



TALBOT'S GIRL CHUM!



TALBOT'S APPEAL TO HIS GIRL CHUM!

A Dramatic Scene in the Long, Complete School Tale contained in this Number, 11-19-19



TALBOT'S GIRL CHUM!

A Magnificent Long Complete Story, dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

Talbot Does His Best!

ARIE!

"M" Talbot of the Shell uttered the name softly as he entered one of the wards of the sanatorium at St. Jim's.

Mario Rivers, the school nurse, and Talbot's chum of many years' standing, was seated by the window with a letter in her hand.

These were slack days in the "sanny." All the St. Jim's fellows happened to be in perfect health, and there had been no cases requiring Mario's attention. There had not even been any strained ankles as a result of stirring tangles on the football field.

Mario did not look up with her usual bright smile. Talbot attributed this to the fact that she was "fed up" with having nothing to do.

"Did you want me, Toff?" asked the girl.

"The Toff" was the nickname by which Talbot had been known in the old days—those dark days when he had followed the calling of a crackman.

Much water had flowed under the bridges since then, and Reginald Talbot had won and retained the respect and popularity of his schoolfellows. Tom Merry & Co. seldom called him "The Toff" now, but Mario Rivers adhered to the old nickname.

"I haven't seen you for ages, Marie!" said Talbot. "You never show yourself these days."

"Am I so greatly in demand?" asked Marie.

"Yes," said Talbot, "you are! Time was when you came to a study feed at least once a week, but you seem to have gone into retirement now. Are you practising the part of a harrist for some play or other?"

"I have other things to occupy me, Toff."

Talbot glanced round the ward, deserted save for these two.

"I don't understand," he said.

"There are no patients."

"I mean I am occupied with my thoughts."

Talbot laughed. It was a hearty

laugh, for Talbot was feeling very backed with life on that October afternoon. The School House had just defeated the New Horace at footer, and he had scored the winning goal for his side.

"Look here, Marie!" he said. "I know what's the matter with you. You've got too reserved—the setting—and the result is you're beginning to mope."

Talbot noted that his girl chum was looking unusually pale, and she had not smiled at him yet.

"I—] say, Marie—" he began.

"Well!"

"I haven't offended you in any way, I hope!"

"Of course not, you silly boy!"

Talbot looked relieved.

"I was beginning to think I had got into your black books!" he said.

"You will never do that, Toff!"

A silence fell between them. It was broken at length by Marie.

"Did you want to see me about anything in particular?"

Talbot nodded.

"The final of the chess tournament takes place tonight in Tom Merry's study," he said. "By a series of strokes I've managed to get into the final with Manners, and you know what Manners is as a chess-player! No other fellow can get near him! I'm booked for a fearful bickering, and if you come along, Marie, it will sort of take the edge off."

Talbot expected Marie to close with the invitation at once. She had always taken a keen interest in his performances, both as a chess-player and an outdoor athlete.

To his surprise, however, Marie remained silent.

The happy flush faded from Talbot's face.

"Don't you want to come, Marie?"

"I should like to come very much, Toff, but—"

Talbot thought he understood.

"Of course, if you've got work to do—" he began.

"It isn't that. I—I've got to keep an appointment."

"Here!"

"No; outside St. Jim's," said Marie, rather tersely.

Talbot looked surprised.

Dark had fallen, and outside in the quadrangle the wind blew fitfully, while splashes of rain were visible on the window-panes. It was not a nice night for an appointment to be kept outside the school.

"Is it urgent?" asked Talbot at length.

"Very!"

"I—I hope you'll be all right," said Talbot uncomfortably.

"What do you mean, Toff?"

"Well, it's a beastly sort of night to be out in. Can't you put it off?"

Marie shook her head.

"I have already said that it is very urgent," she remarked.

Talbot thought he detected a note of irritation in her voice.

"I don't want to be inquisitive, Marie," he said quietly, "but would you mind telling me whom you are keeping the appointment with?"

"I—I can't, Toff!"

Talbot's surprise changed rapidly to alarm.

He began to entertain fears for Marie's safety. If she were going to keep an appointment with somebody he knew—somebody he could trust—the girl would have made no secret of it. Marie was holding something back. She did not wish Talbot to know the name of the other party.

Why?

Talbot was almost as pale as Marie now. He was worried and anxious.

He was hurt, too; hurt to think that Marie Rivers shrank from taking him into her confidence.

"It is not like you to have a secret from me, Marie!" he said.

The girl lifted her troubled face to Talbot.

"Don't press me for the information, Toff. I've promised not to give it!"

"You've promised!" echoed Talbot, in wonder.

"Yes!"

"Am I to conclude, then, that your appointment is to be kept with some undesirable person?"

Marie laughed for the first time. But it was not a pleasant laugh.

"He is most undesirable," she said, Talbot looked bewildered.

"You admit that he is undesirable— whoever 'he' may be—and yet you're going out, on a night like this, to see him!"

Marie nodded.
"And you won't give me his name?"
"I can't!"

Talbot was strictly mystified. He stood for a few moments twisting his cap in his hands. And then a sudden fear took shape in his mind.

Was it possible that Marie Rivers intended to meet one of those old associates—a member of the gang of cracksmen which had flourished in Angel Alley?

Talbot tried to banish the supposition. That gang had broken up long ago. John Rivers, its leader, had served his King and country with distinction, and had forsaken the life of a cracksmen for a more honourable calling.

As for the others—Hokey Walker and the rest—they had followed the lead of John Rivers, Marie's father. At least, Talbot thought they had.

But there might still be a black sheep. Perhaps one of them, demobilised from the Army, and unable to find a home and an honest means of livelihood, had reverted to a life of crime. The more Talbot thought about it, the more probable it seemed.

An old member of the gang was trying to get into touch with Marie!

With what object? Talbot wondered. To persuade the girl to join forces with him, perhaps. Or possibly to borrow money. Whatever the object, it was sure to be an unwelcome one.

Talbot's hands were tightly clenched. He had forgotten all about his tussle with Manners at the chess table. All his thoughts were for Marie.

If his surmise were correct, he must do all in his power to prevent his girl from keeping the appointment.

Marie Rivers was straight as a die. But she was, after all, only human, and it was just possible that she might succumb to evil influences. The members of the old gang had always been very plausible, and one of them might seek to woo her, with honeyed words, into the career which she had abandoned long ago.

To Talbot the thought was terrible.
"Marie," he said hoarsely, "don't go!"

"But I must, Toff."

"You will do far better to stay where you are."

"Are you alarmed for my safety?"

"You know I am, Marie!"

"Then you are very foolish. There is no danger—none whatever."

"If I wish I could feel certain of that. Take my advice, Marie— the advice of an old pal—and don't go."

"I have already said several times that I must."

Talbot started to pace to and fro in the ward.

A short time before he had not a care in the world. Everything had been merry and bright. And now it seemed that he was suddenly plunged into a sea of trouble.

Not that he was thinking of himself. His thoughts were centred on the girl who sat by the window. She did not see the danger of the situation so clearly as he did. Talbot was far older than his years. He knew that there were unscrupulous people in the world—people who would stop at nothing to attain their ends. In the hands of such scoundrels Marie Rivers would be a mere plaything.

Talbot had hoped that the past was dead and buried—that the horns' nest at Angel Alley was extinct. But it now seemed to have sprung into being again, menacing the future of this young and charming girl, for whom his friendship would never die.

Presently Talbot stopped short in his stride.

"Marie," he said, "you ain't no go!"

The girl raised her eyebrows.

"Really, Toff—"

"You ain't no go!" repeated Talbot.

"I forbid you to keep that appointment!"

Marie could not but admire Talbot as he flashed out the challenge. At the same time, she was very angry.

"I shall not permit even you to dictate to me, Toff!"

For a moment their eyes met.

There was determination—strong determination—in Marie's face.

Talbot saw that nothing save sheer force would hold her back from keeping that appointment with the person whose name he did not know. And anything in the nature of force was, of course, out of the question.

Talbot threw out his arms appealingly.

"I urge you, Marie, for your own sake—for the sake of everything you hold dear—not to go. You have not told me the name of the person you intend to see, but I can almost guess; and you have already admitted that it's an undesirable party. Think what it means, Marie! Think of the future!"

There was a mist before Talbot's eyes. He could not go on.

Marie Rivers ran to her feet.

"It's no use, Toff. I would meet your fellow if I could, but it is impossible. I have made up my mind to go, and nothing shall stop me. That is final!"

Talbot realised the futility of further persuasion.

Marie's determination could not be shaken. She had made up her mind to go, and go she would. And what then?

Talbot's mind was in an anguish of doubt and fear. But he could do nothing—nothing at all. He must accept the inevitable.

"Very well, Marie," he said quietly.

And with a heavy heart he quitted the room.

CHAPTER 2.

Very Mysterious!

"H EAH he is, deah boys!"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth uttered the proclamation as Talbot came into the Junior Common-room.

"Where have you been, you duffer?" asked Tom Merry. "We've been waiting for you."

Talbot said nothing. He halted in front of the Common-room fire, and rubbed his elbow against the mantelpiece. His thoughts were far away from the crowd of shell-fellows and Fourth-Formers. He was among them, but not of them.

After a moment's silence, Arthur Augustus jammed his celebrated monocle into his eye, and surveyed Talbot with a look which should have shrivelled him up.

"Well, Talbot, you are behave' in a most wretchedable manner!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "Tom Newby has already told you that you have kept us waitin'. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Talbot remained silent.

Tom Merry stopped quickly towards his chair, and laid his hand on Talbot's shoulder.

"Talbot, old-man, is-is anything wrong?"

"No," said Talbot dully.

"Well, you seem to be very much off colour. You're sure everything's all right?"

"Quite," said Talbot.

He had no wish to saddle Tom Merry with his troubles. The Captain of the Shell had been an excellent chum to him in the past, but he would be unable to help in the present crisis. Where Talbot had failed it was not likely that Tom Merry would succeed. Marie Rivers had made up her mind to keep the appointment with the unknown person, and wild horses would not tear her from her post.

The juniors—there were nearly a score of them in the Common-room—glanced curiously at Talbot.

The handsome Shell fellow seemed like a fellow in a reverie. He appeared to be quite indifferent to the fact that he was shortly to meet Manners in the chess final. As a matter of fact, Talbot was not thinking of chess at all just then.

Aubrey Racker, the cad of the Shell, thought he had discovered the cause of Talbot's strange manner.

"Of course, he's fussy of gettin' a lickin'!" sneered Racker. "He knows that he can't hold a candle to Manners, so far as chess goes, and he'd like to cry off."

"Wreath Wacker," protested Arthur Augustus, "you have no right to speak of Talbot in such a way; meanwhile I have a very good mind to administer a faithful thrashing!"

"Spook!" murmured Meely Leather soothingly. "Never let your angry passions bubble over, Gussy. Words lead to blows, and think of our youth and innocence!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Talbot," said Jack Blake, "are you coming along?"

Talbot looked at Blake without comprehending.

"Coming along?" he repeated.

"Where to?"

"To Tom Merry's study, you duffer!"

"What for?"

The juniors stared blankly at Talbot.

What was the matter with the fellow? Surely he could not have forgotten that he was due to meet Manners in the final of the chess tournament!

Manners himself stepped forward, and confronted Talbot.

"You—you mean to say you don't know what's going on?" he exclaimed.

Talbot shook his head.

"Chess!" roared Manners, by way of enlightenment. "You're playing us at chess, you bubbling jabbercrack!"

Talbot understood at last.

"I forgot!" he stammered.

"You forget!" howled Manners.

The cool admission was almost too much for Henry Manners. He was an inveterate chess-player—the finest exponent of the game at St. Jim's—and he could not understand anybody forgetting an important game. Chess was not to be dinked to Manners. To Talbot it seemed to signify nothing.

"Oh, come along!" said Tom Merry impatiently.

And he led the way from the Common-room.

The rest of the juniors followed, including Manners and Talbot.

The latter walked mechanically. Had his schoolfellows watched him more closely they must have seen that he had something on his mind.

In Tom Merry's study all was ready for the tournament. A small table stood

in the centre of the apartment, and on it was the chessboard, complete with its army of blacks and whites.

Monty Lowther exhibited himself master of the ceremonies. — "Take your seats, gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "Keep clear of the table! There's room for half a dozen on the window-sill. Remove yourself from the archway, Gussy. That's reserved for the nobility and gentry!"

"Weally, Lowther! Are you insinuat'ing?"

"Precisely!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus hunched up from the armchair like a jack-in-the-box, and started to push back his cuffs.

"Bai Jove! I will not stand —"

"Then you can sit, old top!" said Jack Blake. And he pushed the elegant Gussy back into the armchair.

The swirl of St. Jim's gaped widely for his morsels.

"Weally, Bishel! I regard you as an interloper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Order, please!" rapped out Monty Lowther. "We want to get to business. There are too many disturbing elements here, and the chief one is Gussy's face!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Before Arthur Augustus could reply to this deadly insult, Monty Lowther proceeded:

"We are gathered together this evening, gentlemen, to witness a thrilling, waddy, and healthless conflict on the chessboard —"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The leading characters in this bullfight, gentlemen, will be Henry Manners and Reginald Talbot, both of the Shell. These two, thanks to their extensive knowledge of bishops, rooks, knights, and pawns, have worked their way into the first —"

"Hurrah!"

"And they will now proceed to do their best to wipe each other off the face of the earth!"

Cries of "Good old Manners!" followed, interspersed with shouts of "Huck up, Talbot!"

Monty Lowther surveyed his audience impressively.

"Second act of the ring!" he exclaimed. "Time!"

Manners seated himself at the chess-table. Talbot did not budge.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "You don't seem to be in a vovvy great hurry, Talbot!"

"Eh?"

"Time to begin, fellow!" roared Tom Merry.

Talbot flushed, nodded in a dazed sort of way, and seated himself at the table opposite Manners.

Try as he would, Talbot could not concentrate on chess.

The gusts of wind which drove against the windows of the study reminded him that Marie Rivers was venturing forth, on such a night, to keep an appointment with a man of doubtful character—possibly a crookman.

What did this petty little chess tournament matter, when Talbot's girl chum was in danger?

For Talbot felt convinced by this time that there was a very real danger.

He became vaguely conscious of the fact that the fellows were urging him to begin.

"File in!"

"Your move, Talbot!"

Manners, having set the game in motion, sat with folded arms, like Napoleon, and scowled across the table at his opponent.

"This isn't to be an all-night sitting!" he growled.

Talbot roused himself with an effort, and started to play.

The spectators looked on with eager anticipation. The general opinion was that Manners would win, but most of the fellows hoped that Talbot would give him a good run for his money.

They were disappointed.

Talbot played abominably. His moves were faulty, and Manners soon had him in a hopeless knot.

"My hat!" murmured Monty Lowther. "If this is chess, I'd prefer to see a nice exciting game of hopscotch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all right!" together, Talbot urged half a dozen voices.

Talbot made a desperate effort to retrieve his position.

For the next three minutes he put up a plucky and determined fight against an opponent who was more than his match, and then his efforts seemed to sicker out like the feeble light of a candle.

Outside the wind gathered fury, causing the study window to rattle and shake.

Talbot could stand it no longer.

It was impossible to sit there, playing chess, when his mind was filled with suspense and with vague, shadowy fears.

Talbot sprang to his feet, shaking the table with such violence that bishops and rooks and pawns went flying in all directions.

"You damn ace!" howled Manners. "Look what you've done!"

The rest of the juniors stared at Talbot in astonishment. They began to wonder if he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

Tom Merry was at his elbow's side in a moment.

"Talbot! I'm sure there must be something wrong! You're not yourself!"

"Trot out your troubles," said Monty Lowther, "and let your uncle help you!"

For answer, Talbot strode to the door.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Aren't you goin' to finish the game, Talbot?"

"It's mucked up now, anyway!" said Manners savagely.

Talbot went straight out without a word. Tom Merry followed, and joined him in the passage.

"Look here, Talbot," he said quietly, "let me help you!"

"You can't Tom!"

"I might be able to if you tell me what's wrong."

Talbot shook his head.

"I don't even know myself the extent of the trouble," he said. "Half of it may be my own imagination. I want to get away. I want to be alone."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, I don't know—anywhere!"

"You can't go out on a night like this!" said Tom Merry.

The wind whistled through the corridors of St. Jim's. It was a wild night.

Talbot turned his troubled face towards his chum.

"You can't help me, Tom. No one can. Perhaps things may not be so bad as I think. It may be a false alarm. But—but I can't bear company just now. I must go!"

And Talbot walked away in the direction of the quadrangle. Without cap or coat, he was going out into the night.

Tom Merry went back to his study with a thoughtful expression on his face. He was greatly concerned for Talbot. Something very serious must be the matter, he reflected, for Talbot to act in that strange fashion.

"Has he gone, dear boy?" asked Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Weally, this is most peculiar! Talbot must be in a terrible of some sort."

"He certainly shows all the symptoms!" said Monty Lowther. "He should have confided in his uncle. Then we could have seen him through all right."

"Heber Talbot!" granted Manners. "The chess fiend's fixed out, thanks to him!"

"Never mind," said Jack Blake. "You'll be able to play it later on."

But Manners, like Rachel of old, roused, and would not be comforted, weaned to a chess-table—amused and exasperated. He had looked forward to a seven battle of wits at the chess-table, and he had been disappointed.

The juniors dispersed to their own studies; and as they went they asked themselves and each other the puzzling question:

What was the matter with Talbot?

CHAPTER 2.

Trapped on the Highway!

MARIE RIVERS was seated alone in the ward where her interview with Talbot had taken place.

"I hate to cross his wishes," she murmured to herself. "But I must go! I simply must!"

The girl unfolded the letter she held in her hand, and perhaps the sixth time she perused the diluteed scroll.

Talbot's surmise that Marie's appointment with one of the members of the old gang happened to be quite correct.

The letter ran as follows:

"Marie,—I must see you to-night, on the Wayland Road, near the six-post, at 8 o'clock. Don't let a soul go you are coming. I will explain everything when I see you. Please don't fail to turn up for old time's sake. JIM DAWLISH."

Marie knew Jim Dawlish well—only too well. He had not been one of the members of the Angel Alley gang. He was not so cultured as Marie's father. Many of the members of the gang had been educated accountants, but Jim Dawlish was nothing more nor less than a common hoodlum.

Like Talbot, Marie Rivers had hoped that the past was dead and done with.

All things considered, hers was a happy lot at St. Jim's, and when she looked back across the bridge of years, and pictured the old, shady existence in the slums, she shuddered.

Marie's thoughts had sometimes turned to Jim Dawlish. She had heard that he had joined up soon after the gang was disbanded; moreover, that he had made good on the field of battle.

What did he want with her now?

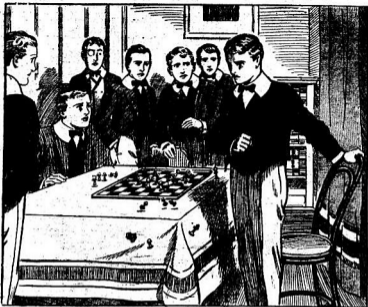
"I expect it's money," reflected the girl. "He has been demobilised, and perhaps he is not fit enough to take up regular work. He wants me to help him."

But there was another and a more sinister possibility which Marie Rivers overlooked.

Was it not possible that Jim Dawlish on his return to civil life wished to reassert the old gang?

He could not revive it in the original form, of course.

John Rivers, Hooky Walker, Reginald Talbot—these three would never again revert to a life of crime. But in their places Jim Dawlish might be able to enlist others—rough and unscrupulous fellows like himself, who, finding it impossible under prevailing conditions to live honestly, would be willing to agree under his banner.



Talbot springs to his feet, shaking the table with such violence that bishops and rooks and pawns went flying in all directions. "You clumsy ass!" howled Manners. (See chapter 2.)

Had Marie Rivers counted on this possibility, it was extremely doubtful if she would have kept the appointment. But she was under the impression that Jim Dawlish was about to appeal to her generosity, and if this were the case he would not appeal in vain.

"I'll see him," murmured Marie, "and if he stands in need of help I'll see what can be done."

With this resolve, the girl rose and put on her hat and coat.

The wildness of the night—the creaking and groaning of the old clogs in the quadrangle—might have caused a less venturesome girl to shrink from the ordeal, for it was undoubtedly an ordeal to go out unaccompanied under such conditions.

Marie went lightly down the stairs, and battled her way across the windy quad.

"Jim Dawlish could hardly have chosen a worse time for the appointment," she told herself.

A tall figure loomed up from the opposite direction.

"Who is that?" It was the familiar voice of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster. "Why, Miss your soul, it is Miss Rivers!" Marie passed.

"Surely you do not propose to venture out on such a night as this?" continued Mr. Railton.

"Why not?"

"There was a challenge in Marie's voice. "It is hardly safe," said Mr. Railton. "I myself have just walked in

from Ryecroft, and the experience was far from pleasant. At one stage of my journey a tree came crashing down across the roadway just in front of me."

"My dear Mr. Railton, I am not afraid of trees!" said Marie.

"But there is danger—positive danger—in walking abroad on a night like this. If you are on your way to the village to summon the doctor, allow me to go instead."

Marie laughed.

"I do not require the doctor," she said. "But I shall be quite all right, I assure you."

Mr. Railton shook his head doubtfully, but he saw that the girl was determined.

"Very well, Miss Rivers," he said. "I trust you will return safely."

The Housemaster raised his hat, and Marie passed on to the school gates. Toggles, the porter, was about to look up, but he stood aside to allow the girl to pass. Unconsciously, he repeated Mr. Railton's warning.

"Which it's a stormy night, Miss Rivers," he said.

"What of that, Toggles?"

"I should strongly advise you not to go back. Wot I says is this 'ere—"

Marie did not wait to hear what Toggles had to say. She stepped out into the roadway, which, owing to recent rains, resembled a quagmire.

"That's the second warning I've had," she murmured. "It reminds me of"

"Excuse!" "Try not the pass," the old

man said. Mr. Railton and Toggles seem to think that all girls are weaklings."

Marie stepped out briskly along the rain-soaked road.

She was anxious to get the business over and done with. The sooner Jim Dawlish got clear of the neighbourhood the better. Talbot must not know of his presence in the locality, or the Shell fellow would be angry; and he would be angry with Marie for keeping the appointment.

The wind whistled about the girl's ears as she went, scattering little wisps of hair over her forehead.

It was very dark, and there were deep ruts in the roadway, but Marie walked on with a resolute step.

Presently she stopped short, with an exclamation:

Lying right across the road was a huge tree, which had been blown down in the gale.

This was evidently the tree Mr. Railton had referred to, and Marie, who had thought lightly of the accident at the time, was a little startled now as she realised that the Housemaster had missed death by a matter of yards.

Marie climbed over the massive trunk, and resumed her journey.

She branched off on to the Wayland road, and did not pause until she distinguished the ancient signpost, which looked up ghost-like in the gloom.

A waiting figure stood beside the post.

For perhaps the first time, Marie

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begin to feel frightened. A strange sense of loneliness crept over her. She needed Talbot at her side.

True, Talbot had tried to dissuade her from going, and she had been cross with him. But he was probably right. It was not wise—indeed, it was extremely foolish—to keep an appointment of this sort.

But it was too late to retract. Jim Dawlish had seen her. He stepped out into the roadway.

"So you're come, Marie?"

"Yes." The girl was panting a little. "I was very surprised to get your letter, Jim. What do you want?"

"You!"

The word was rapped out with such startling suddenness that Marie Rivers was taken aback.

"What—what do you mean, Jim?"

Jim Dawlish scanned the road in each direction. So far as he could ascertain, the coast was clear.

"I mean this," he said, speaking with slow deliberation. "I'm 'ed up—desperately 'ed up—and I want money at once! I don't doubt I could get it by evas'ing a few crims, but I 'aven't any tools. When the gang broke up, the tools were disposed of."

Marie nodded.

"In any case, there is no need for you to return to your old method, Jim." The girl spoke steadily, though her heart was beating fast. "I can advance you some money."

"Ov much?"

Marie made a mental calculation.

"Ten pounds," she said at length.

Jim Dawlish laughed mockingly. "A fat lot of good that would be to a man in my circumstances!" he said. "It would last me a fortnight—pl'aps more, and then I should be stony again."

"Ten pounds is all I have at present," said Marie.

"Then you're welcome to it!" said Jim Dawlish. "I'm bustin' for much bigger game. My figure is not less than a hundred quids—not a penny less!"

"I don't understand you, Jim!"

"Then I'll make my meanin' clear, I intend to cart you off—"

"What!" gasped Marie.

"And to 'old you up to ransom. Soaveis quite romantic, don't it?" Jim Dawlish chuckled softly in the darkness.

"I shall take you away, and the 'eadmaster of St. Jim's would willingly part with a cool hundred or so to 'ave you back. I 'appen to know that he thinks a lot of you. His wife does, too. They'll pay and look pleased, and then I'll let you go."

Marie Rivers could scarcely believe her ears. Jim Dawlish's calm, matter-of-fact statements almost took her breath away.

"You—you're going to kidnap me?" she exclaimed.

"That's an ugly way of puttin' it, Marie. Kidnappers are generally pretty rough sort of coves, and they give you a damned unpleasant time of it. I shan't do that. My methods are guin' to be very gentle." Jim Dawlish chuckled again. "I'll look after you like a father, and then, when the 'eadmaster pays me the figure I shall name, I'll let you go."

"But this—is this madness?"

"When a man's been over there"—Jim Dawlish jerked his thumb vaguely in the direction of France—"and he's stood up to Hun bullets for four years, and then comes back and finds that he's not wanted; that there's no employment for 'im, he get desprit. And madnes is only the next step."

Marie shivered a little.

The girl had not been prepared for anything like this.

Even Talbot, in his wildest apprehensions, had not imagined that his girl chum would fall a prey to kidnapers.

"And Talbot, Marie reflected, was far away at that moment, unable to raise a finger to help her.

Jim Dawlish bunched forward. He had something in his hand. Marie could not tell what it was.

"There's been quite enough jaw," said the man. "I can't afford to stop 'ere much longer. Somebody might come along, and—"

Marie Rivers decided to make a fight for freedom. She was only a girl, but she had a boy's pluck. And the unpleasant prospect of being kidnaped gave a spur to her resolve.

Clenching her fist, she stepped forward quickly, and planted it full in the face of Jim Dawlish.

So unexpected was the blow that Dawlish staggered. But he recovered himself on the instant, and advanced towards the girl.

Simultaneously, three shadowy figures emerged through a gap in the hedge, and Marie realized for the first time that Jim Dawlish was not alone. He had enlisted the services of three others—all ruffians like himself.

Marie Rivers stood her ground without flinching.

She could not possibly hold her own against four men, she knew; but she might possibly succeed in keeping them at bay until help arrived.

"Now, don't make a fuss," said Jim Dawlish. "Come quietly, or—"

For answer, Marie again swung her clenched fist towards the scoundrel's face.

Jim Dawlish was on the look-out this time, and he easily evaded the blow. Then, with astonishing agility, he sprang towards Marie Rivers.

Marie was about to utter a cry for help, when something was suddenly clapped over her nose and mouth.

The girl started to struggle, strongly at first, but the movements grew feebler, and she began to experience a feeling of suffocation.

Finally, she lapsed into unconsciousness, and all was blackness and oblivion.

CHAPTER 4.

Talbot Makes a Discovery!

TALBOT of the Shell passed through the old gateway of St. Jim's with a heavy heart.

He halted in the roadway, and glanced at his luminous watch.

"Nearly eight o'clock!" he muttered. "Wonder if Marie has gone to keep her appointment?"

As a matter of fact, Marie had not yet started on her mission. Had Talbot lingered in the roadway another moment, he would have seen her come out.

heedless of the gale and of the rain which beat incessantly into his face, the Shell fellow set off along the road.

Fate did not direct his steps towards Wayland, or he might have been able to save his girl chum from the hands of the kidnapers. He went off in the opposite direction.

"I wish Marie had taken my advice!" Talbot muttered the words to himself over and over again.

Supposing something was about to happen to Marie? Supposing it had already happened?

The girl had admitted that the man she intended meeting was an undesirable person. This being so, she was deliberately exposing herself to danger.

Talbot's first impulse was to be near Marie, so that he might protect her if the need for protection arose.

But he did not even know where the appointment was to be kept. He might wander around the country lanes for miles without discovering the meeting-place.

And even had he known, he could not have visited the spot. Marie might imagine he was spying.

The junior tried to pull himself together—tried to tell himself that there

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was no danger, that Marie was more than able to take care of herself.

But he could not convince himself that all was well. As he tramped along, with no definite destination in his mind, he was haunted by gloomy forebodings.

"Why couldn't Marie have told me the same of the merchant she was meeting?" he muttered. "Why all this secrecy? She's always trusted me before; surely she can trust me now?"

If anything happened to Marie, if by any mischance she was separated from him, life would not be worth living.

Marie Rivers had become so firmly established in Talbot's thoughts and existence; she was so necessary to his happiness, that her going from him would leave an aching void in his heart.

And then Talbot pulled himself up with a jerk.

"What an idiot I am to imagine that anything like that can happen!" he exclaimed aloud.

The wind buffeted into his face, and the rain lashed and stung him. Unconsciously, he turned, and walked in the opposite direction.

He reached the school gates at length. They were locked.

"I shall have to skin over the wall," he muttered.

Then he hesitated.

What was the use of going in? He would only sit and mope till bed-time. Physical exertion took the edge off his nervous to a certain degree. He would keep on walking.

Accordingly, the junior struck off along the same road which Marie Rivers had taken some time previously.

In due course he came to the tree which had been blown down across the roadway.

"Pretty dangerous for traffic," murmured Talbot. "Still, I don't suppose there are many vehicles about on a night like this."

He clambered over the tree-trunk, and continued on his way.

At the junction of the Wayland Road he passed.

Was it worth while going any farther? "Might as well," he told himself.

Better than being indoors, anyway.

Talbot went ahead. He was drenched to the skin by this time, but he did not heed. Was not Marie Rivers out in the storm also?

Presently something white and fluttering caught Talbot's gaze—something which lay in the roadway close to the sign-post.

Talbot stooped and picked it up.

It was a handkerchief.

The junior examined the article curiously. Its blue border was familiar to him. Where had he seen it before?

Then he gave a start.

"Why, it's Marie's, of course!"

There was nothing very remarkable in finding the handkerchief. Marie might easily have dropped it as she passed that spot.

But when, a moment later, Talbot discovered a glove and a handbag, also lying in the roadway, his worst fears were confirmed.

Something must have happened to Marie!

For a moment Talbot stood rooted to the spot.

Then, producing his electric-torch, he fished it upon the roadway.

A startled exclamation escaped his lips. The surface of the road presented unmistakable signs of a struggle. Talbot could distinguish the footmarks of Marie Rivers, and also those of four men.

The struggle must have been a recent one, or the rain would have erased the footmarks.

Talbot's brain was in a whirl. He was usually cool in a crisis, but his coolness had deserted him now.

Marie, his girl chosen, was in danger:

"She ought not to have come!" exclaimed Talbot wildly. "I should have stopped her. I wasn't firm enough. I let her have her own way, and this is the result! My hat! If I could get within hitting distance of the scoundrels who waylaid her!"

Talbot closely investigated the scene of the struggle.

He noticed the gap in the hedge, and he concluded that Marie's captors—for he was quite convinced by this time that the girl had been captured—had taken her across the fields.

The junior clambered through the gap. It was quite impossible to discern any footmarks in the long grass, and there was nothing to indicate which direction the kidnappers had taken.

What was to be done?

To summon the local police to the spot would be worse than useless.

The local police were represented by P.O. Crump, who was pompous, slow, and stupid.

Mr. Crump would readily have undertaken to chase the kidnappers, and bring them to book; but there the matter would have ended.

"I'll go there, then myself!" muttered Talbot, at length.

It was a hopeless business. Had the junior been hunting for a needle in a haystack, he would have stood a far better chance of success.

Talbot struck off across the field, with the winds of heaven beating discordantly about his ears, and with very little hope in his heart of finding Marie.

On the other side of the field there was a stile. Talbot examined it intently, in the hope of discovering a clue. But the stile was washed clean by the recent rain, and there was no indication that anyone had passed that way.

Talbot clambered over the stile, and crossed the level field. He crossed the next stile, and the one after that. And then he stopped short, realising that the quest was indeed a hopeless one.

There was nothing for it but to retrace his steps to St. Jim's.

Talbot started slowly on the homeward journey, but he quickened his pace as a sudden thought occurred to him.

He would report his discovery to the school authorities, and they would probably send out search-parties.

It was both futile and logical for one fellow to scour the countryside; but with thirty or forty taking part in the search they would be at least a possibility of the kidnappers being run to earth.

As Talbot came in sight of the school the first stroke of ten sounded from the clock-tower.

"My hat! I had no idea it was so late!" he panted. "The fellows will be in bed."

Talbot hastily scaled the school wall. He was sprinting across the wind-swept quadrangle, when a voice hailed him from the shadows.

"That you, Talbot?"

The junior stopped up. He recognised the voice of Kildare of the Sixth.

"Yes, Kildare," he said.

"Where on earth have you been? I've been hanging about for over an hour in this beastly storm. Mr. Railton detained me to wait until you came in."

"That's all right—"

"Oh, is it?" growled Kildare.

"Yes. I'm on my way to see Mr. Railton now!"

And Talbot brushed past the captain of St. Jim's, and hurried into the building.

Mr. Railton was correcting examination papers in his study. He looked up

in surprise as Talbot rushed in without knocking.

"Talbot! You are very late! Why have you absented yourself from the school until this hour? I—"

The Housemaster broke off. He noticed the junior's damp and dishevelled condition. Talbot's boots were plastered with mud, and his face was streaming wet. His breath was coming and going in great gasps. Altogether, he looked a very complete wreck.

"Blimey, my soul!" gasped Mr. Railton.

"What has happened?"

"Marie Rivers has been kidnapped, sir!"

"Good heavens!"

Mr. Railton was quite taken aback. He remembered his meeting with Marie Rivers in the quadrangle—recalled the warning he had given her. He had said that there was positive danger in the girl being abroad at such an hour; and Talbot's startling statement showed that the warning had been justified.

"Kidnapped!" echoed the Housemaster, when he had recovered in some measure from his astonishment. "Are you sure of that, Talbot?"

"It's quite obvious to my mind, sir. Marie—I mean, Miss Rivers—left the school about a couple of hours ago to keep an appointment with someone. I tried to prevent her, but it was no use. Later on, I discovered those things lying in the roadway, close to the signpost on the Wayland road."

And Talbot produced, for the Housemaster's inspection, the glove, the handkerchief, and the handbag.

Mr. Railton turned, the articles over in his hand.

"These are undoubtedly the property of Miss Rivers," he said. "Her initials are stitched into the handkerchief, and I can recognise the glove and bag as belonging to her. And yet the mere finding of these things does not necessarily mean that Miss Rivers has been kidnapped, Talbot."

"There were signs of a struggle, sir. I saw quite clearly the footmarks of Miss Rivers, and also the footmarks of four men. They must have overpowered Marie and taken her away."

Mr. Railton's face was very grave.

"Have you any theory to offer as to the identity of the men in question, Talbot?"

"I can't shake his head.

"No, sir," he replied; "unless—"

"Unless what, my boy?"

Talbot flushed.

"You remember, sir, that before I came to St. Jim's I belonged to a gang of cracksmen?"

Mr. Railton nodded.

"You need not speak of those days now, Talbot."

"I don't want to, sir. I was hoping I should never have cause to refer to those times again. But I can't help thinking that the four men whose footmarks I saw were formerly members of the gang."

The Housemaster started.

"But—but I thought the gang had broken up long ago," he exclaimed.

"The cracksmen have reformed, sir. I believe some of the lesser lights are still going strong. John Rivers used to say, 'Once a criminal, always a criminal.' I believe it's bred in the bone with some of these fellows. The war gave them something else to think about, and they went straight—but only for a time. It's my belief that they've broken out again, and that they are responsible for what has occurred to-night."

Mr. Railton puffed thoughtfully at his pipe.

"But, supposing your assumption to be correct, Talbot, what could be the motive?"

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of these men in kidnaping Miss Rivers?"

"Probably to induce her to return to the gang, sir. Marie"—Talbot found it impossible to refer to his girl chum as Miss Rivers—"was a great help to them in the old days. She was kindred herself. She used to be known as the 'Little Sister of the Poor.' If the gang has revived, as I think, Marie's help would be invaluable."

Mr. Railton nodded.

"I think I know what look place, sir," Talbot went on. "Marie received a letter from one of the scoundrels, asking her to keep an appointment with him. When they met, he urged her to go back to the gang. She refused. The only thing for it, therefore, was to kidnap Marie. No doubt the other three precious rascals were hiding in ambush, and they came out and gave their leader a hand."

"Of course, this is entirely supposition, Talbot?"

"Not entirely, sir. I know for a fact that Marie had a letter asking her to keep an appointment."

"But you do not know who the letter was from?"

"Not for certain, sir. But I'm practically sure it was from a member of the gang."

Mr. Railton was silent for some time. Presently he rose to his feet, and knocked the ashes from his pipe into the fireplace.

"I do not like to think that the worst has happened," he said. "We have nothing in the nature of proof. The finding of those articles in the roadway is evidence, certainly; but it is not overwhelming evidence. It is just possible that Miss Rivers has returned to the school."

Talbot shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's far too much to hope for, sir."

Talbot's lips were twitching, and the events of this evening had made him white and warm.

Mr. Railton laid his hand on the junior's shoulder.

"Do not despair, my boy!" he said. "We must hope for the best. Will you accompany me to the sanatorium?"

Talbot nodded dumbly.

The energy he had displayed in getting back to the school had evaporated now; and it was with heavy, dragging steps that he followed the Housemaster from the study.

He knew that a visit to the school sanatorium would prove futile, but he went, just to humour Mr. Railton.

Meanwhile, where was Marie?

Talbot was morally certain, by this time, that his kidnaping theory was the correct one. And a chilling fear crept into his mind at that moment—a fear that he might never again see the girl whose friendship was dearer to him than his life itself.

CHAPTER 5.

A Scene in the Dormitory!

"A" H, Mr. Railton, I am so glad you have come! Believe me, I am almost distracted!"

Miss Finch, the matron at St. Jim's, had distress written all over her angular features, as the Housemaster, with Talbot at his back, entered the sanatorium.

"Why, what is the matter, Miss Finch?" ejaculated Mr. Railton, though he knew only too well.

The matron wrung her hands.

"It is half-past ten," she exclaimed, "and Miss Rivers is not here! The girl went out some hours ago, and she has not returned. I feel sure something terrible must have happened to her, out all

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alone in this dreadful storm! Just back at the wind! It is racing terribly. Oh, dear! What ever has become of Miss Rivers?"

Mr. Railton listened to this incoherent outburst in silence. Then he said quietly:

"You are quite sure the girl has not returned, Miss Finch?"

"Quite! There is no sign of her, and her hat and coat are missing. I really don't know what to do. This is awful!"

Miss Finch was very fond of Marie Rivers. Marie had a way of forming friendships wherever she went. Her winning disposition, her kindly sympathy, and her bright spirits endeared her to all.

The matron shared the same anxiety as Mr. Railton and Talbot, though, of course, she did not know as much as they did.

The Housemaster consulted Miss Finch as well as he was able, and he and Talbot quitted the sanatorium.

They descended the stairs in silence. When they reached the foot, Talbot said:

"I know there was no hope of finding Marie in the 'snoozy,' sir. She could not possibly have returned, unless she had made good her escape, and those scoundrels will guard her much too thoroughly for that."

"I fear you are right, Talbot."

The junior clasped his hands.

"I'd give everything I possess to see those rascals brought to book!" he exclaimed. "And I don't know a scoundrel's nest until it happens. What's the best move, sir?"

Mr. Railton was silent for some time.

"I was inclined to think so at first, sir, but further reflection leads me to believe that the boy's supposition is correct. There were obvious signs of a struggle, and several things belonging to Miss Rivers were found on the roadway. These details lend a good deal of colour to the theory that the girl fell into the hands of kidnapers."

"Hear my soul! This is most alarming. Action must be taken at once!"

The Head went to the telephone.

He gave the number of the police-station at Ryebrook, and waited impatiently for a response, but none came.

"Are you there?" zapped out the Head.

The only answer was a prolonged buzz from the other end of the wire.

"Really, this is most annoying!" exclaimed Dr. Holmes. "I am beginning to regard the telephone as a useless instrument in a time of emergency. Hallo! Are you there?"

"There's probably no one at the station, sir," suggested Talbot. "Cramp is on his head, and the other men has, no doubt, been called away."

"Try Wayland, sir," said Mr. Railton.

"Ah, yes! I had not thought of that. The Head possibly got through a call to the Wayland station."

On this occasion he was more successful. The distant voice of the Wayland police-station became audible.

"Hallo! Who's that?"

"This is Dr. Holmes speaking."

The voice, which had been slightly inaudible at first, changed to one of severity.

"Oh, yes, sir! What can I do for you, sir?"

"I have reason to believe," said the Head, "that Miss Rivers, my school nurse, has been overpowered on the Wayland Road, close to the airport, and carried off by a party of ruffians."

There was an exclamation of incredulity from the other end of the wire.

"It is a practical joke, sir?"

The Head flushed crimson.

"You must not be too impatient, Talbot," said Mr. Railton. "Hest assured that everything shall be done that can be done. We will see Dr. Holmes together, and I will lay the facts before him, so far as we know them."

Master and junior proceeded along the passage, and emerged into the quadrangle.

The storm was now at its height, and the gale whistled and shrieked round the roofs and corners of St. Jim's.

A light still burned in the Head's study. Dr. Holmes was comfortably before the fire in an armchair, pouring over a volume of forgotten lore.

The worthy Head started up in alarm as his visitor entered. He noted Talbot's pale, tense look, and the gravity of Mr. Railton's expression.

"Dear me," exclaimed Dr. Holmes. "I trust nothing is amiss, Railton?"

In a few concise sentences the Housemaster expounded the Head with the events of the evening.

To say that Dr. Holmes was astonished was to put it mildly. The Head simply gaped.

"Can it be possible, Railton, that kidnaping is still rife at the present day?"

"It would certainly seem so, sir. The conditions were ideal for would-be kidnapers. The storm was raging with intense violence at the time, and the ruffians would not be likely to meet with any opposition on the road."

"You are sure this is not a wild theory of Talbot's?"

"I was inclined to think so at first, sir, but further reflection leads me to believe that the boy's supposition is correct. There were obvious signs of a struggle, and several things belonging to Miss Rivers were found on the roadway. These details lend a good deal of colour to the theory that the girl fell into the hands of kidnapers."

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"It is a practical joke, sir?"

The Head flushed crimson.

"I am not in the habit of resorting to practical jokes!" he shouted.

"I'm not suggesting it's a joke on your part, sir. What I mean is, let one of

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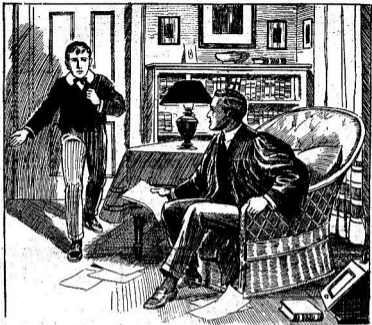
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"Blow my hat!" gasped Mr. Railton. "What has happened?" "Miss Rivers has been kidnapped, sir!"
 "Good heavens!" Mr. Railton was quite taken aback. (See chapter 4.)

your scholars come to you with a cock-and-bull story?"

"No!" snapped the Head. "I am dealing with facts. It is a fact that Miss Rivers has been missing from the school for some hours. It is also a fact that certain of her belongings were found on the public road, and that there were indications of a struggle. I want you to take the matter up without a moment's delay!"

There was a grunt from the policeman. He happened to be very comfortable where he was, and did not see the fun of venturing out into the storm or what he considered would prove a wild-goose chase.

"All right, sir?" he said, without enthusiasm. "I'll see what can be done." "Kindly treat the matter as extremely urgent!" said Dr. Holmes.

And he replaced the receiver on its hook.

Talbot turned his face, now almost haggard, towards the Head.

"I don't think we shall get much satisfaction from the police, sir," he said. "To begin with, they hardly credit the story, and, in the second place, they are much too slow and stolid."

"I can see that you wish to suggest something, Talbot. What is it?"

"Could you not send out search-parties, sir, to scour the countryside?"

"That is precisely what I intended doing," said the Head. "I will arrange for a properly organized search to be made in the morning."

"In the morning!" echoed Talbot, in dismay. "Why, the seconds may be miles away by that time, sir!"

"That is hardly likely," interposed Mr. Railton. "So far as we can gather, they had no means of transit, and their movements will have to be very cautious and guarded. They will doubtless find a temporary hiding-place in the neighbourhood."

"I think you are right, Railton," said Dr. Holmes.

Talbot threw an appealing glance at the Head.

"I don't think we ought to lose any time, sir. If the search-parties were sent out right away, there would be a much better chance of rescuing Marie."

Dr. Holmes hesitated. He walked to the window, and threw up the lower part.

There was a sudden rush of wind from without, and the papers on the Head's desk were scattered in all directions. Heavy raindrops, too, splashed in on to the study carpet.

"It is a terrible night!" said Dr.

Holmes, hastily closing the window. "It would, I am afraid, be little short of rash folly to send out search-parties under such unfavourable conditions. I realize exactly how you feel, Talbot. Mr. Railton shares your anxiety, and so do I. We shall know no rest until Miss Rivers is safe and sound once more. But you must recognise the futility of scouring the countryside on a night like this!"

"You must try to possess yourself in patience for a few hours, Talbot," added Mr. Railton kindly.

"Vary well, sir."

"And now you had better hurry to bed, my boy," said Dr. Holmes. "Why, you appear to be wet through! You will contract a chill if you remain much longer in these garments."

Talbot left the Head and Mr. Railton together, and went up to the Shell dormitory.

He had not expected to find anybody awake, owing to the lateness of the hour, and it surprised him to hear a buzz of voices on his entry.

"Is that you, Talbot?"

"Where have you been, you duffer!"

"What's happened?"

"Tell the whole painful story to your sympathetic uncles!" said Mopsy Lowther.

Talbot groped his way to his bed, and started to undress in the dark.

"Of course, he's been out on the sabbath!"

It was the sneering voice of Aubrey Racker.

"Dry up, Racker!"

"You know Talbot isn't that sort of a cad!" said Tom Merry sharply.

Manners set up his bed.

"What was the idea of walking off in the middle of the dress final, Talbot?" he asked.

"I couldn't give my mind to the game," answered Talbot.

"What was worrying you?"

"I was alarmed for Marie Rivers."

"Alarmed for Marie?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Marie's all right."

"I wish to Heaven I could think so!"

Startled by Talbot's tone, Tom Merry slipped out of bed and crossed over to his door.

He caught Talbot by the arm.

"Has—has anything happened, old man?"

Talbot saw that secrecy would serve no useful purpose.

By the morning, all St. Jim's would know of the disappearance of Marie Rivers.

"Marie has been kidnapped," he said.

"What?"

"She was collared by a set of scoundrels on the Wayland Road, and carried away."

A buzz of amazement ran round the dormitory.

Talbot's words had electrified the Shell fellows.

"You—you're not romancing?" exclaimed Harry Noble.

"It must be true, if Talbot says so," said Tom Merry.

"He wouldn't puff our lads on a subject like this."

"My only aunt!" gasped Manners.

"Miss Marie kidnapped! What's being done about it, Talbot?"

"The Head's got into touch with the Wayland police—"

"A fat lot of use that will be!" snorted George Alfred Grundy.

"I never saw such a sleepy set of Hip via Winkles in

my life as the Wayland police. They'll never run the kidnappers to earth—not in a thousand years!"

"No jolly fear!" said Wilkins.

"I suppose you've been on the track of the rotters yourself, Talbot?" said Tom Merry.

Talbot nodded.

"It was perfectly hopeless," he said.

"I know exactly where Marie was collared, but it was quite impossible to tell which direction the scoundrels took."

Talbot got into bed; but he knew that sleep would not visit his eyes that night.

After could not sleep, with the haunting thought that Marie Rivers was in captivity, combined, perhaps, with acute discontent?

"Back up, old man!" said Tom Merry.

"Of course, if several search-parties were sent out, there would be quite a good chance of collaring the rascals."

"That's just what I told the Head. But he refuses to let search-parties go out in this storm. He's going to wait till the morning, and then it might be too late!"

"Not if the merry plotters are hiding in the district," said Mosey Lowther.

"I don't suppose they will be far away," said Manners.

"Hiding in one of the quarries, most likely," observed Noble.

"There's nothing whatever to worry about, Talbot," said Grundy.

"The case can safely be left in my hands."

"Then it's good-bye to our chances of ever seeing Miss Marie again!" said Mosey Lowther.

And there was a lough.

"Look here," said Grundy faithfully,

"your fellows know jolly well that when it comes to junior detective work—"

"Rats!"

"Dry up, Grundy!"

"Go to sleep!"

Tom Merry, after giving Talbot a final word of encouragement, went back to his bed.

For quite half an hour there was a buzz of chatter and speculation in the Shell dormitory.

Fellows were asking each other what the motive could have been, and whom the kidnappers were.

Talbot did not venture any opinion. He lay quite still, staring into the darkness, and most of the fellows imagined he was asleep.

Aubrey Racker was amongst those who thought so.

Racker heartily disliked the handsome Shell fellow, and he availed a chance of making mischief.

"I believe Talbot knows more about this affair than he chooses to say," remarked Racker.

"Why, what do you mean, you cad?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"It's my fixed opinion," said Racker—

for whose fixed opinion the fellows didn't care a straw—"that Talbot himself hired the kidnappers."

"My hat!"

"Well, if that's not the absolute giddy limit!" said Mosey Lowther, drawing a deep breath.

"This is no time for joking, Racker!" said Tom Merry sternly.

"I'm not joking," said the cad of the Shell.

"Fie from it! I've got evidence to support my statement."

"Let's hear it."

Racker set up in bed, to make himself better heard.

"This evening," he said, "just before the chess final was due to be played, Talbot and Marie Rivers had a quarrel."

"What?"

"I had occasion to go to the 'sarny,' having cut my finger," continued Racker.

"I stopped on the top of the stairs, and heard Talbot slugging Miss Marie no end!"

"I don't believe you!" said Tom Merry contemptuously.

"It's a fact, whether you choose to believe it or not. They had an awful row, and Talbot made a thrust at the finish. This is how he has carried it off—by causing Marie to be kidnapped!"

Racker's story might have sounded feasible to other ears; but Tom Merry & Co. act on their own. They knew Racker, and they knew Talbot. And they considered that the caddish Aubrey was not fit to make Talbot's shoes.

"You must be petty if you think we're going to swallow a yarn of that sort," said Tom Merry.

"As if Talbot would do a thing like that!"

"If Marie's been kidnapped," persisted Racker, "then Talbot's responsible!"

"Racker, you're a lying cad!"

"Talbot was roused at last. He left his own bed, and stepped towards Aubrey Racker's."

The cad of the Shell gave a gasp of alarm. He had supposed Talbot to be fast asleep.

"Is—it's all right, Talbot," he said feebly. "Nothing to make a fuss about."

Talbot advanced grimly.

"I'm going to run your poisonous accusation down your throat!" he said.

There was a chorus of approval from the dormitory at large.

"Go it, Talbot!"

"Wipe up the floor with the beast!"

Talbot laid violent hands on Aubrey Racker, who was heaved out of bed and dumped on to the floor.

Racker scrambled to his feet. He was not altogether devoid of courage, and he threw himself into a fighting attitude.

Then Talbot's ready fist shot out, straight from the shoulder, and Racker recoiled from a smashing blow in the mouth.

Talbot followed up like lightning with

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a halfpenny jolt to the jaw; and Aubrey Ranks hit the floor with a crash which shook every bone in his body.

"Get up and have some more, you cad!" snarled Talbot.

Ranks declined the invitation. Enough, in this case, was as good as a feast.

Talbot could be very relentless when he chose, and these two blows had given Ranks quite enough to go on with.

"Brief," snarled Monty Leather, "but exciting. I rather think Ranks will keep his rat-trap closed after this."

And Monty Leather was right. Ranks waited until Talbot had returned to his bed. Then he gingerly picked himself up and got into his own.

There would be very little sleep for Ronald Talbot that night; there would be very little for Aubrey Ranks, also. One would be suffering mental pangs, the other physical. That was the only difference.

CHAPTER 5.

The Meeting in the Wood.

"WELL, this is most distressing!"

It was not until the next morning that the Fourth-formers knew of the exciting incidents of the previous night.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in common with most of his school-fellows, had been very fond of Marie Rivers. Marie had brought sunshine into the gloom, and now she was kidnaped—carried away by a gang of rogues whose identity was unknown, and whose place of concealment, if any, was likewise a mystery.

The Fourth were just as much impressed as the Shell. Indeed, Jack Blake declared that he would not be able to concentrate on form-work or football until Marie Rivers was found. And Blake's words echoed his sentiments.

"I hope Wadton lets us go on the track of those scoundrels right away," said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, rather."

"What a score over the Shell if we succeed in finding the kidnappers!" exclaimed Jack Blake.

"Look here, you fellows," said Herries, moved by a brilliant inspiration, "I'll commandeered Tower, and—"

There was a chorus of protest at once.

"You jolly well won't!" said Digby warily. "That bulldog of yours is bad enough when he's married, and when he's unmarried he's a holy terror!"

"Apart from which," said Arthur Augustus, "he has no weapon whatever for a fellow's twopenny!"

"He, ha, ha!"

"Oh, come off!" growled Herries. "Tower's a very intelligent animal."

"Totally unlike his master, then?" drawled Cardew.

And there was a fresh outbreak of laughter.

Herries briefed up with indignation.

"Tower will follow the scent like a dog!" he began.

"The scent of a German sausage, perhaps!" said Digby. "But as for tracking down the kidnappers, why, I'd sooner employ one of my white mice!"

"He, ha, ha!"

George Herries had great faith in Tower's faith which was not shared by the others. Tower was certainly a very aggressive-looking animal, but it was not likely that his services would prove useful in an emergency of this sort.

"That dog of mine—" began Herries.

"Bless your dog!" growled Jack Blake. "Let's go down to lookie."

Breakfast was not a merry meal.

The masters looked grave and anxious,

and their gravity and anxiety were shared by the fellows.

Perhaps the only person who showed no concern for the fate of Marie Rivers was Baggie Trimble, who tackled his breakfast with his usual gargantuan appetite.

"Miss Marie will turn up sooner or later," mumbled Baggie. "What's the use of moping?"

But the easy philosophy was not shared by Trimble's school-fellows.

After breakfast Mr. Railton made an announcement.

"Most of you are aware," he said, "that Miss Rivers is missing from the school. It is feared that she has fallen into the hands of a party of ruffians, four in number. Dr. Holmes has asked me to state that search parties will be sent out this morning. A number of spies have already been detailed, also a party of boys from the New House. I have now to arrange for six members of the Shell and six Fourth Form boys to take part in the search."

There was a general craning of heads towards Mr. Railton, and a babel of voices arose.

"I'll go, sir!"

"Count me in, sir!"

"Same here!"

There was no lack of volunteers. None of the juniors were averse to missing morning lessons in order to take part in the search.

Mr. Railton raked his hand for silence.

Finally the Terrible Three, Talbot, Noble and Glynn, were selected from the Shell.

George Alfred Grandy at once raised a protest.

"Where do I come in, sir?"

"Silence, Grandy!"

"Ah, no, do let me be allowed to go to be allowed to run to waste!" said Grandy.

"Take a hundred lines!" snarled Mr. Railton.

"Oh, cranks!"

Grandy subsided with a grunt. He was not at all satisfied with the House-master's selection, but further criticism would mean an additional dose of lines. Grandy therefore stored up his indignation, holding it in reserve until afterwards.

The chosen members of the Fourth were Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, D'Arcy, Cardew, and Clive.

It was understood that Figgins & Co. of the New House, would also be taking part in the search.

Breakfast over, the various parties set out on their mission.

"Mind your way, Tommy!" inquired Mr. Llewellyn, painting at the school gateway for instructions.

"We ought to start from the place where Marie was captured," said Manners.

"The Sixth are doing that," said Tom Merry. "I vote we explore Rylcombe Wood. What do you say, Talbot?"

Talbot nodded without speaking. He was wishing that the search-party had been sent out eight hours sooner.

The Shell fellows plunged into the wood, and explored its dark recesses with great thoroughness. It was a deep wood, and an ideal hiding-place for transgressors of the law.

When the search had been in progress an hour or more, Talbot broke away from the others and went on in advance by himself. He was conscious of a fierce eagerness to get to grips with Marie's captors. The chances were ten to one against their being discovered in Rylcombe Wood, but—there was always the tenth chance.

With rapid strides Talbot swung along the narrow, zig-zag path which led to a clearing in the wood.

As the junior stepped into this clearing, someone else entered it from the opposite direction—a tall, swarthy-looking man, whom Talbot recognised on the instant.

"Jim Dawlish!"

Talbot rapped out the name as he halted face to face with his confederate of past days.

Dawlish showed no surprise at the meeting. He knew that Talbot was at St. Jim's.

"At your service, Toff!" he said, making a snick bow.

Talbot doubted his hands.

The thought at once leapt to his mind that Jim Dawlish had played a part—the principal part, probably—in the kidnaping of Marie.

"You don't seem pleased to meet an old pal!" said Dawlish, with a sneer. "I'm only expected to be kind on both cheeks, or anything like that; but you might at least give a decent greeting!"

Talbot levelled his hand.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed. "The gang has broken up—"

"You're outside there!" chuckled Jim Dawlish. "The gang is still going strong. Yes, we've lost the professor, and Hockley Walker, and some of the others who prefer to be honest and starve. But there are several new 'uns, and they're all glad to acknowledge me as their leader."

Jim Dawlish evidently had a great idea of his own importance.

Talbot's next words came with a suddenness which startled even Dawlish.

"Where is Marie?"

There was an impressive silence. Dawlish pulled himself together.

"Marie!" he repeated, apparently puzzled. "Who's Marie?"

"You know quite well who she is," said Talbot. "Where have you taken her, you scoundrel?"

Jim Dawlish looked pained.

"Really Toff, you might show a bit more respect to an old pal! The last I've heard of Marie—if you happen to meet Marie Rivers—was that she was 'nursin', or something, up at your school."

"Cut it out!" said Talbot sharply.

"Last night Marie was kidnaped on the Wayland Road, and I believe—no, I'm sure—that you had a hand in the affair."

"Now, look here, Toff—"

"You dare not deny it, Jim Dawlish!"

The rival could not meet Talbot's accusing eyes. His own sought the ground.

"Never to you, Toff, that I know nothing about it!" he said.

Talbot severely heard the words. He was quite convinced that Dawlish was one of the rogues he sought, and he was wondering how he could effect the man's arrest.

It would be useless for Talbot, single-handed, to tackle the fellow. The junior remembered that Jim Dawlish had been the best fighting man in the old gang. That was chiefly why he had been included, for he had little else to recommend him. He had lacked the skill and cunning of the more cultured members.

Talbot had a whistle in his pocket; but if he sounded it and gave the alarm Dawlish would promptly take to his heels.

The only thing to do, Talbot reflected, was to keep Dawlish occupied in conversation until such time as Tom Merry & Co. arrived on the scene. He could then be overpowered and taken to the police-station, where he would be made to divulge the whereabouts of Marie Rivers.

Jim Dawlish eyed Talbot curiously for some moments. He wondered what was passing in the junior's mind.

"So—so you've returned to the old life, Jim Dawlish?" said Talbot at length.

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"I understood you had checked all that sort of thing, and started abroad."

"So I did, Toff—so I did. When the gang broke up I went into Kitchener's Army. I was a fool—a mad fool! I could have netted a fortune if I'd carried on the old game—cracking 'em and so forth. But the Professor 'ad turned honest, and so 'ad the others, so I thought I'd do the same. I threw up my chances of getting rich, and took a rifle and pack for a hob a day. I went to France, and for close on four years I stood up to the Hun bullets. They got me twice. Not serious wounds, mark you, but quite enough to go on with. And then, early this year, I got my ticket and came back."

Jim Dawlish paused, and moistened his dry lips. Talbot motioned to him to continue. He was reflecting that Tom Merry & Co. would not be long now.

"What did I come back for?" Dawlish went on. "A comfortable 'ome, a grateful nation, a decent pension for services rendered! Not a bit of it! If I'd been a Conolly and stayed at 'ome all through the war I should 'ave got just as much credit. When I was out there—"Dawlish jerked his thumb southwards—"I won the D.C.M. and the M.M."

The speaker pulled aside the lapel of his coat, revealing several inches of ribbon sewn on to his waistcoat.

"I got the D.C.M.," continued Dawlish, "for saving an officer's life. I carried 'em to the dressin'-station under a rain of Hun bullets. A comfortable 'ome, a grateful nation, a decent pension for services rendered! Not a bit of it! If I'd been a factory manager now—'ad he 'ad no use for me. No use for me!" Dawlish's face was hard, his tone was bitter. "He owed 'is life to me, and yet he refused to 'elp me when he saw that I was down and out."

"That takes some swallowing," said Talbot.

"But it's true! It's as true as I'm standin' 'ere now. I don't go back to the old life without a struggle. I tramped the streets of London for weeks. I suffered what you 'ad to suffer! I could not bring me in a livin' wage. And I wasn't trained! 'Sorey, but we've got no vacancy. If I've 'eard that once, I've 'eard it a 'undred times! My four years' service—these medals—what did they do for me! Nothing! Who cared tuppence whether I'd fought for my country or loafed about at 'ome? Nobody! I stuck it out until I was nearly starvin', and then I came to my senses and realised that it didn't pay to go straight. No I went back to the old life. I'm a desperate man, Toff, and so long as I can get money I don't care what methods I take to get it. A man must live."

Talbot glanced anxiously at the speaker. He could not be quite certain whether Jim Dawlish was sincere; or whether he was merely trying to work upon the sympathy of his one-time confederate.

"So you are hard up!" said Talbot at last. "But I fail to see how you can make your position any better by kidnapping Marie."

"I tell you I know nothin' about it."

"I don't believe you."

"Why should I want to kidnap the girl?"

"That's just what I can't make out. But I'm jolly certain you did kidnap her—or, at any rate, you knew who did. And, what's more, you're going to tell me where Marie is!"

"Oo can I tell you what I don't know?"

Talbot's anger welled up at the speaker's persistent denial. It was useless to wait any longer, he reflected. Tom

Merry & Co. had probably taken one of the side-paths, in which case they were a mile away by now.

The junior measured the bony form of Jim Dawlish, and resolved to tackle the man single-handed.

It was a desperate plan, but it was the only way.

Talbot had nothing in his favour, except that he was about to launch a surprise attack. He might possibly succeed in flogging Dawlish before the latter could do any damage.

Jim Dawlish covered his mouth to speak, when Talbot suddenly sprang upon him.

The utter unexpectedness of the attack quite threw the man off his balance.

Talbot had him by the throat in an instant, and bore him to earth.

Dawlish uttered a fierce imprecation, and then something in the nature of a wailing wail commenced.

The St. Jim's junior clung tenaciously to his man, but Jim Dawlish had muscles of steel.

For perhaps a couple of minutes the unequal contest continued; and then, realising that he was being woeed, Talbot set up a shout.

"Rescue, St. Jim's!"

The echoes of his voice died away in the wood.

It seemed hopeless to shout, but it was Talbot's only chance now.

"Help! Help!"

"Help you?" roared Dawlish. With a desperate effort he struggled to his feet. Talbot did the same, and for a short space the two stood glaring at each other.

Then Jim Dawlish advanced to the attack. Once, twice his fist shot out, and the second blow caught Talbot between the eyes and sent him spinning.

The junior went to earth with a crash.

For a moment he lay dazed. In his fall his head had struck the stump of a tree, and he was almost stunned.

After a brief interval he managed to struggle to his feet.

And then he saw that he was alone in the clearing of the wood.

His antagonist had vanished!

CHAPTER 7.

No News!

ANY luck?

Tom Merry & Co. bore down upon Talbot as he was making his way slowly and painfully in the direction of St. Jim's.

"Talbot shook his head.

"We've drawn blank, too," said Monty Lowther. "We haven't seen sign of a shadow of the blasted kidnapper."

"Perhaps the other searchers will have something to report when they get back," said Marmon hopefully.

"Why, Talbot," exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly, "you've been scapping!"

Talbot nodded.

"I had a set-to with a fellow I met in the wood," he said.

"My hat!"

"Tell your uncles all about it," roared Monty Lowther.

Talbot explained briefly what had occurred. Tom Merry & Co. listened in amazement.

"If only you fellows had been within call," concluded Talbot, "we should have cornered him. As it was he floored me and got away!"

"You're certain he had a hand in the kidnapping of Marie?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Positive."

"Let's go back and hunt for him, then!" said Marmon excitedly.

"I'm afraid he'll be miles away by now," said Talbot.

"Never mind! We'll see if we can

find any trace of the beggar," said Monty Lowther.

The juniors made their way to the clearing, from which they struck out in the direction taken by Jim Dawlish.

For upwards of an hour they searched; but the rasal had carefully covered up his tracks, and there was no sign of him.

Finally, the searchers gave it up. They were tired and leg-weary by this time, and it was with lagging steps that they returned to St. Jim's.

Jack Blake & Co. of the Fourth met them in the gateway.

"Anythin' doin', deah boys?" inquired Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Talbot's seen one of the kidnapper, but we haven't nailed him," said Tom Merry.

"Hoi Jove!"

"You mean to say you let him slip through your fingers?" said Jack Blake incredulously.

"Talbot was by himself when he met the scoundrel. He tackled him single-handed, but the fellow got away."

"Have you hunted for him?" asked Digby.

"Oh, no!" said Monty Lowther, with crushing sarcasm. "We've been right through the wood, and across goodness knows how many ploughed fields, just for the benefit of our health!"

"I'll put Towser on the trail at once!" said Herries.

And there was a general assest.

"You fellows don't seem to have much confidence in Towser," grumbled Herries.

"Quite right," grunted Tom Merry. "We aren't!"

"Look here—"

"Blush!" said Marmon warningly.

"Here comes Railton!"

The Housemaster advanced towards the group of juniors.

"Have you anything to report, my boys?"

Tom Merry acquainted Mr. Railton with what had occurred.

The Housemaster listened intently; then he turned to Talbot.

"You are sure that this man whom you encountered in the wood was one of the kidnapper, Talbot?"

"I'd stake my life on it, sir! Of course, he denied it, but I didn't believe him. His name's Dawlish, and I know him in the old days, before I came to St. Jim's. He admitted that he was hard up and didn't care what methods he practised to get money, so long as he got it."

Mr. Railton looked puzzled.

"But his financial position will not be improved by kidnapping Miss Rivers!" he exclaimed.

"Unless he holds her to ransom, sir," suggested Tom Merry.

"That is absurd, Merry!"

"I don't know so much, sir," said Tom. "The rasal probably knows that Miss Marie was a general favourite at St. Jim's. I shouldn't wonder if he tried to make the Head bend over a lump sum for her release."

"By Jove!" said Talbot suddenly. "I had'n't thought of that!"

"I regard it as extremely improbable," said Mr. Railton.

At that moment the other two search-parties—Figgins & Co. of the New House, and a number of seniors—came in at the gates.

They had nothing to report.

"We commenced our search at the place where Miss Rivers was captured, sir," said Kildare, "but although we've tramped for miles, and made endless inquiries, we've heard nothing of the kidnapper."

"Neither have we, sir," said Figgins.

"And 'no hurry!" roared Fatty Wynn. "Famished, in fact!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stroked the speaker sternly through his moustache.

"I regard you, Wynn, as a poison peckah!" he said. "You are always thinkin' of your innah man!"

"Rats!" growled the Falstaff of the New House. "Better than always thinkin' about rainbow-coloured socks, any-way."

"Weally, Wynn—"

Mr. Railton interrupted this wordy conflict.

"Everything has been done that can be done," he said. "If you will give me a description of this man Dawlish, Talbot, it shall be issued to the police. It is something to know that the scoundrel is still in the neighbourhood. His capture is only a matter of time."

Talbot gave Mr. Railton the necessary particulars, and the searchers went in.

Tom Merry took Talbot by the arm. "Come in and join us at a food in the study," he said. "You've eaten nothing since last night. And for goodness sake look up, old man! It's not like you to mope. You heard what Railton said! The capture of Dawlish is only a matter of time!"

Talbot sighed.

"I only wish I could think so," he said. "Railton doesn't know Dawlish as I know him. He will be able to steer clear of the police without much difficulty. You know what the local police are. They'd never catch a law-breaker—except by accident."

"But there's us!" chimed in Monty Lowther. "We're not beaten yet. We'll keep our eyes open for Dawlish, and there will be a present about sherd for him if we get hold of him!"

"Hear, hear!" said Manners.

But Talbot refused comfort.

He felt that the chances of seeing Marie Rivers again were becoming more and more remote.

If only he could have got the letter of Jim Dawlish in that affair in the wood!

He had done his best; he had fought his hardest; but the knowledge afforded him little consolation.

Now that he knew that he was a "wanted" man, Jim Dawlish would move out of the locality with all speed.

He could have nothing to fear from the police; but the St. Jim's fellows, in their keenness to rescue Marie, would be quite a different proposition.

The only hope remaining to Talbot was that the girl might make good her escape. Marie was very resourceful, and she would get away if she were given half a chance.

But the hours passed. The afternoon merged into evening, and no news came to hand concerning the kidnapped girl.

Dr. Holmes, in his anxiety and distress, regularly telephoned to the Wayland police-station every hour. On each occasion he received the same reply. The police were prosecuting the search with the utmost thoroughness. That was all.

In the quadrangle, over which the winter dusk had descended like a pall, a number of juniors strolled about in groups, discussing the strange affair, which had cast a shadow over the whole school.

CHAPTER 8.

Talbot's Resolve.

BAGGY TRIMBLE of the Fourth was standing in the dusky gateway when the postman appeared, bringing his letter.

There was quite a post at St. Jim's in the evening, and it was merely a local one.

"Any letters for me?" asked Baggy,

though he knew very well there were not.

"No, Master Trimble," said the ancient postman. "There's only one letter, and that's for the 'Ead!"

"I'll take it is for you," said Baggy. The postman hesitated. He was supposed to deliver the Head's letters in person. But it would save him a journey, he reflected, if Trimble relieved him of the letter. Moreover, it was not a very important-looking message, judging by the envelope.

"Thanks, Master Trimble!" said the postman.

And the letter changed hands.

When the postman's heavy steps had retreated along the road, Baggy Trimble examined the letter by the light of the big lamp overhanging the school gates.

One of Baggy's failings—and he had a good many—was an insatiable curiosity. He was for ever poking his nose into matters which did not concern him.

The envelope was addressed in an ill-spelt scrawl to the headmaster of St. Jim's. The flap was not properly sealed, and Baggy Trimble carefully opened it with a pump-finger-nail. He then drew out the scrap of paper which was inside, and perused it with keen interest.

The note ran as follows:

"Sir,—This is to inform you that Marie Rivers is a prisoner in my hands. The price of her release is £100 (one hundred pounds). Until this sum is handed over, she will remain where she is."

"If you are prepared to hand over the mummy, meet me by the side-post on the Wayland Road at midnight on Saturday. You must come alone. I am an armed man, and if you bring anybody with you, I shall law. On receipt of the mummy, Marie will be released."

"It nibe interest you to no that it was Talbot, of your school, who betrayed Marie into my hands."

The letter was signed in full by Jim Dawlish.

Baggy Trimble, as he read it, fairly shook with excitement.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "Marie Rivers held to ransom! And it was Talbot who betrayed her!"

So intense was the fat junior's excitement that he quite overlooked the fact that he was tampering with the Head's correspondence.

With the letter open in his hand, he scuttled across the quad.

"I say, you fellows, just look here!"

There was a rush of juniors to the spot. Baggy Trimble was soon surrounded with Shell fellows and Fourth-Formers. Talbot, however, was not among them.

"What's all the excitement about, Baggy?" inquired Tom Merry.

Trimble described the letter in his hand.

"Come into the hall, where it's light, and read this!" he exclaimed.

The crowd of juniors, rapidly growing in number, followed Baggy Trimble into the hall.

"Is this spoof?" asked Racke.

"If it's a bog-pulling stunt, Trimble," said Jack Blake, "you're going to get it in the neck!"

Baggy Trimble held up the letter for everyone to see. The envelope fluttered to the floor, and Tom Merry stooped and picked it up.

"Why, this is addressed to the Head!" he exclaimed. "How did you come by it, Trimble?"

"Absolu'ly! I—I told the postman I'd bring it in. The envelope wasn't stuck down and I couldn't help seeing what was inside—I couldn't, really!"

"You prying wonna!"

"Oh, really, Merry—"

Ashby Racke snatched the letter from Trimble's hand, and read it eagerly. His eyes glittered as he turned to his school-fellows.

"I know it!" he exclaimed. "I was right all along! Talbot betrayed Marie Rivers to her kidnappers!"

"Wicks, you are an utter cheat!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, pushing his way forward. "In the temporary absence of Talbot, I intend to give you a painful thrashing!"

"Hold on, Darcy!" said Tom Merry.

"Give me that letter, Racke!"

Racke handed it over.

In the ordinary way Tom Merry & Co. would not dream of reading correspondence intended for the Head; but where Talbot's honour was at stake they felt they had every right to do so.

"So Dawlish hopes to get a hundred quid out of the Head, does he?" mused Monty Lowther. "Well, I hope he'll be unlucky!"

"As for his statement about Talbot," said Jack Blake, "it's a rotten lie!"

"Absolutely!"

But everyone didn't seem to think so. Ashby Racke saw a good chance of striking a blow at Talbot, and he made the most of it.

"I told you Talbot and Marie Rivers quarrelled," said Racke, "and this is the result! Dawlish is an old pal of Talbot's, and they worked the kidnapping stunt between them. Then they must have had a tiff or something, and Dawlish has given Talbot away. It's as clear as daylight to me!"

"Same here!" said Mellish of the Fourth.

And there were others who believed Racke's summing-up to be correct.

Tom Merry & Co. and Jack Blake & Co., however, flatly refused to believe that Talbot had had a hand in the affair. They wanted far stronger evidence than the statement of a man like Jim Dawlish before they condemned Talbot.

"The Head will think the same as we do," said Tom Merry. "He knows old Talbot better than that."

"Yea," said Blake.

Baggy Trimble was about to slide out of the hall, but Cardew's ready hand descended upon his shoulder.

"One moment, my fat pal!" said Cardew. "You're goin' to take that letter along to the Head!"

"I'm not! I—"

"Your mistake! You are! You can explain to the Head that you thought you'd be savin' him trouble by openin' his letters for him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was no escape for Baggy Trimble. He was hustled away in the direction of the Head's study, and when he reached the door of that sacred apartment the letter was thrust into his hand.

Monty Lowther rapped on the door, and the Head's voice responded at once.

"Come in!"

Cardew opened the door, and Baggy Trimble was literally bundled into the study.

Dr. Holmes looked up from his writing-table.

"Well, Trimble?"

Baggy went forward gingerly with the letter.

"Ahem! I—or—that is to say—shew—"

"Come to the point, boy!" snapped the Head.

The fat junior took the plunge.

"The postman handed me this letter to give to you, sir," he said. "The envelope wasn't sealed, and the letter dropped out!"

To the unbounded relief of Baggy

Terrible, the Head accepted this explanation.

"Very well, Terrible. You may go." Baggy handed over the letter and went.

Dr. Holmes ran his eye over the extraordinary epistle in astonishment.

"Bless my soul!" he murmured. "This is amazing! I must send for Mr. Railton!"

The Housemaster, when he came in and read the letter, shared the Head's amazement.

"What do you make of this, Railton?" asked Dr. Holmes.

"Indeed, I hardly know, sir. You will not, of course, allow yourself to be lulled into accepting this man's terms?"

"Must assuredly I shall not!"

"As for the statement that Talbot betrayed Miss Rivers into the hands of her kidnappers, nothing could be more absurd!" said the Housemaster.

"I agree with you, Railton. At the same time, I cannot ignore such a grave allegation. I will send for Talbot, and receive his assurance on the matter."

The Head despatched the page-boy post-haste for Talbot, but Talbot did not come.

"Really, this is most annoying!" murmured the Head, at length. "I cannot understand why the boy does not come when sent for."

Meanwhile, where was Talbot?

Unable to endure any longer the suspense of cooling his heels at St. Jim's, he had formed a desperate resolve.

Single-handed, he would screw his search for Marie!

He well knew what it would mean. It would mean, perhaps, long days of tramping and hardship and disappointment. But anything—anything was better than inaction.

Talbot knew that the Head would never consent to his going, so he had gone on his own initiative.

Without a word to anybody, he had packed a few belongings, and, whilst his schoolfellows had been engrossed in the letter from Jim Dawlish, he had noiselessly slipped across the dark quadrangle and scaled the school wall.

He would not rest, he told himself,

until Marie Rivers was reinstated at St. Jim's. He would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to rescue the girl from the hands of her captives. Marie must be found. That was the one thing which mattered. Nothing else counted.

And so, with head erect, and with a firm purpose in his heart, Reginald Talbot set out on his lonely pilgrimage.

Stars twinkled above him. His feet rang on the frosty road, and, with long, swinging strides, he vanished in the direction of Wayland.

In the Head's study at St. Jim's Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton exchanged bewildered glances.

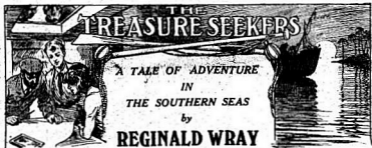
"Where ever can Talbot be?" exclaimed the Head, for the tenth time.

He did not know, and neither did Mr. Railton, that the quest had begun in real earnest for Talbot's Girl Charm.

THE END.

Another long, complete story next week, dealing with Talbot's quest for Marie, entitled "In search of Marie!" Order in advance.

The Opening Chapters of our Great New Adventure Serial Story.



IN THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

Dick Danby, a stalwart lad of sixteen, obtains the promise of partnership from Captain Morgan Kidd, skipper of the auxiliary schooner Foam, and his daughter Stella, in a treasure cruise to the wrecked vessel Pathan. Dick is the sole survivor of the Pathan, which was torpedoed, and is lying, half-submerged, off an island in the South Seas. In the wrong room of the dilapidated inn two millions sterling in bar gold and money; also the Dragon's Eye—a wonderful diamond.

Harry Fiddling and Joe Maddox, chosen of Dick's, are overhauling two diving outfits for the expedition.

Otto Schwab, posing as a Dutchman—though in reality the commander of the U-boat which sank the Pathan—and Solah Mendonca, a villainous Malay, are their unscrupulous rivals for the treasure.

The Foam is at present moored off the wharf of a Fijian seaport.

Now Read on

The Rescue of Wang Su.

TEN minutes later Dick Danby left the Foam, and walked briskly along the wharf towards the shore.

He was in the highest of spirits, for now the success of his expedition seemed assured.

Suddenly he was startled by a loud splash in the water alongside the jetty, and a piteous cry:

"Help! Help! One time quick! Me drowned dead! Help!" sounded in his ears.

The cry ended in a fearful gurgling sound, as though the imperilled one was at the last gasp.

Throwing aside his coat, and kicking off his shoes, Dick Danby peered over the side of the wharf.

At first he could see nothing but a succession of constantly-widening circles.

Then long-fingered hands, attached to a pair of shiner eyes, and finally a four-cornered, yellow face, behind which loomed a long, black pigtail, rose to the surface.

"Help! Help, poor Chinaman!" yelled the struggling man, as, thrashing the water wildly with his arms, he sank beneath the surface once more.

Without a moment's hesitation, Dick Danby dived to the drowning man's rescue.

As Dick disappeared beneath the waves the Chinaman ceased to sink, his eyes twinkled mischievously, and a sly smile parted his thin lips almost from ear to ear.

But by the time Dick, swimming with all his might, had regained the surface, and had reached his side, the Chinaman's face, the very picture of blind terror and hopeless despair, bobbed under the water just as his rescuer seized him by the arm.

With a shrill cry of delight, the Chinaman flung his arms round Dick's neck, and clung to him in a way that threatened to drag him to the bottom.

"Leave go, you yellow-faced little rat, or I'll knock your head off your shoulders!" shouted Dick, struggling to break free.

The threat had the desired effect, and

a few minutes later Dick had dragged the Chinaman ashore. So still he lay that, for a moment, Dick feared help had come too late.

But, just as he was debating in his mind whether to run for assistance, or resort to artificial respiration, the rescued one settled his doubts by sitting up and saying laboriously:

"Wang Su velly wet Chinaman!"

Dick Danby burst into such a hearty roar of laughter that Wang Su groined in sympathy.

"You save Wang Su's life. Wang Su velly grateful. Top-hole grateful! Wang Su velly boy!"

"That's all right, Chick! Glad I happened to be passing," returned Dick, who, like all Brits here, hated to be thanked.

"Mo vould boy!" repeated the Chinaman, in the tones of one asserting an uncontrovertible fact.

"I think not, old chap. You see, I don't want a boy. Besides, I'm leaving here shortly," returned Dick.

But the Chinaman only shook his head until Dick feared he would shake it off, as he repeated:

"Wah boy save Wang Su's life. Wang Su white boy's boy."

"Look here, you zoddling manderin, didn't I tell you I don't want a boy!" almost shouted Dick.

Then he stopped, and glanced more closely at the Chinaman.

"I say, aren't you the Chick who looked through the Foam's porthole whilst Captain Kidd, Miss Stella, and myself were talking in the cabin a little while ago?" he demanded.

No Dutch did ever boasted a more sudden expression than that which came over the Chinaman's face as he stolidly replied:

"See no sobby! You veeve Wang Su's life. Wang Su vould boy!"

"Oh, but your fat head!" cried Dick angrily, as he turned on his heels and made his way along the beach, until he struck a path through the palms leading to Mr. Fielding's house.

As he stepped on to the veranda Jerry Fielding, a good-looking, well-built youngster of about his own age, greeted him cheerily.

"Hallo, my looking piloter! What says the pirate?"

"It's all right, Harry. You, Joe, and I have to go to the Foam this evening for supper, and to discuss details," replied Dick, sinking into the easy cane-chair his chum pushed towards him.

"I know he'd cotton on at once. He's the biggest old sport that ever hoisted the Jolly Roger!" laughed Harry. "But what have you been doing with yourself—you're dripping!"

"Oh, nothing much: I tumbled off the wharf, that's all," explained Dick, asking, ere the other could question him further, "Where's Joe?"

"He'll be along in a minute. We've got the two diving-suits packed up and all ready. When do we sail?"

"The sooner the better," replied Dick; and he gave his chum a detailed account of what had taken place in the cabin of the Foam.

As Dick related how they had caught Schwab and Mendonza listening at the skylight, a prolonged whistle escaped his chum's lips.

"I know the chap you mean—in fact, both of them. If we are up against that lot, we have a tough proposition before us. Schwab is hand-and-glove with every low-down beachcomber and ocean white on the islands, and Mendonza has a strong following amongst the worst class of Malays," he declared.

"Seems we've struck trouble. Perhaps I ought not to have let you in for it," returned Dick doubtfully.

"I'd never have forgiven you if you hadn't! It's the kind of adventure I've been simply aching for all my life," was the prompt reply.

"Now slip into my room, change, and have a dean. We'll wait all our while about us this evening," he added, leading the way inside the house.

Wang Su Proves His Worth.

DICK had smiled when Harry Fielding suggested sleep, but he had had a busy and no clothes day, and by the time he had bathed and changed into a clean, white drill suit of his young host's, the bed looked so inviting that he stretched himself upon it just for a moment, and—

When he woke up, the short twilight of the tropics was on the island.

With an exclamation of dismay, for he was already overdue on board the Foam, he sprang from the bed, and hastened on to the veranda.

"Where's Master Harry?" he asked of a frizzy-haired Fijian servant.

"He gone with Messrs. Maddox. He say he meet you one time on de Foam," replied the man.

Dick waited to hear no more, but

who had robbed him rise to his feet with the envelope containing the plan of the island in his hand.

A single glance, through half-closed eyelids, showed Dick the evil face of Mendonza.

Nor was he surprised to see that the Malay's companion was Otto Schwab.

"I've got the papers, Herr Commandant. Better let me cut the young puppy's throat!" cried Mendonza, holding up the missing plans.

"Bah, you dog! We would have a gunboat after us directly his body was found; and be damn's blab, or he'd give his secret away," returned Schwab, holding out his hand for the papers.

Then a strange thing happened.

An over-ripe melon hurled through the air, and, bursting in it struck the Malay's face, covered his head and shoulders with its juicy contents.

As, gurgling and grunting, the man fell back, a yellow hand, thrust from between the forest, upright leaves of a ground palm, snatched the paper from his grasp.

With a cry of savage rage, Schwab pushed his half-blinded companion aside, and plunged into the undergrowth, in pursuit of the unknown desperado; whilst



As, gurgling and grunting, the man fell back, a yellow hand, thrust from between the broad, upright leaves of a ground palm, snatched the paper from his grasp.

hastened down the rocky-kept path that led from the trader's house to the sea.

There was still a little light in the open, but the fronds of palms and tree-ferns, meeting overhead, plunged the pathway into so complete a darkness that Dick's run soon became a walk.

Even then he had to grope his way, and was making but slow progress, when a slight noise immediately behind him caused him to turn partly round.

The next moment some heavy object struck him, a dull pain shot through his head, and he fell heavily on to the ground, where an opening in the foliage allowed a few rays of the fast-departing light to penetrate.

The next moment he felt a hand thrust into the inner pocket of his coat, and knew that his assailants were after the plan of the island.

Unarmed, and completely at the mercy of his unknown foe, Dick saw the wisdom of lying still, and, if possible, leading the men—for there were two—to suppose that their blow had been more efficacious than it really was.

He was rewarded by seeing the man

Dick Danby, smiling himself of the opportunity, sprang to his feet and made off as fast as his legs could carry him.

A quarter of an hour later Dick Danby stepped from the wharf on to the deck of the Foam, where he found the whole party anxiously awaiting him.

"Hallo, Dick! Where on earth have you been? We were just thinking of going ashore to look for you!" cried Harry Fielding.

Dick Danby related his adventures since leaving Mr. Fielding's house.

"Skill and crew-boost! But the sharks were mischief!" ejaculated Captain Kidd. "By the way, Dick, where did you pick up your boy?" he added.

"Boy! What boy?" demanded Dick.

"Wang Su, he calls himself. Came aboard a couple of hours ago with enough damage for a First Sea Lord. Said he was 'Mama Danby's boy,' so I sent him forward with the Kanakas," explained the skipper.

Angry though he was that the Chinaman should have made him appear guilty of foisting a servant on the good-natured

The Editor's Chat.

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"THE GREYFRIARS HERALD."

will be published again on October 19th! That is a very important piece of news which I want all "Gem" readers to bear in mind.

Requests for the reappearance of the "G. H." have come to me from all parts of the world, and I know that the appearance of No. 1 is being awaited by hundreds of thousands of readers of the Companion Papers throughout the world!

That great feature of the old "Greystairs Herald"—"TECK HAMPEES"—is being renewed, and full particulars of a splendid competition will be given in the first number. Every reader will have an equal chance of winning one of these much-coveted TECK HAMPEES, so be sure you enter.

I want to give you a very important piece of advice. If you wish to be certain of

obtaining No. 1 of the new edition of the "G. H." place an order with your newspaper for it at once.

This is the only way to avoid disappointment. There is going to be a tremendous rush for the new "G. H." and unless you have given a definite order, you may not be able to obtain No. 1. That would be a terrible disappointment to you, wouldn't it? So don't fail to follow my advice.

I finished the date—October 19th—and tell all your chums about it. I want you all to rally round and support the first school journal ever published.

NOTICES.

Correspondence, etc. Wanted.

L. Martin, 14 Chapel Terrace, Handbridge, Chester, has for sale "Magnets" 50-500, "Gems" 515-500, "Penny Populars" (new series) 3-3, "Boys' Friends" 200-600, 114 each.

Victor Skerper, 1 Alliance Street, Salford, has for sale "Magnets" 60-500, "Gems" 514-500, "Penny Populars" (new series) 5-5-10; "Boys' Friends" 200-600.

A. J. Johnson, 54, 55, Kirkcaldy Lane, Birmingham, has a Veevor Cyclopedia which he will exchange for 50 "Magnets" or "Gems" (value 50s.). Write first.

Miss Mary H. Goss, 15, Buxley Park, Edinburg, wants "Magnets" Nos. 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100.

Fred. Niggett, 52, Chestnut Road, Holloway, London, N. 1, wants "Magnets" or "Gems" Nos. 1-250, 251 each.

Arthur F. Mead, 21, Melrose Road, Holloway, N., has 200 "Magnets" and "Gems" to sell.

Ernest Proctor, 21, Warren Road, High Park, Huddersfield, Leeds, has for sale "Magnets" 474-600, "Gems" 60-100; "Penny Populars" (new series) 1-10, 20 each.

J. A. Roberts, 2, Beauchamp Road, Chaplain Junction, S.W. 11, has for sale "Penny Populars" (new series) Nos. 1-250, 251 each.

Evans Benjamin, 25, Kenning Road, Ashford, Liverpool, has many back numbers of "Gems," "Magnets," "Boys' Friends," "Penny Populars," "Helen's Love," all in good condition. Will exchange for most-hand covers. Write first.

Alan Bellon, 8, Ross Street, Spennings, Durham, has for sale "Magnets" Nos. 215-250, 251; "Gems" 423-600; "Penny Populars" (new series) 0-50; "Boys' Friends" 200-600, 114 each.

John Roberts, 124, Ladbroke Place, Edinburg, wants No. 1 of "Greystairs Herald" (old series) 64, offered.

slight without even mentioning it, Dick could not help laughing at the Chinaman's perseverance.

"He tells me you saved him from drowning, and, with all his faults, Chinamen are very grateful," said Stella.

"I almost wish I hadn't," groaned Dick, so ingenuously that the whole party roared with laughter.

"Supper ready!" announced a cheerful voice close behind them, and there was Wang Su, clad in a loose blue shirt, yellow shorts, an ingratiating smile on his lips, and a rapin on his arm.

"What are you doing here? Didn't I tell you I had no use for a boy!" demanded Dick sharply.

"Me v'ry good boy. Wash-cup, brush-teeth, make beds, cook!" Oh, supple cucker, how now, bird-swain, shalls firm, anything?" rippled Wang Su, with appropriate gestures for every qualification.

"Ripped ready!"

"Oh, well, we'd better leave it, then!" grinned Captain Kidd, loading the way to where, beneath an awning rigged over the stern, Stella had laid the table for supper an hour or so before.

To her astonishment she found that what had been a cold collation had been reinforced by a tureen of delicious soup and several hot dishes.

"Wang Su, you're a perfect treasure!" she whispered to the Chinaman's ear.

Wang Su beamed with pleasure; then, hastening into the cabin, emerged with a tray of steaming-hot cups of coffee.

"It's a great pity those meanish shirks have got hold of your map, Dick. It will lead them straight to the wreck!" declared Captain Kidd as they seated themselves at the table.

"But they haven't got it. You forget it was snatched from the Malay's hand directly after he was hit in the face with the rotten melon," returned Dick, smiling at the recollection of the incident.

"Which means a third party knows about our expedition, and that will make things even worse," remarked Harry Felsling.

"I only wish I knew who that had belonged to," began Dick. "Then, struck by a sudden thought, he glanced towards where the Chinaman was frantically feeling for something that had apparently slipped down the back of his back.

"Go forward, if you want to scratch yourself, Wang Su!" he said in low but hoarse tones.

"No! no! scratch! Me— Ah, heh! he hee!"

With the last sentence the Chinaman drew the missing map from what Dick subsequently discovered was a secret pocket in the back of his vest—one of many in various parts of his clothes.

(Another long instalment of this grand new adventure serial will appear in next Wednesday's GEM. Order your copy now.)

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