



Reginald Talbot was one of Charles Hamilton's most impressive creations among the new boys at his various schools. He made his first appearance in the Gem in July 1914, just before the outbreak of the first World War in the series 334-7, when he prevented Gussy from being robbed of his twenty-five guinea gold watch:

He was a youth of Darcy's own age, well dressed, with a diamond pin in his tie, and a cigarette between his lips. His form was active, athletic; his face was handsome, with clear-cut features and dark flashing eyes.

Later, he saved Dr. Holmes from being waylaid by the same gang, and was taken to St. Jim's. His story seemed strange but plausible: his parents being dead, he was brought up by an uncle who took him to Australia and eventually they returned to England. They stayed at a hotel in Luxford until his uncle left and wrote a letter saying his fortune was gone and Talbot must now fend for himself. The Head agreed that Talbot should enter St. Jim's as a pupil, though the more cautious Mr. Railton insisted on checking up by visiting Luxford, but the story appeared watertight. Talbot entered the school and soon won many friends, especially as he was an expert cricketer, but in truth he was a very cunning cracksman, the son of the infamous Captain Crow, who had taught him his art and had educated him to take his place in good society; indeed, Charles Hamilton referred to him as a Raffles at one stage.

Magnet readers will readily see the resemblance between Lancaster and Talbot. The Magnet version was perhaps more credible in that the cracksman was a sixth-former, and at the end of the series he left and was never heard of again. The Gem series, however, gained immeasurably by relating the impact made upon Talbot by the friendship offered by the juniors, and the story was written at a time when Charles Hamilton was not afraid to pluck the heartstrings. Equally fascinating was the handling of Joe Frayne, who knew the Toff of old, in Angel Alley days; at first, he was persuaded that Talbot had reformed and later, when he knew better, his mouth was closed by the knowledge that Talbot had saved the life of his best friend, Wally D'Arcy. So, with a delicacy of feeling somewhat strange in a waif from the slums, he left St. Jim's rather than remain with his silent knowledge of the crimes.

There is in this series a glimpse of a forgotten world, where a form-master like Mr. Selby could amass a numismatic collection worth £500 (stolen); where Mr. Glyn could run a cricket week and find bedroom accommodation for two teams (his safe was cracked); and where the Grammar School could put on an al fresco performance of a Shakespeare play (while Dr. Monk's Leonardo da Vinci was stolen).

In Shakespearean tragedies the hero is in conflict both with himself and with society. Talbot was often in conflict with himself and began to regret

the life he was leading. He was even incautious enough to mutter such things as "If only they wouldn't be so decent to me" when Levison was spying on him behind a screen. Talbot was, of course, in conflict with society in general, in that he robbed where he was a guest, and in conflict with Levison in particular, who began to ferret out the truth. Levison suffered from the inveterate drawback of a liar in that no one would believe him, and this situation led to a fascinating duel of wits in which Talbot was wily enough to ensure that Levison could prove nothing - it was a classic case of diamond cut diamond.

Talbot told the gang that he would crack no more safes, but Hookey Walker and the others decided to rob St. Jim's without his assistance. Talbot heard them and interrupted them, knowing that this would entail his own downfall:

Levison - the cad and spy Levison - had been right, and Tom Merry and his friends had been wrong. It was a bitter discovery. The fellow he had liked and trusted and chummed with was a liar and a thief - a Professional criminal! Tom Merry groaned in anguish of spirit.

At the end of the series it was stated that Talbot was never seen again at St. Jim's and it is interesting to wonder whether this was just a form of words for ending the series or whether Charles Hamilton did in fact intend to write nothing more about him, but succumbed to pressure from the editor, possibly based on readers' reactions. The editorial column in the Gem was not very informative on matters like this, but certainly Talbot did re-appear.

The war had broken out by the time of the next series - a disconnected one in Gems 351-3 and 353. Mr. Foxe of Scotland Yard arrived with the news that Talbot had been seen in the district, and he asked the juniors if they had been in contact with him. There was general denial coupled with indignation on all sides at the thought that they would betray Talbot, apart from Levison who offered his services as a spy. Talbot was working on a farm but, by saving a troop train from being blown up by a German spy, he earned "The King's Pardon" as the first story was called. The following story was something of an anti-climax, as Talbot took on the vacant post of boot-boy in the New House, but two important events occurred: Levison apologised to Talbot for his behavior in the past, and (on the recommendation of Dr. Holmes and Lord Eastwood) the Toff was awarded a Founders' Scholarship which included three years' free tuition and an allowance of money as well. Talbot was now established as a permanent member of St. Jim's. J.N. Pentelow said in the St. Jim's Gallery:

Let it be said here that from this moment Talbot always ran an absolutely straight course. But the shadow of the past was over him, and he had enemies. Again and again the past was raked up to prove him guilty of crimes of which he was totally innocent.

Occasionally, in some of these earlier Gem series, there would be little inconsistencies from week to week. In No. 353 Levison, in desperate need of £5 to pay a debt, asked the Terrible Three for money. They had no resources, and Levison in his anger turned upon Talbot who happened to be there, and reviled him for his past, the apology in the previous issue having been forgotten. Talbot did, however, come to his aid and Levison was genuinely grateful. When Tresham of the Fifth, who had embezzled the funds of the form Football Club, attempted to put the blame on Talbot and plant incriminating evidence, it was Levison who was clever and devious enough to turn the tables on Tresham in a most unscrupulous manner:

"I don't know that I'd quite like to be a match for him in that particular line," said Monty Lowther.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"No; but if I hadn't been, where would Talbot be now?"

"True enough!" said Tom Merry.

Here may be seen two important points: one is the beginning of Levison's reformation, with a sense of gratitude and a desire to repay; and the other is that Tom Merry seems to rate Talbot more highly than Monty Lowther does.

In the final number of the series, Gem 355, Tom Merry was fiercely defensive of Talbot whereas Monty Lowther appeared to be dubious. Hookey Walker had escaped from prison and was chalking cipher messages on the front door of the School House. Levison seemed very interested, and his searches for clues became so unconventional that he was sent to Coventry, yet in the end it was he who solved the cipher and saved Talbot, and manipulated the capture of Hookey Walker. It was an imaginative ending to the second series, and Levison was even more deeply entrenched as a friend of the Toff.

It was a long time before Talbot was able to forget his past. In Gem 358 entitled "Talbot's Triumph" a new science master arrived at St. Jim's who turned out to be the Professor, a member of the old gang who was determined to crack a few safes in the neighbourhood. He was so well disguised that the the Toff did not recognise his old associate, but when he did John Rivers, alias the Professor, was arrested. His last words were "The lock was never made that can hold me." By way of a change, "Talbot's Christmas" in Gem 359 relates how the juniors captured a German spy near Laurel Villa.

The third Talbot series was probably the greatest of them all, mainly because he was once again facing a dilemma. The Professor, having escaped from prison, arrived in the neighbourhood again, in yet another disguise, and his daughter Marie Rivers came to the school as a nurse to help in the sanatorium. They hoped to enlist Talbot's services as a cracksman and, though the Toff was willing to denounce the Professor, he had a regard for Marie that made him wish not to implicate her as well. Marie was also in a dilemma, her duty to her father conflicting with her regard for Talbot. Around



With his eyes turned upwards, Levison climbed on. To save Talbot, he had to get into the Shell dormitory unknown. It rested upon his shoulders to save the boy who had saved him, and he was striving to do it!



this conflict of loyalties, a splendid battle of wits ensued. A major climax came when Talbot, the victim of the Professor's plotting, was turned out of the school at the end of the second number, with Tom Merry in tears at the gate.

It is possible at this stage to pinpoint a certain misjudgement on the part of Charles Hamilton. Certainly the episode was handled very carefully, but there is no doubt that Tom Merry's concern for the fate of Talbot began to threaten the status quo of the Terrible Three. Manners and Lowther went along with Tom Merry in his support for Talbot, but it seemed quite clear that their loyalty was founded in their sympathy for Tom, not in their belief in Talbot. Tom Merry, on the other hand, believed whole-heartedly in Talbot's innocence. He was right to do so, but at the same time he was isolating himself from his old friends. Tom even hit Gussy when that noble youth expressed his regret that Talbot had reverted to his old ways. Eventually the truth came to light, and Talbot was found among the down-and-outs on the Embankment. Later the Professor joined the army (at the same time as Mr. Railton), and in the famous Double Number 375 "Winning His Spurs" Talbot helped a much changed Hookey Walker to emigrate with his wife and child to America. Tom Merry thought Talbot should have reported him to the police, and an estrangement followed. It was even possible to sympathise with Levison, who said:

"You see, Mr. Talbot's chums left him in the lurch, it was up to me, and as I owed him the tin, I made an effort and got it for him. I'd have done it if I hadn't owed it to him, as a matter of fact, if he'd have taken it. We don't all turn our backs on a fellow when he's hard hit."

The story was complicated by the capture of yet another German spy, but of course all misunderstandings were cleared away in the end.

"Winning His Spurs" was never reprinted by the Amalgamated Press, possibly because of the war-time background, and the same may be said of the other justly celebrated Double Number in 393, "The Housemaster's Homecoming". This was in effect the real end of the long Talbot saga. Mr. Railton came home wounded from the front in company with Colonel Lyndon, the uncle of Crooke, and a recently elected member of the Governing Board. Crooke poisoned his mind with tales of Talbot's past and Colonel Lyndon was quite convinced that he had seen Talbot before, probably in a court where he was a magistrate, and he persuaded the Governors to rescind the award of the scholarship, whereupon Dr. Holmes resigned. In the end it was proved that Talbot and Crooke were cousins, and so Colonel Lyndon adopted his nephew Talbot. The complicated web of Talbot's past had now been drawn to a conclusion and it would have been ideal if the matter had rested there, but of course it did not.

From time to time, figures from Talbot's past continued to return to plague him, some of these stories being written by Charles Hamilton but most by substitute writers. In 1931, in that odd twilight of the Gem, when the juniors gave up eton jackets and very few genuine stories appeared, No. 1197 "The Man from Angel Alley" produced Rogue Rawdon, yet another member of the gang who had escaped from prison. He masqueraded as Mr. Linton's nephew from Australia until Talbot recognised him and arranged for his arrest. It is odd that at a time when Charles Hamilton wrote so few Gem stories, he should have chosen to resurrect yet another figure from Talbot's past. Nevertheless, it was the end of the line for the Toff.

Talbot played a different role in a number of stories that were self-contained, so to speak, without any new outside characters, when he was suspected

because of his past and not because anyone had arrived from Angel Alley. (In a similar way, Levison was sometimes wrongly suspected after his reformation.) The first series of this type had appeared earlier in Nos. 376-8, and its dramatic qualities bear ample testimony to the the argument that outside characters were not needed. Gore took money from the Head's safe, which had been left ajar, in order to pay a gambling debt to Tickey Tapp. Talbot met trouble when he opened the safe in order to replace the money. Many years later, in Gems 988-991, a similar series featured Crooke instead of Gore. Crooke owed £50 to Bill Lodgey and found the key to Mr. Railton's money drawer; so he helped himself. Although some similar episodes were used, the series was impressive, especially in the way in which Colonel Lyndon arrived at the the truth after Talbot had left the school. If the first series was more emotional, the second series was more sophisticated and more finely developed, as might be expected after an interval of twelve years.

So ends the Tale of the Toff. His attractive personality is undeniable, and the vicissitudes of his career make splendid reading even after the passing of over seventy years. The stories are an excellent example of the difference between the Magnet and Gem modes of writing. The Talbot stories touch emotions which one seldom encounters in a Greyfriars story. The description of life in the slums, the account of the change of heart of the former young cracksman occasioned by his new environment, his acceptance at the school, his quarrels with Tom Merry over points of right and wrong, his trials and tribulations when falsely accused by reason of his past career - these are all episodes one does not expect to find within the pages of the Magnet. But that does not make them one whit the less absorbing to read nor one jot the less important among the writings of their author. For whether one likes emotional stories or not, one cannot but admire the craftsmanship with which these Talbot stories were written, and one cannot refuse to admit that, however much sentiment one can find in the St. Jim's stories, it never degenerates into mere sentimentality. The Toff was undeniably one of the most popular characters in the Gem, and although he was a comparative latecomer he attained an eminence in the St. Jim's stories which he never lost. Perhaps the most fitting conclusion comes from J.N. Pentelow:

As for the right sort they think a heap of Talbot. He is not quite like them. His early experiences have left him more serious and thoughtful than most of the fellows among whom his lot is cast. But he is cheerful enough; and he does everything so well - better than everyone else except Tom Merry, and as well as Tom - that one sometimes suspects that he might go ahead of Tom if he cared to. And he never swanks. To Reginald Talbot there is one fellow at St. Jim's who will always come first - Tom Merry. Others are his friends; but none other means to him what Tom means. For Tom he would cheerfully lay down his life.