

GOOD OLD "GEM"!

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LIBRARY

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TALBOT'S DARKEST HOUR!

A Scene from our Magnificent Long Complete School Story. Don't Miss It!

EDITORIAL CHAT.

My Dear Chums,—

It is a great pleasure to me to receive so many enthusiastic letters from my readers. All my correspondents say how splendid are the stories of St. Jim's which are now appearing in the "Gem," and the general opinion of most readers is that the paper has never been so good as it is now. This is very good news indeed. The excellent series of portraits on the back of the "Gem" has also proved very popular, and I know you all

look forward eagerly to the next number of your favourite paper to see which of the characters of St. Jim's has been placed in the position of honour. Readers may rest assured that a portrait of each of the boys will appear in due course. Our serial, "The Invisible Hand," still ranks high in the opinion of my readers, and many have expressed the view that it gets more exciting and thrilling with each succeeding chapter. Next week I have got another splendid story of St. Jim's for you, entitled: "His Past Against Him!" This will undoubtedly rank as one of the finest yarns which has yet appeared in the pages of the "Gem," and you will do well to secure your copy of the paper early next week before your newswagent is sold out. Don't miss next week's "Gem," whatever you

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YOUR EDITOR.



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TALBOT'S DARKEST HOUR



A Grand Long Complete
School Story of the Chums
of St. Jim's.

BY...

MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

REGINALD TALBOT.

CHAPTER 1.

A Surprise for Wildrake!

"Hi!"
Kit Wildrake looked round. The dusk was falling in the lane, and Wildrake of the Fourth was hurrying his steps to reach St. Jim's before the gates were locked for the evening. Taggles, the porter, like time and tide, waited for no man.

The junior was still a good distance from the school, when a figure emerged from a gap in the hedge and called to him. Wildrake eyed the stranger rather warily as he stopped. The lane was lonely at dusk; and the man was not a prepossessing-looking individual. His clothes were almost in rags; a rag of a hat was squeezed down on untidy hair, and three or four days' stubble adorned his square chin.

"Hi!"
"Hallo!" said Wildrake. "What do you want?"

"Jest a word with you, sir," said the ragged man civilly, as he came out into the lane.

"I guess I'm in rather a hurry," answered the Canadian junior. "Sharp's the word."

"You belong to the school yonder?" The ragged man jerked an unclean, stubby thumb towards the grey tower that showed over the trees in the distance.

"Correet!"
"Know a young gent of the name of Talbot?"

"Talbot of the Shell? Yes."
"That's a young gent I want to speak to," said the stranger, peering at Wildrake's handsome, sunburnt face in the dusk.

Wildrake looked astonished.
This ragged, stubbly, shifty-eyed tramp did not seem a likely acquaintance of Talbot of the Shell.

"Well, if you want to speak to Talbot, I suppose you can call at the school," said Wildrake.

The man grinned.
"Not in these duds!" he said. "Not in these 'ere trousers, sir. Think they'd let me in?"

"I guess not," assented Wildrake. "But look here, my man, no gammon; you can't know Talbot of the Shell at St. Jim's. What are you getting at?"

"Oh, I know him, sir; better'n you do, p'r'aps," said the stranger. "He's a fine young gent, he is, and won't go back on an old acquaintance. If you'll be so kind, sir, will you give him a message from me?"

Wildrake hesitated.
It seemed to him incredible that there could be anything in common between this scarecrow of a fellow and Talbot of

the Shell. Yet there did not seem much harm in delivering a message.

"I've 'ung about the school, on and off, for two days, waiting for a chance to speak to him," went on the ragged man. "Tell the Toff that, sir."

"The Toff?" repeated Wildrake.
"That's Master Talbot, sir—a pet name of his among his old friends."

"You've not got the neck to tell me you're an old friend of Talbot's?" ejaculated Wildrake.

"Why not, sir? We has our ups and downs in this world. You tell Master Talbot the Weasel wants to see him. That's all sir. No 'arm in a message like that there."

"I guess not," said Wildrake slowly.
"I reckon I can tell him that, if that's all."

"That's all, sir. Tell him the Weasel wants jest a word with him, and no harm intended. Tell him I'm hanging on jest hereabouts until I see him."

"Talbot could not come out to-day," said Wildrake. "The gates will be locked in a few minutes. I guess I shall get shut out if I don't hustle."

The Weasel smiled.
"Never mind, sir. You jest tell him that, if you'll be so kind to a man what's down on his luck."

"I guess I'll do that," said Wildrake.
"So-long! I've got to be moving, or it's lines for me."

"'Arf a mo', sir—"
"Well, sharp?" asked Wildrake impatiently.

"You—you needn't tell him afore the other young gents, sir; tell him by himself," murmured the Weasel.

"I guess I don't want to be mixed up in any pesky mystery," said Wildrake, half-repenting of his promise. "Why shouldn't I tell him before the other fellows, if there's no harm in it?"

"Jest to oblige a cove what's down on his luck, sir," said the Weasel humbly. "The Toff's a good sort, an' I don't want to disgrace 'im."

"Oh, is that it?" said Wildrake. "All serene; I guess, I'll give him your message, anyhow."

Without waiting further, the Canadian junior started at a run for the school.

The Weasel stood in the dusky lane, staring after him, for some moments. Then, as there was a rumble in the distance, and the headlights of a car flashed through the dusk, the ragged man leaped back through the hedge and disappeared.

Kit Wildrake kept up a rapid trot towards the school.

He had been for one of his long rambles over the moors, and was rather late in returning; and he was anxious to get in for call-over. Missing call-over meant an imposition. As he came up to the gates, they were already closing, and the portly figure of Taggles

loomed in view behind the bars. Kit Wildrake put on a spurt, and reached the gates before they clanged. He promptly shoved in his foot.

"You're late, Master Wildrake!" said Taggles, blinking at him through the bars.

"I guess not!" smiled Wildrake. "My foot's in time, anyhow, and the rest of me is coming in, old scout!"

"Which it's my dooty to report yer!" said Taggles, shaking his head solemnly. "But seeing as you asked me to tea in your study the huther day, Master Wildrake, and treated me like a real gent, I don't want to be 'ard. You jest nip in."

And Taggles reopened the gate wide enough for the Canadian junior to enter.

"Taggles, old bean, you're a sport!" said Wildrake, and he cut across the quad to the School House, from the windows of which the lights were beginning to stream into the dusk. The gates closed with a clang behind him.

"Bai Jove! You're neatly late, old nut," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the Canadian junior ran into the House.

"A miss is as good as a mile," said Wildrake, with a laugh. "Just going in to call-over?"

"Yaas, wathah!"
"Then I'm in luck!"

Wildrake joined the crowd of juniors streaming into the Hall. He glanced round for Talbot, and saw him coming in with Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, to take his place in the ranks of the Shell. Wildrake, being in the Fourth, had no opportunity of speaking to him then; but he looked at Talbot's grave, handsome face with unusual interest, wondering what could be the connection—if any—between the Shell fellow, and the ragged, shifty man lurking in the dusk in Rylcombe Lane.

Wildrake had been some time at St. Jim's now, and he was on friendly terms with Talbot; but he did not often come into contact with the Shell fellow, as he was in a different Form, and he knew little of him. From the chatter of Baggly Trimble, his fat study-mate, Wildrake knew that Talbot had a past which rather marked him off from the other St. Jim's fellows; but he was not curious, and he had never troubled to listen to all that Baggly would willingly have poured into his ears. Now there came back into his mind some of Trimble's half-remembered chatter. Was it possible that there was some hidden connection between that handsome fellow, the nephew of a governor of the school, and that tattered outcast in the lane?

"After all, I guess it's not my bizney," murmured Wildrake. "I'm going to give the message, and that's all I've got to do. Adsum!" he added, as his name was called.

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And when the roll was finished, and the St. Jim's fellows crowded out of the Hall, Kit Wildrake looked round for Talbot of the Shell, intending to deliver the Weasel's message, and then dismiss the matter from his mind.

CHAPTER 2

The Message!

TALBOT of the Shell was chatting with the Terrible Three at the foot of the big staircase, when Wildrake spotted him. Wildrake paused a moment, but he passed on up the stairs without speaking. The Weasel's injunction, to deliver the message when Talbot was alone, was fresh in his mind. He was half-sorry he had undertaken to do so; but his word was given now, and he had to keep it.

He loafed around in the passage above, waiting for Talbot to come up. But when Talbot came upstairs, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were still with him.

"Bother!" murmured Wildrake. He went into his study—No. 2 in the Fourth—leaving his interview with the Shell fellow till after prep. He was hard at work when his study-mates, Trimble and Mellish, came in, yawning, to a distasteful task.

"Hallo! Going strong, as usual!" grinned Baggy Trimble.

"I guess so," said Wildrake, with a smile.

"Blessed if I know where you get your blessed energy from!" said Trimble. "You seem to like work!"

"I guess it's got to be done."

"Yaw-aw-aw!" yawned Trimble dolorously. "I say, as you're so jolly energetic, you can look out words for me in the dick, if you like."

"Rats!" said Wildrake cheerfully.

"You look 'em out, will you, Mellish?" "I don't think!" grinned Mellish.

Grants from Baggy Trimble.

"It's rotten for me, sticking in a study with two thoroughly selfish fellows," he said. "I did some lines for you the other day, Mellish."

"I gave you a bob for doing them," said Mellish. "A dab at the price, too. Latham spotted them, and I had to do them again. You really owe me a bob."

"Rot!" I say, Wildrake—

"Shut up while a chap's working," said Wildrake.

"Got any toffee about you?"

"No."

"Got any bulls-eyes?"

"No."

"Such a thing as an aniseed-ball?" asked Trimble persuasively.

"No!" roared Wildrake. "Dry up!"

"Well, you needn't yell," said Trimble. "I'd stand you some toffee—if I had any. Oh dear! Hang prep! I'd like to look for the man that invented prep, and take a machine-gun with me! Yaw-aw-aw!"

And, with a yawn and a groan, the worthy Baggy settled down to work at last.

Kit Wildrake was finished first of the three; and, his work done, he left the study, intending to drop into Talbot's room in the Shell passage, and get the message off his mind. He tapped at Talbot's door, and the clear voice of Reginald Talbot called "come in." Wildrake entered.

Gore and Skimpole were in the study with Talbot.

"Hallo! I hope I'm not interrupting work?" said Wildrake.

George Gore looked up.

"You are," he answered.

"Sorry—"

"No need to be sorry—just hike off."

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Gore's manners undoubtedly lacked polish. Skimpole turned his big spectacles reprovingly on his study-mate.

"My dear Gore—" he began, in his solemn way.

"Shut up!" snapped Gore.

"Your reception of Wildrake is barely civil, my dear Gore."

George Gore raised his worried face from his work—Gore was a slow and laborious worker—and glared at Skimpole, laying his hand on the inkpot.

"Do you want this down your neck, Skimmy?" he asked, in concentrated tones.

"My dear Gore, what an extraordinary question!" said Skimpole, in mild surprise. "The answer undoubtedly is in the negative."

"Then shut up."

"But, my dear fellow—"

"Another word, and you get the ink!" howled Gore.

Skimpole sighed, and was silent. He was accustomed to brusque manners from George Gore.

"Did you want me, Wildrake?" asked Talbot, with a smile.

"I guess so. When you've finished will do."

"Right-ho!"

Wildrake waited till the Shell fellow had finished his prep, which was some time before Gore or Skimpole had done. Talbot rose to his feet at last.

"Now, fire away!" he said.

"Don't jaw here!" howled Gore.

"Can't you see I'm tying my brain up into knots as it is?"

"Let's get out of the study," said Wildrake. "Come on."

"Right you are."

Talbot of the Shell followed Wildrake into the passage. The door of the adjoining study was thrown open at the same moment, and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther appeared.

"Finished, Talbot?" called out Tom Merry cheerily.

"Yes, Tom."

"Good man," said Monty Lowther. "Lots of time for our little stunt in the gym. Us four against Figgins & Co. and Redfern of the New House. Gloves on, of course."

"Come on!" said Manners.

"I'll follow you," said Talbot. "Wildrake wants to speak to me."

"Let him speak, then, and get it over," said Tom. "Or, rather, come into the gym with us, Wildrake, and we'll fix it up with another New House chap, and make a five-handed mill of it."

"I guess I'm on, if you like. But—"

"Well, come on, then."

"I—I guess I've got to speak to Talbot."

"Can't you speak as we go?"

"Nanno! You see—"

"Well, go ahead, and get it off your chest!" exclaimed Tom, in surprise.

The Terrible Three waited. It did not occur to them for a moment—or to Talbot either—that there was anything secret in Wildrake's communication. The Canadian junior hesitated, and coloured.

"Well, fire away, kid," said Talbot.

"I—I guess I'll speak to you presently," said Wildrake, rather awkwardly.

"Hallo! Something mysterious and private?" asked Monty Lowther, with a laugh. "Behold, he blusheth! Are you trying to sell Talbot a pup?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I guess—"

"My dear chap," said Talbot good-humouredly, "if you've got anything to tell me, get it out. I don't mind these fellows hearing."

"Why the thump should Talbot mind?" asked Manners. "You haven't

discovered a dead body in his trunk in the box-room, by any chance?"

"Well, I was told to deliver the message only to you, Talbot," said Wildrake, at last. "But if you say I'm to go ahead, I suppose you know your own business best."

"A message?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Yep."

"From the Head or Mr. Railton?"

"Nunno! Somebody outside the school."

"Oh!" said Talbot, evidently surprised. Monty Lowther closed one eye.

"A delicate matter, my infants," he said. "We are de trop! Member I told you the other day at the bunshop that Miss Bun had cast the eye of the sheep upon Talbot? This is what comes of being good-looking—I've often found it a bother myself. We mustn't hear any tender messages. Talbot wouldn't care to let us know that he is meeting fair flappers round the bandstand. Shall we depart, or shall we stay and speak a word in season to this thoughtless youth?"

"You ass!" said Talbot. "You know it's nothing of the kind."

Lowther shook his head seriously.

"I suppose this had better not be mentioned to Miss Marie," he said. "You fellows will be tactful, I am sure."

Tom Merry and Manners laughed, and Talbot looked half-vexed.

"Don't be an ass, Lowther," he said.

"He can't help it, old chap," said Manners. "Don't mind, Monty. Let's get down to the gym, and leave Wildrake to jaw; only don't be all night, Talbot."

The Terrible Three passed on, and Talbot turned to the Canadian junior rather impatiently.

"You're awfully mysterious," he said.

"I can't imagine what message can have come to me from outside the school that my friends are not to hear. Get it off your chest, will you?"

"I guess I'll be glad to get rid of it," said Wildrake. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have brought it, but I told the man I would. A galoot who calls himself the Weasel—"

Talbot gave a violent start.

"What? What name did you say?"

"The Weasel."

"A little man, with shifty eyes, like a rat's?"

"That's the merchant," said Wildrake. "I see you know him. I guess I only half-believed him when he said he knew you."

"And he is here!" muttered Talbot, half to himself.

"I met him, coming back from the moor."

"Give me the message!" said Talbot abruptly.

Kit Wildrake repeated the Weasel's message, as nearly word for word as he could remember it.

The Shell fellow listened in silence.

For some moments his face had shown strong emotion; but it quickly passed, and his expression was impassive again. But the Canadian junior could not fail to be aware that Talbot was deeply disturbed.

"And that is all?" asked Talbot at last.

"I guess so."

"The man's waiting—"

"He said he would wait, where I met him—about a quarter of a mile down the lane, near the end of the Wayland footpath."

Talbot was silent, thinking deeply. Wildrake was moving away, but the Shell fellow signed to him, and he stopped.

"Those chaps expect me in the gym," he said. "There's a mill on. You're rather keen on boxing, I believe."

Wildrake nodded.
 "They're meeting Figgins and Kerr and Wynn and Redfern of the New House for a four-handed mill," went on Talbot. "Would you mind taking my place?"
 "Pleased!" said Wildrake.
 "Thank you!"
 "If they ask after you—"
 "Say I'm sorry I can't come!"
 "Right-ho!"

Wildrake walked away, not wholly eased in his mind. Talbot had told him nothing of his plans; but it was evident that he intended to get out of the school and meet the Weasel. That could be the only explanation of his request to Wildrake to take his place at the meeting in the gym. Wildrake reflected that it was no business of his; but he wondered uneasily whether he had, after all, done right in bringing in the message of the ragged outcast to Talbot of the Shell.

CHAPTER 3.

A Problem for Talbot!

TOFF!
 It was a husky whispering voice from the shadows of the thicket.

A silver crescent of moon showed in the sky, amid fleecy clouds, and a shimmer of light fell between the trees in Rylcombe Lane. A St. Jim's junior, with his coat turned up about his ears, and his cap pulled low over his face, was walking down the middle of the lane, keeping his eyes warily about him on either side. He swung a stick in his hand—and by the swing of it it was evident that the stick was loaded at one end. Talbot of the Shell had not come to the rendezvous unprepared for trouble.

"Toff!"
 A rag of a hat, and a stubby face beneath, shadowed out of the thicket. Talbot halted, and fixed his eyes on the peering face.

"So it's you, Weasel?"
 "Yes, Toff. That young bloke give you my message?"

"Yes."
 "I've been waiting a long time since, Toff," muttered the Weasel, shivering.

"It's not a quarter of an hour since I had the message," said Talbot quietly. "I've had to break school bounds to get here. And now I'm here I've little time. If I'm not back before bed-time I shall be missed. What do you want?"

"Step out of the road, Toff—somebody might pass."

"What does it matter?"
 "I reckon it don't matter much to you, now you're a swell at the big school," said the Weasel bitterly. "There was a time when you was as afraid of a shadow as I am now. There was a time when you couldn't pass a policeman without fearing a hand dropping on your shoulder, Toff."

Talbot's lip curled contemptuously.
 "I never was afraid!" he answered coldly. "But that's neither here nor there. Why cannot you come into the light?"

"The Weasel cast a quick glance up and down the lane. All was silent, save for the wind stirring in the branches. It was nearly nine o'clock, and at that hour there were few passers-by in Rylcombe Lane. But the man's wretched fear was plainly written in his face.

"Can't you guess, Toff?" he muttered. "They're arter me!"

Talbot's face set like iron.
 "The police?"

"Yes."
 "And you've dared to come to me, to send me a message to meet you?" said Talbot between his teeth.

"Step out of the light, Toff—"

"I shall stand here," said Talbot, his lip curling again. "How do I know you haven't pals in the thicket, all ready for me? You're not the first of the old gang that I've fallen foul of!"

"Straight as a die, Toff! I'm alone ere," said the Weasel eagerly.

"What do you want with me?" demanded Talbot abruptly. "You know well enough that the past is dead and done with."

"You was one of us once, Toff!"
 "When I was little more than a child, and knew no better," said Talbot sharply. "But it's no good going over that. It's dead and done with, and you know it. What do you want?"

"I tell you, they're arter me," muttered the Weasel. "I've been tracked as far as Wayland—I've seen 'em there. They may be beating the wood for me for aught I know. Are you going to turn your back on an old pal, Toff?"

"Yes!" said Talbot quietly. "You're no pal of mine, Weasel. If you choose crime, you take the risks of crime; and I would not lift a finger to save you from justice. If you have broken the law again, you can take the consequences. Ask help of the old gang—what are left of them. From me you know what you have to expect."

The Weasel's eyes glittered.
 "And what's that, Toff?"

"I am against you, and all your sort, all the time," answered Talbot. "If you have committed a crime, and the police are after you, it is my duty to hand you over to them."

"Your duty, Toff?"
 "Yes. You were a fool to come here," said Talbot coldly. "Whatever you have done you must answer for it. I cannot help you; and I would not if I could!"

The Weasel showed his teeth in a snarl.
 "And that's the Toff—the son of Captain Crow—the kid who was called the prince of crackmen not so very long ago," he said. "It's the Toff, is it,

who's ready to put the darbies on an old pal?"

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Talbot contemptuously.

The man's manner changed.
 "Don't be 'ard on an old pal, Toff! I never done it—I swear I never done it. They're arter me on suspicion, but once I get lagged, you know I've got no chance. 'Ow many convictions agin' him?' says the beak. There ain't a chance for me Toff, and I swear I never was near the place, and never had a hand in cracking the crib."

"So it's a crib that was cracked?"
 "At Lantham," said the Weasel, "and a night-watchman knocked on the head—rather bad. Man answering to my description seen 'angin' about. But it wasn't me, Toff. You know what the detectives do when they can't find the man—fix on the likeliest cove, and make out that he did it. There's a warrant out for me, and I never done it!"

Talbot searched the man's face sharply with penetrating eyes. There was a wild earnestness in the Weasel's look—earnestness mingled with fear and hopelessness. It was possible enough that a long record of crime had told against the ruffian, helping out a flimsy chain of circumstantial evidence. Again the Weasel's eyes sought the shadows, glancing to and from like those of a scared wild animal.

"Two days I've been hanging about, Toff, trying to get a word with you," he muttered. "I daren't get back to London—they're watching for me. I daren't show up in the daylight. I had to see you, and when I seed a young feller coming along with a St. Jim's cap, I took the risk of sendin' you a message. You'll help me, Toff. You're the only one as can!"

The grim determination in Talbot's face had disappeared now. If the man's tale was true—

"What have you been doing the past year or so?" asked Talbot.

"I got a job in a motor works," muttered the Weasel. "But it come out that



"Toff, you've come!" A haggard face peered from the bushes. Tom Merry turned, and the moonlight, through the branches above, fell on his face. "Ain't the Toff? Hang you! Who are you? Tom jumped back, his heart throbbing."

I'd been in chokey and—and they fired me. Since then I've been on the provl. P'raps I've helped myself to a hen or a rabbit here and there. But as for cracking a crib, I never thought of it. When I passed the police-station in Lantham and saw my description up—with a reward—you could 'ave knocked me down with a feather, Toff. Never been near the place. Do I look as if I had the handling of five hundred pounds in notes?" added the Weasel, with a miserable grin of derision. "But if they cop me they'll make out I've got it hid away somewhere."

Talbot bit his lip.
"If you've been trying to go straight—" he muttered.

"I swear I have, Toff!" said the Weasel. "After my last stretch, I give it up for good. Help me to get clear of this, and you'll never be sorry for it, Toff!"

There was a long silence. Talbot was thinking hard, and the Weasel watched the road with shining, scared eyes. Guilty or innocent, the wretched man was in a twitter of nerves with fear.

There was a struggle in Talbot's breast.

If the man had sought to "go straight," and failed from no fault of his own—if it was his record that condemned him now—had the Toff the right to turn his back on him—the Toff, who had been saved from a life of crime by the mercy of Providence?

What could he do? What ought he to do?

"I—I must think!" said Talbot at last. "If I could only believe you, Weasel—"

"You'd 'elp me through?"

"I'd do my best. But—"

"But I can't ask you to believe me, when you know I'm a liar and a rogue," muttered the wretched man. "I done my best, but it ain't no good. Better slide into the river yonder and make an end."

"I must think. I shall see you again," said Talbot. "I had not heard of what happened at Lantham. I will learn all I can of it, and if I think you are innocent, I will help you. I cannot say more than that."

"Then you'll see me again?"

"Yes. It will not be safe here. You've been lurking in the woods for two days, you say. Then you've learned your way about. Do you know the dead oak in Rylcombe Wood, a lightning-stricken tree?"

"I know it."

"I will meet you there to-morrow. I will come when I can," said Talbot. "After dusk will be safest. You understand?"

"Yes, yes, I— Look out, Toff!"

A burly figure loomed up in the road. Police-constable Crump, of Rylcombe, came tramping up. He had been tramping on the greasy belt by the road, and his footsteps gave no sound.

The ragged outcast vanished into the thickets instantly. Talbot, with a beating heart, faced the constable. In the moonlight, he knew that Mr. Crump had recognised him; but the Weasel, in the thicket, had not been seen.

Talbot's heart throbbed, but his face was calm and impassive as he faced the village policeman.

"Evening, Master Talbot!" said the constable civilly, though his eyes lingered curiously on Talbot.

"Good-evening, Mr. Crump!"

"You're out late, sir."

"Yes."

"Thought I saw you talking to some-body, Master Talbot."

Talbot's heart sank.

"Did you?" He smiled.

"It's a lonely road for a kid of your age, sir, at night," said Mr. Crump. "I'm afeared you've broke school bounds, Master Talbot. I think it's my dooty to see you back to the school."

Whether it was Mr. Crump's duty or not, he evidently meant to do it. Talbot nodded assent, and walked away towards St. Jim's by the side of the portly Mr. Crump.

CHAPTER 4.

Missing!

"WHERE'S Talbot?" Tom Merry asked that question as Kit Wildrake came into the gymnasium. The juniors were waiting to begin the "mill," Figgins & Co., of the New House, and Dick Redfern were there, with the Terrible Three, of the School House.

"Talbot's asked me to take his place," said Wildrake. "He's sorry he can't come, after all."

"What rot!" said Tom. "He's got to take on Figgins. We'll jolly soon rot Talbot out, the blessed slacker!"

Wildrake had a strong suspicion that Talbot of the Shell was no longer to be found in the School House. He could guess, too, that Talbot did not want the other fellows to discover that he had gone out of bounds. He chipped in at once.

"My dear chap, I can take on Figgins," he said. "I guess I've told Talbot I'll take his place. Let's go ahead."

"Take on your grandmother!" grinned George Figgins. "My dear little infant, have you ordered your little coffin?"

"I guess I sha'n't wait it yet," said Wildrake, laughing. "Let's get going, you fellows. Talbot has something on, and doesn't want to be bothered. I'll undertake to handle Figgins."

"Something to do with that message you gave him?" asked Tom.

"I think so."

"The giddy mysterious message from the damsel fair?" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Nothing of the kind!" said Wildrake. "My dear chap, give your chin a rest, and don't be so funny. Are we going to begin?"

"Oh, come on!" said Fatty Wynn.

Tom Merry assented, and the "four-handed mill" started. The eight juniors were going strong, with the gloves on, surrounded by an interested ring, when Kildare, of the Sixth, came into the gym.

The captain of the school glanced round, evidently in search of someone. He came over to the boxers, and looked on till Kangaroo of the Shell, who had his watch in hand, called "Time!" Then Kildare chipped in.

"Merry!"

"Hallo, Kildare!" said Tom, looking round.

"Do you know where Talbot is?"

"Talbot? No."

"He doesn't seem to be in the house," said Kildare. "The Head wants him very particularly. He can't be out of gates at this hour. Gore says he left his study after prep with you, Wildrake."

"That's so," said Wildrake, rather uncomfortably.

The Canadian was pretty certain that Talbot had gone out of school bounds, but he was not sure; and, anyhow, he was not bound to say so.

"Don't you know where he is?" Wildrake shook his head.

"No, Kildare. I left him in the passage."

"He was coming down here to box," said Tom Merry, "but something or other turned up, and he called off. Haven't seen him since."

"Well, he's got to be found," said

Kildare. "The Head wants him, and there's a visitor to see him. Some of you had better hunt for him."

"Oh, all right!"

Kildare walked away, probably to continue looking for Talbot of the Shell, in other quarters. He was perplexed and annoyed. Juniors were not supposed to disappear mysteriously when the head-master wanted them.

The boxing-party broke up. There were plenty of other fellows to look for Talbot, but Tom Merry was anxious about his chum. He joined Wildrake as the juniors left the gym.

"It's that message you brought him, Wildrake," he said, in a low voice. "He's gone out of gates."

"I suppose so; I don't know, of course."

"I won't ask you to tell me," said Tom. "But"—he compressed his lips—"Talbot is a chum of mine, as I dare say you know. As a new fellow here, you naturally don't know the story, or much of it, but a message of that sort makes me feel anxious about Talbot. I'll ask you just one question. The man who gave you the message—was he a decent, above-board sort of man?"

Wildrake made a grimace.

"I should rather guess not," he answered. "I was doubtful about bringing the message at all, but I reckoned that Talbot knew his own affairs best, and it wasn't for me to chip in."

"I'm afraid there's some trouble on," said Tom. "Anyhow, he may have come back by now, and we may find him. Trimble!" He caught sight of Baggy Trimble as he came into the School House with Wildrake. "Trimble! Seen anything of Talbot?"

Trimble grinned. As the Peeping Tom of St. Jim's, he generally knew what was going on.

"He's out of bounds," he answered.

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw him nip over the school wall half an hour ago!" grinned Trimble. "That's how I know, old top!"

Tom Merry frowned.

"There'll be a row if he doesn't show up," said Trimble. "Old Skeat is looking jolly grim. I can tell you. I happened to be near the Head's study when Kildare came out, and I saw his phiz."

"Skeat?" repeated Tom. "Do you mean Inspector Skeat, of Wayland?"

"Yes; old Skeat!"

"Is he the visitor Kildare spoke of?" exclaimed Tom. "What can he want to see Talbot for?"

Baggy Trimble chuckled.

"P'raps Talbot's been up to something," he suggested cheerfully. "According to what I've heard, Talbot's got a past that you could cut with a knife. He may have been up to some of his old games— Yaroooooh!"

Baggy Trimble roared as an iron hand gripped his collar, and his bullet-head was rapped against the wall. That was the reward for his valuable suggestion.

Tom Merry passed on, leaving Baggy rubbing his head ruefully. A dozen fellows or more were looking for Talbot now. But it was soon clear that he was not within the school walls. Kildare, with a knit brow, repaired to the Head's study to report.

Dr. Holmes had a rather troubled frown, Inspector Skeat was ponderously seated in an armchair, waiting, not in the best of tempers. The inspector had called to see Talbot, and naturally had not expected to be kept waiting like this. After lock-up no junior should have been out of gates. The inspector's time was of value, as he had already hinted to Dr. Holmes.

"Talbot cannot be found, sir," said

Kildare reluctantly. "I'm afraid he has gone out of gates."

"After lock-up?" exclaimed the Head. "It looks like it, sir," said the St. Jim's captain. "He can't be found anywhere in the school in either House."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. Inspector Skeat compressed his lips.

"Very curious, in the circumstances," he said drily.

"Kildare, please send the boy to me immediately he comes in!" said the Head. "Certainly, sir!"

Kildare withdrew, and closed the door after him. Inspector Skeat fixed his eyes upon the Head, who looked uncomfortable.

"Very odd, very odd, indeed!" he said.

"A foolish escapade," said Dr. Holmes. "I am sure the boy is doing no harm. though, of course, I shall inquire very strictly into this incident. Will you—ahem—wait longer, Mr. Skeat?"

"I must wait till I have seen Talbot, sir."

"You think it is important?"

"Very important."

"Very good!" said the Head, suppressing a sigh. He did not find the society of the inspector exhilarating.

Mr. Skeat waited.

CHAPTER 5. Under Suspicion.

TALBOT, old man!"

Tom Merry uttered the name in tense relief. He was waiting at the gates, looking out through the bronze bars into the road, in the hope of catching sight of his chum when he returned. There was bright moonlight on the road. As Talbot had left the school secretly, Tom did not expect him to show up at the gates when he came back, but he hoped to catch a glimpse of him. As a matter of fact, Talbot came directly up to the gates, with the portly Mr. Crump walking by his side. Evidently he had been caught out of bounds, and Mr. Crump had officially seen him home!

Talbot smiled, and nodded to his chum.

"I'll see you himside, Master Talbot," said Mr. Crump. "Skuse me, sir! Dooty, you know. You oughtn't to be out of doors, and well you know it!"

And Mr. Crump rang a loud peal on the bell.

Taggles came grumbling out of his lodge, and he blinked in surprise at Talbot. The gate was opened, and the Shell fellow came in.

"It'll be my dooty to report this 'ere, Master Talbot," said Taggles.

"I know," said Talbot quietly.

Taggles relocked the gate, and Police-constable Crump passed on with his heavy tread. Tom touched his chum on the arm.

"Talbot, you've been missed."

"Missed?" said Talbot.

"Yes; the Head wants you."

"Well, it was bound to come out, as Crump brought me home," said Talbot, with a faint smile. "I'd better report to Mr. Bailton."

"The Head is waiting for you, Talbot," said Tom anxiously. "Inspector Skeat is with him, and he wants to see you."

Talbot started.

"Why the thump should Skeat want to see me?" he exclaimed.

"Does it mean trouble?" asked Tom, with a clouded brow.

"I don't see how it can. But I'd better get to the Head at once," said Talbot abruptly. "Has Skeat waited long?"

"Nearly an hour, I believe."

"Phew!"

The two juniors walked quickly to the

School House. Wildrake was in the hall, and he came up to Talbot at once. Evidently he had been looking out for him.

"Just a word, Talbot," he muttered. "I've said nothing about the message, or about the Weasel. I thought I'd mention that."

"Thank you!" said Talbot. "I'm glad to know that."

"I guess I don't know what it all means, but mum's the word, of course."

"Yes."

With a nod to the Canadian, Talbot hurried on to the Head's study. His handsome face was clouded. Nothing could have happened more unluckily than Inspector Skeat's call just then while he was absent. He could not imagine why the inspector had called, but he could not help feeling that it boded trouble. Kildare came on him in the passage.

"Head's study at once, Talbot!" he rapped out.

"I'm going there!" answered Talbot.

He tapped at the Head's door.

"Come in!"

Talbot entered.

There was a foreboding of trouble in his breast. The suspicion had flashed into his mind that the inspector's visit had something to do with the outcast who was skulking in the vicinity of the school—the Weasel, whom he had so lately left. Talbot realised that he had to be very wary now. But his handsome face was impassive as he stood before the Head. Dr. Holmes eyed him with grave concern.

"You have been absent, Talbot!" said the Head, with some severity.

"I am sorry, sir," said the junior.

"It is very unfortunate. Inspector Skeat wished to see you very particularly. Into the question of your absence I will enter at another time. Mr. Skeat wishes to speak to you now, in my presence."

"I am at Mr. Skeat's service, sir," Talbot turned towards the portly police-

inspector. He found himself under the survey of a very sharp and penetrating pair of eyes.

There was a grim suspicion in Mr. Skeat's inquiring glance. Mr. Skeat was very well acquainted with the peculiar past of the "Toff."

"I have a few questions to ask you, Master Talbot," he said. "No doubt you have heard of the bank robbery at Lantham last week?"

"I do not read the newspapers, sir," said Talbot. "I did not know that a bank had been robbed at Lantham."

"Such is the case, at any rate," said Mr. Skeat. "A warrant is out for the arrest of an old lag, a man called the Weasel. The evidence against him is pretty clear, and he is wanted. He has dodged us so far, and as he has been traced in this direction the matter has come into my hands. You are acquainted with the man, Master Talbot."

Talbot was silent and troubled.

"Nothing against you, of course, young sir," continued the inspector.

"You're ahem—rather unfortunate past is, of course, known to me. This man Weasel was a member of Captain Crow's gang in the old days, and, therefore, it is pretty certain that you must have known him at one time."

"That is true," said Talbot, a painful flush in his cheeks. He wondered whether Fate would ever allow him to forget those old black days.

"Quite so," said Mr. Skeat. "Now, the man was traced from Lantham to Wayland, and from Wayland he was traced in this direction. Only one attraction can have existed for him in this direction, Master Talbot. You, of course, would naturally refuse to have anything to do with such a character—"

"Of course!" broke in Dr. Holmes.

The inspector nodded.

"That is understood," he said. "But the Weasel, desperate and driven, with the police at his heels, probably hoped to obtain some assistance from an old



Kit Wildrake just reached the school gates before they clanged. He promptly pushed in his foot. "You're late, Master Wildrake," said Taggles, blinking at him through the bars. "I guess not," smiled Wildrake. "My foot's in time, anyhow, and the rest of me is coming in, old scout." (See page 3.)

acquaintance. That is the theory that occurred to me, to account for his flight in this direction. That is why I have called to see you, Master Talbot. Do not suppose for a moment that I doubted you personally. I simply want to know whether the rascal has made himself known to you; whether you know or suspect anything of his movements; whether, in short, he has tried to get help from you, and whether you can help me in any way to lay hands on him?"

Talbot drew a deep, sobbing breath. It seemed to him that the toils were closing round him.

But for the message brought by Wildrake, and his interview with the Weasel, all would have been plain sailing. He could have answered freely and frankly that he knew nothing of the man.

That answer he could not give now. His silence and confusion did not escape the keen, satirical eye of Mr. Skeat.

"Well, Master Talbot?" he asked. "I can give you no information, sir," answered Talbot at last.

"I felt quite sure of that, Mr. Skeat," said the Head. "I agree, of course, that it was your duty to inquire."

The inspector smiled grimly. "You were out of gates when I arrived here, Master Talbot. You have been out of gates some time."

"Yes." "Without leave?" "Yes."

"May I ask for what purpose?" Talbot did not answer.

"Perhaps you will question the boy, sir," said Inspector Skeat, turning to the Head. "He does not seem disposed to answer me."

"Kindly explain why you went out of bounds this evening, Talbot," said Dr. Holmes, rather sharply.

"I went down the lane, sir—" stammered Talbot.

"For what reason?" "No harm, sir."

"I am sure of that. I am quite sure that it was only a foolish escapade—a visit to the village tuck-shop, or something of the kind," said the Head benignly. "But you must speak frankly Talbot, and tell me exactly where you have been. I shall not be severe upon a harmless prank."

Talbot's look was grateful and affectionate as it rested upon the kind old Head—the best friend he had found in a hard world. The doctor's trust and faith in him touched him deeply. Neither the trust nor the faith was shared by Inspector Skeat. Mr. Skeat was much more than a suspicious row.

"Come, come! Speak, my boy!" said the Head.

"I can say no more, sir," said Talbot, deeply troubled. "I have done no harm, and I give you my word on that; but I can say no more."

"What absurd mystery is this, Talbot?" exclaimed Dr. Holmes, in surprise. "You must certainly explain fully."

"Allow me, sir," said Inspector Skeat. "You state that you went down the lane, Master Talbot?"

"Yes." "Did you meet anyone?" "Yes."

"Ah! Who was it?" "I met Mr. Crump," said Talbot calmly. "The village policeman."

Mr. Skeat looked very discomfited. "Yes," said Talbot, with a faint smile. "He saw that I was out of bounds, and insisted upon bringing me back to the school. He has just left me at the gates."

"Did you meet anyone else?" "No answer."

"I fear, Master Talbot, that you are trying to mislead me," said Mr. Skeat.

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"You met another person, I take it, before Mr. Crump saw you and brought you back to the school."

Silence. "Was the person you met the crackman called the Weasel?"

Talbot's colour deepened, but he did not speak.

"You must be aware, Master Talbot, that unless you answer, both Dr. Holmes and myself can only believe that you met this crackman, and that you are befriending him."

"Talbot!" said the Head, in deep distress.

The unhappy junior's face was almost haggard now. He knew what must be thought of his silence—the truth was self-evident if he did not speak. But he could not betray the wretched man who had appealed to him, and placed his fate in his hands. He was bound to silence.

"How did you know the Weasel was in this vicinity, Master Talbot?" "No reply."

"Did he send a message to you?" "The inspector probably did not expect an answer; he was watching Talbot's face. But the 'Toff' had long ago learned to control his features; his look told the portly gentleman nothing."

"Is anyone else in the school concerned in this affair?" "Silence."

The inspector turned to the Head. "It is pretty clear, sir, that the crackman has appealed to Talbot for help, and that this boy is aiding a criminal to escape justice," he said.

"Good heavens!" murmured the Head. "Talbot—unhappy boy! Cannot you see that you must speak out now?"

"I have nothing more to say," muttered Talbot.

"I should be justified," said the inspector, in heavy, measured tones, "in taking this boy into custody on the charge of aiding and abetting a lawbreaker. I shall not take that step." As a matter of fact, the inspector would not have cared to take that step without some more tangible proof in his hands. "I shall show you, Dr. Holmes, every consideration in my power. I must ask you, however, to see that this boy is restrained from conveying any warning to the crackman, whom I hope to arrest before morning. Can I rely upon it that he will be placed in confinement, under lock and key, for the present?"

"Undoubtedly, unless Talbot gives you, at once, a full explanation that clears him of suspicion, I shall order him to be locked in the punishment-room," said the Head sternly.

"You have your choice, Master Talbot."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"I will see to the matter personally," said the Head, rising.

"I will await your return, sir," said Mr. Skeat. "My business here is not yet finished."

"Come, Talbot!" said the Head coldly. "His manner was like ice now. With a heavy heart the junior followed him from the study."

CHAPTER 6.

For His Chum's Sake.

TALBOT—"And the Head—"

"What the thump—"

The Terrible Three were chatting rather dismally in the Shell passage when Talbot and the Head came up. Dr. Holmes had a large key in his hand. Talbot's eyes were on the floor, and he did not look at his chums. The Head stopped at the room which was called "Nobody's Study"—used as a punishment-room. It was seldom used, but evidently it was going to be put to use now. Dr. Holmes turned into the deep alcove before the

door, and the key grated in the lock. He turned on the light, and motioned Talbot to enter.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another blankly as the Shell fellow disappeared into the punishment-room. The Head followed him in, and the door closed behind him. There was a faint murmur of voices.

"What—that can have happened?" muttered Tom, his face very pale. "Talbot's going to be locked in—"

"That old boulder Skeat!" grunted Manners.

"But, what—" muttered Lowther.

The Head came out, and the key was heard to grate in the rusty lock again. The juniors turned away, but out of the corners of their eyes they saw the Head pass along to the staircase and disappear.

"I—I've got to know what this means," muttered Tom. "You fellows keep an eye on the staircase while I speak to Talbot."

"Right-ho!"

Tom stepped quietly into the shadowy alcove, out of which Nobody's Study opened. He stopped and placed his lips to the keyhole.

"Talbot!"

There was a movement within, and a quiet step approached the door.

"Is that you, Tom?" "Yes. What's happened?" breathed Tom. "Can I do anything? Tell me quickly. There'll be a prefect up here soon, very likely, to clear anybody off from speaking to you."

"I'm in a scrape, Tom. You can't help me. Don't worry, old chap," said Talbot. "It can't be helped."

"What have you done?" "Nothing."

"What are you suspected of, then? Tell me."

Talbot did not reply. "Talbot!" breathed Tom. "There's no time to waste. Is it—is it something to do with the old gang—"

"Yes." "That message Wildrake brought you? I thought it must be so. It was from someone you knew—in the old days?"

"Yes," said Talbot heavily.

"Oh, Talbot, you awful ass!" said Tom miserably. "I thought you'd have sense enough to keep clear of anything like that, after all that's happened. Can't I do anything to help?"

"You could, Tom; but I can't ask you."

"You can ask me anything," said Tom impatiently. "Tell me what's happened. Can't you trust me, Talbot?"

"I'll tell you, Tom. Wildrake brought me a message from the Weasel—a man I knew in—the old days. The police are after him for a robbery in Lantham—a bank robbery, I think. A man was injured. The Weasel is hunted high and low. He is desperate, and he tried to get help from me. He—he wants clothes and money, and—"

"Talbot, you're not fool enough, not mad enough, to think of helping him?"

"You don't understand yet, Tom. The man had been—what I was!" Talbot's voice was sharp and bitter. "He gave it up—as I did. The poor wretch tried to go straight, but his past was against him; he hadn't my luck. He has told me that he had nothing to do with the affair at Lantham, and I—I believe him, Tom."

"But if he is innocent, he has only to face his trial," said Tom.

"You don't understand, old fellow; you haven't been down in the depths, as I have. He has a twenty years record of crime. He was seen near the place, or a man like him was seen. It's just the job he would have been engaged upon. If they don't find the real man, they won't have a moment's doubt that it was his work. His flight settles it for him, too."

His word can't be taken; his character's too well known. It will depend on circumstantial evidence, with his life-long record against him. I—I dare say you'll think it doesn't matter much whether such a character goes to prison or not. But—but I've been where the Weasel stands now, Tom, and I've pulled out of it. I believe he had nothing to do with it. I'm not a fool to be deceived. I was going to help him; that's knocked on the head now. But—but—

"They know you met him?"
"Yes."
"Thank goodness you've been stopped from helping him!" said Tom. "That's breaking the law."

"I know."
"Talbot, you'd run that fearful risk, for the sake of a ruffian who is very likely guilty all the time—who is a life-long criminal, anyhow?"

"I might have been a life-long criminal if I hadn't found a good friend to help me out."

"Don't!" muttered Tom wretchedly.
"I made an appointment to meet him again," said Talbot. "I was going to think it over. If I felt sure he was innocent I would help him. I've thought it over, coming back. I do feel sure. I can't help him. But—but he will keep the appointment. And Skeat is going to search every foot of the neighbourhood to-night." Talbot groaned. "He will be taken, and it will be my fault! If I could get word to him—"

He broke off.
"Tom thought hard."

"You musn't think of that, Talbot. If it came out, you'd be arrested. It might mean prison."

"He's going to wait for me, Tom, and he ought to be on the run," muttered Talbot. "He will wait, and—"

He broke off again. "It's no good talking. The poor wretch will go under! And I believe he is innocent, and has tried to keep straight."

"But—"

Tom hesitated. "Where were you going to see him, Talbot?"

"At the dead oak in Rylcombe Wood."
"When?"

"Some time to-night. He will wait. He will be there now," said Talbot.

"Before morning he will be taken." He gritted his teeth. "And I—I'm mew'd up here!"

Tom drew a deep breath.
"Talbot, are you sure—quite sure—that the man is innocent?"

"I feel sure of it, Tom."
"Shall I go?"

"You, Tom!"
"If it's as you say, if the man's innocent," muttered Tom, "I could get out after lights out. Even if I were found out, nobody would think of suspecting me. I'll chance it, Talbot, if you say the word."

"No, no!" breathed Talbot. "You can't—you sha'n't get mixed up in it, Tom!"

"You are going to stay in this room, Talbot?"

"I'm locked in."

"You're not thinking of making a break?"

Talbot did not answer that question.
"I know you could get out, if you tried," said Tom. "That's what I've been thinking; you're going to try to get to the place and warn him. And if you're seen, if you're caught, it's ruin for life. You'd go to prison, Talbot. It would be disgrace and ruin for ever. You sha'n't do that!"

"But, Tom—"

"Promise me that you won't Talbot."
"Tom!"

"You won't promise," muttered Tom.
"I guessed what you intended. I shall go, Talbot. The risk isn't so great for

me as for you. For you it's utter ruin. For me it's only breaking bounds. I can stand the racket for that."

"But, Tom—"

"It's settled," said Tom, in a hurried whisper. "I'm going, after lights out, Talbot. I'll warn the man to clear. But you—you'll promise me to stay here, and do nothing."

"But I can't let you—"
"Promise me—quick! Somebody's coming! Talbot, your word!"

"I promise, Tom!"
"Good!"

"Clear off from there!" It was the rough voice of Knox of the Sixth. "You know jolly well you're not allowed to speak to anyone in the punishment-room, Merry! Take fifty lines, and clear off!"

Tom Merry moved away without a word.

His heart was throbbing.

Only too well he had guessed Talbot's secret intention—only too well he knew that no detention could hold the boy who had been called the prince of crackmen unless he chose. And if Talbot had left the punishment-room, and had been caught seeking the fugitive, Tom shuddered to think of the consequences—black disgrace and utter ruin to his chum.

He wondered, indeed, whether that was a plan in Inspector Skeat's mind—whether the inspector hoped to find Talbot stealing out of the school that night, thus placing proof of complicity in his hands. The danger was terrible—for Talbot.

Tom Merry had taken a risk upon himself, but it was to save his chum from his own chivalrous folly. The danger was not so great for Tom. Even the suspicious inspector, if he spotted him, would not suspect him of knowing anything of the Weasel. But, great or little, Tom was prepared to face the peril for his chum's sake.

When the Shell went into their dormitory that night, Tom's mind was quite made up. For Talbot's sake, he was going to take the risk; and after lights out, after the rest of the Form had fallen into slumber, Tom Merry slipped quietly from his bed, and dressed in the dark.

CHAPTER 7.

Wildrake on the Track.

INSPECTOR SKEAT was still waiting when the Head returned to his study. There was a deep line of trouble in the Head's brow.

"The boy is secured?" asked Mr. Skeat.
"I have locked him in the punishment-room."

"Very good. It is, of course, clear that he left the school this evening to speak with the Weasel."

"I fear so," said the Head sadly. "I have spoken to him seriously, and he says nothing. But I can gather what has really happened. This rascal has appealed to his kind heart, and from a foolish sense of chivalry, Talbot thinks that he cannot betray him. It is an overstrained sense of honour—I am sure nothing worse."

"Possibly, sir. In any case, he is culpable. But I had another matter to speak of. One of your boys, I think, can give me assistance; and if I can arrest the Weasel, of course, the matter will end, and it will not be necessary to deal with Talbot at all. I believe he could tell me where to find the man, if he chose; but so long as I lay my hands on him, I shall be quite satisfied."

"Any assistance in my power, of course; but I do not quite see—"

The Head was puzzled.
"You have a boy here named Wildrake?"

"Yes; a new boy from Canada."

"A couple of weeks ago, Wildrake made rather a sensation here." The inspector smiled. "He found your French master, you remember, who had been shut up in a den in the wood. By a really astonishing skill in tracking, he prevented a crime."

"Quite so. I am told that he is now the model of the school scouts," said the Head. "His early life in British Columbia gave him the training which has produced such surprising results. But how—"

"Will you let the boy come with me, sir?" said the inspector. "I followed with great interest the case in which he picked up tracks in the woods, and found the French master. I believe he can be of service to me. I know the request is unusual—"

"Very," said the Head gravely.

"I would point out, however, that if the Weasel is arrested at once, it may save disgrace falling upon the school through Talbot. If the man escapes, the consequences for Talbot may be very serious, and for the school in the matter of publicity."

"I will send for Wildrake at once," said the Head hastily. "There will, of course, be no danger for the boy?"

"None."

"I have no doubt he will be prepared to give you any help he can," said Dr. Holmes. "He is, I believe, a lad of an adventurous disposition, and certainly of great courage, as he has proved. I could not, of course, consent to his being taken into danger, as I am responsible to his parents."

"There will be no danger, sir; it is simply his skill in woodcraft that I want to use."

The Head touched the bell; and Toby was sent for Wildrake. The fourth Form were about to start for their dormitory, when Wildrake was called to the Head's study.

He came in, in a rather uneasy mood. The Canadian junior was wondering whether anything had transpired, concerning the message he had brought to Talbot. He was quite determined to utter no word to Talbot's harm, even if questioned by the representative of the majesty of the law. His lips were sealed on that subject.

But he was soon relieved of his doubts. It was evident at once that neither the Head nor Mr. Skeat suspected that he had had anything to do with the Weasel or Talbot of the Shell.

Dr. Holmes explained in a few words.

"Wildrake, Inspector Skeat desires to utilise your services, if you are willing to help him. It is your skill in woodcraft that is required. If you can assist the inspector to trace a certain bad character now lurking in the neighbourhood of the school, you will render him a great service, and a still greater one to me personally, and to one of your schoolfellows."

"I am quite at Mr. Skeat's orders, sir," said Wildrake.

He was astonished, wondering whether the bad character referred to was the Weasel. He was soon informed on that point.

"The man is called the Weasel," said the inspector. "He is known to be near the school. He is wanted for a bank robbery at Lantham, in which a night-watchman was brutally assaulted and seriously injured. There will be no danger for you, however—"

Wildrake smiled.

"I shouldn't mind the danger, sir, I guess," he answered. "If the man is as you describe, the sooner he is roped in the better."

"I have the warrant for his arrest," said Mr. Skeat. "If you are willing to come with me, Master Wildrake—"

"Sure, sir!"

"Your headmaster gives his permission. There is bright moonlight now—almost as light as day. Do you think you could pick up traces, as on the previous occasion when you so distinguished yourself?" said the inspector, with a smile.

"I guess so, sir, if there's anything to pick up," said Wildrake confidently. "I'll be jolly glad to try!"

"Then come with me, my boy!" said the inspector very cordially.

In a few minutes Wildrake was in his coat and cap, and leaving the school with the portly gentleman. The Fourth Form turned in, with one bed in the dormitory empty. Wildrake was absent—a fact which astonished the juniors considerably.

"Missin' is gettin' catelin'!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "First there was Talbot, and now there is Wildrake. Do you know where Wildrake has got to, Kildare?"

Kildare, who was seeing lights out for the Fourth, did not gratify Arthur Augustus' thirst for information.

"Don't ask questions, kid," he replied.

"Weally, Kildare—"

The St. Jim's captain turned out the light, and quitted the dormitory. The juniors were left to discuss the strange affair until they fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Wildrake and the inspector had left by the side gate, and were in the road. There, the inspector looked at his watch, and signed to the junior to wait.

Wildrake did not know what they were waiting for, but he was under the inspector's orders now, so he waited in silence.

A quarter of an hour later there was a heavy tread on the road. Police-Constable Crump, of Rylcombe, loomed up in the bright moonlight. The inspector signed to him to stop.

"You brought young Talbot back to the school Crump?" he asked.

"Yessir. Found 'im out of bounds, and run him 'ome, according to dooty," said Mr. Crump.

"Where did you find him?"

"'Bout a quarter mile down the lane, sir, towards Rylcombe."

"Was he alone?"

"He was when I come up," said Mr. Crump. "But I 'ad an idea he'd been talking to somebody by the roadside. It's thickets there, sir. If there was another cove, he dodged pretty quick. Anything wrong, sir?"

"That's as may be," said the inspector. "Please take me to the exact spot where you found Talbot."

"Yes, sir; right back along my beat!" said Mr. Crump.

The fat constable marched on, and the inspector followed with Wildrake. The latter was thinking rather hard. He called to mind the vague stories he had heard of Talbot's past; he recalled the shifty, desperate look of the ragged man who had sent the message. In his own mind, he shaped out the story fairly accurately. The desperate man, escaping from justice, had sought help from the

"Toff"—perhaps with threats. If he was not seized, a St. Jim's fellow might be charged into the affair; and, according to Mr. Skeat's statement, the Weasel was a character whom it was anybody's duty to help in hunting down. There

was a warrant out for his arrest, on the charge of burglary and violent assault; and that was enough for Wildrake to know. He was quite prepared to do his best to lay a dangerous criminal by the heels; all the more if the man was seeking to involve a St. Jim's fellow in his own desperate fortunes.

Of Talbot, Wildrake could not believe harm. The grave, frank face of the Shell fellow rose before his eyes. Talbot was straight as a die, he felt; but that was all the more reason for helping to keep him out of the clutches of a rascal like the Weasel.

Wildrake, as a matter of fact, could have guided the inspector very near to the spot where the Weasel had met Talbot; it was close to the place where the ragged fugitive had stopped Wildrake in the afternoon, to send the message. Police-constable Crump stopped at last, and peered along the thick hedges.

"Jest about 'ere," he said.

"Find the exact place if you can!" said Mr. Skeat.

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Wildrake was examining the grass by the lane now. The ground was soft and sticky from recent rain, in the best state for bearing tracks. Overhead, the moon, now nearly at the full, streamed down silvery light, almost as clear as sunlight.

"I guess this is the place!" said Wildrake.

"Jest about!"

There were tracks plain enough for Inspector Skeat to trace, albeit the worthy inspector was no scout. The prints of Talbot's neat boots, where he had stood in talk with the outcast, were plainly seen, outlined in the soil—deepened from his having stood still for some time on one spot. In the thicket close by, there were ample traces of the lurking fugitive—broken twigs, and a torn rag from his clothes, and muddy tracks. Wildrake smiled; his task was easy—easy, that is, to the well-trained eye of the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch.

"You think you can pick it up?" asked the inspector.

"Sure!"

"Go ahead, then!" said Mr. Skeat, with much satisfaction. "You'll follow us, Crump. Keep your truncheon handy; you'll need it if we come on the Weasel."

Mr. Crump gasped.

"The cove that's wanted at Lantham, sir?"

"Exactly!"

Mr. Crump loosened his truncheon. He was full of eagerness to distinguish himself by the arrest of so notorious a character. Wildrake led the way, and the inspector and the constable followed him.

Muddy tracks led across a young plantation, then by a field, and then into Rylcombe Wood. Other tracks crossed them occasionally, but the boy from the Wild West hardly faltered for a moment. In the wood, however, he had to pause, as the traces were lost on a dry, hard patch. Mr. Skeat and the constable waited, while Wildrake "tried" to and fro, a good deal like a hound that had lost the scent.

"Come on!" said Wildrake, at last.

"Got it again?"

"Sure!"

"Good!" said Mr. Skeat.

Progress was slower now, winding through the wood, far from any footpath. Once or twice Wildrake stopped again; but always he renewed his way. Mr. Crump watched him, half in wonder, half in doubt. There was no "sign" that told any tale to Mr. Crump's eyes. And Inspector Skeat was assailed by doubts at

intervals; though Wildrake's assured manner gave him confidence, as well as his remembrance of what the Canadian had done on a previous occasion.

In the depths of the wood, Wildrake suddenly paused and held up his hand.

"Quiet!" he whispered.

"What—?"

"We're close on now, I guess. I heard a rustle. Stay here till I come back," whispered Wildrake. "I guess we've got the merchant nearly cornered. Don't make a sound till you see me again."

The inspector nodded in silence, and Mr. Crump breathed heavily. Wildrake, falling noiselessly on his hands and knees, wormed his way through the thickets, and disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER 8.

A Startling Meeting!

TOM MERRY'S face was a little pale, and his brows were knitted, as he threaded his way through the shadowy woods. Where the trees were thick it was dark, but bright moonlight streamed down through every opening in the branches.

Tom knew his way easily enough about the woods by day or night, and he threaded on without hesitation towards the rendezvous. But his heart was troubled, and his mind was worried. It was to save his chum from deadly danger that he was there, but dark doubts tormented him. Talbot believed that the Weasel was innocent of the crime laid to his charge, that the wretched man had striven to leave a life of crime behind him, and had failed. But what if Talbot was mistaken? The thought of helping a criminal to escape justice was unpleasant enough. Innocent or guilty, it was not for Tom to stand between the cracksmen and the law. He knew it. But it was to save his chum, and he did not falter, though his heart was heavy.

He came up to the lightning-riven oak at last, a well-known landmark in the wood, though far from the beaten tracks. There he halted, and looked about him. If the Weasel was lurking on the spot, waiting for Talbot, he would see the junior. He might take him for Talbot in the shadows. At least, he would guess that it was a messenger. It was past ten o'clock, and a schoolboy could not be supposed to have any business in such a spot at such an hour.

"Toff!"

It was a husky whisper from the shadows. Evidently the Weasel was there, and on the watch.

Tom Merry felt a thrill at his heart. If the man was what the police believed him to be Tom had placed himself in the presence of a desperate and hardened ruffian.

"Toff, you've come!"

A haggard face peered from the bushes. Tom Merry turned, and the moonlight, through the branches above, fell on his face. There was a muttered exclamation from the Weasel.

"Tain't the Toff! Hang you! Who are you?" He glared at the junior with rage and terror in his eyes, and made a spring from the thicket like a wild animal.

Tom jumped back, his heart throbbing.

"Hands off!" he exclaimed. "I've come from Talbot."

The Weasel paused.

"You're a friend of the Toff?"

"I'm his best chum," said Tom.

"He's told you—"

"Yes."

"Why ain't the Toff come?" muttered the Weasel. "You got a message from 'im?"

He watched Tom's face savagely.

"I've come to warn you," said Tom. "The police know you are here, and Talbot has been locked up at school because they know he met you. He's sent you a warning to get away as fast as you can. He can't help you. He is suspected and detained. There is going to be a search all over this quarter. They know you were in the lane this evening."

The wretched man gave a groan. "They're close on my heels, then?" "I fear so." Tom could not help a feeling of compassion as he looked at the worn, wretched face, haggard in the moonlight. "If you are innocent of what you are charged with, as Talbot thinks, I'm sorry for you, awfully sorry. But there's nothing for it but to run."

"Run!" muttered the Weasel, with a gesture of despair. "Run where? I'm starving now! I've got no money, and I'm in rags. I'm done!"

Tom was silent. It was useless to tell the wretched man that he ought not to have sought to drag Talbot into his misfortunes; that it was, in fact, his doing so that had brought the police so close upon his track. Tom ran his hands through his pockets.

"I have a few shillings," he said. "Take them. I wish you luck. But you must clear at once. Every moment may be dangerous—"

The Weasel gave him a sharp, suspicious look.

"How do I know that this ain't a trick to get shut of me?" he muttered huskily. "If the Toff's turned his back on an old pal—"

Tom compressed his lips. "I have told you Talbot cannot help you. You have brought him into trouble and danger already. For your own sake, go!"

"What—what's that?" The Weasel gave a sudden start, and spun round. "Tom Merry!"

Kit Wildrake leaped from the thicket. He stared at Tom blankly. The Weasel gave a suppressed cry.

"It—it's you—you what took the message to the Toff!" he muttered.

"Wildrake!" muttered Tom blankly. "What are you doing here?"

Wildrake's face grew hard and grim. "That's a question I've got to ask you," he said. "Speak low. Inspector Skeat and a policeman are not twenty yards away. I've led them here on the track of that man. I was going back for them when I heard your voice. Tom Merry, are you mad? What have you to do with that criminal?"

The Weasel sank back against the trunk of a tree, breathing in gasps. Despair seemed to have fallen upon him.

Tom's faced paled as he met Wildrake's accusing eyes.

"You've no right to question me," he stammered.

Wildrake thought quickly. "Talbot sent you?" he said.

Tom nodded.

"Then he is hand-in-glove with that scoundrel, who is wanted for robbery and assault!"

"No," said Tom, between his teeth. "Hang you, Wildrake, how dare you—"

"Oh, let's have a plain talk!" said Wildrake. "That man is a criminal, and I find you here with him. Talbot sent you to warn him to clear. I guess, He's not going to clear, Tom Merry, I answer for that. I give you a minute to get out before the police come. But if that man moves I collar him, and shout."

Tom Merry panted.

"Wildrake—"

"Nuff said!" interrupted the Canadian snuff. "Clear off while you've got the chance. I guess I oughtn't to give you the chance, considering the company I've

found you in. I give it to save the school's good name. Get!"

Tom's face was flooded with crimson. "Listen to me, Wildrake! Talbot believes that this man is innocent—"

"I guess a man gets a fair trial in this country," said Wildrake scornfully. "Leave it to that."

"So I would," muttered Tom. "You can't be fool enough to think that I want a criminal to escape. I'm standing by Talbot—"

"Talbot has no right to chip in between the police and a cracksmán," said Wildrake decisively. "I guess he won't be allowed to, nor you, either, Tom Merry. You must be mad to come here. You've been dragged into this, and it's Talbot's fault—"

"Not a word against Talbot!" said Tom, between clenched teeth.

Wildrake shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I've nothing up against him, but he must be a fool to play a game like this. There's been a robbery at Lantham, and a man's head has been cracked, and this man's wanted for it. That's enough for me to know, I guess. Stand where you are!"

The Canadian junior rapped out the words sharply as the Weasel made a movement. "I'm watching you."

The Weasel's eyes glinted. He sidled round the tree, evidently with the intention of making a dash into the woods. Kit Wildrake sprang towards him.

Tom Merry threw himself in the way. "Wildrake—"

"Stand aside!"

"I won't! Cut it, you fool!" shouted Tom to the Weasel. But the latter was already running desperately.

Wildrake dashed after him, but Tom grasped him, and they struggled. The Canadian shouted.

"Help here!"

Instantly there was a crashing of the underwoods.

Inspector Skeat and Mr. Crump were dashing towards the spot, the latter truncheon in hand.

Wildrake loosened his grip on the captain of the Shell.

"Vamoose!" he breathed. "If you're found here—"

Tom Merry panted. "I don't care! I—"

"You fool, you'll be arrested! Cut it, I tell you!" panted Wildrake. "I'll keep them back if I can while you get clear."

He dashed back towards the advancing inspector, still unseen in the thick bushes.

Tom Merry hesitated a moment. But he realised the fearful peril in which he stood. If he was found there—

He had kept his word to Talbot; he had done his best. The Weasel was in full flight through the woods, like a hunted hare. Tom Merry turned, and dashed away among the trees in another direction. Without pausing a moment to take breath, he ran on, winding through the wood, till at last, with a gasp of relief, he jumped a ditch and landed in the moonlight in Rylcombe Lane.

CHAPTER 9.

A Wild Night's Work!

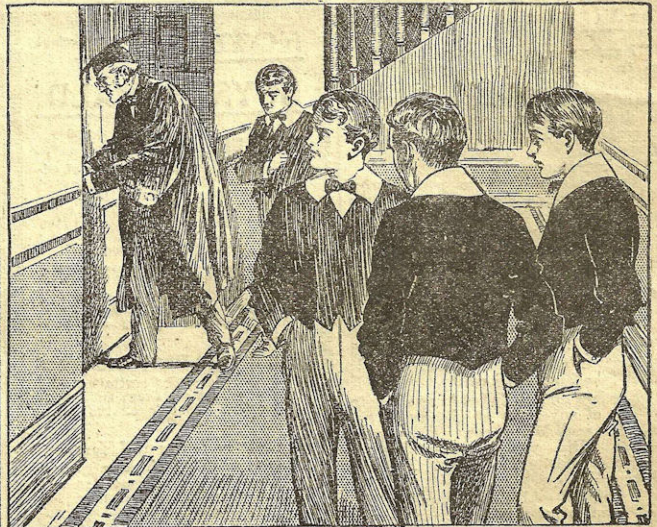
"THIS way!" Wildrake crashed into Inspector Skeat in the dusky thickets, and Mr. Skeat staggered against a tree. Mr. Crump, running close behind, stopped just in time.

But for that halt, the two officers would have burst into the open glade round the dead oak-tree, in time to see Tom Merry before he fled. Kit Wildrake acted on the spur of the moment, to save the St. Jim's fellow. It was at the risk of allowing the Weasel to escape.

"Ow!" gasped the inspector, as he bumped on the tree. "You—you clumsy young ass—"

A momentary smile flickered over Wildrake's face. It was not chumminess that had caused him to crash into the inspector.

"This way!" he repeated. "Quick, then—you found him?" panted Mr. Skeat.



Dr. Holmes turned into the deep alcove before the door, and the key rattled in the lock. He turned on the light, and motioned Talbot to enter. Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another blankly as the Shell fellow disappeared into the punishment-room.

(See page 8.)

"Yes. I came right on him," said Wildrake. "This way; follow me, and we'll have him yet, I guess."

"Quick, then!" Wildrake turned, and ran on by the dead oak. To his great relief, Tom Merry had vanished from sight. But the Weasel, too, had vanished; trampled bush and briar showed the way he had gone. Wildrake gritted his teeth as he led the way at a run on the cracksman's track.

But fear seemed to have lent the Weasel wings. There was no sound of him in the deep wood; he was far ahead. But the track he left could be followed at a run, and the three pursuers pressed on fast; Mr. Crump, puffing and blowing, in the rear.

The track came out on the footpath that ran through the wood to Wayland. On the trampled path it lost. It did not enter the trees again; the fleeing man had followed the footpath. Wildrake stopped, at a loss.

"He's followed the path, I guess," he said. "But in which direction—"

"Get on towards Wayland, Crump!" rapped out the inspector. "I'll go the other way."

"Yes!" Mr. Crump plodded off, as fast as his stoutness would allow. The inspector hurried in the opposite direction, towards St. Jim's, with Wildrake. A few minutes later the latter stopped by a rain-puddle in the path.

"Right!" he exclaimed. "He passed here."

"Going towards the school, then!" ranted the inspector. "Looking for help from somebody there, perhaps. We'll have him."

They pressed on, and came out of the footpath into the Rylcombe Lane. In the shining of the moon, the lane was almost as light as day; but nothing was to be seen of the fugitive in either direction. Wildrake examined the grass by the road; he picked up the tracks again there, but they were lost on the hard surface of the road itself.

"He's taken to the road!" said Mr. Skeat, breathing hard and stertorously after his exertions. "That does you, young man?"

"I guess so; an Indian could not pick up tracks on a road like this," said Wildrake grimly. "I'm sorry; we nearly had him." He did not add that an absolutely certain capture had been prevented by his desire to shield Tom Merry.

The inspector panted. "I'm much obliged to you, Master Wildrake; you've done your best," he said. "It was a close thing. I'll have the mounted constables out pretty fast, and our gentleman will be rounded up, I fancy. Think you can get to your school on your own, if I hurry off to the station? I want to get on the telephone at once."

"I guess that's all right." "One minute, though! Did you find anybody with him in the wood?" Wildrake breathed hard.

"I reckon Master Talbot knows how to get out of any room he chooses to get out of," said Mr. Skeat, with a grim smile. "Did you see anything of Master Talbot? I thought I heard voices—"

"Nothing!" said Wildrake, relieved by that form of the inspector's question. "Talbot certainly was not there, or I should have seen him. I came right on the man. Good-night, Mr. Skeat! If you want me again, you've only got to send word."

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"Good-night, Master Wildrake—and thanks!"

Inspector Skeat started for Rylcombe with great strides, puffing as he went. He was disappointed by a failure that came so close to success; but he had, at least, got in touch now with the fugitive, and he had little doubt of an extensive search rounding him up. It was no longer suspicion, but certainty that the Weasel had been hiding in Rylcombe Wood; and, with the telegraph and telephone at work, he was not likely to get clear. Disappointed as he was at not laying hands on the man, the inspector felt fairly satisfied with his evening's work.

Wildrake was feeling much less satisfied as he walked on to the school.

For Tom Merry's sake, and for the sake of the school, he had saved Tom from discovery, at the cost of letting the cracksman escape. He was very far from satisfied with that result. As he came near the school, he sighted a figure on the road ahead in the moonlight, and a minute later he knew that it was Tom Merry.

He hastened his steps to overtake him; and Tom turned his head at the sound of footsteps.

"You!" he exclaimed, his face clouding.

"Little me," said Wildrake grimly.

"He got away?" asked Tom breathlessly.

"Correct!" Tom Merry drew a deep breath of relief. That, at least, would be good news for Talbot.

Wildrake eyed him.

"I don't know whether you're satisfied with this business," he said curtly. "I guess I'm not. I took you and Talbot for two of the straightest fellows at St. Jim's. I find you helping a cracksman to get away from the police. I guess that wants explaining."

Tom Merry walked on without replying. He felt the position bitterly enough, but there was nothing to be said.

They came in sight of the school.

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"Nothing to say?" asked Wildrake.

"No," answered Tom, in a low voice; "except that I'm obliged to you for giving me a chance to get clear."

"I guess I don't know whether I was right in doing it," said Wildrake bluntly. "I let that man get away, to keep you out of trouble, and the name of the school out of the papers. I guess I don't know whether I did right; I don't know now. But I reckon you're not the fellow I took you for, Tom Merry, and I'm sorry to know it."

With that he quickened his pace, and stopped at the school gates and rang the bell. Tom Merry hurried on. He could not enter at the gates. He climbed the school wall in the shadow of the trees, and dropped down behind the elms that lined the wall inside. The quadrangle was a sheet of silvery light; but under the elms by the wall it was very dark. Tom, as he landed on his feet, looked round quickly; he thought he caught a hurried breath in the shadows.

"Who's there?" he panted. The thought of some watchful prefect was in his mind.

There was no reply; no sound or movement.

Tom stared into the shadows for a moment or two, and then went on his way, concluding that he had been deceived. He did not guess that a haggard face and two hunted, desperate eyes watched him go, from the shadows of the elms.

Wildrake entered at the door of the School House, and Tom saw him from a distance. The Shell fellow skirted round the building, and quietly entered the House by the box-room window at the back—the way he had quitted it. In the box-room he removed his boots. Before going to his dormitory he slipped noiselessly to the Shell passage, where Nobody's Study was situated. It was not likely that Talbot was asleep; and he wanted a word with his chum. He knew how terribly anxious Talbot would be on his account. The passage was quite dark. Tom groped his way to the alcove, and to the door of Nobody's Study. He tapped lightly.

Instantly there was a whisper from within.

"Who is there?"

Tom Merry bent to the keyhole.

"Talbot—"

"You, Tom?"

"Yes."

"Thank Heaven you are back—safe!" breathed Talbot.

"Safe as houses, old chap!" whispered Tom.

"And—and—"

"He good clear!"

"I'm glad of that."

"Good-night, Talbot!"

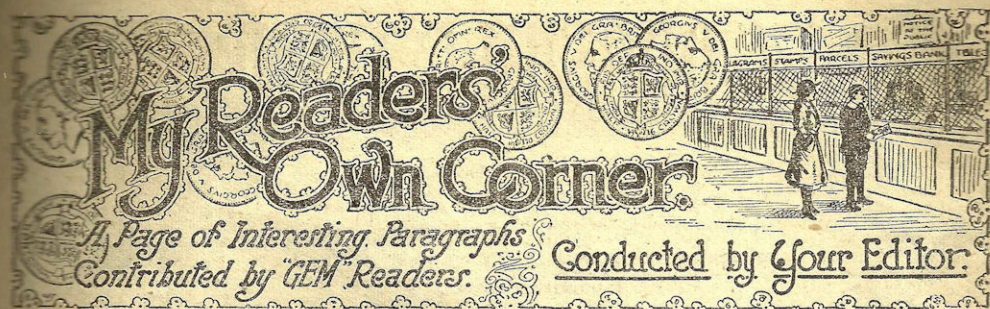
"Good-night, old fellow!"

Tom Merry crept softly away. In a few minutes more he was in the Shell dormitory, slipping quietly into bed.

But it was long before Tom Merry slept; and when at last slumber sealed his eyes, he dreamed of the scene in the wood—the hunted fugitive panting his way in the deep shadows. But he did not dream that the Weasel, hunted from the woods, scared from the roads and lanes, had desperately climbed the school wall, and was now lurking within the walls of St. Jim's. It was well for Tom Merry's peace of mind that he did not know that!

THE END.

(The sequel to this grand school story, entitled: "HIS PAST AGAINST HIM!" by Martin Clifford, will appear in next week's issue of THE GEM Library. Make a point of ordering your copy RIGHT NOW!)



Half-a-crown is paid for all contributions printed on this page.

GETTING EVEN.

As a teacher was leaving his class for the evening, one of the pupils slyly dropped into his hat a piece of paper on which was the word "Donkey." The teacher next morning addressed the boys in a very gentle tone. This is what he said: "As I was leaving the class-room last evening one of your number did me the great honour of leaving his card."—John M. Sullivan, c/o Mrs. W. Sullivan, Rock West End, Castletown Bere, Co. Cork, Ireland.

MISTAKEN.

Old Lady: "Where can I get a ticket to Penzance, my man?"

Porter: "Through that pigeon-hole, madam."

Old Lady: "Don't be silly. How can I get through that pigeon-hole—a stout woman like me?"—C. George, 56, Brunswick Road, Handsworth, Birmingham.

TENDER MEMORIES.

Observer: "I noticed that you got up and gave your seat to a woman in the omnibus who was standing."

Observed: "Yes, that I did. Since childhood I have respected a woman with a strap in her hand."—Austen Chell, 41, Lord Street, Chapel Ash, Wolverhampton.

THE PROMISED MAN.

Two negroes were working in a coal-bin in a Mississippi town, one down in the bin throwing out the coal. And the one inside picked up a large lump, and, heaving it carelessly into the air, struck the other a resounding blow on the head.

As soon as the victim had recovered from his momentary daze, he walked over to the edge of the bin, and, peering down at his mate, said:

"Nigger, how come you don't watch where you throw dat coal? You done hit me smack on de head."

The other one looked surprised.

"Did I hit you, nigger?"

"You sho' did," came the answer.

"An' I jes' wants to tell you, I've been promising the debil a man for a long time, and you certainly does resemble my promise."—Walter Hobbs, 834, Des Erables Street, Montreal, Canada.

SOUND ADVICE.

As the train whirled through the beautiful valley, the inquisitive stranger persisted in sticking his head out of the window to get a better view of the scenery.

"Keep your head inside, can't you?" shouted the guard from the van.

"Why?"

"So you won't damage any of the work on the bridges!"—Jack Walsh, Low Farm, Gilstead, Bingley, Yorks.

TOO MANY PICKLES.

A lady who kept a pet parrot found that the bird liked pickles very much. "Look here, Polly," said the lady, "if you go taking my pickles again I will pull every feather out of your head." This did not seem to worry the parrot, for it took the risk and the pickles; but its mistress kept her word, and deprived it of its head-feathers. A few days afterwards a visitor, who was quite bald, called at the house. Polly eyed him curiously. "Hallo!" it cried. "Another poor beggar been pinching his missus' pickles!"—Miss Marjorie Redfern, 231, Friern Road, East Dulwich, S.E. 22.

THE TABLES TURNED.

Percy was seated in a tramcar when a worthy woman, with two fish-baskets, entered and sat down beside him. He drew his coat-tails away with a sniff of disgust.

"Perhaps you would rather have a gentleman beside you," said the woman.

"Yes," retorted Percy.
"And so would I," came the unexpected answer.—Archie Brinkley, Buggs Farm, Hitcham, Nr. Ipswich, Suffolk.

FINDING HIMSELF.

The other day, when the beach was crowded, a small boy, looking rather bewildered, approached a police-officer, and said: "Please, sir have you seen anything of a lady around here?"

"Why, yes," answered the officer, "I've seen several."

"Well, have you see any without a little boy?"

"Yes."

"Well," said the little chap, as a relieved look crossed his face, "I'm the little boy. Where's the lady?"—Miss Ivy M. Doorian, 47, Crescent Road, Roseneath, Wellingborough, New Zealand.

QUITE FAIR.

A farmer saw a man fishing on his land.

"Here, my man," he shouted. "You must not fish here. This is my property."

"Oh!" replied the angler. "Whose water is that up round the bend?"

"I don't know," replied the irate farmer; "but it ain't mine, anyway."

"All right; then I'll wait until it flows round here," replied the angler calmly.—Miss Mildred Maple, 16, Northumberland Place, Bayswater, W. 2, London.

NOT MUCH.

Topper: "Did anybody remark on the way you handled your new car?"

Goggles: "One man did, but he didn't say much."

Topper: "Oh, what did he say?"

Goggles: "Twenty pounds and costs!"—H. Johnson, 12, Romilly Road, London, N. 4.

WAITING!

It was in the Far South. "How's times?" asked the tourist. "Pretty tolerable, stranger," responded the old fellow, who was sitting idly on the stump of a tree. "I had a pile of brush to burn, and the lightning set fire to it, and saved me the trouble of burning it." "That was good." "Then I had some trees to cut down, but the cyclone levelled them, and did the work for me." "Remarkable! But what are you doing now?" "Waiting for an earthquake to turn the potatoes out of the ground."—Wm. N. Smith, 54, Lime Street, Millfield, Sunderland.

SOME POETRY!

Ratty Ratcliff is in doubt
Whether he is like old Prout.
Crooke will always rue the day
When I O U's he has to pay.
Augustus D'Arcy hides in the fog
When Herries brings forth his dog.
Aubrey Racke, of St. James' School,
Is always ready to play the fool.
Billy Bunter hears too much
When listening to some double-dutch.
Fatty Wynn can eat no lunch
When Merry thinks it time to punch.
Francis Kerr, the merry Scot,
Kept Rabby Burns' supper hot.
—Barclay Skinner, 386, High Street,
Linthgow, Scotland.

W. G. BUNTER'S WEIGHT.

W. G. Bunter, the fat junior of Gregfriars, was taking a spin on Coker's motor-cycle, when he came to a bridge. The clerk at the toll-gate stopped him, and said:

"You cannot cross this bridge."

"How's that?" inquired Bunter.

By way of reply the humorous clerk pointed to a notice in the office-window, which ran thus:

"Load not to exceed one ton on each wheel."—Dyled Jones, Claville, Port Dinovis, North Wales.

THE ASSISTANT.

First Tramp: "At last, Mike, I've got a job, and a good one at that!"

Second Tramp: "What doing?"

First Tramp: "You know that fellow that goes round tapping the wheels of the trains with a hammer—well, I help him listen!"—Walter Haste, 1755, McSpadder Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

STRANGE.

When two Chinamen meet, each shakes his own hand and puts his hat on, if it happens to be off. Then, instead of saying "How do you do?" they ask each other, "Have you eaten your rice? Where are you going? Why are you going there? What did your shoes cost? How old are you?"—Miss Netta O. Russell, Elmview, Derry Road, Strabane, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 686.

CHAT ABOUT ST. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS.

From information received, we hear that Tom Dutton, the deaf junior at Greyfriars, is likely to come into some money in the near future. Having made inquiries, that worthy has informed us that he has "heard nothing" himself.

Ethel Cleveland has ventured to state that Dr. Taylor was quite a dear in his kindness towards George Piggins, when that noble leader of the New House underwent his "Terrible Ordeal." This evidently will be pleasing to our duck's "quack."

Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh, of the "Boys' Herald," states that he contemplates obliging with a song at the next Remove concert. "Hurree" Jamsat Ram "Sing." I feel sure the Nabob of Bhanipur will prove a great success, possibly bring the school down—even though it may be a brick at a time.

Iron Hand, of "Invisible Hand" fame, seems to be voted by the majority of our readers as a first-rate villain. Granted he sins in the "sin-a-matograph," but, after all, it's only "reel" life, isn't it?

Kit Wildrake, so I have been informed, asked Tom Merry to accompany him in a good long "walk." The Shell captain, answering in the negative, stated that he had had quite enough of the "tramp" lately. It's pretty evident that he'll have to do without "March" for another twelve months.

William George Bunter may often be filled up with good things, but at the present it can hardly be said that he holds the good things Mr. Martin Clifford holds. Our famous author is absolutely overbrimming with good stories. We anticipate an "April fool" of them.

You will all be pleased to hear that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy is making a new departure in the near future. He imagines he has the capabilities of a detective. We always thought he seemed somewhat "detective."

Readers are constantly asking me to devote more space to our "Joy." Well, were I to, I'm afraid other readers might write and tell me I was too "over-joyed."

I have been informed by many that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy has just missed a brand new "jigger" from the bike-shed. Having informed the reliable P.-c. Crump, of Rylcombe, of his loss, the famous aristocrat of St. Jim's anticipates an early recovery of his machine. Undoubtedly it's common knowledge what a "copper" will do.

ANSWERS TO READERS.

"SECOND ENGINEER" (Croydon)—Your electrical questions put me to a fair amount of trouble to answer, but I think I have managed every one correctly for you. The reason they have not appeared before is due to the fact that I had to send your letter down to Mr. Martin Clifford at the Isle of Wight to check his decision concerning a couple of them. He was rather busy on a further splendid Kit Wildrake story, and could not reply to your letter for several days. I remember stating that readers could write to me on all subjects ranging from white mice to matrimony; but yours were simply teasers! Here is what you desire to know: No. 1. Whether they have gas or electric service installed at St.

Jim's.—Both. Gas lights the School House studies; electricity supplies all the kitchen, the Common-rooms, the "labs," and work-rooms. They obtain their supply from the Wayland Electric Light Co., No. 2. What voltage enters the school?—210 volts.—No. 3. It is "Direct Current."—No. 4. What is the maximum load?—500 amperes.—No. 5. Have they any of the new half Watts' bulbs in use?—Yes; in the Common-rooms, in both Houses, the library, the reading-rooms, and all "labs" and work-rooms. No. 6. In the event of a fuse blowing who replaces it?—The House electrician. There, my chum, I think that is all you wanted to know.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC READER.

This correspondent writes from Mansfield, Broughty Ferry, near Dundee, and she says: "Most certainly I agree with those readers who say the GEM gets better and better. I think it is splendid just now, and, being a girl, I enjoy 'Joy's Gossip' very much. She expresses my sentiments for Cardew exactly, and I agree with her likewise about Talbot and Merry. D'Arcy is an aristocrat to his finger-tips. Give me the good old GEM for a thoroughly entertaining story. Is Kidare a better bowler or batsman, and who are in the First Eleven?"

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Joy's Gossip

By the way, is it really true that Mr. Ratchiff is going on the Continent? I should never have thought it of him. He seems so serious-minded, and his face would be out of place in a gay city like Paris. But perhaps he is going farther. He ought to do well in Russia. Ratchiffsky would sound fine, and he might stop there, for all I care.

I was bitterly disappointed to hear a friend of mine pitch into John Sharpe. I admire the great detective. The way he is working hand-and-glove with Anne Crawford—the Invisible Hand and Glove, of course—is ripping! Iron Hand wants some knocking out. But my friend says Sharpe could not possibly do what he does. It shows all she knows. Besides, a detective has to perform wonders. If he were butter-fingered, or muffed things, he would cease to be a detective. I like Sharpe best when he is bluffing his enemies, leading them to think what he wishes, and fooling them to the top of their bent. But Sharpe makes one think. You can read between the lines. He is one of the strong, silent men, such a brain!

Perhaps you will be interested to hear that I read the "Boys' Herald," as well as the Gem. I like Dick O'Dare as much as ever, but if you would let us know a trifle more about his character it

would be better still, as the very moment you get fascinated by a character you itch to know more about him—where he came from, what he thinks about, which books he likes best, and so on. We girls can imagine things just as well as boys.

Talking about that, I had such a surprise last week. So had the milkman. It was this way. I was free-wheeling through a village down South, when I saw the words up over a shop: "Tom Merry. Orders executed promptly." My bike was out of hand, and I could not stop, but as soon as the hill came to an end I got off and tramped back. "So you are Tom Merry?" I said to the man who was in charge of the shop. "Yes, miss," he replied. "But you are not the real Tom Merry?" I went on. He had ginger whiskers and a bald head. "I'm real enough, miss," he said; "and if you are living in the neighbourhood, I can deliver the best milk and butter daily." "My poor man," I cried (I felt like doing it, too) "you don't understand! It seems to me you are infringing the copyright." I believe that is the right term. He stared at me; thought I was mad, I expect. There was I, twiddling with my bike-bell, looking at Tom Merry, and yet it wasn't Tom Merry. I felt savage. "I am Merry!" the horrid person said, with a chuckle. "My father was Merry before me, if that's what you want to know." I said I was very sorry to hear it, and that I didn't want any butter. Ugh!

Ginger Whiskers then asked, would I like to see his missus and the kids? "Is one of them called Tom?" I asked. He laughed. "There's Tommy, and Jacky, and Bill, and someone inside, and out they all came. It was a crowd. Young Tom Merry was about seven. I kissed him, although he was eating treacle-tart. "I hope you will be worthy of your great name," I said. "That he will, miss!" cried the butter merchant.

Yours,

JOY.

SIDELIGHTS ON ST. JIM'S.



No. 1.—GUSSY TAKES JOY TO THE PICTURES.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 686.

Dear Mr. Editor.—Wildrake interests me more and more, especially when he goes to the circus and shows what he can do with horses. I wish I had been there! I love a circus! It is heaps better than the pictures. I like everything about it—the absurd clown, who fishes for tiddlers in the arena; the fussy and important ringmaster, with his big whip; and all the others, especially the lady who rides the dancing horse. But the ringmaster is, perhaps, the funniest, in his clean white shirt and his swallow-tail coat. It's his clothes, and his voice, so big and angry, or oily and patronising, as the occasion demands. The ringmaster is so silly, with his superior ways. Some folks put on manners with their clothes. I would have liked to see Gussy go into the ring with the whip. How he would have made them all laugh! As it was, he was splendid. "There is no dangah, Taggies. I am simply goin' for your hat!" How I did laugh!

We ought to hear a lot more about Wildrake. New characters come and go—at least, many of them go, and are forgotten, for I know the stage is pretty full, but now and again there is a boy, who makes himself so interesting and so popular that one feels one must hear more. I hope we shall often meet the clever, nice, frank-mannered boy. He isn't too clever, nor too conscious of the wonderful things he can do. That cork-screw was topping.

I never could abide Knox. He is so bad-tempered, and he is always thinking about being in the Sixth. His manner would frequently disgrace the meanest little fag. Just fancy how he would be in a caravaning trip! The mere thought of a few days in the company of some people gives one the shivers. I am sorry to say I often take dislikes to individuals. You need not even see their faces. There was a woman in a packed train the other day whose shoulders would have annoyed a nice-tempered cow. She just pushed and shoved, and declined to give way. I did want to stick my elbow into her, just to remind her that a girl from Australia was being rammed against the edge of the door. Grundy would have done it if it had been a man.

That's what I like about George Alfred Grundy. He is downright, and says what he means, and does ditto. Of course, he is big and clumsy, and he gets in the way, but he is honest, and would always stand up for anybody who was being trodden on. To my thinking, Grundy does not get the praise he deserves. Most of the fellows do not seem to understand him a bit. Good old Grundy!

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