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LEVISON MINOR'S LUCK!

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

The **GEM** LIBRARY No. 482. Vol. 10



“WHO GOES THERE?”

(A Dramatic Scene in the Grand Long Complete Story in this Issue.)



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to — — —
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For Next Wednesday :

"THE CROSS-COUNTRY CUP!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next week's story is of a kind that I know a very large section of my readers like better than any other. It is a yarn with a strong athletic interest. An old boy presents a handsome cup for competition among the juniors of St. Jim's in a cross-country race. The entry is very big, and there are several fellows who are reckoned to have a chance of carrying off the trophy. Among these are, of course, Tom Merry, Talbot, Figgins, Kerr, Jack Blake, Redfern, and Harry Noble. Whether any of these won—and, if so, which of them; how dark horses like Levison and Gore fared; how Crooke, Racke & Co. did their best—or worst—to spoil the whole race; and of the part Gordon Gay & Co. of the Grammar School played in "frustrating their knavish tricks"—all this you must wait to know until next week, when I feel sure you will all say that Mr. Clifford has given you the best of good value in

"THE CROSS-COUNTRY CUP!"

THE AMERICAN QUESTION THIS WEEK.

I am just a wee bit tired of the Irish argument. Too much ill-feeling has been introduced into it by those who take what I think I may call without unfairness the Sinn Fein attitude. It is a relief to turn once more to the American controversy, and I think the letter which follows quite worth printing, as it states the case reasonably and fairly :

"Dear Sir,—I have read with much interest and some amusement the assertions of your correspondent 'Stars and Stripes' with regard to the American national character, and the views we hold of it. I agree with your reply, but I don't think you said enough. May I be allowed to add something?"

"He boasts of American films. I do not dispute the fact that, on the whole, they are better than the British films. The drier air of the American continent is not a thing to be credited to the enterprise of its inhabitants, I suppose, yet it is just this which gives photographic work a better chance. Many of the American-produced films are the work of British authors, and, moreover, are enacted by British artistes.

"He wants to know why we joke about American veracity. If he only heard the yarns his fellow-countrymen spin when over here! The way they talk of the superiority of everything across the 'pond,' as they call it! I think the truthfulness in the American character goes deep, very deep—so deep that it long ago vanished from sight.

"As to the affair of 1776. Here we are taught at school that the taxation of the American colonists was utterly unjust. Where would our sympathies naturally be after that? Not with those who were responsible for the injustice, surely? We know that those of our ancestors who oppressed those Colonies were in the wrong, and we are not afraid to admit it.

"Americans should remember that some of our greatest statesmen took their view of the matter. The heart of the nation was never in the war. And there was between the combatants the expanse of a great ocean—far wider, for practical purposes, than now. The transport difficulties were simply enormous, while their generals knew the country, and ours did not. They gave us a hiding—true! But they had some advantages over us, and we have never resented that hiding.

"I don't like to hear a Yankee talking slightly of the heroes who have died for them as well as for us—since the cause of the Allies is that of civilisation—in the present war. And I think they are slighting our efforts when they talk, as some of them do, of how much better things would be done if the U.S. came in. Our men are defending the Constitution of which they brag. Who can deny it? What does Germany care for the Monroe doctrine or the Constitution of the U.S.? I think I know where the path of duty for America lies!—Your reader and well-wisher,
 J. W. H."

I think this letter of J. W. H.'s a good one, with some really telling points. But I would say this: There are plenty of Englishmen who revere the memory of George Washington, Philip Schuyler, John Hancock, Paul Revere, the generals, the legislators that were to be, the staunch men of Boston who could not brook tyranny, as thoroughly as any American. They were of our blood, if present-day Americans, very largely, are not, and we claim our share in them, though they did stand up against a mad German-British King and his foolish Minister!

OUR NOTICES.

Leagues, Correspondence, etc.

Miss Chrissie M. W., 66, St. Kilda Rd., West Ealing, would like to correspond with an Australian girl reader of about 14.

Back Numbers Wanted, etc.

By W. A. Trimble, Vermilion, Alta, Canada—"Gem," Nos. 417, 418, 419, 420, in good condition; double price offered.

Private A. Roy, No. 3037, 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 19th I.B.D., A.P.O., Sec. 17, B.E.F., France, would be grateful for back numbers of the "Gem" and "Magnet"; also the "Union Jack."

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James Gray, A.B., No. 9, Mess, H.M.S. Edinburgh Castle, would be glad to have back numbers of the companion papers, and also to correspond with readers.

Drummer W. Malkinson, No. 12383, 1st Platoon, A Coy., 14th Batt. Northumberland Fusiliers, B.E.F., France, asks for back numbers of the companion papers.

Lance-Corporal B. Taylor, No. 2945, 3rd Platoon, A Coy., 1/5th Loyal North Lancashire Regt., B.E.F., France, makes the same request.

Also Private T. Hames, C Coy., 13th Batt. Royal Scots, B.E.F., France.

By W. E. Whitbread, 26, Reginald Rd., Bexhill-on-Sea—"Gem," Nos. 1-390 and 393, 395, and 419; "Magnet," Nos. 1-391. Must have covers; state price.

By A. Rogers, 3, Quex Rd., Kilburn, N.W.—"The Black House on the Moor."

By G. Thomas, 15, Talbot St., Maesteg, Glam.—"The Boy Without a Name" and "Through Thick and Thin."

By P. Young, 9, Milton Rd., Gravesend—Back numbers of "Magnet," "Gem," and "Boys' Friend" 3d. Library.

By H. Kelly, 6, Brown St., Littleborough, near Manchester—"Tom Merry & Co." and "The School Under Canvas."

Gunner H. Mitchell, No. 78729, Headquarters 129, R.F.A., 27th Div., Salonika Forces, would be glad of back numbers of the companion papers.

Private T. Richardson, No. 3883, 11th Platoon, C Coy., 1/20th London Regt., B.E.F., France, asks for a mouth-organ or two to cheer him and his chums.

By E. Wood, Avenue House, Percy Rd., Pocklington, Yorks—"Boys' Friend" Library Nos. 297 to 332.

Your Editor

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COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

LEVISON MINOR'S LUCK!

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.
By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



A natty young lieutenant looked in, and beckoned to Levison minor, who followed him out. "Get into the car, young 'un!" (See Chapter 11.)

CHAPTER 1.

A Ragging for Three.

"SOMETHING'S up!" remarked Monty Lowther. Tom Merry and Manners nodded. That something was up was quite clear to the Terrible Three, though what it was was a mystery. The chums of the Shell were seated in a row in the window-seat at the end of the Shell passage in the School House. They were waiting for Talbot of the Shell to join them, to go down to the footer practice. Crooke and Racke of the Shell, and Mellish of the Fourth, and Piggott of the Third stood in a group in the passage. They were whispering and chuckling together, and glancing occasionally towards the Terrible Three.

Once or twice Tom Merry & Co. had caught the name of Talbot, amid the whispers and chuckles of Crooke and his merry friends.

"Some merry little joke on," went on Monty Lowther. "Something up against old Talbot."

Tom Merry frowned.

"Talbot can take care of himself," said Manners.

"Hallo, Crooke!" called out Lowther.

The black sheep of the Shell looked round, grinning.

"Hallo!" he responded.

"What's the merry jokelet? Can't you let us into it?" asked Lowther. "You know we are rather humorous merchants ourselves."

Crooke & Co. chortled.

Next Wednesday:

"THE CROSS-COUNTRY CUP!" AND "FOES OF FORTUNE!"

"You'll be let into it this afternoon," he replied. "So will all St. Jim's, for that matter."

And Piggott, Racke, and Mellish burst into a roar of laughter.

"It's only a pleasant little surprise in store for Talbot," chuckled Racke. "A very pleasant little surprise. He will be glad to see an old friend."

"An old friend?" said Tom Merry, puzzled.

"Yes; a dear old acquaintance."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crooke & Co. yelled again.

Talbot of the Shell came out of his study, glancing at the merry group as he passed them to join the Terrible Three.

At the sight of the handsome Shell fellow the merriment of Crooke & Co. seemed to redouble.

"Anything on?" asked Talbot, as he joined Tom Merry & Co.

"Looks like it," said Tom frowning. "Racke says you're going to see an old friend this afternoon."

Talbot looked surprised.

"This is the first I've heard of it," he said.

"You're not expecting anybody?"

"No; unless they are referring to my uncle."

"Old friends drop in sometimes without being expected," chortled Crooke.

Talbot looked steadily at the cad of the Shell. The two were cousins, but there was no pretence of friendship between them.

"You seem to know more about my affairs than I do, Crooke," said Talbot quietly.

"You'll know soon enough," said Crooke. "I wish you a merry meeting when your dear old pal comes along!"

"Whom are you speaking of?"

"Run over the list of your old friends, and guess!" suggested Crooke. "The merry crew you palled with when you used to live in Angel Alley, you know, before you set up to be respectable!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot started.

"That will do, Crooke!" said Tom Merry curtly. "Another word like that, and you go over on your back, you cad!"

Crooke laughed scoffingly.

"Mustn't Talbot's old friends be mentioned now?" he asked. "Is he going to give his old pals the go-by now he is respectable? What a disappointment for the Toff's old chums!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry pushed back his cuffs. Any reference to Talbot's unfortunate past was enough to make his chum angry; and Crooke never let the subject rest if he could help it. Talbot caught him by the arm.

"Never mind him, Tom! Let's go down to the footer!"

"I'm going to shut him up!" said Tom Merry. "I've warned him, haven't I? Mop up the passage with them, you chaps!"

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Mellish, in alarm. "I—"

"Give 'em socks!" said Manners. It's about time they were bumped! Come on, Talbot!"

Talbot hesitated. He did not want to come to blows with his cousin, if he could help it.

"Oh, let them alone!" he said. "They don't matter, anyway!"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry was already charging at Crooke, and Manners and Lowther followed his lead. Piggott of the Third fled away down the passage promptly; but his companions had no time to follow.

The charge of the Terrible Three bowled them fairly over.

There was no need for Talbot to chip in.

In a few seconds the three weedy slackers were on their backs, yelling.

"Get up and give us a tussle, dear boys!" urged Monty Lowther. "We're spoiling for a fight!"

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"Keep off, you rotters!"

"Yaroo!"

"Bump them!" growled Tom Merry.

"Keep off, hang you!" yelled Racke.

But the Terrible Three did not keep off. They grasped Crooke & Co., and bumped them on the floor with terrific energy.

"Leggo!" shrieked Crooke. "Yaroo! You rotters! Levison, lend a hand, you rat!"

Levison of the Fourth had just come upstairs.

He stared at the scene in the passage, and laughed.

Levison was more or less a pal of the black sheep of St. Jim's; but he did not seem inclined to go to their aid.

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He stood with his hands in his pockets, laughing, while the Terrible Three smote the passage floor with Crooke and Racke and Mellish.

"Quite an entertainment!" grinned Levison.

Talbot laughed. The scene was entertaining, perhaps, to a spectator, but Crooke and his friends did not find it so.

They roared.

"Now, dear boys, are you sorry?" asked Monty Lowther, softly as the cooing dove. "Are you sorry, Racke, for your bad manners?"

"Leggo, hang you!" shrieked Racke.

"I'm going to bang your head on the floor till you're sorry—like that—"

"Yoooop!"

"Are you sorry?"

"Oh, crumbs! Yes."

"Good! Are you sorry, Crooke?"

"Yes!" gasped Crooke. "Oh, hang you! Yes!"

"What about you, Mellish?"

"Sorry!" yelled Mellish. "Awfully sorry! Oh, dear!"

"Then let this be a lesson to you, my young friends!" said Monty Lowther chidingly. "Now I think we may as well get down to the footer. Ta-ta, dear boys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three went downstairs with Talbot, who was looking a little moody. Crooke & Co. sat up on the floor and gasped.

"Ow, ow, ow!" moaned Mellish.

"Grooogh!" spluttered Racke.

"Oh, dear!" groaned Crooke. "The beasts! The rotters! Levison, you cad, what are you cackling at?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Levison. "I'm cackling at a crew of funky malingerers! Why didn't you put up a fight?"

"Go for that cad, anyway!" muttered Racke, scrambling to his feet.

But Levison promptly beat a retreat, still chuckling; and Crooke & Co. went in search of a brush-up. They needed it badly.

CHAPTER 2.

Levison's Good Angel!

TALBOT'S handsome face was clouded as he walked down to the footer ground with the Terrible Three.

Any reference to the dark old days he had known before he came to St. Jim's touched Talbot on the raw.

Between Talbot of the Shell and the "Toff" of old days there was a great gulf fixed. Looking back on the old days, it seemed almost like a dream to Talbot.

Indeed, the past might have vanished from his mind completely, but for the reminders he received from time to time from the few fellows at St. Jim's who he did not get on with.

Tom Merry understood what was in Talbot's thoughts, and his own face grew dark.

"Don't bother about these cads, Talbot," he said, "they're not worth wasting a thought on."

"I'm not thinking of them," said Talbot. "But—but it's queer what they were saying—about an old friend coming to see me."

"You can't guess whom they were speaking of?"

"No." Talbot coloured. "Of course, in the old days I knew a shady lot. That's no secret. I was one of them, then. But—but the old gang at the Rookery was broken up long ago. The professor's in the Army—Hookey Walker has gone to Canada, and he's living an honest life there. Tickey Tapp has cleared off, for good, I think. And—"

He paused.

"Well?" said Tom.

"There's that fellow Lodgey, who's staying at the Green Man in Rylcombe," said Talbot. "He knew me at that time. But I never had anything to do with him. And since he put up in Rylcombe, I've only seen him once—and that was when I punched him. He couldn't come here."

"Better for him if he doesn't!" grinned Lowther. "We'll make an example of him, if he shows his beery nose inside St. Jim's."

Talbot nodded.

He wondered whether it was Mr. Lodgey that Crooke & Co. had spoken of. The billiard sharper in Rylcombe was on friendly terms with Crooke and Levison and some other black sheep at the school. He had a bitter dislike of the Toff, whom he had known in the days when the Toff was a member of the crackman gang in Angel Alley. But for what purpose could Mr. Lodgey contemplate a visit to the school? It was scarcely likely.

"Bai Jove! You look wathah down, deah boys!" Arthur



There was a terrific crash as the sharper went down in the road, with the Third Formers sprawling over him. "Yow-woop!" gasped Mr. Lodgey. "Oh, lor'! 'Elp!" (See Chapter 6.)

Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form greeted the Terrible Three as they arrived on Little Side. "Anythin' w'ong?"

"Nothing but your merry pronunciation, old chap," said Monty Lowther cheerily. "How do you do it?"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Hallo, fags here?" said Manners, glancing at Levison minor of the Third Form, who was in the field.

"I am coachin' Levison minah," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "He is comin' on wippingly, and I am givin' him the benefit of my knowlege of the game."

"My dear chap," said Monty Lowther solemnly, "what you know about footer would fill a quarter of the books in the school library."

"You flattah me, deah boy!"

"And what you don't know, would fill the other three-quarters," added Lowther.

"You uttah ass!"

Arthur Augustus walked into the field with his noble nose in the air.

The Terrible Three looked on for a few minutes. Frank Levison, the younger brother of Levison of the Fourth, was certainly coming on. He was enjoying the practice, too, and was evidently very keen on it. Levison of the Fourth joined the Shell fellows by the ropes, and his somewhat saturnine face lighted up as he saw his minor's cheery, flushed face in the field.

"Go it, Franky!" he called out, and Levison minor looked round with a nod and a smile.

"Time we went it, too," remarked Talbot. "Come on, you fellows!"

"Hold on a minute, Talbot," said Levison. "I came down here to speak to you."

"Go ahead!"

"There's something on," said Levison. "I don't exactly know what it is. I'm not quite in the confidence of Crooke & Co., as I used to be." Levison grinned a little. He had been on bitter terms with his old friends since he had set his feet on the path of reform for the sake of his minor. "They've left me out of their little game, whatever it is. But it's up against you."

"I don't care for their little game," said Talbot curtly.

"Don't get on the high horse," said Levison coolly. "I know you don't care; but I care for you. I understand that your uncle—and Crooke's uncle, Colonel Lyndon—is coming over to see you this afternoon, later."

Talbot nodded.

"He is coming to say good-bye, before he goes back to the Front," he said. "He is coming to see both, Crooke and me."

"Exactly! And Crooke is laying some little scheme in connection with his visit," Levison said. "I don't know what it is; but, as Crooke has a hand in it, you can depend

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on it it's something caddish. I thought I'd give you the tip."

"Thanks!"

"But you'd rather I minded my own business?" grinned Levison.

"No, I don't mean that," said Talbot quickly. "But, I don't want any row with Crooke, especially the day my uncle is coming. We can't be friends, but there's no reason why we shouldn't keep the peace."

"I'd keep my eye on Crooke this afternoon, all the same, only I've got an engagement out of doors," said Levison.

Talbot gave him a quick look, and he laughed.

"No, nothing of that sort," he said, answering the Toff's unspoken thought. "I'm not going to play billiards with Lodgey at the Green Man, or go blagging with Racke. That's all over and done with."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Talbot simply.

"Till next time, anyway," said Levison coolly. "At present I'm toeing the line, and it's quite agreeable if only for the novelty. It makes Crooke & Co. wild, too, and that's amusing."

"I hope there won't be any next time," said Talbot, with a slight smile.

"I don't know! Some fellows are born to run crooked, and I think I'm one of them. But—but since my minor came, I've tried a different game—and you've helped. I shouldn't wonder if it turns out a success, only—" Levison shrugged his shoulders. "After the novelty's worn off, I might get bored. But it's all straight to-day. I'm going to see Lodgey."

"Levison!"

"But only to collect a quid he owes me," grinned Levison.

"I beat him at his own game the last time I saw him, and he didn't square."

Talbot looked very grave.

"Levison, you know it's frightfully risky going to that place. You nearly got caught there before."

"I rather like the risk," said Levison coolly. "That's what makes it amusing."

"I know you do; but you'll take the risk once too often one of these days. Let me give you a tip for once."

"Pile in!"

"Well, let Lodgey keep the quid. It isn't yours, anyway, if you only won it by gambling. Let him keep it, and have nothing more to do with him. Stick to footer this afternoon."

Levison hesitated.

"You think I should get drawn into the old game, if I went among those bounders again?" he said.

"I think it's very likely."

Levison yawned.

"Do you really care twopence whether I go or not?" he inquired.

"More than twopence," said Talbot, smiling.

"I'll stay, then."

"Good!"

There was a shade upon Ernest Levison's brow for a moment. He had fully intended to go to the shady resort in Rylcombe without joining in any little game when he got there. But perhaps, at the back of his mind, he knew that he would yield to temptation, and was half looking forward to it. But he threw the matter out of his mind, and joined the footballers.

Talbot's face cleared while the game was on, but when the footballers left Little Side he looked very thoughtful as he walked back to the house. He went back alone, before the other fellows left, as he had to change and get ready for his uncle's visit. A touch on his elbow made him look round as he was about to enter the School House.

Frank Levison was at his side.

"Hallo, young 'un!" said Talbot kindly.

"I heard what you said to Ernest," said Levison minor, his face flushing. "I—I'm glad you made him stay, Talbot! You know, Ernest never means to get into—into rotten things, but he does sometimes. He only laughed when I asked him the same thing, and said it would be all right."

Talbot nodded, his expression very kindly. He had wondered a little—other fellows had wondered a good deal—at Levison minor's affection and admiration for his major; but it made him like the fag better. Levison's faults—and their name was legion—never made any difference to the loyal affection of his minor, and Frank could find excuses for the black sheep of St. Jim's that other fellows never troubled to find.

"Ernest thinks an awful lot of you and what you think," went on Levison minor confidentially. "So long as you back him up, it will be all right. And—and you always will, won't you?"

Talbot laughed.

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"Rely on me," he said.

"Now, then, young Levison, we're waiting for you!" bawled Wally of the Third, and Levison minor scuttled off.

Talbot went into the house, in a very thoughtful mood. In the old days the Toff had been more sinned against than sinning, but the old days had left bitter recollections in his mind. Now he could look anyone fearlessly in the face, but it had not always been so. It was that remembrance of what he had once been, that had made the Toff tolerant of Levison's faults, where other fellows felt nothing but contempt. And it came into his mind that, if he could, by his influence over Levison's wayward mind, keep him to the straight path, it would be something like an atonement for past faults and failings of his own.

CHAPTER 3.

Wally & Co. Take a Hand.

"YOU'VE been keeping us waiting, you young ass!" said D'Arcy minor.

"I—I had to speak to Talbot—"

"Oh, blow Talbot!"

"Talbot's a jolly good chap," said Levison minor emphatically.

"Oh, he ain't bad, for a Shell chap," said Wally magnanimously. "He's got more sense than most of the Middle School—I will say that. But that's no reason for keeping us waiting when we're just ready to start."

"Well, I'm ready, too!" said Frank.

"Got the cake?"

"No; I've been playing footer."

"Look here, you young ass—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Joe Frayne. "Let's go and get the cake. We shall never get off at this rate!"

"If you tell me to cheese it, young Frayne—"

"My hat!" chimed in Jameson. "Are we going to Abbotsford this afternoon, or are we going to hear Wally do a jaw-bone solo?"

"You'll go to Abbotsford with a thick ear if you don't mind your p's and q's, Jimmy," said D'Arcy minor darkly.

"Bow-wow!" said Jameson.

"Look here—"

"Rats!"

"Let's go and get the cake," said Reggie Manners, interposing between Wally and Jameson, whose argument was growing decidedly warm. "We've wasted enough time."

"Who's wasting time?" demanded Wally.

"Oh, come on!"

The party of fags proceeded to the tuckshop. D'Arcy minor had planned an excursion that afternoon to Abbotsford, to see the soldiers. And as Levison minor was in funds, it had been decided unanimously to take one of Dame Taggles' two-shilling cakes, in case they got hungry—not that there was much doubt on that point.

"Talking about Talbot, there's something on this afternoon," said Curly Gibson, with a grin. "I got it from Piggott."

"Piggott's a little beast," said Wally. "I've told you kids not to talk to Piggott."

Whereupon Jameson interposed with an impertinent question as to who Wally was, and Wally pushed back his cuffs; but their friends chipped in again.

"What's that about Talbot?" asked Levison minor.

"Well, you know about Talbot," said Curly. "There was something before he came to St. Jim's—he was a murderer, or something."

"You silly ass!"

"Well, he was something, or something, or he was supposed to be something or other," said Curly lucidly. "He lived in a slum or something—"

"Same as Joe did," said Hobbs. "You did, didn't you, Joe?"

"Yes, I did," said Joe Frayne sturdily, "and I'd still be there if Master Tom hadn't got me out of it and brought me 'ere. And I don't care who knows it."

Wally inquired of Hobbs whether he was in search of a thick ear—a question that young gentleman affected not to hear.

"Well, according to Piggy, there's a chap in Rylcombe who knew Talbot when he was slummy," said Curly. "Awful rotten named Lodgey—I've seen him hanging about the Green Man—shocking sort of beast. I don't believe Talbot ever knew him, but Piggy says he did."

"Blow Piggy!" growled Wally. "I'm fed up with Piggy. I held his head under the tap yesterday for smoking."

"Well, this beast Lodgey is going to drop in on Talbot, according to Piggott," said Curly. "I think it's a rotten game, with Talbot's uncle here this afternoon, and all that.

Piggy says it will be awful fun to see the colonel's face, when Lodgey claims his nephew as an old pal."

"By gum, it will be funny!" grinned Hobbs. "Talbot's uncle is a stiff old ramrod, and looks right through you like a gimlet! Fancy him talking to that beery rotter Lodgey! He, he, he!"

"Rotten trick!" said Wally. "How does Piggy know anything about it?"

"He got it from Crooke, of the Shell."

"I dare say Crooke's worked it with Lodgey to do it," grunted Wally. "He's cad enough for that or anything else, if I were Talbot, I'd give him a prize thick ear. Come in and get that cake, Levison minor."

Levison minor halted.

"Why the dickens don't you come?" demanded Wally. "Haven't we got to get back from Abbotsford before dark, fat-head? Don't you want to see the soldiers?"

"Yes; but—"

"Then shut up, and buck up!"

"Look here, I—I'd rather not go—"

"Well, of all the silly asses!" exclaimed Wally, in exasperation. "Here we've arranged it all, and settled it, and now you don't want to go. Come in and get the cake, then, and we'll go without you."

"Yes, buck up!" urged Hobbs.

"Hold on," said Levison minor. "I've got an idea—"

"No, you haven't! Get a move on!"

"About Talbot—"

"Bless Talbot!"

"But—but look here. Suppose we stay in this afternoon, as that rotter is coming?"

"Lodgey, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm surprised at you, young Levison," said Wally severely. "It's a rotten dirty trick, and Talbot will feel awfully rotten if that beast tackles him while the old colonel's here. We don't want to be on the scene."

"No bloomin' fear," said Frayne. "Talbot's a good sort."

"I don't mean that—I mean—"

"Well, never mind what you mean—come in and get the cake," said Wally; and he grabbed Levison minor by the arm, and fairly rushed him into the school shop.

"But I say—" gasped Levison minor.

"Dry up! Mrs. Taggles, Levison minor wants a two-shilling cake—sultana, and not too jolly stale, you know."

"Yes, Master D'Arcy," said Dame Taggles, with a smile.

The cake was wrapped up and handed over, and Frank paid out his two-shilling-piece. Then the fags left the tuckshop, and started for the gates. Wally had hold of Levison minor's arm.

"But I say!" protested the fag. "You don't understand what I meant, Wally. I—I think we ought to stay—"

"Come on!" said D'Arcy minor.

"We ain't goin' to stay," said Joe Frayne. "The Toff will feel bad enough, without us lookin' on."

"Fathead!" said Levison minor. "That isn't it. I want you fellows to stay with me."

"Well, we won't!"

"To wait for that rotter to come along—"

"What?"

"And collar him," explained Frank.

"Eh!" ejaculated Wally. "Collar Lodgey?"

"Why not?" said Levison minor boldly. "There's seven of us, and he's only a boozy waster, anyway. They won't have him in the Army. We could handle him as easy as falling off a form."

"My only Aunt Jane!"

"Just think of it," urged Levison minor, as they went through the gateway. "Talbot is jolly decent—he never rags us like Crooke and some of the Shell chaps—he's a real good sort, and you know it. That beast Lodgey is coming here to show him up while his uncle's here. Suppose we meet the cad on the road and—mop him up?"

"Mop up Lodgey?" exclaimed Jameson, with wide-open eyes.

"Well, we could do it!"

"We couldn't," said Hobbs.

"We jolly well could!" said Wally at once. "I'd like to see the chap we couldn't mop up if we wanted to. Lodgey's only a beery bouncer, and he will come along full of beer. We could wipe up the road with him."

"Hallo, here's the giddy colonel!" murmured Hobbs.

The fags drew aside as a motor-car turned in at the school gates. A grim-looking officer in khaki sat in the car, looking straight before him. The fags knew the brown face and the white moustache, and the keen, steely eyes that gleamed under puckered brows. It was Colonel Lyndon, the uncle of Talbot and Crooke of the Shell.

The car glided up the drive to the School House.

"That's Talbot's uncle," said Jameson.

Wally gave vent to a low whistle.

"My only Aunt Jane! Fancy that beery beggar Lodgey dropping in, and seeing Talbot with him present! I wonder what he'd do?"

"We're going to stop Lodgey dropping in," said Levison minor. "You chaps back me up, and we'll collar him—"

"Back me up, you mean," said Wally. "Who's leader?"

"You are, old chap," said Levison minor amicably. "Let's lay for Lodgey on the road. We can eat the cake while we're waiting."

"Well, that's a good idea," admitted Wally.

"I'd rather go to Abbotsford," said Hobbs.

"Then you can go on your lonesome," said Wally. "I'm going to lay for Lodgey, and give him the kybosh."

"Look here—"

"Follow your leader, and don't jaw!"

Hobbs gave a snort, but he gave in, and the fags went down the road, to lay for Mr. Lodgey when he came to pay his visit at St. Jim's. At the school gates, Racke and Mellish and Piggott and Clampe gathered, with grinning faces. They were waiting for Mr. Lodgey's arrival, which was to take place before the colonel left. Crooke's comrades were anticipating the scene with great glee. The shame and bitter humiliation that were to be inflicted on Talbot tickled them greatly. But the best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley, as the poet tells us; and Gerald Crooke had calculated without Levison minor.

CHAPTER 4. Levison's Way.

"THERE'S a car," remarked Monty Lowther.

The Terrible Three were chatting with Talbot in the Shell passage after the footer practice, when the buzz of the car was heard in the quadrangle. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came along from the end

window.

"Your uncle has awwid, Talbot," he remarked.

"Thanks! I'll get down," said Talbot.

The Shell fellow went downstairs. Crooke came out of his study with a grinning face; he had seen the car from his window.

Tom Merry & Co. gave him an expressive look, to which Crooke replied with a scowl. He passed them, and went downstairs.

"That rotter's got something up his sleeve," said Tom Merry, knitting his brows. "I know there's something on."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Those wottahs have been whisperin' and gwinin' like anythin' togethah. I wondah if Levison knows anythin' about it"

Levison came along the passage, and stopped as he heard his name. He was looking a little troubled.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Is there some scheme on this afternoon?" asked Tom Merry. "I suppose you know what Crooke & Co. are up to, as they're your friends?"

Levison's lip curled satirically.

"If they're my friends, you can't expect me to give my friends away, can you?" he sneered.

"If there's something going on against Talbot, you oughtn't to have a hand in it, I should think!" exclaimed Tom angrily. "Talbot's stood by you a good many times when nobody else would."

"Thank you for reminding me. I had quite forgotten," said Levison sarcastically. "Trifles like that do slip the memory, you know."

"Weally, Levison, I wegard your wemarks as flippant and in bad taste! Is there anythin' on against old Talbot, to cause him twouble with that gwim old uncle of his?"

"Yes."

"And you're going to allow it to go on?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yes," said Levison coolly.

"Well, you rotter—"

"Thanks!"

Tom Merry clenched his hands, and advanced upon Levison with his eyes gleaming. The black sheep of the Fourth regarded him mockingly.

"Hold on, Tommy!" murmured Manners.

Tom made a fierce gesture.

"I'm going to have the truth out of him!" he said, between his teeth. "You know that cad Crooke has played no end of tricks to cause trouble between Talbot and his uncle. If there's another trick going on, I'm going to chip in!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus emphatically.

"What is it, Levison?"

Levison yawned.

"Better ask Crooke."

"I can't ask Crooke, as he's with Colonel Lyndon in the visitors' room. I'm asking you, and I want you to answer."

"I'm afraid you'll be disappointed, then!"

Tom set his teeth.

"You won't tell me?"

"I've got nothing to tell you," yawned Levison. "Would you mind getting out of the way? I want to go into my study."

"You won't go into your study till you've answered me!"

"Dear me! Then I shall have to stay here," said Levison calmly; and he put his hands in his pockets, and leaned carelessly against the wall.

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

"You know Crooke's playing another of his dirty tricks, and you won't tell me what it is?" he exclaimed.

"Exactly!"

"And you don't mean to interfere?"

"Exactly, again!"

"Then put up your hands!" exclaimed Tom Merry furiously.

"Pway leave him to me, Tom Merry!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy pushed back his spotless cuffs. "I'll give the uttah wottah a fearful thwashin!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Jack Blake, coming along the passage. "Gussy on the war-path again!"

"I am goin' to thwash Levison, Blake! Pway hold my eyeglass."

"I'll hold your ear instead," said Jack Blake cheerfully.

"Tell your uncle what it's all about first."

"Leggo my cah, you uttah ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Levison of the Fourth was facing Tom Merry coolly. He did not remove his hands from his pockets. Tom's eyes blazed at him.

"Will you put up your hands, you cad?" he exclaimed.

"Anything to oblige," drawled Levison. "If you're spoiling for a fight, I'm your man!"

He drew his hands from his pockets, and pushed back his cuffs.

"Time!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Hold on!" Talbot of the Shell came hurriedly along the passage from the stairs, and he pushed between Tom Merry and Levison.

"Oh, don't interrupt!" drawled Levison. "The circus was just going to begin."

"Don't interfere, Talbot!"

Talbot pushed the captain of the Shell back.

"Shut up, Levison!" he said. "Look here, Tom, what's the row? You've got nothing to fight Levison about!"

"Nothing at all," agreed Levison. "But let him go on. I've been practising a left drive, and I'd like to see how it works."

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry dropped his hands, with knitted brows.

"Pewwaws it is Talbot's bizney to thwash Levison," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "It's weally all about Talbot."

"About me?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Vas, deah boy."

"What rot!"

"Weally, Talbot!"

"Look here, Talbot!" exclaimed Tom Merry savagely.

"Crooke has some trick on this afternoon; something to cause you trouble with your uncle. Levison knows it."

Talbot's brow clouded.

"Have you seen your uncle?" asked Lowther.

"Yes; I'm going back with him to Abbotsford," said Talbot. "He's talking to Crooke now in the visitors' room. I know Crooke would harm me in that quarter if he could, but he can't do anything."

"Levison knows, I tell you!"

Talbot looked inquiringly at Levison.

"It's a fact," said Levison calmly. "I know Crooke's got a little game on, and I'm not going to tell you, and I'm not going to interfere, exactly as I told that cheerful idiot. If he had inquired a little further, I'd have explained why. I don't know what it is Crooke intends to do; he's keeping it dark, and I'm as much in the dark as anybody."

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry, rather taken aback.

"Bai Jove! Pewwaws we have been wathah hasty, deah boys," remarked Arthur Augustus, in a thoughtful way.

"Upon the whole, I shall not thwash you, Levison."

"You're welcome to try if you like," grinned Levison.

"Weally, you wottah!"

"Oh, don't row, for goodness' sake!" exclaimed Talbot. "There's nothing to row about. Levison has already warned me of what you spoke about, Tom, but he couldn't tell me what he didn't know."

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"Well, he should have explained that," growled Tom. "If a fellow chooses to be an irritating beast, he must expect to get his nose punched!"

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

"Well, go ahead with the nose-punching," said Levison. "I'm ready!"

Tom's hands clenched again. But Talbot drew his arm through his own, and walked him up the passage.

Levison laughed, and went into his study. "Blessed if I know how you can stand that chap, Talbot!" said Tom, with a deep breath. "I never wanted to punch a fellow's nose more."

"He isn't a bad sort in his way," said Talbot. "He tried to put me on my guard, too. But I can't think that Crooke is up to anything. I don't see what he can do. Anyway, I don't care much. Besides, I—I rather think Crooke would be decent just now. Uncle Lyndon is going back to Flanders, and you know what that means. It's possible that neither of us may ever see him again."

"A lot Crooke cares about that!" said Tom contemptuously. "I heard that he had a bet on with Racke about it when the Big Push was on."

Talbot's brow contracted.

"The awful rotter! But—but perhaps it wasn't true, Tom. Anyway, don't row with Levison if you can help it. It's a bit rotten for me, as a friend of both parties."

"Oh, confound Levison!" said Tom. "I don't want to row with him. Come to think of it, I believe he would back you up, too."

"I know he would."

"It's queer that he doesn't know Crooke's little game, whatever it is. He was always thick with that rotter."

"He doesn't have so much to do with that set now."

Tom gave a grunt.

"You're a queer chap, Talbot! Blessed if I don't think you'd see some good in the Kaiser himself!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know about that," said Talbot, laughing.

"But there's plenty of good in poor old Levison. I'm going to get my coat now. The colonel wants to take me to Abbotsford in the car—"

"Talbot!"

Kangaroo of the Shell shouted from the stairs.

"Hallo!" called back Talbot.

"You're wanted," said the Cornstalk junior, coming along the passage.

"Railton?" asked Talbot. "What the dickens have I done now?"

"No; your uncle." Kangaroo looked at Talbot rather curiously. "Better mind your p's and q's, old chap. The colonel's in a rare bate."

Talbot started.

"I don't see why. He was in a good temper ten minutes ago," he said.

"Well, he's in a wax now," said Kangaroo. "He put his head out and asked me to call you, with a voice like a Hun and a look like Von Tirpitz. Better put on your sweetest smile."

Talbot went downstairs with a clouded brow.

Tom Merry looked at his chums expressively. Crooke's little game, whatever it was, was evidently working.

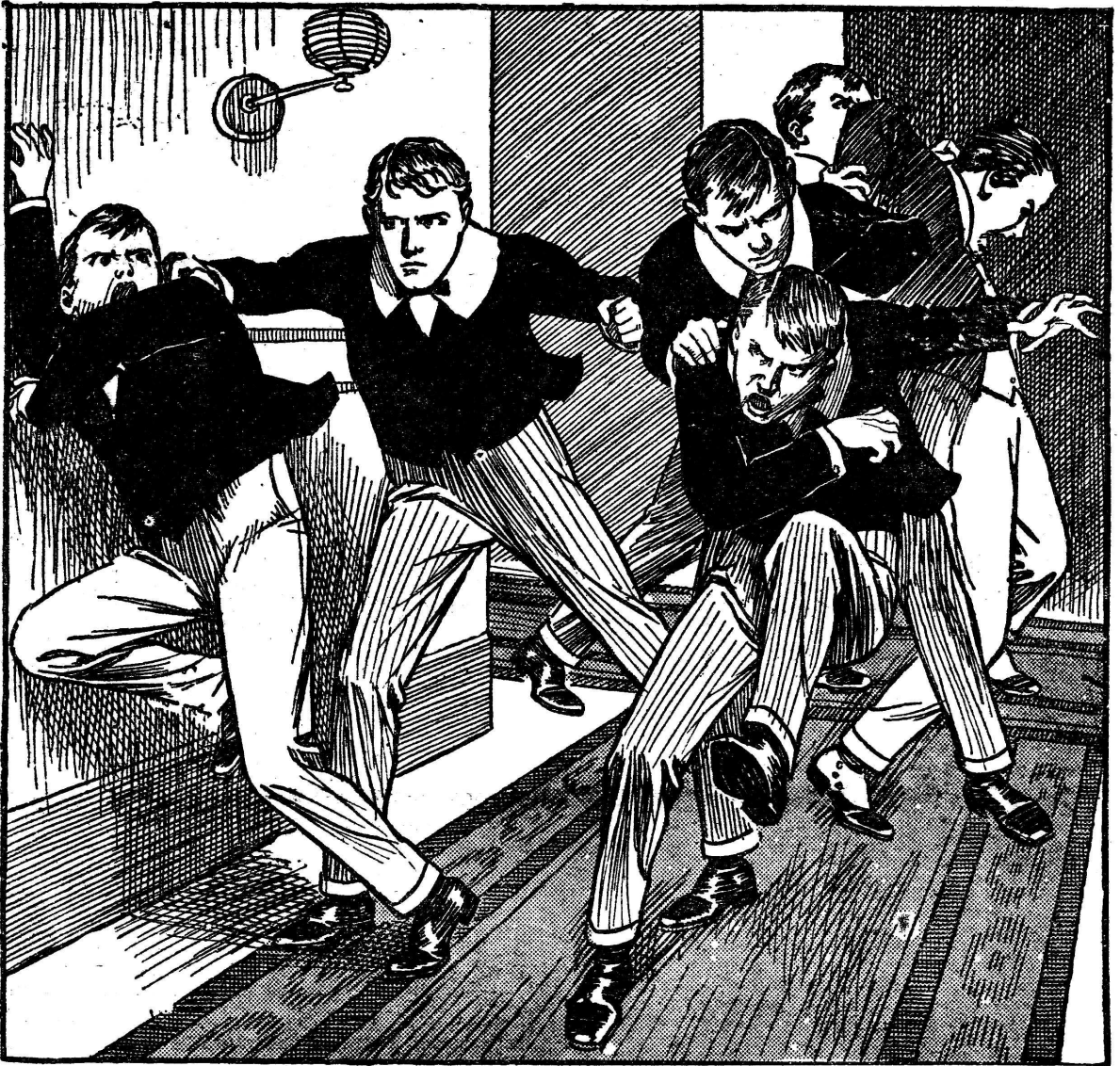
CHAPTER 5.

Crooke's Little Game.

COLONEL LYNDON was alone in the visitors' room when Crooke entered. He had dismissed Talbot, after a few minutes' talk, to get his coat for the run to Abbotsford. He did not think of taking Crooke. It was not difficult to see which was the favourite nephew.

Crooke knew it only too well, and it filled his breast with bitterness. He had never taken any trouble to make himself worthy of the colonel's good opinion—he had never shown anything but the cold selfishness that was natural to him, and he was far from admitting that Talbot's frank, generous nature naturally found more favour than his own cold and selfish one. His view was that Talbot had cut him out with his uncle, with a sole view to what the old gentleman would leave in his will.

Crooke had been brought up to regard Colonel Lyndon's money as his own at some future date. Talbot never gave the colonel's money a thought, but a fellow like Crooke was not likely to credit that. According to Crooke, the cousins were rivals for the dead man's shoes, and Talbot was the more successful rival, and would remain so unless Crooke could put a spoke in his wheel, as he expressed it. And Talbot's miserable past was all Crooke had to work on to that end, and he meant to make the most of it.



Tom Merry charged at Crooke & Co., and Manners and Lowther followed his lead. (See Chapter 1.)

The colonel's keen, grey eyes scanned the Shell fellow's face, and he gave a sigh. That sallow, furtive face was a contrast to Talbot's open, frank, and healthy countenance.

"So jolly glad to see you, uncle!" said Crooke, as he shook hands with the colonel. "It's good of you to come down to say good-bye when you must be frightfully busy!"

"I have plenty to do," said his uncle, "but I should not like to go without seeing both my nephews again."

Crooke's eyes wandered involuntarily to the window. Ho wondered when Mr. Lodgey would put in an appearance.

The plan was cut and dried between Gerald Crooke and his disreputable friend the billiard-sharper. Mr. Lodgey was to be on hand quite early to watch for the colonel's arrival, and to arrive himself very soon afterwards, to call upon Talbot. The whole scene had been carefully arranged, and so far as Crooke could see, nothing could go wrong.

Mr. Lodgey's visit would have the effect of reviving the talk of Talbot's shadowed past, which was beginning to be forgotten. It would make a sensation in the school, with Talbot as the central and humiliated figure. But that was not all. The colonel was to see Mr. Lodgey, and Mr. Lodgey was carefully primed with the tale he was to pitch.

"I am leaving England to-morrow," went on the colonel quietly. "I hope, Gerald, that I shall leave you good friends with your cousin."

"Have you asked Talbot about that, uncle?"

The colonel frowned a little.

"I intend to do so," he said. "Your tastes are not similar, I fear, but there is no reason why you should not be good friends, Gerald."

"I am sorry, uncle, but there are reasons."

"Indeed?" The colonel raised his eyebrows. "And what are your reasons, Gerald, for disregarding my wishes in the matter?"

"I don't want to do that, uncle, of course. But you know what Talbot was before he came to this school—"

"That is all past and done with. Your cousin was brought up among bad associates, and he was more sinned against than sinning. You know very well, Gerald, that he threw his old life over at the earliest opportunity. I understand that he is a general favourite in the school, and the Head has a very strong regard for him. It is not for his own cousin to drag up wretched things that had better be forgotten!" said the colonel sternly.

"Yes, if it was all over and done with—"

"Do you mean to say that it is not?"

"I do!" said Crooke.

There was a pause.

"That is a very serious statement, Gerald," said the colonel at last. "Talbot has assured me on that point, and I accept his word without the slightest hesitation."

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"He can take pretty nearly anybody in," said Crooke bitterly. "He can't take me in."

"You are suspicious—"

"Of course, I'm to blame," said Crooke. "But I don't care about associating with a fellow who was a pal of criminals, and keeps up his connection with them."

"If Talbot kept up any connection with those scoundrels, Gerald, I should not ask you to associate with him—indeed, I should forbid you to do so," said Colonel Lyndon. "You are making a serious accusation against your cousin. If you are not speaking from sheer malice, you must have some proof of your assertion."

"There's lots of proof," said Crooke. "I suppose you won't believe a word against him—"

"Not without proof, certainly. What connection has my nephew with the associates of his earlier days?"

"There's one in Rylcombe now," said Crooke spitefully—"a man named Lodgey, a regular blackguard and scoundrel. It's well known that he was one of the Toff's pals before he came here."

"Talbot could not prevent the man coming to Rylcombe, I presume. The question is, has he any connection with the man now?"

"Yes; they're still friends."

"Can you prove that statement?" asked Colonel Lyndon, his keen eyes searching the spiteful face before him.

"No need for me to prove it!" said Crooke, with a curl of the lip. "A chap told me he heard Lodgey bragging in the village about his pal here—that's Talbot—"

"Foolish tattle of that kind is not evidence."

"That isn't all. The chap said Lodgey was boasting that he was going to call on Talbot here. The man had been drinking, of course. But I'm pretty certain he meant it, for they've met often enough—at least, I believe so."

"So this Lodgey is calling on Talbot?" said the colonel, frowning. "And when is this call to take place?"

"This afternoon."

"Do you know this man Lodgey?"

"I!" exclaimed Crooke, with virtuous indignation. "Certainly not! The man's a billiard-sharper and sporting tout, from what I hear; and he's been in prison. I leave that kind of acquaintance to Talbot!"

"You declare that this bad character is actually coming to the school to see Talbot this afternoon?"

"Yes; I am sure of it. Talbot will pass him off as something else, of course. He wouldn't be likely to let the Housemaster know the kind of friends he has!" said Crooke, with a sneer. "But the man's appearance is quite enough to give him away. A regular boozy rascal!"

The colonel made a restless movement.

"It is impossible that Talbot can have deceived me so!" he exclaimed. "But the fact shall be ascertained."

He stepped to the door and opened it. Kangaroo of the Shell was passing, and the colonel called to him. Harry Noble cheerfully went away to call Talbot, and Colonel Lyndon turned back into the room.

"You've sent for Talbot, uncle?" asked Crooke rather uneasily.

"Yes. I shall question him. You cannot object to my repeating to Talbot what you have said."

Crooke felt an inward tremor. He was prepared for it, yet his craven heart almost failed him at the thought of facing Talbot's clear, honest eyes. But he had left himself no choice in the matter.

"Do as you think best, uncle," he said.

"I shall!" said the colonel grimly.

Talbot entered the room in a few minutes. Kangaroo's good-natured warning had put him on his guard, and he was prepared for trouble. But his manner was quite calm.

"You sent for me, uncle?"

"Yes, boy. Close the door!"

Talbot obeyed.

"Your cousin declares that you have kept up connections with the associates of your early days, Talbot. Is it true?"

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"It is not true," he said.

"Do you know a man named Lodgey in the village?"

"I did know him."

"But now?"

"No."

"He is not coming to see you here?"

"He is not."

"Gerald tells me that a friend of his heard Lodgey boasting in the village that he was going to do so."

"That is no business of mine."

Talbot's voice had grown cold and hard. Of late the Shell fellow had come to have a deep regard for his grim old uncle. The old antagonism had been completely forgotten. It seemed to be reviving now. The sharp questioning of the colonel had touched the Toff's pride.

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"You had no knowledge of the man's talk?"

"None."

"Then if he comes here, he comes without your sanction?"

"Certainly!"

"That means that he will not come?"

"I neither know nor care whether he is coming," said Talbot slowly and very distinctly.

The colonel's grim brow grew grimmer. Crooke's eyes gleamed. Talbot's tone was not conciliatory; he was playing Crooke's game, if he had realised it. But the Toff could not help it. If the colonel doubted him, if he doubted his honour, it was an insult. Why should he be called over the coals in those sharp, peremptory tones, when he was conscious of no wrongdoing?

"That is not the tone to take me with, Talbot!" rapped out the colonel.

Talbot met his eyes fearlessly.

"You are asking me if I have lied to you and broken my word to the Head," he replied. "The questions you have asked me are insulting."

"Gerald says—"

"I have nothing to do with what Crooke says. If you can trust me, I have a right to expect you not to listen to a tale-bearer. If you cannot trust me, I ask nothing at your hands."

"You will hear what Gerald says."

Talbot set his lips.

"I will not listen to a word!" he exclaimed passionately.

"I will not bandy words with Crooke. Crooke is not worth my notice."

Talbot turned to the door and quitted the room before Colonel Lyndon could reply.

"By gad!" muttered the colonel, tugging at his grey moustache in angry perplexity. "By gad! The disrespectful young rascal!"

"He knows it's bound to come out now," said Crooke. "It's too late for him to warn his friend not to come—"

"Silence, sir!" rapped out the colonel. "I do not believe the man is coming at all. You have been misinformed by your tattling friend, or else the fellow was chattering nonsense under the influence of drink. I shall remain and see whether he comes. In that case I shall know what to do. But I repeat that I do not believe that he will come at all."

Crooke was silent; the colonel's tone did not admit of a rejoinder. With a grim brow, the colonel sat down to wait; and Crooke waited, too, with a fervent longing that Mr. Lodgey would not delay his call.

CHAPTER 6.

Levison Minor Does His Best.

"HERE he is!"

Wally pointed through the hedge.

The fags of the Third knew Mr. Lodgey by sight; they had seen him often enough about the village.

Levison minor and his friends had posted themselves in the lane, supposing that Mr. Lodgey would come from the direction of Rylcombe.

But Wally caught sight of the billiard sharper coming across the field from the direction of the river.

"That's the rotter!" said Levison minor. "I'll bet you he was watching for the colonel's car to come along."

"Very likely," agreed Wally. "My only Aunt Jane! Get back to the gates! He will get there before we do at this rate."

Mr. Lodgey's path across the field led him towards the lane, close to a spot opposite the gates of St. Jim's. He had only about fifty yards to traverse when the fags spotted him. Wally & Co. were a hundred yards down the lane, so Mr. Lodgey was only half their distance from the gates.

The half-dozen fags sprinted up the road towards the school at top speed.

Racke and his friends at the gateway had spotted Mr. Lodgey in the field, and were grinning at one another.

They stared at the fags as the latter came racing up.

"We're ahead!" panted Wally.

Mr. Lodgey, as he came through a gap in the hedge, found the fags between him and the school gates.

Wally & Co., panting and breathless, lined up in his path.

The sharper stared at them, not understanding their object at first. Racke & Co. stared, too, from the gates.

"Halt!" said Wally dramatically, raising a grubby paw in a commanding gesture.

Mr. Lodgey blinked at him.

"Wot!" he ejaculated.

"Halt!"

"Stand and deliver!" grinned Joe Frayne.

"Lemme pass, please!" snapped Mr. Lodgey. "I've no time for your little jokes, young gentlemen."

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"Let the man pass, you young sweeps!" called out Mellish from the gate.

"You shut up!" said Wally. "For two pins I'd come and mop you up, Mellish: and I will, too, if I have any of your cheak! Lodgey, my buck, there's your way!" Wally pointed down the lane towards Rylcombe.

"And the sooner you 'ook it, the better!" said Frayne.

"Look 'ere, wot's this game?" exclaimed Mr. Lodgey angrily. "You get out of the way, or you'll get 'urt!"

"Bow-wow!"

"I'm goin' in to see a young gentleman," said Mr. Lodgey.

"Lemme pass!"

"You're not going in to see anybody," said Wally coolly.

"You're going to clear off, my pippin!"

"You cheeky young 'ound!" roared Mr. Lodgey, greatly exasperated. "Do you want me to knock you spinnin'?"

"Yes, if you can do it," said Wally at once.

Mr. Lodgey took a tighter grasp on the stick he carried, and strode forward. He expected the fags to clear away before him.

But they did not. Levison minor made a jump at him, and shoved him back. Lodgey's stick whistled in the air, and descended upon Frank Levison's shoulders with a sounding thwack. The fag yelled.

"Go for him!" roared Wally.

D'Arcy minor and Reggie Manners piled on Mr. Lodgey at once, and Frayne followed suit. Levison minor fastened on him like a cat. Under their combined efforts Mr. Lodgey staggered and reeled, rapping out savage oaths as he struggled. Jameson and Curly Gibson and Hobbs piled in. There were seven pairs of hands on Mr. Lodgey now, and he found them rather too many for him.

There was a terrific crash as the sharper went down in the road, with the Third-Formers sprawling over him.

"Yow! Woop!" gasped Mr. Lodgey. "Oh, lor'! 'Elp!"

"Down him!" yelled Frayne. "Give 'im jip!"

"Sit on his head!" shrieked Jameson.

Mr. Lodgey struggled desperately under the fags, rolling in the dust. But they were too many for him, and he was pinned down.

"Dash it all," muttered Racke to his friends, "they're spoiling the game! That man's got to be let in."

"Let's chip in!" said Clampe.

"My hat! There's the colonel!" whispered Mellish.

Colonel Lyndon had come out of the School House, and he was pacing under the old elms in the quadrangle, his brows darkly knotted, his hands behind him. Crooke was still in the visitors' room, looking from the window. It was high time that Mr. Lodgey arrived, and Crooke was anxious to see him come. He knew that the colonel was keeping an eye on the gates, so as not to miss the rowdy visitor if he did arrive.

The cad of the Shell little dreamed that Wally & Co. had intervened. In his cheery anticipation of Talbot's discomfiture, he had confided the story to his set, and he was not aware that Piggott had tattled on the subject. Not that he would have expected the fags to trouble their heads about the matter, anyway. He had not given a thought to Levison minor of the Third.

Colonel Lyndon paced to and fro under the elms, quite unaware of the scene that was in progress outside the school gates.

That scene was noisy enough, and loud voices reached the colonel's ears from the distance; but he did not heed.

Mr. Lodgey was struggling to throw the fags off, and Wally & Co. were exerting themselves to roll the rascal along the road to the nearest ditch. And Wally & Co. were getting the best of it.

The Third-Formers were warming to their work. They were doing Talbot a good turn, as they considered, and they liked Talbot. And Mr. Lodgey was a boozy sharper, who deserved to be handled, if ever a rascal did.

So they put their beef into it.

And into the ditch Mr. Lodgey certainly would have gone had not Racke & Co. chipped in to his rescue. Crooke's pals did not mean to have the scheme spoiled if they could help it. Racke and the rest chipped in, and the fags found themselves attacked in their turn.

Wally and Frayne and Manners minor were dragged off, struggling and shouting with wrath. Mr. Lodgey threw off the others, and staggered up.

"What are you chipping in for, you cads?" yelled Wally furiously. "Let us alone! Take your paws away, Racke!"

"Leggo, Clampe!" shouted Reggie.

"Let the man alone!" said Racke warmly. "You've no right to interfere with him. I'll call a prefect, if you don't look out!"

"Rate! Rescue, Third!" yelled Wally, hoping to get reinforcements, if any of the Third were within hearing.

"Hallo! What's the row?" Tom Merry and Manners and

Lowther came out of the gates. "What's all this thumping row about?"

"Lend us a hand!" panted Wally. "Collar that cad—leggo, Racke, you beast!—collar him!" yelled Wally frantically. "He's going in to see Talbot!"

"Who?" gasped Tom Merry.

"Lodgey—collar him!"

Taking advantage of the diversion in his favour, Mr. Lodgey had torn himself free, and was making for the gates at a run.

The Terrible Three rushed after him. Wally's excited shout made the matter clear to their minds—this was Crooke's little game!

"Stop him!" shouted Levison minor, struggling with Mellish. "Tom Merry, don't let him get in!"

"We'll stop him!" panted Tom.

Mr. Lodgey was almost in the gateway when the Shell fellows reached him. They did not stand upon ceremony. They laid violent hands upon Mr. Lodgey, and dragged him over backwards.

Mr. Lodgey smote the earth with great force, for the second time that afternoon. He uttered a yell that rang from one end of St. Jim's to the other.

The disturbance was drawing a crowd now. Figgins & Co. of the New House came dashing out, Redfern and Owen and Lawrence followed them; then Julian and Kerruish of the Fourth, and Gore and Glyn and Kangaroo, and half a dozen others. They stared at the sight of Mr. Lodgey rolling and struggling in the grasp of the Terrible Three.

"What the merry thunder!" exclaimed Figgins.

Levison minor butted Mellish over, and tore himself away.

He rushed to join in collaring Mr. Lodgey.

"Hold him!" he panted. "Yank him away! He wants to go in and see Talbot while his uncle's there. We tried to stop him—"

"I understand," said Tom Merry grimly. "Roll him along, you fellows!"

"Bump him!"

"Yaroooh!" roared Mr. Lodgey frantically. "Elp! Perlice! 'Elp! Oh, lor'! Oh, crickey! Yoooop!"

"Let the man alone!" shouted Racke. "Why shouldn't he see his friend if he wants to? It's no business of yours, Tom Merry! Yaroooh!"

A savage back-hander from Tom Merry sent Racke spinning.

A tall form loomed over the crowded juniors in the gateway. A bronzed face and two keen, grey eyes looked over their heads into the road. The disturbance had attracted Colonel Lyndon's attention at last.

"What is the trouble here?" rapped out the colonel.

As a governor of St. Jim's the colonel had a right to chip in.

Tom Merry panted.

"Nothing, sir! Only this rascal wants a ducking. Yank him along!"

"'Elp!" raved Mr. Lodgey.

"It's a visitor for Talbot, sir," said Racke, seizing his opportunity. "The man seems to have been doing no harm."

Colonel Lyndon started.

"A visitor for Talbot—for my nephew?"

"Yes, sir."

"Release the man at once!" rapped out the colonel.

The juniors hesitated to obey. Colonel Lyndon strode out into the road and pushed them aside. They relinquished their hold upon Mr. Lodgey very reluctantly.

The sharper lay in the dust, gasping for breath. Seldom had Mr. Lodgey, even in his career as a welsher, been so roughly handled.

The colonel's hard eyes looked down upon him coldly and scornfully. It was easy to see the man's character at a glance.

"Is your name Lodgey?" snapped the colonel.

"Grooogh!"

"Your name, man?" thundered the colonel.

The sharper blinked at him breathlessly.

"Yes, my name's Lodgey!" he gasped. "Oh, crumbs! I'll 'ave the law of them young demons; I ain't goin' to be 'andled like this 'ere!"

"Get up!"

Mr. Lodgey scrambled to his feet, shedding dust on all sides. He presented a wretched aspect—torn and rumpled and dishevelled and dusty.

"What are you here for?" snapped the colonel.

Mr. Lodgey gasped.

"I come 'ere to see a young friend," he replied. "Them young demons set on me, blessed if I know why—"

"Is your friend expecting you?"

"'Ow should I know?" said Mr. Lodgey sulkily. "I told 'im I'd give 'im a look in some time. It ain't your business, that I knows on, old cock!"

"I happen to be your young friend's uncle," said the colonel grimly. "You shall see him—in my presence." "Oh, my eye! Look 'ere, I don't want to do the young gentleman no 'arm." Mr. Lodgey had learned his lesson well. "I don't know as he had any relations visiting 'im to-day, and—and—"

"Probably not." Colonel Lyndon glanced round at the silent juniors. "Who was stopping this man from coming in?"

"I was," said Levison minor, at once. "These chaps were helping me."

"Why were you stopping him?"

"Because—because—"

"Because you thought it would do Talbot no good for such a man to call upon him while his uncle was at the school?"

"Yes," said Levison minor unsuspectingly. "We were going to clear the cad off, and—"

"I understand! You seem to be a better friend to my nephew than he is to himself," said the colonel bitterly.

"Come in with me, Mr. Lodgey, if that is your name."

"Look 'ere—"

"You don't understand, Colonel Lyndon!" broke out Tom Merry hotly. "Talbot never asked that man to call; he knows nothing of him—"

"My nephew can probably explain quite as well as you can explain for him," said the colonel icily. "Come with me, my man!"

"I don't want to do Master Talbot no 'arm—"

"You will do as you are told!" said the colonel, taking a grip of his cane.

Mr. Lodgey accompanied the colonel in like a lamb. "Well, my only Aunt Jane!" ejaculated Wally. "This is a go! We might as well have gone to Abbotsford after all!"

Tom Merry clenched his hands hard.

"We—we tried to stop him," faltered Levison minor. "It was Crooke who fixed it up for him to come. We knew, and we tried—"

Tom Merry nodded.

"You did your best, young 'un," he said. "But it's all right—it's bound to be all right! Colonel Lyndon is going to know who's at the bottom of it, and I'm going to tell him!"

And Tom Merry strode in.

CHAPTER 7.
The Parting!

CURIOSUS glances were cast at the dusty Mr. Lodgey as he crossed the quadrangle by the side of the tall bronzed old soldier. Mr. Lodgey, who was already recovering himself, cast impudent glances round. The colonel looked neither to the right nor to the left. He strode right on to the School House, and entered it with his ill-assorted companion, and they passed into the visitor's room.

Crooke turned from the window. He made no sign of recognition as he saw Lodgey. Neither did Mr. Lodgey appear to have the slightest knowledge of Crooke.

"Gerald!"

"Yes, uncle?"

"Find your cousin, and send him here!"

"Certainly!"

Crooke quitted the room. Mr. Lodgey sank down in an armchair, stretched out his legs, and rubbed his heated face with a red-spotted handkerchief. The colonel's eyes gleamed for a moment; but he turned away to the window, and stood staring into the quadrangle while he waited for his nephew.

Crooke hurried away to Talbot's study.

Talbot was there alone. His face was dark. The interview with his uncle had been bitterly wounding to the Toff. His eyes glittered at the sight of Crooke's sallow, mocking face at the door.

"What do you want?" he rapped out.

"Nothing," said Crooke coolly. "Colonel Lyndon wants you, that's all, and he's sent me to tell you so. You can go or not, as you choose."

And Crooke walked away.

Talbot rose to his feet, but he

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hesitated. Should he go? It was but a short time since the colonel had sent him to get his coat for the motor-run to Abbotsford. But it seemed a long while since; much had happened since then. Crooke's blow had fallen, and it had fallen hard.

Levison of the Fourth stepped into the study.

"You know Lodgey's here, Talbot?" he asked quickly. Talbot started.

"Lodgey, here!" he exclaimed.

"In the visitors'-room with the colonel," said Levison quietly. "I thought I'd tell you!"

"What is he doing there?" muttered Talbot.

"It's a trick of Crooke's, of course," said Levison, shrugging his shoulders. "I warned you that there was a game on. I see it now. Crooke's fixed it for Lodgey to come here while your uncle is here. That's the little game."

"But—but why?"

"You'll see soon, I expect. My minor got hold of it somehow, and he tried to stop Lodgey coming in," grinned Levison. "The fags collared him in the road, and they'd have cleared him off, only the colonel came on the scene, unluckily. Rather enterprising of young Franky, wasn't it?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"Very," he said. "But I don't see— Well, I'd better go, as my uncle wants to see me."

"You'd better. But be on your guard," said Levison anxiously. "There's something arranged between Crooke and Lodgey, I am sure of that. He hasn't come here for nothing."

Talbot nodded, and left the study. He descended the stairs. His step was firm, and his face calm as he entered the visitors'-room. Colonel Lyndon, stiff as a ramrod, turned on his heel from the window. Mr. Lodgey half rose, making Talbot a very affectionate sign of recognition. Talbot took no notice of him. But the rascal's gesture was not lost on the colonel.

"Mind your eye, Toff!" whispered Mr. Lodgey warningly.

"Mind what you say—"

"Silence, you!" snapped the colonel.

Mr. Lodgey sat down again, with an injured expression. He had given the colonel the impression that he was on familiar terms with Talbot, and that he was trying to put him on his guard—which was exactly the impression Mr. Lodgey wanted to give.

"Talbot!" Colonel Lyndon's voice was hard as iron.

"You know this man?"

"I have known him," said Talbot wearily.

"In your former life, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Did you ask him here?"

"No."

"He has come to see you."

Talbot was silent.

"Wot's the 'arm in a man droppin' in to see an ole pal?" asked Mr. Lodgey, in an injured tone. "I didn't want to get the young gentleman into a row. We've 'ad some good times together, the Toff and me, we 'ave!"

"That is false!" said Talbot quietly. "Have you anything further to say to me, uncle?"

Colonel Lyndon knitted his brows.

"This matter must be explained!" he said harshly. "This man came here to visit you. Some of your friends, knowing I was here, tried to turn him back, and there was a scene outside the school gates. If they had succeeded I should not have seen him, and I should never have known the truth."

Talbot smiled bitterly.

"You mean that you cannot rely upon my word," he said. "I don't blame you. You have a right to doubt me if you choose, considering the past. But you have no right to put me upon my defence like this."

"No right?" thundered the colonel.

"None," said Talbot quietly.

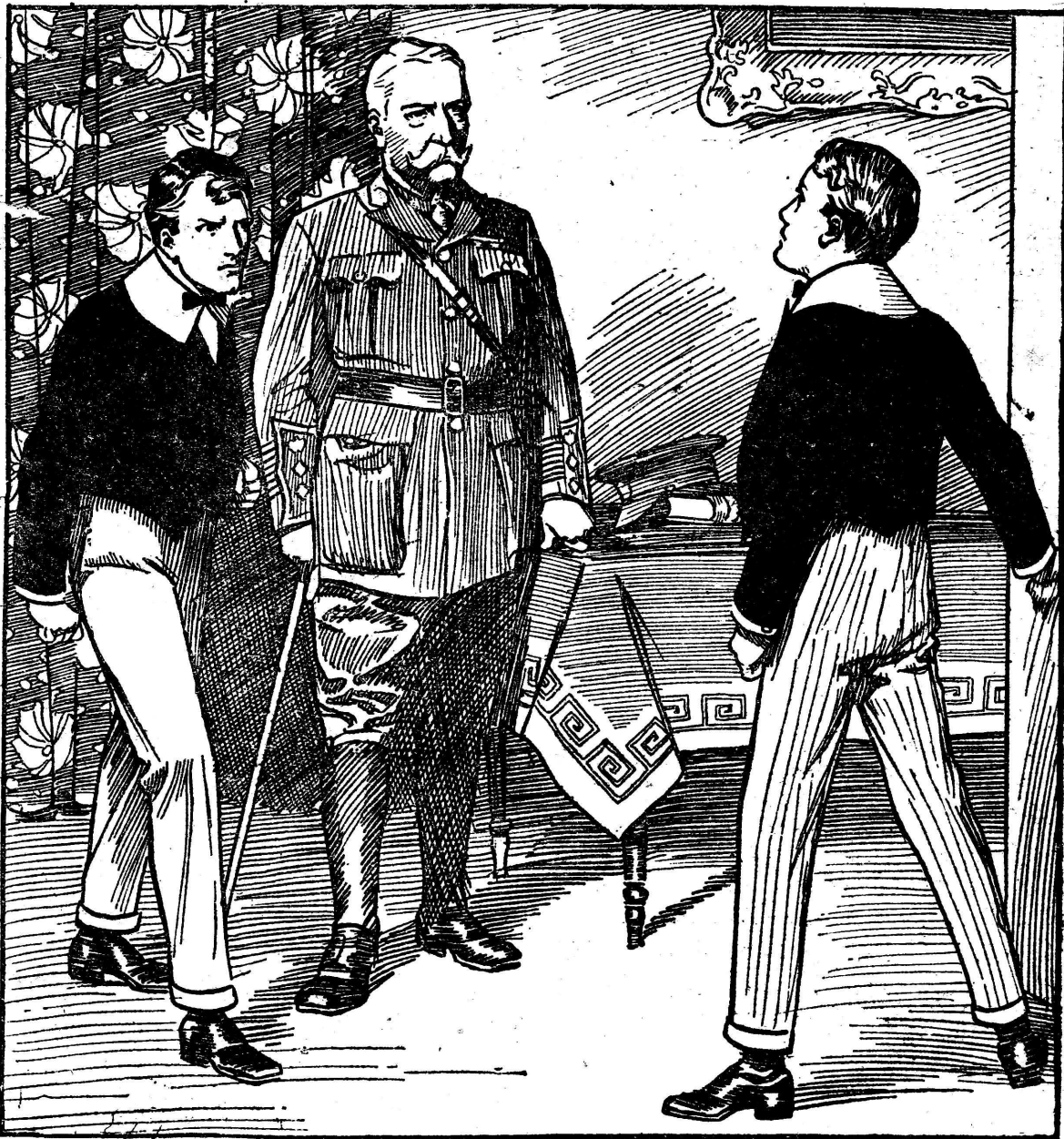
"When you learned that I was your nephew, you acknowledged me of your own free will. I did not ask it. If you regret your kindness, you need have nothing further to do with me. I ask nothing of you."

The colonel's brow darkened.

"This insolence—" he began.

"I do not mean to be insolent."

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"Your cousin declares that you have kept up connections with the associates of your early days, Talbot. Is it true?" asked the Colonel. Talbot drew a deep breath. "It is not true," he said. (See Chapter 5.)

But I will not be doubted, questioned, and put on my defence!"

"You will not!" exclaimed the colonel.

"I will not!" said Talbot firmly.

"You take that line, I presume, because you have no defence to make," said the colonel, in a bitter tone. "I have been deceived in you!"

Mr. Lodgey struck in:

"Look 'ere—"

"Silence, man!"

"I ain't going to keep mum with you a-ragging my pal," said Mr. Lodgey. "Why shouldn't a young gent speak to an old pal? That's what I want to know! Wot's the 'arm in a game of billiards occasionally?"

"So you have played billiards with this man, Talbot?"

"No. He is lying!"

"Why should he lie?"

"Lying, is it?" exclaimed Mr. Lodgey warmly. "That's a bit 'ard on an old pal, Toff. I didn't mean no 'arm. Why

couldn't you give me the tip the old gent was 'ere? I wouldn't 'ave come within a mile of the place!"

"I have no doubt of that!" said the colonel bitterly. "If you have no acquaintance with this man, Talbot, why has he come here?"

Talbot made a weary gesture.

"He has come here to injure me, if he can," he said. "His object is to make you distrust me. He is my enemy!"

"Oh, Toff!" said Mr. Lodgey reproachfully. "Arter the pals we've been!"

"I believe, too, that he was informed of your visit, and came here intentionally because you were here," added Talbot.

"Indeed! And who informed him?"

"I think I know; but I have no proof, naturally."

"S'elp me!" said Mr. Lodgey. "I knowed nothing about it, or I wouldn't 'ave come! I didn't know nothing about it, s'elp me! And I'll go now, too! I ain't the man to stay where I ain't welcome! If I've done you any 'arm by coming

"ere, Toff, I'm sorry, and I 'ope it won't make any difference to our friendship."

Talbot made a gesture of contempt.
"Stay where you are, man!" snapped the colonel, as Mr. Lodgey made a movement towards the door. "I have not finished with you yet!"

"Look 'ere—"
"Hold your tongue!"
Mr. Lodgey's eyes burned, but he held his tongue.
Colonel Lyndon turned to the window, his brows knitted in deep and painful thought.

Talbot stood motionless.
The colonel swung round sharply at the sound of a whisper. Mr. Lodgey was winking and making signs to Talbot. He ceased to do so after he was quite sure that the colonel had seen him.

"You may speak aloud!" said the colonel, with bitter contempt.

"I—I wasn't saying nothing," stammered Mr. Lodgey, who certainly ought to have been upon the stage, so well did he play his part.

"You were whispering, you rascal!"
"I—I—I— Look here," said Mr. Lodgey. "I'm goin' to own up! I don't know this young gentleman!"

"What?"
"I ain't had nothing to do with him," pursued Mr. Lodgey, as if repeating the words of a lesson. "He ain't never come down for a game of billiards at the Green Man, and he never treated me like a pal, or asked me to come an' see him, or— or anything. He ain't never 'ad anything on a 'orse, that I knows on, and he ain't never broke bounds of a night to see his old pals. Nothing of the sort. I take back heverythink I may 'ave said to the contrary!"

Talbot stared at the sharper. This was a change of front, with a vengeance! The colonel's look grew more bitter. He thought he understood. This was the outcome of signs made while his back was turned—so he considered—which was exactly what the astute Mr. Lodgey wanted him to consider. The colonel was a keen man of the world, but he had had little experience with men of Mr. Lodgey's kind, and he was not quite equal to that gentleman's vulpine cunning. Mr. Lodgey, in fact, as he boasted later to his pals in the Green Man played the old sport like a "blinkin' fish."

"Is that all?" asked the colonel grimly.
"That's about all," said Mr. Lodgey. "The young gentleman is as innocent as a baby. I'd been drinkin', or I wouldn't 'ave come 'ere. And I 'opo as I 'aven't done any 'arm."

"You may go!" said Colonel Lyndon.
"Good afternoon, gentlemen!" said Mr. Lodgey affably, and he went.

There was a deep silence as the door closed after him. Uncle and nephew faced one another.

"Have you anything to say, Talbot?" asked the colonel, at last.

"Nothing!"
"Did you expect that man to deceive me with his falsehoods—falsehoods uttered too late?"

"He has told the truth at last," said Talbot.
The colonel made an angry gesture.

"He has retracted every word, at a sign from you!" he exclaimed. "Do you deny that you were making signs to him while my back was turned?"

"Yes."
"Then why did he suddenly retract every statement he had made?"

"He knows best," said Talbot coldly.
"That will do!" said Colonel Lyndon, in concentrated tones of anger. "You supposed me an old man—an old fool—who could be deceived as easily as a child! I am not in my second childhood yet, Talbot. You should have primed this man earlier; it was too late in my presence. You may go, Talbot! I claim no further authority over you. Henceforth I have only one nephew!"

Talbot left the room, without a word.

CHAPTER 8
Croke's Triumph.

TOM MERRY was waiting in the corridor.
He came quickly towards Talbot as the Sheriff fellow, his handsome face very pale and set, walked away.

"Talbot, what's happened?"
Talbot made a weary gesture.

"It doesn't matter, Tom!"
"But it does matter!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Can't you see, Talbot, Croke got that man here to claim acquaintance with you? It was a scheme—"

"I know it was."
"And the colonel believes him?"

"Yes."
"Then you've got to open his eyes!" said Tom. "He's got to know about Croke—"

"I shall not tell him one word about Croke!"
"But—but why?"

"I've no proof, for one thing, Tom. Croke would deny it, Lodgey would deny it. It would only come to bandying accusations. But that isn't all. Colonel Lyndon does not trust me. Perhaps I have no right to expect him to!" said Talbot, bitterly. "But if he cannot trust me, it is better for him to have done with me. I will not submit to incessant suspicion and questioning! Why should I be put upon my defence whenever Croke chooses to play the tale-

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bearer and slanderer. Even the Toff has a little pride, you know!"

"But—but——"

"The matter's ended, Tom. Colonel Lyndon has done with me, and I have done with him. Let it drop!"

"I won't let it drop!" growled Tom Merry. "You've got you back up, Talbot; but if you won't tell him the facts, I will!"

"Tom!" exclaimed Talbot.

But Tom Merry was already hurrying down the passage to the visitors' room. He reached it as the door opened, and the colonel came out.

Colonel Lyndon would have passed him, but Tom planted himself in the old soldier's way.

"Colonel Lyndon," he exclaimed, "you must——"

"What is it?"

"About Talbot——"

"I desire to hear nothing about Talbot!" said the colonel coldly. "Kindly let me pass, boy!"

"You ought to know——"

"Let me pass, I tell you!" thundered the colonel.

He thrust the junior aside, and strode away down the passage. Without a glance at his nephew as he passed him, he strode out and stepped into his car.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

Talbot smiled slightly.

"My uncle is not a man to be reasoned with, Tom," he said. "He has made up his mind, and there is nothing more to be done."

"But—but I say, old fellow——" stammered Tom, in dismay.

"Don't worry about it, Tom! It's still light enough for some footer," said Talbot calmly. "Come along!"

There was the buzz of a car in the quadrangle. Tom Merry looked out at the door.

Colonel Lyndon's car was gliding away to the gates, the massive figure in khaki, upright as a ramrod, in it.

The car turned out of the gates and disappeared.

Tom Merry looked round at his chum.

Talbot's face was pale. What had happened had been a blow to him. But he was quite composed.

"I—I say, Talbot, this is awfully rotten!" muttered Tom.

"Crooke must have made him believe——"

"I suppose it was Crooke," said Talbot. "Lodgey may have come here of his own accord, for all I know. But he knew the colonel was here, that is certain. He played his game well—very well. I suppose Crooke was at the bottom of it."

"I know he was!" said Tom savagely. "That was what the cads were chortling about this afternoon, when we bumped them for it!"

Talbot nodded.

"It can't be helped, Tom. If it hadn't happened now, it would have happened some other time. Crooke was determined to make a break between my uncle and me, and he would not stop at any dirty trickery. I could not prevent my uncle being deceived. And——Talbot's eyes burned for a moment——and I will not enter into a competition of accusation with Crooke. Let him say what he likes, and do as he likes. If the colonel is deceived, that is his business. I am tired of it all!"

"But—but this will make a lot of difference to you, old chap!" said Tom anxiously.

"You mean about money? Of course it will! But I still have my scholarship," said Talbot, with a faint smile.

"I shall not have to leave St. Jim's, Tom."

"But—but it's rotten——"

"It can't be helped!"

Crooke and Racke came out of the School House together. They looked at Talbot as they passed, and chuckled. It was the hour of George Gerald Crooke's triumph, and he was enjoying it.

Tom Merry clenched his hands, and made a rapid step towards the cad of the Shell. Talbot caught his arm in time.

"That won't do any good, Tom," he said quietly. "Let's get down to footer. I'd like to forget all about this."

"The rotter ought to be smashed!" muttered Tom savagely.

"He's not worth it, and it wouldn't do any good, either. Come on!"

The two juniors went down to the footer-field. Crooke and Racke watched them go, with grinning faces.

"My hat!" said Crooke. "I've put a spoke in his wheel at last! Did you see his face? It's all up between him and my uncle."

Racke laughed.

"You are a deep card, and no mistake!" he said.

"I fancy I know my way about," said Crooke complacently. "That rotter shoved in to oust me, and I've ousted him.

He's got his back up, too. I reckoned on that. Don't I know him?" Crooke chuckled gleefully. "It's all up with him, I tell you, as far as my uncle's concerned. Lodgey is a brick. I thought I could depend on him, but it's worked out better than I ever expected. It's worth the flyer I promised him—well worth it! By gad, this means that Talbot's name goes out of the old fool's will, and if he gets bowled over in Flanders, that's five thousand a year for me when I'm of age—what?"

"Lucky bargee!" said Racke. "I wouldn't talk about it too much, though, if I were you."

"Well, only to my own pals, you know. That little beast Piggott got on to it, but he will be mum. Not that it would matter to me if he jawed. He's not likely to jaw to the colonel. Old Lyndon's off to the Front to-morrow. They clear out of Abbotsford Camp in the morning."

And Crooke grinned gleefully. Ever since Talbot had found favour in his uncle's eyes, Crooke's cunning brain had been at work to dish him in that quarter. With Mr. Lodgey's assistance he had succeeded now, beyond his greatest hopes.

For Gerald Crooke the horizon was clear now. For the pain he had caused his uncle, for the shadow that had fallen upon the old colonel on the eve of his departure for the field of danger and death, Crooke did not care a rap. He did not even give that matter a thought. All Crooke's thoughts were centred upon one person, and that person was George Gerald Crooke.

The cad of the Shell started for Rylcombe in high spirits, to see Mr. Lodgey, and settle with him. He had promised the sharper a fiver for his treacherous work, and a fiver was good pay for an afternoon's walk and a few cunning falsehoods, Crooke considered.

Indeed, now that he was successful he felt that he had been too liberal with Mr. Lodgey. It did not yet occur to Crooke that the success of his scheme had placed him under Mr. Lodgey's thumb, and that treachery to his employer would come as easily to Mr. Lodgey as treachery to anyone else.

On the football-field Talbot of the Shell joined in the practice before tea, and few would have guessed, as they watched the keen footballer, that a heavy blow had fallen upon him that day.

The Toff was accustomed to the vicissitudes of fortune from old, and he had learned endurance in a hard school.

Tom Merry found it difficult to put his mind into the game, however. He was more concerned about his chum than Talbot seemed to be about himself.

For the break with his uncle meant a serious difference to Talbot. Probably the colonel, in spite of all, would wish to be generous; but it was quite certain that, after what had happened, Talbot would accept nothing at his hands. The rich man's nephew would be once more the poor scholarship junior—a change of situation that might have dismayed even a strong character. It did not dismay Talbot. He had never given a thought to his uncle's money—he did not give it a thought now. He was young, strong, resolute, and he could look after himself.

There was one regret in Talbot's heart—it was that this break should have come on the eve of the colonel's departure for the Front. That was where the blow fell heaviest.

But it could not be helped; it was not his fault. That troublesome thought he tried to drive from his mind, though not very successfully.

Talbot joined the Terrible Three at tea in their study, and, though he was a little more subdued than usual, he was quite cheerful. It was Tom Merry's face that was the more clouded of the two. Tom wondered whether the trouble would blow over, and a reconciliation would come; but he had little hope of that. One glance at Talbot's quiet face was enough to tell him that the first step would not come from the Toff. And on the morrow Colonel Lyndon would be gone!

CHAPTER 9.

Mr. Lodgey's Little Game.

"W"ERRY good of you to give me a look in, Mr. Crooke."

Mr. Lodgey's manner was very affable as he opened the door at Crooke's knock, and admitted the black sheep of St. Jim's into the stuffy little parlour at the Green Man.

The early winter darkness had fallen. Crooke had dodged into the inn garden from the towing-path, and skulked under the trees to the back door. It would not have done for the St. Jim's fellow to be seen in the precincts of the disreputable inn on that gay of all days!

Crooke came in grinning, and Mr. Lodgey closed the door. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 462. A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

There was a peculiar expression on the sharper's face that Crooke did not notice at first.

He sat down and lighted a cigarette.

"Ow did it go, Mr. Crooke?" asked Mr. Lodgey, resuming his pipe.

"First-rate!" chuckled Crooke. "You must have pitched it to the colonel pretty well, Lodgey."

"I played 'im like a blinkin' fish!" grinned Mr. Lodgey. "Keen old gent—keen as a razor, but not quite up to Joe Lodgey's form."

"He hasn't had much to do with fellows of your sort," remarked Crooke. "You're a new experience to him."

"P'r'aps so," grunted Mr. Lodgey, rather less affably. "Any how, I played 'im. I made out that that the Toff was makin' signs to 'me behind his back to pitch him a yarn; then I owned up that I knowed nothing about Talbot, and said I'd only been gassing—which was the holy truth, only the old gent thought it was a lie and that the Toff had just put me up to it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Crooke.

"And it's gone all right?" asked Mr. Lodgey, curiously.

"First-rate! I don't know exactly what passed between them—I wasn't present; but it's pretty clear that Talbot got his back up at being suspected and doubted. I knew he would. He's as proud as Lucifer—with his past, too! The colonel went off in his car with a face like a gargoyle. And I saw Talbot afterwards—his face was enough for me." Crooke chuckled again. "It couldn't have gone better. And old Lyndon's off to the Front to-morrow, so there's no chance of Talbot getting round him again. Come to think of it, I don't believe he'd try; he's got his back up too much for that."

"And it's all merry and bright?"

"Yes, rather; Talbot's in his black books for good now. That means a jolly good thing for me, and you've earned your fiver, Lodgey, and here it is!"

Crooke, with a lofty air, flicked a five-pound note upon the dirty, beer-stained table. Mr. Lodgey's grubby fingers closed on it.

"Thank you, Mr. Crooke! That's all right to begin with."

Crooke stared at him.

"To begin with? What do you mean? That's what we agreed upon."

"Did we?" said Mr. Lodgey reflectively.

"Yes, we did," exclaimed Crooke warmly; "and jolly good pay, too, I think! You don't pick up a fiver every day, Lodgey."

"P'r'aps I don't," said Mr. Lodgey. "But p'r'aps I shall pick up some more fivers in the future, Mr. Crooke. The old sport is worth a lot to you—it runs into thousands."

"That's not your business!"

"A generous young gent like you wouldn't leave a pal in the lurch, arter vallyble services rendered," remarked Mr. Lodgey.

"I've paid you!" growled Crooke, beginning to feel a vague sense of alarm. "What are you driving at, Lodgey?"

"S'poso I've got a bit of a conscience?" suggested Mr. Lodgey. "I don't like the Toff—he's too 'endy with his fists to suit me. If he takes liberties with a gentleman's nose, he's got to pay for it. But a feller may 'ave a conscience, all the same. What I've done has quered his pitch with his rich uncle, and let you in, Mr. Crooke. That's worth a good bit to you, you know, and a big fortune if the old gent gets bowled over out there."

"Well, what about it?"

"Well, a man might 'ave a conscience," argued Mr. Lodgey. "His conscience might make him go and own up to the whole game."

Crooke started to his feet.

"What!" he exclaimed shrilly.

"I don't say a man would do it," said Mr. Lodgey. "But he might. S'posin' a man's conscience made him do it. What a surprise for the old gent! S'posin' he found out that it was the other nephew, arter all, who was pally with that bad character, Joe Lodgey, and had put up the said Joe Lodgey to visitin' the school while he was there an' pitchin' a yarn—"

"You—you rotter!" panted Crooke. "You—you couldn't

give it away to my uncle! What good would that do you?"

"Well, it would ease a man's conscience," replied Mr. Lodgey calmly.

"Oh, don't talk rot! What do you want?"

"That ain't a perlitto way of putting it, Mr. Crooke. But I do say that a man who's rendered vallyble services is entitled to a whack in the loot."

Crooke gritted his teeth.

He understood clearly enough now. He was entirely in Mr. Lodgey's hands. If that conscientious gentleman chose to make a clean breast of it to the colonel, the game would be up with a vengeance. Crooke, in his mind's eye, saw his whole house of cards tumbling down about his ears.

Mr. Lodgey stuffed tobacco into his pipe, and lighted it, blinking at Crooke through the smoke with a sardonic grin.

It was not from regard for his young friend, and not wholly from hatred of the Toff that Mr. Lodgey had entered into the plot. Mr. Lodgey had seen a good thing in it for himself—a very good thing. And now that the matter had gone too far for Crooke to think of retreat, the rascal was showing his hand.

"What do you want?" muttered Crooke huskily, at last.

"I noticed you'd got another fiver there, sir," yawned Mr. Lodgey. "That wouldn't come in amiss."

"It will clear me out."

"You could get more from his nibs," suggested Mr. Lodgey. "Goin' off to the Front to-morrer, too—bound to be a bit tender-hearted to his loving nephew. And there's ways and means of a young gentleman raising tin on his expectations, too."

"Moneylenders, do you mean?" gasped Crooke.

"Lots of sporting young gentlemen do it," said Mr. Lodgey. "Feller with a rich father and a rich uncle needn't never be 'ard up."

Crooke sank limply into his seat. His triumph had come, but it was beginning to have a bitter flavour.

"You—you want me to go to moneylenders, to—to raise money to give you?" he stammered, in scared tones.

"Ain't it worth your while?" demanded Mr. Lodgey abruptly. "You've done your cousin out of his whack in the old cock's money; you said yourself it means five thousand a year when you come of age. Can't you spare a few hundreds out of that for a cove wot's 'elped you?"

"Hundreds!" stammered Crooke, in terrified tones.

It was not merely fivers the rascal had schemed for—it was hundreds! It seemed to the wretched cad of St. Jim's that an abyss was opening at his feet. Moneylenders, debt and difficulties, ceaseless worry and dread, ceaseless foam of exposure, and all for the profit of the unscrupulous rascal whom he had fancied he was using as a tool! He began to see that it was not Mr. Lodgey who was the tool.

"Undreds," said Mr. Lodgey angrily, "and why not? If I wasn't a honourable cove, I'd say thousands, dash my buttons! You think it over, Mr. Crooke, an' figure out whether you can afford to quarrel with an old pal, an' whether it wouldn't pay you better to do the fair thing. Not going, are you?" he added satirically, as Crooke staggered to his feet. "Well, if you must. May as well leave that other fiver 'ere, to go on with."

With trembling fingers Crooke placed the five-pound note on the table, and quitted the parlour of the Green Man.

Mr. Lodgey winked serenely at the curling smoke from his pipe.

"Joe, my boy," he murmured—"Joe, you're in for a good thing—a soft thing, Joe! You've booked yourself for a good time, Joe; and you've played your game remarkable well, Joe, and you deserve a drink!"

And Mr. Lodgey rapped on the table, and stood himself the drink he felt he deserved.

Gerald Crooke went tramping back through the darkness, with a white face and a lurking terror in his heart. He had tasted his triumph that day, and it had turned to dust and ashes in his mouth. And from the bottom of his heart, the cad of St. Jim's wished that he had never entered into that cunning plot with Mr. Lodgey to ruin his cousin and rival. But repentance—such as it was—came too late. He had plunged in too far for retreat, and he was fairly under Joe Lodgey's thumb, and how it would end he could not even guess.

CHAPTER 10.

The Mouse and the Lion!

"WELL, you're a cherry chap, and no mistake!" said Gore.

Talbot started a little.

He was in his study, with Gore and Skimpole, and he had fallen into a deep reverie. Gore had spoken to him twice without eliciting a reply.

"Eh! Did you speak?" asked Talbot confusedly.

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"Only three times," grunted Gore.
 "I'm sorry. I was thinking."
 "I asked you if you were coming down to the gym," said Gore. "You were going to have the gloves on with me, and show me that drive with the left!"
 "Another time, if you don't mind," said Talbot, colouring. "I'm not feeling quite up to boxing just now."
 "Right you are," said Gore amicably. And he went out of the study.

Skimpole blinked sympathetically at Talbot through his big spectacles. Skimmy was a sympathetic youth.
 "I have observed that you have been in a very thoughtful mood for some time, my dear Talbot," said Skimpole benevolently. "I think I know what is the matter."
 "I hardly think you do," said Talbot, smiling.

Skimmy, the amateur socialist of St. Jim's, had a sympathetic heart, but not a very discerning head.
 "I am sure of it," said Skimpole. "My remarks upon social questions, and the problem of the downtrodden millions, have fallen upon fruitful soil. You have been reflecting, my dear Talbot, upon social inequalities, and the great peril of industrial conscription after the war."
 "Not at all," said Talbot. "Don't begin on that now, Skimmy, there's a good chap."

"If you like, Talbot, I will read you Professor Balmycrummet's latest article upon the submerged tenth."
 "Go and read it to D'Arcy," said Talbot. "It will do him good, as a member of the bloated aristocracy, you know."

"That is a very good suggestion," said Skimpole, with a nod of approval. "I will take your advice, my dear Talbot. Have you seen my copy of the 'Socialist Bumbler'? Ah! Here it is."

And Skimpole left the study, much to Talbot's relief. He was glad to be alone.

The Toff was in one of his rare moods of despondency. The parting in anger with his uncle weighed heavily upon his mind, and the weight seemed to grow heavier with the passing hours.

His whole nature shrank from a contest with Crooke for his uncle's favour. He could not subdue his pride to enter into anything of the sort. Unless his uncle took him as he

was, he could leave him. Talbot asked nothing of him. His pride had been bitterly wounded by the colonel's questioning, and the implied doubt and suspicion. Since he had abandoned the old gang with whom he had been trained, he had been as straight as any fellow at St. Jim's. The whole School respected him. The shadow of the past was lifting from his life and from his mind. Yet all that, it seemed, went for nothing. At a cunning whisper from the enemy, he was to be called upon to defend himself—to be put upon his defence like a suspected criminal!

His handsome face flushed hotly at the thought. He could not, and would not, endure such a position. Either there must be faith or he and his uncle could go their different ways.

But—there was a but! It really did not affect the matter, the fact that his uncle was going on the morrow to face death once more in the trenches of Flanders. Yet that fact weighed with Talbot more than anything else. His uncle had left him in anger—misjudging him—and he was going to danger, perhaps to death. The thought haunted Talbot. He knew that the parting caused the old man pain as well as anger. And he was going out into the rain of shells—into the valley of the shadow of death!

Yet the junior was helpless. What could he say—or do? Even if he entered into a contest of recrimination with Crooke, he could prove nothing. And—the thought stung him to the soul—Crooke believed that his object was to secure his uncle's fortune if death should strike him down. What if the same suspicion should come into the mind of the colonel? Thinking of Talbot as he now did, was it not more than likely, if the lad made advances towards a reconciliation?

He could not take the first step, it was impossible. Yet Talbot would have given many years of his life for his uncle to have left him in confidence and affection, as of old. But he was helpless.

He was pacing to and fro in the study, his brows lined with painful thought, when a timid tap came at the door. He did not hear it. He was thinking miserably of the great change that half-holiday had made to him. The door opened, and Levison minor of the Third looked in.

"Can I come in, Talbot?"
 The Shell fellow turned quickly.
 "Yes, come in," he said.

He was glad of the interruption to his anxious thoughts, which led him nowhere.

Frank came in, and closed the door.
 "I—I—I wanted to ask you something, Talbot, if you'll let me," he said hesitatingly.

"Go ahead, kid," said Talbot. In spite of the weighing trouble on his mind, Talbot's tone was as kind as ever.

"You—you won't think it cheek?" stammered the fag.
 "No; pile in!"

"About—about that fellow coming here to-day," said Levison minor hurriedly. "I—I got to know of it. Piggott had been jawing, and—and I got Wally and the rest to help me, and we tried to stop him."

"I know," said Talbot. "I'm much obliged to you, kid. It was rather a queer idea, but I know you meant to do me a good turn."

"I did, really," said the fag eagerly. "I'd do anything for you, Talbot, after the way you've stood by Ernie. But—but it wasn't any good—he came all the same."

Talbot nodded.
 "But—but did he do any harm?" asked Frank. "I know it's cheek to ask you, but—but I'm anxious about it. I know what your cousin wanted—to get you into a row with your uncle. Will you tell me—?" He broke off.

Talbot hesitated.
 "You know I sh'a'n't jaw, Talbot," said Frank.

"I know you won't," said Talbot, his troubled face breaking into a smile. "You're a good little kid, Frank. Yes, he did do harm; but it can't be helped."

"He made the colonel think he was pally with you, and that you chummed with him, and asked him here," said Frank shrewdly.

"Yes, that's it."
 "And that's what Crooke and his friends are grinning about, isn't it? You're in a row with your uncle?"

"Yes, I suppose they would be grinning about it," said Talbot bitterly. "It must be very entertaining—to Crooke."
 "But—but it will blow over, won't it?"

Talbot shook his head.
 "You—you mean it's all off—your uncle won't have anything more to do with you?" stammered Frank.

"Yes; but don't you worry about it, kid."
 "But—but it's a rotten shame!" burst out Frank indignantly. "Why, it was Crooke all the time. He pals with

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that rotten, and you don't. He planned the whole thing. We all know n."

"The colonel doesn't know it."

"You could tell him!"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be any use, kid, he won't take my word now," said Talbot, his lips setting a little. "But it can't be helped. Don't you bother your head about it. I dare say it will all come right in the long run."

"But your uncle is going away to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"It's a rotten shame!" said Frank again. "Cooke ought to be shown up. I—I suppose there isn't anything a chap can do?"

"Nothing," said Talbot, smiling. "Only don't jaw about it in the Third. But I know you won't do that."

"Not a word," said Frank.

He left the study with a troubled brow. Talbot went down to the Common-room with as cheerful a face as he could assume.

Frank Levison had gone out into the quadrangle.

The fag's heart was throbbing with indignation. He would have given a great deal to help Talbot. The big, handsome Shell fellow was a hero in the eyes of the Third-Form fag, and his patient friendship with Levison major, the outcast and black sheep, had earned Frank's undying gratitude. The little fellow was thinking over the problem, cudgelling his brains for some means of helping Talbot. And as he thought and thought over the matter, a strange idea came into his head, which startled him at first, but which, as he thought over it, appeared more and more feasible.

Levison minor went into the School House for his coat. As he came out, with coat and cap on, Wally hailed him in the passage.

"Where are you off to, young Levison? Don't you know it's near calling-over?"

Frank hurried out without replying, leaving D'Arcy minor staring after him.

Ten minutes later the St. Jim's fellows gathered for roll-call in Big Hall. Mr. Railton took the roll, and there was a pause when he came to Levison minor's name. Levison major had answered "Adsum!" and the next name on the list was Frank's.

"Levison minor!"

No reply.

Ernest Levison glanced over at the Third-Formers. His brother was not there. Wally was looking about him, too.

"Levison minor!" repeated the Housemaster.

Levison minor was marked down as absent, and the roll was finished and the St. Jim's fellows streamed out.

"Where the dickens is my minor?" asked Levison, stopping Wally in the passage. "Why has he cut call-over?"

"Blessed if I know! He went out ten minutes ago."

"Went out?" exclaimed Levison. "The gates are locked!"

"Well, he had his coat on, and he went out."

"The young ass!"

"Picking up some of your manners and customs, Levison major!" sniggered Hobbs of the Third. And there was a laugh.

When the Third Form went into their Form-room for evening preparation with Mr. Selby there was one member of the Form absent. Mr. Selby noted the absence of Levison minor at once, and made a mental note of it. Mr. Selby's cane was ready for Levison minor when he came in late.

But Levison minor did not come in late. He did not come in at all. The Third Form prep ended without his having put in an appearance.

CHAPTER 11.

Levison Minor Beards the Lion in his Den!

"HALT!"

The challenge rang out sharply through the darkness and mist. The man in khaki at the camp gate peered out on the muddy, misty road. A diminutive figure in coat and cap and scarf came out of the gloom. The big, bronzed soldier stared down at the boy.

"Hallo! What do you want, young shaver?" he asked good-humouredly.

"I want to see Colonel Lyndon, please."

"Hay?"

"I want to see Colonel Lyndon!"

The man in khaki chuckled. That request from a small schoolboy tickled his sense of humour. Levison minor realised it, and his face flushed. But he did not budge. He had come there to see Colonel Lyndon, and he meant to see him somehow.

"The colonel isn't on view this evening, my little man,"

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said the Tommy good-temperedly. "Call next Christmas, or the Christmas after."

"But—but I must see him. It's important!" faltered Frank.

"Must be important," agreed the Tommy gravely. "Awfully important, I dare say. But it can't be done. Better go home to bed. Hasn't your nurse missed you yet?"

Levison minor's face crimsoned.

"Now, cut along, kid, and none of your little jokes!" said the Tommy at the gate.

"I've got to see Colonel Lyndon."

The sentry began to look impatient. He was accustomed to dealing with all kinds of queer callers at the camp, but for a diminutive schoolboy to call to see the colonel was really the limit.

"Cut along!" he repeated. "The colonel's busy."

"I know. He's going away to-morrow," said Frank.

"That's why I've to see him to-night. It's only for a few minutes. Ask him—"

"I can't leave the gate, you little duffer!"

Frank felt a chill. He realised that it was absurd to expect to see the C.O. The colonel did not even know his name if it was taken in. But he had come there with a purpose, and he did not mean to be beaten. The distress in his face arrested the soldier's attention.

"Who the dickens are you, young shaver, and what do you want with the C.O.?" he asked.

"I'm Levison minor," faltered the fag.

"Not a relation of the colonel's?"

"Oh, no!"

"Just want to see him to wish him good luck—what?" grinned the sentry. "My eye! Some kids are cheeky!"

"No, no! It's important—"

"Oh, cut along!"

A handsome officer came out of the gate, and he glanced for a moment towards the schoolboy. Frank caught sight of his face, and uttered an exclamation. It was Captain Lord Conway, the "major" of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of St. Jim's. The fag had seen him at the school when he had come to see the Head.

"Lord Conway!" exclaimed Frank eagerly.

"Hallo!" said the captain.

"You know me!" exclaimed Frank. "I'm Levison minor of St. Jim's! I—I want to see Colonel Lyndon!"

Lord Conway smiled.

"I'm afraid you can't, my little man," he said. "The colonel's very busy this evening. We march to-morrow. What the dickens are you doing out of school at this hour?"

"I—I came to see Colonel Lyndon. It's important."

The sentry had gone back to his post, leaving the matter to the officer. Lord Conway looked curiously at the flushed, eager face of the fag.

"If it's really important, I might speak to Colonel Lyndon," he said. "What is your business here, my boy?"

"Oh, thank you!" gasped Frank. "It—it's about something that happened when the colonel was at St. Jim's this afternoon. There was a—a mistake, and I want to explain. Colonel Lyndon will be glad to know what I've come to tell him. If—if you'd only let me come in for a few minutes—"

Lord Conway hesitated. He had noted that the colonel had returned from St. Jim's with a grim, harassed brow, and without his nephew, whom he had intended to bring on a visit to the camp. Conway had given a passing thought to the matter, wondering if anything was wrong.

"It's about Talbot," whispered Frank. "Talbot's in disgrace with his uncle, and it's all a mistake, and I can explain. You know Talbot?"

"I know him," said Lord Conway briefly. "Wait here a few minutes. I will speak to the colonel, anyway."

"Oh, thanks—thanks!"

The captain disappeared. Frank waited with beating heart. He had come there on a generous impulse—to help, if he could, the fellow who had often helped his brother. If he could only succeed!

Lord Conway came back in about ten minutes, and he beckoned to the fag. Levison minor followed him with beating heart.

He traversed the great camp at the heels of the striding officer, hardly looking about him as he went. The fag had to break into a run now and then to keep pace with the big young man in khaki. They passed into a room where half a dozen officers were talking, all of whom glanced curiously at the fag of St. Jim's. Then the fag was taken into an inner room, and Lord Conway left him there.

As a tall, bronzed, grim-looking man rose from his chair, with knitted brows, Frank realised that he was in the presence of the colonel.

His heart almost ceased to beat as the grim face turned on him and the sharp eyes, under the grey, puckered brows, were fixed upon his face.

"Well?" The monosyllable came like a bullet, and the little fag trembled in spite of himself. "What is it?"

"I—I—I—" Frank's voice died away.

The grim, bronzed face before him relaxed a little.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, my boy." The hard voice was kinder now. "You wanted to see me. You have something to tell me about my nephew. I cannot spare many minutes. What is it you want?"

Frank took his courage in both hands, so to speak. It was now or never.

"I—I thought I ought to come, sir!" he gasped. "I—I want you to know that—that it was all lies—all lies about Talbot. He's the best fellow that ever breathed, and every chap at St. Jim's knows it, and—and—"

The colonel's keen eyes searched his face. He read nothing there but honesty and loyalty.

"You know something of what happened to-day, my boy?"

"Yes, sir. That man—Lodgey—"

"What do you know of him?"

"I know Talbot had nothing to do with him, sir. It was all Croke's lying!" burst out Frank. "He was Croke's friend, not Talbot's! Croke made him come, and there's a dozen fellows at St. Jim's who know it, too!"

"You are the boy who seized him in the road, I think?" said the colonel.

"Yes. I'd found out what was on, and we meant to keep him away," said Frank. "Croke's friends knew what was on, and we got it from Piggott. Piggott's a little beast—like all Croke's friends! I—I don't want to run down Croke, of course, but—but you ought to know, because you're down on old Talbot now. Talbot's the best chap at St. Jim's!"

The colonel's face had changed strangely.

"You are a friend of my nephew?" he asked.

"Well, not exactly," said Frank. "I'm in the Third Form, and Talbot's in the Shell. But I'd do anything for him, after what he's done for my brother."

"What has he done for your brother?"

Frank hesitated. But he realised that it was best to speak freely; Talbot's future depended on the result of that interview. And so it came out—in faltering tones—of Levison's recklessness, due—as the fag sincerely believed—to bad companions—of Talbot's steady influence over him which had drawn him to the path of right and decency. The colonel listened, hardly uttering a word; content to watch the flushed, eager face of the fag; to read there loyalty and truth, to know that every word the little fellow uttered came from his heart. A cunning rascal of Mr. Lodgey's type could hoodwink the plain old soldier; but he knew truth when he saw it, and he knew that he saw it now. And it was his nephew, whom he had distrusted and disbelieved, whom this innocent little fellow regarded as the good angel of his reckless brother—Talbot, the supposed associate of rascals—who had tried to hold the black sheep of St. Jim's to the right path.

Frank paused breathlessly at last.

"And—and Talbot never had anything to do with Lodgey," he faltered. "Except once he knocked him down. We heard about that, because the rotter jawed to him. Lodgey knew you were there to-day, sir. He was in the field, watching for your car, and he was following you in when we spotted him and collared him; and we'd have got him in the ditch, too, only Croke's friends chipped in to stop us. They didn't want us to spoil Croke's game."

"Did Talbot send you here to tell me all this?"

Levison minor started.

"Talbot? No! He doesn't know."

"You came of your own accord?"

"Yes."

"Have you leave to be out of school so late?"

"No fear!" said Frank. "I've cut prep. I shall get an awful licking from old Selby. But I—I don't care. I—I mean Mr. Selby. He's my Form-master."

"And what you have told me is known to others?"

"Yes. Wally knows—that's Lord Conway's young brother, you know, sir—and Tom Merry knows. Talbot knows; and—and I don't believe Croke would have the nerve to deny it, either, if you asked him straight. He's a funk," added Levison minor contemptuously.

"Indeed! My nephew is a funk, is he?" said Colonel Lyndon grimly.

Frank turned crimson.

"I—I didn't mean— I—I forgot he was your nephew for a minute; only—only it's a rotten shame he should make you waxy with old Talbot for nothing!"

The colonel burst into a laugh. The language of the Third Form sounded strange in his ears, with an echo of his own far-off boyish days.

"I am glad you came here, my lad," he said. "I think I see matters a little more clearly now. One of my nephews,

I fear, is a young rascal. Not that I was unaware of that," he added to himself. "Wait here!"

The colonel passed from the room. Five minutes later the fag heard the sound of a motor-car outside the building. A natty young lieutenant looked in. He beckoned to Levison minor, who followed him out.

"Get into the car, young 'un!"

Levison minor, with his brain in a whirl, stepped into the car. Colonel Lyndon was already there. The car buzzed away through the tight, and Abbotsford Camp was left behind in the darkness and mist. Frank stole a glance at his companion; the colonel's face was so grim that he did not dare to speak. But the fag felt that he had won the victory. He had cleared Talbot of unjust suspicion, and his cheery little face was full of satisfaction. Not a word was uttered as the car hummed on through the winter evening, to stop at last at the gates of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 12.

The False and the True!

MR. RAILTON looked into the junior Common-room in the School House.

"Talbot! Croke!"

Talbot rose from the chess-table, where he was playing chess with Tom Merry.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Colonel Lyndon wishes to see you. You will find him in the visitors' room," said the Housemaster.

Talbot started violently.

"My uncle!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Croke, kindly go with Talbot."

Gerald Croke came forward reluctantly. What had the colonel come back for? he wondered savagely.

Croke was not in good spirits that evening. The thought of Mr. Lodgey's power over him sickened him, and filled him with vague fears and terrors. Why had the colonel come? Had the treacherous sharper betrayed him already? Croke's heart almost stood still at the thought.

Some of the fellows looked curiously after the cousins, as they left the Common-room. Colonel Lyndon's return, after his visit in the afternoon, was surprising enough. Most of the fellows knew that Talbot's uncle was leaving for the Front on the morrow. But Tom Merry's face had brightened. The hope rose in his breast that the colonel's visit meant that he had repented of his harshness to his nephew.

Croke gave his cousin a look of hatred in the passage, but did not speak. His heart was heavy with fear and doubt.

Colonel Lyndon rose as they entered the visitors' room. Never had the bronzed old face looked so grim.

"You are surprised to see me here to-night," he said. "You did not expect to see me again, Talbot?"

"I was afraid I should never see you again, sir," said Talbot.

"I have received some information which lets in light upon the happenings of to-day."

Croke trembled.

The colonel's grim eye was upon him, and he noted how the cad of the Shell changed colour. Croke's knees were knocking together. Lodgey had spoken, then! Not for a moment did the thought of Levison minor cross the wretched plotter's mind.

"It seems"—the colonel's voice was like the rumble of thunder—"it seems, Gerald, that you were kind enough to arrange a little comedy for me this afternoon."

"I?" faltered Croke.

"That you arranged for your friend, Mr. Lodgey, to call while I was here, and to hoodwink me!" said the colonel.

"Uncle! I—I—"

"Perhaps it was not difficult," said the colonel, his voice like the lash of a whip. "I am a plain old soldier, unused to trickery. I feared, Gerald, that you were a rascal; but I did not know that you were so unscrupulous a knave as you have proved to be!"

"I—I deny it!" muttered Croke thickly. "Whatever Lodgey has told you, it's all lies! I—I— The man has a spite against me. Talbot's put him up to it, I've no doubt—"

"Silence, sir!" thundered the colonel. "Your confederate has not betrayed you, as you seem to suppose. I have learned the truth from another source."

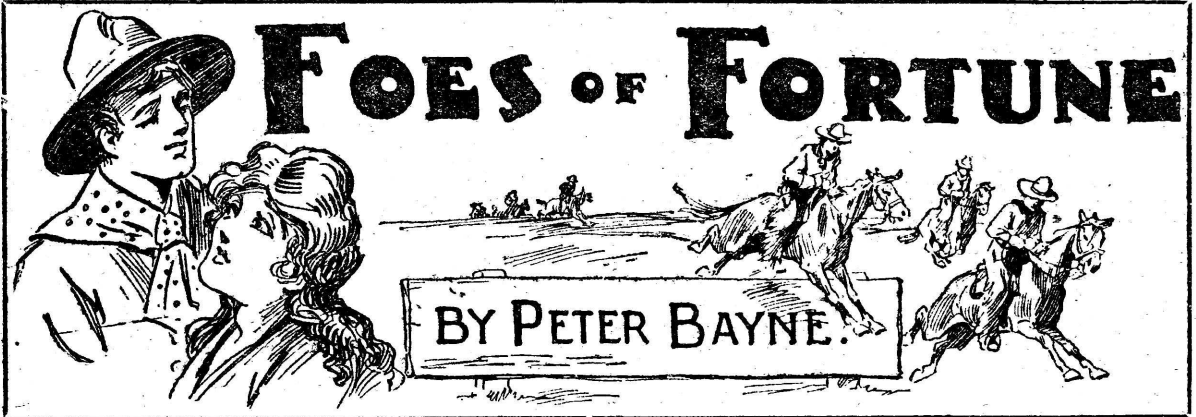
Croke stood utterly confounded. Lodgey had not betrayed him. How, then, did his uncle know? In the khaki camp, a dozen miles away, how had he learned?

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

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A NEW ADVENTURE SERIAL. START TO-DAY!

**The First Chapters.**

CARTON ROSS, a lonely and friendless youth, is attacked while asleep by a party of brigands, led by DIRK RALWIN. He is disarmed, and narrowly escapes with his life by plunging into the roaring waters of the Amazon. He is picked up by a small boat, which is carrying HARVEY MILBURNÉ and his daughter, LORNA, to their home at San Ramo, a small settlement some miles away.

Carton's father (the son of CYRUS ROSS, a famous money magnate) has just died, and Cyrus Ross, with the rest of his sons and relatives, is drowned by the collision of the financier's yacht with a battleship in the Channel during a fog. Carton Ross is, therefore, the sole surviving member of the Ross family, and heir to millions, though he is unaware of it. Dirk Ralwin, who has stolen Carton's wallet containing papers which reveal his identity, hears of the great calamity which has befallen the family, and at once sets out for San Ramo, where Carton has gone with the Milburnes.

After destroying the house, the outlaws carry Ross away to their encampment. During the night, however, Lorna appears at his tent, aids him in recovering his papers, and together they escape. They succeed in shaking off their pursuers by swimming across the river to an island, where they come upon an old ruined building, occupied by an Englishman, RODDY GARRIN, and a Chinese, AH CHING. They are made welcome, and all lie down to sleep.

During the night an intruder enters stealthily, evidently in search of something, but is driven away by Ah Ching, who, in a moment when everything is lit up by a flash of lightning, recognises him as a Yankee, HUXTON FENNER, who had previously been a member of the small party, but had deserted. Then a terrific storm bursts, and they all take refuge in a dungeon under the building.

(Now read on.)

The Lone Horseman—Betrayed to the Enemy—The Raft—Wireless.

The fire was kept alight, and the refugees, gathering round it for warmth, listened to the roaring of the storm, and wondered what unseen foes might be lurking in the darkness outside the fort, waiting to attack them.

To remain where they were seemed to be the only wise thing to do. Yet they instinctively knew that with the dawn of a fresh day Huxton Fenner would return—this time not alone.

The growing sense of some unknown danger gathering over them united Carton Ross and his companions as nothing else could have done. There they were—two brave and sturdy British lads, a fearless girl, and a little Chinaman, full of cunning and resource.

"Ah Ching," said Roddy Garrin, "we're out to beat the band, my son, and don't you forget it!"

Ah Ching nodded his big head, and smiled approvingly.

"Suppose any man touchee me," he said; "then he have a velly rough time."

Through lashing, drenching rain and madly-howling wind, Huxton Fenner rode into the jungle.

The track leading across it to the riverside was obliterated from sight. When the lightning flamed, illuminating every object with intolerable brilliance, it shone upon a limitless stretch of undergrowth, beaten flat by the tempest.

Never did the horseman remember such a night. A sullen rage and terror possessed him. Had he dared, he would

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have returned to the dismantled ruin on the hill from which he had fled in a panic of guilty fear.

But he was too much of a craven to make the attempt. Dazed and bewildered as he was, he had lost all sense of direction. Better go on, he resolved, trusting in the intelligence of his horse to take him to some place of safety rather than turn back, seeking a way across a trackless wilderness.

Stricken down on the mainland by the deadly marsh fever soon after his desertion of Roddy Garrin and Ah Ching, his former comrades, Fenner had lain for weeks in a miserable hut occupied by an old Indian hunter.

Upon recovering from his illness, he found himself destitute, and utterly unable to obtain the means of livelihood. The hardships that he had endured on the island faded from his memory. There, at any rate, he had never lacked food or companionship. So he made up his mind to return there, and crossed the river in the boat that he had stolen, reaching the island not long in advance of Carton Ross and Lorna.

Securing the boat to a stake in the bank, he set out for the old Spanish fort. It was a roundabout way that he took, and by the time he arrived at his destination, Lorna and her companion were already there.

Unseen by those within, he entered the building, and concealed himself from observation. Then, his curiosity aroused, he listened intently to the conversation that was taking place, missing not a syllable of it.

The knowledge that he gained from it excited him to an extraordinary degree. Those papers of Carton Ross, he vowed, must and should be his. The use he could make of them would bring him such wealth as he had never dreamed of possessing.

Unlike Dirk Ralwin, who desired money as a means of gaining power and great influence, Huxton Fenner craved for it to gratify his thirst for pleasure and enjoyment.

The gay haunts of New York and San Francisco knew him well. In them he had squandered a fortune. He was a gambler and a sharper; and it was at Buenos Ayres, after losing all his money in a run of bad luck at baccarat, that Fate led him to join, in a subordinate capacity, the ill-starred expedition of which Roddy Garrin was a member.

The world fame of Cyrus Ross was known to him as to all other men. Often had he thought with envious longing of the great financier's unlimited riches.

And now all that vast wealth belonged to the homeless, wandering lad who had found shelter from his foes in a roofless ruin on a desolate island.

Foiled though he had been in his attempt to steal the papers from their owner, Huxton Fenner had not abandoned his quickly-formed intention of gaining possession of them.

To do so he was ready to commit any desperate deed. The moment he heard of them, he there and then resolved never to rest until they were in his hands.

His immediate need, however, was shelter from the hurricane. The raging force of the wind was sapping his power of endurance. Trees crashed across his path, imperilling his life, and he was bruised in a score of places by the blown wreckage that struck him on face and body.

From the kind of dazed trance into which he was fast falling, Huxton Fenner was suddenly aroused by the fall of a thunderbolt not ten yards away.

It came down in a hissing ball of white fire that tore up the ground with an appalling explosion. Driven mad by terror, the horse rose straight up on its hind legs, squealing and pawing the air. A wild plunge flung Fenner from the

saddle, but he regained his seat in a moment, and quickly brought the excited animal under control again.

Instead of riding on, he dismounted and walked slowly in the direction of a group of mangrove-trees that he had caught sight of a minute or two before. Two or three men were standing near the spot, and they had seen him as he had them.

"That was smartly done," said one. "You know how to manage a frightened horse. If I'm not mistaken, though, I've seen it before to-night, and then there was someone else on its back."

This remark told Huxton Fenner what he had already suspected. These men were some of the bandits who had followed Carton Ross and Lorna to the island. The knowledge thus gained, while it put him on his guard, did not in the least disconcert him.

"Was there?" he said. "Well, I wanted the horse, and I took it. No doubt you would have done the same in my case."

"No doubt," the other agreed, with a cynical smile. "Your nature seems to have much in common with my own, and I should like to know more about you. Though not a pleasant spot on such a night as this, it is better to be here than out in the open, and I think we can make you comfortable till the morning."

Following his guide a short distance, Fenner found the rest of the outlaws sheltering under a natural, waterproof covering formed by the interlacing boughs and tough foliage overhead of the mangroves.

A burning torch, made by rolling together the leaves of a resinous plant, cast a dim light on the scene. Food and drink were given to Fenner, who lost no time in putting himself on a friendly footing with his new companions.

The man who had first addressed him, he discovered, was Ayton Aylman, who was in command of the little band. To Aylman he confided all that he deemed it prudent to tell concerning himself, and the reason for his presence on the island.

"Your appearance here is fortunate for us," said the outlaw. "We shall be saved the trouble of searching for Carton Ross now that you can lead us straight to the place where you tell me he is."

"Then you are anxious to capture the fellow?"

"More so than you may imagine," Aylman replied. "It might be bad for me if I went back to Dirk Ralwin without him. The chief has shot dead more than one man for failing to carry out his orders."

"And what about the other three who are with Ross now?"

"The girl, Lorna Milburne, must be taken prisoner along with him. It's not her fault that Ralwin wasn't killed, instead of being slightly injured, by the shot she fired at him. As for Garrin and the Chinaman, they may go scot-free, unless they interfere and get in the way. In that case, they must take the consequences."

Knowing them like he did, Fenner was certain that Roddy Garrin and Ah Ching would stand by the fugitives to the last, but he did not say so; and neither was he troubled by the thought of what the morrow held in store for his former comrades.

When morning dawned the outlaws set out from their resting-place. The storm had passed, but the devastating effects of its fury were everywhere visible. Making a stealthy approach to it, the members of the band took careful observation of the fort.

Not a sound came to their ears. They believed that the inmates were asleep, and that the task of capturing them would be an easy one. Led by Huxton Fenner, they rushed into the building. It was empty, and silent as the grave, the only sign of its recent occupation being the ashes of a wood-fire.

"Curse it!" cried Aylman angrily. "The birds have flown!"

"Wait a minute," said Fenner. "They may have seen us coming, and be hiding somewhere."

But a thorough search of the place proved fruitless. Carton Ross and his friends had vanished as completely as if they had never been there.

"They can't have got far away," said Fenner; "and the tracks they made will be easy to follow. We shall find them before long, in spite of their cunning."

Leaving the fort, the outlaws eagerly took up the search, and in a few minutes they picked up the trail of the fugitives. It led towards the river on the far side of the island, and, like a pack of hungry wolves on a hot scent, they followed it.

Perched on the upper branch of a tree, in which she was acting on look-out duty, Lorna saw the bandits riding down the hill from the fort. She immediately reported what she had seen to her comrades, who were busily at work finishing the building of a raft.

The raft had been recently constructed by Garrin and

Ah Ching, there being only a few minor details, of it left to attend to. Knowing that the outlaws would renew the search for them when the storm was over, the comrades had resolved to leave the island, and journey down the river to the nearest settlement.

They were out before daylight, and as the result of their energy the raft was almost ready for them. It was stoutly pieced together, and large enough to accommodate ten or a dozen passengers. At the moment Lorna gave her warning, Ah Ching and Garren were fitting two long sweeps in a couple of long supports screwed to the stern part of the floating structure.

"Coming, are they?" said Garrin, without glancing up from his work. "Well, I fancy we shall have gone before they are here. Now then, Ah Ching, look alive there!"

For some minutes no one spoke, and the only sounds were those of feverish activity. Then word came down from Lorna again.

"They're not a mile away," she called out; "and their horses are galloping at full speed!"

"Guess they suspect our intention," said Garrin. "You'd better come on board, Lorna. We're almost ready to start."

The girl descended and took her place on the raft. In another minute the necessary work in hand was done. Slowly the raft began to move away from the shore. Manning the sweeps, the comrades toiled at them with fierce energy.

"Come back, or we'll fire!" cried a loud, stern voice. "It's impossible for you to escape!"

The sharp demand came from Ayton Aylman, who, some distance ahead of his followers, galloped down to the riverside. It was an exciting moment.

The comrades paying no heed to the summons, Aylman levelled his revolver and fired. Every chamber of the magazine was emptied of its cartridge, but the aim was bad, and the bullets either went wide, or buried themselves harmlessly in the logs of the raft.

Cursing with rage and impatience, Aylman shouted to his men as they came bursting through the bushes, and a scattering volley from their rifles rang out.

"Too late!" shouted Aylman furiously.

It was true. Caught by a strong current, the raft was swept round a sharp bend, and disappeared from sight. Between the outlaws and that sudden curve of the bank was a long stretch of impenetrable bush and jungle growth ten feet high. To force a passage through such a barrier would have taken many hours, and Aylman well knew that by the time a way might have been found round it, even on horseback, the fugitives would be miles down the stream.

"We're beaten!" he said, in his exasperation and chagrin. "How they must be laughing at us now!"

No less angry and incensed than Aylman was Huxton Fenner; not so much because the comrades had escaped as on account of the fact that the papers he coveted were now far beyond his reach. Bitterly he reproached himself for not having made a second attempt to gain possession of them when he had been given the opportunity to do so.

"What a fool I was," he muttered to himself, "not to silence that dog of a Chinaman for ever instead of running away from him! But what use is regret? Carton Ross is not yet out of the country. Weeks must elapse before he is able to reach one of the big river ports, and long before then we may meet again."

Sullen and discouraged, the baffled outlaws went back across the island, and returned to the mainland. They feared for themselves, knowing what it would mean for them when they arrived at headquarters, and reported to Dirk Ralwin the news of their failure.

"With a fast steam-launch now," said Fenner, "we should soon overtake them. Isn't there one to be obtained at any of the villages higher up—Quito, for instance?"

"Quito!" Aylman remarked. "Quito!"

The name had set him thinking. Quito! It was there that the new wireless-station had been opened a few months before. The place was important only owing to that fact. It consisted of a few score of houses, inhabited chiefly by Spanish half-castes and natives, engaged in trading on a small scale.

The staff employed at the wireless telegraphy-station might consist of six or seven men, perhaps more. And amongst them there would certainly be one or two who were in active sympathy with Dirk Ralwin, the leader of the revolutionary movement that was for the time being popular amongst all classes.

The germ of the idea implanted in Aylman's brain by the mention of Quito, swiftly became an inspiration. Clearly he saw his way to not only recapture Carton Ross, but at the same time to render a brilliant service to his leader that would lead to his own advancement and profit.

"We'll pay a visit to Quito," he said to Huxton Fenner.

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"They have something there that will be of far more value to us than a steam-launch."

The chief operator at the Quito wireless-station was suffering from a feeling of lassitude and boredom that was not altogether due to the sultry and oppressive atmosphere.

He was a young Mexican, who had seen a great deal of the world, won high honours as a college student, and—this was what he prized most of all—written flaming manifestos in support of more than one of the periodical revolutions troubling his for ever war-distracted country.

Since he had been in Government employment, however, he had been compelled to suppress his natural leaning to whatever rebel faction might be conspiring to obtain power.

This had not been very difficult to do, especially as he drew a handsome salary from the properly-constituted authorities of the Mexican realm, but it was different now that Dirk Ralwin was making trouble for those in power.

He was firmly convinced that Ralwin was a far greater man than the late President Huerta, and he yearned to throw himself and all his energies into the rebel cause. Yet if he did so he would be dismissed from his lucrative post, and he did not want to lose it.

A martyr to duty, he sighed, rose from the chair he had been lounging in, and strolled across to the window, looking out on to the station compound.

Something that he beheld caused him to give a start of surprise. A number of men in uniform, big slouch hats, and armed with rifles, were marching across the compound behind an officer carrying a drawn sword in one hand, and a revolver in the other.

The young Mexican, trembling with excitement, drew back from the window.

"Revolutionaries!" he said. "Dirk Ralwin's men. They have come to take possession of the station."

The door of the operating-room swung open, and Ayton Aylman stepped inside. After closely scrutinising the other's face for a moment or two, Aylman made a mysterious sign with the fingers. The response, promptly given in the same way, brought a smile of satisfaction to his lips.

"Ha!" he said. "Then you are one of us? That will expedite matters a good deal, and in this case, as in most things, time is of the very greatest value."

The two men entered into an animated but brief conversation. Then the operator sat down before his telegraphic apparatus, while Aylman dictated a certain message to him for immediate despatch. And while he dictated, Aylman held his revolver in perilous proximity to the bent head of the operator.

This was for the benefit of any loyal supporter of the existing Government who might be watching the performance, and who would therefore have to report to his superiors that the chief operator was forcibly compelled to yield to the command of Dirk Ralwin's agent.

When the message had been despatched, Aylman took his departure, and rode away from Quito at the head of his men. He was pleased, and so was the young Mexican, who had been able to render a signal service to the head-chief of the revolutionary movement that so deeply excited his sympathy.

Moreover, he had rendered it without danger to himself, and without incurring the risk of losing his post and official salary. That would always be an inspiring memory.

The wireless despatch sent out from Quito was picked up by a cruiser flying the Mexican flag, on patrol duty down the Amazon, and her commander, a secret but ardent supporter of Dirk Ralwin, proceeded at once to act on it.

Afloat and Ashore—The Steamer—A Magic Name—The Cruiser,

"You can take it from me," declared Roddy Garrin positively, "that we have seen the last of our late friends. They'll trouble us no more."

Carton Ross looked doubtful.

"Wish I could think the same," he said; "but we mustn't forget that Dirk Ralwin has agents all over the country. What's to stop him from sending out word to them of our escape, and ordering our detention?"

"Pouf!" Garrin exclaimed. "It'll take those chaps who hunted you all day to get back to their headquarters, and then Ralwin has to communicate with his spies. By that time we shall be far beyond his reach, you mark my words, and he can whistle for us."

"Hope so," Ross answered; "but I have my doubts. Still, if we can escape him once, we can again."

The comrades were taking it easy. A hot sun shone down upon them from a cloudless sky, and they had no desire or need to exert themselves. The raft was floating with the

tide down the great river. The near bank of the stream was plainly visible; the far one was out of sight.

Their narrow escape from the outlaws was now no more than an exciting memory to them. Young and hopeful, they looked forward to a speedy conclusion to hardship and uncertainty. Lorna alone was sad and thoughtful as she wondered as to the fate that had befallen her father. During the struggle that raged around their home with the outlaws, he had suddenly vanished from her sight.

That he was dead, she would not for a moment believe; nor did she think that he had been made a prisoner and carried away into captivity. If he had been, she reasoned, Carton Ross would have seen or heard something of him.

There was sufficient food on the raft to last for several days, so the voyagers had nothing to fear on that score. But most of it was of the preserved variety, and, at the suggestion of Ah Ching, a visit ashore was decided upon to shoot some wildfowl, of which vast numbers were seen near the banks of the stream.

The raft was brought close inshore, and piloted a little distance up a wide creek, where the trees cast a delightful shade. All joined in the hunt for birds, several of which were shot with the revolver, and others knocked over and killed with sticks, in the art of throwing which with an accurate aim Ah Ching was an expert.

When the others returned to the creek, Ah Ching was found to be missing. They sat down to wait for him, but he did not put in an appearance, and they began to feel anxious.

"Where in the world can the fellow have wandered off to?" said Roddy Garrin. "The last I saw of him he was looking up at a monkey eating nuts on the branch of a ceiba-tree."

"Well, he may be there still," laughed Ross. "All the same, we ought to go and look for him. He may be in danger of some kind."

"That's very probable," said Garrin. "If there is any danger going around, Ah Ching is just the chap to fall in with it."

It took the comrades some time to strike the track of the little Chinaman, but eventually they did so, and then it was that they heard the sound of an extraordinary commotion.

"It's monkeys chattering," said Ross, quickening his footsteps. "There must be scores of them to make such a row."

"And I can hear Ah Ching calling to us," remarked Garrin, breaking into a run. "There! Don't you recognise his voice?"

In a few moments they found the missing Chinaman. He was sitting astride the same branch of the tree on which the monkey had squatted that attracted his interested attention. And on all the other branches of the tree, high and low, were more monkeys than any zoological garden in the world ever boasted of having.

They surrounded Ah Ching on every side. One large ape sat and chattered on his back, and playfully gambolled with his long pigtail, which it kept on jerking with a force that made Ah Ching grimace and squirm in extraordinary fashion.

"What a scream!" cried Roddy Garrin, shaking with laughter.

"Why hasn't one of us got a camera? A snapshot of Ah Ching now, and his admirers, would be worth a pile of money. How does it feel to be up there, my son?"

"Velly rotten!" gasped Ah Ching, tears of pain strolling down his cheeks. "You no stand laughing there, but drive these fellows off. My wanchee come down pretty quick. Ouch!"

Another hefty tug at his pigtail stinging him to wild exasperation, he twisted round, and lifted the grinning monkey under the jaw with his fist. The blow sent the ape spinning off the branch into the air. Falling to the ground on all fours, it darted off, screaming, amongst the trees.

"This is where the performance must end," said Garrin, "or Ah-Ching will have to do more fighting than he ears about."

Taking out his revolver, he fired it into the air, and the report of the explosion freed Ah Ching from the too pressing attentions of his simian admirers. Screaming and chattering, they bounded away from tree to tree, and were quickly out of sight.

The little Chinaman, not without calling down a few choice curses in his native tongue on the monkey tribe in general, descended from the ceiba-tree.

"My never try to catehee ape any more!" he declared, tenderly feeling his badly-aching scalp. "When I went up to take that one he let me come close to him, and stopped eating nuts to lookee in my face."

"You're such a handsome chap, you see," said Garrin, with

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

FOES OF FORTUNE!

(Continued from page 20.)

a peal of laughter. "I don't wonder that the monkey was attracted by you. My only surprise is that he didn't kiss your pretty lips."

"He lookee in my face," Ah Ching continued, ignoring Garrin's ribald interruption, "and then he screamed at the top of his voice. He went on screaming, and then all the other monkeys came trooping up. What side they come from my no savee. They all take a long look at me, and when I started to move they said, 'No; you stoppe there!' They say that, my tel you, and I stopped there."

"You couldn't very well do anything else," said Carton Ross gravely, "so long as that big chap sat on your back and pulled your pigtail. Why didn't you land him one sooner?"

Ah Ching's yellow face screwed up with a particularly sly look.

"The pain was velly great, but I wanted you to have a look see," he said, with becoming modesty. "I like my friends to have plentee good laugh and enjoy themselves."

Returning to the raft, the comrades embarked, and were soon floating down stream again. Some of the birds they had shot were plucked and roasted over an old iron brazier, with wood as fuel, that Ah Ching had picked up in his travels and treasured with miserly care.

After the meal had been eaten the little Chinaman played a selection of music on his banjo. He was still strumming on the instrument when Lorna caught sight of a cloud of smoke in the distance.

"That's from a steamship of some sort," said Ross. "Hurrah! It will overtake us before another hour is over. Then on board we go!"

Roddy Garrin stared at the speaker and grinned.

"I'd like to meet the skipper of any boat who'd welcome us with open arms," he said. "We're a pretty genteel-looking crowd to be taken on any of these river steamers, aren't we? No! I reckon that if we applied for a passage we should have to pay for it in advance, and as we've no money, it's the raft we must stick to."

"Not when they know my name," Carton Ross answered, a smile of quiet assurance on his lips. "That would make us welcome on any ship afloat."

Then Roddy Garrin remembered that the lad before him was the inheritor of the greatest fortune in the world. It seemed impossibly unbelievable. His imagination was stunned by the thought of it.

"I was forgetting that," he said, something of what he was thinking showing itself in the expression of his honest face; "but I mind it now. Yes; you're right. You would be made mighty welcome anywhere."

He turned away, feeling a little uncomfortable and abashed, and a wide gulf seemed to open between him and the other at that moment and keep them separate and apart.

Marking the undefinable change that had so quickly come over his companion, and blaming himself for it, Carton Ross regretted that he had made any reference to the wealth that was, and yet was not, his. It sounded too much like vain boasting, and he despised that folly.

The steamer rapidly neared the slow-moving raft. She was one of the crack river boats on her way down to the sea, and her decks were crowded with passengers. Vigorously using the sweeps, the comrades brought their craft athwart the line of the course being made by the ship.

The shrill blast of a steam siren pre-emptorily warned them that they were in the way.

"Better flutter a signal of distress," said Garrin, "or they'll go right past us, and we shall be left."

Lorna waved a pocket-handkerchief, while Ah Ching brandished aloft a spare blue gown that he happened to have in reserve. The signals were plainly seen by those on the steamer, and field-glasses popped up as if by magic, to be focused on the comrades.

"She's not going to stop," said Garren. "By George," he added quickly, "yes, she is, though! Now, I wonder what it is he is saying to us? Sounds curt to my ears."

An officer on the bridge of the steamer was shouting questions through a megaphone as the ship slowed down.

"Who are you?" he roared. "What do you want?"

Ross made vocal response in a voice that clearly carried over the intervening distance.

"My name is Carton Ross," he answered, "the grandson of Cyrus Ross, you know—the millionaire! These are my friends. We want a passage to the coast. Can you take us on board?"

(There will be another grand instalment of this exciting story in next Wednesday's issue of THE "GEM" LIBRARY. Order your copy in advance.)

LEVISON MINOR'S LUCK!

(Continued from page 17.)

"If you deny, Gerald, that the whole affair was a rascally comedy designed to deceive me as to your cousin's conduct, the matter shall be investigated rigorously. The Headmaster of this school shall be asked to take the matter up, and institute a close inquiry as to which of you was on familiar terms with that scoundrel at Rylcombe. Your friends shall be questioned as to what they know, and not a stone shall be left unturned to establish the truth. Are you prepared to face such an inquiry?"

Crooke's knees failed him, and he sank into a chair, shaking. Well he knew what the result of such an inquiry must be—the disclosure of his many shady secrets, enough to cause him to be expelled from the school a dozen times over. The colonel did not need an answer from the wretched, nerveless plotter.

"You have nothing to say, Gerald?"

"I—I—I—" Crooke's voice was dry and husky. "I— wasn't so much to blame, uncle. It was Lodgey's idea from the start. He hated Talbot, and—and he led me into it. I—I never meant—"

"That will do," broke in Colonel Lyndon. "You have said enough. I am not your father, Gerald, and you are not answerable to me. But relieve me of the sight of you. Go!" Crooke staggered from the room.

A compassionate glance from Talbot followed him. In that moment of shame and humiliation and misery, the Teff could feel for the wretched plotter whose schemes had fallen to pieces about his ears.

"Talbot!" The colonel's voice had softened. "I left you in anger, my boy. It seemed to me that I had been deceived—I do not excuse myself. I should have trusted you better—I see that now. I wrangled you, and I ask your forgiveness. You will not refuse it, my boy? Heaven knows it was with a heavy heart that I left you!"

Talbot could not speak; but he grasped the brown hand that was held out to him. The clouds had rolled by at last.

Tom Merry met his cham eagerly as he came into the Common-room. The colonel's car had rolled away from the gates of St. Jim's.

Talbot's face was bright; his eyes were dancing.

"All serene?" asked Tom.

"Right as rain, old fellow! I—I can't say how glad I am! It was rotten to part bad friends with my uncle when he's going out there, and—you understand?"

"I understand," said Tom. "But how did your uncle know?"

Talbot laughed merrily.

"It was Levison minor."

"Levison minor?" ejaculated Tom.

"Yes. The cheeky little beggar went to the camp—"

"My hat!"

"And bearded the lion in his den," said Talbot, laughing. "Who'd have thought of such a thing? Cheeky little beggar!"

"So that's where he was when he missed call-over!"

"Yes. And the colonel's begged him off with Railton. Selby won't give him the licking he's got in store," said Talbot. "The cheek of it—to trot over to the camp and ask to see the C.O. But I'm jolly glad he did. And it was ripping of my uncle to come over at once."

"I'm jolly glad!" said Tom.

Talbot hurried away in search of Levison minor. He found him on his way to the Third-Form dormitory.

"Not licked?" asked Talbot.

Frank grinned cheerfully.

"No. Railton spoke to Selby, and I'm let off with a caution. I—I say, you're not waxy about my chipping in?"

Talbot laughed.

"I'm jolly glad you chipped in, as it turns out," he said. "You're a plucky little beggar, and you've done me a good turn. And if I can ever do you one, kid, you've only to say so."

"Stick to Ernie!" whispered Levison minor.

"Through thick and thin," said Talbot quietly.

"Now, then, young Levison," roared Wally from the dormitory, "are you coming, or are you going to jaw all night with that Shell bouncer?"

And Levison minor, with a chuckle, hurried on to the dormitory.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"THE CROSS-COUNTRY CUP!" by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

LONG AND SHORT OF IT.

Brown: "Do you know Dooley?"
 Jones: "Very well."
 Brown: "Did you ever see him walking out with his girl?"
 Jones: "I should say so!"
 Brown: "Isn't it the funniest sight you ever saw? She is so tall, and he is so short; she is head and shoulders above him."
 Jones: "I would like to see him kiss her good-bye."
 Brown: "He doesn't kiss her good-bye."
 Jones: "What does he do, then?"
 Brown: "He shakes her hand, looks up, and says, 'So-long!'"—Sent in by Patrick Kavanagh, Dublin.

A CORKER.

Three tourists, travelling from the North of Ireland to Cork, were becoming very disgusted and impatient from the fact that the train was very late, and continually making long stoppages between the stations. During one of these stops an official of the company proceeded to examine the tickets.

"Where for, please?" he demanded, as he reached the compartment in which the three travellers were comparing views on the railway company, the train, the journey, etc.
 "Cork!" exclaimed the tourists in unison.
 "Then you're all Cork?" asked the inspector.
 "Yes," replied the wag of the party. "And if your train was the same, maybe it would be easier to draw. I never saw such a stopper in my life!"—Sent in by J. Spiller, South Australia.

CASTING REFLECTIONS.

Bootblack: "Shine, sir!"
 Ugly Gentleman: "No, thanks."
 Bootblack: "Shine yer boots so's yer can see yer face in 'em, sir!"
 Ugly Gentleman: "No, thanks!"
 Bootblack: "Coward!"—Sent in by H. Pemberton, Manchester.

A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.

The village blacksmith, having injured his hand, paid a visit to the local doctor to have it seen to. After examining the hand, the doctor said to his assistant:
 "Fetch me that phial off the surgery table, John."
 "No, you don't!" cried the excited blacksmith. "If this hand's got to come off, you'll use a knife or an axe; but I aren't going to have it filed off!"—Sent in by C. Henderson, Birmingham.

THE WRONG BILL.

Bill Smith, a country shopkeeper, one day went to the City to order goods. They were immediately despatched, and reached home before he did. When the boxes had been carried into the shop, Mrs. Smith uttered a scream, seized a batchet, and began frantically to attack the largest one.
 "What's the matter?" inquired a customer, watching her movements with amazement.
 "Pale and faint, Mrs. Smith pointed to an inscription on the box. It read: "Bill inside."—Sent in by V. Duffield, Birmensley.

SUGGESTED BY AN IRISH READER'S GROAN.

Dear Sir, I'm sorry to complain, And yet I think you'll see My grievance is so very plain You can't complain of me. I've laboured hard in sending jokes; Those jokes were meant to be "The great delight of all the folks Whose eyes this page do see. *Alas!* these gems of priceless wit Were in the basket thrown, Or at the office basely kept For motives of your own. With such an Editor, I fear, There soon will cease to be A Gem at all; its end is near, And quickly sealed will be— Because the Editor can't see The finest jokes are sent by me!"—Sent in by Private J. Stantiall, Gloucester.

FOUL!

A Yankee was describing the game of baseball to an Englishman, thus: "If a ball is struck within that chalked diamond, it is a home run; but if struck without those lines, it is a foul."
 At that moment the ball came over with great force and struck the Englishman on the head, knocking him senseless.
 "What was that?" he murmured on coming to.
 "A foul," replied the Yank.
 "Felt more like a horse!" muttered the injured one.—Sent in by E. E. Mingley, East Ham.

DIPPING THE ENDS.

Walking into her garden one day, a lady discovered the old man whom she employed as gardener busily engaged in cleaning out the chicken-houses. As he was clearing the perches, she said to him:
 "I think you had better dip the ends in paraffin, it is better for them."
 "Yes, ma'am," slowly replied the old man.
 The next morning when the lady was again walking round the garden, the old man came to her and said:
 "Bout what you said yesterday 'bout dipping them 'ens in paraffin—I didn't hardly like to do it; it seemed sorter cruel like."—Sent in by F. Worsfold, Dorset.

SOME MOUSE!

Joek was fresh from the Highlands, and had arrived at Halifax, N.S., en route for Winnipeg. He was sitting at the depot, and, noticing a number of animals' heads hung upon the wall, he called an attendant across.
 "Here, mon!" he exclaimed. "I want ye to tell me what are the names o' they beasties."
 "Oh, that very large black one is the head of a bear," was the reply.
 "Ay."
 "And that one with the small horns is the wapiti," said the attendant.
 "Ay."
 "And that one with the very large horns is the moose," continued the man.
 "A what?" exclaimed Joek.
 "A moose," said the man.
 "Awa, mon!" was the reply. "If that's a moose, what are yer runs like?"—Sent in by E. G. Wright, Wood Green, N.

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,

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