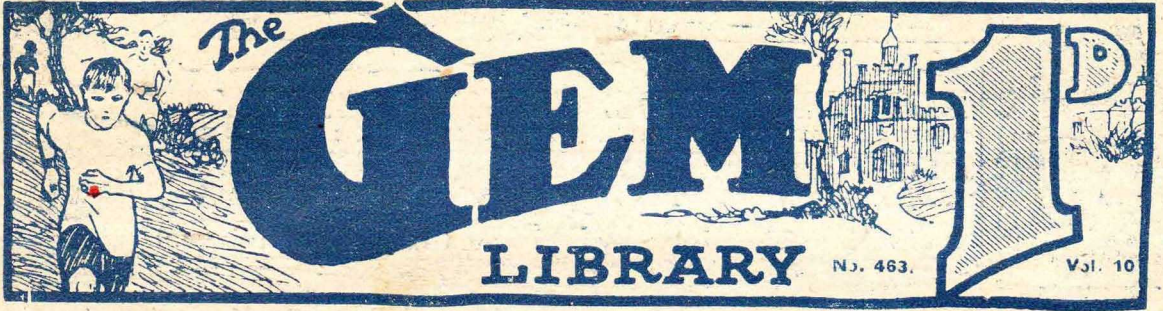


405
Christmas Week Number!

The **GEM** **LIBRARY** No. 463. Vol. 10



TALBOT—LEVISON MAJOR—!

(An Exciting Scene in the Grand, Long, Complete Story in this Issue.)

G. L. P.



THIS WEEK'S CHAT

Whom to Write to
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For Next Wednesday:

"FOR HIS BROTHER'S SAKE!"

By Martin Clifford.

It has already been made plain that Ernest Levison is finding the path of reform hard travelling. To some of my readers this seems to be a disappointment. They want the black sheep of the Fourth put in the ranks of the decent fellows by a stroke of the magician's wand. But that would not be true to life. In the case of a fellow like Levison there is bound to be a struggle before his better nature triumphs over his worse. And what can be more interesting than the story of such a struggle? Even the feelings that sway him for good—his devotion to Talbot, his affection for his young brother—are capable of being turned by circumstances and his own suspicious nature to evil. So it is in the fine yarn which appears next week, though through it all one perceives that in going back to his old ways for a time he has really little relish for them. He has tasted the pleasure of being decent and a sportsman, and the amusements of old have a bitter savour to his palate. How he landed himself into the worst sort of trouble, but escaped its consequences through the generosity of fellows who do not count him a friend, you will read next week, and also how he was saved from otherwise certain disaster by what plucky, loyal little Frank Levison did

"FOR HIS BROTHERS SAKE!"

THE STORYETTE COMPETITION.

This will be discontinued after the end of the year. So many jokes are received, and so few of them are good ones, that the labour it has entailed has been altogether out of proportion to its value, and every week there are hundreds of disappointed competitors—some of them grumbling ones, too—to the ten or so who succeed. It seems to me that the page can be put to better advantage, and I hope to tell you before long of some new competition ideas I have been thinking out.

OUR GREAT CHRISTMAS NUMBER.

Here are a few comments upon this, picked out at random from the many received. Three readers in all said they didn't like it; some hundreds were enthusiastic about it—some hundreds of my correspondents, I mean, of course, for there are very many readers whom no urging will induce to write and express their opinion. It is not that they have not one, but I think that in nearly every case they are so well satisfied that they really do not perceive the necessity for saying anything at all.

"Simply splendid," writes one reader.

"O.K.," says another, who evidently believes that brevity is the soul of praise.

"Weally wipping, as Gussy would say."

"Splendid!"

"Ripping!"

"A real treat—full of excitement from beginning to end."

"I hope the Christmas Number of the 'Magnet' will be much better." (This is from one of the three disgruntled readers. We hope so, too; but don't see any special reason why it needs to be!)

"Simply spiffing!"

"It is great!"

"As good as ever. Perhaps better. Everyone in our crowd agrees that it is just O.K." (This is from an Army reader.)

"Most excellent!"

"Rotten! There are many ways of showing you why it was rotten, but that would take up too much space. Now, I think when someone came to me and asked me to look after his own son, who is about my age, and put a friendly grip on me, as it says, I would not feel as if I wanted to cry.

Also, if I was told the way Tom Merry spoke to Gussy about looking after him, I would weep." (This is the most disgruntled reader of the three. On the whole, I think it was as well he economised on space, as what he does say is not too clear or convincing.)

"Some number! A grand story!"

"I can only say it was rotten to me." (This is the third of the objectors. His is quite a pathetic wail, and I am only sorry he omitted to give his name and address, because the return of his twopence might have made him feel better; and I really should not have grudged that large sum, after the rest of you fellows had done so much to make me feel that my efforts to please you had succeeded.)

"One of the most interesting stories I have ever read." (This very pleasing testimony came from an Army reader in hospital, and is one of the most appreciated of all, I can assure him.)

"One of the best yet published."

"Could not have been better!"

"The best of all!"

OUR NOTICES.

Back Numbers Wanted, etc.

Gunner A. Bezzant, No. 1682, A Battery, 215th Brigade, R.F.A., Jubbulpore, India, would be much obliged to any reader who would send him the "Gem" regularly; and would also like to have back numbers for the last six months or so.

By A. E. Dungworth, 22, Bromwich Rd., Woodseats, Sheffield—"Figgins' Fig-Pudding" and any stories in which Skimpole or Glyn figure prominently.

By E. A. Hibberd, 31, Mantua St., Battersea, S.W.—"Gem" and "Magnet" Christmas Number, 1915.

By S. Glendinning, 56, Elm St., Belfast—"Kildare For Ireland," "Tom Merry For England," "A Hero of Wales," and "A Son of Scotland."

By W. H. Meadows, 11, Netherfield Rd. North, Liverpool—"B. F." 3d. books containing footer stories. Full price offered, but please write first.

Private John Norris, No. 23026, 2nd Platoon, A Coy., 11th Royal Scots, B.E.F., France, would be glad to have back numbers of the "Gem," "Magnet," "G. H.," and "B. F." 3d.

By L. Shanack, 43, Nelson St., New Rd., E.—Any very old "Gems" or "Magnets."

By Horace Prynn, 113, Naylor Rd., Peckham, S.E.—Back numbers "Gem" and "Magnet" cheap.

Private Remmers, No. 19470, 21st Middlesex Regt., 41st I.B.D., A.P.O., Sec. 17, B.E.F., France, would be glad to have back numbers of the "Gem."

By A. Ayres, 22, Buckingham Rd., Brighton—"Gem" Nos. 1-360. State price.

Private J. T. Hawkins, No. 22463, 12th West Yorkshire Regt., 33rd I.B.D., Sec. 17 A.P.O., B.E.F., France, would be glad to have back numbers of the "Gem."

By Frank Lee, 106, Bathurst Terr., Longwith, Mansfield, Notts—Nos. 1-350; also number in old 3d. series in which Tom Merry came to St. Jim's.

By F. Frewin, 782, Fulham Rd., Fulham, S.W.—Back numbers "Gem" and "Magnet"; offers 1½d. each for those earlier than 1916.

By Thos. J. Wight, Coldstream Mains, Coldstream—Christmas Double Numbers of "Gem" from start.

Your Editor

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THE CROSS-COUNTRY CUP!

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



The juniors rushed at the furious farmer, and got him down. Then Grundy seized the whip, and laid it about him with great vigour. "Yaroooh! Stoppit!" howled the farmer. (See Chapter 6.)

CHAPTER 1. An Old Eoy's Gift.

"**B** AI Jove, it's wippin' of him—downright wippin'!" said the Hon. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy enthusiastically. "All the moah wippin', because nobody heah now knows him, an' it's so long since he left the old place that it would not have been at all supwisin' if he had foahgotten all about it."
"How long do you think it will take you to forget all

about St. Jim's, when once you've left, Gustavus?" asked Herries.

"Don't be widic, Hewwies! As if it would be poss foah me evah to foahget!"

"Well, then, I don't see that you need be surprised that Wilslow hasn't! After all, your memory isn't anything much to brag about."

"Weally, I nevah knew such a fellah to argue as—"

Tom Merry cut the great Gussy short.

"It's just exactly the thing we wanted, anyway," he said.

Next Wednesday:

FOR H.S BROTHER'S SAKE! AND **"FOES OF FORTUNE!"**

"You can't get fellows to be really keen on long-distance running unless there's something hanging to it."

"This is good enough. I fancy everybody in the two Forms who can raise a trot will enter," said Manners major.

"Rats to you, with your two Forms!" chipped in Wally D'Arcy. "The cup's open to us, as well as to you silly old fogies, and I shouldn't be surprised if a Third Form chap carries it off!"

"We've got some runners in our Form. We ain't giddy cipples!" said Manners minor, looking at his brother in a very pointed way.

"I shall have a jolly good shot at it, anyway!" said Joe Frayne.

"Same here!" said Levison minor.

"We'll all going in for it," added Jameson. "Anyway, the chap that can run and won't, will get bumped, so that's all about it!"

The fellows of the Shell and Fourth smiled. Naturally, they could not see any prospect of a mere fag walking off with the Wilslow Cup.

Charles Witherington Wilslow had cut no very big figure at St. Jim's in his day. That day was in the fairly remote past, too—only two or three of the masters remembered Wilslow.

Leaving school early to go into business, Wilslow had never risen higher than the Shell. Probably his brains would not have been above the average. The one thing he could do better than most fellows was to run.

Perhaps it was only in the natural order of things, therefore, that his gift to his old school on a very special occasion indeed should take the form of a cup for a long-distance race, confined to members of Forms below the Fifth.

The very special occasion was the winning of the V.C. by Wilslow for a deed of real heroism on the Balkan front. Though now a man of wealth, which he never expected to be in his schooldays, he had joined the Army as a private. He was Sergeant Wilslow when his great chance came, to be seized with both hands.

The story of how he had held on to a very hot position after seeing every commissioned officer in the force detailed to hold it shot down one by one, held on after being thrice wounded, and with not an unwounded man among the few left to him; how he had dared the uttermost danger to save the life of his company-commander; and how, at the finish, he had shared in the wild charge of the reinforcements sent, a ghastly figure, blood-stained from head to foot, but still full of fight—that story had thrilled St. Jim's to the heart.

Dr. Holmes had written him a warm letter of congratulation, saying that he had given the whole school a holiday in recognition of the honour that had come to it through Captain Wilslow's bravery—in this case, at least, promotion had not lagged. And the gallant captain had replied that he would be glad if the Head would give St. Jim's another whole day, and had enclosed a cheque for thirty pounds, to be devoted to the purchase of a handsome cup, said cup to be competed for on the day given.

The juniors were full of excitement. Fellows who had never been known to run a mile talked as if the cup was a dead certainty for them. Others, far more likely to have a look-in said little. Running, not talking, was going to win that cup, they knew.

It would not become the property of the winner. But no one minded that. The winner's name would be inscribed upon it—a lasting record of prowess; and he and the second and third home would all receive gold-medals.

"My hat, Monty, old scout, wouldn't the thing look well on the mantelshelf of our den!" said Tom Merry.

"You are using the wrong tense, Tommy. The proper one is the future, not the conditional," said the humorist of the Shell, not more than half in jest this time.

"What's the silly ass driving at, with his piffle about tenses?" said Crooke, sniffing.

"Conditional, would; future, will. Now, does any ray of illumination penetrate the jungle that a very polite person might call your mind, Crooke?" returned Lowther blandly.

"Oh, I see! You reckon you're going to pull it off?" sneered Crooke.

"Wrong, as usual. I will brag to no greater extent than to say that I'm jolly certain of being ahead of you at the finish, Crooke. It is upon our Tommy that I rely to lift the cup."

"Thought you meant that Manners would have to let his giddy photography slide for a bit, and carry it off," said Tom Merry, grinning.

"You bet I'm going to try!" Manners said. "But I haven't an earthly, really, you know. It's up to you, Tom!"

"Impossible to imagine the cup finding a resting-place outside No. 10 Study, of course!" jeered Racke of the Shell.

"Rot!" said George Alfred Grundy. "I'm going to put in all I know to win!"

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NOW ON SALE.

"FOUL PLAY!"

"It doesn't sound much," remarked Lowther meditatively.

"What doesn't sound much, you idiot?" snapped Grundy.

"All you know. Now, if you could put in all you think you know, or, better still, all you don't know—"

"Oh, ring off! You fellows don't know a good runner when you see him. You ought to have more sense, after I came so jolly near winning the Marathon against a lot of hotter opposition than there'll be this time. I consider that cup as practically my property already."

"It would save time if they engraved old Grundy's name on it before they sent it along," said Digby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shouldn't care about that. It would look too much like swank; and if there's one thing I bar more than another it is swank," said the modest Grundy.

"Oh, my only aunt Amelia Jane! What are you fellows talking about? That blessed cup's coming over our side, you know. If nothing else is certain, that is!"

It was George Figgins, the leader of the New House juniors, who made this remark.

"Well, I'll admit your chance is a jolly good one, Figgy," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, 'tain't only me; if it was I wouldn't open my mouth too wide! But there's old Kerr here, and there's Redfern, and there are others."

"What about Fatty?" asked Lowther, grinning.

"My hat! You don't suppose I'm going to run miles and miles, do you?" said Fatty Wynn. "Got too much sense, thanks!"

Figgins turned upon him, and snorted wrathfully.

"You're not going to be allowed to slack, Fatty, so don't you think it!" he said warmly. "You'll have to start, anyway, like everybody else!"

"Don't mind starting," answered Wynn. "If everybody's going to do that, I shan't be the only one to drop out in the first mile."

Talbot came along through the hall. Talbot of the Shell was just about as fine an all-round athlete as there was among the St. Jim's juniors. Between Tom Merry and him there was very little indeed to choose. But, like Tom, Talbot was modest about his abilities.

"There's the giddy winner!" sneered Crooke, who hated Talbot with a poisonous hate.

They were cousins, these two, and Talbot had done his best to be friendly with George Gerald Crooke. But friendship between two fellows of natures so utterly different was a sheer impossibility, as Talbot had discovered by degrees.

"Had lots of practice running away from the police," said Racke, in a low tone, but not so low that Talbot could not hear.

The fellow who had once been known as the Toff had far more patience than most boys of his age. He had learned lessons in a hard school. But that was too much for him. It was a wanton insult. He and Racke had never come into close contact. There might be some reason in Crooke's enmity, from the point of view of a fellow like Crooke. Racke's was utterly without cause.

Talbot swung round and caught Racke by the collar.

"Better say anything you have to say aloud!" he snapped.

Racke wriggled, but could not wriggle free. He had a yellow streak in him, but he was not entirely a coward.

"I'll repeat it the moment you let go!" he said sullenly.

"You'll get your head punched if you do!" was Talbot's grim reply. "But you shall have your chance."

He released Racke. Young War-Profits, as St. Jim's sometimes called the son of the senior partner in the firm of Racke & Hacke, contractors to the Government, did not speak at once. He stood and glared at the fellow who had handled him. Evidently he was trying to make up his mind whether the game was worth the candle.

"Contraction and expansion are queer things," said Lowther, thoughtfully. "It's a subject that's really worth a little study."

"What are you driving at, you silly ass?" asked Herries politely.

"Lowthah is talkin' wot, as usual, Hewwies," said Gussy. "I vote we give Wacke the fwog's-march foah bein' such a cad as to insult old Talbot, who is worth twenty thousand of such wettles as Wacke!"

"Leave him to me," said Talbot quietly.

"You see," went on Lowther, who never minded having to explain his jokes, "the more Racke senior contracts the more his profits expand! That's one instance of what I mean."

"Just you leave my governor alone, Lowther!" said Racke viciously.

"My dear, good man, I'm going to. I wouldn't touch a war-profiteer with the end of a barge-pole. I'm merely talking natural philosophy. Now, with you, there was a clear case of contraction when Talbot had you by the collar, and your charming countenance began to assume the pleasing

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The bank was rotten with rain and frost, and it gave way under Tom Merry, sliding him back into the water. Talbot, however, had better luck, and he cleared it without mishap. (See Chapter 13.)

hus of a well-boiled beetroot. Your courage expanded. But no sooner was the pressure stopped, and the contraction thereby removed, than there was a distinct contraction of your courage. Jolly queer, I call it, and no end interesting!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you're too funny to live, Lowther!" said Racke. "For two pins I'd——"

"Got a pin, Tommy? I've only one!"

It is possible that Racke would have preferred a row with Lowther to one with Talbot. But Talbot did not intend giving him his choice.

"Have you anything to say to me, Racke?" he asked, quietly but sternly.

"Oh, if you must have it, take it! You needn't suppose I'm afraid of a slinking, burgling cad!"

Talbot's face flamed red.

"Will you come to the gym at once, or must I hit you first?" he said.

"I'll come, hang you!" replied Racke recklessly.

He had no real chance, and he knew it. Talbot might have punished him more heavily than he did; but even as it was, Racke got a pretty stiff dose. For his blood was up, and he refused to give in for some time after it was evident he was beaten hopelessly.

When at last he crawled away there was black rage in his heart against his conqueror. Crooke was not likely to find Racke unwilling when he thought out a fresh scheme against Reginald Talbot.

CHAPTER 2.

Not All of One Mind.

"I VE got an ideah!"

Thus spoke Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth to his chums in No. 6 Study.

"Bury it, Gustavus, before it gets any mouldier," said Jack Blake. "It's sure to be a mouldy one, anyway, if you've got it!"

"I considah you an intolewably wude person, Blake, and if it were not foah the fact that I am wpressed foah time, I should pwoceed to administah to you——"

"Great Scott, Gussy, if you go all that way round when you're in a hurry, I wonder how long you'd take when you had all the time there is?" said Digby.

"Do not be fwivolous, Dig, I beg of you! This is weally a great ideah. Listen!"

"I suppose we shall have to," growled Herries. "No giddy chance of getting any prep done till Gussy's got it off his mind."

"Getting polite in your old age, aren't you, Herries?" grinned Blake.

"Always was polite, old scout. Haven't you noticed it? Why?"

"You spoke of Gussy's mind, and quite as if you believed there really was such a thing!"

"This is my ideah," said Arthur Augustus, oblivious for the moment to their japing. "We ought to charge an entrance-

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fee to every fellah who wuns in the wace, an' use the proceeds to buy tuck—"

"My hat! You must have been going to Baggy Trimble for your ideas!" gasped Digby.

"Weally, Dig! As if I should think foah a moment of takin' counsel with such a fat, cwass ass as Twimble!"

"Sounds mere like that Greyfriars merchant, Fish!" said Blake.

"Bai Jove, I nevah in all my life saw such gwoss duffahs as you thwee!"

"It won't do, Gussy, old kid. The chaps would never stand it," Herries said, shaking his head wisely.

"Stand what, you uttah idiot?"

"Being charged an entrance-fee for the race so that we could buy tuck with the money."

"They'd want to know where we came in that we had the power to wangle the thing like that," said Blake. "Of course, we really are no end superior to the common herd. But that's not to say we can bag their cash."

"I think it's a Fotten scheme," pronounced Digby.

"Oh, you imbeciles! You uttah asses! What in cweation did you think I meant?"

"You said plainly enough," Blake answered, looking at his chum like one intensely disappointed by a sordid revelation of selfishness from one of whom better things were naturally expected.

"What did I say, you silly lunatic?" howled Gussy.

"You heard him, Dig?"

"Of course I did, Blake. He can't deny it."

"Deny what, you idiotic boundahs? I cannot in the vewy least undahstand what you are dwivin' at!"

"You heard, too, Herries?"

"To my sorrow I did, Blake. You'd better dry up, Gussy. We aren't on for taking a share in a wangle of that sort. I'm surprised at you—horribly surprised."

"Oh, vewy well—vewy well indeed! I'll go along to Tom Mewwy, an' suggest to him that an entrance-fee should be charged, an' tuck-boxes foah men at the Fwont bought with the money!"

"Hold me up, Dig! I feel faint! Why didn't you say that before, you maniac?"

"I am not a maniac, Blake, an' I wefuse to have such oppwobvious expressions applied to me. Moahovah, I did say it—"

"You didn't! Now, then, you chaps, did he?"

"I'm jolly well deaf if he did, Blake, that's all," said Digby.

"Same here," said Herries.

"Well, if I didn't say it, that was only because you were so wude as to intewwupt me. Mannahs in this study—"

"He ain't," said Dig. "I don't believe he's been inside the door to-day."

"Bai Jove, what a tewwibly dense bwain you have, Dig! I am talkin' about the need foah an impwovement of mannahs—"

"Right-ho! Go and improve him, then; but mind you don't come back with a thick ear—he may not take to the idea, you know."

"Ass! Donkey! Cwass imbecile! Now, Blake, what do you weally think of my ideah?"

"Oh, I don't reckon old Dig's quite so bad as all that comes to, Gustavus. There's some excuse for a chap not understanding you."

"You are as big an ass as Digby, Blake, an' I wefuse to throw my swine befoah—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Didn't know you were a pig-keeper, Gussy!"

"It's since the time when he had a stye in his eye, I suppose," said Digby. "War-time economy, you know—use up everything, and burn the rest to save cartage."

"I mean my pearls. Oh, weally, deah boys, I do wish you would leave off japin', an' tell me what youah opinion is."

"It's not half bad," said Blake judicially. "But the difficulty about it is that it can't be done unless everybody agrees."

"And everybody jolly well won't agree," added Herries.

"You won't catch chaps like Crooke and Clampe and Mellish paying out for what they can get free," said Digby.

"That objection to the scheme has not been ovahlooked," answered Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "Give me cwedit foah a little intelligence, deah boys!"

"We do—we does," murmured Blake. "For very little indeed!"

But Gussy's method of overcoming the objection was not such a bad one, after all. He suggested the calling of a meeting of all the juniors, and putting the matter to the vote. He regarded it as certain that there would be a thump-
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ing majority in favour of his plan, and that public opinion would prevent the objectors from refusing to shell out when the time came.

As soon as prep was over the four went along to see Tom Merry & Co. They found Talbot with the Terrible Three. All four approved.

"But, of course, a meeting to decide it must be held," said Tom. "I'll call it. That won't be taking too much on myself, I think, though I dare say some of them will say it is. No time to waste, so we'll have it to-morrow."

"An' I'll ask old Kildare to come an' take the chair," said Gussy eagerly.

"If Kildare has set up in the furniture removing line—"

"Oh, do dwy up, Lowthah!"

Kildare, the captain of the school, assented readily, and said the idea was a first-rate one—which caused Gussy to blush with pleasure and consider Kildare a person of real discrimination. But he thought rather less of Kildare's perspicacity when the captain added that if there was really strong opposition to it, it must be withdrawn. To Gussy it seemed that as the idea was so unquestionably good, anyone who opposed it must stand convicted of such wrong-headedness as to render his opinion of no value whatever.

Tom Merry's notice mentioned the cause for which the meeting had been called, and opposition began to crystallise at once.

"I'm not so sure that this meeting's going to pass off without ructions," said Tom to his chums, as they passed into the Common-room together next day. "I've seen Crooke and a few more of the beauties putting their sweet heads together, and I guess I know what that means."

"My hat, old man, you didn't expect everybody would be of one mind, did you?" asked Manners. "What could that crowd do, anyway?"

"Personally, if I found myself of the same mind as Crooke, Racke, & Co.," said Lowther solemnly, "I should rush off at once for a bottle of disinfectant—I should know that was what my mind must need."

CHAPTER 3.
The Meeting.

A CROWD had already gathered in the Common-room, which looked like being densely packed when all interested had assembled.

It was plain at a glance that the crowd had not drifted in at random. Its sections were easy to perceive.

The fags of the Third had marched in together under the leadership of Wally D'Arcy. Figgins and Kerr led a New House contingent of Shell and Fourth-Form fellows. Crooke, Racke, Mellish, Clampe, and Piggott sat in a row:

A little earlier, and Ernest Levison and George Gore might have been found among the malcontents.

But things had changed with those two. Talbot's influence had done Gore a lot of good. He might not yet be all that Talbot could wish, but he was a far more decent fellow than he had been.

Talbot's influence had also been exerted upon Levison. But the black sheep of the Fourth was a more difficult fellow to handle than even the unruly Gore. Alone Talbot could never have prevailed over the black streak in Ernest Levison's nature.

But what Talbot could not bring about had been done by a certain small fag, who sat now between Wally D'Arcy and Joe Frayne. For his minor's sake, Levison had tried to amend his ways. Not yet had all the evil in him been conquered; but it was significant of the changed condition of affairs that he sat as far apart as well might be from those who had been his chums in the past.

The wasters missed Levison. He had more brains than the rest of them together, and they knew it, though they would not have owned it.

Kildare came in, big, handsome, sunny of face. He took the chair, on the raised platform which had been extemporised for the occasion.

"I have been asked to come along," he said. "Otherwise I shouldn't have butted in, as this isn't an Upper School business, and you fellows ought to be quite capable of running it for yourselves."

"Heah, heah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Shut up, ass!" growled Blake.

"I absolutely wefuse to shut up, Blake! Why should I shut up? The expwession is a wude one, an'—"

"Oh, dry up, do! Can't you see that it looks as if you think old Kildare had butted in?"

"Don't be widge, Blake! I have the vewy highest respect foah Kildare—"

"Well, then, show it by keeping your silly mouth shut!"

Gussy subsided into wrathful silence.

"It will be necessary to elect a secretary to receive entries for the race," went on the St. Jim's skipper. "Then, if a proposition which, I believe, I am expected to put to you is carried, it will also be necessary to elect a treasurer."

"What for?" asked a sulky voice, which sounded like Crooke's. "There isn't any question of money about this bizney, I suppose?"

"There may be," said Kildare. "But let's take things in their proper order. The first thing is the election of a secretary. Has anybody a proposition to make?"

Up jumped Arthur Augustus, after a silence lasting nearly twenty seconds.

"Mistah Chaiahman, ladies, an'-oh, I beg pardon—"

"Dry up, you idiot!" yelled Crooke. "We didn't come here to listen to your rot!"

"Mistah Chaiahman, gentlemen, Cwooke, and others—"

"Good for you, Gussy, old ass!" roared Jack Blake.

"I beg that you will not intewwupt, Blake! Mistah—"

"You said that before. Get on with the washing, Gus!" yelled Wally of the Third.

"Mistah Chaiahman, gentlemen, Cwooke, and othahs,—I beg to ppropose Tom Mewwy as secwetary. We all know Tom Mewwy, an' we all trust him—"

"Speak for yourself!" hooted R.cke.

"Gentlemen, Tom Mewwy has the honour to be distwusted by Wacke. Aftah that, it is sewacely necessary foah me to say moah in his favour!"

And Gussy sat down. Jack Blake clapped him on the back till he coughed. Racke scowled fiendishly. Most of the others roared. Gussy had made a hit.

"Secunder, please!" said Kildare. "We mustn't have these personalities, you know."

"I beg to second the proposition," said Manners.

"Shall I put it to the meeting?" asked the skipper.

"Oh, hold on, Kildare!" cried Figgins. "You can't rush things like that, you know. I've nothing against Merry, of course, but I'm not going to see the New House shoved into a back seat. So, I beg to propose that Kerr be secretary."

"Any secunder?"

"Oh, rather! I'm your man for that," said Dick Redfern.

"All serene. Any further amendments?"

Arose Wally D'Arcy.

"I dunno about an amendment, Kildare—what is it, anyway? But if there's any proposing about—"

"Really, D'Arcy minor, you're not old enough for that sort of thing, you know! Give Gussy his chance first! Who's the lady, anyway?" said Lowther.

"Rats to you! You think you're no end funny; but the things you say ain't half as funny as your silly face. I propose that Franky—I mean, that Levison minor should be secretary. I don't care about the job myself—too much like work—but—"

"Oh, cheese it, Wally! Don't be a bigger ass than you can help!" gasped Frank Levison, who had been utterly surprised to have this honour thrust upon him.

"Any secunder?" asked Kildare gravely.

"I'm 'im!" said Joe Frayne.

"Then I'll punch your head when we get out, Joe!" whispered Levison minor in wrath.

Grundy of the Shell was seen to be talking rather excitedly to his two henchmen, Gunn and Wilkins. Gunn was heard to say: "No go, old chap!" from which it was deduced that Grundy would have taken on the secretarial duties without objection. But he was not proposed.

Racke arose.

"I propose that Crooke be secretary," he said, and dropped back into his seat, as if rather relieved to have done with a task that did not suit him.

"I second that," squeaked Percy Mellish.

"We will take the last amendment first, as is the usual way," said Kildare. "Proposed by Racke, seconded by Mellish, that Crooke be secretary. All who are in favour hold up their hands."

Racke, Crooke himself, Mellish, Clampe of the New House, Piggott—that was all! Crooke glanced over to where Ernest Levison sat. Levison shook his head, smiling an enigmatic smile.

Crooke scowled at the fags. But the fags were not to be intimidated.

A perfect forest of hands shot up when Kildare said "Against."

Whomsoever might be wanted by the majority, very plainly Crooke was not.

"Amendment lost!" said Kildare. "Let's get on. Proposed by D'Arcy minor, seconded by Frayne, that Levison minor be secretary. Those in favour—"

"Here, Kildare—oh, please, Kildare! I don't—"

"Ring off, Franky, you little donkey! Think of the honour of the Form!" howled Wally.

"That's all very well, but—"

"Hands up, those in favour!" repeated the captain.

If the New House fags had followed the lead given by D'Arcy minor, Frank Levison might have found himself forced into a position he did not in the least desire. But only Jameson did so, and he was seized by two of his colleagues from behind, and had his hands pulled down.

The Shell and Fourth of both Houses naturally voted solid against the election of a mere fag.

"I declare the amendment lost. Proposed by Figgins, seconded by Redfern, that Kerr be secretary. Hands up!"

New House voted as one man, fags and all.

"Against!"

New the position was critical, for all depended upon whether the School House fags rallied to the support of their side.

But Wally proved loyal, as might have been expected, and Kerr was counted out. There was no excitement left. Not many voted against Tom at the finish—only Crooke, Racke, & Co., indeed.

Then Kildare put D'Arcy's suggestion before the meeting, saying that he himself thought it a very good one.

Gussy beamed.

Crooke got up, and fairly howled:

"Wilsow gave the cup, didn't he?" roared Crooke. "If there was to be anything to pay for entering, he'd have said so, wouldn't he? It's just like D'Arcy's beastly, swanking, silly cheek—that's my opinion!"

"I'm not sure that your opinion is likely to carry any great weight, Crooke," said Kildare, with a glance of contempt at the red, angry face of the cad of the Shell. "All the same, I think a really big majority—not merely a bare one—should be needed to carry this, and I think Captain Wilsow should be written to for his approval. But I don't mind writing myself, and I really have no doubt at all as to what the answer will be."

There was a thumping majority. Even Racke was ashamed to vote against the proposition. But Crooke was not, and Mellish and Clampe and Piggott followed the Crooke lead.

"Now there's the matter of a treasurer," said Kildare.

"I propose Talbot," said Tom Merry at once. "I also propose that he should combine with the duties of treasurer those of assistant secretary. I should like that much better."

"Dare say you would, old scout!" grinned Lowther.

"I second the proposition," said Kerr, very quietly, but meaningly.

In spite of his redemption of the past, there were times when the cads of St. Jim's lifted their heads against Talbot. Kerr's seconding and the clap on the back which Figgy gave Kerr, and Dick Redfern's "Hear, hear!" were like a vote of confidence in Talbot from the best of the New House, and Talbot understood.

"It can't be done!" howled Crooke. "The fellow isn't to be—"

"Silence, Crooke, or you will find yourself put out!" roared Kildare.

"I agree with Crooke. Surely there's some fellow here with a clean record—"

"Sure, an' if there is, that same is not yourself, ye spalpeen!" yelled Reilly.

"Hear, hear!" cried Dick Julian.

"I'm not going to be shut up!" raved Crooke. "I—"

"You're going to be shot out!" said Kildare grimly. "Now then, you fellows!"

No more was needed. Hands in scores seized upon the two cads. Clampe and Mellish and Piggott squeezed themselves out of the way.

"Yarooogh!" howled Crooke, as he descended outside.

"Yooooop!" hooted Racke. "I'll be even with some of you rotters for this!"

Nobody minded Racke's threats. They returned in high good humour, and Talbot was elected treasurer and assistant secretary without a dissentient voice. Mellish, Clampe, and Piggott were discreetly silent, and Baggy Trimble, as if to emphasise the fact that he was not on the unpopular side, put up both hands. One of them held a large slab of toffee, and when the rest poured out Baggy was still on his knees groping about the floor for his toffee, which someone, by jogging his arm, had caused him to drop.

CHAPTER 4.

At The Receipt of Customs.

"CUT off and ask old Talbot to come and help me with this job, Manners," said Tom Merry next day. "You'll have to put all that photographic tosh away, you know. There isn't room for it." "Cut off yourself!" growled Manners, looking warlike. "And leave my photography alone. I suppose this is as much my den as yours, isn't it?"

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "FOR HIS BROTHER'S SAKE!"

"At the present moment it's the headquarters of the Wilsow Cup Executive, and don't you forget it, my son!" said Tom solemnly.

"I wouldn't bunk—not for you or a dozen like you—only I want to bag the dark-room—"

"Best place for a chap with your sweet temper and your elegant dial," said Tom. "You might tell Talbot on the way."

Manners grunted something that did not sound much like "Yes."

"Now then, Monty, are you going, or am I to put you out?"

"Neither, Tommy, my son."

"Then you're going to help?"

"I'll help all serene. Superintending is about my line. You and Talbot sha'n't go wrong if I can stop you."

And in preparation for his arduous superintending labours Lowther tipped his chair on its hind legs, put his feet on the mantelpiece, and closed his eyes meditatively.

Manners was better than his word, for Talbot turned up within a minute or two.

A notice was at once drawn up and pinned to the outside of the door. This notice signified to all concerned that entries for the Wilsow Cup would be received within, and the sooner the better. The entrance-fee had been fixed at half-a-crown.

Tom Merry had unearthed an old money-box—one of the kind that need keys to open them. The key was lost; but Tom said that was an advantage rather than otherwise. When everything was inside, the box could be broken open and the contents sent to the right quarter. An exercise-book, with pens and ink, completed the preparations.

"You can do the writing, old chap," said Tom. "You write a much better fist than I do."

"Hark to the secretary!" murmured Lowther. "He'll be killed dead with hard work if he isn't careful."

Tom flung a cushion at his head.

"Thanks awfully!" said Monty. "I'm glad you don't forget that it's a fit and proper thing the superintendent should be comfortable, Mr.—er—Deputy-Superintendent."

There was a knock at the door, and Wally D'Arcy appeared before anyone had time to say "Come in!" Behind him showed the faces of Frayne, Jameson, Hobbs, Manners minor, Levison minor, Gibson, and half a score of other fags.

"Are we first in the field, Tom Merry?" asked Wally eagerly.

"You are, kid."

"Right-ho! Enter the lot of us. We've got our chink ready."

Talbot proceeded to enter up the names, the fags watching with absorbed interest.

"Do we drop it in this money-box?" asked Wally.

"If you like, kid."

They did like. Each waited until his name had been set down, and then solemnly dropped in his fee. Then they departed in very cheery spirits.

Then Jack Blake & Co. looked in.

"Mado a start already?" asked Herries.

"Yes; a jolly good one."

"Are theah moah than twelve?" asked Gussy, in some anxiety. "If not, I wefuse to be put down next, because thirteen is a howwibly unlucky numbah, you know, deah boy."

"Seventeen," said Talbot. "Any objection to the eighteenth place, D'Arcy?"

"None at all, deah boy."

"That's just as well," said Lowther sleepily. "for eighteenth is about as high a place as you're likely to get, my son."

"Weally, Lowthiah—"

"Oh, dry up, Gustavus, and give someone else a chance!" said Digby.

The four were entered and cashed up. They did not clear out, although seven made rather a crowd in the study. And hints were wasted upon them.

No one else turned up for a minute or two, so Talbot proceeded to enter up his own name and the names of the Terrible Three, and half-a-sovereign more tumbled through the slot of the box, which was getting quite weighty.

"This is getting a bit dull," remarked Blake, yawning.

"My dear man, it never laid out to be a circus," answered Lowther. "And you're really—er—matter in the wrong place, shall we say? Not exactly needed, you know. Talbot does the work here, Tommy looks over his shoulder to see he does it just so, and I issue orders to Tommy when necessary. Further superintendence is rather worse than superfluous."

Now came a stream of entrants—Noble, Dane, Reilly, Glyn, Gore, Hammond, Kerruish, Newland, and half a dozen

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NOW ON SALE.

"FOUL PLAY!"

others. They were worked off, their departure was expedited if they showed any sign of lingering, and another lull followed.

Then Levison came in alone. Talbot nodded and smiled; the rest nodded without smiling. They had not quite made up their minds yet about Levison. The fellow was shaping better, but a relapse into his old ways might take place any day.

He looked a different fellow, however. There was a touch of colour in his face, and his shoulders were squared.

"Mean to have a shot, Levison?" asked Blake.

"I suppose so. Nothing against it, is there?"

"Of course Levison will have a twy, Blake! Evewy decent chap means to."

Gussy meant to be polite. But Gussy's attempts to encourage Levison in the straight path were seldom successful.

"And that being so, even those who aren't exactly decent need not be kept out, eh, D'Arcy?" said Levison, narrowing his eyes till they were mere slits.

"Oh, weally, deah boy, you take me in the w'ong sense, I assuage you! Evewybody knows that you aren't half such a wot— Oh, Blake, you sillay ass, can't you keep youah gwat hoofs off my feet?"

And the swell of the Fourth danced about with one patent-leather covered foot in a hand.

Levison was not in the least grateful to Jack Blake.

"Thank you for nothing, D'Arcy," he said. "Get my name down, Talbot?"

"Yes. And I hope you'll show up well, Levison. There's no carthly reason why you shouldn't."

Levison's face brightened for just a second. That sort of thing was all right when it came from Talbot.

Then he looked cynical again.

"Oh, I may have a chance if all the favourites come croppers!" he said. "That's all I'm banking on. It does happen sometimes."

And he went.

"Can't make that chap out," said Tom Merry.

"He won't pay for studying," Lowther answered.

"I'm not so sure of that," remarked Talbot thoughtfully.

"I'm not, either," said Tom. "There's a good deal in Levison—more than we reckoned."

"Bai Jove, I agree with you, deah boy!"

"Something in it," conceded Blake.

But Herries, Digby, and Lowther did not think there was much in it. At best Levison's attitude was anything but conciliatory. They did not stop to think that conciliation was not in Ernest Levison's line. His notion of reformation did not include submitting to the patronising kindness of fellows who, he felt sure, still disliked him. He would win his own way, and in his own way.

Thus far no New House fellow except Jameson had turned up. But now Figgins arrived, alone.

"Hallo! The New House bouncers aren't giving the whole bizney a miss, then?" said Lowther.

Figgy looked scornfully at the humorist of the Shell.

"A New House competitor be langed!" he said.

"Hear, hear!" replied Lowther heartily. "Hang the giddy lot! It's about all they're good for."

"Besides, it would give your rabbit hutch a chance of winning the cup, if we were all out of the way, wouldn't it?" said Figgy.

"You burbling chump!" yelled Jack Blake. "Do you—"

"Oh, ring off! I didn't come over here for a slanging match. Look over that list, Merry, and see if the cash is O.K."

And Figgy laid down four pound currency notes and one for ten shillings.

"Easy there!" said Lowther. "Don't ask our Tommy to do any work. Talbot's the working partner. Tommy and I are far too superior for that sort of thing."

"Shurup, ass!" said Tom, taking the list. "Good egg, Figgy! You've been round and collected from all the chaps in your little dog-kennel, I see. Saves us no end of trouble."

Figgins felt and looked disappointed.

This had been meant by way of a snub to the School House—a reminder that there were just as good men of business over the way. Figgins had really taken a good deal of trouble, and, being in funds, had even advanced to several unpeccantous entrants the amount of their fee.

And now all that Tom Merry had to say about it was that it would save him and Talbot trouble.

But Figgy was too good a sort to be sulky.

"Right-ho!" he said. "Glad to save you any fag. You'll need all your energies to scrape even third place for the School House when the great day comes."

"Even if Figgins, Kerr, and Redfern fail, Wynn will win," said Lowther solemnly.

"Shouldn't wonder," said Figgy as he went.

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Levison seized the cad of the Shell under the armpits and jerked him to his feet. "Run!" he panted. "Here comes——"
(See Chapter 13.)

CHAPTER 5.

A Row.

NOW there entered together Crooke, Racke, Clampe, Mellish, Piggott, and a few more of the malcontent tribe, very evidently recruited specially for the occasion.

Jack Blake grinned. He saw that the new-comers were a trifle taken aback at finding the four chums of Study No. 6, where they might have expected to see only Tom Merry and Talbot.

"I didn't know a committee had been elected," growled Crooke.

"Really! Surprising to hear that there's anything you don't know, Crooke!" jeered Lowther.

"Oh, you dry up!" snarled Crooke, who detested Lowther's japing ways.

"So polite a request must be complied with at once," replied Lowther blandly. "The trouble's a pleasure—er—that is to say, a pleasure is a trouble where you are concerned. Crooke. Are you seriously thinking of entering for the cup?"

"I'm not. I've thought, and I'm going to. But I don't see why I should plank down half-a-dollar to oblige you smug bounders. Wilslow never said anything about an entrance-fee."

"No need for you to shell out, Crooke," said Tom cheerfully. "The notion was D'Arcy's, and I'm sure he will be pleased to pay the fee for anyone who feels to poverty-stricken to——"

"Oh, weally, Tom Mewwy— What are kickin' my shins foah, Dig, you uttah idiot? Oh, bai Jove, yaas, I'll pay for Cwooke, with pleasure! It is vevy good to heah that Cwooke

is goin' it foah somethin' besides blaggin' at last, though it's taken him some time to make up his mind to it."

"Such a great mind to make up, you know, Gustavus," murmured Lowther.

Crooke was taken aback. He had not expected this. Tom Merry's cheery suggestion and Gussy's consent took the wind out of his sails.

He stood with his jaw dropped, seeming at a loss how to answer.

Racke gave him a push. Still he did not speak, so Racke shoved him aside.

"The fact of the matter is," said Racke malevolently, "we don't fancy Talbot as treasurer!"

Over Talbot's handsome face a red flush swept, and his eyes gleamed. But he restrained himself. Racke was no match for Reggie Talbot. His countenance to-day bore witness to that fact.

"I don't know that it matters a giddy lot what you fancy or don't fancy, Racke," said Tom coolly. "Talbot's been elected without opposition. St. Jim's thinks him the right man in the right place, and anybody who doesn't agree can go and eat coks!"

"Shell out for Racke, too, Gustavus," Lowther drawled. "Then Talbot won't have anything to do with any sub of his, and the cash won't be dirtied with war-profits!"

"With the gweatest of pleasuah, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, beaming as he put a hand in his pocket.

"Are you talking to me, Lowther?" howled Racke.

"Will you kindly inform Racke that I'm not talking to him, Blake?" said Lowther. "I don't care about conversation with worms of his type."

"Same here!" snapped Blake.

Racke was getting furious, and when Racke got furious there was always the possibility of trouble, for he had more pluck than most of his cronies.

He looked round upon them in contempt. They were not giving him the backing he had expected. Mellish stood looking pea-green; Mellish was no fighting-man, and was sorry that he had been led into this. He knew that the opposition would not give him credit for good intentions; but if a determination not to get hurt could be counted as such, Mellish certainly deserved credit. Percy Mellish was of the stuff of which conscientious objectors are made.

But Croke could be bolder, at a pinch. He had screwed his courage to the sticking-point now. He pushed up beside Racke.

"It's all very well," he blustered. "I don't like saying anything, this fellow Talbot being a relative of mine, but—"

"Will you suggest, kindly but firmly, to Croke, Herries, that he would do well to avoid saying anything at the expense of his own affectionate feelings—especially as other feelings of his will be very liable to suffer if he does?" said Lowther.

"If I suggest anything to Croke it will be with the toe of my boot!" growled George Herries.

"That, my dear man, will do admirably," said Lowther. Across the table Talbot and Croke looked straight into one another's faces. For a moment only. Then Croke's eyes fell. He could not long endure to meet the level gaze of those honest eyes.

"I warn you, Croke, that you had better be careful what you say," said Talbot quietly. "I've stood a lot from you; but that's all over now. In future I mean to treat you as an enemy."

"What else do you think I want?" snarled Croke. "You—you rotten Jacob, you supplanter! A burglar from the slums who has sucked up to my old fool of an uncle—"

Smack!
The impact of Talbot's open hand upon Croke's face sounded like the report of a pistol.

Croke staggered back, his hand to his cheek. "Oh, go for him, Croke! Give the rotter beans!" howled Racke.

Smack!
Racke had got it that time. But it was Tom Merry's hand, for Tom had felt sure that, after yesterday, Talbot would not be keen to hit Racke again just now.

Racke snatched up an inkpot and hurled it at Tom Merry's head.

Tom got part of the contents. Talbot got part. But it was Lowther who received the inkpot itself, and on the instant all Lowther's blandness disappeared. He no longer felt any inclination to jape.

He swayed, lost his balance completely, and collapsed, bringing down Gussy with him.

"Yarooogh!" howled Lowther. "Lemme get at the cad who did that!"

"Ow—yow! Yooop!" roared Arthur Augustus. "Goww-off me, Lowthah, you fatheaded chump!"

He snatched at the tablecloth, and brought the contents of a pot of red ink down upon his nicely creased trousers.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Croke.

Arthur Augustus scrambled to his feet, and went for the cad of the Shell. His eyes were blazing with wrath. All the fighting blood of the D'Arcys was up.

Croke, like a cornered rat, hit out, and took Gussy on the chin. Gussy got home on Croke's nose. Then he planted a pile-driver on the jaw of Mellish.

It was not Percy Mellish's fault that he was near enough to receive that, and he felt it very much—in a double sense. But it aroused what little of the combative spirit there was in him; and in the wild and whirling conflict which followed he laid about him as he had seldom been known to do.

Clampe fought, too. So did the rest, all save Piggott. Piggott thought this was no place for a Third Former, and seeing the chance to escape, took it.

Herries got a kick on the shin, and irritated beyond endurance, seized Croke by the collar, and forced him backwards, half-choking him.

"You'll—ch—ch—choke me!" gasped Croke.

"Serve you right, you beastly kicker!" hooted Herries.

Croke squirmed under the table. Herries, hanging on to him, caught his head a mighty thwack against its legs, and staggered back, dazed.

Clampe struggled at the bottom of a heap composed of three more of his fellow-protesters. Racke had been down, but was up again now. He was the only one with much fight left in him.

He snatched up a heavy ruler, and laid about him recklessly. One foot he planted on the chaste fancy waistcoat of Arthur Augustus; but probably he did not know that, though certainly Gussy was well aware of it.

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Tom Merry got a blow on the head. Talbot had one on the right arm that made him drop it to his side, feeling for the moment as if it was broken.

Lowther, struggling up, fell over Gussy.

"Ow-yow!" shrieked Gussy.
Lowther, caught Racke round the legs, and the pressure upon D'Arcy's waistcoat was relieved. Staggering against the wall, Racke still hit out fiercely. He was mad with rage, and did not heed the fact that the heavy weapon he wielded was quite capable of inflicting really serious damage.

Digby collared the striking arm, and Blake snatched the ruler out of Racke's hand.

At that moment Croke heaved up and sent the table reeling over.

Tom Merry skipped aside, avoided the table, and grabbed Croke. Forcing him to the ground, he sat on him, to make all safe.

Clampe and the rest had made exit now.
"Seven to two!" snarled Croke. "You're a plucky lot, aren't you?"

"We didn't begin this little game, Croke," said Tom. "You came here looking for trouble, and you found it!"

"It's too jolly thick for anything!" said Blake hotly. "See here, Merry, I vote for giving these chaps toko before we let 'em sneak off!"

"And what would you recommend in the way of toko?" asked Tom coolly. "Give it a name, old son!"

"They seem fond of rulers; I guess they'd better have a taste," answered Blake. "Here, you chaps, help me to put Racke over a chair!"

Racke wriggled and blustered and spluttered and threatened; but he was forced over a chair, and Blake laid out with hearty goodwill.

"Now you can go, you cad!" he said. And Herries and Lowther and Digby allowed Racke to rise.

He was scarcely on his feet again before his fist shot out in a vicious lunge at Blake's head.

"Oh, look out, Jack!" shouted Tom Merry.
But the warning came too late.

Blake was taken completely unawares. The blow landed on his right temple, and he dropped as if shot.

Racke stood a moment in utter dismay, his hot blood suddenly cooled. The hand of fear gripped his heart.

"Oh, get out, you vile coward!" roared Tom; and hurled him through the doorway.

Lowther and Dig swung Croke after him.

At that moment Kildare appeared upon the scene.

"What's all this about?" he demanded.

No one was in any haste to explain. They stood silent. The door hid Blake, who lay senseless on the floor, and D'Arcy, who knelt by his side.

Kildare looked searchingly at Racke and Croke. He knew those two rank outsiders, and had little doubt that they were in fault.

"Clear out of it, you two!" he said sharply. "As for the rest of you, don't let me hear another such row as this, or you'll be in for it, hot and strong!"

Croke slunk away at once. Racke hesitated a moment, then went, with lagging footsteps, afraid of what he might have left behind him, yet more afraid of knowing the worst.

Kildare looked as if he meant to ask further questions. But he did not—and for that relief the juniors were very thankful.

They rushed back when he had gone.

Blake had not stirred, and D'Arcy's face was wild with fear.

"Jack, old man! Speak, deah boy!" he faltered.
"Don't get in a tear, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "He's only stunned."

But Tom was none too sure of that.

Talbot, missing for a moment, came back with a jug of water.

Blake stirred as it was poured over his face.

"Ugh!" he said. "My hat, I don't half feel queer!"

"It was a rotten, foul blow!" cried Herries indignantly.

With the help of Gussy, himself shaky, and Lowther, Blake got to his feet.

"The rotter didn't mean to do what he did," he said. "It isn't worth while to hold it against him."

CHAPTER 6.

Trouble With Mr. Peters.

"HOW do you feel, old scout?" asked Tom Merry.
"Oh, all right, Tom," replied Talbot. "How do you?"

"A bit more done than I thought I should be at this distance. I don't mind owning that much. But not so done that I shall have to crawl the rest of the way."

NOW ON SALE.

"FOUL PLAY!"

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The course for the race had been roughly mapped out by a small committee of seniors—Kildare, Monteith, Darrell, Baker, and North.

The arrangements thus made were not absolutely final; but they were near enough to enable anyone who wanted to test himself over the full distance to do so.

As most people know, running the full distance in this way before the race is not generally considered the best possible preparation.

But, of the nine who had started to do it, six, at least, were not likely to take any harm, for they were in the pink of physical condition. These were Tom Merry, Talbot, Jack Blake, Figgins, Kerr, and Dick Redfern. The knowing ones said that the winner would be found among these half-dozen; in fact, it was pretty generally held that three of them would fill the first three places.

Others were keen, however. Levison had surprised everyone by turning out for the test. A still greater surprise was the appearance of Gore. It would have been no use to tell, either, that he was damaging his chance by trying to do so much in advance. Both were as keen as could be, and in deadly earnest.

As for warning Grundy, who could tell the great George Alfred anything? What was there he did not know, or believe he knew? Not quite the same thing, of course; but Grundy thought it so.

Anyway, Grundy was as hard as nails, and was little likely to take harm.

Rather more than half of the distance had now been covered, and Tom and Talbot had slipped somewhat ahead of the rest. Blake had been forced to stop because a shoe hurt him, but had cheerfully declined to let anyone halt with him. Figgins had slowed down after a stiff bit of plough, and Kerr, though he had felt it less, had stayed by him. Grundy caught up them and Blake just as Tom and Talbot disappeared from sight behind a high hedge.

Grundy was a bit blown—pretty badly blown, indeed—but he refused to admit it. As for Levison and Gore, they were somewhere behind. Whether together, or each pursuing a solitary course, no one ahead of them knew. Probably not together. There was little love lost between Levison and Gore, though each in his own way was trying to buck up and make himself something more of a credit to St. Jim's.

Talbot and Tom took a low hedge side by side, and went at a steady pace across a wide meadow.

Beyond the hedge in front of them ran a road. As they drew near this a rough voice hailed them.

"Hi, you there, stop! What d'ye mean by trespassin' on my land?"

They pulled up. As they had no intention of trespassing, and had certainly done no damage, their consciences were clear.

The man who had hailed them was a fellow on a stout chestnut cob. He had ferocious red whiskers and muddy leggings, and all he wore had a look of negligence.

"We hadn't any notion you would mind," said Tom Merry.

"Who are you?" demanded the farmer.

"We're from the school," said Tom.

"Grammar School, d'ye mean?"

"No, St. James'."

"Ah, that's your nasty, low cunning! Th' school, you say, an' reckon I may think you mean t'other shop."

"I never thought anything of the sort! If I had, I should not have supposed anyone about here would be off knowing the difference in our caps!"

"Oh, you can talk!" said the farmer unpleasantly.

"Not being dumb, I can," replied Tom coolly.

"Your mate seems to be dumb!" sneered Red Whiskers.

"Not at all," said Talbot, even more coolly than Tom. "But, on the whole, I've rather an objection to talking to rude people."

"Rude, am I? Let me tell you that I went to the Grammar School here myself when I was a nipper, an' had as good bringin'-up as either of you!"

"Indeed?" said Tom.

"Indeed! I'll give you indeed, you pup!" roared the farmer. "What do you mean by indeed, you unlicked cub?"

Mr. Peter Peters was in no very good temper. He had appeared before the local tribunal that morning, and had heard some home-truths. Exemptions for which he had applied had been refused point-blank, and Mr. Peters had been informed by one outspoken member of the tribunal that, as he was only thirty-nine, he might yet find himself losing his exemption. Farming in the manner in which Mr. Peters farmed could hardly be said to be in the national interest, this extremely unpleasant person had said.

The farmer usually took a pretty stiff allowance during and after his dinner. By way of comfort, he had doubled it that day; but the extra dose had in no way mollified him.

Tom's own temper was rising. He objected to the manner

in which Mr. Peters brandished his whip; he also objected to being called an unlicked cub.

Neither he nor Talbot had come into contact with Mr. Peters before. The farm lay on the Westwood side of Rylcombe, where the St. Jim's fellows seldom went.

"I mean," said Tom deliberately, "that the good bringing-up you talk of doesn't seem to have taken in your case."

The reply of Mr. Peters to that was a savage cut at Tom's head with his whip.

Talbot's arm shot up and took the blow. The cob shied. Mr. Peters lurched out of the saddle.

He fell with one foot still in the stirrup. Talbot, with lightning quickness, wrenched it free.

He may have hurt the farmer in doing so; but worse hurt would have come to Mr. Peters but for the presence of mind of the one-time Toff.

The cob bolted, and even on soft turf a thrown rider would have been in evil case.

But Mr. Peters was not grateful.

"Confound you!" he roared. "What did you do that for?"

"My mistake," said Talbot. "On the whole, I thought it would please you not to be dragged along by your horse; but it was an error to try to please you, evidently."

Peters was on his feet now. He slashed at Talbot; but Talbot dodged, and Tom Merry caught the farmer's arm.

Just at this moment Blake, Kerr, Grundy, Figgins, and Redfern appeared, leaping the hedge in the rear.

At sight of them the farmer's wrath flamed higher still.

"More of you?" he hooted. "Am I to have the whole bloomin' school trapesing over my land? Loose hold of me, you young rascal, or it will be the worse for you!"

But Tom kept his grip. And now Talbot collared the farmer's other arm. Redfern, darting in, had stopped the horse, and was leading it back. The rest hurried along with him.

"You seem to have run against something awkward," said Kerr.

"I should say so!" answered Tom. "This chap objects to anybody's crossing his fields, and says so in quite a nasty way. Seems to think a whip is an argument, and 'unlicked cub' a pet name!"

"We may as well let him go," said Talbot. "There are six of us, and if he tries any tricks, we are bound to be too many for him. Here is your horse, sir!"

But the instant the arms of Mr. Peters were released he flung himself upon the half-dozen, slashing out right and left with his whip.

Jack Blake got it across the face, and it left a great wheal.

Figgy received it on the neck, and he was marked, too.

Not one of them escaped altogether. Grundy gave a howl of fury as the whiplash curled round his legs.

They rushed the furious farmer, and got him down. Grundy seized the whip, and laid it about him with great vigour. It was going rather too far, perhaps; but they had all suffered at Peter's hands, and no one felt at all inclined to blame Grundy.

"Yaroooh! Stoppit!" howled the farmer. "I'll have the law on the whole blessed gang of you!"

"Right-ho!" replied Tom Merry. "Got a pocket-book on you? I'll write down our names in it, if you have. You will want them, you know."

"I don't want your blessed names! I'll come and talk to your Headmaster. I'll teach you!"

"There isn't a vacancy on the staff that I know of," said Figgy, grinning. "And if there was, you'd have precious little chance of getting it, especially if you came drunk!"

Grundy had ceased to use the whip now, though only under forcible persuasion by Talbot and Redfern. Grundy's arm was not tired, and he saw no objection to going on till it was. Not being allowed to do that, he broke the whip across his knee, evidently considering that its usefulness was ended.

"Who's drunk?" howled Mr. Peters.

"We're not—nor yet downhearted!" replied Kerr cheerily.

"Will you promise to behave if we let you get up?" said Blake.

"I'll promise to kill some of you!"

"That," said Figgins drily, "is scarcely a sufficient inducement."

"But it shows he's honest," said Blake. "And he's generous, too. See what he's given me!"

That wheal across Jack Blake's face throbbed and smarted very painfully; but it was not the Yorkshire lad's way to make a fuss about such things, and he grinned cheerfully as he spoke.

"I say, look there!" cried Redfern, touching Tom Merry's arm.

Three fellows in running-shorts and jerseys had halted in the road. They were contemplating the scene with evident interest, and with malicious grins.

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NEXT WEDNESDAY: "FOR HIS BROTHER'S SAKE!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

The three were Raake, Crooke, and Clampe. Mellish, blowing hard, joined them at that moment. It was no testimony to Mellish's ability to run, that trying to keep up with those three should have given him bellows to mend.

"Best make an end of this," said Talbot. "We don't want spectators of that sort."

"We'll cut," said Tom Merry. "Red Whiskers knows we're not exactly afraid of him, and what that sweet gang thinks is no odds. Kim on, you cripples!"

They started at once for the hedge, Mr. Peters scrambled up, and bolted after them; but he had no chance from the first.

They leaped the hedge, and darted across the road, not even casting a glance at Crooke & Co.; they flew the opposite hedge like birds on the wing. Mr. Peters tried to follow.

But he was in no condition for jumping. His foot caught in the hedge, and he sprawled headlong into the ditch.

"Hold on, you chaps!" yelled Figgins, who had glanced over his shoulder. "See the pretty sight! Crooke and his dear little friends being kind to his Whiskers!"

They halted and looked back. It was even as Figgy said. Crooke and Clampe were helping Mr. Peters out of the ditch. Now Mellish started to wipe the mud off him. Raake looked on benevolently, but took no active part in the repairs.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "I say, you fellows, be careful! That merchant has a sweet little way of using his whip to people who are kind to him!"

"Oh, come on!" growled Grundy. "He won't use that whip any more. I've seen to that!"

CHAPTER 7.
A Foul Trick.

ALL the entries had been received. Almost every fellow in the Shell and Fourth had handed in his name, though it was scarcely likely all would start. The fags had also bucked up nobly. By this time the money-box was quite weighty, although part of its contents was in currency notes, weighing practically nothing.

"Tien! a very safe thing to keep the chink in," said Tom Merry, handling it gingerly. "It got damaged in the row the other day. I believe I could break it open with my hands, and I'm jolly sure I could smash it by jamming it with the door."

"Quite a hefty notion for dealing with money-boxes," said Lowther.

"Ass! Tom didn't say that was the way to use the thing," retorted Manners. "I say, Tommy, why not have the oof out, tot it up, and send it along where it belongs? You won't rake in any more now."

"Call Talbot, will you, John Thomas?" said Lowther languidly.

"Who're you talking to, idiot?" snapped Manners.

"Why, you, of course!" "My name's not John Thomas!"

"Pardon! My mistake. Henry, be good enough to call Talbot, please."

"Burbling chump! What do you want Talbot for?"

"You mentioned totting up and other labours. I thought you understood that while Tommy here walks in prideful swank as secretary, the useful and industrious Talbot does the work."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "Here, chuck us the thing, Manners!"

Manners, who had been handling the box, threw it across. At that moment the door was flung open, and someone burst into the room. Tom's attention was drawn

away. He missed the catch, and the money-box fell to the ground with a clank.

The intruder sprawled headlong. "Hallo, Gussy!" said Lowther blandly. "That's an expeditious way of entering, certainly; but it seems to have its disadvantages."

"Some beastly wottah has tied a wope across the dooah!" panted Arthur Augustus, picking himself up. "Can you lend me a clothes-brush, Tom Mewwy! Weally, you fellahs do keep youah study in an uttahly discreditable state of dust and disordah!"

"Oh, go and eat coke, Gustavus! Manners, you fathead, you've busted the thing!"

"You have, you mean. Why didn't you catch it, chump?"

"That was Gussy's fault. I say, look here! What on earth does this mean?"

The money lay scattered about the floor. That was only to be expected. But what was utterly unexpected by anyone there was the fact that nearly all the cash was in coppers.

The languid interest of Lowther disappeared. He and Manners and D'Arcy all went down to help Tom to pick up the coins.

They might well be surprised. As far as they knew, not a single copper had gone into the box. One does not pay half-crowns in bronze coinage as a rule.

In less than five minutes they had recovered every visible coin, and had placed it upon the table.

Then they all stood gazing at it. "My hat!" said Tom.

"Oh, my only aunt!" gasped Manners. "Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, his lower jaw dropping.

"It don't look quite right, even to me," observed Lowther. "You'll have to fetch Talbot, Henry. This job is above our Tommy's weight!"

There should have been over twelve pounds in the box.

There was nineteen shillings and ninepence, to be exact—four half-crowns, three shillings, three sixpences, and sixty-three pennies.

How had the pence come there? And where had the currency notes and silver gone?

"This is a corker!" said Manners.

"I can't begin to see through it," admitted Tom. "I say, are you chaps trying to trip up visitors?" inquired Talbot, appearing at that moment.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT.

The stars gleam white in the winter night,
And the frost is on the panes;
The season of cheer again is here,
The festive spirit remains.
Then hang the weather, and hang the war!
We mean to be gay, as in days of yore.

There's jolly old Jack, with his rifle and pack,
He's back from the foremost line;
And he'll spin us a yarn of the Battle of the Marne,
And his skirmishes fierce and fine!
He'll tell of the Hun's despairing rage,
And make us wish we were twice our age.

That savoury smell! Ah, who can tell
If it's turkey, duck, or goose?
But whatever it is, we're ready for biz,
And our belts we swiftly loose.
My hat! How old Fatty Wynn will grieve
At not being with us on Christmas Eve!

And after the meal, while the joy-bells peal
From the ancient church hard by,
We'll talk of our scraps with the other chaps,
When we blackened many an eye.
And our last big match—what a topping thrill!
When we won by a single goal to nil!

By the fire's bright gleam we'll sit and dream
Of the glorious days to be;
And we'll think with pride of the boys who died
When serving on land and sea—
Well knowing they'd wish, if alive to-day,
That Christmas were kept in the same old way!

—G. R. SAMWAYS.

The door had been shut with the rope still stretched across it. But Talbot had not fallen into the trap.

The new-comer's glance fell upon the coins and the broken money-box.

"Whew!" he said. "Something wrong here!"

"Somebody has been taking out notes and silver, and putting in coppers," said Tom.

"The question, dear boy, is who has played such a nasty trick," said Gussy.

"It isn't the only question, though," said Talbot. "A more important one is—why?"

"There can't be any question about that," Manners said. "It's some beastly thief!"

"I don't know about that. It might not be," said Talbot gravely.

He had seen at once what was only just dawning upon the rest. This was certainly not the work of any ordinary thief. If that had been the case, a clean sweep would have been made of the money. Probably the box would have gone, too.

"It wasn't done for a jape," said Lowther.

"It certainly wasn't," replied Talbot.

Something in his face made Tom Merry wonder. There had been more than one plot against Talbot. Was this another?



Fatty Wynn walked right into a small crowd of Grammarian Juniors on reaching the road. "My hat, Wynn! That's rather an airy costume for a stroll!" said Frank Monk. (See Chapter 12.)

But in actual fact, Talbot had not been the custodian of the money. The box had been left in the Terrible Three's study.

That did not matter very much, however. Talbot was responsible as treasurer. Moreover, he had access to the box at any time.

Not for one moment did Tom suspect Reginald Talbot.

It was Talbot's enemies he suspected—the rank outsiders who had shown themselves ready to play any dirty game for his discomfiture—who had cast doubts upon his honour—who would like nothing better than to see him cast forth in disgrace.

Talbot in turn was down on his hands and knees now.

"See here!" he said, holding up a piece of wire, twisted so that the two ends came close together, but not quite touching—leaving room enough to allow of a thick coin like a half-crown between them.

"That's what the wottahs got it out with, bai Jove!"

"Your perspicacity, my dear Sholmes—"

"Oh, don't rot, Monty!" said Tom miserably. "This is too jolly serious for that sort of thing."

The wire was sticky. Birdlime or something of the kind had been used, it was plain. And the wire had been dropped into the box by accident. That explained why some of the silver had been left.

"It's a beastly, low plot!" said Manners hotly.

"I'm afraid it is," said Talbot, in his quietest way. "But it's not to the address of any of you fellows, I think. It's for my benefit."

"What are we going to do?" asked Tom. "Of course the money will have to be made good; but I'm not flush just now. Are you, Talbot?"

"Practically stony," replied Talbot frankly. "My uncle was to have let me have a whack before he left for the Front. But I haven't had it; I don't know why. Not his fault, I'm sure. Either he was too pressed, or it's gone wrong on the way. And, of course, I can't worry him for it."

Their backs were turned to the door, and Mellish was among them before they realised that it had opened.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, Merry; but Racke and Crooke say they won't let D'Arcy pay for them, and they've sent their money. Clampe, and I don't mind. It's awfully good of Gussy, of course—"

"If you call me 'Gussy' again, you wottah—"

"Get out!" ordered Tom Merry, pointing to the door.

Mellish's eyes were opened widely. He saw the broken money-box, and the pile of coppers on the table. All his curiosity was aroused at once. And Percy Mellish had plenty of curiosity.

"I say, what's all this mean?" he asked, with a grin. "Has someone been burgling the funds?"

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"Get out!" roared Tom.
 "Better give the fellow the receipt he asks for," suggested Talbot.

"All serene! You write it, old chap."
 Talbot sat down and wrote the receipts. Mellish's eyes were still fixed upon the table. Tom and Lowther and Manners were all watching Mellish keenly. To all three it seemed that he was not in the plot, whoever might be. This came as a surprise to him.

But he might have been sent there by those who were in it. And that rope across the door—was it not possible that the fellow or fellows who had fixed that had heard something? Might not the very fixing of it have been an excuse to justify their presence there as a jape if by any chance they were caught listening?

One thing was certain—Mellish would talk. It would be utterly useless to ask him not to. He could not have kept his mouth shut if he had tried. And he was not at all likely to try. He had suffered in the row of two or three days before. Mellish was not as revengeful as Crooke; but he did not forget and forgive quite so soon as this.

Mellish went, with his receipts.
 He had not been gone three minutes before Gore appeared. Gore could not be reckoned hostile. If George Gore liked anyone at St. Jim's half as well as he liked himself, that person was Talbot.

But Gore was not exactly the fellow the five chums would have chosen to share this secret.

"Gee-whizz!" said Gore. "What's this yarn of Mellish's?"
 He looked at the broken money-box and the pile of cash.

"Seems to be something in it," he said.

"The box, do you mean?" returned Lowther. "There's nothing in it now. And there wasn't what there ought to have been when it got busted open."

"This can't be kept dark," said Gore, with knitted brows.

"As Mellish knows of it—not to mention you—that is an indisputable proposition," answered Lowther.

"You chaps— Oh, look here, you don't suppose I'm chump enough to suspect any of you of doing anything off the rails, do you?" said Gore snappishly. "We haven't been the best of friends, I know; but any notion of that sort is dead off. The rest of you can take care of your own credit, for all it concerns me, but if any roiter tries to put this on old Talbot he's got me to reckon with!"

For one moment Talbot's hand rested on Gore's shoulder in very friendly grip. And the rest all felt that they liked George Gore better than they had ever done before. Out of his selfishness—out of the stony soil of his heart—had at least sprung one little growth of something better.

He was loyal to Talbot, the fellow who had sacrificed much for him.

But at this moment there was another interruption.

Into the study poured a dozen fellows, filling the little room to overflowing.

Crooke and Racke were there—juniors of quite another sort, too—Harry Noble and Bernard Glyn and Reilly, Blake and Herries and Digby.

But the most conspicuous figure of all was that of Skim-

pole—conspicuous by reason of what he carried. Crooke had grasped one of Skimmy's arms, and Racke the other; and, as if to even up matters, Noble held Racke's coat-collar tightly clutched, and Blake had Crooke's arm gripped.

CHAPTER 8.

Talbot's Friends and Talbot's Enemies.

IT was a small canvas bag, such as banks use, that Skimmy carried.

"Do you know this, Talbot?" demanded Racke, with a malevolent grin.

"Yes," answered Talbot. "It's the bag I used to keep my money in last term."

"And this term you're keeping other people's cash in it!" said somebody—no one but the speaker was quite sure who.

Talbot's face flushed, but he made no reply to that sneer.

"Where did you find it?" he asked, turning to Skimmy.

Poor Skimmy looked dazed. There was nothing in the world Skimmy would not have done for Talbot, who had always been far more patient with his eccentricities than any other fellow there. Nothing could have shaken Skimmy's faith in Talbot—not even a demonstration by the great Professor Balmcrumpet of Talbot's guilt—but Skimmy understood that not everyone's faith was founded on a rock, as was his.

"It was in the cupboard in our study, Talbot," he answered tremulously, quite forgetting for once to use polysyllables. "I was looking for a piece of rubber tubing. This was behind the biscuit-tin, stuck into a crack in the wall, and with a loose piece of paper nearly covering it."

There was "R. T." upon the bag, in inked letters that had run a little. Talbot's brows knitted when he noted that.

"It looks like my bag," he said; "but mine had my initials inside. Give it to me, old man!"

"He sha'n't do anything of the sort!" howled Crooke. "Why, you'd chuck it into the fire, likely as not!"

"I'll chuck you there if you're not jolly careful, Crooke!" said Blake hotly.

"Perhaps you'll agree to its being handed over to me, as you seem to be so particularly concerned in this bizney, Crooke?" Tom said.

Crooke winced.

"It's everybody's affair. I'm not making out that it's mine in particular," he said weakly. "The thing ought to be emptied before everybody."

"It can hardly be done in this study, then," said Lowther. And he added significantly, looking at Crooke and Racke and Mellish in the background as he spoke: "We've several people here whose room we prefer to their company as it is."

"Empty it on the table, Skimmy," said Talbot.

With a heavy sigh, Skimpole obeyed. He passed his right hand over his bulgy brow in a dazed way as there tumbled out of the bag a pile of silver coins, and after them fluttered out five currency notes—four printed in black, one in red.

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Tom Merry gave a grunt of disgust. To his mind there was no shadow of doubt that this was a plant.

"So that's where the money went?" cried Racke, in spiteful triumph.

"Yes, that's where it went," said Manners slowly; "but we don't know yet by whose hand it got there."

"It seems to me there's something for Talbot to explain," said Crooke, leering.

"I can only say that, to the best of my knowledge, my bag hadn't my initials outside. Wait a moment, though. It had—I remember now. Gore put them on one day near the end of last term, just before I lost it."

"Can't remember doing anything of the sort myself!" growled Gore, darting Talbot a look which said plainly: "Silly ass! You might have trusted me to keep that dark!"

But everybody knew that Gore was not above lying if it suited his book. His disclaimer made no difference.

"That doesn't matter much," Talbot said quietly. "If my initials aren't inside, I never saw that bag before; but if they are, I have not seen it this term until now."

"There are no initials inside," said Tom, having looked. He passed the bag round for inspection, but most of those present refused to look at it.

"Is that the money that was stolen, or isn't it?" sneered Racke.

"What money was stolen?" asked Tom. "Even if this had been found in Talbot's possession, there would have been nothing fishy about it. He's treasurer, and has a right to the custody of it."

"Oh, tell that tale to the Marines!" Racke roared. "Nobody's claimed that it was hidden away like that to be taken care of, and Talbot denies hiding it, and Mellish says you chaps were no end surprised when you found that the box had been meddled with. There's no getting away from the fact that some jiggery-pokery has been done—a fellow with half an eye can see that!"

"Suppose I say I put it there?" said Tom gravely.

"I know jolly well you didn't!" roared Racke.

"I believe you do—on my honour, I believe that you know who did!" said Tom, looking him straight in the face.

But Racke was a hard case. He shrugged his shoulders.

"A plot against the peerless Talbot!" he said. "You and I, of course, Crooke! That's Merry's yarn. Well, he might have done worse. He'll get some innocents to believe it!"

"I believe it!" snapped Blake.

"And I!" echoed Herries, and Digby, and Manners, and Lowther, and D'Arcy, and Noble, and Glyn, and Reilly.

"I—I don't know anything about it, really, Merry!" bleated Mellish.

"Oh, that's no odds!" said Tom contemptuously. "You were in a hurry to do all the harm you could, anyway, you rotter!"

There had been no need for either Skimmy or Gore to speak. There stood one on either side of Talbot, with faces that showed what they felt. A prophet may be without honour in his own country, but Talbot's study-mates were firm in their belief in Talbot.

"What's the row?" asked the voice of Ernest Levison, and the erstwhile cad of the Fourth pushed his way in.

A few words told him. Many there were curious to see what his attitude would be. Levison was jolly keen—even those who liked him least admitted that.

"Has the chink gone?" he asked, peering at the coins and notes on the table through narrowed eyelids.

"No. It's here," said Tom.

"If it's here, Talbot can't very well have stolen it," Levison returned, as if puzzled.

"You admit that's the money, Merry?" growled Crooke.

"Oh, certainly, Crooke! Much more convenient to admit it, you know. Besides which, both Figgins and I took the numbers of the notes."

"Then, if that's the money—"

"Oh, go to Bath, Crooke!" said Levison, like someone suddenly coming out of a reverie. "If there's been any stealing, there are several chaps here I'd mark as guilty before old Talbot—you, for one!"

It was brutally plain speaking, and it made Crooke wince.

"And yourself for another, perhaps?" he countered.

"Before Talbot? Oh, rather!" answered Levison, quite cheerfully.

A queer fellow, Levison—scarcely one to be measured by ordinary standards, but capable of great loyalty, as Talbot well knew.

"What are you going to do about it, Merry?" snarled Racke.

"Nothing! What is there that needs doing? It's a mystery; but I'm not a Ferrers Locke, you know. And the fund is ten-and-threepence better off."

"Five-and-three you mean, Tom," said Manners. "That's what the pennies come to."

"Oh, yes; I forgot! Of course, D'Arcy must have his five bob back now that Crooke and Racke have paid up their own fees. Silly of me; I do believe I was thinking of that as conscience money!" said Tom, with a grin.

"Very silly!" said Lowther. "Fancy anyone connecting Crooke and Racke with a matter of conscience!"

CHAPTER 9.

Plotting with Peters.

BUT when mud is thrown, some of it is sure to stick. Not one of Talbot's real friends fell away from him. They knew it impossible that he should be guilty. They laughed at the notion at first, but soon came to see that it was scarcely a laughing matter.

Then their fists would clench at the least word against their chum, and in a few cases those fists were not clenched for nothing. But most of those who ran down Talbot were not fighting men.

Racke and Crooke did not come to blows with anyone. Those two lay low. The ball had been started rolling, and their efforts were not needed to keep it going. Other fellows whispered that it was a bit queer about that bag—that perhaps Talbot wouldn't have said so much if he had known that Gore was willing to lie in his cause; that he was admittedly hard-up; and that hiding away the funds of which he was, as could not be denied, legally treasurer was a rummy way of taking care of them.

Talbot's popularity was not as wide as, for instance, Tom Merry's. He was more reserved than Tom; and even some of the fellows who trusted him did not care for him greatly.

And the past told against him—that past which he had lived down so finely, but with which, it seemed, he would never be quite done.

Altogether, it was no very happy time for Talbot.

The Saturday afternoon before the race turned out miserably wet. In spite of the rain, quite a crowd of the entrants started out for a last trial run, though none of them attempted the full distance this time.

Every fellow who was looked upon as having the least chance, and lots who had none, were among that crowd.

Racke, Crooke, Mellish, and Clampe were not of it. That fact surprised no one.

But some of those who had gone might have been surprised had they known that very shortly after their departure the precious quartette of rascals wheeled their bikes across the quad, and, clad in raincoats, set out for a ride.

Racke, Crooke, & Co. had business to transact.

Mellish rode behind the other three. Mellish scarcely had his heart in the business to be done, but he could not afford to break with young Moneybags, or, indeed, with the bullying Crooke. Crooke could sing small to those he knew his masters, but he lorded it over Percy Mellish.

"What licks me to the wide," said Racke, "is that so many chaps are prepared to take our dear friend the ex-burglar on trust. It seems a middling silly thing to do, considering his antecedents."

"Good word—antecedents!" grinned Clampe.

"Shut up, you idiot!" snapped Crooke. "We're not all as ignorant as you!"

"Shut up, yourself!" retorted Clampe. "I'll admit I don't know as much about knavery as you do."

"Antecedents haven't anything to do with knavery," growled Crooke.

"Wrong, old sport!" said Clampe. "Talbot's have."

The joke was after their own heart, and Clampe was restored to favour on the strength of it.

"Some of them started to hiss him this morning," remarked Racke.

"Yes. Mellish began that," said Crooke approvingly.

"I didn't, then!" squeaked Mellish from the rear. "And I don't see why he should be hissed for what you chaps did! Now then! There are heaps of worse fellows than Talbot about. He's never down on anyone whose luck is out."

"Mellish is weakening," sneered Racke.

"I'm not—not really," said Mellish, almost torn in two by conflicting emotions. "But if I agree to this bizney we're in to-day, it isn't because of Talbot. I don't think he's got an earthly, really."

"And why not?" asked Racke sneeringly.

"Oh, he doesn't know!" said Crooke. "The chap's the biggest duffer out at anything of this sort."

"No bigger duffer than you are, Crooke. I reckon Merry will win, and I should hate to see him pull it off. Or Figgins—"

"I'm in this to see that Figgins don't," said Clampe viciously.

"Or Kerr, or Blake, or Redfern," went on Mellish.

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of Tom Merry & Co. by MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"They're all better than Talbot over a long distance. There's Gore, too; he's bucking up no end. And I wouldn't be too sure that Levison will be dead out of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Crooke. "What a judge our Percy is!"

"We've something against every chap you've named, one or another of us," said Racke. "If they are going to be in the first fight when the race is half over, so much the better for our scheme, and so much the better for the beggars in the second flight."

"Not that we care a hang about any of them," added Crooke morosely.

With such cheery converse did the four plotters beguile the way to the abode of Mr. Peter Peters, for it was that genial gentleman they were going to visit.

They had struck up a sort of comradeship with him on the afternoon of the row between him and the other runners. Till then they had entertained vague ideas of competing in the run. These were quite given up now—given up in favour of a stroke against the enemy.

And among the enemy they included all who stood by Talbot.

Their plan was to stir up Mr. Peters to interfere with the race. It was understood that the course would pass over two of his fields. Kildare and his colleagues were believed to be in ignorance of any objection on the farmer's part.

"Perhaps I'd better do most of the talking," said Racke. "I fancy I understand the lout better than you fellows do."

The three did not argue the case. Crooke was gloating over the notion that Racke's thrashing by Talbot had made Young Moneybags as bitter against "the Toff" as he was—for the time being, at least. It was hardly likely that Racke's resentment would live on as Crooke's did.

Mr. Peters was at home, and in a condition not unusual with him at that hour—to wit, more than half-fuddled with drink.

He had a bottle of whisky by him as comfort. He seemed to have needed a good deal of comfort, and to have been liberal to himself in its administration.

All four consented to take a little of the spirit. They did not like it. Racke thought it horribly raw, smoky stuff, and Mellish, who would not have liked the kind that Racke might have appreciated, felt sick after a single mouthful.

But Mr. Peters was pleased. He told them they were the right sort—meaning his sort. It was rather a doubtful compliment at best.

Mr. Peters granted approval of their plan. He even improved upon it.

After his experiences of a few days earlier, Mr. Peters had no great longing for renewed personal contact with Tom Merry & Co.

But Mr. Peters was the possessor of a ferocious young bull; and, as Mr. Peters very justly observed, if he couldn't keep his bull in his own fields, where could he keep it?

They said the argument was a good one, and showed Mr. Peters' spirit. Mellish wondered whether it was not partly the result of Mr. Peters' spirits, though.

"Suppose one of them got really hurt?" he faltered.

"That's his look-out, not mine. They've been told fair an' square as I won't have them on my land, an' if they get killed I don't care—no, not the value of this empty bottle!"

Mellish shrank back in his seat, and kept mum thereafter.

"You ain't in any sort of danger," said Peters. "Who's to know as you ever spoke to me? All we've got to do is to keep our mouths shut. I don't even know the day of the race. See? How should I? No one's been along to ask my permission."

This was correct. But there was a reason for it. Tom Merry had spoken to Kildare, and the course had been slightly diverted, steering clear of Mr. Peters' land.

Mellish felt very miserable indeed as they rode back, and Clampe was not quite so cheery as he pretended to be. As for Racke and Crooke, they laughed to scorn the suggestion of anyone's being killed; and they really had sufficient confidence in the activity and pluck of the fellows against whom they plotted to regard it as impossible.

"But it will give the rotters a rare fright!" said Crooke, in glee.

anyone—but this thing hanging over me gives me the blues. It gets worse instead of better. They were hissing me again this morning."

"Pack of geese!" said Tom, in utter contempt.

"You're right, old man. There isn't a fellow among the lot for whose individual opinion I care twopence. And yet it hurts. Mine wouldn't be a popular victory, Tommy."

"That's where you're wrong. They'd get so excited that they would forget what asses they were, and cheer you like mad."

"But they would remember afterwards," said Talbot, with a wry smile. "There isn't another fellow at St. Jim's I'd say so much to, Tom, unless it was Levison."

Perhaps Tom Merry had little relish for being ranked with Levison in Talbot's esteem. He knew, of course, that his chum did not mean to put them on the same plane. No one else could ever be to Reginald Talbot what Tom Merry had been and still was—the first and best of chums.

But the bonds between Talbot and Levison had tightened wonderfully of late. Talbot knew what an uphill struggle the black sheep of the Fourth was having, and watched his progress with something like fear. Sooner or later, he knew, there must come a backsliding; it was not in one of Ernest Levison's nature to reform straight away—to put behind him all the past.

And Talbot was very genuinely fond of Levison minor. The plucky, straight little kid!—that was how Talbot always thought of him. If he had had a younger brother, he would have liked him to be just such another as Frank.

The youngster had had to shed some of his illusions. He knew more of evil now. But it had left his real innocence untouched, because that innocence was not mere ignorance; it went far deeper than that.

"Tom," said Talbot suddenly, "you've got to give me your word of honour that you're going all out to win to-morrow."

Tom Merry was fairly taken aback. It seemed as though his chum had read his inmost thoughts. Somewhere at the back of his mind had been a notion of such a sacrifice as Talbot hinted at. He had not resolved to make it. It might be that the chance would not come his way. There were other good men in the race besides they two.

But he saw now that it would not do. Let Talbot have the least suspicion that such a thing had been done for him, and all the glory of victory would have vanished.

"I give it, Reggie," said Tom.

Kerr was in the Terrible Three's study when Tom got back. Kerr was a welcome visitor at any time, but he was more than usually welcome just then. For the shrewd Scottish junior had put his detective abilities to the task of unravelling a very tangled skein, and his face showed that he had made discoveries.

"Come aboard to report, commander," he said, saluting Tom Merry in naval fashion.

"What have you found out, old scout?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Pretty nearly everything, in one sense. Not much in another, for I'm not prepared to say that I can bring the crime home to the villains."

"Proceed, Herlock!" said Lowther.

"I will do so, Jotson. Awful ass, Jotson, don't you think?" said Kerr innocently. "I have discovered that a St. Jim's chap got one of those bank money-bags from a Rylcombe tradesman a few days ago. The man would recognise the bag again, because it was speckled with red ink at one corner. So is the bag you hold. The chap was—no, I won't say."

"I think we could guess in twice," said Tom gravely.

"Very likely. Another chap bought birdlime at another shop."

"Good hunting, Herlock!"

"I thank you, Jotson! Then a chap—one of the same two—was seen to go into your den one evening just before prep. The fellow who saw it didn't think anything of it, for he wasn't aware that you were out at the time, having tea with us. But he's sure about the date, as it happens, though that's just luck."

"Good again!"

"Then two fellows in one House—I sha'n't say which—sneaked across to another House in the dusk. They were

CHAPTER 10. Backing Up Talbot.

"YOU'VE simply got to win, old chap!" said Tom Merry.

He and Talbot were walking from Rylcombe together on the day before the race.

"Why, Tom? My chance is no better than yours or Figgy's or half a dozen others. And I can't say I feel up to concert-pitch. It's silly—I know that as well as

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Kerr's was the first New House name to go on, and a space was saved below his signature for Figgins and Fatty Wynn. "Kim along, Kerr!" said Dig. And together they went over to the New House.

CHAPTER 11.

The Start.

"MY hat, it's a crowd!" said Tom Merry. And indeed it was a crowd. "Bai Jove, deah boys, it's a fine mornin'!" said Arthur Augustus.

And indeed it was a fine morning. The sun shone brightly from a cloudless sky. There was a touch of frost in the air, and merely to breathe was like drinking an elixir.

The competitors outnumbered the spectators. Very few indeed of the Shell and Fourth were absent, and the fags had turned out in goodly numbers.

They were in front. It was impossible to start all from one line, and in so long a distance a few yards mattered nothing.

Behind the fags were two long rows of the Fourth. Behind them again were two rows of the Shell.

Talbot, looking very cheery and fit, stood between Tom Merry and Gore. There had been a great change in Talbot since he got up. He had felt heavy-hearted then. Now he no longer felt so.

Perhaps the manifesto had told him nothing new. He had been sure of those who had signed it. But it was a kindly thought. They had made Dig go alone to deliver it, for his was the real credit of it.

"I shall keep this as long as I live, Digby," Talbot had said gravely.

There had been a mist before his eyes as he spoke, and when their hands met, that mist seemed to have reached Dig, for he could not see Talbot's face clearly.

Manners and Lowther were not far from Tom Merry, of course. Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby were all together in the fourth line. Among the fags Wally showed between Levison minor and Manners minor, with Frayne and Hobbs and Jameson and Gibson close by.

Ernest Levison had sought no one's neighbourhood. He found himself quite by accident beside his study-mate, Lumley-Lumley. And he was surprised when Jerrold Lumley-Lumley said quietly:

"Wish you luck, Levison!"

"What about yourself?" returned Levison, not too graciously.

"Oh, I'm only in this for a constitutional! You should have a chance!"

"You really think so?"

"I think so, and I hope so," said Lumley-Lumley.

It did Levison good—the more good because he had not expected it, maybe.

Now Kildare, who was starting them, spoke.

"Let's have a clear understanding," he said, in ringing tones that everyone heard. "The course is marked out by red flags, and from any two of these you can always see the next two. In each case you must pass between flags wherever they are, though there won't always be anyone to see that you do it. The course has been slightly altered, I ought to tell you. A man named Peters objects to anyone passing over his fields, so we're giving him a miss."

Kerr was half faced round towards Kildare, and it happened that he could see both Croke and Racke, who were together. What was it in Kildare's speech that had caused the faces of both to fall?

He could not guess. But he was not likely to forget.

"Are you ready?" cried Kildare.

The bent lines straightened themselves.

"One—two—three!"

Bang!

At the report of the pistol all were off.

There was confusion at first—jostling among those who fancied that to get ahead at the start was half the battle. In a long race across country it does not matter a bit. Those who knew enough for this hung back and avoided the jostling.

The course led over the river and across Wayland Moor. Two red flags fluttered in the light breeze in the field on the other side of the road. The impatient ones made something like a rugger scrum of the passage between them.

Practically all the competitors who had any real chance were in the smaller rear pack. One or two were among those strown out between that and the vanguard.

Ernest Levison was one of these.

The fags were all in the bigger crowd. They were too eager to be prudent.

Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, Figgins, Kerr, Redfern, and

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NOW ON SALE.

"FOUL PLAY!"

Noble—the seven thought to be likely to provide the winner—were all together. With them for the present ran Herries, Digby, Lowther, Clive Manners, D'Arcy, Grundy, Gore, Gunn, Wilkins, Hammond, Lumley-Lumley, Kerruish, Dane, Glyn, Julian, and some others whose chances could not be described as rosy, but were not nil.

Already Croke, Racke, Clampe, and Mellish had dropped behind. They would have been with the non-starters—who, of course, included Trimble—but for the look of the thing.

Mellish would have gone on—for a bit, anyway. But Racke's hand on his shoulder had held him back. Mellish had heard Kildare's pronouncement with real relief, and Clampe had not felt greatly disappointed. But hate still burned hot in Racke and Croke, and they were not minded to give up their precious scheme so easily.

"What's the use? It's all off now!" whined Mellish.

"Oh, is it, though?" snarled Croke.

"Not if Whiskers does his share," said Racke meaningly.

"Don't quite see how you're going to work it," Clampe said uneasily.

"Shift the flags, you chump!" snapped Racke.

"I say, here, hold hard! That's a jolly risky game, you know!" protested Clampe.

"We shall all get sacked!" moaned Mellish. "There ain't a dog's chance of not being spotted, you know."

"Think not?" said Racke coolly. "Now, my opinion is quite different."

"Besides, there's something in the Bible against it!" bleated the sneak of the Fourth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" bellowed Croke. It seemed to Croke quite funny that Mellish should think anything in the Bible could concern him.

"Didn't know you were so pi, Mellish," sneered Racke.

"I'm not. But it says 'Cursed is he who removeth his neighbour's landmark,' I know," Mellish replied.

All three of the others laughed this time, though Clampe's laugh was a bit half-hearted. Clampe was not quite so bold a blade as Croke and Racke.

"Sup-sup-suppose the bull kills someone?"

"Rats! Peters is too fly to chance that!"

Mellish stifled a groan. He was in it, he saw—in it up to the neck. Never had he wished more strongly that he had kept straight—run with a decent crowd—shunned these rotters. He might have done it. There was less vice in Mellish than in them, and he had more likeable qualities.

The four hung about until the last of the genuine runners had passed out of sight, and then cut through Rylcombe Wood.

As they crossed the footpath leading from the Grammar School to the castle ruins and Wayland Moor, someone zang out to them.

"Ha,—you fellows! What are you after this way? The others haven't come along here!"

It was Gordon Gay, the leader of the Grammarian juniors, who spoke.

"Oh, we never meant to run seriously, you know!" said Croke.

"Tell the bounder to mind his own business!" growled Racke.

But Croke was too wide for that. Frank Monk and the two Wallabies were with Gay; and that redoubtable quartet would have been far too strong for the four St. Jim's rotters.

"What did you tog up for, then? Beastly slackers! I only wish that Wilsow chap had thrown the race open to us!" said Monk.

"We are going to work round to the later part of the course, to see how the fellows shape when they get there," said Clampe.

"Shows what a jolly queer notion of amusement you've got!" said Wootton major. "We're going to see the giddy finish, of course—begg'd a halfer on purpose."

"But we're not going half-naked to stand about waiting!"

added Wootton minor. "Too parky for us, thanks!"

The four wasters moved off.

"Don't get running! You might injure your delicate constitutions!" yelled Gay after them.

Meanwhile the bigger pack in the race was thinning out quickly.

A couple of miles proved enough to show some of its members that they had overrated their powers.

There were many stragglers by the time the old castle was reached.

From the rearguard but one fellow had dropped out before that.

This was Skimpole. Skimmy would start, though Talbot had tried to dissuade him and Gore had sneered. But running was decidedly not Skimmy's forte, and only by heroic efforts had he managed a mile.

At the castle Fatty Wynn calmly turned it up.

"I've done all the running I'm out for to-day," he announced. "If I go any further it only means a longer walk back, and I may miss the finish."

"Slacker!" said Figgins.

"This is where I stop," said Fatty placidly, and he sat down.

It was sheer waste of breath to argue with him. The pack swept on.

CHAPTER 12.

Removing the Landmarks.

THEY were running steadily, without bustling. It was not yet time for that.

Where now was the close-packed band that had jostled at the start?

Some had dropped out. Others were strung out in twos and threes, and the steady pace of those behind was gaining on them. But well, away at the front ran a little cluster of sturdy fags—Wally & Co., still full of energy.

And behind them, ahead of anyone else, going strongly, too, was a solitary figure—that of Ernest Levison.

Levison was doing from the first what all must do at the finish—he was playing a lone hand.

A mile or two farther on, nearing Wayland, the rearmost pack that had been—but there were plenty in rear of it now—numbered over twenty.

But here it decreased. Glyn, Lumley-Lumley, D'Arcy, Manners, and Herries could no longer keep pace with the rest.

Tom Merry glanced round as they crossed the bridge over the Ryll near Quarry Farm.

It reminded him of the ten little nigger boys.

For now there was a further thinning out and splitting up. Talbot and Kerr ran with Tom.

Only a few yards behind were Blake, Figgins, Clive, and Redfern.

Behind them again were four more—Noble, Digby, Lowther, and Gore.

But Lowther's bolt was practically shot—Tom was sure of that. And he thought Gore in scarcely better case. But there he was wrong.

Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn held together still. But Gunn was not likely to hold on much longer, and neither Grundy nor Wilkins looked a winner.

Dane, Kerruish, Hammond, Julian, and Reilly came behind them at a very short distance.

At the two red flags planted on the high ground above the quarries stood Darrel.

He nodded and smiled as they passed, but said nothing. And nobody said anything to him—nobody among the five contingents just enumerated, that is. They were saving their breath for a more important thing than conversation.

But Darrel waited until some of the stragglers came up.

Here Arthur Augustus, Lumley-Lumley, and Glyn threw up the sponge.

"Come along, you chaps!" panted Herries.

But Arthur Augustus shook his head, and Glyn threw himself down.

Herries and Manners toiled on.

"This is vevy exaspewatin'!" said Gussy. "Theah is my minah still ahead an' goin' stwong, while I am done to the wide!"

"Who's going to win, Darrel?" panted Glyn.

"Ask me another! I'll tell you who's not, if you like."

"Who?"

"You three. Never mind. Everybody can't, and long-distance running isn't everyone's game."

In the meantime, Fatty Wynn, having turned his chubby, good-tempered face homewards, took it into his head to go by the footpath leading to the Grammar School instead of through the woods.

He walked right into a small crowd of Grammarian juniors on reaching the road.

"My hat, Wynn! That's rather an airy costume for a stroll!" said Frank Monk.

"His fat keeps him warm," said Wootton major.

"He's done the course, and is just toddling back again to encourage the others," grinned Carboy.

"It's quite all right," said Fatty calmly. "I started to please Piggy and Kerr, and I've stopped to please myself—see?"

"We're going along to Rylcombe," said Gordon Gay.

"You can come with us if you like, Wynn."

"I don't see your nursemaids, so I may as well," answered Fatty. "You need someone to look after you."

"Only you've got to make out that you belong to another show if a policeman looks hard at you," said Wootton minor.

"There are laws against chaps going about with practically nothings on, you know."

"Any bobby who objects to my legs can go and eat coke!" replied Fatty, looking down thoughtfully at the massive limbs mentioned. "They're quite clean, anyway!"

"And ain't there just plenty of 'em!" grinned Carboy.

"Eet ees Wynn who 'ave ze great beef pedestals," remarked Mont Blanc, the French junior.

"You got a bit further than some of your chaps did, Wynn," remarked Gordon Gay. "Crooke, and that New House bouncer, and the war-profits merchant, and that sly-locking worm—what's his name?"

"I guess you mean Mellish," said Fatty. "What about them?"

"They fell out before they'd fairly started. But they've gone this way. Beats me what for, though. Shouldn't have expected any of that crew to take an interest in the race."

Neither would Fatty have expected it. And almost unconsciously he quickened his pace, full of a vague suspicion that he could not have explained, though perhaps Kerr might have helped him.

He could not say anything to the fellows with him—not yet, at least. But he was glad they were with him. They were the right sort for an emergency.

In the fields west of the Grammar School red flags fluttered under the blue arch of the sky.

From the road the last part of the course could be made out pretty clearly. It was all across country till within a short distance of the St. Jim's gates. The heavy going was likely to test hard those left in near the finish.

"It doesn't touch Rylcombe at all," said Gordon Gay. "We might as well cut across into the Westwood road instead of going all round."

Fatty agreed, though he had no love for heavy plough-land. "No end of a crusty merchant, the chap who lives there," said Frank Monk, indicating the roof of Mr. Peter Peter's abode.

"And don't he look it, with his red whiskers!" said Carboy.

"Some of our chaps had a row with him last week," Fatty said. "That's why the course was changed."

They halted. Before long the foremost runners might be expected to show up, for these spectators had taken their journey easily.

"I say, you fellows, look there!" cried Wootton minor. "One of those giddy flags is moving!"

"They all move. It's the wind, ass!" said his brother.

"It's got over so much stronger than it was."

"I don't mean that, idiot! It's moving along the hedge—see!"

The eyes of all followed the direction in which his finger pointed.

And now all saw plainly.

Not one flag only was moving—two were!

Between the road on which they stood were two hedges and a wide meadow.

"Let's cut across and see!" said Gordon Gay.

He vaulted the gate. Frank Monk was following, when Mont Blanc shouted:

"Oh, look out! Prenez garde! Ze bool—ze bool!"

A big black bull, tossing his head angrily, lumbered towards the two Grammarians.

They wasted no time in getting on the right side of the gate.

"What's the game?" asked Monk, mystified. "Looks to me as if there's something pretty rotten going on!"

"Who's moving those flags?" said Gay. "Whoever it may be, his dirty game is to bring the race over the field where the bull is!"

"That's it," said Fatty. "I can guess who it is, but I'm not going to say. Better stop it, I think. Are you fellows on?"

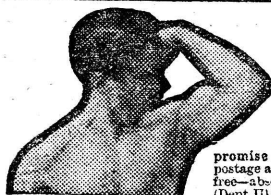
Fatty was as cool as a cucumber, but there was great excitement among the Grammarians.

"Rather!" answered Gordon Gay. "We'll split up and take them from both sides. I'll go this way. Come along, some of you!"

"You'll run into Peters," Carboy warned him.

"Hang Peters! You and Frank and Jack go that way. We'll take this. That suit you, Wynn?"

"Yes," replied Fatty.



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Monk, Carboy, and one of the Woottons took one hedge; Gay, Wynn, the other Wootton, and Mont Blanc the other.

Before moving the flags, Crooke & Co. had satisfied themselves as far as they could that there was no one in sight.

At the last minute Mellish again protested.

"Don't, you fellows!" he whined. "It's an awful thing to do, and we may have to repent it all our lives!"

"Ring off!" snarled Crooke, and Racke gave the sneak a brutal kick by way of encouragement.

Crooke seized one flag, Racke another.

"We'd better not touch them," whispered Clampe to Mellish. But Mellish was too far gone in an agony of fear to take any comfort from this plucky suggestion.

The two found a spot where the hedge was low enough to be jumped, and planted the flags one on either side of it, so that the course now seemed to lead straight over the field in which the bull was.

None of them had perceived the approach of Wynn and the Grammar School band. But now Clampe saw something else, and cackled out in sudden alarm.

"Oh, look out! I saw someone jump that hedge over there! And there goes another! They're coming!"

Crooke's face went almost green. It seemed they had cut this thing too close.

"We can hide in one of the barns," said Racke, the only one of the precious four who was keeping cool.

But at that moment the war-hoop of the Grammar School sounded, and over the hedge to their left came Gordon Gay and his squad.

To their right appeared Frank Monk & Co.

"Bolt!" roared Racke. "Keep your heads down! We're done for if they spot us!"

But there was only one way of escape, and that was through the field in which the bull was.

In sheer desperation they took it—or three of them did. Racke went first. After him pounced Crooke. Clampe, trembling and moaning, followed.

But Mellish threw himself on his face in the long grass and blubbered outright. He felt as though his world was rocking to its foundations.

"Tom Merry's leading!" he heard Fatty Wynn cry, and wondered how Fatty or anyone could care about the race at such a crisis.

"Catch hold of the flag, Frank!" shouted Gay. "Bring it along next field, there's just time! Never mind exactly where you put it!"

"Merry's only a few yards ahead! There's Talbot!" cried Carboy.

"My word, this is a race!" yelled Wootton major. "Hanged if here isn't that chap Levison! Wonders will never cease!"

"And here's old Kerr, and Redfern, too!" shouted Fatty.

"Bravo, New House! Oh, and Figgy—I knew he couldn't be far behind! And Blake! Oh, my hat, here's Gore coming!"

No one was paying any heed to Racke and Crooke and Clampe.

For the present no more runners came into sight. But behind that first contingent of eight Digby and Kangaroo and Dane and Grundy and Clive were still running, not without hope. And behind them again were Manners and Hammond and three fags—D'Arcy minor, Frayne, and Levison minor.

All these knew well now that they could not win; but they meant to finish.

Herries had come to grief at an awkward jump, and Lowther had given up the race with him. Gunn, Wilkins, and Reilly had all dropped out, too. But somewhere in the rear plodded Dick Julian. He, too, was bent on finishing.

"Get up, Mellish, you rotter!" said Fatty.

But at this moment a shrill cry of fear came from the field to which their backs were turned, making them face round on the instant.

The bull was charging straight down upon Crooke, within six yards of him, and Crooke had given himself up for lost.

Racke, ahead of him, had reached the gate. Clampe, behind him, had thrown himself down, or had fallen, and lay as if paralysed by fear.

"Come on!" yelled Gordon Gay. And he went to the rescue without a second's hesitation.

He had snatched a flagstaff out of the ground. It was the only weapon available, and there was no time to be thinking of the rules of the race.

Up came Tom Merry and Talbot.

"What's it all about?" panted Tom.

But Talbot had seen. He grabbed the other flag.

"Go on, you chaps!" shouted Fatty Wynn. "We'll see to this!"

But the case was far too serious for that. Crooke's life was in peril.

Fatty was already over the hedge. Monk and the rest followed their leader, too. No one funkied it.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 463.

NOW ON SALE.

"FOUL PLAY!"

CHAPTER 13.

The Finish.

LEVISON came up. His lower jaw hung. He was evidently in distress, but not done yet! He would struggle to the finish at worst. He saw. Moved by what impulse no one ever knew he followed the rescuers, though he had to blunder through the hedge—he could not lift himself to it.

Crooke had dodged. The bull, wheeling round, sighted the rescuers with their red flags, and came straight for them. Crooke plunged desperately, wildly towards the gate.

Talbot's flag waved before the bull's eyes, and Talbot only just dodged in time to avoid him.

Gay danced in, and drew the infuriated animal's attention.

Crooke sprawled, and emitted a mournful howl. Racke had reached the gate now. He turned as if to go to Crooke's help. But apparently he thought better—or worse—of it, for he did not go.

But Levison did. He was making straight for Crooke, staggering as he ran. He seized the cad of the Shell under the armpits and jerked him to his feet.

"Run!" he panted. "Here comes—"

Crooke ran for his life. But Levison stood still. He could not stir for the moment. His heart seemed to have stopped beating.

Talbot again! In the very nick of time the red flag diverted the bull's course.

Clampe had scrambled somehow into safety. Most of the others had got on the far side of the hedge at Gay's command. But the Grammar School leader and Monk and Fatty Wynn were still waiting for Talbot and Levison. Crooke had now reached the gate.

Kerr, Figgins, Blake, and Redfern had all come up and halted. They did not go over the hedge, because they saw that to do so would only mean hampering those already there. Now Gore staggered along, passed, seeing nothing, and ran on. But when he reached the road he stopped and looked back, surprised to see no one ahead of him. And then he saw.

It was all over in another minute. Somehow the rescuers dodged the bull and got back into safety. And just at that moment Kildare came tearing up on a motor-cycle.

The whole crowd were in the road, and swarming round him by the time he had dismounted.

"Cut along, you fellows! We can explain to Kildare!" shouted Gay.

"Yes, get on!" said Kildare. "Never mind about any irregularity here. That can be put right. Anyone ahead?"

"No," panted Gore.

"Then off with you, and may the best man win!"

Off went the eight. And now, puzzled greatly, up came five more—Digby, Dane, Noble, Clive, and Grundy.

"Get on!" yelled Kildare. "It's all right!"

He snatched the flags, ran across the field, and replanted them.

The four ran on.

Four more came into sight—one and one, and then two small figures together.

Manners panted up.

"You'd better cut out, Manners!" said Kildare sharply.

"You're done, whether you know it or not!"

"Rats!" gasped Manners. But he recoiled, and was glad of the stalwart skipper's supporting arm.

Now came Harry Hammond—Ammond, of 'igh-class' at fame—sticking to it nobly, not nearly as baked as Manners.

"Go on, Hammond!" said Kildare. "There's a chance for you yet!"

Hammond went on.

And now up came two fags—Wally D'Arcy and Frank Levison.

"Well run, kids!" cried Kildare, in genuine delight. "Your brother's on ahead, young Levison!"

Frank shot him a grateful glance, and ran on. Those two were far from done yet.

On ahead the leaders were stringing out again. Talbot did not seem the least bit the worse for the stoppage, though he had done more than his share of the rescue work. Tom showed little sign of being affected.

Kerr—well, it was never easy to guess how Kerr felt. He did not show it. But whatever chance Blake and Figgins and Clive might have had was gone. And Grundy was in much the same plight.

Redfern was still fighting fit. Levison still held doggedly to it. But Gore was in a sorry case. His tongue lolled out of his mouth at times, he staggered as he ran, his face was hideously contorted. Yet still he held on. He had made up his mind to finish, if it killed him—and to finish as far forward as possible.

Three miles from home Tom Merry was just ahead of Talbot.

A Splendid Complete Tale of Harry Wharton & Co. in THE "MAGNET" LIBRARY. Price 1d.

Redfern ran third, running well, too. Kerr had gone ahead of Gore and Levison.

Grundy, lurching heavily, was just behind them.

Noble and Digby drew up to Figgins and Blake and Clive.

Kangaroo passed them. Digby didn't.

"We're out of the hunt, Jack!" he puffed.

"I guess so," answered Blake wearily.

But all three held on.

Dane drew up, passed, went in pursuit of Noble. And Hammond drew up, but did not pass. The gallant little Cockney had shot his bolt at last.

Redfern put on pace and passed Kerr. Or was it that Kerr had slowed down? Redfern hardly knew. The strain was finding him out at last. He would not win, he knew, unless those in front crooked up. But he meant to try hard for a place. And they might crook up—who could tell?

But behind him sounded the pad-pad of two pairs of feet. He glanced over his shoulder.

Gore, with a positively ghastly face. Levison, scarcely better! They had passed Grundy. Dane and Noble had passed him, too. Poor old Grundy was out of it! But he had not done so badly, and he would still finish.

Gore and Levison looked as little like winners as well might be. But Redfern found that for all he could do he could not increase his lead over them. It seemed rather as though they were drawing up to him!

Now, before the foremost runners, in the fields behind Glyn House, lay a brook.

An easy jump at another time. Not easy for anyone now—not even Talbot and Tom Merry.

Tom cleared it, but had wretched luck. The bank was rotten with rain and frost, and it gave way under him, sliding him back into the water.

Talbot had better luck. But he halted, and turned back to hold out a hand to Tom.

"No!" gasped Tom. "It would disqualify me, old chap!"

Even then Talbot hesitated. It was as though he was reluctant to go on till Tom was clear.

"Oh, get on, do!" yelled Tom.

Then Talbot went. But within twenty yards he looked back over his shoulder. And as he looked his foot caught a tussock of grass, and he fell headlong.

He groaned as he got up. "Something had gone wrong—he was not sure what it was, but something hurt horribly.

—But he held on.

Behind him Tom had scrambled out. Redfern, by a great effort, had cleared the brook. Neither Gore nor Levison made any attempt to clear it. They simply waded through.

But Tom Merry's bolt was shot at last. That sudden plunge backward after he had fairly landed had given him a queer shock. He felt sick and dizzy. Like one in a dream he saw Gore and Levison stagger past him, holding on still, grimly determined. And he knew that Redfern was ahead also. But he knew that Talbot led, and somehow he did not feel that he cared very much about anything but that.

"Done, Merry?" panted Noble, going past him.

Tom did not answer. His eyes were on Talbot and Redfern.

Was it possible that Redfern was drawing up, that he would pass Talbot? Something was wrong with the leader! And, behind Redfern again, were Levison, a little in front of Gore now, and Gore, still grimly determined.

Talbot, Redfern, Levison, Gore! Among these lay the race. Noble might try his best, but home was too near now for him to have a chance. And Tom himself had lost his, and those behind him were out of the running.

A gate! Talbot reached it first. But what was the matter with him? He had seemed all right at the brook. Now he clambered over that gate slowly, with difficulty, like an old and feeble man.

As a matter of fact, Talbot had dislocated his collar-bone in his fall. He did not know that himself; but he knew that something had gone wrong, and that something was paining him horribly.

But he was over first, and he summoned up all the energy left to him for that last straight three hundred yards or so along the hard road, lined with eager faces, looking longer than any other three hundred yards had looked since the world began, it seemed to him!

Redfern was only just behind him. Gore fell over the gate rather than climbed it. But to Levison there seemed to have come new energy. He went over more lightly, in better form, than any one of the other three.

Talbot staggered, and the shouting voices were as the sound of many waters in his ears. But Redfern was staggering too, nearly spent; and it seemed a miracle that Gore kept his feet. Only Levison had a sprint left in him.

It was a feeble thing in the way of sprints, perhaps, but it counted.

Levison went away from Gore, drew nearer Redfern, drew up to him, passed him, hung hard on the heels of Talbot!

"Levison! Oh, my hat! Who'd have dreamed it?"

Levison heard, though he could not recognise the voice.

"Talbot! Oh, buck up, Talbot! He's catching you!"

Tom had been right. They had forgotten that Talbot was under a cloud. They wanted him to win. They were cheering him on frantically.

And now the tape was close ahead, and still Talbot held first place, though Levison was almost close enough to touch him. Redfern and Gore were fighting for third place—nothing better was possible for either now.

Ten yards—five—another effort and all would be over!

Talbot fairly flung himself forward, and in the same instant Levison faltered in his stride.

No one but Ernest Levison could ever know whether at the very last he held back the effort that might have taken him ahead. Perhaps even he did not know. He may have done it involuntarily—he may not have done it at all. It is a mystery, like so much in Levison's wayward, undisciplined nature. Yet some who saw believed ever after that Levison might have won if he would! That it was not talked about was only because it was Levison. It would have seemed absurd to credit him with such generosity.

Talbot reeled and fell—past the tape. Levison clutched at someone for support, Redfern, gasping, scrambled in just ahead of Gore.

Gore threw up his arms wildly, and dropped senseless in the road.

Some of them lifted him up and carried him across the quadrangle.

But the rest waited to see who finished. Noble came fifth, not so far behind Redfern and Gore. There was an interval before Tom Merry ran in, baked, but not looking so done as Talbot or Redfern.

Then came quite a small crowd—Figgins, Kerr, Blake, Dane, Clive, Hammond, and the great Grundy. Not twenty yards behind them plodded in the two plucky fags.

They cheered them all, but none more than Wally and Frank. It was wonderful that two such kids should have covered the course in such time. Levison fairly hugged Frank, and the youngster, spent though he was, fairly danced for joy when he heard that his brother was second and Talbot first.

And how they cheered Talbot! Again and again the cheers broke out. But Tom saw that there was something wrong with his chum, and led him off. What was wrong was not discovered till later, and then fellows were even more enthusiastic than before.

They cheered Levison, too; but, as he remarked to Lumley-Lumley later, with his old sarcastic way, everybody thought it a fluke, and nearly everybody a pity.

They would have cheered Gore, but Gore was deaf to cheering. The sanny claimed him, and kept him for some days. But Gore had done himself good. He had shown pluck and endurance, and he took his failure to get a place in a very sportsmanlike way. The first thing he did on leaving sanny was to go over and growl congratulations to Redfern. And Reddy did not mind the growl—he knew that was only Gore's way.

Something of the truth concerning the double conspiracy filtered out—enough for everyone to know that Talbot was blameless, but not enough for any but a few in the secret to understand how black was the guilt of Croke, Racke, & Co. They were tried, condemned, and punished by a highly illegal but quite effective tribunal, and the business ought to have been a lesson to them. It was to Mellish and to Clampe. The other two were more hardened, and on the whole were very well satisfied to get off without the sack.

Mr. Peter Peters figured in the bankruptcy list a little later, and left the neighbourhood, regretted by none.

The Head was evidently surprised when he found that the gold medal for second place went to Ernest Levison; but he said some very nice things, which, it is to be hoped, Levison appreciated. He was really pleased, though he did not own it, when Mr. Railton congratulated him—very gravely, sternly almost, yet unmistakably with sincerity.

"He's wondering whether I'll manage to run straight after this," said Levison to himself. "I'm wondering, too. I hope so, but—"

THE END.

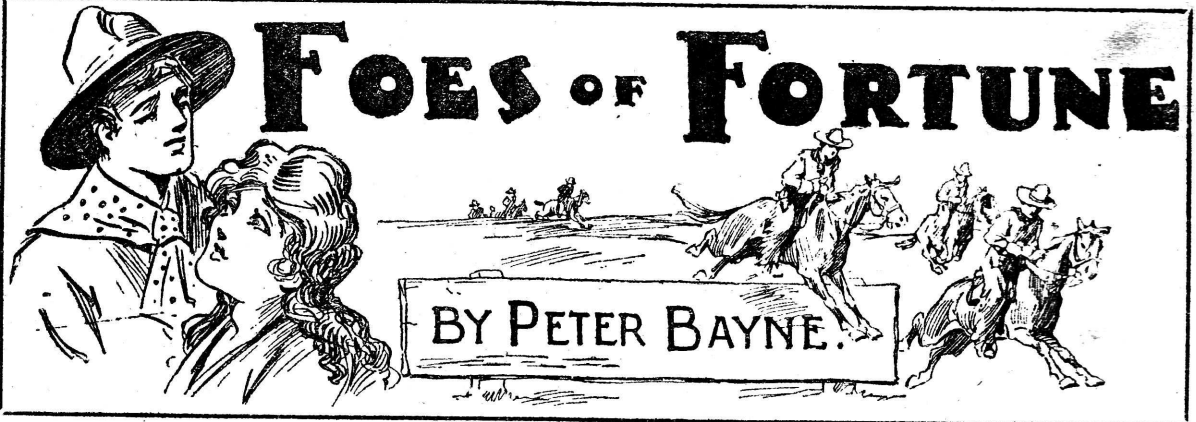
(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"FOR HIS BROTHER'S SAKE!" by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 463.

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "FOR HIS BROTHER'S SAKE!"

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 MILBURN 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 Milburns.

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 Chinnee, AH CHING. They are made welcome, and all lie down to sleep.

The next day some members of Dirk Ralwin's band of ruffians arrive at the ruined house, together with a Yankee, HUXTON FENNER, who had joined them, having previously deserted his companions, Roddy Garrin and the Chinaman. The party have, however, already left the place, and succeed in escaping from the island on a raft. A steamer is seen in the distance, and a signal of distress is given from the raft, and the steamer approaches. Carton Ross calls out his name, and requests that he and his companions shall be taken aboard.

*(Now read on.)***Falsely Accused—Freedom Lost—The Mutineers.**

There was a visible stir of excitement on the steamer. Moved by a common impulse, the passengers swarmed to the deck-rails in order to obtain a better view of the raft and its occupants. The ship's officers hurried to, and fro giving orders. "Full steam astern," and then "Stop" was signalled down to the engine-room.

"Look at that, now!" said Roddy Garrin, his eyes sparkling. "You said just now, Ross, that your name would make you welcome anywhere. It is doing that on yonder craft with a vengeance."

A rope was flung out from the vessel, and deftly caught by Ah Ching. In a few moments the raft was alongside the steamer's gangway, on the steps of which the captain was standing, as if to receive some royal guest.

There were a few sceptics and doubters on board, it was true, people who refused to believe that the handsome English lad who had proclaimed himself to be the grandson of the great Cyrus Ross had any right to such a name.

But the majority believed it straightaway. They did not pause to ask for proof of the astounding assertion. It was too fine and thrilling a sensation to be spoilt just then by the cold logic of reason. Here was the last survivor of the world-famous Ross family, whose sons and daughters had perished with the yacht Emerald off the English coast on that memorable day back in the summer.

So concentrated was their whole attention on the hero of the moment that not one of them had time to notice the approach of a large Mexican cruiser.

Boom! One of the warship's guns had fired a blank shot. The cruiser at once became the chief centre of attraction. That rolling boom of her gun was both a warning and a menace. She had stopped not a hundred yards from the steamer, towards which a spotlessly white steam pinnace, her polished brass work shining like gold in the sunlight, was cutting swiftly through the water.

The captain of the steamship looked startled and uneasy. "What can they want with us?" he said aggrievedly. "We've wasted a lot of time as it is. This is vastly annoying."

The pinnace drew up alongside the raft with a flurry of seething foam at her bows, and the lieutenant in command stood up, saluted, and spoke to the captain.

"Sorry to detain you," he said, "but I have orders from my superior officer, Captain Eshman, commander of the Mexican cruiser Imperator, to arrest the persons you have just taken on board."

"Arrest them! What have they done?"
"They are fugitives flying from justice," was the answer—"dangerous young rebels who have been wanted for some time by the Mexican Government for their active support of the revolutionary movement. Please to hand them over to me."

For a moment there was the silence of tense excitement. Then a noisy hum of conversation buzzed from the lips of the passengers thronging the deck. Some protested, some laughed and jeered, and one and all strove to obtain a clearer view of Carton Ross and his friends.

Surprise, doubt, and perplexity depicted in the expression of his face, the captain stared at the lieutenant. Then his gaze shifted back to the comrades.

"You hear what he says?" he remarked. "If it is true, you must leave this ship instantly. I can give you no protection."

"It's all a pack of lies!" declared Ross indignantly. "The whole thing is a conspiracy! Rebels! Do we look it? We're all of us practically strangers to the country, and are British subjects, not fugitives from a foreign Government, that has no power over us. And I don't believe that any lawful authority has ordered our arrest. I'm convinced that the rebel leader himself, Dirk Ralwin, is at the back of this business."

The lieutenant showed impatience. "We can't stop here all day," he said curtly. "Do your duty, skipper, or it will be the worse for you."

"I know what my duty is better than you do," the other retorted, an angry flush reddening his cheeks, "and I refuse to be dictated to. Young man," he continued, turning his attention once more to Ross, "you tell me that you are Carton Ross, the only surviving descendant of the late Cyrus Ross, the multi-millionaire. Can you show me proofs of any kind to satisfactorily establish your identity? Be quick! I cannot spare you more than another minute."

"Yes, I can," answered Carton Ross quickly, "for I have some papers on me that will give you all the proof you may require."

Boom! A live shell from a four-inch gun tore between the masts of the steamer with a whistling scream. Above the noise of the panic that ensued was heard a megaphoned demand from the cruiser.

"Hand the prisoners over immediately," it peremptorily ordered, "or we sink the ship!"

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

FOES OF FORTUNE!

(Continued from page 20.)

The captain of the steamer yielded to the threat. His stubborn nature was roused, and had there been only himself and his crew to consider, he would have bidden defiance to the entire Mexican Navy. But there were his passengers and a valuable cargo to think about. He was not his own master.

"You'll have to go," he said to the comrades. "I'm sorry, but I can't take you with me. I'll put the whole matter before the proper authorities, though, I promise you that much. It hasn't ended here by a long way."

He shook hands warmly with Carton Ross, who, in a state of dazed bewilderment, preceded his companions down the gangway. As soon as they had taken their seats in it, the pinnace swung round and steamed away.

A mocking shout of laughter rang out. It came from those who, eager to cheer and flatter Carton Ross only a few minutes before, had now turned against him. The lad who was the object of this insulting demonstration turned red and then pale. Bitterly did he feel the humiliation of his position.

"The cowardly curs!" exclaimed Roddy Garrin hotly, shaking his fist in the direction of the steamer. "What they want is another shell or two fired over them. They'd soon yell to a different tune then."

"Oh, I don't know that one can blame them!" said Ross, shrugging his shoulders with a gesture of proud disdain and indifference. "Why should they have believed me? It would have been amazing, come to think of it, if they had done so in the circumstances."

"The skipper believed you, at any rate," Garrin answered, "and showed it."

The cruiser went on up the river directly the comrades were aboard. Officers and men eyed them curiously as they were taken along the deck to where Captain Eshman, a big, stout man with puffy cheeks, little eyes, and a square, black beard, lounged back in a long chair, snoking a fat cheroot.

After regarding each of them with a fixed, glassy stare, he waved his hand to the lieutenant in a gesture of dismissal.

"Take them below," he said, speaking in a thin, squeaky voice that sounded oddly from the lips of so large and ponderous an individual, "and see that they are well guarded. Then make out your written report of what happened, and bring it to me."

Carton Ross stepped forward a pace.

"One moment," he said. "You've not yet told us why we are prisoners. The charge your subordinate here brought against us, that of being dangerous rebels wanted by the Government, is a trumped-up one, and you are perfectly well aware of it. What was the real reason for our arrest? We demand to know it."

"Demand!" squeaked the Mexican, springing up in his chair as though a wasp had stung him in a tender spot. "Do you dare to use that word to me?"

"Most certainly I do," Ross answered, with an aggravatingly cool smile. "And don't bully me," he added, as the other exploded in a terrific burst of abuse. "It will only make the price heavier that you'll be called on to pay for this little business. You can rest yourself assured on that point."

Beside himself with rage, Captain Eshman struck wildly at the other with his scabbarded sword. But his foot slipped, and he fell with a resounding crash on to the deck.

"Tee hee!" gurgled Ah Ching, grinning hideously with rapturous delight. "Tee hee, hee!"

"Silence!" thundered the lieutenant, spinning the little Chinaman round by his nigtail. "All of you come this way."

The haste with which he shepherded the prisoners down the companion-way steps into the ward-room seemed to indicate a desire on his part that they should be spared the visitation of the infuriated captain's wrath. And when he looked at Carton Ross, there was a significant smile on his lips.

"Bravo!" he said. "After that you can count on me doing what I can for you. Santa Claus! What a chimpanzee you made him look!"

Still smiling, he left the ward-room, locking the door behind him. Carton Ross and Garrin looked at each other and laughed heartily as the comic aspect of the situation appealed to them.

"Seems as though Captain Eshman isn't very popular with his first lieutenant," said Garrin. "And I saw some of the crew sniggering, too, when he grovelled on the deck. Think he'll have it in for us over it?"

"He may have for me," Ross answered, "but I'm not troubling about him. It's the thought of how we just missed being taken aboard that steamer before the cruiser came up that is worrying me."

"Forget it!" said Garrin cheerily. "It was a rotten dis-

appointment, but it's over and done with, and we must hope for better luck next time."

But in such circumstances it was difficult for any of them to take a hopeful view of the future. They were prisoners without the shadow of a prospect of regaining their liberty. Time and distance had been of no avail to them in escaping from Dirk Ralwin, the outlaw chief.

That Ralwin was responsible for their recapture they did not doubt. It was a striking proof of his power and far-reaching influence. No ordinary outlaw thus, but a man who had friends and followers near and far ever ready and eager to obey him.

The comrades were left alone. No one came to see them. The cruiser steamed on at high speed. She kept in mid-stream during the rest of the day, but came in closer to shore as evening approached, from which it seemed evident that she would soon reach her point of call.

Suddenly a great commotion broke out on board. The sounds of men shouting excitedly and running along the deck overhead penetrated the ward-room. Then came the muffled report of revolver shots repeated again and again.

"They are firing!" said Lorna quickly. "What can have happened?"

As if in answer to her question, furious blows began to rain on the locked door of the ward-room. In a few moments the door was forced open, and a crowd of bluejackets rushed in, cheering, yelling, and gesticulating in a frenzy of mad emotion.

Taking no notice of Carton Ross and his companions, the excited men flung themselves upon the stands of swords and rifles in the place and seized every weapon they could lay their hands on. Then they went as quickly as they came.

"Great Scott!" cried Roddy Garrin, staring round with wide open eyes. "I know what it all means. A mutiny has broken out."

For some time dissatisfaction and discontent had been rife amongst the crew of the Imperator. Now the smouldering flames of mutiny had broken out into active conflagration, and the disaffected men were already taking possession of the cruiser.

The suddenness of the revolt had come upon Captain Eshman and the few who were loyal to him as a complete surprise. Fighting desperately, they were driven from the deck, those who escaped finding refuge wherever they were able to.

The mutineers swept from end to end of the cruiser in a human wave that bore down all before it. Discipline and restraint were cast to the winds. Singing, yelling, and dancing, the lawless horde reigned supreme where, but a few minutes before, they had been subjected to an iron rule.

"It isn't safe for us to remain here," said Carton Ross, as the uproar on deck mounted to a deafening din. "Sooner or later some of those fellows will return, and they won't leave us alone then."

"That's true enough," Garrin remarked. "We shall have to put up a fight for it without a doubt. Let's search about for some weapons."

Ross shook his head.

"What would be the use of them?" he said. "We couldn't make any effective use of them against hundreds of desperate men. No! Our wisest plan will be to leave the ship before we've attracted too much notice. It's almost dark now. What we must do is to reach the deck as secretly as possible, jump overboard, and swim to shore."

The daring proposal was instantly agreed to, even Ah Ching showing delight over it. Led by Carton Ross, the comrades left the ward-room and stole noiselessly up the steps of the companion-way to the deck.

It was fortunate for them that at that moment the mutineers were vigorously engaged in an attack on the bridge, where the captain and some of the officers were offering a determined resistance. The members of the defending party were well armed, and poured down a hot fire at their foes.

Paying no thought to the danger of the shots flying past them, the comrades hurried to the side of the deck. Garrin and Ah Ching were the first overboard, and they immediately struck out for the shore.

"Now, Lorna!" whispered Ross, as she sprang up on to the taffrail. "Mind how you strike the water. I'll follow close behind you."

A fierce shout sounded in his ears, and an enormous Mexican, flourishing a drawn sword in his right hand, darted in between him and Lorna and seized the girl by the hair of her head.

To save herself from falling, Lorna jumped back on to the deck. Instantly the ruffian, casting away his sword, lifted her up in his arms to carry her away. But he had reckoned without Carton Ross, who, picking up the sword, sprang in the mutineer's path.

"Hold hard," cried Ross, "or I'll run you through!"

(Another grand instalment next week.)

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

A BOB IN TIME.

A man who found it necessary to travel a great deal in the course of his business was exceedingly mean. It was his proud-boast that he had never tipped a railway-porter or an attendant at an hotel.

One day this miserly traveller was watching the porter place his luggage in the guard's van.

"Now, be very careful with that trunk, my man," said the miserly traveller. "I wouldn't have it fall for ten shillings."

"Probably not," replied the porter. "But a shilling in time may save nine."—Sent in by C. Ward, Devonport.

VERY GREAT.

Jimson: "Does your wife ever pay you any compliments, Benderley?"

Benderley: "Never!"

Jimson: "Well, mine does. She flatters me."

Benderley: "Often?"

Jimson: "Oh, yes, frequently.. Particularly in winter."

Benderley: "Why does she flatter you in winter?"

Jimson: "You know that my Christian name is Frederick?"

Well, whenever the coal-fire needs replenishing she points to the fireplace and says, 'Frederick, the grate.'"—Sent in by E. Carroll, Birkenhead.

EASY.

Jones was one of those men who was always boasting. One subject that he boasted about more than any other one was the number of things, such as bookcases and cupboards, that he had made for his home.

His friend, Brown, had become very fed up with Jones' bragging about what he could make for his home, so he decided one day to take a rise out of Jones.

"Jones," he said, "how would you make a Venetian blind?"

"Easy," replied Jones. "Why, I should just stick my two fingers in his eyes."—Sent in by M. Lowe, Newcastle.

SOME SPIN.

The fond father was taking his young offspring round the garden, pausing at intervals to deliver discourses on certain things which he thought would interest the child.

Coming at length to a wall covered with ivy, the father noticed that a spider had spun his web in the centre of it.

"See the spider, my son," he said. "Is it not wonderful? Do you reflect that no man can spin that web, no matter how hard he may try?"

"Well, what of it?" replied the up-to-date youngster. "Watch me spin this top! No spider can do that, however hard he may try."—Sent in by J. Missemmer, Shanghai.

TOO HIGH.

Teacher: "Now, Johnny, when you're singing 'Hark, the lark,' why don't you sound the 'H'?"

Johnny: "Please, sir, there's no 'H' in music; it only goes up to 'G.'"—Sent in by Miss G. Williams, Barry.

SEEDY.

Jack was a country lad, and was looked upon by his friends as a dull, stupid boy. But Jack, in his heart of hearts, had ambitions to be smart. So one day he set out on foot for the nearest town, and after spending some days looking for employment, he at last obtained a position as assistant to a general shopkeeper.

Jack determined to be very cautious in his work, as he had been warned that fun might be poked at him, owing to the fact that he was fresh from the country.

One day, when he was alone in the shop, a woman entered. "I want some birdseed, please," she said.

"No, no, ma'am; you can't rush me!" replied Jack firmly. "Birds grow from eggs not seeds."—Sent in by G. Bird, Bath.

THE NEW ARRIVAL.

A young knut, having saved up enough money, at last purchased a motor-cycle. The first day that he went out he dressed himself in the latest and most approved motor-cycling costume, with goggles and all complete. The cyclist gaily tooted his way through Regent's Park towards the Zoo.

Suddenly he slackened speed, dismounted, and said to a little urchin standing on the pavement:

"I say, my boy, am I right for the Zoo?"

The boy gasped at so strange a sight, and thought that it must be some new animal for the gardens.

"You might be all right," replied the boy, "if they had a spare cage, but you'd 'a' stood a better chance if you'd 'ad a tail."—Sent in by Miss A. Stone, Belgravia, S.W.

GREASY!

Bubble: "When is a boy not a boy?"

Squeak: "I don't know."

Bubble: "When he falls in the river and comes out dripping!"—Sent in by G. Davis, Brixton, S.W.

NOT IN THOSE TROUSERS.

The sergeant-major of a certain regiment was a bit of a martinet, and was constantly finding fault with the slightest things. One day he was sitting in his room in the barracks, and, happening to glance out of the window, he saw a private pass in full uniform with a bucket.

This roused the sergeant-major to fury, and he promptly dashed to the door, opened it, and hailed the private.

"Where are you going?"

"To fetch some water, sir," replied the man.

"What!" yelled the sergeant-major. "In those trousers?"

"No, sir; in the bucket!" was the reply.—Sent in by Miss E. Roberts, Earles Town.

OBEDIENCE.

Brown: "I say, old man, can you tell me which is more obedient—a church bell, or a church organ?"

Jones: "Give it up."

Brown: "Why, the church bell, because it rings when it is tolled; but the organ says, 'I'll be blown first.'"—Sent in by R. Foulger, Birmingham.

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