"THE TOFF'S CHANCE!" GRIPPING YARN FEATURING REGINALD TALBOT AS A BOOT-BOY AT ST. JIM'S INSIDE.

The GEM 2d

'RATTY' GETS THE BOOT!

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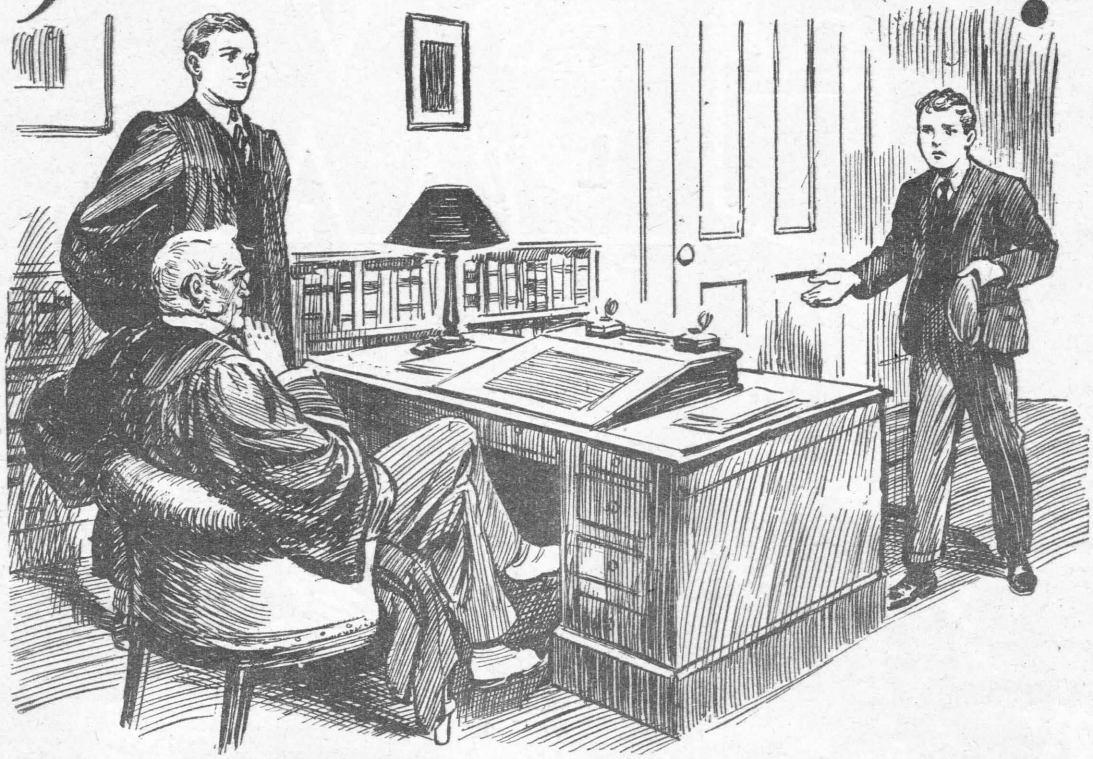
REGINALD TALBOT, THE ONE-TIME SCHOOLBOY CRACKSMAN, RETURNS TO ST. JIM'S —AS THE NEW HOUSE BOOT-BOY!

The TOFF'S CHANCE!



"Mr. Ratcliff has discharged the boot-boy in the New House," said Talbot. "He wants another boy to take his place. I thought that perhaps you might speak a word for me." The Head looked surprised. "You wish for the place?" he asked. "Yes, sir," said Talbot.

CHAPTER 1.
"Boots" on the Warpath!

"HANG his boots!"

"Hallo!"

"Blow his boots!"

"By Jove!"

"Bust his boots!"

Figgins & Co., the heroes of the New House at St. Jim's, stared in surprise at Hooper. Figgins & Co. were just coming down the stairs, being bound for the School House, where Tom Merry & Co. were entertaining a little party to tea.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were in a hurry to get to the School House—especially Wynn. But they stopped as they caught sight of Hooper.

Hooper was the boy who filled the honourable position of "boots" in the New House at St. Jim's. He was generally a mild and civil youth, but there wasn't much mildness or civility about him now.

He was carrying a pair of boots in his hand—Mr. Ratcliff's boots. Mr. Horace Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House, was very particular about his boots. He was fussy and fault-finding in very many things, and there were few persons under his authority who had not cause to dislike him.

All the fellows who belonged to the New House at St. Jim's had experienced the sharp edge of Mr. Ratcliff's tongue more than once. Naturally, boots had found it sharper than the

schoolboys. Mr. Ratcliff had a way of nagging servants, which led to frequent changes in the staff of the New House—a contrast to the School House, under Mr. Railton's rule, where such changes were very uncommon.

Hooper was apparently bringing those boots away from Mr. Ratcliff's study, after having taken them there, and he was furious.

His remarks were not addressed to anybody in particular. They were hurled into space loudly and emphatically. He blowed and busted Mr. Ratcliff's boots in a voice that was quite possibly audible in the Housemaster's study itself.

"What's the matter, kid?" asked Figgins kindly over the banisters, as the Co. stopped at this unwonted display on the part of boots.

Hooper looked up at the three juniors on the stairs and snorted.

"It's 'is blessed boots!"

"Ratty's?" asked Kerr sympathetically.

"Yes. Look 'ere!" The boot-boy held the boots up for inspection. "Ain't they clean? Look at 'em! That's wot I say—look!"

Figgins & Co. smiled and inspected the boots. Certainly they looked very nice, and the Co. said so.

Hooper gave a snort of deep disgust.

"Which he's in one of his tantrums," he said disrespectfu'ly. "And he's told me to take 'em away and clean 'em properly! Ain't they cleaned properly—wot?"

"Ahem!" murmured Figgins.

If Mr. Ratcliff was in one of his "tantrums" it was not surprising that he had come down heavily on the boot-boy, who had been unfortunate enough to be nearest. The thunderbolt might have fallen on Figgy himself, or anybody else who happened to be near the ill-tempered Housemaster. As the juniors often remarked, Mr. Ratcliff was a beast, but not a just beast.

"So I says bust his boots!" said Hooper. "I ain't goin' to stand it! That I ain't! Which 'ere he's been out and got his boots muddy, and calls on me in the middle of the arternoon to shine 'em, which I does. It ain't my dooty by no means to clean boots in the arternoon; and now he says, says he, 'Go and clean 'em again, you lazy young rascal!' I ain't goin' to stand it!"

"'Shush!" murmured Figgins.

"I says blow his boots!"

"You'll get into a row, kid!" said Fatty Wynn. "Better go and blow off steam in the boot-room; it's safer there."

"Bust his boots—and bust him!"

"'Shush, you young fathead!" said Figgins, anxious for the boot-boy, in the kindness of his heart. "You'll get the sack, you know!"

Hooper gave another emphatic snort.

"I don't care if I does!" he said.

POWERFUL LONG YARN OF FOOTBALL, FUN AND EXCITEMENT, IN WHICH THE TOFF FINDS HIS PAST LIFE A HEAVY BURDEN IN HIS EFFORT TO MAKE GOOD!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD

"Now my father's got a fried-fish shop in the Mile End Road, I ain't bound to stick it if I don't want to. And I ain't goin' to. I ain't a slave——"

"'Shush!"

"Called me a lazy young rascal, and said he would box my ears!" spluttered Hooper, evidently boiling with indignation. "I ups and says to him, 'No, you won't!' says I. 'Git houter this room, you impertinent young vagabond!' he said."

"Hallo! What's all that thundering row about?" asked Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, coming along the passage. "You young rascals ragging the boot-boy?"

"No fear!" said Figgins. "Not a bit of it."

"It's all right, Monteith," said Kerr. And he added in a whisper over the banisters to the boot-boy: "Hook it, you young ass!"

"Clear off, Hooper!" said the prefect. "Don't hang about here with your boots."

He did not speak unkindly, but Hooper was not in a reasonable mood. For a very long time Hooper had stood what he termed the "airs and grices" of Mr. Ratcliff, having no resource for a livelihood but his job as boot-boy in the New House at St. Jim's.

But matters were changed now that his parents had opened a fishshop in the Mile End Road. With that and dazzling resources behind him, Hooper could afford to be independent. The proverb says that a worm will turn. Hooper had turned at last. The "push" no longer had any terrors for him.

"Who are you torkin' to, Master Monteith?" said Hooper defiantly.

The Sixth Former stared at him.

"Hallo! What did you say? Clear off, kid!" went on Monteith kindly enough, guessing that the boy was fresh from one of Mr. Ratcliff's raggings. "Don't jaw so much, or you may get into trouble."

"Which I says, I ain't standin' it! Bust the boots!"

"Hooper!" called out Mrs. Kenwigg, the House dame, from a distance. "Hooper, come downstairs at once!"

"Which he ain't satisfied with his boots, ma'am," replied Hooper. "And if he ain't satisfied—why, he can clean 'em himself!"

"Now, cut off!" said Monteith.

"Blow his boots—and blow him!"

"Mr. Ratcliff will hear you, you young duffer——"

"Let 'im 'ear me!" vociferated Hooper. "Let 'im! Don't I keep on tellin' you that I ain't standin' it any longer? The old blighter!"

"Hooper!"

"I ain't in this 'ere school like you and can't get hout!" said Hooper, evidently comparing his position in the New House very favourably with that of Figgins & Co. and Monteith. "I can go when I like! I ain't under 'is blessed thumb! Box my ears, will he? By gosh, let him try it on!"

"Hallo! Is this a circus, or a meeting, or what?" asked Sefton of the Sixth, lounging on the scene. "What is that young blackguard kicking up a row for?"

"Blackguard yourself!" retorted Hooper promptly.

The bully of the Sixth jumped. Never had he dreamed of receiving such a reply from such a person as a boot-boy.

"Why, you cheeky young hound!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, you go and chop chips!" said Hooper. "And don't put your paws on me, or you'll get a boot in the eye—and sharp!"

Sefton, who was reaching out, backed away very suddenly, as Hooper swung a boot into the air. Figgins & Co. burst into a chuckle. The sudden retreat of the Sixth Form bully tickled them.

Mr. Ratcliff's door opened. The Housemaster had heard the noise in the passage, and he looked out of his study, with a thunderous frown on his always sour face.

"What is this?" he snapped. "Hooper, how dare you make a disturbance in this passage? How dare you, I say! Do you want to be discharged?"

"Which I don't care twopence!" said Hooper independently.

"What—what?"

"Blow your boots, Ratty—and blow you!" said Hooper.

"Wha-a-at!"

"And if you want 'em cleaned again, you clean 'em yourself!" said Hooper. "Box my ears, will you? You jest try it on, Mr. Ratty Ratcliff, and see how quick you git a oner in the weskit!"

Reginald Talbot, now pardoned for his past crimes, is made very welcome by Tom Merry & Co. when he returns to St. Jim's as a boot-boy. But to Mr. Ratcliff the presence of the Toff is far from welcome, and the sour-tempered, snobbish Housemaster does his worst to ruin the Toff's chance of a new start in life!

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The boot-boy's loud voice had brought a dozen fellows into the passage, and there was an irresistible burst of laughter at his extraordinary address to the Housemaster. Never had such plain language been addressed to Mr. Horace Ratcliff in his own House.

And the juniors—who would have given a great deal to be able to address Mr. Ratcliff in a like strain—enjoyed it exceedingly.

The New House master stood transfixed. For some moments he could only gasp. Then he strode towards the boot-boy, his gown rustling, his eyes gleaming.

"You—you impertinent young rascal! You are discharged! You hear me? You are discharged on the spot!"

"Who cares?" jeered Hooper. "Which I'm ready to go, and jolly glad to see the last of you!"

"You—you vagabond! I—I will thrash you before you go! I will——"

"'Ands off, you old codger!" said Hooper, swinging up the boots. "I've 'arf a mind to let you 'ave 'em in the neck now!"

"Good—good heavens! Boy—wretch—rascal!"

"Bow-wow!" said Hooper disrespectfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Boys! How dare you laugh at this—this vulgar and blackguardly display?" shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. "Every boy present will take fifty lines! Hooper, you—you young rascal—you unspeakable hooligan——"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"I said shut up, and I mean shut up!" retorted Hooper. "I'm a-goin' this blessed arternoon, and I 'ope you'll like cleanin' your own rotten boots in the mornin', old Ratty! And afore I go I'll tell you wot I thinks of you, and wot all the fellers thinks of you, only they don't dare to say so. You're a bully! You're a nagger! And I'm glad to 'ave done with yer!"

"Oh crumbs!" murmured Kerr. "Ratty is getting it straight from the shoulder this time!"

Mr. Ratcliff, red with rage, fairly rushed at the boot-boy. Hooper swung up the boots, and hurled one of them, and there was a thud as it crashed upon Mr. Ratcliff's chest. Then it clumped on the floor as the Housemaster staggered against the wall, gasping.

"Seize him!" panted Mr. Ratcliff. "Monteith—Sefton, seize him—ruffian—the—the——"

Monteith made no movement, but Sefton ran at the boot-boy. He staggered back as the second boot whizzed through the air and caught him under the chin. Sefton ingloriously rolled over on the floor, with a loud bump and a louder howl.

"Well bowled!" gasped Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Hooper stalked independently away, unpursued, and retreated triumphantly to the lower regions. Mr. Ratcliff, gasping and casting a furious glance round, retreated into his study, and closed the door with a bang. His dignity had suffered very much in that ridiculous encounter with the rebellious boot-boy, and he realised it very keenly. And he knew that all the onlookers had enjoyed the scene, which added to his annoyance and rage.

A quarter of an hour later, Hooper, the rebel, with a bag in his hand, shook the dust of St. Jim's from his feet. And Figgins & Co., who had lingered to give the boot-boy a tip before he went, took their way to the School House, brimming with merriment.

CHAPTER 2.
The Guest of Honour!

"TALBOT'S not here!" remarked Tom Merry.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, the Terrible Three of the Shell, were in their study in the School House, looking very cheerful.

The study table was laid for tea, and the "spread" was one of unusual dimensions and plentifulness. A guest of honour was expected that afternoon.

Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, the chums of Study No. 6, came in, looking very cheerful also. They, too, were looking forward to the arrival of the expected and distinguished guest.

"Bai Jove, Talbot hasn't awwived!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Talbot not here?" said Blake. "It's nearly six!"

"I twust he is not goin' to disappoint us, deah boys," said D'Arcy. "I am weally lookin' forward to seein' old

Talbot again! Besides, I've thought of an ideah!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that statement very impressively.

But somehow or other the juniors did not seem to be very much impressed.

D'Arcy waited a moment for eager inquiries as to what the idea might be, but they did not come. The swell of St. Jim's sniffed, and polished his famous monocle, and jammed it into his eye.

"I wemarked that I have an ideah, deah boys," he said.

"Whose?" yawned Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, I twust you will not be funny on a sewious subject. I have thought of a wheeze for gettin' old Talbot back to St. Jim's."

"Get it off your chest!" said Tom Merry. "Might be something in it. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings——"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a babe and sucklin', you ass! Howevah, to come to the point. It is agweed on all hands that old Talbot has got to come back to St. Jim's——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Of course, there has been sneewin' on the point fwom Levison and Mellish and Cwooke and one or two othah cads," said Arthur Augustus, "but that won't make any diffewence to us—nor to old Talbot."

"Not a bit of it!"

"We have agweed to forget the past. It cannot be denied that old Talbot was bwought up vewy badly—in the cwiminal classes, in fact—and that when he came to St. Jim's before he was, in point of fact, a cwacksman—nothin' more or less——"

"Leave that out!" growled Tom Merry. The chums of the School House did not like to be reminded of the unpleasant past of their pal Talbot.

"Come to the point, if there's one to come to," suggested Monty Lowther.

"I'm comin' to it, deah boys. You all know that old Talbot weformed and became a weally wippin' chap; you all know that he wisked his life to wescue my bwothah Wally; you all know he's a weal bwick——"

"Tell us something we don't know, Gussy," murmured Manners.

But the swell of St. Jim's had evidently thought out that little oration in advance, and he went on, unheeding.

"You all know that Talbot would be a cwedit to any school. And now he is fwee as air! He has weceived the King's pardon, and the past is done with. He starts afwesh. When he comes here he will have a lot of fwiends to back him up. Therefore, I wepeat, we're goin' to have him back."

"Hear, hear!"

"But what's the idea?" demanded Blake. "We've had a lot of gas, but we haven't come to the idea yet."

"I'm comin' to that, deah boy. Talbot is at pwesent without a home. He has lost his job at Slingsby's Farm, as Farmer Slingsby doesn't want extwa hands at pwesent. He has agweed to come here to tea with us before he cleahs off out of this neighbourhood."

Blake sat down with a resigned expression.

"Wake me up when he gets to the point," he said. "I can do with a nap for an hour or two."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass, Blake! I'm comin' to the point. My ideah is this. Talbot is goin' away, and pewwaps we shall nevah see him again. Well, my ideah is not to let him go."

"What!"

"We have offahed to waise the money to pay his fees here, and he wefuses, because he is so beastly independent, you know. Well, my ideah is not to take 'No' for an answah. He is comin' here to tea—may be here any minute. My pwoposal is to collah him and keep him here!"

"My hat!"

"We simply won't let him go," pursued Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, evidently greatly taken with his idea for capturing the former junior of St. Jim's. "We'll pile on him and collah the boundah. Then we'll bump him and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"In a purely fwiendly way, of course; but we'll bump him, as fwiends, until he gives us his word to stay!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, deah boys——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" was echoed from the doorway, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy swung round, and saw the junior who was the subject of his excellent scheme.

"Talbot, deah boy!"

The handsome junior came into the study.

There was a warm greeting from Tom Merry & Co. It was only lately that Talbot had come out of hospital, but he looked quite fit and well. The hard, open-air life on a farm had set him up wonderfully. And there was a bright and happy expression on his face. It was like wine to him to find himself once more at St. Jim's, among his old chums, who had never forgotten him.

All St. Jim's knew Talbot's story, but there were few of the fellows who did not like him and respect him.

That he had been brought up a member of a cracksman gang was common knowledge. But it was common knowledge, too, that he had thrown the old life over at the first chance, and since then had been straight as a die.

And now he had won his pardon by a deed of heroism that had thrilled his friends with pride—at the risk of his life baffling a Spanish spy who had attempted to blow up a railway bridge and wreck a troop train.

It was no wonder that the juniors of St. Jim's were proud of him, and, with very few exceptions, were ready to forget the black past and take Talbot to their hearts and their friendship.

"Sit down, old fellow," said Tom Merry, pushing Talbot into a chair. "This is the last tea-party with all of us together, and it is going to be a corker. Figgins & Co. ought to be here by this time. You heard Gussy's idea. What did you think of it?"

Talbot laughed merrily.

"Just like Gussy!" he remarked. "I only jolly well wish I could come back to St. Jim's, that's all."

"You're goin' to, deah boy."

The junior who had once been known as the Toff, the comrade of Hookey Walker, the cracksman, shook his head.

"Nothing doing," he said. "You fellows have treated me awfully decent. I shall never forget it. But I fancy there are some fellows in the school who wouldn't overlook the past as readily as you have done."

"Oh, wats!" said Arthur Augustus warmly. "That's all wubbish! Let the dead past bury its dead, you know!"

"And then—the Head," said Talbot.

"The Head is all wight. I know he wants you to come back," said Arthur Augustus. "I happen to know that he consulted some of the governin' board on the subject as to whethah there would be any objection. And there isn't. You see, my patah is on the board of governahs, and the Head jawed to him about it, and the patah asked me lots of questions about you, and I told him what a wegulah bwick you are. Of course, he had heard of the way you dished that wottah and saved the twoop twain. So it's all wight about the Head and the governahs!"

"Then it's only a question of cash," said Tom Merry.

"Rather a serious question, as I haven't any," said Talbot, with a smile. "I've even had to give up my job at Slingsby's Farm. I've got to get to London and look for work—not that it's a very good time to look for work."

"You are comin' here!"

"You see, you can let us stand by you, as your old chums, Talbot," urged Tom Merry. "We can raise the cash among ourselves——"

Talbot shook his head.

"And after a term or so you'll win a scholarship," said Tom. "Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence of the New House are here with scholarships, you know, and you can do the same!"

"In the long run, yes," said Talbot. "But that would take time, and, meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile, we'll look after you."

"It's impossible, old chap. I'm awfully obliged, and I know you mean jolly well, but I can't take charity, and that's really what it would amount to. It's rotten to have to stay away from St. Jim's, but there you are! It can't be helped."

"I wefuse to let you go, deah boy!" said D'Arcy. "Gentlemen, as Talbot pwoves to be an obstinate ass, I suggest cawwyin' out my ideah. We'll collah him and bump him till he agwees to stay."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a thump on the door, and Figgins & Co. came in grinning.

They shook hands warmly with Talbot.

"You're late," said Tom Merry.

"Sorry, there's been a row in the New House!" said Figgins, chuckling. "You should have seen Ratty—quite green!"

"It was stunning!" said Fatty. "You should have heard him. You know Hooper, our boot-boy, not a bad kid. He's been slanging Ratty, and he's got the sack, and he's gone—just cleared off!"

"Rotten!" said Tom Merry.

"Oh, he's all right," said Kerr, laughing. "His father's got a new fried-fish shop in the Mile End Road, and Hooper didn't want to keep his job any longer. So he got his back up at last and gave Ratty the straight tip. You should have heard him talk!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "And you should have seen him biff Ratty with a boot. It was worth a term's pocket-money!"

The juniors laughed joyfully.

Mr. Ratcliff was equally unpopular in both Houses at St. Jim's, and the idea of his being "biffed" with a boot tickled them immensely.

"And now Hooper's got a rise in life and gone, we're stranded without a boot-boy," said Figgins. "Ratty will have to find another one jolly quickly, or we shall have to clean our own boots in the morning. Not that that will hurt us, either. It was worth more than that to see Ratty biffed with a boot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Figgins & Co. sat down to tea in great spirits.

CHAPTER 3.
A Surprising Idea!

TALBOT had been silent for some time while the merry talk ran on in the crowded study in the Shell passage.

There was a wrinkle of deep thought upon his boyish brow. He was thinking hard.

Figgins' story of Hooper's rebellion and sudden departure had brought a new and curious idea into his mind.

He hesitated to communicate it to the other fellows; but he was thinking about it.

Tom Merry noticed his abstraction, and regarded him curiously.

"Penny for 'em!" he said.

Talbot started.

"For what?" he said.

"Your thoughts, of course," said Tom, laughing. "You seem to be thinking out some awfully deep problem."

"I—I've got an idea," said Talbot. "I don't know what you fellows will think of it——"

"An idea for staying at St. Jim's?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Yes."

"Good!"

"Hear, hear!" chirruped Arthur Augustus.

"Pile in, old chap!" said Figgins heartily. "If there's anything we can do, we're yours to command. You know that."

"I know, old fellow," said Talbot gratefully. "I'm not likely to forget the splendid way you fellows have stood by me. I've been thinking about Hooper."

"Hooper!" repeated Figgins in surprise. "What about Hooper? He's gone."

"He has left the school?"

"Yes, rather! Ratty fired him on the spot. He wanted to go, really; he didn't want his job here any longer," said Figgins, laughing.

"Then he won't want to come back?"

"Not likely. Ratty wouldn't let him, if he did."

"Then," said Talbot slowly, "it wouldn't be like taking another chap's job away. I couldn't do that, of course."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"There's a new boot-boy wanted in the New House," said Talbot, looking at the surprised juniors quietly. "Why shouldn't I take the place?"

"My hat!"

"Mr. Ratcliff must get a new kid, and he can't have found one yet. In fact, as Hooper left without giving notice, it will be rather awkward for Mr. Ratcliff, I should think. He can't fill the place to-day, unless somebody comes and offers. Well, why shouldn't I offer?"

"You!" gasped Tom Merry.

"I!" said Talbot. "I can clean boots, I suppose, and do odd jobs quite as well as Hooper can."

"Great Scott!"

"You—a boot-boy! By Jove!"

"Why not? It's honest work and nothing to be ashamed of in it that I can see. Better than what I used to be, anyway," added Talbot, with a gloomy contraction of the brows. "If Mr. Ratcliff would accept me——"

"My hat!"

"I can give him a character—extending back some weeks," said Talbot. "Mr. Slingsby will speak for me, so far as he knows me. I dare say the Head would put a word in for me, too."

"B-but——"

"Then I could stay here, at all events, if only as a boot-boy," said Talbot, his eyes glistening. "I shall have a chance of going on with my lessons in my spare time."

"Bwavo!"

"What—what an idea!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "I—I say—you'll find Ratty a jolly bad master, Talbot, old chap. He will rag you."

"Let him!"

"But you—you'd be a servant," said Lowther.

"Beggars can't be choosers," said Talbot, with a shrug of the shoulders. "So long as a chap does honest work, and does it well, there can't be anything to be ashamed of in his position. Only a snob would think so."

"Yes, that's right enough!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, with a sage shake of the head. "If there was anythin' to be ashamed of in bein' a servant, deah boys, it would be w'ong to keep servants, as the weceivah is as bad as the thief!"

"Oh, there are no silly snobs here!" said Tom Merry. "That part is all right, Talbot. But you'll find it a hard job, and jolly unpleasant."

"I don't expect to find it pleasant anywhere, working for a living, without having been taught a trade," said Talbot.

"Bai Jove! It's a jolly good ideah, if Talbot could stand it," said Arthur Augustus. "The chief dwawback is that he would be in the New House, and not in the School House along with us."

"Oh, we'd look after him!" said Figgins.

"Hear, hear!" said the Co. cordially.

There was an excited discussion on the subject. Tom Merry & Co. wanted Talbot to stay at St. Jim's as one of themselves; but that was not possible. And the next best thing was to keep him at the school on any terms that were possible.

The juniors all agreed upon that. It seemed a little curious to think of Talbot in the role of boot-boy, but there was no false pride about the Toff. He was prepared to work, and to work hard, and certainly he would make an excellent boot-boy, if he tried.

"It's settled," said Talbot, at last. "Of course——" He coloured a little. "Of course, in my new position things would be changed. I understand quite well that it won't be possible for you fellows to talk to me as—as you're doing now. That will be a bit of a change."

"Wats! I shall wegard you as a pal, in all possible circs."

"So shall we all!" said Tom.

"Yes, rather!"

"Don't talk out of the back of your neck, Talbot!" added Figgins. "I suggest your going to the Head first and asking him to speak to Ratty. He will give you a good character."

Talbot rose to his feet.

"I'll go to the Head now," he said. "Nothing like striking the iron while it's hot, you know. Later on there may be rivals after the job."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come back and tell us how you get on," said Tom.

"Right-ho!"

Talbot left the study. Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another. Talbot's idea had taken them by surprise. But they were glad to think of keeping him among them on any terms whatever.

"I hope he'll get the job," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "Later on he may get a scholarship, like old Reddy."

"Hallo! The giddy cracksman's come back!" sang out a voice as Talbot went down the passage. The Toff flushed and looked round. "What the deuce are you doing here, young Bill Sikes?" asked Clampe, grinning.

"Yaas, wathah! I should be willin' to spend a lot of my spare time coachin' him," said Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows——"

"Ratty is a rotten master," said Figgins, "and some of the chaps in our House are not—not quite up to our mark. Talbot won't have an easy time, I'm afraid, if he's taken on. But, at least, he'll have us to stand by him."

There was no doubt about that. Boot-boy, or junior, or whatever he might be, Talbot was always sure of the hearty friendship of Tom Merry & Co. And that would certainly make a great deal of difference to him in his new position.

CHAPTER 4.

Talbot's Chance!

"HALLO, Talbot!"

Talbot, on his way to the Head's study, paused as he met Levison of the Fourth in the passage. Levison stopped and looked at him curiously, flushing a little.

"Well," said Talbot coldly.

Levison had always been his enemy. When he had been at St. Jim's, the cad of the Fourth had always been against him; and later than that, when Mr. Fox of Scotland Yard was hunting for the Toff, Levison had helped the detective to run him down.

Talbot's hands clenched involuntarily at the sight of the Fourth Former. He expected a sneer or a jeer from Levison, but there was a surprise in store for him.

"I—I didn't know you were here," said Levison awkwardly.

"I came to see Tom Merry."

"I am glad to see you," said Levison. "I—I suppose you know I helped the detective fellow when he was looking for you the other week?"

"I know it."

"And—and afterwards you jolly nearly got killed in saving the troop train," said Levison. "Well, I—I've thought about that, and—and I'm sorry, Talbot."

Talbot stared at him in surprise. It was the very last thing he had ever expected to hear Ernest Levison say.

Levison laughed awkwardly.

"I suppose you didn't expect me to look at it like that?" he said.

"Well, no; I didn't."

"I can't say more than that," said Levison. "I'm sorry I was down on you, as it turned out. That's all."

"Thanks!" said Talbot, more cordially. "It's decent of you to say so, Levison. I don't bear any malice."

Levison held out his hand, and Talbot shook it genially enough. Then he went on his way to the Head's study with a brighter look on his face.

Levison's action seemed a good augury for his new career at St. Jim's. It would make a great deal of difference to him if he had no longer the bitter enmity of Levison to confront. And in his new position, if he obtained it, it would have been in Levison's power to cause him many petty annoyances. It was something to be relieved of that.

Talbot knocked at the door of Dr. Holmes' study, and the Head's pleasant voice bade him enter.

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, was chatting with the Head when Talbot came in.

Both the masters looked very kindly at him, and shook hands with him cordially. To them Talbot was no longer the Toff, the confederate of Hookey Walker & Co.; he was the heroic lad who had almost lost his life in saving the troop train.

"I'm glad to see you, Talbot!" said the Head. "The fact is, I was just speaking about you to Mr. Railton. We were discussing whether it could possibly be arranged for you to resume your old place in this school."

"You are very kind, sir!" said Talbot. "But I have no money, sir, and that makes it impossible for me to come here on equal terms with the other fellows. But if you would do something for me, sir——"

"Anything I can do, my boy?"

"Mr. Ratcliff has discharged the boot-boy in the New House, sir. He wants another boy to take Hooper's place. I thought that perhaps you might speak a word for me," said Talbot diffidently.

The Head looked surprised.

"You—you wish for the place?"

"Yes, sir, if you see no objection."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head.

"I have learned to work hard, sir," said Talbot. "I should be able to perform the same duties as Hooper. Of course, I want experience; but I should be very quick to learn the work, and I will do my best."

"Dear me!"

"Of course, if you don't approve, sir, I will not think any more of it," said Talbot anxiously.

"My dear boy, I do approve!" said the Head warmly. "It can be arranged also that your studies can be pursued, though, of course, not to the same extent as if you were in the Shell as before. What do you think, Mr. Railton?"

The School House master nodded approvingly.

"I think it is an excellent idea, sir, if Talbot is prepared to face the difficulties of the position. I am afraid, my boy, that you will find it very different from what you were accustomed to when you were here before."

"I am ready for that, sir. If I can keep on my schoolwork to some extent, I should be more than satisfied," said Talbot.

"Very well," said the Head. "I will speak to Mr. Ratcliff, and I have no doubt that he will accept you in the place you mention. I will also speak to your former Form-master, Mr. Linton, concerning your instruction. You may be sure, my boy, that all of us are eager to benefit you in any way possible. We are proud that you once belonged to the school."

"You are very kind to say so, sir."

"Very good. I will send you word."

Talbot retired from the study in a mood of great satisfaction. The job was as good as his now. Mr. Ratcliff was not likely to refuse a request from the Head.

Talbot sighed a little as he thought how much better it would have been if his new place had been in the School House under Mr. Railton. But that could not be helped. After all, if he did his duty well, there was no reason why he should not satisfy even the irascible Mr. Ratcliff, and, at all events, he would give that unpleasant master no cause for complaint.

His step was light as he returned to Tom Merry's quarters. The juniors greeted him with a general chorus:

"Well?"

"I think it's all right," said Talbot. "The Head's going to speak to Mr. Ratcliff. I suppose that will settle it."

"Bound to," agreed Tom Merry.

"And I'm going to keep on lessons in my leisure time, as far as possible," added Talbot. "Of course, that won't be so much as I should like, but it will be something. And I shall have time to work up for a scholarship, I hope."

"Yaas, wathah! I'll help you, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus generously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for laughtah, you fellows! I am goin' to stand by old Talbot like anythin'! You remembah I used to coach Lynn——"

"I don't remember that Lynn got much benefit from it," grinned Tom Merry.

"Wats! I am wathah a dab at coachin'. As a mattah of fact——"

"And Talbot will be able to play footer, too," Figgins remarked.

"You are intewwuptin' me, Figgins!"

"Go hon! You'd like to practise with us, Talbot?" said Figgins. "I've only seen you play footer once—at Abbotsford; but you are jolly good at the game—I could see that. You'll be a recruit for the New House eleven."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry warmly. "Talbot is a School House chap. He was in the School House when he was here before."

"He's going to be in the New House now, though!" said Figgins warmly.

"Yes; but——"

"In the circs——"

"Look here, Figgins——"

"Bosh!" said Figgins. "Talbot's going to play for our eleven! We want him! 'Nuff said! Rats!"

"Hold on!" said Talbot, laughing. "You forget that I shall be only a boot-boy. You don't play boot-boys in junior House elevens, Figgins."

"Oh, we'll manage it!" said Figgins. "If anybody raised any objection, I'd jolly well give him a thick ear! I can't say fairer than that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And Talbot can come into our study and do his prep with us," said Kerr.

"Good egg!"

"Wats! Talbot can come ovah to Study No. 6 and do his pwep——"

"Bow-wow!" said Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins, I do not wegard that as an intelligible wemark! I shall insist——"

"Order!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "I wish we could fix it for Talbot to be boots in our House instead of the New House. I suppose it can't be done. But you won't have a very nice time with Ratty, I'm afraid, old chap."

"Oh, I shall be all right," said Talbot cheerfully—"if only Ratty takes me, and I hope he does!"

"Here comes Toby!" said Monty Lowther, a little later. "Well, Toby, what's the verdict?"

Toby, the School House page, put his head into the study, with a grin.

"Master Talbot's wanted," he said.

"Good!" said Talbot.

"Which you are to go to the New House and see Mr. Ratcliff in his study," said Toby.

"Right!"

Toby looked curiously at Talbot. Like everybody at St. Jim's, he knew the history of the Toff, but he liked him immensely. Talbot had always been kind and considerate towards Toby when he was a Shell fellow in the School House.

"I say, Master Talbot," went on Toby. "'Scuse me, but are you going to take old 'Ooper's place in the New 'Ouse?"

"If I can get it," said Talbot.

"You—a blessed boots!" said Toby, with a whistle.

Talbot laughed, and nodded.

"Well, that beats it!" said Toby.

"I'll tell you what, Toby," said Tom Merry. "Suppose you were to change

jobs with Talbot—you go into the New House, and——"

Toby shook his head emphatically.

"Which I'd rather 'ave the push than live in Mr. Ratcliff's 'Ouse," he said. "And I'm sorry for you, Master Talbot. You'll 'ave a 'oly time!"

And Toby, with a commiserating look at the prospective victim, departed.

Talbot, however, looked quite cheerful as he made his way across the quadrangle and entered the New House. He was to stay at St. Jim's, and that fact alone compensated for all drawbacks.

CHAPTER 5.

The New Boot-Boy!

"COME in!" said the acid, unpleasant voice of Mr. Ratcliff, as Talbot tapped at the Housemaster's door in the New House.

Talbot felt a slight sinking of the heart as he entered, but his face remained calm and composed, his manner respectful.

Mr. Ratcliff was seated at his writing-table. He was not looking good-tempered. The "row" with Hooper had left its effect upon him, and it had not yet worn off. Also, he was suffering from indigestion—a complaint he was very subject to, chiefly owing to want of exercise. When Mr. Ratcliff suffered from indigestion, Mr. Ratcliff's unfortunate neighbours generally suffered from Mr. Ratcliff.

Talbot stood respectfully before the table, and the narrow eyes of the New House master rested upon him.

"Dr. Holmes has spoken to me concerning you, Talbot," began Mr. Ratcliff snappily.

"Yes, sir."

"It appears that you wish to take the place of the boot-boy whom I discharged for insolence this afternoon?"

"I hope you will give me a trial, sir."

"You can work, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, certainly."

"As the Head has made the request, I do not care to refuse it," said Mr. Ratcliff. "Otherwise, I should hesitate very much about accepting your service, Talbot. Your record is—ahem!—peculiar."

Talbot flushed.

"I understand that you have had a very extraordinary up-bringing. You were the—ahem!—associate of thieves and vagabonds from your earliest years!"

"That is true, sir."

"You were, in fact, what is called a cracksman, boy as you are?"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot, his flush deepening.

It was just like Mr. Ratcliff to "rub it in" in this way. Whenever Ratty had an opportunity of saying anything unpleasant, he never left it unsaid.

"I trust, Talbot, that all your connection with this kind of life is—ahem!—over and done with?" pursued Mr. Ratcliff.

"If it had not been, sir, Dr. Holmes would hardly have recommended me to you for a place in this House," said Talbot, his voice trembling a little, in spite of his self-control.

"Ahem! Yes, quite so. I have no doubt that you have satisfied Dr. Holmes. I may as well tell you, however, that I am no great believer in these sudden reformations, and I am surprised at Dr. Holmes wishing to admit you in this school in any capacity."

"There are a good many persons now, sir, who will answer for my character," said Talbot.

"Probably; but I have my own ideas about that," said Mr. Ratcliff. "However, I hope you will prove trustworthy."

Talbot's face was crimson.

"If you do not think so, sir, I suppose it is useless for me to come here. I am sorry."

He made a movement to retire.

"You need not go," said Mr. Ratcliff in a rasping voice. "As it happens, I need a new boot-boy in rather a hurry, and I am disposed to give you a trial. I trust you will be properly grateful."

"I trust so, sir."

"Another point," said Mr. Ratcliff. "You were formally here as a junior in the Shell. Of course, you understand that that is all changed. If you enter this House as a servant, you will be expected to conduct yourself as a servant."

"Certainly, sir," said Talbot, biting his lip hard.

"There must be no assumption of equality with the juniors—no airs of familiarity, or anything of that kind," explained Mr. Ratcliff. "I am a believer in the strict upholding of proper class distinction. If you are here as a boot-boy, you will be expected to act as a boot-boy."

"I quite understand."

"Dr. Holmes has informed me that he will take measures for your education to be looked after as much as possible," continued Mr. Ratcliff. "What a boot-boy can want with Latin and mathematics is beyond my comprehension, and I do not conceal from you, Talbot, that I hardly approve of this. However, that is Dr. Holmes' affair. It must be understood, however, that you are to fulfil all your duties, and not neglect your work with this curious idea of taking lessons, and that I myself have no time whatever to devote to your instruction—none whatever!"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff coughed.

"Ahem! I think that is about all," he said. "You can go to the housekeeper's room now. Mrs. Kenwigg will deal with such matters as—ahem!—your labour and your remuneration, and so on. You may go!"

"Yes, sir."

Talbot quitted the study.

His interview with Mr. Ratcliff had not raised his spirits. For some moments he wondered whether he had done wisely in seeking the place. The Housemaster had as good as said that he did not quite believe in the Toff's reform of character, and that it was only by the Head's desire that he was receiving the boy into the House at all, even in a menial capacity.

The interview did not promise very well for the future; but Talbot set his teeth and resolved to go through with it. It would be cowardly to yield at the first rebuff, and he was anything but a coward. After all, he could keep out of Mr. Ratcliff's way. The path of a boot-boy did not often cross that of a Housemaster. By hard work and civility, by strict attention to duty, he might convince even Mr. Ratcliff in the long run that his estimate of him was mistaken.

"Hallo! The giddy cracksman's come back!" sang out a voice, as Talbot went down the passage on his way to the housekeeper's room.

Talbot flushed and looked round.

It was Clampe of the Shell who made the remark.

"What the deuce are you doing here, young Bill Sikes?" asked Clampe, in surprise.

"Shut up, Clampe!" growled Redfern of the Fourth. "Hold your silly tongue, you rotter! How do you do, Talbot, old man?"

"Well, he is a cracksman, isn't he?" said Clampe, grinning. "Or he was, anyway."

Redfern shook hands with Talbot, and Owen and Lawrence, who were with him, followed his example. Clampe indulged in a sneer.

"Good enough for you County Council school bounders, no doubt," he remarked. "I'd prefer not to shake hands with a cracksman myself."

"Pile it on!" said Talbot quietly.

"Yow!" roared Clampe suddenly, as Redfern caught hold of his collar and unceremoniously banged his head against the wall. "Yarooh! Leggo! Reddy, you beast!"

"Going to shut up?" asked Redfern genially.

"Yow-ow-ow! Yes!"

"Good!" Redfern released Clampe, who stood rubbing his damaged head furiously. "You talk too much, Clampy—much too much!"

"Will you tell me where the housekeeper's room is, Master Redfern?" asked Talbot.

Redfern jumped.

"Master Redfern," he repeated. "What are you 'mastering' me for, you ass?"

Talbot smiled.

"I'm the new boot-boy," he explained.

"Eh—what? Off your rocker?"

"It's so," said Talbot. "I'm the new boot-boy, and I want the housekeeper's room. I begin work here to-day, Master Redfern."

"Well, my hat!"

"Boot-boy!" shrieked Clampe. "My hat! You a boot-boy! Well, this takes the whole giddy cake! Ha, ha, ha! You'll burgle the boots! You'll crack the knife-machine! He, he, he!"

And Clampe fled as Redfern made a ferocious movement towards him, and rushed away to tell the surprising news in the Common-room.

Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence surrounded the new boot-boy in great surprise.

"Look here! Is it a fact?" asked Lawrence.

"Yes, Master Lawrence."

"Don't 'Master Lawrence' me, you fathead."

"But I must, sir. I have to get into the habit," said Talbot.

"I'll jolly well punch your head if you do, all the same," growled Lawrence.

"Well, this takes the cake," said Redfern. "I wish you luck, Talbot, old man. Mrs. Kenwigg is an old duck, but Ratty—— Ahem! Well, I'll show you to the House dame's room, anyhow."

And Redfern led the new boot-boy to that apartment.

Talbot thanked him, and tapped at the door, and Mrs. Kenwigg called to him to come in.

The plump, comfortable dame was seated in an armchair before her fire in the cosy room, knitting, and she raised her eyebrows as she saw Talbot.

"Dear me, it's Master Talbot!" she said. "I heard about your saving the train, Master Talbot. It was very brave and noble of you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kenwigg! I——"

"And how kind of you to call on me now you have come here," added Mrs. Kenwigg. "Sit down, Master Talbot!"

"The fact is——"

"Take that chair near the fire."

Talbot flushed a little.

"The—the fact is, Mrs. Kenwigg, I'm the new boot-boy."

"Deary me! You, Master Talbot! You don't say so!"

"But I do, ma'am," said Talbot, with a smile. "Mr. Ratcliff has kindly taken me on in Hooper's place, and he has sent me to you to be told my duties."

"Well, bless my soul!" said Mrs. Kenwigg. "Thank you, Master Talbot!"—as Talbot picked up the fallen ball of wool, and handed it to her. "Well, you 'ave took my breath away. And you are not joking? You are really a boot-boy?"

"Yes, really, ma'am. I—I hope I shall give satisfaction."

"Deary me!" was all Mrs. Kenwigg could say.

And it was some time before she recovered sufficiently from her astonishment to initiate the surprising new boot-boy into his new duties.

CHAPTER 6.
At Work!

TALBOT very quickly dropped into the ways of his new place. In two or three days he was quite as satisfactory a boot-boy as the dismissed Hooper had ever been.

He was up early in the morning, long before the rising-bell rang out to call the St. Jim's fellows from their beds. And he went to bed later than the juniors. But he always looked very fit and healthy.

He did his work well, and many of the fellows remarked that the boots were much better cleaned than in Hooper's time.

Mrs. Kenwigg, too, was satisfied with the way the knives were cleaned. Talbot never broke any of them in the knife-machine, and Hooper, as the House dame was never tired of repeating, broke on an average a knife every week. When Talbot lent a hand with the washing-up, he never dropped a plate or a cup, which Hooper had frequently done.

The House dame had had her doubts at first. She liked Talbot—everybody did, or nearly everybody. But she had had very natural doubts whether a boy who had once been at St. Jim's as a pupil would take properly to the place of a boot-boy. She fully expected trouble below stairs, and above stairs, too.

It was only to be expected that a lad so peculiarly placed should show signs of "side" towards the other servants, and impertinence towards the upper servants, and perhaps towards the schoolboys.

But Talbot never did, and Mrs. Kenwigg's kind heart was soon set at rest upon that point.

Talbot was no fool. He knew his place. He believed in his heart, with Robert Burns, that "the rank is but the guinea's stamp, the man's the gold, for all that." But while he was in the place of a boot-boy, he made it a point to know his place, and to keep it.

And so the new boot-boy in the New House was not long in winning golden opinions from all sorts of people.

His work was always done, and done well, and he was willing to help others with their work, if they wanted him to, without raising an argument as to whether it was his "place" to do certain things, or whether it wasn't.

Above stairs he came into contact with the boys as little as he could, and when he did come into contact with them, his manner was irreproachable.

Clampe, who had anticipated cheek and "side," had told the other fellows that he would jolly well soon put the boot-boy in his place. But Clampe made the discovery that the new boot-boy did not want putting in his place; he kept there without any putting.

And when Clampe, who was a good deal of a bully, went out of his way to make himself disagreeable to the boot-boy, trying to provoke him into what he would have called insolence, he found that Talbot was not to be drawn. The boot-boy was very quiet, very respectful, and quite inoffensive, and Clampe had to let him alone for shame's sake. To say nothing of the fact that if Clampe had gone too far, he would have had Figgins & Co. and Redfern & Co. very promptly "on his neck."

Many of the fellows beside Clampe expected side from the new boot-boy, but as they did not discover any signs of it, they loftily admitted that the kid knew his place, and left him to himself.

And, once satisfied that he knew his place, some of them were very kind to him.

Indeed, Sefton of the Sixth carried his kindness so far as to offer him a shilling one day as a tip for carrying a message to Rylcombe. And Sefton was very much annoyed when Talbot offered cheerfully to carry the message, but declined the tip.

"You don't want the bob?" said Sefton, with a stare. "Why not?"

"I am paid for my work here," Talbot explained patiently.

"But you fellows always take tips; you're jolly keen after them, as a rule," said the Sixth Former.

"Perhaps so, but I'd rather not, if you don't mind."

Sefton slipped the coin back into his pocket and shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you like," he said. "I suppose this is cheek on your part because you were once a junior in this school—eh?"

"I don't mean to be cheeky, sir," said Talbot quietly.

"Well, all right; you can cut off," said Sefton.

And the boot-boy cut off.

Excepting in that one particular, that he had declined anything in the nature of a tip, Talbot was a boot-boy to the manner born, and he gave satisfaction on all sides.

Even Mr. Ratcliff had no fault to find with his boots. Not that Talbot escaped the keen edge of Ratty's tongue; far from that. When Mr. Ratcliff was irritable, his nearest neighbour generally had the benefit of it, and Talbot had his share. But he bore it all quietly. It was no more than the juniors of the New House had to bear, as a matter of fact, and what the schoolboys could endure, the boot-boy could endure.

Tom Merry & Co. were a little disappointed.

They had expected to see a great deal of Talbot when he was once more installed at St. Jim's, but it did not prove so. Talbot had plenty to do. His work occupied most of the day, and his scanty leisure hours were chiefly devoted to study.

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, had very kindly undertaken to help him. Talbot had been a hard worker when he was a junior in the Shell, and he had won the Form-master's good opinion, and it stood him in good stead now. Mr. Linton gave him an hour every day, and Talbot made the most of it. And in his garret in the New House he often worked when the fellows had gone to bed.

That garret had once been occupied by Hooper, and when Talbot took possession of it, it had been adorned by flaming oleographs on the walls and a collection of picture postcards of celebrated film actors and actresses.

Talbot had made a change. The gaudy adornments had disappeared promptly, and a little shelf, which Talbot made himself, was loaded with books, the principal possessions of the new boot-boy. And when he had an evening to himself, Talbot would spend it in that little room, high above roofs, "slogging" away at his books with an energy which would have earned him the reputation of being a "swot" if he had belonged to a Form at St. Jim's.

The hope was always strong in him of gaining one of the many scholarships that belonged to the ancient Foundation of St. Jim's, and thus recovering his old place as a junior in the school.

Yet he was not dissatisfied now.

He regarded himself as fortunate to a great extent. He was doing honest work, he was proving that his reform was sincere and lasting, and he was earning money by his labour, and he had long since learned that ten shillings earned by honest work was better than a hundred pounds obtained by dishonesty.

It was in the field of sport that he felt his position most keenly. He was a keen footballer, and he would gladly have taken his place in the junior team of the New House. He would gladly have joined the fellows in their practice. But it was impossible.

Most of them would have welcomed him in their ranks. But he felt that it would not do. He was a boot-boy, and he had no right to mix with the schoolboys, and he would only mix with them on sufferance, and his pride was too strong to allow of that.

But his friends in the junior Forms did not see it in the same light. Talbot, owing to his peculiar experiences, had an old head on young shoulders. But the juniors were not given to thinking very deeply, and they began to feel a little sore at Talbot's keeping himself so strictly in his place.

And before he had been a week in his new position, without putting in an appearance in Figgins' study, where he would have been heartily welcomed at any time, Figgins & Co. decided to "put it to him straight," as Figgy termed it.

And the Co. proceeded to the boot-room, a little apartment that had a view of a paved yard, to talk to him "like Dutch uncles," as Figgins said.

Talbot was there. The knife-machine was installed in the boot-room, and Talbot was cleaning knives. The juniors heard the sound of the machine as they came along, and a cheery sound of Talbot humming a tune.

Figgins kicked the door open, and the Co. marched in.

The knife-machine stopped, and Talbot looked round. He was in his shirt-sleeves, with an apron on, and looked cheery, but a little dusty.

"Hallo!" said Figgins.

"How are you getting on?" asked Kerr.

"Very well, thank you, Master Kerr!"

Kerr sniffed.

"Don't 'master' me, fathead! I don't like it!"

"Excuse me, sir, but I must. Mr. Ratcliff would be angry with me if I did not address you in the proper manner—and quite rightly, too."

"Oh, pile it on!" said Kerr. "Why haven't you been to our study, ass?"

"I—I feel that I oughtn't to come, sir."

"Rot! Why not?"

"Because I'm the boot-boy, and you——"

"Well, you're coming in to tea this time," said Figgins. "We've got a special tea."

"And a steak-and-kidney pie," said Fatty Wynn temptingly. "You know, one of Mrs. Taggles' steak-and-kidney pies!"

"When will you be free here?" asked Kerr.

Talbot hesitated.

"This is my last job for the present, unless anything special should be wanted," he said. "But—really, Master Kerr——"

"Then come along as soon as you've finished."

"We're having the School House fellows over," said Figgins. "We'll ask anybody you would like to meet, Talbot. Some of them are growling because you never speak to them. I give you that straight!"

Talbot looked distressed.

"I hope they don't misunderstand me," he said. "I'm only trying to keep in my place. My employers would not like my having much to do with the fellows. It wouldn't be right."

"Oh, rats! Look here, you're coming to tea?"

"I—I—I'll ask Mrs. Kenwigg's permission," said Talbot.

"All right. We'll come with you and ask her," said Figgins. "If she says 'No,' we'll tie a tin can to her cat's tail every day!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And when the knives were finished, and Talbot had doffed the apron and donned his jacket, the party proceeded to Mrs. Kenwigg's room.

Talbot was feeling a little uncomfortable.

He was almost painfully sensitive on the point of keeping in his just position and not assuming any privileges that his position did not entitle him to; yet it was difficult to resist the influence of Figgins & Co.'s genial friendship. His heart yearned for the company of his old comrades.

"Can Talbot come to tea in our study, Mrs. Kenwigg?" asked Figgins, plunging into the subject at once. "He used to be our pal, you know!"

Mrs. Kenwigg smiled and nodded.

"Certainly, if you wish," she said kindly.

"Thank you! You're a brick, ma'am!" said Figgins joyfully. "Come along, Talbot, you bounder! This way!"

And the Co. marched Talbot off in triumph.

CHAPTER 7.

Mr. Ratcliff is Shocked!

TOM MERRY & CO. came cheerily into the study.

Kerr had cut across to the School House to inform them that Talbot had come to tea, and the Co. had come over joyfully. They had almost completely lost sight of their old chum since he had become boot-boy in the New House.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, slapping the boot-boy on the shoulder. "You're almost a stwangah, deah boy."

"Why haven't you been over to Study No. 6, you bounder?" demanded Blake indignantly.

"Or to our study?" growled Monty Lowther.

"Anyway, here the bounder is now," said Digby. "And mind, while we're here at tea, we're all pals again. None of your Master This and Master That or you'll get a thick ear!"

"Yaas, wathah! Dwop all that for the pwesent, Talbot, deah boy!"

Talbot laughed. His face was very bright. Once more in the genial circle of the juniors of St. Jim's, he was thoroughly happy. It was hard luck that he could not take his old place in the school. But he was prepared to enjoy the present occasion as long as it lasted.

And it was enjoyable. Under the experienced care of Fatty Wynn, a really stunning spread had been prepared. The study was soon in a buzz with cheerful, happy voices—indeed, the cheerfulness in the study was so emphatic that fellows stared in to see what was "on." Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence came in to join the party, which taxed the space in the study to the utmost. Clampe looked in and giggled.

"My hat! The boot-boy to tea!" he ejaculated.

And then he retreated with a howl as a squashy orange caught him in the eye.

Talbot did not seem to have heard Clampe's unpleasant remark. He would not damp the good spirits of his friends by showing how it affected him.

But that cheery little party was destined to be interrupted.

The study door was suddenly thrown open, without the preliminary of a knock. There was the rustle of a gown, and Mr. Ratcliff strode in.

The juniors jumped to their feet at once. Talbot rose with a flush on his face. He understood at once that Mr. Ratcliff's coming boded no good to him. The New House master's eyes were fixed upon him.

"You are here, Talbot!"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot.

"Are you aware that you have been rung for?"

"No, sir. I am sorry!"

"I desired to send you with a message," said Mr. Ratcliff crushingly. "I found that your services were not at

my disposal. This is not what you are employed for, boy!"

Talbot made no reply. He might have argued that his hours of duty did not extend to twenty-four a day, and that the House dame had informed him that his services were not required just then. But he knew that it would be useless to appeal to Mr. Ratcliff's reason or sense of fair play. Mr. Ratcliff lacked both.

"And you," said Mr. Ratcliff, with a withering glance at the juniors, who were looking very red and uncomfortable—"I am surprised at you! Indeed, I am shocked!"

"Is anything the matter?" asked Tom Merry, with a glitter in his eyes.

"I twust, sir," said Arthur Augustus, with great dignity, "that we have not shocked you in any way, Mr. Watcliff!"

"You have shocked me," said Mr. Ratcliff. "I may say, disgusted me. Do you know no better than to associate on equal terms with a boy employed in the House to clean boots and knives?"

The juniors became crimson.

"We are not snobs, sir," said Arthur Augustus, rather unluckily, for his remark might be taken to imply that Mr. Ratcliff was a snob, as, indeed, he was.

The Housemaster glared at the offending junior.

"D'Arcy, how dare you make such a remark?"

"It is twue, sir," said D'Arcy sturdily. "I should be very sowwy to be a snob!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Monty Lowther.

Mr. Ratcliff raised his hand, and pointed to the door.

"With you School House boys I will not deal," he said cuttingly. "If you choose to act in a manner calculated to degrade you, I suppose it is a matter for your own Housemaster to deal with. You shall not do so here, however. Kindly leave this House at once!"

"I—I asked them to tea, sir!" stammered Figgins. "I—I think——"

"Silence, Figgins!"

Mr. Ratcliff was still pointing to the door, and the School House fellows, feeling extremely angry, passed out. Then the Housemaster turned his eyes upon the equally angry New House fellows.

"With you I shall deal!" he said grimly.

"What have we done, sir?" asked Kerr.

"You have acted in a disgraceful manner by asking a boot-boy to tea in your study!" said Mr. Ratcliff.

"We think——"

"I will not allow you to argue with me, Figgins. If you have no sense of proper distinction, it is my business to teach you. Once and for all, I forbid this kind of familiarity with the servants employed in this House. Do you understand?"

Figgins did not reply; he could not. If he had spoken, he would have uttered some startling home-truths concerning Mr. Ratcliff which would have earned him a flogging at least.

"As for you, Talbot, you can return to the kitchen at once!"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot, in a stifled voice.

"I forbid you to assume these airs of equality with the boys of this House. Will you remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you fail to do so on another occasion, Talbot, I shall discharge you."

"Very well, sir."

"Now go!"

Talbot went.

Mr. Ratcliff remained a few minutes longer to lecture Figgins & Co., and to give them an imposition all round of a hundred lines of Virgil. Then he retired, with a comfortable feeling that he had made quite a large number of persons thoroughly miserable.

When he was gone, Figgins closed the door, almost choking. He brandished a big fist at the door, as if it had been the countenance of Mr. Horace Ratcliff.

"Oh!" gasped Figgins. "Why—why can't we handle him? Why can't we jump on him? I—I can't stand much more of him! Beast! Rotter! Cad! Snob! Worm!"

"He's all that, and more!" groaned Redfern. "Fancy jumping on poor old Talbot like that! Oh, the rotter—the awful rotter!"

"He never did like Talbot," said Fatty Wynn dismally. "He only likes fellows like Clampe, who are ready to lick his beastly boots."

"The rotten cad!"

"The beastly snob!"

"We'll make him wriggle for it, somehow," said Lawrence vaguely. "Housemaster or not, he's no right to insult Talbot like that."

"Poor old Talbot! This knocks on the head any more teas in the study," said Owen.

"I suppose it does—the beast!" said Figgins.

"I—I wonder how old Talbot's feeling about it now?" muttered Kerr.

"Pretty rotten, I should think."

"We'll make Ratty feel rotten, too, before we've done with him," said Figgins, gritting his teeth. "I don't feel inclined to finish this feed, for one. Let's go over to the School House—Ratty can't rag us there—and we'll hold a council of war, and decide how to make the beast wriggle for this."

"Good egg!"

And the angry juniors followed Tom Merry & Co. to the School House. They found those usually cheerful youths in the same vengeful frame of mind, angry and gloomy.

The whole crowd held an exciting meeting in Tom Merry's study, the object of which was a scheme for making the obnoxious Ratty "sit up." And when Tom Merry and Figgins & Co. put their heads together to scheme a scheme, something generally came of it.

CHAPTER 8.

Clampe Catches It!

TALBOT was at work in the boot-room.

But he was not humming a tune now, and his handsome face was clouded.

The small-souled and mean-minded Ratty had succeeded in deeply wounding one whose nature was so much finer than his own that Ratty had no chance whatever of understanding it.

It had been against his better judgment that Talbot had accepted Figgy's invitation to tea in the study.

He knew that the Housemaster, if he should hear of it, would not look at it in the same light as the juniors.

Mr. Ratcliff had no special cause to dislike Talbot, excepting that he disliked all frank and cheerful natures, which were so different from his own.

It might even have been supposed that a boot-boy was too insignificant a personage to be noticed by a great person like a Housemaster at all. But Mr. Ratcliff had keen and prying eyes for anything. And he was a snob of the first water. Talbot was a boot-boy—a servant in the Housemaster's employ. Therefore he must be made to feel his position. That he had once been a junior in the school was an additional reason, in Mr. Ratcliff's eyes, to take care that he did not presume upon his former position.

Talbot's carefulness for the past week had kept him clear of the Housemaster and his petty tyranny. His first mistake had brought Mr. Ratcliff down on him. And Mr. Ratcliff was really glad to be able to feel some justification for his vague dislike of the boy.

According to Mr. Horace Ratcliff, Talbot's position in the school was all nonsense. The boy ought to have been sent to a reformatory, Mr. Ratcliff thought. Anyway, the Head's regard for him was an absurdity. Mr Ratcliff simply fumed at the idea of a mere boot-boy going over to Mr. Linton's study for tuition. A boot-boy's place was to clean boots.

The New House master, indeed, had made sarcastic remarks to Mr. Linton on the subject—remarks to which the master of the Shell replied so dryly that Ratty had felt extremely mortified, and so disliked Talbot all the more.

Mr. Linton had allowed observations to escape him which hinted that Mr. Ratcliff was a snob, and Mr. Ratcliff did not forget it.

Talbot's heart was heavy now.

He had made a mistake in yielding to Figgy's pressing demands, he knew, but it would not have mattered in the other House. In the New House it mattered very much.

After all, he was servant there, and it was not judicious, to say the least, that the boys should be on familiar terms with the staff "below stairs."

Talbot knew it, and he had determined to keep in his place; and the first time he had departed from that wholesome rule the thunderbolt had fallen.

It was bitter enough for Talbot.

Indeed, he was thinking now, as he worked at polishing silver with quick hands but a heavy heart, whether he had done wisely in coming back to the school at all.

He had intended to work his way upward, and one of the many scholarships on the old Foundation might easily be within his grasp.

But—there was a big "but."

He had been so happy for that hour in Figgy's study, before the Housemaster descended in his wrath.

Talbot could not help suspecting that Mr. Ratcliff resented the Head having so warmly recommended him to give Talbot the place. The Housemaster could not, of course, refuse a request from the Head.

But he was very jealous of his authority in his own House, and, to his small and suspicious mind, it probably seemed like an encroachment upon his authority.

He had lectured Talbot soundly, and he had spoken somewhat sharply to Mrs. Kenwigg on the subject, directing that good lady to see that there was no "more of it." And poor Mrs. Kenwigg, much irritated by the Housemaster's reprimand, had been somewhat irritable with Talbot in consequence.

Talbot polished away at the silver with a clouded brow. After all, would he have done better to keep away from the school he loved?

At all events, there could be no more friendliness with his old friends. That was completely knocked on the head. To them, in future, he must be nothing but an ordinary boot-boy.

There was a cautious step in the passage, and there came a slight tap on the boot-room door, and it opened. An eyeglass glimmered in.

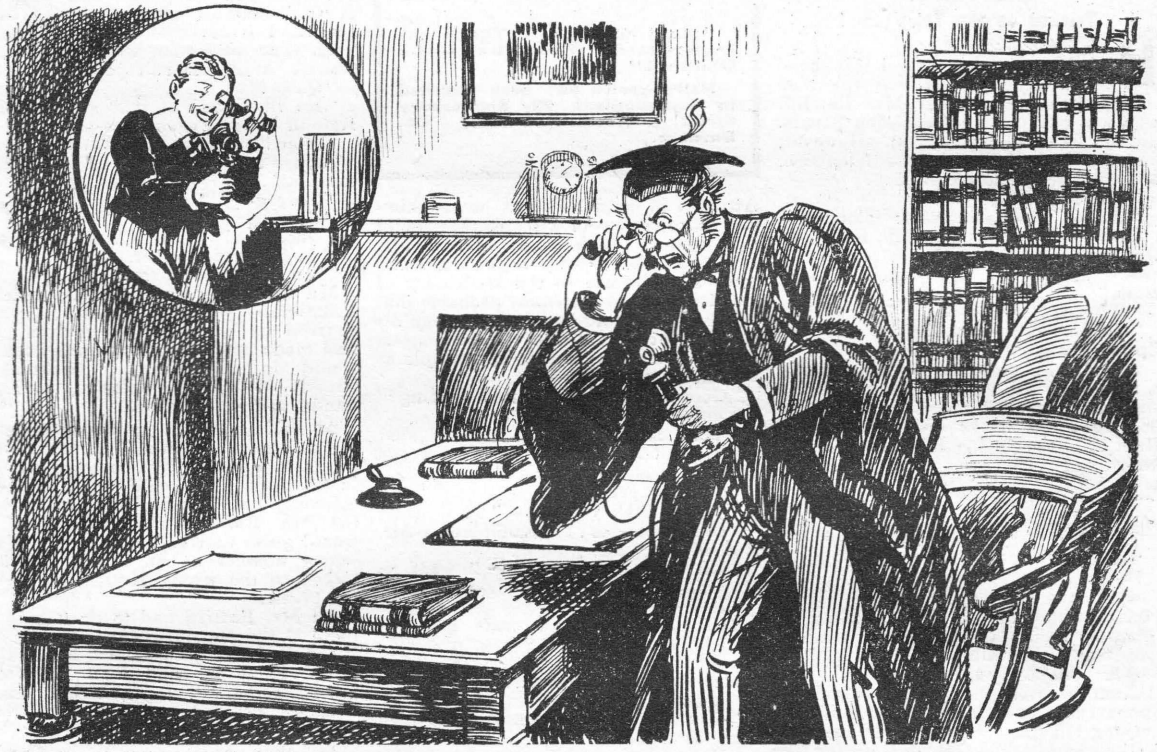
"D'Arcy!" muttered Talbot.

The swell of St. Jim's entered the room and closed the door. He smiled benignly at Talbot.

"Yaas, deah boy! I've come ovah to see you, old chap. We all want to tell you how sowwy we are for what happened this aftahnoon, you know."

"Thank you!" said Talbot. "But you'd better clear. There will be trouble if you are found here, speaking to me."

"That's all wight, deah boy. Watty's gone out," said Arthur Augustus. "I felt bound to come ovah and speak to you. I haven't let anyone see me comin' in. I'm wathah a deep chap, you know."



"You are there, Railton?" asked the voice on the phone. "How's that rascal Ratty?" "Wh-a-at!" stuttered Mr. Ratcliff. "Still the same sneaking, rotten old worm—eh?" went on the voice. "Oh!" gasped the New House master, almost bursting with wrath.

Talbot smiled.

"Yes; but——"

"Hard at work?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes."

"Can I help you, deah boy?"

Talbot laughed.

"No, thanks! It's all right. You'd better clear, Master D'Arcy—really. If you should be seen here it means trouble for both of us."

"We all wegard Watty as a fwightful cad," said Arthur Augustus, "and we're not going to stand it—we're goin' to punish him."

"Punish him?" said Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah! Wag him, you know."

"My dear chap——"

"We're all in it," grinned Arthur Augustus. "Us School House chaps, you know. Figgins & Co. are goin' to be left out, because Watty might get down on them. It's a School House wheeze, and I thought it would make you feel bettah to know that Watty is goin' to be put thwough it."

Talbot looked worried.

"Not on my account!" he exclaimed. "I wish you'd give up the idea. Don't do anything of the sort. It will lead to more trouble, old man."

Arthur Augustus smiled reassuringly.

"That's all wight, deah boy; we're goin' to be awfully careful. And I'm goin' to get you out of this, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Talbot, in wonder.

"Out of this posish, undah Watty's thumb," explained Arthur Augustus. "My patah is comin' down on Saturday aftahnoon to see a juniah House match, and I am goin' to put it to him. As a governah of the school, he is bound to do somethin', considewin' that you saved my minah's life, and that you wisked your life to save the twoop twain. I am goin' to put it quite stwaight to my governah."

"Don't!" said Talbot. "We've been through that already. I tell you, I can't accept charity from anybody. I'm going to work my way up, if I've got it in me. And I think I have. And now, do get off, D'Arcy, there's a good chap!"

"Vewy well, deah boy—good-bye!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took his departure.

Talbot went on moodily polishing. He had had to send away his friend, but the gloomy little boot-room seemed gloomier than ever when the swell of St. Jim's had gone

Clampe met Arthur Augustus as he came up the stairs from the regions below. D'Arcy almost ran into him as he stepped into the passage.

Clampe stopped.

"At it again—what?" he sneered.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass on the cad of the New House.

"I fail to compwehend your meanin', Clampe," he said, with dignity.

"Mr. Ratcliff's forbidden that bootcad to have anything to do with the fellows," said Clampe. "You'd get into a jolly row if he knew you'd been to see him."

"Are you wefewwin' to my fwiend Talbot as a cad?" asked Arthur Augustus, dropping his eyeglass to the end of its cord and pushing back his immaculate cuffs.

Clampe backed away a pace or two.

"Look here——" he began.

"Pway answah my question!"

"Yes," growled Clampe; "and I—— Yaroooh!"

Clampe gave a yell and staggered back against the wall, and pressed both hands to his nose. The elegant swell of the School House was a hard hitter when his temper was roused, and it was roused now.

"Yow-ow!" roared Clampe. "Yah! School House cad! Rescue! Yow-ow!"

There was a rush of New House juniors to the spot at once.

"School House cad! Kick him out!"

"Bump him!"

"Chuck him out!"

"Hold on!" roared Redfern, shoving his way forward. "Hands off! Come along, Gussy. it's all serene!"

And Redfern escorted the swell of the School House out of the dangerous quarter. Then he returned to Clampe, while Arthur Augustus trotted away across the quadrangle.

"You rotter!" howled Clampe. "Sticking up for a School House cad. You——"

"Yes; look here, Redfern——" began Pratt of the Fourth.

"Rats!" said Redfern. "I heard what Clampe said. He was calling

Talbot names. He isn't fit to clean Talbot's boots!"

"Boot-cleaning isn't my trade!" sneered Clampe.

"Caddishness and snobbishness are more in your line—what?" said Redfern. "I'm jolly glad D'Arcy dotted you on the nose; and if you say another word, I'll dot you in the eye."

"Look here—— Yah! Oh!"

Redfern suited the action to the word, and Clampe sat down on the floor with a yell.

"Have some more?" said Redfern sweetly.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

Clampe did not want any more. And Redfern walked away, and left him caressing his nose with one hand and his eye with the other.

CHAPTER 9.

Tricked on the Telephone!

BUZZZZZZZZZZZ!

Mr. Ratcliff raised his head and grunted. It was the telephone bell. And Mr. Ratcliff, who was busy with examination papers, did not like the interruption. However, he rose and crossed to the telephone, and took down the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!" came a voice along the wires, which Mr. Ratcliff failed to recognise. "I've rung you up to tell you that it's all right about Golden Rain."

"Wh-a-at!"

"Golden Rain—the geegee for the Spring Handicap."

Mr. Ratcliff snorted. It was evidently a mistake. Mr. Ratcliff was not in the slightest degree interested in racing, and he had never heard either of Golden Rain or of the Spring Handicap. Somebody had given the wrong number, apparently.

"It's all right," the voice was going on, "and you've won, Railton."

Then Mr. Ratcliff jumped.

"Railton!"

He thought he understood. Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, whom Mr. Ratcliff disliked as intensely as it was possible for a small nature to dislike a big one—Mr. Railton had been dabbling in racing, then! Mr. Railton—who kept up such excellent appearances, and seemed to think of nothing but his work and athletics—Mr. Railton had backed Golden Rain for the Spring Handicap! Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered green. What a discovery!

He had intended to tell his unknown interlocutor that he was on the wrong number, and to ring off. Now he did nothing of the kind.

Mr. Ratcliff was not above prying into another man's affairs, and to catch the other Housemaster on the hop was worth a little trouble. There had more than once been sharp words between the two Housemasters of St. Jim's, though they contrived to keep up an outward appearance of civility.

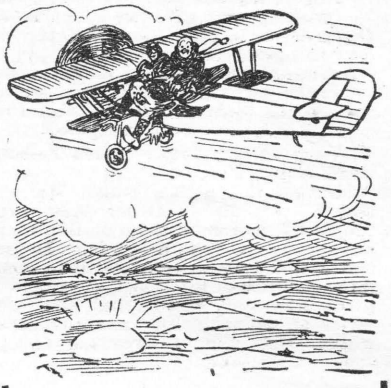
Mr. Ratcliff's meddlesome nature made him prone to interfere with the boys of the other House—which the School House master very naturally resented. And a series of snubs had not had the effect of teaching Ratty to mind his own business, but they had the effect of making him feel exceedingly bitter towards Mr. Railton.

"I say, that is you, Railton?" went on the voice, after a pause. "I'm on the right number—what?"

"Yes," said Mr. Ratcliff steadily.

He intended to hear more now.

DECEIVING!



"Haud on, Jock! That's nae hauf-a-croon! That be Loch O'Skene!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to J. Beaumont, 23, Shaftesbury Street, Stockton-on-Tees, Co. Durham.

Already, in his mind's eye, he saw himself in possession of a secret that would give him the whip-hand. For if Mr. Railton's dealings with bookmakers and races should come to the knowledge of the Head, it was extremely probable that Mr. Railton would be asked to resign his position at St. Jim's. Housemasters were supposed to instruct by example as well as by precept.

"Good! Can I come this evening?"

"This—this evening?"

"Yes. As Golden Rain has won, that clears up our account, you see. I can give you back your paper!"

"M-my paper?"

"Your I O U, you know."

"Oh, yes—yes!" stammered Mr. Ratcliff

"I'll come along to-night," went on the voice. "Say half-past eight—what?"

"I—I——"

"Of course, I can't come into the school. Wouldn't do for you to receive a visit from Freddy Welsh, the bookmaker—would it, Railton?"

"N-no!"

"You can't come down to the Green Man, as usual?"

"Upon my word!" murmured Mr. Ratcliff, almost overcome. So the School House master was in the habit of frequenting the Green Man, the low public-house in Rylcombe. A St. Jim's senior had once been expelled for haunting that place.

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes were almost dancing now. If he only had proof of this, how he would have his old rival under his thumb—the fate of the man he disliked, and who despised him, in the hollow of his hand. It really seemed almost too good to be true.

"I'll come," went on the voice. "I've got your I O U, and I know you're anxious to have it back. Not very safe to have a paper with your name on it going about, is it? Ha, ha, ha!"

"N-no!" stammered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Well, I'll bring it this evening."

"I must get that piece of paper," murmured Mr. Ratcliff, sotto voce. "Written proof—written proof, upon my word! I think Mr. Railton will find it to his advantage to be somewhat more civil in the future." He chuckled softly. "What a discovery to make—all through this scoundrel getting on to the wrong number! Of course, it is my duty to look into the matter, and make quite sure whether Mr. Railton is—ahem!—indeed such an utter blackguard as he appears to be. In that case, certainly, it would be my duty to bring the matter to Dr. Holmes' knowledge——"

"You are there, Railton?"

"Yes, I am here."

"How goes it? Pretty chirpy—what?"

"Ye-es!"

"How's that rascal Ratty?"

"Wh-a-at!"

"Still the same sneaking, rotten old worm—eh?"

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff, almost bursting with wrath. So that was how the other Housemaster talked of him among his low associates!

"Well, I'll be along at half-past eight," went on the voice. "I'll come to the side-gate. At exactly half-past I'll tap on the gate. You can open it. I'll hand you the paper, and walk on. It won't take a minute; no need even to speak. I understand how you have to keep your connection with me dark, of course. Will that suit you?"

"Quite!"

"No likelihood of that sneaking cad Ratcliff hanging about, I suppose?"

"N-no!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

"Right-ho, then! Half-past eight exactly."

"Very good!"

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said Mr. Ratcliff, and he hung up the receiver.

Then he sat down to think.

Mr. Ratcliff's brain worked quickly sometimes—especially when it was spurred on by hatred or malice. He had made up his mind at once what he would do. This rascally bookmaker, Freddy Welsh, was playing into his hands, as if on purpose.

At half-past eight he would come to the side-gate. He would hand over the paper to a man whom he could not see in the dark. He would not guess for a moment that it was Mr. Ratcliff and not Mr. Railton, any more than he would guess that he had been given the wrong number at St. Jim's, and had talked to the wrong Housemaster over the phone.

All Mr. Ratcliff had to do was to be there at the appointed time, take in the paper that the unsuspicious bookmaker would hand in, and then he would possess proof, in Railton's own handwriting, of that master's nefarious dealings on the Turf.

And that paper, shown to the Head—from a sense of duty, of course—would mean a very uncomfortable interview for Mr. Railton with Dr. Holmes.

After that, the School House master could not remain at St. Jim's. That would be impossible.

Mr. Ratcliff chuckled at the thought. It had been a stroke of luck—a tremendous stroke of luck for him—that the wrong number had been given to the unseen Freddy Welsh on the telephone.

. . . . .

In the prefects' room in the School House there was a telephone, which the juniors sometimes used—generally when the room was empty. At this very moment it was empty, save for a group of juniors, and one of them was at the telephone.

It was Monty Lowther.

Lowther had just rung off, and he was grinning. The other fellows were gasping.

Mr. Ratcliff's interlocutor was not so far away as he had deemed. He had not known where "Freddy Welsh" was. He would have been surprised if he had known that he was no farther off than

the School House, and that his real name was Montague Lowther.

"Well, what do you think?" grinned Lowther.

"Bai Jove!"

"My only hat!"

"It takes the cake!" said Tom Merry. "I hardly thought it would work, but it has!"

"Like a charm," said Lowther serenely—"like a giddy charm. I knew that Ratty would simply jump at a chance of finding out anything against old Railton."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Any decent chap would have said at once that I'd got the wrong number, and refused to hear another man's secret," went on Lowther. "But I knew Ratty wasn't that sort!"

"No feah!"

"What a rotten cad!" muttered Blake. "Awfully rotten beast! And what a silly ass to think that Railton is a plunger on the Turf!"

"A fellow like Ratty always suspects people; and the better appearance they keep up, the more he suspects them!" chuckled Lowther. "He'd give an ear to get old Railton down! Now he thinks he's got a chance. And he's jumped at it! If it hadn't worked, we could have thought of something else. But I knew it would work."

"And now——" said Herries.

"Now Ratty will be skulking inside the little gate at half-past eight in the dark," said Lowther. "No moon to-night. It will be jolly dark under the trees, too! His idea is that Freddy Welsh—ha, ha, ha!—won't know he isn't Railton."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And my idea is that he won't know we're not Freddy Welsh. We get out over the wall soon after eight, and at half-past eight we tap on the gate——"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And Ratty opens it, all ready for the incriminating document to be passed in."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he gets a jugful of red ink right in the chivvy!"

The juniors shrieked.

"It's worth the price of the ink—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes!"

"Yaas, wathah! Oh cwumbs! Poor old Watty!"

"And, whatever he suspects, he won't be able to say a giddy wordlet, for he can't confess that he intercepted a telephone-call for Railton and tried to sneak a paper belonging to him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo! What's all this cackling?" asked Darrell of the Sixth, coming into the prefects' room. "Outside, you fags!"

And the juniors crowded out, chuckling gleefully. The plan for the punishment of the obnoxious Ratty was working, as Lowther declared, like a charm. And there was much eagerness among the chums of the School House for half-past eight—the fateful hour—to arrive!

CHAPTER 10.
Inky!

MR. RATCLIFF came out of the New House at a quarter past eight that evening, muffled up against the cold wind.

The collar of his coat was turned up, and he wore a soft hat pulled down over his brows. There was very little of his face to be seen—chiefly his nose, which bore a strong resemblance to a beak.

The Housemaster crossed the quadrangle towards the school gates, to give the impression to any casual observer that he was going out. As soon as the darkness of the quad swallowed him up, however, he changed his direction, and hurried along the inside of the school wall towards the little gate which was used by masters and prefects, who had keys to it.

It was a cold and windy March evening. It was not very pleasant standing there with the keen wind playing on him, and, well wrapped up as he was, Mr. Ratcliff felt cold and chilled and not at all comfortable.

He was very impatient for half-past eight to strike, so that this disagreeable vigil would be finished.

It was worth a little discomfort, he reflected, to have the man he disliked, the man he regarded as an enemy, in the hollow of his hand. Then, when the written proof was his, he would have a painful duty to do—to acquaint the Head with the real character of Mr. Railton. A very painful duty, which Ratty would perform with great solemnity and sadness, and great inward enjoyment.

The friction that had always existed between the two masters, their mutual dislike, and Ratty's uncomfortable feeling that Mr. Railton despised him, spurred Ratty on to play this trick on the School House master.

Not that he admitted to himself that it was a trick. Mr. Ratcliff had an elastic conscience, which approved of everything he did. He was now performing a stern duty—or, at all events, he tried to think so.

He was too busy with his thoughts to notice, especially in the moaning of the wind, a slight sound some distance farther along the school wall. It did not occur to him that certain juniors, concealed in the darkness, were clambering over the wall at a distance from him, one of them carrying a large jug very carefully.

Half-past eight chimed from the clock-tower.

Mr. Ratcliff unlocked the gate and remained close to it, ready to open it quickly at a tap from without.

It was very dark where he stood.

When the gate was open the man outside would catch but a dim glimpse of him—a figure muffled up in an overcoat—and, naturally, would not be able to see that he was not Mr. Railton.

All would go well. Mr. Ratcliff's heart beat faster than usual as he waited. The half-hour struck. It was time!

Tap!

The sharp rap of knuckles on the outside of the gate sounded clearly. Mr. Ratcliff pulled the gate open.

It was very dark without, under the shadow of the tree overhanging the wall. Mr. Ratcliff dimly saw a shadowy form as he reached out his hand to take the letter which should have been handed to him, according to the arrangements made on the telephone.

Then——

Whiz!

Whoosh!

Splash!

A fiendish yell rang out from the startled Housemaster.

A sudden flood of some smelly liquid had splashed full in his face, and he staggered back, choked and blinded and astounded.

"Yah! Oh! Grooogh!"

There was a chuckle from the darkness outside; then a pattering of retreating footsteps.

That was all!

Mr. Ratcliff clasped both hands to his face, gouging the liquid from his eyes and nose and mouth. In his amazement and fury he gasped and yelled and roared, utterly forgetting that he was there on a secret mission.

"Ugh! Ow, ow—yow! Groogh! Oh, help! Ah! Hah! Yah! Groogh!"

Taggles, the porter, looked out of his lodge as that remarkable ebullition of noises came to his ears.

"'Allo!" called out Taggles. "Wot's all that?"

"Ow, ow! Yugh! Yoogh! Groogh!"

"My heye!" ejaculated Taggles. "Sounds like somebody a-drowning! Wot on earth is it? My heye!"

"Yow—ow! Owwwwwwgggh!"

Taggles came out of his lodge with his lamp. He was astounded by the noises. He was still more astounded by the sight that met his eyes. The New House master was gouging at his face, which was streaming crimson.

Taggles gazed at him with wide-open, startled eyes.

"My heye! Wot's 'appened?" he gasped. "Wot's makin' your 'ead bleed like that, sir? Oh, my word!"

"Yowwwwwwggh!"

"'Elp!" roared Taggles. "Mr. Ratcliff 'ave 'ad an accident! 'Ere, sir, lemme look at it! Lemme 'elp you inter my lodge! Oh, my heye!"

"Hallo! What's the matter?" exclaimed Monty Lowther, coming through the elms.

He did not come from the direction of the School House, as he should have done at that hour; but Taggles did not notice that, and Mr. Ratcliff had no eyes just then for anything but red ink.

"It's a haccident!" gasped Taggles. "Mr. Ratcliff 'ave 'urt 'is 'ead!"

"Dear me!" said Lowther. "My hat, what a stream of blood! The injury

(*Continued on the next page.*)

must be frightfully serious! Better call a doctor!"

"Bai Jove! What's the mattah here?"

"What's up?"

"Call a doctor!" roared Lowther. "Mr. Ratcliff's had an awful accident!"

"Great Scott!"

Fellows were streaming out of both Houses now. Mr. Railton came quickly from the School House with a very startled look.

He uttered a sharp exclamation at the sight of Mr. Ratcliff, with his face streaming crimson in the light of the lamp. He did not like his colleague; but he was concerned, of course, at seeing him in such a state.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "What has happened? Take my arm, Mr. Ratcliff. Let me assist you——"

"Groooogh!"

"Where is the wound?"

"Grooogh! I am not wounded!" yelled Mr. Ratcliff. "I have not had an accident!"

"What! But all this blood——"

"It is not blood—it is ink!"

"Ink!" gasped Mr. Railton.

"Yes, ink!" screamed Mr. Ratcliff, beside himself with rage. "I have been the victim of an outrage, and you, sir, are a party to it!"

Mr. Railton jumped.

"I? What are you saying, sir? What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean!" shrieked the New House master, almost foaming. "I was tricked into coming to this gate after dark—tricked, sir!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Railton coldly. "You are not so utterly absurd, I suppose, as to imagine that I could have anything to do with such a trick? You are speaking very wildly!"

"You—you—— I—I received a call on the telephone, and—and——" Mr. Ratcliff broke off.

Furious as he was, he realised that it would not do to admit in public that he had deliberately taken a call on the telephone that was intended for Mr. Railton, and that he had come there to intercept a paper belonging to the School House master. For, as he had not received the paper after all, he had no proof that it was a "shady" document.

Indeed, he began to understand now that the document did not exist at all, and that the caller on the telephone had been simply pulling his leg.

"You received a call on the telephone," said Mr. Railton wonderingly. "Why should that make you come to this gate, sir? I do not understand."

"I—I—I——" stammered Mr. Ratcliff.

There was a crowd round him now, and all were looking at him in wonder as well as merriment. There were some juniors in the crowd who could have explained, but they did not intend to do so. They enjoyed the scene and kept their little secret.

"I—I was tricked!" the New House master went on. "I—I was spoken to on the telephone, and—and——"

"But why——"

"I—I will see that someone is punished for this! I——"

"You have hinted that I had a hand in the matter, sir," said Mr. Railton icily. "I must ask you to explain your words."

Mr. Ratcliff ground his teeth.

"Your name was used to make me come out here!" he snapped.

"By someone on the telephone?"

"Yes."

"That is very extraordinary. It was a trick, of course," said Mr. Railton. "I should think it was quite unnecessary for me to say that I have no knowledge whatever of the matter."

"You have no knowledge of a man named Freddy Welsh, I suppose?" snarled Mr. Ratcliff.

"None whatever! I have never heard the name."

"What!"

"Really, Mr. Ratcliff, I utterly fail to understand you!" said Mr. Railton impatiently.

The New House master glared at him. The truth was dawning slowly on his mind now. It had been a trick all through—there was no such person as Freddy Welsh, and Mr. Railton was not mixed up in racing and betting transactions.

The mysterious caller on the telephone had been playing on his dislike of Mr. Railton, in order to lead him into a trap.

Who had done it? Some fellow belonging to St. Jim's, perhaps—he had enemies enough in the school. But it came into his mind at once that the matter could not possibly be investigated. He dared not confess in public the shabby trick he had intended to play upon his colleague. He dared not even confess the suspicion he had entertained, now that he knew it was all moonshine.

In a state of mind that was very nearly frantic, from fury and the knowledge that he was helpless to punish the japer, Mr. Ratcliff rushed away towards the New House, panting.

Mr. Railton looked after him in astonishment.

"This is simply extraordinary," he said—"simply extraordinary!" And Mr. Railton shook his head and walked back to the School House.

Tom Merry & Co. followed him, smiling. The other fellows were grinning, but they were surprised, too. Tom Merry & Co. were not surprised, but they were longing to get somewhere where they could yell with laughter in security.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy ecstatically. "How did you like his chivvy, deah boys? He looked wathah wed, didn't he?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he can't say a word!" chortled Lowther. "He can't admit he was spying and sneaking!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's got to let the matter drop, in case the truth comes out——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, bai Jove! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, you chaps!" exclaimed Kangaroo of the Shell suspiciously. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Just a suspish!" murmured Monty Lowther. "We've got a faint idea that Ratty was tricked into something, thinking he could do Railton a rotten bad turn——"

"My hat!"

"And there was somebody waiting with a jug with a gallon of red ink in it, and——"

"Oh, you bounder! Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kangaroo.

Mr. Ratcliff strode into the New House, almost foaming at the mouth. Figgins & Co. met him in the doorway, and stared. They scuttled off to their study, to laugh at their ease. The Housemaster was as crimson as a newly boiled beetroot, and his collar, his tie, his clothes, his overcoat were streaming red ink.

He hurried up to his bed-room and rang for hot water, and for the next hour he was busy. And when he had finished, and was exhausted with washing and rubbing and scrubbing, there was still a red-inky flush about his ears and about the roots of his side-whiskers. And the state of his temper for the rest of that evening was not to be described in words.

CHAPTER 11.
Ratty Comes Down Heavy!

WHO had done it?

Mr. Ratcliff debated that question savagely in his mind.

He had thought the matter over very carefully, and he came to the inevitable conclusion that the unknown person who had called him up on the telephone belonged to St. Jim's. Only someone belonging to the school could have known him well enough to know that he would be willing to take a call intended for someone else.

He ground his teeth as he reflected that the call was, in point of fact, intended for him all the time—that his

Dimly Mr. Ratcliff saw a shadowy form outside the gate. T startled Housemaster as a sudden flood of smelly liquid sp and as

interlocutor had calculated upon his acting dishonourably.

A public inquiry into the matter would probably have revealed the culprit; but it would have revealed also the "rotten" manner in which he had acted himself, his desire to take an unscrupulous advantage of his fellow-Housemaster, and from that kind of publicity Mr. Ratcliff very naturally shrank.

It was impossible to make the affair public. But if he could have discovered who the "japer" was, he could have punished him in his own way, biding his time, and using his own peculiar methods. But who was it?

The trick had been played, doubtless, in return for some late punishment inflicted upon someone under his authority, and the call had, doubtless, come from a St. Jim's telephone; there were half a dozen in the school.

"Freddy Welsh" was a fictitious personage, and there had been some grinning junior at the other end of the wire. The enraged Housemaster realised that now. Someone who knew him and his peculiar methods and peculiar nature thoroughly well.

Mr. Ratcliff started as a sudden thought came into his mind. He remembered the scene in Figgins' study and the ill-concealed anger and resentment of the juniors. It was one of them who had played this trick, undoubtedly, or—the boot-boy!

Mr. Ratcliff rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

The boot-boy!

Why had he not thought of that before? It was quite clear to him now. This was the revenge of Talbot for the humiliation inflicted upon him. Mr. Ratcliff saw it all. He rang, and told the maid to send Talbot to him.

The boot-boy of the New House came into the study a minute later, with his usual quiet and respectful manner. Mr. Ratcliff fixed a baleful glance upon him.

"You are aware of what has happened this evening, Talbot?" he asked.

"No, sir," said Talbot. "I did not know anything had happened. I have only just come back from Mr. Linton."

"You have been with Mr. Linton?"

"Yes, sir. He has been giving me my tuition."

Mr. Ratcliff grunted. He did not approve of that kindness on the part of the master of the Shell.

"Have you used the telephone to-day, Talbot? There is a telephone in the housekeeper's room?"

Talbot looked astonished.

"I never use the telephone, sir."

"You have not used it to-day?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"Have you been outside the school walls this evening?"

"No, sir."

"You know nothing about the outrage that has been perpetrated upon me?"

"I—I didn't know anything had happened, sir."

Mr. Ratcliff looked at him scrutinisingly. Talbot appeared as if he were telling the truth; but Mr. Ratcliff did not believe him. Mr. Ratcliff never took anybody's word about anything.

"Someone drenched me with red ink at the gate, Talbot."

"Indeed, sir! I had not heard of it."

"And I suspect," pursued the Housemaster, "that it was done in revenge for my calling you to order this afternoon and very properly putting a stop to your insolence in assuming familiarity with the boys here."

Talbot started. He remembered what Arthur Augustus had stated during his visit to the boot-room.

"Ah, I see that touches you!" said the Housemaster sarcastically. "You may consider yourself discharged, Talbot!"

"Discharged, sir?"

"Yes. Kindly tell Mrs. Kenwigg that you will be leaving at the end of the week! You may go!"

Talbot stood rooted to the ground.

Discharged!

That afternoon he had been thinking, dispiritedly enough, whether he had done wisely in coming to the school at all; whether it would not be better to go. But now he was told to go, he realised how much he wished to stay. As boot-boy—as anything—he wanted to remain in the school he loved.

"But—but—but, sir——" he stammered.

"That is enough," said Mr. Ratcliff icily. "You may go. I may add that I did not approve of your coming here at all, considering your unpleasant record. A reformatory would be a better place for you, in my opinion. Go!"

Talbot turned crimson.

"You have no right to discharge me without a fault!" he exclaimed. "I have done nothing; I did not even know what had happened until you told me yourself, sir."

"I do not believe you!"

Talbot bit his lip hard.

"Very well, sir, I will go. I hope you will be sorry for your injustice some time."

"Silence! Go!"

"And before I go," said Talbot steadily, "I shall explain to the Head that I am leaving by no fault of my own. That much is due to myself. Dr. Holmes will be disappointed, and I have a right to explain that to him."

"Leave my study!"

"Very well, sir."

Talbot left the study. His face was pale and troubled as he went down the passage. Here was an end to his hopes and dreams. The scholarship he had hoped to win—that was out of his reach now. The petty spite of the Housemaster had frustrated all his plans. He had done nothing to offend, but the blow had fallen upon him. The unfortunate boy's heart was heavy as he returned to his room.

Should he go to the Head? He shrank from the possibility of causing trouble between the Head and the Housemaster; he shrank from appearing to complain. Enough had been done for him already; he could not ask the Head's interference now. His pride rose at the thought. He had received favours, and he would not ask for more. Better to go, and then he would write and explain to the Head, and thank him for all he had done. That was better.

But to go—to leave the school—to throw up all his hopes and plans!

He sat on the edge of his bed, thinking it over. It was the end of all his dreams. Even in a menial capacity there was no place for him in the old school.

But it was up to him to bear it in silence.

It was late when he went to bed, and it was later before he slept. He had tried to study, but he could not concentrate on the task. Hope was gone from his breast.

What was the use of the struggle, after all? The thought came into the unhappy lad's mind that it was useless; that it was folly to think of redeeming the past, or of working his way to better things. He was almost penniless. He was willing to work; he wanted only a chance.

Within his grasp was wealth, if he chose to take it, and a welcome from his old associates. He knew that Hookey Walker had escaped from the police; he knew where he could find him; he knew how gladly his old confederates would welcome him back to the ranks of crime. What if he threw it all up—if he abandoned the hopeless struggle—if Talbot disappeared, and the Toff came to light again?

As he lay sleepless in the hours of darkness the temptation assailed him; the thought would not be driven from his mind.

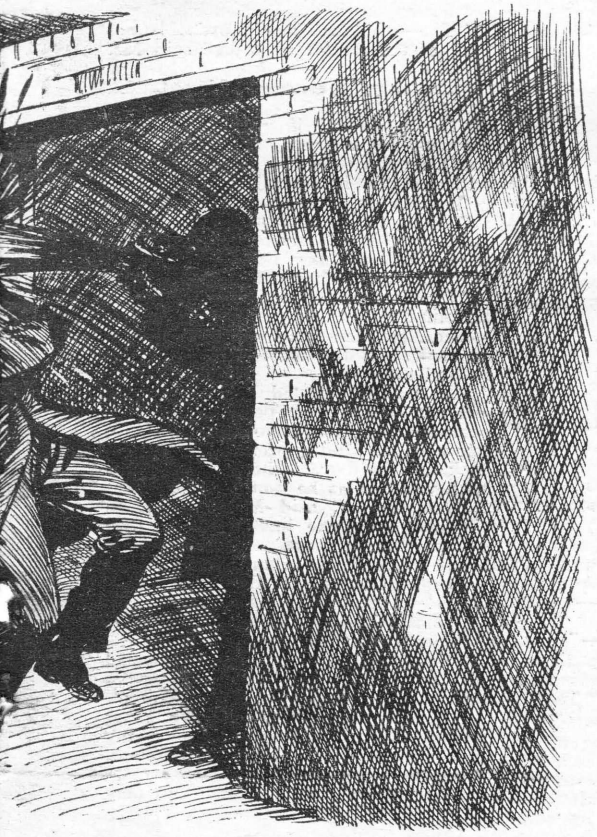
The old wild life, the adventure, the risk, the wealth of it! What was the use of travelling against his fate?

In those dark hours the fate of the unhappy lad trembled in the balance.

But he drove the tempting thought from his mind at last. Whatever happened, there could be no going back for him. Honesty was the watchword he had set for himself, and he would keep to it—he must keep to it!

He slept at last.

The next morning he was pale and



hen—— Whooosh! Splash! A fiendish yell rang out from the ashed full in his face. He staggered back, choked, blinded, ounded.

quiet. He saw the fellows go into class. He wondered what his friends in the Fourth and the Shell would think if they had known that he was to go.

He avoided coming into contact with any of them that day; he did not wish them to know. He knew how they would be distressed if they knew that their action had been the cause of his discharge. They had meant to punish Ratty for his caddish conduct, but it was upon Talbot that the punishment had fallen. They should never know that! When he went, they should not know why; and after he was gone they could not ask him. He would spare them that knowledge.

In the evening he took his way as usual to Mr. Linton's study. He was there half the evenings in the week. He usually went with a light step and a light heart. The study he keenly desired and valued did not seem like work to him. But this time his step was slow and his heart heavy. It was the last time he would see the master of the Shell.

Mr. Linton greeted him kindly, as usual. The master of the Shell was a somewhat cold and severe man, but he was always kind to Talbot. He observed at once the cloud on the lad's brow, and could not fail to see that he was absent-minded and distraught during his lesson.

"You are tired?" asked the Shell master kindly, as he closed his books at last.

"It isn't that, sir," said Talbot, with an effort. "I—I shan't be coming any more, sir; that is all."

Mr. Linton raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed! You are giving up your studies? You find that you cannot pursue them along with your own work?"

"It's because I'm leaving, sir."

"You are leaving your employment?"

"Yes, sir."

The master of the Shell regarded him gravely.

"Of course, that is your own affair, Talbot," he said, after a pause. "Yet if you will take advice from me, I should recommend you to persevere. You are making excellent progress—indeed, considering the disadvantages you labour under, I may say that your progress is wonderful. You have every chance of gaining one of the Founders' Scholarships in the course of time. Next term, in fact, you may be able to take your old place in the Shell. Unless you really feel the work is too much for you, I should strongly advise you to keep on."

"I—I can't, sir!" Talbot almost gasped. "I'd like to, but I can't!"

"May I ask why not?"

Talbot was silent. To say that he was "sacked" was like asking for sympathy.

But the master of the Shell guessed the state of the case.

"Do you mean that you are not leaving of your own accord, Talbot?" he asked.

"Ye-es, sir."

"Has Mr. Ratcliff discharged you, then?"

Talbot nodded.

"I am sorry," said the master of the Shell. "It is a pity you could not give satisfaction there—a great pity. I trust you have done your best."

"It is a mistake, sir," said Talbot. "Mr. Ratcliff thinks somehow that I was concerned in what happened to him last night."

"But you were not?"

PITY POOR PUSS!

"Sorry, puss, but someone must get the blame for stealing the jam!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to C. Anderton, 9, Derwent Street, Leigh, Lancs.

"Certainly not, sir!"

Mr. Linton pursed his lips.

"I will see Mr. Ratcliff," he said finally.

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Talbot, flushing. "I didn't mean that, sir. I—I don't want to ask any favours of Mr. Ratcliff."

"If it is a mistake it should be cleared up, and you ought not to suffer for a mistake," said Mr. Linton. "I regard it as my duty to see Mr. Ratcliff about this matter. Say no more, Talbot. I trust I can arrange the matter."

Talbot said no more. Mr. Linton lost no time. Ten minutes later he was in Mr. Ratcliff's study in the New House.

———

CHAPTER 12.
Ratty Climbs Down!

MR. RATCLIFF received the master of the Shell with chilly politeness. He had not forgotten their previous talk on the subject of Talbot.

Mr. Linton felt a certain awkwardness in beginning, and he plunged into the subject at once.

"I am very distressed to hear that Talbot is leaving his situation here, Mr. Ratcliff," he said. "He is progressing so well with his studies that it is a great pity they should be broken off."

"I do not approve of that kind of thing for a servant employed in my House, as you are aware," said Mr. Ratcliff icily.

"Ahem! Of course, I am carrying out the instructions of the Head," said Mr. Linton. "It appears to be a mistake that has caused you to——"

"Nothing of the kind."

"But, really, Mr. Ratcliff——"

"Excuse me, I cannot listen to any criticism of my way of conducting my House," said Mr. Ratcliff. "That is purely my own affair."

"Quite so," said the master of the Shell, flushing. "But as this is a mistake, it is my duty to prove it to you. It appears that you were assaulted last evening in the quadrangle by some practical joker——"

"By Talbot," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"You believe so?"

"Certainly! And I do not care to discuss the matter."

"Last evening," said Mr. Linton, "Talbot was in my study, working with me. He came in just after eight o'clock. He stayed until nine-thirty. While he was there I heard something of a disturbance in the quadrangle. That was when this very unfortunate occurrence took place. As Talbot was with me at the time, you will see for yourself that he cannot possibly have been the person who played that very disrespectful trick upon you."

Mr. Ratcliff bit his thin lips. As he had been drenched with ink at half-past eight, and Talbot had been in Mr. Linton's study from eight to half-past nine, it certainly could not have been Talbot. It was a complete alibi.

"You see, sir, that it is a—a misapprehension," said Mr. Linton, as the Housemaster did not speak.

"It—it appears so," stammered Mr. Ratcliff. "I—I suppose it could not have been Talbot in the circumstances, as—as you say."

"Then may I tell the boy that you have excused him—ahem!—that he need not regard himself as discharged?"

"No, sir," snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "I do not consider it consistent with my dignity to bandy words with a boot-boy. Talbot is discharged!"

Mr. Linton's eyes glittered.

"Very well, sir," he said. "I will discuss the matter with the Head, and we will see what can be done for the boy. It is due to him that Dr. Holmes should know that he is discharged through no fault of his own."

Mr. Ratcliff started.

"There is no need for the matter to be mentioned to the Head at all!" he exclaimed.

"I consider it due to the boy."

"The—the Head would probably not look at the matter as I do," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"Probably," assented Mr. Linton dryly.

"In—in short, if you—you assure me that the boy was, in fact, in your study at the time of the outrage——" muttered the Housemaster.

"I do assure you on that point."

"Then, taking everything into consideration, I will rescind my decision. I will tell the boy he may remain," said Mr. Ratcliff ungraciously.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Ratcliff!"

The New Housemaster made no reply to that, and the master of the Shell retired satisfied.

Mr. Ratcliff gritted his teeth. He did not care for his petty injustice to come to the knowledge of the Head, knowing the kindly interest Dr. Holmes took in the boy. But he was pale with vexation as he sent for Talbot.

"Ah, ahem!" said Mr. Ratcliff, as the boot-boy came in. "I learn that—that you could not have had a part in the outrage last evening, Talbot. In the circumstances, you may keep your—ahem!—place."

Talbot's face lighted up.

"Thank you, sir!"

"You need not thank me!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "I simply desire to be just. I do not approve of you, Talbot, and I do not approve of your being here. I have taken you into my House at the request of Dr. Holmes. I cannot very well send you away without just cause. That is all. You may go."

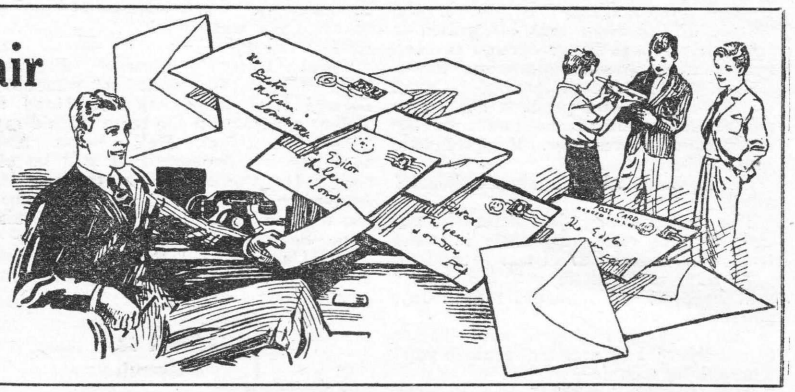
Talbot went.

He knew that he had to thank Mr.

(*Continued on page* 18.)

The Editor's Chair

Let the Editor be your pal. Drop him a line to-day, addressing your letters: The Editor, The GEM, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.



HALLO, chums! Which stories do you consider were the best the GEM published in 1936? I ask the question because I recently received a letter from the secretary of the GEM Club at the Modern School, Surbiton, in which he sets out the result of the voting by club members on last year's stories. Here is it: 1—"St. Jim's Captaincy" series. 2—"Gore's Guilty Secret." 3—"Mystery of Eastwood House" stories. 4—"The Traitor" and its sequel. 5—"The Mystery of Tom Merry." 6—"Treasure of Santa Maria" stories. 7—"Getting Even With Ratty." 8—"The Laugh's on the First Eleven." 9—"The Toff" series. 10—"The Shanghaied Schoolboys."

That's a very good selection, and I think it includes most of Martin Clifford's best efforts of 1936. But I was rather surprised to find the "Toff" series coming so low in the list. Judging from readers' letters, I should have given it first place. However, it would be interesting to see what other readers think. So, when you are writing to me, chums, let me know the stories which stand out in your mind as the best published in 1936.

"THE SHADOW OF THE PAST!"

There's no doubt that when the best stories and series of 1937 are written down, the present series will figure high in the list, and next Wednesday's yarn in particular will be well remembered. It is a powerful story of real human interest, in which Talbot finds the shadow of his past suddenly rising up to darken his new life at St. Jim's.

It is certainly unfortunate for the "Toff" when a theft occurs in the very study in which he is quartered. That is the start of the trouble for Talbot, for, in the circumstances, the one-time cracksman is the first upon whom suspicion falls. But the theft is hardly a few hours' old when there is another and more sensational robbery. Twelve pounds, the funds of the Fifth Form Football Club, are stolen! Who is the culprit? It certainly looks very black against Talbot, and his friends can do nothing to help him. But there is one junior who is out to prove his innocence, and, strangely enough, that one is Ernest Levison, the Toff's old enemy!

Here is a great yarn which will compel your interest from the first line to the last. See that you don't miss it!

"THE FALL OF THE FADDIST!"

The Remove at Greyfriars have had to put up with a lot from their temporary Form-master, the "Chesham ass," as they call him; but at last they are determined to stand no more of his nonsense. In next week's exciting yarn you will read how they hit back at the faddist by starting a passive resistance campaign—refusing to eat any food at all, while at the same time being perfectly orderly and respectful. Mr. Chesham is at a loss what to do. But, did he only know, it is the beginning of the end of his reign in the Remove.

Frank Richards tells the yarn in his usual fascinating style, and readers will enjoy it immensely.

Before I answer this week's readers' letters, I should like to draw your attention to the grand cover-to-cover yarn which appears in this week's "Magnet." It is called "COKER THE KIDNAPPER!" and deals with the amazing efforts of the one-and-only Horace to get his place in the Greyfriars first eleven.

If you enjoy the GEM, then you will assuredly like our companion paper, too. Once a reader, always a reader! See about your copy of this week's "Magnet" to-day.

IN REPLY.

S. E. Clarke, Winneba, Gold Coast.—It is quite impossible to publish your "Pen Pal" notice in the next issue of the GEM. It will appear in due course.

J. Feldstein, Montreal, Canada.—Many thanks for your letter and suggestion! I am sorry, but there isn't the space available in the GEM to publish the feature you suggest. Your "Pen Pal" notice has been added to the waiting list.

R. Dunn, 100, Rushmore Road, London, E. 5.—I haven't the address of Reader Foster, of London, W. 2, as, of course, I cannot keep all the letters I receive, and his has been destroyed. But I have given your full address, in case Reader Foster's eyes catches this reply.

R. Maule, Stamford Hill, N. 16.—There is no weekly paper which publishes the adventures of Jimmy Silver & Co. But the chums of Rookwood appear in the "Schoolboys' Own Library" about every other month. Watch the adverts in the GEM. Three numbers of this library, price fourpence each, appear on the first Thursday in every month. Tom Merry is 16 and Ernest Levison is 15½.

M. J. O'Donohoe, Streatham, S.W. 16.—Thanks for your letter! Johnny Bull does not come to Greyfriars for some considerable time yet. Yes, a film of the chums of Greyfriars is to be made, starring Nellie Wallace and Claude Dampier. Kerr is nearly 15½ years old.

C. Stephens, Dublin.—Sorry I can't supply you with old numbers of the GEM and "Magnet" prior to 1934. If I hear of any reader who can, I will let you know.

R. Davies, Bakewell, Derbyshire.—Rylcombe is near enough a mile from St. Jim's, and Wayland about four miles. There are, roughly, three hundred boys at St. Jim's. Glad you liked the "Toff" series. You'll enjoy the present yarns even more.

N. E. Surridge, Bristol.—So your reasons for not liking the GEM are: "Every story is a complete one, there are too many House rows, and you think the comic yarns silly." Personally, I think every story must be complete in itself, whether it is one of a series or not; otherwise it becomes part of a serial. I don't agree that there are too many House rows; and, in any case, friendly rivalry between the juniors adds no little liveliness to the yarns. Lastly, the humorous stories, far removed from being silly, are just as popular with readers as serious ones. It is no easy thing to "put over" humour in cold type, but I am convinced that Martin Clifford's humorous stories are as clever and funny as any published.

All the best, chums!

THE EDITOR.

PEN PALS COUPON
6-3-37

PEN PALS

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(*Continued on page* 27.)

Ratcliff for nothing. It was to the master of the Shell that his gratitude was due. It was bitter enough to keep his situation on such ungracious terms. But there was the scholarship—he must work for that—and perhaps next term he would be out of the power of the unpleasant Housemaster. Beggars could not be choosers.

But he went to bed in a more cheerful mood.

The next morning, just before breakfast, Figgins came cautiously into the boot-room, where Talbot was at work.

"I want to speak to you, old scout," said Figgins. "To-morrow's Saturday, you know."

"Buzz off, old chap!" said Talbot hurriedly. "I—I mustn't speak to you! There'll be trouble——"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Figgins. "Reddy, Owen, and Lawrence are going off to-morrow afternoon—going to see Redfern's people, you know—and so they won't be able to play in the House match. Now——"

The door was flung open, and Mr. Ratcliff appeared.

Figgins broke off in dismay. Talbot groaned inwardly. He was in for it again. The Housemaster was simply glaring.

"Have I not warned you, Talbot, about this familiarity with the juniors of this House?" he thundered.

"I—I say, sir, it was my fault!" stammered Figgins. "I—I came here, sir! Talbot told me to clear out—he did really, sir!"

"Silence, Figgins! This is the last time I shall warn you, Talbot! On the next occasion you will be sent away immediately."

"Yes, sir," said Talbot heavily.

"I will not be put to the trouble of watching my servants to see that they are not guilty of presumption and familiarity," said Mr. Ratcliff.

"I—I say, sir!" gasped Figgins. "I—I really——"

"You may go, Figgins! You will take five hundred lines!"

"Oh!"

And Mr. Ratcliff marched Figgins out of the boot-room in an almost homicidal frame of mind.

Later that morning Figgins confided the incident to his chums, and the Co. was very wrathy.

"Only we can't speak to the chap again!" grunted Figgins dismally. "Ratty comes down on him as well as on us, so it won't do. We've got to give him a wide berth, or else he'll get the sack. Poor old Talbot!"

"I shall dot Ratty in the eye some day!" said Fatty Wynn, with conviction. "I've got a feeling that I shall do it!"

"Wait till I'm grown up!" said Figgins, brandishing his fist in the air. "When I'm older, I'll come back and see Ratty, and then——"

Figgins sparred furiously into the air by way of showing what he would do then.

"Never mind. To-morrow afternoon Ratty is going out," said Kerr. "He goes to Abbotsford, you know. Then we can speak to Talbot and get him to play in the eleven, perhaps."

"Ratty would hear of it afterwards," said Fatty Wynn. "Then he would be down on Talbot."

Figgins snorted.

"Blow Ratty! We've got to work it somehow. We're not going to lose the House match to please him! Reddy, Owen, and Lawrence will be away, and we've got to make up a team somehow. Talbot's the man. He's a ripping player. We want him."

"But Ratty——"

"Boil Ratty!" growled Figgins. "We've got to work it somehow. Blessed if I don't ask the Head if Talbot can play in the team. He'd say 'Yes' like a shot. He's a brick. And as Ratty will be out, that will be all right. He won't be able to chip in. And when he snarls afterwards, Talbot can tell him he had the Head's permission. Savvy?"

The Co. regarded the great Figgins admiringly. Truly, it was a great idea.

CHAPTER 13.
Figgy's Recruit!

SATURDAY afternoon came. It was an important occasion for the juniors of St. Jim's.

Football was in full swing. The senior eleven, led by Kildare, was playing Abbotsford.

But the juniors were not bothering their head about the first eleven match. They had a much more important matter to think of—the junior House match.

House matches were contested very keenly at St. Jim's. Each House was determined to be Cock House in the footer, at least. And on this particular afternoon prospects were not very rosy for the New House junior team.

Three good men were missing from the ranks. Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence were away. Figgins had reserves to put in their places, certainly, but the reserves were nowhere up to the form of the missing trio. And the School House fellows were in great form. Figgins had a very natural objection to seeing his team "walked over" by Tom Merry & Co.

There was a good player to be had if only Figgins could contrive it. He had seen Talbot play football only once, but he had seen enough to know that Talbot was a first-class player, and far above the average. And there was no earthly reason why Talbot shouldn't play for Figgins in the junior eleven.

He would take Lawrence's place in the front line, and play up better than Lawrence could, and so make up for the absence of Redfern in the half-back line to some extent. Talbot would be a tower of strength to the eleven, and would compensate for the necessity of playing a couple of duds.

Figgins had thought it out, and he was determined upon it. Talbot simply had to play!

It was useless to ask permission of Mr. Ratcliff. If it had been old Railton, as Figgins remarked bitterly enough to his chums, it would have been all right. Railton would have given instant and cordial permission.

But it was no good with Ratty.

But after dinner Figgins & Co. watched Mr. Ratcliff depart for Abbotsford with great satisfaction.

Mr. Ratcliff had a friend at Abbotsford School, with whom he was to pass the afternoon, as he frequently did. And never had the heroes of the New House been quite so glad to see the back of their obnoxious Housemaster.

"All serene," said Figgins joyfully. "Mrs Kenwigg will let Talbot off—I know that. Only we've got to have permission to shut Ratty up when he begins to snarl. I'm off to see the Head!"

"Good luck!" said the Co.

And Figgins proceeded to the Head's study as bold as brass.

Dr. Holmes was there, and he gave the junior a kindly nod.

"If—if you please, sir," said Figgins, feeling a little less bold now that he was in the presence of the Head. "If—if you please, sir——"

"Well, Figgins?"

"We—we're playing a House match to-day, sir," said Figgins, "and some of our men are away. We've got to fill up the places. Would—ahem!—would there be any objection to Talbot playing for us, sir?"

"Talbot?" said the Head.

"Yes, sir. He's a ripping player, and—and I think he could get off. It's only for an hour and a half, you know, sir."

Dr. Holmes smiled.

"I see no objection, Figgins," he said. "Indeed, I think it will make a pleasant change for the boy. I may say that I am glad to see that this change in Talbot's position has made no difference to your friendly feelings towards him."

"Not a bit, sir! We all like him!" said Figgins eagerly.

"Well, I have no objection, certainly. However, it is to your Housemaster you should go, Figgins. You must ask Mr. Ratcliff."

"He's gone out, sir. I—I'm afraid he won't be back till after the match."

"In that case, you may ask the House dame, Figgins, and if she does not require Talbot he is quite at liberty to play for you."

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

And Figgins cut off, full of joy. He burst like a whirlwind into Mrs. Kenwigg's room in the New House.

"Deary me!" exclaimed Mrs. Kenwigg. "Master Figgins, what ever——"

"Can we have Talbot for a little while, Mrs. Kenwigg? You can let him come out for an hour and a half," said Figgins.

"Mr. Ratcliff does not approve——"

"The Head says so, ma'am," said Figgins hurriedly. "I just asked him, and he says Talbot can play in the match if you don't need him."

"Then it is all right," said the House dame graciously. "He is a good boy, and works very hard, and I am sure I shall be glad to see him have a little pleasure. You may tell him he can go, Master Figgins!"

"You're a duck, Mrs. Kenwigg!" said Figgins enthusiastically.

And he rushed out, leaving the good dame smiling.

There was another whirlwind in the boot-room. Talbot was at the knife-machine, in his apron and shirtsleeves, when Figgins rushed in, caught him by the shoulders, and waltzed him round the room, gasping.

"Hallo! What the dickens——"

"Come on!" trilled Figgins.

"I—I say——"

"You're going to play in the eleven this afternoon!" shouted Figgins. "Savvy?"

Talbot's face lighted up for a moment. Keenly enough he would have enjoyed a footer match that bright, sharp afternoon; but he shook his head.

"Can't be done! Mr. Ratcliff——"

"Head's permission!" hooted Figgins.

"What!"

"Ratty's out, and I've asked the Head! Got it all right—full permission from the Head and Mrs. Kenwigg! Come along and change I'll lend you some clobber!"

"But—but Mr. Ratcliff will be ratty! I—I really can't come, Figgins."

"Head's permission, you ass!"

"Yes; but——"

"Don't you want to come, you slacker?" demanded Figgins, in surprise

and dismay. "Why, I thought you'd be jolly keen to play!"

"Of course I'd like to come," said Talbot wistfully. "I'd like nothing better; but——"

"Then come on!" said Figgins. "Here's Fatty and Kerr. It's all right, you fellows—got permission, and Talbot's going to play!"

"Hurrah!"

"Lend a hand," said Figgins. And the Co. seized hold of Talbot and jerked his apron off, and waltzed him out of the boot-room, half resisting.

"But—but, I say, you chaps——"

"You see, we need you," said Figgins. "Come on! We've got three men away, and unless we do something, the House is booked for a record licking. You're a New House chap, aren't you? I don't care whether you're in a Form, or in the boot-room. You belong to the New House, and you've got to play for us!"

"You don't want to see us licked, Talbot?" said Kerr.

Talbot had a struggle in his mind. He was keen to play, and surely with the Head's permission he was safe to play without fearing unpleasant consequences. And even if Ratty was down on him, wasn't it worth it?

"You really need me—honest Injun, Figgy?"

"Never needed anybody so badly—honest Injun!" said Figgins. "I tell you, Reddy and Owen and Lawrence are away. We're booked for a thumping licking unless we can straighten the team somehow. You're the man we want. We know how you play. I can put in a couple of passable reserves and you!"

"I'll try," said Talbot; "but——"

"No buts! You're playing! Come on!"

And Talbot gave way—against his better judgment, perhaps; but there was no resisting Figgins & Co. And the Head's permission—surely that would make it all right, even with Mr. Horace Ratcliff.

Figgins lent him the footer "clobber" that was necessary, and he walked down to Little Side, with his coat and muffler on over his football rig, with the New House team. All the team were glad to see him in their ranks; and there was a shout from the School House eleven, who were already on the ground, at the sight of Talbot.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon Figgy's new recruit. "Talbot, bai Jove!"

"Yes, rather," grinned Figgins. "A rod in pickle for your old eleven—what?"

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "I'm jolly glad you're playing, Talbot; but you're on the wrong side. You ought to be in the School House team!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Rot!" said Figgins emphatically. "Talbot's a New House chap, isn't he?"

"Well, yes," admitted Tom Merry. "Anyway, it's all serene. I'm jolly glad he's playing. We shall have to look out, you fellows!"

Talbot laughed.

"It's ripping to play," he said. "I'm afraid you'll find me a bit out of practice, Figgins."

"Oh, bosh!" said Figgins cheerily. "You're as fit as a fiddle, anyway! You School House bounders can look out for a whopping!"

"Oh, we'll give you a bit of a tussle!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "You've got a good man there, but the result is a dead cert, all the same. This is where you are going to get it where the chicken got the chopper!"

"Yaas, wathah! It is weally wippin', as my patah will be able to see Talbot playin'!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "The governah may be here any minute now—— Bai Jove! There he is!"

And Arthur Augustus rushed away to greet his noble "governor" as a motor-car hooted into the gates of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry and Figgins tossed, and the kick-off fell to the School House.

Arthur Augustus, having exchanged greetings with Lord Eastwood, rushed back just in time to take his place in the ranks. Lefevre of the Fifth, who was refereeing, blew the whistle, and the match started, watched from the start by an interested crowd of juniors, all the more interested because the boot-boy of the New House was playing in the New House ranks!

And Figgins & Co. rejoiced. And Tom Merry & Co. rejoiced, too, but with mixed feelings. They were glad to see Talbot enjoying himself, glad that he was getting a good game; but it was likely to cost the School House dear.

But the School House were not beaten yet. The ball was kicked off again, and Tom Merry & Co. attacked hotly, and the New House felt the loss of Redfern in the half-back line. But Fatty Wynn in goal was as strong as ever, and he cleared the ball every time a shot came in. At last, the New House forwards got another chance; and the front line came sweeping down the field, passing beautifully, Talbot well to the fore.

The whistle was just going for the kick-off when Mr. Ratcliff's sharp, acid voice rang out. "Talbot! How dare you! Come off the ground immediately! Do you hear? Your place is in the boot-room!"

CHAPTER 14.
Sacked!

"GOAL!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

Figgins slapped his new recruit ecstatically on the shoulder. It was the first goal of the match, and it had been scored in the first ten minutes. And it was the boot-boy of the New House who had scored it!

"Good old Talbot!" chuckled Figgins. "Didn't I tell you fellows—what?"

"Bravo!"

The New House team lined up again triumphantly. Figgins' faith in Talbot had been more than justified. And Tom Merry told his men that they would have to pull themselves together.

The juniors remembered Talbot's prowess as a cricketer when he had been in the Shell at St. Jim's. It was quite evident that he was equally reliable in the great winter game.

The New House crowd cheered the advance of their champions. Mr. Railton of the School House had come down to see the match, and with him was Lord Eastwood, Gussy's noble pater.

His lordship, as a matter of fact, was not wholly attracted there by the exploits of Arthur Augustus. His gaze was upon the opposing ranks—upon the lithe, sturdy figure and handsome face of Talbot.

"So that is the lad?" he said to Mr. Railton.

"Yes; a fine fellow," the School House master replied.

"I like his looks."

"He was a universal favourite when he was here," said Mr. Railton. "Everybody was sorry when he left, in spite of the—ahem!—the peculiar circumstances. But I think it must be owned that the boy has redeemed his unfortunate past by that act of heroism which earned him the King's pardon!"

Lord Eastwood nodded.

"I quite agree with you," he said; "and I cannot forget that, when he was a schoolboy here, he saved the life of my youngest son. Neither of my boys

has allowed me to forget it; in fact, I am fully of your opinion, and Dr. Holmes', that this boy deserves to be given a chance, and I have urged my opinion upon the board of governors. I shall be glad to speak to Talbot after the match. He cannot refuse what will be offered to him—a Foundation Scholarship."

"He is very proud and very sensitive," the Housemaster remarked. "Still, there is no reason at all why he should refuse. It does not smack of charity in the least. Scholarships were founded for poor scholars, and he cannot hesitate to accept a favour from a donor who has been dead many years."

"Quite so. I shall insist upon his taking it!" said his lordship. "By Jove, sir, how well the boy plays! Look!"

Mr. Railton was looking. Talbot was coming through the School House eleven again like a knife through cheese—though the defence was good, too. The backs could not stop him. And Herries, in goal, could not save the quick shot that came in. It lodged in the net, and there was another roar from the New House crowd.

"Goal! Goal! Hurrah!"

"Good old Talbot!"

The New House were two up.

But Tom Merry & Co. were exerting themselves now, playing for all they were worth, and just on the stroke of half-time, Tom Merry sent the ball in, beating Fatty Wynn at last. Then the whistle went.

"Two to one!" grinned Figgins, as the panting players left off for a well-earned rest. "And to think that Ratty would have kept him out of the match if he'd been here! Bow-wow!"

"How do you like it, Talbot?"

Talbot smiled joyously.

"Ripping! It was good of you to play me, Figgins!"

"Good thing for our side," grinned Kerr. "They'd have been all over us otherwise. We're going to beat them hollow."

But the School House bucked up well in the second half. Combining cleverly they brought the ball down to the New House goal, and Jack Blake sent it whizzing in, Fatty Wynn nearly turning a somersault in a vain attempt to save, and the score was equal—two goals each.

Then followed a gruelling tussle for the winning goal, and for a long time Fortune smiled upon neither side as the game swayed up and down the field.

Mr. Railton and Lord Eastwood remained watching the match for some time, and then walked away to the School House. All, or nearly all, the juniors of St. Jim's were gathered round the field, watching the strenuous game. And when Talbot brought the ball right up to goal after a splendid run, the New House cheered him wildly. The goal did not "come off," however, and the School House pressed again in their turn.

Both sides were fighting hard, and it was getting near time. Again the New House forwards got away, passing like clockwork, and there was a scramble in front of the School House goal.

It was going on fast and furious when Mr. Ratcliff came in at the gates of St. Jim's, and crossed towards the New House. Mr. Ratcliff heard the shouts from the direction of the playing fields, but he did not glance in that direction. Mr. Ratcliff was not interested in football.

But suddenly, half-way to the New House, Mr. Ratcliff paused. A thunderous roar from the football ground came to his ears, and he started and set his teeth.

"Goal!"

"Well scored, Talbot!"

"Talbot! Hurrah!"

Mr. Ratcliff swung round towards the football ground as if on a pivot. Talbot! There was only one fellow at St. Jim's of that name, and he was boot-boy in the New House.

Talbot on the football field!

Mr. Ratcliff's narrow eyes gleamed green, his thin lips set hard, and he strode towards the football ground with a hasty stride.

"Talbot!" he muttered. "Is it possible? The insolent young rascal, after my warning to him! Upon my word, I will teach him that this insolence is too much!"

The players were lining up again. There was ten minutes to go, and the New House were once more one up. Mr. Ratcliff pushed his way through the thronging juniors and reached the ropes. There was the New House boot-boy lining up with Figgins & Co.!

Mr. Ratcliff's eyes glittered.

"Talbot!"

The whistle was just going for the kick-off. Mr. Ratcliff's sharp, acid voice struck upon Talbot's ears like a knife, and brought him suddenly back to earth, as it were. He looked round.

"Talbot! How dare you! Come off the ground immediately. Do you hear? Your place is in the boot-room."

Talbot stood rooted to the ground.

"Mr. Ratcliff!" burst out Figgins. "The Head——"

"Silence, Figgins!"

"But, sir, we had——"

"Hold your tongue! Talbot, come off the field and go into the House instantly!"

Talbot gave his chums a hopeless look. There was no help for it. Mr. Ratcliff had to be obeyed. With downcast face and heavy steps he left the football field. There was a shout from the crowd.

"Shame!"

"Silence!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff furiously. And he stalked away after Talbot, in the direction of the New House.

"Shame!"

And the crowd gave a deep groan for Mr. Ratcliff.

Talbot disappeared into the New House, with Mr. Ratcliff in his wake. The footballers stood dismayed and furious.

"Did you ever see such a beast?" hissed Figgins. "After we had the Head's permission, too!"

"The uttah wottah! Let's appeal to the Head!"

"Only make it worse for Talbot," groaned Figgins. "We've got to stand it. We'll finish this a man short. Line up!"

"No, you won't!" said Tom Merry. "Put another man in."

Figgins called a New House junior from the crowd. The match went on, but all the spirit had gone out of it.

It finished with the score unchanged; the New House had won by three goals to two, but they did not look joyful as they came off the field.

They were angry, indignant, and apprehensive for Talbot.

And they had reason. Mr. Ratcliff had marched his victim into the New House, and there he poured out the vials of his wrath.

"I have warned you, Talbot," he said venomously. "It seems impossible to make you realise your true place in this House. As you cannot understand it, I refuse to allow you to remain here!"

"Figgins asked the Head's permission for me to play in the match, sir," said Talbot dully.

"Don't argue with me! I have had enough of your insolence, of your outrageous assumption of equality with the boys here. You are discharged. You understand, you are discharged! You will pack your box and leave to-day. Not a word. Go!"

"Very well, sir," said Talbot quickly. And he went to his room.

Mr. Ratcliff stood fuming in his study. He had had his way at last. The boy he disliked was "sacked," and this time there was no one to say nay to the tyrant of the New House.

Talbot packed his box. It was all

up, now—all over at last! It was the end!

He finished packing the box, and then sat down. Where was he to go? Out into the world again, out into the battle of life, away from all he held dear, once more an outcast. He had asked nothing but to work his way, and that was denied him. The past had to be paid for, but surely Fate was exacting too high a price!

CHAPTER 15.
Talbot of St. Jim's!

TAP!

Talbot looked up wearily as the door opened. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who came in. His face was very bright.

"Hallo, old chap! Lookin' wathah down in the mouth—what?"

Talbot nodded; he could not speak.

"Watty playin' the wottah again?"

"I'm sacked!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I'm going this afternoon," said Talbot heavily. "I'm glad to be able to say good-bye to you, D'Arcy. It's all over for me here!"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus cheerily. "Watty's sacked you, has he? All the bettah, deah boy!"

"What?"

"You're not goin'," said D'Arcy. "You're comin' with me now. My governah's in the School House, and he wants to speak to you. He's got good news for you."

"News for me?" said Talbot, not comprehending.

"Yaas, wathah! And, oh, bai Jove, won't it be a surpwise for Watty!" chuckled the swell of St. Jim's. "Buck up, deah boy, it's all sewene! Come along!"

"But—but——"

"Come on, I tell you! You can't keep my patah waitin', you know!"

Arthur Augustus fairly dragged Talbot out of the room, and almost rushed him out of the New House. Wondering, and almost dazed, Talbot allowed himself to be led across the quadrangle and dragged into the School House.

A crowd of fellows awaited him there—Tom Merry & Co. and Figgins & Co.—and they were all looking very bright and cheery. Evidently they had heard the news, whatever it was.

"Here he is!" chirruped Blake. "Hurrah!"

"He's sacked!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "Watty has sacked him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on deah boy!"

Talbot, in a state of amazement, was led into Mr. Railton's study.

"Talbot!"

A handsome old gentleman rose to meet the bewildered boy, holding out his hand cordially.

Talbot shook hands with him mechanically.

"Here he is, dad!" said Arthur Augustus jubilantly. "Watty—ahem! —I mean Mr. Watcliff—has sacked him for playin' in the footer match. Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is Lord Eastwood, Talbot!" said Mr. Railton, with a warning glance at the exuberant Arthur Augustus. "Lord Eastwood is a governor of St. Jim's. He mentioned your case to the board of governors at the last meeting, and he has good news for you."

"Good news, I trust you will think, my boy," said his lordship. "You may be aware—h'm!—that the governing body of this school has in its gift certain scholarships, called Founders' Scholarships, which are bestowed upon poor scholars, entitling them to three years' tuition at St. Jim's, with a due allowance of money, to be paid quarterly."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Talbot.

His head seemed to swim for a moment.

"There are free scholarships in the gift of the governors," Lord Eastwood explained. "You must not make the mistake of supposing that there is anything of the nature of charity in this. The scholarships were founded for this specific purpose by a gentleman—h'm!—who has been dead for many years. In recognition of your heroic conduct in saving the troop train, and for other reasons, with which Dr. Holmes has acquainted them, the board have bestowed this scholarship upon you I congratulate you, Talbot, and I am sure that you will deserve this, and will prove a credit to this great and historic school!"

As Arthur Augustus remarked later, in Study No. 6. "The governah was weally quite eloquent, bai Jove!"

Talbot stood dazed.

For some moments he could not speak. The change in his position was too startling to be grasped at once. But slowly he understood. He was no longer a boot-boy—sacked. He was really a St. Jim's fellow again, on equal terms with all the rest, in the same position as Redfern—a scholarship pupil of the old school! It seemed too good to be true!

He found his voice at last, but it was hard to control it when he spoke.

"I—I——" He stammered a little. "I—I don't know how to thank you, sir—you and the Head. I don't deserve this——"

"Wats!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"I—I don't—but I'll try to!" stammered Talbot.

"I am sure you will, my boy!"

"But—but——" Talbot flushed crimson. "I must tell you, sir; perhaps you do not know what I have been—er——"

His voice broke.

"I know your whole history, my boy," said Lord Eastwood. "I have been fully acquainted with it for some time. I think you have been more sinned against than sinning, and I know you have striven to redeem the past. You have succeeded. There is not a boy or master in this school who does not honour and respect you—or, at least, ought to do so!"

"Hear, hear!" came from the passage.

His lordship smiled.

"You will take your old place in this House, Talbot," said Mr. Railton. "You will occupy your old study. You belong to the Shell, as before. I congratulate you, my boy!"

"Thank you, sir! I'll try to deserve your kindness!" faltered Talbot.

He seemed to be walking on air as he left the study. He was boot-boy in the New House no longer; he was Talbot of the Shell once more—Talbot of St. Jim's!

In the passage the juniors were waiting for him.

"Hurrah!"

"Hip-pip!"

"Shoulder high!" sang out Blake.

And there was a rush for Talbot.

He was swung up on the shoulders of Tom Merry and Monty Lowther, and rushed out into the quadrangle. Round him surged the crowd of juniors, waving their caps and cheering.

"Right round the quad!" yelled Figgins. "Under the windows of the New House!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"March!"

And Talbot was rushed on in triumphal procession. From scores of throats burst in a roar the old refrain: "He's a jolly good fellow!" The roar was at its loudest as the juniors swept by the New House. It reached the ears of Mr. Ratcliff—as it was intended to do.

Like a fox from its lair, as Blake put it afterwards, Mr. Ratcliff came striding forth.

"Talbot, get down instantly! Merry—Lowther—how dare you? How dare you, I say, treat in this manner a servant whom I have discharged! Talbot, go into the New House instantly! Do you hear me, you wretched boy——"

"Excuse me, sir!" said Talbot, with great politeness. "I am under the orders of my own Housemaster, sir."

"What?"

"As I belong to the School House, sir, I take my orders from Mr. Railton," said Talbot cheerfully.

"I—I—you—you——"

"Talbot's one of us now, Mr. Watcliff!" chirruped Arthur Augustus joyfully. "He's got a Foundation Scholarship, sir. I'm sure you will be pleased to heah it. He belongs to the School House, sir; he's in the Shell, and—and we've bwought him here for you to congwatulate him, sir!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Ratcliff stood transfixed for a moment. He was utterly beaten. He rushed back into the House.

He had no more to say. And the grinning juniors marched Talbot on, shoulder high, making the circuit of the old quad, and from the distance came in a roar to the ears of the New House master:

"He's a jolly good fellow!
And so say all of us!"

(Next Wednesday: "THE SHADOW OF THE PAST!" Talbot has regained his place in St. Jim's, but his troubles are by no means over—as he discovers, when a robbery in the school puts him under suspicion! Don't miss this great yarn—order your GEM early.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,516.

THE HALF-STARVED FORM THAT HAD TO WEAR NIGHTCAPS, DO SKIPPING EXERCISES, AND TAKE TABLOIDS FOR THEIR HEALTH!

THE REMOVE ON A DIET!

By Frank Richards.

(Author of the grand long yarns of Greyfriars appearing every Saturday in our companion paper, the "Magnet.")

WHAT HAPPENED LAST WEEK.

Just when the Greyfriars Remove think they have seen the last of the faddist Form-master who deputised for Mr. Quelch while the latter was sick, Mr. Quelch has a relapse, and Mr. Chesham assumes control once more.

He soon starts imposing his cranky ideas on the Remove again. Food is cut down to a minimum, and study teas are forbidden. So Harry Wharton & Co. go to the tuckshop—only to hear Mr. Chesham giving orders to Mrs. Mimble that no food is to be sold to Remove juniors. It is checkmate for Harry Wharton & Co.!

(Now read on.)

No Pass!

BILLY BUNTER tapped at the door of Wingate's study. There was a grim expression on the face of the Owl of the Greyfriars Remove. Billy Bunter was hungry, and he was desperate.

"Come in!" called out the captain of Greyfriars. Bunter entered the study. Wingate looked at him across a well-spread tea-table. "What do you want?"

Bunter cast a hungry eye on the viands.

"I didn't know you were having tea, Wingate; but now, as I'm here, I shouldn't mind having a snack with you."

"Wouldn't you?" said Wingate, laughing. "Well, I should! If you've only come here to be cheeky you had better clear out."

"I want you to give me a pass, Wingate."

"What for?"

"To go down to the village."

"H'm!" said the captain of Greyfriars, looking at Bunter. "I don't know about giving passes to juniors after locking-up."

"You gave Wharton one the other day."

"Wharton is a sensible chap, and he had business to attend to. There was a lot of trouble the other day through Levison getting a pass from Carberry. But what do you want to go down to the village for?"

"It's most important business."

"What kind of business?"

"I'm expecting a postal order," explained Billy Bunter. "I've been expecting it for some days now, but there has been a delay in the post. I want to go down to the post office to inquire about it. I couldn't get back before locking-up, and so——"

"I've heard about that postal order," said Wingate, laughing. "I believe it's something like a standing joke in the Remove, isn't it?"

"Well, it's time I had it."

"Yes, but speak out. What do you really want to go down to Friardale for? Is it to go to the tuckshop?"

"Why should I want to go to the village tuckshop when there's one here at Greyfriars?" said Billy Bunter evasively.

"H'm! I heard from Carr that it was closed to the Remove by order of the new Form-master."

Bunter turned red. He had not expected the captain of Greyfriars to be aware of that fact.

"Well, yes, I believe something of the sort has happened," he assented. "Will you let me have the pass, Wingate? It's really awfully important about my postal order."

Wingate shook his head.

"I'm afraid it can't be done, Bunter. I know perfectly well that you want to go to the tuckshop, you see, and I can't allow you to disregard your Form-master in this way."

"Well, suppose I do want to get some grub?" said Bunter, almost tearfully. "Do you know how that beast Chesham is treating us?"

"You must not speak of a master like that," said Wingate.

"Well, he is a beast, you know," said Billy Bunter. "He's starving us to death! I've never known before what it is to be hungry—I'm famished. He's stopped us having tea in the study and closed the school shop to us!"

"Haven't you had tea in Hall?"

"Yes; but you know what a measly

Driven to desperation by the crazy fads of their Form-master and the ridicule of their rivals, the Remove are determined to have done with the whims and fancies of the crank!

tea the school tea is. You never turn up at school tea yourself, you know, Wingate. Besides, that beast—I mean, Mr. Chesham—is at the table, and he allowances us. Fancy cutting down the grub of a hungry chap to three thin slices of bread-and-butter, and barring eggs, or bloaters, or anything that we used to bring in."

"Hard cheese, and no mistake!"

"If you let me have that pass, Wingate——"

"Can't be done. The discipline of the college has to be maintained. If any other boy asked me to back him up against a Form-master I should lick him. I let you off because you are a young ass. Get out!"

"But——"

"By the way, I don't want that cake," said Wingate. "Will you take it away with you and get rid of it somewhere?"

"Certainly, Wingate!" said Bunter, with alacrity.

He seized the cake before the captain of the school could change his mind and bolted.

Wingate laughed as he closed the door of the study. The captain of Greyfriars sympathised with the Lower Fourth under the reign of the faddist, and he knew what would become of the cake.

Bunter departed to the nearest unoccupied study, to be out of sight in case the Remove master should come along, and started on the cake.

It was a pound cake, but it might have weighed only an ounce judging by the speed with which the fat junior demolished it. Until the last crumb had vanished it did not occur to Bunter that he might have spared a little for his chums.

"H'm!" he murmured. "That was very nice—but I quite forgot the chaps. Still, there wouldn't have been enough to go round, and they're not as hungry as I am. It was only a snack, after all, though I certainly feel a bit better."

Bunter wiped the traces of cake from his mouth and went down the passage.

Mr. Chesham was coming upstairs, and he stopped to speak to Bunter. He glanced kindly at the Owl.

"Are you feeling better now, Bunter?"

"Yes, sir," said Billy Bunter. "I am feeling a little bit better."

"The feeling of hunger has passed off?"

"A little bit, sir."

"I told you it would be so. You see, it was merely habit-hunger, due to the overeating you had previously indulged in. As time passes on you will feel it less and less."

The Form-master walked on, and Bunter winked at the ceiling.

"I shall certainly feel it less and less if I get some more cakes," he murmured. "I wonder how many sorts of a silly ass that fellow is?"

The chums of the Remove were chatting at the foot of the stairs. Their faces were glum as Bunter joined them.

"Well, did you get your pass?" asked Harry Wharton.

"No; Wingate seemed to guess that I should go to the tuckshop if he gave me a pass to Friardale."

Wharton laughed.

"He didn't need to be a Sexton Blake to guess that," he remarked. "But you're looking a little less down in the mouth than you were, Bunter. Have you found a bone anywhere?"

"Really, Wharton——"

"He's cadged something from Wingate," said Bob Cherry.

"Nothing of the sort!" said Bunter indignantly. "Wingate had a cake he didn't want, and he asked me to get rid of it, and I took it away. I don't know why he didn't want it, as it was all right. Of course, I ate it."

"Of course you did!" said Nugent. "I didn't think you would get that pass. If we want to get to the village shop we shall have to break bounds."

"We can do that," said Bob Cherry.

"We should be justified in doing it, too," said Harry Wharton, with a gleam in his eye. "Chesham had no right to confiscate our tea."

"The wrongfulness of the honourable proceeding was terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The fadfulness of our esteemed Form-master is only equalled by the fatfulness of his head and the stupidfulness of his worthy ideas."

"I don't know what's to be done," said Bunter. "I'm afraid it will mean serious results for my constitution if I go to bed hungry."

"It means an expedition to-night after lights out, that's all," said Harry

THERE'S NOT A DULL MOMENT IN THIS LIVELY YARN OF THE CHUMS OF GREYFRIARS AND THEIR FADDIST FORM-MASTER.

Wharton. "I don't see anything else that can be done."

"It's a wheezy good idea, my worthy chum."

"The goodness of the idea is terrific," grinned Bob Cherry, imitating the nabob's beautiful English. "The honourable wheeziness of the idea is only equalled by the terrificality of the esteemed jape."

And the nocturnal expedition was unanimously agreed upon.

The Nightcaps!

"CHECK!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

It was close upon half-past nine, the bed-time of the Remove, and the chums were in the Junior Common-room. Hurree Singh and Nugent were playing chess, and Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry were sitting near them, discussing in a low voice the details of the scheme for breaking bounds that night.

"Check, is it?" said Nugent, who was a beginner at the great game and still under the instructions of the Nabob of Bhanipur. "H'm! I suppose I had better interpose my knight."

"That would leave me to take your queen bishopfully," purred the nabob.

"By Jove! So it would! Can I push up a pawn?"

"I should take it pawnfully."

"Then I had better shove in the bishop."

"I should then knightfully check the honourable king, as you would no longer be threatening my rook bishopfully."

"What the dickens can I do, then?"

"Move the worthy king, my esteemed chum, and that will prolongfully lengthen the game one move."

"Good! I shall be able to stick this out some time yet, I think."

"Mate!" beamed the nabob, as he moved.

"My hat!"

"You are mate rookfully, my worthy chum."

"I think I shall retract that move."

"It would make no difference, as there is only one square you could move to, and then I should mate you queenfully."

"Well, you're teaching me this game," said Nugent. "I notice that you always win, somehow. Hallo, it's half-past nine!"

The nabob looked up at the clock.

"It is time for the worthy Carberry to come and remind us of the bedful hour. I don't see any signs of the honourable Carberry yet."

"Here's Chesham."

The Remove master entered the room. Immediately every eye was fixed on him.

"Bed-time, my boys," he said genially.

"Yes, sir," said Harry Wharton. "We generally wait for the prefect whose turn it is to see lights out in the dormitory, sir."

"I have relieved the prefect of his duties," said Mr. Chesham. "In future I shall see lights out in the Remove dormitory."

The Removites looked sulky. Chesham was more pleasant than Carberry, the bully of the Sixth, as a matter of fact. But the juniors regarded this as a new interference—a new break in the good old customs of Greyfriars.

"Come, it is time," said Mr. Chesham mildly.

The juniors rose. They formed up to follow Mr. Chesham.

"What is it the ass is carrying?" murmured Bob Cherry, glancing towards a bundle the Form-master carried under his arm. "Is it something for us?"

"Blessed if I know!"

The Remove marched into their dormitory. Mr. Chesham unfastened the string of his parcel, the juniors watching him with great curiosity. The Form-master gave them a beaming smile.

"I have something for you, my boys," he said—"something which should have been provided for you long ago, were it not that these little matters are often overlooked. I dare say it has occurred to you that when there is a draught in the dormitory you are in danger of catching cold. This danger can be averted by wearing a nightcap."

The Remove gasped.

The Form-master opened the bundle. It contained a number of nightcaps, evidently packed just as they had come from the London establishment that supplied them.

"There!" said Mr. Chesham. "I have obtained these nightcaps at my own expense; but I do not grudge it as it is in the cause of health. I regard you as being in my charge, and myself as answerable for your physical well-being. Come and select your caps, my boys."

The Remove did not stir.

Mr. Chesham laid the nightcaps on a bed, and glanced round. He was very mild and gentle, but there was a gleam of determination in his eyes.

"Come and select your caps, my boys."

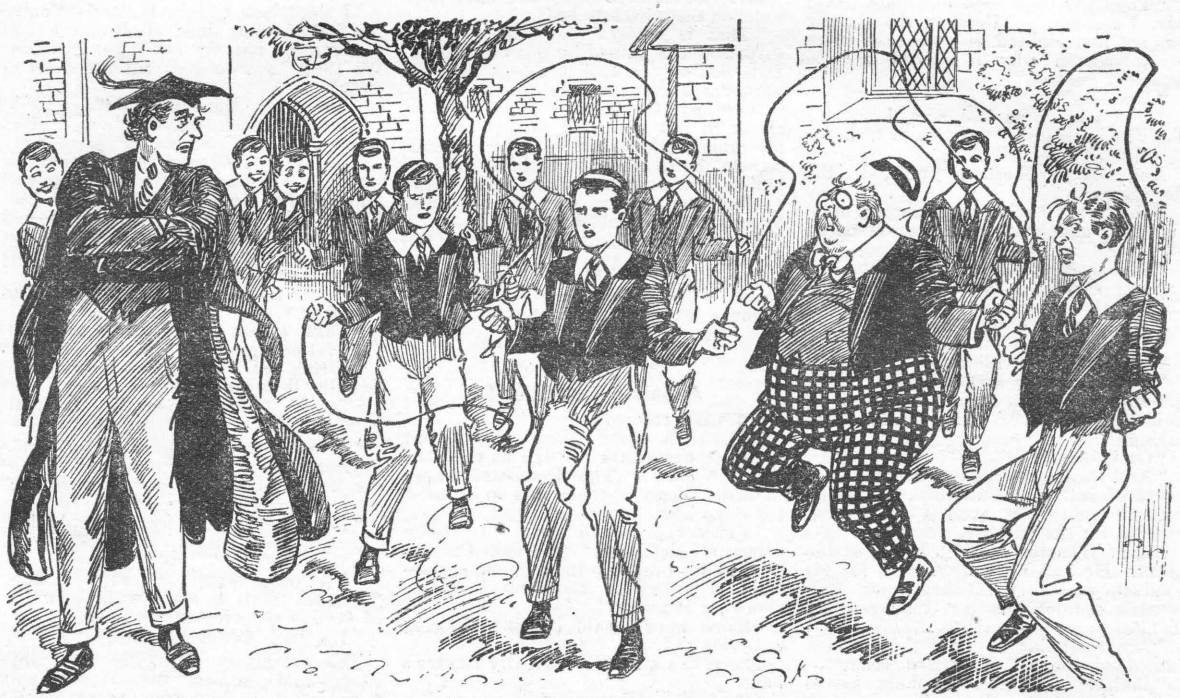
"We have never worn nightcaps before, sir," said Harry Wharton.

"That is unfortunate, but it is not too late to begin."

"We don't like being coddled."

"It is not coddling to take proper care of the health."

"We would rather not——"



"Now begin skipping!" said the Form-master, standing in front of the furious juniors. With crimson faces the Removites skipped, while from the Upper Fourth fellows burst a roar of laughter. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"The ratherfulness is terrific!"

"I am afraid I must depend upon my own judgment, Wharton, in preference to yours," said Mr. Chesham, with sarcasm. "As head boy of the Form, come and take your cap first."

Harry Wharton hesitated.

Never was he more strongly tempted to lead a revolt of the Form; and the savage looks of the Removites showed how willingly they would have backed him up, even to the extent of flinging the Form-master out of the dormitory.

But across Harry Wharton's mind flashed the remembrance of the pale, worn face of Mr. Quelch, and his appeal to the Remove before he left Greyfriars. He had known that the lot of the Remove under the rule of the faddist would not be a pleasant one, and he had appealed to them to keep order.

That appeal weighed much more with Harry Wharton than a command would have done.

The eyes of the whole Form were upon him. He advanced slowly to the bed and picked up a nightcap, the first that came to hand.

"Put it on, Wharton," said Mr. Chesham.

Wharton put on the nightcap. The contrast between its snowy whiteness and the crimson of his face was startling. There was a murmur in the room.

But the leader of the Form having taken the initiative, the rest followed him, and no one cared to take the burden of defiance upon his shoulders. One by one the Remove came up and took the nightcaps and donned them.

Mr. Chesham nodded a pleased approval.

"You will find this a very pleasant innovation when you have become accustomed to it," he observed. "It is necessary for the health to sleep with the window open, and therefore the use of a nightcap naturally follows."

"I have always slept with my window open at the top, sir," said Harry Wharton, "but I've never caught cold from it."

"Then you have been fortunate," said Mr. Chesham. "Because the danger has not materialised, in your case, there is no reason why it should not be guarded against."

"But——"

"You will go to bed now, boys. I shall be back in ten minutes to turn out the lights."

And Mr. Chesham quitted the dormitory.

Bob Cherry hurled his nightcap upon the floor and executed a war-dance on it.

"The ass!" said Harry Wharton.

"The shrieking fathead!" said Bob Cherry.

"The howling duffer!"

"The dangerous lunatic!"

"The screaming idiot!"

"And that's the sort of animal we've got to put up with for a Form-master," said Hazeldene. "He wants suffocating!"

"Or boiling!"

"And we've got to stand it—that's the worst of it!" said Bulstrode. "That's because we've got such a jolly good captain for the Remove, you know."

Harry Wharton took no notice of the taunt. He had his own reasons for his conduct, and they satisfied him. Bulstrode's opinion was less than nothing to him.

"Are we going to wear these rotten fatheaded things?" demanded Skinner.

"Better, while the Chesham ass is looking," said Russell. "We can chuck them off as soon as the lights are out."

"H'm! That's all right!"

The Remove went to bed. Mr. Chesham looked into the dormitory, and smiled a smile of satisfaction as he glanced along the row of nightcapped heads.

"Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The lights were extinguished, and the door closed behind the Form-master. There was a general sitting up in bed and hurling forth of the obnoxious nightcaps. In two seconds or thereabouts not a single cap remained on a single head.

"That's better!" said Bob Cherry. "Fancy going to bed in a nightcap like a giddy old grandmother! Rats!"

"My only hat!" said Nugent, as the handle of the door was heard to turn. "He's coming back!"

"Great Scott!"

It was a fact. The Remove had been a little too hasty. The dormitory door reopened, and Mr. Chesham re-entered, with a lamp in his hand.

"I forgot to tell you, my boys, about your baths in the morning. Dear me, what has become of your nightcaps?"

He stared at the bare heads of the juniors in amazement.

There was a painful silence for some moments. Mr. Chesham glanced round, saw the nightcaps on the floor of the dormitory, and understood.

"Boys!"

There was an angrier note in the new master's voice than the Remove had ever heard in it before. No one replied.

"Boys, I can only regard this as deliberate impertinence and an act of disobedience! Get out of bed, and take up your caps at once!"

The Removites did not stir.

"Do you hear me? Each of you will take a hundred lines of Virgil for this outrageous action, and, unless the caps are taken up, I will make it five hundred lines each!"

There was no arguing with that. The Removites slowly and sullenly got out of bed, and, with red, savage faces, donned the hated nightcaps again

Mr. Chesham held up the lamp and watched them back to bed.

"That is better!" he said. "I am surprised and pained by this occurrence. It is not only a foolish action on your part, but it shows a want of respect that is very painful to me. I returned to speak to you upon the subject of your morning baths; but, in the circumstances, I will come to you before rising-bell to-morrow morning and refer to the subject then. I am very much pained by this act of disobedience!"

And the Remove master quitted the dormitory. A very perceptible hiss followed him, but this he affected not to notice. The door closed, and the Remove were in darkness—and nightcaps—once more!

A Baffled Expedition!

"THE rotter!"

A dozen voices uttered that expressive remark as the door closed. The Removites sat up in bed. None of them was in a mood for sleep now.

"I'm not going to wear this rotten thing, all the same," said Bob Cherry, hurling his nightcap into the darkness—"not if I have a thousand lines for chucking it away!"

"Same here!" said Nugent, flinging away his cap.

There was a howl from Billy Bunter's bed.

"Ow! Who chucked that at me?"

"Ha, ha! It was an accident, Bunter!"

"That's all very well, Nugent——"

There was a light sound of falling nightcaps in various parts of the dormitory. Only a very few of the more timid juniors retained their headgear.

"I wonder if the rotter will come back?" remarked Skinner.

"I think not," said Harry Wharton. "He came back by chance last time. If he came back on purpose, it would be like spying. With all his faults, he's not that sort."

"No, that's true."

"We're not going to wear his beastly nightcaps! That's settled, if he gives us the whole Æneid to write out from start to finish!" said Harry determinedly. "We can't have a revolt of the Form, but we're not going to wear his nightcaps, or take any of his beastly medicines, or go without grub to please him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"There's some new rot about baths to-morrow morning," said Bob Cherry. "I'm getting fed-up with faddism!"

"I think we all are. About these nightcaps—we'll make them up into a bundle to-morrow morning, and get the House page to take it to the village and send it to Chesham by parcel post!"

"Ha, ha! And we'll write 'Declined with thanks' on the parcel."

"That's a good idea! It will be a hint that we don't want any of his bosh!"

"I say, you fellows——"

"As for the new regulation about morning baths, I don't know what it is; but, whatever it is, we're up against it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I say, you fellows——"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's Bunter still talking! Aren't you tired yet, Bunty?"

"I say, you fellows, have you forgotten about the grub? It's a long way to the village, you know, and I'm fearfully hungry!"

"I haven't forgotten," said Harry. "Bob and I are going——"

"I think I had better come with you, Wharton, and then I can have a snack at the tuckshop before we start back."

"I think you hadn't, Bunter. You're too fat and too slow. Bob and I will manage it, but we can't get out yet. We shall have to wait till the coast is clear."

"But, I say, I'm famished!"

"Well, famish quietly!" said Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry, you would be sorry to wake up in the morning and find that I had expired during the night. I think I had better come with you——"

"Bosh! Look here, we can't get out for half an hour at least, so you may as well go to sleep."

"I can't go to sleep when I'm famished."

"Take a bite out of Hoffman, then. He's fat enough."

"I tink tat Punter is fat enough to live like te polar bear in te vinter," said Hoffman. "He live on his own fat, Punter. You can do te same."

"It is a wheezy good idea," said Hurree Singh. "The esteemed Bunter can live fatfully on his own corporosity."

"I say, you fellows——"

"I'm going to sleep," said Bob Cherry. "Wake me up, somebody, when it's time to bunk."

"I'll wake you up," said Bunter. "I'm not likely to sleep with the pangs of famine gnawing at my inside."

"Ha, ha! Cheer up, Bunty!"

The dormitory gradually sank into silence and slumber. Billy Bunter, who was almost as fond of sleep as eating, was soon in the arms of Morpheus, in spite of the gnawing pangs he suffered

from. Most of the other Removites followed his example.

Harry Wharton kept awake, however, and when ten o'clock chimed out from the school tower he stepped out of bed and shook Bob Cherry by the shoulder.

"Gr-r-r!" said Bob lucidly.

"It's time, Bob!"

"Is it?" said Bob Cherry, sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes. "I was just dreaming a beautiful dream about pork chops. Right-ho! I'll get up."

The two juniors were soon dressed. They put on rubber shoes and took their shoes in their hands. A sleepy voice came from Nugent's bed:

"That you, Wharton?"

"Yes. We're going."

"Good luck!"

Harry Wharton opened the door. The passage was dark and silent, and there was no sound from below. The juniors stole towards the staircase and looked down. The lower part of the house was still lighted, but no one could be seen.

"Would it be safe to risk it?" muttered Bob Cherry.

Wharton shook his head.

"No. Someone might come out of one of the studies and spot us. Besides, we've got to get in again. If we left the window unfastened, it might be fastened again before we got back. I think we had better try a back window."

"Come on, then!"

"The lower box-room is the place."

"Yes; and the ivy outside will be all right to climb down."

The chums stole away towards the lower box-room. They had been out at that window before, as a matter of fact. Though it would have been easier to leave the house by the ground floor, the use of the box-room window only meant taking a little more trouble and a little risk, and the risk was nothing to them.

But as they came in sight of the box-room door, Bob Cherry halted, with a muttered exclamation of dismay. There was a light under the door, which was ajar.

"Some beast is there!" muttered Bob Cherry. "Look!"

Harry Wharton stopped.

"Who the dickens can it be in the box-room at this time of night?" he muttered.

"Let's see."

They stepped on silently. The door was only slightly ajar, but sufficient for the chums to look into the room.

"Chesham!"

"My hat! So it is!"

It was the master of the Remove. He was kneeling beside an open box, which Harry remembered now to have seen the local carrier deliver that evening. Perhaps the Form-master had only just found time to attend to it. He was unpacking some articles from the box, but exactly what they were the juniors could not make out.

"Some more rot," murmured Bob Cherry. "Just like the Chesham beast to choose this moment to be here when we want to get out of the window."

"Blow him!"

"We can't get through now."

"Hardly. We shall have to try another window—the one at the end of the passage."

"Somebody might come upstairs and see it open."

"Can't be helped. We shall have to risk it."

"Oh, I'm game! Come on!"

The Remove chums stole quietly away. There was a step in the gloomy passage, and a lamp glimmered before them.

"Stop!"

Before the juniors could dart away the voice rang out sharply, and they knew that they were seen, and that it was useless to flee. They stopped.

One by one the wrathful Remove juniors came up to Mr. Chesham, took the nightcap handed out and donned it. The faddist Form-master nodded approval. "You will find this a very pleasant innovation when you have become accustomed to it," he observed.

"Vat does dis mean after, mein poys?"

It was Herr Rosenblaum, the German master. He held up the lamp, and surveyed the two juniors with a rather grim smile.

It was hardly necessary to ask them what it meant. The fact that they were out of their dormitory, and carrying their shoes in their hands, was plain enough evidence that they had intended to break bounds.

Harry and Bob looked at the German master, and he looked at them.

"You were going out, mein poys?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry quietly.

"Vharton, I did not tink tat of you," said Herr Rosenblaum. "I did not tink tat you vas te kind of poy to preak pounds mit yourself at night."

"I hope you don't think we were going to break bounds for any harmful purpose, sir," said Bob Cherry quickly.

"Den vy you go out mit yourselves, mein poys?" asked the German master.

"We were going to the village shop, sir," said Harry Wharton, feeling that concealment was useless, or worse than useless in the circumstances. "We were going to get some grub for a dormitory feed, sir."

"Tat vas ferry wrong, Vharton."

"We don't get enough to eat under our new master, sir."

"H'm! But it is ferry wrong to preak pounds mit yourselves pefore," said the German master, with a shake of the head. "I not report you dis time to your Form-master; but you promise me tat if I let you go now, you do not preak out again to-night."

Wharton was silent.

"You promise me," repeated the herr emphatically, "tat you not preak out again to-night, and tat no vun else in the Remove vill preak out, and I let you go. Odervise, I take you to your Form-master."

There was no help for it; and it was really getting off very cheaply.

"We promise, sir," said Wharton.

"Ferry vell, you may go!"

"Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night! And I advise you to be patient mit yourselves, mein poys."

The Removites returned to their dormitory. They were in a despondent mood. It was impossible to break their word to the German, and so the expedition was off, for that night, at least.

"Hallo!" said Nugent, as they entered. "You're back soon. You haven't been to Friardale."

"We were caught," said Harry.

"Phew! Two hundred lines, and a week's gating?"

"No; it was Rosenblaum, and he let us off."

"Good egg!" said Nugent, much relieved. "He's a good old sort."

"We've promised to keep in to-night."

"Then Hurree Jampot and I had better go."

"We've promised for the whole Form."

"Oh, scissors! Then it's off?"

"Quite off!"

Harry commenced to undress. The sound of voices had awakened Billy Bunter, and he sat up in bed eagerly. Having been asleep all the time, he did not know that it was not yet a quarter-past ten, and Harry's voice was sufficient to make him feel sure that the two juniors had returned laden with provisions.

"I say, you fellows, is it all right?" asked Bunter, rubbing his eyes. "I believe I've dropped off to sleep, after all, Wharton. Have you got the stuff?"

"No."

"What?"

"We were spotted, and we had to give it up for to-night."

"You—you gave it up? You haven't got the grub?"

"Sorry, Bunter, but that's how it stands."

"Oh dear! What's to be done? Why couldn't you let me go instead? Blessed if I don't go, anyway! You'll see that I won't get caught."

"You can't go."

"Why not?" demanded Bunter, who already had one leg out of the bed.

"For one thing, because you're such an ass, and you're bound to get into mischief."

"I say, Wharton, that's my business, you know!"

"And, for another thing, because I've promised that nobody in the Remove shall go out to-night."

"You shouldn't have done it, then. I'm going——"

"You're not!"

"Look here, Wharton——"

"Get back into bed, Bunter, and don't be an ass! If I hadn't promised, Herr Rosenblaum would have reported it all to Chesham, and we should have been looked after too sharp for you to have a chance of getting out. Don't be an ass!"

"That's all very well; but I'm hungry!"

"Go if you like, Bunter," came a voice from Bulstrode's bed. "I suppose the truth is that Wharton's funked it, and doesn't want you to show him up. Go if you like."

"Hold your tongue!" said Harry sharply. "I tell you no fellow in this Form is going out to-night!"

"I'd go if I liked."

"Try, then! I'll jolly soon stop you!"

"Not worth the trouble," yawned Bulstrode, turning over in bed. "I'm going to sleep."

"I say, Wharton——"

"Oh, shut up, Bunter, and go to sleep!"

And Billy Bunter finally did so.

The Morning Baths!

THE clang of the rising-bell awoke the Remove to a new day. Harry Wharton was the first to wake, and he sat up in bed just as the door opened, and the master of the Remove entered the room.

"Good-morning, Wharton!" said the Form-master genially. "I hope you feel all the better this morning for having worn a nightcap."

"Not at all, sir."

Mr. Chesham frowned. He glanced round the room, saw the nightcaps strewed all over the floor, and understood that they had not been worn. But he made no remark. The juniors already had a hundred lines each over those nightcaps, and perhaps the Remove master thought they had had enough.

"The rising bell is going, my lads," he said, as the Removites blinked at him from the pillows. "It is time to get up. There is a great benefit in early rising, and I have been thinking of having your hour of rising altered, and made half an hour earlier."

"Have you, you utter ass?" muttered Bob Cherry.

"Did you speak, Cherry?"

"Only to myself, sir."

"You must not get into the habit of muttering to yourself, Cherry," said Mr. Chesham kindly. "It is caused by a species of rickets, and may become serious. If you notice anything of the kind growing on you do not hesitate to consult me about it, and I will give you an unfailing remedy I have the good fortune to possess."

"Thank you, sir," said Bob Cherry.

"Now, there is the question of the morning bath," said Mr. Chesham. "What kind of baths are you accustomed to taking here, Wharton?"

"We haven't baths in the dormitory, sir," said Harry Wharton. "Some of us take sponge baths every morning, and some don't."

"H'm!" said Mr. Chesham. "Well, I will consider the question of having hip-baths supplied for the use of the Remove. Meanwhile, you must be content with your wash basins and sponges, as hitherto. It is, of course, necessary for the whole body to be washed in the morning."

"That's always been left to us, sir," said Bulstrode. Bulstrode bathed once a week and thought that that was quite enough, if not too much.

"Then it will no longer be left to you, Bulstrode," said Mr. Chesham, looking at him. "I am master of this Form. You will bathe every morning. There is no reason why one part of the body should be washed clean and the other left dirty. The real question is the temperature of the bath."

"We always have cold water, sir," said Nugent.

"I believe in boys being hardy," said Mr. Chesham, "but there is no doubt that cold water has a bad effect on a weak chest—such as Wharton's, for example."

Harry turned crimson.

"My chest is all right, sir!" he exclaimed.

"I think I know better than you do about that, Wharton. You must take a bath in tepid water every morning. I have instructed the housekeeper to send up cans of hot water for the purpose."

The countenances of the Remove cleared somewhat. Many of them naturally preferred hot water to cold water for washing purposes in the morning.

"But as a matter of fact," said Mr. Chesham, "the temperature of the bath must be suited to the requirements of each individual boy. Wharton will take a bath in tepid water. You hear me, Wharton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bunter, on the contrary, requires cold water—in fact, I am sorry it is not possible to obtain some ice to put in the water for Bunter."

Billy Bunter shuddered.

"If you please, sir, I think it's unhealthy to bathe every morning," he said.

Mr. Chesham laughed.

"I think you will find it very good for your health, Bunter. It will help to cure you of your sluggishness and laziness, and the desire you have to keep on eating at intervals throughout the day."

"Oh, really, sir——"

"Let me feel your pulse, Bulstrode."

"My—my pulse, sir?"

"Yes. I wish to determine the temperature of your bath."

"I don't bathe every morning, sir."

"Then it's time you began. Give me your wrist."

"If you please, sir——"

"Give me your wrist. I have no time to waste. I have to settle this question for the whole Remove this morning, and if too much time is taken up, you will not have time for breakfast before going in to lessons."

The Remove looked daggers at the Form-master. Mr. Chesham did not notice it. He was feeling Bulstrode's pulse. He nodded his head.

"Ah, yes! You require a cold bath, Bulstrode."

"I'd rather have a hot one, sir, if I've got to have one at all," said the bully of the Remove sulkily.

"Quite possibly; but I am giving you what is good for you, not what you would like," said Mr. Chesham. "You will take a cold bath. You next, Cherry."

Every member of the Remove was examined in turn by the Form-master, and before that was over the cans of hot water were at the door, brought up to the door by the grumbling Gosling.

"I am going to test the temperature in every case with a thermometer," said Mr. Chesham. "I am devoting a great deal of time to this matter, and as I am afraid you do not fully realise the importance of it, I shall remain to see that my instructions are carried out."

There was a murmur of discontent in the dormitory.

The juniors had been willing to allow the Form-master to make his arrangements, thinking that he would then withdraw, and that they could follow their usual habits. But the lesson of the nightcaps had not been lost upon the faddist Form-master.

There was rebellious discontent in every face. Bulstrode growled audibly as he drew off his pyjamas. He had intended to have his usual wash—which Bob Cherry described as a cat-lick—and then dress himself. But under the eye of Mr. Chesham there was no choice but to carry out instructions.

Harry Wharton was looking angry, too. He liked a cold bath in the morning, being of a healthy and hardy frame that was invigorated by it. Billy Bunter, on the other hand, shuddered at the prospect of touching cold water, and he was extremely economical with it.

"Bunter!"

"Yes, sir."

"You will be late. Move a little more quickly!"

"Certainly, sir; but——"

"Come, you are dawdling!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid it will cause serious injury to my constitution if I wash all over in cold water, sir."

"Nonsense, Bunter!"

"I'm already in a weak and feverish state, sir, owing to insufficient food."

"You will do as I tell you, Bunter."

"But if you please, sir——"

"Take fifty lines, Bunter. If you do not immediately obey me, I shall cane you."

Bunter groaned and poured out the cold water from his jug into the basin. He plunged the sponge into it, squeezed it out as dry as he could, and proceeded to sponge his fat arms in a very gingerly way.

"That is not the way, Bunter," said Mr. Chesham. "I see that I shall have to give you some instruction. Give me the sponge."

"If you please, sir——"

"Give me the sponge!"

Bunter handed it over. Mr. Chesham pushed back his cuff, and then plunged the sponge into the water and soaked it.

"Now then, Bunter, that is the way——"

"Ow-wug-g-g-gh!"

Bunter gasped and gurgled as the cold water ran all over his bare fat arms. But the Form-master was merciless. He soaked Bunter with cold water from head to foot, till the Owl was whimpering and shivering.

"Do you feel invigorated, Bunter?"

"No, I don't!" roared Bunter.

"Boy, that is not the way to reply to me."

"I don't care!" yelled the unfortunate Bunter. "I won't be frozen all over with beastly cold water and starved to death!"

"Silence! You will soon feel a warm glow as the consequences of this cold bath. Finish it yourself. Bulstrode, you are very slow."

"I don't want to bathe!"

"Take a hundred lines! Now, make haste!"

Bulstrode scowled, but he made haste.

It seemed to be a misfortune of Mr. Chesham that he provided nearly every boy in the Form with a temperature that disagreed with him most. But a mere detail like that was not likely to worry the faddist, who was fairly on the warpath.

The juniors usually had a run out of doors before breakfast, but Mr. Chesham's new kindness left them no time for that now. Breakfast had already commenced in the dining-room when the Remove came in. Grins and whispers from the Upper Fourth greeted them.

"They look rotten, don't they?" murmured Temple.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"I hear that they've been washed to-day for the first time," remarked Fry. "Gosling had to take up cans of hot water for the purpose."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence, there!" said the prefect at the head of the Upper Fourth table.

The Remove went to their places with crimson faces and dark brows.

They were hungry that morning—hungrier than most of them remembered ever to have been before. But breakfast was sparing. Bacon had been abolished before; eggs had followed it now. There was wholemeal bread-and-butter and lettuce.

The Remove ate as much bread-and-butter as the watchful Form-master permitted, and champed the lettuce, as Bob Cherry remarked afterwards, "like a lot of giddy rabbits."

Billy Bunter's face was woeful. As a matter of fact, the fat boy of the Remove was feeling all the better for a cold bath, but he would not admit it. But he was undoubtedly hungry.

Mr. Chesham might explain that it was only habit-hunger, but it was very real to the unfortunate Owl. He was hungry, and so were most of the others when they went into the class-room for morning lessons.

The Tabloids!

THE Remove was in a worse humour than ever that morning. Harry Wharton's patience was beginning to wear out, as well as that of the others. For Mr. Quelch's sake, and for other reasons, Wharton wished to keep the peace if possible. But it was looking now as if the faddist Form-master was determined to make it impossible.

Bunter gave very little attention to the lessons. He was not studious at the best of times, and now he was hungry. When Bunter was hungry, his hunger loomed large in his imagination, and banished all lesser concerns.

"Construe, Bunter!" said Mr. Chesham sharply, bringing the Owl with a start out of a beautiful day-dream, in which roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, and potatoes figured largely. "You are not paying attention to the lesson, I think."

"I'm sorry, sir, but——"

"You must not allow your mind to wander in the class-room——"

"I was thinking, sir——"

"Indeed! And what were you thinking of, Bunter, to the exclusion of the matter we now have in hand?" said Mr. Chesham, with sarcasm.

The sarcasm was quite lost on Bunter.

"I was thinking of the refreshment we were to have this morning, sir," he said. "I hope you haven't forgotten what you said on that subject, sir."

The Form-master laughed.

"Certainly not, Bunter. The refreshment will be served out at eleven o'clock, when you take your recess. At the same time the skipping-ropes will be served out."

The Remove simply jumped.

"You may be aware," went on the Form-master blandly, "that skipping is an excellent exercise, and it is adopted by members of famous football teams to

(*Continued on the next page.*)

PEN PALS

(*Continued from page* 17.)

Miss Bella Meche, 88, Gold Street, Johannesburg, **S. Africa**; girl correspondents; age 16-18; stamps, etc.

Miss Sylvia Locke, 24, St. Shellep Street, East Brunswick, Melbourne, **Victoria**; girl correspondents; interested in everything especially sports; age 16-17.

Miss M. Robinson, 23, Danby Street, **Liverpool, 5**; girl correspondents; age 18-25; sports, films, books, animals.

Ronald Jardine, 2, Waldegrave Road, Longsowerby, **Carlisle**; age 14-16; films, hobbies, sports, etc.; anywhere abroad.

Miss Eleanor Petrie, 32, Wansbeck Road, Jarrow-on-Tyne, **Co. Durham**; girl correspondents; America or Australia.

Kemal Mahfood, 34, Bercombe Ave., Vinyard Pen P.O., Jamaica, **B.W.I.**; age 14-19; stamps, and exchanging of newspapers and magazines; British Isles, Spain, Italy, Holland.

Robert Tamitagama, 24, Gotami Road, Borella, Colombo, **Ceylon**; age 17 upwards; books, drawing, cycling and films; England and America.

S. R. Wright, Gauge Inspection Section, Inspectorate of Guns, Gun and Shell Factory, Cossipore, Calcutta, **India**; pen pals; photographs; England.

Lionel E. Lauyou, 8, Cubett Street, Richmond, E.1, Melbourne, **Australia**; interested in copies of "Nelson Lee Library" dated before 1926.

A. Kruger, 38, Grace Street, Jeppe, Johannesburg, Transvaal, **South Africa**; age 13-15; stamps, Meccano; England, Scotland.

Ernest Kirsch, Hotel Ritz, 3, Anchor Bay, C.P., **South Africa**; views, autographs.

George McNeill, 804, Balmoral Street, Medicinehat, Alberta, **Canada**; pen pal; stamps, chemistry; British Empire.

Miss Margery Martin, 24, Weldon Street, Moncton, New Brunswick, **Canada**; girl correspondents; age 18-25; sports, stamps, photography.

Gordon Buchnar, 59, Tennyson Avenue, Grays, **Essex**; would like to hear from readers interested in the earliest issues of the "Modern Boy."

Miss Margaret P. Bigley, Dykebar Cottages, near **Paisley**; girl correspondents; age 16 and over; Western Highlands, Highlands of Scotland.

Miss G. Fryatt, 70, Cleves Road, East Ham, **London, E.6**; girl correspondent; age 16; Africa.

V. A. Baxendale, 1, Vincent Street, Openshaw, **Manchester**; music, dance bands; particularly in U.S.A.

Miss Doris Glazebrook, c/o Miss U. Searles, 3, Lonsdale Avenue, Fleetwood, **Lancashire**; girl correspondent; age 14-16; reading, swimming, snaps, films; overseas, Australia, Canada, U.S.A.

William Blades, 5, Rochester Street, **Gateshead**; locomotives, railways; U.S.A.

Ronald Higgins, 10, McDonald Road, Heysham, **Lancs**; age 14-16; pen pals; overseas.

Douglas Brooks, 678, Walmersley Road, Bury, **Lancs**; pen pal; cricket.

Miss Irene Wareham, Lombard Street, Petworth, **Sussex**; girl correspondents; age 15-16.

Miss Agatha Hughes, 34, Oswin Avenue, Balby, **Doncaster**; girl correspondents; age 16-18.

F. Andrews, Esq., 114, Bramington Road, Queen's Park, **London, W.9**; age 14 and over; poetry.

E. Shaw, 555, Liverpool Road, Holloway, **London, N.7**; age 14-16; cricket.

Dudley Kirker, c/o McGill, 98, Kilmanoch Road, Shawlands, Glasgow, S.1. **Scotland**; would like a pen pal in New Zealand to send him the "Auckland Weekly News" in exchange for British newspapers; or a pen pal in North America interested in exchanging newspapers.

John Brophy, Ballon Hill, Ballon, Co. Carlow, **Irish Free State**; pen pals; age 21-22; especially in Kilkenny.

Alan Thompson, 245, North Road, Hull, **Yorks**; pen pal; age 10-12; India or France.

D. C. Moore, 11, Grenade Road, Charlton, **London, S.E.7**; interested in botany, biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, etc.; any country.

George Squires, 14, Shepstone Avenue, Pietermaritzburg, Natal **South Africa**; age 16-19; interested in all sports.

Miss Rita Halse, 1517, Cote St. Luc, Montreal, **Canada**; girl correspondents; age 13-15.

Miss Margorie Charles, 80, Bridge End Road, Grantham, **Lincolnshire**; girl correspondents; age 14-17; overseas.

G. P. Boyle, 27, Buckingham Street, Heaviley, Stockport, **Cheshire**; pen pals; age 16-18; exchange of newspapers, etc.; Germany.

B. Lloyd, Albemarle Hotel, **Brighton**; "World-Wide Correspondence Club"; Sec., Billie Lloyd.

Stephen J. Fraser, 30, Park Grove, Portway, West Ham, **London, E.15**; pen pals; overseas.

Eric Milnes, 11, Thornbury Crescent, Thornbury, Bradford, **Yorks**; age 14-17; cycling, sport, films; Australia.

Miss M. Wynne, Lyndhurst, Roundwood Avenue, Meliden, **North Wales**; girl correspondents; age 13-15.

John Townsend, 82, Haslemere Road, Southsea, **Hampshire**; pen pals; age 11-13; West Indies, South Africa.

Miss Jean Baker, 35, Normansmead, Brentfield Estate, Willesden, **Middlesex**; girl correspondent; age 17-21; ice-hockey, skating, tennis, swimming; Canada, South Africa, France.

Lance Beckwith, Clava Street, Murray Bridge, South Australia, **Australia**; stamps, chemistry, postcards; Southern Rhodesia, West Indies, Jamaica, and all islands in the Pacific.

Basil Wakefield, Mapua, Nelson, **New Zealand**; pen pals; stamps.

Walter Kaz, P.O. Box 16, Fauresmith, O.F.S., **South Africa**; age 13-15; stamp collecting.

S. Horn, 66, Weller Street, Goodwood Park, Adelaide, South Australia, **Australia**; age 13-16; stamps and sport.

H. S. Sussman, 20, Synagogue Street, Kimberley, **South Africa**; age 14-16; stamps, chemistry, sports, photography; China, India, Australia, England, Canada.

Miss Ruth Storrs, Penarth, Dane Road, Sale, **Cheshire**; girl correspondents; age 15-18; overseas.

Denis Brockington, 58, Highbury Gardens, Ilford, **Essex**; age 10-13; chemistry and general matters; Australia.

Roy Baker, 470, Pacific Highway, Lindfield, Sydney, N.S.W., **Australia**; age 14-15; James Preston, 17, Pen-y-lan Road, Roath, **Cardiff**; age 35-60; painting, sketching, films; Great Britain.

Frederick J. Cole, 36, Lyndhurst Road, Peckham, **London, S.E.15**; mathematics, philosophy.

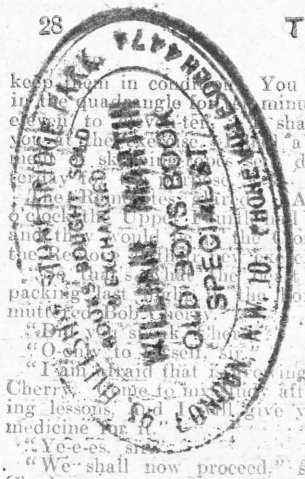
G. Rowett, 17, Hollin Park Mount, Oakwood, **Leeds, 8**; age 11-12; stamps; overseas.

A. Ralph, 74, Cooper Road, Grimsby, **Lincolnshire**; pen pal; age 15-18; abroad.

Henry Walker, Rosella Cottage, Holy Island, **Berwick-on-Tweed**; age 10-13; ships, birds' eggs.

M. Gilbert, 57, Ridgmount Gardens, **London, W.C.1**; age 12-14; old GEMS and "Magnets" up to 1935.

Miss Vivienne Cowlisha, 242, Martin Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, **Canada**; girl correspondents; stamps, photography, writing; South America, Hong Kong, Ceylon, Egypt.



keep them in condition. You will skip in the quadrangle for ten minutes, from eleven to ten-ten, and I shall watch you. [illegible] a consignment [illegible] down yesterday [illegible] At eleven o'clock [illegible] a recess, and then you [illegible] to see the [illegible] exercise. [illegible] was unpacking [illegible] box-room!" muttered Bob Cherry.

"Do you [illegible]

"O-oh, no [illegible]

"I am afraid that [illegible] on you, Cherry. Come to [illegible] after morning lessons, and I will give you some medicine [illegible]

"Ye-e-es, sir."

"We shall now proceed," said Mr. Chesham.

The lesson proceeded in a desultory way. Fortunately Mr. Chesham was not a strict master. The boys felt too slack to do any good work. They were all hungry, and they watched the hand of the clock creeping round slowly. They were curious to know what kind of refreshment was to be served out. Whatever it was, they could eat it; but there was no sign of it in the class-room.

The big hand of the clock was upright at last, and the Form-master laid down his book. He picked up a little box, which the class had not previously noticed, from his desk.

"You will file past here, my boys," he said, "and I will serve out the refreshment as you pass. You will find the skipping-ropes in the hall. Each of you will take one as you go out."

The wondering Remove came out from the forms. Mr. Chesham had opened the little box, and a number of small tabloids wrapped in tissue paper could be seen. Each was about the size of a halfpenny.

Harry Wharton received the first, and he stared.

"W-w-what's this, sir?"

"They are Dr. Hoomboog's Famous Tabloids," smiled the Form-master. "They contain the essence of wholemeal wheat and prime beef. They have to be eaten slowly. They will taste somewhat bitter, but that is a trifle. Each contains as much nourishment as a loaf of wholemeal bread and a rumpsteak."

Harry walked on. The Remove solemnly filed past the Form-master, each member receiving one of the precious tabloids.

It was not till they were in the passage outside that they gave expression to their feelings in words.

"The utter idiot!" said Bob Cherry. "We might have guessed that he would go in for tabloids."

"Blessed if I'm going to eat this stuff!" said Hazeldene. "You never know what these things are made of."

"Chuck them away!" said Nugent.

"I think I'll eat mine," said Bunter. "Anything's better than nothing, and some of this patent muck is useful sometimes, I believe."

He put the tabloid in his mouth, and his features were twisted up immediately into a painful expression.

"What does it taste like, Bunter?"

"Ow! I'm poisoned!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's—it's horrible! It tastes like—like bitter aloes, and like—like the glue smells when it boils over on the fire."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Ow! I'm poisoned!"

Bunter dashed off to wash out his mouth. The tabloids went out of the open doorway into the Close in a shower.

Mr. Chesham came out of the class-room. He had stopped behind to dissolve a tabloid in his mouth, and to take a pill at exactly three minutes past eleven.

"Finished the tabloids, my boys?" he asked cheerfully.

"They're all gone, sir," said Nugent.

"Do you feel better?"

"Bettair zan if we had eaten zem," murmured Adolphe Meunier.

"Did you speak, Meunier?"

"Non, monsieur; I zink viz myself."

"Come to my study with Cherry after morning school. This is a species of rickets, and, if attended to in time, can be wholly eradicated from the system. Now we will go out and take exercise, my boys. Take your skipping-ropes."

The Remove, with furious faces, picked up the skipping-ropes and followed Mr. Chesham out into the sunny Close.

"My only hat!" muttered Bob Cherry. "Fancy skipping like a giddy girls' school, with those Upper Fourth cads looking on!"

The Remove groaned in spirit.

The Upper Fourth were nearly all in the Close, and they looked on with great interest as the Remove came out with the skipping-ropes looped over their arms.

"Form up in lines," said Mr. Chesham.

The Remove formed up.

"Now begin skipping," said the Form-master, standing in front of the furious juniors like a drill sergeant.

The Remove began.

With crimson faces they skipped, while the Upper Fourth burst into a roar of irresistible laughter.

Skip, skip, skip!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good!" said Mr. Chesham, with a beaming smile. "You will find this sane and healthy exercise much more beneficial than the usual horseplay you indulge in. Very good!"

The Upper Fourth were shrieking—as much at the expressions on the Removites' faces as at the absurd spectacle of over thirty boys skipping. It was only for five minutes, but it seemed to the unhappy Remove that that five minutes would never end.

"Very good!" said Mr. Chesham. "We will now return to our studies, invigorated and refreshed by this change of occupation. We will make it a point to keep up this skipping exercise, and in future you shall do it under my supervision three times a day."

"Shall we?" murmured Bob Cherry, as the Remove went grimly in. "I rather think not! What do you say, Harry?"

Harry Wharton's face was determined in its expression.

"Not much," he said. "That's the last time the ass is going to make a guy of me!"

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to stop him!" said Harry Wharton.

"How?"

"That will want thinking out. But one thing's certain; we're going to stop him."

And from the Remove came a deep murmur of approval. They were ready for anything. They had had enough of it, and one and all were determined that, by hook or by crook, a stop should be put to the reign of the faddist.

(The Remove mean business now with a vengeance! Read next week how they hit back at their Form-master. See that you don't miss "THE FALL OF THE FADDIST!")

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