, in fact, under another guise? Such a lad must have been accustomed to playing many parts. Who could say that he was not now playing another cunning role for his own ends?

"This boy was here in your time, Railton?" the colonel asked, turning to the School House master.

"Talbot? Oh, yes! I have not been away long, you know," said Mr. Railton, with a smile. "The Germans cut short my usefulness very early."

"He is in your House, I understand."

"Yes; and a credit to the House!"

"A credit to the House!" repeated the colonel. "I have heard something concerning him which points to his being anything but a credit to his House, or to the school. You know his story, of course?"

Mr. Railton's brow clouded.

"His story is known to all the school," he replied. "I suppose some tattling tongue has acquainted you with it, colonel."

Crooke reddened.

"I have heard about him," said Colonel Lyndon shortly. "It was my nephew, sir, who acquainted me with the history of that boy."

"Ahem!"

"My nephew told me, naturally enough. His present disgraceful appearance is due to an attack from the hands of that boy Talbot."

"I was not here at the time, of course," said Mr. Railton. "But I can say that Talbot is a most peaceful lad, and not in the slightest degree quarrelsome. Probably there was provocation. Boys will be boys, you know, and a fight between two juniors is not, after all, a serious offence."

"According to my nephew, this boy Talbot attacked him without provocation, and deliberately disfigured him, as you see him, knowing that I was visiting him to-day."

Crooke shifted uncomfortably. That story was good enough for the colonel, a stranger to the school, but it would hardly do for Mr. Railton. The Housemaster shot a quick disapproving glance at the cad of the Shell.

"I am quite certain that Crooke is mistaken in making that assertion, colonel," said Mr. Railton quietly. "I am assured that Talbot would do nothing of the kind. It would not be at all like him."

"You appear to have a high opinion of that unfortunate boy."

"That is true. The manly way in which he has fought his way up, and succeeded in spite of his misfortunes, has earned him a high opinion from everyone who knows him."

"Huh!"

Colonel Lyndon was silent, and he resumed watching Talbot. As an old cricketer he could not help admiring the bowler. Talbot was showing at his best, and there were loud cheers when another wicket fell to him.

"A good cricketer, at least," said the colonel grudgingly. "I think I have seen that boy before somewhere, Mr. Railton. I should like to see him nearer."

"I will call him."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was next man in, and he was adjusting his gloves. This always took the Honourable Arthur Augustus some little time, during which the field had to wait. Talbot was chatting with Tom Merry, while the fieldsmen yawned. He had not once glanced towards Colonel Lyndon—indeed, Tom wondered whether Talbot knew that the old soldier was there.

"Railton's beckoning to you, Talbot!" called out Monty Lowther.

Talbot glanced round. Mr. Railton was signing to him from the ropes. For a moment the Shell fellow hesitated.

"Cut along!" said Tom Merry. "We've got to wait for Gussy, anyway."

Talbot nodded and started for the spot where the Housemaster stood with the grim, bronzed veteran. Colonel Lyndon's eyes were fixed upon him as he approached, though Talbot did not seem to see it. He appeared oblivious of the existence of the colonel.

A curious expression came over the bronzed face as Talbot came nearer. Hitherto the colonel had only seen him from a distance.

His eyes seemed to fasten themselves on the handsome, flushed face as the Shell fellow stopped just inside the field of play.

"By gad!" cried the colonel. "Boy, where have I seen you before? Do you hear me? Where have I seen you?"

CHAPTER 11.

Trouble for Talbot.

THERE was a slight buzz among the St. Jim's fellows close at hand. The crowd was thick round the ropes, and a dozen or more fellows had heard the colonel's strange exclamation and noted the startled look upon the hard, bronzed face.

Colonel Lyndon started towards the junior as he spoke, scanning his face as if he would read his very soul.

Talbot looked at the colonel at last. He could not ignore him further. But he seemed in no hurry to reply.

"You know Talbot, sir?" exclaimed Mr. Railton in surprise.

The colonel compressed his lips.

"I do not know his name," he said, "but I know his face. Do you hear me, boy? Where have I seen you?"

"Answer Colonel Lyndon, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, a little sharply.

"I do not think Colonel Lyndon has ever seen me before, sir," said Talbot, speaking to the Housemaster. "I have certainly never seen him."

"Nonsense!" rapped out the colonel. "How could I know your face perfectly well if I had never seen you?"

Talbot did not answer that. Apparently he could give the colonel no information, or else he did not choose to do so.

"I have seen you before," said Colonel Lyndon, still scanning Talbot's face. "You tell me you have never seen me?"

"Never, sir!" said Talbot, driven to speaking directly to the colonel at last.

"Then it is very curious—very curious indeed," snapped the colonel. His manner indicated that he did not believe Talbot's statement, and the junior understood that well enough, and his cheeks burned.

Mr. Railton understood it, too, and his brows contracted. He had a great regard and respect for the colonel, whose good qualities he had reason to know. But there was a glint of something like anger in his eyes now.

"You may rely absolutely upon Talbot's statement, Colonel Lyndon," he said, a tone of sharpness creeping into his voice. "If Talbot had ever seen you before, he would tell you so at once."

"That is so, sir," said Talbot.

"Doubtless it is some resemblance to another person——"

"I have seen that boy somewhere, though I cannot recall where," said the colonel icily. "I have not only seen him, but I have known him—every feature in his face is perfectly familiar to me, and even the tone of his voice. I have seen him, and I have heard him speak. How that can have happened without his seeing me, I do not profess to understand."

Talbot's flush deepened.

Arthur Augustus had arrived at the wicket at last, and was ready for the over. The fieldsmen were gathering nearer to Talbot, however, surprised by the strange scene. Talbot could not very well be recalled while in talk with the Housemaster and the distinguished visitor, and the game had to wait. Tom Merry did not feel inclined to go on a fieldsman short. He glanced at Figgins, and Figgins nodded. They waited.

Colonel Lyndon seemed to have completely forgotten that a game of cricket was in progress at all.

His last words had reached the ears of Tom Merry & Co., and Tom's eyes began to gleam. Crooke's uncle was deliberately casting doubt upon Talbot's word, and that was more than enough to make Tom angry.

As for Crooke, he was listening in sheer amazement. Chance was turning in his favour in the oddest way. The colonel's extraordinary idea that he knew Talbot, and that the Shell fellow was attempting to deceive him on the point, was about the best thing that could have happened—from Crooke's peculiar point of view. Not that Crooke believed that his uncle was right—for how could he had known, or seen, the Toff, in the Toff's old days? Crooke's opinion—not expressed, of course—was that the old duffer had made a bloomer. But that "bloomer" helped on his case against Talbot, by adding to the colonel's prejudice.

The silence that followed the colonel's words was painful in the extreme. Sympathetic glances were cast towards Talbot by his chums, and they looked very grimly at the old soldier. What the deuce did he mean by calling Talbot a liar before all St. Jim's, Tom Merry wondered savagely. Respect for the Head's guest, and for the khaki, prevented the juniors from uttering thoughts — which would have startled the colonel if they had been uttered.

It was Talbot who broke the silence. He did not look towards the colonel.

"May I return to the game, sir?" he asked Mr. Railton. "The field is waiting."

"Remain where you are!" snapped out the colonel, and Mr. Railton made the junior a sign to obey, angry and puzzled as he was.

Talbot did not stir.

"You must be mistaken, Colonel Lyndon," said the Housemaster. "It is a case of some resemblance. At all events, it is a matter of no consequence, I suppose."

"It may be of the greatest consequence, Mr. Railton. I know this boy's history, and I presume that he is admitted to this school on the understanding that he is a reformed character. Not that I, as a governor of the school, should approve of his admission here in any case. But it does not point to reform, sir, that he denies what I am positive must have been the case—the boy must have some motive for denying what is certainly the truth."

Tom Merry's lips opened, but he closed them again, choking back the hot words he would have uttered.

Talbot's cheeks were burning.

"You have cast doubt upon my word, Colonel Lyndon," he said, a throb of passionate indignation in his voice. "Mr. Railton, may I go? I must not answer Colonel Lyndon as I should like to answer him."

"You may return to your game, Talbot," said Mr. Railton.

The colonel made a gesture, as if to detain Talbot. The Shell fellow took not the slightest notice of it. He turned his back upon the colonel, and walked to his place in the field.

His cheeks were burning, but otherwise he was quite cool. But his chums were hot with indignation. The insult to the popular junior had been so open and unprovoked; though they could surmise that Crooke had already been poisoning his uncle's mind against Talbot.

"The brute!" Tom Merry muttered to Lowther. "To go for old Talbot like that—for nothing! What has Talbot done to him?"

"Must be cranky," said Lowther. "I suppose Talbot looks like somebody he's seen somewhere, that's all. Where does the old duffer think he's seen him, and what does it matter, anyway?"

"It's a rotten shame."

"Rotten," agreed Lowther.

Thompson had gone on to bowl, and the game was resumed. Many glances were turned on Talbot curiously, as the game proceeded—not so much to watch his cricket now, as to note what effect the colonel's talk had had on him.

Apparently there was no effect. Talbot was in as good form as ever, at all events. He appeared to have dismissed the colonel from his mind, and to be devoting his whole attention to his duties in the field. There was a loud shout as Arthur Augustus, swiping the ball away in his well-known style, swiped it into Talbot's palm, and it was held.

"Well caught, Talbot!"

"Bravo!"

The St. Jim's fellows gave Talbot a thundering cheer, less on account of the catch than for the benefit of Colonel Lyndon. The whole crowd were aware in a few minutes of what had passed, for twenty or more fellows had heard every word, and the juniors wanted to show the colonel that, whatever he thought of Talbot, they regarded him as the right sort. There was a general feeling that they were "up against" the grim-faced man in khaki, backing up old Talbot against an undeserved attack.

So the cheers rang out loud and long, and were repeated, as if that somewhat easy catch had been the catch of the season.

Talbot understood, and he smiled. Colonel Lyndon understood, and he frowned. The most remarkable circumstance was, that from the batsman who had been caught out there came a ringing "Huwway!" Arthur Augustus had caught what was on, and he was almost pleased to be caught out, in order to have an opportunity of testifying publicly his high opinion of old Talbot.

Colonel Lyndon tugged at his white moustache.

"That young fellow seems to be generally popular, Mr. Railton," he remarked.

"Deservedly so, in my opinion," said Mr. Railton.

"Notwithstanding his past?"

"Because of his past, I should say—that is to say, because of the noble struggle he made in extricating himself from such miserable surroundings."

"Yes—if he has done so," said the colonel grimly. "But what evidence is there that he is not simply playing a part here?"

"His general conduct."

"Which may be deceptive."

"Impossible, in my opinion."

"A leopard cannot change his spots, nor an Ethiopian his skin," said the colonel.

"Talbot is neither a leopard nor an Ethiopian," said Mr. Railton. "He is just a decent British lad, who was brought up amongst unscrupulous rascals, and turned to the right path at the first opportunity. Do you think, sir, that the King's pardon would have been bestowed upon him for nothing? He risked, and almost lost his life, in saving a troop train from disaster. Five hundred gallant fellows owed their lives to what he did that night."

"That proves nothing as to his character. I have been a soldier for twenty years and more, Mr. Railton, and I have frequently noticed that desperate deeds of bravery have been performed by men of bad character."

"I do not deny it. But in Talbot's case I am convinced that reform is complete—in fact, I am certain that in his evil days he was acting against his nature, and that he was never really his true self until he had found the right path."

"Yet he has lied to me."

"I cannot think so."

"But I tell you, Mr. Railton, that I know the boy perfectly well, though I cannot recall where I have seen him. But I can guess," added the colonel grimly. "He may have come before me—as a magistrate. That would account for his disinclination to admit that he has seen me before to-day."

"He has nothing to fear from telling the truth. The pardon he received from the Government covers all the past."

"True—yet he may have good reasons for wishing to conceal some of the circumstances of his past—especially if his present conduct is merely a trick, and designed to deceive."

"If you knew him better, you would not think so, sir."

"I intend to know him better," said Colonel Lyndon.

And with a nod to Mr. Railton, he walked away from the cricket-ground. A shout rang in his ears as he went:

"Well bowled, Talbot! Bravo!"

CHAPTER 12.
Loyal Chums.

"BAI Jove, a wathah surpwisin' wesult."

That was Arthur Augustus' comment upon the result of the Form match. The Shell had won hands down.

In the Shell innings Fatty Wynn's bowling had been as deadly as usual, but the Fourth had not been able to keep down the runs. Talbot was batting in his best style, well backed up by Tom Merry and Kangaroo and Lowther, and the runs had piled up. The Shell had two wickets to spare at the finish, and they did not agree with Arthur Augustus that the result was surprising at all. But Study No. 6 and Figgins & Co. agreed in regarding it as surprising.

Truth to tell, Tom Merry was thinking less of the cricket win than of other matters. As a rule, all other considerations were banished from his mind when cricket reigned. But now he had to think of Talbot—and Talbot's prospects. For it had been driven into his mind that the colonel in khaki constituted a danger for his chum.

Talbot understood it, too, though he said nothing. After the match Talbot disappeared quietly, probably wishing to escape remarks upon the strange scene that had passed during the match. The Terrible Three went into Study No. 6 to tea, and also to talk over what had happened, and what might follow.

They were anxious for Talbot.

The one-time Toff had weathered many storms, but all the clouds had rolled by, and, excepting for a few carping fellows like Crooke, he had won all hearts. Poor he certainly was, but his scholarship and the allowance attached to it maintained him quite comfortably at St. Jim's. His position had seemed unassailable.

One after another his enemies had been silenced. Levison of the Fourth, once his bitter foe, was one of his most loyal friends; Gore, his surly study-mate, was devoted to him. Fellows good, bad, and indifferent all liked Talbot, and pulled well with him.

The old gang amid whom his early years had been passed had vanished. The Professor was fighting in Flanders, a corporal in Kitchener's Army. Hookey Walker was leading a new life in a new land beyond the sea. The rest of the gang had been scattered far and wide—the rookery in Angel Alley knew them no more.

It had seemed that the Toff was safe from the waywardness of Fortune at last—so long as he was true to himself.

Yet another danger had arisen, and from a quarter he could never have suspected. The colonel was a governor of the school, and his influence was great. He seemed to have taken a dislike to Talbot at first sight, or else he had imbibed a bitter prejudice from his nephew.

He had stated, where twenty fellows could hear him, his opinion that Talbot ought not to be at St. Jim's; and that could only mean that he intended to use his influence to have him removed from the school. With such an opinion firmly fixed in his mind, his grim sense of duty must lead him further.

What would be the result?

When the chums of the School House came in to tea they knew that the colonel was shut up with the Head in his study. They could guess easily enough what was the subject of his conversation with Dr. Holmes.

"He's wunnin' down old Talbot to the Head," said Arthur Augustus, more in sorrow than in anger. "I am surpwised at him! If he had any sense, you know, he would know that Talbot was all wight!"

"We're going to back up Talbot," remarked Blake rather vaguely.

The juniors were all agreed that they were going to back up Talbot—though what form the backing-up was to take, against a governor of the school, was not clear.

"Suppose we give Crooke a jolly good ragging?" suggested Herries, whose ideas were always of an energetic variety. "He must have told his uncle lies about Talbot."

"The truth was bad enough, if he told it," said Tom Merry quietly. "We know Talbot is all right, because we know what a splendid chap he is; but his history would have a different effect on a stranger."

"But if the Head's satisfied, I don't see that this old johnny has any right to find fault," said Blake.

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus warmly. "Besides, my patah is a governah of the school, and he is satisfied with Talbot. He wecommended him to the Board for his scholahship. If the colonel cuts up wusty I shall spwing my patah on him."

"Yes, it would do some good if Lord Eastwood chipped in," said Tom Merry. "I don't quite see what old Ramrod can do. But I know he means mischief. He means to get Talbot shifted out of the school if he can."

"Blessed rotter!" growled Herries.

"Let us be just, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus mildly. "He is not a wottah! No man is a wottah who has fought the Huns and stood up for the Empire. He is actin' fwom a mistaken sense of dutay."

"Bit potty, I should say," remarked Lowther. "Perhaps he got sunstroke or something out there. What can have put it into his noddle that he knows Talbot? Talbot wouldn't deny it if it were true."

"Of course he wouldn't. Case of mistaken identity," said Manners.

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows.

"That's queer, too. Talbot isn't a chap that you see the like of every day; he's a bit out of the common," he remarked.

"That's so," agreed Lowther. "Now, there are dozens and dozens just like Gussy, f'rinstance——"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"And heaps and heaps like Blake."

"You silly ass!"

"But we're a bit more distinguished in the Shell," said Lowther imperturbably. "You don't see fellows like us every day."

"Not outside the Zoo!" growled Blake.

"Why, you fathead——" began Lowther.

"Oh, don't be funny!" implored Digby. "Keep it for the 'Weekly,' Lowther, old man! Hallo! Come in, fathead!"

This was addressed to the door, upon which a tap had sounded.

The juniors looked round, expecting to see Talbot; but it was Toby.

"Master Talbot 'ere?" asked Toby. "I've looked in 'is study, and he ain't there."

"Is Talbot wanted?"

"Yes; in the 'Ead's study, Master Merry."

"Is Colonel Lyndon there?"

"Yes, sir; and Mr. Railton, too, lookin' hawful worried," said Toby confidentially. "Which I 'ope it ain't a row for Master Talbot. But he's wanted."

"He's striking the iron while it's hot," said Blake, with a grimace. "All serene, Toby! Leave it to us; we'll find Talbot, and tell him."

"Yes, Master Blake."

Tea was unfinished in Study No. 6, but the juniors did not think much about tea just then. They wanted to see Talbot before he went in to the Head and assure him of their loyal support.

The seven juniors quitted the study and proceeded to look for Talbot.

Talbot was not easy to find; but they ran him down at last in the old tower. He was seated there on a mass of old masonry, with a book on his knees, and a pencil in his hand—"mugging up" Latin in the sunset. His handsome face was very grave, but he looked up with a smile as they came up.

"We expected you to tea," said Blake. "But never mind tea now. You're wanted in the Head's study."

Talbot closed his book and rose.

"I expected it," he said quietly.

"It looks like trouble, old man," said Tom Merry, as they walked towards the School House. "The old johnny has a down on you."

"I know."

"You've got to stick to your guns," said Tom anxiously. "The whole school will back you up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Colonel Lyndon is a governor of St. Jim's," said Talbot, in his quiet voice. "If he makes a set against me it will be hard. He seems satisfied that I am a liar, and it will be easy enough for him to believe worse if he believes that."

"But can't you explain somehow?" asked Lowther. "He thinks he has seen you, and we know he hasn't, as you say so. He must have seen somebody like you——"

"Yes."

"You think that's the case?"

"I know it is."

"You know!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Then—then you can explain it all, and he will see that he has made a mistake."

Talbot's jaw set squarely.

"I shall explain nothing to Colonel Lyndon, and ask no favours at his hands," he said. "If I were sinking in the sea I would not take his hand to pull me out. Let him do as he chooses."

"But—but if he is mistaken——" muttered Tom. "Talbot, old man, a lot may depend on this. He's got a lot of influence."

"Let him use it as he likes. The first time he saw me he insulted me before a crowd of fellows," said Talbot bitterly. "It's what I should have expected of him. If he drives me from St. Jim's, that's what I should have expected, too. But if my staying here depended on him, I would not ask him."

Tom was silent. He remembered what Talbot had told him before—of some strange connection between him and the colonel, though they had never met. It was a mystery he could not comprehend, and which Talbot evidently was not inclined to explain. The bitterness in Talbot's tone was a surprise to the juniors, too. He had often had more than enough to try his temper, but they had never seen him bitter before. It was clear that the colonel's feelings towards him were fully reciprocated by the Toff.

"But—but you won't go," said Tom at last, as they reached the School House. "That's what he wants. You've a right here, Talbot, and they can't make you go if you don't choose. You've got to think of us, you know."

Talbot nodded.

"I know what my rights are, and I shall stand up for them," he said. "Thank you for standing by me as you're doing. I sha'n't go if I can help it. You can depend on that."

"Stick to that, old chap."

Crooke of the Shell was standing in the hall, and he smiled as Talbot left his friends and hurried towards the Head's study. It was not a pleasant smile. It told of the triumph which the cad of the Shell regarded now as secure.

Tom Merry clenched his hands, and unclenched them again. It was of little use to black Crooke's other eye. He turned his back on the black sheep of the Shell, and waited.

CHAPTER 13.

Talbot Goes Through It.

TALBOT entered the Head's study with a firm step.

Dr. Holmes was seated at his table, with a troubled frown on his brow. Mr. Railton stood by the window, also looking very troubled. The Housemaster's homecoming was not turning out wholly pleasant, after all. Colonel Lyndon seemed destined to cast a shadow upon it from every point of view.

The colonel's face was like iron. From under his shaggy brows he shot a glance at Talbot of suspicion and dislike.

Talbot did not look at him. The colonel might have been a piece of furniture in the study so far as Talbot was concerned. He looked at the Head, seemingly totally unconscious of the colonel's existence.

"You sent for me, sir?" His voice was clear and calm. There was trouble ahead, and he knew it. But trouble and the Toff were old acquaintances.

"Yes, my boy," said the Head kindly. "I sent for you at the request of Colonel Lyndon. You are probably aware that Colonel Lyndon is a governor of the school. My dear boy, you must not think for one moment that my opinion of you has changed in the slightest degree. But I have no choice but to listen to what Colonel Lyndon tells me, and to satisfy him. I hope that I shall be able to do so. That this will be a painful ordeal for you, Talbot, I am aware, and I am sorry. But it is unavoidable."

"I am at your orders, sir!"

"Colonel Lyndon has become acquainted with your history, Talbot. He is naturally surprised that a junior of St. Jim's has such a history, but I have endeavoured to acquaint him with the extenuating circumstances. However, he prefers to hear your explanation from your own lips. As a governor of the school he has a right to question you, and to satisfy himself, of course. You understand that?"

"Certainly, sir!"

The Head's manner was kindness itself. Talbot could see that it was much against his will that he was acceding to the wishes of the grim old gentleman in khaki. But there was little choice in the matter for the Head. The circumstances of the case were unusual enough, and the colonel's surprise and displeasure were not unnatural, stranger as he was to Talbot and to all that told in his favour.

"You will therefore answer all the questions the colonel puts to you, Talbot," said Dr. Holmes. "You will oblige me in this way, my boy."

"I will do anything you wish, sir," said Talbot.

"Look me in the face, boy!" said the colonel harshly.

Talbot raised his eyes, and looked calmly and steadily at the grim, bronzed face. If the colonel had expected to find fear or uneasiness in his look, he was disappointed.

Indeed, there was a gleam in the junior's eyes that told rather of scorn than of fear. The colonel's jaw set harder.

"Your name is Talbot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it your real name?"

There was a pause before Talbot replied.

"It is the name I bear," he replied at last.

"Have you a right to it?"

"I have a right to it!"

"What I mean is, was it your father's name?"

"It was his name, but not his surname."

"What was his surname?"

"That name has been covered with disgrace," said Talbot, his voice trembling a little for the first time. "For that reason I do not bear it. Neither do I wish it to be known. I have the right to say nothing about it. I do not conceal any of the facts of my history. They are as black as anyone could suppose them. But my father's name does not concern anyone but myself."

"I understand that he was known as Captain Crow?"

"Yes."

"Crow was not his name?"

"It was a nickname."

"He was not a captain?"

"He was captain of a gang of cracksmen, thieves, and forgers."

Talbot's voice was quite steady now. Mr. Railton stared

miserably out of the window into the green quad, shimmering in the red light of the sunset. He knew what Talbot was suffering at that moment, as the Head knew. The colonel seemed to know nothing.

"Your father is dead?"

"He is dead."

"Lately, or long ago?"

"A considerable time ago."

"In what manner?"

"Colonel Lyndon!" murmured the Head. The Head had seen the moisture that started, in spite of himself, to Talbot's eyes. Outcast and criminal as "Captain Crow" had been, he had never lost the affection of his son, and he was not forgotten. The Head's kind nature shrank from the torture the colonel was inflicting upon the boy. But Colonel Lyndon did not seem to hear the murmured protest.

"He received injuries in a struggle," said Talbot. "He died afterwards from them."

"A struggle with the police?"

"Yes."

"They were seeking, I suppose, to arrest him?"

"Yes."

"You had been a member of the gang of which he was the chief? You had helped him in his work against the law? You were brought up to do so?"

"Yes."

"And you did not know that it was wrong?"

Talbot paused.

"I cannot say that," he replied. "I suppose every wrong-doer knows that he is doing wrong. As soon as I was old enough to think for myself, I knew that it was wrong."

"Yet you never left it?"

"While my father lived I could not abandon him—at least, I never thought of doing so. I suppose I ought to have done so. But it is not easy to break with a training that commenced at childhood."

"But afterwards?"

"Afterwards, the gang made me their leader—boy as I was. I was useful to them. But, though I was leader, I was really in their hands. In truth, I was a tool, and fancied myself leader. The Professor was the real leader. But I conceal nothing. Many of the enterprises were planned by me, and carried out under my direction. I was a skilled cracksman, and I had a pleasure in exercising my skill. Then the danger and excitement of the life appealed to me. I had been taught to consider myself an Ishmael. It had been pointed out to me that the world is full of wrong and injustice. We robbed the rich, but we often gave to the poor. Many of those we robbed had made their money by stock operations that were little better than robbery, though not against the law. I do not say this as an excuse. I only say that this kind of reasoning appealed to my very young mind, trained on the wrong lines, and unaccustomed to distinguish between right and wrong. When the truth came home to me, I realised how wrong it was. That was when I came here. When I came, I found myself among honest and honourable fellows, who regarded a thief as one of the vilest things in existence, and a liar as little better, and it was as if I had recovered my sight after being a long time blind."

There was a simple eloquence in Talbot's words; he was speaking from his heart. The Head's kind eyes moistened. The colonel's face was as grim as ever. His experience had been a harder one than Dr. Holmes's.

"And then you reformed?" he asked.

"Not immediately. The new thoughts and feelings that came to me confused me at first. I was troubled and doubtful. In the gang, anything of that kind was only taken as a sign of softness, of cowardice. It seemed to me that I was weakening, that I was growing into a coward. I am ashamed now to say that I struggled at first against the change. But the change came, all the same. When it came it swept everything else away. From that time I determined to do nothing, to say nothing, that could disgrace me in the eyes of the fellows who liked me here. I have kept to that."

"Since then you have touched nothing that was not your own?"

Talbot winced.

"Nothing."

"And you have not, since then, lied, or pretended, or played a part?"

"Not since the truth came out. Since the Head knew me as I was, my conscience is clear. His kindness to me helped me."

"My dear boy, what kindness I have shown you has been more than repaid," said Dr. Holmes gently.

"You tell your story well," said Colonel Lyndon, with a curl of the lip. "But I have heard clever stories told before. Have you anything in the nature of a proof to offer, concerning this extraordinary reform?"

"I think so. At that time, I had loot in my hands to the value of thousands of pounds. It was restored to the rightful owners. I should now be working for my bread, but for Dr. Holmes's kindness in securing me a scholarship in the school. Now I have nothing but my scholarship allowance. I might say, too, that the Head's safe is at my mercy. There is no safe in the United Kingdom that I could not open if I chose—I have not touched it."

"I have been a magistrate," said the colonel drily. "I have known of a criminal restoring his plunder, and yet keeping in a secret place plunder that was not known of by the authorities."

Talbot crimsoned.

"I have only my word to give you," he said.

"The word of a boy who, on his own confession, was trained in crime, and obtained admission to this school in the first place by false pretences."

"Yes," said Talbot, in a low voice.

"And you expect that word to be taken?"

"Dr. Holmes has taken it. But once—when my miserable history caused suspicion to fall upon me unjustly—I had to leave St. Jim's. My friends found me afterwards, freezing and starving. If I had had concealed plunder to draw upon, I should not have frozen and starved in the streets of London last winter."

"That is conclusive," broke in Mr. Railton. "I saw Talbot when he was brought home as near to death as he could be, and live."

"Conclusive upon that point, perhaps," said the colonel grudgingly. "But upon all other points the question remains open. You are aware, boy, that in order to gain credit for your reform your conduct is required to be above suspicion. In any other boy a lie might be set down to a vicious nature, a vicious inclination, or carelessness, or many other causes. But a lie from you is an indication that your supposed reform is a mere pretence."

"I acknowledge that, sir."

"You lied to me to-day."

"I did not lie to you, Colonel Lyndon."

The colonel turned to Dr. Holmes.

"I have listened to this boy's story," he said. "All I can say of it is, that all that tells against him is clearly proved, even by his own admission; and all that tells in his favour rests upon supposition. Even upon his own story, I cannot consider him a suitable boy to remain in this school. But I have more to say than that. I accuse him of a deliberate attempt to deceive me. It is true that I cannot at the moment recall where I have seen him and known him. I think it was probably when I was on the Bench, and he was doubtless brought before me as a criminal. But that I have both seen him and heard him speak I am assured. His looks and his voice are perfectly familiar to me."

"You have neither seen me nor heard me speak!" said Talbot coldly.

"Do not interrupt me, boy. I have not the slightest doubt that this boy has been brought before me on the Bench, doubtless under some other name. He denies having seen me, and he must have a powerful motive for such an attempt at deceit. The only possible conclusion is that his reform is a pretence, and that he dare not recall to my mind the circumstances under which I have seen him before. Doubtless if they were known they would let in an unpleasant light upon his present conduct—would, in fact, prove that his present conduct is humbug, sir—sheer humbug—and that some of the statements he has made to you are as false as his denial of all knowledge of me."

The colonel's voice was harsh, and his eyes gleamed under his rough brows. His mind was evidently made up.

Dr. Holmes looked deeply distressed.

"Talbot," he said gently "try to recall, my boy, whether you have met Colonel Lyndon before."

"I have never met him before, sir."

"Have you ever, in your unfortunate early days, been brought before a magistrate at all?"

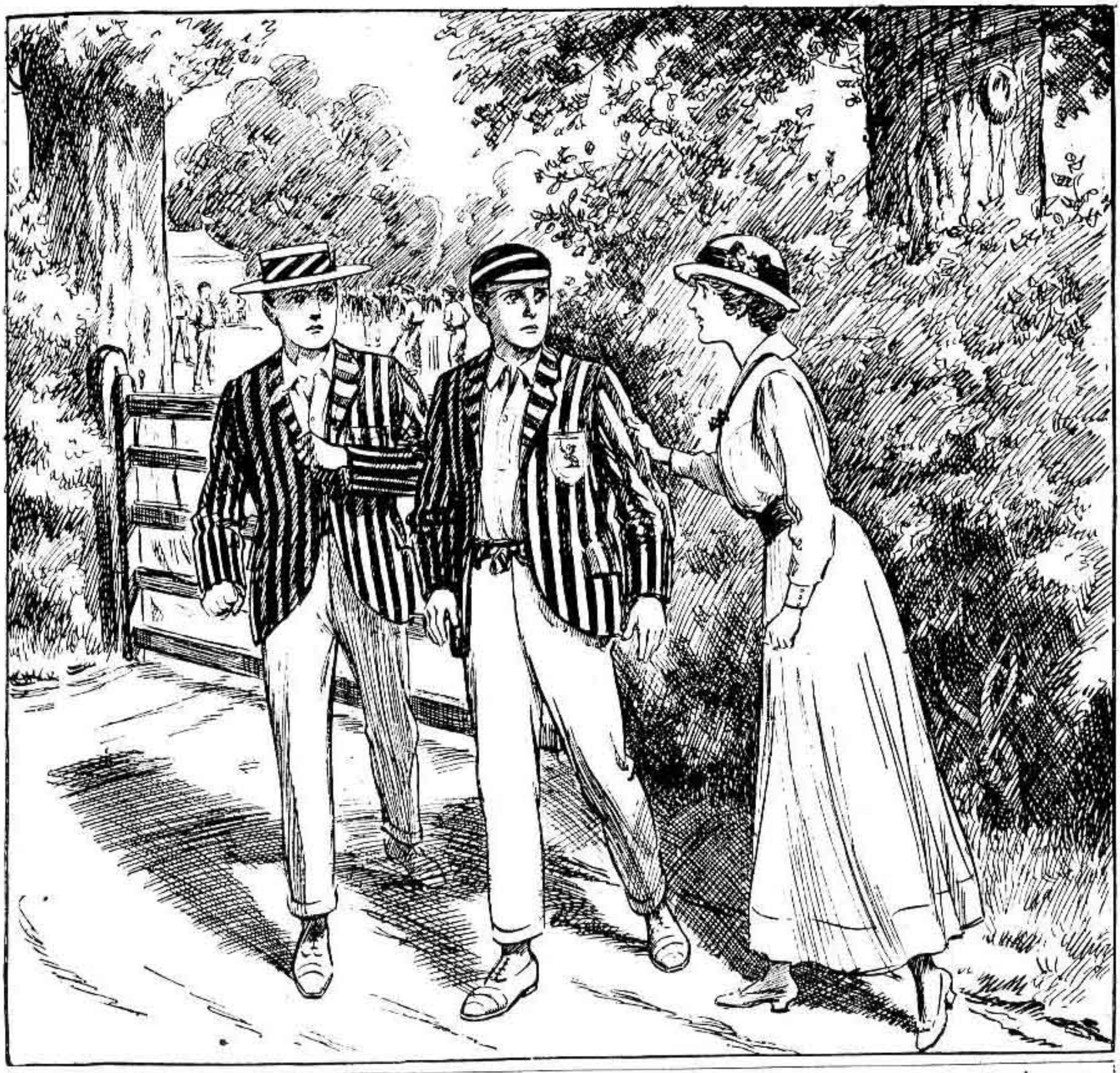
"Never once, sir."

"You have never been arrested or charged in any way?"

"Never, sir."

"Naturally he would say so!" snapped the colonel. "One lie backing up another does not cost anything. Dr. Holmes, you know me, and I give you my word that this boy is perfectly well known to me, and it can only be as a criminal that he has ever come under my knowledge. My fixed opinion is that he is playing a part here, and that his connection with the criminal classes is very far from being severed. I have my duty to do as a governor of the school. I am thankful that I have found out how you are being deceived, and I trust that your eyes are opened now—and yours, Mr. Railton."

"I cannot agree with you, Colonel Lyndon," said the



Talbot put on his blazer, and followed the captain of St. Jim's. A soft hand was laid on his arm, as he was quitting the cricket-ground. "Stop!" said Marie Rivers. (*See Chapter* 16.)

Head firmly. "I can only believe that some chance resemblance has deceived you."

"That is my opinion exactly," said Mr. Railton.

The colonel gnawed his underlip.

"Then I have my duty to do," he said. "I cannot tamely allow a boy whom I believe to be a confirmed criminal to remain in this school, where he may corrupt others. I shall call a meeting of the governors, and put the case before them in the strongest possible manner."

"You will do your duty, Colonel Lyndon, and I shall do mine," said the Head. "My duty, as I see it, is to trust this boy until he shall give me some reason to regard him with distrust."

"Thank you, sir!" said Talbot.

"Very well," said Colonel Lyndon, rising to his feet. "I am sorry to find myself in disagreement with you, Dr. Holmes—more sorry than I can say. I am sorry, too, that this unpleasant affair occurs on the day of your homecoming, Railton. But I have my duty to do, however unpleasant it may be, and I have never yet shrunk from a disagreeable duty."

The Head made a sign to Talbot, and the junior quitted the study.

. . . . . .

"Sacked—what!"

Crooke of the Shell asked the jeering question as Talbot came down the passage, his head erect, his face pale but quite calm.

Tom Merry shoved the cad of the Shell aside so forcibly that Crooke staggered and fell against the wall.

"What's happened, Talbot?"

"We're all backin' you up, deah boy—wemembah that."

"Talbot, what has the Head done?"

"Nothing," said Talbot. "Colonel Lyndon is going to call a meeting of the governors, and get me sent away from the school if he can. I am going to stay—if I can. That is all."

"The Head is backing you up?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Yes. He is a brick!"

"And Railton?"

"Yes."

"And you and I and all of us!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "It's all St. Jim's against Crooke and Crooke's uncle. Hang Crooke and bless his uncle!"

"You'll sing another tune soon!" said Crooke savagely. "Wait till——"

"Hallo! Must you chip in?" growled Blake. "Shut up!"

And as Blake accompanied the injunction with one of his celebrated left-handers, Crooke shut up promptly.

Colonel Lyndon came striding down the passage, his shaggy brows drawn tight together. Respect for the khaki and for the Head's guest kept the juniors silent, but never had they felt so inclined to give anyone a hearty groan. But the colonel had black looks as he strode away.

"I've got an ideah, dear boys," said Arthur Augustus, his noble eye glimmering behind his eyeglass. "It's St. Jim's

against the colonel, and I suggest that we show the colonel what St. Jim's thinks——"

"We can't rag the Head's guest, fathead!"

"I wefuse to be called a fathead, Blake, and I am not suggestin' waggin' the Head's guest. I am suggestin' a demonstwation. Get all the fellahs to turn out and give three cheahs for Talbot as the colonel dwives away."

"Good egg!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Don't!" exclaimed Talbot quickly. "Please don't! Better not——"

"Bow-wow!"

"Come on!"

"Gather up the clans!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The idea caught on like wildfire. Shell and Fourth and Third simply rose to Arthur Augustus's valuable suggestion. The word was passed round with electric swiftness. A tremendous crowd gathered in the quadrangle before the colonel was in the car. And as the Head's car glided down to the gates, with the grim old veteran sitting bolt-upright in it, there was a roar.

"Three cheers for Railton and three for Talbot!" shouted Tom Merry.

The old quadrangle rang with the roar that followed. The echo hurled it back from the ancient buildings.

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

Tom Merry jumped on an old oaken bench under the elms and waved his cap.

"Gentlemen, who's the best cricketer at St. Jim's—Lower Forms?"

"Talbot! Hurrah!"

"Who's one of the best fellows breathing?"

"Talbot! Bravo, Talbot!"

"Who's going to be backed up by the whole school so long as there's a shot in the locker?"

"Talbot of the Shell! Hurrah for Talbot!"

Which was, perhaps, very pleasant for Colonel Lyndon to hear as he drove away. His bronzed face gave no sign. But in the Head's study Dr. Holmes frowned a little, and then smiled, and Mr. Railton laughed heartily.

"The school has given its opinion, sir," he remarked. "I don't think Talbot will be molested after this."

CHAPTER 14.
An Expression of Opinion.

"FEEL fit, old chap?"

Tom Merry asked the question rather hesitatingly. Tom was in his flannels, and had his bat under his arm. Talbot of the Shell was also in flannels, and certainly he looked fit enough. His handsome face was a little graver than usual, that was all.

It was a sunny summer's afternoon, and that afternoon the Grammarians were coming over to play St. Jim's Juniors. Talbot of the Shell was a mighty man with both the willow and the leather, and he was the player whom Tom Merry could least have spared from the team.

But there was another event coming off that afternoon, as well as the Grammar School match—an event which transcended the cricket match in importance, even in the eyes of Tom Merry & Co.

It was a meeting of the governors of the school.

Not that meetings of the governing board, as a rule, troubled the juniors very much. Governors might come and go, without even a glance from the heroes of the Fourth Form and the Shell.

But the meeting that day was of unusual importance, and touched Tom Merry & Co. very closely. For upon the result of that meeting depended whether their chum, Talbot of the Shell, remained at St. Jim's, or whether he quitted the old school for ever.

Tom Merry, indeed, seemed more worried about it than Talbot himself. He had been inclined to scratch the cricket fixture, but that was scarcely feasible—other fellows had to be considered, to say nothing of the Grammarians. The match had to be played, but for once Tom Merry's heart was not in the cricket.

Unwilling as he would have been to lose Talbot's services, since the match had to be played, he was willing to excuse the Shell fellow if he wanted to stand out. Hence his anxious question.

But Talbot only smiled quietly.

"Fit as a fiddle," he replied.

"You feel up to playing?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Quite!"

"You know what's happening this afternoon?" said Manners.

"Of course!"

"And doesn't it worry you?" asked Tom, in wonder. "You don't look as if it does certainly."

"What's the good of worrying?" said Talbot quietly. "Whatever happens, I shall have to stand it. If the governors decide that I must go, I shall have to go. If they decide to let me stay, I shall stay. Anyway, it won't make any difference to the cricket. If it's to be my last match here, I shall be glad to have played in it."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Come on, old scout!" he said.

The four Shell fellows walked down to the cricket-ground. The rest of the junior eleven were there, as well as a crowd of other fellows, and they all looked a little curiously at Talbot.

They could not help wondering how he was taking it, and whether the anxiety of his position had any effect on his form.

That day Talbot of the Shell was the cynosure of all eyes at St. Jim's.

In the Form-room that morning fellows had looked at him, expecting to see some signs of inward trouble in his handsome face. But, apart from his grave expression, there was no other sign. Crooke, his old enemy, was grievously disappointed. He had fully expected to see Talbot looking downhearted, at least. He confided to his chum Mellish that the fellow had plenty of nerve; but added with satisfaction that that would soon be taken out of him.

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, had been markedly kind and considerate to Talbot that morning. But Talbot had gone through his lessons as usual. If a sense of trouble was weighing on his mind, he did not allow it to make any difference to his work.

At dinner, it was noted that he had not lost his appetite. The prospect of being called before the meeting of governors had not taken that away.

Now he was turning up to the cricket just as if nothing out of the common was to happen that afternoon. Certainly he had plenty of nerve.

"Feelin' all wight, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth, as the Shell fellows joined the crowd before the pavilion.

"Yes—why not?"

"Isn't it wathah a wowwy?"

Talbot smiled.

"Yes, a little. But it can't be helped."

"Bai Jove! If I had to go thwough it, I should be off my feed," confessed Arthur Augustus. "But wemembah that we are all backin' you up, deah boy!"

"Thanks!"

"And my patah is comin' to the governahs' meetin', you know, and he is goin' to back you up."

"He is very kind."

"Of course, he couldn't do anythin' else," said Arthur Augustus. "He is vewy indignant about the meetin' bein' called at all. He is vewy much down on Colonel Lyndon's vewy inconsidewate action."

"And the Head is going to back you up, Talbot," said Jack Blake.

"And Railton!" added Digby.

"Good old Railton!" said Tom Merry. "Lucky he's home again. Hallo, Kildare—you coming down to see the match?"

Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, came up with a very grave expression. Like nearly everybody at St. Jim's, Kildare liked Talbot, and was concerned about him.

"I've a message for Talbot," he said. "The Head does not want you to go out of gates this afternoon, Talbot. You may be wanted by the governors."

"I understand," said Talbot. "I'm playing in the match. I suppose I can do that."

"I suppose so," assented Kildare. "Only be ready to come into the governors' room as soon as you're wanted."

"Right-ho!"

"I hope it will turn out all right for you," added Kildare kindly, and with a nod, he walked away.

Talbot appeared plunged in thought for a few moments.

"It's rather awkward," he remarked at last. "I may be doing my innings when the governors want me, Tom. If I have to go, it will mean a wicket down. Perhaps you'd better leave me out."

"Not unless you want to be left out," said Tom Merry quickly. "We'll chance that."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "We'll wisk that, Talbot. We can't spare you fwom the team, deah boy."

"Better play," remarked Blake.

"Bai Jove, heah comes Cwooke's uncle!"

All eyes turned upon a motor-car that was gliding up the drive from the gates, towards the Head's house. A grim-faced, bronzed officer was sitting bolt upright in the car. It was Colonel Lyndon, the uncle of Crooke of the Shell,

recently home on leave from the front. He was the first of the school governors to arrive for the meeting, and he was early.

Dark glances were turned on the car by the crowd of St. Jim's fellows. It was the colonel who had insisted upon that meeting being called; it was he who was to urge that Talbot of the Shell should be compelled to leave St. Jim's, and that his scholarship should be cancelled. It was he whose deep and unaccountable dislike for the Shell fellow had caused all the trouble that clouded so many faces that afternoon.

"By Jove, it's my uncle!" exclaimed Crooke. "Now the band's going to begin to play!"

"Shut up, you cad!" growled Blake.

Crooke grinned spitefully.

"You wait a little longer," he remarked. "Wait till your blessed favourite is called before the governors, and they go into his record. If Talbot's at St. Jim's to-morrow, you can use my head for a footer!"

"You uttah cad——"

"Give the colonel a groan!" suggested Herries of the Fourth. "It'll show him what we think of him and his blessed meeting."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Talbot quickly. "Don't! You'll get into a row. Remember, he's a governor of the school."

"I do not appwove of his bein' a governah of the school. I wegard it as a wippin' ideah to give him a gwoan."

"You'll get it warm from the Head if you insult my uncle!" said Crooke savagely.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Let the old johnny alone, but let's show him what we think of his nephew. No law against that."

"Good egg!"

"Here, hands off!" yelled Crooke, as the juniors closed round him. "Hands off, you silly rotters—yow-ow-ow!"

Hands closed on Crooke on every side. Tom Merry & Co. were fed up with Crooke. They knew that it was the cad of the Shell who had, in the first place, poisoned the old colonel's mind against Talbot. And Crooke had not shown a sign of repentance; he had not troubled to conceal his satisfaction at Talbot's approaching downfall.

"Frog's-march!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Hurrah!"

"Better not!" exclaimed Talbot anxiously. "Tom—Figgy—don't! It will only make trouble for you. I don't mind what he says. Let him alone."

But Talbot's voice was not heeded. To make an example of Crooke, and show Colonel Lyndon exactly what St. Jim's thought of his precious nephew, just jumped with the inclinations of the juniors.

Crooke, struggling and yelling frantically, was swept off his feet in the grasp of a dozen hands.

With a rush, the juniors bore him off the cricket-ground, and swept him, with arms and legs flying wildly, into the quadrangle.

"Bump him!" shrieked Arthur Augustus gleefully. "The colonel is looking this way! Bump the wottah!"

"Yaroooh! Help!"

Bump!

The sudden uproar caused the colonel to turn his glance towards the crowd of juniors. A black frown came over his face at the sight of his nephew struggling in their midst. He rapped out a word to the chauffeur, and the car halted in the drive.

With a rush the excited juniors came up to the car.

Bump again.

Crooke was deposited with a sounding concussion upon the drive under the eyes of his uncle. He sprawled there, dishevelled and panting. The crowd swept back to the cricket-ground, leaving Crooke sprawling under the stern eyes of Colonel Lyndon.

CHAPTER 15.

Tom Merry Speaks Out.

TOM MERRY & CO. returned breathless to the pavilion. They had shown in the most unmistakable manner what they thought of Colonel Lyndon's nephew—and, incidentally, of the colonel himself. And they did not care if trouble followed. They wanted it to be clearly understood that all St. Jim's were backing up old Talbot.

"Bai Jove, he looks watty, deah boys!" chuckled Arthur Augustus, turning his celebrated monocle upon the car from the safe distance of the cricket-ground.

"He do—he does!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Black as thunder!" chortled Figgins of the Fourth. "Let him look as black as he likes! He can't scare us with his scowling!"

"Wathah not!"

There was no doubt that the colonel looked black. Crooke had picked himself up, gasping, and stood blinking at his uncle in the car. Colonel Lyndon was speaking to him, though his words did not reach to the cricketers. Finally, Crooke limped away, and the car drove on to the Head's house. The colonel, still with a black brow, disappeared into the house.

"Bai Jove, there will be a wow!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "If the Head cuts up wusty it will wathah muck up the cwicket match!"

That reflection came rather late into the mind of the Honourable Arthur Augustus.

"By Jove, it will!" said Blake.

Tom Merry set his lips.

"I don't care, for one!"

"Here come the Grammar bounders!" said Figgins.

The brake from the Grammar School arrived, and the visiting cricketers came on the ground. Gordon Gay, the junior captain of Rylcombe Grammar School, looked rather curious as he shook hands with Tom Merry.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Looks like it!" murmured Monty Lowther, as Mr. Railton came from the direction of the School House.

"Your old Housemaster back?" said Gay. "Jolly glad to see him, though he has his fin in a sling. We've heard about him."

"Give him a cheeah, deah boys!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "That will put him in a good tempah, pewwaps!"

Mr. Railton was looking very stern. The School House master had his left arm in a sling—a souvenir of the battlefields of Flanders, where he had faced the Huns with his comrades in khaki. Mr. Railton's return to the school had evoked tremendous enthusiasm, though the great reception the juniors had given him had been somewhat marred by the grim-faced colonel who had come down with him.

But the cheer rang out spontaneously as the disabled Housemaster came up. His coming evidently meant trouble for the fellows who had ragged Colonel Lyndon's nephew, but nothing could detract from Mr. Railton's popularity.

But the cheer did not make the Housemaster's brow relax. Perhaps he guessed that it was intended to turn away wrath.

"All the boys who took part in the outbreak a few minutes ago are required in the Head's study!" he said curtly.

"That's all of us, sir," said Kerr.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Only those who actually laid hands upon Colonel Lyndon's nephew, please. They are to come with me at once."

"Very well, sir!"

"We'd better all come if there is to be punishment, sir," said Fatty Wynn. "I'd have laid hands on him if I could have got near enough."

"Same here, sir!"

"You have heard what I said," replied Mr. Railton, frowning. "The boys in question will follow me at once, and the others will remain here."

Tom Merry and Lowther, Figgins and Blake, D'Arcy and Herries and Reilly followed the Housemaster. Their hands had been laid on Crooke of the Shell, though it was by sheer chance, for there had been a general rush for him. More hands would certainly have been laid on him if there had been room for any more.

But Mr. Railton's word was law, and the seven juniors followed him, and the rest remained on the cricket-ground with the astonished Grammarians. Talbot, looking very distressed, made a step forward, and then stopped. He had not touched Crooke. For once the calm of the handsome Shell fellow was broken. It was on his account that his friends were in trouble, and it moved him as his own troubles had failed to move him.

"Mind waiting a bit, Gay?" asked Kerr, rather awkwardly. "There's half our team gone to get the chopper!"

"Oh, don't mind us!" said the Grammarian skipper. "We'll wait. Only sorry there's trouble."

Tom Merry & Co. followed their Housemaster into the School House. Their faces were grim.

It was not agreeable to be called away for punishment just when the visiting team had arrived on the ground. But they were not sorry that they had handled Crooke.

Mr. Railton led the way to the Head's study and opened the door. The seven juniors filed in. The Housemaster followed them, and closed the door after him. In the study Colonel Lyndon was standing with a frowning brow, and the Head sat at his table with a troubled expression. Crooke of the Shell was there, still looking very dusty and rumpled, and with his eyes gleaming.

"These are the boys, Mr. Railton?"

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Holmes bent a stern glance upon Tom Merry & Co.

Next Wednesday's Number of the "Gem" will be the usual price, 1d., and will contain a Splendid, Long, Complete Story, entitled:

"THE JEW OF ST. JIM'S!" - - - By Martin Clifford.

"Merry, you are the head boy in the Shell. I am surprised at this conduct on your part. You should have known better. You have been guilty of an act of gross disrespect towards Colonel Lyndon, one of the governors of the school."

"Weally, Dr. Holmes——"

"Silence, D'Arcy! Answer me, Merry! What have you to say? You were aware that Colonel Lyndon is a governor of the school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet you insulted him by treating his nephew as you did under his very eyes."

"We didn't mean to insult him, sir," said Tom Merry, colouring. "We only meant to—to—to——"

"To what?"

"To show him, sir, what all the school thinks of Crooke. We all know that Crooke has told Colonel Lyndon things about Talbot——"

"Crooke, it appears, was the means by which Colonel Lyndon became acquainted with Talbot's unfortunate history," said the Head. "But that is no excuse——"

"My nephew told me the facts, as he was quite right in doing!" said Colonel Lyndon, in a grinding voice. "I am not surprised that it has led to his persecution here, considering how popular that young reprobate Talbot seems to be!"

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"You have no right to call Talbot names, sir!" he exclaimed.

"What, boy——"

"Merry——"

"Talbot is one of the best fellows breathing!" exclaimed Tom, his anger and indignation breaking out in spite of himself. "It's a shame that he should be picked on like this—a shame!"

"Yaas, wathah—a wotten shame!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "And we all say the same, sir, governah or no governah!"

"Silence!" exclaimed the Head.

A curious look came over the colonel's iron face. Tom Merry's outburst might have been expected to anger him, but it did not appear to do so. The flushed, handsome face of the captain of the Shell seemed to appeal to the bronzed old veteran somehow.

It recalled to his mind, perhaps, the far-off days when he had been a schoolboy at St. Jim's himself, the days when he, too, had had faith and trust in human nature, before a hard experience had soured his nature and seared his mind with doubt. His look was almost kindly as it dwelt upon Tom Merry's face.

"One moment, sir!" he said. "Let me speak to this boy. Merry—your name is Merry?"

"Yes," said Tom, his eyes meeting the keen grey orbs with defiance.

"You are a friend of this boy who is called Talbot?"

"Yes."

"But you know his history?"

"I know that he never had a chance," said Tom. "I know that when he did get a chance he took it at once, and since then nobody has been able to say a word against him—nobody but a slanderer." And Tom's eyes shot a quick look of scornful disdain at Gerald Crooke.

"You are aware that he is the son of a criminal, who met his death in a struggle with the police?"

"That is not Talbot's fault."

"You are aware that he was trained from his earliest boyhood among thieves and outcasts, and that he became a cracksman himself, boy as he was, and that he was hunted by the police?"

Tom Merry winced. He knew it all—knew it only too well, and it was bitter enough to know it.

"Talbot did not choose his upbringing, sir." Tom Merry's voice trembled in spite of himself. "I know all you say; we all know it. But we know, too, that Talbot risked his life to save a troop-train from disaster, and that he was given the King's pardon for doing it. We know that he threw over his old life when he came here, and suffered for it, too. We know that he's proved over and over again that he's as true as steel. We know what a good chum he is. He hasn't an enemy in the school, excepting Crooke. And we all know why Crooke dislikes him."

"Indeed! And why?"

"Uncle——" began Crooke.

The colonel raised his hand.

"Let Merry answer me. I am waiting for your answer, Merry. Unless you intend to withdraw what you have said——"

"Nothing of the kind, sir. We all know why Crooke hates him. It's because he's the most decent fellow in the school, and a cad always dislikes a decent chap."

Crooke's sallow face flushed crimson.

"You must not speak to Colonel Lyndon of his nephew like that, Merry," said the Head.

"Colonel Lyndon asked me, sir."

"Quite so; I asked him," said the colonel, unmoved. "I am glad to have a frank answer. It shows me that I was not mistaken—that that boy Talbot has a dangerous influence over better boys than himself, and that his presence in the school is a danger to every other boy here."

Tom Merry's lips opened, but the Head made him a stern gesture to be silent.

"That will do, Merry. Colonel Lyndon, these are the boys who were guilty of disrespect towards you. You will see that such conduct is not allowed here." The Head took up his cane. "Merry!"

"One moment!" said the colonel quietly. "I think I understand this matter a little better now. It appears, Merry, that you and your friends are enthusiastic in Talbot's cause?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom defiantly, "we are."

"Yaas, wathah! And my patah is backin' him up, too."

"And you intended your action of a short time ago to be a testimony of your support of that unfortunate boy?" pursued the colonel, taking no notice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's interruption.

"We did," said Tom.

"Very well. Your opinion of that boy is mistaken, but I can make allowances for thoughtless loyalty," said Colonel Lyndon. "Dr. Holmes, may I request you to remit the punishment of these boys? I excuse their action, so far as I am concerned."

The juniors simply blinked at the bronzed old face. That was about the last thing they had expected to hear Colonel Lyndon say.

The grim-faced old soldier, whom they had agreed in regarding as a tyrant and a persecutor, seemed to have a heart within him after all.

Dr. Holmes laid down his cane.

"I shall do as you wish, Colonel Lyndon, of course. Boys, you may go."

"Thank you, sir!" stammered Tom.

The juniors backed towards the door. Their resentment towards the colonel for his treatment of Talbot was as keen as ever, but they felt that they owed him some thanks, too, and Blake voiced the general feeling.

"Thank you, Colonel Lyndon!" he said.

Then the juniors backed out.

Colonel Lyndon pursed his lips when they were gone. He made a gesture to his nephew, who quitted the study, gritting his teeth. Crooke's unhappy anticipation of a licking all round for Tom Merry & Co. had been disappointed.

"A fine set of lads, sir," said the colonel unexpectedly. "Cheeky young rascals, to treat a governor of the school in such a manner, but I like them. St. Jim's is as sound at heart as ever it was."

"I am glad to hear you say so, colonel," said the Head, a little puzzled and considerably relieved.

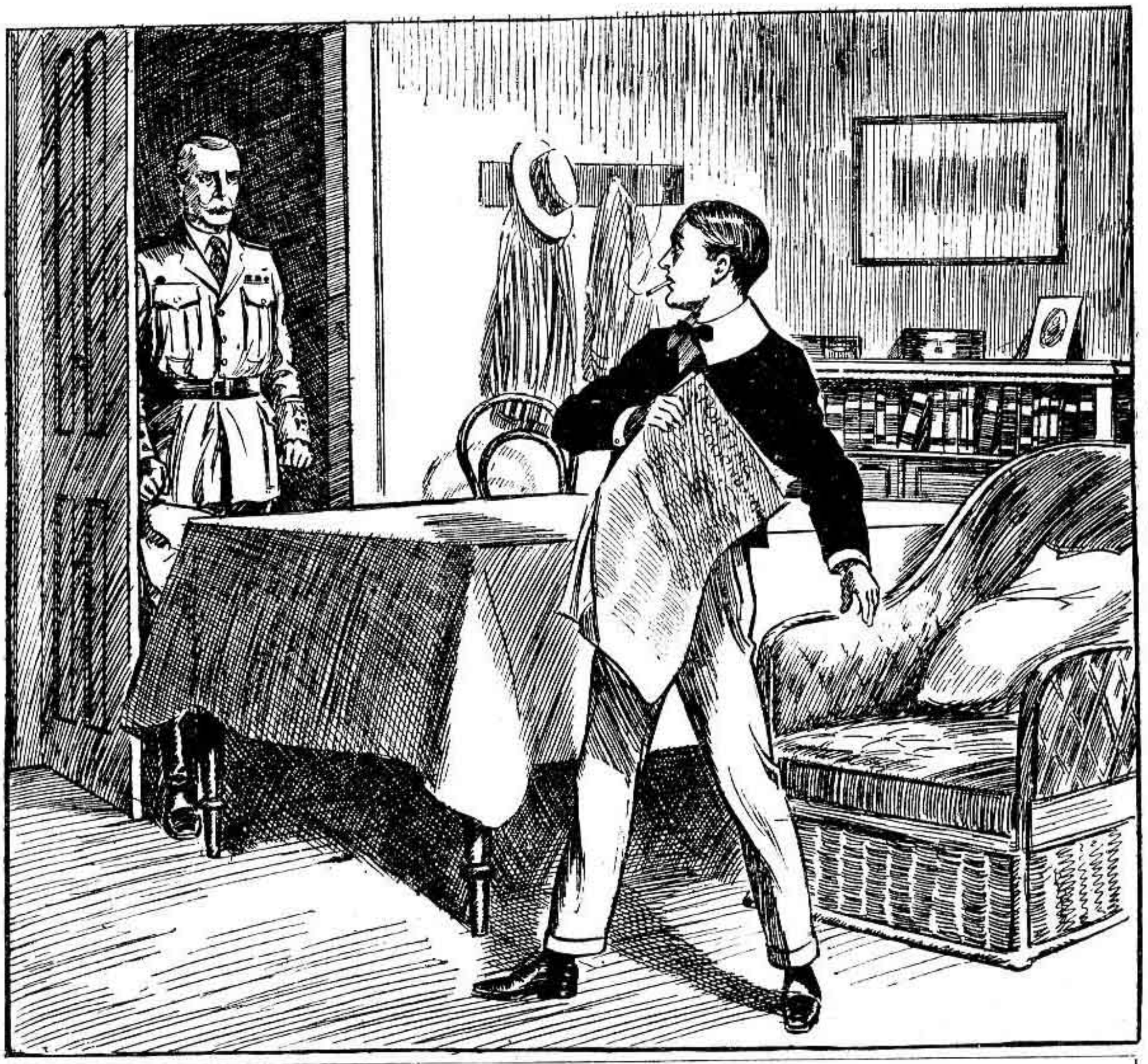
"It is like a British boy to stand by a friend when he is down," said Colonel Lyndon. "That is how they regard this matter, I can see."

"Are they not right, sir?" said Mr. Railton.

The colonel's shaggy brows contracted.

"No, Mr. Railton, they are not right. Their feelings do them credit, but they are mistaken. This popularity of Talbot is only another proof of the cunning and craft of that wretched boy. His influence over his schoolfellows can only be dangerous. Who can tell what evil he may not lead them into, influencing them as he does?"

"If he were an evil boy, undoubtedly," said the Housemaster. "But all who know him are convinced that he is nothing of the kind."



Colonel Lyndon stood in the doorway, and Crooke leaped wildly to his feet, the sporting paper still clutched in his hand and the cigarette still between his teeth. He was dumbfounded! *(See Chapter 20.)*

"His record speaks for him, Mr. Railton. Not to mention the fact that, of my own knowledge, I know him to be a liar and a pretender."

"I cannot agree with you."

"I am aware of that," said Colonel Lyndon drily. "You have already told me so more than once, Railton. But I repeat to you, as I shall repeat before the governing board, that I have recognised that boy, that I know him perfectly well, and yet he denies having ever been in my presence. That I cannot recall where and when I have seen him is beside the point. The fact remains that he is quite well known to me, yet he denies all knowledge of me."

"It is odd," said the Head, "but I can only conclude that you have been deceived by a chance resemblance, sir."

"Impossible! He has denied what I know to be the truth, and that convinces me, if I needed it, that his reform is a pretence and a sham. I should not be doing my duty to the school of which I am a governor if I spared any efforts to have that boy excluded from St. Jim's."

"You will do what you consider your duty, Colonel Lyndon. I shall do mine, which is to give that unfortunate boy every support in my power," said the Head. "The decision rests with the governors. I need hardly add that if the decision is against my view I shall resign my position as headmaster of this school."

"Dr. Holmes!" The colonel tugged at his white moustache. "That, at all events, is unnecessary."

"Unless I possess the confidence of the governing board, colonel, I am out of place here," said the Head quietly. "If my protection of that unhappy lad is condemned by the governing body, I shall have no alternative but to resign. But I shall do my best for him."

"And I for St. Jim's," said Colonel Lyndon.

CHAPTER 16.

Playing the Game.

TALBOT'S face lighted up as Tom Merry & Co. came back to the cricket-ground. Their looks showed that the expected trouble had not fallen upon them.

"All serene?" asked Talbot eagerly.

"Right as rain," said Tom Merry. "The chopper didn't come down, after all. We can get on with the cricket."

"That old johnny is wathah a bwick," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "He asked the Head to let us off, for some weason. Pewwaps he isn't as black as he's painted, you know."

Talbot's face set hard. The mere mention of the colonel was enough to bring that hard look on his face. Tom Merry wondered again, as he had wondered before, what was the mysterious connection between his chum and Crooke's uncle. The colonel had declared that he knew Talbot, and Talbot had denied it; all the school knew that. Yet there was some connection, for Talbot's feelings had been bitter towards Colonel Lyndon even before he had seen him.

Tom remembered what Talbot had said once—that but for Colonel Lyndon he might never have been what he was, might never have been the "Toff," the associate of criminals and cracksmen. Yet they had never met.

It was strange and perplexing enough, but Tom Merry never thought of doubting his chum. He would have doubted himself sooner.

"He is a vewy queeah old fish," Arthur Augustus concluded. "Let's get on with the cwicket. The Gwammah boundahs are waitin'."

The Grammarians had waited patiently. But now Tom Merry tossed with Gordon Gay, and the match began, St. Jim's batting first. The innings opened for St. Jim's with Talbot and Figgins at the wickets.

Tom Merry gave his chum an anxious glance as he went on to bat.

With so much in suspense, with all his future depending on the events of that afternoon, it was surprising that Talbot of the Shell should be in his usual form for cricket, and that he could put his mind into the match. Yet he showed no change—he was cool, keen, and alert as ever.

In the old days, the Toff's nerves had been of iron, and his nerve was not failing him now. It was perhaps his last match on Little Side at St. Jim's. That was only too possible. But if it was to be the last time that he played for Tom Merry's eleven, Talbot was determined that his side should have no fault to find with him.

And the first over showed that he was in all his old form. Never had he wielded the willow with such deadly skill. Even Gordon Gay's bowling failed to touch him. The Grammarian skipper sent down the best he knew, and Talbot knocked it to the wide.

There were loud cheers for Talbot when the over gave him 12. It was a good beginning for St. Jim's.

Round the ground the crowd of St. Jim's fellows was thickening. It was as much for Talbot as for the match that the fellows came there. The sword of Damocles was over the handsome junior's head, and the fellows marvelled to see him playing up as if black care and he were strangers.

Arthur Augustus clapped every hit with great enthusiasm. But the swell of St. Jim's ceased to clap as a new figure arrived at the pavilion. It was that of Miss Marie, Talbot's girl chum. She had come down to see the match, a bright smile upon her sweet face. Arthur Augustus rushed to place a chair for her, and Marie thanked him smilingly. It was easy to see that the girl did not yet know of the shadow that hung over her chum. Talbot had not told her.

"Awf'ly good of you to come down to the match, deah gal," said Arthur Augustus. "I hope you are goin' to see me make a centuwy."

"I hope so," assented Miss Marie.

"That is if Talbot gives me a chance," added D'Arcy. "At pwesent it looks as if he will do most of the battin' wequired. He is in gweat form."

Miss Marie looked at Talbot. He was batting again, this time to Frank Monk's bowling. He was hitting great hits, and the St. Jim's crowd roared approval.

"Wippin' cwicketah," said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, isn't he?" said Miss Marie.

"And we're jollay well goin' to see him thwough," said the swell of St. Jim's, "Bai Jove, pway excuse me—there's my governah."

A big car had appeared on the distant drive, and Arthur Augustus recognised the family motor-car. Lord Eastwood sat in the car, and Arthur Augustus rushed away dutifully to greet his "governah." He dashed up, hat in hand, as his lordship stepped from the car outside the Head's house.

"Awf'ly glad to see you heah, patah," said Augustus, as the earl shook hands with him. "It's quite a welief, you know. I've been tellin' the fellows how you are goin' to back up old Talbot."

Lord Eastwood smiled.

"Certainly I am going to do that, Arthur, to the best of my ability," he said. "I have not forgotten that Talbot saved Wally's life."

"There's hardly a fellah in the House he hasn't done a good turn to, father," said Arthur Augustus. "It's simply disgustin' the way Colonel Lyndon is down on him. Of course, he doesn't know him. But I've told all the chaps that you are goin' to fwustwate his knavish twicks."

"You should not have spoken of Colonel Lyndon like that. The colonel is a gallant officer, and a distinguished soldier."

"Yaas, I know; but he has no wight to be down on old Talbot. We're all stickin' up for him, you know. He's battin' now."

"Indeed!"

"Yaas, wathah—battin' away like Gwace at his vewy best. He isn't wowwyin' about the blessed governahs—ahem! I mean——"

"You had better go back to the cricket, Arthur."

"Yaas, dad."

Arthur Augustus went back to the cricket. Another and another car arrived, and several carriages, and then a trap from the station. The governing board were gathering for the meeting. Arthur Augustus kept one eye on the cricket-ground, and the other upon the arriving great personages. He pointed them out for the benefit of Miss Marie—without at first much interesting the girl, who was watching Talbot at the wickets. Talbot was still batting, Blake having joined him now—Figgins being out to a smart catch by Gordon Gay.

"What is it—a meeting of the governors?" Miss Marie asked at last.

"Yaas, wathah! Hasn't Talbot told you?"

Miss Marie opened her eyes.

"Talbot! No. It has nothing to do with Talbot, surely?"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus, realising that Marie was in ignorance of what was impending, wished that he had not spoken. But it was too late. The smile had faded from the girl's face, and she looked anxious. Happy as Marie Rivers was at St. Jim's, she had never quite lost a lurking fear that some shadow from the old life might yet fall upon her and her chum—from that dark life when she and the Toff had been pals, and which seemed now like a strange and evil dream to her. Always that secret fear lurked in the mind of the daughter of the "Professor."

"Is anything the matter?" she asked quickly.

"The—the mattah!" stammered Arthur Augustus.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Bai Jove! L-look at the cwicket!" said D'Arcy. "That's a 4. How old Talbot is hittin' out, isn't he?"

"Is Talbot in trouble?"

"Twouble!"

"Will you not tell me?"

"Ahem! I—I supposed you knew—all the school knows," stammered D'Arcy. "I am sowwy I mentioned it——"

"I am glad you mentioned it. If Talbot is in trouble, I ought to know. You know he was my friend before I came here. Tell me what has happened."

"It's Cwooke's uncle," said Arthur Augustus reluctantly, "Colonel Lyndon, you know. He was in Mr. Wailton's wegiment, and he came home with Wailton fwom the war. Cwooke has been tellin' him things about Talbot, and he is a governah of the school, and he's insisted on a meetin', to—to—to——"

"He is against Talbot?"

"Yaas."

"Only because of what Crooke has told him?"

"N-no! He—he saw Talbot the day he came heah with Wailton, and said that he wecognised him. He was certain he had met him befoah, and Talbot denied it. Of course, we all believe old Talbot. Colonel Lyndon was makin' a sillay mistake. But he makes out that Talbot was lyin'—the sillay ass."

Marie clasped her hands.

"And Talbot did not explain?"

"You see, he couldn't. The colonel must have seen somebody like him, and fancies that it was Talbot."

"Yes, yes."

"But he thinks that Talbot must have come befoah him when he was a magistwate, you know." D'Arcy coloured. "Befoah Talbot came heah, of course—in those wotten old times, you know, when he knew Hookay Walkah. He thinks Talbot's got some motive for denyin' it—the duffah!—as if old Talbot wouldn't tell the twuth."

"But Talbot could have explained——" Marie caught her breath. "Did he say nothing?"

"Nothin'—only that he had nevah met Colonel Lyndon."

The girl was silent, but her face was pale now. The shadow she had feared, had fallen. The Toff, who had escaped so many troubles and perils—was he to escape this one? Was his pride to stand in his way—that was the question the girl was asking herself. But Arthur Augustus did not know what was passing in her mind. Miss Marie did not speak again—and she was blind to the cricket, and to the big score that Talbot was piling up for St. Jim's. The sunshine of that summer's afternoon had been blotted out for her.

Tom Merry was at the wickets now with Talbot. Wickets were falling, but Talbot's was still secure. There were 40 runs now to his credit, out of a total of 60. So far as appearances went, he was good for his century.

Tom Merry was not in his usual form. He was troubling for his chum more than Talbot troubled for himself. He knew that all the governors had arrived now—that in the governors' room the meeting had begun. In that stately apartment the board was in session. The colonel was there, to speak in Talbot's condemnation—the Head was there, to defend him. How would it end? How was it going?

Tom could not help thinking of it, and several times the green cricket-field was a blur before his eyes.

What if the colonel, grim and determined and unpitying, carried the day? What if Talbot of the Shell was condemned to go forth, an outcast, from the school that had become his home—from the chums to whom he had become so dear. After all his struggles, was this new and unexpected blow to strike him down?

Tom Merry's heart was full of passionate anger as he thought of it. It was so undeserved—so cruelly unjust. Instead of the cricket-field, he seemed to see the great room, the white and bald heads gathered round the table—the tall, thin form of the colonel towering. He seemed to hear the hard tones, rapping out the words that were to be Talbot's doom——

Crash!

"How's that?" called out Frank Monk, from the other end.

"Out!"

Tom Merry went back to the pavilion. He had taken 4 runs—that was his total for the innings. He could not help it. He could not have played a good game that afternoon to save his life.

"Hard cheese, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus sympathetically. "Howevah, I am goin' to get a centuwy if I can."

And the swell of St. Jim's went on to take Tom Merry's place. Talbot was still batting in great form, and Tom looked at him in wonder. He had lost his wicket through thinking of his chum; but Talbot was not thinking of himself.

Did he not care? Tom Merry knew how much he cared.

"Oh, it's a shame—a rotten shame!" Tom Merry muttered unconsciously aloud.

"You are thinking of Talbot?"

It was Miss Marie's voice at his side, and Tom looked round with a start, and coloured, and raised his cap.

"You know?" he asked confusedly.

The girl nodded.

"Yes. You think it will be serious for the Toff—I mean, Talbot?" Her eyes dwelt anxiously on Tom's troubled face.

"I don't know. I hope not. The Head is for Talbot, and D'Arcy's pater; but the rest—I don't know. If they agree with Colonel Lyndon——" Tom Merry clenched his hands. "Oh, if a fellow only knew what was going on there now!"

His eyes turned towards the School House.

What was going on in the governors' room? Had they reached any decision yet? And what decision?

Tom's heart was throbbing. If he only knew! But he would know soon enough!

"Bravo, Talbot!"

The shouts were ringing round the cricket-field again. It was a boundary-hit, and 4 more for St. Jim's. Talbot was playing the game of his life.

"Will he be called before the governors?" asked Marie.

"I think so."

"I must speak to him before he goes—I must tell him——" She checked herself. "Do you know why Colonel Lyndon is his enemy?"

"Only because of Talbot's past; and he thinks that Talbot lied to him—some silly idea that he recognised Talbot—that he'd known him before somewhere——"

"He had never met him," said Marie.

Tom's eyes gleamed.

"Ah! You know that, Miss Marie?"

"I know it. But I know, too, why Colonel Lyndon believes that he has seen him. I could explain—Talbot could explain. Why does he not?"

"Talbot could explain?"

"He could. But I understand: it is his pride that will not let him. He will ask no favours from Colonel Lyndon."

Tom pressed his hand to his brow. It was burning.

"I—I can't understand this!" he said. "Talbot knows something of Colonel Lyndon—he's said so—yet they have never met." If he could explain how the colonel came to make this mistake, that would almost settle the matter. If he can, why doesn't he?"

"That is Talbot's secret, not mine," said Marie quietly. "But--but if I could speak to him before he goes to the governors' room, I—I might induce him——"

Tom Merry's face lighted up.

"I understand. I'll make him see you—I'll see to that! Make him tell anything he knows that would clear this up. If it were proved that the colonel is mistaken, that Talbot told him the truth the other day, that might see him clear. I can't understand why he should be silent if he can do that. He must speak!"

"I will do my best."

They watched the cricket in silence after that. As yet the summons had not come for Talbot. The meeting was long. Last man was in for the St. Jim's side—Arthur Augustus had not stayed in to make a century, after all. Herries was last man in, and he was receiving the bowling from Gordon Gay.

Kildare of the Sixth appeared in sight from the School House. He was coming towards the cricket-ground.

"Kildare!" muttered Tom Merry. "Talbot's wanted. Kildare's coming for him!"

The captain of St. Jim's came up to the pavilion. He hesitated as he saw that Talbot was standing at his wicket.

"Talbot's wanted!" he said.

"I'll call him off," said Tom Merry.

Crash!

Herries's wicket was down; there was no need to call Talbot off now. St. Jim's were all down for 100—and of that 100, 60 were Talbot's. Talbot of the Shell had been first in, and finished not out!

Kildare signed to him as he came off the pitch.

"You're wanted," he said.

The batsman was flushed, and breathing a little hard; but he did not seem tired. He nodded quietly.

"Shall I change?" he asked.

"No; they're waiting for you. Come as you are."

"Very well."

Talbot threw on his blazer, and followed the captain of St. Jim's.

A soft hand was laid on his arm as he quitted the cricket-ground.

"Stop!" said Marie Rivers.

CHAPTER 17.

Before the Governors.

MARIE RIVERS had hurried from the pavilion. She wished to speak to Talbot, but not in the hearing of the crowd of cricketers.

Talbot stopped as her light touch was laid on his arm.

The girl's face was pale and agitated.

Kildare looked at her curiously. He wondered what the Little Sister of the Poor could have to say to Talbot of the Shell that moved her so deeply.

"Yes, Marie?" said Talbot quietly.

"I must speak to you, Toff."

"The Head has sent for me, dear."

"It is a meeting of the governors, Miss Marie," said Kildare. "They are waiting to see Talbot."

"Yes, yes! But one moment! You can give me one minute," said Marie hurriedly. "It may make all the difference when Talbot is before the governors!"

Kildare hesitated, wondering all the more. But he nodded, and stepped back. A minute more or less would not make much difference, though he had been asked to bring Talbot to the governors' room at once.

"Toff," whispered Marie, "I know it all now; you did not tell me——"

"It was useless to worry you, Marie."

"You should have told me. But now you are going before the governors. Your future is at stake now."

Talbot nodded.

"I know the mistake that Colonel Lyndon has made. Tom Merry told me. Toff, you can explain it if you choose."

Talbot was silent.

"I could explain it," resumed Marie. "But what you have told me is your secret, and not mine, Toff. But you will explain? If Colonel Lyndon knew the truth, surely his heart would soften towards you."

Talbot's face hardened.

"I do not want any kindness from him," he said. "I ask nothing at his hands. Let him do his worst. I have my rights here, which I shall defend as well as I can. But I will ask nothing of him."

"But—but you could explain; and if he knew——"

Talbot gave a bitter smile.

"You are wrong, Marie. If he knew all there is to know it would not soften his heart, as you suppose. It would make him more determined, if possible, to injure me. He hated my father, and he would feel the same towards me if he knew that I was my father's son."

"But—but the ties of blood——"

"Does the man look as if he feels such ties strongly?" said Talbot; and his lip curled. "Besides, if it were my life that were at stake I would not utter one word that would seem like making a claim upon him. Did the ties of blood appeal to him when he might have saved my father from—you know what? If I am driven from the school, let it be so. Better that than making an appeal to him!"

"But—but——"

"And it would be useless, Marie. He is hard as iron. If I made such an appeal he might not believe it; he might regard it as a falsehood to move his pity." Talbot flushed scarlet. "His pity! Would you have me ask for that? Better disgrace, or death itself!"

The girl sighed deeply.

"I must go, Marie," said Talbot, his voice becoming gentle again. "Believe me, my dear, I am right in this. And whatever comes, I shall have the courage to face it. Afterwards I will see you; I will tell you what has passed."

Kildare made a gesture, and Talbot followed him.

Marie, with a clouded face and dimmed eyes, moved away slowly towards the Head's garden, to wait for Talbot—to wait till the ordeal should be over.

Talbot, with a firm step, followed the captain of St. Jim's into the School House. From the cricket-ground many eyes watched him until he disappeared. Kildare led the way without a word to the governors' room.

Outside the old oaken door, carved by hands that had been dust for hundreds of years, Mr. Railton was waiting. His face was clouded.

"One word before you go in, Talbot," said the School House master. "My boy, whatever happens, remember that you have not lost the Head's confidence or mine."

"Thank you, sir!"

"It has occurred to me that you may be able to explain the mistake Colonel Lyndon has made—for that it is a mistake I am convinced."

"It is a mistake," said Talbot.

"You are sure that he has never seen you before he saw you here at St. Jim's?"

"Quite sure!"

"Then it must be someone closely resembling you that he has seen, which gives him this strange impression?"

"Certainly!"

"But if he has seen such a person closely resembling you, Talbot, surely that person must be a relation of yours, and you must know something of him. If you could say as much that would be an adequate explanation."

Talbot was silent.

"Search your mind, Talbot, and if you can make any explanation of the kind, remember that it may save the situation for you."

Mr. Railton opened the door and led Talbot into the room. The Toff entered with a firm step.

The old oak-panelled room, lighted dimly through the ancient stained windows, was very quiet. At the table eight or nine old gentlemen were seated with the Head of St. Jim's. There was a glimmering of bald heads and white moustaches. Every face was grave—gravest of all was that of Colonel Lyndon of the Loamshire Regiment.

Every eye was turned upon Talbot. Lord Eastwood gave him a kindly glance and a slight nod of recognition. Those of the governors who had never seen him before glanced at him curiously, scrutinisingly.

The boy could not fail to make a favourable impression upon such as were not already prejudiced against him.

Handsome and sturdy, his well-built figure showing to advantage in his cricketing garb, the flush of healthy exercise in his cheeks, Talbot of the Shell made an attractive picture in the dusky old room. He came like a breath of the fresh air and the sunlight from without.

"This is the boy?" asked one of the governors, peering at the Shell fellow over his gold-rimmed pince-nez.

"This is Talbot, Sir William," replied Mr. Railton.

And with an encouraging look at the junior the Housemaster retired.

Talbot stood silent, facing the governing board. It was the first time he had seen that august body in session. Such an experience seldom fell to a junior of the school.

His manner was quiet and respectful, but he was not awed. His conscience was clear, and his courage was high. The Toff had been through too many dangers and vicissitudes to tremble at any ordeal now.

Colonel Lyndon was looking at him with eyes of steel, perhaps expecting to see confusion or fear in his face. He saw only calmness and constancy.

Dr. Holmes cleared his throat. The kind old face of the doctor showed how distressed he felt.

"Talbot, Sir William Lacy wishes to ask you some questions."

"Yes, sir," said Talbot.

Sir William, the chairman of the governors, peered at him. Colonel Lyndon had succeeded in impressing his views upon the chairman, yet the old gentleman could not help feeling a kindly sentiment towards the handsome young cricketer who stood erect and fearless, and yet so respectfully, before him.

"Ha! Hem!" began Sir William. "This is—ahem!—not exactly the kind of boy I had been expecting to see, Dr. Holmes. But appearances are sometimes deceptive—hem! Talbot—I must call you Talbot, though it appears that it is not your name——"

"It is my name, sir!"

"But not your surname, as I understand."

"No, sir."

"It appears that you have some objection to your surname becoming known."

"Yes, sir."

"What are your reasons?"

Talbot's lip trembled.

"My father's name has been disgraced. There is no reason why I should bear it. I have already explained that to Colonel Lyndon."

"But why should you not state what your name is—at least to Dr. Holmes, who has always been your friend and protector. I understand from your headmaster that you have told him nothing upon this point."

"I have asked Talbot nothing upon that point, Sir William," said the Head quickly.

"Quite so, quite so. But let the boy answer my question. Doubtless, my lad, you have a real objection to bearing a stained name. But there appears to me no reason why you cannot state here what your name actually is."

Talbot did not reply.

"Come, come!" said Sir William, a little testily. "This secretiveness tells against you, my boy. If you definitely refuse to let your true name be known, what can we conclude but that you have some unworthy motive for concealing it?"

"My motive is not unworthy," said Talbot, flushing

"But you have a motive?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. What is it?"

Talbot was silent.

There was a pause, and some of the governors exchanged glances. Even Lord Eastwood looked very grave.

"Am I to understand," Sir William rumbled at last, "that you refuse to tell the board of governors your real name, boy?"

"I do not desire to tell anyone, sir."

"Dr. Holmes, perhaps you will point out to Talbot that he is prejudicing his case—prejudicing it very seriously!" snapped Sir William.

"Talbot," said the Head gently, "please answer Sir William's question. Surely there is no reason why you should not do so."

"You have nothing to fear from frankness, Talbot," added Lord Eastwood.

"I know I have nothing to fear, sir. But I have a right to keep silent if I choose." Talbot's voice was clear and steady. "Dr. Holmes never asked me that. He accepted me here in the name of Talbot, which is my name, and was my father's name, though not the surname. What name I bore before I came here does not concern anyone but myself. If I have done wrong since the governors gave me my scholarship, that scholarship can be taken away. If my presence in the school is unwelcome, the governors can send me away from St. Jim's. If you believe that I have lied to Colonel Lyndon, as Colonel Lyndon believes, you must condemn me. But my father's name is a matter that concerns only myself, and I have a right on that subject to say nothing."

"You mean," rapped out the chairman, "that you will not answer my question?"

"I mean that I have good reason for not doing so, sir."

"Will you do so—yes or no?"

"No, sir!"

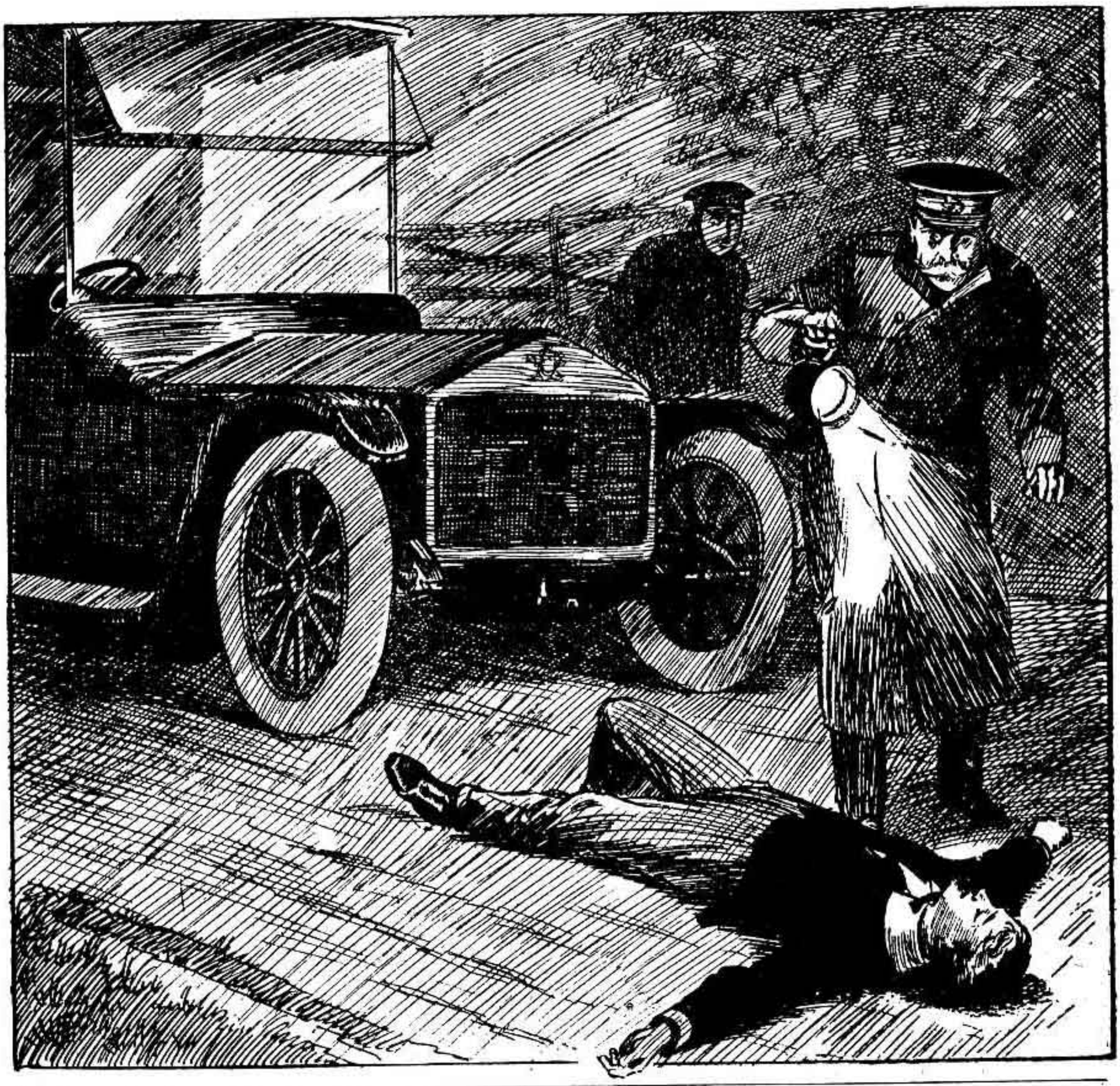
Talbot's tone was respectful, but it was final. And there was another long, long pause.

CHAPTER 18.
The Decision.

DR. HOLMES'S agitated cough broke the silence. The Head was distressed. Sir William Lacy hemmed a little savagely. Talbot's silence, which he regarded as sheer obstinacy, if not worse, had an irritating effect upon him. Colonel Lyndon's bronzed face set more grimly than ever.

Talbot could see that he had made a bad impression upon the whole body. Even Lord Eastwood looked dubious now, though he had come there especially to act in Talbot's favour. What did the boy's strange silence mean? the earl was asking himself. The question that had been put to him was not put out of mere curiosity. The governors of the school had a right to know the name of the boy whose fate they were deciding. Even if it was not a material matter, why should the boy not answer? What motive could he have for concealment, unless it was an unworthy one?

Talbot realised how much he had injured his cause, but he did not falter. He waited, strong and calm.



Colonel Lyndon threw open the door of his car and sprang out. "The lamp—quick!". He bent over the motionless form. The bright rays streamed upon a pale and handsome face, and the colonel set his teeth. "Talbot!" he murmured. *(See Chapter 24.)*

"Well, well," said Sir William at last, "the boy refuses to answer. Apparently he does not know that obedience and respect are due to the governing body of the school. We will pass on. I have other questions to put to you, Talbot, which perhaps you may see fit to answer."

"I will do my best, sir," said Talbot, colouring again under the ironical tone of the chairman. With Sir William, at least, his cause was already lost.

"Colonel Lyndon informs me that he recognised you the first time he saw you at this school—that you are perfectly well known to him. He must, therefore, have seen you at a time when you were a member of—ahem!—the criminal classes."

Talbot winced.

"As Colonel Lyndon cannot recall the precise time and place of the meeting, he concludes that you must have come before him when he was a magistrate, before the war," resumed Sir William. "But that you are perfectly well known to him he is assured. Is it not so, Colonel Lyndon?"

"Absolutely assured!" said the colonel drily.

"It appears that you have denied ever having come into contact with Colonel Lyndon. I need not tell you that the board places absolute reliance upon Colonel Lyndon's statement. It rests with you, therefore, to explain the circumstance. When did you first see Colonel Lyndon?"

"Last week, sir—the day he came with Mr. Railton."

"You state that you have never seen him before?"

"Never, sir!"

"You realise that your statement is in direct conflict with that of my colleague on the board?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any explanation to offer?"

"Only that Colonel Lyndon has made a mistake, sir."

"Huh!" came from the colonel.

"Colonel Lyndon is quite positive that he has not made a mistake. What kind of mistake do you suggest has been made?"

"It is a case of resemblance, sir."

"You speak positively, as if you knew that to be the fact."

"I certainly believe it to be the fact, sir."

"H'm! Have you a brother?"

"No, sir."

"Or a relative who closely resembles you?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"You would imply then that some stranger, unconnected with you, resembles you so closely as to have deceived Colonel Lyndon?"

"I do not mean that at all."

"Then what do you mean?" asked Sir William testily.

Talbot paused before replying. For the first time he seemed to falter a little under the gaze of so many searching eyes.

"I have nothing more to say, sir," he replied at last. "Colonel Lyndon certainly never met me before he came home with Mr. Railton. That is all I can say. I think he has been deceived by a resemblance—that is, indeed, the only way of accounting for his mistake."

"H'm, h'm!" was Sir William's comment. "Dr. Holmes, I have finished with this boy. His answers are most unsatisfactory."

Dr. Holmes made Talbot a gesture to retire.

No word was spoken till the big oak door had swung shut after the white-clad form of the young cricketer.

Then the chairman of the governors h'mmed again.

"I think there is little more to be said." Sir William glanced round at the grave faces of his colleagues. "Gentlemen, you have heard what Colonel Lyndon has told us, and you have heard that boy's replies. I think there is only one conclusion to be drawn."

There was a murmur of assent.

Lord Eastwood seemed about to speak, but he remained silent. He had expected full frankness from the unfortunate boy he had come there to defend. But what could he say, when Talbot refused to speak in his own defence?

Dr. Holmes took off his glasses and polished them, and replaced them on his nose. The good old gentleman was greatly agitated. It was a crisis for him, as well as for Talbot.

"Dr. Holmes has been deceived by this boy," resumed Sir William. "In the kindness of his heart, he has been imposed upon. That the boy acted very gallantly in the troop-train incident, I freely grant; and it must be admitted that by his courage he earned the pardon that was bestowed upon him for his earlier offences. At Dr. Holmes's recommendation, supported by Lord Eastwood, a founder's scholarship was conferred on the boy, and he was admitted to this school. It was a very serious step to take—very serious indeed. But the board has been accustomed to placing implicit reliance upon Dr. Holmes's judgment."

"With good reason," remarked one of the governors.

"With excellent reason!" said Sir William. "I take it that no member of the board feels the slightest failure of confidence in the gentleman who was selected unanimously to fill the important post of headmaster of this school. We all make mistakes. Dr. Holmes will allow me to say that the admission of this boy to St. Jim's was a mistake—the mistake of a too kind and generous nature."

A murmur of approval followed.

The governors felt that the situation was delicate. To dismiss Talbot from the school, without implying censure upon the headmaster, was a little difficult. Sir William was softening the blow as much as he could.

"It is agreed, however, that the boy must go?"

There was a general nodding of bald heads. Lord Eastwood's head, however, did not nod. Sir William eyed him grimly.

"May I request your views, Lord Eastwood?" he inquired.

"I prefer not to speak," said Lord Eastwood. "The boy has certainly failed to speak as I expected to hear him speak. But I cannot forget that on a certain occasion he risked his life to save that of my youngest son."

"That he is a courageous lad, with many good qualities, appears well established," said Sir William. "Heaven forbid that he should be cast out into want, to be driven by necessity into crime! No one, I believe, suggests such a thing. But that his reform is not wholly sincere is quite clear to me, since he refuses to answer perfectly reasonable questions, and has undoubtedly spoken falsely in denying all knowledge of Colonel Lyndon. Care must be taken of his future, and he must be given every chance to redeem his past; but this school is no place for him. We have a very heavy responsibility towards the other boys and their parents. He must go."

Another nodding of heads.

Dr. Holmes rose.

"I am sure that Dr. Holmes agrees with the board?" added Sir William hastily.

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"I do not agree," he said; "I cannot agree. My faith in that boy is not to be shaken. He has proved his good faith too well for that. But it is not for me to oppose the wishes of the board by which I was appointed to the headmastership of this school."

"Quite so—quite so! And the decision of the governing board must not be taken as implying any want of confidence——"

"I thank you, Sir William; but I cannot take it otherwise," said the Head steadily. "I beg, therefore, to place my resignation in the hands of the governing board."

CHAPTER 19.
The Last Match.

"WELL bowled, Wynn!"

That shout, ringing from the cricket-ground, greeted Talbot's ears as he came out of the School House into the blaze of sunshine.

In the governors' room he had forgotten the cricket-match, but the cricket-match was going on. The Grammarians were batting, and Tom Merry & Co. were in the field, a substitute fielding in Talbot's place. Fatty Wynn was bowling now, and a Grammarian wicket had just fallen to his deadly hand.

Talbot strode away mechanically towards the cricket-ground. Crooke was lounging idly by the door of the house, and he gave him a sneering smile, but Talbot did not even see him. He strode away, his brow clouded, his face very grave.

That it was all over with him at St. Jim's seemed pretty clear. His appearance before the board of governors had been the finish.

Colonel Lyndon had carried the day.

From the battlefields of Flanders the grim old soldier had come—to ruin Talbot of the Shell. Talbot, like the rest, had looked forward keenly to Mr. Railton's homecoming. Little had he dreamed of the misfortune it would bring to him. With the returning Housemaster had come the colonel of his regiment—the iron old soldier whose grim determination, taken upon his first meeting with Talbot, had now been carried out. That was what the Housemaster's homecoming had meant to Talbot of the Shell—the darkening of his future, the shattering of all his hopes.

Cricket was not much in his thoughts now, but he made his way to the playing-fields. He was, after all, wanted there. It was to be his last match on the school ground, as he had feared. He would do his best for his side, in spite of the trouble that weighed like lead on his heart. Tom Merry should remember him as having played the game to the last.

The glimmer of a white dress, a beckoning hand, drew his glance towards the gate of the Head's garden, and he changed his direction. Miss Marie was waiting for him there, anxious to know his fate. He reached the gate, and the girl's eyes dwelt upon him in anxious inquiry.

"What has happened, Toff?"

Marie's voice was low and tremulous.

Talbot made a weary gesture.

"It's all over, Marie?"

"You are to go?"

"Yes."

"They have said so?"

"They have not told me so yet, but I could see it. I did not answer their questions. I have a right to be silent about my own affairs, I think," said Talbot, with a curl of the lip. "What has my father's name to do with the matter?"

"And you would not tell it?"

"I would not."

"Because of Colonel Lyndon?"

Talbot nodded.

"Because of him."

Marie clasped her hands on the gate.

"Toff, if he knew——"

"He will never know," said Talbot quietly—"never! Don't you see, my dear, he would take it as an appeal to his compassion. He was my father's enemy. But for his hard heart, I might never have known the rookery in Angel Alley—I might never have been called the prince of cracksmen. My father"—his voice trembled—"might never have met the fate that was his. I would not take his hand to save me from death!"

The girl sighed. She read the grim determination in Talbot's face. At that moment there was a strange likeness between the handsome young face and the grim, bronzed face of Colonel Lyndon—a strange, fleeting likeness. For the moment, Talbot looked years older and harder, but his brow cleared.

"Don't worry, dear. I can stand it. After all, this was too good to last. I had no right to expect it to last. I've had a good time here, better than I ever deserved. I can face the world again. I shall not go under. It's hard to leave you, Marie—hard to leave the fellows. But it was bound to come I suppose. Now I must get back to the cricket."

"The cricket!" repeated Marie.

Talbot smiled.

"They want me. I am going to finish the match. I am not going to whine, Marie, because I've had a hard knock. And that man shall not see me weaken."

"Toff!"

He turned back.

"I have seen him: I have studied his face," whispered the girl. "He is hard; but he is not so hard as you think. Toff,

He has a heart. After all, what you have always heard of him came from one side only. From him you have never heard a word; he might have a different story to tell——"

"What I have heard of him, Marie, came from my father."

"I know—I know! But he was bitter, and perhaps he was unjust; when men are bitter they are unjust without knowing it. If the colonel knew your name——"

"He will never know it!"

Marie sighed, and did not speak again. Talbot, with a smile, turned away, and strode to the cricket-ground. The Grammarian innings was at its finish. Gordon Gay and Wootton major were batting, and as Talbot arrived on the ground, Wootton's wicket fell to a catch from Figgins.

"All down for 105," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "They have 5 wuns on the innings, deah boys."

"You'll have to get that century in the second innings, Gussy," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "St. Jim's relies on you!"

"Weally, Lowthah—— Hallo, heah's Talbot!"

A crowd of eager fellows surrounded Talbot of the Shell as he came up. It was difficult to read in his face what had happened. He was quiet and calm.

"How has it gone, old chap?" asked Tom Merry.

"What did they say?"

"Is it the chopper?"

"Talbot, old man, you know we're anxious. What's the giddy verdict?"

"The board are consulting," said Talbot. That he felt what the result of the consultation would be, there was no need to say. After all, there was a chance yet—the shadow of a chance, at least. "I dare say they'll let us know later. How are you fellows getting on?"

"They're 5 ahead on the innings," said Figgins. "Are you going to bat in our second innings?"

"Certainly."

"You feel fit, deah boy?" said Arthur Augustus.

"Why not?"

Talbot evidently did not wish to talk about himself, and nothing more was said on the subject just then. The cricketers prepared for the second home innings, and when it opened, Talbot went on to open it as before, this time having Tom Merry as his partner.

The St. Jim's fellows watched him in admiration mingled with wonder.

The ordeal he had been through, and the uncertainty before him, might have tried any fellow's nerves; but Talbot did not seem to have turned a hair. So far as could be seen, his thoughts were wholly in the game.

Certainly he was batting in great form.

Gordon Gay and the Woottons, major and minor, tested him with their deadliest bowling, and did not find him wanting.

"Bai Jove, he's made of iron, deah boys!" Arthur Augustus remarked, as he watched the sturdy figure crossing the pitch. "I should be feahfully wowwied, you know, if those old johnnies were debatin' about me. And there is old Talbot makin' 4!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Well run!"

"One thing is jollay certain,' continued Arthur Augustus, "and that is, that we're not goin' to allow old Talbot to be turned out. If the governahs decide to send him away, the Lowah School will make its voice heard. I shall pwotest!"

"And the governors will be brought to their knees at once," remarked Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Man in!"

Tom Merry's wicket was down, for 15 this time. The captain of the Shell was decidedly not at his best that afternoon. Blake joined Talbot at the wickets, and the runs continued to pile up.

From a window in the School House, a bronzed face and a pair of keen grey eyes looked towards the distant cricket-ground. Colonel Lyndon's gaze was fixed on the green expanse, the white figures, the shouting crowd. Across the quad, the name of Talbot was borne to his ears again and again, amid cheers.

The colonel gnawed his lip.

He had succeeded in what he regarded as his duty. Talbot was to go, and he knew that the boy must have realised it. Yet he could play cricket—could keep his wicket up, and make the running, as though no trouble impended.

Was it only courage, the courage of a high and noble nature? Was it the hardihood and effrontery of the criminal? Those questions had to be answered according to his opinion of Talbot.

His brow grew grimmer as he watched. In the coolness, the courage, and the self-possession of the persecuted junior, Colonel Lyndon read defiance and reckless scorn.

He turned away from the window, gnawing his lip. It was the last time the outcast would show defiance for authority—the last time his name would ring amid cheers across the playing-fields of St. Jim's. The sun would not rise again upon Talbot in the old school.

CHAPTER 20.
Fairly Caught!

CROOKE of the Shell came into the visitors' room hesitatingly.

His uncle wished to see him before he left; it was natural enough, but the cad of the Shell shrank from the interview, as he always shrank from his uncle. He had always a lurking fear that those keen, grey eyes would read to his heart, read through his mean and despicable character. But for his expectations from his rich relative, and his father's commands, Gerald Crooke would never have endured those interviews with the grim old soldier. But as it was, he had no choice in the matter, and he had to do his best to please the colonel.

Colonel Lyndon's manner was not reassuring as his nephew came in. Never had the brown old face looked so grim.

Crooke stole a look at him, fearing to meet his eyes. He never liked catching those keen eyes.

"I—I suppose it is all right, uncle?" he said.

"What do you refer to, Gerald?"

"About Talbot."

Colonel Lyndon nodded.

"The governors have decided to send him away," said the colonel.

Crooke's eyes lighted up; it was worth while enduring the old colonel for a time, for this result. His enemy was down, and Crooke had no compassion for a fellow who was down. He rejoiced.

"It's a jolly good thing for the school, uncle," he remarked.

"If I had not believed it to be a good thing for the school, I should not have acted in the matter," said the colonel coldly. "However, I do not wish to speak to you about Talbot, but about yourself."

"Yes, uncle," said Crooke uneasily.

"Sit down, Gerald!"

The black sheep of the Shell sat down, with an inward groan. This meant that he was not to get off with a few minutes. What on earth had the old duffer to say to him, to be so solemn about? That was Crooke's thought. The colonel was undoubtedly more solemn than usual. Perhaps the scene in the governors' room had not been without its effect upon him; perhaps his success had left a bitter taste in his mouth after all.

There was a short silence in the room, and Crooke wondered uneasily what was coming. Had any of his little peccadilloes reached the grim ears of the colonel? Could his uncle have learned about the smoking and the cards, and so forth? Had somebody sneaked? Crooke was on tenterhooks.

But when the colonel broke silence at last, his voice was unusually kind, and the junior started as he heard it.

"Gerald, I am going to speak seriously to you. I may not have time to see you again before I return to France—my leave is short. You know, of course, that that means that it is possible that I may never see you again."

"I—I hope not, uncle!"

"You are my nephew, Gerald—my only near relation, so far as I know, excepting your mother. You have not been aware, perhaps, that I have always taken an affectionate interest in you, my sister's son. I am not a man of many words, and perhaps nothing of the kind has occurred to your thoughts."

"You—you have always been kind to me, sir," stammered Crooke, astounded. What this sudden tenderness could possibly mean, he could not guess. Certainly he had never suspected his grim old uncle of affectionate feelings before.

"You do not know, perhaps, that I am a disappointed man, Gerald." The colonel was speaking half to himself. "If my temper has been soured, it was not without reason. Your mother is my sister, and for her sake I have wished to take a pride in you. I had another sister, now dead, whom you have never seen. But you have heard something of her."

"I've heard my father speak of her, sir," said Crooke, lost in wonder. "Her husband was a rotter, and went to prison or something, and disgraced all his connections. My father's told me never to speak of him or mention his name. I don't know whether he's still living."

"Neither do I," said the colonel. "If living, he is probably in a convict prison now. He was a scoundrel, and my younger sister's early death is upon his conscience, if he has or had a conscence. And his son, my sister's son—whether that boy is alive or dead I do not know; but if living, he is doubtless

a criminal like his father." The colonel checked himself. "Enough of that. Gerald, my experience has been a bitter one, and it has hardened and soured my temper. But——" He paused, and Crooke waited in silence, with the colonel's eyes upon his face. "Gerald, such hopes as are left to me are bound up in you. Is it not worth while to try and be worthy of an old man's affection, and to give him cause for pride in you?"

Crooke drew a deep breath. He understood now—the colonel must have learned something about him.

It was a relief that his uncle was kind, instead of stern and accusing, as Crooke would have expected. It might be possible to talk him round yet. That was the only thought in Crooke's mind. Any responsive throb to the grim old man's kindness never came to his hard heart.

"I—I hope you haven't any fault to find with me, uncle," faltered Crooke.

The colonel sighed.

"Naturally, I have asked your Housemaster and your Form-master about you, Gerald. They do not seem to have a high opinion of you."

"I don't see why not, sir," said Crooke boldly. "I don't know that I've done anything wrong."

"And, to judge by this afternoon's scene, your schoolfellows do not have much regard for you."

"I've got my own friends," said Crooke sullenly. "It's that fellow Talbot who's influenced the others against me."

"Yes, yes, that is probable—a dangerous boy," said Colonel Lyndon, with a nod. "It is very probable. But it does not appear that you take part in the school games, Gerald. A nephew of mine should not be a slacker."

"I'm not a slacker, sir. I should be in the House team now, and playing cricket to-day, but——"

"But what?"

"Talbot's got the place I ought to have. He can twist Tom Merry round his finger, and Merry is cricket captain."

"Then it is not by your own wish that you stand out of the games?"

"Not at all, sir. I'm a keen cricketer. But ever since Talbot's been at the school, I haven't had a chance. You'd hardly believe the influence he has over the fellows—and he's up against me, because I won't pal with him."

"You have been punished for smoking, Gerald."

Crooke bit his lip.

"A—a fellow gave me a cigarette one day, and my Form-master happened to spot me trying it," he stammered.

"It was not only one occasion, from what I have learned, Gerald. What you say of Talbot and his influence is doubtless quite correct, but it does not alter the fact that you are unpopular among the boys—a very fine set of lads, so far as I can see—and that your masters have punished you for vicious conduct. I do not wish to be hard on you. But I expect that when I visit you again, there will be a change."

"I'll do my best, uncle. When Talbot's gone——"

"Yes, yes. If you see your faults, and endeavour to correct them, that is all that I ask. Remember, Gerald, that you will be a very rich man some day, and riches bring responsibilities. If a German bullet should reach me out there, you will have a large fortune when you come of age. I should not like to think that my nephew would grow up into a vicious idler, with no thought but for pleasure."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Crooke, with an inward chuckle. Crooke's idea was that when he was rich, he would have what he called a "good time"; but it was evidently injudicious to let his uncle become aware of that.

"Remember what I have said, Gerald, and remember my wishes," said the colonel. "You are a Lyndon on your mother's side, and you should seek to be worthy of the blood that flows in your veins. That is all, my boy!"

The colonel rose to his feet, his bronzed face grim again. The boy had vaguely disappointed him. Crooke shook hands with his uncle, and quitted the room, leaving the colonel staring from the window.

Crooke returned to his study, wondering.

"Blessed if I can make him out!" he muttered. "A queer old johnny, by gad! He's heard things about me—I suppose I might have expected that. And he's forgotten to tip me—he might have squeezed out a fiver, at least. Family affection instead of a tip—it comes cheaper!" Crooke sneered savagely. "I wish he'd go—and take his dashed sermons with him!"

Crooke opened the table drawer, and took out a cigarette, and lighted it with great satisaction. Then he threw himself into the armchair, and opened a pink paper, and was soon deeply immersed in the contents. It was a relief after his interview with the colonel.

"Blue Bird—three to one against!" murmured Crooke. "Now, if I see Banks this evening, I'll certainly have a half-sov. on Blue Bird at Newmarket. He's dead certain to romp home, I should say."

There was a knock at the door, and it opened.

"This is my nephew's study? Thank you; my boy, Gerald——"

Crooke leaped wildly to his feet.

Colonel Lyndon stood in the doorway.

The sporting paper was clutched in the junior's hand, the cigarette still smoked between his teeth. He was dumbfounded.

Colonel Lyndon started as he saw him, and his face set hard as iron. He stepped into the study.

The cigarette dropped to the floor. Crooke threw the pink paper under the table. But he knew that it was too late. His uncle had seen both.

"Uncle," stammered Crooke, in utter confusion, "I—I didn't know. I—I——"

"You did not expect me in your study," said the colonel. "I can guess that. I forgot something I intended to give you, and I came here—— I have a ten-pound note for you, Gerald. It is here."

The colonel laid a crisp banknote on the table.

"Thank you, uncle. I—I—— The fact is——"

Crooke's voice died away. What on earth could he say, he wondered. After that serious talk downstairs, the colonel had found him with a cigarette in his mouth, a racing paper in his hand. There was nothing he could say. Lies could not serve him in that emergency.

"Good-bye, Gerald!" The colonel's voice was calm, but hard as steel. "Fortunately, I have been favoured by chance. I am aware now of the true character of my nephew. Only ten minutes ago——" He paused. "I have no right to lecture you, Gerald. I am only your uncle, after all, not your father. You owe me no duty, unless you choose, and evidently you do not choose. You will not be troubled by any further sermons from me, Gerald."

Colonel Lyndon stepped from the study.

Crooke made a step forward.

"Uncle!"

The door closed. The firm steps of the old soldier died away down the passage. Crooke stood rooted to the floor.

"By gad!" he muttered at last. "That's done it—that's really done it!" His eyes fell on the banknote, and he picked it up, crisp and rustling in his fingers. "Well, there's the tenner. The mater will talk him round—the mater can do anything with him. Anyway, there's the tenner, and I'll have two quid on Blue Bird!"

And Crooke lighted another cigarette.

CHAPTER 21.

The Heaviest Blow.

"A CENTUWY, bai Jove!"

"Hundred up! Hurrah!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

The Grammarian match was going strong. Leather-hunting was the principal occupation of Gordon Gay & Co. Talbot, at the wickets, had made his century for the second innings.

The bowlers and the field had accounted for most of the other wickets. But Talbot of the Shell was like a rock.

The crowd was simmering with enthusiasm. Talbot's name was shouted far and wide. Colonel Lyndon, the last of the governors to leave after the meeting, heard the roar from the cricket-ground as he departed. Talbot, under sentence, was winning the match for his side.

If his nephew had been more like that boy—like that outcast! was the involuntary thought that rose in the old soldier's mind. He sighed, and turned his back on the gates of St. Jim's. His work was done there. He went with a heavy heart.

"Last man in!" was the word on Little Side.

A few minutes later, Talbot fell to Gordon Gay's bowling—he had very nearly been not out again. But he had completed the 100 for his innings. The St. Jim's figure for the innings was 140. It was Talbot's game.

Tom Merry slapped him on the shoulder as he came off, flushed and breathing hard. His batting had been wonderful.

"Safe as houses for the match!" said Tom. "It was ripping, old chap!"

"Simply wippin'!" chortled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "And the Grammah boundahs won't have a beastly look-in, you know."

Gordon Gay & Co. felt the same about it. In their last innings they fought hard to a finish, but they were still 30 runs short when the end came. The shadows were lengthening on the old quadrangle when the last Grammarian wicket fell. St. Jim's were winners by 30 runs.

There was a chorus of triumph among the Saints. Talbot was the hero of the hour; he had won the match for his side!"

Gordon Gay & Co. departed in their brake in the gathering dusk. The match had been a long one, and the sun was setting. School House and New House juniors were rejoicing. But there were some clouded faces among them. Tom Merry & Co. were thinking more of their chum than of the victory over the Grammarians.

What had been the result of the governors' meeting?

As yet it had not been made known.

It was noted and commented upon that Mr. Railton looked unusually grave. Fellows who had had a glimpse of the Head declared that he looked cut up. That was not very promising for Talbot.

The verdict must, of course, be communicated to Talbot ere long, but the Head seemed in no hurry to tell him the result. Talbot knew what that meant, and his chums guessed. Good news would have been told at once. The kind old man shrank from dealing him the blow.

The Terrible Three were in their study with Talbot, when Toby came to call the latter to Dr. Holmes's study. Tom Merry's face was glum.

"Let's know as soon as you can, old chap," he said.

Talbot nodded, and followed the page.

Tom moved restlessly about the study. He could not keep still. Lowther and Manners sat silent and morose.

An eyeglass glimmered in at the door, with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's distressed face behind it.

"Talbot's gone to the Head, deah boys!"

"I know."

"I'm afwaid the choppah's comin' down." Arthur Augustus seemed dangerously near to blubbering. "It's a wotten shame—a beastly shame!"

"Rotten!" said Tom Merry between his teeth. "The best fellow breathing—the very best!"

"If they want to turn him out, Tom Mewwy, somethin's got to be done. My patah's gone, without sayin' a word to me." D'Arcy wrinkled his brows. "I wondah what that means? I'm suah he's done his best for Talbot."

"Colonel Lyndon's led the governors by the nose," said Manners bitterly. "Hang him! What did he want to come here with old Railton at all for? He spoiled everything from start to finish."

"It's a whack in the eye for the Head, too," said Lowther.

"I'd wesign if I were the Head," said Arthur Augustus. "I wouldn't stand it. They have no wight to ovahwule him like this."

Tom clenched his hands.

"It was all Crooke's fault at the beginning. If Talbot has to go, we'll make that cad sorry for himself!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was some consolation in the idea of ragging Crooke, but not much. Talbot's going was a heavy blow. What would the place be like without Talbot. The juniors waited with heavy hearts for their chum to return to the study. The minutes seemed to drag.

Meanwhile, Talbot of the Shell was in the Head's study. He found Dr. Holmes with a sombre brow.

But the Head's glance was very kind as it rested on the junior.

"I am afraid I have bad news for you, Talbot," he said.

"I expected it, sir."

"The governors have decided that it would be better for you to leave the school. I need not tell you that I do not approve of their decision."

"Thank you, sir!"

"My faith in you is not shaken in the least," said the Head. "I hope, Talbot, that you will always let me be your friend, and that you will not let me lose sight of you in the future."

"I should be very ungrateful if I could forget your kindness to me, sir," said Talbot. "I shall do everything you wish."

"As for your future, that will be taken care of. You are aware that it is in the power of the governors to cancel a scholarship for good reason, and that step they have decided upon. But it has been decided, also, to make you full compensation for its value."

Talbot's lip curled slightly.

"I shall not accept it, sir. I cannot. I shall leave St. Jim's as I entered it. I cannot accept anything from those who have treated me unjustly."

"You must think of your future, my boy."

"I have health and strength, sir, and I can work. I cannot accept anything from the governors of the school."

The Head sighed.

"You must have your way, Talbot. I have no right to give you orders now. I am no longer your headmaster. I am, indeed, no longer the headmaster of this school at all."

Talbot started violently.

"Dr. Holmes! You have not——"

The Head smiled faintly.

"Yes, I have resigned my position here, Talbot. The decision of the governors left no other course open to me. I shall remain until a new headmaster is appointed, that is all."

"Oh, sir!"

Talbot's handsome face was pale now. It was not only his own ruin, then, but he had brought something like ruin upon the kind old man who had befriended him. For he knew how all the Head's thoughts and feelings were bound up with the old school. He knew only too well how that kind heart would ache when it was torn from the familiar surroundings—the grey old walls, the dusky old library, the familiar study where so many years of kindness and usefulness had been passed. And it was upon his account that the Head was to lose it all.

It was true, as the doctor said, that there was no other course open to him. He had his dignity to consider. In disagreement with the governing body, he had no course open but to resign. The governors' decision was, in point of fact, a condemnation of his action in befriending the outcast, and, as the Head's opinion remained fixed and unchangeable, he could scarcely continue in his position.

"And—and it is for my sake!" exclaimed the boy, the tears starting to his eyes. "I have brought this upon you, sir! If only I had never come to St. Jim's!"

"I am glad that you came, Talbot," said the Head quietly. "It has given you a chance in your life, which you have taken, and for that, at least, I am glad. Will you be ready to leave the school to-morrow, my boy?"

"To-night if necessary, sir."

"To-morrow will be soon enough," said Dr. Holmes. "And your plans?"

"I have made none, so far, sir. I shall find something to do. I am used to looking after myself," added Talbot. "I shall never forget your kindness, sir. I hope some day I may be able to repay it."

"You can repay it, Talbot, by keeping to your good resolutions, and leading a life worthy of you. But that, I am sure, you will do."

"You may be quite sure of that, sir."

"I shall see you again, to-morrow, before you leave."

Talbot left the study. His steps were unsteady as he made his way back to the junior quarters. His face was pale, and his eyes were moist. His look struck the juniors as he came into Tom Merry's study.

"It's all up?" asked Tom, with a catch in his voice.

Talbot nodded.

"All up with me," he said. "But I expected that. That's nothing. It's worse than that. I could stand it for myself, if only——" He groaned aloud. "I seem to bring bad luck with me! The Head's resigned."

"The Head!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I'm the cause of it, of course. I wish I had never come to the school," said Talbot miserably. "I wish—I wish—— But what's the good of wishing now? It's too late—too late!"

CHAPTER 22.

Rough Justice.

"HEAH is the wottah!"

Crooke of the Shell looked startled and terrified. A crowd of juniors had come into the common-room, and they had found him.

The cad of the Shell had reason to be scared. The look on Tom Merry's face was quite enough to terrify him.

"Hands off!" he exclaimed, backing behind the table. "It's not my fault that Talbot's got to go! Hands off!"

"You uttah cad!"

"Collar him!"

"Rag the cad!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry, as the juniors closed round the wretched Crooke. "We've got to talk to the cad. Mind he doesn't get away!"

Crooke stood panting, with the ring of juniors round him. There was anger, scorn, contempt in every face.

Tom Merry raised his hand.

"We know what you've done, Crooke. Your uncle has made the governors come down on Talbot—for nothing. You did it in the first place. I won't say anything about your uncle, but I'll tell you what I think of you. You planned from the first to use his influence against Talbot, and you succeeded."

"I—I——"

"Talbot's got to go. He's got to leave St. Jim's. You fancy that you'll be rid of him—a fellow you've always disliked because he's decent, and you're a crawling cad. Well, you're going, too."

"What!" gasped Crooke.

"You're going, too!" repeated Tom Merry grimly. "We

won't stand you at St. Jim's. You've got Talbot turned out. We're going to turn you out!"

"You—you silly fathead, you can't!" yelled Crooke. "Do you think the Head will listen to you?"

"We're not bothering about the Head. You've got Talbot sent away—a chap whose boots you're not fit to blacken. We're going to make St. Jim's too hot to hold you!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We won't stand you any longer, Crooke," said Blake. "And you can take your choice—either you clear off yourself, or you'll be made to go!"

Crooke sneered.

"And how will you make me go if I won't go?"

"We'll rag you till you're glad to go," said Tom Merry. "And unless you go at once to the Head, and ask for permission to go home, we'll begin now!"

"You—you idiot! My people——"

"Hang your people! If your father wants to know why you've come home, tell him we don't want a sneak and a cad at St. Jim's, and that we won't stand one. He can put you into his office, and teach you to be a swindler; that will suit you!"

"My father——"

"Oh, we know all about your father!" said Tom Merry bitterly. "We know he made a fortune out of the speculation where my old governess, Miss Fawcett, lost all her money. Don't talk to us about your father. As for your uncle, we've shown him what we think of him. What we think of you, we'll make you understand. Now, are you going to the Head?"

"No!" yelled Crooke, crimson with rage and terror. "I won't! If you think you're going to make me leave the school——"

"We do!"

"And we mean bizney, deah boy!"

"You've got to go as well as old Talbot!"

"I won't!" shrieked Crooke.

"Then this is where the ragging begins. Collar him!" said Tom Merry.

The juniors closed on Crooke. The cad of the Shell made a wild rush for the door, but a dozen pairs of hands dragged him back.

Herries of the Fourth produced a dog-whip from under his jacket.

"Shove him across the table!" he said.

"Face down!" said Blake.

Bump!

Crooke was whirled into the air, and brought down across the table, quivering with rage and apprehension. The determination of the juniors astounded him. In all that crowd he had no friend; no one was there to raise a finger to help him.

The whip lashed in the air.

"Give him a dozen to begin with," said Tom Merry. "We'll show him what the School House thinks of a slanderer and a backbiter!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Lash!

"Help!" yelled Crooke frantically.

"Go it, Hewwies, old man! Pile in! Give him anothah!"

"Yaroooh! Let go!" screamed Crooke. "Help! Kildare—Darrel—Mr. Railton! Help!"

"Pile in, Herries!"

Lash! Lash! Lash!

It was only too clear to the rascal of the Shell that the School House fellows meant business. He had triumphed over Talbot, and now his turn had come. He had never dreamed of this—that Tom Merry & Co. would take the law into their own hands in this way.

It was a thing he could not have foreseen. In his cunning he had overreached himself. He writhed and yelled under his punishment.

There was a quick step in the passage.

"Cave!" yelled Hammond. "Here comes Kildare!"

"Lock the door!" called out Tom Merry.

"You—you can't keep Kildare out!"

"Lock the door, I tell you!"

The door slammed; the key turned. A moment later there was a thundering knock outside, and Kildare's angry voice was heard:

"Open this door at once, you young rascals!"

"Bai Jove! Kildare is awf'ly watty!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Go on, Herries!"

"You bet!" said Herries.

And the dog-whip descended again upon the wriggling, yelling Crooke.

"Yow!" roared Crooke. "Kildare! Help!"

The captain of St. Jim's shook the door-handle furiously outside. Never before had the authority of the head prefect of the School House been contemned in this way. But for once the Lower School was out of hand.

"Will you open this door?" roared Kildare, from the passage.

There was no answer from within. Nobody wanted to cheek Kildare, but nobody intended to admit him to the common-room.

"You'll get flogged for this!" yelled Crooke. "You'll get sacked. Yarooh! Leave off, Herries, you rotter! I—I'll go to the Head if you like!"

Tom Merry made Herries a sign to cease. Herries, who was just getting his hand in, ceased reluctantly.

"You'll go to the Head, Crooke, and ask him to send you away?"

"Ow! Yes," mumbled Crooke, almost weeping with rage and pain. "Anything you like, you beast! Ow!"

"Open the door!" said Tom.

The door was unlocked, and thrown open; and Kildare of the Sixth strode in, his face in a flame.

"How dare you lock me out, you young rascals? What have you been doing to Crooke?"

"Waggin' him, deah boy!"

"Sorry, Kildare," said Tom Merry. "You can lick us if you like, but we've got to see that Crooke does as he's agreed. He's going to leave St. Jim's."

"The ordah of the boot, fwom the juniahs!" explained Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Kildare gasped.

"You cheeky young sweeps——"

"Are you going to the Head, Crooke?"

"No, I'm not!" yelled Crooke furiously, dodging behind the stalwart form of the captain of the school. "Kildare, keep them off!"

"Stand back!" shouted Kildare, as the juniors made a forward movement.

"Let us get hold of that cad, then!"

"Merry, how dare you speak to a prefect like that?"

"Crooke's going to be kicked out, Kildare. He's got Talbot turned out, and he's going, too. You can't protect him!"

"I can't?" exclaimed Kildare, in angry amazement.

"No. You can do as you like afterwards, but just now we're dealing with Crooke!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Bwavo!"

"Merry, do you want to be reported for a flogging?" shouted Kildare.

"I don't care! Collar that cad, you fellows!"

Tom Merry led the rush. Kildare, much to his amazement, was swept aside by the tide of juniors, and Crooke, shrieking with terror, was once more in the hands of Tom Merry & Co.

CHAPTER 23.

Saving His Enemy.

"HELP!"

"Bring him along!"

"Carry him to the Head!"

"Yaas, wathah! Huwway!"

With a rush the crowd swept out of the common-room, with Gerald Crooke struggling and writhing in their midst. Kildare, breathless, astounded, staggered to his feet.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "Great Scott! How is this going to end?"

He rushed after the juniors. His thought was to keep the mutineers, at least, from that reckless visit to the Head's study. But he was not heeded; his voice fell upon deaf ears. The juniors he collared did not resist, but he could not collar them all. Crooke was rushed away.

Kildare, almost at his wits' end, dashed away to Mr. Railton's study. The Housemaster had already heard the uproar, and the captain of the school met him in his doorway.

"What is it, Kildare?"

"Something like mutiny, sir. The juniors are all piling on Crooke; they think he's the cause of Talbot's being turned out. They're taking him to the Head's study!"

"Good heavens!"

"They won't listen to me, sir. You may be able to stop them!"

Mr. Railton nodded, and strode away quickly, with the Sixth-Former at his heels.

The crowd of excited juniors was swarming down the wide, flagged passage that led to the Head's study. They had almost reached the door of that sacred apartment, Crooke still yelling and kicking and struggling.

"Boys, stop this instantly!"

"Bai Jove! Wailton!"

There was a sudden pause. The popular Housemaster's voice quelled the tumult for the moment. Mr. Railton, indeed, was not in a position to deal forcibly with the rebels, with his once strong arm, shattered in battle, hanging helpless in a sling.

But that helpless arm appealed more to the juniors than anything else could have done. The disabled Housemaster's authority was more unquestionable than it had ever been.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Mr. Railton, frowning. "Release Crooke at once!"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then the gripping hands fell away from Crooke. The cad of the Shell sprawled on the floor, and then scrambled up. He looked dishevelled and furious.

"Now, Merry, you appear to be the ringleader, kindly explain this," said the master of the School House sternly.

"We're all in it, sir," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah, sir."

"I am speaking to Merry. Answer me," said Mr. Railton. "This is the second time you have led a disturbance to-day, Merry!"

Tom Merry faced the Housemaster, flushed but fearless.

"I don't know that I'm the leader, sir; but I should be if the chaps wanted leading. But they don't. We're all determined about this."

"About what?"

"Crooke and Crooke's uncle have got Talbot sent away from St. Jim's, sir. We want Crooke to follow."

"Yes, rather!"

"What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gandah!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Crooke is not answerable to you, Merry, but to the Head. As for Colonel Lyndon, what he has done does not concern you boys. I can make allowances for you, as you naturally feel the parting with your friend. But there must be no more of this. You hear me?"

The juniors were silent.

"If there is any repetition of this, every boy concerned in it will be reported for a flogging," said Mr. Railton. "Now disperse!"

The juniors looked at one another. Any other master they would have perhaps resisted. But they could not resist the Housemaster of whom they were so proud, and whose arm lay helpless in its sling. In silence, with gloomy and moody faces, the crowd broke up.

Mr. Railton had not punished them. They would not have cared if he had. Their feelings were stirred to the depths.

Talbot, stainless in their eyes, was under sentence; on the morrow he was to go. Their resentment was bitter. They dispersed at Mr. Railton's command. But they did not change their determination. It was only postponed.

"We can't back up against Railton," said Tom Merry, in the common-room. "We must be decent to old Railton. But Crooke doesn't get off. He seems to be able to talk his precious uncle over—let him talk him into letting Talbot alone, and then we'll let Crooke alone. But if Talbot goes, he goes—or he'll get a dog's life if he stays here."

"That's settled," said Kangaroo of the Shell. "Railton's with us, only he can't say so. So is the Head. Both of them think Talbot ought to stay—the Head's resigned over it. That shows what he thinks. We're losing Talbot, and we've got to lose the Head—all through Crooke and his beastly backbiting!"

"Yaas, wathah! Cwooke's going if Talbot does."

The minds of the juniors were made up.

Crooke, almost in fear and trembling, returned to his study. He deemed it best to keep out of the public view for a time. His few friends—Mellish, Piggott, and the other black sheep—were leaving him severely alone. If the school had sent him to Coventry, he would not have felt it very keenly—that could only have lasted for a time. But with active ragging he could not deal; and he felt that there was more to come.

He began to wish that he had never spoken of Talbot to his uncle. Yet the opportunity of revenge upon the boy he had always disliked had seemed too good to be lost. And it was not all his work—the colonel had acted, too, upon his own initiative. But Tom Merry & Co. could not reach the colonel, and they could reach Crooke. The cad of the Shell had to pay for both.

He had not been half an hour in his study, when there was a tramp of many feet in the passage. He sprang to the door—the key was gone. It had been taken away.

He slammed the door, and glanced wildly round the room, thinking of a barricade. But there was no time. The door was flung open from without.

"Here he is!"

The raggers had come. Crooke gazed in terror at the swarm of grim and unrelenting faces in the passage.

"Will you let me alone?" he shrieked.

"When you leave St. Jim's—not before," said Tom Merry.

"I can't! I tell you—I——"

"We'll make you!"

"Help!" yelled Crooke.

"Hold on, you fellows!"

Talbot of the Shell came shoving through the crowd in the passage. His face was pale and harassed. Way was made for him at once; he sprang into the study and waved the raggers back.

"Hands off Crooke, you chaps!" he exclaimed. "Don't let there be any ragging now. Chuck it!"

"Wats!"

"Bosh!"

"You clear off, Talbot, old chap!" said Tom Merry. "We don't want you to have a hand in it. But we're not letting Crooke off."

"Nevah, deah boy!"

There was a forward movement, and Crooke sprang behind Talbot. Talbot, the fellow he had maligned and injured, was his only defence now. Talbot, erect, stood before him.

"Stand back!" he said. "Tom—all of you—don't let there be anything of this. You can't help me by it. It will only distress the Head and Mr. Railton. They stood by me all they could. It isn't fair on them. Tom—I don't want to go away leaving bad trouble behind me!"

Tom Merry paused.

"Look here, Talbot——"

"Besides, Crooke isn't so much to blame," said Talbot hurriedly. "Let the fellow alone. Don't let there be trouble on my account. It makes it all the more rotten for me."

"That's all vewy well——"

"Oh, you're too good to live!" said Blake, in disgust. "We're not going to have that cad here after you're gone. We can make him go."

"We'll wag him till he goes, and if the pwefects chip in, we'll wag them, too," said Arthur Augustus truculently.

"Oh, let Talbot have his way!" said Tom Merry. "It's the last thing we can do for him. Let that rotter alone. Come on!"

Tom strode from the study. The raggers hesitated, with dark looks at Crooke, but they followed him. The ragging was over. Talbot and his enemy remained alone in the study. Then the Toff moved to the door.

"You're all right now," he said.

Crooke gasped.

"I—I—— Thank you for chipping in," he said. "I—I wasn't so much to blame, Talbot, and—and I'm sorry I ever said anything against you!"

Talbot turned back from the doorway.

"I dare say you didn't say much more than the truth," he said. "That was bad enough. I'm going to-morrow, Crooke. I'm sorry we haven't been better friends while I've been here."

Then he was gone.

Crooke sat down, gasping for breath, his heart throbbing. He was safe from the resentment of the School House fellows, and it was Talbot who had saved him; it was the Toff's influence that stood between him and vengeance. And this was the boy he had helped to drive in disgrace from the school. What did he deserve at Talbot's hands—and what had he received?

"I—I wish I'd let him alone!" muttered Crooke. "Hang it all! I wish I'd let him alone!"

There was a trace of remorse in his hard heart for the harm he had done. But it came too late. What he had done he could not undo. The fiat had gone forth—and that night was to be Talbot's last at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 24.

At the Eleventh Hour.

"TO-MORROW!"

Talbot muttered the word aloud, in a tone of hopeless misery. He had gone out—by himself—he wanted to be alone to think. The last rays of the sun were disappearing in the west; night was falling on the fields and the river.

The Toff had halted on the little stone bridge that spanned the Ryll, and leaned on the rough old parapet, looking back towards the school.

Over the trees rose the grey old tower, catching the last golden glimmer of the sinking sun.

To-morrow!

A few hours more, and he was to turn his back upon the old school—that happy span in his troubled life was to end; and he was to face the world once more—alone.

Alone!

The friends he had made—Tom Merry and his chums—would he ever see them again? And Marie, the chum of his earliest boyhood—she, too, was to say good-bye on the morrow—perhaps for the last time.

The end of the long struggle had come at last—the very end—unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue.

In the midst of happy carelessness the blow had fallen, and the lad, whose young life had been so full of shadow, was to go forth once more, a wanderer on the face of the earth.

Now that he was alone the calmness was gone from his handsome face. The misery that gnawed his heart was only too clearly reflected there.

What had he done to deserve this? The past—he had atoned for that, if loyal faith and rectitude could atone for it.

And it was not only his own ruin. He had dragged others down with him. The kind old Head. He also was to look his last upon the school he loved, within whose grey old walls he had passed so many years. If only that last and most bitter blow had not fallen, Talbot felt that he could have borne it better.

If only he could have prevented that!

Could he have prevented it? That thought was tormenting him now. For the sake of his pride he had been silent, when speaking might have saved him. For his own sake he would not speak, but for his kind old friend's sake, if by humbling himself he could have prevented that misfortune, what right had he to think of his pride?

But it was too late. His enemy was gone. To seek him, to appeal to him. The proud blood boiled in his veins at the thought. Yet if it would save that blow from falling upon his old, kind friend—but would it? What if he humbled himself for nothing? For he could ask nothing for the Head without asking for himself. If he stayed, if the governors rescinded their decision, the Head's resignation would be withdrawn, but not otherwise. Unexpectedly, unhappily, the doctor's fate was bound up in his own.

Was it too late? He knew that Colonel Lyndon had not yet left Rylcombe. He had seen his car there as he passed the inn in the village. What if he sought him, if he humbled himself before that hard, stern man, not for his own sake, but for the sake of his kind and generous friend?

There was a bitter struggle in the boy's harassed mind.

In what mood would he find the colonel? Certainly not in a kind one, for, hard as he was, Colonel Lyndon could not fail to feel keenly the happenings of the day. But for the disagreement with the Head which the question of Talbot had caused, the colonel would doubtless have stayed at the school that night, and spent the evening fighting over old battles with Mr. Railton. But this dispute had divided him from his comrade-in-arms, the Housemaster sergeant. And that, too, he would put down to Talbot's account.

To humble himself before that man—perhaps for nothing after all! The proud lad quivered and shrank at the thought.

And yet—for the doctor's sake!

The darkness thickened on field and river as the time passed unheeded. The gates had long been closed at St. Jim's, but Talbot had long forgotten the passage of time. In that hour of doubt and difficulty he could not decide. His duty was not clear.

There was the buzz of a motor-car on the road leading to the bridge, and two lights gleamed from the darkness. But the junior did not hear; he did not see. His brow was wrinkled; his thoughts were far away. Suddenly he stepped back from the parapet and turned in the direction of the village.

His mind was made up. He would go to the colonel, if indeed it was not too late. If Colonel Lyndon was still at the inn he would find him and speak to him, and humble his pride for duty's sake and the sake of gratitude to his benefactor.

There was a shout from the road—a shout of alarm. Two bright lights glared under his eyes. He started back. For once the cool and iron-nerved Toff was not himself; that long mental struggle had told on him, and it had left him dazed and confused.

There was a whir of jamming brakes. Like the eyes of some wild animal, the bright lights had rushed down on him. Talbot sprang back from the road on the narrow bridge. He felt a heavy shock, and fell——

Through his dizzy mind at that fearful moment a thought passed like a flash. Was that the solution of the problem? Was that the end? Then darkness closed upon eyes and brain, and he knew no more.

The car had stopped—buzzing, whirring. The chauffeur looked with straining eyes at the figure that lay beside it in the dust, motionless. A hard, bronzed face looked from the car window.

"What is it?"

"An accident, sir; a boy in the road——"

"Good heavens!"

Colonel Lyndon—for it was he—threw open the door and sprang out.

"The lamp—quick!"

He bent over the motionless form. The bright rays streamed upon a pale and handsome face, and the colonel set his teeth.

"Talbot!"

He knelt without a movement, his eyes fixed on that colourless face. It was Talbot who lay insensible before him, the boy he had driven from school—Talbot of the Shell. What had brought the boy there in the path of his car? That cool, self-possessed lad, whose hardihood that day had amazed him—what had been the matter with him then? Had he been deaf and blind, that he had blundered there, to be knocked down by the car?

"Not killed, sir?" The chauffeur's voice trembled.

"No." The colonel roused himself with a start. "No. Only stunned, I think. Hold the light here."

There was a stain of crimson on the white forehead. Talbot lay without sound or movement. He seemed scarcely to breathe. The colonel had recovered his self-possession. His brown hands were quickly at work. He tore open the collar and the vest to give the insensible lad air. He supported the heavy head upon his strong arm. A thin wisp of ribbon caught on his fingers. It held a locket—a plain steel locket. Even at that moment it struck the colonel as strange that the boy should be wearing a locket upon a ribbon about his neck. In the shock it had snapped open.

"Is he—is he badly hurt, sir?" The chauffeur was staring at the colonel in wonder.

Colonel Lyndon did not reply. He did not hear.

His eyes were fastened upon the pictured face in the locket, riveted there as if he were mesmerised.

It was a woman's face, a sweet, kind face, the face of one who had known a troubled life, but kind and sweet and patient. With a trembling hand the colonel raised it and held it closer to the light, his eyes growing dim as he gazed at it. He had forgotten the boy He had forgotten everything—everything but that pictured face.

There was a faint moan from Talbot. His eyes opened wildly. They fell upon the bronzed face so close to him, and he made a movement to draw back, and groaned. His head was throbbing.

"He's coming to, sir."

The colonel did not speak. He did not move. Talbot's eyes fell upon the locket in the brown hand, and he gave a faint cry.

"Give that to me!"

Colonel Lyndon came to himself. His glance turned on Talbot, searching his face as if he would read his very soul.

"Boy," he muttered hoarsely, "what does this mean? How came you with this picture? How came you with this miniature of my dead sister?"

Talbot did not reply, but his lip curled bitterly. The colonel grasped his arm so hard that he gave a cry of pain.

"Answer me!" His voice was almost fierce. "How came you with this?"

"It is mine."

"I tell you it is the picture of my sister, now dead."

"She was my mother," said Talbot quietly.

CHAPTER 25.
Light At Last.

THERE was a strange, subdued excitement in the School House at St. Jim's. Talbot had missed calling-over, and he had not returned. Tom Merry was wondering anxiously where his chum was—wondering, with an aching heart, whether the outcast had gone without waiting for the morrow. From his study he heard the arrival of a car. He heard Colonel Lyndon's voice in the quadrangle. Soon afterwards he knew—all the school knew—what had happened.

Talbot of the Shell was in the sanatorium under the care of the Little Sister. He had been knocked down by the colonel's car, and Colonel Lyndon had brought him back to the school.

The colonel had not gone again.

Tom Merry had dashed away at once to see Miss Marie, to ask after his chum. He found the girl pale and troubled, but her looks reassured him. Talbot was not seriously hurt. The car had grazed him. He had struck his head upon the stone of the bridge. On the morrow he would be up and well again. And Tom Merry went with his heart lightened.

In the quadrangle, as he returned to the School House, he passed the colonel. Colonel Lyndon was pacing to and fro in the gloom under the old elms, and Tom, catching a glimpse of his face, wondered

For the iron old face was broken with emotion, the hard

The heart of the Duke of Wellington would surely swell with pride if he were able to come back to us and take active command in the field. As in his day, the British soldier is as valiant and fearless as ever. The above picture shows an advance being made by a section of our artillery under the heavy and persistent fire of the enemy.

harshness was gone, the firm lips were trembling. The colonel did not even see him, and Tom hurried on, wondering and amazed. What did the colonel care if the boy he had harmed so much was injured? Had the juniors, after all, misjudged the stern old man?

"How is he?"

A score of voices asked the question as Tom Merry came back.

"It's all right," said Tom. "Only a knock. Colonel Lyndon's car knocked him down, but it isn't serious."

"Bai Jove, what a welief!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "The old johnny's face looked quite howwid, you know—as if he had killed him. He seems awf'ly cut up about it, anyway."

"He does," said Tom. "I've just seen him. I can't understand it. It only needs a word from him for Talbot to stay, but he won't speak that word."

"Queer old beggar," said Blake. "He's marching up and down in the quad. Doesn't seem to see anybody or anything. Levison says he saw tears in his eyes."

"Gweat Scott!"

"It's a fact!" said Levison. "Jolly near blubbing, I can tell you. I saw him quite close when he was getting Talbot out of the car."

The juniors were lost in wonder. The colonel had been shut up for some time with the Head and Mr. Railton. They wondered why. A faint hope was growing in Tom Merry's heart that the grim old man had relented, that he would spare Talbot. He, and he alone, could undo the harm that he had done.

"Here's the Head!" murmured Lowther.

Dr. Holmes, his face very grave, came down to the door with Mr. Railton. The crowd of juniors watched them curiously. They felt that something was going on—something they could not understand. That slight accident to Talbot of the Shell could not wholly account for it.

They watched the two masters join the colonel in the quadrangle, they saw the three figures disappear in the dusk towards the sanatorium. They were going to see Talbot. Why was the colonel going to see him? What did he care?

They little guessed, then, why he cared or how much he cared. They little dreamed how that iron nature had been shaken. The colonel's step was unsteady as he entered the ward, as the Little Sister led him to Talbot. Talbot of the Shell, propped up with pillows, his head bandaged, met the colonel with a calm glance. His face was hard, but it softened as he looked more closely at the old soldier. A look of wonder came into his eyes.

The colonel advanced to the bedside. The Head and Mr. Railton, silent, stood back. Miss Marie watched silently, but her eyes were very bright. She seemed to see now the end of the black trouble that had come upon her boy chum.

"My boy"—the colonel's voice was faltering—"you feel strong enough to speak?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"I am not hurt," he said. "I have had harder knocks than this. I shall be able to leave to-morrow."

Colonel Lyndon's lips quivered.

"If you leave, it will be by your own free choice," he said. "Why did you not tell me? If you had told me your name, I should have understood. My boy, you will answer me frankly now. Your name is Wilmot?"

"My name is Reginald Talbot Wilmot."

"Your father——"

"My father was Captain Crow, chief of the cracksmen," said Talbot bitterly. "But once he was Richard Talbot Wilmot, before that name was disgraced."

"If you had told me that, I should have known. It is because of your likeness to your father that I believed I had seen you before."

"I suppose so."

"I knew your face, even your voice," said the colonel, "but I did not think of connecting you in my mind with Wilmot. It is fifteen years since I saw him last. And I had seen him but few times. I did not know he was dead. I should never have dreamed of seeing his son here. I did not know whether the child that I had never seen was dead or living. I should never have known your secret if I had not seen my sister's face—your mother's face—in the locket."

"Why did you not tell your uncle, Talbot?" said the Head.

Talbot's face hardened again.

"I expected nothing from my uncle, and I would ask nothing at his hands," he replied. "My uncle knows why."

"Because your father was my enemy," said the colonel. "He left a legacy of hatred to you."

"Because you were my father's enemy, and when you might have saved him you let him go to the dogs," said Talbot passionately. "If you had given him a helping hand when he needed it, I might never have been what I was. You refused it, and therefore he hated you, and I——" He broke off.

"And you hated me?"

"No," said Talbot, "I did not. My mother was your sister. I knew that you had been kind to her before she met my father. But I would ask nothing of you, I will ask nothing now."

"You have heard only one side of the story, my boy," said the colonel quietly. "No, I will say nothing against your father; you need not fear that. He is dead, and his sins have died with him. Perhaps I was hard. But what could you expect me to feel towards the man to whose wrongdoing, as I believed, my sister's early death was due? She died, and he came to me—for the sake of her child, as he said. But all I thought of was her death, and that I could not forgive him. Afterwards, I would have found him if I could. I sought him, but he had vanished. He had changed his name and disappeared. But I would have helped him then and saved him from himself, for the sake of my sister's son. But it was no longer in my power."

"I—I did not know that." Talbot's face changed. "My father always believed——"

"I understand. And that belief he passed on to you. And you fancied that if I had known that you were Richard Wilmot's son it would have made no difference to me?"

"I do not think that it would. But in any case I should never have made an appeal to you. Perhaps I was wrong."

"You were wrong, my boy, though I do not blame you. And—and you allowed me to persecute my own nephew, to drive you away." The colonel's voice trembled. "If I had only known! And I should never have known but for that accident."

"You would have known," said Talbot. "I was on my way to you when your car knocked me down. I was going to speak, not for my own sake, but because I had brought trouble on one who had always been kind and generous to me." He glanced at the Head. "I could not resolve upon it at first; but I did at last, and I meant to tell you, to humble myself——"

"For my sake," said Dr. Holmes, in a moved voice. "I understand, Talbot. If you had been allowed to remain, I should have remained also."

"That was my reason, sir. It was hard for me, but I owed you too much to think of myself. The son of Captain Crow has no right to be proud," he added bitterly.

"But now," said Colonel Lyndon—"now you will remain. I shall explain my mistake to the governors. It will be proved that I was mistaken, and that you had told the truth, my boy. I shall acknowledge you as my nephew—my sister's son."

"You—you know what I am, what I was," stammered Talbot. "You know——"

"I know that you were more sinned against than sinning, and I know that I wronged you, unintentionally, Heaven knows. I have that wrong to set right. I have thought of you many, many times during these years, though I never hoped that I should meet you. Now I have found you. I had thought of my sister's son as lost among criminals, stained with crime; but you have saved yourself without my help. I shall be proud to acknowledge you as my nephew. The name you bear here you will continue to bear; that will be for the best. The associations of your father's name need never be revived. I will take steps to have that name made legally your own. My boy, there have been mistakes on both sides. Let the past be buried, and let us think no more of bygones."

Talbot held out his hand impulsively. The strong brown palm of the colonel closed on it. In that grasp all bitterness was buried.

* * * * * * *

"Huwwah!"

That was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's remark when the news was received.

It was a nine days' wonder at St. Jim's.

Talbot was to stay: that was the first good news. Tom Merry & Co. rejoiced. The threatening cloud had passed away. Once more the sun shone on the chequered life of the Toff.

But that was not all. Talbot of the Shell—the Toff, the prince of cracksmen, the boy who had been unknown, a nobody from nowhere—had found his uncle in Colonel Lyndon—an uncle of whom any fellow, as the juniors admitted now, might have been proud.

It was a surprise to Crooke of the Shell, more than to anyone. Talbot, the boy he had plotted against and injured, was his cousin, and Talbot had known it ever since the colonel had come home with Mr. Railton, though he had said no word. Whether Crooke was pleased or otherwise, he kept to himself; but Talbot's defence of him had, perhaps, touched his heart, and certainly when he rejoined his schoolfellows Crooke of the Shell gave him a cordial greeting.

There was great rejoicing among the Co. Talbot—he was still Talbot at St. Jim's—received warm congratulations on all sides. No longer an unknown scholarship boy, he was the nephew of a soldier distinguished in the war, and his position at St. Jim's was more than secure. There was another meeting of the governors, and the colonel made full explanations to them, and the sentence, of course, was rescinded, and nothing more was heard of the Head's resignation. Indeed, Sir William made Talbot a little speech of congratulation and shook hands with him warmly.

All St. Jim's rejoiced in Talbot's good fortune, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was barely restrained from re-engaging a brass band to celebrate it. It was good luck and happiness, after all, that had been brought to Talbot of the Shell by the Housemaster's homecoming.

THE END.

THIS·WEEK'S·CHAT

Whom to Write to — — — — —

EDITOR "THE GEM" LIBRARY.

THE FLEETWAY HOUSE. FARRINGDON ST. LONDON.E.C.

OUR ·· THREE ·· COMPANION ·· PAPERS!

"THE MAGNET" — LIBRARY — EVERY MONDAY | THE "PENNY POPULAR" — EVERY FRIDAY | CHUCKLES. — ½D — EVERY SATURDAY

For Next Wednesday:

"THE JEW OF ST. JIM'S!"

By Martin Clifford.

This great story of school life, which appears in the "Gem" Library on Wednesday next, deals with the fortunes of Dick Julian, a good-natured Jewish lad, who makes his entry to St. Jim's. With that foolish and ignorant contempt for Jewish people which characterises certain boys, Monty Lowther and one or two others resolve to give the new junior a warm time; but Dick Julian amply proves that he knows how to take care of himself, and Lowther gets as good as he gives. Angered beyond his usual self, the humorist of the Shell subjects Julian to all the petty insults he can think of; but when at length the Jewish junior is responsible for a remarkable deed of heroism, his schoolfellows—Lowther included—are quick to appreciate his magnificent pluck, and their unbounded admiration goes out to

"THE JEW OF ST. JIM'S!"

FOLLOWING IN ROBERT CARLTON'S FOOTSTEPS!

Still another young gentleman has nefarious designs on the "Gem" Library. The latest offender is a Master W. Malpas, who gives his address as Magdalen Street, Oxford; but I should not advise any of my chums to endeavour to communicate with him there, as the address is so beautifully vague. What a pity that these anti-Gemites always refrain from stating their full addresses, so that the straightforward, loyal Gemites may write and tell them, in good, round terms, exactly what they think of them!

Here is the precious effusion which Master Malpas has seen fit to send me—in an unstamped envelope, of course. Nevertheless, it was well worth paying out twopence to get a glimpse of such wonderful spelling. I have made no alterations in the orthography. It is so infernally funny as it stands.

"Magdalen Street,
"Oxford.

"Dear Sir,—I have bene a reeder of the 'Jem' fore the last fore yeers, and I must say that I think the toan of the paper has deterriorrated rather then improved. I and my frends have formed a Anti-'Jem' Sosiety, and depend upon it, we shall not give in in the ½-harted manner Master Robert Carlton did.

"A few of our greevances are as folloes:

"(1) We think there should be more compytishuns for 'Jem' reeders only.

"(2) The gooddy-gooddy caractur of Tom Mery. No Brittish boy could posibly ackt as he does.

"(3) The utter nonsense of D'Arsy, wich only wastes tyme and paper.

"(4) It is riddiculus to supose that a boy would spend five pownds on a single fead.

"(5) Why don't you have a seeryal abowt Bufaloe Bil or Sweenie Todd? In all the 'Jem' seeryals I've red I can't remembur seeing a single crime.

"We have manny more greevances, but these are enuff tor you to settle. Our Sosiety, wich now consists of 22 memburs, would be glad to heer from nu Anti-'Jem' Sosietiz.

"Hoaping you will be onnest enuff to publish this, and so give us a fare heering.—I remane, Your indignatious reeder,

"W. MALPAS."

Poor old Malpy! Perhaps it would not be a bad idea if he sent a sample of his "nu speling" to the authorities of the famous University in his town. One wants something to keep one's spirits up in war-time. I hope that all loyal Gemites in Oxford will rally round and make it their duty to exterminate, crush, and wipe out the twenty-two "memburs" of which Master Malpas makes mention—that is to say, if they are not fictitious, as I am strongly inclined to believe.

I shall have pleasure in publishing the best reply I receive from an Oxford reader to the letter printed above. It should be very interesting. Meanwhile, Master Malpas had better mind his p's and q's—"p" standing for police, and "q" for quod. He will come into close contact with both if he does not refrain from circulating slanderous statements in connection with the "Gem" Library.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

G. A. M. Bruning (Chiswick).—Brooke, the scholarship boy at St. Jim's, is a day-boarder belonging to the School House. The characters you mention are fifteen years of age.

F. Barlow (Oldham).—Clever boy! You were the only reader who pointed out the error, which must be laid at the door of the unfortunate printer.

F. Baldwin (Guiseley).—So you're another admirer of the immortal Gussy, are you? Let 'em all come!

Charles Ball (R.N. Division, Crystal Palace).—The authorities will not allow us to do as you suggest.

Mollie Black (Tunbridge Wells).—Kildare is seventeen, and Kerr fifteen years of age. Send your jokes in on postcards, Mollie.

"Bon Ami" (Melbourne).—The story you mention has never been published at five shillings, for the simple reason that such a price is rather exorbitant to the average boy.

Gordon Bennett (Bolton).—Any bookbinder will bind your "Gems" for you. The cost will be very reasonable.

R. Wentworth Baddeley (Auckland).—I passed on your words of praise to Mr. Clifford, and he blushes!

Miss K. Clifford (Victoria).—Mr. Martin Clifford's residence is at Folkestone, Kent.

Tom Chapman, 7, Cogan Street, Barrhead, Renfrewshire, would like to hear from readers in his district with a view to forming a "Gem" league.

Ernest F. Cook (St. Albans).—There are many good makes of bicycles on the market, but I am inclined to plump for the Rudge-Whitworth. Thank you for your kind comments.

G. Chapman (Greenwich).—You should write again to the individual in question.

"Jack Canuck" (Toronto).—Right you are, sonny! Clifton Dane shall have a look-in very shortly.

C. L. (Bradford).—I cordially reciprocate your good wishes.

W. Cottenden and Chum (Toronto).—Understaffed and overworked as I am at present, I am afraid it would be impossible for me to make you out a list of all the boys at St. Jim's, with their respective studies. You will gain a good deal of information by studying the stories closely.

E. H. Curtis (East Ham).—Good luck to you and your league! Shall be glad to hear of the progress of the latter.

"Irish Rat" (Dublin).—What a complimentary nickname you have given yourself! If you write to Messrs. W. & G. Foyle, booksellers, Charing Cross Road, London, W.C., enclosing a stamped, addressed envelope for their reply, they will doubtless be able to get you the book you require.

W. R. Winter and Chums (New South Wales).—Your suggestion shall receive my careful consideration.

"Critic" (Sheffield).—You say you "don't know how books of the 'Gem' type can be produced." But why show your ignorance?

"Curious."—Yes, some of the stories in the "Union Jack" have been founded on fact.

Next Wednesday's Number of the "Gem" will be the usual price, 1d., and will contain a Splendid, Long, Complete Story, entitled:

"THE JEW OF ST. JIM'S!" - - - By - - - Martin Clifford.

Fred Dawkins (Clapham Junction).—Sorry, but we don't publish readers' advertisements of the kind you name.

George Dando (Bristol).—No, I shouldn't think cycling was injurious to a boy's swimming. I believe Burgess, the Channel swimmer, was hot on a "bike-ride."

F. Dawson (Hull).—No boy at St. Jim's hails from your town.

Messrs. W. Smyth and J. Downey (Sydney).—The Imperial Poisoner has interfered with the smooth routine of our Correspondence Exchange, which has been postponed indefinitely.

Daisy Duggan (Kilkenny).—You are a brick to take your disappointment smiling. As a matter of fact, the storyette in question was sent in before yours. Don't forget the rigid rule—postcards only!

Colin Barr (New South Wales).—I quite agree with you that for every fellow who does his best to cause a split in the circle of "Gem" readers, ten new chums are added to the long list of loyal ones. You, Colin, old boy, are doing your share. Many thanks!

"Dulcie."—Monty Lowther has no brothers or sisters. I am not so sure about Jack Blake. Sorry I cannot get a French correspondent for you.

"Double S." (Leigh).—Your chum is wrong, and you are right. Go up one!

Dorrie Edwards (Dartford).—As you will have seen, Lumley-Lumley was in a trance. Wharton, the famous "Magnet" character, usually spends his "vacs" with his uncle and guardian.

Mabel Damon (Victoria).—I thank you most sincerely for your continued loyalty to the "Gem" Library.

T. W. Ellison and W. J. Nicholson (Morpeth).—Lumley-Lumley has not gone to that bourne from which no traveller returns.

J. F. (Berkeley Square).—Apply to any of the club secretaries. You will get their addresses from the directory. Your father's military record is one to be proud of.

E. Fynn (Shepherd's Bush).—The Correspondence Exchange has "shut up shop" for the time being.

Albert F. (Surrey).—Thanks for suggestion. Will keep it by me.

Laurence Green (West Australia).—Sorry I cannot comply with your request.

"A Friend and Reader" (Heaton Moor).—The characters at St. Jim's are so numerous that you will readily understand the impossibility of giving them all the "star" turn each week. A story will be written shortly, however, in which the junior you mention will take a prominent part.

"A Girl Reader" (Brixton).—The full names of the characters mentioned by you are Patrick Reilly, Herbert Kerruish, and Leonard Lefevre.

A. H. (Cork).—Thank you for your letter and criticism. The latter has been duly noted.

Gordon W. (Portsmouth).—I wish a lot more boys would persuade their younger brothers and sisters to read "Chuckles." It is the pick of the bunch so far as coloured comics are concerned.

"A Patriotic Ulsterman" (Londonderry).—Allow me to thank you most heartily for your loyalty. You are one of those splendid fellows whose worthy aim it is to uphold the high traditions of the "Gem" Library at all times.

"A Loyal Gemite" writes: "I am a very jolly chap, and I want to know if you would let me wright a comical story each week for the 'Gem.' If you won't let me, I shall know that all the letters you print on your Chat page are a fraud." I'm not likely to let my reader become a "Gem" contributor after that!

"A Loyal Girl Reader" (Bristol).—Send your story along to me, together with a stamped addressed envelope, and I will give you my honest opinion of it.

Frank Alderton (Ipswich).—The best boxer in the Shell is Tom Merry. Almost every public school has prefects—otherwise, unruly juniors would most certainly get out of hand.

"A Camberley Reader."—A plan of St. Jim's and district has already been published. No, the "Gem" cannot be obtained in volume form.

"An Old Reader."—Mesmerism is a practice you are well advised to steer clear of. The habit of smoking may be checked by sucking an acid tablet occasionally, though, of course, you must exercise your will-power also.

"A Loyal Pal" (Lockwood).—St. Jim's and Greyfriars are over twenty miles apart.

Rue Arnold (Victoria).—Owing to delays in Colonial mails, the Correspondence Exchange has had to be postponed indefinitely.

"A Loyal Reader" (Finchley).—Taking past records into consideration, the junior eleven of Greyfriars is better than that of St. Jim's. More will be heard of the character you mention shortly.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 393.

"A Good Scots Reader."—No, the "land o' the thistle" didn't win the International Contest, though she had a good try; and my loyal Scottish chums are to be warmly commended.

"A Reader" (Camden Town).—Popular though "Tom Merry's Weekly" is, I am afraid it is impossible to publish it every week.

"Effie."—For my girl readers, I can thoroughly recommend the books of Louisa M. Alcott. The best-known are "Little Women" and "Good Wives."

"A Kentish Chum" (Dartford).—Sorry I cannot acquaint you with the movements of the cinema actress in question.

"A Govan Knight."—Write to Messrs. Barr & Co., 21a, Bow Lane, London, E.C.

"A Scottish Reader."—If your conscience tells you that you ought to be in the Army, then you should blind yourself to the protestations of your aged parents and the fact that you have two brothers already serving, and go. That is the sort of sacrifice the Government expects.

"A Loyal and Constant Reader" (Surbiton).—Very well. I won't do any more of "that amalgamation rot"—till next time! Your suggestion for a book dealing with Talbot is being put to the vote. You can get what you require from any dealer in fishing tackle.

Reggie Allen (Norwich).—Send in your storyettes on postcards, an't please your Majesty.

Alice Dwyer (Tipperary).—Miss Doris Frodin will be pleased to receive back numbers of all kinds. Her address is simply Hampton-in-Arden, near Manchester.

A. G. (Hampstead).—I don't want to appear obstinate, but Tom Merry sha'n't grow up! He's going to be a model of Peter Pan. I can't imagine Tommy as a staid and sedate Sixth-Form prefect, and I am sure most of my readers can't, either. We want to retain the "boyish" atmosphere, and not introduce a lot of tottering and toothless old men into the stories.

"A Yiddish Chum" (Wolverhampton).—Look out for the great Jewish story, "The Jew of St. Jim's!" which will appear in the "Gem" Library next week.

"A Soldier Reader" (A.S.C., Aldershot).—Very many thanks for your loyal remarks!

"A Staunch Reader of the 'Gem'" (Glasgow).—Send your spare copies to Miss Doris E. Frodin, Hampton-in-Arden, near Manchester.

J. M. B. (Glasgow).—Stick to the "Gem." It is *the* boys' book of to-day, and no chum of mine will ever have cause to regret his loyalty to this journal.

"A Pompewite" (Portsmouth).—Don't worry about your height at your age. Nature will fix things up for you.

"A Staunch Chum" (Herefordshire).—The Christian names of Herries and Digby are George and Robert Arthur respectively. Both are fifteen years of age.

Lance-Corporal A. S. (Canada).—Many thanks for your kind promise of support.

"An Old Reader" (Stratford).—I am inclined to discourage hypnotism as being a dangerous practice.

"A Constant Reader" (Nottingham).—Apply at the nearest recruiting-office.

"A Gemite" (Woolwich).—Naughty boy, to write letters to your Editor in school hours! Don't do it again! I agree with you that the "Deadwood Dick" stories are to be thoroughly recommended—as fire-lighters!

"A Queensland Girl Reader."—Glad to hear that, although your name is neither Ethel nor Marie, you did your "bit" for the "Gem" Library. It will not go unrewarded.

"A Loyal Carew" (Bristol).—Mr. Frank Richards, of "Magnet" fame, will write another threepenny book story when time permits.

"A Regular Reader" (Cork).—That's right; send your spare copies to the soldiers. They love a good laugh.

Walter Foster (Sheffield).—I am afraid my reply to your letter is somewhat belated, but other matters have claimed my attention. By all means go ahead with your amateur mag. There's no reason why you shouldn't be a real, live editor one of these days!

"A Regular Reader" (Fulham).—Glad you like our serials. Are you getting new readers for the companion papers?

"A Lonely Boy Reader" (Kentish Town).—I sympathise with you most sincerely in your position, and regret I cannot help you in the way you name.

Minnie Aris (Birmingham).—So you think the Chat Page in the "Gem" interesting, do you? Well, it will be still more so if readers will only send me such jolly letters as yours, which I may reproduce.

"A Sincere Girl Chum" (Glasgow).—Thank you for your nice little note. You shall have your wish.

THE EDITOR.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

A LESSON IN LUCIDITY.

First Loafer: "'Eard about ole Wot's-'is-name?"
Second Ditto: "Yus, corse I 'ave. Wot about it?"
First Loafer: "Wot about wot?"
Second Ditto: "Why, wot about wot you was goin' to tell me about ole Wot's-'is-name?"
First Loafer: "Why, I 'ear that since 'e came 'ome from where 'e was, 'e's bin an' moved down to thingummy, and married 'er—you know the bloke—well, 'is sister. 'Adn't you 'eard about it?"
Second Ditto: "Yes, I did 'ear somethink, but I ain't 'eard no details—not till now!"—Sent in by Miss P. Edwards, Victoria, Australia.

WHO PULLED HIS LEG?

The musketry instructor had just been giving a lesson on the rifle to a particularly "green" squad of recruits.

"Now, is there any questions anyone would like to ask?" he queried, at the end of his lecture.

One dull-looking "Johnny Raw" stepped forward, blushing awkwardly.

"Yes, my man?" said the instructor encouragingly.

"Please, sir," stammered the recruit, "be it roight that the 'arder I pulls the trigger thing the farther the bullet goes?"

Then the instructor sighed.—Sent in by A. Marvill, Parkgate, Rotherham.

AN ILL-FITTING ADAGE.

A lady patient, telephoning to her doctor, apologised for asking him to make such a long journey to attend her.

"Oh, that's all right, madam!" replied the medico cheerfully. "I have another patient in your vicinity, and so I can kill two birds with one stone!"—Sent in by W. Oddele, Hitchin, Herts.

BELATED PROFITS.

Customer: "You say these watches cost five shillings to make, do you?"
Jeweller: "Yes, sir, I do."
Customer: "But if you sell them for that amount, where do you gain?"
Jeweller: "By repairing them, sir!"—Sent in by C. H. Ralston, jun., Cheetham, Manchester.

A COVERT RETORT.

The man entered a cab, and instructed the driver to take him to the cemetery a few miles distant.

On dismounting from the vehicle he gave the cabby the exact legal fare.

The cabby looked at the coins, slowly deposited them in his pocket, and said, pointing to the horse:

"D'yer see that white 'orse with the short tail?"

"Yes," said the passenger, rather puzzled. "What of him?"

"Oh, nothink! Only I 'opes as the next time you're brought 'ere it will be with a black 'orse with a long tail! Evenin', sir!"—Sent in by R. Wilson, West Stanley, co. Durham.

THE SECRET?

They were two great friends, but, being women, had never disclosed to each other their ages.

"Yes," said one of them, "I have carefully kept my age a secret since I was twenty."

"Roally!" exclaimed the other. "Never told anyone?"

"No, never!" asserted the first speaker.

"I expect you will some time," casually remarked her friend. "You will 'let the cat out of the bag' when you least expect to."

"What, after I have kept the secret for ten years!"—Sent in by Fred Redstone, Tavistock, Devon.

LOGIC.

A boy was brought into court, and charged before the magistrate with throwing stones, and thereby breaking a window.

"Please, sir, I was only going to break the window, but it was Billy Wiggs who threw the stone that broke it!" he wailed.

"Going to is the same as doing," replied the magistrate sternly. "You must pay half-a-crown for a new pane of glass!"

The boy placed his hand in his pocket, and then withdrew it, still empty.

"If going to is the same as doing," he remarked, "I was going to pay the half-a-crown, so now I've settled for the damage!"—Sent in by T. O'Donoghue, Waterloo, Liverpool.

EXTORTING FAMILY SECRETS.

A man with an uncanny mania for juggling with figures, produced pencil and paper, and commanded a friend to——

"Put down the number of your living brothers; multiply the result by two; add three; multiply the result by five; add the number of your living sisters; multiply the result by ten; add the number of dead brothers and sisters; substract one hundred and fifty from the result."

The sum was duly completed.

"Now," said the figure maniac, "hand me the answer."

His friend duly complied with his request.

"The right-hand figure is the number of deaths in your family; the middle figure the number of your living sisters; and the left-hand figure the number of your living brothers," said the expert. "Is not that so?"

It was. Try it yourself.—Sent in by J Lee, Walterstone.

EXASPERATING.

The two suburban amateur gardeners were swearing vengeance on cats. These feline beasts, it is needless to state, were held responsible for all their horticultural failures.

"It appears to me," said one suburbanite, "that they pick out your choicest plants to scratch out of the ground."

"Yes, that is so," said another. "There's a big tabby-cat who scratches my plants out, and then sits gazing at me in open defiance."

"Why don't you hurl a brick at him?" asked the first speaker.

"That's what makes me mad," was the reply. "I can't! He gets on top of my greenhouse to defy me!"—Sent in by A. Ferrier, Plymouth.

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 post-card) 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.

The First Chapters of Our Grand New Adventure Serial.

UNDER THE DRAGON.

The opening chapters of a great new story of thrilling adventure in the Far East.

BY

PETER BAYNE.

Last Wednesday's instalment told how:—

NORRIS BRENT, a young Englishman, agrees to accompany his unworthy cousin, GUY MELVILLE, on an exploration tour in China for a rare plant only to be found in that part of the world. Misfortune dogs their footsteps, and a crisis is reached when the Chinese pack-carriers, who are with them, mutiny. Stranded in a wild, inhospitable land, there is nothing for it but to return to civilisation, and the cousins, together with YEN HOW, Norris Brent's faithful servant, set out on the weary journey.

The little band is overcome by thirst, and Melville, refusing to share his water with the others, pushes onward through the desert, leaving his companions to their fate. Fortunately, however, Yen How lights upon an oasis, and the danger is averted.

After a week's tramping the couple come upon the residence of a wealthy mandarin, and a fight ensues with the servants in the courtyard. Norris Brent is only saved from death by the timely intervention of Silver Pearl. An attachment springs up between Norris Brent and the beautiful Chinese maiden, who is the ward of Ming Yung, the mandarin. Whilst the young Englishman is holding a conversation with Silver Pearl, Ming Yung appears on the scene, and Brent is urged to flee for his life. He and Yen How reach a small, swiftly-rushing stream, and, boarding a boat, make good their escape.

(Now go on with the story.)

Down the River—The Poisoned Cake—Run Down—The Wireless Message.

Norris Brent and Yen How were free.

The death-hunt after them was baffled and held up. It had failed almost at the very start.

Yet in escaping from one danger the fugitives had but plunged into another. The boat they were on was carried away down the stream with a hurtling rush, and while endeavouring to keep a straight course Yen How had the misfortune to lose the heavy steering oar, which was torn from his grasp by an eddying current of water and borne far out of reach and sight in a moment.

As there was no spare oar the little vessel was now at the mercy of the swirling torrent. It spun round and round, dashed first to one side and then to the other, and lurched so heavily that the comrades had difficulty in maintaining their balance.

There was, however, little risk of it being dashed against the banks of the stream, which widened out into a great river. After a while the force of the current moderated, and the boat ceased its mad gyrations, although its course still continued to be an erratic one.

The comrades had no fear of being followed by their foes. They believed that they had seen the last of them. Yet Norris Brent was not glad on this account. On the contrary he almost regretted that he had not remained with Silver Pearl, and boldly explained to Ming Yung the meaning of his presence there.

That danger of some sort threatened the beautiful girl he loved he was sure, and that he was utterly powerless to avert it from her filled him with an overwhelming sense of impotence and despair.

Forced to flee as much for her sake as his own, he knew that thenceforth Silver Pearl could only exist for him as a memory. Fate had decreed that they were to meet for a little while, and then to be parted for ever.

Moody and despondent, Brent stared across the rushing waste of water to the high, shelving banks of the stream. For a long time he made no effort to throw off the mood that was on him. Then the reaction came, and his spirit, responding to the call of unquenchable youth, throbbed anew with hope and trust in the unknown future.

"Some day," he murmured, "I shall meet her again. It's pretty rotten for us to be separated in such a way, but better that than death, and Ming Yung meant to kill me. His very looks told me so. What terrible eyes the man has! They look right through one."

Some large sailing-junks, beating up-stream, appeared in sight. The Chinese on board paid little attention to the boat as it swept by them, but this was doubtless because they mistook Brent for one of their own race, the large straw hat and native dress supplied him at the instance of Silver Pearl, giving him an outward resemblance to his companion.

More river craft were passed, and villages were frequently seen nestling amongst the trees covering the lofty hills sloping down to the banks of the stream.

It was evident by these signs that the fugitives were far beyond the wilderness wherein they had so nearly found their graves. Once more they were in the midst of human life and activity.

"We'll go ashore and get some food," said Brent. "I'm hungry as a hunter, and I expect you are, too."

Yen How showed all his teeth in a wide smile.

"You bet!" he rejoined. "My too muchee hungry. Plenty fish and rice I likee just now."

It was difficult work bringing the boat alongside the bank, for the steering had to be done with the hands, but at last the comrades made fast and stepped ashore.

Climbing up a steep and sandy slope, they found themselves on the edge of a great palm-grove. A winding path between the palms led them to a temple beyond whose open doorway they caught glimpses of the gilded figures of Chinese gods, and hanging tapestries that in London and Paris would have sold for fabulous sums.

A Chinese priest who was scattering rice from a bowl for the birds that came fluttering down from the trees was the only human being to be seen.

He was old and of venerable appearance, with a silvery white beard that swept down below his waist. Looking up at the comrades, he greeted them with a smile. His gaze rested longest on Norris Brent, whom he immediately identified as a foreigner, and his eyes shone with a bright hardness for a moment.

Courteously he listened as Yen How explained the reason that had brought him and his companion there. Then he raised his hands, with a motion indicative of compassionate understanding and sympathy.

"Wait here awhile," he said, "and I will go for that which will minister unto your needs."

Going to a house next to the temple, he returned in a few minutes, bearing a small rush-basket containing some cooked rice, fish, and a number of little cakes coated with sugar, and of appetising appearance.

"Eat, my children!" he said benevolently. "The food is taken from my own poor store. I give it to you with my blessing."

In taking the basket as it was handed to him, Yen How accidently let it fall to the ground, and some of its contents were scattered at his feet.

Instantly a village dog, of the mongrel type, darted forward and snapped up one or two of the sugared cakes before it could be driven off. The old priest was greatly upset by this incident, so much so that Yen How, his mind struck by a queer suspicion, glanced sharply after the dog that was the cause of the trouble.

The animal was lying down near the temple wall, licking its lips, and greedily eyeing the basket that Yen How held in his hand. All at once it rose, started snapping and barking, and then ran round in a circle.

"What's happened to the brute?" exclaimed Brent. "It must have gone mad!"

The priest, agitated and alarmed, made a movement of retreat, but Yen How caught hold of his arm and held him fast. The dog suddenly bounded into the air with a convulsive spring, howling and frothing at the mouth as it did so, and fell, with limbs stiffening, in an agonising death.

"He put poison in littee cakes," said Yen How, glaring accusingly at the old Chinaman. "He mean us to die."

Brent gripped the aged miscreant's long beard and gave it a savage tug.

"You hypocritical scoundrel!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "You deserve to be strung up by the neck for this. Great Scott! If you were a young man I'd thrash you till my arms ached!"

Yen How reached down and picked up a cake.

"Make him swallow it," he urged. "He dance velly pretty then."

The culprit, silent until now, let out a yell that could have been heard a mile off, and struggled frantically to escape. The doom to which he had treacherously consigned the two comrades had no charm for him.

With Brent holding firmly on to his beard, he backed and side-stepped with an agility that was amazing in one of his years. It was obvious that he believed he would be forced to eat the poisoned cake.

"That's enough, Yen How," said Brent at last, laughing in spite of his anger at the amusing capers of the terrified Chinaman. "We've given him a fright that he'll remember for the rest of his existence. Now clear off, you miserable old humbug, and reflect on the fate that you should have shared with your dog."

Scuttling away like a startled rabbit, the priest hurried into the temple, closing and barring the door of the building behind him. From within there came a moment later the loud booming of a huge gong.

"He seems to be sounding an alarm," said Brent. "There'll be a crowd here in a few minutes, when it won't be a healthy spot for us. Come on, Yen How! We must go on being hungry for a while. The food one is offered here is a bit too satisfying for me and you."

Before they were out of the palm-grove the boom of the gong had stopped, and the shouting of many voices informed them that the temple priest was in the midst of his friends.

"Velly sorry you no let me make him eat littee cake," said Yen How, with a mournful shake of the head, when they were once more afloat. "It would do him good."

"No doubt of it," Brent laughed in response. "Far too much good to please me, Yen How. As it is, he will never recover from the shock I gave his dignity by pulling his beard."

A few miles farther down the river a supply of food sufficient to last them until they reached Canton was obtained at a village, and also a couple of boat-oars for use.

There was no need to row, however, and the boat was borne quickly onward. Night came on, but the comrades had no intention of breaking their journey, for they hoped to be in Canton some time the following day.

Soon after dark a bright light was seen far ahead. As it drew nearer, Brent saw that it was a searchlight, and that it came from a gunboat which was steaming slowly up the waterway. At first he thought that it was a British vessel, and the prospect of being taken on board and finding himself once more under the protecting flag of his country thrilled him with joy. But presently Yen How declared that the stranger was a Chinese ship.

"You're right," said Brent, his eyes making out the figure of the Imperial dragon carved on the bows of the approaching vessel. "I expect it won't be returning to Canton for a few days, else we might have asked to be taken on board. Ah! Now she's spotted us!"

The beams of the searchlight caught the boat and remained fixed upon it. So dazzling was the radiance that Brent and his companion were almost blinded, and could not look at it.

"They can see us plain enough," said Brent, his eyes smarting under the fierce light that beat upon them; "but never a glimpse can I catch of them now."

The searchlight did not move from the boat for a second. It grew more and more intolerably bright with disconcerting swiftness. Now the churning beat of the gunboat's screw was heard by the comrades. A cry broke from Yen How's lips, and, seizing an oar, he commenced to paddle with all his might.

Quickly Brent followed suit, a horrible paralysing suspicion flashing across his mind. The gunboat was going to run them down.

The boat, turned out of its course, headed for the nearest bank, which was over a hundred yards away. It shot through the water; but it could not escape, and as the prow of the strange ship cast its shadow over them, Brent and Yen How realised that Fate was against them.

The gunboat struck the little craft, hurled it forward, and then ran it down with a grinding crash and steamed on over it as it sank beneath the troubled surface of the great stream.

Thereafter the searchlight played over the spot where the ill-fated boat had vanished, and moved slowly to and fro from bank to bank, but no sign of the catastrophe that had happened was visible anywhere.

The Chinese commander of the gunboat then spoke a few words to an officer, who went to the wireless telegraphy-room and sent off a message which Ming Yung received a minute or two later:

"Your order obeyed," ran the message. "The boat in which the feringhee and his Chinese companion escaped has been run down and sunk. The occupants perished.

"Foo Yung, Commander of the gunboat Haichen."

The message did not move Ming Yung into any display of emotion. For all the interest he showed it might have had no meaning for him.

The Smoke Picture—On the Hillside—Ming Yung's Revenge.

In the garden where Norris Brent had last spoken to her, Silver Pearl stood and communed with her own sad thoughts. The pale cheeks and the wistful look in her dark eyes told of a grief that was hard to bear.

She was oppressed with anxiety as to the fate of him who had so strangely crossed her path in life. Dark fears crowded through her mind.

Since his flight she had heard nothing of Brent. His name was not mentioned by her guardian, nor had Ming Yung referred to the discovery he had made on the day of his return home. Yet Silver Pearl derived no comfort from his silence, which, knowing Ming Yung as she did, she regarded as of ominous import.

The Chinese sent in pursuit of the two fugitives had returned after a prolonged absence, and by what she observed she gathered that they had met with failure. But Ming Yung had a long arm, as many had cause to know, and his agents were to be found in every part of the Far East, and even still farther afield.

The sound of her name startled Silver Pearl out of her reverie. Ming Yung was calling to her from the painted summer-house which was his favourite resort during the months of tropical heat.

Had he something to tell her of Norris Brent? She hoped that he had, and yet fear mingled with hope, for some inner voice of her being whispered that, had all been well with the English youth, she would have heard no news of him from her guardian.

Entering the summer-house, she found Ming Yung seated at a table reading a letter that he had written in the Chinese script on long slips of red paper. He took no notice of her for several minutes. Then he raised his head and looked at the girl with a searching gaze.

"On the first day of the new moon," he said with sudden abruptness, "you leave with me for a journey across the ocean. We go to the other side of the world—to England."

To England! As she heard the words, Silver Pearl felt her heart give a bound, and an eager look crossed her face. The link between England and Norris Brent was an indissoluble one. Reference to the one set her dreaming of the other. If Brent were alive, she would see him again in the land of his birth, for he had told her that he was returning to it with the least possible delay.

The look in her face betrayed the nature of her thoughts to

Ming Yung. He read her heart and mind as though they were the pages of an open book. It was a simple matter for him to do so. No seer, or soothsayer of ancient days was more skilled than he in interpreting the meaning of every fleeting expression of the human countenance.

"The first day of the new moon," said Silver Pearl, "will be the day after to-morrow. There will be much to do in such a short time——"

"Everything is prepared for the journey," answered Ming Yung. "I gave the necessary instructions upon my return home, when I discovered the young feringhee making love to you."

Silver Pearl, a hot flush in her cheeks, hung her head.

"You will have wondered why I have not spoken to you about the matter," Ming Yung continued. "The time was not ripe to do so. Now it is. Last night news of Norris Brent came to me."

Silver Pearl leaned slightly forward in the eagerness that possessed her at hearing these words.

"What was it?" she inquired.

"Good news!" Ming Yung answered, in a monotonous, level tone of voice. "He has been punished for his presumption. You shall see how with your own eyes."

Taking a silver-filigreed box of lacquered palm-wood from a shelf in the near wall, he removed the lid, and poured out a small quantity of white powder on to a round brass plate.

This plate he set on the table before him. Then he looked long and steadily at Silver Pearl, and though his snakelike eyes held the girl in a kind of hypnotic spell, his thoughts were not centred upon her, but upon a scene that he visualised with a remarkable wealth of realistic detail.

"Look!" said Ming Yung at last, applying the flame of a burning taper to the heap of white powder on the brass plate. "See how the feringhee suffered my vengeance!"

A thin, vapourish cloud rose up from the burning powder. It scented the atmosphere with a sweet, sickly odour like that of opium. Her will dominated by a stronger one, Silver Pearl peered at the coiling pillar of smoke, and a strange, fantastic vision was evolved before her eyes.

She saw a great river, dim and shadowy in the darkness of night, with a boat floating on its surface. There were two figures in the boat, and as she watched them a bright light flashed across their faces.

Then she knew that they were Norris Brent and Yen How, and her pulses drummed to a feverish sense of excitement and expectancy.

The light thrown upon the boat and its occupants became a dazzling radiance. It came from a gunboat that came flashing into the scene with the vividness and rapidity of a moving picture.

A lump came up into the girl's throat. Her heart beat so quickly that it gave her pain. She clenched her hands tightly, and fought back an almost overwhelming desire to cry out.

Then she saw what she instinctively knew she was going to see. Suddenly the gunboat hit the smaller vessel, smashed it into so much driftwood, and ground it down into the darksome depths of the river.

A stifled scream burst from Silver Pearl's lips. She shut her eyes, and put her hands to her face, endeavouring in vain to blot the terrible vision she had seen from her mind.

When she looked again, the ascending cloud of vapour was gone. Even the brass plate had vanished from the table. The sunlight was shining into the room as she remembered it was doing a few minutes before.

Only Ming Yung remained to assure her that she had not been the victim of a mere illusion of her fancy. He was looking at her, but his face was expressionless, and the girl drew back with a shuddering sense of fear and horror of him such as she had never felt before.

"You sent him to his death!" she whispered. "You gave the order for the gunboat to sink his boat in the river!"

"It was to be," said Ming Yung impassively. "There is no resisting fate. It calls us, each and every one of us, at our appointed time. We obey the call."

Rising from his seat, and drawing his long cloak about him, he disappeared through an inner doorway of the room.

Once more Silver Pearl went out into the solitude of the garden, with grief and despair tearing at her heart. All hope was dead within her now.

Never once did she doubt the truth of what had been so strangely revealed to her in the cloud of scented smoke. Ming Yung was not as other men. He had powers that in a former age would have won for him the unenviable distinction of being burned at the stake as a condemned wizard.

And just as surely as Silver Pearl believed that Brent had met with his death as shown in the moving smoke-picture, so was she certain that Ming Yung was responsible for what had taken place.

Close upon her first outburst of sorrow, there came a sudden, passionate hate and scorn for her guardian that surprised her by its intensity. She vowed to herself that somehow, some day, the fate of her young lover should be avenged, and that she would devote herself to the carrying-out of this vow as to the discharge of a high and sacred duty.

Little did Ming Yung suspect that he had turned the girl whom he treated as his daughter into a dangerous enemy. Had he known it, the knowledge would not have disturbed him. To overcome and crush the enmity of others was to him a supreme delight.

Two days later, he and Silver Pearl set out on the first stage of the twelve-thousand-mile journey to England. Ho Beng was the only servant Ming Yung took with him, and not even he knew anything of the motives that his master had in travelling to the other side of the world.

Secretive and inscrutable, Ming Yung trusted no one, and not until it was accomplished did anyone but himself know of his purpose.

A short stay was made in Hong Kong while the little party waited for the outgoing steamer. One night, Ming Yung took Silver Pearl to a native theatre.

After the performance they were taken back to the hotel, high up on the famous peak, in sedan-chairs carried by uniformed Chinese coolies.

The night being close, Silver Pearl had the hood of her chair lowered, and many were the admiring glances cast in her direction. When passing under the light of an electric arc-lamp, she was startled to hear someone call to her by name.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the tall, boyishly-graceful figure of Norris Brent hurrying in her direction. The shock of seeing him again, after being convinced that he was dead, was so great that she swooned away, and was insensible to what was happening for several moments.

"Silver Pearl!" she heard Brent whisper anxiously. "Can't you hear me speaking to you?"

Opening her eyes, she looked up into his face. The coolies had set down the sedan-chair, and were now taking their ease in utter unconcern of what was happening near to them.

"Shall I pay them off?" asked Brent, looking at the men. "We can walk on together then, if you think that you're able to. I've such a lot to tell you."

"Yes," Silver Pearl agreed, noticing that the sedan-chair bearing Ming Yung was vanishing round a bend in the road some considerable distance farther on. "I can walk. I'm better now. The surprise of seeing you again was too great for me. I believed that you were dead and drowned in the river."

Brent darted a curiously questioning glance at the girl.

"You did, eh?" he remarked. "That's rather funny, because I was nearly drowned in the river, and it's the greatest wonder in the world to me that I'm walking up the peak with you by my side."

"Tell me what happened?" Silver Pearl inquired, her beautiful face radiant with new-found joy and happiness. "I want to know everything."

"Well," said Brent, "Yen How and I escaped in a boat down the river. We thought that we were out of danger, and so we were for a time, but we soon struck it again. The worst came when a Chinese gunboat ran us down, not by accident but deliberately, mind you, and our boat was smashed to splinters.

"How we managed to swim ashore I can't pretend to tell you, for the whole thing was exactly like a beastly nightmare, and we were at our last gasp when we touched the bank. A friendly Chinaman gave us shelter until the next morning, and a day or two later we reached Canton, crossing over to Hong Kong the same day. And now you might give me the news about yourself?"

Silver Pearl smiled shyly up into the ardent eyes gazing down into her lovely face.

"There isn't much to tell you," she replied. "Only you will be astonished to hear that I am on my way to England."

Brent looked his unutterable amazement.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed. "You've almost taken my breath away. It seems too gorgeous to be true. I'm going home to England, too. Think of it! We shall be able to make the journey together. What steamer are you going by?"

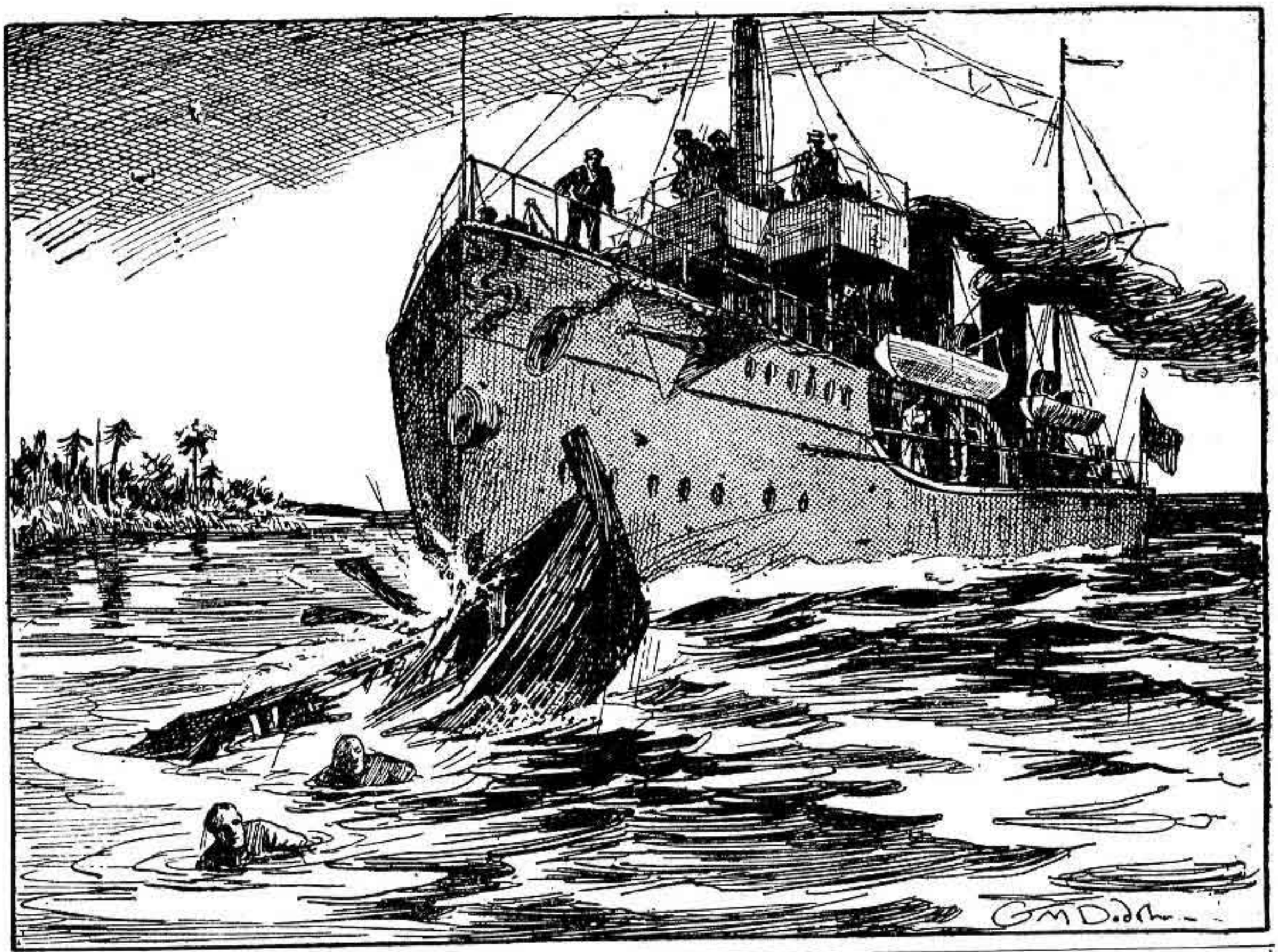
Silver Pearl shook her head.

"I can't say," she said. "Ming Yung has not told me the name of it."

The mention of Ming Yung's name seemed to cast a sudden gloom over Norris Brent's high spirits. It brought vividly back to his memory the circumstances of his first and last meeting with the dreaded Chinaman, whose extraordinary personality had so impressed itself upon his mind.

"I'd forgotten Ming Yung," he said, "in my joy at seeing you. I suppose he has nothing very agreeable to say about me?"

"He fancies that you are dead," Silver Pearl answered,



The Chinese gunboat struck the little craft, hurled it forward, and ran it down with a grinding crash, and steamed on over it as it sank beneath the troubled surface of the great stream. (*See page* 41.)

"and if he knew that you were alive, his anger would be such that he would not rest until you were no more. Listen!" she continued earnestly. "It was Ming Yung who gave the order to the commander of the gunboat to sink you. I know it. He believes that the order was carried out."

Brent pursed up his lips, and emitted a long, low whistle of surprise.

"He must be a fiend of a man," he said, "but I'm not afraid of him now. He can do no more harm to me!"

"You do not know Ming Yung," Silver Pearl answered, "or you would think differently. To let him know, by travelling on the same boat to England with him, that you are alive would be madness. He must go on believing—for the time being, at any rate—that you are dead. It will be best, both for my sake as well as for your own."

"Then you still care for me?" Brent murmured. "You've not repented of what you told me when I last saw you?"

The girl met his questioning look with eyes shining with the light of fearless love and trust.

"When I gave my heart into your keeping," she answered him, "it was for always. I shall never cease to care for you, whatever the future may have in store for us."

But nearer to them than they could have imagined there was danger. From amongst some bushes on the opposite side of the narrow road the crafty, yellow face of Ho Beng looked out.

It was visible in the moonlight for a moment or two, and then faded from sight as the young lovers walked on up the hill.

At a bend in the road, beyond which was a small hotel, Silver Pearl came to a halt.

"We must part here," she said. "It will not be safe for you to go any farther with me. That is the place where I am staying."

"When can I see you again?" inquired Brent. "Then I'll tell you what I've decided to do about travelling home on the same steamer as you."

Silver Pearl was silent for a few seconds.

"I will try and meet you here to-morrow morning, after Ming Yung has gone out," she then said. "But whatever you do, you must run no risk of him seeing and recognising you."

Brent laughed with gay assurance.

"I'll take care of that, you may be sure," he answered, "although I doubt very much whether even Ming Yung would place me now that I'm rigged out in European clothes again."

Reaching the hotel, Silver Pearl hastened to her own room, where, standing by the windows opening on to the verandah, she gazed out into the beautiful night, and dreamed of a world where all was love and enchantment.

In another room of the building Ming Yung, smoking a mixture of opium and leaf tobacco in a long, silver-bowled pipe, was disturbed by the stealthy entrance of Ho Beng, his trusted slave.

"Honoured lord," said Ho Beng, bending low before the other, "I have something to tell you that will not please you. May I speak of it?"

Ming Yung gave the desired permission by a wave of his hand. He suspected that the news concerned Silver Pearl. Not for an instant did he think of the English youth, upon whom had fallen the full force of his vengeance.

"On her way home from the theatre to-night," said Ho Beng, "Silver Pearl was met by a young feringhee, a white youth whom you have seen before."

Ming Yung darted a quick glance at the speaker.

"You waste time," he said. "When and where have I seen this feringhee?"

"You saw him upon your last return home," answered Ho Beng slowly. "He was in the garden, with Silver Pearl, and by the aid of the Evil One he escaped from your vengeance. He and Silver Pearl talked long together. They must have met by appointment. How else should one know that the other was here? You have been deceived, my master."

Ming Yung did not stir, and not a muscle of his face moved, although he inwardly seethed with hate and a burning sense of humiliation that was entirely new to him.

"Are you sure that you were not mistaken?" he asked. Think carefully before you answer me."

"All that I have told you is the truth," replied Ho Beng. "I swear to it by all the most sacred memories of my ancestors. The feringhee is the British youth, Norris Brent, who entered your house upon an ever-to-be-regretted day!"

Without speaking again, Ming Yung dismissed Ho Beng with a curt gesture.

As soon as he was alone the Chinaman, whose secret power and influence were of so formidable and widespread a nature, dropped the mask of indifference that he had worn when listening to Ho Beng's communication.

Springing to his feet, he shook his clasped hands above his head in a tumult of rage. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, his eyes blazed, and his face was all drawn and distorted, as he paced up and down the room with the swift, noiseless tread of a caged and infuriated tiger.

"Tricked!" he hissed, between his teeth. "Tricked and deceived by a mere lad and a girl! But I will have their heart's blood! They shall pay the bitter price for setting their wits against mine to the full!"

He stopped, his eyes glaring round the room, and then he crossed quickly to the door. Here he paused again, stood motionless in deep thought for some time, and then went back to his seat with slow, measured step.

Setting out, in the madness of his wrath, to wreak summary vengeance on Silver Pearl for the deception he believed she had practised upon him, Ming Yung had suddenly remembered that he was on British territory, where the law of the white man was all-powerful to make itself felt.

"Patience!" he said aloud. "Patience is the greatest thing in the world. In my anger I was forgetting that great and noble truth. It is patience that will win me to my vengeance on all my enemies in the end!"

Cold now after the heat of his rage, Ming Yung crossed to the window, and looked down the steep hillside to the harbour of Hong Kong, to the magnificent port that is so stupendous a tribute to British grit and enterprise.

Lights flashed and gleamed everywhere. Great ships swung with the tide as they lay at their moorings. In no direction could one look without seeing multitudinous signs of an activity whose influences were felt in every part of the world.

Ming Yung gazed down upon it all, and the unspoken wish of his whole being was that he could blot out everything that met his gaze by one sweep of his arm.

"Patience!" he murmured again. "The power to do all things is won by patience. And science has yielded up to me secrets not known to other men. Soon the power that I am seeking for to make me master of the world shall be mine!"

Next morning, when he went up to the Peak to meet the girl he loved, Norris Brent received a disappointment. He waited about for a long time, but saw no sign of Silver Pearl, and went away, to return again in the afternoon.

Still seeing nothing of her, he went boldly on to the hotel, and there he was informed that she whom he was seeking had left at sunrise with Ming Yung for some unknown destination

The rest of the day Brent devoted to making inquiries everywhere, but he failed to secure any satisfactory information.

Silver Pearl and her guardian had vanished from his ken as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

At Eagle's Cliff.

The sun of a glorious English summer shone down on the gabled roofs of Eagle's Nest, as fine and noble an ancient mansion as any to be found amongst the Devonshire hills and dales.

Cresting the summit of a mighty hill, overlooking the sea on one side, and a great valley on the other, Eagle's Nest had braved the storms of eight centuries.

Green woods of oak and elm surrounded it, protecting its time-stained walls from the roaring winter winds, and increasing yearly the wealth of the estate. The house had been in the same family for hundreds of years.

Its oak-panelled walls were hung with the portraits of men who had given distinguished service to their country in the most critical times of the national history.

Yet great wealth, as men estimate riches in these modern days, had never come into the possession of the owners of Eagle's Cliff. Despising the mere possession of money, they were invariably content with the lands and forests that had been theirs for generations.

And now the last direct descendant of the original head of the family, who had reigned for so long at Eagle's Cliff, was dead.

He had never married, and everything had gone to a relative who was of another and a distant branch of the family. This successor to the ownership of the mansion and estate was Guy Melville, who, after the disastrous ending to his Chinese expedition, had hurried home to England to take up the possession of his inheritance.

He had been at Eagle's Cliff now for several weeks. The peaceful rest and calm of the place did him a world of good, after the suffering and hardship he had undergone in China, and he looked forward to spending the rest of his life in a manner that would be most enjoyable to himself, and distinguished by the leisurely independence that his newly-acquired position gave him every claim to.

Now and again, however, Guy Melville would be disturbed by a haunting vision of the past. Back to his mind would come the memory of a lad, his own cousin, whom he had abandoned to a cruel death from thirst in the sun-scorched desert.

At such times Melville would take his gun and dogs, and tramp for miles in the thick woods surrounding the mansion, striving in the excitement of the chase to forget the accusing vision that disturbed his peace and enjoyment of life.

Such memories were with him on this particular day, as, with gun over his shoulder, he strode down the steep path leading to the valley.

"Back here!" he called, as one of the dogs sprang forward, barking loudly. "Come back!"

The dog returned obediently to heel.

Then Melville, turning a corner of the path, found himself face to face with Norris Brent, the cousin whom he had left to a hideous fate.

(Another splendid long instalment of this grand serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy in advance.

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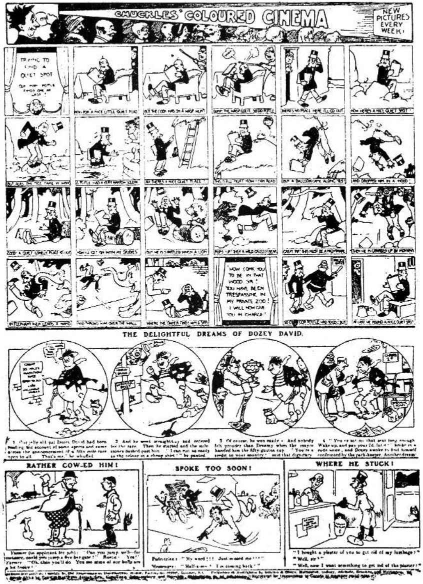

CHUCKLES' COLOURED CINEMA
NEW PICTURES EVERY WEEK!
TRYING TO FIND A QUIET SPOT
HOW COME YOU TO BE IN THAT WOOD SIR! YOU HAVE BEEN TRESPASSING IN MY PRIVATE ZOO! I WILL NOW GIVE YOU IN CHARGE!
THE DELIGHTFUL DREAMS OF DOZEY DAVID.
RATHER COW-ED HIM!
Farmer (to applicant for job): "Can you jump well—for instance, could you jump a five bar gate?" Rustic: "Yes!" Farmer: "Oh, then you'll do. You see some of our bulls are a bit frisky!"
SPOKE TOO SOON!
Pedestrian: "My word!!! Just missed me!!!"
Motor-car: "Half-a-mo! I'm coming back!"
WHERE HE STUCK!
"I bought a plaster of you to get rid of my lumbago?"
"Well, sir?"
"Well, now I want something to get rid of the plaster!"


REMARKABLE MIDGET EDITION OF BRITAIN'S BEST COMIC!
The Smallest Edition of an 8-page Comic Paper Ever Published.
Chuckles ½d
PRICE ONE HALFPENNY
BREEZY BEN AND DISMAL DUTCHY GIVE THE ROUGHS A ROUGH TIME!
TO NIGHT AT 8 EAST LYNNE THEATRE ROYAL
HOOLICUMS
1. The Breeziest of Bens and the Dismallest of Dutchys had a shock last week. They were advertising a play, and Dutchy had a bit of stage scenery to carry, when they were spotted by two of the worst. "Mateys, if you take my tip, you'll get yer feet waggling quick," said the parrot. "You may take it from me there's no birthday present comin' here!"
2. And so they did a rapid guy round the palings. And when those two tender hearted bepeds with the bludgeons arrived, they said: "Where the boiled beef an' carrots 'ave they gone? Down this 'ole?" "Guv'nor, you've got it in once," said the bird. "I see you are Sherlock Holmes's. I'm proud to meet you. Yes, down that 'ole, sir, as ever was."
WOTTA DRAUGHT!
THE PLOT THICKENS
COME OUT AND PLAY ALICE
3. Then a funny thing occurred. That hole happened to be the inside of Ben's sandwich board, which had been painted on at the theatre to represent a brick hole in a play. And as Ben slooshed over the other half, he shouted: "It's a sangwidge board, and you are the ham in the sangwidge." "I'm de mustard," said Dutchy, as he ironed the other chap's hat.
4. Then, while the robbers were recovering consciousness, our two and a quarter—the quarter being the parrot—rushed away. But no good. On came those two terrors again. "Sore greel, old sport!" panted Ben. "I carn't run another inch. Oh, why wasn't I born a red cabbish?" "Oh, shuttit!" said Dutchy, as he hastily threw his roll of scenery over the hole in the fence.
YES SIR THEY WENT DOWN THIS LANE
BATHING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN
5. And now we have the relentless scoundrels again panting for the gore of our heroes: "They cawn't be fur away this time. Just wait till I cop that fat sailor, there won't be enough of 'im left to blow away. They've slipped down this alley, I s'pose." "Quite right, me lad," said the bird. "Down there's the ticket."
6. "Yo-ho! here they come thro' me painted scenery!" yelled Dutchy, as the two purse snatchers sloshed into the canal. "Give my love to the kippers an' tiddlers, mates," said Ben, "till I fetch a cap to collect you for bathin' in the canal!" And the parrot said: "Ladies and gents, I present myself with the—" So long!

OUR GRAND NEW SERIES OF COMPLETE STORIES.

THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN CUSTARD AND HIS NEPHEW THE NIB.

This Week!

CAPTAIN CUSTARD'S CONVERT.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Captain and the Bailiff.

"Nib, my nobble nugget," said Captain Custard, looking over the breakfast table at his nephew, "d'you happen to be in love?"

"Gracious, no, uncle!" said Nib, looking up and smiling beyond the limits of his serviette. "Why?"

"You seem to have lost your appetite, then," said the captain. "What's the matter with your egg? Isn't it ripe?"

"Yes. Beautiful!" said Nib. "But I never was gone on poultry."

Captain Custard chuckled, and then his genial face grew suddenly serious as he glanced at the newly-arrived letter in his hand.

"Look here, Nib," he said, "talking about eggs, can you say you've ever seen your uncle the worse for intoxicating liquor?"

"Which of my uncles?" asked Nib mischievously. "D'you mean the one with the umbertrotter and whiskers like a young furze-bush?"

"I meant your Uncle Custard," said the old salt solemnly. "Have you ever seen him drunk, intoxicated, three-sheets, half-seas, canned, sewn, oiled, or boozy?"

"Never!" said Nib firmly. "But I've seen him tight."

"Then you're a wallywag, prevaricator, and perverter!" said the captain. "Your Uncle Custard isn't a non-totaller, any more than he's a tee-smoker. But there's never been a time since his wooden leg when he couldn't have got a job sewing potatoes in rows as straight as a bee-line. No, my lad, drink's a bad thing. Look at that letter."

Nib took the note, and his face grew as serious as its natural construction would let it. This is what he read:

"Dear Captain Custard,—I do hope you will excuse me writing to you, but, as you were such a good friend to my husband, I think you are the only one who could help me now. During the last trip or two my husband has been on the drink, and I've had no money. The bailiffs are in the place, waiting for him to come home, and his boat is due in at noon today. He is sure to break out again, but if you could meet him, perhaps he might take notice of what you say, and come home like the good fellow he is when he is running straight.

"I know you will help me if you can.—Yours very sincerely, MRS. WALKER."

"Who's Mrs. Walker, uncle?" asked Nib, looking up.

"The busiest, hardest-working, and neatest little body whose husband ever liked a drop too much!" the captain said. "So old Cookie Walker has broken out again, has he? Ah, well, we'll see what we can do!"

In spite of its drawbacks, Nib finished his egg, and then he and Captain Custard stumped over to the other side of the town, where Mrs. Walker struggled to make ends meet in a clean little cottage facing the sea.

She was a neat, careworn little woman, but her face broke into a bright smile when she opened the door and saw who were her visitors. A little girl of perhaps three summers, with golden curly hair, clung to her dress.

"Why, captain," Mrs. Walker said, "I didn't expect you to call! It's——"

"Always be ready for the unexpected, ma'am," said the captain, stamping over the threshold. "And how's the little maid?"

He bent down, and the old passion for children shone in his eyes as he took the child's pink cheeks gently between his fingers.

"I'd kiss her, ma'am," he said, "if it wasn't for these confounded whiskers of mine. Make children shudder! Just like kissing a bunch of horsehair! Shall I go in here, ma'am?"

He pointed to the little parlour door, and a sudden distressed look came into Mrs. Walker's face as she indicated in dumb show that a bailiff was in possession.

"Is that so, ma'am?" said the captain in a low tone. Then he looked at Nib, and, winking, strode in at the parlour door. "This way, Nib," he said aloud. "This is where my old pal Cookie has his zoological collection and museum. He keeps all his curios in this——"

"Hallo! Why——" He paused in mock astonishment to see a short, bull-necked, red-headed man sitting in a chair as if he was anchored there—a man with an equally red, flat face, a heavy chin, and a nose which had a mistaken idea as to the amount of face territory it was entitled to.

"Why, Cookie," said Captain Custard, advancing, "how you've changed, you bullet-headed son of a sea-cook, you!"

The man glared at the captain, gazing also with some astonishment at Peter the parrot, seated contentedly on his pipe.

"You've made a mistake for once!" he growled. "I ain't Cookie!"

"Well, now, I thought you couldn't be," the captain said amiably. "Cookie was a good-looking chap when I knew him." Then he added quickly: "I suppose you're a friend of Mrs. Walker's—or you're the district visitor, perhaps?"

"No, I ain't!" the man said shortly.

"A lodger, then?" suggested the captain.

The man grinned, as if he enjoyed the situation.

"That's it!" he said. "A lodger—that's wot I am!"

The pleased nature of the grin annoyed Captain Custard, so he drew a deep breath, and Peter the parrot appeared to become suddenly voluble.

"Oh, my, what a face for a museum!" he cried. "What an oil-painting! What a strawberry-bed!"

The bailiff glared angrily at the bird. In his bullet head he had only room for one idea at a time. So he forgot the rather remarkable intelligence of the parrot, and remembered only that he had been grossly insulted.

"Is that bird alluding to me?" he asked truculently.

But Peter cut in again:

"Allow me to introduce you, gentlemen, to Cookie Walker's curio, Sir Oxide of Iron—commonly known as Rusty Nob! Got so intoxicated one night that he had to crawl home, and the policemen didn't arrest him 'cause he took him for a glow-worm! Oh, my, what a face!"

"Look 'ere!" growled the bailiff. "That bloke'll get his neck wrung if he ain't civil! I don't care if he is a bird!"

"Tell him to take off his mask and let's have a peep at his face!" chirped Peter.

The bailiff made a grab at the surprised parrot, but Captain Custard skilfully eluded him and retired backwards from the room into the hall, where the door was still open. He whispered a word to Nib, and then the bailiff followed angrily.

"I don't take insults from nobody!" he said. "Let alone a blooming parrot!"

"Hand Sir Oxide my card!" chirped Peter.

The captain's ventriloquism was superbly deceptive. "Hand Sir Oxide my card and tell him to name time and place. How about tomorrow at dawn, fifty paces north-south of the gasworks, where the free-shoot joins the allotments? Tell him to name his weapons—pistols, gatling-guns, pea-shooters, or Zeppelins! It's all the same to——"

"Be quiet, Peter!" snapped the captain. "Can't you see that if you carry on like that you'll annoy the gentleman?"

He rattled some silver in his pocket, and imagined he noticed an answering twitch of the bailiff's ears.

"Don't take any notice of Peter, sir," he said. "There are some faces which sort of get on his nerves. Parrots are sensitive birds."

"'E's got a nasty way of expressing hisself, anyhow!" growled the bailiff, rather mollified by the sight of the money.

During this little exchange of compliments Captain Custard had edged round so that the bailiff was between him and the door, and now he proceeded to keep the intruder occupied while Nib took up a position on his hands and knees immediately behind "Sir Oxide."

"Yes," said the captain, "he's a straightforward bird is Peter. Have you any new half crowns, sir?"

"Can't say as I 'ave!" the bailiff said eagerly, extending his palm.

"Nor have I," said Captain Custard. "Those are all old ones."

He dropped the coins back in his pocket, and the bailiff's face went almost pale with chagrin. But before a word could be spoken the captain gave the man before him a sharp prod in the territory bisected by his watchchain.

A moment later he looked up in a dazed way from a sitting position on the garden path outside.

"Nettle-tea's good for gravel-rash!" said the captain, closing the door.

He turned to Mrs. Walker, who was half amused, half frightened by the novel ejectment of the bailiff.

"How much was he in for, ma'am?" he asked.

"Ten pounds," she said. "It was for some furniture my husband bought on hire. I haven't been able to keep up the payments, so——"

"Ten pounds, ma'am," said the captain, passing something secretly to Nib. "Ten pounds, ma'am"—watching Nib out of the corner of his eye. "Well, look here, ma'am, I'm going to tell you a secret. Cookie—that's your husband, ma'am—had queer ways of hiding money. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you found that ten-pound note under the hall mat, ma'am—I shouldn't, really. Then you can push it through the letter-box to the curio outside, ma'am. But Nib and I have got to meet your husband. I think we'll leave by the back way; that man might want to argue. It's quite on the cards he might want to argue. Good-day, ma'am!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Two Ginger-Beers.

Mrs. Walker, wondering, and a little confused by the captain's manner, showed them to the back door, from which they made good their escape, and a little later they were at the quay, watching the mooring of the small coaster Polly Anne.

It was some time, however, before a little man, with bow legs and a genial, kindly face, came down the gangway. He had twinkling eyes and a jolly expression, but his mouth was weak, and his face showed the signs of continued intemperance. His face lighted up with pleasure when he saw the captain.

"Why, cap'n," he said. "And how goes it, old ship? How's the old peg?"

"Quite good enough to keep steady on, Cookie, my lad," said Captain Custard. "What's this I hear about your going on the drink, and not giving your wife any money? Eh, what's this I hear, ye scallywag?"

Cookie Walker hung his head a little.

"Quite right, cap'n," he said. "I'm a bad lot. Poor little missus and the kid, bless 'em—no money! But you've got to be a sport these days. Let's go and have one, and talk it over."

"I don't want one," the captain said. "Even ginger-beer gets in my head, and makes me forget my responsibilities."

Cookie Walker laughed.

"I'll wager one or two won't make any difference," he said. "Come on!"

He led the way into a hostel near by, and ordered a glass of ale.

"What're you taking, captain?" he asked.

"Perhaps I'll risk a ginger-beer," the skipper said. "But I won't answer for consequences!"

The drink was brought, and Captain Custard gulped it down. For some minutes he was quiet, and then suddenly he began to laugh and joke and talk very excitedly, whilst Nib looked on with an expression of well-feigned anxiety.

"What's up?" asked Cookie. "Got in your 'ead a bit, has it?"

A baleful look came into the captain's face, and he looked at his companion threateningly.

"Look here," he said, "if you insult me I'll pitch you over that counter!"

"Now, then," cut in the landlord sharply. "I don't want no quarrelling in 'ere!"

Without more ado the captain seized a couple of sandwiches.

Whilst the landlord was removing them from his face he led Cookie violently out of the house.

"Come on," he said, swaying about over the pavement. "Let's get on to the next place."

A little bit afraid of the captain's quarrelsome attitude, Cookie Walker led the way to the next public-house, where a violent brawl followed another ginger-beer, so Cookie and two others were sent spinning into the corner of the bar.

"Look here, cap'n," said Cookie, rubbing his head outside, "pull yourself together! What d'ye want to row for?"

"I'll show you! I'll teach you!" gasped the enraged captain. "Come with me!"

He led the little cook into a grocer's, and in a threatening way ordered the largest barrel of ginger-beer they had. After a while it was rolled into the shop by two assistants, and Captain Custard pointed to it.

"Now," he ordered, "unless you want a good dressing-down, take that up home! I'm coming up to your place to finish it!"

"But look here, cap'n," said Cookie, "I can't carry——"

"D'ye hear what I say?" thundered Custard.

With considerable muttering Cookie Walker rolled the barrel out of the shop, and, with Nib's assistance, half-carried, half-rolled it through the town and up the hill.

It was a warm job, and the perspiration was pouring off the features of Cookie Walker, who had been talking to himself all the way in a very low tone.

But Captain Custard was a hard taskmaster. He threatened continually, touching the little man up occasionally with his rope's-end, and swaying about the road in the full intoxication of two full-strength ginger-beers.

Cookie paused presently for a rest in the middle of the hill.

"Get on with it, there!" thundered the captain. "What are you hanging about for? Don't you know I'm getting thirsty?"

Cookie began to roll the barrel feverishly, wondering what on earth would happen to the captain when he had imbibed the whole barrelful of deadly fluid. He mentioned his fears to Nib.

"I told him not to take it," Nib said, in almost a whine. "He'll probably start smashing your home up. There'll be no holding him!"

"He must 'ave a funny 'ead," said Cookie, "to let ginger-beer get in it like that!"

"He's like a lot of others," Nib whined. "When they get a drop of drink they forget all about their friends and relations. I don't know whatever would happen if uncle had a wife and child. But, there, I don't think he'd touch it then."

Cookie glanced sharply at Nib, but our friend was wiping his eyes with the edge of his sleeve, and a few minutes later the barrel was brought to rest outside the cottage.

The door opened as it did so, and Mrs. Walker darted out with the little girl.

"Why, Harry dear!" she cried; and Cookie forgot his troubles for a moment, and returned kiss for kiss, his eyes glowing as he took the little girl's face in his hands.

"I'm so glad you've come straight home, dear," Mrs. Walker said. "But——" She paused doubtfully. "What's this barrel, Harry?"

"That's my business, ma'am!" thundered Captain Custard. "Wheel it in there, Cookie, before I give you the dressing-down I promised you!"

"I was telling my wife 'ow pleased I was to see 'er," said Cookie quickly.

He rolled the barrel up the path, and hoisted it into the passage.

"Roll it into the parlour," commanded the captain, "and fetch me a quart jug—quick!"

Cookie Walker was getting a bit resentful now. In the kitchen he pondered whether it would be worth while to try and turn Captain Custard off the premises. But he decided to try tact first.

When he arrived back in the parlour with the quart jug, Captain Custard was reclining in the big chair where lately the bailiff sat, and his face was beaming amiably.

"Well, Cookie, my lad," he said soberly, "glad to be home again?"

Cookie looked at him sharply, and then mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Well," he said, with resentment, "'ave you got over it, then?"

"Got over what?" inquired the captain innocently.

"Being drunk on two ginger-beers," said Cookie.

"What!" cried the captain. "Have I been drunk, then?"

Cookie thought about being sarcastic at first, but he couldn't be bitter enough. He decided to be candid.

"You've not only been drunk," he said, "but you've been nasty, quarrelsome, obstreperous drunk! Abusing and ill-treating your best friends, you 'ave!"

"And I'm not the only one, Cookie, my lad," Captain Custard said. "We all do that when we get on the drink. Those we love the best we treat the worst. There's a cove I know—as kind and good-hearted a chap as you'd meet in a year's cruise—and he's got the best wife in the world and the sweetest little kiddie on the universe. They might be as happy as flies in a treacle-barrel, but they're not, and 'cause why? This particular cove gets on the drink occasionally, spends every bean he's got, and then leaves the missus at home to find food and face the bailiffs."

Mrs. Walker coughed a little while the captain was speaking, and then left the room with face averted. Cookie saw her, and a deep flush came to his bronze face. He waited till Captain Custard had finished, patiently.

Then he crossed over, and took the old sailor by the hand.

"It's the last time, cap'n," he said. "I'm going straight after this—straight as a die!" He pointed to the barrel on the floor. "That's my tack now—for good!" Then he added humorously: "Are you going to join me, cap'n?"

"Dare I?" said Captain Custard, smiling and winking prodigiously at Nib. "You saw what two did, Cookie!"

The little man laughed, and prepared to draw the bung.

"Three's lucky!" he said.

THE END.

(Captain Custard and his merry nephew will turn up again next week. Order your "Chuckles" early so that you can meet them as usual next Saturday.)

A MISPLACED VENGEANCE!

A Magnificent Complete Tale, Dealing With the Further Adventures of the Famous FERRERS LOCKE, Detective.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
An Appeal For Help.

"Want to see you as soon as possible. Urgent and important. Come to Riverbank, Hammersmith Mall. DALLAS."

Ferrers Locke was sitting in dressing-gown and slippers by his reading-lamp, between nine and ten o'clock of an evening late in March, when the above telegram was brought to him. He had been out of town all day, doing some work for Scotland Yard, and was just settling down to enjoy his pipe and book, which he was not in the humour to forsake. But on further consideration of the message his professional instinct was aroused, and, besides, he was reluctant to disappoint his friend Mark Dallas, a young physician who had recently bought a practice in the Hammersmith district of London.

"I had better go," he decided. "Dallas is too sensible a fellow to summon me all that distance, and at this hour, without good reason."

Having exchanged his indoor attire for more suitable clothing, the detective walked rapidly from his chambers to the Tube station, where he caught a Metropolitan train almost immediately. Twenty-five minutes later he reached Hammersmith, and a cab whirled him down King Street, turned sharp to the right at the bridge entrance, and pulled up about a hundred yards beyond, on a narrow, elm-shaded road that runs westward along the Thames, and is raised above the water by a granite wall. A lamp by the gate—the house stood back a little from the footway—showed Riverbank to be a slim three-storey building of the past century—one of a row that had been fashionable in the later Georgian period, but had lost prestige when the great City covered the surrounding neighbourhood with bricks and mortar of the cheap villa type.

"I am awfully glad you came," said Dallas, who opened the door himself. "I needed your assistance badly, or I should not have wired. It is a peculiar case, and requires more than medical skill. Perhaps I should have sent for the police; but I preferred not to do so."

"What is wrong?" asked Locke.

"I will tell you in a moment," was the reply. "Step this way. My patient is quiet just now."

He led the detective to a back room on the first floor—evidently the favourite abode of a learned and studious man. With the exception of the space allotted to a few curious prints and engravings, the walls were lined with glass-covered cases, half of which contained books and documents. The others were filled with antiques of various kinds, with scientific instruments and chemical apparatus.

"I will explain as briefly as possible," said Dallas. "Dr. Martindale, a bachelor, lives here with one servant—a man named Dodson. A woman comes every day to do the cooking and charring, but she goes home at night. Since I settled in Hammersmith I have several times attended the doctor, who suffers from a weak heart. This evening at eight o'clock he was writing at that desk by the window. Everything was precisely as you see it now. The lamp was burning brightly, and the window was partly open, to admit the fresh air. Suddenly Dodson heard a sharp cry, and he rushed upstairs to find his master standing, with a white and terrified face, gasping for breath. 'The head!—the head at the window!' he cried. 'Take it away!' And with that he clutched at his heart and dropped to the floor. Dodson sent a neighbour's boy for me, and as soon as I arrived I got the doctor into bed. He was then unconscious, and he still remains so. The fright and the shock were too much for his feeble heart. His condition is serious, and I fear the worst."

"I am not surprised that he was upset," said Locke. "Some scoundrel meditating burglary must have climbed to the window and looked in."

"That is impossible," Dallas answered gravely. "The window is ten feet from the ground, and the blank wall beneath it is covered with smooth plaster over the brickwork. No one could have climbed up. Yet the doctor was certainly terrified by something real and tangible. He is a strong-minded, sensible man. I cannot believe he was the victim of a delusion."

"Was there a ladder about?"

"No, and nothing else that would have answered the purpose."

"Have you searched the garden?" asked the detective, as he looked out of the window.

"Only superficially. Suppose we go over it again now?"

"Yes, I think we had better."

Before doing so, however, the detective questioned Dodson, whose statement agreed in every particular with the story told by Dallas.

Then, taking a lantern, the two men went into the garden, which was enclosed on both sides and at the end by a brick wall. A glance at the smooth wall of the house satisfied Ferrers Locke that no one could possibly have pulled himself a foot above the ground. He carefully examined the shrubbery and the turf, and lingered for a moment by a tall ash-tree that stood six yards straight out from the window of the doctor's study. Going farther on, his search was rewarded by the discovery of a single footprint on the edge of a flower-bed at the end of the garden.

"There was a man prowling about," he said, "and here is where he scaled the wall in his hasty flight. What is on the other side?"

"A paved passage, leading to the next street, at right angles to the river," replied Dallas; "it is useless to look there. By Jove! I have an idea! Could the rascal have brought a ladder with him?"

"That is extremely unlikely," said Ferrers Locke. "I am ready to admit, my dear fellow, that this affair contains an element of deep mystery."

"That is the reason I wired for you, and I am glad that you justify my action. But I must return to my patient. Will you accompany me?"

"I should like to see him," assented the detective.

Dodson was in attendance on the doctor, whose bed-room adjoined and communicated with his study, and had a single window overlooking the garden. He lay motionless, with closed eyes. His breathing was scarcely perceptible. One glance at the iron-grey beard and moustache, at the clean-cut, intelligent features, meant recognition to Locke.

"I might have guessed before," he whispered. "It is the Dr. Martindale."

"Yes, the scientist and traveller," Dallas replied.

There was no need of further words. Silently and meaningly they looked at each other for a moment, while their minds travelled back to the time when the name of Dr. Phineas Martindale, learned savant and explorer, member of various scientific societies, author of several books and monologues, was a name that commanded attention everywhere. Six years before, he and a colleague—M. Paul Vernet, of the Louvre—were sent to Peru by the British Society, to study the ruins of the old towns of the Incas. Two years later the savant returned alone, preceded by the news of his companion's death at the hands of the Indians in the interior. Subsequently there were rumours of foul play in regard to the Frenchman's fate, and, though they were speedily hushed up, the scandal was more than Dr. Martindale could endure. He disappeared from public life, and ceased to give lectures or write books. People wondered and commented for a while—then forgot all about the affair.

"I did not even know that he was in England," said Ferrers Locke. "I supposed he was somewhere abroad. And all the time he has been living in this remote suburb——"

"Hush!" whispered Dallas.

The patient had suddenly opened his eyes, and they gleamed with delirious terror. He partly lifted himself on one elbow. "The head! Take it away!" he muttered, in a thick, inarticulate voice. "It is Paul's face. He has come to life!" His eyes closed, and he dropped back again.

"He imagines it was M. Vernet's face he saw at the window," said Dallas. "Men have strange fancies when they are out of their right minds."

"Yes, very," assented the detective, with a quiet significance that was lost on his companion. "I think I must be off now."

"I will go part of the way with you," said Dallas, "and return later. There is nothing more to be done here at present, and I can safely leave Dodson in charge."

They walked together as far as the physician's office in King Street, and the detective went back to town by the District Railway. A theory that would account for Dr. Martindale's fright was shaping itself in his mind, and he was so oblivious to all else that he was carried to a station beyond his own.

"It is worth investigating, wildly improbable as it seems," he reflected, as he got out of a cab near his chambers about an hour after midnight.

Promptly at half-past seven the following evening, the detective was admitted by Dodson to the house on Hammersmith Mall. He had been busy in the neighbourhood since the middle of the morning, and had just left Dallas, with whom he arranged a little plan that he wished to carry out by himself at Riverbank. He observed at the time that the physician had something on his mind; but he did not invite his confidence. Dr. Martindale's condition was practically unchanged, though during the day he had been conscious for several brief intervals. He was sleeping soundly when the detective entered the room, and his face was turned partly from the window, at right angles to which the bed stood. The sash was closed, and the curtains were drawn.

Locke studied his surroundings carefully, and then made the necessary arrangements for his test, the success of which he by no means felt assured of. He stood a large screen near the wall opposite to the window, and ensconced himself behind it. Then Dodson, having turned the gas-lamp a little higher, drew aside the window-curtains, opened the sash to admit the cool air, and left the room.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Preserved Head.

The minutes dragged slowly by, and there was no sound but the ticking of the clock, or the restless stirring of the unconscious man on the bed. Two little holes were cut in the screen, and with his eyes glued to these, the detective watched and waited, seated on a small chair. The vigil had lasted half an hour, and he was beginning to think that a disappointment was in store for him, when his alert ears caught a faint sound.

The next instant a ghastly object suddenly took shape in the black opening of the window. It was a man's head, apparently severed at the neck, and the glare of the gas shone full on the brown hair, the beady eyes, and the yellow, parchment-like skin. There was nothing to indicate what held it suspended in the air; nor was that the worst. The whole head was no larger than a man's two fists.

This horrible apparition was by no means what the detective expected to see, and for a moment he was almost paralysed with fright. His blood felt like ice, and cold drops started to his brow. He shook like a leaf. Then in a flash of inspiration he remembered something that suggested a clue to the mystery. At once he grew calm, ashamed of his fears. While he hesitated a moment, undecided what to do, his chair creaked loudly, and with that the head vanished. There was a distant rustling noise, as of retreating footsteps.

He called Dodson, and bade him shut the window and lower the curtains. When this was done Ferrers Locke came out from behind the screen, a puzzled expression on his still pallid face. He did not tell the man what he had seen, nor did he go down to the garden, as might have been expected. With a glance at the sleeping patient he entered the next room—the doctor's study—and having made sure that his actions could not be observed from without, he took from one of the bookcases a volume of the "Encyclopedia Britannica," turned to the letter P, and read for ten minutes.

"Eureka!" he muttered softly. "And now for the man!"

He left the house and hurried round to King Street. Dallas had just dismissed a patient.

"Any luck?" he questioned eagerly.

"Yes; I have solved the mystery. I want you to come with me at once. This is no affair for the police."

The physician clapped his hat on his head, and the two set forth on their errand. The distance was not far, and they presently stood at a small house in a dingy street two hundred yards to the rear of Hammersmith Mall. A faint rap brought a slatternly woman to the door.

"You have a lodger—a Frenchman?" whispered Locke. "Is he at home?"

"He has just come in, sir," was the reply. "But——"

"We want to see him. It is all right, madam."

They pushed by the startled woman, went rapidly up the stairs to the first floor, and opened a door that showed a gleam of light below it. In the wretched little apartment stood a slim, wiry man, with a sunburnt complexion and twisted black moustache. At the sight of his visitors he was taken quite by surprise.

"What do you want?" he demanded hoarsely in fair English.

"Hands up, and I will tell you!"

But instead of obeying the command the Frenchman recklessly thrust his right hand behind him. If he had a weapon in his hip-pocket he got no chance to reach it, for Ferrers Locke, who was unwilling to fire, sprang at him and seized him.

"What does all this mean?" the physician asked in amazement.

"I think I can tell you directly," the detective replied. "Cover this man with your revolver."

He began to search the room, and his first discovery, which brought a word of satisfaction to his lips, was a jointed fishing-rod. Then, opening a travelling-bag, he drew out a round object wrapped in cloth. He unrolled it, and Dallas turned white as a sheet as he looked at the contents.

"By heavens, it's a human head!" he cried.

"This is the head of M. Paul Vernet, who accompanied Dr. Martindale to Peru," interrupted the detective. "It has been preserved, with the features as they were in life, by the devilish art of the Aracayan Indians. Our friend here, M. Henri Lecoure, is the clever manipulator of the head. He suspended it by a thread from the end of yonder fishing-rod, and dangled it in front of Dr. Martindale's window. His motive was——"

"I think I can fathom that," broke in Dallas.

"You have outwitted me!" the prisoner exclaimed bitterly, addressing Ferrers Locke. "And since you know so much I will confess the truth. I am no criminal. I have worked for justice—and for revenge. Paul Vernet was my dearest friend, and I was convinced, when Dr. Martindale came home without him, that there had been foul play. Why do I think so? I cannot say. But in my heart I disbelieved the doctor's story, and I made a vow that I would penetrate to the bottom of the mystery. I was a poor man, but I saved up enough money for the purpose. Two years ago I went to Peru. At Lima I found one of the native guides who had been with Dr. Martindale, and I hired him to take me across the mountains and the pampas to the interior of the country. There we were captured by the Aracayan Indians, who spared our lives and made us prisoners. I was in captivity among them for more than a year; and then, in one of their huts, I saw the head of Paul Vernet, preserved by their wonderful art. There was a bullet-hole in the skull—you may see it if you look—and by this I knew that my poor friend had been shot by his fellow-explorer, for the Aracayans have no firearms.

"I waited for my opportunity," he resumed, after a pause. "It came. I stole the head and escaped. In the end, when I had suffered incredible hardships, I reached the coast, and sailed for England. The rest you will understand. I had no legal proof against Dr. Martindale, so I determined to punish him in another way—by torturing his soul and conscience with the sight of his murdered companion's features. If I have laid him on his deathbed—well, messieurs, he deserves it, most assuredly."

"Not so. He is less guilty than you think," said Mark Dallas. "I had no chance to tell you of this before, Locke. But this afternoon Dr. Martindale was conscious for a brief time, and during that interval, knowing that his hours were numbered, he told the story of Paul Vernet's death. It seems that they two were alone, searching in some ruins on the verge of the Aracayan country, and they found a valuable golden ornament, studded with jewels. They quarrelled over it—both were hot-tempered men—and Vernet attacked Dr. Martindale. The latter drew his revolver to defend himself, and it accidentally exploded and shot Vernet in the temple. At that moment some Aracayan Indians burst from the forest, and the doctor, who was horror-stricken by what he had done, fled to save his life. He rejoined his guides in the rear, and the whole party were compelled to retreat to the coast. Undoubtedly this is the true version, though Dr. Martindale can hardly be blamed for disguising the facts. The sad affair ruined his life, made it a burden to him, and banished him from the companionship of his fellow-men."

"I must believe you," said Henri Lecoure, "for a dying man would not lie. Had I known this before I might have spared him my vengeance."

"It is too late now," Locke replied solemnly.

Under the peculiar circumstances the Frenchman was permitted to go free. As Dallas and the detective walked towards Riverbank the detective explained the methods that had led to his success.

"There was nothing brilliant about it," he said modestly. "What I knew of the doctor's visit to Peru, and his mention of Vernet's name in his delirium, led at first to the belief that the lost man was alive, and had returned to England to accuse the comrade who had deserted him in the wilds. I made inquiries, and ascertained that a Frenchman had recently taken lodgings in Hammersmith. However, after what I saw to-night"—he described his experience—"I formed a different theory, and it was the right one. I read up the Aracayan method of preserving human heads, and concluded that it was Vernet's own face that had terrified Dr. Martindale."

"But how, my dear fellow?"

"I remembered reading in the papers several years ago that M. Henri Lecoure, the friend of Vernet, had started on an exploring trip to Peru. It was easy to guess his purpose—to connect him with the doctor's shock."

Two days later Dr. Martindale passed quietly away, without again regaining consciousness; but the real cause of his death was not made public.

THE END.

(Another brilliant tale of the famous Ferrers Locke next Saturday. You should order early to avoid disappointment.)

TRIED AND TRUE!

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3.)

moment afterwards the Italian detective entered the room.

He was white as a ghost, and he was alone.

"Alone?" asked Prosper huskily, even before he troubled to prove his visitor's identity and bona fides.

"Alone!" answered Poletta, with a groan.

"What has happened?" gasped Prosper.

"Prescot has escaped me—at the last moment! He had the nerve and brain of the lot of us put together!" said Poletta bitterly. "He seems possessed of supernatural intelligence and pluck! Dio mio!"

"If he is here alone in Yokohama he is lost!" cried Prosper. "The place is swarming with Imosni's spies. Still, you have the packet, that is the principal thing. We have done all we could to save him. The packet——"

"But I haven't the packet! That's just the mischief of it all!"

"You have lost that, too?" cried Prosper, in a voice that was shrill with tense anxiety and fear.

"He has taken it!" Poletta groaned aloud again.

Prosper paced the room in an agony of dismay and nervous apprehension.

"How? When? Where?" cried Prosper fiercely. "I thought from your message that all was well."

"You had good reason to. A few hours after leaving Honolulu I made myself known to Prescot. We had a great scene. Again and again I reiterated the fact that I acted for Orson, and not for Jordan Imosni, but he stuck to his guns, refused to part with the packet, and threatened to shoot me, and, sooner than part with it, declared he would jump overboard and take it to the bottom of the sea.

"Well, I had him in my power, and I did not want any more violence, so I plainly told him that, whether he kept the packet or gave it to me, I should take him to Yokohama, and go with him to you. The position was incongruous. On the voyage he sulked. I let him have his way. When we sighted land, however, I locked him in his cabin, and kept him prisoner, intending to send for you on our arrival, to see if you could not persuade the dogged young imbecile that I was his friend."

"Well, and what then?" asked Prosper.

"Well, I went to his cabin an hour ago to give him one more chance, and to my utter astonishment found him quite docile.

"'I'll come with you,' he said. Prescot and I landed, and together we walked towards a cab to drive here, when suddenly, without a word or a look of warning, he turned, tripped me neatly, and took to his heels. I was completely taken off my guard. I gave chase, but he had disappeared. I came on here post-haste to warn you."

"If he has escaped Imosni's spies," said Mr. Prosper, "we may safely expect him here every moment. To-day is the hundredth day. He is in Yokohama. We shall shortly see him, unless—unless——"

The door opened, and a clerk entered again.

"Mr. Edward Terrence!" he said.

"I knew it!" cried Prosper. "He has fulfilled his mission! He is here! We are saved!"

Guy Prescot's Reward.

Guy Prescot entered Mr. Prosper's office a minute afterwards. He found Mr. Prosper alone; for, on Poletta's own suggestion, the detective had retired to an inner room, so as not to arouse Guy's suspicions.

"How do you do, Mr. Prescot?" said Prosper quite casually as he held out his hand. "Glad to see you safe and sound."

Guy took the outstretched hand, and subjected Mr. Prosper to a swift and searching examination.

"Yes," he said at length, "there's no mistaking you. When I came in just now I was quite prepared for anything. I've had an awful time of it!"

"And the packet is safe?" asked Mr. Prosper eagerly.

"Yes," said Guy, in a voice that quivered with tense excitement, and held, too, a ring of triumph in it, "the packet is safe! There it is!"

He flung the little sealed parcel on to the table and gasped with relief.

"It's over and done with! I've done it just in time!"

Prosper seized the packet, examined it, and said devoutly:

"Thank Heaven!"

Then, without another word, he walked across the room to the fireplace, in which a fire was burning cheerfully, and before the eyes of the astonished Guy Prescot tossed it into the flames.

At the last signs of the little package disappeared, he turned to Guy.

"Now," he said, "I breathe! We've beaten Imosni. We are saved!"

But Guy Prescot had sunk to the floor and fainted.

When he recovered his senses a quarter of an hour afterwards, Prosper and Poletta were bending over him.

He sat bolt upright as the memory of the thing he had witnessed came back to him—the precious packet, for which he had been through fire and water and a hundred deaths, burning to ashes before his eyes! Was it for this that he had done what he had done? It seemed incredible.

"You have destroyed it!" he gasped hoarsely.

"Yes," answered Prosper, his eyes telling him that he had been acting blindly against Cyrus Orson all the time.

And Poletta added his quota of explanation.

The shock of the explanation stunned Guy for quite a long time. That ever since he had received those telegrams at Gibraltar, four days after leaving Southampton, he had been acting against his employer, seemed too incredible for belief. Yet such indeed appeared to be the case. But how was he to have known? He had only carried out his original instructions.

In vain did Mr. Prosper endeavour to persuade him that in the end all was well—that Cyrus Orson would be more than content—that he, Guy Prescot, had, notwithstanding all misunderstandings, saved the banker's honour and life. Cyrus Orson had only desired to get back the packet into his possession to destroy it. That had now been done.

Prosper, Poletta, and Guy adjourned to a neighbouring restaurant for lunch, and discussed the whole matter in every detail. Previously Prosper had despatched a cypher marconigram to relieve Mr. Orson on the sea.

When they got back to Prosper's office they found two strange men awaiting them.

"Imosni gang!" whispered Prosper.

And Poletta and Guy instinctively felt for their revolvers, but it was a needless precaution.

"You're too late, gentlemen!" remarked Mr. Prosper. "Mr. Prescot has accomplished his mission!"

"Too late!" groaned the elder of the two men, and turned away without a word, and, followed by his companion, left the office.

"I think that is the last of them," said Mr. Prosper triumphantly.

"But Jordan Imosni still lives," said the Italian.

"He will be arrested as soon as he steps on Japanese land," said Prosper.

"If he isn't already in irons on board H.M.S. Tremendous," added Guy.

Two days afterwards H.M.S. Tremendous arrived at Yokohama, and the captain reported the murder of Sir Richard Yeovil and the suicide of Jordan Imosni. He also handed over Hermann Dopper to the proper authorities. The man was a raving lunatic.

When in due course Mr. Cyrus Orson arrived in Yokohama, and was informed of all the various occurrences, he seized Guy's hand.

"Ask anything of me, Prescot!" he cried in a voice that was choked with emotion. "I will grant anything you wish!"

But Guy shook his head. Indeed, at that moment there was nothing he wanted. He was content. He had performed his mission.

But Cyrus Orson was not the man to forget such service as Guy had rendered, and when he returned to England a few days later Guy Prescot accompanied him as private secretary, with a salary of five hundred pounds a year. In addition to this, the banker presented him with a cheque for a thousand pounds, and gave him clearly to understand that he would be well remembered in his will.

"And, Prescot," he said, "there is one thing I must ask you. Never from this moment refer to that packet I entrusted to your care."

"Shall I never know what it contained?" asked Guy Prescot.

The banker shook his head.

"I can only tell you this," he said, "that if it had left your possession—if it had ever come into the hands of Jordan Imosni—the British Empire would not exist to-day! That is all I can ever tell you."

And that is all Guy Prescot ever knew. And when he again returned to his aunt, that good lady's curiosity as to the reason of his strange absence was, needless to say, unappeased.

He is still Mr. Orson's secretary, and has a great future before him.

THE END.

("PHANTOM GOLD," our splendid new serial, commences in next week's issue. To avoid disappointment, order your copy in advance.)

This genial old Antarctic explorer has lost his pet polar bear. Can YOU find him?

Dear Reeders,—In Collyflour Cort, ware I reside, there hav been grate doins latly. A big Skooter Karnivle, orgenized bi miself and mi pal, Freddy Fraydence, caim orf dewring the parst weak.

Ov cawse, U awl no wot a skooter is—1-ov them fings witch U stand on, wile U push wiv yore uver foot, and gide wiv your ands. They R awl the faeshun now-a-daze, and nacherally Collyflour Cort wasent 2 B left B-hind ware ennythink up-2-dait is conserned.

The thort ov orgernising a karnivle and devoting the proseeds 2 raising a Collyflour Cort Zepperling Defens Corpse, wiv me in kommand, entired mi brane 1 nite wen warking down owr cellerbrated thurrerfare and B-ing nocked over bi 2 smawl Collyflour Cort resdents hoo ware having a rase on thare skooters.

B-ing ot stuff at the gum miself, and noing that ennybuddy hoo is ennybuddy in owr cort has got a skooter, it seamed just the very idere, sew i serched owt mi buzzum pal, Freddy Fraydends, and we werked owt the detales togevver.

The 1st item wos a tawchlite proseshun ov awl the Collyflours taking part. (Bi Collyflours i meen, ov cawse, peepul living in Collyflour Cort, and knot the vegitable of that naim.)

Thare ware a few site ackzidents in the proseshun, cheef ov witch wos that Topsy Tintickle had her hat set alite bi mi gal, Emmerline Paddlehoof, hoo wos ackused ov doing it 4 the purpus. Topsy, as usule, had kwite a lot 2 say about it, and addid sum insultin remarx about mi gal's appearance, wen, ov cawse, i put mi foot down.

Wen the tawchlite proseshun wos neerly finished a speshul kunstabell caim up. He enkwired 4 the orgeniser ov the show, sew i stepped up and shook hands wiv him.

"Ear, that'll doo!" he growled. "I caim 2 tell U that awl these tawches must B put owt at wunce. Knot 2 shake hands wiv U!"

"Put owt!" i exclaimed. "Wi?"

"Wi!" he shouted. "Wi! Don't U see that every Zepperling withing fiftey miles will cum up? There's enuf lite ear 4 the outside ov about ten electrick theaters!"

Sew the konsekwence wos that awl the tawches had 2 B put owt, but as it happend there wos kwite enuf lite 2 go on wiv the programme.

The nexs event wos a rase for owners ov home-maid skooters, twice rownd the cort, and thros the posts at the end. The prize wos a kompleat vollume ov CHUCKLES, presented bi the edditer. I did knot go in 4 this rase, as mi skooter is an up-2-dait moddle, fitted wiv rubber tires and a motor-horn.

Willy Weerdims wos the winner, on a masheen ov his own desine. I presentid the handsum vollume 2 him in the naim ov the edditer ov CHUCKLES, wile awl the Collyflours cheered themselves horse.

There ware a lot ov uver events, includding a blindfold rase (witch wos won bi Norman Nosenkal), a tandum rase—2 kompetitors on 1 skooter (and, wot wos funnieg ov awl, a rase ware eech kompetiter had his legs tyde together wiv a peece ov roap about 2-feet long.

Awltogevver the karnivle wos a grate suksess. I pulled orf 1 prize miself, and kollected suffishunt munny 2 start the Collyflour Cort Zepperling Defens Corpse.

Yor old pal,

Barthlomew Bluenose.

A WOMAN'S RULING PASSION.

Husband (rushing into the room): "Come out, quick, for Heaven's sake!"

Wife: "Why, what is the matter?"

"The house is on fire, and we shall be burnt to death if we hesitate a moment! Run, run for your life!"

"Yes, I'll be out in a minute, dear. I've got to tidy up the room a little, so that it will look decent when the firemen arrive."

TOO MANY RESTS.

An Englishman was rowing against an Irishman in a race at the Yarmouth Regatta. The Englishman was winning so easily that he stopped two or three times, and shouted to Padd, to come along.

After the race everyone was chaffing Paddy on the beating he had received from the Englishman, but he simply shrugged his shoulders and remarked:

"If I had had as many rests as he had I could have beat him quite easily!"

THE PLANET PA'S!!

Telescope Proprietor: "Step up, ladies and gents, and view the planet Mars. One penny, mum."

Old Lady: "Oh, gracious, hain't it round and smooth!"

Telescope Proprietor: "Will the bald-headed gent please step away from the front of the instrument!"

QUESTION.—WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TALL THIN MAN MAKING LOVE, AND THE CROWN PRINCE OF GERMANY? ANSWER.—ONE'S A LANKY SUITOR AND THE OTHER'S A SWANKY LOOTER!

OUR GRAND SERIAL STORY!

A MAGNIFICENT STORY OF THRILLING ADVENTURE.

BY CRAVEN GOWER.

INTRODUCTION.

Guy Prescot, a clerk in the employ of Cyrus Orson, a millionaire banker, is singled out by his employer to go on a mission of international importance. He is to take a small packet of papers to a Mr. Prosper in Yokohama. The journey must not exceed one hundred days, and the packet is not to leave Guy Prescot's possession on any account. Jordan Imosni, a rich Greek, endeavours to obtain the all-important packet, and a spy in his employ, named Rudolph Lafroy, traces Guy from England to Naples, Brindisi, and Port Said. About this time Guy's employer, Cyrus Orson, fearing that his implacable enemy, Imosni, has discovered his plans, determines to follow Guy himself and obtain the precious packet of papers in person. Guy Prescot, believing the real Mr. Orson to be merely a fraudulent impersonator, eludes him, as well as an Italian detective whom the banker has engaged, named Signor Poletta. Doubling on his tracks, Guy takes a passage to New York, crosses the American continent by rail, and arrives at San Francisco, where Imosni, the chief of Guy Prescot's employer's enemies, corners him, but the lad, by means of a daring ruse, escapes, and boards the Eastern Queen, a fast boat bound for Yokohama. He is on the last lap of his race for safety and honour, but is still remorselessly dogged by Imosni's numerous spies and the police forces of various countries on false charges made by the spies, and even by Mr. Orson himself, and a clever Italian detective whom the banker has engaged. On the liner Guy is surprised by being told by another passenger, a man named Hermann Dopper, that he also is in the employ of Mr. Orson, and is watching over Guy's welfare. Mr. Dopper suggests that they retire to his cabin to talk over the matter. Once in the cabin Guy is made prisoner by Dopper, who proves to be another of Imosni's agents. By means of poisonous gas pumped into the cabin, Guy is almost overcome, when a terrific explosion occurs, and the Eastern Queen rapidly sinks. Guy and Dopper are rescued, and shortly afterwards a large submarine, the Octopus, which torpedoed the Eastern Queen, appears, aboard which is Imosni. She strikes a submerged reef and goes to the bottom.

(Now go on with the story.)

Returning Good for Evil.

The title of this chapter aptly describes what took place immediately afterwards.

About thirty men were struggling for life amidst the wreckage of the sunken Octopus, and would undoubtedly have been lost had it not been for the unexampled pluck and resourcy of the commander of the Eastern Queen's steam-pinnace. He promptly put about, and steamed back into the swell and the scene of the disaster, regardless of danger of explosion or sunken reefs. Lines and lifebuoys were thrown out, and many sailors were rescued.

The pinnace was already overcrowded, and it was quite impossible to take more than a dozen of the half-drowned men on board. The rest, however, were supplied with lifebelts and buoys, and were thus taken in tow.

It required a tremendous amount of discretion and ingenuity on behalf of the officer in command, who stood, revolver in hand, to keep order, and quell any attempt at a panic or disobedience of orders.

Luckily, the explosions had been heard and seen by the yacht-cruiser, as well as by those in the small boats, and in less than half an hour the cruiser had come to the rescue, and taken the refugees of both the Eastern Queen and the Octopus on board.

She was H.M.S. Tremendous, bound for Shanghai, from Esquimault.

Amongst those who had been saved from the Octopus was Jordan Imosni. Rudolph Lafroy and the man Gether had gone down with the ill-fated vessel.

Imosni was almost unconscious when he was taken on board H.M.S. Tremendous, and remained in a semi-comatose state for over twenty-four hours. During those twenty-four hours Guy Prescot had a great many things to explain, settle, and determine; and it was largely owing to the fact that he knew two of the ward-room officers of the cruiser, and that one of the midshipmen was Tom Rawley—a first cousin—that he was able to avoid arrest, for, under the circumstances, it was not to be wondered at that the captain of the Tremendous should want a very strict enquiry made, especially in relation to the identity of a young man who was known as Terrence, yet who stated, and abundantly proved, that he was Guy Prescot, and said who had been the cause of such an alarming disaster.

Guy, metaphorically, took the bull by the horns. He demanded a private interview with Sir Richard Yeovil, K.C.B., the captain of the Tremendous, and frankly told him the facts of the case.

Sir Richard did him the honour to believe him, and informed him that, as far as he was concerned, he would give all the protection in his power.

"I'll help you, Mr. Prescot. A few minutes ago I was on the point of demanding the packet, and examining its contents, before deciding on any course of action. After all, that is my duty. However——"

At that moment, and before the captain could complete the sentence, the door of the cabin opened, and a wild-eyed, dishevelled man strode in.

"One moment!" he cried. "You shall hear me first!"

Guy started back, with a cry of surprise, for the man was Jordan Imosni.

Sir Richard Yeovil sprang to his feet.

"How dare you, sir!" he thundered.

But Imosni was in no wise frightened.

"I dare you, sir," he answered, "to refuse to hear me; and, after having heard me, to refuse my demands!"

Something in the man's voice and manner appeared to impress the captain, for, though he still frowned most ominously, he said:

"Very well, then, let me hear your story."

"Tell him to produce the packet!" said Imosni defiantly. "Open it, by the right you have, when I have finished. If I have lied, you may do as you will with me; if I have spoken the truth, then I demand, as my right, the packet, and your protection."

"Speak!" said Sir Richard again.

And Guy, withdrawing a pace or two instinctively nearer the door, held his breath, and listened, as Jordan Imosni commenced, in cold, crisp tones:

"Cyrus Orson, the great London banker, and I have for several years been opponents in various ways. I hate him, and he hates me. So much to explain my position in this matter. Be it known also in advance that I am the representative in the matter of the Mikado of Japan, against whose empire Mr. Orson and his partner in this particular matter have been systematically scheming for a number of years."

"Well," said Sir Richard gruffly, for Imosni paused, as if to give time for his extraordinary statement to work the desired effect, "go on. Come to the point. I am not interested in Mr. Orson, or you, or the Mikado of Japan. What do you affirm that this remarkable packet contains?"

Jordan Imosni smiled grimly.

"The packet contains four things," he said slowly.

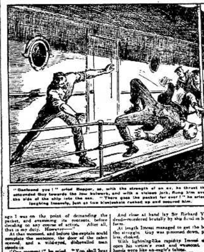
And then, before either Guy or the captain realised what was the matter, he had sprung at Sir Richard like a panther. A knife glittered for an instant in the air, and, the next moment, plunged into the heart of the gallant officer, who, without a groan, tumbled heavily to the floor dead.

Guy was petrified with horror. The thing had been the work of an instant of time. Imosni had lured them on into breathless interest, and then seized the opportunity. Before Guy could raise a finger in self-defence Imosni had swung round, knife in hand, and was upon him.

"This time," he hissed, "there shall be no mistake! You die! You——"

But as they rolled together on the floor Guy managed to seize the wrist that held the knife, and, with almost superhuman strength, wrenched it from the murderer's grasp, and flung it to the other end of the spacious cabin.

Hand to hand they fought and struggled. Imosni was like a madman. Guy was possessed of the strength of desperation.



"Confound you!" cried Dopper, as, with the strength of an ox, he thrust the astounded Guy towards the low bulwark, and, with a vicious jerk, flung him over the side of the ship into the sea. "There goes the packet for ever!" he cried, laughing insanely, just as two bluejackets rushed up and secured him.

And close at hand lay Sir Richard Yeovil, dead—murdered brutally by the fiend in human form.

At length Imosni managed to get the best of the struggle. Guy was pinioned down, powerless, choked.

With lightning-like rapidity Imosni clawed open his victim's coat and waistcoat. His hands were like an eagle's talons.

"The packet!" he hissed. "The packet! This time I will not fail!"

The man's hand was on the money-belt. A mist swam before Guy's eyes. He felt faint. He was sinking—sinking into oblivion. All was lost.

"Yes—yes, by Heaven, I have it! It is mine!"

With a half-inarticulate cry of triumph, Jordan Imosni gripped the packet in his hand, and sprang to his feet.

For a dizzy instant Guy saw him there, with the packet in his hand, and a smile of fiendish, demoniacal joy distorting his repulsive face. Then he had gone out of the cabin.

To leap to his feet and give instant chase was the work of a moment. Summoning all his strength, Guy realised that at all costs he must obtain possession of the packet before Imosni had time to hide it, or cause him to be arrested, as he undoubtedly would, on the charge of murdering the captain.

He caught him up on deck. Land had been sighted, and in an hour the cruiser would be at Honolulu.

Imosni received something of a shock when he saw Guy close at his heels, and an even greater one when he found the packet, which he held in his hands, snatched from him, and himself sent spinning against an iron stanchion by a well-directed left-hander, which caught him between the eyes, and caused him to see starry constellations.

Guy crammed the recovered packet in his breast-pocket, and was just about to rush off and fully report matters to the first lieutenant—who, fortunately, he knew personally—when he was suddenly seized from behind.

He had just time to catch sight of his new assailant. It was Hermann Dopper, and his eyes were ablaze with the light of insanity.

"Confound you!" cried Dopper, as, with the strength of an ox, he thrust the astounded Guy towards the low bulwark, and, with a vicious jerk, flung him over the side of the ship into the sea.

"There goes the packet for ever!" he cried, laughing insanely, just as two bluejackets rushed up and secured him.

"Man overboard!" rang from end to end of the great cruiser.

Boats were promptly lowered, and engines slowed and reversed. But before the first boat got away Guy was but a little black dot, bobbing up and down in the waves, fully half a mile away.

"Unless he's a good swimmer," said the coxswain of the whaler that was on the way to his rescue, "we shan't save him!"

And on board H.M.S. Tremendous excitement ran high, for hardly had the alarm of "Man overboard!" gone forth than the body of Sir Richard Yeovil was found murdered in his cabin.

About a mile away a fine steam-yacht was seen to be making in the direction of the brave young swimmer. She was a prodigiously fast boat, and the officer on the bridge made her out to be the yacht Javelin, from San Francisco.

"If she's smart enough," he remarked, "she'll pick him up five minutes before the whaler reaches him. Jove, how she moves!"

The Hundredth Day.

Mr. Prosper sat in his office in the Nagoya Street at Yokohama. He was alone, and the table at which he sat was strewn with cablegrams.

A hundred days ago he had bade "bon voyage" to Guy Prescot at his rooms in Hawley Street, Adelphi, and during the intervening period he had not known a moment's rest or peace of mind. The strain had been fearful, the anxiety intolerable. He had aged twenty years.

Every minute detail of the great game which had been played out between Cyrus Orson and Jordan Imosni had been cabled to him. Almost every hour he received advice. Others were acting, were in the thick of it all, but he had only to wait—wait and dread unnamable things.

Cyrus Orson was on his way to Yokohama. The Italian detective was in Yokohama at the present moment, and Mr. Prosper expected to meet him within the next half-hour.

The last cablegram lay before him. Deciphered, it ran as follows:

"Yacht Javelin broke a shaft a few hours out of San Francisco. Had to return for repairs. Found Imosni had started in pursuit in U.S. submarine, Octopus. Did not overhaul until within ten miles of Honolulu, when, seeing man violently assaulted and thrown overboard from H.M.S. Tremendous, became suspicious. Picked man up, and found him to be Guy Prescot. I kept in the dark, and my captain ascertained that Eastern Queen had been destroyed by a submarine. Many lives lost, but majority of passengers, officers, and crew able to get off in boats. Submarine struck coral reef shortly afterwards, and sank. H.M.S. Tremendous saved many lives of both Eastern Queen and Octopus, amongst them being Dopper, Imosni, and Guy Prescot. The former mad. Imosni attacked Prescot, killed captain of Tremendous. Dopper threw Prescot overboard. Further particulars later. Having Prescot safe on board, and quite unsuspicious of my presence, steamed full speed for Honolulu. Am starting at once for Yokohama. At sea will make myself known to Prescot. Fully reported Orson, and hear from him that he is in San Francisco, and is taking next boat for Yokohama. All going well, shall be at your office with Prescot and packet on Wednesday next—the hundredth day.—POLETTA."

That was the cablegram received from Honolulu, and now Mr. Prosper was awaiting the fulfilment of its promise.

The yacht Javelin had been reported all well, and it was now close on the stroke of noon. The seconds seemed interminable. He had his instructions. Cyrus Orson had cabled them a dozen times in a dozen different ways. How long Poletta was! Surely nothing could have gone wrong now—now at the very last moment!

There was a knock at the door. Prosper caught his breath.

"Signor Poletta!" announced a clerk, and a

(Continued on page 6.)


THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT!
Ermyntrude: "Ah! There's something like a man, now!"
Bertie: "Aw-aw—I say, you know, what about me?"
Ermyntrude: "Well, you're something like a man, too."
THE BIRDS RUNG OFF.
THE BIRDS EAT ALL MY SEEDLINGS!
1. "Condsah those sparrows!" roared old Sprouts. "As fast as my seeds come up those birds have the bloom-ing cheek to eat 'em!"
THEY MAKE A NICE ROW OF BLOOMS!
IN OFF!
THAT KEEPS THEM OFF!
3. And, whenever a bird settled on those bells, of course they ting-a-linged, and off the birds flew. "You're on the wrong number," laughed old Sprouts. "Rung off!"
MUSTARD KEEN AND HIS TERRIBLE TERRIER
1. "Now, if I can only catch him with the swag I shall get several stripes," thought I to myself, when I perceived my old enemy, Pick-handled Percy, the most notorious of sneak thieves, dodging round a corner.
2. And immediately on his heels, sir, I dodged round after him; but in the meantime he had been up to another dodge, so that when I appeared, the swag had disappeared. "Where is it?" I said.
4. That brainy tyke had upset the water-can into the drain-pipe and thus exposed Percy's plan. Percy had a great reception at the station.—Thine. MUSTARD KEEN.
LITTLE TOMMY TREDDLES AND HIS TOY AEROPLANE.
1. Tommy Treddles looks a bit down in the mouth, doesn't he? The fact is, he's broke! "But, surely I'm fly enough to make some money!" he's groaning, while you're looking at him.
2. And at that instant an idea burst out of his cranium exactly as you see it in the above black and whitescope. Look at the board he's painted.
SWIMMING LESSONS 1/- AN HOUR
3. "Swimming Lessons." That's his idea. And by the time he'd fixed the lifebuoys to his machine, he'd got two customers. Are we ready?
4. Then he started treddling. "I'm well in the swim, now!" he gushed, as he pocketed the two boblets, and his customers swallowed the Atlantic.
IT MIGHT HAVE "BIN" WORSE!
COAL BOX
ANY PORT IN A STORM
GOT 'IM, HA HA!
DUST BIN
1. O. K. Pokey was being very severely chased by a copper when, rounding a corner, he all of a suddenly twigged a convenient coal-box. And into it he dived, head first.
2. Misfortunately the cop twigged him diving in, and settled himself comfortably on top of the box. "That's got him!" he grunted. "It's a black look-out for you, O. K., very black!"
3. But, the cop didn't know there was a trap in the roof, so that when O. K. pushed it open rapidly the cop found himself in the dustbin. "O. K. boys," laughed O.K.
BARK versus BITE!
VERY PRIVATE
1. "Hello!" gurgled the bull-pup. "Here's that fisherman fishing here again, and he knows he mustn't. Now I'll just show him who's which!" "I wouldn't be that angler feller for something!" panted the bunnies.
2. And just round then the bull-pup hurled himself at that fisherman's leggings, and fixed his teeth in them right up to the gum. And it's pretty certain he'd have hurt some-thing—
3. If they really had been leggings—but they weren't! Nunno, dear reader. That wily old angler had been standing in a hollow tree stump. "That 'bark' is rather worse than your bite, eh?" chuckled the angler.
BOXO THE MUSCULAR MARVEL
1. Old Boxo, the strengthest strong man known, was having a large cup of tea, Id., "Somewhere in France," when he overlistened two Hun spy merchants concocting some foul play. "Der Zeppelin come dis vay," they grunted.
LOOK OUT FOR THE ZEP BOXO!
I'M PREPARING FOR IT, SIR!
2. So Boxo got busy putting a spoke in their wheel. "Keep a sharp look out for that Zep you warned me of, Boxo!" chirruped the captain. "I'm getting ready for them," said Boxo, as he put another stitch in the netting he's knitting.
3. And when the net was finished he pulled down a convenient sapling and fixed the net on to it. "Now," he grunted merrily, "all I want is a tree for a handle and all is ready."
SERGEANT SHRAPNEL THE CYCLIST SCOUT
1. "Well, what's about put the tin hat on this manœuvre," moaned Sergeant Shrapnel, when a Hun shell spoilt the shape of his machine. "What's to be did?"
TIE MY BOOTS TO THE WHEEL
2. "I'm generally full of boot-iful ideas," he said, as he took his boots off and fastened them to the front wheel. "And I shouldn't be surprised if this one doesn't beat the lot!"
3. Then he bowled the wheel down the road and it left behind it a string of Shrapnel's footprints. "I think this idea will prove a track-tive enough to put the Huns off the track!" he gushed.
WRITING HER WILL NOT.
WHAT HE YEAR-NED FOR.
MAKING IT PLAY-N!
TIRED TED GIVES THE SHOPKEEPER THE SLIP.
WHEN YOU TAKE A BATH USE MOONLIGHT SOAP
TA TA!
1. "Ha! What's that?" said Tired Ted. "When you take a bath use Moonlight Soap! Certainly! I've just taken the soap, so now I think I'll take a bath." And he took one off the hook!
2. "Hi! What are you taking?" roared the enraged shopkeeper. "I'm only taking your advice," laughed Tired Ted. Then he got serious. "My word! I must give this fellow the slip!" he said.
3. Then he threw the soap in front of the shopkeeper. "I've given him a very decided slip," said Ted, as the shopkeeper threw several somersaults. "And I don't often take a bath. Tra, hoo!"
CRACKED!
HIS(S) OBJECTION!
PICK AND JEWS!

6. Boys must obey orders smartly, implicitly, and with cheerfulness.

7. Sixth-Formers only are privileged to have fags. Boys in any other Form making use of such a liberty are laying themselves open to punishment.

8. Boys buying goods on credit from local tradesmen must on no account allow their liabilities to exceed the sum of ten pounds.

9. Wilful damage to the school property will be visited with heavy fines.

10. No boy is to leave his dormitory after lights out, except in a case of emergency.

11. Prefects are empowered with the right to cane unruly juniors, but on no account must any other instrument of castigation than a cane be employed.

12. Smoking in any shape or form is strongly discountenanced.

13. The use of doubtful language will not be tolerated, either in or out of the school.

14. The only boys' papers allowed in the school are the companion papers, viz., the "Magnet" Library, the "Gem" Library, the "Penny Popular," the "Boys' Friend," "Chuckles," the "Boys' Friend 3d. Library," and the "Greyfriars Herald."

15. Every boy should carry with him, in his life and actions, the high traditions of St. James' School and seek to do nothing calculated to bring a slur upon this honoured foundation.

(Signed) RICHARD HOLMES.
Headmaster.

A Special Supplement given away with the "Gem" Library. Readers are recommended to detach these four pages. Then to fold them up and keep for future reference.

ST. JAMES' COLLEGIATE SCHOOL

RYLCOMBE, SUSSEX, ENGLAND

A USEFUL BUDGET OF INFORMATION CONCERNING THE FAMOUS SCHOOL, ITS STAFF, AND ITS SCHOLARS, ETC. ETC.

COMPILED BY THE EDITOR OF THE "GEM" LIBRARY, IN CONJUNCTION WITH Mr. MARTIN CLIFFORD.

St. James' Collegiate School, Rylcombe, Sussex.

Telephone: 156 Wayland.
Telegrams: "St. James', Rylcombe."

THE STAFF.

Headmaster.—Richard Holmes, M.A.
Assistant Masters—
Horace Ratcliff, M.A.
Victor Railton, M.A.
Philip G. Lathom, B.A.
Leslie M. Linton, M.A.
Henry Selby, B.Sc.
Percy Carrington, B.A.
Monsieur le Blanc Morny.
Herr Gottfried Schneider.
Porter.—Ephraim Taggles.
House Dame (School House).—Mrs. Mimms.
House Dame (New House).—Mrs. Kenwigg.
Nurse.—Marie Rivers.
School Tuckshop.—Martha Taggles (Proprietress).
Page-boy.—Toby Marsh.

ST. JAMES' COLLEGIATE SCHOOL

(Founded A.D. 1570.)

The school is delightfully situated in the heart of Sussex, one mile from the pleasant little rustic village of Rylcombe, through which the shining Ryll winds its charming course.

Accommodation is provided for nearly 300 scholars, the School House (the original structure) containing 200, and the New House (added in 1852) boarding just under 100 pupils.

St. James' School is split up into Forms in the usual way, under the captaincy of Eric Kildare, with James Monteith as first subordinate. Every branch of sport is indulged in by the boys, cricket and football being compulsory. The greatest matches of the season are contested against Greyfriars.

The school Board of Governors includes such celebrated and distinguished gentlemen as Sir Harvey Wyatt, Colonel James Lyndon, the Marquis of Bagshot, the Viscount Headford, T. St. J. Harrison, Esq., J.P., and the Lord Eastwood.

SCHOOL ROUTINE.

(Subject to Alteration.)

Rising-bell, 7 a.m.
Chapel, 7.30 a.m.
Breakfast, 8 a.m.
Morning School, 9 a.m. to 12 a.m.
Dinner, 1 p.m.
Afternoon School (Wednesdays and Saturdays excepted), 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.
Recreation, 4 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.
Tea in Big Hall (optional), 5.30 p.m.
Calling-over, 7 p.m.
Preparation, 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.
Recreation (juniors), 8 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Recreation (seniors), 8 p.m. to 9.45 p.m.
Lights out, 10 p.m.

It is the duty of the ruling body of prefects to see that the above times and regulations are rigidly enforced, and to report any breach of the rules either to one of the Housemasters or to the headmaster in person.

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ST. JAMES' SCHOOL.

THE "GEM" LIBRARY.

One Penny. Every Wednesday.

EDITED BY H. A. HINTON.

Stories dealing with the scholars are written exclusively for the above journal by Martin Clifford.

The GEM Library was launched in the year 1907, and its popularity is largely on the increase. It is hoped shortly to publish "Tom Merry's Weekly," a bright little paper controlled by the juniors, which will tend to give a better insight into the life and work of the school.

NOTES ON THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS.

BAKER, STANLEY.—A valiant Sixth-Former, loyal to Kildare, and excelling in all manner of sport. Age 17.

BLAKE, JACK.—A sturdy son of Yorkshire, who excels on the football field and is always ready for a lark. A study-mate of the immortal Gussy. Age 15.

BROOKE, DICK.—One of the few day-boys at St. Jim's, and a jolly good fellow. Age 15½.

CONTALINI, GIACOMO. — Tom Merry & Co.'s ally. Hails from the sunny climes of Italy, and signalised his arrival at St. Jim's by thrashing Buck Finn. Age 15.

CROOKE, GERALD.—A cad of the first water. Associated with Levison in many shady doings, and has often

SOME FAMOUS SPORTS RECORDS AT ST. JIM'S.

Contest.	Winner.		Year.
Mile	J. H. Hopwood	5 min. 4 sec.	1870
Half-mile	P. Purkis	2 min. 17 sec.	1858
Quarter-mile	C. P. Lacey	54 sec.	1895
Hurdles	R. Talbot	15¼ sec.	1915
High-jump	J. R. Browne	5 ft. 2½ in.	1904
Long-jump	H. Austin-Phillips	20 ft. 4 in.	1888
Cricket Ball	Jack Dyson	93 yds. 2 ft.	1900

THE GREATEST FIGHT IN THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY.

The most famous fight on record at St. Jim's is that which took place in 1899 between "Slogger" Sawyer, of the Sixth, and a fellow-senior named Simms. The latter having reported Sawyer to the authorities for breaking bounds at night, a challenge was issued and accepted, and the fight took place behind the Chapel on the morning of March 25. Nearly all the school assembled to see it, and the combat continued with unabated fury for 22 rounds, at the end of which time the Slogger stretched his opponent flat upon the ground. Both seniors were in a shocking state, and Sawyer was afterwards expelled.

who often sets up in rivalry against Figgins & Co. and Tom Merry & Co. A magnificent sportsman, and thoroughly true-blue. Age 15.

REILLY, PATRICK. — A good-tempered Fourth-Former, with a wonderful Hibernian accent. Loyal and true in all his dealings. Age 15.

RUSHDEN, PHILIP.—One of the mighty men of the Sixth. A sound sportsman and a capital prefect. Age 17.

SEFTON, JAMES.—A cowardly bully in the Sixth Form. Has narrowly missed expulsion on several occasions. Age 17.

SKIMPOLE, HERBERT.—An extraordinary junior in the Shell, with ridiculous and impossible notions. A great admirer of the works of Professor Ballycrumpet, and a staunch champion of Socialism. Has also tried his hand at inventions, thereby causing much havoc.

ST. LEGER, ARTHUR.—A rascally associate of Cutts of the Fifth. Age 16½.

TALBOT, REGINALD.—The most interesting figure in junior St. Jim's. Formerly a cute and clever cracksman, he has undergone a complete reformation, and is now one of the noblest fellows in the Shell. Gained the King's Pardon for past offences by gallantly frustrating a German attempt at train-wreckage. Well-balanced in mind, unemotional in temperament, and a great sportsman. Was previously assisted by Marie Rivers, with whom he is still on terms of friendship. Age 15½.

THOMPSON, GEORGE.—A typical junior in the Shell and an indirect supporter of the Terrible Three. Age 15½.

WEBB, GEORGE.—A sensible and conscientious prefect. Age 17.

WILKINS, GEORGE.—A study-mate and supporter of the great Grundy. Age 15½.

WYNN, DAVID.—Otherwise known as the Falstaff of the New House. A plump, good-natured junior, who lives in a realm of tuck, and is never happier than when attending a study celebration. A goalkeeper of great ability and closely allied with Figgins in all his undertakings. Age 15.

RULES.

1. Boys are forbidden to break bounds under any circumstances.

2. No scholar may absent himself from the school premises under any pretext after calling-over unless he obtains the necessary pass from a master or prefect.

3. All boys in the Fourth Form and upwards are to wear silk hats on Sundays.

4. The games of football and cricket are compulsory in the case of all juniors, who must put in an appearance on the playing-fields at least twice a week.

5. Complaints regarding the school food must be made to the headmaster in person.

JULIAN, DICK.—The Jewish junior at St. Jim's, who was wronged by Monty Lowther on his arrival, but has since turned up trumps. A splendid fellow in every way. Age 15.

KERR. GEORGE.—A shrewd and clever son of Scotland, noted for his marvellous powers of impersonation. The nearest and best chum of Figgins, and always on hand when japes are in progress. Age 15.

KERRUISH, HENRY.—A genial sportsman from the celebrated Isle of Man. Age 15.

KILDARE, ERIC.—The big, athletic captain of St. Jim's, with a heart of gold. First in class and first in the field, and a worthy son of the Emerald Isle. Age 17.

KNOX, GERALD.—A dissolute scoundrel in the Sixth, second to none in bullying and blackguardly conduct. In his position of prefect he never fails to make it warm for all juniors who cross his path. Age 17.

LANGTON, HERBERT.—One of the leading lights of the Sixth Form and a fine footballer. Age 17.

LAWRENCE, EDGAR.—Redfern's right-hand man. Age 15.

LEFEVRE, PHILIP.—One of the soundest fellows in the Fifth Form. Age 16½.

LEVISON, ERNEST.—A cunning, unscrupulous cad, with no pretensions to decency. Formerly at Greyfriars, from which school he was expelled in disgrace. His one redeeming feature is a curious devotion to Talbot. Age 15.

LOWTHER, MONTAGUE. — The irrepressible humorist and punster of the Shell, and one of Tom Merry's closest chums. Always looks on the bright side, and is most to be admired when things are at their blackest. Somewhat weak-willed and easily led, as evidenced by the occasions on which he ran away from school to take up stage-life and cinema-acting. The third of the Terrible Three. Age 15½.

LUMLEY-LUMLEY, JERROLD.—Son of an American millionaire, and one of the most daring fellows at St. Jim's, where he is known as the "Outsider." Lawless and unruly at first, he has since undergone an almost entire reformation. Age 15.

MANNERS, HENRY.—An ardent photographer and a member of that famous trio, the Terrible Three. Rather hasty at times, but a loyal chum and a real good fellow. Age 15½.

MELLISH, PERCY.—Cad, sneak, and rank outsider. One of the weakest and worst fellows in the Fourth, and is usually employed as a catspaw by Levison, with whom he has been connected in many dark doings. An utter toady and spy, not to be trusted farther than he is seen. Age 15.

MERRY, TOM.—The genial, light-hearted skipper of the Shell and leader of the Terrible Three. A first-class sportsman, captain of the junior cricket and football teams, and a born leader of boys. His nature is strongly marked by courage and cheerfulness. Age 15½. Editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly."

MONTEITH, JAMES.—Head prefect of the New House. A good fellow at heart, but inclined to be selfish and imperious. Has had many tiffs with Kildare in the past, but has recently been true to his colours. A very useful fellow on the playing-fields. Age 17.

MULVANEY, PATRICK.—A good-natured Irish senior in the Sixth. Age 17.

MULVANEY, MICHAEL. — The mischievous minor of the above. Age 15.

NOBLE, HARRY.—An Australian youth of great personal attractions and a splendid sportsman. One of the most popular fellows in the Shell. Age 15½.

NORTH, JACK.—A prefect of high repute and a firm friend of Eric Kildare. Age 17.

OWEN, LESLIE.—One of the scholarship boys who came to St. Jim's with Redfern and signalised their arrival in such an exciting manner. Age 15.

RAO, KOUMI.—The Indian junior at St. Jim's, who possesses the Oriental notion that riches will win him any object. Uses flowery language, and would go through fire and water for George Figgins, who has befriended him. Age 15.

RAY, ROLAND.—A fine, upstanding fellow in the Fourth. Good at games and a useful all-rounder. Age 15.

REDFERN, RICHARD HENRY.—A sunny, good-natured scholarship boy.

come within an ace of expulsion. Age 15½.

CUTTS, GERALD.—The cad of the Fifth. A thorough black sheep, who spends his days in listless idleness and his nights in pub-haunting. Age 16½.

DANE, CLIFTON.—A real schoolboy, hailing from Canada. Full of life and fun, and owner of a particularly violent parrot. Age 15½.

D'ARCY, ARTHUR AUGUSTUS.—A dignified, lavishly-dressed dandy, familiarly known as "Gussy" and the swell of St. Jim's. Lives only for his personal appearance, and is the laughing-stock of his chums in consequence. Somewhat devoted to the other sex, and at all time scrupulously polite. Always true to a chum, and stands firmly for the right. Age 15.

D'ARCY, WALTER.—The reckless young rascal who leads the members of the Third Form in all their escapades. Minor of the great Augustus, from whom he extracts many tips. Always game for a lark, and gets out of scrapes as quickly as he falls into them. Age 12½.

DARREL, GEORGE.—One of the head prefects, and Kildare's best chum. Plays a strong game of football, and has stood by his leader in many a crisis. Age 17.

DIGBY, ROBERT ARTHUR.—A decent fellow, in No. 6 Study with Blake and D'Arcy. Age 15.

DUDLEY, EDWIN.—One of the prefects. Excels in sport of all description, and loyally backs up Kildare. Age 17.

FIGGINS, GEORGE.—The long-limbed, athletic leader of the New House juniors. Shines in every branch of sport, and is greatly attached to Ethel Cleveland, D'Arcy's fair cousin. Has instigated numerous raids on the rival House, with more or less success. Age 15.

FINN, BUCK.—An arrogant American, of the bragging and boastful type. Beaten out of time by the new Italian junior, Giacomo Contalini. Age 15.

FRAYNE, JOSEPH.—Formerly a London street-arab. Through the genial influence and good-natured encouragement of Tom Merry, has won for himself a permanent place at St. Jim's. Simple and affectionate by nature, and associated with Wally D'Arcy in all manner of "japes." Age 12½.

GIBSON, STANLEY.—Familiarly known as "Curly." One of Wally D'Arcy's staunchest supporters, and a great favourite with the Third. Age 12½.

GLYN, BERNARD.—An inventive genius, with a gift for anything in the electrical and engineering line. One of the best of fellows. Age 15½.

GORE, GEORGE.—A very peculiar fellow in the Shell. Big and burly, and once a thorough blackguard, he has now retrieved his past conduct to some extent, though he not infrequently lets his old habits gain the mastery over him. Shares the same study as Talbot and Skimpole. Age 15½.

GRAY, ALBERT.—A handsome Sixth-Former, upright and honest. Has a place in the senior elevens, and is a prefect. Age 17.

GRUNDY, GEORGE ALFRED.—Late of Redclyffe. A burly junior, handy with his fists, who fondly imagined he could win his way at St. Jim's by sheer brute force, but had a rude awakening when Tom Merry thrashed him. Has formed a Volunteer Corps, a paper to rival "Tom Merry's Weekly," and numerous other undertakings, only to be baffled and beaten. Quite a good fellow at heart. Age 15½.

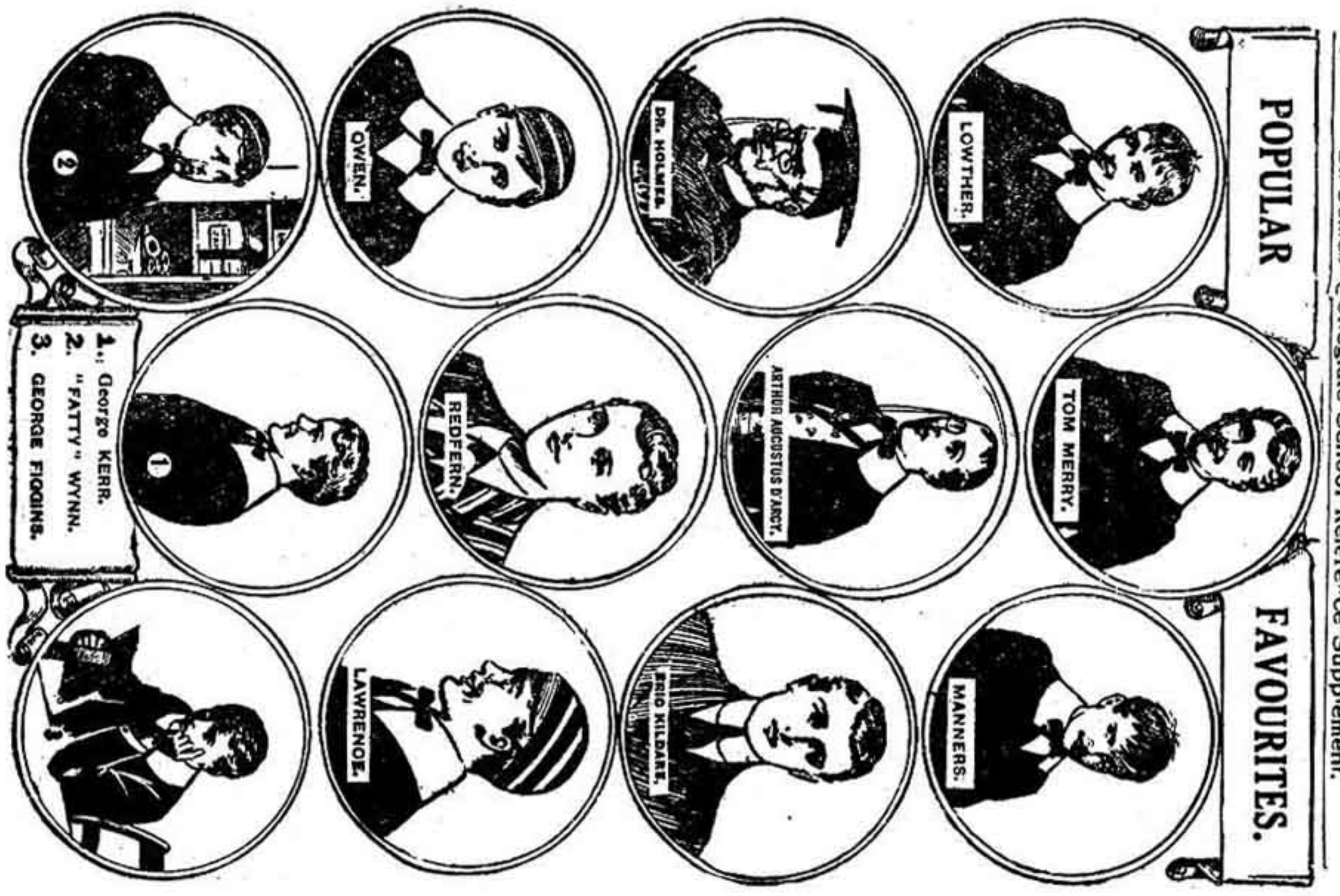
GUNN, WILLIAM.—A sturdy Shell fellow, who backs up Grundy through thick and thin. Age 15½.

HAMMOND, HARRY.—The son of a man who made his fortune in the hat trade—hence the phrase: "'Arry 'Ammond's 'Igh-class 'Ats." Though shunned at first on account of his Cockney dialect and mannerisms, he has now firmly established himself in the good graces of his schoolfellows. Age 15.

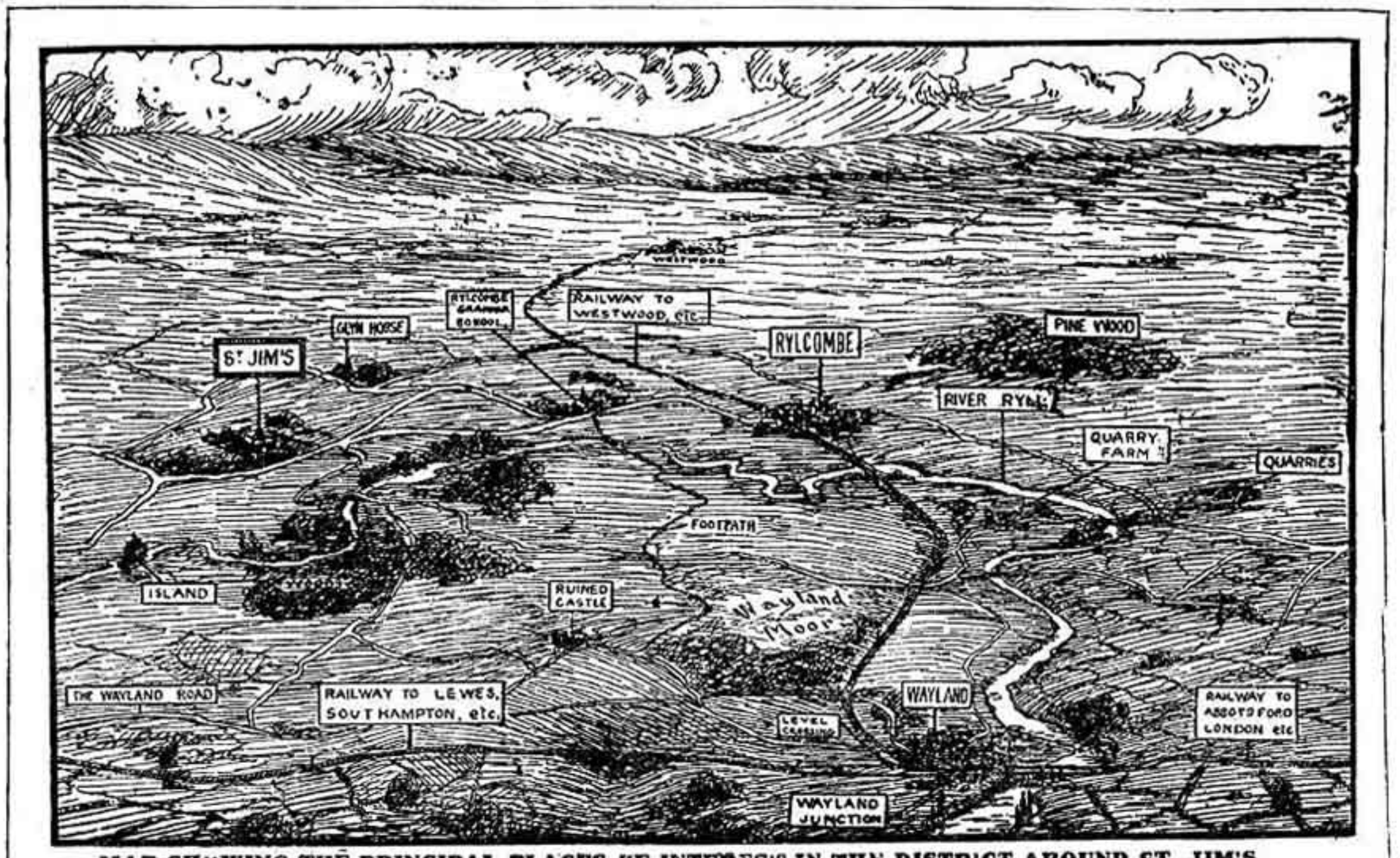
HERRIES, GEORGE.—Known to posterity by his famous cornet, upon which he performs hideous noises. A study-mate of Blake and D'Arcy. Deeply devoted to his bulldog, Towser. Age 15.

JAMESON, ERNEST.—An ardent supporter of Wally D'Arcy, of the Third. Age 12½.

JONES, HORACE.—A genial Sixth-Former and a good sportsman. Age 17.



St. James' Collegiate School Reference Supplement.



MAP SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL PLACES OF INTEREST IN THE DISTRICT AROUND ST. JIM'S.