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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

June 22nd, 1929.

"TALBOT'S ENEMY!" This week's fine school story—inside.

With expulsion looming over him, it looks as if Reginald Talbot will be forced to pay the greatest price for his loyalty to an old comrade. But the one-time Toff finds that it is the darkest hour that comes before the dawn!

TALBOT'S

By Martin Clifford

CHAPTER 1.

A Message for Talbot.

"HOLD ON! Just a word with you, youngster!"
Tom Merry halted.

There was something curiously stealthy and cautious in the husky tones of the voice that hailed him.

The man was standing just in the lane by the stile that gave admittance to Rylcombe Woods. Though it was early evening yet, it was dusky under the trees, and Tom could scarcely see the face of the man lurking there.

"Well," he called, "what is it?"

Tom was far from being a nervous youth. But the lane was deserted, and he was taking no chances.

The man grunted. Then he stepped out on to the grass bordering the lane, and his features became clear.

Tom Merry gave a violent start as he saw the face.

It was not unknown to him.

He had good reason to remember that thin, hard face, with the sharp, grey eyes. It was the face of one of the two men who had broken into St. Jim's some nights ago—it was the face of the man Tom and his chums had captured in the quad at midnight, the man whom Talbot of the Shell had afterwards aided to escape.

Tom's face went hard.

"Keep your distance!" he snapped, as the man made another step towards him. "What do you want with me, anyway?"

The man glanced cautiously up and down the lane. Then he looked keenly at the junior.

"You—you know a lad named Talbot at the school there?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes, I do!" said Tom.

"He's a chum of yours?"

Tom nodded curtly.

"I thought so!" muttered the man, his face showing satisfaction. "I fancied I'd seen you with him, young gent."

"Yes," assented Tom significantly. "It was at midnight the other night, wasn't it?"

The shot went home. For a moment the man stepped

back, his eyes fixed glitteringly upon the junior. Then he pulled himself together, with a short laugh.

"You're jokin', of course, youngster?" he said, with a twisted sort of grin. "I've seen you walkin' along the lane here with the Toff—"

"With whom?"

"With—with young Talbot." The hard-faced man corrected himself hastily, and eyed Tom narrowly. "With Talbot, I meant, of course, young fellow! I've seen—"

"I'm in a hurry!" said Tom curtly. "I've got to get in before lock-up. If you've got a message you want me to hand to Talbot, you can hand it over, and I'll see he gets it safely."

"I know a straight chap when I see him," said the man, his eyes fixed searchingly on Tom's frank face. "You wouldn't be a pal of the—of young Talbot's unless you were to be trusted." He drew an envelope from his pocket, on which was a scribbled name and address. "That's for Talbot. Hand it to him on the quiet, young gent. And thanks for—"

"I'll give it him the moment I get in," said Tom, cutting him short.

He took the envelope, nodded, and walked on.

The man had vanished from the stile when Tom Merry looked back a few seconds later, and a troubled look came into the junior's eyes.

What did it mean?

He was sure—quite sure—that the man was the cracksmen the juniors had captured in the quad that night, and whom Talbot had aided to escape.

And just now the man had unguardedly referred to Talbot as the "Toff"—the name under which Talbot had been known in the old, dark days, when he himself had been a member of a gang of lawbreakers!

Why had Talbot aided the man to escape? Was it from pity—because he had recognised the man as a former associate in crime?

Tom Merry felt sure there was more behind it than that. In fact, he knew from recent happenings that there was.

But what should he do? His duty, after all, was to acquaint the police with the news that the rascal was still



A DRAMATIC LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY DEALING WITH THE ADVENTURES OF TOM MERRY & CO. AND REGINALD TALBOT, OF ST. JIM'S!

ENEMY!

in the vicinity. Tom wondered, indeed, at the man's amazing daring in remaining in the district when the police were still hunting for the burglars.

Yet Tom Merry knew he could not. If Talbot did not wish the man arrested, then he had some very good reason in mind. Moreover, it was more than likely that such a course might mean grave danger for Reginald Talbot.

Tom's face was serious as he hurried back to St. Jim's.

How was it going to end? Already rumours were going round the school, with Reginald Talbot the object of curiosity and suspicion. If the whispers got to the ears of anyone in authority—

Tom Merry was very soon to learn that his fears in that respect were not ungrounded.

In the hallway he found little groups of fellows talking together excitedly, and it was easy to see that something unusual had happened.

"Hallo!" said Tom, joining his chums, Lowther and Manners. "Anything wrong, you fellows?"

"Rotten news, Tom," answered Lowther glumly. "You haven't heard it yet—about old Talbot, I mean."

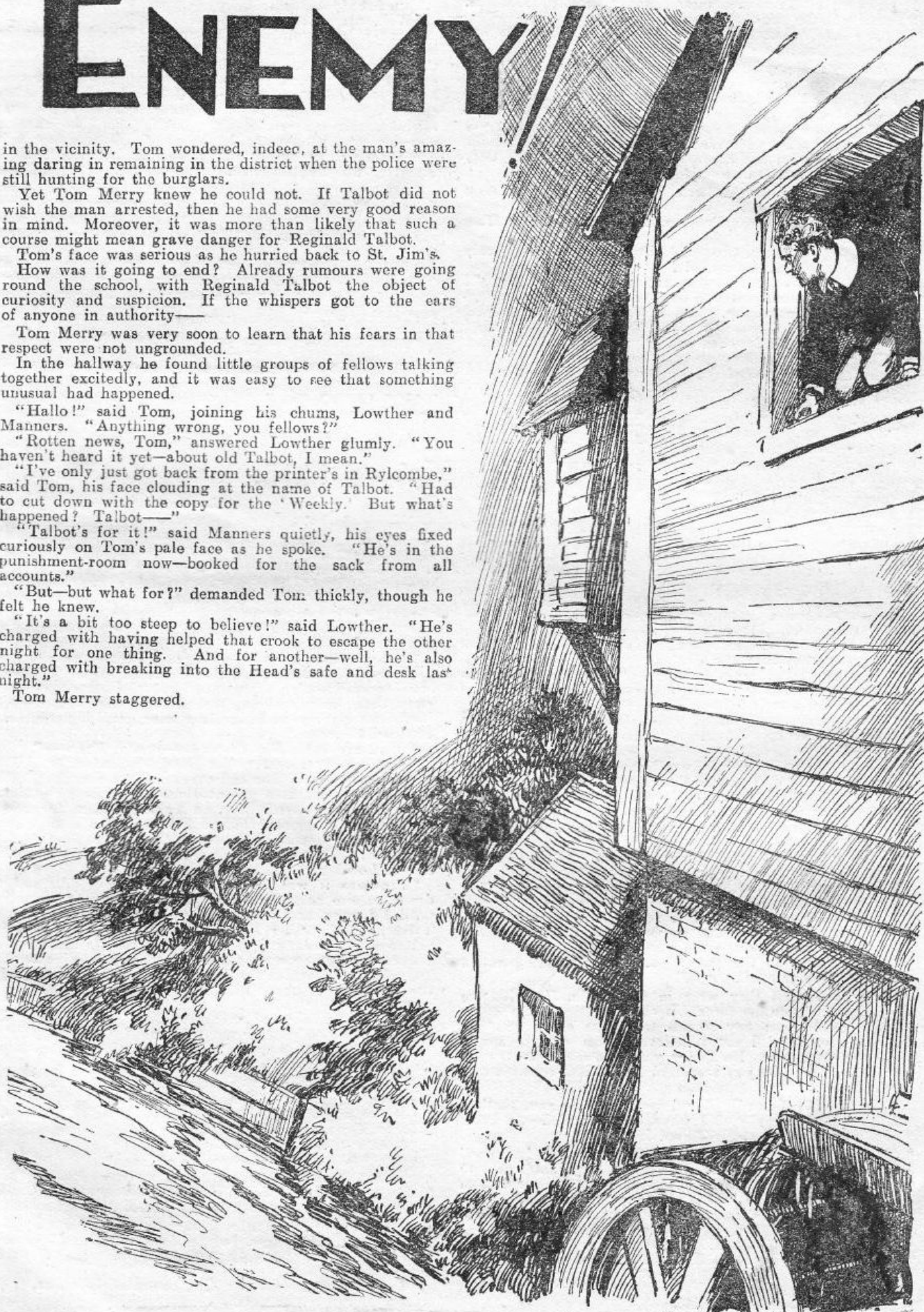
"I've only just got back from the printer's in Rylcombe," said Tom, his face clouding at the name of Talbot. "Had to cut down with the copy for the 'Weekly.' But what's happened? Talbot—"

"Talbot's for it!" said Manners quietly, his eyes fixed curiously on Tom's pale face as he spoke. "He's in the punishment-room now—booked for the sack from all accounts."

"But—but what for?" demanded Tom thickly, though he felt he knew.

"It's a bit too steep to believe!" said Lowther. "He's charged with having helped that crook to escape the other night for one thing. And for another—well, he's also charged with breaking into the Head's safe and desk last night."

Tom Merry staggered.



"It's all rot, of course!" said Manners, though he spoke without conviction. "Talbot's straight—"

"Of course it's rot!" snorted Lowther angrily. "I don't believe a word of it—at least, of his breaking into the dashed safe and desk last night. That's too steep for words!"

"A yarn of Trimble's, most likely!" growled Manners. "Talbot's in the punishment-room right enough, but—"

"Look here, Manners, you rotter—" Baggy Trimble was protesting; but Racke cut him short.

"Ask Tom Merry if it's a yarn," he suggested, winking at Gerald Crooke.

Tom Merry flushed, and he clenched his fists hard.

He felt suddenly sick with utter dismay. So the worst had happened—the secret he held of Talbot's was on every tongue. But who had made it known? Who had told the authorities of what had happened the previous night? Only Talbot and he had known—unless—

There was Crooke—Talbot's cousin, and his bitterest enemy at St. Jim's.

Gerald Crooke's face paled, and his eyes fell before Tom Merry's steady, scornful gaze.

"This is your doing, Crooke!" hissed Tom, obviously only holding himself in by an effort.

"My doing?" echoed Crooke, trying to speak coolly. "I like that! Someone seems to have sent the Head an anonymous note, or something. But, of course, I know nothing about it!"

Tom took a stride forward and gripped Crooke's shoulder.

"You lying cad!" he breathed. "It was you! I know it was you!"

"Tom—" began Manners uneasily.

"Shut up, Manners!" snapped Tom, his voice trembling. "I tell you this is more of that cad's work. He hates Talbot like poison, the reptile. He's out to ruin him, and I—"

"Let go, you rotter!" panted Crooke, his face crimson. "I tell you—"

"Oh, get outside!" said Tom savagely.

He sent Crooke spinning away from him. Then he strode on, his face pale and anxious. Lowther and Manners hurried after him.

"Hold on, Tom!" said Lowther. "What on earth does it all mean, old man? You know something, or Racke wouldn't have mentioned you like that!"

"What's happened exactly, you fellows?" answered Tom dully. "Crooke says someone sent the Head an anonymous note—"

"That's the yarn, and from all accounts it's true," said Manners. "The note claims that Talbot let that man free, and also broke into the Head's study himself last night. Anyway, I saw Railton taking Talbot along to the punishment-room myself, so it looks as though the beaks believe it."

"Crooke sent that note," burst out Tom. "Only he could have done—could have known—"

"Tom!" gasped Lowther. "What do you mean? You know something! Look here," he added grimly, "there's truth in it, Tom. The rest is rot, I believe; but I suspected, and I believe Blake suspects, too, that Talbot did help that fellow to escape the other night."

"Come along to the study," said Tom, looking round sharply. "We can talk there."

He waited until they were in Study No. 10, with the door closed. Then he faced his chums.

"I've never kept any secrets from you chaps yet," he said quietly, "and I don't believe Talbot expects me to keep any from you. He knows you fellows can be trusted as well as I do. So you suspected Talbot had released that man, Lowther?"

"Yes, I did. I hardly dared mention it to you, though. Still, both Manners and I have been worried—we knew you'd been worried about Talbot lately."

"I have," admitted Tom grimly. "And I've had good reason to be. The fact is, Talbot did help that rascal to escape from the woodshed. And it was the same man Talbot was talking to by the old tower that night."

"Oh!" gasped Lowther. "But—but about what happened last night, Tom. Surely that isn't true?"

"Yes, it is," said Tom Merry abruptly. "Talbot broke open the Head's safe and desk. I saw him at work there at midnight myself."

"Wha-a-at?"

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CHAPTER 2. The Warning!

LOWTHER and Manners stared at their leader almost incredulously.

"It—it's true," stuttered Lowther. "And you actually saw him?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Well, my hat!"

Tom's chums were quite overcome. Whatever they had believed about Talbot having aided the crook to escape, they certainly had not believed the rest of the charge against him. True, they were well aware—as was every fellow at St. Jim's—that Reginald Talbot had led a life of crime before coming to the school; that he had been a skilful crook and cracksman himself. But that was long ago—Talbot had done with the past. He was now a St. Jim's fellow, honoured and respected by all, and his integrity was unquestioned.

Talbot was one of the most popular fellows in the Lower School. He was a keen, all-round sportsman, and a prominent member of the Shell. Talbot of St. Jim's was a far different fellow from the "Toff" of old, the boy cracksman from the slums.

"But this absolutely beats the band!" gasped Manners. "We suspected him in regard to that fellow getting away, and we've heard queer rumours to-day. But—well, if you saw him, Tom—"

"I did."

"And you've kept it to yourself?"

Tom nodded.

"I saw Talbot leave the dormitory last night, and I came down after him. I found him breaking open the Head's desk. It was a shock for me," said Tom quietly; "but a bigger shock for Talbot when he saw me. We talked the thing over, and I went back to bed, telling him that if anything was missing the next morning I should report him; not otherwise."

"Phew!"

"Nothing was missing," said Tom. "And the authorities believed it was the work of the man who burgled the

place the first time. But I know differently, of course."

"Yet you kept silent—" began Lowther, aghast.

"I kept silent because Talbot is my pal, and I believe in him," said Tom, speaking steadily. "Talbot gave me his word that, though things looked black against him, his intentions, strange as his actions were, were honourable. I accepted his word."

"Well, my hat! But that note—surely, Tom—"

"That note was sent to the Head by Crooke," said Tom. "I feel sure of it. The cad overheard me charging Talbot with letting that man go—overheard it quite by accident. Since then he's been spying on Talbot. After I'd gone to bed last night someone locked Talbot in the Head's study—obviously believing that he'd settled Talbot then."

"Phew! That sounds like Crooke, anyway!" breathed Monty Lowther.

"I'm sure it was Crooke. He must have followed me down, or else he had followed Talbot. Anyway, he waited until I'd gone, and then he must have locked the door on Talbot. But," added Tom, with a grim laugh, "he'd forgotten that a locked door was no obstacle to a fellow like Talbot. Talbot soon picked the lock, and then he went to bed. In the morning he charged me with having played the traitor, and locked him in."

"Oh, my hat!"

"It looked like it, of course, to him," said Tom. "But when Blake told us how he had caught Crooke spying on Talbot it made Talbot think. He realised then that it was Crooke and not me."

"And Crooke sent an anonymous letter to the Head?" breathed Manners. "Oh, the sneaking cad!"

"We've no proof of that!" said Tom curtly. "But—well, it looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Crooke's his bitter enemy—he always was against him!" exclaimed Tom Merry, setting his lips. "He thinks Talbot's turned his uncle, Colonel Lyndon, against him. Crooke would do anything to get Talbot ruined and kicked out by his uncle."

"He's succeeded now, by the look of things!" growled Monty Lowther. "I believe Talbot won't say a word—won't even defend himself."

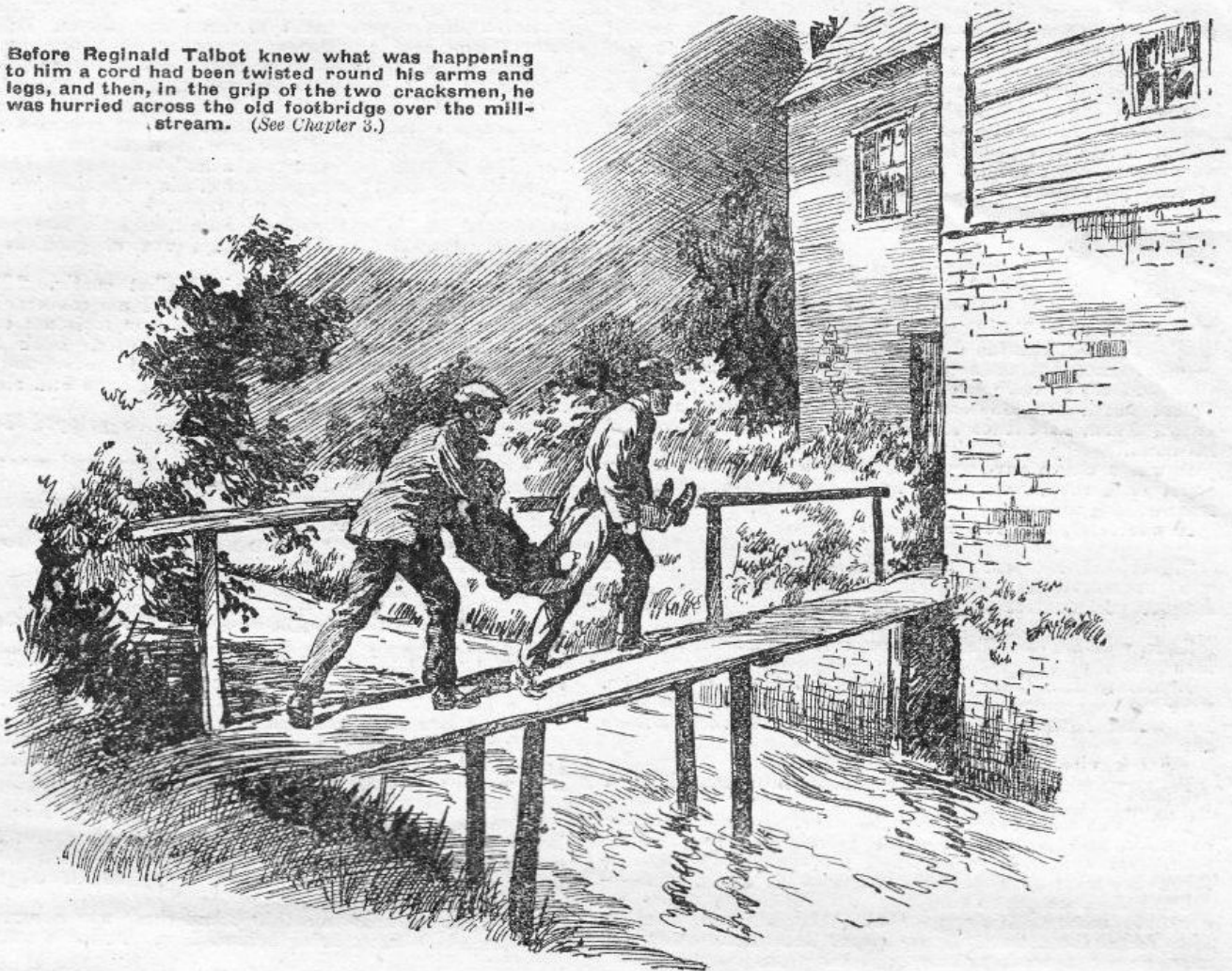
"Looks like the sack for him," assented Manners.

Tom Merry set his teeth.

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come, Boys!

Before Reginald Talbot knew what was happening to him a cord had been twisted round his arms and legs, and then, in the grip of the two cracksmen, he was hurried across the old footbridge over the mill-stream. (See Chapter 3.)



"You fellows keep this to yourselves, of course," he said quietly. "I don't ask you to believe in Talbot—you don't know him quite as I do. But I know you'll respect my confidence. Anyway, I'm going to speak to Talbot now if I can."

"Not allowed to speak to a chap in punishment-room, you know," said Manners.

"I know. I'm risking it," said Tom.

"But what does it all mean?" ejaculated Lowther. "Hold on, Tom. Why should Talbot release that rascal? And if his intentions are honourable why should he—"

"I don't pretend to know that," Tom answered, his face clouding again. "It's all a deep mystery to me. But I believe in old Talbot. He's some good reason for his actions. I'm standing by him in this."

With that Tom left the study abruptly. He had confided in his chums, as he always did, and he knew he could rely upon their silence, whatever they thought privately of the strange business.

In any case, it seemed that silence was useless now. Talbot was already charged with the crimes—if crimes they were.

With a heavy heart Tom Merry made his way to the punishment-room.

The room was at the far end of a passage just off the Shell quarters, and it was strictly out of bounds when occupied by a fellow under sentence of expulsion—as at present.

But Tom was chancing it.

He went cautiously up to the door and knocked.

"Talbot, old man!"

"Hallo! Is that you, Tom Merry? Oh, good!"

"I've a message here for you, Talbot," said Tom, speaking as loud as he dared. "I met that fellow in the lane just now—he gave me a letter for you. I'll shove it under the door."

"You—you mean Jim Crow?" came Talbot's startled answer.

"I don't know the man's name. It was the fellow we caught the other night, Talbot," said Tom grimly. "Here's the message."

He took his letter from his pocket and slid it under the locked door.

"Right; I've got it!" called Talbot. "Thanks, old man. Better go now—if Railton catches you here—"

"That's all right—don't worry about me, Talbot," said Tom, his voice husky. "I say, old man, I'm sorry about this—more sorry than I can say. You—you don't think I sent that note to the Head—"

"What rot!" came Talbot's earnest reply. "Of course not, Tom. It was Crooke—I don't need to make a guess at that."

"I think so, too!" said Tom. "But, look here, Talbot. This can't go on. For goodness' sake speak out to the Head. You know he's a good sort, and will understand and make allowances—if you tell him all. If you don't—"

"I can't do that—yet," said Talbot. "I shall have to take my chance, Tom. But you shall know all when it's possible for me to tell you."

"Talbot, this may mean the sack for you, old man—"

"I know it. But I'm hanging on for a bit, Tom. I've got to. Hold on, Tom, I was almost forgetting. I wanted to speak to you—to give you a warning. I want you to keep an eye on Koumi Rao, Tom."

Tom Merry jumped.

"On whom?" he gasped. "Koumi Rao, of the New House—"

"Yes—yes. He's in danger, Tom—at least, I fear he may be soon. If I'm sent away, or if I'm detained here, will you keep an eye on him? I don't think there's much danger, but one never knows. It may come to that yet. I can't explain all now, but I'll tell you—"

"Quiet."

Tom gave the hurried warning as a step sounded at the end of the passage. It was Mr. Railton, and he caught sight of Tom Merry outside the door of the punishment-room. He strode up angrily.

"Merry," he snapped, "what are you doing there? You are strictly out of bounds at present."

"Y-yes, sir. I—I was just speaking to Talbot, sir—"

"That much is obvious, Merry!" snapped the House-master. "Go at once, and take two hundred lines for this breach of rules. But for the fact that Talbot is a friend of yours I would punish you more severely. Go!"

And Tom Merry went, feeling he had got off lightly in

the circumstances. But he went in a state of amazement. What did Talbot mean—what had he been about to tell him? And what had Koumi Rao, of the New House Fourth, to do with the case? Koumi Rao, the Indian junior, was a chum of Figgins, but not of Talbot's. What possible connection could he have with Talbot and the crooks who had broken into St. Jim's in such mysterious circumstances? Tom Merry was bewildered. But he meant to take the warning to heart for all that. As before, he was content to take his chum's word for it.

CHAPTER 3. Talbot Acts!

REGINALD TALBOT waited, his heart thumping. But Mr. Railton did not open the door. Apparently he had happened to be passing and had heard Tom Merry's voice in the dark passage. Presently Talbot heard the Housemaster's footsteps depart and die away. Then, as silence fell, he looked at the envelope in his hand.

It was a cheap envelope, and his own name was written on it in a rough, scrawling hand. He tore it open and scanned the missive.

It was brief, and ran as follows:

"Meet me by footbridge over mill-stream after dark to-night to report. If you don't turn up we'll have another go ourselves to-night. J. C."

That was all, but Talbot knew what it meant, and his face paled.

Evidently Jim Crow and Bowyer, his burly accomplice, were getting impatient—possibly suspicious of him also. He would have to see them and persuade them not to act.

What was to be done?

Talbot paced the floor of the punishment-room, his brow wrinkled deeply.

There was only one thing to be done. He must get out somehow, and he must see the rascals—try to persuade them to abandon their quest. If he could only convince them that what they sought was not at St. Jim's, then—

Until dusk deepened into darkness Talbot lay pondering over the matter. His supper was brought, and when at last Toby, the School House page, had taken away the tray, he set to work to carry out his plan.

To the ex-boy cracksmen it was easy.

The lucky find of a strong piece of wire that had been used to strengthen a damaged leg of the bedstead was all he needed to pick the door-lock, and he managed this quickly enough.

Very soon the door was open and freedom lay before him.

For some minutes Talbot listened before venturing out of the room. But the House was quiet, and he soon realised that boys and masters had retired for the night.

The time had come to make his risky move.

With ears and eyes open he made for the box-room, softly raised the sash, and clambered through on to the leads outside. Then he closed the window again, and dropped from the roof of the outhouse to the quad below.

Three minutes later he was safe on the far side of the school wall, and he set off at once for the river. He reached the towing-path at last, and for half a mile he walked alongside the glimmering, murmuring river. It was a mild, summer night, and there was light enough still for him to see his way. He turned off the towing-path at last, and took a narrow, barely-defined path that led through the trees lining a backwater of the Rhyl.

The old mill loomed up at last, ghostly and still in the gathering darkness. He stopped by the footbridge spanning the mill-stream.

Almost at once a lurking form emerged from the dark trees facing the old, tumbledown mill. The sullen roar of the water at the sluice-gates drowned the sound of his approach, and Talbot started violently at a touch on his shoulder.

"Only me, Toff," said a soft voice. "You've managed to come then, kid. Good lad!"

"Yes, I've managed it, Jim Crow," said Talbot, recognising the thin, sharp features now. "You gave me a start—"

"It's the noise of this darned weir, Toff," grinned Jim. "And I s'pose my face gave you a start, too; I ain't shaved for three days, kid. Me and Bowyer's livin' a sort of retired life just now," he added, with a grim chuckle. "Though I expect the narks have about given us up by this. You heard anythin' about 'em, Toff?"

"I think they've given up search for you round here," said Talbot quietly. "They imagine you've got clear and are well away by this time. But—but you asked me to meet you here, Jim, and here I am."

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"It's about that diamond, Toff—the Star of the East," muttered Jim Crow, his eyes fixed intently on Talbot's face. "You told me this afternoon you'd had a try for it yourself with the tools Bowyer left at the school."

"Yes, I told you what happened, Jim. I opened the Head's safe and searched it. I also opened the Head's desk and searched that. But there was no precious stone there, Jim Crow. I don't believe it is at the school at all. You've been misinformed, Jim."

"Shucks to that!" snapped Crow, his voice showing deep disappointment. "We know it's there, I tell you. You've overlooked it, Toff; though, I admit, it isn't like you to blunder. The Toff of the old days was as good as any man at the game."

"Never mind that, Jim," said Talbot curtly. "Those days are past and done with so far as I am concerned. I did what you asked me to do. I tell you it is not there, and I don't believe it can be at St. Jim's. Look here, Jim, you're risking a great deal on a mere supposition. The stone isn't there, and you're wasting time and risking imprisonment. Give it up and go away."

The man's lean face went hard, and he gripped Talbot by the shoulder.

"Kid," he said, "we're after that stone, and we mean to get it. It's there I tell you. The gang I belong to never makes a mistake like that. They've agents in India, and it's known for a bloomin' cert that the Star of the East was sent to your headmaster to hand over to this Indian prince, Koumi Rao."

"Then—"

"Hold hard, Toff, and let me finish. I asked you to have a go, and I told you where to find them tools. If you've let us down—double-crossed us—"

"I tell you I tried and I could not find it," said Talbot angrily, his face crimsoning in the dusk.

The grey-eyed man held Talbot's face to the light and looked at him hard and long.

"You were always a straight kid, Toff," he said at last. "I'll believe that. But where are them tools now, and me and Bowyer will have a go to-night."

Talbot caught his breath.

"I've not told you what happened yet," he said in a low voice. "Someone—a fellow who hates me at St. Jim's—saw me at work last night, and he's told the Head. The tools were found in my study, and I'm in disgrace; probably I'll be expelled to-morrow."

Jim Crow growled something, and there was a muttered oath from the dark trees behind him. Talbot started as he heard it.

"Only Bowyer, kid!" said Jim Crow savagely. "He don't trust you as I does, so you'd better mind your eye. So you've lost them blamed tools, darn it!"

"Yes; it was through no fault of mine."

A big form loomed from out of the trees, and Bowyer joined them. His bristly, evil face was savage with disappointment.

"I told you 'ow it would be, Jim," he snarled. "Trustin' to this blamed young fool! I—I'll—"

"You'll leave young Toff alone, Bowyer," said Crow in a curiously soft and low tone. "You'll have me to deal with if you touch him! The Toff's an old pal of mine."

"But them tools—"

"It's a darned nuisance!" Crow growled. "But—where will they be now, Toff?"

"Goodness knows—in the Head's study, I suppose. He said he wouldn't tell the police about them because of me," said Talbot heavily. "But you're not thinking—"

"Then there's nothin' to worry about, Bowyer," grinned Jim Crow, after a pause. "If they're in that room we'll soon find them, and gettin' in will be easy enough; we did it before without tools, my lad. Now, Toff, you're going to show us a short cut to St. Jim's, and you're going to lend a hand, kid. It'll seem like old times again."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

It had come to what he had feared.

He had ransacked the Head's safe and desk in his search for the diamond belonging to Koumi Rao. But he had never intended to hand it to Jim Crow and Bowyer—far from it. His intention had been solely to find it and to place it in a safe place to prevent the men getting it.

"Hold on, Jim Crow!" he said at last, making his mind up on the impulse. "Not so fast. I've no intention of helping you. So you may as well know that now as later."

"What?"

Jim Crow stared blankly at him. Bowyer gave a muttered growl.

"What d'you mean, Toff?" said Jim Crow, his voice suddenly harsh. "Didn't you try last night, you young fool?"

"I did try last night!" said Talbot boldly. "But if I found the stone I should never have handed it over to you. My intention was to put it safe out of your reach."

"Toff—"

"I've told you once, and I'll tell you again now," said Talbot, speaking steadily and clearly, "the old days are

done with me. I've finished for good with crooked work of any kind. I won't be a party to theft—I refuse to see a schoolfellow robbed. Koumi Rao's a friend of mine, and I shall do my utmost to save his property."

It was Jim Crow now who spat out an oath. His grasp closed again like a vice on the boy's arm, making him wince.

"I told you the kid would double-cross us!" hissed Bowyer. "I warned you, Jim, you fool. Even now he may have given us away to the blamed narks."

"If I'd wanted to, do that I should have done it long ago!" gasped Talbot. "Jim Crow knows I wouldn't, and he knows why."

"Toff—you blamed young fool!" hissed Jim Crow savagely. "You don't mean what you said just now, kid—"

"Every word of it!" said Talbot recklessly. "I helped you to escape the other night, Jim Crow, and I'd never give you away to the police."

"But, Toff—"

"Jim," said Talbot pleadingly, "never mind this man.

escape the other night. It was little enough after what I owe you. But—but though I did that, and am willing to do it again, or risk anything to save you from capture, I will not, and cannot, help you in robbing Koumi Rao or anyone else. That's final, Jim!"

Bowyer growled savagely, and made a stride towards the daring junior. But Jim Crow gripped his arm, and sent him staggering back with surprising strength.

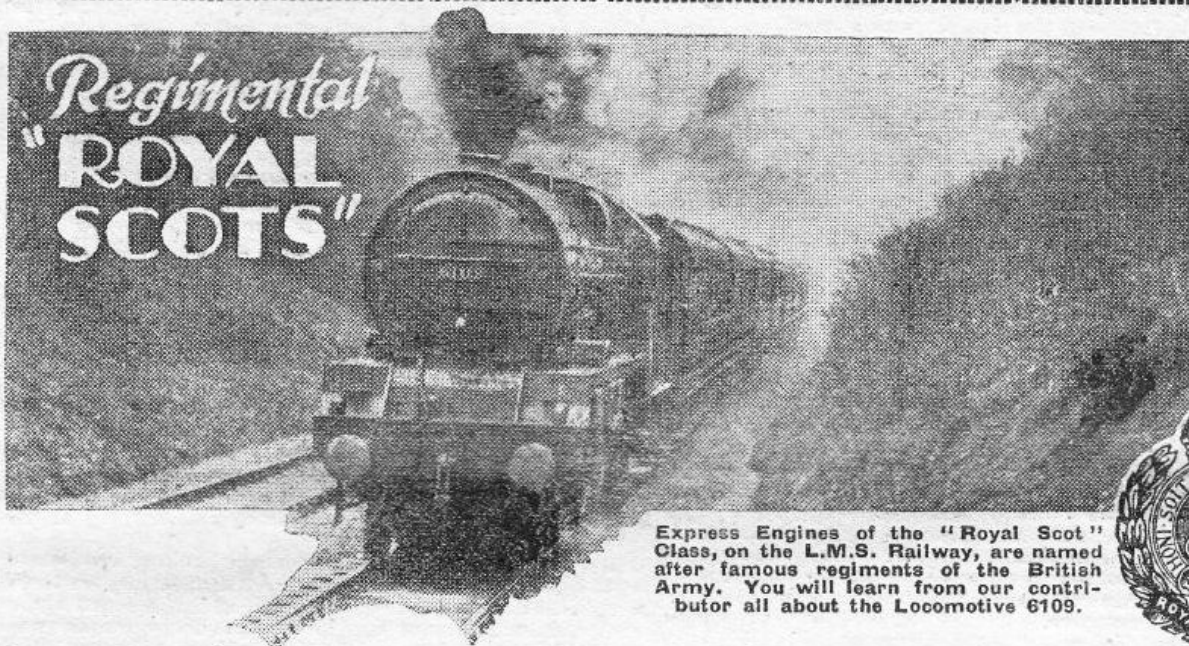
"Hold hard, Bowyer!" he snapped, a dangerous note in his voice. "None of that! The Toff ain't going to be harmed if I can help it. You mind yourself, durn you!"

"But the young—"

"Cut it out!" snapped Jim, who was obviously the master mind. "We'll leave the Toff out of it, then, and so long as he doesn't interfere with our game—"

"I shall certainly do that, Jim!" said Talbot boldly. "I refuse to stand by and see Koumi Rao robbed, I tell you. I shall do my utmost to stop you—short of getting you nabbed."

"You mean that, Toff?" said Jim Crow.



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What a name for an engine! It just fits Locomotive 6109, of the "Royal Scot" class to a T, doesn't it?

Yes, Royal Engineer is about the most apt of all names for an engine, as the Sapper motto is the most apt of mottos.

"Ubique," meaning "Everywhere," might well be written on all engines as well as "Quo fas et gloria ducunt," which is: "Where duty and glory leads."

Far more than anyone is the engineer called upon to take his life in his hands, for he is the pioneer in all campaigns;

the first to throw the bridge over the river, the last to blow it up.

No other regimental unit is so often used for rearguard and vanguard actions. It was in 1683, long before locomotives in any shape or form had even been thought of, that the Sappers first came into existence as a separate body, but it is obvious that wherever there have been armies, there must have been engineers. It is useless to single out any one engagement in which they attained prominence, for they have attained distinction in every war that England has fought.

Like the famous "Royal Engineer"

locomotive, the engineer is a man of all work; in turn, surveyor, mechanic, architect, geologist, builder of bridges, blaster of rocks, digger of mines, expert in everything that conduces to rapidity and safety of transport.

And that is just the ideal for which Locomotive 6109 of the "Royal Scot" class stands. Daily she transports her hundreds of passengers between London and Edinburgh, safely, surely, speedily. Does she not deserve the honourable title of "Royal Engineer" and the enviable motto of "Ubique?"

(Another railway article next week.)

Take my tip, and give this game up right away. It's a useless one, I'm sure. Even if such a valuable stone has been sent to Koumi Rao the Head would never allow him to keep it, nor would he keep it himself. It would be either sent straight back to India, or else it would be sent to a bank. Common sense ought to tell you that."

"You—you mean to let us down, Toff?" snarled Crow.

"I refuse point-blank to help you. More than that, I shall do all in my power to stop your game, Jim," said Talbot doggedly. "I haven't forgotten what you did for me years ago, Jim," he added quietly. "It was to give me the chance to escape the police that you sacrificed your own chances. You got three years hard for it. It was a jolly generous and unselfish act, Jim Crow—not many men would have done it. You've good stuff in you, and I'm the very last fellow who would ever give you away, or see you caught if I could help it."

"Oh, shucks! Chuck that stuff!" said Jim Crow roughly.

"That's all done with, kid—any other member of the gang would have done that for you, Toff, in the old days! I'm not the fellow to ask you to help 'cause of that!"

"I know that!" said Talbot. "That's not you, Jim; you're a pretty tough nut, but you're a true pal, and you've been more than true to me in the past. I only wish I could repay you some way. I gave you your chance to

"Yes, I most certainly do."

"Then I'm afraid we'll have to handle you a bit and put you somewhere out of harm's way," said Jim Crow, in a cold, steely tone. "I'm sorry to have to do it, but we're after that stone, and we mean to have it. Collar the kid, Bowyer—and no games with him, mind!"

"Jim—"

It was all Talbot had the chance to say. The next moment Bowyer and Jim Crow had grasped him—and they held him fast. Before he knew what was happening to him a cord had been twisted round his arms and legs; and then he was hurried across the rickety, shattered old footbridge over the mill-stream. The door of the old, ruined mill was wide open, and the next moment Talbot felt himself laid down on an earthen floor in darkness. Then, without a word, the two men left him, and the door was closed, and he heard something being fastened across it.

He was alone in the old rat-infested mill, bound and a prisoner. But he was not thinking of that as he lay on the damp, mouldy floor. He was thinking of St. Jim's, now at the mercy of the rascals. And especially was he thinking of Koumi Rao. If the men failed in their quest—as he felt certain they would—what would they do next? Would Koumi Rao be safe from them? Talbot doubted it, and his heart sank.

CHAPTER 4.

A Desperate Chance!

TALBOT groaned.

All about him was darkness, deep and impenetrable.

Yet he did not despair—it was not like him to give in without a struggle.

It was still of Koumi Rao that he was thinking. He knew the character of the two cracksmen only too well. Bowyer he had never seen before, but he had already summed him up as a cowardly bully—ruthless and cruel—with no regard for anyone, or anything, save his own skin. Jim Crow was of a far different stamp. He was a man without fear, ruthless in pursuit of his ends. Yet he had more than one redeeming quality. He was loyal to a friend, and he had already shown that he had a soft corner in his queer, twisted nature for Reginald Talbot, his pal and accomplice of former days.

Yet even Jim Crow would never allow him to stand in the way of his objective.

If the men failed to find the stone, then there was danger for Koumi Rao—of that Talbot was assured.

Scarcely had Talbot been lying there a few seconds when he made his mind up and started to work to release himself in deadly earnest.

In an instant he realised with a thrill of hope that the cords that bound him were quite loose—Jim Crow had tied him while Bowyer had held him, and Talbot knew that Jim had purposely dealt with him as gently as he could. Rascal as he was, the man was not the fellow to hurt anyone weaker than himself unnecessarily.

Yet, even so, Talbot was surprised at the ease with which he released himself. Jim Crow was not the man to take chances, either.

The imprisoned junior was soon to discover the reason.

He shook himself free of his bonds at last, and stood up in the darkness, with a deep gasp of relief. Then he took his pocket-torch out and sent a beam of light flashing round him.

It shone on mouldy, damp walls of stone, and then came to rest on the door.

Almost trembling in his anxiety, Talbot fumbled at the door fastenings. Had the rascals fastened it securely on the outside, or had they relied upon his bonds?

He soon knew. The door was fastened on the outside, evidently with a bar of wood across it. In growing dismay, Talbot tugged and pushed to no avail. Then he flung his weight upon it again and again. But though it shook and rattled, it did not give.

"Done!" groaned Talbot. "So that was why Jim didn't trouble to tie me securely. If it was only a lock—"

But it was no lock obviously—even Talbot's skill could avail him nothing in this case.

He gave it up at last, and hurried up the rickety, broken stairs to the next floor of the mill. Here the walls were of wood, rotting, and with jagged holes showing through which came glimmers of starlight.

Moreover, there was a window—or a jagged opening that had obviously held a window.

Talbot approached it and locked out.

Below him was the mill-stream, looking like a long strip of black glass in the darkness. Beyond were the dark, waving trees, and through them he caught glimpses of the river glimmering in the starlight.

Talbot caught his breath.

The mill-stream was not wide, and a dive outwards from that height might take him well out towards the centre, at least. And to a powerful swimmer, as he was, it did not seem an insuperable task.

Dare he risk it?

The danger was great in the darkness, and the look of the black, shining, swirling mill-race was far from inviting. The roar of the falling water by the mill-wheel sounded like thunder in the stillness of the summer night.

But it was the only way of escape. After his defiance of the two crooks he knew they would never allow him to go free again until they had gained their object. He had vowed to them that he would do all in his power to prevent them gaining their ends. He had been rash to do so openly—Talbot realised that now—but he had done so, and they were unlikely to give him his freedom now.

The thought of being a prisoner in that dark, rat-infested mill, brought a shudder to the junior. Moreover, apart from his own hapless position, there was Koumi Rao, the Indian junior. So long as the men were at large, with their object ungained, there was danger for Koumi Rao. Even Jim Crow was likely to have far less consideration for the Indian junior than for the junior he had left in the mill.

Talbot set his teeth.

His mind was made up. He stuffed his cap into his

pocket, and then he climbed up into the aperture, his face set and resolute.

The next moment he was crouching, framed in the opening, his hands clinging to the woodwork of the ruined mill.

One swift look downwards he gave, and then, taking a grip of his nerves he bunched himself together, raised his hands, and sprang outwards and downwards.

Straight and swift as an arrow his athletic form shot downwards, and parted the glassy surface of the millstream with scarcely a splash at a perfect angle.

Then came the fight of his life to Talbot.

The first cool shock of the water as he plunged into it was pleasant and exhilarating. But even as he thrilled to it he felt as if giant hands were gripping and tearing at him as the force of the current made itself felt. The sullen murmuring of the falling water gave place suddenly to a thunderous roaring in his ears that deafened and bemused him.

Then he felt himself being swirled along, and a sudden thrill of fear shot through him.

It seemed to clear his bemused brain, and the next instant he had got a fresh grip of himself and was fighting for his life, swimming as he had never done before.

He was on the surface now, and the starlight gleamed above his head. He glimpsed the wooded bank, black and shadowy, and he set his teeth and began to fight for it with renewed courage and hope.

It was a far more dangerous and difficult task than he had anticipated, but he would do it.

The roaring of the mill-race was nearer now—terribly near it seemed. Yet he realised soon that he was holding his own—more than holding his own. The wooded bank was nearer—he was sure of it, and his heart leaped with hope again.

For what seemed to him an age, though in reality was but a few, brief minutes, Talbot struggled and fought desperately for his life in the black, gleaming flood. His lungs felt near bursting, and his brain was reeling when at last his outstretched hand struck something—slimy wood; the wood of the bank.

His heart thrilled with joy.

He clutched desperately, and his fingers slid off the slimy surface of the baulk. But his next frantic clutch held, and in a moment both hands had a grip, and he hung on desperately, the racing stream tearing and tugging at his legs and body.

For several minutes Talbot hugged the baulk of wood while he got back his breath and strength. Then, setting his teeth for the effort, he began to haul himself up. Again and again he slipped back, but at last his dogged determination was rewarded. He got foothold on the baulk of wood, and then the rest was easy.

Clutching the wooden edge of the bank above, he hauled himself up, and the next moment he was lying on the bank, safe, but exhausted and half conscious.

As in a dream he lay flat, panting, his chest heaving, the roar of the mill-race seeming strangely distant now. But gradually it became clearer as his senses returned.

He staggered to his feet at last, and shook the water from him, with a deep gasp of thankfulness. He had done it. He was free—free to prevent the crooks from carrying out their designs.

Unless he was already too late! At that thought Talbot squeezed some of the water from his drenched clothes, and then set off at a brisk trot for the towing-path. By the time the dark pile of St. Jim's came in sight through the trees, Talbot was warm and steaming.

Still and silent lay the great pile of school buildings under the stars, and in the shadow of the School House Talbot halted, breathless and panting.

What should he do now? His position was difficult in the extreme. To rouse the House would be easy. But somewhere about the building were the two cracksmen, and to raise a sudden outcry would be to risk their capture.

Talbot was determined not to risk that. He would have been thankful enough to see Bowyer captured. But how could he bring himself to do anything that would lead to the capture of Jim Crow—the man who had given his liberty for him? Where would he have been now but for Crow's strange act of sacrifice on that terrible night years ago? Possibly still a hunted criminal, possibly in prison. All he was now he owed to Crow.

Talbot gnawed his lip in doubt and indecision as he gazed up at the looming pile under the stars. Duty and loyalty to his school struggled with gratitude and loyalty to the comrade of his early days.

He moved at last. He would get inside and see how the land lay first, and trust to luck for his actions then. So far all seemed well—no light showed on the school, and no sound reached his straining ears.

He climbed up on to the roof of the outhouse, and gained the box-room window. He had left it open an inch

at the bottom, and soon he was standing, listening intently, in the room itself.

Still no sound came, and silently closing the window, the junior stepped out into the passage, his heart beating fast.

He scarcely felt the discomfort of his drenched clothes. His nerves and senses were keyed up to a high pitch of anxious intensity. Had anything happened yet? Not a sound was heard as yet in the sleeping school. Possibly the crooks were not inside, or possibly they were over in the New House—

The thought of this made Talbot's heart beat faster.

Crow knew Koumi Rao by sight. He also knew he was in the New House. If the men had failed in their quest in the School House, as they might easily have—

What was that?

Talbot's reflections and fears were rudely interrupted.

With an alarmed gasp he crouched back against the wall again, with face averted. It was Mr. Railton, he felt sure, and he knew what discovery would mean for him.

There was to be no escape for Talbot, however.

A light suddenly flashed out, and as the Housemaster rushed up, its beam fell full upon the crouching form of the junior.

Mr. Railton stopped with a startled exclamation. The dancing light steadied upon Talbot, showing him up plainly.

Escape and further concealment were useless then. He raised himself and faced the master.

"Talbot!" panted Mr. Railton. "You, boy?"

Talbot said nothing. With utter despair in his face he stared into Mr. Railton's stern eyes. The Housemaster eyed him in no little agitation. It was only for a moment, however. Then, ordering the junior to remain there, Mr.



As Monty Lowther's foot touched the gunwale of the rocking boat and he strove to balance himself, Koumi Rao gave him a gentle push with his scull. Lowther went backwards with a howl. Splash! "Good-bye, my dear School House friends!" called Koumi Rao cheerily. (See Chapter 7.)

From somewhere downstairs came a sudden cry, followed by faint sounds of a scuffle.

Talbot's heart leaped, and the next moment he was racing down the stairs, heedless of the darkness.

The sounds were louder now. He heard a sudden fall and another cry—a cry in a voice he was sure he recognised.

It was Mr. Railton's voice.

Had he blundered into Bowyer and Crow, and were they struggling with him?

It certainly seemed so. The question of what he should do was taken out of Talbot's hands now. There was only one thing for him to do. The Housemaster was in danger, fighting against odds, and it was impossible for him to remain inactive.

He fairly flew down the stairs, and tore along the dark passage, realising as he went that the sounds came from the direction of the headmaster's study.

Again he heard Mr. Railton shout—a shout that was abruptly stifled. Then the sounds of struggling suddenly ceased, and were followed by racing feet coming towards him.

The men were upon Talbot before he realised it. He made to jump aside and let them pass, but even as he did so a dim form loomed before him, and then a fist shot out.

It was obviously a wild shot, but it found its mark, for all that. A heavy fist took Talbot under the chin, and he went to the floor in a heap.

In a moment the two dark forms had flashed past him, and had vanished in the darkness.

Talbot staggered to his feet, hugging his aching jaw. He leaned back against the panelled wall of the passage, his senses reeling for a moment or two, and then he realised that someone else was approaching at a run along the passage.

Railton dashed on again. He halted at the far end of the passage. A landing window was wide-open, and the Housemaster did not need to go farther.

He leaned out of the window and stared out into the quad.

No sound came to him, and not a thing moved in the deserted quadrangle. He withdrew his head at last. The intruders had gone—to follow them now would be useless.

He closed the window quietly, fastened it, and returned to Talbot.

The junior was still leaning against the panelling, his face white and dazed.

"Talbot," exclaimed the Housemaster, his voice terribly stern, "what does this mean? You were left locked in the punishment-room this evening. How come you to be here, in such circumstances? Why, you appear to be drenched through, boy?"

Talbot licked his dry lips, but did not answer.

"Come with me, Talbot!" rapped out the Housemaster, after a brief pause. "I will speak to you presently."

He hurried Talbot along to his own study. There he crossed at once to the telephone and rang up the police at Wayland, and spoke for a minute or two. This done, he turned to the shivering junior.

"I will not ask you if you were with those scoundrels, Talbot," he said icily. "After what has already taken place I think that is a foregone conclusion. You will accompany me now to the punishment-room. You had better rub yourself down, don your pyjamas without delay, and get into bed. I will take your wet clothes away with me. I will not trouble to lock you in this time, Talbot. But I warn you not to attempt to escape again. Come!"

And Talbot went, his lips trembling, his heart heavy as

lead within him. Obviously, Mr. Railton believed he was in league with Crow and Bowyer—had let them into the House, in fact. And he realised that to deny it, or attempt to deny it then, would be useless. In any case, he was too dismayed and hopeless to try. Ten minutes later he was in bed.

But sleep did not come to him that night. And when rising-bell rang out the next morning he climbed out of bed heavy-eyed and weary, and wondering dully what that day had in store for him.

CHAPTER 5. Expelled!

ST. JIM'S was in a buzz the next morning. How the news had got out nobody seemed to know, but Trimble was in possession of it before breakfast. Baggy Trimble, the Paul Pry of St. Jim's, had his own peculiar ways and means of gaining information. At all events, the news soon was out, and it caused a tremendous sensation.

Tom Merry and his chums heard it, with sinking hearts. Once again St. Jim's had been broken into. Mr. Railton just going to bed after working late on exam papers, had blundered right into the arms of the two cracksmen, and a brief, exciting fight had followed. Even this morning, besides showing signs of a sleepless night, the Housemaster's face bore evidence of the desperate struggle.

The St. Jim's fellows were thrilled. But they were more than thrilled regarding the news about Reginald Talbot.

Talbot had broken out of the punishment-room, and also had broken bounds. More than that, he had been caught by Mr. Railton in the company of the crooks.

That was the story going round the school that morning. Trimble had added to it a little from his own fertile imagination, of course. But there was no doubting the facts.

The Terrible Three and Blake & Co. were discussing the news when Trimble rushed up to them with a fresh bit of information.

"I say, you fellows," he gasped excitedly, "what do you think? I've—"

"I think you're a nosy little sweep and a babbling gossip-monger!" said Lowther. "I also think you ought to be kicked—"

"He, he, he!" sniggered Trimble. "I say, it's quite true about Talbot, you fellows. He must have broken out, because old Taggy's just fixing a giddy bolt on the outside of the punishment-room door. He, he!"

And Trimble sniggered again. It was strange what a lot of enjoyment Baggy Trimble seemed to derive from the troubles of others.

"Fixing a bolt on the door!" exclaimed Blake. "Oh, my hat!"

"Talbot's been before the Head," giggled Trimble. "I saw Railton yanking him off just before breakfast. It's the sack, of course. I say, didn't I always tell you fellows that Talbot hadn't really reformed? It was just as I said—spoof. He was just lying low waiting his— Yarroooooo! Whoooooop!"

Trimble hadn't intended to finish his remarks like that. He merely did it because Tom Merry and Blake both landed out with their boots at the same moment.

They both got home on Baggy's tight trousers, and Baggy roared and departed in great haste. He fairly flew.

"Well, that's queer," said Tom Merry, some of the gloom lifting from his face. "If they've taken the trouble to have a bolt fitted on the door, then it doesn't mean the sack—at least, Talbot won't be sent home to-day."

"Hardly looks like it," agreed Blake. "It's all a rotten business altogether. Blessed if I can understand it, or Talbot. The fellow must be absolutely potty to carry on like this."

"Rotten!"
"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head dismally. "I am vewy sowwy for old Talbot. I can hardly believe it possible—in fact, I don't. Bai Jove! Shall I go and have a talk to the Head about him? A few words in season now might do Talbot a great deal of good."

"I should," said Lowther. "Only put plenty of stuffing in your bags first, old man!"

"I could explain to the Head what a weally decent fellow we all thought Talbot was," said Gussy thoughtfully. "Our support might just turn the scales in Talbot's favah, you know."

"Fathead!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Ass!" snorted Jack Blake. "Even a fellow who can wag his jaws like you can't alter the facts."

"Yaas, but—"

"You'll keep out of it, old son," said Blake. "Talbot's

got himself into a fine old hole, by all accounts. I'm blessed if I can make things out at all. But it's too jolly serious for us to go chipping in. It would only make the Head angrier."

"Yes; don't play the fool, Gussy," said Tom Merry glumly.

"Vewy well," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head again. "On weselection, I think I'd bettah not interfere."

"Much better," agreed Blake. "If you ask me, that rotter Crooke's got something to do with this."

"He gave Talbot away in the first place," said Tom Merry, setting his lips. "Look here, I'm going along to have a jaw with Talbot. You fellows keep cave."

"Tom—"

"You awful ass—"

But Tom Merry did not heed. He hurried away, and, after a sharp glance about him, entered the passage leading to the punishment-room. In a moment or so he was at the door.

"Talbot, old man!"

There was a movement within the room, and footsteps crossed to the door.

"Is the door unlocked, Talbot?" whispered Tom Merry.

"Yes," came Talbot's voice, in startled surprise. "They seem to think it's useless locking it again," he said bitterly.

"But, Tom, do go away, old fellow. No good you risking anything for me now. I'm done!"

"I'm coming in," said Tom Merry.

"It's bolted on the outside."

"I know. I'll soon have that right."

Tom Merry had already seen the bolt on the door, and he soon slid it back. Then he opened the door and slipped inside, closing the door softly after him.

Talbot stood facing him, white-faced and grim.

"I had to come, Talbot," said Tom quickly. "What's happened? You've seen the Head this morning?"

"Yes,"

"Well?"

"The worst," said Talbot dully. "I'm sacked, Tom! I really could scarcely expect anything else, could I? The Head was just enough. He demanded an explanation; he gave me every chance to explain my conduct. But I refused to say a word. I condemned myself by my own silence. In any case, the charges were true enough—at all events, though I'm not in league with these men, I did do what I'm charged with doing. And, of course, that meant the sack."

Tom's features showed his utter dismay.

"Talbot," he panted, gripping his chum by the shoulders, "you must speak! You've got to speak, and save yourself, before it is too late!"

"I can't and I won't, Tom!"

"But do listen, old fellow—"

"I know how you look at things, Tom," said Talbot, his handsome face set and dogged. "But I can't do it. All I have, all I am now, I owe to Jim Crow. He was a loyal pal to me once. In the old days he was good to me, too. He defended me against some of the brutal ruffians I had to deal with. He's a strange man, Tom—hard as flint in some ways, but gentle as a woman in others. He was good to me. He gave his liberty so that I should go free. He served three years of toil and misery in prison for my sake. I can't do anything that will lead to his capture. I can't give him up to justice."

"But, Talbot, the Head will understand—"

"He won't—he couldn't. The man is a rascally criminal to him. He would do what he considers his duty—have him hounded down and arrested. Once they knew his name, and had a description of him—"

"I don't see it, Talbot—"

"It's no good talking, Tom," interrupted Talbot, almost impatiently. "I've thought it well out. I refuse to explain the facts to the Head while Jim Crow is in the vicinity. I'm hopeful still that the men will give up their quest and go away. I can tell the Head then—"

"It will be too late—"

"I must risk that."

"But what quest is it—what are they after, Talbot?" asked Tom wonderingly. "All you're saying to me now I scarcely understand. You've told me nothing yet. I just trusted to your word that what you have done and are doing is from honourable motives. I believed you, and still believe in you. But what does it mean? You speak of that man Crow saving you—"

"I'd forgotten you did not know," said Talbot dully. "I meant to tell you the first chance I got, Tom. You know what I used to be—you know my past. I was a cracksmen in the old days—a member of the gang that Jim Crow belonged to. Well, one night," said Talbot, with a shudder, "we were trapped by the police, he and I, with only the hope of one of us escaping. Crow could have got away easily; instead, he chose to let me go—he made me go."

"You'll keep out of it, old son," said Blake. "Talbot's

(Continued on page 12.)

THIS WAY FOR FRANCE!

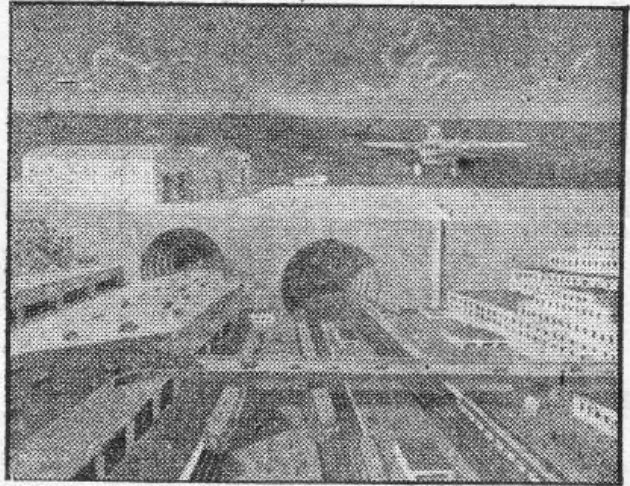
Another great dream of the future is **THE CHANNEL TUNNEL**.

Some day this will be built, and England and the Continent will be linked up. What a dream!

AND YOU CAN SEE WHAT THIS TUNNEL WILL BE LIKE by getting next week's **GEM** in which will be another **TOPPING COLOURED PICTURE CARD** depicting this wonder of To-morrow!



MARVELS of the FUTURE!



No. 11.—The Channel Tunnel.

FANCY jumping on a motor-bus in your own home town and telling the conductor calmly to give you a ticket to France! If you did it to-day the conductor would either look at you very queerly or he would ask you not to be funny. But it's coming, as sure as can be, at no far distant date.

The plans are all cut and dried—there are several different schemes for the Government to select from—and the machinery for boring great tunnels from the chalk cliffs of Dover underneath the bed of the English Channel and into France are in readiness. When the word "Go!" is given, the Channel Tunnel will start to be a real and solid fact.

No longer shall we be an isolated country. But we are not now, really, because enemy aeroplanes, if they wanted to, could buzz over the sea from the Continent in a very few minutes—if our own defensive aircraft were not looking. Besides, the Tunnel could be blocked at any instant if an invading army tried to swarm through it. So the old objections that for many years have weighed against this wonderful project no longer hold water.

The idea is to build parallel tunnels, 150 feet below the chalk bed of the Channel, to line them with cast-iron walls, and to have one tunnel for railway use and another for motor traffic. Pedestrians? Well, no one is likely to want to walk about 26 miles, so they haven't been catered for!

It really is a mighty undertaking, and the thought that has for years gone to the planning of tunnelling schemes and the perfecting of machinery for digging out the chalk and soil can only be regarded as colossal. From the first scheme of a tremendous bridge, with 400 stone pillars to hold it up, and a project to span the Channel by means of a

continuous row of floating pontoons anchored together by great chains, we have now got to the present collection of schemes, any one of which the Government might choose.

Next week's article deals with "THE AEROPLANE CAR!" another dream of the future, which is the subject of the **TWELFTH** Free Gift Picture Card.

As for the actual boring of the tunnel, this would be done by mechanical navvies; aided, of course, by real human navvies and engineers. The machines that are to get rid of the intervening soil and chalk are amazing things. They will cut out tunnels about nineteen feet in diameter like a mole burrowing through loose soil, at the rate of $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet every hour for six days a week, the whole work of tunnelling, lining the tunnels, laying rails and the motor roadway, and so on, taking about four years!

There will be three shifts of men each day, the change-over taking place on the spot, so that work would not cease for an instant, except for that one necessary day of rest each week for both men and machinery.

From centre to centre the giant tunnels will be about 36 feet apart, and here and there they will be joined by cross-galleries. The electrically-operated mechanical diggers will "eat" the soil as they peel it away, the material passing back through each of the great machines—there will be over 100 of them at work when operations are going full blast—and smashed to powder at once.

The powdered material will be passed into great tanks and there churned up with water until it is just mud, this then being pumped back to the tunnel shaft and up and into the sea. As the tunnel lengthens, the men with the wall-plates will get on with their job, the lining being fixed in place as the soil-eating machines forge steadily ahead.

Iron plates in hundreds of thousands of tons will be needed for the circular walls, many thousands of tons of cement, and something like 72 miles of railway track. The cost will be round about £30,000,000, and when the Channel Tunnel is opened, one of the most astonishing engineering achievements will be brought to a thrilling and sensational climax.

If ever it comes to blocking the tunnel, in a time of grave national emergency, this could be done by wrecking an old locomotive mid-way along the rails, and by piling up an old bus or two, in the respective tunnels, with steel rails and other debris to complete the blockage.

Another scheme provides for a "dip" in the centre which could be filled with sea-water at the mere pressing of a button, and emptied as easily and swiftly in the same way, when the threat of invasion has passed.

"Talbot's Enemy!"

(Continued from page 10.)

He remained and faced capture. He gave himself up so that I should escape. Now do you understand?"

Tom nodded silently. He understood the reason for Talbot's strange behaviour in releasing Crow, at all events.

"I understand that. I suspected, of course, that you owed the man a debt of some kind," he said quietly. "I can't blame you in such circumstances. The fellow can't be such a rascal, Talbot."

"He's better than a good many who are outwardly respectable," said Talbot, with some bitterness. "Anyway, I escaped, and Jim Crow served a sentence of three years—for my sake. I had never seen him since until the other night, when we caught him in the school at midnight. You can guess how I felt when I recognised him. I had always longed to meet him again—I had always kept the hope that some day I should repay the debt."

"I understand, Talbot," said Tom Merry gently. "I don't blame you—I should have done the same myself. But—but what is the mystery behind it all? What are those men after, Talbot? And what connection can Koumi Rao have with them?"

"I can easily explain that," said Talbot grimly. "They are after a precious stone—a diamond worth untold gold, I believe. It belongs to Koumi Rao, and was sent to him recently by his uncle. Koumi Rao, as you know, is a prince, and his uncle's a sort of king in India—a wealthy old joker who's always sending him little trinkets, like that—though the beaks have written more than once and asked him not to do so. Anyway, an International gang of crooks have got wind of it, and they've sent Crow and his accomplice after the diamond."

"Phew!" breathed Tom. "I'm beginning to grasp it all now. I happened to overhear Railton talking to Linton about Koumi Rao and a precious stone or something the other morning. And—and it's actually here at St. Jim's?"

"I don't think so myself," said Talbot. "I can't imagine the Head keeping such a thing at the school. But now you know what I was after when I broke into the Head's safe and desk. I was determined those men should not get it—should not rob a friend and schoolfellow of mine. My object was to get hold of it, and to put it in a safe place—somewhere where they would never find it. I knew they would try again almost at once—I knew them too well, and I was taking no chances."

Tom Merry clasped his chum's hand.

"I'm jolly glad I believed in you now, Talbot, old man!" he said quietly. "It was a struggle—after what I had seen I could not help my suspicions and doubts. But I took your word, and I'm thankful I did. But you were mad to act as you did. You should have gone to the Head or to Railton—"

"Never," said Talbot. "It was the only way—though I admit it was mad—or seemed mad."

"But last night?" asked Tom. "You went out—"

"I went to meet Jim Crow—he asked me in that note to do so. I went, and tried to persuade him to throw up the game. He refused. Then I unwisely showed my hand—told them I would stop their game somehow. They did what I might have expected—they captured me—tied me up and left me a prisoner in the old mill in that backwater. Then they started off to have another attempt."

"And you—"

"I was afraid of harm coming to Koumi Rao, for one thing," said Talbot simply. "I dived through that broken window in the mill wall and got away that way."

"You—you swam across the mill stream?" stuttered Tom, aghast.

"Yes; luckily I managed it all right, though it was a stiff job."

"I should jolly well think so," said Tom. "My hat! It's a risky thing to do at the best of times. And then—"

"I came back to St. Jim's and ran right into Railton," said Talbot. "Just my luck! I heard him cry out, and rushed up just as the men got away. Of course he imagined I was with them—I can scarcely blame him for thinking so, either."

He finished, and for some moments there was silence. The sheer hopelessness of Talbot's position was clear to Tom Merry now, and he groaned.

"Talbot," he said thickly, "you're not going to be expelled. You've simply got to go to the Head and explain all. I won't see you expelled like this."

"I haven't gone yet," said Talbot steadily. "You've no

need to worry about me, Tom. And you won't give me away—I know that. I've got to take my chance."

"But if you're expelled, why are you being kept here?"

"That's one bit of luck," said Talbot, with a mirthless laugh. "My uncle, Colonel Lyndon, is away, and the Head can't get into touch with him. The house is closed, and the Head has nowhere to send me. He means to keep me in here a prisoner until he can get into touch with my uncle. That may mean days. A lot may happen in that time."

"Oh!"

Tom breathed in relief. There was some comfort in that, at all events.

"And now you must go, Tom," said Talbot, in sudden alarm. "If you're caught here this time it may mean a flogging for you, old man. Go—at once! I'll see you again, perhaps—at least, I won't leave St. Jim's without seeing you, whatever happens."

Tom nodded, his eyes misty. He realised that to be caught there would do Talbot no good, and would certainly be serious for him. He grasped his chum's hand, and then he slipped out. A glance round showed there was nobody about. But his heart was heavier than ever now. He knew now what the mystery was, but he saw no way out for Talbot—unless the expelled junior gave in and told all. And Tom Merry knew Talbot would never do that.

CHAPTER 6.

Up the River!

"YOU fellows got anything on?"

Jack Blake asked the question after dinner that day as he looked into Study No. 10 with Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy. It was a half-day holiday, and the four Fourth-Formers were in boating flannels and evidently bound for the river.

The Terrible Three were all in the study, Manners fixing a roll of films in his Kodak, and Tom and Lowther lounging in the couch and chair respectively. Lowther was whistling drearly, and Tom Merry himself was looking dismal and worried. The Terrible Three looked none too happy on that summer's afternoon.

Blake & Co. looked cheery enough, however.

"Nothing, old tops!" said Lowther, ceasing to whistle. "We're just trying to persuade Tommy to put his cap on and come out for a run, but he's got the pip—wants to stick indoors and mope."

"Bai Jove! That is not like you, Tom Mewwy!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head seriously. "You had better see the matwon, and have a dose of physic. Yaas, wathah!"

"Ass!" said Tom, with a short laugh. "I'm not feeling up to trotting about—this affair of Talbot's, I suppose! You fellows going up-river?"

"Just that! We thought you chaps would like to come!" grinned Blake. "A ripping picnic up-river, you know."

"Monty and Manners can go," said Tom. "I'll stay in, I think."

"Rats! You come along as well, Thomas!" said Blake. "Your staying in, groaning and worrying, won't help old Talbot at all."

"I know; but—"

"We'll come, anyway," said Lowther. "Especially if you've got a well-filled picnic-basket. Count on us!"

"Yes, rather," grinned Manners. "We're on!"

"Ahem!" Blake coughed and exchanged a dismal look with his chums. "Ahem! The fact is, you fellows," he explained, "we're rather tight just now. Gussy's pater's let us down badly. Instead of the fiver we expected he's sent Gussy a lecture on extravagance."

"And nothing else," grinned Digby. "As if old Gussy was extravagant! Perish the thought! Why, he only buys two new silk hats a week, and a new necktie lasts him at least two days—and I've known him wear a pair of spats three times before throwing 'em away."

"Weally, Dig—"

"And we spend the rest of his money for him," said Blake. "However, the point is that we're rather stony at the moment."

"But who's standing the grub for the picnic, then?" asked Manners, staring.

"That's why we're asking you," explained Blake blandly. "We're inviting you in the hope that you'll supply the grub. See?"

"Well, my hat?"

"Weally, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, "you have put that wathah indelicately, you know! If you'd allowed me to explain the posish—"

"Rats! Well, is it a go, you chaps?" asked Blake anxiously. "You fellows happen to be in funds—"

"I've got fourpence!" said Manners dismally.

"And I've got one-and-twopence," said Lowther. "If that's any good—"

"I've got a few bob!" laughed Tom Merry. "In the sad circus, I'll come, I think. We can have tea at the lock-keeper's cottage—I think my bit will run to that."

"Good man!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy. "It will cheeah you up a little, Tom Mewwy. I am vewy sowwy indeed about old Talbot, but stayin' indoors and wowwyin' won't help mattahs. Wathah not!"

Tom Merry saw that well enough, and he was only too glad to get out of doors. In a few moments the chums had donned caps and blazers, and were leaving the School House en route for the river.

In the quad they came across Baggy Trimble mouching disconsolately by the gates. He promptly tacked himself on to the party.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Buzz off, Trimble!"

"Roll away, old barrel!"

"Look here, you fellows," said Trimble, trotting alongside, "I think I'll join you if you're going up-river!"

"Think again!" suggested Lowther.

"Now, don't be mean!" urged Trimble. "I say," he added, with some excitement, "lemme come with you, and I'll put you on to a good thing. Fact!"

"Rats!"

"I mean it!" said Trimble, refusing to be shaken off. "Look here, that beast Figgins and his pals have just gone up-river. And they've got a whacking bag of grub with them."

"Figgy!" said Blake, stopping. "That's interesting, anyway."

"Oh, come on!" said Tom Merry. "Blow Figgy!"

"Oh, really, Merry! I say, it's a fact. You fellows lemme come and I'll tell you where they're going to stop. I offered to help Figgy carry the cricket bag, but the beast kicked me!"

"Good! How many times did he kick you?" asked Lowther.

"Only once—before I got out of the way."

"He ought to have kicked you at least a dozen times!" said Lowther.

"Yah! I say, fancy the cads taking that beastly nigger, Koumi Rao, and refusing to take me—a decent English chap!" snorted Trimble. "An insult—"

"Better let Koumi Rao hear you call him a nigger!" grinned Lowther. "There'd be a funeral in the Trimble family."

"Oh, come on!" said Herries. "Kick that fat ass and come on!"

"Hold on!" said Lowther. "Trimble wanted to put us on to a good thing, so we ought to return the compliment. Like to be put on a good thing, Baggy?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, rather! If you mean— Here— Yow!"

Bump!

"Yoooooop!"

"Now you're on a good thing," said Lowther, as he sat Baggy down in the gravel drive. "Gravel's a good thing—for

(Continued on next page.)



for Worcester sauce and other condiments. At present there is a fresh attempt to grow the soya bean, which is an Eastern vegetable, in Great Britain. From this amazing bean can be made substitutes for milk, flour, margarine, cheese, and coffee, cakes for cattle, custard powders and infants' food, and salad oil. Also it can be used commercially for varnish, paint, lubrications, celluloid, rubber substitute, printing inks, and glycerine for high explosives. It is believed by some authorities that if we can grow the soya bean in quantity in Great Britain we could, in the event of a war, be absolutely independent of imported foods from other nations.

Q. What is a basinet?

A. This was the curious question set for senior boys at the School for the Sons of Drapers and Tailors' Cutters which a young reader chum, Reginald Fishwick, attends. Reginald himself stated in answer that this was a wicker cradle or a sort of perambulator for a baby, and was disagreeably surprised when he was told that he was wrong. What you were thinking of, Reginald, was a bassinet—two s's, please note. A basinet is a light steel headpiece of the kind used by knights in ye days of olde.

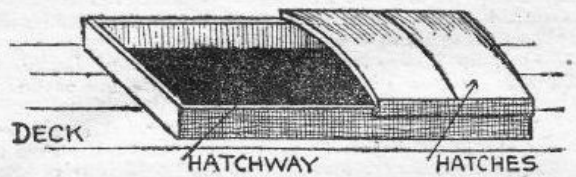
Q. What is Big Ben?

A. The question has been sent in by a Warwickshire reader who signs himself "Jarge." This lad and a friend called Tammas have been having a slight argument, and it is all about Big Ben. Jarge

says that Big Ben is the clock on the tower of the Houses of Parliament in London, and Tammas says it is the name of the tower itself. They want me to settle the question for them, and have arranged that the loser shall send me a full pound of Warwickshire apples. Boys, you are both wrong! Big Ben is the name of the great bell that strikes the passing hours. The first bell cast was named after Sir Benjamin Hall, who was Chief Commissioner for Works in London in the middle of the last century. It was found to be cracked, and the second bell cast was named St. Stephen, which is thus the correct name for what people now call Big Ben. So, Jarge, I suppose both you and Tammas will each send me "a full pound" of apples now? If you do, let 'em be hard, green ones, as I have a score to pay off against that cheeky young imp, the office boy!

Q. What are hatches?

A. In large ships, Tommy Corkran, an opening in a deck, down which people or cargo may go—a hatchway, as it is called—has a cover in several pieces called hatches, and which are fastened on by beams or rods, known as battens. So sailors, who are going to cover the hatchways, will use the term "batten down."



This is called the hatchway, through which the sailor goes to get to his quarters below deck.

Q. What is a Dandie Dinmont?

A. A breed of dog (Teddie Scott, of Sunderland). The name arose because your namesake, Sir Walter Scott, the famous writer, showed these dogs as the pets of a character, Dandie Dinmont, in one of his books. Glad to hear that this year you have really had the sun in Sunderland!

Q. What is soy?

A. If ever you go into a Chinese or Japanese restaurant in London (Eric G., of Brixton), you will probably see on each table a small bottle or bowl containing a brown sauce. This sauce is called soy, and it is made from one of the most useful vegetables in the world, the soya bean. Soy is salt of taste and is the foundation

Q. Is it unlucky to spill salt at table?

A. So the old superstition has it, "Old Reader." All sorts of beliefs have come down through the ages from many nations of the world about salt. The idea of throwing salt over the left shoulder after spilling it at the table is for the purpose of counteracting the bad luck. Exactly how this action does it is not quite clear, but it may be because another old superstition has it that the spirits of evil are always behind our left shoulder and the spirits of good at our right hand. Thus, when salt is thrown over the left shoulder, it would presumably go smack into the eyes of the evil ones and, for a while, prevent them from working harm.

(More answers to queries next week.)

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Basinet—the steel headpiece that was worn by the soldiers and knights of bygone days.

drives and paths, you know. Hope you're satisfied, old fat man! Sit tight on the good thing now you're on it!"

"Yow! Beasts!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Leaving Baggy seated on the gravel, roaring, Lowther and his chums walked on towards the river. They soon reached the boathouse, and, getting out a four-sculled skiff, they started off upstream.

It was a glorious summer afternoon. Under the hot sun the juniors perspired at the sculls as the skiff shot past wooded banks and smiling meadows. There were plenty of school boats out, but few fellows were troubling to pull far upstream that afternoon. Most of them had been pulled into the banks, and their owners were lounging on the warm grass in the shade of trees to idle the afternoon away.

But Tom Merry & Co. were energetic youths, and they pulled on steadily. None the less, they were not fated to reach the lock-keeper's cottage that afternoon.

Blake, who happened to be at the rudder-lines, suddenly gave the order to easy-all.

"What's wrong?" demanded Tom Merry, resting on his sculls.

"Got a fly in your optic?" asked Lowther sarcastically, mopping his perspiring brow. "Phew! It's warm!"

"Look yonder!" grinned Blake. "On the bank to the left there—higher up."

"Oh!"

"Koumi Rao!" breathed Lowther.

"What about him?" said Tom.

He glanced across at the figure on the bank.

It was Koumi Rao right enough. He was in boating flannels and he was lying flat on his back on the sloping bank, his dusky face upturned towards the hot sun. He looked as if he were slumbering peacefully. Below him, rocking on the current and tied to an overhanging willow, was a large four-sculled skiff. Nobody else was in sight.

"Look at the dear!" murmured Blake. "And look at that cricket bag lying near him. That must be the bag Baggy spoke of; it's full of grub, I bet. What a chance! The chance of a lifetime!"

"Oh, let 'em rip!" said Tom. In the usual way, the skipper of the Shell would have jumped at such a chance to score off their New House rivals. But he was not feeling like a rag that afternoon. In fact, he simply could not forget Reginald Talbot and give himself up to enjoyment. "Let 'em rip! In any case, Figgy and the others can't be far away."

"Rot! I'm surprised at you, Thomas!" said Blake, with a soft chuckle. "There's a bag full of grub, and we're on our beam-ends. They've raided our grub more than once. Besides, we can't let the little fellows make themselves ill."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Gussy. "Weally, Tom Mewwy, I think this is a wippin' chance! Koumi Rao is alone—"

"I scarcely think so," said Tom Merry, grinning. "The chap loves to wallow in the sun; it reminds him of India, I fancy. But Figgy and his pals will be near somewhere. Yes, I thought so. There the bounders are—in the shade of those trees."

"My hat! So they are!"

All the juniors saw them now—three sprawling forms lying in the shade of trees farther along the bank. They could just glimpse their white flannels above the grassy bank and through the foliage. Unlike the dusky Indian junior, Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn preferred the shade to the broiling hot sun.

"Only four of 'em, anyway!" commented Blake, with a chuckle. "And, like the giddy poem, we are seven. What about it, Tommy?"

"Oh, all right!" said Tom, smiling. "Might as well live things up a bit. I'll tell you what! Five of us will tackle Figgy, Kerr, and Fatty, and hold 'em down, while the other two tackle Rao and collar the grub."

"Good wheeze!"

"Pull in, then—softly."

They pulled in gently, and plans were hurriedly made. Gussy and Lowther were to tackle Koumi Rao, collar the grub, and rush into the boat. Then the others would leave Figgy & Co. to it and make a rush for the New House boat. Both boats would then pull out into the stream, thus making it impossible for the marooned New House quartet to follow.

It was quite a nice scheme—if all went well.

CHAPTER 7.

In Ruthless Hands!

"QUIET!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Don't gas, Gussy! 'Shush!"

"Bai Jove! I was merely wemarkin'—"

"'Shush!" hissed Blake in a ferocious tone.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Gag him, someone!"

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"I should wefuse to be gagged! I see no reason—"

"Shurrup!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus relapsed into indignant silence; the ferocity in Blake's voice quite startled him.

The boat touched the bank ever so gently a few yards beyond the spot where Koumi Rao lay. The juniors scrambled out with great caution, and Tom Merry pulled the boat gently on to a sandy shelf.

Then they parted—Gussy and Lowther to deal with Koumi Rao, while the rest overpowered the other three unsuspecting New House fellows. They were to act suddenly, upon a whistle from Tom Merry when all was in readiness.



Like Red Indians on the war-path, the two parties trod softly through the grass towards their unconscious victims.

Whether Koumi Rao was asleep or not they did not know; he certainly had not moved his position. But they could hear a drowsy murmur of voices from Figgins & Co.

But Koumi Rao was not asleep—far from it!

What followed was solely the fault of Arthur Augustus—or his chums claimed that it was.

In his efforts to avoid tearing his elegant flannels on a briar-bush, Arthur Augustus stepped acid: incautiously, and then came a sharp sound, as he trod on a twig.

Snap!

The damage was done beyond recall.

Koumi Rao's head jerked up instantly, and he sighted the advancing two at once. And, besides being quick-witted, Koumi Rao was a very active youth indeed.

He leaped to his feet instantly with a yell.

"Look out, Figgins! School House bounders!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

All caution was thrown aside then by Tom Merry & Co.

Arthur Augustus and Lowther flung themselves upon

Koumi Rao, while a moment later came a yell from George Figgins, followed instantly by sounds of a fierce struggle under the trees.

"Look out, Rao! Watch the grub! They're after the grub! Get away with it! Quick!"

Apparently Figgy imagined Koumi Rao had not been attacked.

But Koumi Rao did his best to obey. He ducked as Gussy jumped at him, and butted the unfortunate Arthur Augustus full in the waistcoat—or where Gussy's waistcoat would have been had he had one. Arthur Augustus gave a strangled sort of howl, and sat down suddenly.

Like an eel, the lithe Indian youth avoided Lowther's

"Help, help!" Gerald Crooke's voice rang out in a shriek of terror as he was carried along in the swirling mill-race. It was Talbot who acted first. His hands went up, and next instant he had plunged from the bridge to the rescue of his cousin. (See Chapter 10.)



desperate clutch, and shot out a foot. Lowther, just jumping forward to the attack, took a header over it.

Koumi Rao gave a gasp, and, grabbing up the cricket-bag, he made a wild dash for the boat rocking under the willows.

He reached it safely, dropped the heavy bag into it, and leaped in. Then he tore at the painter.

He had just torn it free and grabbed at a scull, when Lowther, with Arthur Augustus at his heels, came bounding down the bank, both of them yelling with wrath.

The boat began to move as Koumi Rao gave a desperate push with the scull. Then Lowther made a wild leap for it.

His foot touched the gunwale, and as he swayed, striving to balance himself on the rocking boat, Koumi Rao pushed again with his scull—but this time it was against Lowther's flannelled chest that he pushed.

He did not need to push hard.

A gentle push did it.

Lowther gave a sort of strangled howl, and went backwards.

Splash!

"Good-bye, my dear School House friends!" called Koumi Rao cheerily.

The Indian youth always was excessively polite.

Fortunately, Arthur Augustus just managed to pull up in time, and he helped the raging, drenched Monty Lowther to flounder out of the river—which he did quickly enough.

With water streaming from him, he danced about on the bank, spluttering and gasping with fury while Koumi Rao bowed politely. As the boat docketed out into the stream the Indian junior seated himself and picked up the sculls.

Then he pulled away swiftly, and it took Lowther and Gussy quite a minute to discover what his objective was.

One swift glance round, once he was out in the stream, showed Koumi Rao the School House boat. He made for it instantly.

Too late did Lowther and Gussy realise his intention.

As his own boat grounded, Koumi Rao leaped to the prow, and, reaching over, he got a good grip on the gunwale of the boat, whose nose was drawn up on the sand. A single hefty tug sent it afloat again, and another swift, strong push sent it sailing out into the river.

There was a roar of rage from Gussy and Lowther as they came pelting along the bank, Lowther's wet trousers flapping dismally round his legs.

Once again Koumi Rao was too quick for them.

He pushed off desperately, and in a moment he was well out of reach on the sparkling, gleaming river.

Then, leaving the School House craft to drift where it liked, Koumi Rao settled down to the sculls and pulled hard. Within three minutes a bend of the river had hid him from the sight of the juniors on the bank. The last he saw was a crowd of School House fellows crowded together on the distant bank and a howl of wrath reached his ears faintly.

He chuckled, and after a few seconds' reflection on the position, began to pull his craft into the backwater that was just round the bend.

The current flowed fast here, and to his ears came the sullen roar of the mill-stream by the wheel. He pulled into the rushes that lined the banks, selecting a spot under a spreading willow that hung well over the water. It was a good hiding-place for the boat, and, fastening it up, he leaped ashore.

Koumi Rao was a very serious, thoughtful youth as a rule, and he usually took little part in the junior rags. Though his greatest chum in the New House was George Figgins, he rarely, indeed, joined him in an outing. But he was quite enjoying himself now, and his dusky features wore a grin.

The boat was safe now, and so was the grub. He would do a bit of scouting round and discover how the land lay. Possibly he would get an opportunity of aiding his chums—of releasing them if they were prisoners.

He did not see the forms of two men that had been sprawling on the bank of the backwater—one, a burly, evil-jowled man, with a scowling brow; the other, short and thin-faced, with a tight-lipped mouth, and keen, grey eyes.

But they had seen Koumi Rao.

Bowyer and Jim Crow had been idling drowsily in the long grass by the reeds and willows, but they were wide awake enough now. They had watched the dusky junior jump ashore, and then Jim Crow gripped his companion's arm in a vice-like grip.

"You see him?" he hissed, his keen eyes glittering with excitement. "It's him, Bowyer—it's the durned kid himself! It's that Indian youngster. Shucks! What blamed luck!"

Cautiously he got to his feet, and Bowyer followed his example, looking startled and bewildered.

"You mean—"

"It's Koumi Rao—that Indian kid!" breathed Jim Crow, peering through the screen of willows and foliage. "He's run right into our hands, Bowyer. Strike me pink! And he's alone!"

Crow silently slipped off his tweed coat, his eyes fixed on the back of Koumi Rao, who stood looking about him.

"You goin' to—" began Bowyer, his own eyes beginning to glitter.

"Yes. We'll never get a chance like this again. Down him—and not a sound, on your life!"

Koumi Rao half-turned, as though he had heard the muttered whisper. And as he did so the attack came sudden and swift.

He had a brief vision of two figures, and then something was swept over his head, completely blindfolding him. He gave one startled gasp, and then he was struggling desperately in the two sinewy arms that held him, pinning his arms to his side.

But he struggled in vain.

Wiry and strong as the Indian junior was, he was like a child in the grasp of Jim Crow and Bowyer. He had imagined at first that he was in the hands of his School

House rivals. But he realised now that the strong, ruthless hands that held him were not the hands of juniors.

He felt himself lifted and borne away, he knew not where. Through the jacket that enshrouded his head he heard the faint crashing of feet through undergrowth, the mumble of men's voices, and the roar of the mill-race—a roar that grew louder and louder.

The Indian junior was lowered at last on a hard, cold floor.

He felt the jacket raised a little and wound tighter round his face and head. Then he felt cords being passed round his legs and arms.

His struggles were in vain.

It was done at last. Koumi Rao lay there helpless, and then the jacket was wrenched from his head.

He gasped in relief. Then he blinked about him.

He was in darkness, save for the dim glimmer of a candle close by him on the stone floor. In his nostrils was a damp, earthy smell. The roar of the rushing water was deafeningly close now.

At once he knew where he was—he was in the old water-mill, a prisoner of the two men who stood staring down at him gloatingly.

"Got him!" muttered Jim Crow. "This is him right enough!"

"You villains!" panted Koumi Rao, his dark eyes gleaming up defiantly at his captors. "What does this mean? How dare you imprison me like this! Do you know who I am?" he added proudly and haughtily.

"Yes, we know, kid," grinned Jim Crow.

"Why have you done this?" said Koumi Rao, in the proud, dignified tone his chums knew so well. "What does this mean, you scoundrels?"

"You may as well know that right away, my dusky young friend," grinned Jim Crow. "There's something at St. Jim's that we want from you—a little bit of stone it is. A pretty little diamond that was sent you by your uncle in India. It's called the Star of the East, I believe. We've tried to get our hands on it in one way, and now we're going to try another. Got the idea?"

Koumi Rao set his lips.

He knew now what it all meant only too well. Only that morning he had had a private conversation with Mr. Railton regarding the stone. He knew what few at St. Jim's knew—that the recent burglaries at the school were attempts to get the stone—his property. Of the stone itself Koumi Rao cared little; such valuables were nothing to him. He himself had tried more than once, by letters to his uncle, to make that worthy understand that such things were out of place to a boy at a public school. Koumi Rao, in fact, was not a little fed-up with the worry of the thing.

And now, here was more worry—a very serious worry, in fact, this time. He himself had not even handled the diamond yet. The Head had, of course, intercepted it in the post, and it was now lying in the bank at Wayland, waiting to be sent back to India. Yet Koumi Rao saw it was going to be a difficult matter to make the crooks believe that.

"Yes, I understand what you mean," he answered curtly. "But you are wasting your time, my friends. I have not the stone you speak of in my possession. It is where my headmaster sent it—in the bank at Wayland. In any case," he added defiantly, "I would never allow you to have it were it in my power, you rascals!"

Bowyer grunted, and looked at his companion. Jim Crow grinned.

"Shucks!" he said scornfully. "That yarn won't do for us, youngster. We know it's at the school, and we means to have it! Now, see here, kid. We don't want to harm you—that ain't my way. But we got to have that stone. You hand it over, or tell us how to get hold of it, and you go free, unharmed. See?"

"I have already told you all I can tell you, or intend to tell you," said Koumi Rao calmly.

"Oh, all right!" grinned Crow. "I didn't expect you to sing low yet awhile. After you've been in here a bit p'raps you'll change your tune, though," he added significantly. "There's ways and means of making a chap speak when he don't want to. You may feel like talking when you get hungry, for instance. We'll see, my dusky young friend. Come on, Bowyer; we'll leave the kid to think it over. I think the game's as good as ours now."

And with that Crow led his accomplice away, after blowing out the candle. The doors opened and closed, and

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,114.

Koumi Rao heard the bar placed across. He found himself alone and in deep darkness, save for the chinks of light that entered the old mill through the cracks in the door.

He was a prisoner—kidnapped!

CHAPTER 8.

Where is Koumi Rao?

"**B**LOW!"

"Likewise dash!" gasped Jack Blake. "Done in the eye!"

"Dished and done brown!" groaned Tom Merry.

Tom Merry & Co. were wrathful and dismayed.

Victory had been snatched from their hands.

They had never anticipated such swift and unexpected action from Koumi Rao. They had overwhelmed Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn easily enough after a brisk struggle. But it was only to find that Koumi Rao had outwitted them.

At the yells of Arthur Augustus and Lowther they had released the New House trio and had rushed to the river bank. They had been just in time to see Koumi Rao vanish round the bend.

But it was not until they really grasped the fact that their boat was also gone did they give vent to their feelings to such an extent.

"Dished and done!" repeated Tom Merry. "And we can't go after the rotter! He's got our boat! Oh, the—"

"There's the boat!" exclaimed Blake. "Oh, good!"

"Yaas, wathah! It has dwifted across the wivah, bai Jove!"

It was one welcome discovery, at all events. Their boat could be seen now—it had drifted against the far bank, lower down the river.

Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, breathless and indignant, came up to them.

"You rotters!" gasped George Figgins. "Good old Rao. I'm jolly glad he's done you in the eye. It's a New House score, after all."

"Is it?" snapped Tom Merry. "You New House worms had better sing small or we'll duck you in the giddy river, old son!"

"Yaas, wathah! That feahful wuffian Koumi Rao neahly winded me, and almost caused me to go into the wivah."

"What about me?" howled Lowther, who was squeezing the water from his dripping garments dismally. "Look here! Throw those beastly cads in—let's get our own back!"

"Good wheeze!" said Herries. "We can get our own back on them, anyhow—Hallo, they're off!"

The New House trio were off. They suddenly decided to go while the going was good. Figgins had guessed what Koumi Rao's plan would be, and he wanted to be free to aid it.

"Oh, let 'em go!" snorted Tom Merry. "Well, what a wash-out! Still, we'll get Koumi Rao yet. Here's Grundy and his pals. Give 'em a shout, chaps!"

The School House juniors bawled across the river as a skiff came into sight, working a rather rocky course upstream. In the skiff were Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn. The great George Alfred Grundy was just showing his chums just how a boat should be rowed—which possibly accounted for the rocky and erratic way in which the skiff was jerking along.

Just opposite them the boat came to an almost abrupt stop, and one of the sculls in Grundy's big hands seemed to be trying to dive to the bottom of the river.

Grundy, in point of fact, had caught a crab—not an unusual occurrence with him.

With a very red face, he strove to drag the oar free, whilst Gunn and Wilkins watched him grinningly.

Then they heard the yelling of Tom Merry & Co.

"Hallo!" bawled back Wilkins. "Cheerio, you fellows! It's all right—we're not in danger yet! Only Grundy sculling—"

"Fishing, you mean," grinned Gunn.

Grundy glared.

"Look here—" he began, but Gunn hurriedly interrupted him.

"I say, old chap, those chaps want us to get their boat. It's drifted across, or something!" he exclaimed, picking up the scull.

Grundy seemed glad to stop rowing, and the three Shell fellows soon reached the boat against the bank. With Gunn rowing, they towed it across to Tom Merry & Co.,

who boarded it in great relief, while Lowther set off at a run back to St. Jim's to change.

"Thanks, you fellows!" said Tom Merry. "Now, you chaps, we're going after Koumi Rao. We're not dished yet."

"Bai Jove! Wathah not!"

"Good wheeze!"

"We'll stop to see Grundy fishing for crabs another time, Wilky!" called Blake affably. "Ta-ta, Grundy!"

"Cheeky cads!" growled Grundy. "Look here, go after them, Gunny. I'm going to thrash the lot of them for that!"

"Oh, all right!" grinned Gunn.

But though Grundy & Co. went in the wake of the other boat, they did not succeed in catching up with it. Wilkins and Gunn were not such warlike fellows as Grundy. And Tom Merry and his crew soon left them far behind.

As they passed the backwater Tom Merry called a halt, and scanned the rushes and reeds of the narrow stream right up to the looming bulk of the old mill. But he saw no signs of a boat, and gave the order to row again.

"Queer!" he muttered. "We ought to have caught the beggar up by this."

"He's a crafty bounder," said Blake. "He could easily have hidden his boat in those reeds. Shall we go back and search?"

"No—blow him!" said Tom, after a pause. "Let him rip now!"

There was still a chance that Koumi Rao was ahead, however, and they pulled on. But the lock-keeper's cottage came into sight at last, and still there was no sight of the Indian junior and his craft.

"He's done us right enough," grinned Tom. "Never mind. We'll turn the tables on Figgy & Co. some other time, never fear."

"Yaas, wathah!"

So Koumi Rao and the cricket-bag full of grub were dismissed from the minds of Tom Merry & Co. They pulled ashore, and, after a ramble and a swim, made their way to the cottage for tea. It was a very pleasant tea in the shady orchard of the cottage, and the juniors did full justice to the eggs, and jam, and home-made bread, and fresh butter. Then they pulled leisurely down-stream towards St. Jim's.

At the boathouse they were surprised to find Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn standing on the landing-stage, talking gravely to Kildare.

"Hallo! Something up," said Blake.

Kildare called across to the School House party. Besides the New House trio, Grundy & Co. and several other fellows were crowding round Kildare, and all were looking scared.

Tom Merry & Co. ran up the stage, and Figgins gave a gasp as he sighted them.

"Hallo! Oh, good!" he exclaimed. "Here they are! I say, have you fellows seen anything of Koumi Rao?"

"Eh? Not since he went off with the grub," said Tom Merry. "Why—"

"How far up-river have you been?" demanded Kildare grimly.

"To the locks. We should have passed him, though," said Blake. "We imagined he'd hidden among the reeds in the mill backwater, and we didn't bother about him. Why, anything up?"

Figgins' face went paler still.

"Yes; there must be," he said unsteadily. "We've searched everywhere for him. We guessed he would make for there, and we worked through the wood and shouted. But he didn't show up. And—and—"

"It's beginning to look serious, kids," said Kildare gravely. "Did you find the sculls and things actually in the backwater, Grundy, or in the main stream just off it?"

"We found one oar right out in the river, and the rest of the things just inside the backwater," said Wilkins. "We guessed there'd been an accident, and began to hunt round. It was obvious they'd floated out of the backwater, though."

"And you found nothing else?"

"No."

"What's happened, Kildare?" demanded Tom Merry, in alarm.

"Bai Jove! Pway—"

"It's nothing to be seriously alarmed about yet," said the skipper of St. Jim's. "But Grundy and his pals found a pair of sculls floating in the backwater, also Koumi Rao's panama hat, a blazer belonging to Figgins, and a footboard out of a boat. Figgins says Koumi Rao was in a boat, and had vanished, and— Well, it looks rather queer and a bit alarming."

"I tell you something must have happened to him, Kildare," said Figgins, almost wildly. "My blazer was in the boat, and his hat. It must have sunk—probably in that backwater."

"Well, probably the kid's managed to swim ashore and

cut off back to St. Jim's to change his clothes," said Kildare. "No need to get scared yet, kids. Hallo, here's Darrell back now!"

Darrell came pedalling along the towing-path from the direction of the school. He sprang from his bike, and his face was grave.

"No go," he announced. "Koumi Rao hasn't returned to school. Nobody seems to have seen him, anyway."

Kildare's face went graver.

"He may be on his way now, though," he said. "You told Railton?"

"Yes. He says we're to go up-river and hunt for him—all the seniors here, at least."

"Right! You kids get back to school. You can leave this to us!" snapped Kildare. "Get the fellows out of the boathouse, Darrell."

"Right!"

Darrell ran into the boathouse. The senior eight had only just returned from a practice spin, and both Kildare and Darrell were in rowing togs, as were the rest of the crew who were just putting their oars away. The Sixth-Formers donned sweaters, and, getting three more skiffs out, they prepared to start out on the search.

"Look here, Kildare!" said Figgins, white-faced and agitated. "We're going up-river again, too. We can join in the search, surely?"

"No reason why you shouldn't," said Kildare, after a pause. "Yes, the more on the job the better. It's possible Rao has hurt himself, and is lying injured somewhere. You'd better search the woods, though, and we'll search the banks and reeds in that backwater."

With that Kildare boarded a boat and started off up-stream at top speed. Tom Merry looked at Figgins in great alarm.

"This is rotten, Figgy!" he said, in a low voice. "Look here, we're coming, too!"

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove! If anything has happened to poor old Rao—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not finish, and nothing more was said. Figgins & Co. were only too glad of the aid of the School House party, and soon all the juniors were trotting along the towing-path en route for the scene of the accident—if accident there had been. But there was a curious gleam in Tom Merry's eyes. He did not share the general dread. The sudden memory of Talbot's warning had come to him. Was this the work of Jim Crow and his rascally accomplice?

He felt sure it was so. The evidence pointed to a river accident; but he knew Rao was a good oarsman, and was unlikely to have an accident. And in view of what Talbot had told him—

Tom remembered Talbot's adventure in the old water-mill, and it was in the vicinity of the mill-stream that the oars and other things had been found. Putting two and two together, Tom Merry was convinced that he had hit on the truth. But despite the fact that the fears he had had for Koumi Rao's safety were now dispelled, his face was dark as he hurried off with his chums to begin the search.

CHAPTER 9.

Tom Speaks His Mind!

"TALBOT!"

Tom Merry spoke in a cautious whisper that reached the ears of the prisoner in the punishment-room. There was a movement within, and Talbot's voice answered:

"You, Tom?"

"I'm coming in, Talbot," said Tom. "I want to speak to you. I must!"

"Tom, you're running a big risk—"

"I know—I know! Never mind that," said Tom; and he reached up and drew back the bolt. The next moment he was in the room, and the door closed softly behind him.

Tom's face was white, and full of anxiety. And he looked tired out, as indeed he was. It was nearly bed-time at St. Jim's, and it was some time since the search-party had returned—at least the junior members of it. So far as Tom knew Kildare and his fellow seniors had not yet come back. Koumi Rao had not been found.

It had been an exciting and alarming evening for St. Jim's. The general alarm grew as hour succeeded hour, and no news of the missing junior came to hand. Mr. Railton had organised another search-party of seniors to aid Kildare, but it had been in vain. Koumi Rao seemed to have vanished. And few there were who did not believe that his body was in the river.

The thought was a terrible one, and a cloud settled upon the school that evening. Only Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners did not share the general view, but they kept their

theory to themselves. What the Head and the authorities in general really believed had happened Tom could only guess. They were well aware of the plot to gain Koumi Rao's property, and it was possible the thought had occurred to them that Koumi Rao had fallen into the hands of enemies. But that theory was not allowed to become known if they did hold it.

It had been a terribly worrying time for Tom. He hated to think that so much worry and dread should be caused, when possibly Koumi Rao was unharmed. Certainly the position was serious enough, in any case. But Tom had a keen sense of duty, and he wanted to tell what he knew—to relieve the general dread and anxiety.

Yet he could not. He had given his word to Talbot not to speak a word that might lead to the capture of the cracksmen.

Tom's mind had been torn with doubt and anxiety, and he was determined now to speak to Talbot, to get the matter settled one way or the other.

Talbot saw that something was amiss at once.

"Tom," he exclaimed, "what's happened? You look

"You've not heard, then?"

"I've heard nothing. Toby came in with my supper; but Linton was with him. I thought it queer as Railton usually comes—"

"I'll tell you," said Tom, "Koumi Rao is missing. Those rascals have got him!"

Talbot staggered.

"What? You mean Crow and Bowyer?" he panted.

"Yes. They must have got him!"

And in swift, hurried sentences, Tom told of the afternoon's adventures, and of the vain search for the missing Indian junior.

"To almost everyone it looks as if he's come to grief in the river," he added grimly. "But, knowing what we know

"Good heavens! But—but—"

"Those floating oars and things were spoof, of course," muttered Tom. "He must have pulled round near the mill, and they spotted him and collared him. Then they sank the boat, and sent the oars and things adrift to make people think Koumi Rao was drowned. Don't you see, Talbot?"

"Yes," Talbot nodded dully. "That's what's happened!" he groaned. "Koumi Rao's a good swimmer, and he knows how to handle a boat. Crow and Bowyer have got him. But"—his face suddenly paled—"but didn't they search round the mill?"

"Up to the mill-wheel—yes," said Tom grimly. "All round there has been searched. But who was likely to go inside the mill? All the fellows feel sure he's drowned, Talbot. They only searched the woods half-heartedly, I'm sure. I myself was very nearly setting our chaps to searching the mill. But I remembered my promise to you."

"Thank Heaven, Tom!"

Tom Merry set his lips, and faced Talbot squarely.

"Talbot," he said thickly, "this can't go on. I didn't hint at anything to the fellows. I took your word for it that this fellow Crow would not hurt anyone."

"He wouldn't—not willingly," said Talbot.

"I hope he won't," said Tom, his voice showing his agitation. "I felt like a cad, Talbot—a cad for not telling what I know. This can't go on, Talbot. You've got to release me from my promise. That mill must be searched, and Koumi Rao must be found."

"Tom—"

"It isn't right to allow everyone to think Rao's drowned," said Tom. "It isn't right to allow so much worry and distress. We feel sure he isn't drowned. We ought to speak out and say what we know, whatever the consequences to that rascal. They're talking of dragging the river in the morning, Talbot."

Talbot gritted his teeth, his handsome face deeply disturbed.

"There's another way out, Tom," he said pleadingly. "I know just how you feel about it. I hate it as much as you do. But—give me to-night. If you'll leave this door unbolted I'll go myself, and I'll get Koumi Rao free somehow—if he is there. I swear I will! Give me until the morning. After that you can do what you feel is your duty."

Tom did not answer for a moment. Then he nodded his head.

"I see what you mean," he answered. "But you can't handle those fellows alone, Talbot. They've captured you once, remember. Look here, I'll come with you. For that matter, my chums can come, too—they will willingly."

"You've told them, Tom—"

"Yes; Lowther and Manners, at least. I keep no secrets from them as you know, Talbot. You can trust them."

"I know that. But will they come?"

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"Like a shot. For that matter, Blake and the rest of Study No. 6 will come, too," said Tom, his brow clearing a little. "We can't afford to take chances, Talbot; and those men are desperate, remember. With Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy we should be eight all told. You know you can trust all of them to keep your secret."

Talbot frowned, but he nodded at last.

"You can try them," he said quietly. "I hate to drag any of you into this business. But now Koumi Rao's missing—well, I dare not take chances, as you say."

"It's a go, then," said Tom. "I'll explain everything to them, and swear them to secrecy. And I'll come along here and unbolt the door at about eleven-thirty. How's that?"

"Right. Should be late enough," said Talbot, in a low tone. "I—I hope all goes well, Tom. And now clear off before you're caught here, old man. Good-bye!"

Tom Merry slipped out of the punishment-room and rebolted the door. Then he stole away, after a cautious glance about him. But there was nobody about, and he reached Study No. 10 safely. His chums were out, and he found them down in the Common-room, where the disappearance of Koumi Rao was the one absorbing topic among the juniors. Tom beckoned to his chums and to Blake & Co., and took them along to his study, and there he told the story—a story Lowther and Manners already knew, of course. Blake did not seem so surprised as Tom had expected.

"I thought something of the kind was going on," he said grimly. "But Talbot's a fool to let it go on like this. Those rascals ought to be caught. But—well, after all, I can't blame old Talbot. I suppose we should have done the same."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus huskily. "I am vewy sowwy indeed for poor old Talbot. He is in a weally tewwible posish, you know. Howevah, I am game to go out to-night for one."

"Same here!"

"Yes, rather!"

It was an eager, excited chorus, and Tom Merry nodded.

"Right!" he said, looking round at his chums. "We'll do it, then. Blake, you'd better keep awake in the Fourth dorm, and I'll see to things in ours. Is that agreed upon then?"

"Yes."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And so it was settled. All St. Jim's retired that night with unusual quietness, though there was an undercurrent of excitement that could not be hidden. But Tom Merry and his chums were tingling with something more than excitement—an eager anticipation that kept them awake long after the others had dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER 10.

Saving a Spy!

"READY, you fellows?"

"All ready!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Outside the Fourth Form dormitory the Terrible Three met Blake & Co. at a little after eleven-thirty that night. All were dressed with the exception of the gym shoes which they carried in their hands. Without further talk, they started downstairs in single file, tingling with excitement.

What the night held in store for them they could only guess. But up to lights-out Koumi Rao had not returned, and they were all grimly determined to do their utmost, come what might, to bring about his release—if he was a prisoner.

On the lower landing the group halted, and Tom Merry hurried cautiously along to the punishment-room. He unbolted the door, and after a whispered word Talbot came out. He was also fully dressed, and Tom handed him a pair of spare gym shoes. Then they joined the rest of the party, and left the House by the box-room window.

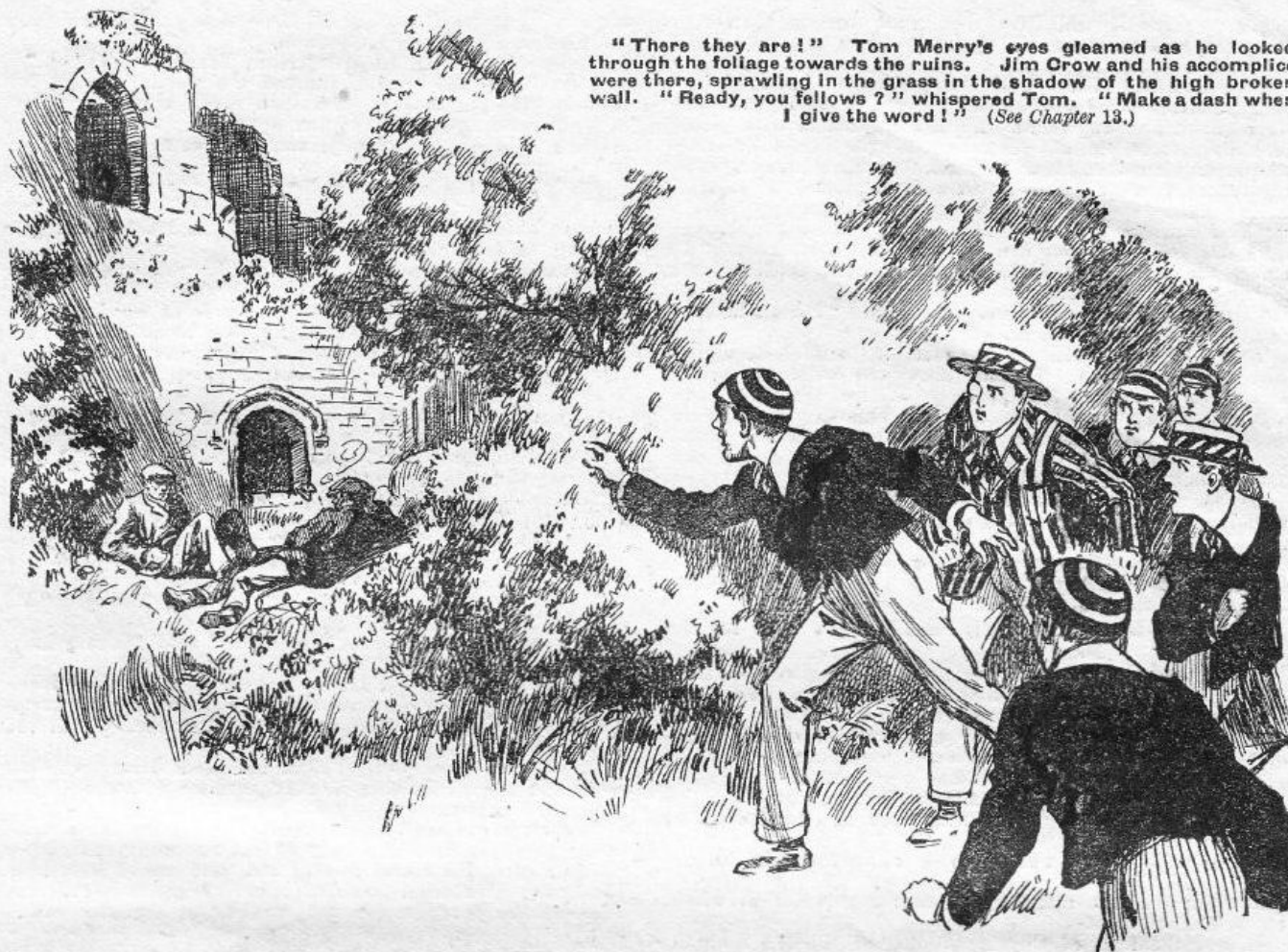
It was a warm, sultry night, with a dim, hazy moon that cast ghostly shadows from the old elms and school buildings. In silence they crossed the quad, and made for the school wall. Once Tom Merry stopped short and glanced behind him.

"What's the matter, Tom?"

"I thought I heard a sound behind us," breathed Tom, staring back into the gloom. "It sounded just like someone stumbling on the gravel."

They waited a moment, listening, but no sound reached them, and then they went on again, reassured. Soon they were swarming over the wall into the lane, and then they set off at a steady trot for the river, taking the narrow lane to the boathouse.

Reaching it, they hurried along the towing-path, silent and deserted now. In the misty moonlight the river looked shadowy and ghostly, with here and there a splash of



"There they are!" Tom Merry's eyes gleamed as he looked through the foliage towards the ruins. Jim Crow and his accomplice were there, sprawling in the grass in the shadow of the high broken wall. "Ready, you fellows?" whispered Tom. "Make a dash when I give the word!" (See Chapter 13.)

silver on its glimmering, rippling surface. The deep woods, black and shadowy, stretched away like a long black wall on both sides of the murmuring Rhyl.

More than once Tom Merry glanced behind him as they hurried on. He had a strange, unaccountable feeling that they were being followed, but he saw nothing each time he glanced back, and his chums scoffed at the suggestion.

They reached the backwater at last.

Dark and forbidding looked the old mill, looming up, gaunt and shadowy at the end of the backwater, surrounded by the dark trees. The sullen roar of the race added to the ghostliness and eerie appearance of the deserted spot at that late hour. The reeds rustled in the breeze as the juniors approached it by the rough path at the water's edge. From somewhere in the deep woods came the eerie, startling hoot of an owl.

Blake shuddered.

"What a ghastly show!" he breathed, looking up at the shadowy mill. "I'm sorry for Rao if he's shut up in there, anyway."

"We'll soon have him out if he is!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah! Bai Jove! What a dweadful spot to be in at night, deah boys! I weally think— Bai Jove! What was that?"

A sharp snap had sounded behind them. The juniors stood listening, with their hearts thumping; but the sound was not repeated.

"Our nerves are on edge," said Blake, with a faint chuckle. "There's all sorts of night-prowlers about now—it was an animal of some sort."

"Must have been."

They went on again, and soon they reached the mill. Tom Merry gave the word, and they cautiously crossed the rotting footbridge, keeping in the shadows as much as they could. On both sides ancient willows hung down over the bridge and water, and it was a simple matter to take shelter. They stood before the door at last, their hearts beating fast with excitement.

No light came from the old structure, and not a sound reached them above the roar of the falling water.

"Quiet!" breathed Tom Merry. "I'll go first, and flash my light round. They may be upstairs—there are two more floors, I think. For all we know, they may have spotted us coming—they must have the wind up after all the fellows that have been searching round this part this evening. Ready?"

"Yes; go ahead."

The bar of wood across the door was gently lifted from its sockets. Then Tom got a grip of the door and wrenched it wide.

The light flashed, sending a dazzling beam around the inside of the gloomy interior of the mill.

It played on an earthen floor, and on rough, brick walls, slimy and glittering with moisture.

But on nothing else. The basement of the old mill was empty.

"Upstairs!" breathed Tom. "Get ready for fireworks! They're bound to hear us now."

He set his teeth and crossed over to the rickety staircase leading up to the next floor.

He mounted the rotting steps cautiously, and the rest crowded after him, with beating hearts, yet ready for anything.

All their caution was wasted, however. Like the basement, the first floor was empty. On the floor were bundles of old straw that looked as if they had served as beds at a recent date. Moreover, there were scraps of paper about and innumerable burnt matches and cigarette ends.

"Gone!" breathed Talbot, his heart sinking. "I feared so! I know Jim Crow too well to believe he would take any chances. He knows I know their hiding-place, and he remembers my vow to beat them. They've waited until dark, and then moved from here. Possibly they had already found a new and safer hiding-place."

"Looks like it. We'll try the next floor, though," said Tom Merry grimly.

They ascended another staircase, more rickety and unsafe than the other. Above was a small, low apartment, where the machinery of the mill had been at one time; even now rusted wheels and bolts lay about the dusty floor. Tom Merry crossed to a jagged hole in the wall through which ran a great rusted axle, and peered out over the quiet countryside.

Black woods and waving trees met his gaze, with the river narrowing away in both directions, like a great, twisted ribbon of dull silver. Somewhere in the woods and lonely spaces were the kidnapers and their captive, he felt sure. None of the juniors had yet dared to mention Koumi Rao in connection with the shining river. But now Tom spoke.

"The men have been here, that's certain," he said. "Talbot knows that only too well. And they've only left here to-day, by the look of things. In my view they've

left here with Koumi Rao. I'm more certain than ever now that he's not drowned."

"Same here!"

"We're about dished and done, though, for to-night!" said Tom, his voice showing his dismay. "Those men may have taken him anywhere. There's the moor, with plenty of hiding-places, the old ruined castle, the windmill, and a couple of ruined cottages at least. If those rascals know the country at all they'll soon have found a suitable hiding-place."

"You mean to give it up now, then?" asked Digby.

"I don't see what we can do to-night," said Tom. "To search for him in the darkness would be like looking for a needle in a haystack!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Gussy dismally. "Bettah leave it until to-morrow, deah boys!"

There seemed nothing else for it, and the juniors descended in silence. Talbot's brow was wrinkled, and it was plain he was puzzled greatly. Where were Jim Crow and his accomplice? It was quite possible they were in the woods, of course; possibly they had come upon a woodman's hut, and had gone to spend the night there, in preference to the rat-infested mill.

But to search through the black woods at that hour was a hopeless proposition; it was extremely unlikely any one of the juniors could find his way in the dark through them.

They reached the open air at last, and Talbot closed the door, and was just about to place the bar across when Tom Merry did a remarkable thing.

He leaped forward suddenly, and made a rush for the footbridge.

What happened next was startling to a degree—startling even to Tom Merry, who had just glimpsed a dark form slip into the shadows of the overhanging willow.

As Tom made a rush for the spot there sounded a sharp crack, the splintering of rotten wood, and then—

There sounded a wild shriek and a splash.

"Good heavens!" shouted Tom Merry.

He reached the bridge in a flash, and he stared down at the black, swirling waters.

A struggling form was there—a white face and an up-flung hand.

Even in the dim moonlight Tom recognised that white, terror-stricken face.

It was the face of Gerald Crooke, of the Shell at St. Jim's—the face of Talbot's cousin!

"Help, help!"

Crooke's voice rang out in a shriek of terror.

Tom Merry stood thunderstruck, and it was Talbot who acted first. He was already on the spot, and as he heard his cousin's voice he glanced swiftly down through the broken rails and saw the white face amidst the foam of the mill-race.

Talbot had grasped the meaning of the strange happening in a flash, and he acted like lightning.

His hands went up, and next instant he had plunged from the bridge.

Splash!

The splash he made was instantly followed by a second one, as Tom Merry recovered his wits and went in also.

Crooke was struggling madly, and was already some yards from the bridge, being rapidly carried along the dragging swirl of the race.

But Talbot caught him up in a few swift strokes, and his grasp closed upon his cousin's outflung arm.

Then Tom Merry surged up to the rescue.

Like Talbot, Tom was a powerful swimmer, and, realising the fight for life and death that lay before them, he was swimming now with all his strength.

Several of the other juniors had been about to follow, Blake included; but suddenly the leader of the Fourth pulled up and shouted a warning.

"Don't! Stop!" he bawled frantically. "Leave it to them, Gussy—Lowther! Stop! We'll be of more use on the bank! We'll only get in their way!"

It was sound wisdom. To have dived in would only have complicated matters—indeed, it might have made things worse.

Arthur Augustus and Blake wrenched madly at a long branch of willow. Lowther, Manners, Digby, and Herries ran along the edge of the stream, and then lowered themselves down on the long baulk of sodden wood that ran below the grassy bank.

It was well they did so, and well that D'Arcy and Blake rushed up just then with the branch.

They were well ahead of the struggling group in the black water, and Blake sent the branch swishing out ahead of them.

Fortunately, Crooke had gone in within a few yards of the bank, and already Tom and Talbot, working desperately together, had hauled their burden a yard nearer. But they

were being swept along; for all that—slowly but surely, and the branch proved their salvation.

"Grab it!" shouted Blake. "Now, Tom—now, Talbot!"

It was Tom Merry who grasped the slender end of the branch. He got a grip, and then made a further effort and got a stronger grasp higher up the branch.

Blake held on desperately, and Herries and Digby soon had a grip also.

The trio in the water swirled slowly towards the bank, still fighting for life. Crooke seemed insensible. Talbot had been forced to strike him to prevent his frantic struggles ruining their hopes.

It made matters much easier for the rescuers, and the desperate fight was soon ended.

Talbot was the first to touch the baulk of wood, and his clawing hands held fast. Then willing arms reached out to him, and in a few moments Crooke was hauled on to the bank. Then Tom and Talbot, dripping and exhausted, were hauled out after him.

They sank on the bank, drawing in deep gulps of the night air.

"Oh, thank goodness!" panted Blake. "Good for you, Tommy—and you, Talbot!"

"Second dose for me to-day!" gasped Talbot, coughing violently. "And I don't want another! How's Crooke?"

Crooke had only fainted, and he soon came round.

His face was white as chalk, and his eyes were wild.

He shuddered as he glanced around him.

"It—it was Talbot, wasn't it?" he said faintly. "My cousin! He got me out!"

"He and Tom Merry between them," said Blake grimly. "You've them to thank for your life, Crooke!"

Crooke gulped, and then he looked at Talbot, who was just sitting up, his head on the knee of Arthur Augustus. There was a strange look on the stricken face of the cad of the Shell.

He did not speak until Talbot and Tom Merry were on their feet again, and then he staggered up with the help of Blake and Digby.

"Talbot saved me!" he repeated dazedly, as if he could scarcely believe it. "He knew it was me, and yet he came in after me. He knows what I am, and how I hate him. He knows I've tried hard to ruin him more than once. But—but he saved me—saved my life at the risk of his own!"

The other juniors said nothing. Crooke spoke as if he were half unconscious—delirious, in fact. But he was neither.

He sobbed as he swayed in the grasp of the juniors.

"All serene, Crooke!" said Talbot, speaking at last and eyeing his cousin curiously. "You're safe enough now. Better come back to school and get to bed."

"I think we'd all better do that," said Tom Merry, squeezing the water from his clothes as best he could. "I've seen as much of this place as I want to for one night. If you're fit, Crooke, we'll get back."

Crooke was feeling better now. Talbot took his arm, and they started back. Scarcely a word was spoken all the way back to St. Jim's save for a muttered word as someone stumbled in the darkness. The school wall loomed ahead of them at last, and as they stood in its shadow Crooke spoke.

"Hold on!" he said shakily. "Before we go in I've something to say, you fellows. I fancy you know what I was doing there—by the mill?"

"We can guess!" said Tom Merry curtly.

"I was spying!" muttered Crooke, his voice low. "I saw you fellows get out of bed, and I followed. You nearly caught me in the quad when you stopped and looked back; I slipped on the gravel. I was close behind you most of the way. I knew you had something on to-night; I saw it when Tom Merry took the rest of you from the Common-room."

"Go on!" said Tom grimly.

"I—I was listening outside the door of No. 10," said Crooke. "I— Well, you know the rest. I kept awake and followed. I waited on the mill-bridge, but you came out quicker than I expected, and Tom Merry spotted me, I suppose. Then—then I lost my head, and as I was rushing away I crashed into that rotten rail, and went in."

He shuddered.

"And Talbot went in after me," he said, in a broken voice. "I—I've been a howling cad! I've hounded Talbot, and I was out to ruin him—to get him sacked from St. Jim's. It was I who sent that note to the Head. I—I'm sorry, Talbot! I only wish I hadn't now. I can't expect you to forgive me for what I've done; it's too late now! But I want to say I'm sorry, and I swear I'll make it right with the Head!"

"Crooke—" began Talbot, in alarm.

"You shan't be sacked!" said Crooke, almost wildly. "I'll see the Head! I'll tell him everything! You shan't be sacked for the sake of a man like that beastly crook—or through a rotter like me, either! In the morning—"

"Crooke," said Talbot earnestly, "listen to me, for goodness' sake! Never mind what you've done—it's too late now. Telling the Head won't alter matters, I'm afraid. But it's the very last thing I want. If you feel grateful to me, then all I ask you to do is to remain silent. Say nothing of what you have found out to a soul. If you feel you owe me anything, that is what I ask of you."

Crooke nodded, without speaking, and began to scale the wall. The rest followed silently. They were astonished—amazed at such an admission from the cad of the Shell. Obviously, those terrible seconds in the mill-race had been a shock to him, and wrought a great change in his character. His voice and manner showed his sincerity.

The juniors crossed the quad and were soon indoors again. All was silent. They had obviously not been missed. To think of carrying on the search was useless now. Crooke, Tom, and Talbot were soaking wet and shivering, and they needed a rub down and change urgently if they were not to catch a chill. They parted with but few words, and while the rest went to the dormitories, Talbot went to his lonely prison.

But he realised suddenly that it was not a prison now. For Tom Merry had completely forgotten to come with him to lock his door again.

Talbot entered the room softly and closed the door.

His face was grim. The others were deeply disappointed and dismayed at the dismal result of their night out. But Talbot was not now. A strange theory was working in his mind—a theory he was resolved to put to the test before anyone was astir the next morning.

He undressed swiftly, and squeezed the water from his clothes, and then, after a rub down, he donned his pyjamas. Then he set his alarm-watch for five o'clock and placed it under his pillow. Ten minutes later he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 11.

Caught!

THE soft ringing of his alarm watch awoke Reginald Talbot the following morning, and though sleepy-eyed and weary, he leaped out of bed almost on the instant as remembrance came to him.

His course of action was clear, and he was taking no risks of being stopped from carrying it out.

Not even the servants would be about yet, and he meant to be well away from St. Jim's before they were.

He dressed swiftly. The day before his other clothes had been dried, and they were in the room now. He did not stop to wash, and after listening at the door for some moments he started out and hurried along to Tom Merry's study. There he scribbled a brief note telling what his intention was.

This done, he left the note on the table and went to his own study. Here he searched in the cupboard and soon found what he wanted—his swimming costume. He thrust it in his pocket, got his cap and hurried from the study, making for the box-room again. Soon he was in the quadrangle, and cautiously skirting the building, keeping well clear of windows, he made his way to the old oak.

Not a soul was astir; all was quiet save for the twittering of birds and the cawing of rooks in the old elms. It was a glorious morning, but there was a keen nip in the air. Talbot swarmed up the slanting oak, and dropped from the

wall into the lane beyond. Then he set off at a sharp run for the river.

His first idea had been to get a boat from the boathouse, but he abandoned that now, and trotted away along the towing-path. He stopped at last after running for a mile or so, coming to a halt opposite an island out in the river.

Here the Rhyll broadened out considerably, and the island lay some distance out from the bank he was on. It was Abbey Island, and from where he was Talbot could get a glimpse of the sunshine on the old ruins through the distant trees.

Talbot stared out, uncertain how to proceed now. He had abandoned the idea of using a boat, because he was afraid he might be seen approaching the island. The same fear made him pause now. He knew the wariness of Jim Crow. Early as it was, he did not feel like taking chances. Still, he wished he had brought a boat now, for the swim in the early morning would be cold, and he did not relish the thought of a stay on the island in swimming garb. Moreover, if the crooks were on the island, anything might happen.

And Talbot felt sure they were. It had struck him suddenly when leaving his chums the previous night, that the crooks would not dare to move with their prisoner until dusk, at least. And they could scarcely get far with him then. Wherever they were, Talbot felt sure they could not be far away from the mill.

Tom Merry had mentioned Abbey Island, but that theory had been abandoned when it was pointed out that the crooks would have no boat to reach it.

Then the thought had come to Talbot:

Had Jim Crow and Bowyer sunk Koumi Rao's boat? They could easily have hidden it among the reeds—it would have taken a long time to search there. He did not believe they had sunk it now, but had merely hidden it, and sent adrift the oars and things to make it look like that. With a boat at their disposal, they could easily take their prisoner across to Abbey Island, and in the ruins they would find a hiding-place—a far safer one than the mill.

Why hadn't anyone thought of such a simple theory before?

But it was not too late, though Talbot wished now that he had his chums with him.

As he stared across at the island, another idea came to Talbot. It was an ingenious wheeze he had used often when on scouting expeditions.

He slipped back farther among the trees, and soon found what he wanted. It was a broken branch of a tree, and it hung down from the parent tree, held by a mere strip of

He tore it off with a vigorous tug, and then he started to undress, and to don his swimming costume. It was soon done, and tying his clothes up into a bundle, Talbot placed them in readiness on the bank. Then he dropped the branch into the river, after which he stuck the bundle of clothes into a fork of a smaller branch among the foliage, well clear of the water.

This done, he slipped softly into the river, still gripping hold of the floating branch.

A moment later he was swimming cautiously out towards the island, pushing the branch before him as he went, the

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YOUR EDITOR SAYS— MAKE SURE OF IT, CHUMS!

Of course you've all heard of the Channel Tunnel? Even though it doesn't exist as yet, this stupendous task of engineering, by which it is proposed to bring England and France within half an hour's distance of each other, has forced itself upon practically everyone's notice at some time or other. How will this amazing tunnel, twenty-one miles long, look when completed? Perhaps you've tried to picture it to yourself before now. In any case, the free picture card in our grand Marvels of the Future series, which will be given away in next Wednesday's GEM, is one that simply must not be missed! It shows our special artist's impression of one of the most fascinating aspects of the CHANNEL TUNNEL. "Shooting the Moon" is a stunner, isn't it, chums? Well, its successor is quite as good, if not better! 'Nuff said!

Spread the good news, chums! Next week's story of Tom Merry & Co. is one of the greatest treats ever offered to readers of the good old paper. A yarn of fun and thrills in the circus, with a laughing, dare-devil bare-back rider—

"TOM MIX JUNIOR!"

as its star! Martin Clifford tells me that he thoroughly enjoyed writing this story of the sawdust ring and the big tent, not forgetting the girls of Spalding Hall, and that's sufficient guarantee that you'll enjoy reading it—and then ask for more!

Our gripping serial, "THE FLYING FISH!" is nearing its end, but that doesn't mean that the thrills are diminishing by any means. They come thick and fast in next Wednesday's instalment. And don't forget to look out next Wednesday for the announcement of our new serial—it's the goods!

Your old friend the ORACLE is on the programme with a further batch of answers to queries, and then there's another interesting article dealing with the L.M.S. "Royal Scot" Locomotive, No. 6110.

So-long, chums, till next week!

YOUR EDITOR.

foliage hiding his head and shoulders from anyone on the island.

He swam slowly, almost allowing the branch to drift with the stream. When near the island he stopped swimming, contenting himself with guiding the drifting mass towards the bank.

A few kicks now and again were enough, and slowly he approached his objective. To anyone who happened to be on the look-out, the branch would look like a floating branch—nothing more.

Talbot touched the sandy bottom at last, and keeping a sharp look-out, he scrambled ashore. Then he drew in the branch and removed the bundle of clothes.

The island was thickly wooded right down to the water's edge, and after listening a moment Talbot removed his costume, rubbed himself down a little and dressed swiftly.

So far, so good. It was extremely unlikely that Jim Crow and his accomplice would be abroad yet, but the junior had taken no chances so far and he intended to take no risks now.

He plunged cautiously into the wood, and started to make his way inland towards the ruins. The sun was now high, and he felt warmer and ready for anything. The Abbey ruins come into sight at last, and Talbot proceeded more stealthily than ever.

He stopped at last. Before him, through a thin screen of foliage, lay the ruins, silent and with the bright sunshine gleaming on mossy, broken masonry. Some of the stone walls were still standing, shattered and gaunt, with here and there a high, arched window. Scattered around for a considerable distance were masses of stone, most of them overgrown with grass and weeds.

More than once had Talbot visited the ruins when on summer picnics, and often enough he had explored the vaults beneath. Few people other than St. Jim's fellows ever came to the island, however, and he realised that Crow and Bowyer could not wish for a safer hiding-place.

He watched the ruins for several minutes, his eyes fixed upon a jagged hole in the flagstones close to one of the walls.

It was the entrance to the vaults, and if the crooks had taken refuge on Abbey Island they would be found there, he felt sure.

He moved at last.

Not a sound had reached him. All was still save for an occasional rustle as a rabbit ran among the age-old stones.

He tiptoed across the flagstones and approached the hole in the ground. With heart beating fast, he reached it, and peered down. After listening for a moment or two he started down the broken, mossy steps.

At the bottom was a door—a shattered, massive oaken door, studded with great nails, that was always open. Talbot looked for it, and then he drew a deep breath.

The door was closed.

It could never have closed of its own accord. Talbot remembered trying to close it once when larking with his chums there. Only a man of great strength could have forced those rusted hinges to work.

But it was closed now. Talbot's heart beat faster, and he tiptoed the remaining steps, and peeped through a jagged hole in the old oak.

He could see nothing. But to his ears came the sound of soft breathing from within.

Talbot was sure of it. Someone was inside the cell—sleeping.

The junior caught his breath. Then he peered through again, striving to get a better view of the interior. And then it happened, with startling suddenness.

As he leaned against the door it gave under his weight and fell inwards.

Crash!

The noise of the heavy door falling, with all Talbot's weight against it, split the silence like a thunderclap.

It rang and echoed in the gloomy vaults behind.

Evidently the hinges had been broken off, and the door merely leaned against the opening with a wedge of wood only to hold it in place.

But Talbot had no time to wonder how the thing had happened. He lay half-stunned across the massive door, and as he did so a startled oath rang out. The next moment strong, rough hands were upon him, pinning him down to the door, and a heavy knee was pressed into his back.

"It's that blamed kid again, Jim!" came a hoarse, gasping growl. "It's that durned pal o' yours. We've got him again."

There was a sound of scrambling feet on the floor of the vault, and another man jumped into the bright daylight before the opening.

It was Jim Crow, and the other man was Bowyer.

Talbot had succeeded in his search—he had found the men he was after. But it was to avail him little.

He started to struggle; but it was hopeless, and he knew it. He could scarcely squirm in the big ruffian's grasp.

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Moreover, Crow was now standing by, ready to lend a hand, if necessary.

His hard face was grim.

"So you've turned up again, Toff!" he said curtly. "You blamed young fool! It would have paid you best to keep clear of us for a bit! But now you're here you'll stay. You won't escape us a second time, Toff! Tie him up and shove him with the other kid, Bowyer!"

And Talbot realised with a groan that his game was up. But he knew who was meant by "the other kid," and his heart thrilled. His guess had been right—he had found Koumi Rao! And Tom Merry knew where he had made for that morning. The game was not lost yet. Soon, he knew, his chums would be on the trail, and the thought filled him with renewed hope.

CHAPTER 12.

Crooke Speaks Out!

TOM MERRY came down from the Shell dormitory showing plain signs of having slept little. He did not go straight to his study, and it was from Kildare that he heard the news of Talbot's absence.

He met the captain of the school on the stairs, and Tom asked him for news of Koumi Rao.

"None!" said Kildare. "But you've no need to worry too much yet, kid," he added, noting the concern on Tom's face. "I can't tell you why, but the beaks don't think he's drowned. They think something else has happened to him! The police are on the job, and he may turn up yet!"

Tom nodded. He knew why the "beaks" didn't think that, but he knew better than to show that he knew. Before he could speak again, Kildare continued.

"But he isn't the only one missing this morning, Merry!" he said, surveying Tom Merry sharply. "When Talbot's breakfast was taken to the punishment-room a few minutes ago it was found that he'd gone."

"Gone?" repeated Tom blankly.

"Yes—the room was empty. But someone must have unbolted the door for him," said Kildare bluntly. "You were a pal of his, Merry. Do you know anything about it?"

"I know nothing about his going, Kildare!" stammered Tom, evading the question and speaking truthfully enough. "You mean he hasn't slept there during the night?"

"Yes—his bed has been slept in!" said Kildare. "But he must have bolted in the early morning. Anyway, he's gone, and someone will have to answer for it. Someone let him out—that's clear. If you find out anything about it, let me know, kid."

And Kildare passed on.

The junior was astounded. Yet he soon guessed what had happened. He had forgotten about the bolt, and Talbot had seen his chance and taken it. He had gone to search on his own for Koumi Rao!

Tom's chums were also astonished when they heard the news from him. And it was not until after breakfast that Tom found Talbot's note.

"Abbey Island!" breathed Tom, scanning the note in amazement. "That's where he's gone! My kat! Why didn't we think of those rascals sticking to the boat? That's just the place they would make for if they had a boat."

"What shall we do?" said Lowther. "He may run right into those men."

"I think we can trust Talbot not to do that!"

"Well, he was caught before, anyway!"

Tom nodded, frowning.

"Yes, but he'll be more on his guard this time. Anyway, I don't see what we can do, chaps! We'll have to leave it to him. But if he doesn't turn up in a reasonable time we're going after him, you fellows."

"Yes, rather!"

And Blake & Co. agreed with Tom there. They would give Talbot plenty of time in which to make an appearance, and if he failed to turn up they would know what to do.

Lessons seemed endless to Tom Merry & Co. that morning. Very few juniors could give their minds to work. The shadow hanging over the school kept them in a buzz of excited conjecture. Even the masters themselves were restless. But noon came at last, and Tom Merry soon learned that Talbot had not returned.

Even then the captain of the Shell was not much alarmed.

"He would know that if he came back the beaks would collar him and lock him up safely!" he told his chums sagely after dinner. "He's lying low somewhere, I fancy! He knows he's of more use to Koumi Rao free than locked up in the punishment-room. The beaks wouldn't give him another chance of escape."

"Wathah not! Nevahtheless, it is wathah wowwyin', deah boys!"

"It is!" agreed Tom glumly. "Still, we'll give him until afternoon classes!"

Afternoon lessons came and went, and then Tom began to realise that something had to be done. Inspector Grimes, from Wayland, had visited the school twice that morning, and he had interrogated Tom Merry and several other fellows known to be chums of Talbot and Koumi Rao. But the portly and pompous inspector had got nothing out of Tom, at all events.

When lessons ended Tom called his chums together, and they left the School House, determined to get out a boat and search Abbey Island for themselves.

As they crossed the quadrangle, Gerald Croke ran up to them.

"Any news of Talbot, Merry?" he asked Tom, his lips trembling.

"None—as far as I'm aware!" said Tom curtly. "But I don't think you need worry overmuch yet, Croke. He's out searching for Koumi Rao, I expect. You've not mentioned him to anyone, I hope?"

Croke's face set doggedly.

"I haven't yet," he muttered. "But someone ought to, Tom Merry! He may be in danger—grave danger! I can't keep silent if you can, Tom Merry. In any case, I mean to tell the Head everything. I shall own up to what I've done, and I don't care what happens to me. I'm going to speak up for Talbot!"

Tom eyed him in alarm, and some curiosity. He didn't imagine the cad of the Shell to possess any decent feelings. In the past Croke had rarely shown anything but hatred and envy for his cousin—the boy from the slums who had supplanted him in the favour and fortune of his uncle, Colonel Lyndon.

Yet obviously Croke was in real earnest now! His narrow escape from death in the racing mill-stream the previous night still filled in his mind. Possibly, as time wore on he would forget it, and his hatred of his cousin would revive. But just now remorse and regret were uppermost—the little good in Croke had the upper hand.

"Croke," said Tom earnestly, "don't breathe a word of this yet—not until Talbot tells you you can! You may do more harm than good if you open your mouth now! Do what Talbot told you and keep your mouth shut."

Gerald Croke did not answer. His face set doggedly, and he turned and walked away. Tom Merry seemed about to run after him, but he changed his mind and paused.

"He's spoofing!" said Blake, his lips curling. "The cad is merely gassing—he'll never dare to own up to his cadishness to the Head or anyone else! Let him rip!"

"I think you're right!" said Tom. "Come on!"

He turned abruptly and dismissed Croke from his mind. If he had seen the black sheep's further actions, however, he would not have done so so easily.

For Croke walked straight indoors and went along to the Head's study. His face was white as chalk, and his eyes were unnaturally bright. He had reached a decision at last, and for once the cad of the Shell showed real courage.

The Head was in his study, and Croke was soon standing before him. He could scarcely speak at first, but when he did start the words came out in a flood.

Dr. Holmes listened in amazement, and then he halted Croke and rang the bell. Toby answered it, and the Head



"Hold on, Toff!" Jim Crow's grasp tightened on Talbot's collar, and then the junior himself was able to help. He fought with hands and feet as the man above started to lift. (See Chapter 13.)

sent him for Mr. Railton, who was soon on the scene. The Head bade Croke tell his story again. And Croke, calmer now, did so.

He finished at last, and the Head looked at the House-master of the School House.

"All along I have had a suspicion that there was more behind Talbot's defiance than we suspected, Railton," he said quietly. "We were quite right, however, in our suspicion that those scoundrels were after Koumi Rao's property. And, thank Heaven, there is a good chance the boy has come to no harm."

"I could not bring myself to believe that he had, sir," said Mr. Railton, his face showing his excitement and astonishment. "He is a powerful swimmer, and is used to a boat. As you know, I held the opinion that those men were responsible for his disappearance, despite the inspector's opinion. Shall I order Kildare to get the prefects together? I will go up the river with them."

"Yes, yes! And I will ring up Inspector Grimes at once. You had better have one of the school boats in readiness for the police, Mr. Railton."

Mr. Railton was a man of prompt action, and he hurried out at once. Dr. Holmes took up the telephone, and the number he gave was that of the Wayland Police Station. Things were moving rapidly to a climax.

CHAPTER 13.

To the Rescue!

TOM MERRY & CO. lost no time in getting to the boathouse. Then they hurriedly got out a boat and started upstream at a good pace. Unlike Talbot, they did not trouble about caution yet.

In the note Talbot had said that he would search Abbey Island, and they made for it without ceremony.

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The sun was hot, and it was warm rowing. But they kept the pace up, though the oarsmen were streaming with perspiration by the time the island came in sight.

Tom did not fear the crooks. He knew he and his chums were more than a match for the men, if it came to a fight. But, under his orders, the boat was steered round the far side of the island, and soon it bumped against the sloping bank.

The juniors scrambled out, and the boat was dragged up high and dry. Tom hoped that by going round the island he would avoid suspicion if anyone was on the look-out, and he began to exercise greater caution now. It would be far better to take the rascals by surprise.

He led his chums into the woods, and made tracks for the ruins.

Through the trees they sighted the crooks at last. Tom parted the last screen of foliage and took a peep round.

As he did so his eyes gleamed.

"There they are!" he breathed. "I can see the rascals plainly. Make a dash when I give the word."

Jim Crow and his accomplice were there. They sprawled in the grass in the shadow of the high, broken wall of the ruins, quite close to the opening leading to the vaults. Both were smoking and talking, and, from the sound of their voices they were holding a heated argument.

As Tom Merry gave the word there was a startled shout from the cracksmen. That was all they had time for before the juniors were upon them.

Jim Crow fought like a fiend, and Tom Merry & Co. had more than a handful with him alone. Obviously, he saw that their chances were desperate, and he asked no quarter and gave none. Bowyer kicked and fought like a brute, but he soon had enough of it, and tried to make a desperate breakaway.

It was just at that moment that a cry rang out—a sharp cry, followed by the thud of falling stone.

With startling and unexpected suddenness it came, and the sounds seemed to come from far above their heads at some distance away.

But there was urgent appeal in the cry, and the juniors' hearts almost stood still for a brief instant. They ceased to fight, and Bowyer, at least, saw his chance and took it.

He sent the startled juniors rolling to right and left with vicious swings of his great fists, and then he leaped to his feet and ran for it.

"After him!" howled Blake, recovering himself. "Don't let that brute get away! After him!"

Herries, Digby, and Lowther stood for a second undecided, and then, as Blake himself pelted away after the man, they also gave chase at top speed, and vanished through the trees.

But Tom Merry and the rest did not go.

Tom had recognised that cry; it was the voice of Reginald Talbot. And, obviously, Jim Crow had recognised it also.

He made no attempt to escape, though he could easily have done so, for the juniors unconsciously had released their grip of him. He seemed to sense instantly what the cry and the sound of falling stones meant.

He gave a grunt and ran to an opening—a broken doorway, half-blocked with masonry—in the wall of the ruins. The wall was high with a great, arched window in it, in addition to the doorway. It was part of a nave-like structure, the best preserved part of the old abbey. Only the walls were standing now. They towered up, shattered and broken at the tops, roofless, and open to the blue sky above.

The floor was of flags, over which grass and moss had grown. But in one spot was a jagged hole, and near was a loose flagstone that had apparently covered it. The walls themselves formed part of a great high apartment, open only at the top, and at the doorway and window in the one wall. The walls were of rough stone, broken, time-worn, and covered with moss and lichen.

And both Koumi Rao and Talbot were there.

Talbot was high up at the top of the far wall, and he was hanging desperately by his fingers to the extreme edge, his feet vainly scraping the stonework for a foothold. Koumi Rao was half-way up, fingers and toes clinging to the rough stonework.

It was easy to guess what had happened.

Little dreaming that rescue was so near at hand, the two prisoners were making a desperate attempt to escape.

They had obviously found a way out of the vaults through the opening in the floor, and escape by the doorway had been hopeless with the men lounging outside.

Then the idea of climbing the far wall had occurred to them. There was a door in this wall, huge and massive, but the task of shifting it on its rusted immovable hinges was obviously an impossible one.

It was a desperate, dangerous venture. The stonework was crumbling to pieces, and gave no safe foothold or handgrip. Talbot had reached the top safely, but then

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disaster had overtaken him. The jutting stone under his feet had broken away and gone crashing downwards, and an involuntary cry of fear had escaped the junior.

But his fingers had retained their grip and now he hung downwards, unable to draw himself upwards, and vainly striving for foothold again.

Tom Merry took in the situation at a glance.

Talbot's danger was great. His fingers could not hold the weight of his body much longer. At any moment he might come crashing down—a fall that could only result in serious injury, if not death.

Tom shuddered.

"Hold on, Talbot!" he called, his voice shaking with anxiety. "Hold on, for Heaven's sake!"

He jumped over the rubbish in the doorway, but someone else was before him. Tom felt himself flung roughly aside, and the next moment he gasped as a short, wiry figure ran across the paved floor and began to climb up the wall swiftly, like a great cat.

It was Jim Crow!

The man's face was set grimly and his keen eyes were gleaming. Talbot had told them the man was an expert cat-burglar, and they had ample evidence of his skill now.

With scarcely a pause he went up and up, taking advantage of every jutting stone. With bated breath the juniors watched him. Koumi Rao had scarcely moved since they had appeared—he seemed helpless to move himself now.

"Keep still, kid."

The cracksmen snapped out the order curtly, and Talbot obeyed. He ceased to struggle and hung there limply. Crow was level with him now. Another moment and he was past him and astride the wall.

He paused a moment, obviously breathless, and then he stooped and took a grasp of Talbot's collar.

"Hold on, Toff—another second'll do it."

The man's grasp tightened on Talbot's collar, and then the junior himself was able to help. He fought with hands and feet as the man above started to lift, his face crimson with the strain, his teeth clenched and eyes staring.

It was soon accomplished—the grey-eyed man was amazingly strong, and almost before Talbot knew it he found himself astride the wall, half-fainting, and with Jim Crow's firm grasp still upon him.

"He's done it!" breathed Tom Merry. "Oh, thank Heaven! He's done it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors below watched, anxious still. They saw Talbot speak to the man, who grinned back, and after a glance about him pointed to the far side at what they could not see. At the same moment Talbot looked about him, and he seemed to see something else—something across the island that filled him with alarm.

He spoke hurriedly to his companion, and the grin faded swiftly from Jim Crow's sallow cheeks. He muttered a swift imprecation, and then he started to swarm along the wall, Talbot making his way behind him.

Both reached the end of the wall they were on, and then they vanished from the sight of the juniors.

"Come on!" snapped Tom Merry.

He started round the ruins, and the others followed. Reaching the far side, they soon saw, with gasps of relief, that Talbot's danger was over.

Here another wall dropped away in a series of shelving steps to a drop of some ten feet or so to the ground.

Jim Crow had already dropped when they rushed round, and Tom was in time to steady Talbot as he took the drop and landed unhurt on his feet.

"Thank Heaven, Talbot!" gasped Tom. "That fellow—"

But Talbot interrupted him almost fiercely.

"Where did you leave your boat?" he demanded.

Tom pointed in the direction from which he and his chums had come.

"Over there," he said. "You'll find it—"

But Talbot did not wait.

"Come on, Jim!" he panted. "Quickly!"

He started off, and the grey-eyed man went with him, none of the juniors attempting to stop him. The two vanished into the thick trees.

"Well, my only hat!" gasped Manners. "Going to let him go, Tommy?"

"Yes, and good luck to him," said Tom Merry quietly. "We could never have saved Talbot. You all right, Koumi, old chap?"

"Right as rain, Tom Merry," said Koumi Rao, who had made his way down again by this time. "I thought nothing could save Talbot then, my friends. That man—"

He broke off as a sudden crashing sounded from the trees. The next moment they realised just why Talbot and Jim Crow had made such a hurried departure.

It was not because they feared the juniors might attack again. For just then several figures burst from the trees.

One wore an inspector's uniform, and behind him were three constables, and Blake, Herries, Digby and Lowther.

Inspector Grimes was looking red and breathless, and he panted hard as he pounded up. The inspector's weight was not suitable for running.

"Where is he?" he gasped huskily. "Where's that other man? Quick, you young idiots!"

"Have you got the big fellow—Bowyer?" asked Tom Merry, anxious to delay things if he could.

"Yes, he ran right into us!" snorted Inspector Grimes. "We've got the beauty, lads! And now where's the other fellow? Have you got him?"

"He was here a minute ago," said Tom.

"Has he gone?" bellowed the inspector, fairly bristling with sudden wrath. "You—you young idiots! Which way did he go—quick?"

"That way," said Tom, pointing vaguely in the direction Talbot and the man had taken.

"Oh, you—you—"

Inspector Grimes spluttered wrathfully, and then set off at a run again, the constables pounding at his heels.

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus, wiping his perspiring brow. "I suppose you did quite wight in pointin' out the way for old Gwimes, Tom Mewwy. But I hope that wascal gets away. Cwook or no cwook, he is a vevy bwave and unselfish man. He sacrificed his own chance of escape in ordah to save Talbot."

"Hear, hear!"

"And I do, too," said Tom Merry grimly. "It isn't the first time he's done that for Talbot, either. I hope he does get away, and good luck to him, and blow old Grimes! But I fancy he will get away—Talbot will see to that. He took him towards our boat, anyway. I wouldn't have given Grimey the tip if I hadn't been certain of that."

And Tom Merry meant it.

CHAPTER 14.

The Clouds Lift!

"HURRY, Jim—hurry!"

And Jim Crow did hurry—he had no desire to make the acquaintance of Inspector Grimes and his men. He followed at Talbot's heels as the junior raced recklessly through the wood, heedless of scratches and tumbles. The game was obviously up—he did not doubt that Bowyer was captured, and he knew what that ruffian's loyalty was worth. They had played their last card, and had failed.

Talbot reached the edge of the island, and he pointed to the boat drawn up.

"Here you are, Jim!" he panted. "Make straight for the far side, then dive into the woods—and you'll have to take your chance then. And—and, Jim, go straight after this! It pays in the end. Now—go! And good luck to you!"

He shook hands with his comrade of old, and then, as Jim Crow jumped into the boat, Talbot pushed him off. The man grinned back at him and grasped the sculls. The boat swept out into the river and shot towards the far shore.

Talbot watched it a brief moment, and then he hurried away along the bank, his face clouded and anxious. He had done his best, although he was not finished yet. There was a queer lump in his throat, and his eyes glimmered curiously. It was the very least he could do for the reckless criminal who had first saved his liberty and now his life.

It made the junior feel sick at heart as he thought of the strange mixture of good and bad in the man who preferred a life of crime to an honest one.

The junior came in sight of what he sought at last.

It was a boat grounded on the sand—a big school boat, but obviously the one that the police had arrived in.

And it was unguarded. With a thrill of joy, Talbot saw that not a soul was near it, and he hurried forward to it, his eyes gleaming.

He dragged out the sculls and flung them far out into the river. Then he shoved the boat off and sent it rocking out into midstream.

"Marooned!" he muttered, with a grim laugh. "I expect old Grimes will suspect me, but that can't be helped. In any case, I'm finished at St. Jim's. And now to face the music!"

And with that Talbot set off towards the ruins again. He had had his fling; he had defied all authority and even the law, and now he had to pay the price. Of one thing he was resolutely determined, however, and that was that he would not speak a word of his secret either to the Head or the police until he knew that Jim Crow was safely out of the district and out of reach of the law.

But a surprise was in store for Reginald Talbot.

He reached the ruins, to find Tom Merry & Co. still there with Koumi Rao, who was detailing his adventures to them and showing the juniors the secret flagstone he and Talbot had found while exploring the vault where they had been imprisoned. At the ruins also was a constable, standing

guard over the sullen, savage-faced Bowyer, who lay on the ground handcuffed. Evidently the constable had followed the inspector, dragging his unwilling prisoner with him.

Talbot drew Tom Merry on one side.

"Who brought the police on the scene, Tom?" he asked curtly. "Somebody must have done. Was it one of you fellows? I can't think it was you, Tom."

Tom frowned and shook his head.

"I don't know, Talbot," he said quietly. "It wasn't one of us. We came on our own."

Talbot nodded and drew a deep breath of relief. He was satisfied.

"It was Crooke, I fancy," said Tom, after a pause. "He said he was going to own up to the Head as we were starting out, and I told him not to. I didn't dream that he meant to do it. But he must have done. If he did, though, it was not through malice this time, Talbot. He did it for your sake. Anyway, we shall soon know."

It was not long before Tom Merry & Co. learned the truth. Inspector Grimes and his men came trudging back to the ruins, the portly inspector fuming and mopping his perspiring brow. He fumed still more as he found that Bowyer's accomplice and leader was still missing. He eyed Talbot very queerly, but he said nothing beyond asking he and Koumi Rao a few questions regarding their imprisonment. But he suddenly remembered that he had left the boat unguarded—the sort of mistake Inspector Grimes often made—and he led a stampede back to the spot where he had left it. He stamped up and down the bank with rage when he found it had gone, and glimpsed it drifting downstream in the distance.

Then Tom Merry & Co. made the discovery that their boat had gone—a discovery they had fully expected to make—and the inspector almost tore his hair.

But the party were not fated to be marooned on Abbey Island for long. A big boat came into sight soon afterwards, and in it were Mr. Railton, Kildare, and three more seniors. Soon the marooned party were being ferried across to the mainland, where the Housemaster ordered all the juniors back to school at once.

But he found a far different Dr. Holmes from what he had expected.

"I have heard the full story, Talbot," said Dr. Holmes quietly. "Your cousin—Crooke—has told me all. You have done very wrong indeed, my boy. You should have confided in me, your headmaster. And yet both Mr. Railton and myself feel we can scarcely be unduly severe with you in the circumstances. Yours was an unhappy predicament to be in. Moreover, you have wiped away a great deal of your wrongdoing by your brave rescue of your cousin in the mill-stream. That act alone has saved you from the severest penalty—expulsion. It was in an attempt to repay a debt you owed to that wretched man that you sinned, and I feel I cannot punish you for that. The fact that, as Kildare tells me, the man has since added to that debt at the abbey ruins makes me feel that he was, after all, worthy in no little measure of your gratitude. I shall not punish you, Talbot, nor shall I punish your cousin. You and he have, I am assured, suffered enough, and this should be a lesson to him especially. You may take your place in the school as usual, my boy."

And with a kindly nod Dr. Holmes dismissed him; and Talbot left the study dazedly, scarcely able to believe his good-fortune.

Talbot felt there was only one thing needed now to fill him with deep thankfulness, and that was the knowledge that Jim Crow had escaped.

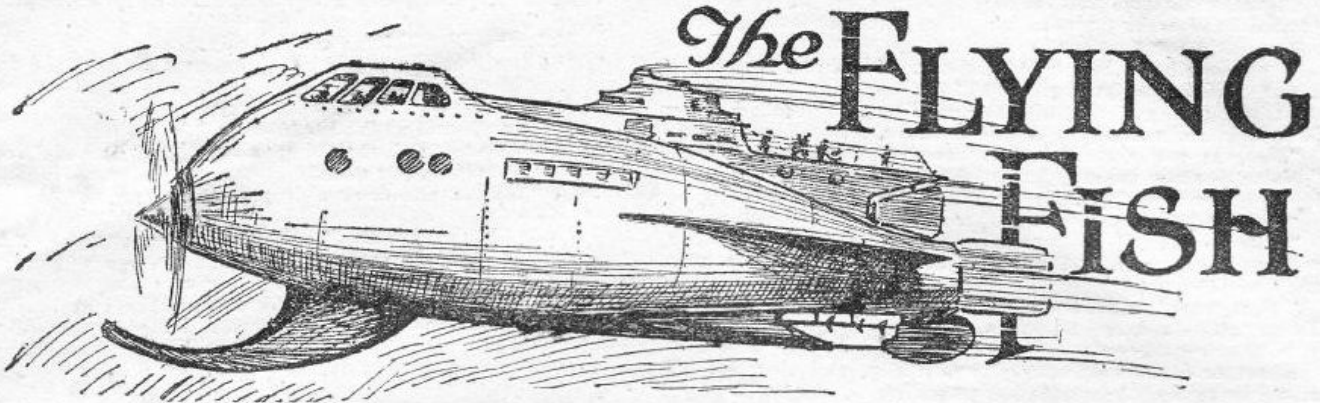
And that knowledge did come; for the grey-eyed man was not captured. But only Talbot himself—and Tom Merry, to whom he confided—ever knew how he escaped,

There is little more to be told. The Star of the East was sent back from the bank at Wayland to India, and no one was more glad to hear that it had gone than Koumi Rao himself. And Bowyer received a long term of imprisonment for attempted burglary and kidnapping—a sentence he richly deserved.

As for Talbot, he took his place in the Shell as usual the next morning, and from the ovation he received it was clear his popularity had not suffered; quite the reverse! But often when his thoughts turned to Jim Crow his eyes would glisten, and he would wonder whether his old comrade in crime would ever cross his path again and give him the opportunity of repaying the double debt he owed him.

THE END.

(There will be another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's GEM, entitled: "TOM MIX JUNIOR!" Don't miss it, whatever you do.)



Just when Rodney and his companions are congratulating themselves that they have succeeded in eluding the clutches of the tyrant, Boronov, Fate steps in and plays them a very scurvy trick!

INTRODUCTION.

Rodney Blake and his chum, Dan Lea, are captured by Prince Karaginski and taken aboard a strange-looking craft resembling in shape an airship and a boat combined. Almost immediately this huge craft rises from the surface of the sea and speeds them away to the "Valley of No Escape." Here, in charge of Herr Boronov, Colonel Stangerfeld, Wummburg, and a host of armed guards, are thousands of prisoners building at desperate speed a fleet of Flying Fish, the invention of a man named Ashton, now a madman in the hands of the conspirators. With this formidable fleet the heads of the conspiracy hope to conquer the world. Following a rumpus with Wummburg, Rodney to his amazement comes face to face with his father, a news correspondent. Adrian Blake hurriedly explains that he has gained access to the conspirators' stronghold with a view to encouraging the half-starved slaves to revolt against their task-masters. The deception is discovered, however, almost as soon as the revolution begins, and Adrian Blake, together with Rodney, Lord Braxton and Karaginski, whom Boronov has accused of being a traitor, are sentenced to be shot. By a miraculous escape the party, with the exception of Karaginski, escape with their lives. The arrival of three Soviet planes shortly after this forces the intrepid adventurers to seek refuge in the Flying Fish. Capture seems almost certain again when Ashton, the mad inventor, restored to reason in some miraculous way, comes to the rescue and sets the Flying Fish in motion. With the three enemy planes in pursuit the Flying Fish is making good progress when Adrian Blake and his companions discover to their horror a squadron of planes ahead of them trying to cut them off.

(Now read on.)

A Fight to the Death!

IT was perfectly true. Adrian Blake and the inventor had set the course of the Flying Fish west, with the intention of crossing Europe direct for England. Like a swarm of angry wasps, the nine Soviet planes—four of them heavy bombers, and the remaining five fast-flying smaller ones for aerial attack—were rising fast to form a bristling screen across their path.

"It would be a cloudless night as well!" muttered Adrian Blake, with a shrug of his shoulders. "If it was anything else, we might easily give them the slip. There's nothing for it but to try and dodge them, and—if we can't—put up a fight. The ship's fully armed, so we can give Boronov a taste of his own medicine."

While Adrian Blake and the wounded inventor were left in the control cabin to manœuvre the vessel, Rodney and Sacha, Lord Braxton and the doctor, set about making preparations for the battle in the air which it was evident would have to be fought. Dan was down in the engine-room, helping Larry O'Hagan to keep the motors fed and running smoothly, and could not be spared.

The others placed themselves at stations from which the armament of the Flying Fish could be used to the best advantage. The heavy machine-guns were soon ready with their belts of bullets, and the small but highly explosive aerial torpedoes waiting to be discharged. It was discovered that a dozen large bombs placed in the hull of the airship could be dropped by the pressure of electric buttons in the control cabin.

It was a ridiculously small force with which to man a vessel of this size and attempt to fight the Soviet planes which, before very long had passed, were hot in pursuit and drawing closer and closer round them like a net. But they were full of heart, and Rodney especially was glowing with anticipation of the coming clash; and Sacha, with the bitter memory of his father's murder at the hands of Boronov, was determined to do what he could to avenge it.

"It won't be my fault if they stop us, old fellow!" he said to Rodney, as they shook hands on a good fight.

Sacha went to his station forward on the port side, and had scarcely been there five minutes when he drew first blood.

One of the smaller, fast-flying planes had come inquisitively close, following the same course as the Flying Fish, and probably imagining that those on board it were unarmed. But Sacha let a small aerial torpedo go winging, and it caught the fellow right amidships, breaking the back of the plane and exploding so violently that at such close quarters the shock made even the Flying Fish rock slightly. The next moment the enemy plane went hurtling earthwards in flaming fragments.

Almost simultaneously, another plane coming impudently close to Rodney on the starboard side, he let fly with his heavy machine-gun, pouring a leaden hail upon the pilot and his companion, clearly visible in the cockpit. The effect was instantaneous and terrible, showing that the gun had been well-aimed. Both the pilot and his companion had been struck, for they could be seen lolling over one side in a heap, while their machine, now out of control, nose-dived, and began to spin in a terrifying descent downwards out of sight.

Apparently those two sharp lessons as to the ability of those in the Flying Fish to hold their own caused the rest of the attacking force to be more careful in their approach, for they hung off a little. No doubt they were holding a hurried consultation with each other by wireless, for they descended to a lower height and drew in together.

Of this momentary hesitation Adrian Blake took advantage by suddenly having the course of the airship altered to a southerly direction, and the reason for this was clear to Rodney at once. Out of the south-west a dense black storm-cloud was moving fast, and towards this the Flying Fish was soon making a swift, easy flight. Also, being so quickly and easily manœuvred as she was, she had the advantage of the more cumbersome planes, themselves taken a little by surprise at the change in course.

However, they were not long in deciding what to do, especially the three big planes from the valley. These were now nearer to the Flying Fish than the others, but still too far off to attempt any attack. So the lads left their stations for a while returning to the control cabin to find that Adrian Blake had been at the wireless, intercepting the messages in Russian which had been passing among the enemy craft.

"I've collected quite a deal of interesting information," he said, after congratulating Sacha and Rodney on the success of their first air-fights. "Boronov and Von Roden are in one of those planes from the valley. They've given up trying to prevent us from flying beyond Russian territory, and they are out to follow us and destroy us at all costs. They've wirelessed to an army air-station on the Black Sea coast to meet and attack us, so—unless we can make that storm and hide before the Black Sea squadron sight us—we must be ready for more trouble."

And here news came startlingly of further trouble, as unexpected as it looked to be disastrous. Dan appeared at the control-cabin door in his shirt-sleeves, and grimy with oil and dirt.

"Mister O'Hagan be reckoning the starboard motor's crotching up!" he exclaimed. "He's doing what he can to it; but we'll have to go slow," he said.

A hurried glance at the speedometer showed that this had swung back violently already, while the movement of the airship as well had become less smooth. The floor had taken a slight list. At the same time Dr. Fraser, who had been for'ard in a cabin redressing the wound of the inventor, Ashton, came along with more bad news.

"There are about six planes ahead of us, sprung up out of nowhere," he said, not knowing that the others already were expecting an attack that way. "And poor Ashton's done too much already, Blake. He's been a plucky fellow, but I'm afraid he can't last more than another hour or so. You'll have to carry on."

"I'll do that!" nodded Adrian Blake grimly, and turned to Dan. "Tell Larry to do his best. Everything depends on him!"

It certainly did look as if the Flying Fish and those on board her were face to face with their last hour. The slightly listing vessel, no longer flying with smooth ease, but rather limping south in her effort to gain the shelter of that approaching storm-cloud, seemed to have become an easy prey of the droning winged hornets all but surrounding her.

When Rodney and Sacha returned to their fighting stations, the Russian planes were closing in on the unfortunate airship to the north and west, while in the southwest the six fresh craft were fast rising to meet her. Adrian Blake had swung her round more to the south, and down below, in the engine-room, O'Hagan was toiling like a fury to sweeten the temper of the faulty motor. From his fighting station, Rodney realised that they had passed out of Russia, for below—terrifically far below—there gleamed a vast stretch of water—the Black Sea, as he knew.

Apparently O'Hagan had effected some improvement to the motor as time passed with a grir slowness, for the list became less, and the speed quickened a little. This, however had not happened too soon, for the enemy planes were massing around them, three machines making directly for the Flying Fish on Rodney's side.

This time, when the right moment came, he did not use the machine-gun, but loosed an aerial torpedo at the nearest craft. It was a lucky shot, for the machine crumpled and wheeled earthwards. But the other two swept on closer, sending spurts of machine-gun fire at the Flying Fish, and evidently trying to rise and fly over her, with the intention of dropping bombs on her.

They were frustrated in this by Adrian Blake, who made her rise vertically, a manoeuvre which the planes could not imitate, and so were at a disadvantage. For some time, by this means of vertical lift and fall, it was really Adrian Blake who kept the enemy at bay, while always the Flying Fish crept southward, with the angry enemy always just prevented from crippling or even striking her, although repeated attempts to bomb her were made.

More than once, in the thrill of that ding-dong fight, Rodney thought of peaceful little Tidewell on the rocky Devon coast, and of the night when he had first seen the grey, grim shape of the Flying Fish emerge from Littleworth Cove's smooth waters. How little then had he imagined he was to pass through the amazing adventures he had since shared with Dan! To-night, thousands of feet above the Black Sea, ringed round by death, he was wondering if he would ever see Tidewell and Littleworth Cove again.

It needed only one bomb from those big Soviet planes to strike the Flying Fish in some vital spot for the end to come—a terrible end, too awful to think of. And so that he should not think of it he got busy with his machine-gun, peppering every enemy craft which came into his line of fire, till suddenly he became aware that fortune had at last given them a helping hand. The Flying Fish had begun to pass out of the clear moonlight, and was becoming swallowed up by a dense, black cloud, heavy with rain.

This did not happen without a certain amount of shock to the vessel, for the storm was evidently a terrific one. When the prow of the Flying Fish met the full force of it presently it seemed as if she had been struck a heavy blow, from which she staggered, and once again her list became more noticeable. With no more enemy craft in sight, Rodney made his way back to the control-cabin to find his father anxiously telephoning down to O'Hagan.

"You must keep her going, Larry," he was saying. "If you can only do that, we're safe enough now. This storm's our one chance for a get-away. I'm running her due south. We're just about making Asia Minor now. If we can only keep her going till we reach Egypt, we shall be all right."

"Can he do it?" asked Rodney, as his father finished speaking.

The latter nodded.

"He's doing his best. He's not so sure now that it is altogether the motor. He's trying to find out what it is. Anyhow, it'll take Boronov and his planes all their time to find us now, so that's something. If we find presently that we can't keep her going, we'll have to descend and take our chances where we land. So long as the elevators don't go groggy we shall be all right. All the same, I wish Ashton was fit to take charge. He might so easily be able to put things right."

Ashton, however, was only semi-conscious and lying down, Rodney discovered when he went at his father's suggestion to find out how the inventor was. So the Flying Fish had to pursue her crippled way through the black storm, which was striking her broadside on. It was to Rodney an eerie sensation, being carried through this dense gloom, unable to see or know where they were.

"It must end somewhere, Sacha," he said presently to the Russian lad, when it had seemed as though they had been hours creeping through the storm area. "It says something for the strength of the Flying Fish that she just sort of shook herself for a minute and doesn't seem to mind it. There's one thing about it, old Boronov and his planes will have been forced to make a bolt to earth if some of them haven't been smashed up. Once out of this we've no more to worry about."

Not long after the end of the black storm area was reached, and the Flying Fish emerged into a grey dawn. They were, Rodney and Sacha could see, over land and not very high above it, though too high to make out clearly in the poor light what sort of country it was. They could see, however, that the land came to an end quite near towards the south, and a town with a harbour lay on the coast.

(Continued on next page.)

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"THE FLYING FISH!"

(Continued from previous page.)

"This must be Asia Minor, and that will be the Mediterranean," said Rodney, with relief. "We shan't be long getting to Egypt now, and that's British, so we shall have beaten old Boronov after all."

He had scarcely said this when a queer, grating noise sounded harshly through the vessel, startling them. Hurrying out of the cabin to discover what it meant, they found that Dan and the Irishman had come tumbling up from the engine-room below and were racing towards the control-cabin, pale and anxious under their grime.

"It's the fore elevator gone smash, Blake!" O'Hagan was yelling. "Have a care, man, or we're in for a frightful crash."

From the control-cabin, with his hand on a lever and alarmed eyes staring at the height register, Adrian Blake shouted back some reply. But the worst was evidently to be feared. The fore-part of the airship was dipping violently, and she began to swing round in a circle. Like a great bird with her back broken, she seemed to be choosing some spot to which she could flutter downwards.

"It's the end, it is, after all!" said the Irishman, as Lord Braxton and Dr. Fraser, white of face, joined them. "It's the end, and a nasty end, too, my friends. She's going, and taking us with her. A stiff upper-lip, bhoys, and meet it like men!"

Rodney, from a window, could see the country below seeming to move up quickly to meet them, and he stiffened himself. A few minutes since he had felt so sure they would reach Egypt and safety. And now—he and Dan would see Tidewell no more. How could they? The Flying Fish was hurtling downwards, swinging round in an ungainly circle all the while. With every passing second the ground was nearer. Only a few hundred feet now separated them from the final crash.

And she was packed with violent explosives! Rodney gripped Dan by one hand and Sacha with the other.

"Anyhow, we're all three going together," he said, as the Flying Fish gathered speed in her fall and, with great tearing noises of metal breaking away, hurtled faster and faster downwards.

Good-bye to the Flying Fish!

RODNEY closed his eyes, awaiting as bravely as he might the sickening thud and crash which he hoped might bring instant death rather than mutilation and a long agony. He dimly heard the high-pitched voice of the wounded inventor, Ashton, shouting something to his father about a safety-clutch; and, reopening his eyes, he saw the gaunt figure of the inventor clambering in at the control-cabin door.

"Whatever he does now won't matter much!" Rodney afterwards remembered saying to himself. Yet, in the next minute he must have done something, for the downward rush was perceptibly checked, becoming suddenly far more gradual, with the airship still circling round in an ungainly spiral.

When the control-cabin part of the ship did at last reach ground it was not with the sickening thud and devastating disaster which Rodney had expected. All the same, it was with sufficient violence to fling him off his feet and send him dashing against the main airship-door. The next moment this door opened outwards with a crash, and sent both Rodney and Dan headlong into the open air. They found themselves half buried in sand.

But the two boys did not remain there longer than an instant, for the fore-part of the airship had reached the ground only to be blown into fragments sky-high through the concussion of the explosive stored in it. Adrian Blake and the elder men, carrying the wounded inventor with them, had already leaped from the ship as the two lads lifted themselves from the sand.

"Run like blazes!" Adrian Blake shouted to them. "As far from her as you possibly can get!"

There was indeed little need of the warning. Explosion after explosion came from the shattered inside of the great broken vessel, dense clouds of smoke belching from her, and flames beginning ravenously to devour the wreckage. It was a terrible and awe-inspiring sight which the lads looked upon at last when, breathless after ploughing a hurried way over the desert sand, they came to a standstill on a hillock and gazed upon the last of the Flying Fish.

For a long time the continued roar of explosions shook even the ground on which they stood so far off. The flames grew faster and bigger with an amazing speed. Machine-gun bullets were going off wholesale, and the air became so dangerously thick with flying missiles that the whole party hurriedly took shelter behind the sand hillock when some of them came uncomfortably close.

(For the concluding chapters of this powerful serial, see next week's GEM.)



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